

Isabelle

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*To my children-
Adam, Ben, Emma, James & Eden-
I love you.
And to Amy, for all your help
in getting ARD Press off the ground.*

CHAPTER ONE

Adam wearily leant over to check the time on his bedside clock. It was early, 3.17am; a scenario that he had been forced to deal with during the past few weeks. He was genuinely tired when his head hit the pillow, but as always he had made the mistake of mentally sifting through the tedium of his day, reliving and reconstructing. One thing led to another and now at 3.17am he found himself once again consumed by loneliness.

As a kid he remembered sitting up in bed and peering inquisitively out into the darkness, trying to make sense of time and space. He then tried to sleep with his head under the sheets, frightened and with no answers. Now twenty-odd years later he was still facing the same darkness, in much the same quandary. Each sleepless night was beginning to take its toll, leaving him weaker and less able to cope with his incessant mental gymnastics. He was becoming immersed in himself, no longer being able to decipher his irrational, jumbled thoughts and was overwhelmed by their speed and consistency. They were like bullets ricocheting within his skull and he

tossed and turned desperately trying to escape them. Adam began to pray for the sweetness and bliss of oblivious sleep, but more than that, to be set free from the relentlessness of his own mind.

After hours of servitude, eventually, at least for this particular night, Adam Tasman-Bishop found sleep, for a moment releasing him.

Seemingly moments later, strips of light edged slowly and silently across the floor in a ragged-edged pattern created by the cane blinds through which they emerged. Outside life was well underway and the harbour traffic cacophony dragged the rest of the world into consciousness. But inside this room life remained muffled, in the background somehow. The thin layer of dust that covered most everything lay dormant; there was not a stir or sound.

He'd found the warehouse two years prior through a friend, and had spent what money he had creating a basic kitchen and bathroom. The remaining space he modestly furnished with a bed, a two-seater sofa, circa 1920 and an old kitchen table and chairs he'd found in a local junk shop. It was basic in every sense, but these things were of little importance to him. Adam's work was foremost in his life and he devoted all of his energies to that one pursuit.

As an artist Adam had so far been successful. Two exhibitions and a few private commissions had kept him going, buying paints and canvas, a few articles of clothing when he needed them and of course food, when he thought of it. He'd even managed to put a few dollars aside, just in case. But just now money was the least of his problems. For the

past few weeks, getting down to work had been a real struggle, one that for an artist was like backed up plumbing of the soul. Several canvases stretched and prepared sat ready, propped up against the wall. Ideas had come but had not transferred to the brush. As each day passed without progress, Adam's frustration and eventual depression grew. Sleep, when he could grasp it, was the only temporary relief from his pain and for the first time in his life, he was avoiding each day and the promise of more inaction and uncertainty.

As the morning gently drifted into day, Adam at last reacted to its constant beckoning. The warmth of the sun on his cheek forced him to move, albeit to escape the reality. Then suddenly through the stillness came a wake up call, perhaps a little too nerve-shattering than he would have liked. There was a loud rapping on the door, and it thundered through his brain like a jet breaking the sound barrier.

'Taz! Ya there Taz?' called an all too familiar voice. Adam rolled onto his back, unimpressed.

'Shit!' he grumbled, knowing exactly who it was, even in his half-stupor.

'Come on Taz, open up?'

Ted was an old school friend, and in fact the only one in the world that still called him 'Taz'.

'I'm coming!' shouted Adam, his slurred reply and tone unsympathetic. He threw on a paint-splattered shirt by the bed, to cover a similarly rendered T-shirt and hobbled stiffly to the door. With both hands he unbolted the old steel bolt and yanked on the heavy door. It opened with a creak

'What the hell do you want at this hour?'

'This hour?' replied Ted. 'It's ten o'clock, old son!'

Ted burst into the studio throwing Adam carelessly to the side and hurled a large duffel bag onto the floor. Adam took a deep breath and reluctantly shut the door.

'What the hell's this?' asked Adam, pointing to the bag and scowling 'Well?'

Ted's face collapsed into a slightly coy, 'I'm not responsible' look that he sported so often in his vain attempts for forgiveness. Adam's expression instantly hardened.

'Look...she's done it again, chucked me out,' explained Ted, his nose wrinkled up like a mischievous schoolboy.

Adam sighed deeply then stormed over to the table, turning around with his hands like claws, ready to strangle his friend.

'So who is it this time? Shit, how many times have we got to go through this?'

Adam slumped, exasperated. 'Jenny's not stupid, you know; you can't keep doing this to her. She deserves better!'

Ted gave up the 'I'm a victim' look and dredged up just a little guilt from deep down inside himself.

'I know, I know,' he admitted. 'But can I stay for a few days; just until I can patch things up again?'

Adam let his chin fall onto his chest limply. 'What choice do I have? You know where the sofa is.'

Ted, with a grin broadly etched across his face, launched himself onto the sofa, and crossed his legs, stretching out in front of him over the arm of the sofa.

Adam looked at him squarely. 'You know you're going to lose her one day, don't you?' Ted replied with that salesman-like twinkle in his eye.

'Just let me work Ted.....OK?' begged Adam, waiting for a reply.

'I will, I promise.'

Adam huffed and went to get a glass of water.

Ted had done this too many times to Adam and he was about fed up with it. But this time, given Adam's state of mind, he wasn't that upset, and he could do with the company. Perhaps someone else being there would help him break this unproductive cycle in which he found himself.

Ted was a lovable rogue, bright, intelligent, but when it came to women he was out of control, hopeless. He was an Ad Copywriter, on great money and married to an attractive, talented young career woman with all the prospects in the world. But Ted would risk all of this daily, for any woman who tickled his fancy and unknowingly paid the slightest attention to him. Adam could never work it out, this unyielding attraction that women had for the man. It wasn't as if he were Paul Newman or someone of that ilk.

Ted was about five foot six tall, a bit portly, with brown curly hair, not particularly cared for. He was pleasant looking, but not what you'd call a 'great looker'. But with a charismatic glint in his eye and all the charm and confidence in the world, he bounded

from one infidelity to another with amazing resilience. It was his poor wife that was paying the price, struggling with her husband's rather hapless indiscretions and still somehow clinging to this boy that had so far refused to grow up into a responsible man.

Ted had stowed his gear away and was busily making coffee to help clear out the cobwebs. Adam stared blankly at a virgin canvas now secured on one of his homemade easels in the corner. The light flooded the white textured linen, accentuating its clean, untouched surface. Ted silently handed Adam his coffee and he took a sip without saying anything.

Adam had had the same feeling each day, standing there before a blank canvas. He would almost become mesmerised, peering into its pleading void. A plethora of emotions stirred within him, like something trying to emerge but inadvertently trapped. An idea, a purpose unrevealed sat over his shoulder, so close yet so far. There was something that needed to be painted, but the thought was elusive and he just couldn't grasp what it was. He had had blocks before, but nothing like this and this run of sleepless nights wasn't helping.

Ted sat there on the sofa nursing his coffee and looking pensively up at Adam. He could feel there was something wrong with his friend, but unlike before when the creative flow had somehow temporarily halted, Adam seemed more disturbed this time, more affected, almost nervous. Ted thought it best not to push his luck, so he said nothing and

remained seated, absorbing the warmth and comfort of his hot, black brew.

Adam appeared a tragic figure. He was tall and thin, fragile looking with long straggly blonde hair. His face appeared younger than his twenty-four years and his facial features were finely structured, giving him a gentle and kind appearance. With the palest blue eyes he seemed angelic, and if it weren't for the three-day growth and the paint splattered rags on his back, you could well have made that assumption. But Adam was no angel and although grace of movement and his elegant, artistic hands often implied a strong feminine side, he had a very definite rash and impulsive artistic temperament.

But Adam was likeable, and although his rather insular life often kept the world at bay, people were drawn to him. Ted was one of the few people that Adam let into his world, and being such an old friend, Ted knew old 'Taz' better than most.

For some time now Ted had noticed a sense of longing in Adam. It was as if there was something missing within him that begged replenishment or a problem remained unresolved, a question unanswered. In many ways Adam was the stereotypical artist, suffering for his art. But in essence Adam was as happy as a lark, doing exactly what he wanted to do. How people saw or judged him he cared far less about than the way he dressed or chose to live. Adam was a loner, but there was something in his life he was searching for, and that search now seemed hastened. As Ted studied his old friend, he thought that perhaps a good woman was all he

needed. But Adam had something else on his mind, just at that moment.

Ted finished his coffee and feeling a little out of place with Adam so intent on working, he decided to go for a walk and get some fresh air. He quietly disposed of his cup in the kitchen sink and headed for the door.

'Out for a bit! See ya later then!' he shouted, slamming the steel door behind him. Adam gestured goodbye with a furtive wave but didn't turn around; he was too lost in his empty canvas.

As the echo from the thud of the door eventually subsided in the vast open space of the studio, Adam put down his brush and hung his head.

'Maybe I'm pushing too hard?'

'Nothing else has worked,' he mumbled, trying now to loosen up and clear his head.

As an experiment, he decided to try a new approach, a careless, abstract approach unlike his usual planned execution. Normally this would have been out of the question, having got used to a strict regime, a professional and organised process that had in the past always provided the best technical and creative results. But now he was desperate, and anything to unblock this hideous, seemingly insurmountable glitch, was worth trying.

He arranged all of his brushes, palette knives and paints and oiled down his palette, closing his eyes and taking a deep rejuvenating inhalation.

'Music! That's what I need.'

He rushed over to a portable stereo player tucked away under a layer of dust and some old paint

rags, then quickly sifted through the pile of tapes around it and found an old 'Led Zeppelin' tape.

'God! How long since I've heard this?' he chuckled, blowing the dust off its plastic case and then placing it into the tape port. He made sure the power was on, then rolled the tape and turned the volume up high.

Adam stood once again in front of the white canvas and closed his eyes, allowing the music to imbue his body. The studio suddenly came alive with sound and rhythm, and a smile crept across Adam's face.

'Yeah, that's it,' he groaned, his narrow hips beginning to gyrate under the spell of the music. He picked up his palette and brush and looked deeply into the white linen surface, searching for that elusive spark. The music was getting louder in his head, its rhythmic pounding and raw power seducing him, taking him over.

Suddenly there seemed something indistinct before him, somehow replacing the empty void. He could see a form, a painting with vibrancy and texture, developing before his eyes. It was as if all he had to do was to fill in the blank space, the painting itself already completed. Adam found himself hurriedly mixing paint, slurping on the primaries with careless abandon and whipping them together with his palette knife in lightning strokes. He was almost throwing the paint onto the canvas, with a brush, with a knife, anything to get the paint up. It was a frenzy of movement, slapping and swishing, almost aimlessly, or so it seemed.

Adam was shading with his hands, blending and scraping with his knife. The colours found their place, searching for the form in which they belonged and Adam was simply going along for the ride. As the music swelled, so did his emotions and his brush strokes became bold and impassioned. When the melodies became lilting and the subtle tone and timer of the acoustic guitars filled the studio, so too the brush strokes filled the canvas with clear and gentle hues. He was blending colours and tones into interactive forms that recreated again and again, over and over.

Adam had entered another world. He felt apart from his physical self, his mind taken elsewhere. A creative energy had simply taken over, energy that he had never fully experienced before. His controlled and developed techniques had suddenly flown out the window, and he was now at the mercy of creativity itself.

On and on it went, the music playing on a continuous loop in the cassette player. Time itself had abandoned the studio. It was as if the painting was creation itself and all else radiated from it as a result. Then suddenly, amid the fevered rendering, Adam abruptly returned to the real world as Ted barged noisily through the door and into the studio. His arms were full of grocery bags.

'Sorry I'm late Taz, I dropped into Harry's and.....'

Ted stopped dead in his tracks, his mouth gaping. As if in slow-motion, one of the grocery bags slipped unceremoniously through his arms, crashing

to the floor and splitting; broken eggs, gurgling milk and broken biscuits strewn everywhere.

'Who the hell is that?' exclaimed Ted, staring in horror at the canvas. 'You been smokin' something?'

Adam remained motionless, almost catatonic. Broken free from his frenzied painting, he was left reeling, feeling disoriented. He suddenly realised what he was doing, and having been hardly aware of it, was more than a little bit put out. As the fog inside his mind began to clear, he looked at Ted's anxious expression and then to the spilt groceries. Ted still hadn't moved.

Adam apprehensively turned to face the canvas and as he focused, his jaw almost dislodged in shock. Amid the mass of hurriedly applied paint a form was revealing itself. At first it was subtle, almost lost amid the fevered crosshatching and colour blending. But the more he stared at it, the clearer it became. It was like looking at one of those clever dimensional graphics that you stare at until the hidden image appears. Then suddenly your eye sees the image and it appears to jump out at you, making you feel stupid for not having seen it straight away.

As he peered at this strange artwork, a face appeared as clear as his own. But what was staring back at him was horrid, as sinister a face as he'd ever seen. It was more the expression on the face and its evil intent that was so unnerving.

'Who did that?' asked Adam thoughtlessly, trying to deal with it.

'God, I did!'