

The background of the book cover is a photograph of a dilapidated, dark interior space, possibly a hallway or a room in an old building. The walls are made of brick and are peeling and damaged. The floor is covered in debris. In the distance, a person is standing in a doorway, silhouetted against a brighter light. The overall atmosphere is eerie and mysterious.

**MURDER IS NEVER
BLACK OR WHITE...**

**THE
COLOUR
OF
DEATH**

MICHAEL CORDY

Bestselling author of *The Messiah Code*

About the Book

In a residential neighbourhood of Portland, Oregon, an unknown young woman uncovers a shocking crime scene by inexplicably sensing the evil within its walls. To the police, she is a mystery. She can't even tell them her own name. They christen her Jane Doe.

Suffering terrifying hallucinations, Jane is assigned to Nathan Fox, a forensic psychiatrist struggling with his own demons. Together they must piece together the jigsaw that is Jane's identity.

Then a sequence of brutal killings terrorizes the city and Fox learns Jane is the only cryptic link between the unrelated victims. To solve the murders, Fox must discard his black and white preconceptions, look beyond the spectrum of normal human experience and confront the dark truth of her past...and his own.

Contents

Cover
About the Book
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Prologue

Part 1: A Memory of Dying

Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15

Part 2: The Last Echo

Chapter 16
Chapter 17
Chapter 18

Chapter 19
Chapter 20
Chapter 21
Chapter 22
Chapter 23
Chapter 24
Chapter 25
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Chapter 31
Chapter 32
Chapter 33

Part 3: The Great Work

Chapter 34
Chapter 35
Chapter 36
Chapter 37
Chapter 38
Chapter 39
Chapter 40
Chapter 41
Chapter 42
Chapter 43
Chapter 44
Chapter 45
Chapter 46
Chapter 47
Chapter 48
Chapter 49
Chapter 50
Chapter 51

Chapter 52
Chapter 53
Chapter 54
Chapter 55

Part 4: Beyond Indigo

Chapter 56
Chapter 57
Chapter 58
Chapter 59
Chapter 60
Chapter 61
Chapter 62
Chapter 63
Chapter 64
Chapter 65
Chapter 66
Chapter 67
Chapter 68
Chapter 69
Chapter 70

Epilogue
Acknowledgements
About the Author
Also by Michael Cordy
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THE COLOUR OF DEATH

Michael Cordy



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For my father and my mother

Synaesthesia: (Origin - Greek *syn* = together + *aisthesis* = perception)

In its simplest form it is best described as a 'union of the senses' whereby two or more of the five senses that are normally experienced separately are involuntarily and automatically joined together. Some synaesthetes experience colour when they hear sounds or read words. Others experience tastes, smells, shapes or touches in almost any combination. These sensations are automatic and cannot be turned on or off. Synaesthesia isn't a disease or illness and is not at all harmful. In fact, the vast majority of synaesthetes couldn't imagine life without it.

The Synaesthesia Society

Synergy: (Origin - Greek *sunergos* = working together)

Cooperation of two or more things to produce a combined effect that is greater than the sum of their separate effects.

Oxford English Dictionary

Prologue

Portland, Oregon

SITTING WITH HIS sister in the back of their parents' hired station wagon, the boy doesn't realize how close he is to death. His mind is preoccupied with thoughts of his eleventh birthday party in two days' time and how much he loves family holidays with his American aunt and uncle in Oregon. Everything about America's North Pacific coast seems more glamorous than England: the summers hotter, the beaches whiter, the cars bigger, the skies bluer. The giant sequoias his parents took him to see today dwarf the mightiest oak trees back home in Cornwall. Only his teenage sister interrupts his reverie, when she starts pinching her right forearm.

'Stop it, Ali,' he pleads. She gives a bored smile, pushes her forearm closer to his face and pinches harder. Sometimes he hates his big sister and wishes he could make her disappear.

His mother turns from the front passenger seat. 'What's going on?'

'She's pinching her arm.'

'It's my arm. He doesn't have to look.'

'Stop it, Alice. You know how it affects your brother.' His mother smiles at him. 'Don't look at her, Nathan.'

'We need some petrol,' his father says.

'We're coming into Portland, Richard. Surely we've got enough gas to get back to Samantha and Howard's?'

Nathan loves the way his mother says gas instead of petrol. He sometimes wishes his father were American too, then they would live here all the time.

‘I don’t want to risk it, Jenny. It’s getting late.’ His father points to a Chevron garage. ‘We’ll fill up there, use the phone and tell them when to expect us back.’ He pulls into the forecourt then looks over his shoulder. ‘You two stay in the car.’

‘I want to get out. It’s so *boring* in here,’ groans Alice, as if boredom is the worst thing in the world.

‘Let’s all get out,’ says his mother. ‘Stretch our legs, use the restroom.’

The little bell on the kiosk door rings as they go inside. Nathan’s father stays by the car while his mother uses the phone in the corner and Alice uses the toilet out back. Nathan flicks happily through the rack of comic books until he finds a Superman issue he hasn’t yet read. The bell on the door rings again as his father comes in to pay for the petrol. Nathan keeps on reading and is so lost in the book that he doesn’t notice his sister return, or the doorbell ring for a third time. Only when his mother grips his arm and pulls him towards her does he look up and register the fear in her eyes and the stony expression on his father’s face. Alice is pale as their father gestures for them to move closer together. Something is wrong.

Then he sees the two men and a cold queasy lump forms in his belly. Both wear sinister black coats with hoods that obscure their faces. He watches as one pulls a pistol from under his coat, the other a sawn-off shotgun. They ignore Nathan and his family and focus on the Asian clerk behind the counter. Pistol points at the cash register, revealing a tattoo on his right forearm: a cobra coiled round the shaft of a strange-shaped crucifix, topped with an oval loop instead of a vertical bar. ‘Hey, Jackie Chan, empty the register.’ The clerk nods nervously and reaches down below the counter.

There is a moment of eerie calm.

Then Shotgun shouts, 'The fuckin' gook's hitting the alarm,' steps forward and fires both barrels. Nathan squeezes his eyes shut just in time. When he opens them again the clerk has disappeared behind the counter. Blood drips like crimson treacle off a stack of cartons behind where he had stood.

'What do we do now?' Pistol says, agitated, pumped.

Shotgun leans across and empties the cash register. 'Get out of here, I guess.' As Shotgun moves for the door Nathan notices he has the same tattoo on his arm: a cobra coiled round a strange crucifix.

'What about them?' Pistol says, turning suddenly to Nathan and his family, who are standing in a line: Mum first, then Dad, Alice and him – a firing squad in reverse.

Shotgun shrugs as he opens the door. 'Killed one pig, may as well kill 'em all. I'll get the car running.' As Pistol raises the gun and flexes the muscles in his forearm Nathan watches the coiled cobra tattoo writhe into life.

'You don't need to do this,' Nathan's father pleads with an urgent calm. 'I'm a doctor. I might be able to save the clerk—'

Pistol's hand shakes, making the cobra dance. 'Shut the fuck up,' he snarls. 'You can't save anyone. You're not worth a fart in hell. You're not chosen. You're not one of us. You're all pigs.' At that moment Pistol looks directly at the boy. Despite his hood, the angle of the light catches the dilated pupils of the man's bloodshot eyes and Nathan knows he is going to kill them. As Nathan's numb fingers drop the comic book to the floor his last instinct is to turn to his mother—

The first shot rings out.

The boy feels the bullet hit him.

Followed by searing, intolerable pain.

Then nothing.

Until Nathan becomes conscious of a young cop kneeling over him. The brass badge on his navy uniform says Portland Police. 'C'mon, son. Let her go now. We'll take care of this. Come with me.'

As if in a hideous dream Nathan looks down and realizes he is cradling Alice in his lap. Her eyes stare up at him but they are as lifeless as a doll's. There is a bullet hole in her chest, a well of blood so deep and dark it looks black. He remembers their argument in the car and feels sick. 'She's my sister,' he says numbly.

He turns to his parents but the cop pulls him to his feet. 'Don't look, son. No good can come of that.' As the boy stands, the policeman examines him. He is covered in blood but none of it is his. 'You weren't hit. Why weren't you hit?' He detects an almost accusing tone in the cop's disbelief. Nathan feels no relief at being unharmed, only confusion.

How can he still be alive?

'Come with me,' the policeman says. 'There's nothing you can do for your folks, but you're safe now.' The cop opens the door and the boy flinches when the doorbell rings one more time. There's a small crowd outside and police cars with bright flashing lights. He squints, dazzled and dazed. He hears his name being called and turns in the direction of the familiar voice. In his confusion, watching her run towards him, he thinks for one blissful second that his mother has survived. Then he realizes it's her sister, Aunt Samantha, and the sweet illusion disappears for ever. She sweeps him up in her arms and squeezes him to her.

'You're OK now,' she says. 'We'll look after you.' Over her shoulder Nathan sees his uncle Howard. His face is white with shock and he looks angry.

The cop leans in close. 'What exactly happened in there, son?'

The boy buries his face in his aunt's coat. Her perfume reminds him of his mother. 'I don't know,' he says. 'Two men came in with guns. They killed the clerk but I don't

know what happened after that. I can't remember.' He starts crying, big painful sobs. 'I can't remember anything.'

'It's OK, Nathan,' his aunt soothes. 'It doesn't matter. All that matters now is you're safe.'

But she's wrong. It *does* matter. Knowing how his parents and sister died, and understanding why he didn't die with them, matters more to him than anything else in the entire world.

PART 1
A Memory of Dying

Portland, Oregon. Nineteen years later

IT WAS JUNE, summer in the city, and the night breeze felt cool on her skin as the young woman hurried through the quiet streets. An ambulance siren rang out and she could see its wailing sound unfurl before her eyes: a ribbon of reds and blues that flared across the dark sky. The alien city teemed with unfamiliar sounds, smells and sights that threatened to overwhelm her senses. Clouds obscured the moon and stars but the sodium street lamps held back the velvet darkness, revealing ghosts flickering in her peripheral vision. To keep them at bay, she looked straight ahead and walked down the middle of the sidewalk. Clutching the heart-shaped locket at her neck with one nervous hand, she stroked her cropped hair with the other, unconsciously feeling for the missing blonde curls she'd cut off to alter her appearance. Despite everything that had happened she yearned to forget the last few days and return to a state of blissful ignorance, homesick for the once-idyllic world she had fled.

Heading for the bus station, she passed houses with trees and yards, and began to relax. It was less enclosed here and quieter, as if everyone save her was asleep. Even the ghosts. She looked up at the sky and realized it would be dawn in a few hours. She smiled with relief and her face – sun-freckled, with razor-sharp cheekbones and pale haunted eyes – lit up. Perhaps she could survive out here

among the children of men. She'd take a bus down the coast to California, to the place she'd been born, and start again. Her mother had said it was beautiful, that you could reinvent yourself down there and become whoever you wanted to be.

A police car approached, the sound of its engine a symphony of greens. Panicked, she gripped the locket tighter and backed into the side alley of the nearest house, hiding in the shadows. As the car disappeared into the night she sighed and leaned against the wall. Suddenly, she arched her back and jumped away, as if scalded by the red brick. The dark, silent house looked no different to the others – two storeys, shuttered windows and a red-tiled roof – but she had learned how deceptive appearances could be. Tentatively, she rested her palm flat against the wall, like a doctor placing a stethoscope on a patient's chest. Her face was sickly pale now, as white as the moon that made a sudden appearance through the dark scudding clouds. Every instinct screamed at her to get far away from here, as fast as she could. But a small internal voice counselled her to conquer her fear and make *it* flee. Using her hand like a divining rod she let it lead her along the wall. All the time her terror grew – along with the certainty that she couldn't turn back. The night was still but she could hear things, terrible things, and she could see ...

She squeezed her eyelids shut but was unable to close her mind's eye. Looking down at the clear stone path, she stepped over something visible only to her, and then came to a solid wooden door. It was locked. Sick and frantic, she knew this was the moment of no return. Fight or flight. Run away or break down that door. Looking around in panic, she noticed a truck in the large carport. Beside it was a pile of logs. And an axe.

As if in a trance she picked it up and tested the keenness of the blade. Her father would have scolded her for letting it get so blunt but it would suffice. The thought

of him converted her fear to rage and hardened her resolve. Wielding the axe, she braced herself, took a deep breath and swung it as hard as she could. She slammed the blade into the door with practised, powerful blows that belied her slender frame. With each impact she willed the sound of rending wood to drown out the screaming in her head. Stepping through the splintered door she found herself at the top of mildewed stone steps, which led down into the dark underbelly of the house. She shivered, despite her exertions and the warm night.

More cries, some angry, some fearful, echoed in the dark but it was hard to know if they were real or coming from inside her own head. At the bottom of the stairs a dank passageway greeted her, illuminated by an infernal red glow. Like a lost soul entering hell, she walked towards its source, the sounds growing louder with each step. She passed a generator flanked by two cans of kerosene and a red wall light, then the corridor widened into a room walled with vertical wooden slats. It took a second to realize she was surrounded by cages, occupied by hollow-eyed young women. As they turned to her, half in terror, half in hope, she saw they were even younger than she was, little more than girls. She raised her axe and smashed the slatted, padlocked doors to tinder. 'Run,' she shouted, as she dragged them out of the cages and pushed them to the exit. 'Get out of here.'

Shepherding the last dazed girls down the corridor, she heard guttural male voices cut angrily through the screams. She turned to see two men running towards her. The nearest was bald, stocky and breathing hard, his face contorted with rage. In the far gloom two more men were descending a stairway from the house above. All carried guns and spoke a language she didn't understand. Their unfamiliar sounds tasted strange on her tongue. She dropped the heavy axe and ran for the exit. The sound of the first gunshot flashed crimson before her eyes, like a

blood vessel bursting. The second shot hit her, grazing her temple and spinning her against the concrete wall of the narrow passage. Dazed and gritting her teeth against the pain, she got to her feet and stumbled past the generator. The impact of the third shot sounded - and looked - different: metallic.

The kerosene cans.

Time paused for a second, followed by an explosion that sent a kaleidoscope of colours flashing before her eyes. A ball of intense heat knocked her to the ground. Then the colours disappeared. Replaced by black.

A FEW MILES across town, Dr Nathan Fox woke with a start and found himself in a dimly lit room, slumped in a chair, back aching. For a moment he didn't know where he was. It sure as hell wasn't his apartment. Then he saw the bed and remembered he was in one of the private rooms at Oregon University Research Hospital. This had to be the first time he had spent the whole night in a hospital since his years as a medical student.

Tonight wasn't work, though. This was personal.

He stood and studied the patient lying in the bed. In repose, with his eyes closed, the man's gaunt face looked relaxed and at peace. In the low light Fox could almost imagine he was well, except for the sound of his ragged breathing, which told Fox that the pneumonia was now in its final stages. Since the antibiotics had been stopped the disease had advanced rapidly. Pneumonia hadn't been the real killer though: just the merciful coup de grâce. Fox stroked the patient's clammy forehead and the man's eyes flickered open, stared blankly for a moment then closed again. At least the morphine was minimizing his discomfort.

A sigh made Fox turn to the woman lying on the couch beside the bed. Like Fox, she too had been keeping vigil all night and as he straightened her blanket he was glad she was now sleeping. The glow through the shutters told him it was almost dawn. Yawning, he flexed his legs and checked his watch. His first outpatient would be here in a

few hours and he welcomed the distraction of work. First, though, he needed to go for a run in the hospital grounds and wake himself up. He met the senior nurse in the corridor.

‘You OK, Dr Fox?’ She instinctively reached out a comforting hand but, equally instinctively, he shifted his body, subtly evading her touch. ‘Can I get you anything?’

He smiled. ‘Thanks, Kate. Just look after Samantha when she wakes. I’ll be back to check on both of them but page me if anything changes.’

A little over two hours later – after a run round the grounds, a shower and a hot milky coffee with two sugars in the hospital canteen – Fox was sitting behind his desk in his small office in the psychiatric and neurology department with his first patient of the morning. Fox enjoyed the variety of his work. Although he treated outpatients here at the main hospital he spent much of his week at Tranquil Waters, the hospital’s specialist residential psychiatric clinic, and still managed to squeeze in time for police forensic work. This morning’s patient had been on Fox’s latest experimental programme and the man’s first words buoyed Fox’s spirits:

‘I can’t tell you how much the treatment’s helped me, Doc. You’ve given me my life back.’

‘I’m pleased, John. Really pleased.’ Fox contrasted the beaming young man sitting across the desk from him with the desperate, haunted patient he had met six months ago. Then, John Fontana had been tyrannized by obsessive-compulsive disorder triggered by spending several years in a religious cult. Fox prided himself on his professional objectivity but detested cults and the damage they caused. John’s form of OCD didn’t involve manifest behavioural compulsions but obsessive repugnant thoughts (he was convinced he was possessed by the devil), which made it notoriously difficult to treat with behavioural therapy. The condition had stopped John working, sleeping or having a

social life – or any kind of life – for almost five years. Finally, after every other treatment had failed, he had joined Fox's experimental programme. Fox scanned John's notes and went through a checklist of questions. 'How would you rate your anxiety levels now?'

'Overall, I'd say they'd halved, down from a ten to a five. I even have moments when I actually forget about my OCD. I got my old job back, too.'

'You're working again. That's great. How's your sleep? Still need Valium or chlorpromazine?'

'Nope. My sleep's fine. Just taking the Prozac and risperidone you prescribed.'

'Any side effects?'

'Just the dry mouth I told you about last time and I've put on a bit of weight. But I can live with fat and happy.'

Fox smiled as he noted the improvement from earlier consultations. 'You're still attending the ACT sessions?'

'I haven't missed one. They're really helping me get some distance from my thoughts.'

'Excellent.' Fox checked the file one last time, then closed it. Of the thirty subjects on his study, twenty-eight had enjoyed significant improvements. 'In that case, John, I'd like to see you in a year's time to check on progress but for now just keep taking the medication and attending the sessions.' He stood. 'All the very best, John.'

'You've saved my life, Dr Fox.' John moved to embrace him but Fox reached out and shook his hand. 'I can't thank you enough.'

'Trust me, seeing you doing so well is more than enough.' Fox smiled. 'Thank *you* for taking part in this programme. Your courage in volunteering will allow us to help others.' Seeing John leave, Fox's thoughts returned to the man he had watched over last night, and his smile faded. He wished he could have done as much to help him. As the door closed behind John, there was a gentle knock and it opened again. The expression on the nurse's face,

and the fact that she hadn't sent one of her staff, told him all he needed to know. 'It's time?'

'I'm afraid so, Dr Fox.'

Ever since the murder of his parents and sister, Nathan Fox had learned to distance himself from pain and loss but as he returned to the room of last night's vigil he knew it wasn't always possible. Fox was often asked how someone with his natural empathy could inhabit the minds of the mentally disturbed without becoming somehow infected or affected, and he always gave the same answer: detachment. If you became involved, or got too close, you became vulnerable and lost perspective. Applying this philosophy to his personal life didn't please girlfriends who mistook him for the marrying kind, but usually it served him well and kept him safe. Usually.

After taking the elevator to the third floor, he barely suppressed the urge to run the length of the corridor to the private room. As he approached the bed and the woman tending to the patient, Fox could feel his defences falling away. His uncle Howard and aunt Samantha, who despite planning on never having children had brought him up as their own, were the only people in the entire world to whom Fox's strategy of detachment and distance didn't apply. Howard had never tried to replace his father but in so many ways he had. He had stepped into the blackest part of his life, when Fox was drowning in almost intolerable grief, and like a beacon in the dark had provided unswerving guidance with unconditional love. When Samantha saw Fox, she reached for him. 'They say it's close now, Nathan,' she said.

Fox put his arm round her shoulder and kissed her cheek. 'His suffering will be over soon.' He checked his uncle's pulse, listened to his ragged breathing and accelerated the morphine drip. Fox's parents and sister had been ripped from him in an instant, when he was too young to understand fully what had happened. Alzheimer's had

stolen his uncle away over a period of years, day by day, brain cell by brain cell, when the medically trained Fox had understood *exactly* what was happening.

Suddenly, Howard let out a rattling wheeze and opened his eyes. He reached out his hand and gripped Fox's arm. Samantha leapt forward. 'Howard, Howard. It's me, Samantha.' She stroked his face. 'Nathan and I are both here.' Howard looked at her and then at Fox and his fevered eyes cleared. In that instant, for the first time in a long while, Fox felt sure his uncle recognized them. Then Howard's grip slackened and his hand fell back on the bed. Samantha looked at Fox with red-rimmed eyes and smiled.

Fox nodded. 'He knows we're here. He knows he's not alone.'

Moments later Howard took a shallow breath, released a final, rattling sigh and was still. Samantha, who had always been so strong for Fox, suddenly collapsed in his arms and began to cry. 'He saw us,' she said, shock and wonder tempering her grief. 'I think he was trying to say goodbye.'

Fox said nothing, just enveloped her small frame in his arms, supporting her, making sure she didn't fall.

3

THE FLAMES REACHED high into the dawn sky, lending the silhouetted neighbourhood of nondescript brick houses an unfamiliar air of drama and menace. Red trucks from the Portland Fire Department were already on the scene while uniformed cops were holding back the small crowd that had gathered despite the early hour. More cops and paramedics were helping a group of blanket-wrapped girls into a bus.

Getting out of his car, Chief of Detectives Karl Jordache took a sip of black Arabica from the flask his wife had prepared for him. He was medium height and broad – too broad according to his doctor, who had him on a low cholesterol, low fat, zero-taste diet – but his charcoal-grey suit fitted well, and he was light on his feet.

‘What have we got, Danny?’ he called to the nearest policeman.

The cop checked his notes and indicated the girls getting on the bus. ‘There were at least eleven in there, Chief. They claim they were abducted and caged in the basement. According to the fire chief, the wooden cages are why the brick house went up like a torch. Helped by the kerosene, of course. The basement reeks of it.’

‘Who are the girls?’

‘A couple of American runaways but mostly illegals from the old Soviet republics who paid a syndicate – part of the Russian mob – to ship them into the US and hook them up

with jobs. See those Douglas firs at the back end of the yard? A couple of girls who tried to escape were killed and buried under there.'

'Who says the slave trade's been abolished?' Jordache muttered wearily. 'The sleazeballs promise the girls money and a better life, then lock 'em up, take their passports, get them addicted to drugs and force them into the sex industry.' He sighed. 'Christ, the girls are little older than my two daughters. They all got out OK?'

'Yep.'

'The Russians?'

'They're being taken down to the station for processing. Two are badly burned but they'll live.'

'That's too bad.' Jordache watched an unconscious, blackened figure being moved to the ambulance on a gurney. 'Is that her? Is that their mystery saviour?'

A nod. 'The girls are calling her their guardian angel.'

'Avenging angel more like. I heard she appeared out of nowhere with an axe and busted them out.'

'That's what they say. The Russians confirm their story and claim she was alone. They assumed she was police.'

'Police? She's not one of ours.'

'She doesn't belong to anybody so far as we can gather. No agency knows anything about her: who she is, where she comes from, what she was doing here, or how she even knew the girls were down there. She's got no ID on her, just a silver locket round her neck.'

'A real mystery, huh?' Jordache watched the medics load her on to the ambulance and slam the doors shut. As it pulled out and the siren wailed into life he climbed back in his car. 'Finish up here, Danny, I'm going to learn a bit more about our friend.'

Twenty minutes later Jordache found himself in the emergency room of Portland General Hospital, standing in front of a fiercely protective intern who was refusing to let

him get beyond the green curtain screening the mystery woman.

‘I need to ask her some questions, Doc.’

‘She’s not speaking to anyone,’ the woman replied. ‘Not till we’ve checked her out.’

‘Help.’ The cry from behind the curtain was so raw it didn’t sound human. The doctor swivelled and pulled back the screen. The woman on the bed was sitting up, a blackened arm propped against the wall, the other pointing at an empty gurney to her right. ‘Help him,’ she rasped from her smoke-ravaged throat. The whites of her terrified eyes looked huge and unnaturally bright against her blackened face.

‘What’s wrong?’ the doctor said, rushing to her side. ‘Help who?’

The young woman collapsed back on the bed, arms falling by her side. ‘The man with the knife in his chest. Can’t you see the blood? Do something. He’s dying.’

Jordache looked at the empty gurney. ‘There’s no one there,’ said the doctor.

The young woman shook her head, dazed. Despite the soot and grime, she had an ethereal, otherworldly beauty. ‘What’s happening to me?’ she whispered to no one in particular.

The doctor shone a light into her eyes and examined her head. ‘You’re hallucinating. You experienced a trauma above the left temple. The bullet only grazed your skull but you were unconscious and are still in shock. The detective tells me you’ve been to hell and back.’

Jordache moved closer and noticed how luminous her eyes were. Her clothes were plain and simple, possibly homemade: cotton top, loose jacket and dark denim trousers. The only distinctive thing she wore was the silver locket round her neck. He could see a catch on the side and wondered what it contained. Who was this girl? How had she known about the girls in the basement? And where had

she found the courage to go down there alone, armed only with an axe? When she saw him looking at her locket she clutched it to her chest like her life depended on it. He smiled. 'My name's Detective Karl Jordache. I'm here to help you. Can I ask you some questions?'

'Not now—' the doctor started to say.

The young woman rested a blackened hand on the doctor's white sleeve. 'Please,' she pleaded in a dry rasp, 'may *I* ask something?' Her speech was old-school polite, out of town.

'Sure,' said Jordache, leaning in before the doctor could object. 'Shoot.'

The young woman frowned, marshalling her thoughts, then posed the exact same question Jordache was going to ask her: 'What's my name, Detective? Who am I?' At that moment, he saw in her eyes a fear as raw as any he'd witnessed in all his years of policing: a realization that she had become lost from herself, unable to find the way back to the person she had once been. 'Help me,' she pleaded. 'Someone, help me.'

Ten days later

ALMOST A WEEK had passed since his uncle Howard's funeral and Fox had already phoned his aunt twice that morning. Once from his apartment in north-west Portland and once in the car driving over. Samantha was always out of bed by six and it was almost eight thirty. As he parked his battered second-hand Porsche outside the house he spotted her small Ford. She must be in, he thought, as he rang the bell on the door of the imposing Victorian house and banged the brass doorknocker. The funeral and the wake that followed had been surprisingly joyous, with his aunt taking centre stage and appearing to revel in the celebration of her beloved husband's life. Nevertheless, Fox had called or visited every day since, concerned that anticlimax and depression would descend once the well-wishers had left her to get on with the rest of her life. He usually called when he guessed she might be at her lowest ebb without Howard: just after she got up and before she went to bed. Though she was invariably in good spirits and dismissive of his concerns, he was determined to be there for her, as she and Howard had always been there for him.

He used his set of spare keys to enter the house that had been his childhood home since he was eleven. He heard voices. 'Samantha?'

The television was on in the lounge, tuned to one of the rolling twenty-four-hour news channels. *Who is the*

mysterious avenging angel? read a banner across the bottom of the screen. The mystery woman staring out at him looked lost and otherworldly. Her pale skin, cropped fair hair and beautiful eyes momentarily diverted his attention. A reporter's voice explained: 'The authorities are still no closer to identifying the mystery Jane Doe who broke eleven girls out of a sex traffickers' dungeon in Portland. Although recovering well from her burns and physical injuries, she's being moved to a specialist psychiatric clinic for further treatment. To date, all attempts to match her fingerprints, dental records or DNA in major databases here and abroad have failed, and no one has yet come forward to identify her. If *you* recognize her, then please call this number.'

He turned off the television and called again, louder. 'Samantha. Samantha.' Nothing.

He searched the rooms, passing photographs of his parents and sister and bookcases crammed with books. The house had always been filled with books. The kettle in the kitchen was warm and the glazed doors leading out to the garden were still locked but there was no sign of Samantha.

He ascended the stairs. At the top he turned and glanced down the landing to the two bedrooms at the end. The one on the right was his aunt's. The one on the left had once been his. As he walked towards them he passed two more rooms: twin studies. He looked in the first and his relief made him smile. His aunt was sitting at her desk, small and birdlike, ears covered by huge headphones connected to a black iPod, peering through thick reading glasses at a loosely bound typescript. As she sipped coffee from an oversized cup, her pale brown bob, streaked with silver, nodded gently to the beat of whatever she was listening to, which, knowing Samantha Quail, could be anything from Tchaikovsky to U2. After all these years she still closely resembled the memory he had of his petite

mother. Fox had inherited his height from his father, along with two other legacies he had stubbornly retained from his childhood: his surname and English accent. With her penchant for kaftans and bright colours, Professor Samantha Quail betrayed her roots as a fully paid-up member of the hippy, flower-power generation. Not for her the cashmere cardigans and tweed skirts of conventional academia.

Deciding not to disturb her, Fox moved on to the next study. Although it had been unused in the years since Alzheimer's had claimed her husband, Samantha had left it unchanged. Fox could still smell his uncle's Virginia pipe tobacco and feel his presence in the room. You could guess Howard Quail had been a professor of ancient history and archaeology from the artefacts in the display cases and the textbooks and periodicals on the groaning shelves, many written by him. Howard's controversial and outspoken theories had not only affected his career but also that of his brilliant wife. If Howard had been less of a maverick, Samantha would almost certainly be teaching quantum physics at some Ivy League school rather than at Portland State. Fox suspected, however, that even if Harvard or MIT had come calling she would have stayed where she was - a big fish in a small pond. As Fox studied Howard's books about the ancient past, the irony wasn't lost on him that in the months preceding their author's death Howard had been unable to recall anything of the present, least of all his own name.

Fox picked up a flat stone paperweight from the desk. The size of a hardback book, it was polished smooth and dyed a deep ruddy brown. His uncle had once told him that it was part of a Mayan sacrificial stone, upon which victims were held down and their hearts cut out to appease some ancient god. He replaced the stone and picked up a silver-framed photograph displayed prominently beside it. A small boy in a white uniform held a trophy almost as big as he