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THE ROAD TO BEDLAM



MIKE SHEVDON

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The Courts of the Feyre Series
Sixty-One Nails

MIKE SHEVDON

The Road to Bedlam

THE COURTS OF THE FEYRE VOL. II



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For Sue

Kayleigh was running out of places to look. It wasn't like Alex to skip lessons like this. Well, OK, just that once, but they'd done it together, scaring each other with the prospect of getting caught in town when they should be at school. This was different. They had arranged to meet before Geography so that they could swap ideas on the homework, so where was she?

She went through the outer doors, peeping around the wall in case a teacher lurked there. The playground was empty; no teachers and no Alex. She was about to go back into the building when she heard a noise from the gym block. It was more of a yell than a scream and it wasn't Alex's voice, but there shouldn't be anyone in the gym block at this time.

She checked the playground again and ran across the tarmac, praying the teachers in the room facing the playground were now engaged with their mid-morning classes and too busy to be looking out of the windows. She reached the side door to the gym and slipped through, breathing hard. The echo from her school shoes on the wooden floor where outdoor footwear wasn't allowed made her walk around the edge rather than crossing the open space. She stopped and listened. There were voices in the girls' changing room.

She tiptoed quickly down the passage and stopped. The voices were louder. She leaned on the door, pushing it open slightly, and recognised Tracy Welham's voice and the unmistakable smell of cigarettes. She was about to ease the door closed again and leave them to coat their lungs with tobacco when she heard Alex.

"I won't tell anyone, honest, but you have to let me past."

"Have to, do I?" challenged Tracy. She was in the year above them and had a bad reputation.

"You'd better let me go now," Alex asserted, "or something bad is going to happen."

"Yeah," Tracy said, "something bad is going to happen. Grab her."

It was the sound of the scuffle that drove Kayleigh into the changing rooms. Two other girls, mates of Tracy's, were holding Alex, forcing her into one of the cubicles. At the sound of the door, Tracy turned to face Kayleigh.

"You'd better let her go or I'm gonna get the teachers." Kayleigh raised her voice, keen to make sure the others heard her.

"Get out of here now, horse-face," said Tracy, "or you're getting the same."

They crowded Alex into the cubicle and she could hear the grunts and shoves as Alex struggled against the two older girls.

Tracy tossed the cigarette into one of the sinks and made a grab for Kayleigh's long hair. Kayleigh evaded her, slipped back past the changing room door and pulled it behind her. Tracy's arm came through the gap and Kayleigh trapped it in the door.

"You little sod!" Tracy's hand grasped for Kayleigh. "I'm gonna rip your hair out."

"Kayleigh!" Alex's voice sounded hollow in the tiled room. "Tell them to stop, tell them I can't hold it. It's getting free. I can't hold it!"

Kayleigh's mind raced. "You have to let her go," she shouted through the door at Tracy. "She's not herself. You don't understand. She's really going to lose it."

"Yeah, we're really scared about that." Tracy shouted to her mates, "Drown the little bitch." She pulled her arm back and slammed the door closed on Kayleigh.

Kayleigh shoved at the door, her shoes sliding on the smooth floor as she pushed against Tracy, holding it shut from the other side.

"You don't understand. You have to let her go!"

From behind the door came the sound of burbling and then coughing and retching.

"Drown the bitch!" Tracy urged them.

The sound of burbling resumed, but underlined by another gurgling sound. Kayleigh hammered on the door, screaming for them to stop. The gurgling deepened to a low rumble, the sound vibrating through Kayleigh's bones, making her teeth ache. The temperature dropped suddenly. The chill sent goosebumps down Kayleigh's arms.

There was a moment of silence.

Then the rumbling returned, building to a crescendo until everything burst at once behind the door. Kayleigh hammered on the door, screaming to them to open it before it was too late, pleading with Tracy. Water started streaming out from under the door, pooling around Kayleigh's feet. Suddenly Tracy was trying to pull it open.

Water crashed into the gap, the weight of it against the door pressing it shut. Tracy was screaming to her to push, her hands white against the edge of the door as water and sewage from the drains put pressure on the gap. Kayleigh tried to wedge her foot in it but the flow was too strong, it was thrusting her aside. The door slammed shut on Tracy's fingers. Kayleigh heard her yank them free with a bone-popping wrench.

The screams turned to hammering as the changing room rapidly filled with foul-smelling water. Kayleigh could hear them shouting and yelling as the water swirled around them. Water was pouring under the door, spraying round the edges as the pressure built. She could see the door handle rattle and then jerk as hands were dragged away, screams gulped off as they lost their footing and were swept under. Their cries echoed, rising and fading as the water began to turn, the screams turning to gasps as they tried to swim against the swirling current. Her imagination conjured the vortex, tugging at their clothes, pulling them into the centre, dragging them under.

Kayleigh turned and ran down the passage and out through the gym screaming for someone, anyone to come and help. She ran across the playground, tears streaming down her face, shouting until her voice cracked, knowing it was already too late.

The pool of light was no more than twelve feet across and, for this critical moment, defined my world. Beyond its boundary circled my attackers. They would not kill me, at least not on purpose, but they would hurt me if they could.

The blade in my hand was heavy, a training blade made of dark wood, the handle worn smooth by calloused hands and burnished with sweat. I held it level, two-handed, keeping my grip light but firm, giving it the potential for movement in any direction and leaving my assailants no clue as to how they would react.

It had been a long day, both physically and mentally. I was already aching and sore from earlier sessions and I was unlikely to leave this circle without further bruises to add to my collection.

I took a slow breath, rejecting the distraction of consequences. I had to stay in the moment and not let my mind wander. I had to deny them an opening, an opportunity to step into my circle and attack.

This was my circle. It had been made for me to define the space I must defend. Every day the circle got smaller, sometimes by a little, sometimes a lot – giving me less time to manoeuvre. I'd given up trying to predict how it would change, only acknowledging that it would not grow in size, only shrink.

A shift in the air brought me round as a dark figure danced into the light, blade arcing down at my head. I stepped forward and around, sliding my own blade upwards so that his cut glanced off my blade with a clack and swished down over my shoulder. I spun and sliced my blade where the shadow had been but it just whistled through empty air, the figure once again merging with the shadows.

"Too slow," chuckled Tate, his deep voice rumbling from the darkness.

I stepped back into the centre only to have a figure leap in front of me launching a series of short diagonal strikes. I used my own blade to deflect each one, slowly giving ground, only to realise that

her intent was not to hit me, but to drive me backwards out of the circle. Once outside the pool of light I would be at the mercy of anyone already accustomed to the shadow. I deflected the next cut and shoved the attacking sword away, using its momentum to break my attacker's balance and letting my own point drop. I reversed my grip and punched the pommel hard into the attacker's midriff.

There was an answering grunt as my blow sank home and the figure folded over, at the same time trying to tangle my wrist in her grip. I wrenched the sword away, lowering my stance to give me a better posture and drawing the blade up in a long slice. It found only shadows.

"Good. You remembered." This was the voice of my tutor and I smiled at the rare praise. It was he who had taught me that both ends of a sword were a weapon.

I circled slowly, regaining my position at the centre. This would not end until someone went down. The fight wasn't over until it was won or lost, another maxim from my lessons.

I barely saw the next attack. The figure emerged at my left flank, almost casually. He came down in one clean strike, my ears registering the whistle of the blade even as I stepped sideways to avoid it, no time for a deflecting blow. It glanced painfully off my shoulder, but I used the angular momentum to launch a horizontal cut that would part his head from his shoulders.

My slice whirred through empty space as I felt something hook behind my ankle. It was whipped upwards and I sailed over backwards landing with a crunch on my shoulders. The air was driven from my lungs in a great whoosh, my blade bouncing out of my hand across the floor.

A point pressed against my throat, just hard enough to make breathing difficult.

"How many times have I told you not to let go of your weapon?" Garvin paused, literally pressing home his point, and then withdrawing it, allowing me to respond.

"I couldn't hold it."

"No wonder. You went down like a sack of gravel."

His form blended and shifted from the indistinct shadowy figure that had decked me into a lean, wiry man in a charcoal jacket and turtleneck shirt. The style was austere and it suited him.

The fluorescent lights flickered on and the circle vanished in their glare.

I lay on my back, trying to catch my breath. Amber was by the door, switching the lights back on. She showed no indication of being winded after the punch in the midriff, her quiet eyes observing me as she observed everything.

Tate, the other assailant, grinned at me in the harsh light. Garvin collected my sword from the floor and then walked across the tiles to the wall-mounted rack where the weapons were stored. He checked down the length of each blade carefully before stowing his sword and mine in their appointed places.

Then he took another practice blade from the rack and paced back towards me. I recognised it immediately and sagged at what the heavier, longer blade meant.

"Two hundred," he instructed me.

Sitting up, I took the heavier blade from him. It meant two hundred practice cuts against the car tyre that hung at chest height from a chain in the corner before I could leave for the evening. I sighed deeply, knowing that I could tell him no, but that if I did, he would instruct me no further.

I nodded and he turned and walked away towards the door. Tate stood, leaning on the end of his sword, his grin widening at my misfortune.

"It's a sword, not a walking stick, Tate," Garvin reminded him as he came to the door. "Clean and check the weapons."

The smile vanished from Tate's lips and he lifted the end of the sword from the floor, saluting in acceptance of the rebuke and of the chore that went with it. Though I rated Tate as a fighter, I also knew that he would do whatever Garvin told him, almost without question. It was a matter of leadership. Garvin led and Tate followed.

I pulled myself to my feet, careful not to use the practice sword for support in case that earned me

further two hundred cuts. A glance towards the door showed that Garvin had left, Amber in tow.

"He had you clean there, Niall." Tate's rumbling chuckle made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"That's true, but a few weeks ago he would never have had the opportunity because either you or Amber would have been there first."

His smile widened. "You're coming along, sure enough," he said, nodding, acknowledging the progress I had made, "but I could still take you in an even fight."

I let the wooden sword swing gently back and forth in my hand and looked him over. He was taller than me and heavier. His dark brown hair fell in long waves to his shoulders, adding to the impression of bulk. He was certainly stronger than me and I knew that for all his muscled bulk he could move like quicksilver when he wanted to.

"With one of these, maybe," I indicated the heavier practice sword, "but with something lighter? I'm not sure that's true any more, Tate."

It wasn't a challenge. A challenge implied ego and that had been knocked out of me in the months since I'd started my training as a Warder, at least as far as swords were concerned. But part of mastering a weapon was knowing how good you were, who you could take and who you couldn't. A few weeks ago, I wouldn't have speculated, but now? I really didn't know who would win.

"Some other time, huh? I've the weapons to check over."

It was my turn to grin.

He nodded and turned to the weapons racks to carry out his chore. I knew that he would inspect every blade carefully, rather than have Garvin find one later with a chip out of it or a crack along the grain. Garvin had told him to check them and he would, because that was what Garvin expected.

I went over to where the tyre hung from its chain. I knew that cutting at the heavy reinforced rubber built strength and stamina, but that didn't make it any easier. In a real fight it wouldn't matter if I was tired, bruised and sore, but this wasn't a real fight.

My first two cuts set the pace and after that I let my body take over, varying the cuts each time as I'd been taught. Overhead down, left side, inside left, slide and cut, turn and slice. My body followed the rhythm of it, the heavy thwack of the sword against the rubber punctuating the turns and twists, my brain counting down the cuts to zero.

After fifty strokes I broke the rhythm, preventing my imaginary opponent from guessing the timing. The whistle and thwack of the blade accelerated and slowed, doubled and paused. I tailored my movements, becoming sharp then smooth, elaborate then direct, spurring myself to find new ways of hammering the swinging rubber.

I missed the time on one, sending shock waves vibrating up my wrist, and reacted by turning around, sliding the blade through the centre in a long thrust designed to impale before spinning around, letting the blade whistle out in a flat blur that whacked the tyre into a spin. I spun back to intercept and then let it spin.

I had reached two hundred.

The tyre wound down, turning one way then the other, as I went through a series of stretches and stances, letting my muscles recover slowly, using the effort to ease the tension between my shoulder and the tingling in my wrist.

Tate had waited for me and took the practice sword with a grin. He wiped it over with a cloth and then inspected it for damage before returning it to its place on the rack. We walked in companionable silence through to the changing rooms. I stripped off gingerly and inspected the livid bruises I had accumulated through the day. My fey genes meant that they would be gone by tomorrow, only to be replaced by a fresh set.

Tate shed his clothes and was already in the shower by the time I had my towel ready, his gravelly

voice singing a song I didn't recognise about a fair maid whom he was trying to tempt with a variety of unlikely and sometimes grisly gifts.

"Did you make that up?" I asked him, stepping under the cascade of hot water.

He stopped singing. "Mostly not, though some of the verses are mine."

"It's an unlikely courtship," I suggested. "What kind of girl wants a severed head as a betrothal gift?"

"It's the head of her enemy, so I suppose it has its attractions." He shrugged.

"It doesn't seem much like a love token."

"She's a fey lass, so who knows what she wants?" Tate stepped past me, grinning, grabbed his towel and wrapped it around his waist.

I had to admit, he had a point.

I stayed under the hot water, letting the percussion and warmth ease my muscles while Tate went back into the changing room to get dry. After a few moments, his deeply resonant tone resumed the song.

I thought of my own fey lass, waiting for me. I didn't think that she would welcome a severed head as a gift, but then she wasn't truly fey any more than I was. The true fey were altogether more strange.

Not for the first time I shook my head at the turn my life had taken in the last nine months. My first encounter with the Feyre had been only the previous September when, having had a heart attack on the underground, I had been rescued by an old lady who had woken the fey magic within me to heal my failing heart.

I shook my head and smiled. The old lady had turned out to be a lot older than she looked, though she had changed now so that she appeared to be in her midtwenties. She had become my guide, my mentor and eventually my lover and I had gambled my life in a trial by ordeal for her safety and that of my daughter.

My daughter, Alex, had taken to Blackbird. I had hoped that they would get on well enough to be in each other's company, but I had found myself prodded into jealousy by the way they bonded. They would sit on the sofa, heads together, whispering to each other, and when challenged would tell me that it was nothing to concern me.

When I'd asked Blackbird what they were talking about, I'd been told to mind my own business.

"She's my daughter," I had protested.

"All the more reason that you shouldn't ask."

"Have you told her about me being fey?" I asked her.

"No. You're her father. When the time is right, you should tell her."

Blackbird left me with that thought. I'd held off telling Alex about the gifts I'd inherited from my unknown fey ancestor and the possibility that she would also inherit them. I reasoned that it was partly because I didn't really know whether it would happen or not, and partly because I dreaded what it might mean if it did.

My own gifts came from my affinity with the void, an element that the Feyre believed separated one thing from another, preventing matter from collapsing in on itself. If Alex had inherited that from me then she would inherit the female form of the gift, an ability to become incorporeal, a ghostly shadow of herself, invulnerable to physical harm. She would also inherit darkspore, a corruption that she would be able to spread at will on any surface, allowing her to consume other beings and feed on their flesh.

It wasn't the best news a father could give his daughter. I imagined her reaction, the curling of her lip in that peculiar way as she elongated 'eww' into a whine. I smiled at the thought, but it had kept me from telling her.

It wasn't certain, though. I had also been told that humanity had introduced a random factor into the

inheritance. The Feyre had long had problems with fertility. When they did have children they bred true, each to their element, their forms reflecting their differing affinities. When they discovered that the union between fey and human was fertile it caused a rift between those who believed that the union would save the Feyre from extinction and those who saw human-fey hybrids as an abomination, a corruption of their bloodlines. What neither the pure-bred Untainted nor the remaining factions of the Seven Courts had realised was that the human DNA somehow altered the mechanism of inheritance, meaning that there was no way to be sure what fey traits would be inherited. My hope was that maybe Alex would inherit some other gift, possibly fire and air like Blackbird rather than the grisly gifts of the void.

In any case there was no way to tell. She would either find herself one day gifted with uncanny power, or she wouldn't. If she did, she would live an unnaturally long life. If she didn't, she would live a human lifespan and age and die long before I did, assuming that no one broke my neck with a wooden sword first.

I dried myself and pulled on my jeans and T-shirt. I was not allowed the charcoal uniform of the Warders. Garvin would decide when I could wear grey and he would make sure that I would not disgrace the reputation of the Warders before he would allow that. His decision was final.

I looked forward to that day with a degree of trepidation. It would mean that he thought I was worthy of it, which was a huge compliment, but it would also mean that I was available for duty. Being a Warder meant being ready twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. The Lords and Ladies could request our assistance or assign duties whenever they felt like it. That was the job.

In practice, it wasn't an onerous schedule. Mostly the courts kept to themselves, dealing with their own internal issues. It was only when something affected all of them that the Warders were involved. Then the Warders would be called upon to carry out the will of the Seven Courts of the Feyre, which could be anything from delivering a message to carrying out an execution. The will of the courts was absolute, and the Warders were there to ensure it was enacted. I had heard that a job rarely took more than three of them.

There were six of them and me, one from each of the seven courts. I had bargained for my life by threatening to expose the High Court's weakness. Their solution had been to make me a Warder, ensuring my loyalty and my silence, sworn under an oath bound by magic far more powerful than my own. But I wasn't an active Warder until Garvin said I was. It was his call.

I clipped my phone to my belt. Amber called it my boy-toy and had told me to drop it down a well. She spurned all the trappings of technology and connected with no one outside the Warders as far as she knew. Even then it was a cold relationship. My phone was my connection with my human life and the means by which other people, human people, could contact me. In truth it had its limitations. If I used too much power with it near me then the battery would drain, sometimes beyond recharging. It had been through five batteries in its short life, even though I carried it only when I needed it. It wasn't allowed in the practice hall where it could distract me from my training but it meant I could check for messages when lessons were done for the day.

It beeped twice when I turned it on. That would be Blackbird wanting to know what time I would be home. She had only partially settled into domestic life and felt vulnerable without the magic that her pregnancy denied her. I was assured it was quite natural and that it was to protect the baby from the raw power of fey magic. She accepted it, but she wasn't happy about it. It was the first time she had been without magic for hundreds of years and she felt the loss keenly.

I grabbed my bag. The phone beeped again. What was the matter now? She knew I couldn't be contacted until the session ended, so what was the point of sending me multiple messages? Or was it simply that she wanted me to get some milk on the way home?

I unclipped my phone from my belt and pressed the button to read the messages. The phone beeped

again as I held it. What was the matter with it?

The first message was from voice-mail saying that there was a voice message for me. The second message was from Blackbird. It said, "Call me, URGENTLY." The third message was from voicemail again. Another message beeped as I dialled Blackbird. What was going on?

The number rang twice, then picked up.

"Hello?"

"It's me. You wanted me to call."

"Thanks goodness, Niall, I've been trying to reach you all afternoon. Katherine rang. There's been an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"It's Alex. She's in hospital."

My stomach clenched at her words. "What happened? Is she OK?"

"I don't know. There was some sort of incident at school. They called Katherine. She called me when she couldn't reach you. She said they were going to the hospital."

"Is Alex all right?"

"I don't know, Niall. She said to meet her there."

"Give me the name of the hospital."

Blackbird read out the address of a London hospital and gave me directions.

"If Katherine calls, tell her I'm on my way."

"I'll tell her."

"Are you OK?" I asked her.

"Yes." I could hear the lie clear down the phone line. Blackbird had once told me that magic was too close to truth for the Feyre to be able to lie convincingly.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm fine." She must have known I'd hear the lie. "Go see to your daughter. She needs you. Call me when you have news."

"I will." I ended the call and headed for the basement. It was a two-hour drive to London, but I had no intention of driving. The house had another exit for those that could use it.

The Ways were lines of elemental force that crisscrossed the landscape allowing the Feyre to travel quickly from place to place. While the High Court had no Way node of its own, it did have access to the Ways. I went down a set of stairs to a room below ground.

Garvin had told me that the room I entered had been created by the Luchorpán, the Court of the Maker, to connect to the Ways without actually joining them permanently. The floor was marked with an intricate pattern, marking the points that could be accessed with radial lines terminating in silver stars, mirroring no constellation I knew.

The Ways were held open by a smoky clear stone which, if you looked into it, was threaded through with tiny filaments like complex wiring. While it was placed in the centre of the pattern the Feyre could come and go, but once the stone was removed the connection collapsed and the house was isolated from the rest of the Ways.

I only used a couple of the connections, the one that would take me to the house where Blackbird and I lived, and the one terminating in central London. There were eight or nine other connections I had never used. I once asked Tate where they went, and he said, "Everywhere."

I found the star that signified the connection with London. Standing over it, I reached down with my power. Beneath the floor, the power of the Way swelled up to meet me. I took a step forward and it swept me into the stream, bearing me through a depth of blueblack night, swirled with streaks of unearthly light. On other occasions I would have exhilarated in the power of it, but now I only wanted it to carry me to my daughter. I shimmered into being in another basement, many miles away.

stepping off the line and mounting the steps to the ground floor two at a time.

~~My training made me leave the house cloaked in magic. This was one of the places that could connect directly with the High Court of the Feyre and Garvin would not thank me for revealing its secrets. I wrapped myself in power, cloaking myself with misdirection before unsealing the wards of protection holding the front door and exiting to the street. I walked away from the square where the house stood without looking back. Only when I was clear did I let the misdirection fall away and start hailing black cabs.~~

The driver knew where the hospital was. I asked him to hurry, but with the evening traffic the progress was frustratingly slow. My impatience must have shown because he turned in his seat and leaned back to speak to me.

"Do you want me to try another route? It'll be longer and cost a bit more, but it might be quicker."

"Do it."

He waited until the traffic moved forward, then turned sharply into the other lane. He reversed and then completed the U-turn to go back the way we had come. Shortly after, he turned into a narrow alley, taking us down the access roads between the backs of buildings, swerving around wheelie bins and badly parked cars. When we came to other main roads, he went straight across, halting only to wait for a gap so that he could drive over to the next back alley. We navigated up and down one way streets, taking odd turns and driving right around squares to get to rat runs that crossed the main routes. I held on to the grab handle to stop myself being thrown around in the back of the cab as we swerved around obstacles. Finally we juddered to a halt.

"The hospital is down there, about fifty yards or so. I can't get any closer because of this bastard truck." He nodded at a huge truck parked in the middle of the road. "It'll be another twenty minutes if I take you round the oneway to the door."

"That's great," I told him. "I'm really grateful." I paid him, adding a substantial tip.

"Ta muchly," he grinned.

I got out of the cab and the driver began backing down the street away from me. I could see the problem now. Someone had parked one of those enormous trucks that you usually only see in Europe in the middle of the road and left all the lights on. It looked new, the paintwork bright and clean. On the back there was a row of hazard warnings, the familiar sign for radiation, one for biological and another two that I didn't recognise.

As I walked past it I felt something I almost didn't recognise. There was faint emanation from the truck, something that was only familiar because of what had happened the previous autumn. It wasn't strong, but it was the unmistakable taint of cold iron.

Cold iron was anathema to fey magic and having it close set my teeth on edge, but this was only a trace, an echo of that sensation. There was no signwriting or logo down the side of the truck to identify it. If I had more time I would have investigated, but I needed to get to the hospital.

As I passed, I noted the driver sitting inside the truck reading a newspaper. He looked settled, as if he'd been there some while. It struck me as odd because he was blocking the entire street and the police would normally insist that something like that was moved to clear the access, especially the close to a hospital.

At the end of the street was the Accident and Emergency Unit, just as the cab driver had promised. I trotted past the entrance where ambulances were parked, their crews waiting on standby, to the public entrance and went straight to the information desk.

"I'm looking for my daughter, Alexandra Dobson?" Alex had taken to using her mother's maiden name instead of my surname when Katherine and I divorced. It made sense, but somehow it still hurt.

The man consulted his computer. "You'll need to go through that door and take a left. Head right down to the end and then take the lift up to the sixth floor. She's in the Tesla Wing. Ask at the nursing

station when you get up there."

~~I thanked him and followed his directions. I had to wait for the lift and nearly went for the stairs~~ instead. It was six floors but I was a lot fitter than I used to be. The lift doors opened just as I had decided to take the stairs.

On the sixth floor, I followed the signs to the Tesla Wing and went straight to the nursing station. As I started to speak, I spotted Barry, my ex-wife's new husband.

"Never mind," I told the nurse. "I can see them."

I went to walk past, but she stepped into my way.

"I'm sorry, sir. You can't go down there."

"I'm Niall Petersen, Alex Dobson's father."

"I was told her father was already here," she said.

"He's not her father." I told her. "He's her stepfather."

"I see." Her attitude was brittle. "You may come with me then."

She walked ahead of me down the corridor to where Barry was waiting. His expression was grim. My stomach clenched when he didn't smile.

As we came near, Katherine, my ex-wife, appeared. The nurse was about to speak when Katherine ran forward and threw herself at me, hugging me close. Barry looked on, embarrassed.

"Oh, Niall, thank God you're here. We've been trying to get hold of you all afternoon."

The nurse looked nonplussed and then turned and walked back to the station, apparently happy that she was indeed Alex's father.

"Where is she? What's happened?"

Katherine took a deep breath, stepping back. "There's been a terrible accident."

"Is she OK?"

"They're treating her now."

"Can I see her?"

"No one is allowed in. They won't even let me in."

"What happened?"

"She was at school. No one knows what went wrong. We were told an hour ago that three girls are dead."

"Dead!"

"They were found in a changing room. Kayleigh, Alex's friend, raised the alarm. There was some sort of biological contamination. Everyone who had any contact with it has been brought here."

"What in hell happened?"

"They've quarantined the school, no one is allowed on site. Some sort of specialist unit has been brought in to deal with it all. The doctor came by half an hour ago and told us that they were doing everything they can to save Alex, but it's touch and go."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know, Niall. That's all they would say. The doctor said they were specialists, the best in the country, and they were doing everything they could."

I held my hand up to pause her, then went back to the nurses' station.

"Excuse me. I would like to see my daughter, please?"

"It's Mr Petersen. Is that right?"

"Yes." She knew perfectly well who I was.

"I've asked the consultant to come and see you. He asked me to notify him when you arrived."

"Fine. I'd like to see my daughter."

"I'm afraid that's not possible at the moment, Mr Petersen."

"Why not?"

"I don't know if you're aware, but this is a specialist isolation unit. We treat everything here from the ebola virus to smallpox. We have very strict protocols which must be followed absolutely to the letter for public health reasons. I'm afraid you will only be able to see your daughter when the consultant gives the all-clear. I'm really sorry, I know this must be hard for you, but that is the way it has to be."

"I want to see whoever's in charge."

"The consultant is on his way."

"Good."

I turned away, angry at being thwarted but anxious not to show my anger. It would get me nowhere in this environment. I walked slowly back to where Katherine and Barry waited. They were holding hands, but dropped them guiltily as I turned towards them. In a moment of clarity I could see that the only reason Katherine wasn't throwing herself at the walls was because Barry was being her rock.

I went to stand with them.

"They won't let me see her either; it was worth a try, I suppose. Barry, I can't tell you how much I appreciate you being with us. I know Alex would want you here." I offered my hand and he took it, pressing it long and slow.

"I couldn't bear to be anywhere else. You know she means a lot to me."

I nodded, conscious of the relief on Katherine's face.

"It's the same for all of us," I lied, and pressed Barry's hand into mine, offering what little comfort I could, knowing that his pain was so much less than my own.

"What else do we know?" I asked him.

"A consultant came to see us, but he wanted you to be here."

"So we wait?"

"We wait."

Katherine went back into the waiting room and sat on the edge of the vinyl-covered armchair biting her nails. Barry and I sat in the corridor, watching the hallway for signs of movement. It occurred to me that I could break into the area where Alex was, if I wanted to, but that I had no idea what awaited me there. This was unknown territory for me and my training had taught me caution.

We didn't have long to wait. A man in a dark suit appeared at the nursing station. He glanced at us and then turned away, speaking at length with the nurse in quiet assured tones. Then he nodded to her and came to meet us. I stood, as did Barry. Katherine appeared, warned by our movement.

She spoke first. "Is there any news?"

"I'm Mr Phillips." He offered his hand to me and answered Katherine's question. "No, I'm afraid there's no change."

"I'm Alex's father," I told him.

"I'm glad you're here. I need to explain what's happening and obtain your consent."

I noticed the sheaf of papers in his hand. The close, tight printing spoke of indemnity clauses.

"Consent for what?" Katherine beat me to the question.

"I'll explain it all. Shall we sit in here?" He glanced at Barry. "I... ah... only need Alexandra's and her genetic parents' consent."

"Barry is staying with me." Katherine caught his hand as he turned away and drew him into the waiting room with us.

The doctor caught my eye.

"It's OK," I told him. "Barry should hear this too."

"As long as you're comfortable with that."

We sat on unsuitable chairs around a table that was too low.

The consultant adopted an official tone, presumably reserved for moments like this. "Your daughter

has been involved in an incident at her school, as you know. This type of incident is very unusual, but fortunately we have protocols in place that can be applied. There has been some degree of biological contamination..."

"What does that mean?" I interrupted him. "What is biological contamination?"

"It's a term used to describe a range of incidents, but in this case it means that your daughter has been affected by a dangerous pathological contaminant. I don't want to get too technical, but you must understand that this is a most serious situation. We were unable to save three of the girls involved and I have had the unpleasant duty of informing their families earlier. Your daughter's condition is uncertain at best. In cases like this we have been most successful when we have intervened, but we need your consent to do that."

There was something in his tone. My Fey senses told me that he was telling the truth as he saw it, but there were undercurrents in his words that left me uneasy.

"Why won't you tell us what's wrong with her?" I asked him outright.

"Mr Petersen, I have a duty to your daughter and to some extent also to you. I also have a duty to the public not to cause unnecessary panic. We have the situation contained and there is no cause for public concern, but I am unwilling to divulge the exact nature of the contamination as it might draw unnecessary and unwanted attention. It is difficult enough for the families concerned without the press becoming involved. Believe me, there is nothing worse at a time like this than having reporters camped out on your lawn. So far, the nationals have been satisfied with the press release. They have been offered an explanation that there was a hazardous build-up of pressure in the sewers and that the resulting explosion caused the fatalities. This isn't the whole truth, but it is sufficient for the purposes. They are concentrating on the human interest aspects of the story."

"Is this the school's fault?" I asked him. "Did they do the proper maintenance?"

"I can assure you, Mr Petersen, that there will be a formal investigation but our initial findings indicate that there is no way that the school could have prevented what happened. Thankfully, this is a highly unusual occurrence involving a rare form of biological contamination and quite beyond the capacity to prevent or predict."

"But you won't tell us what."

"You understand my position. My priority is with your daughter."

"Just give us the damn forms." Katherine's voice cut across us both.

Mr Phillips spread the forms out on the coffee table. The print was tiny and I guessed that even if we were legally trained we would be there until dawn if we truly wanted to understand the implications of what we were signing.

"Where do we sign?" I asked him.

"Let me explain firstly that you are giving your consent for us to take whatever action we deem necessary to save your daughter. I am not asking for this lightly. Once we intervene things could move quite quickly and we can't keep running back to you to ask if it's OK to proceed. I am asking for this with the knowledge that we were unable to save the other three girls."

He paused, letting the words sink in. I nodded, accepting his case.

"If you would sign this general release here and here and initial it there," he marked the points with an X, "and these specific releases here and here." He offered me his ballpoint.

I took the pen and signed the forms. Katherine waited until I had signed all of them and then took the ballpoint from me and signed them too.

"Can we see her now?"

Mr Phillips looked surprised. "I'm afraid that's completely out of the question. She's in total isolation."

"Dammit!" My fist smashed on to the table. Katherine started at the noise. The sound reverberated

in the small room. "We need to see her! We're her parents! We have rights!" It was only then realised I was shouting.

The consultant raised his hands, half defensively, half placatingly. "Not until the all-clear is given I'm afraid. This is a very serious matter."

"Steady, old chap," said Barry. "The man's only doing his job."

"You don't..." I ran out of steam as I caught Katherine's eye and she shook her head minutely. "Sorry, Barry. Sorry. I just wanted..."

Mr Phillips stood up, relieved to be rescued and too obviously wanting to be gone before I started shouting again.

Katherine stood and held out her hand to the consultant. "Please do everything you can," she told him. "Bring me back my girl."

He shook her hand and then offered his hand to me and then also to Barry. "We will do everything in our power," he said, his words ringing with certainty for once, and then turned and walked out. I listened to his footsteps fade down the corridor.

I sighed and collapsed back into the chair. I felt so helpless. I had consigned my daughter into the hands of the professionals in the blind hope that they knew what they were doing. My fears were reflected in Katherine's eyes as she hugged Barry's chest close to her, all the while watching me over his shoulder. We had both made our decision but neither of us was sure we had done the right thing.

The next few hours were torture. Initially I went to the nurses' station and asked for news every ten minutes. It was a discipline for me to wait the full ten minutes before I went to ask her again. Eventually the nurse asked me as gently as she could to stop pestering her. She promised to come and find us all as soon as there was any news.

I drank coffee. I tried to focus on the ancient newspapers and tatty magazines that were spread around the waiting room but I found myself reading the same sentence again and again without comprehension.

"I'm going outside to phone Blackbird," I told Katherine. "She'll be worried too."

"If anything happens, Barry will come and get you straightaway, won't you, Barry?" Barry nodded in agreement.

I stopped at the nurses' station and told her where I was going. She promised to send someone for me if anything changed.

I went back to the lift, descended to the ground floor and walked through reception out into the heavy night air. It was cooler, the sort of night when the light haloed around the street lamps. I used the speed dial on my mobile to call Blackbird. She picked up on the first ring.

"Hello?" Her voice sounded thin and reedy.

"It's me. Were you asleep?"

"No. What's happening?"

"I don't know. They're treating her now. The waiting is driving me crazy."

"It was on the six o'clock news. They're saying that it was a sewer gas explosion."

"It's more complicated than that. They say there's been some sort of contamination. They're being very closed-mouthed about it. They're trying to keep it from the press. Whatever it is, it sounds serious."

"Did they say she was going to be OK?"

"No, just that they would do their best."

"That's all you can ask for, Niall."

"I know."

"How's Katherine holding up?"

"She's OK. Same as me really. She has Barry with her."

There was a pause.

"I'll come if you want me to, Niall."

"No, it's OK. You'll never get a train at this time and a taxi would cost the earth."

One of the things I had discovered about Blackbird was that she had never learned to drive. With her magic she had never needed to, but now that she was pregnant and her magic had failed her, she found herself marooned by lack of transport.

"I'll call you as soon as we have news," I assured her.

"Do, please." She sounded small, but the depth of feeling came through, despite the tinny line.

"I'd better get back in case there's news."

"OK, give Katherine a hug for me."

"I will. Take care."

"You too. Bye."

I clicked the phone off and took a deep breath and walked back into the fluorescent brightness making my way back up to the isolation unit.

As soon as I appeared, the nurse said, "No news."

I smiled weakly and went back to join Katherine and Barry.

They roused themselves as soon as I appeared, then fell back into their chairs as they realised that it was only me. I returned to the armchair, the vinyl cushions wheezing as I sank into it. We sat apart, each with our private thoughts. I suspected that, like me, they were each thinking of the things they would have done differently had they known it would come to this.

When the man appeared in the doorway we all started. None of us had heard him approach. It wasn't Mr Philips, the consultant, but another man, grey-bearded and wearing a shabby jacket over a grey sweater.

"Mr and Mrs Dobson?" He glanced at the three of us.

"Yes?" Katherine answered.

I stood up. "I'm Niall Petersen. I'm Alex's father."

"And you are?" he said gently to Barry.

"I'm her stepfather. They're divorced." He nodded to Katherine and me. It sounded vaguely like an accusation.

"Have you heard?"

"Did it work?"

"Is she OK?"

Our three questions clashed as we searched his face for answers.

He came in and sat down between us.

"My name is David Beetham. I'm not a doctor. I'm a grief counsellor."

He watched us process that information.

"There's no easy way to say this, but I'm afraid I have to tell you that your daughter died a short time ago."

The worst thing was that they wouldn't let us see the body. Both Katherine and I wanted to see her, just to say goodbye and to be able to believe what had happened. Barry was mute, unable to find anything to say that would touch the grief in Katherine and me. He had been fond of Alex, perhaps he had even loved her, but she wasn't his daughter.

The grief counsellor was kind but firm. "It's out of the question, I'm afraid," he said. "The protocols that come into force in these circumstances are very strict. There is to be no risk of contamination."

He paused, seeing that there was no recognition of his protocols from either me or Katherine.

He tried again. "It is a terrible tragedy that your daughter is dead. It would be a much greater tragedy and a gross neglect of responsibility if anyone else died because we had not been as careful and as cautious as we possibly could be."

"We just want to see our girl," Katherine wailed, and then dissolved into another bout of helpless sobbing into Barry's chest.

I stood alone, my fists clenched into tight wads of flesh, the tendons on my wrists standing out like live wires as I tried to contain the anger that welled up within me. The need to see her, one last time, was raw in me. I knew that I could reach her despite anything they could do to stop me, but also that if even so much as acknowledged the dark hot core that dwelt within me, it would feed on my anger and release a power that would be beyond my ability to control. No one would be safe, not the counsellor, not Barry and not Katherine.

"Is it such a lot to ask?" I ground my teeth, biting down on the anger that wanted release.

"Mr Petersen, I'm truly sorry. If we had a choice then we would allow it, but we do not. The wider safety implications have complete precedence. Is there someone to take you home, perhaps? Is there someone waiting for you?"

"There is someone, but..." Wiping unwanted tears from my eyes with the heel of my hand, I tried to breathe. I wasn't sure I could tell Blackbird. What explanation could I give? Alex was dead, but saying those words would somehow make them more real.

"Would you like me to call them first and talk to them, to make it easier?"

I hesitated and then shook my head. "I have to tell her myself."

There was a hand on my arm. It was Katherine. "We'll come with you," she offered. "Barry can drive you home."

"It's hours away. It's not even in the same direction."

"That doesn't matter. It's not like we'll be sleeping, is it?"

I hugged her to me and kissed her hair. Using the Ways I could be home within half an hour, whereas in the car it would be a long drive. I could use the time to think of something to say.

"Thanks," I told her, then nodded to Barry. "Thank you."

"The least I can do," he said, shaking his head.

The counsellor escorted us all the way to reception. He gave us a card with his contact details and said that we could call him night or day. He warned us that the next few days would be hard but that we would come through it. He told us to speak to our friends, our families and our loved ones and that they would help us come to terms with our loss. He asked if we were religious and offered to put us in touch with the chaplain for the school. He told us we might find some comfort with the other families that had lost their girls. It all sounded like good advice as it drifted past me like smoke. How could I possibly understand?

The car journey was long and dark. Katherine sat in the front while Barry drove. They barely spoke to each other. I couldn't help wondering whether their relationship would survive this. It brought

Katherine and me closer than we had been in years, whereas it placed a barrier between her and Barry that was going to be there for a long time. I wondered if he was strong and patient enough to deal with that. Katherine was right; he was a good man. Sometimes, though, that wasn't enough.

The motorway lights streamed past like a pulse, echoed by the road noise. Barry drove and Katherine stared at the road ahead while I went through all the ways I could think of to tell Blackbird what happened. Most of the time I never got as far as saying it, even in my head. Just the thought of meeting her eyes with that knowledge in my heart was too painful. I shied away and began again until I felt numb with it. The pain was still there, knotting my gut and clamping my throat, but I was dead to it. I could no longer feel.

The lights died away as we transferred to country roads, leaving me in welcome darkness. The trees closed in and shrouded the road, slowing us so that we wound through the tunnel of leaves while my heart grew heavier as I recognised the twists and bends, and then we were there. As soon as the lights hit the front of the house she was in the doorway looking fragile in the harsh light. I got out of the car and walked towards her. By the time I reached her I was dumb. The pain I had locked away welled up in me, knotting my throat, spilling hot tears down my cheek. She simply opened her arms and held me while I shook with sobs.

"Oh, my poor love," she said. "My poor, poor love."

She led me inside, leaving Katherine and Barry to follow hesitantly into our tiny thatched house amid the trees. They stood inside the door looking lost while Blackbird guided me to the big settle where Alex had loved to slouch, her head lost in a book, shoes kicked off, feet up, idly twisting her hair around her finger. The memory made the pain sharper until I could feel sharp metal in my gut, curled around it, hugging it to me like an unwelcome friend.

"Come in, please, come in," said Blackbird, "It's not much but you're welcome here."

Katherine and Barry edged in, and then Katherine started crying again and Barry was holding her and then we were all in tears. It was some time before order could be restored.

Blackbird disentangled herself from me and went through into the adjacent kitchen to put the kettle on. Then she returned and guided Katherine into the chair by the small log fire while Barry knelt beside her holding her hand and stroking her hair. Then Blackbird returned and sat with me, holding my hand in both of hers.

"What happened?" she said.

Between us, we managed to convey what had occurred, though it was mostly Barry who did the explaining. I was grateful for that. It was hard enough to hear those words, never mind say them. Blackbird was quiet, squeezing my hand hard when we came to the part where the grief counsellor appeared. There were more tears shared and then she made everyone tea and talked with us until we calmed. Finally, Barry suggested that they should be making tracks.

"It won't be the same without her," said Katherine.

"No, it won't," Blackbird agreed.

"The house is going to feel so empty."

"I know."

"Oh God, I'm going to have to go through her things, aren't I? Someone will have to."

"I'll help you," Blackbird offered.

"Thank you, but I think maybe you shouldn't be upsetting yourself in your condition. They pick up on these things. You have to be careful. How long until you're due?"

Blackbird looked suddenly uncomfortable. "I'm... not sure."

"Not sure? They must have got better at this since I had Alex... Oh, Alex." Her eyes filled again and I thought that there would be more tears, but she straightened. "It catches you out, doesn't it?" she said, brushing her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's going to be like that for a while, I think," said Blackbird.

~~"She was so looking forward to the baby."~~ Katherine fished into her pocket for a better tissue and then blew her nose noisily. Barry was at her shoulder, slipping his arm around her waist, squeezing her close.

"We'd better head off," said Barry. "I can contact the hospital tomorrow for you, or later today, and find out what the arrangements are. There'll be the funeral to get through."

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Call me tomorrow, and thanks. You've been a rock. I don't know how Katherine or I would have managed without you."

"You do what you can." He shrugged, shaking his head in resignation.

Blackbird and I stood outside on the edge of the light that spilled from the doorway while Barry reversed his Toyota back down the narrow bumpy drive, through the gateway and out on to the road. We waited until the headlights vanished and the sound of the car was drowned by the susurrus hush of the night wind through the branches.

"Are you coming in?" asked Blackbird.

"In a minute."

"Don't be long. You'll get chilled."

"OK."

Blackbird went inside, leaving the door ajar behind her so that a fan of light faded across the grass into the edge of the trees. Clouds scudded across the circle of sky above me in the first glimmerings of dawn. The moist smell of leaf mould and woodsmoke lingered in the clearing around the house. I stood for a long while, thinking. Alex had been my world. I had fought to protect her and risked my life to keep her safe only to have her snatched from me while my back was turned. How could that be? The pain welled up in me again and made it hard to breathe.

I swallowed hard, forcing down the lump that formed in my throat. In truth, I wanted the pain. I wanted to immerse myself in grief. Would it be so terrible to ignore everyone and everything else and wallow in selfish sadness? What would it achieve? Nothing. It wouldn't bring her back. It wouldn't even help to keep the memories sharp so that I could hoard them like some jealous serpent, coiled around and squeezing them for the bitter milk of sorrow. I took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. I was dog-tired but not ready to sleep. Maybe if I went to bed, Blackbird would sleep for a while. She looked like she needed it.

Once inside, I locked the door and drew the inner curtain across the porch to keep the warmth in. The fire was the only heating in the house, so I banked it with logs and put the guard in front of it, knowing that it would still be burning by the time we needed to be up again. Then I turned off the lights and climbed the switchback staircase to the high vaulted room above, finding Blackbird huddled in a nest of quilts, waiting for me. I undressed, crawled in alongside her and let her ease in under my arm, resting her head on my chest until her breathing deepened and she finally slept. I lay awake and drifted, unable to sleep but badly in need of rest. The sun rose outside our circle of trees but within the dappled clearing our house creaked and settled in shade, fostering my shadowed thoughts.

I must have slept eventually because I was woken by heavy banging on the door. I left Blackbird, pulling the quilt back over her head and went down in only sweat pants to see who was disturbing us. It was Garvin.

"You're late," he said without preamble, "and you look like shit. What's up?"

"You'd better come in."

I left the door open and went back into the sitting room, tugging back the long drapes from the small window to allow the filtered daylight into the room. It was never light in this house, but Blackbird liked it that way. I poked the fire into life and tossed another log on to the embers. The wood sizzled and cracked as the heat blistered the bark.

"What's wrong, Niall?" He never called me Niall. He always used my fey name, the name I had earned in a trial by ordeal. He always called me Dogstar.

So I told him. I started from the beginning and didn't stop. I told it like a story, as if it were something that had happened to an acquaintance; nobody close, no one I cared about. It made it easier.

He stood initially and then sat on the battered settee and listened. He didn't say anything at all and his silence let me speak. I got as far as telling him about returning to the house in the early hours and then Blackbird appeared in the doorway looking wrung out and pale, the soft skin under her eyes bruised with exhaustion and worry.

"I'll make tea," she said.

I started to finish the tale but he raised his hand and stopped me.

"Enough, I've heard enough. Is there anything I can do? Is there anything the Warders can do?"

"No. There is nothing to fight."

"Fighting isn't all we do, Niall. If you think of anything, even a small thing, you only have to ask and it will be done."

"Thanks."

"You have my deepest sympathies. I had no idea or I would have come earlier."

"We were sleeping, or trying to sleep."

"Then you have my apologies for waking you."

"It's not a problem. We would have to be up soon anyway. There are arrangements to make. We have to organise a funeral."

"Once again, Niall, I offer my services and that of your fellow Warders. If there's anything you need, just ask."

"It's something I have to do myself."

"I understand. I should go."

"I think Blackbird's making tea."

"Don't worry, I'll go. You know how to reach me if you need anything?"

"Yes."

He stood and faced me, placing his hand upon my shoulder.

"Anything at all, you'll let me know?"

"Yes."

He released me and went to the kitchen door, where he spoke a few soft words to Blackbird and then turned and left, easing the heavy wooden door shut behind him. I sat in the armchair and watched the fire. Blackbird brought me tea, but it went cold in my hands before I stirred.

It was Barry's call that raised me. We spoke at length and then I threw myself into the arrangements. I had to liaise with the school, the church, the hospital; everyone seemed to have some claim on my daughter's death.

I didn't bother attending the opening hearing of the inquest. We were told that the Coroner would order an investigation, that the bodies would not be released until the investigation had delivered its preliminary findings, and that the proceedings would be adjourned. Apparently it was over in ten minutes.

Katherine and I were invited to a meeting with the head teacher from the school, which we thought a little strange. The school found themselves caught between the appalling guilt at what had befallen our children and the awful thought that we might sue them for negligence. I hadn't even considered the possibility after the remarks made by the consultant. We had been told that the cause was a freak accident and that there was no way that the school could have predicted it. It wasn't until I met the other girls' parents that I realised why they were being so cautious.

Katherine and I were guided into an orderly office to meet the head teacher and the chair

governors. They were in a sombre mood and greeted us with courtesy and obvious sympathy.

"~~The whole school is in shock,~~" the head told us. "~~I never realised that such things could happen~~ anywhere, never mind here. Obviously the whole of the PE Block has been sealed off and we are not accepting the children back on site until we have assurance that it's completely safe."

She sighed. "That doesn't help you, though does it? I can't tell you how sorry I am for your loss. Alex was a joy to have in class and a pleasure to teach. Her loss will be felt keenly throughout the school for a long time to come."

"Thank you," Katherine answered.

The chair of governors, a quiet man who sat to one side throughout the conversation, leaned forward. "We'd like to suggest a joint memorial service, as soon as we can allow the people back on site. We think it would help the children and the families to come to terms with what happened. Would that be OK?"

I looked at Katherine and she nodded.

"The families will obviously have their private funerals, once arrangements can be made, but this has affected everyone in the school. The whole community is in shock."

"I think we understand that," I said, while part of me was thinking that it was nothing compared to losing your child.

"We'd like to bring everyone together, if that's OK?" said the head. "To help the children and the staff. The school will be closed for the day of the service and I think most of the staff are planning to come along, if that's all right with you?"

"Yes, they'll be welcome, of course," I told her.

"Please let us know if there's anything we can do."

The head stood and offered her hand to each of us in turn. She had a firm handshake and a steady grip. We turned and left, with me still wondering what the meeting had been about. In the anteroom were another couple. The mother had bleach-blonde hair in a scraped-back style and big gold hoop earrings dangling from her ears. She wore a white denim jacket that matched the white knuckle grip she had on the big brown leather handbag on her lap. The chalk-stripe suit and slicked-back hair of the man next to her made them an oddly matched couple. He looked uncomfortable, styled somewhere between city trader and used-car salesman. He was out of place.

She stood as we took our leave and I heard the conversation start behind us. The head greeted the parents with the same courtesy she had shown us.

"Mr and Mrs Welham, I'm glad you could come and see me at such a difficult time."

"You needn't give me none of that," said the woman. "He en't Mr Welham and you're responsible for this and no messing."

"We talked about this on the phone, Mrs Welham."

"Yeah and I en't finished yet. Now you listen to me..." The door into the head's office thumped closed behind them and Katherine looked sideways at me. She winced as shouting started beyond the door, underlined by the calm tones of the head.

"I do have some sympathy..." said Katherine.

"I don't think it helps," I told her, "and it won't bring any of them back."

"What I don't understand is what they were doing together. Alex never mentioned this Tracy Welham or the two other girls before. It's not like they were friends or anything. Kayleigh was the only one she ever talked about."

"I feel sorry for Kayleigh. She must feel like a lost soul without Alex. They spent their lives in each other's pockets."

"Her Mum rang me last night. She said Kayleigh's done nothing but cry. She doesn't know what to do with her."

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