

JAMES MCKENNA

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James McKenna also writes for young readers

The Mind Traveller trilogy of action/adventure stories for 9 -15 year olds

CHAPTER 1

"Why? Why do you take the ones I love? You kill them violently, you show no mercy." Sarah hung her head and shivered, her mother's favourite scarf clasped in both hands.

In her heart Sarah knew why. Death gave no mercy to the bereaved. Her mother had told her so when Sarah's stepfather died and again when Sarah's own husband, George, had been killed in Afghanistan. On both occasions pain ate into her mind and soul, destroying all faith. She cursed God then and she cursed him now. But on those two occasions at least mother and daughter had been able to comfort each other. Now Sarah's support went to Grace, her own seven-year-old daughter. Grace suffered the loss of her beloved grandmother with the desperate grief of a child who does not understand.

"Why, why did they kill Grandma?" she kept asking. "Why didn't they stop? She was so kind and I loved her."

Seven days ago, at the funeral Grace clutched her mother's hand while tears flowed in silent pain, bewildered by the cruelty of a world she had only started to discover. A week later she appeared to have accepted her loss, though underneath she had changed. Sarah recognised the child's strength and matched it with her own. Yet in her heart and mind she felt unable to fill the vacuum left by the death of one they both loved. Their family had been five, now they were only two.

Standing from the living room floor of her mother's bungalow, she surveyed the neatly folded clothes ready for the charity shop. At the same time Grace clattered into the kitchen from the garden, Scamp, the Jack Russell mongrel, following at her feet.

"Muma, you OK? I heard you shout." Grace ran and clasped Sarah around the waist.

"I'm fine, my love." She stroked her daughter's cheek. "Just sorting the last of Grandma's clothes."

"Can we go into the woods?" Grace looked up as Scamp padded in eager anticipation.

Sarah glanced from the window to the pine forest growing beyond the garden fence.

"No darling. We'll be going soon and I don't like you in there on your own."

"But I'll have Scamp with me." The dog jumped up on hearing his name, his front paws against Grace's legs.

"Just stay in the garden, please."

Grace blew breath and dropped her shoulders.

"No!" Sarah gave the smile which indicated conversation closed.

"All right then. Come on, Scamp." Grace turned and left, the little dog at her heels.

Sarah entered her mother's bedroom, the wardrobe and drawers now cleared of all clothes and personal items. This left only the dressing table and she stood before it as if a shrine. Inside lay the truths, the secrets and loves of her mother's life. Sarah brushed fingers against the polished surface. Once more the pain of loss crept over her. Grace, herself and Grandma had been the tight nucleus of a three-member family, a family ripped apart by the drunken stupidity of a hit and run driver, the culprit still not caught.

The policeman had shrugged. "Joy riders from Luton, car most likely stolen. If they've left prints inside we'll find 'em. But it was dark and no witnesses." He shrugged again. Had her husband been alive he would have tracked down the criminals and dealt with them in the manner of old, her own father, maybe the same. She did not know, she had never met him, knew nothing about him and her mother would not talk of him. She told Sarah that one day she would have access to the truth. Had that time arrived? She

had talked of letters, documents and photos stored in a box kept in her dressing table.

Her hand shook as she opened the top drawer. The time had come to discover her father. She guessed he was rich, he had bought this substantial house thirty years ago, probably as compensation for leaving a loving woman with his infant child. A penalty for his guilt in deserting them both. From her own Mediterranean complexion, she guessed he maybe came from Southern Spain, Italy, France or Greece. Maybe a handsome man, for people called her beautiful, though beauty also came from her mother.

Inside the drawer lay a document case plus a number of folders. She lifted the lid to find the case crammed full of papers, the top one a letter to herself.

"Mummy." She heard Grace shout, heard her running through the kitchen and into the living room. She turned immediately to help.

"There's a man in the woods, he looked over the fence." Grace grasped her mother. "He frightened me."

"No need to be scared, we're not the only people who walk in the woods." Sarah cradled her as Scamp looked on with worried eyes.

"But he stared at me, his face was covered."

"He was probably cold," Sarah said, unease creeping over her. She moved to the window and looked to the tree line but saw no one. "Come on darling. It's time to go. Fetch Scamp's lead." Sarah watched Grace run into the hall before she carefully removed the document box from the dressing table and carried it to the car.

She returned to lock and check all doors and windows, best be careful. Grace and Scamp secured in the back seat, Sarah edged the car out of the drive on to the deserted village road. The other houses were prosperous, all extended to the maximum, the owners hard at work to pay their mortgages.

Sarah drove through the country lanes to Harpenden, listening to Grace sing songs and Scamp make appreciative noises. She had left married quarters in Aldershot two months after George's funeral, then rented a housing trust property in the south of Harpenden. The schools were good, the neighbourhood safe and only ten minutes' drive from her mother in Wheathampstead. Within commuting distance from London, Harpenden homes were occupied mainly by the young and affluent. She soon made friends and on discovering her a widow, men came calling. She shunned all except those who expressed a simple desire for friendship. These were few and John Kirkwell the best. Unlike most, not once had he tried to get inside her knickers. She appreciated that. Since her husband's death she had spurned all suggestions of sexual engagement, feeling the love of husband still burning deep within her heart and soul. Sometimes she wondered if John was gay. He had been helpful and supportive at her mother's funeral, keeping discreetly in the background but always ready to step forward. He had introduced her to the local branch of the Democratic Justice Party. She soon made even more friends amongst the mainly female members and learnt John was a banker who, through connections, raised a lot of money for the party. The primary belief of the DJP was the enhancement of women's rights, their equality and condemnation of sexual harassment and abuse. They also supported law and order, civil rights and acceptance of the transgender and gay communities, both male and female, which gave further proof John Kirkwell might himself be gay. She had no idea where he came from, his family or background. He looked and dressed like most young businessmen in Harpenden, skinny jacket and trousers, the side of his head shaven, spiky on top plus a designer stubble, a tan which might have come from a sun bed or his ancestral genetics. He treated her with friendly respect and courtesy. She appreciated that. Both he and other members

of the DJP had persuaded her to come to the party's yearly jamboree, this time, on the insistence of Laura Manning, to the Greek island of Paxos. Out of season it was inexpensive, warm and not full of tourists. She had arranged for her friend Libby to come and look after Grace for five days and because Libby would bring her own dog, Grace had accepted without a fuss. For Sarah it would be the first holiday since her husband's death. She would miss Grace but looked forward to sun and beach.

Parked outside her house in Southdown she went around to the boot of the Vauxhall and retrieved the document case while Grace and Scamp ran into the back garden. When the case stood on the table of her living room, she debated whether to open it, then decided to wait. The evening had started to close in, Grace would soon head for bed and her iPad. Best to look when she had peace and silence. She felt excited that at last she might find the truth regarding her father and her origins.

CHAPTER 2

Fear came to Judith Holmes the instant she opened her eyes. Staring into the black void of darkness she sensed a viperous presence, unseen, unmoving, coiled.

Instinctively she reached a hand to the warmth of her sleeping husband then just as quickly she removed it. His infidelity had destroyed any reassuring comfort. She was alone. Alone she forced herself to face her fear. Logic rationalised she had suffered a shock awaking from nightmare. Distant tapping through the ancient timber of their 18th century farmhouse indicated some door or window left open.

In the night beyond, she heard trees rustling in the wind, their boughs tossed beneath a cloud shrouded moon, their shadows hiding predators waiting to feed.

Her bladder needed to be emptied. That and the tapping, she realised, were the reasons she had woken. Still she did not move, dared not move, unable to rid herself of primeval phobia. Darkness held the dread of evil which her sophisticated mind could not suppress. Predators in the night devoured more than small creatures.

"Stupid woman," she whispered the words, then proved herself by leaving the bed and walking into darkness, arms outstretched to feel for the door.

In the hall, moon shadows flickered on the parquet floor, trees swayed dark shapes beyond the windowpane and her fragile sanctuary. Her shiver was involuntary.

The glare of electric light, the flush of water in the cistern all gave assurance of the real world and helped to banish the aftermath of the nightmare. Her face in the mirror retained traces of youthful beauty, a beauty betrayed by her husband's desire for wanton lust. Her life,

love, devotion, support and fortitude had all been brushed aside for the gratification of sex. Prostitutes, pole dancers, lobbyists and researchers all left their mark and one of them, a transmitted disease. It had infected her husband, John Holmes, Member of Parliament. It had infected Judith, a once devoted wife.

In the harsh light her skin looked gaunt and pale without makeup. She traced a finger on the lines of her image and felt bitter over her barren womb. She was determined to make a better world, a place safe for honest women, for the law abiding, for those who kept faith and honour, who cherished love above the bestiality of sex and commercial gain. For that reason, she had joined the DJP and risen through the ranks. Margo, their charismatic and forceful deputy leader, had promised her vengeance, and a seat in Parliament.

Her watch read 4.36 am as she made her way back along the passage, pausing by the study door as it was pushed and sucked by air pressure from an open window beyond.

The malevolent spectre returned. It stood mocking from behind the study door. Would he have her murdered to gain public sympathy and sexual freedom? She stepped inside, saw the curtains stirred by a flurry of wind which scattered papers on the floor. Judith snapped on the light. No darkness, no spectre but her fear remained. She crossed and closed the open window locking out the world beyond where trees bowed in grey shadow beneath the racing moon.

"I will take power," she said to the empty room. "I will take vengeance. You mock good women, but now you will pay the price of our retribution. All of you. The DJP have the female vote, and will take power."

Back in her bedroom she lay in the cocoon of darkness and pulled the comfort of the quilt against her isolation. The room was pungent with the stale confinement of her

husband's sleeping body. A smell intermingled with the traces of her own perfume and now, the raw stench of cut flesh.

In alarm she reached a hand to his chest and felt a stickiness which spread beneath her palm with the consistency of hot oil. In an instant she had switched on the bedside light, bathing the room in a soft glow of pink. Her fingers glistened crimson. She gasped, then shrieked at the sight of her husband's blood. Pulling his shoulder towards her, the shriek was stifled by the clutch of terror as his head lolled to one side. His eyes were wide and staring, his neck gaping. The carotid and jugular were severed each side of a gushing wound, the trachea gurgling in jagged pulses until his turning momentum sent a jet of blood directly into her face.

Judith spat out the essence of her husband's life, rubbed a hand to her eyes to clear the partial blindness. His blood was dripping from her lips and chin, soaking her nightclothes, spreading bright red stains on the warm quilt she had once shared in love.

"Not this," she screamed. "My God, not like this. What have I done?"

CHAPTER 3

Sarah went about her morning routine with the anticipation of discovery. While Grace ate breakfast, Sarah stuffed washing into the machine, made the beds then placed her mother's document case on the kitchen table. Grace put on her shoes and coat, collected her satchel and Scamp, then all set out on the walk to school.

"What lessons do you have today?" Sarah asked.

"First reading, then maths, then history. After lunch it's geography, then sport." Grace lifted two fists into the air. "My favourite."

"Sure you'll be all right with Libby while I take a few days away?"

"Course Mum, I like Libby and I'll have Scamp. I'll miss you but Libby's good at Lego and she promised to help me finish my giant castle." Grace took hold of Sarah's hand. "Love you Muma."

"Love you too, my angel."

Back home Sarah opened the document case and lifted the papers from inside. A brooch slipped from beneath the first letter landing on the table with a singular thud as if announcing its arrival. She guessed it about two and a half inches in diameter and made of silver. What captured her total gaze was the photo held under glass in the middle. In black and white, a portrait showing the beauty of her mother in youth. More intriguing for Sarah was the handsome young man beside her. They looked a magnificent couple, warm and content in their love for one another. The brooch, she guessed, would be worn with coat or jacket, a brooch that clearly sent a message. I am spoken for.

Sara read the letter that had lain on top.

"Dear Sarah,

I am gone now, but hopefully in a place I can still watch over yourself and Grace.

You will see from the photo what your father looked like. I loved him and I believe he loved me, but he had much trouble in his life and because of that, he left me. However, he always supported us, though kept his distance. The enclosed letter from him will explain a little. He told me always to look after this brooch and you must do the same. Why he wanted this I do not know. Maybe because it showed the bond and unity of our love, a love never allowed to blossom.

Your loving mother."

Sarah replaced the letter and picked up the one beneath, the handwriting in pen and ink, neat and bold, the date thirty-two years ago.

"Dear Ruth,

Due to pressure from my family and business in Italy, I fear I must let you go. I shall always remember our love and our daughter, Sarah, but I must also keep you from the dangers that now encircle me. In remembrance of our happiness I give to you this brooch and our photo. Keep them safe, never let them go, for the brooch holds our betrothal. I will send money for as long as able but promise me with all your love, you will keep this brooch safely hidden. Some may come looking but they must never find it. What it hides I leave to you and Sarah.

Forever my beloved, forever and ever. Silvano."

Sarah felt the tears on her cheek as she placed the letter down. Her mother had never spoken of these matters, her life a secret shadowed by what had passed. She read the remaining letters and documents, one her mother's last will and testament leaving everything to Sarah. The rest were love letters from Silvano, most from before she was born.

She returned all to the document case, except for the brooch. This she turned over and over in her fingers. The back appeared solid. So what secrets lay within? Something in the photo? She examined it closely but saw only the beauty of a loving couple.

CHAPTER 4

Detective Chief Inspector Sean Fagan edged his second-hand Ford car through London's rain and traffic as he headed for the offices of the Organised Crime Agency in Pimlico. Cobbart had given the meeting Priority One, that gave Sean hope of finally getting a job. Six months of writing reports on national crime statistics was not his idea of active policing. The statistics had shown a huge surge in criminal activity and a spiralling drop in criminal prosecution. It coincided with an early release policy to ease overcrowding in prisons. The public were losing patience. So was Sean.

He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel while listening to the second movement of Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto on the car radio. Outside, gusts of wind shaped clothes around the bodies of people, creating a vision of figures hewn from rock while blusters of shrapnel rain blistered the windscreen between the monotonous thump of the wipers. Winter had passed, so had spring and unseasonal storms at the start of summer reflected his mood. At forty years of age he knew his disenchantment with professional life had arrived too early. He had left the police to join CAT, the Combined Agency Task Force so he might fight crime without the rule books. So far that fight had not materialised. Classical music, good wine and good food gave support to the solitary existence of his private life. He knew a good woman would help but since his split with Victoria, no other had chanced his way and his wife Camilla seemed long ago. He did not consider himself a handsome man. Tall and solidly built with a nose large enough to give character, he channelled his intellect into understanding his job and environment. In this way he saw

women as pleasing entities who passed him by. Yet he knew a chance for him remained because he also watched their eyes and caught their smiles.

Beethoven faded into annoying adverts then a reader came on with a news summary. A child molester had been released from prison due to a technical fault at his trial. Two young girls had been raped in Epping Forest. A pensioner had been jailed for attacking a burglar who stole his military medals. Judith Holmes, widow of John Holmes the MP who had been brutally murdered by an intruder at their home six months previously, had won the by-election for her husband's vacant seat. On a pledge for law, order and female equality, she had increased the number of seats held by the Democratic Justice Party to six. The fastest growing political party in England, the next election would see the DJP outpace the Liberals, their demands for radical reform of the justice system, police and female rights, gave them popular support and tabloid backing.

"Just get rid of the wankers and the paperwork," Sean said to no one. "Get rid of the politically correct who bog the system with administration. Let the police go to work."

Twenty minutes later Sean entered the office of Chief Superintendent John Cobbart and greeted him with a wave, surprised to see his own boss, Colonel Fox of the Combined Agency Taskforce also sitting at the table. Fox nodded in greeting.

Cobbart sat amidst his usual pile of chaos. Every chair, every working surface covered with files, papers and books. A greeting came with the devious troll-like smile, after which he was nicknamed. He waved Sean to a chair.

Sean moved two sets of box files to create room before sitting. His summons to HQ had come out of the blue. With these two present it had to be a decent job. Six months after being seconded to the Combined Agency Taskforce,

he had no assignment or team. Time was hanging and filled with frustration.

The troll sat in his familiar pinstriped suit, dandruff on his collar, grey hair in need of a cut, half-rimmed glasses on the end of his nose. He appeared more academic than a serious policeman but Sean knew him as a hard-edged taskmaster; someone with little time for the new breed of political administrators. One of the old boys, Cobbart backed his men and stood his ground. He moved papers on his desk, tapping a finger. Not a good sign.

"Colonel Fox is here by my invitation," Cobbart said. "Because he knows more about what we will discuss than I wish to know. The police do not want to become involved in any part of CAT activities. You will also be pleased to know you've finally been allocated an assignment."

Sean sighed relief. "About time. I've been hanging out for six months."

The troll shifted more papers. "Well this might not be quite the job you had expected but I assure you it is vital to future national security."

"John, please, no more nondescript admin. I went from detective inspector to chief inspector. I volunteered for the Combined Agency Taskforce to combat terrorism and global crime. All unofficial and off record, so off record, that CAT does not officially exist."

"That's because the rules we work by are totally unorthodox," Fox said. "But we still need the right operative for the right job. What I will offer you is an assignment needing, skill, diplomacy and most of all, secrecy."

Sean gave them his nice guy smile. It was wasted. "So, what is this assignment?"

"Operation Black Rose. Murder, corruption, sex and politics. An everyday story of parliamentary folk." Cobbart pushed a folder across the desk. "The Democratic Justice Party now have six members. Analysts predict at the next

election the House will be hung and because of popular support the DJP will increase their seats to possibly one hundred plus. In other words, they will have access to serious power."

"That's democracy."

"But is it?" Cobbart sat back and laced fingers. "In the last two years the DJP has become the peoples' answer to widespread disenchantment with Government failures. It promises popular solutions. Rigorous control of crime, rigorous control of discrimination against women, the return of education to the teachers, the return of medical health to our doctors, civilised behaviour on our streets and removal from administrations of a politically correct bureaucracy that places criminal rights above the peoples' rights. All funded by serious money."

"Peoples' power and peoples' bullshit. Anyone serious knows they won't deliver."

"There lies one of the dangers. In a democracy a lot of non-serious people have the vote. They do not vote as a consequence of weighty, intellectual judgement; they vote for whomever the tabloids dictate. They vote through emotion or anger. So, they nearly always vote for the wrong people."

Sean raised his hands and spread them in question. "That's democracy. Voting is a precarious gamble."

"Granted, but you will agree, most votes are cast on emotional assumptions."

"That's people power."

"Like the communist revolution?" Cobbart parted his hands and raised one finger. "All the DJP members of parliament are women. It is basically an all-female party and consequently draws support from female voters across a wide political spectrum, including, I might add, my own wife." Cobbart sat back and shook his head. "She used to be a diehard Conservative."

Sean grinned. "Women can be fickle. But it's their prerogative. That's not a crime, John. What the hell is this to do with CAT?"

"Everything," Fox said. "Elected members of DJP have called for the electronic implanting of tags into all criminals for five years after serving their sentences."

"That would make our job easier," Sean said.

"Other leading voices in the party have called for the surgical removal of hands from habitual burglars, the castration of repeat rapists, forced re-education of problem families, life sentences for drug dealers and many other crimes."

"That's to catch the vote. It will never happen."

"It already has. At 2am this morning a burglar on early release who had forty previous convictions was dumped outside Nottingham City Hospital with both his hands hacked off. Nottingham is where Judith Holmes, DJP won her parliamentary seat. In Leeds a mother and two daughters have been arrested for cutting off the genitalia of a freed rapist. He had sexually assaulted the youngest girl. Leeds is where Margo Portland, DJP won her seat."

Sean shrugged. "Peoples' justice. It had to come but who really cares other than the politically correct, and only then if the victims are of ethnic race? In reality, gentlemen, most of the country will be cheering. But one thing's for sure, those bastards won't steal or rape again. Likewise, a bullet in the brain or bollocks solves a lot of problems."

Cobbart's troll smile appeared. "Off the record, my sentiments exactly and that's one of the worries over DJP. The more popular they become, the more atrocities will occur. The grannies of this country, the mothers and the women who are constrained by real fear, are giving vent to their anger. They see justice and safety forsaken for the benefit of criminal welfare. That anger is boiling and, I fear, it will throw a lot of mutilated criminals to the surface."