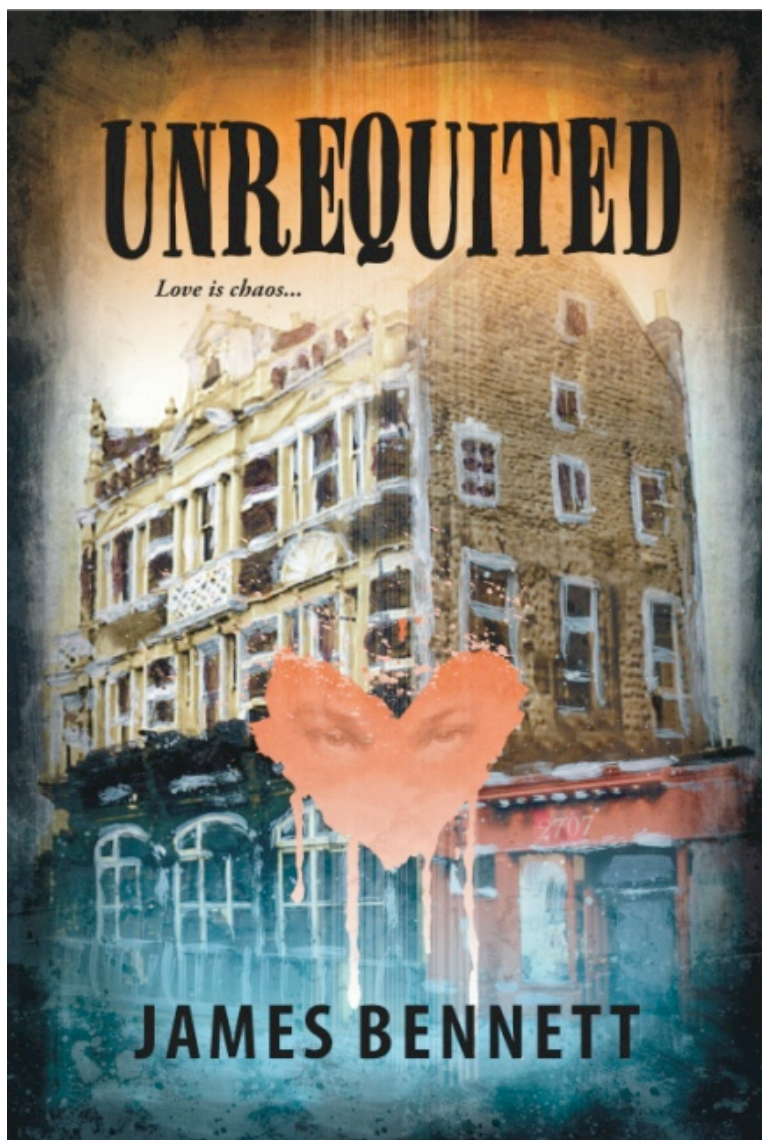


UNREQUITED

Love is chaos...



JAMES BENNETT



UNREQUITED



JAMES BENNETT



ZUMAYA BOUNDLESS

AUSTIN TX

2007

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental.

UNREQUITED

© 2007 by James Bennett

ISBN 13: 978-1-934135-64-8

Cover art © François Thisdale

Cover design © April Martinez

"I have always..." from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams, copyright ©1947 by The University of the South. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

All rights reserved. Except for use in review, the reproduction or utilization of this work in whole or in part in any form by any electronic, mechanical or other means now known or hereafter invented, is prohibited without the written permission of the author or publisher.

"Zumaya Boundless" and the eagle colophon are trademarks of Zumaya Publications LLC, Austin TX.

Look for us online at <http://www.zumayapublications.com>

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bennett, James, 1972-

Unrequited / by James Bennett.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-934135-64-8

ISBN-10: 1-934135-64-X

1. Gay men--Fiction. 2. England--Fiction. I. Title.

PR6102.E63U57 2007

823'.92--dc22

2007030392

DEDICATION

There is no time to make enemies; this one's for the heartbreakers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To all the people who inspired, influenced or introduced this book—family, lover or friend—thank you.

Unrequited: *adj.* (of love) not returned. ORIGINS from *requite* “make a suitable return for.”

ENDING

It ended with the car crash.

The autumn sun beamed between the trees on Railway Road, filtering shadowed pools across the pavement. The road went steeply upwards from the junction at the foot of the hill, rising towards the iron bulk of the railway bridge, a looming titan guarding the suburb below from any threat to the leafy calm.

At the foot of the hill, a hedgerow's tattered line edged the sloping meadow of Stationhouse Park, the laughter of children playing there muffled by the rush of townbound traffic on the nearby junction. The area appeared idyllic, the air alive with the mellow scents of the dying season.

I scanned the street as I trudged downhill, a canvas bag thrown over one shoulder, the front of my T-shirt smeared with streaks of engine grease. The afternoon heat felt like a tourniquet, the sunlight penetrating my sleep-deprived eyes, the sound of cars on the carriageway rattling my brain.

Temples throbbing, I passed the park wall, head down, counting my steps in a kind of mantra, never looking behind me. A door slammed shut in the distance; a dog barked madly on an adjacent street. In my exhaustion, the echoes came from another world.

Reaching the lower end of Railway Road, I heard the car approaching fast behind me, a rolling hum of escalating gears. The engine snarled, and I heard a stifled cry as the car sped past.

I turned and made fleeting eye contact with the driver through the windshield. His pupils were dilated in fear, his mouth spitting obscenities at the swerving vehicle. The car gathered momentum and raced relentlessly towards the intersection.

I'm still not certain if he saw me.

I stood on the pavement, transfixed. In the driver's sight, I must have seemed a statue seen through the acceleration blur. I fancied, for a fraction of a second, he stopped screaming as our eyes met.

If a message passed there, it went unheeded in his terror.

Then the car rushed past, smoke spewing from the bonnet, a raven's plume billowing over the hood. It bulleted forwards with a jagged screech, bumping metallicly off the bottom of the hill, barely missing the traffic lights, then skidding into the middle of the junction. It swerved in a half-circle, tyres squealing as gravity pulled it around, painting arcs of rubber on the asphalt. The rear ones reached blowout velocity, torn rubber landing in tatty shreds at my feet.

I stared at them with stupid eyes.

The car had come to a growling halt in the centre of the intersection. The driver's body, thrown forwards by the skid, had cracked the windshield, his head rearranging the glass into a dazzling cobweb of errant lines. Even from a distance, I could see blood spilling on the dashboard.

The sunlight made the glass look pink.

The trees at the base of the hill stopped swaying. The children in the park fell mute as the seconds froze around them. Somebody cried out a belated warning.

The intersection lights switched to green.

A coach hurtled down the carriageway with a mechanical howl of brakes. It swerved toward the lay-by as the driver saw the stalled, smoking car, his arms working furiously to steer away from disaster. I saw panic in his eyes, beads of sweat speckling his forehead. Through the windows of the coach, schoolchildren stared at me, their faces contorted in a tapestry of horror.

The afternoon quiet shattered in the thundering crunch of metal rapping metal. The machines dragged a torrent of sparks across the tarmac, the coach wheels buckling the roof of the stranded car. The coach teetered at speed then overturned, coasting at an absurd angle. Glass splintered; the coach driver took to the air through the windshield to land on the road with a sickening thud.

Stillness descended.

Cars approaching the intersection screeched to a standstill, people within them staring at the carnage. The air was choking with petrol fumes and the rancid stench of burning rubber. On the sky-facing section of the coach, lying on its side like a beached whale, broken windows sparkled with sunshine and blood. The broken bodies of children lay half in and half out of the crumpled vehicle, their school uniforms in disarray. A blond girl no more than ten years old, her hair in matted pigtails, arms twisted in the hollow of a wheel cover, looked about vaguely, not comprehending the scene of the accident or understanding she was trapped in it.

The first car, the cause of the collision, mangled beneath the coach, showed only the back bumper protruding from the tangled wreckage. The

middle of the junction looked like a bizarre display of garage art designed by a lunatic.

Car doors slammed. Vehicles chugged doubtfully around the crumpled sculpture blocking the road. People called to one another through the spell of shock that gripped them. Panic bubbled, nonsensical instructions flew, unchecked blasphemies resounded. People wept and screamed. Somebody called out for an ambulance. The throng became a chorus of chaos, taking up the cry.

I watched, entranced by the anarchy unravelling the day. A scrap of smouldering metal had hurtled through the air and landed on the wall behind me with the clamour of metal on stone, the overgrown hedgerow now ablaze.

A series of small popping sounds issued from the contorted vehicles, and the crowd scattered in alarm. Strangers knocked me to the ground in their hurry to retreat. My elbows met the tarmac, but I made no sound. A man yelled down at me. His eyes said you're an idiot, lying there in the road. He pointed over his shoulder at the coach as if I were somehow blind to it.

A few seconds later, a wave of heat washed over my skin. The two ruined vehicles rose up in an asphalt-shaking explosion, a crimson flower blossoming from the tarmac. Between my shielding fingers, I saw the blond schoolgirl engulfed in flame.

Debris fell about me. A twisted number plate. A smoke-blackened seat. A rain of melting glass. I dragged myself to the safety of the grass verge, coughing, eyes watering as the world filled with vapours. The hedgerow crackled and spat, another sun beating on my back.

I stood up, drunkenly swaying. In the inferno, the crumpled silhouettes of the entangled vehicles danced and shimmered.

A man rushed forwards, asking if I was hurt. I waved him away with a desperate smile. My assurance softened his face, and he turned back to the crowd, now flocking around the perimeter of the crash like guests attending a grotesque barbecue. The shriek of an approaching siren sent nervous ripples of conversation through the mob. Everybody craned their necks to see who was coming to their aid.

I did not join them.

Instead, I brushed the fallen glass off my T-shirt, exhaling in relief. In a daze, I wandered up the flaming road.

I walked for six whole minutes before the shock caught up with me.

PART ONE

ROAD OF WONDERS

I have always depended on the kindness of
strangers.

— Tennessee Williams
A Streetcar Named Desire

CONVENIENT AMNESIA

The Sound Cage pumped out a ceaseless barrage of pop garbage, near-drowning out the clamour of all its high and pretty customers. There was a fancy dress party going on, the usual hullaballoo of Halloween. Autumn was finally fading, if not the memory of the car crash.

Sitting alone at the bar, an island in an ocean of Saturday night, I nursed an Alabama Slammer and felt sorry for myself. My body clock informed me it was half-past drunk and getting later by the minute, but the last place I wanted to be was at home.

All around me, a carousel of voices rotated with inebriated cheer. A young woman to my right was dressed as an Indian squaw, the feathers on her head tilted at a peculiar angle as her cardboard headband melted under the strobe lights. She was necking a man in a New York cop's uniform as if her life depended on it. At the corner of the bar, a bare-chested cowboy flicked jelly babies into his mouth and grinned gleefully into space. The atmosphere swam with perspiration, resounded with raucous laughter. Fractured chatter mingled with the clink of glasses, the muffled explosions of party poppers and the thunderous music. Smoke was everywhere.

I upended the glass, finishing the drink without tasting it. I was about to reorder when a stranger emerged from the crowd and leant forward across the adjacent stool, waiting to be served. His shirt stretched over the muscles of his back, and I watched him through a veil of melancholy, distracted by his attractiveness.

He noticed me looking and tilted a smile in my direction.

"I could die in here," he said, his dark eyes shining under the disco lights.

"By the time the bartender arrives, you probably will."

He rolled his eyes, amused by the slurred sarcasm. "I won't remember if I do."

“Convenient amnesia,” I said. “The best reason for drinking in the first place.”

The crowd broke into a whoop at a familiar song, and headed off en masse to the dance floor, the cop and the squaw carried by the tide. I lit a cigarette and watched them disappear, the squaw’s feather bobbing like a disembodied shark fin.

The stranger used the lull to reply.

“Drinking to forget, or drinking to remember?”

I tapped my temple with a finger. “I’ve been cursed with a photographic memory. That’s why you find me downing unidentifiable cocktails and waiting to pass out.”

He laughed, nodding in understanding. “Drowning sorrows, then?”

“You might say that.”

“Need a hand?” He gestured at the stool next to mine, cocking an eyebrow.

I shrugged. Taking this as assent, he straddled the seat and sat down.

The bartender finally arrived, his exhausted face barely managing a servile smile. We ordered our drinks—another cocktail for me, a whiskey for the stranger, who passed a note over the bar, waving me away when I reached for my wallet.

I drew on the cigarette and looked at nothing.

“So, what’s the occasion?” he enquired, detecting I was losing interest.

“Sorry?”

“The reason for the sorrow-drowning?”

I narrowed my eyes and replied through a haze of exhaled smoke.

“What do you think?”

“Judging by the state of you, it has to be love. Nobody gets that particular kind of look from anything else.”

“Thanks. Buying me a drink doesn’t automatically give you the right to tell me I look like shit.”

“Actually, I was thinking the exact opposite. Everybody gets a little blue sometimes. You’re holding it well.”

“Next you’re going to ask me if I come here often.” I sighed, uncomfortable with the indirect compliment. “Don’t bother. If you want to cheer me up, just leave me alone. I’ll remember a stranger who bought me a drink once. If you stay, you’re in danger of becoming depressed.”

“I’m depressed already,” he countered, grinning. “Have you looked around at the people in here?”

To illustrate his point, he directed a thumb over his shoulder. I followed it to a table in the corner where a group of drag queens struggled to raise a knight in tinfoil armour from a pool of overturned beer. Their Day-Glo heels slid precariously on the tiles.

The sight made me laugh. The stranger intercepted this show of amusement with an outstretched hand.

“Jason Farthing,” he said. “And you are...?”

“Aaron,” I told him, knowing he had trapped me with laughter. “Aaron Edgeway.”

“So, trick or treat, Aaron?” he asked. “You gonna tell me why a boy like you is down in the mouth, or just sit there all night in a slump?”

“You wouldn’t believe it.”

“Try me.” He took a sip of his drink. “I’m not easily shocked.”

I stared at him, trying to figure out his intentions. His hair was straight and thick, gelled back from a neat brush of eyebrows. The eyes sparkling beneath them contained an honest interest, but I shook my head gently.

“You don’t want to hear it. Like you said, I’m trying to forget.”

“That bad, then?”

“You have no idea.”

Jason pondered this for a moment.

“You know how I get shit off my chest? When things are too fucked up to talk about?”

“Blow your brains out with a double-barreled shotgun?”

“I write it down,” he said, overlooking the cynicism. “I keep a diary. That way, when I read it back, I can see how pathetic I was being and laugh. It’s a good way to get it out of the system.”

“It’s one way,” I agreed, tipping my glass at him. “This is the other.”

“I’m serious,” Jason protested.

“So am I.” I tilted the glass against my lips, downing the cocktail in one hungry gulp.



Outside the club a light rain fell, swirling in the wake of passing cars and scribbling under the streetlights. I pulled my jacket around me, moisture slicking my hair into jet strands. The chill sobered me, clearing the fog of cocktails and cigarette smoke. My ears thumped with the echoes of dance music, my eyeballs dizzy after the strobe light.

The last stragglers from the fancy dress party tottered past, sprinting for the sanctuary of a bus shelter to escape a drenching. I watched them gather damply under the corrugated roof, like cartoons ejected from an animated film, marooned in a strange new world of traffic cones and windblown litter.

Jason Farthing had not left my side, following me out into the foul weather, but I was ambivalent to his attention, alcohol dulling my concerns. He revealed polite particulars in the hope of catching my interest. I

half-listened, nodding distantly. I offered polite smiles to each mundane revelation, wondering why he still followed me in the downpour.

I did my best to discourage his banter, raising a hand to a passing taxicab and gazing into the blank shop windows, but there seemed no escape from his optimism.

When we finally reached the corner, I faced him with a dismissive smile.

“Thank you for the drink,” I said. “I can make my own way from here.”

He gestured across the road to the watery neon of a fast food joint.

“Don’t you want to get out of the rain, Aaron?”

I shook my head, pointing to a taxi rank farther up the street. He nodded, a touch crestfallen. I had taken three or four steps when he tugged at my jacket.

“Can I see you again?”

I turned and met his apologetic look with level doubt. “I’m not the person you’re looking for.”

“I’ll take that risk. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I looked up the street, considering the question. The situation was awkward. I was thinking about someone else. Thinking about Victor.

“Come on,” Jason insisted, nudging me. “A phone number, an email address—anything? One date is all I’m asking for. If it’s too much after that, I’ll leave you in peace.”

“I don’t know...”

“Tell you what,” he said, reaching into his coat and retrieving a mobile phone, “I’ll give you my number. That way the choice is yours.”

“You don’t give up, do you?”

“I have a high tolerance for rejection,” he admitted, shrugging.

I brought out my own mobile phone and punched his number into it. “I can’t promise you anything.”

He didn’t appear to hear me. “I’ll wait for your call.”

With that, I started towards the yellow glow of the taxi rank.

“Remember what I said about writing stuff down,” Jason called after me. “You might find it helps.”

I only looked back when I reached the opposite side of the road. By that time, he had vanished into the windswept night.

I wondered why I was smiling.



This story is born from that wisp of friendly advice. A tale of love found and love lost, the embers of a dream pulsing with memory, a path of coals beneath my feet.

The tunnel of the past, dripping with shadows, begins to unfold, sucking me down and into the mire. Yesterday's country rolls before me, splintered by abandoned tears. Walking back into my ruin, perhaps I will decipher the madness of the past year or so. Know peace again.

I feel the release of a small pressure, the movement of daggers in my heart, as I put pen to paper and allow the pain to flow freely.

For this, I am thankful.

Maybe the need to return the favour made me call Jason Farthing two days after that night in the Sound Cage and reluctantly agree to see him again. I tell myself this, anyway, unwilling to admit that sometimes, in spite of experience, we never learn anything at all.

Echoes.



It's traditional to lie on a first date.

I waited outside the entrance to the train station, standing in denim jacket, shirt and jeans, feeling out-of-place in the hubbub of travellers scurrying past on all sides. Jason swerved the Jeep into a vacant taxi bay and reached across to open the passenger door, a smile illuminating his face. He asked me if I was feeling all right.

Of course, the answer was a glaring no, but reluctant to burden him with troubles, I merely nodded. I resolved to put cynicism out of my mind, at least for tonight. Tonight, I'd keep the wolves from memory's door by pretending I was happy.

It had been ages since I'd ventured out on a date. Not since the beginning of my yearlong relationship with Victor, nor its collapse three months ago. I was painfully out of practice, and the knowledge added to my anxiety. I told myself I would have to take the plunge sooner or later if I wanted to move on.

Strapped into the passenger seat, I felt edgy yet thrilled, like going up the slow incline of a rollercoaster. I checked my reflection in the wing mirror. Wayward black hair framed my pale features; green eyes stared back at me with a caustic glimmer.

The sun was setting in the late-autumn sky, streaking the clouds with cool cerise, glinting off the windshield in molten rainbows. Browning trees along the road dropped dying leaves to the pavement, wrinkled pages of unkempt chapters, choking gutters and clogging doorways.

We wove through rush-hour traffic on Anderson Road, heading uphill away from town. I watched Jason in my peripheral vision as he concentrated on the road ahead.

He'd dressed casually for the occasion—blue corduroys and a white T-shirt. The clothes hung fashionably on his well-built frame, lending

him an informal neatness. The waves of his hair looked enticingly touchable. His aftershave filled the Jeep's cab, a candy scent that betrayed the effort he'd made for the occasion.

Nevertheless, I rolled down the window and breathed in a rush of November air, the smell of exhaust fumes stinging my nostrils, jogging a remembered image of a flaming car.

The Jeep swung by a roundabout and turned onto Marigold Hill. The cemetery's wrought iron gates slid past, an untidy line of headstones glinting behind them like old teeth. The sight held an unhappy resonance. Marked within that row of stones lay my father's grave, unvisited since the day of his burial last January.

That rainy day seemed impossibly far away but reached out to me still.

I shuddered.

Then Marigold Hill was behind us. We headed for Italian, leaving the echo in our wake.

First dates are a nerve-packed experience, teeming with potential faux pas and awkward silences, but after a second glass of wine, I gradually relaxed in Jason's company. We sat at a table by the open window, overlooking the town and watching the stars come out.

The restaurant was small compared to the more elegant bistros in town but not without charm. Soft light gleamed from a suspended candelabrum, and the fresh scent of flowers mingled with the aromas drifting from the kitchen. The place was relatively empty, with only an older couple sitting by the far wall, who took no notice of us.

We finished our meal, and the small talk dwindled.

"You're in a better mood tonight," Jason observed. "I didn't think you were going to show...but I'm glad you did. It's not often I share such appealing company."

I gave a slight pout. "I don't do dates, either."

"I find that hard to believe."

I snorted. "Believe it. And please, cut the flattery."

He put his glass down, frowning.

"Aaron, I don't mean to embarrass you," he said after a while. "I just mean you look...nice. Aren't I allowed to pay you a compliment?"

I met his gaze squarely. "Depends on what you want. People say so many things...most of which they don't mean."

"You're too young for such a jaded viewpoint, surely?"

"Jaded. Wise. It amounts to the same thing."

He refilled my glass.

We looked at each other, calm appraisal over the tablecloth. A waiter arrived and cleared the debris away. I lit a cigarette, offering the packet

to Jason. He took one with a shrug. Kindling it, I watched flame shimmer off his eyes.

The waiter retreated, and Jason asked, "So, how come you're so sensible?" A pause. "Boyfriend trouble?"

"I'm as single as it gets."

"You don't meet people?"

"Nobody I like," I admitted, "for a combination of reasons, I suppose. They're too vain, too stupid...too attached..."

"So, there was someone?"

"Or they ask too many questions."

He laughed, his fishhook of inquiry deflected by an equally talented restraint.

"You think I'm prying," he said.

"There are rules, Jason."

"There are?"

"Yes. But I'll answer the question. There was someone...once. We broke up a few months ago. We lived together for a while." I looked away. "It didn't work out. The whole thing lasted a little over a year—isn't that the way it goes? You meet someone, think you see something in that person, something different, and you call it love. Then...well, then you find out you were wrong the whole time."

"I don't think I've been in love." He dragged on the cigarette and gazed out the window. "It's such a difficult thing to define." He turned his attention back to me with faint unease. "So, what happened between you and...?"

"Does it matter? It's over. I should've known better, et cetera, et cetera. A million love songs later, and I'm still left with the undeniable truth—love doesn't last."

"You really are jaded."

I shrugged, dismissing the matter.

"Look, do we have to talk about this?" I stubbed out the cigarette. "I'm sure you don't want to hear the gory details. I don't want to bore you."

Jason laughed again, a sound as sweet as the wine.

"Fine by me. What do you want to talk about?"

"Anything but love," I said, resting my head on my hands. "Anything but love."

Jason paid the bill and drove me home. He walked me to the door of the old house on Kemp Street, looking daunted by the ramshackle building but happy enough to play gentleman.

"You live here alone?" he asked

I glanced up at the cracked windows and the sprawl of dead ivy clinging to the wall. "It was my father's house. I inherited the place when he died earlier this year."

“Oh...I’m sorry.”

I shrugged, unwilling to relate the miserable tale. “He had a heart attack.”

I fitted the key into the lock, my fingers absently brushing the rusty gold number on the wooden door. “The number seven is widely considered to be lucky. That would be funny if it wasn’t so sad...don’t you think?”

Jason seemed unsure how to respond. There was one of those awkward pauses that generally accompany mention of a family tragedy. I’d startled myself by saying anything in the first place. Doubt beat its wings quietly in the background.

After the silence, he nodded and moved off down the garden path, out of the glow of the hall light. His face was lost in shadow, a gentleman denied. As I turned to open the door, he called my name in a whisper.

“Aaron, why did you come tonight?”

I replied to the rusty gold number on the door.

“I wanted to see if I’d been deluded in the Sound Cage by an alcoholic haze. I wasn’t.”

I turned slowly to face him. Jason held up his hands, a gesture of mock exasperation. I could see him beaming in the dark.

“Does that mean I qualify for a goodnight kiss?”

I went to him, pacing shyly to where he stood. His eyes filled the world with soft intensity. I inclined my head, allowing for his slight height advantage, and his fingers caressed my hair. There was no emptiness in the kiss, no flash of panicked nerves. The kiss was gentle and strong.

But I knew I was kissing against doubt.



This ancient house is full of echoes.

My footsteps ricochet down the hall, as though someone follows me. A shadow bleeds across the broken kitchen window. The dying tree in the back garden scratches at the eaves where the guttering rattles, invisible marbles poured into the pipes. A door slams shut down the end of the upstairs corridor, in my father’s old room, a sound like a shouted rebuke.

I know what they are, these things that go bump in the dark.

They are echoes of the past.

A GHOST AT THE TABLE

In September, before the car crash and before Jason, there was Catherine Wales and a seed of ruin. We'd agreed to meet at the Chapter House, one of the classier cafes in town. The Chapter House boasted an open fire, and the scarred wooden furniture lent the place an Old World feel. The cafe seemed like a safe enough haven from the hoi polloi hurrying by outside, if not from the darkness within our hearts.

I'd met Catherine through Victor about a year ago. A student studying politics at the local university, she was never as artistically ambitious as Victor but remained one of his closest friends. From the chaos that disbanded our social circle into distance and regret, Catherine alone made contact. We'd not spoken since the breakdown of mine and Victor's relationship two months before, but all it had taken was a phone call.

After a little persuasion, I'd reluctantly agreed to this uncomfortable rendezvous.

Catherine sat sipping coffee and gazing out at the downpour. The rain chased pedestrians into shop doorways and under umbrellas on the other side of the glass.

She glanced over, flicking her red hair from her face.

"You look tired," she said.

"I've not been sleeping much," I told her. "I'm still not used to sleeping alone. I lie there in the dark...and I can't stop thinking, can't switch off. When I do sleep, I keep having dreams. Weird dreams. And then I wake up and I'm in hell."

I sipped my cappuccino.

"I'm worried about you, Aaron." She fixed me with her grey eyes. "I hope you're taking care of yourself."

"Just bad dreams. Bad dreams and Valium."

“The dreams will end,” she promised. “It’s only been a couple of months...” She veered off that particular path, opting for a safer route. “These things take time.”

I snorted, carving a hole in the cappuccino foam. Catherine drained her coffee, and silence sat between us for a minute.

“This is difficult,” I said. “It can’t be easy. Victor is your friend...”

“This isn’t about Victor. You’re also my friend. It came as a shock to me, too, you know.”

We were lying to each other even then. Our vicious little circle.

“Have you seen Victor? Have you talked...since...?”

Since.

“No,” she said, glancing over at the counter where a skinny waitress flipped through a newspaper. She gave a pained smile to cover the undercurrent. “You know...no explosions.”

I had hoped for more information. Questions rammed the space behind my lips, blocked by my reluctance to appear completely pathetic.

Does Victor even think of me?

A word, one small sign, a flicker of affection...but, no. Nothing. To evade tears, all I asked was “Would you like another coffee?”

After her drink arrived, the waitress depositing the mug with barely a change in her bored expression, we resumed conversation. Memories sat restlessly between us, like a ghost at the table. Eventually, the engine of trivia exhausted, the ghost at the table raised its voice again.

“Have you thought about what I said?” Catherine enquired. “Talking about it?”

“We are talking about it.”

She presented me with a knowing stare. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“You want me to talk to Alex.”

“Yes, I do. Sometimes, people make mistakes...”

I shook my head, but she pursued the matter.

“Look, don’t pull that face. There’s water not under the bridge yet. It feels like such a waste. You’ve known each other for years.”

“Ever since school,” I conceded sourly. “I don’t want to talk about Alex. Not now. I’m done with that.”

Her expression changed to something less sympathetic.

“Stop frowning, Catherine. He made his choice, didn’t he?”

She looked down at her hands, as if she could read the answer on her palms. Her subdued voice told me my stubbornness had eaten her argument.

“What will you do?” she asked.

I watched the rain falling on the street outside, scouring the pavement and rippling the puddles into oscillating circles.

“I know what I won’t do.”

“You won’t talk to Alexander?”

“I’ll never talk to him again.”



Love is chaos.

Pick up any lifestyle magazine, and between the glossy pages, you’ll see how hard people try to govern love, trying to make sense of the senseless. Ten signs to tell if he/she is cheating, how to drive him/her wild in bed, take the sexual personality test (if you scored mostly Ds you’re an impotent asshole, et cetera, et cetera).

The list is inexhaustible, the rules endlessly bankrupt.

A recent topical article was a parable advising the newly bereft how to get over someone, based around a story of a girl whose lover had left her to marry a younger woman. Typically, the girl was heartbroken, thinking she might die or go crazy, trying to erase the pain of her betrayal. She decided to dispose of all the stuff he had left behind, all the things he’d ever given her—photographs, dresses, jewellery, letters.

The girl bundled the lot into her garden and threw it on the barbecue, watching a pillar of smoke billow into the air as she swigged from a bottle of cheap Chardonnay, swearing she’d cried her last tears. She deleted the traitor’s number from her mobile phone, and all the numbers of all the people she had ever met through him. She rearranged the house they had once shared, moving pictures and furniture, changing the bedspread, painting the walls and buying some new plants.

She was physically confirming a change had taken place, altering her environment to reduce unwanted reminders, a kind of feng shui for the heartbroken.

The moral of the story? To jettison the past, of course.

Reading the article, I wondered why the girl had stopped there. I mean, if the moral was correct, why didn’t she move house, change her name, get a facelift?

In the story, there was an overlooked flaw—human memory.

No matter how strictly one followed the rules of the article, there would always be that old demon, memory. That’s where the rules fall down, like walls of charred letters and incinerated valentines. You can’t throw memories on a pyre, or erase them from your mobile phone. You can’t move a sofa around to forget that, once upon a time, you were loved.

Memories and rules designed to bind them, both dependable as walls of ash.

Love is chaos.



I'd been honest with Catherine about the dreams, but how could I have told her their appalling details? She would only have become more alarmed.

In the worst remembered dream, I wandered the streets of my hometown, hovering inches off the ground. Buildings leant precariously at infeasible angles, juxtaposed in geographical nonsense.

The town was empty, veiled in a melancholy fog. It clung to the mad-cap balconies and around the twisted lampposts like a vaporous serpent. I drifted across a bridge and floated to the top of Marigold Hill, propelled forward over the withered flowers and through the cemetery gates.

A carved angel turned a moss-covered face to the skies, gazing upward with hollow eyes. The trees bent inwards, leafless but never still, forming a shadowy tunnel where the teeth of iridescent gravestones smouldered and glowed. As I travelled, rooks wheeled overhead. They moved in slow motion, turning a perfect circle in the miasma, a black zero framed by the branches of gnarled trees.

I looked fearfully at the graves. As I gravitated towards them, I saw no inscription on their faces, no dearly beloved, no in loving memory of, no sorely missed. Each stone was perfectly smooth, jutting unevenly from the wet grass.

Taped to each gravestone was a photograph.

I observed the dark squares, jet against the glare of the stones, marching off into the distance, row upon row of them. My gaze followed the graves, and then something wavered in my peripheral vision.

As gradually as the circling rooks above, I discerned an indistinct figure. Where the path snaked a line through the graves, meeting with the crooked trees on the horizon, someone was waiting.

A man.

He stood dressed in a mud-smearred suit, torn at elbow and knee, showing bloody patches of skin beneath. I struggled to retreat, to swim back the way I'd come, but it was useless. The air swarmed, fluttering the photographs on the graves into frenzied clattering, the applause of skeletons. Strange eddies pushed me towards the pale, besmirched figure.

He stood and waited, still as the gravestones.

I recognised the rotten face of my father. The rooks ceased their circling and swooped about us, their wings stirring up a gale to tear the photographs loose. The black squares flapped everywhere, the same repeated image caught in a furious whirlwind.

My father pointed at me and opened his decomposing jaw. His green tongue rolled out, and maggots fell between his broken teeth.

"You," he croaked.

So, I didn't tell Catherine about the dreams. Or how I'd wake, drenched in sweat, in the darkness of the empty bedroom. Instead, I sat across from her in the Chapter House as September rain came down and memories crowded around me, listening to her advice.

As her words reached me, my mind travelled back across time to a place before pain. Before love overtook me, a retreating tide that carried me out to an ocean of nothingness.

It all began a year and a half ago.

AN INVITATION

“Fucking hell! Jesus! Fuck!”

That was Alex Clay’s reaction the first time he tried cocaine.

We were in Mickey’s house on Partisan Road, a dilapidated terrace on the Merchant Estate. The windows were open to the warm April night, and Alex and I sprawled opposite each other on the overstuffed sofas lining the living room. On the coffee table between us, Mickey dissected powder with a credit card, sculpting long white lines on the glass surface. The table’s debris—Rizla packets, cigarettes, a set of scales and a half-finished bottle of vodka—had all been shoved carelessly to one side.

Alex convulsed with laughter, pushing his wiry frame into the cushions as if he were an aeroplane clearing a runway. His floppy brown fringe, a perpetually scruffy mess no matter how much he styled it, wagged from side to side as the dust hit him.

“Fuck!” he announced again.

I looked at the wallpaper to quell my anxiety. Mickey knelt on the carpet, glancing up to wave the rolled-up note in my direction.

“No way am I touching that shit.” I grimaced.

“Shit? This is grade-A magic,” Mickey returned. “I pride myself on customer satisfaction.”

“Well, I’m not one of your customers.”

Alex leant forwards on the couch and gave me an encouraging smile.

“Come on, Aaron, don’t be square all your life. I won’t tell anyone.”

“That’s hardly the point. Your friend here is a drug dealer.”

Alex and Mickey laughed uproariously, and my cheeks burned. Alex crossed the room and slumped down next to me, flinging an arm around my shoulders.

“Look, it’s just a stupid rumour. You make it sound like I’m leading you into a life of crime or something. We’re only having a bit of fun. Don’t you want to come to the party?”

“Alex...I’m not sure...”

“After all the trouble I went to getting an invite?” He sounded mildly astonished by my reticence. “Aww, come on. Don’t be a stick-in-the-mud.”

Mickey looked up from chopping powder and slowly extended his fist with the rolled-up fiver stuck between his fingers. Alex nudged me gently.

With a vanquished sigh, I accepted the note.

I slid off the sofa and hunkered over the narrow white lines on the coffee table. I shot Alex a worried smile then put the note to my nostril and snorted.

An acidic rush tingled into my synapses. To prove I wasn’t a killjoy, I placed the note under my other nostril and finished the line off in one hungry suck.

Alex sniggered, patting me on the back.

My lower lip went numb. An unfamiliar lightness stole over me. Everything appeared sharp-edged in the cluttered room. My body felt warm and loose.

Alex squeezed my shoulder.

“That wasn’t so bad...right?”

“You never change,” I informed him.

I met Alex when I was eleven years old. He’d been in the class above me, a thirteen-year-old remedial student so intent on truancy he seemed to exist outside the laws of time. After a dizzying introduction to marijuana on the school playing field, we began to kick about together on a regular basis, a fact I never dared share with my father until eight years later. Our friendship, by then, was concrete and sacrosanct.

Alex worked as a mechanic in his father’s downtown garage. The only adequate description of his other hobbies would be budding artist (of no little talent) and part-time joyrider. He was also a bass player in a local grunge band, the infamous Clump, an outfit so bad they’d actually become a local draw.

Between the ages of twelve and fourteen, I developed a clumsy crush on Alex but, thankfully, never found the guts to admit it. I recall a drunken smooch at an end-of-term party, but it would be hard to claim that as definite. Could be it’s just an amnesiac brew of hormones and wishful thinking—either way, we grew up past it. Friendship became more important in the long run.

Sometimes, we could read each other in the special way that close friends can.

“So, whose party you going to?” Mickey asked.

Mickey was older than we were—around thirty, I think—a sometime associate of Alex’s. Alex had provided me with a steady supply of marijuana over the past eight years—ever since that muddled day on the playing field, in fact. Mickey was a big man, having almost the same stature

as my father and being almost as mean-looking, until he gave a crooked grin and transformed into a dishevelled cherub with a receding hairline.

Lacking Alex's confidence, I hung back and let my friend do the talking.

"Sylvester White's, the house by the river," Alex explained.

"The White Mansion?" Mickey raised a tangled eyebrow. "You're talking about the son of Charles White, the entrepreneur?"

"The very fellow."

"I wouldn't get mixed up with that guy. He's into some heavy stuff."

"People say the same about you," Alex remarked. "It's a party, that's all."

I listened without paying attention. I'd become mesmerised by the carpet design. Then Alex was tugging my arm and saying it was time to go.

We stumbled into the street.

"No car tonight?" I asked, granting my friend a knowing look.

Alex slapped a hand to my shoulder.

"Let's walk," he said.

We passed along Partisan Road, a spring breeze rustling in our faces, filling my lungs with a cool balm. We headed downhill to where the serpentine river shimmered with starlight. Our town rests at one end of a wide valley cutting south through the surrounding countryside, culminating in a stretch of forested hills. Those hills, scarred by the remnants of a mining past, go on forever. The town sprawls at the bottom of the valley as if stuck there. Leafy avenues roll down sloping streets, converging at the level centre of shops and office blocks.

Beyond the urban hub, caught in the curve of the endless hills, grand Georgian mansions overlook the town's dissecting river and the private canal running adjacent to it. This area, known locally as the Green Breach, was where Alex and I headed that night.

A shred of doubt followed me down the road.

"You sure nobody will mind me coming? I've only met Sylvester once, and he won't remember me. I don't want to impose."

"Aaron, when will you ever learn? The best parties are crashed ones."

"Alex, I'm serious. These people—well, they're rich and we..."

"You don't think we're good enough?" Alex inquired, then smiled wryly. "We can hobnob with the best of 'em! You look great, so what are you worried about?"

He stopped, standing before me in ripped jeans and a scruffy leather jacket. Underneath the jacket he'd fastened a tartan belt below a creased T-shirt. The T-shirt bore a skull-and-crossbones motif, and even in the gloom, I could see the safety pins studding the seams.

“Everyone will be too wasted to notice you, anyway,” he said, a touch defensively.

“So now I’m a wallflower.”

Alex shook his head, despairing of me. “You’re the prettiest boy I know. When are you going to have some confidence in yourself?”

“Like you, you mean? Probably never.”

“I’m an artist, and you love me for it.”

I said nothing. After all, he was right.

“Did you bring your camera?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“Pass it here, let’s take a picture.”

I dug in my haversack, passed him the camera, and he fumbled with the lens cap. I clicked my tongue and stepped over to assist him.

“Leave the photography to the experts,” I said. “Here, stand back. Stop grinning like that, you look like you’re about to swallow the damn thing.”

The flash illuminated his narrow features. We both laughed. Then Alex was jogging off backwards, safety pins jangling.

“Come on, slow coach. Last one there and all that.”

As he ran, he began kicking at the cars parked along the avenue, setting off their alarms. I shouted, and he hollered back at me. A light went on in a house across the street, and a man started yelling out the window.

I ran like the wind.

We’d been running for a while, high with the sport, when the strap broke and the camera fell from my shoulder. I stumbled forwards to catch it, but the camera hit the tarmac with a ricochet of splintering plastic. We came to a halt, panting. Despondent, I knelt to sift through the wreckage.

I cursed, my breath carving plumes in the chilly air. “That was brand-new.” I shot Alex a mortified look. “Stuff you, for making me run!”

“Accidents happen.” He looked sheepish. Then, perhaps seeing this didn’t placate me, he offered, “Look, I’ll get you a new one, okay?”

“You won’t remember.”

But by midnight, I’d forgotten all about the camera.



Through the looking glass of memory, some reflections are as clear as a bright blue morning. My recollection of Sylvester’s party, however, is not the perfect mirror of events. Rather, my memories are time-ruptured shrapnel, scattered pieces, some facing up, some facing down.

According to Alex, Sylvester's parents were in Europe on business. Sylvester's father had a finger in every pie, a directorial board member on the verge of some corporate breakthrough or other. The entrepreneur's wife, in the great tradition of nepotism, had taken employment as his personal assistant and so travelled with her husband extensively, leaving the elegant house by the river in the care of their only son.

Sylvester was free to entertain his own breed of society in their absence.

Apart from an obligatory stint at a London university, Alex informed me, Sylvester had never truly left home. As we approached the White residence, I could imagine why. The building loomed like a grandiose bastion of luxury and privilege against the night. From what Alex said—and what little I knew myself—Sylvester White was the archetypal rich kid, spoilt rotten and educated far above his envious peers.

Apart from living in a mansion that boasted twelve bedrooms, six bathrooms and a massive garden backing onto a private canal, his parents compensated for their regular absence by bestowing a multitude of gifts upon their only child. These included video recorders, cameras, a sound deck—there was a fully equipped recording studio in the basement—computers, endless trips abroad and a sports car, a latest-edition Lexus in indigo-ink pearl.

As if these blessings weren't enough, Sylvester White was one of the handsomest men I have ever met.

As we drew near the porch, the pillars strewn with coloured Chinese lanterns, I felt a lump creep into my throat. Kerosene torches lit the lawns, where a few guests braved the chilly spring weather around fancy-looking garden tables. An assortment of expensive vehicles littered the driveway, and I assumed the poorer cousins attending had to park their less-than-impressive transportation out on the road.

Alex let out a low whistle, eyeing the Jaguar, the Lexus and the yellow Ferrari in the open garage.

"What I wouldn't give to ride in those beasts. Our host is a lucky man."

"There's a difference between luck and plain old circumstance," I pointed out.

"Like you wouldn't kill for all this."

"You can't take it with you, Alex."

"No, but you can have a bloody good time along the way."

I nudged him. "Materialistic pig."

We continued our banter as we swept through the double doors and into the crowded foyer. Almost immediately, we lost sight of each other in the press of low-cut cocktail dresses and winking tiaras, jostled into a throng of tuxedoed socialites and wannabe aristocrats. Bizarrely, the

crowd in the foyer had fused with the less-wealthy partygoers. Amongst the designer coiffures and clothing, a dreadlocked head or the bright fabric of a tie-dyed T-shirt flickered through the hubbub, standing out under the dazzle of a crystal chandelier.

I pressed through the throng, my cocaine high tempered by a reefer someone passed me. If I'd feared formal introductions, I needn't have worried. The cavern of the living room was crammed with a confusion of guests. Funk music pounded from the amps, and a smoke machine belched a vaporous blanket over the scene. Strobes flickered above the people dancing, the whole ensemble moving in stop-motion. Adrift by the DJ box—in actuality a wide mahogany desk—I drew on the joint and looked around for Alex.

The DJ waved to get my attention. The strobe picked out the whites of his eyes against dark skin.

“Sunshine, mate,” he introduced himself over the music. “Any chance of a toke?”

I passed him the joint over the spinning vinyl.

“Rockin’”

The music made conversation impossible, so Sunshine took a few hasty drags, gave a thumbs-up and passed the joint back. I moved off, navigating through the weaving guests, uncertain of my place, knowing there would be no one here I recognised.

I pushed my way to the gargantuan kitchen, and here I laid eyes on our host, back pressed against the curve of a breakfast bar as he passed a pipe around to the hangers-on within its orbit. I observed his lithe, relaxed body. Sylvester White laughed casually and distantly, in the way only the rich can. He stood nearly as tall as Alex, but any similarity ended there. Sylvester's blond fringe swept neatly back from his forehead, combed into an impeccable side parting, a feat Alex had never managed in all the years I'd known him.

Sylvester looked over and granted me an imperceptible nod of acknowledgement. I returned a lost smile then, shy at his attention, ventured down a corridor to my left. I plucked an abandoned bottle of red wine from a hallway table and took a swig. Some debutantes passed me, giggling.

Desperate for fresh air, I meandered through the corridors in search of the garden, travelling farther into the heart of the house. I descended carpeted steps and passed a bathroom full of guests. I felt crowded by the smoke, and mildly claustrophobic. Fresh air would be the antidote.

The clamour of the party receded behind me. I reached the end of the long passage, faced with a set of large oak doors. Thinking I had found the patio, I turned the brass handle, and the door swung open.

My vision filled with gentle blue light. Nobody had told me the mansion contained an indoor swimming pool.

The light reflected off the undisturbed water, rippling on the tiled walls. I took in a breath of chlorine-scented air and closed the door behind me. Taking another swig of wine, I paced down the side of the pool, trainers squeaking on the tiles. Reaching the deep end, I removed my footwear and sat down, dipping my feet into the lukewarm water. With the ripples lapping at my shins, it was an easy thing to sink into daydreams.

I lay back against the tiles and lit a cigarette. Soon, I was deep in a trance. I failed to notice someone enter the room. When he spoke, his voice echoed off the walls.

“You know, you really shouldn’t be in here.”

I opened my eyes, startled, and stared up at Sylvester White.

He stood above me, reflections wavering across his white silk shirt, a chance pattern of cerulean shadows.

He was smiling.

“For a minute,” I said sleepily, “I thought you were a hallucination.”

“Well, I hope that I’m not.”

I sat up, offering a disarming smile in return.

“Too much drink, perhaps?” he asked, gesturing to the wine.

I passed him the bottle, and he took a long swig.

“Have we met somewhere before?” A brief grin flashed across his features. “Something about you seems vaguely familiar.”

“I’m not a burglar or anything. I came here with Alex. Alexander Clay?”

Sylvester nodded and took another swig then passed the bottle back, his eyes never leaving my face. He pointed to my bare feet, paddling lethargically. He chuckled. “What do they call you, then?”

I told him my name, surprised by his interest. Rumours circled in my dazed mind, but they seemed disjointed, evaporating into nothing. I glanced at his face, oddly attracted. I judged him a few years older than me, but in my inebriation he seemed strangely ageless, like a visiting angel.

“You have a good name. Biblical,” he said. “Aaron was the brother of Moses. He helped lead the slaves out of Egypt.”

“Are you flirting with me?”

“Oh, yes.”

We continued talking about nothing in particular, watching the reflections on the placid water. When he eventually asked if I’d like to have a private tour of the mansion, I told him yes, that would be interesting.

FILM STAR

The noise of the party beat through the walls, muffled and remote. The passageways distorted the music, as though the festivities went on two doors down the street rather than within the same mansion.

The back stairs, covered in deep-red carpet, bled up to a mezzanine. A tall window overlooked the landscaped garden, and past the web of the tennis court nets, I made out the oily line of the canal, indicated by a jetty striking out into the water. To one side of the window a huge painting hung. As we passed it, my bare feet padded wetly on the carpet. I had forgotten my shoes at the edge of the pool.

The painting depicted boats sailing on a calm blue sea. In the foreground, a man in a hat rowed his vessel across a carefully sculpted ocean. He hunkered beneath a single sail, a yellow scimitar in a brushstroke sky. The hued tides rolled in, reflecting an imagined glimmer of sunlight.

The colours swam before my eyes.

The joint Sylvester had constructed in the pool room contained a bewitching mix of weed and something stronger and sweeter, throwing my senses into dizzy solace. Smoke wreathed the air, giving the painted sea an illusion of motion.

“You appreciate the art?” my host enquired. “It’s a Van Gogh—*The Sea at Saintes-Maries*,” Sylvester explained. “One of my father’s favourites. I’m not sure if it’s original—I’m sure Father likes to think so. He won it a year ago.”

“He won it?”

“During some high-powered gambling game, I believe. At least, that’s the story he told over Christmas dinner.” Sylvester grinned, revealing perfect teeth, the result of some expensive dental treatment. “He’s a gambling man. A trait that runs in our family, I’m afraid. We like to take risks. Don’t you?”

At a loss for what to say, I offered, "I wouldn't know where to begin with a game of poker."

"You'd be surprised by how quickly you learn, and then, you're hooked." He smiled again. "Just like this gear."

He waved the joint under my nose. The unfamiliar fragrance stung my nostrils.

"I guess gambling's okay," I said. "Drugs are still illegal."

He uttered a sharp laugh, a harsh sound in the exquisite surroundings.

"Well, now," he said, "most pleasurable things are, wouldn't you agree?"

Sylvester stroked the glass frame with his fingers. I noticed his perfectly manicured nails, clean as burnished ivory. I glanced up and took in the crystal chandelier, illuminating the landing in a bright ambience.

"You have a beautiful house," I remarked. "It's like a small palace. You're lucky. You should see my house."

Fixing me with an appraising look, Sylvester said, "There are lots of things more appealing than houses, don't you think?"

"I—I guess so."

"Take you, for instance," he purred. "But don't feel overwhelmed by all this junk. I wouldn't want you to feel uncomfortable."

"Junk?" I asked incredulously, sidestepping the compliment.

"Yes, junk. Stuff. Odds and ends—whatever you choose to call it."

He took his fingers from the frame and moved his hand slowly down my arm, stroking the fabric there.

"It's just a painting," he explained in a cloudy undertone. He stood very close to me, so close his nose was almost touching mine. I caught the scent of wine on his breath. "It's just a house."

And then we were kissing. I stood pressed against the landing wall, my stomach wheeling in a blissful roulette. Sylvester's body moulded into mine, and I felt his arousal through his well-tailored trousers. The sensation misted my brain with smoke and bewilderment.

"Come with me," he whispered. "I have another game we can play."

He led me up the remaining stairs, until we stood outside another panelled door. We kissed again, leaning gently against the wood. Our lips met fiercely, as though we were underwater and he required oxygen.

Then, a voice greeted us from the shadows. I looked over Sylvester's shoulder, vision blurring, and observed the man standing there. He was dark-skinned, a Spaniard perhaps, his curly hair resting on his broad shoulder muscles. His features tilted in an amused smirk. It seemed I wasn't the only one who had lost some clothing during the party, for the man was topless. I flicked admiring eyes over his torso, wondering if he, too, might be a hallucination.

Sylvester turned his head and greeted the man with a smirk of his own.

“Carlos! Are you spying on us?”

Carlos was smoking a reefer. He exhaled in a thick smog, his voice heavily accented and smoke-light.

“You know, Sly, I’ve always been an occasional voyeur. What is this pretty young thing you’ve found?”

The weirdness of the moment escaped me, and I accepted the joint when the Spaniard held it out to me. I took a drag, ignoring Sylvester’s hand on my backside. Carlos grinned like a fox then laughed, a rich, melodious sound, as Sylvester opened the door to the bedroom.

The chamber beyond was lit with intimate light—the glow of a lamp on a low table. In the centre of the room, piled high with embroidered cushions, a wide futon spread out before us. Drapes of muslin hung from the walls, granting the room a tent-like ambience. In the corners, palm fronds in earthenware vases threw lush shadows against the walls. The bowl of an incense burner dangled from the ceiling on golden chains.

The host summed up the opulence of the chamber as he closed the door behind us.

“Arabian Nights,” he murmured.

Carlos kissed me. It came as a surprise, but I did not resist him. His stubble burnt my lips, awakening senses. I slid my fingers over his chest, marvelling at the smoothness of his skin. Sylvester crouched behind me on the futon, his cool hands massaging the back of my neck.

Carlos placed the reefer to my lips and smoke filled my lungs, exhaled into his mouth. Sylvester watched us with heavy-lidded eyes, and I ran a hand through the golden tangles of his hair. He sighed, enraptured. He tilted my head to his, and our tongues danced together. His fingers brushed my nipples, etching lines of fire down my ribs.

Carlos put his hands to my knees, parting them gently. He rubbed the inside of my thighs, bringing heat to the muscles there, my breath stuttering from my throat.

I closed my eyes, swirls of colour erupting behind the lids.

As the tide of our hunger rose, I became the focus of their attentions—Carlos at my front, Sylvester at my back and hands everywhere. Cushions scattered as Sylvester reclined on the futon, and I descended with him, his excitement brushing the small of my back. I raised my arms, and he rolled my T-shirt over my head, discarding it with a flick of his wrist. Carlos lowered himself to the side of the bed, kneeling before me as if in prayer. He tugged at my jeans, exposing my lower half to the humid air. The ministrations of his lips sent shivers up my spine, sweat pricking needles on my skin.

Sylvester held the reefer to my mouth again, and I breathed in, breathed out into the vacuum of his mouth. He tore off his shirt and dropped it to the floor. Carlos's hands kneaded my buttocks as my fingers worked at Sylvester's belt buckle, unzipping the heat concealed there. I licked the underside of his manhood, tracing the line of saliva with my finger, tasting expensive soap and the salt of excitement. Closing my lips around the swollen head, I drew him into me. He gripped my hair gently while Carlos nibbled at my neck.

We stayed like this for a while, the three of us joined in a tango of flesh. Then, a silent signal passed among us. Carlos rose to his knees, shoving his jeans down, his thick penis protruding from a mass of shiny hair. My fingers gripped him, my mouth still gripping Sylvester, Sylvester's hands gripping, ungripping, gripping, ungripping...

They took turns to enter me.

On my back, Sylvester pulsating inside, his hips bumping mine, my lips closed on Carlos.

On my front, Carlos within, rocking gently then more forcibly.

On all fours, Sylvester's mouth working beneath me while Carlos thrust, stabbing delight into my belly. Flesh blurred, fused into a whole. We were a new being, a twelve-limbed creation writhing on the sheets, crying out in staccato moans.

Sylvester came first with a brief shout of release, and I followed, drawing a shuddering breath from the sweat-tinged air. Moments later, Carlos pulsed rapidly in my hands, and jism spattered lightly on my cheek. We collapsed, our shape unfolded, the new creation disconnecting itself. We lay entwined and silent on the chaos of the cushions.

The bottle of wine carried on the "tour" had toppled over; red liquid pooled on the wooden floor like fresh blood. I closed my eyes. Sylvester's arm curved around my waist. My heart slowed by warm degrees; I receded into a comfortable space where there was nothing but endorphins rewarding my bloodstream.

I must have slept.

When I awoke, the slick of wine on the chamber floor was still wet. The sound of the party rumbled below, vibrating the floor. Sylvester lay naked beside me, blond fringe in his face, an arm crooked over my navel. I watched him sleep, his eyelids flickering as he travelled through dream-land.

Slowly, I removed his arm and sat up.

Carlos had gone. Only one red footprint by the bedroom door suggested he had even been in the chamber. I listened to Sylvester snoring then decided to follow Carlos's lead. The lust had expired, leaving a weary guiltiness behind it. I disentangled myself from the sheets and rose unsteadily to my feet.

As I was yanking on my jeans, wondering nebulously where my shoes were, I lost my balance, slipping on the pool of wine. The floor seemed to plunge suddenly, like a boat cresting an unforeseen wave, and I pitched forwards with arms splayed. I flailed towards the muslin-covered wall, an expletive flying from my lips.

There came a crash as one arm connected with an urn, spilling palm fronds and fragments of clay across the floorboards. The other arm connected with the muslin. One fist clutched at it desperately, suspending me in mid-fall for a moment. Then the fabric parted with a noisy rip, and the curtain fell down. I cracked my head on the floor, teeth rattling like loose keys on a piano.

Sylvester, disturbed by the commotion, bolted upright on the futon, his face transfigured by alarm. I rolled into a ball, clenching my limbs to numb the pain. He crawled over and placed a hand on my head.

“That wasn’t very bright,” he said. “You’ve practically wrecked the room. You could have damaged the equip—”

I spat, “I didn’t do it delib...” then trailed off as I noticed what I had uncovered.

Where the muslin had fallen, I stared into a narrow alcove, a low tunnel retreating into the wall. Machinery lined the exposed aperture. A computer monitor blinked above a row of video recorders stacked one on top of the other, forming a bank of red and green lights. I could hear them whirring quietly, the hum of dozing bees. Underneath the array, a wide case bleeped intermittently. Wires snaked from somewhere behind the monitor, weaving toward each corner of the wall, their pale colour betraying how they’d been designed to blend with—and be hidden behind—the shrouds of muslin.

My gaze, quick now despite my intoxication, followed the line of a wire to where it ended above the door. The spherical lens of a camera stared back at me. Another wire ended at the foot of the doorframe, a camera protruding from the wall above the overturned urn, the fragments incongruous in the presence of the stacked machinery. The camera lenses reflected the rouge light—the eyes of fiends, ever-watchful.

Sylvester placed a hand on my chin and tried to draw my face away from the alcove. I clambered to my feet and glared down at him.

“Look at this!” I pointed to one of the cameras. “And this!” Stabbing my finger at another.

He frowned. “Calm down. I see no reason to get so wound up.”

“You must be out of your mind! You filmed us, didn’t you—filmed us having sex? You expect me to be calm about it?”

I scowled at the array. It looked like a spaceship’s console in a science fiction saga. I stretched out a hand to one of the recorders.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” Sylvester warned.

I pressed play.

The blank monitor winked into life with a fizz of static. The screen displayed four differing perspectives of the same scene—Carlos humping me while I performed fellatio on Sylvester, all in glorious Technicolor.

I staggered backward and bumped into my host, who had risen to his feet and stood behind me.

“Delete it,” I commanded. “Delete it now.”

“No,” Sylvester said, grabbing hold of my arm. “I’m not going to do that, I’m afraid.”

“Let go of me.”

“What for? So you can run and tell the police?” The question sounded almost polite. Then he shook his head. “It won’t do you any good. Do you know who my father is? The chief of police is one of his friends, for Christ’s sake. Even if they did listen to you, which I severely doubt, it’d be your word against mine—the word of a pauper against the word of a prince.”

I stared at him, mouth open. He gave a frosty smile.

“From this point on, I’d watch your tongue.” He gripped my arm harder, squeezing the muscle painfully. “You could get yourself into trouble. Trouble you don’t want...and that would be a crying shame.”

“Fuck you!”

He spun me round, his face in mine. His features had lost none of their placidity, but I could sense danger emanating off him, a different kind of heat. His eyes glittered in cold calculation. I struggled in his grip, lifting my hand in a claw. He pushed it away and slapped me across the face.

The unexpected blow exploded my vision, bringing blood to my mouth.

In the alcove, the monitor showed me straddling this sudden assailant, riding him as I took Carlos in my mouth.

Sylvester pinned my arms to the wall.

“Look at that tape. You’re a pretty thing, yes? A pretty thing that gives such good head.”

“Get off me!”

“You’re not leaving this room until you promise not to open that sweet little mouth of yours,” he purred. “People know better than to mess with me, Aaron. Open your trap, and you’ll learn that the hard way.”

“What are you saying?”

“Do you know how many people go missing every year? How many young men, just like you, take off from home one day, never to be seen again? It’s as if they vanished into thin air.”

“And Carlos? Are you going to murder him, too?”

He gave a sharp laugh, his feral eyes never leaving my face.

“Carlos is an associate of mine. He helped me rig this up,” he explained savagely. “Don’t be so...puritanical. You said yourself that you’re not exactly well off. Imagine the money you could make. You’re one in a million. A natural. A star, for heaven’s sake. Don’t you want to be a star?”

I ranted into his face. “I’m not your whore. I don’t want your fucking money!”

“Please yourself,” he growled, tightening his grip, “but don’t think my interest will waver so easily. Maybe it’s time you grew up.”

I realised he had an erection. He pressed closer to me, licking at my ear.

“No!”

With an effort of will, I wrenched my wrist free and grasped his hair, scratching his scalp. He stumbled backwards, cursing. He panted for a moment against the opposite wall, his naked skin glistening in the gloom. Then, a thin smile edged back onto his face, his eyes regarding me with unashamed indifference.

“Suit yourself,” he said. “We can play the game any way you like.”

I staggered to the doorway.

“Don’t forget, Aaron,” he sneered. “I still have the tape.”

I fled from the chamber, pulling my jeans up. I leapt down the stairs, taking the steps three at a time, and careened past the mezzanine window and the Van Gogh, my bare feet rushing across the carpet. I sprinted down the corridor, flying past the open door to the swimming pool, heading onwards in a panic, back to the party.

ITILE: *Unrequited*

AUTHOR: James Bennett

PUBLISHER: Zumaya Boundless

GENRE: Literary/Suspense

FORMAT: Trade Paperback, perfect-bound, \$14.99, 272 pp., Trim 6 x 9; ebook, \$6.99

ISBN: Paperback: 978-1-934135-64-8; ebook: 978-1-934135-65-5

RELEASE DATE: October 2007

For review: publicity@zumayapublications.com