

# The Iron in Blood

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## CHAPTER 1

### Rebecca

I'm not a believer. I'm pretty sure I never really believed in Father Christmas or the tooth fairy or any number of magical creatures that litter childhood like so much detritus from earlier darker wierder times. Let's face it, the idea of a tiny person sneaking about taking children's teeth while they sleep is just creepy. I've never been a member of any of the current world religions or their derivatives either. I don't believe that invisible pixies populate gardens, or that aliens spend their time cruising the skies looking for the worlds' most intellectually challenged individuals to deliver messages of goodwill and try out their latest in probes. And I'd certainly never have dreamed of believing in vampires.

I do read books, though, and watch movies, and I've noticed that one of the common theories about vampires is that it's a condition that is somehow transferable between two individuals, like some kind of freaky infection.

Turns out vampires do exist. But they're born, not made.

The story of how I ended up, not believing in vampires, but knowing without a doubt that they live and breathe, started a couple of weeks before my eighteenth birthday. I was walking home from school at about three one gloomy Thursday afternoon, watching the familiar cracks in the pavement glide by below my feet, when the sound of a car engine being revved made me glance up at the car hurtling towards me. I guess I should have known that it would never be able to stop on time, but I just stood there watching it, right up until it clipped my left leg and sent me flying through the air.

I landed painfully on the road, and slid for a few feet, adding various unbelievably painful grazes to my growing list of injuries. I lay there on the tarmac, stunned by the unfamiliar pain shooting through my body, while people started gathering around me, shouting for help and collectively dialling 999 on about eight mobile phones. A skinny woman wearing a purple jumper loomed over me, and pushed me back down every time I tried to sit up. I lay on that road, embarrassed and aching, and hoping against hope that nobody I knew would ever find out about this. Teenagers hate fuss, and I hated it more than most.

Next thing an ambulance had arrived – a huge yellow blob-shaped vehicle with a blue light flashing away on top of it. Two paramedics jumped out of the front of the vehicle, one really short with a big pervy grin, and one really tall with a vaguely sour expression. I wondered briefly if I was going to be continuously sliding down an incline between the two of them as they carried me into the vehicle, but fortunately they came equipped with a stretcher that was balanced beautifully on nice even wheels. They made sure I was breathing and conscious, and then they asked me loads of awkward questions before they lifted me carefully onto a hard board, and strapped the world's most constricting torture

device around my neck. They picked up the board, yep, definitely an incline; and slid it onto the stretcher, where it turns out I had a great view of the tall guys nostrils. As they shut the doors behind me I tried to see what had happened to the guy that hit me with his car, but he was nowhere to be seen. The police later told me that he had driven off without stopping, and as nobody had gotten his number plate, the likelihood was that he would get off scot free.

They were wrong.

### **Angus**

I remember that first call from my brother. I had arrived back at the hotel I'd been staying at for the past eight weeks. It was five in the afternoon, dark already and cold, and I'd just finished tracking down a man I'd been looking for for the past three days. He lived in a medium sized town about fifty miles from where I was staying, and I intended to pay him a surprise visit the following day. England is a beautiful country steeped in history and tradition, but it was also home to the type of man that I liked to, er, find. Hence my presence in the country when Marcus phoned.

When he told me that a match had been found, at first I did not believe him. He and Fergus had been searching for decades, and had so far turned up nothing. I thought he was playing some sort of joke. He has a tendency to do things like that; his sense of humour can be a bit peculiar. I suppose it may have a lot to do with him being the ultimate academic, plus the fact that he and Fergus lived in almost complete isolation from other more normal people. But when he repeated his statement, and I heard the suppressed excitement and elation in his voice, I knew that he was telling the truth, and I was pleased for him. And for Fergus. They had both worked so hard on this project, Marcus the geneticist, and Fergus the computer whizz. Thirty years spent sweating away at a seemingly impossible task that had been left to us by our equally frustrated father, and they had just achieved the second major breakthrough. The first had been when Marcus had isolated that little group of genes that separated us from the rest of humankind, that collection of base pairs that sat lurking in our DNA and that was ultimately responsible for both our strengths and our strangeness.

Marcus and Fergus had decided that I would be the retriever and general facilitator, mainly because I happened to be in the same country as the person with the alleged match, but also because I did not stand out in a crowd quite as much as they did. There was not much of an age difference between the three of us, unless you counted a few minutes. Besides, our father could never remember which of us had been born first, consumed as he was by the grief of losing our mother. Nonetheless, Marcus and Fergus had always behaved as if they were the older brothers, and ordered me about accordingly, and I had gone along with it. It had seemed too much effort to argue, and I had been far more interested in learning to use my own specific abilities.

As Marcus read out a name in a slightly breathless voice, I felt our narrow world changing and expanding, like a giant stone wall had unexpectedly morphed into an open window, and we were stood surveying the possibilities that lay beyond it. We weren't alone anymore. A seventeen year old girl was responsible for that revelation, and suddenly I felt very protective towards this young woman whom I had not even met yet. It didn't occur to me to write her details down. There was no point, really. I always remembered everything people told me. It was one of my *talents*.

### **Rebecca**

That board was unbelievably uncomfortable. As the ambulance jolted and swerved its way through traffic, my discomfort grew, until I wasn't sure which was worse – the pain from every bony prominence in my body pressing onto that board, or the pain of my actual injuries. It was a tight call.

After what seemed like hours we finally arrived at the hospital, where I was finally rolled off that board, while someone prodded my spine for signs of injury. The neck collar was also removed once I was able to convince the slightly sceptical A&E doctor that I had absolutely no pain whatsoever in my neck. I rotated it madly and lifted my head right off the mattress to show him how little it hurt. He grinned at my efforts, and gave the nurse the collar. I wondered briefly if it would need to be incinerated. It deserved nothing less, in my opinion.

The doctor then asked me what had happened, so I told him I'd been hit by a car. He nodded like this happened all the time. I looked around the crowded A&E department. It probably did happen all the time here.

Then he asked me where it hurt, and I pointed to my left knee, which had by now swollen to the size of a small rugby ball. He pursed his lips, said, "Hmm," and mumbled something about x-rays. Then he listened to my chest and pressed on my abdomen, ordered a few blood tests, and left. A nurse appeared within seconds and asked me if I would mind if she took a few blood samples to send to the lab to check that I hadn't lost too much blood, and to cross match my blood type just in case I needed a transfusion. I thought that was reaching a bit, but I consented anyway. She also wanted to know if I wanted her to contact anyone to let them know where I was, and if I wanted anything for the pain.

I told her yes and no. Yes to the painkillers – now that I was off the board, the pain had become concentrated in my knee, which had begun to throb excruciatingly, and painkillers seemed like a wonderful concept right now. No to the contacting of relatives idea. My mother was a drug rep, who spent most of her time on the road in between visits to doctors and related medical professionals. She was also likely to panic if she heard that I was in hospital, and she always drove erratically when she got excited and I was afraid she would end up in here on a board too. My brothers were either at school or in college, and neither drove yet, so calling them would be a bit pointless. I decided to call my mother once I'd been x-rayed and sorted out and discharged. Then she would have no reason to panic. Hopefully. The nurse looked a bit doubtful, but I was seventeen, and Gillick competent, so I was able to make my own decisions with regards to medical treatment. My GP had explained all about that when he was trying to persuade me to go on the pill a few months back. I told him that I did not have a boyfriend, but he seemed reluctant to believe me. I bet in his mind all seventeen year olds are rutting like rabbits.

Twenty minutes later, and the painkillers were mercifully starting to work. The nurse had said that they were stronger than ordinary paracetamol, and I believed her. My head seemed to have detached itself from the rest of my body, and I felt very relaxed. The doctor returned to tell me that I had fractured my patella, and mentioned something about a cast, before running off to answer a call for a doctor in resus, wherever that was. I remember lying there wondering what exactly a patella was, and not really caring too much that I didn't even know if it was anywhere near the knee. I would google it when I got home.

Forty minutes later I phoned my mother from one of the pay phones in the waiting room. I tried to explain what had happened while I balanced awkwardly on two crutches and one good leg. The injured leg was encased in a hot, heavy cast, and felt like it didn't really belong to me. The phone was jammed between my left shoulder and my ear.

“What’s a patella?” she wanted to know.

“It’s a bone in the knee,” I told her confidently, hoping I was right. Like I said, my mother has this tendency to panic, and I’d become used to behaving as if nothing serious was happening, just to prevent her from hyperventilating and having one of her “turns”. My mum was a deeply caring woman, who had never quite recovered her equilibrium after my dad died nine years ago. I think she was terrified of losing one of us too, and any suggestion of trouble involving any of her three children sent her thoughts spiralling into a vortex of fear that she struggled to get back from. We had adapted to this, and we led fairly secretive and seemingly mundane lives as a result.

“I’m in Leicester!” I heard the alarm creeping into her voice, so I hurriedly told her that I would call a taxi, and meet her at home, and that there was no need for her to rush back. I briefly explained about the cast and the crutches, and said that my knee felt a lot better, which was sort of true and sort of not. It was starting to throb again. She seemed to calm down slightly, and reminded me that she would reimburse me for the taxi, and then she made loud kissing noises down the phone, said goodbye, and hung up. I smiled. Mum was mental, but I loved her to bits.

### **Angus**

She’d already left by the time I phoned the hospital. I prevaricated and told them I was her father, and they eventually gave in and told me briefly that she’d fractured her patella, but that it wasn’t a bad break, and would heal by itself within about six weeks. I thanked the nurse that I had spoken to, and hung up. Seconds later my mobile phone rang. It was Fergus, and he was calling to relay some information that he had obtained illegally by hacking into both the NHS database and the hospital’s computer system. I grinned. I wasn’t perturbed at all by the way in which he had achieved this. It was not so much a case of the ends justifying the means, although that did play a part. It was just that most ethical dilemmas had been dismissed from our consciences many years ago. They had been overwhelmingly irrelevant to our lives back then, and they still meant very little to us. Not being orientated with the world’s moral compass had become a habit, I suppose, and I myself had done much, much worse than this before.

“I’m sending it to your phone now,” he said, and rang off. Fergus the conversationalist.

I waited two minutes before I heard the phone buzz, and checked my inbox. As I read through the few details that had been so expertly stolen by my brother, I became aware of how little we knew about her. Name, date of birth, address, previous A&E attendances (one for a broken finger two years ago, one for a foreign body ear aged 3). Assorted bits of useless information, like date of last tetanus shot, and name of GP. Not a lot to work with, but enough for now. I wondered idly what she looked like.

### **Rebecca**

Crutches are hard work. You’d think they would make life easier; I believe that’s what they’re supposed to do, but no. I was stuck at home for three days following the accident, trying to get used to the things so I wouldn’t fall over and kill myself as soon as I went back to school on Monday. I was hampered by a five ton cast that extended from around my ankle to just above mid thigh, and it itched. Still, it could have been worse. As soon as my codeine induced fog faded, it occurred to me what could have happened, and I went into a kind of delayed shock. Admittedly, it was pretty minor; I am not one for histrionics – I don’t see the point, but I came to realise how lightly I’d gotten off. And then I started being angry

with that idiot that had hit me. He could have killed me, and he would probably have driven away then too.

Mum seemed to take it well at first when she got home that evening, but when I went up to say goodnight to her later, she was sobbing quietly. I felt awful, even though I knew it was not entirely my fault. I hated to see my mother cry, especially since crying was something I seldom did.

"You OK, Mum?" I asked lamely, knowing that she wasn't really.

"I'm fine, baby," she said, smiling ruefully through her tears. "I'm crying from relief more than anything else. How is the knee?"

"Not too bad."

"Don't forget to take some of those painkillers before you go to bed," she reminded me for the tenth time.

"I won't," I said, leaving the sentence ambiguous for a reason. I was tired of the hazy head feeling and the pain seemed to be settling. I'd be OK tonight. I'd take the tablets when I got the pain again. As I left my mother's bedroom I marvelled at how it was that some people could cry so easily, while others couldn't. I wondered if there was something wrong with me.

### **Angus**

I drove past her address twice that Friday morning. It had taken an hour or so to get from the hotel in Oxford to Banbury, a medium sized town that squatted over the M40 just as the South East became the Midlands. She lived in a semidetached house in the middle of a long row of similar properties. Relatively new builds, it looked like. Maybe ten years old, but already showing minor signs of wear and neglect that seemed to pervade so called middle income areas. I found Rebecca's house easily. Neat garden, peeling paint on the window sills, elderly Peugeot in the driveway. The second time I drove past I examined the surrounding houses. No for sale or for rent signs. People must like living here. Interesting, but potentially problematic.

I'd been thinking about how to approach the situation ever since Marcus had told me that they'd found a match. Straightforward abduction was certainly an option, but it would inevitably lead to complications. Police involvement, media, that kind of thing. Not that that would necessarily stop me. I had abducted people before – it wasn't hard. I guess you could say that it's another one of my talents. It's just that the people I usually abducted, well, their opinions of me were more or less completely irrelevant. This girl, this Rebecca Harding, she was different. It was part of our vague plan that she become one of us, and the smoother the integration, the better. It would be counterproductive to have an infuriated or severely depressed girl on our hands back home.

I decided to move my base of operations to a nearby hotel for a few days. Oxford was too far away to be driving back and forth each day. I also needed to discuss a few issues with both of my brothers. It had been blind luck that I had been in the same country as this girl, but things needed organising now. I had considered various options for surreptitiously inserting myself into Rebecca's life, and becoming a neighbour seemed the most practical solution. It would mean that I would be able to keep an eye on her too. Fergus would have to buy one of these neighbouring houses for me. It wasn't likely to be difficult to persuade him to do it. He would relish the challenge.

I booked myself into a generic hotel above a pub a few miles from Rebecca's home, and phoned Marcus and Fergus at the lab, where I knew they would be at this time, and most

other times too. Marcus was and had always been obsessed with his lab and his research, and Fergus had set up a wall of computers inside it so he could keep an eye on his brother, or so he said. I reckon he liked the company, though he'd never admit it.

"Angus!" Hearing my name always came as a bit of a jolt for me. I often wondered why my father had named us as he had, besides the fact that we'd all been born in Scotland over half a century ago. He had told us that he wanted our names to be similar, so that we could have a kind of collective identity. Pretty bloody ironic under the circumstances, really. Being fundamentally and extraordinarily different to everyone else and alike only to each other was a given for us. It was our affliction.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Rebecca**

Those crutches were trying to kill me. I abandoned them after a couple of days and managed to get about in a kind of hip grinding straight legged stagger. My brothers thought it was hilarious to watch me trying to negotiate the stairs to my bedroom, and laughed a little too loudly for my taste. Fortunately Joe was away at a friend's for most of the weekend, but I had to contend with Mark giggling and my mother trying not to smile.

Then I thought about trying to negotiate all the stairs and passages at school, and I shuddered. The school I attended had more than its fair share of bullies, and my own personal nemesis was an oversized thug called Shanice. She infested my life with her greasy hair and her sneers and her motley collection of equally dysfunctional friends, and was one of the main reasons I was looking forward to the next academic year. Shanice would be leaving then to go and work in some factory or shop or live off the welfare system. I didn't really care what she did, as long as I didn't have to look into those piggy eyes ever again. Unfortunately that beautiful day was a good few months away, and until then I was stuck with her.

I have to say, I was really not looking forward to Monday morning.

### **Angus**

I spent the weekend doing a bit of investigating of my own. Fergus had given me a broad description of the car that had hit Rebecca, which he'd probably hacked from the police database; and then a list of matching cars in the region, starting with the ones reported stolen, and then those with a male teenager in the family, and then the rest. It took me four hours to find the hit and run driver. Turns out he had had an argument with his partner and had driven off in a blind rage after smacking her around a bit.

I'd actually narrowed the list of potential suspects down to fourteen likely candidates, and twenty six more possibles. I visited each in turn, pretending to be looking for someone called Jack McShane, an entirely fictional character of my own making. I had asked for the same person at twelve different residences when I stumbled upon my target. I knew it was him as soon as he opened the door, and I felt the tangle of his thoughts sliding over the rage and frustration and meanness that was his mind. That was another of my talents, you could say – an ability to sense the general gist of someone's thoughts without actually reading them in detail. It was a useful ability in situations such as these, where finding the correct quarry was not a straightforward "follow the clues" exercise.

I looked briefly at the cowering woman in the background, with a fresh black eye and a small baby clutched in her arms, and I made a decision.

In situations like these, where the man's infraction was easily reported and proven, given the necessary resources, and which was punished by the laws of the country, I usually simply contacted the police and gave them the information needed anonymously, and made sure that they followed it up. But in cases where the law did not recognise the crimes being committed, I intervened. Wife beating was not usually considered a crime until the woman broke out of her prison of abuse and fear and reported it. I disagreed. I glanced again at the small vulnerable frightened mouse of a woman and her helpless baby, and I knew that this teenage thug needed a bit of corrective manipulation. It would give me something to do to pass the time.

I picked him up the next day.

### **Rebecca**

Sunday was a strange day all round. Big brother Joe was away someplace, so it was just me and Mark and Mum, who always cooked a vegetarian roast dinner for us on Sundays. She was rubbish at it, and usually turned out yellowed vegetables, crunchy roast potatoes and lumpy gravy, but we never complained. I cooked weekdays, or the boys would heat up some microwave meal and present it with a flourish, but Sunday was Mum's day, and she took it seriously. Taste buds adapt, eventually.

Our street was not a bad one for the area. The occasional gang of feral teenagers would come wandering down the road, hurl a few stones and be obnoxious to any passersby, but they would soon get bored and amble off again. So when the commotion kicked off across the road, everyone came out into their front gardens to see what was happening.

The house that appeared to be at the centre of all the attention was more or less diagonally across the road from our place. It was occupied by a middle aged woman and her thirty-something son. They were a creepy pair. She had bright yellow hair and the deep wrinkles that you get from smoking too much, and a mouth like an upside down 'u'. He always looked like he needed a bath, with his lank greasy hair and stained clothes. I never got close enough to him to find out, but he looked like he would smell funny, kind of musty and stale. They were both outside in their rubble-strewn front garden. She was yelling at a man carrying a settee into the removals van that was parked half-on-half-off the pavement. I was impressed. I had never seen anyone make so much noise with a lit cigarette dangling out the corner of their mouth.

"Looks like they're moving," said Mark.

"Good," said Mum.

And that was that.

### **Angus**

It took me a while to explain to Mr Hit-and-run why he was tied to a chair in the middle of a conveniently deserted warehouse. He didn't believe it at first, that someone would take the time to kidnap him because he'd run over some girl. When I told him that I didn't like wife-beaters either, he looked positively stunned.

"We're not married!" was his excuse. That said it all for me.

Make no mistake. It's not that I don't enjoy violence. I do. I was designed for violence, for tearing and crushing and snapping flesh and bone. So if I can control the brute in me, the seething rage and hunger that threatens to erupt every living minute of my life, if I can control that, then mindless idiots like the one whimpering in front of me had no business assaulting a defenceless woman because he was *upset*.

I reached out and tasted the texture of his thoughts. I smelt the fear in his sweat. This one would be easy.

About the time Marcus was setting up his lab and doing various degrees in genetics and physiology, I set out to explore the potential that my father had seen in me just before he died. I discovered that I was able to delve into the minds of people, to pick out the essence of who or what they were. I could sense fear, and anger, and greed, and lust, and hatred; although I couldn't actually read people's minds or hear what they were thinking, I could get a sense of their thoughts and feelings. And one day, as I was dealing out my own form of justice to an unrepentant paedophile, I realised that I could modify that essence, those emotions. Inserting anything into a human mind was almost impossible under normal circumstances. The rapidity and randomness of their flickering thoughts made it almost impossible to get through. It was like trying to penetrate a firewall.

That day I discovered that there was one thing that slowed thoughts and concentrated the mind, allowing me to drive a specific concept or set of values into that briefest of gaps. *Pain*. Severe pain crystallised thought, and the amount of hurting required depended on the individual. Pain is always subjective. That paedophile had required hardly any. Some needed a lot more to render their thoughts motionless.

I broke Mr Hit-and-run's left femur with one hand while I searched for that elusive gap. It shimmered briefly into existence, and I thumped a silvery wedge into his mind. He would never knowingly hurt another living thing again. I cut the restraints that held him, and carried him to a nondescript white van parked just inside the massive doorway. I'd leave him near a deserted road, and then call emergency services anonymously. They'd find a bewildered man next to a road, he wouldn't remember what had happened, or how he got there, and they'd assume that he was just another hit and run. Ironic, really.

### **Rebecca**

The racket died down at about 6 that evening. It had been dark for an hour already, and cold even for January, so nobody had bothered to hang about outside to watch the show. I went out at seven to escape the stifling warmth that my ever shivering mother claimed she need to survive the long winters. The frost was already settling on the grass out front, and it crunched underfoot as I walked to the low brick wall that surrounded most of the house. I leaned against the wall, and closed my eyes, enjoying the relative silence and the biting cold on my skin, pretending for a few moments that the houses and all the people on this crowded island had vanished, and that I was utterly alone, breathing the icy air and hearing my heartbeat rushing in my ears.

"Rebecca?" My mother. She never called me Becky or Bex, and I was grateful for that. I did prefer the long version of my name, but I wasn't fussy. I'd answer to anything, really.

"I'm out here."

"Come in, baby. You'll catch a cold out there." My mother firmly believed that getting cold caused all manner of illnesses. I'd explained to her about viruses and bacteria and all that. Made no difference. It always amazed me that someone who hated and feared the cold so much insisted on staying in a country renowned for its rubbish weather. I'd asked her about it before, and she'd said that she didn't want to uproot us all just because of the weather. It seemed as good a reason as any other to me. And my "roots" were pretty weak, as roots go. I didn't have any close friends; just acquaintances that I made conversation with at school to keep up appearances. The only ties I had were to my family. They were all I needed, I guess.

## Angus

Marcus phoned late Sunday night to let me know that he'd confirmed the match with the blood sample that he'd somehow managed to acquire. Deception, probably. Marcus and Fergus could both get the biggest sceptics, the most narrow-minded bureaucrats, to glug down any story they chose to feed them. You could call it a kind of vocal charisma. Or long distance hypnosis. I was admittedly fairly good at convincing people to do what I wanted, but those two were devastating. Especially face to face. It occurred to me that they would probably be able to persuade Rebecca Harding to abandon everything she knew here and go with them just by looking at her. A small part of me suppressed that thought with what could have been jealousy or possessiveness, or maybe a bit of both. I wasn't sure. These feelings were alien to me, so I ignored them. I'd already decided that I'd approach this rationally, explain the whole situation to the girl, hoping that she would understand and accept what I had to tell her. Give her a chance to come to terms with everything under her own steam. But if she said "No," there was always plan B.

Fergus had miraculously managed to purchase a house across from Rebecca and her family. The occupants had been persuaded to leave fairly abruptly, and he informed me that it was standing empty, and ready for me to move in at any time. He sounded smug. I grinned, and considered about wiping the smug look off his face, but it was a fleeting thought. I would have to deny myself that satisfaction until my task here was accomplished. Growing up with two brothers and a distracted father meant that we had spent most of the time fighting, testing our strengths and each other's weaknesses, and the urge hadn't really dimmed as we had aged.

Marcus was the intelligent one, frighteningly so, able to read thick textbooks in hours, and not only remember their contents, but also comprehend every single concept contained between those intimidatingly numerous pages. He had about fourteen degrees, some of them achieved simultaneously, three or four at a time. Freaky by anyone's standards, even ours.

Fergus was slightly different, also gifted, but a bit like a kid with ADD. He was unable or unwilling to concentrate on one thing for long periods of time, and his flitting intelligence found a friend in the tangled workings of computers and the internet. No task was too complicated for him. He was probably the most accomplished hacker in the world, too good to even be detected. Humility was not one of his talents, though, and he laughingly resisted all my efforts to teach him.

I was different to both of them, both in appearance and intellect. They were pale, with silvery blonde hair and startling grey eyes. I was just as pale, but my hair was much darker, almost black, and my eyes were brown, nondescript, really, which was why it was decided that I should become the reconnaissance expert. I wasn't as extraordinarily gifted intellectually as my brothers were; my intelligence was apparently well above average (Marcus had tested us all a few years back – no prizes for guessing who got the gold star), but my strengths lay elsewhere. I could read people, of course, and after that occasion with the paedophile, I guess I could write them too, in a manner of speaking. I was strong and fast, but we all were, though I did have a bit of an edge on my siblings. A lot of an edge, really, but they didn't like to admit it.

My unique talent lay in hunting. Not the shooting defenceless animals type of hunting; anyone with a firearm and half a brain could do that. I hunted people, tracking down men and women who did not want to be found for whatever reason, and who often went to

great lengths to *not* be found. I seemed to be able to anticipate their actions, and the direction that those actions would take them. Kind of like a mixture between a profiler and a strategist. I'd been employed by various organisations over the years, the GSG 9 in Germany, the SAS here in the UK, and the FBI eventually. I had made it a rule never to stay in the same place for more than five years, and always used a new identity forged by my hacker brother. Each establishment taught me new skills, but the work was seldom very challenging, and I'd started drawing unwanted attention to myself by having a better solve rate than most. And there was always the frustrating problem of "proof", and "beyond reasonable doubt". I didn't need these to make a decision about whether someone had perpetrated a crime. I looked at their minds and I *knew*.

My father had conditioned us more or less from birth to shy away from attention of any sort. It's a hard habit to break, so when the FBI started giving me commendations and asking all number of questions, I left, and started tracking people on my own. Bad people, unspeakably bad people, who eluded police through contacts and cunning and often sheer luck. Sometimes I was able to reprogram them, but if I couldn't, if the hurting was too much even for me, I killed them and discreetly disposed of the remains. Marcus often asked me why I did it; how I was able to stand in judgement of these people, when so many others wouldn't. I told him that someone had to do it.

Everyone needs a hobby.

### **CHAPTER 3**

#### **Rebecca**

Monday morning. I had dreaded this day since my accident five days earlier, and its inevitable arrival did nothing to lessen that dread. The cast encasing most of my left leg had started to crumble slightly around the edges, so I wandered around the house shedding Plaster of Paris flakes. Some of them went down the inside of the cast and added to the cacophony of itches and prickles marching up and down the skin of my leg. The cast, despite all its crumbling, felt like it had doubled in weight, but I had been practising with the crutches, and was able to swing myself around without endangering lives, including my own.

I modified my school uniform with a pair of Joe's black track bottoms, and a thick black sock encasing my left foot, and examined the effect in the mirror. White shirt, tie, dark green jumper. I glanced at my face. I looked tired, grumpy and slightly scruffy. Never mind. Dressing up had never really been my thing. I tied my hair back and went to have breakfast.

Mark was already at the table, calmly eating Cheerios with a fork. He was, as usual, dressed way before anyone else, except Mum, who had left for work thirty minutes ago. Mark was the good-looking one in the family, with wheat blonde hair and sky blue eyes, but he didn't care. He lived inside his own head most of the time, preoccupied by his own thoughts. I often wondered what he was thinking, that could keep him so fascinated and so detached from the world around him.

"Why are you eating Cheerios with a fork?" I just had to ask.

"Am I?" Mark looked at the fork, surprised, and then he shrugged. "Seems to work OK." That was a typical Mark conversation. Bizarre, peculiar, and not quite right, but not completely wrong or obviously mad either. Mark walked a fine line sometimes.

"I see those people from across the road are completely gone now. There's even a sold sign stuck to the wall." The sign was new and shiny and looked like it didn't want to be there. The top right hand corner had already detached itself from where it had been tacked to the crumbling brick and was waving slightly at the gusts of wind that teased it.

Mark grunted. "Good riddance."

I raised my eyebrows. "I didn't know that you knew them?"

"I didn't."

I left it at that, and went to pour bran flakes into a bowl. Ten minutes later, and Mark was standing outside waiting for Harry. Harry lived a few blocks away, and the two fourteen year olds had drifted into the habit of walking to school together. I don't know why, they hardly ever seemed to speak to each other. I propped a book that I was reading for the second time open with a tin opener, and ate my breakfast at a leisurely pace. I read loads of books; for me it was a way of escaping the cocoon of unnecessary anxiety my mother wrapped around us. As if any anxiety could ever be considered *necessary*. But my mother seemed to worry most when you wouldn't think she had a reason to worry. I didn't want to add to all of that by actually having a social life, and I don't much like other people, so it's not a strain to avoid them. Weird, I know, but I like books.

Today I was reading slowly, enjoying the words as they rolled off the page. I wasn't worried about getting to school on time. I glanced down at my cast, my iron clad excuse.

### Angus

I was at the house by eight in the morning. I stood outside for a few seconds, absorbing the general air of neglect and crumbling mortar that surrounded the place. I went inside and dialled Fergus.

"This was the best you could do?" I teased him. "It's a tip."

"So?" Fergus, buoyant with his success. "What do you want now?"

"A cleaning service, to start. And renovators. Today."

"Hmm. Fussy. I'm on it." He hung up.

I wandered around inside. I knew the cleaners and renovators would be arriving soon, but I didn't feel like going back outside and loitering. I didn't mind the cold or the wind, not at all, but I might draw attention to myself. I wasn't ready for that yet. I don't think I ever will be.

So; sitting room downstairs, also a kitchen and a tiny utility room. The sitting room had yellowing walls, dark pink carpets and numerous stains on the walls. The carpets looked newer and more garish in patches where the furniture had stood. Dirt had improved things, apparently. There was a page from a magazine taped to one of the walls with discoloured sellotape. It showed some woman in what looked like a pink velour tracksuit and gaudy make-up. She was eating an ice cream.

The kitchen was filthy, each available surface crusted over with unidentifiable residues. The cupboards were covered in beige and brown linoleum. The floor was green and sticky. It reeked. I decided to go upstairs to escape from the sights and smells that assaulted my senses. It wasn't much better; there were two bedrooms and a small bathroom, which was filled with cracked tiles, faded wallpaper, and mould. Lots of mould. The bedroom that overlooked the front garden was slightly larger than the other, and didn't have the same sweaty socks and dirty body stench. The wallpaper was pink with green and yellow stripes. I was starting to detect a theme. I wandered into the smelly sock room and opened a grimy window. Wide.

Something caught my attention then. I smelled pain and fear, but it was not human. I glanced around the room, trying to pinpoint the origin of the smell. It didn't take long.

A battered looking cardboard box sat in a corner, untidily, as if it had been thrown there. Inside a small, dirty white kitten looked fearfully up at me. It moved its head and

front paws slightly, and mewled weakly. Its hind limbs seemed useless. Dried diarrhoea encrusted its thin hindquarters.

I stood looking at the small creature curled up in its cardboard box, in its own filth and pain and misery, and I felt the rage howling in the recesses of my soul. I fought to suppress it, grinding my teeth and clenching my fists at my side. It took at least five minutes to bring myself under control, and then I was able to consider the problem at hand, if not dispassionately, then at least more levelly.

As I saw it, I had two options. I could simply reach down and snap the creature's neck, ending its agony quickly and easily. Or I could try to help it. I looked into the innocent blue eyes of the little cat, and dismissed the first option. I had a duty to humanity, even if I barely represented it myself. This animal had known nothing but the cruelty of people. It was time for it to taste the kindness.

Decision made, I bent over and gently lifted the box, and carried it downstairs and outside, trying to minimise the jolting of my steps to prevent inflicting further discomfort.

I stood outside next to the car I'd bought a few months earlier, wondering where the nearest vet was. I was debating whether or not to call Fergus again, or to do some research on my iphone, when a simpler solution presented itself.

"Excuse me," I called to the blonde teenage boy leaning against the wall of the Harding residence. Where can I find a vet that's open?"

He looked up at me, surprised.

"There's one a few miles up the road. It should be open now. It's got an emergency surgery too." He had a deep voice for his apparent age, and he spoke articulately. "Why?"

"I've just bought this house," I inclined my head towards my latest purchase, grimacing slightly. "And I found this in one of the bedrooms."

The teenager raised his eyebrows. He glanced at the house. "A bit of a fixer upper."

I smiled wryly. "Yes, I know."

He pushed himself away from the wall and crossed the road, obviously curious to see the contents of the box. The kitten squeaked at him as he peered inside. His face darkened and he made a decision.

"Well, I can't direct you there, because I'm rubbish at directions, but I can show you where it is. You can drop me at school afterwards, if you want. I'll hold it," he added.

"Thanks." I nodded, and handed the box over to him while I unlocked the car. He took it carefully, as if it were a precious gift, and waited for me to open the passenger door for him. He slid in one movement onto the front passenger seat, where he placed it on his knees before buckling his seatbelt.

"Nice wheels."

"Thanks," I grinned at him. I liked powerful cars, but not the ostentatious ones. I was somehow pleased that he recognised the monster that lay beneath the unobtrusive metallic shell. I started the engine, and it roared into life. The CD player came on automatically, blaring slightly. I liked loud music while I drove. I turned it down.

"That's my sister's favourite."

I froze for a second, slightly stunned by the casual reference to someone who had become so profoundly significant to us over the past few days. Then I felt absurdly pleased that she liked the same music that I did. I shook my head, and pulled out of the parking space and onto the road.

"I'm Mark," he glanced up.

“Pleased to meet you, Mark. I’m Angus.” It was typical of me to forget to introduce myself. Human interaction was not one of my strong points. It was quite funny in an almost tragic way that out of the three of us, I would be the one who would have to become the people person. I chuckled at the thought.

“Left here, then right just after that pub.”

“OK,” I replied and we spent the rest of the journey in silence. When we arrived at the Hillcrest Veterinary Surgery, Mark insisted on coming inside with me. I explained the situation briefly to the receptionist, who cooed gently at the white scruffy kitten. I asked her to get the first available vet to have a look at it, and then do whatever was necessary to help it. I gave her my mobile number, and asked her to contact me as soon as she knew what the problem was.

She glanced up at me from her position leaning over the box, and raised her eyebrows. “It could be expensive.”

“Money is not an issue.”

She nodded, and carried the box into one of the consulting rooms, talking in a high pitched voice to the kitten as she left. It mewled in reply. I turned to Mark.

“Let’s get you to school.”

He nodded briefly. “Thanks.”

I dropped him outside a large brick building surrounded by a six foot chain link fence, and teeming with school kids. The sign said St Paul Secondary School. He hopped out of his seat as soon as I stopped, waved, and disappeared into the crowds. I sat for a moment, wondering what it was like to go to school, and wondering if I would have liked it. Probably not. I had never been to school, nor had my brothers. My father had wanted to minimise our exposure to normal life and normal people. I guess he must have believed that what we didn’t know, we wouldn’t miss. He had known that we would have to leave school before we all changed, and just being around other people became too risky. Mostly for other people, of course, but for us too, in a way. There’s nothing that upsets people more than when somebody gets killed. Declaring emphatically that it had been an accident wouldn’t have cut it - there would have been too much blood. People would have been angry and vengeful and we would have been locked up, if we were lucky.

I turned the car around and headed back to my newly purchased property, hoping that the cleaning staff had arrived. They had, and shortly afterwards a huge white van with the name of a renovating company pulled up. A stocky man in overalls got out, looked at the property, and grunted something to his passenger, a young man with a slack jaw and acne. Next thing the place was swarming with people. I got back in the car and went to find some breakfast.

### **Rebecca**

I hadn’t even realised that Mark had disappeared until Harry knocked on the door, looking forlorn and embarrassed.

“Mark here?” Chatty Harry.

“He went outside to wait for you.” I tried to look over his shoulder, which was difficult. At fourteen Harry was already way taller than me, and bulky. He had a mop of unruly, suspiciously black hair that was combed forwards and covered half his face, and an stud in his nose.

“He must have left early,” Harry shrugged, and then grinned at me. “Bye, Rebecca.” He enunciated each syllable of my name separately. I smiled back, vowing to chew Mark out

about sharing his annoying enunciation of my name with his friends. Harry left, and I reluctantly abandoned my book, slung my bag over my shoulder, and hobbled outside, crutches in hand. I locked the door behind me and set out slowly for school, which was a couple of blocks away, less than a mile. It felt much longer. The bell went about three minutes before I finally swung myself through the big double gated entrance on my trusty crutches. I'd started to appreciate them a few hundred yards into my journey. I was still exhausted by the time I got to school, and my upper arms were burning. I stood for a few minutes, catching my breath before heading off to my first class of the day.

I had forgotten about Mark's disappearance this morning until I saw him standing next to Harry during break. They were both leaning against the south facing wall of the school hall, eyes closed, absorbing the weak sunlight that played over their faces. I left them to their easy companionship and went to explain my late arrival to the headmaster.

I was halfway there when I almost bumped into Shanice. I had been watching the ground for cracks and crevices that could ensnare one of the rubber tips of my crutches and send me flying to land in an undignified heap in front of all these curious onlookers.

I sensed her malignant presence, stopped, and looked up into her mean piggy eyes. Shanice and I had a history that spanned at least ten years of mutual animosity. We had first encountered each other in primary school, where Shanice had tormented me relentlessly for about six months, until one afternoon I had snapped and punched her in the face, breaking her nose. I still cherished the memory. Shanice felt differently, obviously, and although she had stopped pestering me, she had developed an intense loathing of me that manifested itself in hateful stares and the occasional sneered remark. I managed to ignore her most of the time, but I had known I would be in trouble today. I was vulnerable, see, and there's nothing a bully likes more.

"Oi! Freakface!" Original, Shanice. Nice one.

I said nothing, just watched her, anticipating the blow, and wondering if I could do anything about it. I could put weight in my injured leg, but I would be clumsy, and my hands were tangled in the handles of the crutches.

"Not so brave now, are we?" she taunted me.

"Shanice Smith!" the headmaster's voice rang out. "To class please. Now!"

The bell must have rung. I hadn't noticed it. Shanice flushed angrily, her bloated face turning an unhealthy puce colour.

"Whatever!" she said in her whiny voice. "See you later, Freak," she hissed at me, and then she turned and left.

"Well, Miss Harding, I can see why you were late for school today. Carry on." Our headmaster was a harsh but fair man, but he still made me nervous, so I nodded and left as soon as I was able to coordinate the crutches. I knew Shanice had detention that afternoon, so I would be able to escape home unharmed. But I also knew I'd see her tomorrow again. I shuddered.

### **Angus**

I was halfway through my second coffee in what was supposed to be an upmarket breakfast café type thing, when my mobile started vibrating. It was Marcus. He sounded jubilant.

"She's one of us!"

"I know. You said we had a match."

"No, no, that was just a blood group match." Marcus always became impatient with us when we failed to grasp something, even when he had neglected to actually explain it properly. It was like he expected us just to know what he knew. It was flattering in a strange way, but also very frustrating.

"She has an unusual subgroup that I had Fergus flag when it came up. It's the same subgroup that we have, sure, but I wasn't certain that she would have any of our peculiar genes. But today I ran the second DNA comparison. She's got all three genes, Angus."

"Which means?" Sometimes I could be a little slow.

"She's a *vampire*!" Marcus was really getting excited now. I looked around to make sure nobody had heard his yelling.

"God, Marcus, don't use that term. You know Father hated it."

"This is brilliant, I can't believe it, it's just fantastic." Marcus sounded a bit hysterical.

"Explain, Marcus," I said. "Don't you have to be a, er, like us to have children like us?" Our father and mother had both been iron metabolisers, people who can use iron in a different way to normal people. Traditionally, I suppose we would have been called vampires, but we no longer had to drink blood to fulfil our iron needs. Iron tablets sufficed, and we had become slightly more civilised as a result. Well, Marcus and Fergus, certainly. But the underlying physiology was there, and we still really *liked* blood; we just didn't *need* it.

Marcus had coined the new term for what we are. And even though I didn't like hearing the word vampire out loud - force of habit, I suppose - I found the political correctness of Marcus' term a bit offensive. Call a spade a spade, dammit. Just not where anyone can hear you do it.

"Apparently not. This is so exciting! A recessive set of genes! I can't believe it!" Exclamation marks all over the place.

"So why doesn't she behave like one?" I wasn't convinced. "She's past puberty now, surely." When our hormone levels started changing, especially with the surge in steroid hormones, like testosterone and oestrogen, our bodies switched to a kind of a dual metabolism. So we could metabolise normal food like normal people - fats, carbohydrates, proteins. But when we had enough iron in our systems, our bodies could use it ways we couldn't yet fully understand. Marcus was still working on figuring that one out.

Marcus was silent for a few seconds, considering the question. "Well, she's female, and they store less iron than males, and she's probably a vegetarian. She most likely hasn't had her first hit yet." Marcus' use of drug terminology was strangely appropriate. It was how I had come to think of being a vampire - I subconsciously flinched at that word again. We had a set of unique receptors which responded in an unusual way to iron, that everyday substance, like an alcoholic responds differently to a shot of whiskey than a normal person would. Except maybe an alcoholic was not the best analogy. The craving was there, certainly, but our drug did not incapacitate us. Instead it made us invincible and powerful, strong enough to break boulders, and fast enough to run alongside speeding cars. I closed my eyes and recalled the heady rush, the clarity of vision, the enhanced senses, the sensation of muscles ripping through the sluggish air, the crystallisation of all pleasure and wonder into this perfect rush of being.

Our father had explained the situation to us one day when we were twelve. The signs were all there that we were going to hit puberty soon, and he wanted the transition from slightly strange but mostly normal boy to utter freak to go as smoothly as possible, I suppose. He was a good man, my father, strong, obviously, but compassionate too, and

intelligent enough to have figured out the basic metabolic reason for our unusual abilities. He had met my mother towards the end of her life, still youthful looking, another benefit of being able to use iron as we do. We heal fast, restoring aging and damaged cells rapidly, so we look as if we are just out of school, or in our early twenties, for most of our long lives. Adult, but never old.

We were the inevitable result of their union, and our birth sapped whatever life our mother had left in her, and she died a few days later. My father, to his credit, never blamed us for her death, but set about educating his three small, precocious boys, and loving us as best he could. And when we hit puberty, and our lives changed forever, he was there to guide us through the changes, and reassure us that we always had a choice. We could harness the power, or we could let it harness us and become monsters. I like to think that we did the former, but sometimes I'm not so sure.

And now Marcus was telling me that there was someone else like us out there, someone who would need guidance through the changes that she would inevitably go through, one way or another. My father had always worried that if we did not expose ourselves to the effects that huge doses of iron had on our systems, and learn to control them, that we would eventually succumb to some profound and overpowering instinct and actually kill someone and drink their blood. It made sense. There's a lot of iron in blood.

I imagined Rebecca biting someone's carotid artery, responding to some deep, unacknowledged desire, and drinking their warm blood as it was pumped directly from the heart to her open mouth. I thought of how her family would react, and flinched again. It was bad enough knowing that you are a freak without everyone else knowing it too. I would have to do something to help the girl. I wondered, not for the first time if I was the right person to do it. I considered asking Marcus or Fergus to take over the task, but a stab of what could have been jealousy made me dismiss that thought. I would do this myself, and let the dice fall where they may.

### **Rebecca**

Mark came bounding through the door as soon as he got home. I'd arrived a few minutes earlier, and had scrambled out of my uniform, and was munching on a slice of toast in the kitchen and reading my book. It was nearing the end, and I already knew what was going to happen, but it was well written, and by one of my favourite authors, so it didn't matter.

"Met our new neighbour this morning," he announced out of the blue, saying just enough to pique my curiosity, as usual. At first I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but then I remembered the commotion across the street yesterday.

"Already?"

"Yep. He found an injured kitten, so I showed him where the vet was. Seems OK." Then he was gone, bounding up the stairs two at a time. I shrugged. I wasn't sure if it was the kitten that seemed OK, or if it was the neighbour.

"He's got a fab car too," shouted my typically male sibling from upstairs. I chuckled. Amazing how some things are important to some people, and not one bit significant to others.

### **Angus**

The vet's receptionist phoned just after breakfast. I was driving back to my hotel. I pressed the speaker function on the phone set.

"Hello, is that Angus Byrne?"

"Yes." She paused, maybe waiting for me to go on.

"You brought the kitten in this morning?"

"Yes." I wondered, not for the first time, if I should try to be more talkative, but I had nothing else I felt I needed to say.

"Just to let you know that it's got a broken pelvis. Vet says it looks like someone's stomped on it." My knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Another pause. "Anyway, she's going to need a few wires to stabilise the pelvic fractures, if that's OK. We can do it for you this afternoon, and you can fetch her tonight."

"What time?"

"Between six and seven pm?"

"OK."

Pause. "OK. Bye then."

As I hung up I thought of the kind of person who would stamp on a small animal hard enough to break its bones. I wondered how anyone would ever be able to justify doing something like that, and yet I knew from experience that there were people out there who hurt animals for fun. They were one of my favourite targets. Them, and the monsters who abused children.

Fergus and I had developed a kind of partnership a decade or so back, when I realised that being a legitimate policeman was not a very efficient way of fighting crime. You'd hunt for a certain perpetrator for ages, and when you eventually found them, you would have to hand them over to what was essentially a deeply flawed system, and hope that justice would prevail. Yeah, right.

So Fergus hunted the crime online, looking on sites like youtube for video footage of cruelty of any description. He would send me the footage, and whatever information he could garner from the IP address. I did the rest, finding those deeply repulsive individuals who were responsible for such atrocities, and I hurt them. Sometimes I hurt them quite a lot. And then I would rewrite their mean little minds so they would feel physically and mental agony if they even considered being cruel in any way to anything ever again. Paedophiles were a bit more difficult to find, but find them we did, and they were the ones I usually killed. Sometimes a mind will be so dark and foul and evil that repairing it is just not an option.

As I drove, I realised that it was going to be difficult for me to keep a kitten in a hotel room. I thought of Mark, and of his obvious compassion for the little animal. I decided to ask him if he would watch the cat overnight. I could always smuggle it into the hotel, but I had something I needed to do tonight, and I didn't know how long it would take. I didn't want to leave the small feline invalid unattended in some empty hotel room. I phoned Fergus' mobile.

"What?" Fergus answered. "We're busy here, you know."

"Yeah, yeah. I need the names of those people who lived in that house you just bought for me, and their current whereabouts."

Fergus was suspicious. "Why?"

"They left something behind."

"OK, I'll do some checking up and send you the details in a few. Bye!" He was gone. I guess not being talkative must run in families.

**Rebecca**

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