

Chapter 11

The front lawn of Simon's home in Cam was scruffy and the driveway a compost of leaves. Cobwebs strung across the front door.

"I'd better make the bed." Kathy clacked upstairs. "You could turn the heating on."

Simon walked through the chilly kitchen into the garden and stared. The grass brushed his knees. Weeds swamped the flowerbeds. His greenhouses were ghosts, dark and still.

His heart beating, he pushed the door. No heat wave hit him. Black sticks stuck out of plastic pots, drooping with dead leaves. He walked into the second greenhouse and shivered. He stood stunned. Blood drained from his face. "Ten years' work . . ."

Back indoors, he switched on the heating and opened the fridge. Empty. He checked the larder. Also empty.

"I'll have to go to the supermarket." Kathy had changed into a warm sweater. "Aren't you cold?"

"Kathy, what happened to the plants?"

"You've been gone six months, remember? Helen came all summer term, but she went abroad for the holidays. You were dead, so we switched them off."

"And where have you been living?"

Kathy sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window. "Dursley Park."

"Dursley Park? Why on earth?"

"Morrison Henley, you know, our MP? He's been very good to us since you died. I couldn't have managed otherwise. The police. Banks. The university. Wills. So we're living over there."

Simon's heart thumped. "*Morrison!*"

"You know him, then?"

"You bet I do. We fought him over the nuclear scheme and he toyed with us like a cat with a mouse. Why on earth are you living there?"

Kathy looked down and played with her nails.

"You're not—" A lead weight gave birth in Simon's chest. *Oh, please, no.* He closed his eyes and shook his head. *This can't be happening.*

"You were dead, Simon. What was I to do?" Kathy folded her arms tight, her eyes a mixture of challenge and a search for approval. "Don't you realize you have no legal status? You are missing, presumed dead, and

we must wait seven years before you're officially dead. What am I supposed to do? Push the pause button on our lives and come back in seven years' time?" She found a tissue in her sleeve and blew her nose. "You say you've had a nightmare. You have no idea what you've done to us. We never knew what happened. Your partner could have murdered you. The tribes might have killed you."

"Kathy—"

She leaned closer, her voice low, taut with fury. "You do realize your story is bloody ridiculous. I can't believe you'd expect the Israeli police to swallow that rubbish—it's pathetic. Six months, Simon! What are you hiding? Drugs? Another woman? I assume her boyfriend stabbed you, and it serves you right." She looked away.

"No, Kathy, I told you the truth—"

She turned back. "And we were left with no news and no income." Tears pooled. "You try going to the government for help, with no documents. 'Where's your evidence? Oh, you have none? I'm sorry, Mrs. Archer, we can't help you then.' That's all the help we got from them. Of course I asked Morrie."

Simon took a deep breath, searching for some form

of understanding, but the compassion didn't arrive. Instead he wrestled with images of Henley and Kathy together. He forced himself to think of something else. "What about Ruby?"

"Oh, Simon, he's been so kind. He's given us a whole wing, and Ruby has a suite to herself with a day room, and he's even hired a nurse to care for her, so she doesn't need to go to the clinic all the time. She's happy there."

And so are you, I bet. Simon's anger began simmering. "Is she there now?"

"How else could I go swanning around the world looking for you?"

"So if I want to visit my daughter, I have to go to Dursley Park, is that it?" His rage boiled over. "To the *Honorable* Morrison Henley, MP, who schemed to make millions endangering the British public with his nuclear power. Now has another scheme, to steal my wife and family. Well, he isn't going to get his way this time. I insist you bring Ruby back at once." He banged the table.

"Oh Simon, be reasonable. Dursley is our home now. We could live together over there. There's plenty of space. I'm sure Morrie would be only too happy to

have you too, now you've risen from the dead."

Simon jumped his feet, shaking. "I don't believe what I'm hearing. You want me to live there, with you in his bed when he feels like it, and come back to mine when he doesn't? That's disgusting. I'm sorry, Kathy, I don't get this. My sisters tried communal living in Ireland and it destroyed them. At least they weren't married. That's not what we promised when we got married, is it? Forsaking all others, remember? Till death us do part, remember? Who's being unreasonable now?"

She picked up her bag. "There's no point in arguing when you're like this. I'll go and get the shopping."

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Simon sat for a long time, dazed. He flip-flopped between furious anger and bitter despair—between a huge emptiness that threatened to swallow him whole, and a blind fury that wanted to strangle Henley. Why did such evil people prosper? Why did they get away with it?

Ever since being trapped in history he'd had one simple goal—to come home. Now he sat in an empty house that was no longer a home, with a woman who was no longer a wife. For a moment he just wanted to

return to the nightmare—at least they believed him there.

In his obsession with his plants and trying to help Ruby, he'd neglected his wife, but what else could he have done? He tried to picture Morrison, Kathy and Ruby as a happy family together in Dursley Park. He shook his head. No, he must try to rebuild what they'd lost. What he'd lost. *Marriage Counseling*? The thought made him miserable.

Kathy returned, dumped the shopping on the kitchen table, and left. He wasn't hungry. He went upstairs and collapsed into bed.

Ruby woke him. "Daddy." She fell on his chest and wept. "I knew you weren't dead, Daddy, I told them."

Simon hugged her tight. She was so thin. "Honey, I wanted to get some plants to make you better, but I didn't. I am sorry." He stroked her hair, dull and wispy. *I can't lose her. I can't.*

"Don't be sorry, Daddy. I will get better, I promise. Now you're home again." Still hugging Simon, Ruby faced the doorway. Kathy stood there. "Mum, I want to live with Daddy. Can we live with Daddy? Please?" She turned back and stroked his face. "You've grown a beard. It feels so funny."

That afternoon Kathy aired Ruby's room and unpacked her favorite soft toys. Simon bought her a bunch of flowers. At bedtime she clung to him and wouldn't sleep. "Don't go away again, Daddy. Please."

The next morning, Simon's boss summoned him to his office at the University of Bristol. Simon dreaded the meeting. If the Israeli police and Kathy didn't believe him, why would his skeptical boss? Simon could already hear him. "Give me the facts and only the facts."

He drove to Bristol. With heavy legs, he climbed to the top floor of the old, brick building.

"Thank you for coming, Simon. Please sit down." Professor Geering's glasses glinted. Christmas cards cluttered his large desk. "Of course we're pleased you're alive. Tell me what happened."

Simon prickled with embarrassment, rubbing his stomach, still sore from Ahumm's knife. No, he wasn't mad, but what could he say? *Facts, Simon, facts.*

"I don't understand, sir. I'd had a series of strange historical dreams. After I fell into the pool, I seemed to be there in reality. There were species there I'd never seen, plants and animals we know to be extinct. I had the opportunity to study a three thousand year old

flora." Simon found himself stroking his beard. Geering, examining him like a specimen, drummed his fingers on his desktop.

"And how did you end up in Israel?"

Simon glanced up at his boss. "How—"

"It was in the papers."

"Really? We . . . we sailed there."

After a long pause, the professor pursed his lips. "And all this took six months?"

"Yes, it did."

"And you had no means of reaching us?"

"No, sir. I didn't."

Geering looked out of the window. "Simon, this is the sort of story I'd expect from a ten-year-old."

"I'm sorry, professor, I—"

"Simon, it has not been easy to arrange cover for your unexpected absence. As you were presumed dead, we ceased your salary and employed your replacement. Our budget cannot accommodate you both. I shall inform the dean, and you will attend a staff review. Whether we are able to keep you remains to be seen. However, we will see what can be done for the next two terms."

"Thank you, professor, that's very kind of you."

"I make no promises, and there will be two conditions. Firstly, you are to make an appointment with a psychiatrist, and furnish me with the report. Secondly, you are not to discuss your *experiences* on campus. We should try to maintain academic excellence, don't you agree?" He smiled sardonically. "Merry Christmas."

Simon felt wrung out like a dish rag. In the common room, the staff besieged him.

"It's true. He's risen from the dead." With a sweep of his arm, Brice Medway bowed low, tugging Simon's sleeve. "Yes, he is risen indeed! What's it like on the other side, Simon? Do please tell us. Is it hot?" He roared with laughter. His long hair quivered.

"Simon, this is amazing. We heard you were home." Helen Shipton smiled, relief in her voice. "What happened?"

Simon surveyed his colleagues, scientists all. They wouldn't believe him for a moment either. Least of all Brice. Fortunately, Geering had given him an excuse. "I'm sorry, it'd take too long to explain. Perhaps another time."

Brice moved close, peering at him. He breathed coffee. "Pretty are they, the Malaysian girls? Eh?"

After he left, Simon took Helen aside. "I need to talk to someone. Would you mind?"

"If you're sure it would help, but I am a biochemist, not a psychologist."

* * *

Two nights later, they met for dinner. She wore a long, black dress and pearls. Her hair and make-up were immaculate.

"Wow, you look amazing. I didn't dress up. Sorry."

"That's fine." Helen smiled thinly. They sat, and she touched his arm. "I am sorry about the greenhouses. We kept them going until July."

"It was very good of you to—"

"I didn't know what else to do, and Kathy wasn't around."

Simon looked up from the menu, gazing at nothing. "She's had a rough time. She had to tell Ruby I was dead, which didn't help her recovery."

"That's so sad. If I can do anything—"

"They moved in with . . . with someone else." He looked at the wall. A Hindu goddess stared at him from beside a waterfall. His heart thumped with fear, and he closed his eyes. He couldn't breathe. "No!" He

shook his head and turned back to her, swallowing bile. "Sorry. We're trying to pick up the pieces."

"It must be a nightmare."

"That's what I thought at the beginning. Oh, you mean fixing a marriage. Yes, not easy. No experience there, you see."

Helen touched his arm again. "Have you lost all the plants?"

Simon nodded. The waterfall seemed to be mocking him. "Everything. Ten years' work."

"What an awful waste. I do feel responsible. Will you start again?"

The thought chilled him. "I don't know, Helen. They'd be hard to replace. You wouldn't believe how six months can change your life. I mean, what really happened to me? I must know." He shared the bones of his story. It sounded even more otherworldly. "The prof wants me to go to a psychiatrist, and 'furnish me with the report.'" Simon smiled. "It is kind of you to listen. I am sure you think I'm potty."

"Not at all. Your colleague Kurt called several times. It's clear you've had a very unusual experience. I can understand the need to make sense of it."

"It was very real at the time. I have a hole in my

stomach. My feet are tough from months without shoes, and I can speak Hebrew."

"That might prove you've been in Israel, or at sea perhaps, but it doesn't prove the historical thing."

"No, but listen. It was three thousand years ago. I saw species that no longer exist in Malaysia, now only endemic to Sri Lanka and India. If we found fossilized seed or pollen, it would prove the history."

"Or they were carried by birds or wind. You'd need more proof than that. You didn't bring anything back, I suppose?" Helen said.

Simon shook his head. "I wish I could find out more though, but where does one begin?"

"The Bible might be a good place to start. Or the internet?"

"The Bible?"

"Isn't the story of Solomon there? I am sure he gets more than a passing mention. Didn't he write proverbs?"

"Thank you, Helen. I hadn't thought of that."