

## Chapter 1

### The Beginning

As I finished typing, I noticed that a spot of blood had dropped onto the space bar. I put a hand to my mouth. Blood always has a queasy effect on me. No sooner had I felt the pang of nausea when another droplet plopped onto the keyboard. I looked up. On the screen were three words. "I told you." I blinked and prepared to type my reply still fighting the urge to heave. My fingers hovered over the keyboard, they had told me, they had warned me what they would do and I had chosen not to believe them. I felt a warm drop of liquid splash onto my neck. Looking up I saw that the dark red patch on the ceiling had increased in size. It had grown to big to ignore, it loomed overhead like a malevolent melanoma. My right index finger hit the keyboard and I began to type; "Who are you?" I stared at the screen to will a reply. Then, a groan from the bathroom above me. I thought that strange. He was conscious.

The chair squeaked as I pushed back from desk, cocking my head I listened hard; hoping to catch the sound of another groan. As a second moan of pain floated down, my eye caught the screen. A photograph had appeared. A picture of me taken only moments before. I sat, as if frozen, adrift between the image on screen and the low murmurs from above; not knowing which I should deal with first.

The answer came moments later, as I was snapped from my daze by the sound of the bathroom door opening and footsteps coming down the stairs. I stood, minimised the web page on the screen and faced the doorway. The heavy sound of the steps ceased as the feet hit the hall carpet. I prepared myself as the door opened slowly revealing a dishevelled figure. Dave stared at me, "You hit me," he whispered, "You hit me, Joe."

I blinked in the sight, the congealed blood and open wound on the side of Dave's head yawned at me. I had hit him a lot and very hard. Dave stepped into the room and staggered towards me. I moved to steady him as he stumbled.

"Why?" he asked.

"Because you saw me." I replied.

Dave fell into the chair, it sagged under his great weight. I looked from him to the screen, Someone other than Dave had also seen me.

"You gonna hit me again, Joe?" he said.

I shook my head. Someone was watching me and now Dave seemed to be the least of my worries.

"Who's that on the bathroom floor Joe?"

The tone of my brother's simple question wrenched at my guts.

"A bad man Dave; a genuine baddie."

Dave looked at me quizzically; "Then what am I to you?"

I looked at him and shrugged "You shouldn't have tried to stop me," I said.

Dave simpered and slumped forward, his hefty shoulders shuddering. I tugged a hanky from my jeans and dabbed at the open wound. "Sorry..."

Dave winced as the cotton made contact with his scalp. He bit his lip and said "What are you going to do now?".

I stopped, lost in thought. I had to find out who was watching me and sending the messages. I wasn't going to learn anything new from our friend on the bathroom floor. My mind reeled. The computer. Dave untying that man, me yelling for him to stop, hitting him too hard. My life was normal until today. Or maybe it wasn't. Join the dots, connect the random acts; then out of the chaos, reason, purpose and surely logic will emerge. Right? I had been going through my life blindly up until now, letting event after event just happen to me. I needed to see beyond the normal. Eyes wide shut. That's how I have lived my life, ignoring uncomfortable truths; playing at an Everyman suburban normality. No more. How could Dave understand the danger of untying that man? How could I have known the danger of letting an old friend into the house?

I finished cleaning up Dave's head and led him into the living room. I settled him on the sofa and turned on the TV. He loved the cartoons. I had to put the pieces together. I walked back to the computer. A new message blinked at me;

"How's Greg? How's the man upstairs?"

"Who are you?" I typed my reply. I bit my finger nail as I stared at the blinking cursor waiting for the reply.

"A friend... run, run now."

I reacted quickly. I ran to Dave, pulled him roughly from the sofa and said; "We're going."

"Can't we wait 'til it's ended?" he sighed.

"Thomas needs to help Emily pull the heavy load." I tugged at his collar, manhandling him through the front door and into the summer sun.

"How did you know that?" asked Dave in astonishment.

"I've seen it before," I replied. I grabbed Dave's arm and pulled him after me.

I tugged and pushed Dave in equal measure down the street towards our car; remotely unlocking the Range Rover's door as we went.

"Get in." Dave scowled at me and let out a yell of pain as his head scraped the frame.

"Don't be so rough! What's the hurry?" he moaned.

Ignoring him I slammed the door and ran for the drivers seat. My seat belt clicked into place, the ignition fired and then the car hit us.

There was a splintering crash and the passenger door buckled inwards. My ears buzzed, everything seemed foggy. Dave slumped across my lap. No matter how hard I pushed and pulled, I couldn't shift his vast weight off me. I glimpsed three masked men by the car, then I passed out.