

Chapter One

Welcome to Avalon

The dusty road lay empty before him in the fading light. Aiden Connelly rubbed his eyes wearily wondering just how much of his journey was left. Behind him, his little angel, Meegan, slept soundly, oblivious to the dramatic change her life was currently undergoing. His wife stirred in her sleep and Aiden could not help but smile at her tangle of mahogany curls splayed widely around her head. She was usually so immaculate, yet in the throws of sleep she had wrestled around on the uncomfortable seat of the rented car and now resembled a wild woman. This was how Aiden liked his wife, Isla, best. Relaxed, carefree. For so long they had both been so consumed by everything. Even the birth of Meegan had felt like yet another chore, something else to be responsible for, rather than the joy that it should have brought them.

That was why they were here, now. Travelling down an old highway that seemed to be leading them into the middle of nowhere. In reality it was taking them away from it all; the stress, the chaos, the ridiculous pace of the city to a new, quieter life. It was what they needed. Aiden could feel himself becoming a stranger to his family; the hours he needed to spend at the office were increasing daily and he began to question his motives in life and the choices he had made. Initially he got into law for the money, but as he progressed through the course he developed a passion for it. Two years working for one of the most prestigious law firms in Chicago was slowly sucking any positive feeling he had had towards his job out of him. He dealt with high profile cases, they lived in a beautiful penthouse, but Aiden was in serious danger of having no soul.

‘The rat race isn’t for everyone,’ his late father had advised him. ‘Happiness is true wealth.’ It was rather cliché but Aiden could not help but be inspired by the old man’s words. He had grown up in the country, on a farm, and had only happy memories of his childhood. He wanted the same for Meegan. Finding another job was easy considering his previous experience, convincing Isla was the hard part. She loved living in the city, she was always shopping and lunching with friends. As Aiden had pointed out to her, her first love, art, had taken a back seat over the past few years. She had not painted a thing since three summers ago. Admittedly, she had been preoccupied with the arrival of Meegan, but still... Aiden helped her realize that a clean break was what they all needed; surrounded by nature she would undoubtedly be inspired and start painting again in no time.

Dusk was fast turning into night as the headlights of the rented car gleamed upon the approaching roadside.

Avalon - 20 miles

‘Not far now,’ Aiden said aloud.

‘Huh,’ Isla stirred, awoken by his voice.

‘Not far now, honey. We will soon be in Avalon.’

‘Oh good,’ she yawned. ‘I’m really tired.’

‘Tired? You’ve been asleep for half of the journey!’

‘You try sleeping in these seats, it’s like lying on a rock!’

She snapped her visor down and studied her reflection.

‘Ugh, just look at my hair. Thank God it will be dark when we arrive’. Turning to check her daughter, ‘Has Meegan been asleep this whole time?’

‘Sure has.’

The couple smiled at one another. It felt good. Aiden dared himself to hope that this was all going to be the start of something wonderful.

Less than an hour later the Connelly family pulled into the driveway of their new home. After driving down what Aiden had

assumed was the high street, he had quickly located his new neighborhood. Avalon was a small, sparse town; he had only spotted one convenience store, along with two churches, a hair salon, a doctor's surgery and a florist. From various flyers dotted around he had quickly assessed that there was a high school nearby with an impending football match that was obviously of great importance to the community. Given that they didn't seem to have much else going on, this did not surprise him. He had yet to locate his new offices, Cope and May Attorneys at Law, but he had a few days yet before he had to start work so that could wait. Given the size of Avalon he doubted that they would be far away.

'Well...it's quaint,' Isla stood surveying the wooden one-storey property before her. It had certainly seen better days. Like an ageing movie star, if you looked hard enough you could still see the glimmer of something special; that many years ago it was something magnificent but now the years had performed their devastating trick and what was once glorious was now faded and lackluster. Isla imagined that the house had once been a beautiful blue, as bright and wonderful as a summer's day, but that blue had dulled to a sad shade of grey. The white of the windows had yellowed and the front lawn exposed more dirt than grass. It really was a far cry from the modern, immaculate penthouse she had left behind. It was all she could do not to burst into tears. She hoped that tomorrow things might seem brighter but she knew that in the harsh light of day even more flaws would be exposed to her. This was Aiden's dream, not hers. But she loved him, and she loved Meegan. In her heart she knew that this had to work; it was their last chance.

'It certainly has character,' Aiden wrapped a strong arm around his wife's delicate shoulders. Instinctively she leant into him.

'You can paint the house, decorate it inside. Do whatever you like. Just think how great it will feel to be doing something creative again.'

'And the garden?'

‘Well now I’m working less I’ll do the garden up a real treat. Get a jungle gym for Meegan, maybe a small pond for you, you’ve always been saying how you would love to have some fish, that you find water soothing.’

Isla smiled, and it was genuine. She could feel the clean air of Avalon filling up her lungs and it felt good. Above her the night sky sparkled and she was amazed at how many stars she could see.

‘I think we can make this work,’ she told her husband hopefully.

‘I know we can, hun. You, me and Meegan, it will be wonderful.’

‘Dada,’ Meegan called from the car, the cool breeze from the open car doors awakening her from her slumber.

‘Hey, princess,’ Aiden cooed as he lifted her from her car seat. ‘Do you like your new home?’ He turned the tiny toddler to face the house and she rubbed her hazel eyes sleepily.

‘Night, night,’ she murmured grumpily, indicating that she wanted to sleep.

‘I second that,’ Isla yawned.

‘Hopefully the movers put everything in the right place.’

Aiden lay in bed counting the cracks on the ceiling. Isla was already fast asleep. The gentle hum of crickets gave a comforting soundtrack to his muddle of thoughts. The house needed a lot of work; the realtor had been very clear about that and he wasn’t lying. The profit they had made on the penthouse would more than cover any costs for maintenance work. Before she had slipped into that oh so wonderful world of dreams, Isla had asked him why he had chosen to move to Avalon of all the towns in America. She had drifted to sleep before he could respond, and lying awake next to her, a good hour later, he was still struggling to find an answer.

After three days of intense unpacking, Aiden pulled up outside Cope and May Attorneys at Law. It hadn’t taken him long to locate the modest office since Avalon was so small and it was the only local law firm. Two days previous he had enquired about his future workplace whilst buying groceries and the clerk had been more than helpful, informing him how the business was once

run by Edmond Cope and Howard May, but since Howard's death three years ago Edmond had been going it alone. Apparently he managed fine at first, but even a town as small as Avalon has its fair share of legal affairs that need tending to so, apparently reluctantly, he advertised for a new partner. This revelation made Aiden a little anxious; Mr. Cope probably had his own way of doing things and would no doubt take all the better cases for himself. If there were any cases at all. Even though he had been there for just a few days, Aiden was already noticing that the pace of life in Avalon was remarkably slow; it was the kind of place where you didn't bother locking your doors and would happily let your kids play out on the front lawn.

Cope and May was located between Smith's Pharmacy and Redd Books. In total his journey to work had taken him about ten minutes. Aiden liked the thought of being able to go home for dinner, in Chicago his commute had taken two hours in total. At night he was almost always too exhausted to do anything besides collapse on his bed. Most nights he came home way past Meegan's bedtime, much to Isla's annoyance. The past three nights, being there to bath his little girl and read her a goodnight story, had been amazing. He had no idea how much he had been missing out on and sacrificing for his job. Even though he knew that working in Avalon would be worlds away from what he was used to he knew that he was already reaping the benefits. Taking a deep breath he braced himself and walked through the glass front door to the cheerful chimes of a small bell.

'Good morning,' a cheerful elderly lady seated at a mahogany desk along the far wall greeted him. Her ashen hair sat atop her wrinkled face like a giant choux bun. Her small frame was adorned with a tight, crisp, white shirt and her glasses hung down from a chain around her neck. The words 'prim and proper' sprang to Aiden's mind.

'Well good morning, I'm Aiden Connelly.'

'Ah, Mr. Connelly. How lovely to meet you! I'm Betty Hales, I've been secretary here for the past twenty years. Oh, it is most exciting to have you here working with us. Please, do take a seat, I'll let Edmond, Mr. Cope, know that you are here.'

Aiden obliged and settled himself on one of the two battered leather couches that occupied the waiting room. There was a coffee table littered with magazines, ranging from Gardening Monthly to Vogue, all clearly out of date. The hardwood flooring was surprisingly tasteful and the walls were painted a calming pale shade of green. Aiden guessed that the room had recently been decorated, albeit the ancient seeming furniture, including the leather couches, one of which he was rapidly sinking into. He hoisted himself up using the arm into a less comfortable looking position.

‘Oh, Mr. Copes,’ Betty had pressed the intercom on her desk. ‘I have Mr. Connelly for you.’

‘Send him in.’

‘In you go then, dear. Best of luck,’ she smiled. Aiden nodded and lifted himself up from the absorbing couch and entered the door beside Betty’s desk, which he assumed was the office as the only other door in the room was marked ‘lavatory’.

The main office was a large room, painted in the same soothing green as the waiting area. Two large desks with computers occupied a majority of the space and numerous filing cabinets lined two of the walls. The desk nearest to the door was immaculate whilst the other was awash with papers and files. A man hastily got up from the cluttered desk and quickly smoothed down his blue shirt.

Edmond Copes was getting on in years. As his hairline decreased his waistline expanded until now he was basically bald and quite rotund. It was common knowledge that he enjoyed his drink; if Aiden played his cards right he would learn of the generous amount of liquor the old man kept in his desk drawer. It had been common practice for himself and his old partner, Howard May, to indulge in an afternoon tippie when work was slow. Since Howard’s death, the afternoon tippie had increased to occasionally include mornings too. Three years was a long time to be in an office alone and Edmond was a sociable man. He loved nothing more than entertaining his large family at his equally large home. In all honesty he had opened up the position for a new

partner out of loneliness rather than necessity. When he read Aiden's profile he could scarcely believe his luck; a young hotshot lawyer wanting to work in Avalon? With his pending retirement looming he was hoping that Aiden may well indeed be someone whom could take over the business. But this was all jumping the gun somewhat. Edmond stuck out his podgy hand and Aiden shook it enthusiastically.

‘Edmond Copes, welcome, welcome!’

‘Thank you, Mr. Copes.’

‘Please, Edmond, Mr. Copes was my father! Your desk is there, my boy, do take time to familiarise yourself with it. The computer is all set up, she may not look it but Betty is a whiz with technology!’

Aiden smiled but was inwardly flinching at the ‘my boy’ comment.

‘I would give you a tour of the place but there isn’t much to see. There is the waiting area where Betty is, the restrooms and here, the Epi-centre of it all! I expect you are used to much bigger places but this serves us all right.’

‘Bigger is not always better.’

‘True, true.’

‘So...’ Edmond was still standing in the centre of the room, his ample chest puffed out in grandeur. ‘Cope and May has been serving the legal needs of Avalon for a good thirty years come this fall. I myself founding the company, along with my dear friend and colleague Howard May, God rest his soul. We went to college together you see, studied law, wanted to make a change and that. We thought about going to work in the city but were perhaps too attached to our families and what not to leave. But the town has been good to us; we are never short of work.’

‘Glad to hear it.’

‘That was why the position of partner came up. I was getting bogged down by it all; some days I wasn’t getting home until 6pm! The wife said enough is enough! I work to live, I don’t live to work. You know, son?’

‘I hear you loud and clear.’

‘Good, good,’ Edmond now settled himself once more at his desk.

‘When I read your profile I knew you could handle things here; will most likely seem a doddle compared to what you had to deal with in the city. The thing is to remember that Avalon is full of good people, for the most part. There is the odd bad apple but most cases are property disputes, drunken brawls, that kind of thing. Nothing too wayward. It may seem menial at times but it is ultimately rewarding. Like I said, it is a town full of good people and they are always more than grateful for our help. Only the other day Mrs. McKenzie from the small farm down the road sent me a basket of lovely apples to thank me for helping her husband when he got sentenced a DUI.’

Aiden nodded.

‘We get a lot of DUIs. Folk just don’t think, but we have a good relationship with the local law enforcement who keeps us up to speed on things. Buck Fern is the local Sheriff and has been as long as I can remember. Straight as an arrow that man. Folks round here respect him and that’s important in keeping the peace and all that. I’ll get him to pop by later this week; no doubt he’ll be keen to meet you.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘You got family, Mr. Connelly?’

‘Yes, a wife and daughter.’ Aiden’s reply clearly pleased Edmond. ‘And please, call me Aiden,’ he added.

‘Well, Aiden, how old is your little ray of sunshine?’

‘Meegan turns two next month.’

‘Two, how wonderful! My grandson Grant was two just last week. Lovely age. Well, I suppose I need to stop smacking my gums with you and get down to working. We are starting to sound like a couple of hens with our cackling!’

Aiden could feel himself warming towards the old man. You couldn’t help but like him.

‘But first things first, you cannot work without coffee,’ Edmond pressed the intercom on his desk.

‘Betty, my dear’.

‘Yes, Mr. Cope,’ her response came back crackly through the machine.

‘Can we have two coffees,’ to Aiden, whispered, ‘you do drink coffee, son?’ Aiden nodded. ‘Yes, two coffees please, Betty.’

‘Right away.’

‘Thank you, my dear.’

After Betty has bustled in with two steaming coffees and a plate of biscuits, Edmond handed Aiden a thin brown file. On the front it read;

White, Brandy

Case no. 2315

Aiden assumed it was a routine DUI and was about to read the notes when Edmond stopped him.

‘Now that there is an unusual case. It is pretty much open, shut, not much to be done. I’m giving it to you as I thought you would have experience in that sort of thing, and being new to town, folk might not want you delving into their personal matters quite so fast.’

Intrigued, Aiden opened the file.

‘A murder case?’ he could not conceal his shock. A shiver of excitement ran down his spine. He was prepared to deal with domestic disputes, unruly neighbors, but a murder! This was legal gold!

‘Don’t get too excited there, Aiden. Like I said, open, shut. Mrs. White is a resident here in Avalon; we represent her as an obligation not through choice. She has already confessed to the crime and is awaiting sentencing over at Eastham Ladies Penitentiary, about twenty miles east of here.’

‘I see,’ Aiden muttered, his eyes scanning over the records before him.

‘She murdered her husband in cold blood, terrible matter. ShoOK the town to its core. He was a beloved town hero. She must have been possessed by the devil himself to do such a thing.’

‘When is the hearing?’

‘Three weeks from now. You just need to go over, give her legal support, explain what will likely occur after her guilty plea.’

‘So, she is down for first degree murder?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So under state law...?’

‘It will be the death penalty, son. No messing about here.’

‘My God, she’s only twenty-four.’

‘It ain’t pretty, son. Murder never is. If you feel this case is a little too heavy for you, just say. Personally, I knew Brandon and know his father well, we go to the same church. It wouldn’t feel right representing Mrs. White myself. I’m sure you understand.’

‘Yeah.’

‘That is the downside of working in such a small town. You know pretty much everyone who walks through them doors and it is hard not to be attached or emotionally involved. Especially this case. Everyone round here is still reeling from it all.’

‘Any idea why she did it?’

‘None at all. As her lawyer I guess it is your job to sniff that out. That’s if you want the case?’

‘Yeah, yes, of course! I dealt with a lot of murder suspects in Chicago so it is not a problem at all.’

‘Well then, I most heartily welcome you to Cope and May Attorneys at Law. May we enjoy a long and prosperous working relationship together.’ Edmond raised his coffee mug in celebration, as did Aiden. In his mind, Edmond was all too aware of the bottle of sweet, sweet liquor nestling just inches from him but reasoned it was too early on in his relationship with Aiden to break it out, even when a toast was in order. Besides, it was only half past nine in the morning. To drink before noon was something only winos did.

Aiden spent the rest of the day researching the Brandy White case. Edmond had been right when he had said that it was open, shut. Mrs. White had confessed to the murder of her husband almost immediately; in fact she had been the one who had dialed 911. He had seen this kind of thing before, a domestic argument gotten out of hand. They had only intended to fire a warning shot. The police report made for chilling reading; Mr. White had been stabbed in the chest six times. Mrs. White was apparently covered in his blood and hysterical when police arrived at the scene. Aiden made a call to Eastham to arrange a visit for the following day.

It was early afternoon and Aiden felt that he was all wrapped up with his work and prepared for his visit to Brandy the next day. Edmond must have sensed this as at 2pm he looked over from his

desk; he had furiously been typing at his computer pretty much all day, apart from the occasional call to Betty for coffee.

‘Fancy calling it a day, Aiden? I’ve got Mr. and Mrs. Johnson in here this afternoon to discuss setting up a will so I’ll be needing the office to myself anyways.’

‘Only if you are sure?’

‘Yes, it’s fine. There are no strict hours here, just get the work done. So you are popping over to Eastham tomorrow?’

‘Sure am.’

‘I like your style, just dive right in. If you could pop by on your way back, just to report in and that?’

‘Of course.’

‘Wonderful, Betty has some directions to Eastham in her desk; I’m sure she won’t mind fishing those out for you.’

Aiden said his goodbyes, gathered up his briefcase and jacket and went out to talk to Betty. Left alone, Edmond felt that he more than deserved the small drink which he was already pouring for himself.

‘Terrible business,’ Betty was shaking her head as she riffled through her drawer looking for the directions.

‘He was a lovely young man, so handsome. And she...well, beauty clearly is more than skin deep. Ah, here it is,’ she handed Aiden a crumpled piece of typed paper with a faded map on the back.

‘I’m sorry it isn’t very clear, dear. We rarely have the need to visit the ladies’ prison you see. Usually the men making all the trouble, no offence.’

‘None taken.’

‘If you get stranded just give me a call. I’ve lived here all my life and know my way around Avalon like the back of my hand.’

‘Thanks, I will.’

‘Well, best of luck with your first case, Mr. Connelly. Not that you’ll need it.’

‘Thank you, Betty.’

Aiden was satisfied with his first day at work. He had a decent case, he was leaving at a very reasonable hour. He couldn’t wait to get home and spend the evening with his wife and daughter.

‘Well, I could certainly get used to this!’ Isla exclaimed as her husband entered the kitchen at 2:30pm.

‘On work days I’m not used to seeing you during daylight hours!’

‘I know, great isn’t it?’ Aiden beamed as he kissed his wife on the cheek.

‘And how is Daddy’s favorite girl?’ Meegan was sat in her high chair and squealed with excitement when she saw Aiden.

‘She’s been helping Mommy wash up.’

‘Good girl,’ he ruffled her fine hair and placed his briefcase down on the table.

‘So, good day?’

‘Yeah, really good. The place is small but I expected that. I really like the guy, Edmond Copes, seems really genuine.’

‘You should invite him round for dinner. I take it he is married?’

‘Whoa, get you, Suzie Homemaker! Since when do we invite people round for dinner? Four days in Avalon and you are a changed woman!’

‘Gimme a break,’ Isla dried her hands on the tea towel and playfully flicked him with it.

‘We are in a new town. It will be good for us to make friends with people. Besides, with you working I’m going to get lonely and be in need of adult companionship. There is only so much baby talk I can handle.’

‘Well I’ll ask him then, although I don’t want to blur the lines between work and home.’

‘This isn’t Chicago, Aid. People here aren’t ruthless and spineless, they are kind.’

‘What makes you so sure?’

‘Well, since being here I’ve been to the grocery store and today the salon and everyone is always super nice, although they keep inviting me to church...’

‘See’

‘What?’

‘They are already trying to ram their belief system down our throats.’

‘Don’t be so silly. They are just trying to make us feel part of the community. We are going on Sunday. End of.’

‘What?’ Aiden made a mock face of disgust at Meegan who burst into fits of giggles.

‘It will be good for us. Besides, Meegan has never even been christened.’

‘Since when were you interested in all that religious stuff?’

‘Jeeze, Aid, I’m just trying to make a good impression. While you are at work I’ve got to be here holding down the fort and I don’t want us to be the heathen family who don’t attend church. If we plan on settling here we are going to need friends.’ Isla’s hands were now placed firmly on her hips as she stared him down.

‘I’m just joshing you, honey. Of course I’ll go church Sunday. I need to start making contacts of my own. Edmond was saying how he’d introduce me to the local sheriff soon.’

‘Sounds good. So was it all cattle ownership suits and someone erecting a fence on another’s lawn?’

‘Actually, I got a murder case.’ Isla’s eyes widened.

‘What, here? I thought this was a safe place!’

‘It is, it is. I haven’t established much yet, but it seems a simple domestic case. Wife stabs husband in a frenzy’.

‘I can relate to that,’ Isla teased.

‘It is nothing I haven’t dealt with before. I’m going to meet the suspect tomorrow.’

‘Where?’

‘Local women’s prison. I’ll let you know what it’s like, for when they take you in for losing it with me.’

‘The nerve!’ Isla threw the tea towel from beside her at Aiden but he caught it mid-air.

‘Nice try,’ he laughed. Meegan joined in the laughing.

‘Well, I am busy tomorrow, too.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Meegan and I are going to get beautified at the local salon. They were more than happy for me to take her there whilst I got my hair done. Could never have done that in Chicago.’

‘See, we are already reaping the benefits. I’m home, you are now a God-fearing housewife...’

‘And since you are home, you can prepare dinner tonight with me for a change.’

‘What is on the menu for chez Connelly?’

‘Spaghetti Bolognese.’

‘Ah, bellissimo’!

That evening was one of the most pleasant Aiden had experienced in a long time. He cooked dinner with his wife, played with his daughter and as the sun set he didn’t feel exhausted and drained, he felt alive. He sprawled himself across the couch, glass of wine in hand, surrounded by cardboard boxes in various stages of unpacking. The house was slowly starting to come together and feel like home. Isla had already started to paint some of the walls which made a huge difference. A little time and a little love and it would be amazing. He looked out into the garden wistfully, imagining summer barbeques with friends, Meegan playing happily with Edmond’s grandson, Grant. The men enjoying some ice cold beers, the women gossiping over some wine. Isla seemed to be settling in which was good news. This was all such a culture shock for her but she was taking it really well. Aiden assumed that finding the beauty salon had made a big impact on her mood. His wife loved to get pampered and shop. Since shopping was confined to the few stores Avalon had to offer she would have to make do with pampering for now, not that he was complaining.

‘You coming to bed, baby?’ Isla asked from the doorway.

Aiden craned his neck to see her and noticed a familiar, knowing glint in her eyes. He sprang up from the couch and bounded upstairs like an excited schoolboy. Oh yes, he most certainly could get used to this.

Chapter Two

First Encounters

From the little research that Aiden had done, he knew that Eastham Ladies Penitentiary was a maximum security prison for the most serious of offenders. This didn't unnerve him too much as he had expected as much. In his ignorance he felt mildly relieved that it was a female prison, knowing how much more intimidated he would feel about his impending visit if it were a male prison. He had seen one too many prison movies and avoided male prisons as much as he could.

The previous night he had enjoyed a deep, dreamless sleep and had awoken so refreshed that he truly felt that he could take on the world. Full of optimism he kissed his wife and daughter goodbye and with Betty's directions, headed out to Eastham.

The prison was not hard to find, it was well signposted for pretty much the entire journey. Aiden had been driving along empty roads that seemed to lead to nowhere for a good forty minutes when a huge, grey castle appeared on the horizon. Instead of a moat there were rolling fields with various layers of electrical fencing. The gate consisted of dozens of barriers and enforced metal doors which grudgingly slid open when he stated his name and purpose to the hard-faced security man. From a distance Eastham seemed strangely beautiful. A huge blot on the endless expanse of rolling prairies, it looked like something from another world. Aiden half-expected to be greeted by Spock as he parked up and headed towards yet another guarded entrance.

All the outer walls were a dense grey, the only fleck of colour coming from the blue uniform worn by the guards.

Despite being surrounded by luscious acres of green grass none grew within the walls of the immense prison. Aiden wondered if this was a result of all the electrical fencing, or if nature just knew that she was not welcome here. This was a place for those who did not deserve to hear the sweet lullaby of birdsong, or breathe in the luscious scent of a blooming flower. Here, the condemned were at the last outpost before hell, but no doubt many felt like they were already there. Whilst from a distance Eastham looked impressive, once inside you realized just how imposing a structure can really be. Aiden had only just arrived but was already looking forward to being able to drive away.

‘Freedom’, he mused to himself, ‘is much too underrated’.

Inside was not much better. The air felt decidedly cooler and the indifferent grey of the stone had crept along the interior walls in the form of paint. Green doors, though the colour of baby sick, were a welcome break from the dismal decorating. Aiden was led along countless corridors, his footsteps echoing on the plastic tiled floors. He was ushered through so many security gates that he began to worry if he was ever going to be able to get back out.

‘Prisoner 929 is in maximum security.’ The burly female guard had told him when he had finally made it to reception, her voice monotonous as if she had forgotten how to express emotion. He was currently being led by another, equally ample female form, down a labyrinth of corridors. His palms were sweaty and his attempts to make small talk had not even been acknowledged. The women who worked there were tough; he supposed that they had to be. But no matter how tough they were, he knew that they would be no match for what lay behind the locked doors which they were now passing by. Aiden had expected hands grasping through railings, voices crying out their innocence, but all was quiet. Those cells he passed where you could see in, the lone occupants were sat, sometimes reading, sometimes just staring into space; none so much as fluttered an eyelid as he clomped past.

Finally he was motioned into a small room where one wall was made entirely of Perspex glass. Beyond the glass, there was a lone chair facing him which was flanked by two guards. On Aiden's side of the glass there was a basic desk and a plastic chair.

'929 will be with you shortly', the woman told him. 'I'll wait for you outside.'

Aiden nodded and thanked her but she was already gone before the words had even left his mouth. He moved the chair and positioned himself opposite the other currently vacant chair. Placing his briefcase on the desk he took out a Dictaphone and a notebook. He had no idea what to expect from Prisoner 929.

'Are you ready?' one of the guards asked from the other side. Aiden merely nodded in response.

'Send her in!' the other guard yelled. Her. It was the first acknowledgment that Brandy White was indeed a woman and not just a number.

Prisoner 929 was ushered into the room. She was wearing a garish orange jumpsuit and her hands were handcuffed. Eyes trained to the floor she obediently followed the guard's instructions and sat herself down in the chair opposite Aiden. Still she did not look up. She placed her cuffed hands in her lap and he noticed how tiny they were. The thick metal bracelets overwhelmed her small wrists so much so that he wondered if she could easily free herself from her constraints if she so desired. Not that the guards needed to worry if she did get free. When she shuffled in Aiden assessed that she was no more than five foot one and incredibly petite in build. They could easily lift her up with one arm. Her bleached blonde hair fell in waves upon her shoulders and down her back. She appeared like a fairy child, not a murdering monster. Finally she raised her eyes to meet his and Aiden looked upon his first client in Avalon.

His breath caught in his throat for a moment as he gazed at Brandy White. She was devastatingly beautiful. Her lips were a deep red, plump and permanently pouting, the skin which was exposed on her face and hands was as white and as delicate as the finest china. Her face was a perfect heart shape, with a

delicate button nose. But it was her eyes which had captivated Aiden. They were so round and wide in her little head, the colour of autumn leaves, fringed with dark, curled lashes. Her eyes bore into his, questioning, confused.

‘Mrs. White, I am your attorney, my name is Aiden Connelly.’ He noticed her relax at his introduction.

‘How do you do, Mr. Connelly?’ her voice was soft and melodic, laced in a lazy southern drawl. ‘I thought you might be a priest.’

‘A priest?’

‘Yes, sir. I asked them if I could see a priest but I haven’t been visited yet.’

‘Why do you want to see a priest?’

Brandy seemed alarmed by his question.

‘Why, Mr. Connelly, I have not been to church in well over a month, it is a matter of urgency that I see a priest, my immortal soul is at stake!’ He wondered if she was joking but he could tell by her anxiety that she was being quite earnest.

‘Well then, I will see if I can set that up for you, Mrs. White.’

‘Please, call me Brandy. It just doesn’t feel right being called Mrs. White.’

‘Very well, Brandy, I am here to represent your case at your upcoming trial. I will need to go over details of the event with you, verify your statement with the one you gave to the police. If you have any questions at all...’

‘Are you from Avalon?’ she interrupted.

‘Yes, I am.’ She furrowed her brow.

‘I do not mean to be rude, Mr. Connelly, but I don’t recall ever seeing you around and Avalon is a mighty small place.’

‘I’m new, moved there less than a week ago.’ He felt uncomfortable that the conversation was moving towards him; it was important to never reveal personal information to clients.

‘Must be different from living in a big city.’

‘City?’ he nervously wondered how she could possibly know where he was from.

‘Relax,’ she smiled, noticing his tense expression. ‘Your suit gave you away. You can’t buy smart suits like that in Avalon, and if you did you would find little occasion to wear

them. In all honesty I'm mighty touched that you made such an effort to come and see little old me!

He searched for the cynicism in her comment, but saw only a warm smile and kind, yet frightened eyes.

'Well, let us get down to it,' Aiden leant and retrieved a file from his briefcase and switched on the Dictaphone.

'Can you please just state your name and age, for the recording?'

'Brandy White. I'm twenty four.'

'Thank you. So on April 6th of this year, you were charged with the murder of your husband, Brandon White.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Records state that you yourself made the distress call to 911 at approximately 11:23pm.' Brandy nodded.

'Can you please answer vocally for the recording?'

'Oh, yes, I made the call.'

'Did you call because you regretted what had just happened?'

'Oh no, sir. I waited until he was dead, then called.'

'So, you admit that you deliberately stabbed your husband,' he checked his notes, 'six times in the back and chest?'

'Yes.'

'Waiting until he was dead and then calling 911?'

'Yes.'

'Would you say that you were of sound mind when the incident occurred?'

'Oh yes, for the first time in my life I saw things clearly.' Aiden found her responses puzzling and was beginning to question the young woman's sanity. She did not appear to be the least bit remorseful and was quick to admit her guilt. On all accounts she should come across as callous and cold, but there was a warmth in her eyes and in her smile that suggested that meditated murder was something she could never had committed, even in her wildest dreams.

'Was the murder premeditated?'

Brandy flushed with embarrassment and Aiden realized that she had not fully understood his question. 'Was it planned out?'

'Yes and no.'

‘Can you be clearer, please?’

‘Well, I knew it had to be done, I just didn’t know when until the opportunity arose. So I guess that it was sort of planned.’

‘OK’, Aiden jotted down a few notes. ‘So that you understand, Brandy, you have pleaded guilty to the murder of Brandon White and say that you did this of your own free will whilst of sound mind.’

‘Uh huh.’

‘This means that at your trial, if the judge is satisfied that you are guilty of first degree murder, under state law, you will receive the death penalty.’ Aiden felt sick to his stomach as he said it. Brandy nodded in understanding and tears pricked her eyes but did not wash down upon her cheeks. She took a deep breath, quickly composing herself.

‘I am happy to accept the consequences for my actions.’ There was something bizarrely noble about her attitude.

‘Very well, then. As your attorney you can address any questions you have to me.’

‘Oh good, since no one talks to me in here. I’ve been getting kind of lonely,’ a sadness seemed to envelope her tiny frame. Aiden wondered if the reality of what she had done was beginning to set in.

‘Well, I’ll come back in a few days so that we can discuss things further.’

‘I’d like that,’ she smiled. The guards moved forward as their time together came to an end, ready to escort Prisoner 929 back to her cell.

‘Will you be attending church this Sunday, Mr. Connelly?’ Her question caught him off guard.

‘Why yes, I believe I will be.’

‘Well then be sure to send Father West my regards.’ With that she left the room and the atmosphere suddenly grew much more oppressive. She was a light and Aiden felt a pang of guilt that he would be assisting in helping to extinguish it.

As Aiden passed through the security gates and started his journey back to Avalon he reflected upon his first meeting with Brandy. During his career in law he had encountered many men

and women accused of murder, some guilty, some not so guilty. They varied in age, ethnic background, financial status, but one trait that they all had in common was that when you were with them, no matter what they were saying, be it professing their innocence or describing the murder in gruesome detail, there was always an element of anger, and dare Aiden say, evil, lurking behind their eyes. Whilst these people may seem perfectly normal on the outside, he could always sense that malignant rage and malice which would drive them to do something as terrible as taking another life. What puzzled him about Brandy was that in her eyes all he saw was sadness. Something about the case just wasn't adding up.

Besides the fact that she did not seem in any way monstrous, which was a silly conclusion anyway, she was more than likely putting on a show for Aiden, hiding her true self. But even if that were the case, there were the simple physics of it all. Brandy White was tiny; she could not weigh more than 112 pounds. How had she managed to overpower her husband? Perhaps he was enfeebled? Had caring for a sick husband driven her to madness? It was possible. Aiden noted that he needed to do more background research on Brandon White. He needed to know why a seemingly sweet and innocent woman would murder her own husband in cold blood and then so freely admit to it.

His mind had been racing so much that Aiden had failed to realize that he was already back in Avalon. The sky had now clouded over with the threat of rain. A small voice in the back of his mind reminded him that this was tornado country but he dismissed it. He parked up outside Cope and May; he was quickly getting to know his way around town.

'Well, hello, Mr. Connelly,' Betty greeted him warmly as his arrival was declared through the gentle jingle at the door.

'Hello, Betty, how are you today?'

'Very well, thank you, dear. And yourself? Did you find Eastham alright?'

‘Oh yes, no trouble at all,’ he was about to walk into the office when he added, ‘your directions really helped.’ Betty beamed at this, and, maybe he imagined it, seemed to blush slightly. Isla was always teasing Aiden about his effect on women but he failed to notice it. Looking back, he reasoned that he had never chatted a woman up before, had never needed to as they seemed more than happy to approach him. Isla had cornered him at a mutual friend’s party when they were at college together. She later told him that she only did it because he looked like James Dean. Not that Aiden was complaining. Yes, he had never been short of female attention and had never pursued a woman. The macho side of him would have welcomed the challenge of the chase, but the lazier side felt why run after what you already have, on a plate no less?

‘Hey there, champ!’ Edmond was at his desk typing away, surrounded by stacks of paper and three empty coffee mugs. He was clearly having a busy day.

‘How did it go at Eastham?’

‘It went well,’ Aiden said as he sat down and switched on his computer, ready to write up his report of his first meeting with Brandy.

‘Although...’ he stopped himself from going further. Edmond would surely think him a fool if he confessed to his mixed feelings about the case.

‘Although?’

‘No, nothing,’ Aiden waved his hand dismissively.

‘No, go on, son. You can talk freely here, you are amongst friends.’

Aiden took a deep breath.

‘Brandy White, she is so, you know, small? And very well spoken. She even expressed her desire to see a priest. She just doesn’t fit the stereotypical role of a cold killer.’

Edmond stiffened in his chair and locked eyes with Aiden. His face was set in a stern expression.

‘Brandon White was a good, decent man. A pillar of the community. Small she may be but her wickedness knows no bounds. I’ve no doubt she fluttered her eyelashes and pouted her big red lips. To look at, you would think she was the sweetest

thing. Do not be taken in by her. She is beautiful, but deadly. Keep your distance.'

Aiden was surprised by Edmond's hostile tone and knew better than to push the conversation further.

'You are right, of course,' Edmond relaxed at this and his eyes drifted back to his computer screen. 'I just need to do some more research on the case; I need to get more background on Mr. White.'

'Well, you won't be short of information around here. He's a local hero, led his high school football team, the Avalon Angels, to win their first ever State Championship. It was wonderful. He attended church every Sunday without fail and worked for his father, Clyde, over at his timber company. He was Clyde's only son, he has been in pieces ever since.'

Aiden just nodded as he jotted down football, church and timber. He wanted to get a better idea of who Brandon was. Everyone in Avalon seemed to idolize him, but if he was such a great man, why would his young, beautiful wife kill him? If a story like this had occurred in Chicago the papers would have had a field day.

'Was there a lot of media coverage on the murder?'

'Oh, tonnes. The local paper, of course, and once word got out about what had happened more and more started turning up and asking questions. Things have died down a bit lately but I expect the media circus will come to town again around the trial. You best be ready, my boy. Once they get wind that you are her lawyer they will come sniffing round and asking questions. It is always best just to keep schtum'.

'Yes, don't worry, I won't say anything to the press,' he added newspapers to his list.

'Good lad.'

'Before I forget, my wife, Isla, would like to have yourself and your wife round for dinner one night.'

'Oh how splendid!' Edmond smiled ear to ear. 'I'll have a word with Mrs. Copes tonight. Although I should warn you, she does like a drink or two.'

The clouds still hung heavy with the threat of rain when Aiden pulled into his driveway. He had spent the afternoon

going over his notes and listening to the audio recording of his meeting with Brandy. He had assembled a number of questions for when he next went to visit the prison and was determined to find out more about her deceased husband, Brandon.

The sweet smell of apple pie floated on the air and enticed his senses. He hoped that the delicious aroma was coming from his own home but did not want to get his hopes up as it would be completely out of character for Isla to bake.

To Aiden's delight, when he entered the kitchen he was greeted by a glorious pie sitting proudly in the centre of the table.

'Well, well,' he called out. Meegan came hurrying in to greet him, throwing herself clumsily into his legs for a hug.

'Hey, tiny dancer,' he scooped her up in his arms and noted how quickly she was growing and gaining weight these days. He was thankful to now be having the chance to savour each and every precious moment of all her too fleeting childhood.

'Pie, pie!' she squealed, pointing over at the table.

'Yes, I can see a lovely pie. Did Mommy make it?'

'And me!'

'Oh, of course, and you.'

'She helped crush apples,' Isla informed him as she entered the kitchen.

'Clever girl,' Meegan was beaming with pride.

'How was work?'

Aiden set his daughter down and she ran off into the living room. He admired the pie again and gave his wife an approving smile.

'Well this is certainly nice to come home to. Makes a change from take-out!'

'The nearest take-out is two towns over so you better get used to good old home cooking!'

'Work was good thanks, hun. Went to the prison, it was quite interesting. I can't make her out.'

'Who?'

'The suspect. She seems, well, not like a killer.'

'But she is though, isn't she?'

'Well, yes, she confessed.'

‘There you go then. Don’t go over-thinking it. Just enjoy handling a simple case,’ Isla began to lay the table for dinner.

‘So what delicacy have you whipped up for tonight?’

‘Macaroni and cheese.’

‘Oh,’ Aiden found it hard to conceal his disappointment at the meal which had been his staple diet whilst a struggling student.

‘I know, it isn’t the most exciting but the pie took forever, I’m still getting used to this whole Stepford Wives scenario.’

‘I’m grateful, don’t get me wrong. I love mac and cheese, and I know Meegan is crazy for it. Thanks,’ he went over and planted a kiss on her cheek.

‘So, what do you think?’ Isla stepped back from him and held her hands out expectantly, her face was full of excitement.

‘So?’ Aiden was confused.

‘Come on Aid, don’t kid, you like it right?’

‘Erm...’ he looked his wife up and down, unsure what the answer she was looking for was.

‘God, Aid!’ her tone made it clear he had given a very wrong answer.

‘My hair, jeeze! I had my hair done, remember? Shorter, new colour. God, you just live in your own little world, just like you did in Chicago!’ her face was flush with anger, and now that she mentioned it, her hair did look a bit different.

‘Hey,’ Aiden was getting defensive, ‘there is no need to be like that. I’ve just got in; give me chance to get myself together.’

‘There was a time when you would notice something like that straight away!’

‘Well, excuse me for not being the most perceptive man in the world! Your hair looks great, Isla. Sorry I didn’t notice it the second you walked into the room. Maybe you shouldn’t have distracted me with the pie if you wanted to be the centre of attention!’

‘Oh, that’s right, I think it’s all about me,’ her hands were folded across her chest, her eyes locked onto Aiden in a death stare and her voice was now eerily calm. He hated women’s mood swings. He hated arguing because he knew that whatever he said was inevitably going to be the wrong answer.

‘It usually is always about you.’

Now her eyes bulged with rage and the calmness was once again swept away by her anger.

‘Oh yes, Aid. Me, me me! We are here because of ME! Isn’t that right? How dare you! I moved *my life* for *you*. And this is how you repay me? Great! I’m trying my best to keep it together, this place is so unbelievably backwards, getting my hair done at least helps me get some sense of normality.’

‘Do you know how shallow that sounds?’

‘I don’t care! I’m here and I’m really trying. I don’t want to become some housewife who fades into the background of your life!’

‘Isla, I see you. All I could think when I came in was how proud I was of you baking a pie, which is so much more important to me than your hair being immaculate. That is why we are here, to get our values right. You look beautiful to me no matter what. I don’t want Meegan to grow up being image-obsessed. I don’t want her to get sick like you did.’

Isla’s eyes grew teary at the mention of her battle with anorexia, which while a distant memory, still had the power to cut her like a knife. Aiden crossed the space between them which was littered with insults and spite. He held his wife in his arms and kissed her new hair.

‘You look beautiful, baby, you always do.’ She was now crying into his shoulder.

‘Mommy?’ Meegan was looking up at them, bewilderment streaked across her little face and tears streaking her podgy cheeks.

‘Oh, baby girl,’ Isla gasped, hurriedly wiping the tears from her own cheeks.

‘What...is...wrong?’ the little girl sobbed, the confusion of seeing her mother cry overwhelming her.

‘Nothing, honey,’ Isla was now hugging her little girl as her sobs turned into hiccups.

‘Daddy told Mommy he was going to eat the whole pie because it looks so good and I’m very hungry,’ Aiden offered as an explanation.

‘No!’ Meegan screamed and started hitting his legs in fury.

‘Hey,’ he protested, grabbing her little arms mid-punch. ‘I’m sure that there is enough for us all to share, you and Mommy did a great job and I’m very proud.’

Isla smiled warmly at them both.

‘And doesn’t Mommy look super pretty with her hair?’

‘Oh yes,’ Meegan was now smiling again. Aiden felt exhausted, living with two women was far from easy.

‘They make my nails pink!’ she showed her dad her tiny nails which now glistened and sparkled. He hid his true feelings with a smile as he couldn’t handle another argument. Meegan was two; she didn’t need to be getting caught up in all that beauty stuff yet. He would discuss it with Isla another time. For now, they were going to enjoy a nice family evening together.

As they sat down to eat that evening, rain began splashing against the windows with a sudden fury; the tension in the air finally lifted.