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The Son-in-Law

Written by Charity Norman

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The
SON-in-
LAW

CHARITY
NORMAN


ALLEN & UNWIN

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For Tim

Thanks for all the banana cake.

In the Leeds Crown Court

REGINA

V

Joseph William Scott

Exhibit 53: Transcript of 999 call made by Scarlet Scott

Operator: Hello, ambulance emergency.

SS: Um, can you please help? My mum's lying on the ground.

Op: She's lying on the ground? Is she conscious?

SS: We can't wake her up.

Op: Is she breathing?

SS: Dad, is she breathing?

Joseph Scott (in background): No, she's not breathing, she's not breathing . . . Christ. Tell them there's no pulse!

SS: She isn't breathing, she hasn't got a pulse.

Op: Okay, help's on its way now.

SS (crying): Please tell them to hurry, she looks wrong.

Op: Who have you got with you?

SS: My dad and my brothers.

Joseph Scott (shouts): Help her, please! Her heart's stopped.

Op: Okay, I heard that. Help's on its way, lights and sirens.

I'm going to tell you exactly what to do, okay?

SS: Okay.

Op: Listen to me carefully and tell your dad.

SS: Okay.

Op: Is she flat on her back?

SS: No, she's—

Op: Tell your dad she has to be flat on her back.

SS: Dad, she says to get her flat on her back. Okay, he's done that.

Op: No pillows?

SS: No, there aren't any. We're in the living room.

Op: Tell him to check her mouth . . . Is there anything in there, like food or vomit?

SS: *Dad, is there anything in her mouth? . . . No, there isn't.*

Op: *Tell him to put the heel of his hand on her breastbone.*

SS: *She says put the heel of your hand on her breastbone.*

Op: *Put his other hand on top of that hand.*

SS: *Put your other hand on top of that one.*

Op: *Okay? He's doing that? Now press down, pump her chest about twice a second.*

SS: *She says pump her chest about twice a second.*

Joseph Scott: *Twice a second, okay . . . Oh my God, oh my God.*

Op: *Is he pumping her chest now?*

SS: *Yes, but she isn't . . . why isn't she waking up?*

Op: *You're doing really well, really well. What's your name?*

SS: *Scarlet.*

Op: *How old are you, Scarlet?*

SS: *Ten.*

Op: *You're doing so well. That music's very loud, isn't it? Could you turn it off?*

SS: *Um . . . no, I can't reach the knob.*

Op: *That's okay, don't worry. Your dad needs to pump rapidly, tell him just to keep going, I'll let him know when it's time to stop.*

SS: *She says you have to pump rapidly, keep going till she says to stop.*

Op: *Good girl. You're doing so well. How old is your mum, Scarlet?*

SS: *I don't know . . . um, thirty-three I think.*

Op: *What's her name?*

SS (long pause): *She's gone a funny colour.*

Op: *I need you to listen to me, Scarlet. Is your dad still pumping her chest?*

SS: *Oh no—I think she's dead! I think she's dead!*

Op: *Scarlet, listen, I need you to stay calm for me. Is he still doing it?*

SS: *Yes, but she isn't waking up.*

Op: Okay. Your dad needs to keep going. How old are your brothers?

SS: Theo's seven and Ben is a baby.

Op: I can hear the baby crying. He's not hurt is he? No? Did your mum have a fit, or . . .

SS: No, she didn't.

Op: So what's actually happened to her?

SS: My dad . . . (crying) . . . my dad hit her.

Op: He hit her?

SS: And then she fell over and now she's . . . (screams) There's blood on the floor!

Op: You're doing such a great job. Do you think Theo could go to the door and look out for the ambulance?

SS: Theo—no, he can't go because he's hiding, he's scared.

Op: Okay. Are you in the front room? Can you see into the road?

SS: Yes I can.

Op: Is the front door locked?

SS: No it won't be . . . Please, could you tell them to hurry?

Op: The ambulance is almost there, and the police, okay? Is your dad still doing the compressions?

SS: The . . .

Op: Is he still pumping her chest rapidly?

SS: Yes he is, but he's crying and crying.

Op: Help should be with you any minute now.

SS: My dad's crying and Ben's crying.

Op: You're being very brave, you can be proud of yourself.

SS: They're here! I can see the lights outside.

Op: Can you go and let them in, Scarlet?

SS: Okay . . . (to paramedic) In here, quick, she's in here. (Voices in background, unintelligible)

Op: Scarlet? The crew are with you are they?

SS: And some police.

Op: You've done really well.

SS (crying): Is my mum going to be all right?

One

Scarlet

My mother used to say her wedding day was like a fairytale. It was a blue and gold morning, and a million daffodils rippled beneath the city walls. She and my father were young, beautiful and crazy about each other.

‘Don’t let people tell you love isn’t like in the films, Scarlet,’ she said. It was one of those moments when she seemed to be surfing right on top of a foaming, frothing wave of happiness. ‘Why on earth shouldn’t it be? There *is* such a thing as happy ever after. People think it’s cool to scoff.’ She gave a little laugh, humming along to the jazz music she had playing on the stereo. ‘Miserable sods, I say.’

For some reason, that evening is one of my clearest memories of Mum. She smelled of . . . well, of Mum; her special sandalwood scent, and coffee and maybe wine. I’ve got one of her soft cardigans under my bed, and it still smells like her. If I press my face into it and shut my eyes, I can pretend it *is* her. I must have been about eight because Flotsam and Jetsam were kittens then, fluffy white pom-poms galloping across the bed. Ben wasn’t even born. Theo was lying on the floor, trying to read a baby book from the new entrants’ class at school. His tongue was sticking out.

Our parents were getting ready to go somewhere for the evening. Mum seemed thin and quick, like an elf, with her red-gold hair cut short and chic and a shining sweep of fringe to one side. When she was happy, as she was that night, she seemed to light everyone up. The music went right through her like an electric current. It made her dance, and her dress sparkled and flashed as she moved. When she sparkled her way past Dad, he pulled her into his arms—*gotcha!* he said—and they danced together. I thought they looked like film stars. Their legs moved at the same time, in the same direction, and they looked into one another's eyes. Then he kissed her.

'Do you believe in love at first sight?' I asked when she sat down at the dressing table.

'Absodiddly! It was love at first sight for Dad and me. He was my knight in shining armour, did you know that? He rescued me from a wicked knave, fought for my honour and carried me away.'

'A wicked knave?'

She laughed into the mirror as she stroked on her dark pink lipstick. It was as though she had a secret joke with the lady reflected there. I could see that mirror lady's eyes. They were all colour, like glowing green glass in a pale face. 'I was having a little trouble with a guy at a party.'

'And Dad carried you away?'

'Well, in a manner of speaking.'

'Like Prince Charming?'

Dad was listening to all this, chuckling as he laced up his shoes. Mum reached out and touched his face with her long fingers. 'Charming shmarming! Your dad was *much* more glamorous than that big girl's blouse! Hang on.' She danced over to the cupboard and found her photo album. Then she made room at the dressing table, patting the chair beside her. Dad ruffled Theo's messy hair and said he'd read him a story before the babysitter arrived, and the two of them potted off. Theo was a miniature Dad, really, except that he had a button nose where Dad's was heavy

and strong. They both looked old-fashioned, with slate-coloured eyes and serious expressions that seemed to burst into sunshine when they smiled.

Mum and I looked through her album, though I'd seen it many times before. In my favourite picture, my parents were standing by a fountain. They'd just got married.

'See?' she said, smiling at it. 'Look at him! I still think he might turn out to be a lost Russian prince, only he doesn't know it yet.'

I agreed, because I loved her. But I remember thinking that Dad looked just like Dad, even dressed in a posh tailcoat which I've never seen him wear in real life. He was gazing at her as the photo was taken. She was talking, and whatever she'd said was making him laugh. He was pushing his glasses up his nose and looked like a nice, very handsome history teacher and not like a murderer at all. Mum's wedding dress clung to her body and gathered in white folds around her feet, like double cream when you pour it out of a jug. She wore a lace veil with a circle of flowers. This had been my grandmother Hannah's, and Great-Gran's before her, and I could wear it one day.

I ran to my bedroom and fetched my library book, *Maid of Sherwood*. The illustration on the jacket was of Maid Marion riding into the forest to look for Robin. She was wearing a blue gown and a white cloth over her head, held on by a circlet of gold. She had huge eyes and a thin face.

'Maid Marion's you,' I said.

Mum clutched me to her chest. Actually, it was a bit too tight. 'Oh, Scarlet.' She sounded as though she was running out of breath. 'Don't you ever change. Don't ever be horrid and sulky like I was. You absolutely have to stay just the way you are right now.' Then she kissed both my cheeks—*mwah, mwah*—quite hard, almost angrily. It gave me dark pink kiss marks.

I later wondered whether that was why she let him kill her. Perhaps she didn't want to see us three grow up. I thought if she'd really wanted to be with us she would have found a way to stay alive. Then we wouldn't have had to live with Hannah

and Gramps. Now, of course, I realise this is nonsense. Mum couldn't help dying. Her brain was flooded with blood which made it swell up.

I never did take that book back to the library. Eventually they sent a grumpy letter and I paid the fine out of my Christmas money. So *Maid of Sherwood* was my Christmas present to myself. I've still got it under my bed. I've got the photo album too, but I've made a few changes there.

Two

Joseph

The prison was carefully designed to look grim, dwarfing the streets as a dour warning. On a bitter December day, when gusts knifed in from the Pennines, it could have been the brooding castle in a horror film.

It was on such a morning that a metal door swung quietly open. It led into an open area festooned with yellow signs announcing that this was *HMP Leeds*, as though Armley Jail was a jolly tourist attraction. A man in his thirties stepped out into a world that whipped and churned with icy particles. He wasn't dressed for the Yorkshire winter; a lightweight cotton suit hung, crumpled, from broad shoulders. The fingers of one hand were rapidly turning red as they gripped the handle of a plastic bag, and round-rimmed glasses disappeared beneath a film of sleety particles.

The door banged behind him, shutting him out. For a second or two he seemed unable to move. He turned his head and watched a prison van as it swept towards massive vehicle gates. Then he raised a forefinger, pushed his glasses up his nose, and set off past the yellow signs, past the eyeless walls and into the city's streets. A car honked and swerved as he seemed about to step out in front of it. An elderly woman edged past with her eyes averted. Finally he crossed the road and took refuge in a bus shelter.

Four schoolgirls in uniform perched on the narrow seat, smoking and gossiping. They cast sidelong smirks at the stranger as he stood examining a timetable on the wall. One of them—obviously the clown of the group, a ponytail sprouting from the side of her head—whispered something, and the others erupted into giggles.

As time passed, the smoking girls began to stare openly at the newcomer. He looked vampire-pale and faintly exotic. His cheekbones were high and Slavic, tinged blue in the bitter air. After much nudging, Ponytail spoke up.

‘Want one?’ she offered, holding out a packet of cigarettes.

His eyes were blue-grey, bloodshot under heavy brows. ‘I don’t smoke. Thanks.’

‘Scuse me,’ she persisted, with a do-or-die glance at her fellows. ‘We’ve got a bet on about you. Not being funny or anything.’

‘Not being funny,’ echoed the stranger dryly. His voice carried a hint of Geordie. ‘Go on then.’

‘Did you just get out of jail?’

‘Been a free man for . . . ooh, twenty minutes?’

‘Thought so!’ she screamed. ‘Whassit like? My boyfriend’s uncle was in there. He reckons the food’s terrible, worse than bloody Hull and that’s saying something.’

The newcomer shrugged discouragingly, and turned back to the timetable.

The girls were not put off. *You ask . . . No you ask . . . I asked last time . . . Go on, Karin.* Ponytail stepped closer, wrapping her striped school scarf across her mouth.

‘Scuse me . . . erm, look don’t take this the wrong way or anything, but my mates want to know what you was in for.’

He was shivering now, shoulders hunched, forcing his hands into his trouser pockets.

‘*She* reckons you’re a nonce,’ said his interrogator, pointing at one of her cronies. ‘But I reckon—’

The stranger never heard what she reckoned. Her voice was drowned out by the furious blast of a car’s horn as a black four-wheel drive mounted the pavement.

‘Scott!’ yelled the driver, leaning across to open the passenger door. ‘Scott, you fuckin’ tosshead, where d’you think you’re going?’

The tosshead managed a strained smile. ‘Akash, where’d you get the wheels? Tell me you didn’t pinch it.’

‘Company car. Now stop asking bloody stupid questions and get in. You must be freezing your tiny bollocks off out there.’

The girls had watched this exchange with fascination. Ponytail had one last shot. ‘C’mon! Can’t have been that bad. Bet you didn’t kill nobody.’

The stranger looked over his shoulder, one foot in the car. ‘You bet I didn’t?’

‘I’ve just bet two quid you didn’t.’

‘Then you’re two quid out of pocket,’ he announced calmly, before ducking inside.

The four truants stood watching as the heavy vehicle lurched off towards the dual carriageway. There was a thoughtful silence. Eventually, Ponytail ground her cigarette stub out on the pavement. ‘What a load of shite. I reckon he was in for something really boring. Looked like a friggin’ undertaker.’

‘Sexy eyes though,’ said the smallest one, fanning herself comically. ‘Whew! I’ve just been smouldered at by a murderer.’

Ponytail made an obscene gesture. ‘People with little round specs don’t do murders.’



Joseph Scott huddled in the passenger seat, blowing on his numb hands.

‘You’re as pig-ugly as ever, Scott,’ remarked his companion affably. He was young, white-toothed and hair-gelled. ‘Let’s turn up the heating . . . That better? Fuck’s sake, tell me those aren’t the only clothes you’ve got?’

‘The suit I wore to court when I got sent away. Symbolic.’ Joseph looked out of the window, flinching as cars flashed past, dazed by the sheer speed of the outside world.

Akash smiled at the back of his friend's head. 'Crazy, isn't it? You think you're going to be all *woohoo*! You fantasise for months about chasing skirt and getting totally ratted and filling your face with Mum's home cooking. Then you step out that gate and . . . what next?'

'Feels like a foreign country.' Joseph rubbed his face. 'How did you know I was coming out today?'

'I phoned your solicitor. Got to the gate complex, they said you'd already gone. I've been driving around bloody Armley looking for you, silly prick.'

'Thanks.'

'You're welcome.'

Joseph turned away from the window. 'You rescued me from some monstrous ladettes. Shouldn't they be in school?'

Akash put on a plummy accent, which seemed to come easily to him. 'That's modern gals for you. Country's going to the dogs . . . It's the parents I blame. Anyway, where to, mate? Pubs are open, barmaids are lined up and waiting.'

Joseph imagined the taste of a pint. 'You're on.' He hesitated. 'In a bit. I need to get to York first and see my solicitor. I was planning on catching a bus. I've got a travel warrant.'

'You're out of your tree! You don't want to spend your first hours of freedom sitting in some lawyer's office. Me, I never want to see another one again as long as I live. Look, there's the Prince Albert. Shall we—'

'After I've paid a visit to my solicitor,' Joseph insisted. 'He's expecting me.'

'Is this about the kids?'

'Of course it's about the kids.'

'Mate, is this a good idea? You're on licence, right? I bet you've got a condition on there about not contacting your family.'

'True.' Joseph had a copy of his licence conditions in his pocket. 'I'm not supposed to go anywhere near their house—which is in York, admittedly. But nobody said I couldn't visit my solicitor.'

‘Let’s get some decent food and a pint down you. You need to think this through.’

‘You can feed me caviar and champagne if you like. Bathe me in ass’s milk, I won’t change my mind.’

‘You’ve waited all this time, Scottie. Another couple of days won’t hurt.’

Joseph’s jaw tensed dangerously. ‘I’ve been counting down the hours until I can walk into that solicitor’s office. It’s all that’s kept me going. Come on, Akash, you know what it’s like in there—nothing to do but think. If you don’t want to nip across to York, fine—I’ll catch a bus.’

Akash capitulated. ‘Okay. York, here we come. Where are you staying tonight?’

‘I told the probation guy I was planning to look up my sister in Gateshead,’ said Joseph unenthusiastically. ‘He wants to know my new address by Friday.’

‘Have you phoned her?’

‘No. She’d dance on my grave, given half a chance.’

‘Any other family?’

‘Just my old man. Last I heard he was living it up on the Costa Blanca.’

‘I’ve got a sofa. You’re welcome to it for as long as you need.’

‘Thanks,’ muttered Joseph. ‘That would be . . . Thanks.’ He stared down at his hands, and after a moment Akash turned on the radio. A boy band was playing.

They’d reached the outskirts of York before Joseph spoke again. ‘Sorry. Sorry. Thanks for picking me up. I’ve got a discharge payment of sod-all, so we’ll blow it on a pint.’ He pulled some notes from his pocket. ‘So, is this your car?’

‘Yeah . . . well, technically it’s Dad’s. He set me up in a business. You’re looking at the managing director of Squeaky Clean Offices and Domestic. The good news is, I’ve got a load of women to boss about. The bad news is I work half the night.’ The young man forced his way into the overtaking lane between two cars, gesticulating when one of them flashed its lights.

The wind had dropped by the time they arrived in York. So had the temperature. 'I'll wait for you in the pub over there.' Akash blew out his cheeks, rubbing his hands together. 'Fuck, it's brass monkeys.'

Joseph looked around, getting his bearings, still disoriented. The air seemed oddly opaque.

'I think it's going to snow,' he said.

Three

Hannah

I don't know where to begin. Not with him, that's for sure. How can he be the beginning, when he destroyed everything that gave my life meaning?

She was our only child, you see. There was no understudy. Joseph Scott brought down the curtain forever. She was extraordinary from the moment she was born—a delicate creature with the brightest eyes the midwife had ever seen. I was twenty-six years old, and euphoric. My baby was a crumpled thing of wonder, an alien creature from outer space, the most precious object in the universe. Things that seemed vital a week before had become irrelevant. The skiing holiday? Ridiculous—of course we couldn't go, not until Zoe was old enough to join us. My battle for promotion to departmental head? Who cared? My alcoholic sister Eliza wanted to stay for a few days? No, she bloody well couldn't. Nobody could. We had a new baby.

Zoe was born in a cottage hospital, near where we were living at the time. In the next bed a girl called Jennifer nursed her eye-watering eleven-pounder, Bradley. Jennifer had pink cheeks and a pinker towelling bathrobe, and her bedside cabinet was covered with cards screaming *It's a boy!* As though she didn't know.

‘What you calling yours?’ she asked, eyeing the scrap of life in the cot by my bed.

‘Zoe,’ I said. ‘Zoe Eliza.’

‘S’nice. This your first?’

I nodded, a grin of idiocy plastered across my face.

‘Bradley’s my third,’ she said. ‘And believe me, he’s my last!’

Freddie held Zoe as though she was made of crystal, his foolish smile his matching mine. His hair was already in retreat, leaving shiny temples. I thought it looked distinguished, with his long face and fine bones.

‘Is that the granddad?’ whispered one of Jennifer’s visitors.

Freddie and I pretended not to hear, while Jennifer shushed and the visitor giggled.

Jennifer’s husband came to take her home the next morning. I watched as she organised her things, chattering amiably. Minutes later, she had gone. The midwife came to make her bed. Funny thing: I missed her terribly. In fact, that was the day I began to cry, for no reason at all. Freddie found me snivelling in the nursing chair. Zoe had fallen asleep in my arms, heart-shaped mouth open, dribbling milk onto my blouse.

‘It’s not getting her,’ I sobbed, as Frederick patted and soothed.

‘What’s not getting her?’ He touched the whorl of copper hair on Zoe’s mushroom-soft head. Her veins pulsed beneath the fontanel.

‘Life,’ I said. ‘Death.’

But it did.



I think I shall start with the letter.

It arrived the day they let him go. It lay there, making the kitchen table filthy with its very presence, with a rash of purple stamps from the censors. Perhaps we’d dropped off the list of forbidden correspondents, or perhaps the authorities had slipped up. We’d already had two from his solicitor, so I had a fair idea what this one was about.

I wouldn't open it. The thing could go in the bin. *There!* I cast it into that dark pit and heard the satisfying click-clack of the plastic lid. It would be sinking helplessly into a glob of leftover porridge. *That's what I think of you!*

It had been snowing since lunchtime, and the garden was already a white wilderness. The heaviest fall had passed, but miniature wagon wheels of lace still waltzed and swirled. Frederick and Ben were out there, trying to make a snowman. I could see them through the kitchen window. Ben took three steps to each one of his Gramps' as he shovelled snow into the tiny wooden wheelbarrow. Frederick made that barrow for Zoe, when she was small. He and she used to weed the flower beds together. I'd hear her chattering—yabber yabber yabber, without a pause for breath—and his delighted laughter. We wanted more children, expected more, but after three excruciating miscarriages I got the message and poor old Frederick got the snip.

I opened the oven to find my scones smoking merrily. Damn and blast Joseph Scott, he even made me burn the scones. I rescued the best of them before tapping on the window. Frederick and Ben were bent low over the winter-bare cabbage patch—examining some life form, for sure. Frederick would be speaking in rich, enthusiastic tones like David Attenborough, and Ben would be staring up into his grandfather's face with a look of total absorption. Four years old, and seventy-six. Those two had a love affair going on.

I opened the kitchen door, warbling names to the tune of 'Waltzing Matilda'. 'Frederick Ben, Frederick Ben, would you like some tea and scones?'

The warmth of the kitchen billowed out, hanging like a heavy eiderdown in the frozen wastes. Freddie took his grandson's hand and the two figures headed towards me—one tall and too thin, each step taken cautiously for fear of a slip on the icy path; the other small, plump, with a jerky quick-walk. Flotsam, one of Zoe's Birman cats, pattered behind, tail high.

They were letting him out today. He'd probably be free by now. We'd had a letter from the authorities to tell us so. Nice of them, I suppose. I certainly didn't want to meet him face to face with no warning. I didn't want to meet him face to face at all; but one day I would turn a corner in the supermarket and there he'd be, bold as brass, leering at me like the psychopath in a bad film. I could feel the familiar hatred stirring inside me. It burned. What would I do, when confronted by my daughter's killer? Perhaps I'd find his car and cut the brake cable. Nobody would blame me.

Ben and Frederick burst into the house in a flurry of slush and Tarzan calls, hanging up their coats on pegs, peeling off wet woollen gloves and—in Ben's case—plonking down onto the doormat and tugging at his wellingtons. His right foot was by his nose. I don't remember ever having that India-rubber flexibility.

'Put your gloves on the radiator,' I ordered. 'And your horrid wet socks.'

They weren't listening. They were two artists, planning an installation. 'So we're agreed on bottle tops for buttons, and . . . What about eyes, do you think?' asked Freddie.

Ben pulled the boot off his other foot. He had a revolting running nose, and squirmed as I wiped it.

'Here—give that snowman one of Gramps' caps,' I suggested, taking down an old one from a peg. It was a tweed flat cap, and the silk lining was torn.

'It's a *snowlady*,' cried Ben, guffawing indulgently at my density. 'Not a *man*! Can we have one of your great big wedding hats?'

'I'm surprised at you, Hannah,' added Frederick, white brows twitching. 'Making assumptions based on gender stereotypes.'

'Oh, shut up.' I stuck out my tongue, and Freddie put his arm around my shoulder, as he must have done a million times over the past forty years.

I was twenty-four when I met and married Frederick Wilde. I had no intention of falling in love—not then, not ever. I was absorbed in my doctorate in York, and Not the Marrying Type.

One evening, a fellow postgrad called Laura talked me into going to the last night of *The Caretaker*. Apparently the production had garnered rave reviews (*in Frederick Wilde's hands, humour and darkness intertwine with shocking sensitivity*). I sat through the play, thought it ugly and didn't care two hoots whether the director was Frederick Wilde or Donald Duck.

Laura was having a fling with the stage manager, so we were invited to a last-night bash afterwards. They were an entertaining lot, I had to admit, and I began to enjoy myself. A lanky, tweed-jacketed chap seemed to be the centre of attention.

'Who's that?' I asked Laura's boyfriend.

He glanced around. 'That's Freddie Wilde!'

'Who?'

'C'mon, I'll introduce you. You're going to love him.' And with those unwittingly prophetic words, he led me to my destiny.

It was Frederick's humility that struck me first. People in the theatre hung on his every word, yet he always seemed to regard their stories as more interesting than his own. I found in him everything I admired, perhaps everything I lacked—creativity and humour and forgiveness of human nature. God knows what he found in me. He was twelve years my senior, though that seemed ludicrously irrelevant. My parents fretted and fussed about the age gap but they soon fell under his spell. We married within a year, and were still married forty years on. Laura and her stage manager parted company a week after *The Caretaker* closed.

That wretched letter. The lid of the bin seemed agitated, as though some animal was scavenging in there. Who knew? Perhaps Scott was writing to say he'd never trouble us again. Perhaps the letter was a suicide note—just the kind of thing he'd do, try and load his guilt onto us.

Flotsam settled in the armchair in the corner, close beside his sleeping twin sister. Ben climbed up onto his tall stool at the table and grabbed a scone, legs swinging. Frederick sat opposite. 'Scones! How lovely,' he declared, tactfully ignoring the whiff of incineration.

‘There’s a review of Scarlet’s play in the local,’ I said, passing him a copy of the *Yorkshire Post*. ‘Take a look.’

He put down his cup, lifted his glasses onto his nose and studied the paper. *The Bootham amateur dramatic society’s production has much to delight . . . lighting, music . . .* I watched him read, knowing that he was getting to the best bit. ‘Oho!’ He cried in triumph. ‘*Scarlet Scott has commanding presence as Puck, and steals every scene she is in.* Oh, that’s marvellous. Well played, Scarletta!’

‘I’m not surprised,’ I said, rereading it over his shoulder. ‘She lights up any stage. So did her mother. So do you, when you act.’

‘Are we going to see Scarlet’s play, Hannah?’ asked Ben.

‘Of course!’

‘Hm.’ He considered this information as he reached for more jam. ‘Will Theo come too?’

‘Definitely! It’s just the sort of play he’ll like.’

‘Will it be boring?’

‘No, it’s wonderful. It’s about fairies.’

‘More to the point,’ added Freddie, ‘if you sit still and keep quiet, we’ll take the three of you out for pizza afterwards. And ice-cream.’

‘Okay then. Gramps, d’you think tee-ran-a-saw-us ate pizza?’ asked Ben, whose twin preoccupations were food and dinosaurs.

‘Meatlovers was his favourite,’ Freddie replied seriously.

The pair of them began to witter absurdly about prehistoric pizza while I wandered in aimless little circles, fretting about that envelope in the bin.

‘All right, my darling?’ asked Freddie. ‘You’re not eating.’

‘I’m watching my weight . . . trying to keep the rate of inflation under control.’

He knew me so well. ‘It’s today, isn’t it?’ he asked quietly. When I nodded, he seemed to age another ten years. He looked like what he was—an elderly man who would never stop grieving. He reached out and rubbed my arm. His own hand was

crisscrossed, indigo rivers under the thin skin. ‘They have to let him out. He’s served his time.’

‘If I see him anywhere near here . . .’ I muttered.

‘He won’t come here.’

‘Who?’ asked Ben, scraping his knife around in the jam. ‘Who won’t come here?’

‘Nobody you know, sweetheart,’ I said. And it was true. Ben hadn’t seen his father since he was a year old.

‘Shall we go back outside now, Gramps? Let’s get it finished before Theo and Scarlet come home.’ Cramming the rest of the scone into his mouth, Ben slid from his stool.

I dug out a straw sunhat for their snowlady and promised to pay a state visit as soon as she was ready. ‘I’ll bring the camera,’ I said, as they pulled on their boots.

‘And a woolly scarf?’ wheedled Ben. ‘Even snowladies wear scarves.’

‘What are you calling her?’

As Ben tugged at the door, winter swirled in with a long, cold gasp. ‘Snowmummy,’ he replied without hesitation, and I could have wept for him.

Once they’d gone, I cleared the table and poured myself another cup of tea. It was still there, fossicking around in the filthy depths. I couldn’t stand it. So I reached into the bin—tea bags, porridge, revolting sticky bits of toast—and lifted out the envelope between finger and thumb. It oozed menace.

I ripped the thing open and read the letter fast as I could, feeling polluted.

Dear Hannah and Frederick,

Already, four words in, I was disgusted. *Dear?*

I don’t know whether you’ve received my solicitor’s letters, but as he has had no reply I thought I would send one of my own. I expect to be released very soon now. As you know, I

haven't seen the children for over three years and I've missed them more than I can say. I didn't ask, and you didn't bring them. The visiting area isn't a great place for families. I didn't like the idea of them being searched and prodded, and anyway it wasn't how I wanted them to think of me.

But soon I'll be out, and that's very different, as I hope you'll agree. So I was wondering, where could I see them and when?

'You'll see them over my dead body,' I said aloud.

They need to know me. They need to know that their father is a human being, not a devil, and that I am bitterly sorry for what I did. If wishing would change things, Zoe would be alive and I'd be the one dead.

At least we could agree on that. In a perfect world, he'd be the dead one—or, better still, expunged from history.

Please write to me at this address, but put my prison number on the envelope or it won't get here. Or else to my solicitor, Richard O'Brien in York. If I don't hear from you, I'll have to apply to the court. I hope it won't come to that.

*With my genuine best wishes,
Joseph Scott*

The letter was dated two weeks previously. It must have taken some time to get through those useless censors, out of Armley and into the postal system. Didn't matter. I wouldn't be replying to him or his blasted solicitor. The mere sight of his handwriting—the image of his murdering hand holding the pen—made my knees shake. Letter and envelope were hurled back into the bin.

Then I sat at the table and pressed my hands against my mouth. I wouldn't cry. Joseph Scott wouldn't make me cry, not

ever again. I'd cried gallons of tears; I'd wept until my eyes were bruised. I'd lived in darkness, even flirted with the idea of ending my life. All because of him.

More than anything else in the world, I longed for Joseph Scott to disappear forever.