

# In Memory of Chris Parsons

*Preview*

Mark W White

'Our memory is a more perfect world than the universe: it gives back life to those who no longer exist.'

Guy de Maupassant

# Part One

Chris

## Chapter 1 – A Trip with Lisa

Chris Parsons opened his eyes to a new day. Mornings these days felt so fresh, so vibrant. As soon as he awoke, he was eager to rise and experience something new.

As he lay there, the earthy smell of welcome overnight rain which permeated through the open window nagged at his memory. There was a word for it. It took a while to come to mind, which was odd as it was one of his favourites: petrichor. How could he have forgotten?

A glimmer from across the room briefly distracted him. A languid shaft of light nuzzled through the curtains, crossed the bedroom to seek out the expanse of the magnolia wall but was deflected back by the chrome bezel of the ancient TV resting in the corner, racing back to target Chris's eyes with perfection.

Chris sat up to avoid its glare, keen to bring the day into focus. Then reality dawned.

His excitement died the moment he saw his wife perched on the wicker chair on her side of the bed, already dressed and reading a book – although staring at it blankly might be a more accurate description. Once he recognised the pain in her eyes, it all came flooding back. Today would be a struggle once more.

He shuffled across the bed, swung his legs around and leant forward to hold Lisa's hands. She put the book down – her battered old copy of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, yet again – and wordlessly accepted his grasp.

To his admittedly biased eyes, she still appeared in her early thirties rather than their common age of forty-eight. Her dark skin felt as smooth and flawless as when they'd first met at university all those years ago on the same computer science degree.

To this day, he'd never truly understood what she'd seen in him. A socially insecure, self-absorbed young man was no match for such a confident, gorgeous woman, but she'd proven to be the making of him. They'd remained happily together ever since, at least until recently.

When she'd unexpectedly fallen pregnant shortly after their graduation, he'd known it was the right time to get married and hadn't regretted the decision for a single moment since. They'd settled in Maidenhead on the Thames in Berkshire, giving them access to a ready supply of jobs in the ever-changing huddle of technology companies around the M4 corridor of uncertainty. Until last year, they'd had no need or desire to move away from the area.

Once their daughter, Alexis – Alex, as she'd later insisted – had been born, their world felt complete.

Alex had been a precocious young girl, then a surprisingly subdued teenager, before sensibly settling into a similar career to her parents, specialising in artificial intelligence after her degree. Just like them, she'd met the man who seemed destined to be her life partner while at university. She'd bonded with Daniel Oliver while completing surreptitious cryptic crosswords at the back of too many boring lectures. Chris thought at first that she could have done better until he realised how similar Daniel was to him at that age. Like mother, like daughter, clearly – who was he to question their judgement?

And then she was gone.

One stupid accident and Alex's life had been cut short, all her potential never to be realised. Unsurprisingly, it had transformed their lives too.

Chris looked down at his pale hands wrapped around Lisa's smooth, dark forearms. His lightly tanned skin was starting to show the first telltale stigmata of age, the liver spots on the back of his right hand an irritating reminder. The last year was having an ongoing impact in untold ways.

'We'll get through this,' said Chris, squeezing her arms gently. 'We must.'

Dry-eyed, Lisa nodded, then extricated herself from his grasp and abruptly stood up.

'I'll be in the lounge,' she said.

Chris's eyes followed her around the room as she left through the bedroom door, her taut posture betraying her mood. He had to do something to help. His own pain was hard enough to bear but seeing Lisa's distress made him even more determined to alleviate her suffering.

After Alex's death, they made a fresh start away from too many painful reminders of a happy existence, uprooting their lives from the busy Berkshire commuter belt and relocating to rural Wiltshire. Neither had been enjoying their jobs, having risen to senior managerial roles which sucked the creativity from their souls. It had been an easy decision to take a break while contemplating what came next.

Downsizing to move to the small town of Calne, where an equivalent property cost less than half of their house in Maidenhead, meant that they could live mortgage-free and still have enough of a nest-egg to survive for a few years, worst case. If push came to shove, one or the other of them should be able to pick up a software contract role working from home, so it didn't seem to be too much of a risk. It would be just what they needed.

It hadn't panned out as he'd hoped, not entirely. They'd been busy at first: moving, setting up their new home, exploring the nearby towns and villages. They'd felt immediately welcome in the town, and it had lived up to their expectations of a quiet, somewhat sleepy locale with many fascinating places to visit nearby – exactly what they'd wanted.

As with much of England at the time, there was a degree of rose-tinted reminiscence pervading the community, looking back to a more prosperous past of the town. There was nothing wrong with that, which Chris saw as a coping mechanism in a troubled world. With growing uncertainty in the country, the pride in its past helped alleviate the worry for its future.

After a promising start, Chris and Lisa had gradually adopted a new routine which kept neither of them fully satisfied. Chris knew they needed to keep busier, to start getting out more again, and it looked as if that was exactly what would help Lisa today. He picked up his iPad from the bedside cabinet to check the weather. Perfect. It was a bright, crisp autumn day – just what was needed for his plans.

Chris took his time getting up, wanting to give Lisa some moments alone before accosting her with his plans. His usual routine of a shave followed by a slightly too hot shower engendered the desired feeling of renewal. Once dressed, he wandered into the lounge to find Lisa sat on the edge of the sofa. She was studying her face in a compact mirror, smiling wistfully to herself. Hearing Chris enter, she looked up.

'What are you planning today?' she said, her words belying her expression of disinterest. Still, she seemed engaged enough to realise he wanted something.

Chris considered how best to reply. There was no point in dragging her along if she was reluctant, but he knew it would do her good. Fresh air and exercise were always a tonic for his own mental health, and he knew it had the same impact for Lisa. Often, the hardest part was getting started. Once that hurdle had been overcome, they'd both feel better. He was sure of it.

'I fancied going out for a walk,' he said. 'It looks a lovely day. Coming with me?'

'I guess,' she said. 'Anywhere in particular?'

Chris deployed his best ingratiating grin.

'Oh, you know. A short drive. A walk up a hill.'

A transient smile brightened Lisa's face.

'I should've guessed,' she said. 'You're obsessed with that place, you know?'

'I know,' said Chris. 'There's just something so unspoilt about it. The views are amazing – it makes me feel at peace.'

Lisa stood up.

'That's all I needed to hear,' she said. 'Let's go.'

Surprised by her unusually abrupt decision-making, Chris decided to go with the flow. He didn't want to risk Lisa changing her mind if he stopped for breakfast first, and anyway he didn't feel that hungry yet. They could always call in at a café on the way back and have a fry-up.

Once he'd thought of it, he immediately fancied the idea of a late brunch, and it could serve more than one purpose. They seemed to talk more these days when they were sat across a table in a public place. It would help break the tension.

But first, a visit to his current craving: the neolithic burial mound of the West Kennet Long Barrow.

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They took Chris's battered old diesel Renault, bought in the days when it was supposed to be the environmentally friendly choice. He felt guilty driving it now, and really wanted to get something greener, but couldn't justify the expense while they had no source of income. It was a constant sore on his conscience, so he restricted himself to short drives whenever possible.

Their route went past the Victorian gothic town hall which dominated the town centre again these days. Despite having seen photos of the town from decades earlier, Chris still couldn't fully envision how everything had been dwarfed by a pork processing factory backing those days. It only showed how transient everything was, how an industry could grow from nothing, command the local economy for a century and then vanish without trace, living only in the memories of the residents. And yet a few miles down the road, the permanence of the rolling hills of Wiltshire and the millennia-old human monuments lay in wait.

Unexpectedly, Lisa spoke as they passed the town hall.

'Remember the first time we came here?'

'Of course,' said Chris. 'We had fish and chips in the bistro over there.'

It was a moment indelibly ingrained in his memory: the view across the stream towards the town hall while enjoying a surprisingly good outdoor meal, the chill in the air as the sound of babbling water engendered a sense of peace, the feeling of acceptance as he began to believe they could move forward with their lives again.

'That's when we finally decided to move here,' said Lisa.

'Yeah, we went straight around the corner and into the estate agents.'

'It all moved so fast,' said Lisa. 'Alex was so happy for us.'

A cold shiver ran up Chris's spine and grabbed him by the throat. He glanced across to Lisa, but she was serenely looking forward through the windscreen, oblivious to his shock.

Alex hadn't been with them. She couldn't have been – she was dead.

He didn't know what to say. How could Lisa be confused about that? Alex's death was the mountain behind which their sun had set, yet there was something oddly familiar about her mistake.

Mutely, he drove onwards through the town and out towards Cherhill. As the countryside opened up around them, his spirits began to lift. Perhaps Lisa had simply misspoken.

Nothing could spoil his mood driving down this road. The stretch down to Marlborough was one of his favourites in the country. It may have been in the centre of Calne that they'd agreed to relocate here, but it had been this drive out afterwards seeing the splendour on the doorstep that had cemented the decision for him.

As they drove through Cherhill, the magnificence of the white chalk horse carved in the grassy hill rode into view. Despite his hatred of the type of blinkered nationalism that had taken hold of the country, there was something about the scene that never failed to make him feel proud, his upbringing having instilled its quintessential English essence into his soul. He belonged here. This was his home, no matter how the national character changed.

'Remember when we walked up there a few months ago?' said Lisa.

'Early spring, wasn't it?'

'Yeah, they'd just re-chalked it,' she said. 'It looks a bit grubbier now.'

She was right, it was becoming a little tarnished now autumn had fallen. Climbing up there was a special memory. Although the hill wasn't too steep, he'd been knackered by the time they'd reached the summit above the horse – another sign of his age, and the fact that he'd not kept himself as fit as he should have over the years. Lisa had been much less affected by the climb, but his exhaustion hadn't stopped him from enjoying the stunning views. He'd sat down, splayed his palms across the grass and imagined a connection to the chalk beneath stretching out away in all directions. He'd felt utterly content.

They fell back into silence as their journey took them past the turnoff into Avebury before the small but imposing shape of Silbury Hill came into view. The brown signs pointing to its flat-topped conical mound triggered a smile of reminiscence.

'I can't believe you did that,' said Lisa, knowing what he was thinking.

'One off the bucket list,' said Chris.

An odd feeling washed over Chris, a sensation of déjà vu that he'd had the same conversation before with Lisa on the way to the long barrow. He couldn't place the memory. Frustrated, he dismissed the thought.

As Silbury Hill was fenced off, he'd always been annoyed at not being able to get near it. So one clear summer evening, he'd driven there at midnight with a torch, clambered over the fence and scrambled up its grassy bank to the top. It was the tallest artificial prehistoric mound in Europe, so the sense of the past was overwhelming as he made his way to the summit. It had been everything he'd hoped for up there, lying on his back and staring up at the stars. He'd stayed there for over an hour, watching the heavens in the enhanced darkness of the countryside, even catching a glimpse of a shooting star.

It had been a magical moment of tranquillity, one he intended to replicate when the moment was right. He had in mind when that would be too – it was all over the news at the moment. The Anderson-Howell comet, predicted to be the brightest in centuries, would be fully visible in the UK shortly. Chris intended to experience it in the best possible conditions. He'd never forgotten the feeling of awe seeing a faint comet through a pair of binoculars in his twenties, so the chance of viewing one with his naked eyes was something he wasn't going to miss. Lisa would love it too, being even more of an astronomy buff.

'Here we are,' he said, as they approached an unassuming lay-by on the other side of the road.

Chris expertly performed a U-turn and parked behind the only other car. It seemed as if it would be a relatively undisturbed visit to the barrow, as he'd hoped. Looking over the recently resown wheat field covering the hill, he could just make out the largest of the standing stones of the long barrow poking above the crest.

They disembarked, heading through the metal gateway to the public footpath which skirted around the fields and up to the top. He paused to look at the English Heritage sign just inside, taking Lisa's hand as he read the information yet again.

'It never ceases to amaze me how uncommercialised this place is,' said Chris. 'It's over five-thousand years old, but you can just wander inside, touch the stones, climb across the top, everything.'

'I know,' said Lisa, smiling softly. 'You tell me every time.'

'Well let's go then.'

The West Kennet Long Barrow was part of the extended Stonehenge-Avebury complex of prehistoric sites, dating back well before three thousand years BC and yet freely accessible. It was Chris's go-to place whenever he needed mental rejuvenation. There was something about it that made him feel renewed with every visit.

He took several deep breaths of the cleansing countryside air as they set off, vainly hoping it would eventually remove the pollutants accumulated over the years living near the M4. It was wishful thinking, but it made him feel better to imagine the agricultural odours permeating into his bloodstream to fight off the city infections.

It was a relatively gentle climb up the last stretch towards the brow of the hill, but he was still short of breath before they reached the top – yet another sign of his age and unfitness. As they approached the summit, the full row of standing stones in front of the entrance came into

view. The toothy sentinels guarded the opening to the long burial mound. Chris ground to a halt, entranced as always by the ancient grandeur of the sight before him.

Admittedly, if he broke it down, it was just a hundred-metre-long, grass-covered uneven hump with some randomly shaped sarsen stones in front of it, but it meant more than that. He could feel the sense of ancient history, could imagine the prehistoric rituals that took place at this very spot all those millennia ago. If he closed his eyes, he could smell the fires burning nearby. He could sense the warm, smoky air blowing against his face, could hear the drums of pagan rituals being enacted at the long barrow.

Actually, he *could* hear drums. There was a dull thudding noise coming from within the barrow. Curiously, he stepped down into the entrance pit and peered into the dimness of the barrow itself. The resonant drumbeat was much louder here, echoing spookily from the depths of the internal chamber.

As his eyes slowly adjusted to the darkness, he could just discern the forms of two people standing in the gloom at the very end of the barrow, a portable sound system between them. It was hard to make out what they were doing, but he assumed it must be some sort of neopagan ritual. Suddenly feeling self-conscious, not wanting to disturb their private ceremony, Chris withdrew back into the light. He'd revisit the interior later, once they'd finished.

'What's next?' said Lisa, who'd remained outside.

'Let's go up on top.'

Lisa nodded, turned and walked around the back of the mound, followed by Chris, who fell back as her brisk pace took her away. Chris wanted to take his time to savour the view down the far side. The rolling Wiltshire hills were covered in a many-hued patchwork of fields, with tree-lined thoroughfares snaking through the vista, only broken by compact farm buildings nestling rightfully in the landscape. It was all topped by a brilliant clear blue sky with nary a cloud to pock the bright terrain.

Lisa waited for him at the end of the mound, before they made their way up the informal path onto the top of the barrow itself, walking right to its centre.

'Stop,' said Chris to Lisa, who was forging on ahead again.

'Why?'

'I want to admire the view,' he said, pointing down the hill towards where their car was parked. 'Look at that.'

Lisa shrugged and stopped. Chris had hoped the fresh air and scenery would have cheered her up a little. It seemed as if it would take more than that, but he wasn't going to let it spoil his enjoyment.

He gazed down the slope on the nearside of the mound. It was even more impressive than the natural beauty of the fields at the back. The landscape below was dominated by the imposing mound of Silbury Hill behind the hedgerows concealing the main road, beyond which he could make out the ring of standing stones around the village of Avebury.

Here he was, standing on one piece of prehistory, looking over two other unique specimens directly before him. He couldn't imagine anything more perfect, even if he'd designed it himself.



## In Memory of Chris Parsons

'We must visit Avebury again soon,' he said, nodding in its direction. 'It's nice to see it from up here, but there's nothing like being able to touch the stones themselves.'

Lisa frowned and looked at him uncertainly.

'You can see Avebury?' she said.

'Of course,' he said, pointing beyond Silbury Hill. 'Can't you?'

Lisa shook her head before smiling unconvincingly.

'Maybe I need to get my eyes checked.'

He smiled back.

'Maybe.'

Chris carefully stepped a little way down the slope, then sat down.

'What're you doing?' said Lisa.

'I just want to sit here for a while,' he said. 'Take it all in. Relax.'

Lisa stared at him for a few seconds.

'I'll leave you to it then,' she said.

'What do you mean?'

'I... I'll just go for a walk,' she said. 'Give me a bit of time on my own, OK?'

'OK, darling. Take care.'

'I will,' said Lisa. 'I'll meet you back here when I'm done. Why don't you close your eyes and have a rest?'

Chris did feel a little lethargic. It might not be a bad idea, especially at such a peaceful, restorative location – let the ancient powers rejuvenate him by osmosis from the barrow beneath.

'I might just do that,' he said.

Chris watched Lisa leave and fade into the distance before returning to the view towards Avebury. After a few minutes, he lay back onto the grass, shimmied to get comfortable, and closed his eyes. Within a short while, with the warmth of the autumn sun completing the sensation of perfect tranquillity, he'd drifted into a light sleep.

## Chapter 2 – A Brunch with Alex

As he awoke from his slumber atop the long barrow, Chris Parsons gradually became aware of a nearby presence. He opened his eyes, blinking away the sleep-induced confusion to allow reality to coalesce. He raised a hand to shield the bright sun haloed behind the head of the woman standing over him.

Who else could it have been standing there? As if he could ever forget that beautiful face, its tawny skin perfectly framed by her dark, curly hair.

'H, Alex,' said Chris, his heart warmed as always to see his daughter. He tried to remember where she'd been. 'Finished your walk?'

'Yup,' said Alex grinning. 'I'm back. Come on lazy, let's go.'

Her smile always brightened his mood whenever it was directed towards him. He wasn't sure he'd have coped through the pain of the last year without her support.

'One minute,' said Chris, sitting upright and taking a deep breath. 'Not quite awake yet.'

He leant back on his hands and admired the view down the hill one last time. He'd never tire of it.

'Shall we go there next?' said Alex, noticing where his gaze was directed. 'Avebury, I mean. Maybe grab a bite to eat?'

'Sounds good to me,' he said, remembering he hadn't had any breakfast yet. He pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. 'Can I just poke my head inside the barrow before we go?'

'Sure Dad,' said Alex, taking his hand and leading the way.

He couldn't come up here and not complete his obligatory tour of the place. Hopefully the neopagans had finished their ritual, or whatever it was, by now. Somehow he felt the need to pay his secular respects before he left too. He had no idea why, but it was part of him now. This place had gotten under his skin in the few visits he'd made so far.

Perhaps it helped to fill the void left by Lisa's death last year, something meaningful to cling onto while the rest of his world fell apart. Other than Alex, of course.

It had come out of nowhere, a stupid accident just after they'd moved to Calne to build the next phase of their life away from the rat-race. Everything had started so well after their move, rekindling the closeness that had been slowly stifled from their lives by the stresses of the daily grind. Then, as if she'd never existed, Lisa was gone.

But Alex remained. It was something to live for.

Without Alex's regular visits every couple of weekends, he didn't know if he'd have the strength to go on. He was sure they were a coping mechanism for her too, putting on a false show of strength just to help him. He appreciated it. Her visits gave him something to focus on, the anticipation as necessary as the event itself.

'Are you sure Daniel is alright with you visiting so often?' said Chris as they sidled down the slope behind the standing stones.

'Of course Dad,' said Alex. 'I've told you before, don't worry about it.'

'You sure?'

'Stop it,' said Alex. 'Come on, let's go inside.'

Alex stepped down towards the entrance and disappeared inside the darkness. Carefully, Chris followed her footsteps.

He knew what Alex said about her fiancé Daniel Oliver wasn't the whole truth. They'd never entirely hit it off, and that was primarily his fault. At first, he hadn't been convinced Daniel was the right man for her, thinking she could do better than a naive working-class lad like him. Eventually, he'd seen how hard a worker he was, how his career was taking off and, more importantly, how much he loved and doted on Alex. He'd do anything for her, and did.

By then though, the damage was done. Daniel wasn't so naive that he didn't realise how Chris had felt. Daniel had always remained polite and courteous but had kept his distance ever since.

That was a problem for another time. Right now, he had his own life to sort out, but he was sure Daniel was as big a help to Alex as Alex was to him.

Chris followed Alex into the main chamber of the long barrow. It was just high enough to walk upright all the way without needing to stoop. A few seconds passed before his eyes adjusted to the dimness, despite the tiny ceiling windows that had been added in more modern times. Ignoring the small side alcoves, they made their way straight to the far end.

There was an unexpected smoky smell pervading the chamber, which increased as they reached the final space. His foot kicked against something on the floor, barely discernible in the gloom. After a few seconds waiting for his eyes to adjust further to work out what was there, he gave up, pulled out his phone, and turned on its light. The cold white glare illuminated some wildflowers and foliage scattered in a circle surrounding scorch marks on the earth, presumably an offering to whatever god or goddess the devotee adhered to.

Chris turned off the torch. He felt as if he was intruding again. Whatever his own lack of spiritual belief, it seemed that the space was being put to good use, in keeping with its history. If it still served a purpose right through to the modern day, that was good – a seemingly unbroken connection of worship linking our prehistoric ancestors to technological man.

'Let's go,' said Chris, feeling content.

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After a gentle walk down the farm track bisecting the upper field, made a little slippery by the recent autumnal showers, they emerged near the lay-by.

'Clean the mud off your shoes Dad,' said Alex as Chris went towards the passenger door. 'Your car may be a polluting wreck, but that's no reason to make mine dirty.'

Chris rolled his eyes theatrically but scraped his shoes on the kerb.

'Better?' he said, lifting his feet in turn to let her see.

'It'll do.'

They got into Alex's new Nissan Leaf, which she'd only had a couple of months. It was her pride and joy, and she never missed an opportunity to point out how much more environmentally friendly it was than his old Renault. He knew she was right, but he had higher priorities than changing his right now. Cars were something that got him from A to B,

preferably reliably, but not something he had any particular interest in. Once he'd got his head together and understood what his future held, he might contemplate getting something a bit more responsible.

Chris still found the quietness of the electric vehicle unnerving as it drove back past Silbury Hill and into Avebury. It seemed unnatural, but he guessed he'd get used to it eventually. It was only a short drive there which passed almost unnoticed. After a few minutes, they'd parked in the National Trust car park and were walking into the village.

'Where shall we eat?' asked Alex.

'Would you mind if we walked around the stones first?' said Chris. 'I'm still feeling a bit muzzy headed after my sleep.'

Chris hadn't felt himself since he'd awoken. It was hard to put his finger on it, but he was sure he'd forgotten something. Was it something he was supposed to be doing? He wasn't sure.

The sensation wasn't unusual – it had been a regular companion over the past year. He'd been told it was an aftershock of Lisa's death, a traumatic impact on his psyche that would fix itself eventually. Time was a great healer or some such clichéd claptrap, he was routinely assured. He wished time would get its act together and sort him out. He hated feeling like this.

'You OK, Dad?' said Alex.

Chris nodded.

'I'm fine. A bit of fresh air will clear it.'

'Go on, own up,' she said, smiling to banish her concerned expression. 'You want to cuddle the stones, don't you?'

'Maybe,' he said, returning a good-natured grin. 'Depends if one of them is my type.'

'Cold, hard and stony, you mean?'

'I was thinking upright, dependable and inspirational.'

'And ancient.'

'You do know how to cheer me up, you know?'

They broke into a comfortably familiar spontaneous laugh. Alex put her arms around Chris and hugged him tightly.

'Come on then Dad,' she said, opening the gate to the field of stones.

Silently, they walked along the line of Neolithic monoliths stretching around the henge like unwavering sentinels. Chris rested the palm of one hand on each as they passed, the coldness of the communion gradually permeating through to his bones. He stuck his hand into the pocket of Alex's coat for warmth.

'How...' began Alex. 'How's your memory?'

Chris extricated his hand and stuck it in his own pocket, hunching forward slightly.

'I... I can't remember,' he said, trying to deflect from his uncertainty, but failing. He wasn't sure how to answer. He knew what was coming, part of the familiar pattern with Alex as she lovingly but annoyingly tried to coax his memory back to normality.

'You can do better than that. Do you remember how you got to the long barrow today?'

'You drove me,' said Chris.

Of course that was what had happened, they'd just come from there in her car. Alex nodded.

'Thought you'd say that. That's good, means you're connecting things better now. Do you remember the journey? What did we talk about?'

Chris frowned. The memory was admittedly a bit vague, as was too often the case at the moment. The concept was there, the details were missing.

'About... eating in town when we first came here. About me climbing up on Silbury Hill?'

'Good,' said Alex. 'At the very least it's not gotten any worse.'

She put her hand into his pocket and squeezed his.

'We'll get there Dad.'

Chris squeezed back, then took his hand out and placed it against the nearest standing stone. It was so frustrating. He knew there were gaps in his memory, but Alex's reminders bought it painfully to the forefront of his mind.

He closed his eyes and leant his cheek against the icy stone, raising his other hand to rest against it as well. That was better. The contact with the power of the ancient sarsen grounded him emotionally.

He knew Alex was only trying to help, make him face up to the problem, but he was happier when he could just ignore it. At least when he was with Lisa, she didn't keep going on about it.

Chris's legs suddenly felt weak as a pain stabbed through his temple. That wasn't right – it couldn't be. Lisa was dead. What was he thinking?

'You OK Dad?' said Alex, noticing his obvious distress. She took his arm to help support his weight. 'Dad?'

'I'm sorry, I just felt...' said Chris, at a loss for the right words. '... felt as if your Mum...'

'Don't worry,' said Alex, reaching to wipe away a tear from his eyes. 'I know. You felt as if you'd seen her recently, didn't you?'

'It felt like a dream,' said Chris. 'Damn, my head aches.'

Alex hugged him, her gentle touch easing his tension.

'It's fine,' she said. 'It's not the first time, and won't be the last. Think it's happening more often now. The doctors say that it's a good sign, that things are starting to knit back together. You just have to let it happen naturally.'

'I wish it would hurry up.'

'Time's a–' started Alex before Chris interrupted.

'Don't you dare. It's about the only thing I can reliably remember, that's time's a great bleeding healer. I'm sick of it.'

'Sorry,' she said. 'Look, maybe it's time to try something new. I think you might be ready.'

'I'll try anything. What?'

'Not here,' said Alex. 'Let's talk over some food. How about the Red Lion?'

'Sure,' said Chris.

Where else would they go? Despite the food being nothing special, there was something magical about eating inside a prehistoric stone circle. Anyway, he realised he was starving now, and his legs still felt weak after that wobble by the stone.

Needing one final sight to reorient himself, he looked across in the direction of Silbury Hill and the West Kennet Long Barrow. He held his breath as he tried to understand what he saw – or rather, didn't see.

There was no sign of either of them. That made no sense. He'd clearly seen the spot where he was now standing when atop the barrow earlier. He looked all around the horizon, but there was nothing.

Further disoriented by his Swiss cheese memory, Chris turned and followed Alex back towards the whitewashed thatched building of the Red Lion pub.

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They were shown to a window table next to the old internal well, disappointingly covered by a clear perspex enclosure. He ached to drop something down it.

'Can I get you anything to drink?' said Ashley, the pleasant young waitress with a name tag, a warm smile and dead eyes.

'Diet coke please,' said Alex. 'Seeing as I'm driving.'

'Pint of HSB please,' said Chris. 'Seeing as I'm not.'

Alex raised her eyebrows as the waitress left them with their menus.

'What?' said Chris.

'It's a bit early for a pint, isn't it? It's only just midday.'

'I know, but I couldn't resist when I saw they had HSB on the way in. It reminds me of...'

Chris trailed off, as the details tantalised, but wouldn't emerge.

'Ye olde Hampshire childhood days?' prompted Alex.

'Yes!' said Chris, as the memories crystallised. He'd been born and raised in a village in Hampshire for the first twenty-or-so years of his life before university and Lisa had tempted him away. 'My first local pub served HSB. There's nothing else quite like it.'

Alex smiled, which was all the reassurance he needed.

'If it helps the memories to come back, then drink away,' said Alex.

'Well, if I have more than this, I'll probably fall asleep, but maybe the one will help.'

'What was the name of the village again?'

Chris narrowed his eyes.

'Testing me?'

'Perhaps,' she said smirking. 'That was your starter for ten.'

'Wickham,' sighed Chris.

'Correct,' said Alex. 'Now for your bonus questions. Who was the most famous historical figure to come from the village?'

'William of Wykeham,' he said. 'Look, you know I don't have a problem remembering older stuff.'

'Except you couldn't remember it just now. Focus, Dad. What college did he found?'

'Winchester,' he said, gratified how fast the answer came. 'OK, that's enough.'

'I say when we're finished,' said Alex. 'What was his motto? One you'd do well to remember.'

'Manners makyth man.'

'Well done Dad,' said Alex. 'Your prize is... your pint of beer. Enjoy, you've earned it.'

'Gee, thanks.'

After a couple more minutes, the waitress came back with their drinks.

'Are you ready to order?'

'I'll have the all-day breakfast, please,' said Chris, not even having looked at his menu. He knew what he wanted. It was better late than never.

'I'll just have the halloumi fries starter please,' said Alex. 'Bit early for me.'

'Sorry about that,' said Chris after the waitress left. 'I'm starving.'

'Don't worry. Daniel's cooking when I get back anyway, so I don't want much.'

Chris took a first, small sip of his bitter, followed immediately by a longer mouthful, swooshing it around in his mouth before swallowing.

'Ah, that's good,' he said. 'Haven't forgotten that taste.'

'Good. So what was the name of your local?'

'The Kings Head,' said Chris without hesitation. He decided to pre-empt the next questions. 'An old coaching inn. Had a skittle alley out the back. Any more questions, or have I been interrogated enough?'

'Maybe,' said Alex. 'Just doing what the doctor ordered. The more memories we can get to stick, the quicker your recovery.'

He knew that. He knew she was doing the right thing. It just made him feel like a patient all the time, not her father. The only role he really cared about right now was that of being a Dad. It had always been the most important thing in his life from the moment he'd first held her, and he knew he'd let her down. He hated being a burden – he had to find a way to get back to normal.

'You mentioned trying something new?'

'Yeah,' said Alex. 'Something your doc said would be worth trying when the time was right. I'm no expert, but I think you're ready. You definitely remember things better now, so I reckon it's worth a try.'

'What is?' said Chris.

'Don't get too excited. Just a new style of consultation, probably including some cognitive and creative therapy.'

'Is that all?'

He could remember having plenty of one-to-one counselling sessions in the early days, even if it was a bit vague now. It hadn't found it helpful at all.

'It won't be anything like your early treatment,' said Alex, recognising the doubt in his eyes. 'You'll stick with the same therapist throughout and have a customised program of sessions and exercises to follow at your own pace. Honestly it may not sound much, but if it clicks, you'll make rapid progress.'

'I guess.'

'Keep an open mind Dad. Surely it's worth a try?'

He did say he had to get back to normal, to stop being a burden to Alex. What other choice was there?

'Where would I have to go?'

Alex fumbled in her pocket and pulled out a business card.

## In Memory of Chris Parsons

'Luckily there's a specialist who lives in Lacock and takes consultations in her own home. It's near the George Inn, so you can get therapy and a beer in the same visit. What more could you ask for?'

He took the card and studied it. At least it would be somewhere he already knew how to get to, and even knew where to park. One less thing to worry about – and it was another place he loved to visit.

'Erica Immurson, Reconstructive Cognitive Therapist,' Chris read out. 'That's quite a mouthful.'

'She's Norwegian, apparently.'

'I meant her job title.'

'I'm sure she can explain what it means,' said Alex. 'Want to give it a try then?'

'I guess it would be churlish to say no,' said Chris, holding up the card. 'Seeing as you've gone to so much trouble.'

'That's good,' said Alex, pulling out another card from the same pocket. 'Here.'

'What's this?'

'Your appointment card,' said Alex grinning. '2 p.m. tomorrow afternoon. Don't be late.'



## Chapter 3 – A Consultation with Erica

Chris Parsons opened his eyes to a new day. Mornings these days felt so fresh, so vibrant – then remembrance dawned. He closed his eyes and tried to return to sleep, ignoring the smell of freshly mown grass seeping in through the window which usually served to inspire.

It was no good. The roiling maelstrom of transient memories offered no rest. Flashes of Alex, ephemeral evocations of Lisa burst into flame before reality extinguished their existence. They were gone. He was alone.

A nagging recollection of something on today's agenda dragged him fully to consciousness, anxiety born of confusion stopping the memory from coalescing into focus.

'Alexa, what's on today?' said Chris.

A disembodied woman's voice came from the small screen on Chris's bedside cabinet, which changed to show his calendar.

'You have one item in your calendar today. Appointment with Erica Immurson at 2 p.m. in Lacock.'

'Thank you,' he said instinctively. It was the closest thing he got to a conversation most days.

'You're welcome,' responded the voice assistant.

He'd been trying to forget about it. He should never have agreed to it. When someone – it must have been his doctor – had recommended a new type of therapy, it had been all too easy just to go along with it. He should have stood up for how he really felt. It would be a waste of time.

All the other consultants and therapists he'd seen over the last year had amounted to nothing positive, as far as he could remember, so why would this one be any different? But he had no fight left, it was easier to go with the flow and keep everyone happy.

It wasn't clear to Chris what was supposed to be different about this therapist. He tried to remember what the doctor had said, but all he got were flashes of Alex's beautiful face. Tears filled his eyes as the remembrance of his loss threatened to overwhelm him.

Was he ever going to get used to it? It was now over a year since he'd lost Lisa and Alex in that ridiculous accident, but the pain still seemed just as intense. He could only hope that this new approach would bear fruit.

He closed his eyes again and breathed deeply, but his mind was too active now.

'Alexa, who is Erica Immurson?' he said, hoping his digital friend would have a piece of information that would jog his memory as to what the therapy was supposed to be about.

'You have one Erica Immurson in your contacts,' said Alexa. 'Is this who you want?'

'Yes.'

'Calling Erica Immurson,' said Alexa, closely followed by a simulated dial tone.

'Alexa, cancel!' shouted Chris.

'OK.'

His heart beating faster, Chris sat up. He looked around his gloomy beige bedroom at the scattered piles of laundry. That was something that desperately needed doing: to tidy the place and do some washing. Lisa would have hated the state of her home.

'Alexa, open the curtains thirty per cent,' he said.

With a muted blip of confirmation and a gentle whirring, his bedroom curtains gradually opened a little and the autumn sunlight flooded in. Even if he'd let the place run down a little, at least he'd managed to get his home automated. He vaguely remembered being advised to concentrate on a personal hobby as part of one of the attempts at therapy, and he'd chosen to experiment with the ever-expanding field of home automation.

For a while, it had turned into an expensive obsession, but at least it had kept him relatively sane, even if every room was now full of gadgets. He still enjoyed keeping up to date with the latest things, but now he'd reached the point where he was feeling the need to look forward again.

He either had to envision a new future for himself, a new role to fulfil over the next couple of decades, or he may as well not bother waking up in the mornings – not that that hadn't crossed his mind over the last year. Chris dismissed the thought. He knew how fast he could fall into depression if he let his mind go down that road.

It looked to be a beautiful day outside. Hopefully the weather would hold up for his trip to Lacock, and he could have a long walk around the old village. Fresh air and exercise always helped his mood.

'Alexa, what's the weather forecast?' said Chris.

'The weather for Monday will be mainly sunny with light clouds, a high of seventeen degrees and a low of seven. Overnight, light rain will spread in from the west, and the wind will increase. The magnetic field is expected to remain strong throughout the day, and no special precautions are required, but the prognosis is unstable for later in the week.'

That sounded perfect, he could have a walk in the sun today, and there was the chance of a decent light show in a few days. With a bit of luck, it might coincide with the Anderson-Howell comet finally being visible to the naked eye – fulfilling two things he'd dreamed of seeing since he was a kid watching Patrick Moore on the TV. A major comet was a random happenstance that was well overdue in the northern hemisphere, but he'd never expected to be able to see the aurora borealis from the comfort of his own garden.

With the weakening of the Earth's magnetic field as part of the ongoing gradual geomagnetic reversal of the poles, the majestic spectacle of the aurora was becoming a more commonplace event this far south, but he never tired of it, and it was becoming more and more spectacular. It was only a minor recompense for routine failures of the power grid and other electrical systems, and the increasing prevalence of cancers, but he had to take pleasures where he could find them these days.

Lisa would have loved it. Astronomy was even more her passion than his.

Suddenly he remembered where he'd put the information about the therapist. He opened the drawer in his bedside cabinet to reveal two small cards. The first was a business card with her name and job title printed in dark blue.

'Erica Immurson, Reconstructive Cognitive Therapist.'

The second was his appointment card. The handwriting wasn't his but looked eerily familiar. As hard as he tried, he couldn't quite manage to identify it, and the effort left him with a tense feeling across his temples.

It wasn't much to go on, but it was a start. Next time, he'd put all the information about the appointment on the Alexa calendar, not that he really knew what to do with the job title of Reconstructive Cognitive Therapist yet.

He had a vague recollection that the therapist was Norwegian, but for some bizarre reason, the only mental image he could conjure was that of the actress Gillian Anderson. He had no idea where that came from. Not that he'd complain. At least his weird recollection gave him something to look forward to this afternoon, even if it was a delusional fantasy.

Chris shook his head at his own broken memory recall, swung his legs out of bed and stood up. It didn't happen often, but he was unexpectedly in the mood for housework, starting with tidying his bedroom. That was good, keeping busy helped him forget what had happened to Lisa and Alex – not that he could remember the details.

A sharp stabbing sensation in his temple caused him to stumble and sit down again. Clearly that wasn't something he wanted to think about yet. It would come, hopefully.

Chris could already tell that today was going to be a strange one, and probably painful.

\*

Chris left his dirty Renault in the National Trust car park on the outskirts of Lacock and walked towards the village centre. At least he was making good use of his National Trust membership these days, probably the first time for many years. It had too often been a comfort blanket of possibilities, never to be experienced, especially since he'd been alone.

Virtually the whole of Lacock was owned by the National Trust, preserving the village in aspic to delight tourists and film crews, with its unspoiled appearance making it an ideal location for period and nostalgic dramas.

Chris wasn't going to complain. He loved the sensation of walking back in time as he approached the centre of the village, past the quaint stone houses, the old post office, the huddle of picturesque buildings.

He slowed to a halt when he noticed how unusual the wide-open space of the high street appeared today, lined with anomalous red and white striped parking cones, broken only by the odd vintage car parked in front of the chocolate-box shops.

At the far end of the area, which was strewn with patriotic bunting, stood a huge white crane towering over the village with a helicopter hovering in the distance. In amongst the bunting were flags that Chris didn't recognise, red rectangles containing a blue circle in the centre, bordered in white with a lightning flash through it.

It was obvious they were preparing to film yet another production here. It wasn't the first time he'd seen the village overrun by a film crew. His first visit here with Lisa and Alex after their move had coincided with the filming of the *Downton Abbey* movie. That wasn't long before the accident when...

Chris stumbled as a jolt of pain shot through his brain. Unsteadily, he put his hand on the nearest car to support himself.

'Hey,' said a man's voice from behind the vehicle. 'Do you mind?'

'Sorry,' said Chris instinctively, pulling his hand from the car which he realised was a gleaming vintage model with a dark maroon body and jet-black wheel arches. 'Nice car.'

The man walked around to Chris's side of the car. He was carrying a bucket, and his hands were filthy, covered in what looked like very wet mud. He eyed the car suspiciously where Chris had touched it.

'No harm done,' he said, before adding gruffly, 'not that it would matter anyway.'

'Something up?' said Chris, still feeling woozy after the pain, happy for an excuse to stay and talk.

With a look of surprise, the man studied Chris.

'You with the production?' he said.

'Nope, just visiting,' said Chris.

'Good,' said the man, visibly relaxing. 'They're using my car in the shoot today. Isn't she a beauty?'

Chris made a show of appraising it respectfully. He had no clue about cars, nor did they interest him. It was definitely old and shiny though.

'Lovely,' said Chris, trying to be polite. 'What is it?'

'A Citroën Traction Avant,' he said, beaming with pride. 'Late 1930s, perfect for their movie. I've spent several days getting it ready. Immaculate, in fact, but it wasn't good enough.'

'What's wrong with it?' said Chris. 'It looks... great.'

'Too bloody clean,' he said with disgust, holding up his bucket and displaying his muddy free hand. 'They want it dirty. It doesn't look lived in, says the director. Not authentic enough. Authentic? What would that idiot know about authenticity.'

Chris struggled not to laugh at the outburst.

'What's the movie?'

He paused, before shrugging.

'You know *Pride and Prejudice*?' he said.

'Of course,' said Chris. 'I think the BBC version was filmed here, wasn't it? Another remake?'

'Sort of,' he said, raising one hand ready to semi-air quote. 'Except it's been "re-envisioned" and set in 1930s England. Elizabeth Bennet writes feminist novels, and Mr Darcy is a fan of Oswald Mosley. As I said, the director is an idiot.'

'Sounds... odd,' said Chris. He enjoyed costume dramas and fresh takes on things, but there were limits, especially yet more normalisation of fascism. 'Not sure *Pride and Prejudice* fans will go for it.'

'They're calling it *Author and Authoritarian*, which just about sums up the barrel they're scraping,' he said. 'What do I care? As long as I get paid and can get my car clean again afterwards, then I'm happy.'

'True. Well good luck,' said Chris, making his excuses before his amusement got the better of him.

It was a bizarre exchange out of the blue about a weird movie. Alex would have been rolling on the floor laughing by now.

Chris's legs wobbled briefly before striding forward. It was lovely, if painful, to recall happy memories of Alex and Lisa, but he couldn't let the grief that always washed over him dominate his life.

Yeah, right. Who was he kidding? That's why he was on his way to see this new therapist. He had to find some way of stopping the remorse from dragging him down whenever he dropped his guard – the sadness that pulled him back into the happier past was stopping him having a future.

Oblivious to his picturesque surroundings, Chris marched to the end of the high street and then down past the George Inn. Pulling out the card to double-check the address, he approached a pretty little cottage with a tiny name plaque next to the doorbell: Erica Immurson, Therapist.

Chris looked up and down the street, which was deserted. He checked his watch. Perfect timing, about five minutes before his appointment. He took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

He wasn't quite sure what to expect, probably not Gillian Anderson or the clichéd stern pony-tailed blonde woman that had been a subsequent mental image, but he definitely wasn't anticipating the cheerful face that greeted him when the door opened.

'Well hello there. You must be Chris Parsons,' she said, shaking his hand without waiting for acknowledgement. 'Erica Immurson. Come in, come in.'

She stood back and gestured him into her home.

Erica was a little taller than Chris, a slightly overweight middle-aged black woman with wavy dark brown hair and a broad toothy grin that seemed to stretch from ear-to-ear. She was an enormous, joyfully imposing presence that swept him straight into her consultation room. She felt oddly familiar, but he had no idea why, or how.

'Please, take a seat,' she said in her rich voice, pointing to a dark brown leather sofa. She adjusted the matching single chair to face it at a slight angle and sat down.

The room was unexpectedly homely: floral drapes framed the sash windows; family portraits were displayed at every opportunity around the room; floor to ceiling bookshelves which covered most of one wall had ornaments, knick-knacks, paperbacks, DVDs and BluRays, as well as what appeared to be technical journals and hardbacks, arranged tastefully across them.

Chris squeakily settled into a comfortable position on one side of the sofa. Erica picked up a notebook, licked her fingers, and leafed through the pages. After finding the right place, she read quietly for a minute, her face showing no reaction other than deploying a tranquil smile throughout.

Chris was just starting to get irritated when Erica looked up at him and broke out the toothy grin again. It was hard not to smile in response.

'So,' she said, then paused as if rethinking her approach. 'I've read your referral notes. It's a thorough appraisal of your treatment so far, and I can see the strategies your other consultants have tried. First things first though – tell me, why are you here?'

'I want to get better,' said Chris, unsure what else to say.

She held his gaze and shook her head slowly. Chris felt as if he was about to be disciplined by a disapproving teacher. It was Mrs Harris all over again.

'Not good enough,' said Erica. 'What symptoms are actually causing you problems? What of the many things troubling you would you like to fix first? Be honest.'

'I keep forgetting things,' said Chris. It was the first thing that came to mind. 'My past is full of holes.'

'Better. Give me some specifics. Tell me the way that affects your daily life.'

It was something so fundamental to who Chris was now, he initially struggled to think of a coherent way of explaining it. He could feel it, wasn't that enough? He could remember how it had affected him today though.

'When I wake up, I often know I was planning on doing something, but can't remember what. Mornings are always the hardest. I've tried writing things down. Even then, often I can't remember *why* I wanted to do them. I know... I can feel that I've discussed it with someone, agreed it, and can even remember some of the conversation. I just can't remember who it was with. It's as if they no longer exist.'

'Good, good,' she said, scribbling some notes into her book while nodding. 'That's a start. Let's focus on that. Is it just recent events you're forgetting? What about last year? Two years ago?'

It was a good question, although the answer should have been in his notes from previous consultants.

'I can remember things from longer ago, on the whole.'

'Like?'

'Like us moving to Calne from Maidenhead. Like helping our daughter move in with her boyfriend – fiancé – in Basingstoke. Everything is pretty clear up until...'

Chris trailed off, tension spreading through his temples and stiffening the muscles in his neck.

'Until the accident?' completed Erica.

Chris nodded mutely.

'That fits,' she said. 'You have what we call dissociative amnesia, triggered by this accident. Yours is an unusually severe and long-term case, and you're suffering from both retrograde amnesia – difficulty remembering past events – and anterograde amnesia – difficulty learning new information.'

'Yes, yes, I know all this,' said Chris. 'All my consultants have told me that. It hasn't helped fix it though. I know all about dissociative amnesia, I've read up on it online.'

She rolled her eyes at the online comment.

'Well, at least you remember that much,' she said. 'And you've tried hypnotism, music therapy, various medications, group therapy, all that sort of thing, but none of those helped at all?'

'You've read my notes,' he said. 'Nothing made any difference. Admittedly, I enjoyed the art therapy, but I'm not sure it really helped.'

She nodded and jotted in the notebook again.

'I understand you went to Avebury yesterday?' she asked, without preamble.

'How did you know that?'

'Who did you go with?'

'I... I went alone, of course,' said Chris. 'Look, what—'

'What about the West Kennet Long Barrow?' interrupted Erica. 'You went there on the same trip, I believe? Was that alone too?'

'Yes. How do—'

'Not with Lisa?' said Erica, giving him no time to form a thought. 'Or Alex?'

'Of course not,' snapped Chris, his tension growing into a painful headache. 'They're dead! What—'

'How did they die?'

'There was... an accident.'

'Describe it to me.'

'It...' started Chris, unable to complete the sentence as an intense pain shot through his head, down his neck and left arm, accompanied by a white flash in his vision. He closed his eyes and rested his face in his palms. 'I... can't. I don't...'

'It's OK,' said Erica, leaning forward and patting him on the knee. 'Relax. Put it out of your mind for now.'

'Why can't I remember it?' said Chris as the pain lessened, and he was able to open his eyes again.

'That's the one million Euro question,' she said, breaking out her warm smile again. 'Once we understand that, everything else will start falling into place.'

'I hope so.'

'This is good,' said Erica. 'I think you've made a lot of progress already, even if it doesn't feel like it. Reading your notes, you've broken down more severely before when challenged on your memories of the accident. That's a good sign. Let's build on that.'

'How?'

'Let's not push too hard for now,' she said. After a few moments of contemplation, she continued. 'Tell me. Do you suffer from déjà vu? The feeling that you've lived through the same moment before?'

'Yes,' he said, showing the first sign of interest. 'Yes, I do. Quite often.'

'Good, good. It's good that you do, I mean. It shows there are memories in there that you're not quite accessing, but you know to exist. We can work on that.'

'How?'

Erica didn't hesitate. She must have been priming him for a pre-planned suggestion.

'When you go to sleep at night, as you lie there, try to think of a moment from the last couple of days. Something that's a little hazy. Let yourself drift off to sleep, perchance to dream, envisioning that moment. Try to imagine what it would have been like if Alex was there. Or Lisa.'

Chris frowned, his headache throbbing.

'How would that help?'

'It may still be in your mind when you awaken the next day,' she said. 'We can discuss your experiences next time, say in a week.'

'OK, I'll try,' said Chris.

He wasn't convinced.

'You'll need a focus for those thoughts to be fully effective,' said Erica. 'There's something concrete I'd like you to consider.'

'Go on.'

'Think of how you felt when you went to sleep on the long barrow. How you felt when you woke up. I think you know there's a discontinuity there, something for your mind to work on.'

'How do you know about that?' said Chris, at a loss. 'I was alone.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Erica.

'It does to me,' said Chris, feeling as if he'd been violated in some way that he didn't yet understand.

Erica stared back at him, weighing up her words as if she were a parent trying to avoid having to explain where babies came from.

'Not now. All will become clear in time, but knowing everything about your therapy might negatively impact its effectiveness.'

Chris remained silent for thirty seconds, trying to remember that moment, trying to understand how Erica knew about it, about his itinerary that day. He still felt violated, yet he also was starting to feel oddly at ease with her.

There was no menace, just someone trying to help in her own, strange way. Her calm confidence, her spooky knowledge of details of his life that even he struggled to remember himself was an odd comfort. At least someone knew.

'Sure,' he said.

He had to go through with this. He'd promised... someone.

'One last thing,' said Erica. 'Have you changed your home since... since you lost Lisa and Alex. Redecorated, I mean?'

Chris shook his head. It hadn't seemed to be a priority, nor had he felt ready for it.

'Do it,' she said. 'Pick a room to decorate. It'll be a project that will last several days, so you'll have to remember about it when you wake up with pots of paint everywhere.'

'True,' he said with some reluctance.

'You said you enjoyed your art therapy, so get creative. Be bold with your colour selection. Make your home your own, stamp your imagination across it. You need to move on from your past. It's the only way you'll start to recover.'

Chris knew she was right, but it was hard.

'I guess.'

'Don't guess. Do it,' she said. 'Go back via Chippenham and stop off at B&Q. Don't delay. You say that mornings are the hardest, so why not repaint your bedroom? Then you'll have a new experience whenever you open your eyes. Different than when Lisa was there, I mean.'

Chris instinctively reeled at the prospect. It felt like a betrayal of Lisa. It was hard enough to remember details about their last days as it was, but going out of his way to erase her from his future seemed a step too far.

However, he had to try something new.



## In Memory of Chris Parsons

'Sure,' he said again.

'Wonderful,' said Erica, beaming her glorious smile at him like the proud owner of a compliant puppy.

She was right though. It was time to start moving forward again, put on a fresh coat of paint and see what emerged as the brush strokes covered his life's canvas.