

Chapter 1

The guy with the bad attitude has been following me all week. My agent, Jerry, keeps telling me I have to get used to stuff like that, now that my writing has broken and I'm the next big thing in the literary world. But I don't buy that. Just my luck that the bad attitude guy is also a writer. And, the last thing you'd expect from a guy who's trying to be a literary type, he has a bunch of heavy friends. Worse than that, he's saying that he's me.

You don't believe me? It's just my paranoia at being exposed to all this sudden media interest? Well, I can prove it to you. Read on.

I'm sitting in this bookstore on Oxford Street signing books. There's a queue of about twenty or so waiting for a signature and I'm getting the feeling of being watched. OK, there are people there who're looking at me who have come to the signing and I know what you're going to say, "You don't like people looking at you, why set out to be a well-known writer?" And I say, no, being *watched*. The feeling that someone, somewhere is looking you over out of sight. The kind of thing you just *feel*.

And sure enough, when the signing's over and I'm in the bookstore washroom cleaning my hands, there he is. I see him in the mirror first, coming up on me from behind. There's no one else about. He's picked his moment. It's just him and me. I turn to face him, hands dripping. Our eyes meet and he stands there open mouthed in front of me. He's staring at me, eyes wide like he's just seen the most frightening thing in his life.

"I don't know what you're into but I can't cope with the way you look." He's there, right in my face.

I try to keep calm. "What's with the way I look?"

"I saw you first on TV in the interview show and I couldn't believe it. You look just like me. Not similar, exactly like me. The same style, the same clothes, the same way of talking."

You can see why I say he has an attitude problem.

"So, you want to be like me?"

"No! I'm saying that you *are* me. That in some whacked out and screwed up way you *are* another me."

“OK, Buddy, what's your name?”

He doesn't want to answer. But when I start to smile, he does. “Mark Bellamy.”

“And I'm Raymond Bridges.” I hold out my hand and he shoots back three paces.

“Raymond Bridges. That's my pen name. You didn't have to steal that as well.”

I can see where this is going and start to move towards the door. He grabs my shoulder and I spring back to face him. His eyes are a world of fear.

“I know what you are. There's a name for you. I found it out. A *doppelganger*. You're my doppelganger, that's what you are.”

I know then that he's mad, that something is happening in his life to make this so much of a trauma for him.

“I'm telling you here and now, Bridges, whoever you are or whatever you are, that I'm going to do you. Not here, nowhere as public as this. Somewhere very soon in a place of my choosing when you think it's safe. And I'm going to do you dead.”

I can tell right there and then that he's never going to make it as a writer. But the threat is real. I shake him off, make towards the door and leave him standing there.

Outside, I say nothing to Jerry. I don't think he's going to understand.

Chapter 2

OK, I won't lie to you. I have to admit that we do look the same, speak the same, dress the same and probably, when we get down to it, think the same. But now is not the time to get into all that.

I check up on Mark Bellamy. The details are not hard to find. His father is Stan Bellamy, one of the heaviest criminals in the East End of London. Dies in an accident. Just five weeks ago. He has a lot of friends and I'm betting that Mark can call on any number of them.

I can tell what you're thinking. What are the chances that an aspiring writer like Mark Bellamy would have a father like that? But he does. And that's just my bad luck.

Yeah, I know. You could call it sloppy. I should've known he would find me. I should have changed my appearance. But where I come from, you don't do that. Why shouldn't I look the way I do, speak the way I do? Why should I let him threaten me out of this life where I have so much going for me? Because he's got heavy acquaintances to throw at me? No, I like this life more than that, and there's an end to it.

What I have to tell you, is in addition to the writing career and the media interest that comes with it, I'm lucky enough to be hooked up to the most beautiful woman on the planet. Victoria. Victoria Bletchley. I met her at the literary lunch organized by Jerry to launch my book. The London literati turned out and right there in the middle of them all was Victoria. A head turner bar none - long legs, auburn hair, green eyes, knock-you-down smile. You don't believe how good it is? Don't take my word for it. This is how we are together.

We're lying in bed on a Sunday afternoon in the penthouse apartment of the Hamilton hotel with the view over the Thames. The tide is running strong and they're getting ready for the Queen's pageant. Half of London is lined up on the Embankment waiting to catch sight of the boats as they go past. From up high from our bedroom window the crowd is silent, insignificant.

Victoria is reading Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. Seems like when we're not rutting, she's reading. I guess that comes with the territory if you're a professor of English.

She's reading aloud. "I resist any thing better than my own diversity, Breathe the air and leave plenty after me..." And then she's saying, "I've always liked those lines."

I smile. "From *Song Of Myself*. I guess it's all part of his sharing ethos."

You might cringe. But that's the way you talk to an English professor.

"Makes him seem like the first Hippie."

"Which he was. Oh, and a great poet."

She rolls over and I catch sight of her perfect breasts. She smiles. "I'm working on precursors to the biblical nature of Eliot's imagery for the seminar next week."

"And I'm working on something quite different." I look down.

"You're not ready again?"

"I'm afraid so."

"You'd have made a good Hippie. All that free love."

I look at her body and can't believe how much I love this woman. For the second time that morning, we rut like wild animals, as I think you sometimes say.

Later, we stand naked at the window and watch as the boats struggle with the wild flow of the Thames and the pageant passes below us.

So, you see, there's poetry in my life. Oh, and I almost forgot to mention; she likes my writing.

Why would I want to give all of this up for the sake of a screwball who thinks he's me? You're right. I don't want to give any of this up. Which means I have to find some way of dealing with Mark Bellamy.

Chapter 3

The hit comes just as Mark said it would. When I'm least expecting it. I'm walking back from the Borough Market restaurant with Victoria. We're arm in arm, meandering along the Embankment and these two guys approach. You wouldn't say it was broad daylight. There's more than enough lighting for everyone to be clearly seen without the romantic mood being broken. But these guys just don't seem to care.

They're big and they surround us. We've walked along the Embankment to one of the side streets leading off and then into an alley. The one guy has his hand over Victoria's mouth and he's holding her so she can't move. The other guy, the bigger one, sprays something in my face and my lungs are in danger of closing down. He throws me against the wall. "This is from Mark." He knees me in the groin. I fold over, origami style. He pulls me back up. He's about to hit me again with a huge fist that has one of those giant rings on the middle finger that would split a nose in two. I stutter. "I can explain."

The big guy steps back with a broad grin on his face that says, "I got to hear this."

I'm digging deep to manage any kind of a voice. "We're twins, get it?"

"Stan never said anything about twins."

"He must have his reasons."

"And Mark?"

"You know that he's having a hard time since his Ma, and then Stan, died."

"Why would you know about that?"

"Everyone knows about that."

The big guy rubs his chin. He's thinking about it. I take my chance.

"He's got this crazy idea that I stole his identity. First Ma, then Stan going. Then he spots me. It's too much for him to take in."

I've hit the spot, as I think you say. The look on the big guy's face shows that he's now uncertain. I press on.

"I'm trying to help him. Getting him to shake off these weird thoughts he's having. Getting him to reconnect with his brother. Look at me."

The big guy has no choice but to believe me. It's the evidence in his own eyes, after all. He lets go of me and nods to his mate to let Victoria go. I look just like Mark. He sees that I have to be his identical twin.

He starts apologizing in some implausible way. You know, how a big bruiser tries to sound approachable and concerned but knows all along that this is a transition he's not going to pull off. That kind of apology.

They walk us back to the Embankment, to one of those cafes with the aluminium tables and chairs outside and we sit, an unlikely foursome. Victoria is still in shock. My eyes and lungs are starting to clear but I still feel close to vomiting.

The big guy tells us his name is Bernie. Bernie Vinson. He thinks I should have heard of him and when I show him that I don't, he tells me he used to be a boxer. Fought for the heavyweight championship. Lost it on points. And so we talk about Mark.

You must think it strange. But there is no ill intent in taking Mark's pen name. I want to assure you of that. It is one of those coincidences. I'm casting around for a good pen name, something that would stick in people's minds but still sound approachable and I come across Raymond Bridges. And, hey, he looks just like me! I check and he's published nothing to speak of and it's such a good name. I have to have it. So I take it. What harm will it do? And now my book is as runaway success and Mark is angry because I took his name. Well, I can't do much about that now, can I? I'm known as Raymond Bridges. Everyone recognizes me as Raymond Bridges. What can I do?

Bernie doesn't quite say he's sorry. But he agrees to set up a meeting with Mark to try to bring us together. He leaves with his mate and I'm thinking, "How can I explain this to Victoria?"

"You never told me you had a twin."

"Until he showed up, I had no idea either."

She manages a tear-streaked smile. "It's not every day that you find the brother you never knew you had."

We help each other as we walk back to the Hamilton, feeling safer once we enter the pin code and get inside the elevator that takes us to the top floor.

Chapter 4

Bernie has all the makings of an agony uncle. He's arranged the meeting with Mark so that we can clear the air, as he calls it. When I say *arranged*, I think you can guess that this is a meeting I can't refuse.

The venue, the *Rat's Tail*, is one of those East End pubs where the locals make no pretence at making you feel wanted. They're just this side of a turf war with the gang in the neighboring streets and you can feel the atmosphere as you walk in. There they are. Bernie, big and muscular, is sitting alongside Mark in one of the alcoves that are set along one side of a long rectangular space. The rest is as you would expect. A strong smell of beer. A bunch of young men at the bar waiting for something, anything. Not many women.

I don't get a word in before Mark is off and running. "You expect me to believe this twin story. They had *me* and that was it. Everyone knows that."

"These things happen, Mark."

"Don't call me Mark, like that."

I notice then that he has tattoos, the type that you get a glance of at the wrists and collar of his shirt when he moves. The type that make you think that beneath the conventional looking exterior he's a veritable illustrated man.

"Give him time to explain." Bernie is growing into the uncle role.

I take a deep breath. "I didn't have time to explain myself when you turned up, Mark. It was as much a surprise to me to find that I had a brother. In another situation this would be a big lift. These things don't happen every day. I don't see why you can't see it that way. We must have been separated at birth in some way and now we're together."

Mark begins shouting. "Then tell me why you stole from me? Stole my writer's identity. Took the name. Took the image I've been creating. Put yourself up there instead of me. A brother wouldn't treat a brother like that. He'd have more respect."

I have to get this right. Bernie is an emotional man. I can see he's responding to what Mark is saying. I can see his muscular frame tensing, readying itself. And there's no one else near as the object of his attentions but me.

“It's not like that. I look for a name like all writers do and I find that one.”

“And you say that you have no idea that the name is connected with me. What sort of a coincidence is that?”

“I don't have an answer to that, Mark. It's as you say. The odds are long that I would do that without knowing you.”

“A few million to one.” Mark's voice is rising higher.

“But it happens like I say it. I can't make it any different to that. Maybe there's something subconscious in the way I took that name since you chose it for yourself and there's some sort of connection between us as twins. I still can't believe it. How you look just like me.”

“And why do you suppose Stan and Ma kept your existence so secret over all these years that I had no idea about you? Why would they want to do that?”

“They must have their reasons, that's all I can say. Look. Look at us, were identical. Identical twins. Isn't that proof enough?”

Mark reaches some critical point with that. “I don't buy it. I don't buy any of it. I know what you are. You're no brother of mine. You're a doppelganger. I know it. I can feel it.”

Bernie is bemused.

Mark explains. “A doppelganger. Someone just like you. Someone who *is* you in every way. Another you.”

I can see from Bernie's expression that he is starting to question Mark's mental state. But Mark goes on. “Not a twin. I have no twin. Another me. Taking my place.”

I want to say that Mark is behaving like this because of his recent bereavement but Bernie gets there ahead of me.

“I don't think that's going to get you very far, Mark. I know you're under strain. Losing a mother like that and now losing Stan. You're on your own. No brothers and sisters. That's what's bringing this doppelganger stuff into your mind.”

I've convinced Bernie that the root of the problem is that Mark is losing it. Bernie might not be a man of deep thought, but he can see the logic of it, I'm sure. He doesn't need Mark's doppelganger theory. He looks at me, he looks at Mark. He sees we're the

same. Twins. The issue of why Stan kept this secret is much less of a problem than the one that Mark is bringing to him. So, despite expectations, I have an ally in Bernie. He wants the best for Mark. And that best will involve getting some help for Mark, some psychiatric counseling, but he can't say that now.

He tells me this after Mark storms out, leaving the two of us together.

OK, I owe you. You know when I said I won't lie to you. Well that's not true. Where I come from we don't have the same issues over what you call the truth. So, it's difficult to think myself into your frame of mind. When I say I'm Mark's twin and I convince Bernie that's true, well that's a lie. Mark is right. I am his doppelganger.

I know what you're thinking. This guy is unreliable. How can I believe another word he says?

With Bernie's help, I feel the situation can be managed. I can now relax again and enjoy my time with Victoria.

Chapter 5

It's not as simple as that.

The next time I see Victoria, she's with Mark and he has a gun to her head.

He's found his way into the Hamilton apartment by pretending that he's me. Victoria is in a state of shock. He's bound her hands and feet and covered her mouth with duct tape and has her staked out on a chair in the centre of the room. Her stare widens as she sees me with Mark for the first time. But we're twins. It's as simple as that.

I'm trying to keep him calm. "Mark, there's no need for it to be this way."

"What way would you like it?"

"We can talk. We can talk this over."

He's shoving the gun harder against Victoria's temple. "Tell me the truth, or she's gone."

Your truth. It's what you always seem to want even though most of it changes nothing.

"Just put the gun away."

He pretends to fire but then pulls the gun back. Victoria sobs in relief. The gun is now pointing at me.

"OK, Mark. I stole your identity. I took your Raymond Bridges persona and made something out of it."

His eyes narrow. "Meaning that I'd never have made anything of it, is that it?"

"No. No, just that you would have needed more time. I've got the Raymond Bridges thing right up there. It's delivered all this." I open my arms. "The apartment, the reputation, the income...."

He looks around. "On my back. What I would have had if you hadn't stolen it."

"I didn't think it would come to this. I thought you had your own life."

"Yeah, a life that had the dream of this. What makes you think you can just take that dream away?"

"I don't see it that way."

“Well, let's see it this way.” He's coming closer, shoving the gun hard against my forehead. “Let's say I just kill you. Take your place. No reason why this thing can't work both ways. I look like you, talk like you. I'll just be you. Once you're done and gone.”

He looks over at Victoria. “And she'll be gone too.”

I'm trying not to shake. “It doesn't have to be like this. There's another way.”

“Like what?”

“Like I help you. Help you to take my place. Help you to have all this.”

He looks over at Victoria once more and leers. “And her?”

“Not her. Everything, but not her.”

“And the writing?”

“I'll be your ghost. I'm good for two books a year.”

He smiles and backs off. “OK. I'll give you twenty-four hours. Time to get this sorted.”

“OK, OK.”

“And you're going to stand stock still while I untie her.”

I don't like Victoria being treated like this, but this is not the time to respond.

He's starting to remove the tape. “And when I untie her, I'm going to walk her down to the basement and you're going to wait here like nothing's happening because I'll have this gun right over her heart and if you fool with me for a single second, I'm going to do her dead. Get me?”

“I get you.”

“Twenty-four hours. Every hour over that is one of her fingers in the post. Understand?”

I nod. I do as he says and watch him walk Victoria to the door and close it behind him as they leave. I don't even think of calling the police.

I've lost Victoria. And the only way I'm going to get her back is to give up all this. I'm not seeing a way out when the phone rings. It's Jerry.

"I'm calling to remind you about the book signing at the Hamilton Hotel this evening...."

"I have a problem, Jerry. He has Victoria. He's given me twenty-four hours. Then he's starting to send fingers through the post."

"Slow down. Who has Victoria?"

"Bellamy. Mark Bellamy."

Jerry winces. "Not Stan Bellamy's boy?"

"The same."

"Then you do have a problem. The Bellamys, even without Stan at the helm, are a vicious crew. They'd nail your feet to the floor just for the laff."

"So, no police."

"What do you want me to do?"

"You know Soho, Jerry. You know all the right people. Get me some help. Get me some muscle."

"I don't think that muscle is going to do you any good."

"So what?"

"So, leave it with me. Just make it to the signing on time. I'll take care of it."

Chapter 6

That night things get worse.

I go into the lounge of the Hamilton where I'm set to do the book signing and there's a guy who looks just like me!

In that instant, I know how Mark feels. The guy is not like me, he *is* me. Every gesture, the way he stands, the way he's talking to that intelligent, beautiful woman.

Wait a minute. He's talking with Victoria! What's she doing here? She's supposed to be being held hostage by Mark.

For an instant I think it must be Mark. That somehow Jerry's done a deal and has moved him in. But that's not it. There's a calm and sophistication about this Bridges that Mark knows nothing about. The guy is another me.

Somehow Victoria's here and she's looking at the guy who is me just the way she looks at me and it's clear to see that she's thinking that he *is* me.

I've been OK at explaining why I look like Mark but I'm unlikely to be able to explain how both Mark and me look like the guy that's just turned up here.

I go towards them, towards the other guy standing there romancing Victoria and I can see that she looks right at me but she doesn't want to know me. I want so much to hold her, to ask her how she escaped from that maniac Mark, but there's a small cluster of hangers-on around them and I'm thinking that she can't see me because I'm out of her eye-line. I start to push through the pack so that I'm sure she can see me. And still there's nothing. She's looking straight through me and then, as I get nearer, she's looking alarmed and is nudging the guy who looks like me to let him know that she's concerned. He makes a signal with a manicured hand and two heavies close in on me and push me away. Jerry is there too. He sees me and looks straight through me.

I go to the washroom. I look in the mirror. My face is changed. It's still me, but I don't look enough like me, if you know what I mean. I now look like one of those lookalikes that you can hire to stand in for some well-known footballer or rock star. Someone who looks enough like them to pass but, when you look closely, doesn't look much like them at all. It's just a casual resemblance. That explains why the heavies wouldn't let me get close to Victoria. And that explains why Victoria didn't

recognize me when I got near enough to her, the way she carried on talking to the other guy as if he's me. No, he isn't me, it's just that he looks like I used to look and now I look sufficiently different not to pass.

I'm on the outside. He's promoting my book, living in the Hamilton and rutting with Victoria, no doubt.

This is never meant to be. Somehow, there's been some disruption in the quantum slipstream of the ambient doo-da field and a saturation of entropy mess up. It doesn't matter what. It's either a piece of rotten bad luck or someone has got it in for me. Somehow, the arrival of the other guy as me has perturbed the way I look. Changed that enough for me to be not recognized as the person I am.

I look at myself again. I don't even look much like me. Then I realize why Victoria can't recognize me. I don't recognize me. The face is different. Even the clothes are different. OK, the clothes are of the same type – dark suit, white shirt, black shoes – but they're no longer the named label designer gear I'm used to. They look like the kind of stuff you'd spend good money on but choose so you wouldn't get noticed. I look away.

I walk back through the hotel lobby. Victoria and the man calling himself me - the man who *is* me - have gone, taking the media scrum with them. I walk out onto the street. I catch sight of my reflection again. I lower my head. Somehow I know that I don't have that much to be proud about any more. I don't even know my own name.

Chapter 7

I head back to the penthouse apartment above the Hamilton. I can't get in. The entry code is different. I'm trying to think of a way of getting in when I see that one the heavies from the hotel has followed me and is heading my way.

I open my palms in a gesture that says, "OK you've made me. I won't cause trouble. I'm on my way." And he smiles as I walk back along the Embankment.

Leaning against one of the stone parapets buttressing Waterloo Bridge, I pat myself down. There's no wallet, no ID. The pockets in the jacket and trousers are empty. But, wait a minute. There's a tear in the lining of the jacket right hand pocket and something's slipped down into the main part of the lining. I reach in to pull the stuff out. £50 in rolled up notes. Useful, since this is all that I have. Three business cards. *Erin Pascoe*. I guess that's my new name. Erin Pascoe. Can't say it's what I would have chosen, but it's a start in finding out who I now am. There's no other explanation as to why I'm carrying three cards with that name on unless this is *me*.

The address on the card. EP Consultants. It's in E11. I need to check it out.

I start to sweat. A thought is taking hold, something I should already have worked out. If the disruption in the quantum slipstream of the ambient doo-da field that's led to a saturation of entropy mess up, or whatever it is, makes me what I am now, what's happening to the guy that I now am? This other *Erin Pascoe*. He's out there somewhere wondering what the hell's happening to him. And sooner, rather than later, he's going to be coming after me.

So, you see, that's it. The guy who is my old self, and the guy who is with Victoria in the Hamilton has perturbed me and I've perturbed Erin Pascoe and he's perturbed god knows who. It's like waves in a pond when a child throws in a big stone. The waves spread out, strong at first, weakening as they travel out.

And soon enough, I'm thinking about Victoria. How she is with him, the guy who's taken my place, the guy who's now Raymond Bridges. Is she noticing he's different? I'd like to think she is. I'd like to think she's noticing the things that matter, my interest in her work, my knowledge of her secret self, the one she keeps hidden from all but the very few she admits into that very private place. The place where she can be a little girl as much as a towering intellectual talent. The place where love lives.

You're right. Who am I kidding! If the sex is as raw and as orgasmic with the new Raymond Bridges, why is she going to care about the differences with me, the old Raymond Bridges? She puts it down to a change of mood, a forgetting of what he should know about what makes her tick. And he's still winning the day.

I'm trying not to think about the two of them together. Together in the way we used to be together. There in the apartment with the steel-grey Thames flowing below.

And I'm trying to think of something else. Thinking about Victoria's lecture on Eliot. *The Wasteland*. My life since the new guy turned up.

I think up a scene where she's giving that lecture on Eliot and I'm in the audience and, as I now expect, she's not recognizing me. But I don't care. I can sit and watch her, recapture the sound of her voice, the inflection in her soft American accent, that speech pattern that makes her so attractive. The smile as she makes a telling point or answers a question. And I see myself talking to her at the end of the lecture and she's still not recognizing me and I'm asking all these well-thought-out questions and she's interested in the intellectual challenge that this provokes but just doesn't know who I am. And I'm trying to stop myself from telling her who I am and how I've changed because I don't want to seem like a loser to her, a loser like Mark.

I know it's no use standing here by the Thames, lost in thoughts like these. And I know I've to get on with my life as Erin Pascoe, at least for as long as it takes.

Chapter 8

I make it to the address in E11, the address on the business card. It's a rundown newsagent, the kind of place where you can rent a business address with no questions asked.

The kid behind the counter looks about seventeen and has an expression that says that job satisfaction is something he knows nothing about. I show him the card and tell him that I want to find an address for Erin Pascoe.

He sniffs. "Can't tell you that."

I pull out a £10 note and his look changes from complete indifference to mild indifference. I add a second note and he smiles. He reaches under the counter and pulls out a shoebox. It must have about a hundred of those file index cards that you don't see any more these days. He leafs through, stopping at "P". He shows me the address.

"You didn't see that."

So much for confidentiality. I have the address. It's in leafy Wimbledon.

Elmington Drive is a wealthy suburban street. Smart gardens, no parked cars, large houses, most with gravel drives and tall shrubs. Pascoe is doing all right for himself, whatever he's doing, despite his lowlife business address. Number 18. Not bad.

I don't have a key. It's going to look strange if I ring the bell to my own house. I take a chance and walk round the back. The door is open. I walk in.

"I'm home!" I know this is a risk. I don't know how the change from Raymond Bridges to Erin Pascoe has worked. Do I now look like the Erin Pascoe who has been displaced? Was he somehow chosen because he looked enough like Raymond Bridges? I don't know, but I'm about to find out.

There is a noise upstairs and a moment later a smartly dressed woman comes downstairs. She wraps her arms around me and gives me a fat wet kiss on the cheek. "Erin, I thought you'd be at least another two days!" She's standing back now, eyeing me, calling for an explanation.

She's recognized me.

“We finished early.” It was the best I could come up with. “So I made an early start back home.”

“And I’d got myself used to being without you for another few days. How was it?”

“OK. About what I expected.”

I’m concerned that the banality of what I’m coming up with is a giveaway, but she’s satisfied with what’s being said. This must be what she wants to hear.

“Well, you must want to get a change and freshen up.” She looks down. “No luggage?”

“They lost it at the airport.”

“Again! Why can’t they run an airline.”

I smile. Banality it is then. I can do banality.

I don’t know her name. Other than Mrs. Pascoe, and that won’t do. I go upstairs to change. The Master bedroom is her space. It’s all frills and lace and pastel shades. Pascoe must have somewhere to hang out. A large bathroom. I run the taps to make it seem that I’m busy freshening up, as she calls it. I work my way along the landing and find Pascoe’s den. He has a desk, a computer and the expected football memorabilia. No, wait. *I* have those things.

The computer is on, sleeping, but the screen still demands a login password that I don’t know. I reach into the desk drawer and sift through the usual collection of stuff that congregates in desk drawers. Computer cables, phone chargers, a camera, pens, notebook, a USB pen drive. I start leafing through the notebook. No, surely not. There on a single page near the middle is a listing not only of his computer login but his social networking logins too. People know they shouldn’t do it but because they’re so concerned about being locked out of their own pages, they always do.

I find that my wife’s name is Myra. That we have one cat and no children. That we have 43 friends and 81 followers. That we take holidays in the places where everyone else takes holidays. That we are a regular, law-abiding couple. It’s a world apart from the apartment overlooking the Thames.

Or so it seems for a while at least.

I load the pen drive. The folders are encrypted and passwords are required to open them. But the passwords are in the notebook and within the few minutes I'm in. A series of files; the title of each is a date. There's just one name that occurs in each file. Abraham Miller. James D Maguire. Carlton Henry. Michael Finch, Martin Hames. I call up search and enter the names one by one. Each man is wealthy. Two have died in unusual circumstances - Miller in a helicopter crash and Henry in a hit-and-run. Two out of five. That's two too many. Oh, Erin, just what is it that you're not telling your wife about EP Consultants?

There is one further file. It's being kept separate from the other since it's marked as incomplete. The name on the file is Raymond Bridges.

Chapter 9

Later that night, I'm calling her Myra and we're sipping wine as TV plays in the background. She's talking about her job in the bank and I'm listening while stroking the cat – a longhaired grey one – that's snuggled onto my lap. I'm guessing that Myra brings her work home but that my grisly exploits don't get an airing.

She's concerned about her pension from the bank. “They just don't seem to care about the employees the way that they used to. It's all about making money to them.”

She's right there. Why else would the bank be in business? I sympathize. “If they downgrade the pension too much, you could always go to work somewhere else.”

“And lose all that I put into that place?”

“Yes, you've made an important contribution all those years. Put a lot in. I know you have.”

She smiles and has appreciation in her eyes. “That's what I like about you, darling. You really care. You've always cared.”

OK, I'm starting to feel more secure. There's no problem in her accepting me as her lifetime companion, Erin. And there's no problem, as far as I can see, in me as Erin in my new abode keeping quiet about the dirty job that I'm doing that she knows nothing about. The big house in the desirable part of London paid for by my undercover activity.

She snuggles up and puts an arm round me. We kiss. It feels maternal. But a kiss is what it is.

An hour later and we're in bed in the room with the frills and lace and the pastel shades. She kisses me goodnight. I reach forward to touch her breasts. As Erin, I'm sure that this is what she expects. And maybe she does, as her hands-off stare is well rehearsed. I kiss her on the cheek, smile, and turn over to go to sleep. So this is what passes for passion in the leafy suburbs.

Chapter 10

I should have heard him coming but by the time I wake he's in the room. He's wearing a full-face mask. He has a sawn-off shotgun.

Myra is screaming. He stuffs one of her lace doilies into her mouth, ties her up and leaves her face down on the bed all the time covering me with the shotgun. He forces me down the stairs and into the cellar. The door is bolted. He straps me down on an old table, using discarded electrical cabling that has been down there in the cellar for years. He pulls off his mask and stares at me.

It's Erin Pascoe all right, but it's the perturbed version, what happened to the guy when I displaced him. He looks a little like me, like I now am, but not enough to pass. I'm thinking he looks more like me now than I look like the Raymond Bridges who is now romancing Victoria. The stone in the pond. The ripples spreading out. Weakening. But none of that is going to help me now.

OK. It wasn't a disruption in the quantum slipstream of the ambient doo-da field that's led to a saturation of entropy mess up. I shouldn't have told you that. I was being trivial and condescending then, I know. The truth, as you call it, comes out as the old Erin Pascoe resorts to torture.

He has an old rusty blade inserted under my big toe. The nail is being lifted off. And, strapped down, I can't move. I'm screaming.

He's enjoying this. "No one will hear you down here. Scream all you like."

I pass out. He throws water over me. He twists the blade again. I pass out again. He throws water over me again... I'm ready to tell him anything, everything. Well, almost everything.

He's back in my face. "Why are you here instead of me?"

I'm blabbing now. "A mistake. Some kind of mistake. There was a perturbation. I came here as someone else. Raymond Bridges, the writer."

"And why should I be interested in this?"

"You don't need to be. Other than that there was the perturbation. What I didn't expect."

"And?"

“And someone came and replaced me as Raymond Bridges. Shunted me sideways, so that I displaced you.”

His eyes widened. “And made me become this, this someone else.”

“Yes. Like you are, like I am now, but perturbed.”

He twists the blade again. I pass out. He throws on more cold water.

He doesn't like what I'm saying. But, just like Bernie, he has a problem. How else can he explain how he has become like he is and how I have become like he was? It's blowing his mind that he has to believe me because my explanation is the only explanation there is.

“How does it happen? Tell me.” He twists the blade with more force.

“You must have been selected because you look enough like Raymond Bridges.”

He doesn't register any surprise at the mention of that name. Having seen the file, I know he doesn't need to ask who that is. He twists the knife again. “Not who. Just how?”

I only want the pain to go away. I begin to talk again. “It's the solar max.”

“Solar?”

“Yes. Your sun. Solar flares that stream out of the sun, making what you once called sunspots, what you're now calling a coronal mass ejection. Magnetic particles streaming out into space. Over one billion tons of particles, that's solar max. When those particles hit the planet you get all sorts of effects. What you call Northern Lights, disrupted power grids, maxed out communication satellites.”

“And you?”

“Yeah. And me. Riding on the back of all that energy.”

He twists the blade again. “So how did it go wrong?”

“There was a second solar flare a few months after the first. Unexpected. That sent out a second Raymond Bridges, the one that displaced me and made me displace you.”

So, you see, I haven't been straight with you about this. I didn't think it was necessary to tell you the truth, that you'd even care. But now that the old Erin Pascoe has

dragged it out of me, you know it and you can see how shallow I've been with you. I'm sorry. Sorry it had come out this way. I'd rather have told you at a time of my own choosing.

He plays with the blade. "So what am I going to do with you? Kill you?"

"Don't do that."

"With you gone, I'm going to get back to where I was, before what you're calling the displacement, the perturbation."

"If you do that you never get back. You stay this way for good."

"What, then?"

"Get me close to Raymond Bridges and then I can help you."

"How?"

"I know him. I know how he lives, where he goes. I can help you with all this. Just stop turning that blade."

I pass out again. And this time there's no water.

