1. Chapter - Saturday 6pm - Hour 24

"Charlie."

I know that voice. It is the most important voice in my life, my wife, Eileen.

Eileen, the love of my life, has many ways of saying. 'Charlie'.

Often it means, 'and are you sure that is a good idea?' Later, it could be saying, 'I did warn you' or, nearly as often, 'well - who would have believed it?'

This time, though, I'm not sure. Because why? Because, well, to be honest, I'm not sure what anything means.

Understanding might come if I open my eyes. Only, I have this horrible feeling that if I do, my head might explode. Or worse, that it already has.

Usually, you see, whatever the use being put to 'Charlie', I know what I'm going to say. I will be ready to explain how fate has suggested an alternative path to the one I had planned. This time, well, truth be told, I'm not entirely sure where I am in the world. That, surprisingly, is only a little less concerning than wondering if I still have a head.

However, there is also in me an urge I cannot deny, something invented by Pavlov, I think. I have to respond to Eileen. I try.

"Erm- ooh - ahh - ow."

Me, I wasn't just gifted with the gab, I had it poured all over me as a baby and I go regularly to the well of Gab to drink deeply. And that's the best I can manage?

"Charlie?" she says again, and I can hear the love and concern in it.

Usually I believe in action. Yes, there are occasions when waiting for the universe to reveal itself is a good idea, but that can take time and still not be totally clear. You know what it's like, no revelation for hours, then two turn up at the same time.

Movement still doesn't seem a good idea. I have the vague notion that bits of me are debating the idea with other bits of me and concluding that anything sudden like that is doomed to fail.

Instead, be brave Charlie.

I try opening an eye.

The light hits me like the mallet a cartoon cats use when attempting to hit a mouse, but ends up striking next-door's bulldog with. I blink, and, like the bump rising on the head of the dog, things come into focus.

I'm lying down on a bed in a room. The room is small with no door, and only flimsy curtains. The walls look like someone has spent a lot of time throwing things at them to see what will stick. There's a confusing array of sockets, holes for pipes, plastic-tubes and signs like 'oxygen' and 'sharps disposal here'. Also boxes of various shapes and sizes, some with what I guess are dispenser handles, others have locks and stern warnings about who is allowed to open them.

I know this place. I've been here on a few occasions. The last time being when an electrical cable had been incorrectly run in the wall of the cottage, and I dropped a drill on my foot. Those events being connected by a loud bang and the sudden plunging of everything into darkness.

It's the Ipswich Hospital Accident and Emergency department.

That's good. I know where I am. Now, what I'd really like to know is, how did I get here?

Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever woken up, uncertain who you are in an A&E department?

If you are nodding, ready to top my story, then please feel free. But I'll warn you, waking up in A&E is the least interesting thing about this story.

Let's start with the three people watching me.

Eileen was one, of course. At least I hadn't been hearing voices, but I didn't immediately recognise her. Didn't recognise her? That's like me seeing the sun rise and asking who left that bloody light on up there?

But, I tell it as it happened, this is my Mea culpa , and no, that's not one of those Italian opera singers.

So, my eyes slipped over my wife and landed on two strangers.

They were holding on to each other in a way that suggests that they've just survived a plane crash. Yet, weirdly, their attention is focused on me, and they look concerned.

For why? For maybe they just ran over me?

First, I look at her. She's really easy on the eye, so, purely to conserve energy, I focus there for a moment.

Her hair, which is dark brown, is nicely cut and perfectly framing her thin face. Even in a state where if asked me to tell left from right, I'd need at least two tries I can tell that her hair is perfect. As is her make-up. Her dark eyes, brown, and highlighted with a light tan eye-shadow, eyebrows lined and eyelashes mascaraed-though maybe that has run slightly. Her lipstick- there is something wrong there- like it was applied but has been wiped away.

It is her dress, though, which can't help but grab my attention; pale cream, silk, long lacey arms and tiny pearls sown into the bodice. I mean - it's obvious what it looks like, Only, that makes even less sense than - actually, that's wrong. It makes just as much sense as everything else does.

You see, sure, if he- the one she is holding on to- if he had been wearing top hat and tails, or even a very nice suit, then the two jig-saw pieces would join and the picture would make sense. But he's not even well shaved, needs a haircut, has tired eyes and oddly

distracting eye-brows. He jumped as a a nurse walked past - he is obviously nervous. Perhaps he was the one driving?

And his clothes, they follow that 'we're not a couple' vibe. His dark suit looks like it has been hanging unworn in a wardrobe for at least ten years and was probably already out of fashion when it was hung up. Even the shirt isn't right, it might be white, but is too big and the Ipswich Town tie he's used to tidy up the collar is about as loose as their back four.

That last makes me shake my head. The only tie I own is one just like it, and I'd never realised how bad they were at doing the one thing they are supposed to do.

I continue to study the couple and they keep looking at me as though we're long-lost friends, or worse, they want me to repay the ten thousand pounds they lent me.

All the time though, whilst I'm shuffling what I see like one of those plastic puzzles where you have to get the numbers in order, something is nagging me.

It begins as a low whining noise, a dentist drill or fingers scratching across a board. Then it stops being so pleasant. It's a nagging feeling that something big is wrong, and for a moment I want to check I have two legs, I probably did - twice. Still, I can't get it.

A memory hits me. How I once missed a copy of Prince's *The Black Album* at a house clearance—walked right past it. A week later, I read how a fifteen-year-old with seven records to his name picked it up for a fiver in the charity shop down the road. At auction, it went for eight thousand pounds.

And I just missed something way more important.

I swing my focus back past the couple. And at last see Eileen- staring at me.

In my defence. What am I saying? I have no defence. In the defence I don't have, Eileen is not looking her best, still beautiful, but not her best.

Her hair is, well, it's lank, lankish- okay, it looks like she's been playing rugby all afternoon. Her face is less beaming than usual, the rosiness it typically has is - English is a crap language for words sometimes - blotchy. To be frank, she looks tired.

The other thing that it takes me a moment to get my head around is the dressing gown she's wearing. I recognise it. Bright green, and with a big belt that unties really easily. I got it for her when the heating in the cottage died, and she wore it for a couple of years. Why, though, is she wearing it now? Do they have conjugal visits in hospital? I mean, I'll try, but I'm not sure I'm in any fit-

She's holding something in the crook of her arm. A small something, like maybe a melon. Quite an important something I'd guess, by the way she keeps glancing at it, rather than me.

The thing moves slightly, it actually moves. Then a tiny, perfect, pink, golf ball sized hand appears and reaches up. Three little pink fingers uncurl and seem to reach for Eileen, who smiles.

She smiles in a way that you know that summer has arrived and every day is going to be golden from now on in. I won't love her any more than I do now- until tomorrow.

The Tetris pieces are falling into place. The sea is parting, and my memory is returning from whatever cowering place it had retreated to.

"Is that - ours?" I manage to say, and even though I know the answer, I'm all hope and fear, and can feel the most ridiculous smile growing now on *my* face. Eileen looks at me with the same look she gave after she said 'yes' to me marrying her, and dumbfounded, I asked if she was sure.

Then it hits me.

It's like a train has crashed through the room and sent me spiralling away to disaster. I can't breathe. I want to run and hide and never have to face her again. Also, I want to leap up and hold her and promise that I'll never let her go.

I missed it.

I wasn't there for the birth of my first child.

I wasn't there to hold my wife's hand, mop her brow, and say, '25cc of epidural-stat' whenever she needed it.

Of all the unbelievable things I've ever believed in, and done, this is the most unbelievable.

Eileen takes a step towards me, leaning forward so I can see the perfect tiny person in her arms. And all I can do is cry.

My promise. The promise I had made, I glance at the clock- twenty-four hours ago.

"Of course I'll be there - nothing could keep me away."

Something had.

I put my finger out towards the baby Mellon, whose hand is waving in the air. As I touch the palm, the hand grasps my finger and holds on tight.

"I'm sorry," I say, looking at Eileen. The memory of the last twenty-four hours comes bubbling back like tar in a black pit.

"You'll never believe what happened."