

Dead Charming By I D Jackson

Chapter 1

TWO YEARS AGO

When it all started Tony Jones was twenty-eight and his wife Emma just a few months younger. Childhood sweethearts, perhaps destined to be together, they'd met in Miss Holloway's class at King's Road Primary, sitting next to each other on their first day and then all the way through school. Tony's cheeky grin and rough-shorn dark hair captivated Emma at first sight and they became the centre of a tight-knit group of young friends with the world at their feet. They became inseparable, even when they moved on to Stretford High and faced the pressures of puberty. Although they were not romantically involved at school, neither Emma nor Tony developed an interest in anyone else of the opposite sex. Tony spent time with his friends playing football and Emma spent time with hers talking about clothes and playing music, but they always found time for each other. Perhaps it was the proximity of their houses, only three doors apart on Royston Road in Firswood, or perhaps the fact that their parents were friends and their fathers worked in the same joinery business, but everyone was sure that Emma and Tony would end up as a couple.

On their last day at Stretford High they finally kissed: not a peck on the cheek or even a friendly kiss on the lips, but a passionate and determined embrace in the dark of the School Prom night, and the two of them cemented an unbreakable bond.

Their daughter Jade, the product of their love and now two years old, was playful and pretty, and Emma put her dark hair in bunches or plaits and dressed her in brightly coloured dresses so that other mums might see how special her baby was.

If they stopped to think about it, Tony and Emma would have described themselves as normal, ordinary even. They weren't wealthy, thought little of fame or fortune and had few friends to intrude on their leisure time, choosing instead to pour their love and effort into their daughter. When asked, Emma proudly described her husband as solid and reliable, and it was true: Tony was a practical sort of man who wasn't easily fooled and could usually spot a rogue a mile off. That was until Joe Reed charmed his way into their lives. Nobody could have guessed how Reed would affect them and how their world would change forever.

Tony was working for an insurance company in Manchester. He was doing well and the company was thriving. He'd been in sales for about five years, joining Peterson Insurance Brokers a year or so previously as another step up the

ladder. He and Emma were comfortably off and when Jade arrived they'd started saving for the future, putting away Tony's ever-growing commission, as well as ten percent of his salary. Soon he began to do so well that Emma didn't have to work and gave up her nursing career to concentrate on Jade, while Tony spent all of his time providing for them. The couple considered themselves lucky. Life was good and they were as happy as they could be.

Tony could remember clearly the first time he spoke to Joe Reed. It was a Friday in June; Reed had come for an interview and was waiting outside the company director's office. He was the only one sitting there, and as Tony knew that Mr Peterson saw possible new recruits in batches, he realized he must be the final candidate. Tony was known for being pretty friendly and seeing him alone he sympathized with how nervous the guy was probably feeling. Reed was wearing a dark suit that had seen better days, and his shoes were dirty and almost falling apart. Tony's instinct was that he wouldn't be getting the job: Garry Peterson insisted that his sales team look their best at all times; he saw scruffiness as a sign of weakness and he gave guys like this short shrift, so this candidate was on a loser straight away.

"Alright?" Tony said as he approached.

When Reed turned to look at him it was Tony who suddenly felt nervous. Reed's face somehow didn't fit with the unkempt clothes he was wearing and he stared at Tony openly confident, gaining eye contact and not letting it go. Tony stopped in front of him and started to feel the passing of the seconds as if he were being interviewed himself. Reed's bright grey eyes held Tony's for what seemed like an age.

"Who's top dog?" he asked without preamble.

Tony replied instantly, feeling almost as if he were being accused of something.

"Not me!"

Despite the age of his clothes, Reed's grooming was immaculate. He obviously spent a great deal of time making sure that his short straight black hair was gelled into the perfect position to enhance his piercing eyes. His skin was bright and fresh as if he'd just jumped out of a hot shower and the teeth in the smile he flashed at Tony were white and even.

"Marcie Edwards gets the best clients, so her team does the most business,"

Tony admitted, adding, "You'll like Marcie - she's a star."

Reed nodded, remaining silent but still holding eye-contact.

Veteran salesman for Peterson Insurance though he was, Tony felt somehow rooted to the spot. Recovering, he extended his hand. "I'm Tony Jones."

"Joe Reed," the newcomer responded, offering a small but powerful hand in return.

"Well, good luck, Joe," and Tony walked away with the press of Joe Reed's firm handshake still alive in his palm.

When Tony got home that evening Emma was waiting for him with a lasagne and a bottle of beer. He'd missed Jade's bedtime and Emma was keen to hear

about his day. Looking after Jade as a stay at home mum had its advantages, but Tony knew that his wife sometimes felt cut off from the outside world, so the couple had fallen into a ritual of sitting at the kitchen table and talking through the events of Tony's day, picking apart the results and the people. Tony found it relaxing after the pressure of work and hoped it helped Emma feel part of what was going on. Tonight he told her about his meeting with Joe Reed and she was intrigued.

"Do you think he'll get the job?" she asked.

"Definitely! He'll be good too."

Emma was bemused. "I thought you only said hello to him."

"Yes, but there's something about him - something different. I think he'll be amazing," Tony replied thoughtfully.

That night Tony lay in bed with Emma's head on his chest and her arms wrapped around him and couldn't help feeling that his career would be taking a turn for the better. The family was doing well and Tony was already more than happy with their financial position. He knew that his wife would like a larger house than their current three-bedroom semi-detached, and she wanted a brother or sister for Jade. At present they shared the company Audi, so she was longing for a car of her own too. She often felt very isolated when her husband was at work, but if she wanted to see her mum or go to the shops she had to take a bus, or even a taxi. Tony longed to give Emma everything he possibly could, especially because from the moment he'd set eyes on her he'd always had the feeling that he was punching above his weight. She had achieved better qualifications than he had, going on to Higher Education and a degree in art history, and she was very attractive too – tall and slim, with long dark hair and amazing dark brown eyes. Everyone who met Emma loved her from the start. When sleep eventually came, Tony was looking forward to the weekend with his family and didn't have a care in the world.

"Morning, Tony!" said Garry Peterson enthusiastically. "I love Monday mornings: gives us a full five days to make sales."

He'd said almost the same thing on every Monday morning since Tony had started working for him.

"This week should see the team close that twelve month contract with Adidas," Tony told him. "Ken Bolt, their Operational Director is coming in at eleven. Is the boardroom free?"

"I'll make it free," Garry beamed. "Who's the lead on it?"

"Doing it myself; I don't want any confusion," said Tony, full of confidence.

"Good plan! By the way, you've got a new starter this morning. He's coming in for an induction with Becky at ten o'clock, and you'll get him tomorrow morning."

"Who is he?" Tony asked, already knowing the answer.

“He’s potentially the best salesman I’ve ever interviewed,” said Garry. “His name’s Joe Reed and he’s got plenty of experience.”

“Sounds good,” said Tony, smiling to himself.

“I’m giving him to you rather than Marcie because I think he’ll fit in with your team. Good luck with Adidas. You know where I am if you need any help.”

“I won’t, but thanks,” said Tony, grinning broadly at Garry Peterson’s back as he walked away, already greeting Marcie with his *I love Monday mornings* speech.

When Tony arrived for work on Tuesday at his usual time of eight-thirty Joe Reed was already sitting at the desk next to his. When he saw Tony he stood up and made an effort to meet him half way across the office, extending his small, delicate hand with a smile on his face that would have lit up a mineshaft.

“Remember me?” he asked, “Joe Reed, I’ll be in your team.”

“Hi Joe,” Tony smiled. “We start at nine,” he added.

“I’m always early,” said Reed. “Fancy a smoke?”

Tony smiled again and shook his head, turning round the way he’d come, and the pair went outside.

Joe Reed acted as if they’d been friends since the day they were born. He was charming, easy to talk to and right from the beginning there were no uncomfortable silences. He was cheerfully self-confident, smiling a lot and lacing his conversation with compliments, and his enthusiasm was infectious. Looking sharp in shiny black shoes, he was wearing an elegant dark blue suit, cut in at the waist and fitting his slim six foot frame like a glove.

“First day, new suit?” asked Tony.

Joe laughed. “Garry said he only wanted smart people in his company, so after the interview he gave me an advance on my commission to get a new suit and shoes.”

Tony was astonished. “That’s unusual! Garry’s a tight bugger. How did you manage that?”

“He offered,” grinned Joe, “I think of it as the first sale of my new job!”

When the two men went back inside Tony introduced Joe to the rest of the team and he smiled at them and shook hands with enthusiasm. Tony noticed that Reed made people feel shy and nervous in his presence, and Tony himself somehow felt as though he was in Joe Reed’s team rather than the other way round. He sat down with him to show him the ropes and introduce him to his client list but Reed didn’t seem that interested, declaring that he’d be giving them all a quick call later to introduce himself. Tony had to make an effort to keep eye contact with him as his concentration seemed to be fixed on something else across the room. When Reed went to make coffee, Tony followed his gaze straight to Marcie and realised he had been more interested in her than in listening to his new team leader. Grinning to himself, Tony knew he had his hands full with Joe, but he was excited that he was on his team.

By the end of that first day Reed had closed three deals from his introductory calls to clients, which was amazing and showed his massive potential. Tony and Joe had lunch together and somehow Joe was there every time Tony went outside for a smoke or visited the water machine. Tony Jones was hooked and already felt as though they would be really good friends.

“This is Joe Reed,” Tony said to Emma as he walked into the kitchen that evening. Joe smiled more broadly than ever, kissed Emma on both cheeks and gave her a hug. She smiled uncertainly, pulling away a little uncomfortably. “Sorry, Joe Tony didn’t mention he was bringing anyone home. Have you eaten?” Emma was suddenly and acutely aware that she wasn’t wearing any make-up, her hands moving unconsciously down her body to smooth her denim skirt.

“I could murder a beer,” said Reed, his grin fixed firmly in place.

Tony went to the fridge and chose a bottle each whilst Emma retrieved glasses from a cupboard. Joe watched her as she poured the drinks and taking his, drained half the glass at the first attempt.

“Fantastic!” he grinned. “A great new mate with a beautiful wife prepared to cook for me, plus a cold beer; life doesn’t get much better.”

Emma and Tony glanced at each other and both blushed.

Emma started telling Joe about Jade and how advanced she was at walking and talking. Joe laughed in the right places and smiled throughout, nodding in agreement as he revealed that he also had a two year old daughter coincidentally called Emma. When the time came for him to leave, Joe and Emma seemed to have hit it off and she returned his hug with warmth when he made his farewells.

“See you tomorrow for more pain.” Joe said to Tony.

“Ok Joe, see you then.”

“Thanks for the dinner and the drinks, Emma.”

Emma smiled. She’d never met a man like Joe Reed and was startled at how he made her feel. His grey eyes seemed to penetrate to the very core of her being; she wanted to look away, but he held her almost transfixed. All she could manage was, “See you soon, Joe - it was good to meet you,” which seemed inadequate, awkward even, especially given the fact that she could feel an inescapable heat moving from between her legs and into her stomach, slowly lighting what felt like a furnace.

Tony and Emma went to bed about half an hour later and when she was drawing the curtains Emma spotted Joe still sitting in his car a little way up the road. The engine of the ancient Ford was running and through the back window she could see he was engrossed on the telephone. He’d mentioned that his marriage was in difficulty and she wondered if maybe they were having a row and he didn’t

want to go home yet. Despite herself, when the thought crossed Emma's mind that Joe and his wife's problems might be terminal an involuntary smile played across her lips. The vague feeling of guilt that followed prompted her to climb into bed next to her husband and squeeze his body, her hand quickly finding Tony's weakness, which instantly responded.

The next day Emma dressed herself and Jade in matching outfits, preparing to head for the supermarket. All morning thoughts of Joe Reed and the effect he'd had on her slid tantalizingly through her mind. Buttoning her daughter's blue polka-dot dress, she laughed openly at her own foolishness. There was no harm in it, she thought; fancying someone else was a natural part of life, and fun too. Nothing would ever come of it, she wouldn't allow it; she was happy with her life and she was committed to Tony. There was a sudden ring on the doorbell and Emma quickly finished strapping Jade into her buggy and hurried down to answer it. There on the doorstep was a smiling Joe Reed.

"I just wanted to say thanks again for the hospitality last night," said Reed leaning through the door to kiss her cheek.

Emma's blush rose from her chest to her neck and quickly flooded her face. She stood rooted to the spot, somehow unable to get her tongue working as he made his way past her and into the hallway to marvel at Jade.

"You must be Jade," and he made a mock of shaking the tot's chubby white hand. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Emma found herself responding with a huge smile. "She's a madam today." Joe turned to Emma, who realised that he hadn't taken his hand from her waist since he arrived.

"Going out shopping or for pleasure?" he asked, and his grey eyes glinted.

"Shopping," said Emma unable to suppress a giggle as she spoke.

"I've got an appointment not far away," said Joe. "I thought I'd pop in on my way past."

His hand was still on her waist, but she was loath to wriggle and escape him. Something about his eyes and the easy way that he moved and spoke made Emma feel weak at the knees.

"Got time for a coffee?" she asked, pointing vaguely towards the kitchen.

"Not a chance," said Reed, quickly removing his hand and retreating backwards out of the hall and over the threshold. "Tony's a slave-driver and he'll want me back at the grindstone as soon as I'm done here."

The mention of her husband's name jolted Emma back to reality and she had a sudden urge to close the door.

"Ok," she said, "I'll let you get on then."

He smiled. "I'll stay for that coffee next time I'm passing."

Emma couldn't think how to reply; she wanted to tell him not to bother, but something was stopping her and the words caught in her throat. She just watched as he turned, walked down the drive and jumped into his car. Aware of the lingering fragrance of his aftershave, she touched her cheek where he'd kissed her and realised as he drove away that she could still feel his hand on her waist.

Chapter 2

Over the next few months Tony and Joe became good friends. He was everything that Garry had predicted, exceeding Tony's personal sales tally and even overtaking Marcie as the company's top business winner. The two men were soon spending more time together after work, drinking and playing pool at the pub near the office. He often came round to the house in the evening and sometimes even at weekends. Tony was pleased to see that Joe and Emma were becoming good friends too, confident that all this was helping create a more effective team at work.

Then one night he and Emma had an argument over Joe coming to the house so often. She said she enjoyed his company but just didn't want him round all the time; she didn't like her and Tony spending less time together, and she missed their talks after work. Tony didn't understand her sudden change of heart, arguing that Joe only visited so often because he'd split with his wife and he didn't like being so much alone in the flat he rented. Eventually accepting Emma's suggestion Tony reluctantly let Joe know and he seemed to accept it in good spirits and said he would come to the house less often.

As it turned out he didn't ever come to the house with Tony again.

Not long before Christmas Tony was thrilled to learn that Emma was pregnant and the couple began looking at four bedroom houses in Didsbury, a more affluent suburb of Manchester. With the extra commission that Tony was making he was able to buy his wife a new Vauxhall and she seemed to be always at her mum's or out with Jade. Despite all this, she was becoming increasingly moody and withdrawn and the couple began arguing more often than they ever had before. Tony put it down to Emma's hormones playing havoc with her body and tried to be as understanding as possible, but it seemed that the harder he tried the more emotional and unreasonable she became. This was a new side to Emma that he had never seen before.

"What's the real problem?" Tony asked after another silent meal one evening. Emma looked at her husband with tears welling in her eyes.

“You’d know if you bothered to stop and look at what’s staring you in the face!”

New Year saw changes at work too. Marcie didn’t come back after the Christmas break and had apparently left the company. When Tony called she broke down in tears, telling him there were certain people at work she didn’t get on with, and she didn’t feel she was getting the support she needed. Tony had noticed her sales figures and the figures for the rest of her team decreasing over the last two or three months, but since his own team was doing increasingly well he hadn’t taken too much notice, thinking it was just a passing phase. Marcie had been at the company when Tony arrived and he looked up to her as a kind of mentor, so her sudden and unexpected departure came as a real shock. “Come on, Marcie,” he urged. “We’ve been mates for years and this just isn’t like you. What’s *really* going on?”

“It’s nothing to do with you or the work, Tony. I’m just not happy in that environment any more - I’ve had enough.”

“Enough of what?”

“Just leave it, Tony”

“Have you got another job to go to, is that it?” he asked. “You and John can’t survive on just his wages, what with the kids and all.”

“Don’t worry,” she said acidly. “I won’t be taking any of the clients if that’s what you’re worried about. In fact, I won’t be working for a while.”

“Why?” Tony asked bemused.

Her voice was cold. “Just take it on board, Tony I’ve left, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Well we’ll all miss you Marcie,” said Tony with genuine regret.

Tony could hear her starting to cry as she said, “Just watch Joe,” and put the phone down.

Tony looked at the receiver for a second. This was out of character for Marcie: what did she mean by ‘*just watch Joe?*’ Tony knew that she and Joe were friends and also knew they had closed some good business together, so why suddenly turn on him? The only explanation could be that she somehow imagined Joe would take over her team and she had trouble letting go. He went into the sitting room to talk it over with Emma, telling her that Marcie had left and how puzzled he was about her reasons.

“I suppose that’s the nature of sales,” offered Emma. “If you’re not doing well and your figures are suffering, the pressure can get to you.”

“I guess so,” replied Tony. “It just seems to be more than that, and she says she’s not going to work at all for a while. I’d never have thought she was that emotional.”

“Well, it just shows we never really know anyone,” said Emma and Tony guessed she was referring to him too.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, a little irritated.

“Just what it says,”

Tony ignored her remark and relayed what Marcie had said about Joe. “So what do you expect me to say?” she retorted angrily, pushing past him and racing upstairs. Tony followed her, hearing the bathroom door slam. “Emma,” he called through the door, “what was that about?” There was a silence for a few seconds before she replied, “Nothing, I just want a bath.” “As long as you’re ok?” answered Tony, feeling more than a little confused.

The next morning when Tony arrived for work there was no sign of Joe at his desk, which was surprising as he usually arrived first. Tony made himself a coffee and at nine sharp had his daily meeting with the rest of the team. Across the office floor Garry’s door opened and Tony was surprised to see his boss and Joe coming out together laughing. Garry beckoned him over, called him inside and invited him to sit down.

“What happened with Marcie?” asked Tony, taking one of the uncomfortable leather seats in front of Garry’s huge desk.

“She left. She didn’t say exactly why, but I think she had some personal problems that were getting in the way of her work.”

“I spoke to her last night and she was pretty upset.”

Garry looked across his desk, somehow making Tony feel as if the fact he had called Marcie was a breach of some unwritten company rule about talking to ex-employees

“She didn’t say much,” confessed Tony. “I don’t think she’s going to work for a rival company and take the clients or anything.”

“She brought in some good business over the years. Faded towards the end, though. Must have thought it was time to quit while the going was good. We all have to move on some time,” he added.

Tony answered carefully as it sounded like the comment was a general one, rather than aimed specifically at Marcie.

“I’m working on that big construction company over in Prestbury this week.”

“Isn’t that one of Joe’s new accounts?” asked Garry.

Tony stared at him in astonishment. “No, Garry. I cold-called that one myself,” he said. “I’m the only one who’s been involved at all.”

He was a touch angry that someone else was getting the credit for his hard work, even if it was Joe, but Garry ignored his employee’s reply.

“I’ve decided to give Joe Marcie’s old team.”

Tony looked at him in silence across the desk, the anger rising in his guts. Joe hadn’t been with the company more than six months and Garry’s description of Marcie, coupled with his relegating her achievements to *old team* led to his realizing for the first time that all salespeople were expendable in Peterson’s

eyes and that he thought he could replace anyone with a mere click of his fingers.

“Ok,” lied Tony, hiding his anger as he stood up to leave.

“You’re alright with Joe aren’t you, Tony?” asked Garry. “He’s a big asset and I want you to help him find his feet as team leader.”

“Joe doesn’t need my help, Garry. He’s capable of looking after himself.”

“Well, help him if he asks!”

Tony left Garry’s office in time to see Joe having his first meeting with his new team. He was cracking jokes and making everyone laugh, and it seemed certain he’d make a fantastic team leader. He glanced up as Tony passed and the grin that he threw out was laced with what Tony couldn’t help thinking looked like nothing less than naked ambition.

A disturbed Tony left the office early that day and arrived home to find Emma in tears in the bedroom. This wasn’t the first time lately that he’d come home to find his wife crying, and he sat next to her on the bed and put his arm around her shoulders. Instinctively she turned and pressed her head into his chest. “I’m so sorry!” she sobbed.

“There’s nothing to be sorry for,” said Tony, trying to cheer her up. “You’ll feel better soon I’m sure, it’s just our new impending financial burden causing problems already.”

She pulled herself away. “You don’t know the half of it.”

“No, I’m sure I don’t,” Tony said soothingly. He truly felt for her, unable to imagine what she was going through with her emotions apparently permanently on the edge. Eventually, after some gentle persuasion she settled her head back into his chest.

“It’ll be just fine,” he said.

The couple stayed in the same position for a few minutes until Emma’s tears subsided and then Tony pulled a tissue out of his pocket and gave it to his wife.

“Well, I’ve had an interesting day,” he said, trying to take her mind off her emotions.

“Why, what happened?” she asked, blowing her nose.

“Garry called me into his office to tell me that he’d asked Joe to take over Marcie’s team - and I’m supposed to help him become a good team leader.”

Emma remained silent.

“I wouldn’t mind,” went on Tony, “but any of the existing members of that team would’ve been a better choice as far as I’m concerned. I don’t even know if Joe has ever managed salespeople before.”

Emma let out a fresh burst of sobs.

“It’s ok, Honey,” he said, assuming she was worried about his own position.

“I’ll stop earning commission from Joe’s sales that’s true, but I’ll get another team member in the next few weeks.”

Emma was now almost hysterical with tears. She pulled away from him and sat up, her mascara running down both cheeks and into her lip gloss.

“Tony I need to tell you something,” she said and dropped her eyes.

Her tone created a coldness that spread over Tony’s body and he could feel the beginnings of fear growing in his stomach.

Emma remained silent.

“What?” Tony asked instinctively, knowing that what she was about to say he wouldn’t want to hear. “What is it?”

Emma remained silent.

The silence continued for several seconds more until, still looking down and with her tears now dry, Emma almost whispered, “Joe Reed raped me!”

Tony sat motionless for a moment, stunned by a mixture of shock, anger, disgust and dread. Unable to comprehend what his wife had told him, his brain relieved the pressure hysterically through laughter, and as he laughed Emma’s tears began to flow freely again. Tony went on and on laughing while she stood up and walked out of the room, went into the bathroom and quietly closed the door behind her.

The laughter abruptly ended with Tony’s face becoming hard and cold and he sat on the edge of the bed looking down at his feet. His mind was blank: he couldn’t understand why Emma had said that Joe raped her. He noticed that his shoes were slowly becoming wet, and then vaguely realised that tears were streaming from his eyes and dropping onto them like rain. He tried to stand, but his body felt as heavy as stone and his throat was tight with anger and anxiety.

“No, Emma, no!” he shouted.

Then he sat for a long time alone on the bed, crying and wondering how and when Emma could have seen Joe Reed when he wasn’t there. Joe was often out on appointments, probably more than anyone else, and Tony guessed that he must have been visiting the house whilst he was at work.

Eventually Emma came back and stood for a while in the doorway, staring at her husband across the now darkened room. Eventually she came over to the bed, switched on one of the bedside lamps and sat down, leaving a distance between them. She’d stopped crying, but sobs still escaped her like hiccups and she was shaking all over.

After a long silence Tony spoke, his mouth dry. “How did it happen?”

“He started coming round in the afternoon, not long after you first brought him home for tea,” she said quietly.

The lack of emotion in her voice somehow had a calming effect on Tony and he wanted to hear the full story.

“He said his marriage was on the rocks and would I talk to him about it,” she explained. “He asked me not to say anything to you because he reckoned he was embarrassed to talk to someone he respected so much.”

“Go on,” said Tony evenly.

“I suppose he’d been round about ten times and I don’t know how it happened, except he was crying in the kitchen, saying that his wife wouldn’t allow him to

see his daughter,” she said. “I put my arm around his shoulder - you know, to comfort him and somehow...”

“Somehow what?” asked Tony after a short silence.

“Somehow we were kissing,” she said quietly.

The pain in Tony’s chest was growing and he didn’t want to hear another word, but he had to know the truth.

“So what happened next?” he asked.

“I threw him out,” she said. “I was shocked with myself and felt awful. After that I didn’t see him for a couple of weeks and then he called round with a bunch of flowers saying he wanted to apologise, so I let him in.”

“And?”

“Once he was inside the house there were no apologies; he dropped the flowers on the floor and pinned me to the hall wall kissing me, and his hands were everywhere. I tried to push him off, but he was too strong and he said, *let yourself go Emma, you know you want this as much as I do.*” She lowered her head before continuing. “I started kissing him back.”

Beginning to feel dizzy, Tony got up, left the room and went downstairs to get a drink from the fridge. He took out a bottle of beer and opened it, feeling as though he were watching himself move around the kitchen from a position somewhere on the ceiling. The room was starting to spin and he sat down at the table with his head in his hands. Emma had followed her husband and was sitting opposite. She hadn’t switched on the kitchen light, and the faint glow from the lamp in the hall created almost a halo around her head as she spoke.

“He lifted me off the ground and started to climb the stairs,” she said. “I’m ashamed to say that I didn’t stop him.”

Tony was speechless, his throat tightening with emotion.

“He pulled off my clothes and we were on the bed kissing. Then I realised what I was doing and I didn’t want it. I tried to push him off, but he was on top of me and I could feel him pushing against me.”

She got up and went to the cupboard for a glass before returning to the table and pouring some of Tony’s beer into it; then she drank it down in one long draught.

“I told him to stop and get off me,” she went on, “but he wouldn’t take any notice, just started giggling to himself. He towered over me, straightening his arms and pinning down my wrists. His eyes were blazing, Tony – I was so scared!”

“Did he say anything?” asked Tony quietly.

“He said *quiet now bitch!*” said Emma, embarrassment flushing her cheeks, “He put his hand over my mouth and I felt him push himself inside me.”

Tony’s face was streaked with tears. “And what did *you* do?”

“I thought he was going to hurt me. There was nothing I *could* do! He was so strong that I stopped struggling. I stopped... and I let him do what he wanted,” she said, starting to cry again.

Tony sat staring at his wife across the table. She looked like someone else.

“What happened then?” he asked in a whisper.

A long silence followed and Tony became angry as he watched her crying tears reserved for herself. He took her by the shoulders and shook her, repeating his question.

“What happened then?”

“When he’d finished,” she screamed in her husband’s face, “he rolled me over and fucked me in the arse! Ok? Are you happy now?”

Tony rocked back in the chair, realizing after a few moments that his jaw had dropped and saliva was gathering on his chin. He wiped it with the back of his hand, and half whispered his next question, the impossible truth beginning to dawn on him, turning sharp pain to deep despair.

“When did it happen?”

Emma’s tears started to flow again and she was shaking with emotion.

“About two and a half months ago.”

There was no real sleep for Tony or Emma that night as they lay together in the dark. When seven o’clock finally came Tony put on his suit and tie ready for work as usual. He picked up his briefcase from the hall and a knife from the kitchen, not really planning to do anything with it, but wanting to take it with him anyway.

Then as he drove he formed a wild idea of waiting for Joe Reed in the car park, and imagined himself slitting his throat. He waited in his usual parking space and eventually Reed’s old Ford rolled in through the barrier and parked a few spaces away to the left. Tony got out of his car at the same time that Joe did and started to walk toward him. Joe Reed was smiling.

“You fucking bastard!” said Tony, and he took the knife from his pocket. “What the fuck did you do to Emma?” he screamed, but he was too late.

Reliving the moment later, he realized that he should have kept quiet - simply smiled back and plunged the knife into Reed’s chest. Seeing the knife come out was ample warning for Joe Reed and the one punch he aimed at Tony’s jaw was enough to send him sprawling to the ground. He stood over him laughing.

“She’s got a lovely tight arse your missus, Mate. If I were you, I’d screw it every night.”

Then he jumped back into his car and drove away. Tony Jones never saw him again.