

The Group

“I know what you’re going to ask me, almost everyone always does, but I can’t give you a straight answer, I mean it was all a very long time ago. I was only about sixteen at the time. Well, things were different then, you know, it was the sixties, peace and love and all that, flower power and the like. I sort of drifted into the Group. I think I went to a couple of gatherings, and I liked the atmosphere, sort of laid back but intense at the same time.

Does that sound incongruent? I suppose it does, but that’s how I remember it. Jordan always led the meetings; he was passionate, devout, intense and convincing in equal measures. He believed in us and we believed in him. All of us believed in each other. Everyone has to have a leader. Ours was Jordan. I remember him then as a slight man, with a clipped beard and always dressed in casual open-necked shirts and blue jeans. Often barefooted, Jordan had bright blue eyes that could lancinate you with just a sideways glance. He was pleasant, kind, disciplined, and daunting. I would say charismatic but that’s what you would expect me to say, wouldn’t it? But yes, he was.

Once in, you stayed in. Jordan’s confederates saw to that. Nothing physical, no strong arm stuff, they had developed a sinister, subliminal power that could intimidate you by just being there. Does that make sense? Mind you why would you want to leave? Living in what could only be described as a rambling, surprisingly well-maintained, stately home centred in cool, green-covered grounds, populated by wild multi-bright peacocks, moody moorhens and proud geese. Everyone was nice to each other. We slept in mixed dormitories, sharing our food, clothes and our beds. Shocked? Don’t be, this was the sixties, free love was in the air.

Of course, I got pregnant. Everyone was happy for me; you know helpful, kind, caring, and everything. No, I have no idea who the father was; it could have been anyone from four or five Group followers. It didn’t matter to me; babies were babies of the Group. I gave birth in the Group grounds, outside, under the cover of two oak trees surrounded by the entire Group. They held hands, sang and chanted the Group mantras. I felt at ease, blessed even. But soon after Jordan just disappeared. It was sudden and completely without warning, during the night. Was he on imperative Group business? No one knew and if anyone had contact with him after he vanished, they didn’t divulge it to the rest of the Group. A couple of other Group residents tried to assume the mantle Jordan had left behind, but the Group eventually fell apart. People just left and went away.

So did I.

Eventually.

For a while, I lived with my brother, but semi-detached suburban living wasn’t for me and when I fell pregnant for a second time that’s where it all ended. Was leaving my kids hard? Nope. The maternal stuff didn’t cut it for me and anyway, my brother and his

dopey girlfriend were happy to step up to the plate. Later, I heard some stories about the police and fraud squad looking for Jordan, but that was none of my business, besides I had my new life now.

The Group was in my past.

Possibly.”

Irene placed her well-worn, battered, flower-patterned canvas shoulder bag into the grey tray along with a bunch of keys, a silver necklace bearing a round symbol and some loose coins.

Her dark red Doctor Marten boots, adorned with faded, hand-painted blue roses were placed carefully into the following tray. Irene watched as her possessions skimmed down the black conveyor belt. They finally came to an abrupt halt as lay ready to be devoured into the mouth of the X-ray machine. Watched on by a grim-faced, blue-uniformed, middle-aged man, her possessions slipped smoothly into the jaws of the machine.

She flattened down her long paisley patterned skirt and readjusted the pink ribbon that tied back her lengthy greying hair. She fixed her brown eyes on the female guardian of the metal detector waiting her turn to enter. The woman rubbed her latex-gloved hands together and following a slight nod from the plump woman, Irene stepped through the metal detector gateway and breathed an involuntary sigh of relief when the little green light flicked on. As Irene paced through the grey square archway, she sensed a grip of anticipation, like she was taking a journey from her past life into a new and, as yet, uncharted world with a hopeful reunion.

Retrieving her property, Irene glanced up at the glistening bright departure board, silently noting that her flight was due to leave from Gate 8. With the sign reading that boarding was about to commence, she slipped into the nearest ladies' bathroom and locked the first vacant cubicle door behind her. The red door sign displayed engaged. Quickly searching through her bag, she retrieved a brown opened envelope and pulled out a white A4 letter bearing the headline – ‘*Westminster Council Social Services – Children, young people and families*’. She glanced at the typewritten page, frowned, then folded it neatly into tiny squares and then began carefully tearing the letter into little pieces. The torn bits fell like confetti, disappearing one by one down the flushing lavatory. Satisfied that nothing remained in the bowl; Irene exited the cubicle and stood in front of a white sink. Ignoring the other people on either side of her, she diligently washed her hands, applying ample amounts of soap dispensed from a metal container. Content, with dried hands, she then pulled out her passport from the pocket of her purple and pink sackcloth jacket and unconsciously checked its expiry date.

She then slid her boarding card inside its pages and placed the two items into her outside jacket pocket. Donning her large sunglasses, Irene silently vacated the bathroom, hurrying herself to Gate 8. An unseen, serene aura enveloped her insides as she joined the queue ready to propel her now-cleansed body and freed soul across the Atlantic.

A white van pulls up directly in front of the gated driveway. The driver leans forward and punches four numbers into the keypad fixed by four silver-coloured screws to the stone wall at the side of the gates. Just like Moses and the Red Sea, the doors, slowly and silently begin to part. The van cruises through the gates and moves slowly over the gravelled path crunching its way towards the grand mansion house. The faint quacking of distant wildfowl is caught on the breeze as the van pulls up outside a small side building bearing a green sign with gold-yellow letters – The Estate Office. The driver, an elderly balding man, probably just turned seventy, dressed in faded blue overalls and an open-necked checked shirt, climbs slowly out of the van and indicates with a flick of his right hand to his passenger to follow him into the office. A younger man, similarly dressed, with black hair neatly parted and oiled into place, raises his eyebrows in ascent and dutifully follows the older man into the office.

“Ah ha, well I never if it’s not Mathew and Son in person.” Mrs Edith Cavan, the middle-aged, estate secretary is seated in behind a large wooden desk, with a laptop computer, a line of multi-coloured pens and a large notepad set neatly on its surface. Her deep red lipsticked lips were smiling invitingly at the two men. She fixed her bright green eyes on the younger man.

“Very funny, Mrs Cavan, but I reckon Louis here has never heard of Cat Stevens, have you son?”

Louis shook his head looking baffled. Mrs Cavan smirked teasingly at the older man followed by an inviting wink directed at his younger compatriot. Louis looked away through the window, his eyes suddenly intent on the blowing branches of the oak trees in the far corner of the estate, his cheeks reddened slightly.

“Okay, let’s get to business,” said Mrs Cavan suddenly, simultaneously pulling the sides of her pink cardigan over her blue cloth-covered bust.

“I’ve got a job for you, George and Junior, so come around here and I will show the plans.”

George and Louis gathered on either side of Mrs Cavan, both pointedly not making any physical contact with her.

“Right,” she continued, “We need the area between the two oak trees in the corner of the top yard levelled and slabbed. It’s a bit overgrown so you are going to need your strimmer thingy. “This is the layout,” Mrs Cavan unfolded an A2 white sheet with a detailed drawing of the planned project; the two men leaned forward to examine its contents. George scratched the top of his balding head thoughtfully whilst Louis stroked his chin which he hoped made him look professional.

After a few moments of contemplation, George straightened up, wincing slightly holding the base of his spine, he responded,

“All looks pretty straightforward to me.” He glanced sideways at his son,

“Okay with you Louis?” he enquired. The young man nodded.

Mrs Cavan folded the plans and placed them into George’s calloused and lined left hand. “You’re not superstitious are you?” Mrs Cavan looked searchingly into George’s slightly wizened face, her green eyes twinkled.

George looked puzzled.

“You remember this place in the past don’t you George? It was home to that hippie mob in the sixties, they called themselves The Group, or something equally as daft.” George thought for a few seconds, his mind raced back to the golden days of the sixties, when a younger George, with bell-bottomed trousers, tie-died shirts, a sandal-wearing youth dancing in open parks to the likes of Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin and the Kinks. His mouth curled up in remembrance,

“Yes, Mrs Cavan I do remember them, they were a weird bunch didn’t they practise some strange religion, which was the trend at the time? I think it was called Zora... Zorant ... Zorantism or something like that,” George stumbled over his pronunciation. “I always wondered what happened to them?” added George.

“Zoroastrianism”, corrected Mrs Cavan nodding her head. “That’s right, they crudely followed the branch of Zoroastrianism called Zurvanite, it was some ancient mystical stuff, all over my head, I’m afraid. They used to stuff leaflets into your hands at the shopping precinct, I tried to read them but I ended up using them as firelighters! I’m not too sure where they went, but I recall that their leader, a chap called Jordan got himself in some financial trouble and cleared off. The rumour was that he pocketed most of Group’s funds. The Trust bought the place from the Receivers and converted it into this nursing home.”

Anyway,” she continued, “The bit you are about to dig over and slab is the exact area where they did most of their rituals, so the place might have a spell on it or something.” Mrs Cavan was now openly grinning at the two men; they in return, smiled back.

George teasingly gave her a two-fingered V peace sign, adding, “Peace man. Anyway, I’m not into any of that nonsense, Mrs Cavan, I’m just a simple landscaper, with my youngest son here as an apprentice. We’ll soon get the job done.” With her serious face now in place, Mrs Cavan turned away from the men and clicked on the computer, her body language indicated that the conversation was over.

George tipped the long-stemmed, grass-stained strimmer on its side and began to pour a mixture of petrol and oil into its fuel tank. Louis wandered over to the site devouring the scene. Two grand oak trees stood like guardians on either side of the now overgrown area.

“What sort of things happened here then, eh Dad?” Louis stared at George watching him firmly screwing the fuel cap into place.

“Dunno really, this wasn’t my scene, I was too busy watching bands, and I never had any hankerings to join a sect.” George picked up the strimmer and pulled the recoil, it fired into life, screeching like a scalded cat. George revved it a couple of times, satisfied that the tool was in good working order.

“You go over to the far end by the fence,” shouted George over the screaming strimmer, “have a look at the underlying ground, we may need to level it off. I’ll strim these weeds down.” Louis looked again at the two trees marvelling at their grace and stature. He skirted around the side of one of the tree trunks and headed towards the perimeter fencing.

“The fence is broken here,” Louis yelled back at his father, but by now George had donned his face mask and ear defenders, oblivious to all except some creeping thistle and abundant ragwort.

Louis, realising his dad’s tin ear, ventured slowly towards the broken fence, brushing aside some angry-looking nettles. Curiously, he spied some freshly dug earth partially covered by fallen leaves. The bare soil had formed into a small mound. Louis stepped tentatively towards the hump in the ground; oddly his senses told him that something was not right. In the background, he could hear the revving of the strimmer’s two-stroke engine and the thrashing of weeds as they fell banished to their fate.

Pulling a small metal trowel from his overall pocket, and dropping down onto his haunches, Louis dipped the tip of the trowel into the top of the loose soil. Scraping carefully at the earth, he started to uncover a small white object. Digging a bit deeper and around the exposed object, Louis suddenly recoiled, instinctively he put his hand to his mouth. There lying now open in the tree-covered sunlight was a human hand, long white fingers, with the index finger bearing a gold patterned ring. Blue nail varnish had started to fade away from the four exposed fingers.

Probably a female hand thought Louis.

He shuddered, gasped and then composed himself; jumping up, turning, running, shouting to his father, “Dad come over here quick, I think I’ve found a dead body”.

“Ms Trixie Bracebridge?”

Enquired the taller of the two women standing side by side at the front of an open wooden blue front door. The knock was answered by a slightly built, youngish woman, with short, spikey, dark hair, dressed in a loose woollen sweater and tight blue denims. She was standing in the doorway acknowledging her name.

The tall woman continued, “I’m Detective Sergeant Williams and this is my colleague, DC Jones, we’re both from Tinsley CID, and we’ve ...”

Trixie interrupted the speaking police officer and wiped the palms of her hands on her bleached jeans. Looking straight at the sergeant and with her hands now on her hips, she replied,

“Look, I’m sorry what happened, it was just a moment of madness on my behalf. I’m three-quarters through my community service, and it’s all behind me now. Please let me get on with my life.” Sergeant Williams placed her hand gently on Trixie’s shoulder, her eyes narrowed in concern, replying in a soft voice. “Ms Bracebridge, our visit today has nothing to do with your recent shoplifting case, this is a bit more important, I think it's best if we come inside.”

“Jackie is that you? Thank God and you’re alright?”

Trixie was standing by the window, shouting in a piercing high-pitched voice into her black mobile ‘phone. The two silent police officers were sitting opposite her staring straight ahead. Both women were intently following Trixie’s conversation with her step-sister. “I’ve got two coppers here ... no, no, I haven’t got into trouble again ... no it's all cool ... look just shut up for a minute, this is important... PLEASE just listen ... they are saying that they’ve found the body of a dead woman and no OBVIOUSLY it’s not you but hold on, hold on, they are saying that her DNA is the same as mine yes I know that’s out of the question, but apparently it’s impossible that two unrelated people can have the same DNA look you had better get over here ‘cos I’m spooked about all this yes, you ring Uncle Rupert maybe he knows what the hell is going on.”

Jackie Trevelyan’s life could be considered archetypically stable. She was thirty-two going on thirty-three with two school-aged children, one of each, and a nice three-bedroomed home in a much sought-after part of the town. Monthly visits to the hairdressers, weekly trips to the local supermarket and an array of children’s clubs and sports were the elements that made up her life. Her husband of ten years was an engineer by trade. He bought home a good salary, so Jackie could concentrate on being a homemaker, a role she relished. Jackie strove for order. It hadn’t always been this way.

Abandoned from birth by her teenage mother, along with her slightly older half-sister Trixie, Jackie and Trixie had been taken in by her kindly, childless uncle Rupert and his then-girlfriend and now wife, Doreen. The only blip in her organised life was when Trixie was recently and inexplicably charged with shoplifting at the local John Lewis store. Trixie was prosecuted at the order of the store manager who had a well-publicised no-tolerance edict towards shoplifting. Trixie, who was single and led an imbalanced but previously crime-free life, couldn’t give her or the rest of the family a sensible explanation for her erroneous behaviour. So they put it down to a moment of madness.

The dress was even the wrong size!

When Jackie made her call, Rupert Bracebridge was in his back garden tending to the flower beds he had planted earlier in the year. He felt the silent buzz of his mobile ‘phone through

his cotton gardening trousers. Although now touching seventy, Rupert had taken early retirement following a generous offer from his employer and with Doreen also in retirement, they were both enjoying quieter times. With Jackie settled and Trixie getting there slowly, they both felt that they had done a good job bringing up two young girls. It has been a difficult introduction to family life for all four of them with the abrupt disappearance of their foolish mother, Rupert's younger sister, Irene.

Neither Rupert nor any of the remaining family had heard from Irene from the day she vanished. They assumed she was still alive as nobody had informed them otherwise. "*She's probably gone and joined another of those weird sects and living in a cave in Outer Mongolia with a bunch of aged hippies,*" was Doreen's view.

Rupert clicked the red off button on his mobile telephone. With the implement still grasped firmly in his grip, Rupert stared over the garden fence absently watching two Red Kites gracefully circling the afternoon sky. He silently marvelled at their agility and elegance. The conversation with his niece was still burning into his senses; the line '*Trixie, DNA and matched*' was a trio of words that he hoped he would never have to hear. Bringing his thoughts back to the front of his brain, Rupert walked slowly and carefully into the kitchen, where Doreen was stacking the weekly shop into the fridge.

Without a moment's hesitation, Rupert blurted out, "I think they've found Belle in the grounds of the old mansion. She's dead. She was probably murdered." Doreen closed the refrigerator door, with tears welling up in her eyes, she looked up at Rupert, "Are you one hundred per cent certain? Does Trixie know?"

Rupert nodded in the affirmative and rubbed his eyes. "The Police have confirmed a DNA match with her and the body, so she knows something is not right, Christ I can't keep this in any longer," replied Rupert. Doreen raised herself, "I'll make us some tea love, let's think this through before we decide what to do for the best."

She began filling the kettle.

The air in interview room two was stale and uninviting. The light blue painted walls were beginning to fade to a dusky grey and the metal bars at the window were a stark reminder of where you were.

A stern Rupert was accompanied by a grim-faced Doreen; the couple sat on two uncomfortable wooden chairs provided by DS Williams and DC Jones. The four of them faced each other. A wooden desk separated them. The police officers each held an iPad ready to take notes. DC Jones thanked them for attending the station voluntarily and explained to them that they were not being detained and that they were free to leave at any time. The couple raised their eyebrows in unison and agreement.

DC Jones led the interview, “We understand that you have some vital information regarding the discovery of a female body found in the grounds of what is locally known as the old mansion. Is that correct?”

Rupert grunted a positive response.

DS Williams began tapping on her iPad.

“So that you are aware of the circumstances,” continued DC Jones, “We should let you know that we have identified the body. Her name was Samantha Loveridge. She last resided with her adopted parents, Ruth and Alan Loveridge in Vincent Square, Westminster. Mr and Mrs Loveridge reported her missing two days ago. She had gone to visit her birth mother who resided near here and did not return. They have now both identified the body.

Alan Loveridge is an eminent property lawyer, and Ruth is a Human Rights worker. Samantha worked for UNICEF; she spent a lot of time serving in refugee camps all over the world. However, from what you told my colleague on the ‘phone you knew her as Belle Bracebridge.”

DC Jones paused and took a short sip of water. Rupert licked his lips and nodded, he felt Doreen’s hand grasp his. Refreshed from her drink, DC Jones continued looking directly at Rupert; her eyes unwavering.

DC Williams continued to tap.

“Ms Loveridge was murdered. The autopsy found traces of a powerful poison in her system; it had been administered just hours before her death. There was also evidence of a blow to the back of her head which would have rendered her unconscious. A gardeners’ shovel was found in nearby undergrowth by one of our officers.”

Rupert gripped the sides of his chair, he looked down at the desk and then up at DC Jones saying, “Do you have any idea who did this to her”. He steadied for a moment, “Not Irene, surely not?”

A bead of sweat had formed on his upper lip. Rupert wiped it away with the sleeve of the shirt.

DC Jones looked at DS Williams, who motioned back with a slight nod of her head. “We do Mr Bracebridge. We have good reasons to believe that it was your sister and also the young woman’s birth mother, Irene Bracebridge. The woman she came to meet.”

“So you’re telling me I had a twin sister all this time and nobody had the courtesy to tell me?” Trixie was standing, hands on hips, glaring aggressively at her sister. Jackie was seated anxiously on the edge of Trixie’s battered leather settee. She fiddled nervously with her gold locket, intertwining it between her thumb and forefinger. “So who else knew?” asked Trixie.

Jackie averted her gaze from Trixie's fiery eyes and let go of the locket. She looked up at her elder sister steadying her gaze and took a short intake of breath. "Look Trixie, I've only just found out myself, so don't start on at me, as soon as Uncle Rupert told me I was straight round here to tell you. So don't get mardy with me, I'm only the messenger. And before you go all 'diva' on me, remember she was my sister as well ... Half-sister," Jackie corrected herself.

Trixie walked towards the living room window, hands deep into the pockets of her black canvas trousers. She stared out of the window for a few moments. Two small boys strolled past. One was clutching a black and white football the other looked up at the window and mischievously pulled his tongue out at the pondering Trixie. She repeated the gesture back at the little boy and a slight smile hit her lips.

She stood still for a few moments.

The boys carried on with their journey. Then she turned slowly around, removing all traces of the smile from her face and looked across at Jackie, frowning slightly. She whispered, "I wonder what she was like? I suppose we'll never know now."

Jackie nodded silently.

"Thank you constable most welcome," DS Williams was smiling up at a young male officer carrying a melamine tray with two steaming cups of tea and a plate of plain biscuits. DS Williams took the tray from the man and carefully placed it in the centre of the table. "Help yourself Mr Bracebridge, the Home Office hasn't cut our tea allowance ... yet."

DS Williams was smiling sarcastically and simultaneously pushing a faded, flower-patterned cup in the direction of the seated Rupert. He took a short sip of tea and bit into a biscuit.

DS Williams placed her iPad in front of her and shuffled around in her seat in an attempt to get comfortable. "Right Mr Bracebridge, as I explained to you and your wife, the information you can give us about the events leading up to the adoption of Samantha Loveridge could be vital in our investigations into this poor girl's death. So I want you to start from the very beginning, leave nothing out, you must attempt to recall all the circumstances."

DS Williams looked directly at Rupert. She slightly tilted her head to one side; her facial features were indicating that now it was his turn to speak. Rupert gathered his thoughts and fixed his eyes on a damp patch on the wall visible just over DS William's left shoulder. He clenched his hands together and began to speak.

"Well. Right from the beginning Irene wasn't that close. I am two years older than her and when we were kids, we were into different things. Irene was quite quiet, thoughtful even; she had very few friends and spent a lot of her time alone in her bedroom listening to music."

Rupert took another sip from the cup.

Distracted, he could hear a man shouting and a woman screaming right outside of the interview room. A stream of obscenities was being hurled. DS Williams looked over her shoulder in the direction of where the noise was coming from. She turned and faced Rupert shrugging her shoulders,

“All in a day’s work at the local nick, Mr Bracebridge, please try to carry on.”

Rupert shut the disturbance from his mind and breathed in.

“I’m not absolutely certain how she got into this Group stuff, one day she was having breakfast with Mum and Dad, and the next she just disappeared. Of course, we were frantic, not knowing where she was, but then a letter arrived. Irene’s handwriting was on the envelope, she just said she was staying with a bunch of friends at the old mansion and we were not to worry about her.”

DS Williams was rapping rapidly on her iPad. The noise outside had now dissipated. Rupert rubbed his eyes and brushed back his hair.

He carried on.

“I was amazed at Mum and Dad’s reaction. I mean they didn’t seem to be bothered. They had us both late in life, you know, and they were getting on a bit, but they just seemed to accept her decision. It was as if they were glad to see the back of her.”

DS Williams raised her eyebrows, speaking softly, “What did you think about it?”

Rupert rubbed his eyes again.

“Well, straight after work the next day, I went down to the old mansion to have it out with her. But she was having none of it. I recall the conversation very well. She was sitting in a tall armchair looking all ladylike and serene. There was my kid sister wearing a flowing patterned skirt and white T-shirt with a necklace that had a round symbol dangling down her chest. She had an inane smile on her face and she had cropped her hair as well; it was all black and spikey. She used to have lovely hair, you know, now she looked like some hippie tramp.” Rupert’s eyes began to water. He wiped them with his white cloth handkerchief, apologising to the police officer for his emotion.

DS Williams said nothing but indicated with a small hand gesture that Rupert could pause for a moment, to collect himself together.

Rupert opened a packet of cheese and tomato sandwiches.

DS Williams had agreed that they both deserved a break from the interview. Rupert declined the offer from her to dine in the police canteen; instead, he bought some sandwiches from a shop across the road from the police station. He then found an empty bench ready to eat

them. Deep in thought and chewing carefully, Rupert mulled over his morning in the interview room. ‘*Was Irene a murderer?*’ If only he had tried harder to persuade the young Irene to leave the Group, better still if he had been a more caring elder brother, maybe, had he seen the signs, he could have stopped her from joining them in the first place.

Rupert sighed as two young girls, each aged about fifteen or sixteen walked past him. Slim and fashionably dressed, they chatted earnestly with each other, smiling, giggling with their heads held high. One carried a blue folder under the arm. They looked full of life. Irene never acted like these girls, why didn’t he try harder with her?

He ate one and a half of the sandwiches and dispatched the remains into the grubby waste bin placed next to his seat. Time to go back to the station and the unrelenting DS Williams, Rupert hauled his tired body up and trudged reluctantly across the road heading directly into the grey-brick building.

“Sorry, Mr Bracebridge, but Sergeant Williams has been called away on an urgent matter, so I’m afraid you’ve got me for the rest of the interview,” DC Jones was already seated at the side of the small wooden table that separated the interviewer from the interviewee.

The air was still stale.

“Shall we carry on?”

Are you OK to continue? I’ve ordered us some tea and biscuits; they will be along in a minute. My colleagues’ notes tell me that you left off where the young Irene told you that she was staying with the Group”.

Rupert sat down and stretched out his arms and then laid them on the table in front of him, the palms of his hands flat down on the rough surface. “OK. Well. Nothing really happened after the time I saw her in the old mansion. She made it plain that she wouldn’t return home and the indifference Mum and Dad had over her situation sort of ingrained itself into me. So we just carried on as if nothing had happened. This remained until about a year after she left us, when right out of the blue a bearded young man turned up at our house one evening banging loudly on our front door, asking, well demanding really, to speak to my mother or father. I answered the door to him. I recall his face was full of fear. I explained that neither was at home, they were both away on a two-week vacation in the Seychelles and could he call back in a couple of weeks.”

Rupert paused as a blue-uniformed female police officer slipped into the room bearing a tray of tea and biscuits. Both Rupert and DC Jones nodded their thanks to the officer. DC Jones handed a cup to Rupert who took an immediate gulp of hot tea.

Hesitating for a moment, Rupert continued, “The young man got all flustered and almost screamed at me, he said, and I remember it distinctly, ‘In two weeks it could all be too late’. He gripped me by the shoulders looked straight into my face and said ‘You’ll have to do it’.”

DC Jones looked up from her notes her pale blue eyes narrowed asking, "Do what?"

Rupert started to explain.

The young man informed Rupert that he had come from the Group. Unbeknown to the Bracebridge family, about three months previously, Irene had given birth to twins, two girls. She had named them Trixie and Belle. This was the issue. The young man told Rupert that the Group loosely followed an abstract version of Zurvanite. One of the features that emanated from these teachings was the syndrome of an evil and a good twin.

Irene had been forced by the Group to nominate which one was the good twin and which one was the evil twin.

This evening Irene had chosen Belle as evil.

Rupert was just about to carry on when suddenly there was a taught knock on the door and DS Williams walked briskly in. Rupert and DC Jones looked up in surprise.

A red-faced Sergant Williams addressed them both.

"Sorry, Mr Bracebridge, but I'm going to have to stop you for a moment, I have some news. Irene Bracebridge has just been detained by the San Francisco police department. She is now in their custody awaiting deportation. She was traced to a small apartment in the Noe Valley area of the city. The only other occupant of the apartment was a British man named Joe O'Riodan, apparently, he has resided in California for several years."

DS William looked enquiringly at Rupert, "Does this name mean anything to you?"
Rupert thought for a second, shaking his head, he replied, "No I've never heard of him."

DS Williams left the room quietly closing the door behind her. DC Jones waited for a few seconds and then invited Rupert to continue. "Right, OK Mr Bracebridge, I believe you were about to tell me what this young man from the Group wanted you to do, is that right?"

Rupert inclined his head slightly.

He was beginning to get tired; he sipped from a glass of water, stretched his arms over his head and then took a large lungful of stale air.

Feeling slightly invigorated he began to impart the final instalment of his account.

Rupert, with help from the unnamed young man from the Group, had entered the old mansion in the middle of the night. They had got into the grounds through a broken fence near two large oak trees. The side door was unlocked. The young man led the way, it was clear to Rupert that the man had planned this expedition carefully. Rupert stayed close to the young man and following noiselessly in his wake. On their journey to the old mansion, the man had explained his worries to an increasingly bewildered Rupert. He was convinced that the Group

members were planning to do something awful to the designated 'evil' twin, Belle. Rupert had to be the baby girl's saviour.

Rupert was silently directed to where the baby was sleeping. She was in an unlit side room away from the main dormitories. Taking the baby from its cot Rupert wrapped it in its warm blankets and placed her in a basket handed to him by the young man. With the basket under his arm, he retraced his steps back to his vehicle and laid the basket and baby down on the rear seat of his car.

The young man had warned Rupert to get the baby as far away as possible, it was his unwavering belief that some of the more fanatical Group members would seek to harm Belle if they tracked her down. Rupert thought quickly, he needed a place of safety, urgently. Rupert remembered that his parents sometimes stayed at a nunnery in Westminster, called the Sisters of Charity Convent.

In his confused mind, he judged that this would be the best place to leave her. The Nuns would know what to do. Rupert drove carefully down to SW1, about a fifteen-minute drive in the early hours, with his niece still sleeping in her basket in the back seat. That was the last time he saw her.

Laying her basket on the steps next to the front door of the convent, he rang the bell four times, whispered "Goodbye Belle" and then quickly disappeared into the back streets of Westminster. It was just starting to get light.

"Did you ever see Irene again?" asked DC Jones. "Oh yes, I did," replied Rupert, this time he rubbed his eyes furiously. "About two months later she arrived on our doorstep, with a backpack on her shoulders and Trixie in her arms. Both of them were scruffy and untidy. Evidently, the Group had disbanded and each member had to go their own ways,"

Rupert sighed. "Mum and dad had decided to stay on the in Seychelles indefinitely. They had purchased an apartment in Anse Royale and they intended to remain there for a while. I was left in a three-bedroomed semi. My long-term girlfriend, Doreen had as good as moved in permanently, but as Irene pointed out, we'd got plenty of room for another two."

"It didn't work out."

Rupert was now back into full flow.

"Irene and Doreen were at loggerheads constantly. We were being used as unpaid childminders for Trixie as Irene just pleased herself. She often disappeared for days on end. Doreen started on at me to do something, but I could sense that Irene was not well mental health-wise and I didn't want to drive her out onto the streets, especially with a very vulnerable two-year-old."

Rupert looked wistfully at the police officer,

"You'd have done the same for a member of your family, wouldn't you?" DC Jones nodded back to him without expression, not convincing Rupert that she wouldn't have.

“Anyway, the inevitable happened, Irene announced she was pregnant again. She spent the whole of her pregnancy lounging around the house contributing nothing, only just carrying out the bare necessities for Trixie. She had the baby, another girl, in the local hospital and returned to us. I reckon she was only with us for another three weeks when she disappeared again, this time it appeared for good, she had taken all her possessions, such as they were. She left nothing behind except her two children. She hadn’t even given a name to her new little girl. We named her Jacqueline after Doreen’s late sister.”

“So, there you are; me and Doreen left with a newborn baby and a two-year-old.” Rupert took another long drink from the glass of water thoughtfully topped up by DC Jones. He stared down at his hands turning them over and looking intently at his fingernails. “And that’s it, you know all the rest.”

Rupert leaned back in his chair and exhaled loudly.

DC Williams silently slipped back into the interview room taciturnly motioning to the two occupants. Following a long silence, DC Jones asked, “Did Irene ever mention Trixie’s twin whilst she was staying with you?”

Rupert replied, “Nope, never and I didn’t bring up the subject either. I was worried that it would open up a serious can of worms.” DS Williams walked over to Rupert and lowered her backside onto the corner of the desk; she thought for a second, her eyes staring intently at the ceiling. Turning towards Rupert she said, “Did your girlfriend, Doreen know that you’d left the baby at the convent?”

Rupert shook his head. “Not at the time, I only told her about it many, many years later, well after we were married. I was feeling really down and I had to get it off my chest. I never really came to terms with what I did, but I was still quite young, I thought what I was doing was for the best.”

DC Jones and DS Williams were sympathetic to his plight but felt duty bound to inform a disconsolate Rupert that abandoning a three-month-old baby was a criminal offence and he could face prosecution.

Rupert just shrugged his shoulders; it was all a long time ago. Sensing that the interview was over, the trio stood up in unison. DS Williams helped Rupert with his camel-coloured jacket; she placed her hand lightly on his left shoulder. “Thanks for this information, Mr Bracebridge I know this couldn’t have been easy for you. Your statement has been a great help in our investigation.”

Rupert tried to smile. She continued, “I will let you know when Irene Bracebridge is returned to the UK, ready to be interviewed.” Rupert uttered some incomprehensible words of thanks and left the building.

Doreen and Jackie were waiting for him standing close to each other on the pavement. “Come on Uncle Rupert,” announced Jackie, trying hard to be bright and cheerful. “The drinks are on

me, it looks like you need one.” Rupert gave her the thumbs up and linked his arm to Doreen’s. The threesome set off in search of the nearest pub.

DC Jones was leaning against the back wall of DS William’s small office. DS Williams was seated behind a dark brown wooden desk. There was a moment of silence between the two women as both reflected on the past one-hour interview with Irene Bracebridge.

Not that much interviewing had been completed.

Irene had been led, handcuffed, into the interview room by two uniformed prison officers. She was dressed in a white disposable boiler suit. The handcuffs were released. The two police officers immediately observed her entirely expressionless face; it was as if she was in some kind of trance. Her long grey hair was loose around her shoulders, reaching her waist, she was unwashed and unkempt. Dark circles had formed under her eyes and her skin colour was an eerie pale yellow. They had invited her to sit in front of them and introduce themselves. Irene sat obediently, placing her hands on the desk her long fingernails were encrusted with grime.

She remained completely impassive, not even a flicker of emotion was evident.

With the formal cautionary procedures completed, DC Jones and DS Williams attempted to begin questioning Irene. Irene said nothing. Her lips were pursed together as if they were sealed by powerful glue. The officers, taking it in turns, tried in vain to deploy all the interview techniques they had learned during their combined twenty years of service, but Irene simply gazed over their heads with an unusual glazed loom in her pallid grey eyes. She remained upright, silent and stolid.

DS Williams looked up from her desk at her standing colleague. She bit her bottom lip. “Well that went well, didn’t it?” she was speaking in a sarcastic tone, “Not a bloody word from the woman, it’s as if she’s in another dimension.”

DC Jones flipped her reading glasses down from the top of her head onto the bridge of her nose and opened a brown file. She began to flick through several A4 printed papers. She stared down at the seated DS Williams and scratched her chin. “We’ve got enough on her to charge her anyway, I mean it would be better if we had a confession or something, but, look, the evidence is pretty damning, the CPS will go with this, I’m certain.” DS Williams nodded her head and expertly swivelled her chair to face the office window. She brushed some imaginary crumbs from her plain brown skirt and looked inattentively at the busy outer office.

Swallowing slightly, she answered, “I’m sure you’re right, but let’s just run through it all again, I want to be certain, this is turning out to be a pretty weird case. All these hippie cults, mystical nonsense, abducted twins, abandoned babies, runaway mothers and tormented brothers. Jesus, I sometimes wonder.” DS Williams sighed noisily and pivoted her chair back to face DC Jones. “Come on, let’s get on, I want to get home on time tonight, Dave’s cooking

a roast ... AND ... before you ask, no you can't, it's just me and him tonight." DC Jones's mouth drooped in fake disappointment at the same time she gave DS Williams a wink.

"Look there's a free table over there by the window, you go and grab it and I'll get the coffee. Do you want a scone?" Jackie Trevelyan nudged her Uncle Rupert towards the vacant table. With Rupert safely seated, she carried over a tray containing two mugs of coffee and two rather anaemic-looking scones.

They both sat in silence taking the occasional sip from their respective mugs. Jackie was the first to break the hush.

"Well, at least she had the sense to plead guilty, that spared the Loveridges from having to go through a long trial." Rupert placed his mug onto the Formica-covered table and looked up at his niece. "I don't think she had much choice really, I mean the evidence was pretty overwhelming. I just wish she would speak out and explain."

Rupert looked down fingering the half-empty salt cellar and dabbed at the leftover crumbs on his plate.

Earlier that morning the packed courtroom had witnessed CCTV footage of Irene and Samantha going into the Costa on the High Street and then about half an hour later heading up Church Hill which led directly to the old mansion. A dog walker identified the pair at the back of the mansion shortly after 8.00 pm.

With a rodent controller confirming that a supply of his toxic rat poison had gone missing shortly after visiting Irene's flat and her DNA found at the crime scene, there could only be one conclusion. Irene had declined to be legally represented. She simply uttered the words "guilty" to the judge and remained, as she had since the day of her arrest, totally silent.

As Irene was taken down, Jackie was certain that Irene gave a glance up to the public gallery and focussed her eyes momentarily on Trixie.

The Loveridges had been quite magnanimous to the Bracebridges, telling them on more than one occasion that they, Jackie, Rupert, Trixie and Doreen were not to blame for their relatives' actions. If anything they had to shoulder some of the blame. They explained that Samantha had received a Facebook message from an unknown source telling her that her birth mother wanted to contact her. The message gave her all the details of where her mother lived. Alan and Ruth had urged their daughter to make contact. They both thought that it was Samantha's right to have the opportunity to meet with the woman who gave birth to her. Alan suggested that Samantha should contact Westminster Social Services and seek their advice before she arranged any meetings.

The Facebook message, whilst well-informed, was anonymous and therefore should be treated with suspicion

The social worker completed a thorough and proper investigation and confirmed that Irene was willing to meet Samantha, although she claimed that she was unaware of the message sent to Samantha. The first two visits were supervised and deemed successful; it was the third unsupervised meeting where Samantha met her fate. All of them speculated and agreed that it was their collective belief Irene had sent the unidentified message in the first instance.

As Ruth Loveridge angrily pointed out, “She was being set up all along by a wicked, twisted and calculating woman, bent on carrying out this dreadful act.”

Jackie and Rupert walked arm in arm treading slowly back towards her home. Trixie had excused herself straight after the hearing, informing the rest of her family of a headache and tiredness. “Where has Trixie gone?” asked Rupert. Jackie tugged gently at his arm, “She’s gone off for a few days, I think all this has got to her, I mean like it or not Samantha was her twin.”

The pair continued their walk.

“I saw her checking her passport so I reckon she’s gone to visit that mate of hers that works in Brussels.” Rupert smiled at Jackie, “Lucky her, knowing what she’s like she could be gone for two days or two years, I wonder if she will ever settle?” Jackie laughed, “That’s our Trixie”.

It was the first time the pair had smiled for weeks.

Trixie spotted him the moment she swept into the arrivals lounge. Bearded, wearing a red and black 49ers T-shirt tucked into blue denim jeans, he looked almost identical to the photograph he had emailed to her just thirty-six hours earlier. Trundling her tightly packed black suitcase behind her, she spun him around and dramatically flung her arms around his neck, an action reminiscent of a 1940s romantic movie.

“Daddy, I’ve met you at last,”

Trixie’s eyes were welling up as the man gently kissed her cheek. His face reddened.

“Err, now then Trixie, you know we are not sure about that, so let’s put the paternal stuff to one side, OK?” Trixie dropped her arms to her side and fixed an exaggerated pout on her lips.

“Yeah, OK, anyway, what do I call you? Jordan, Joe or are we going to formal, eh, Mr O’Riodan? What’s it to be?” The man thought for a second, “Jordan is definitely out, I don’t want to hear that name ever again, so Trixie, sweetie, let’s leave it with plain Joe. OK?” Trixie grinned and nodded. Joe took up the handle of her suitcase, she slipped her hand through the crook of his arm; they both strode towards the glass exit doors. The concierge

hailed them a taxi, and as the pair clambered into the rear seat, Joe turned to look at Trixie, his face now lined with anxiety.

"You've got some explaining to do, young lady, this Irene and Belle business is eating into my brain, we'll find a restaurant and you can do the talking." Trixie smiled and settled herself into the seat. As she stared blankly out across the airport car park, she heard Joe instruct the cab driver to head to the Hotel Nikko.

"I thought you'd be pleased," Trixie was staring intently into Joe's face, "What's the matter with you, it's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

Trixie and Joe had finished lunch and were both now sitting on a slatted wooden bench in Father Alfred E. Boeddeker Park, just a short stroll from the hotel. They had walked in silence. Joe was still trying to process the conversation they had had over their meal.

Sitting side-by-side, Trixie dipped her right hand into her patent leather shoulder bag and pulled out a small black plastic-covered book. A large round symbol was embossed into the cover. Underneath it was one word written in red – JORDAN. Trixie thrust the book in front of Joe. "Look it says in your book here, that twins are co-eternal representatives of good and evil. The good one is to be revered and the evil one is to be banished. So what's your problem?"

Trixie had fixed her eyes directly at Joe, her expression demanding an explanation from him.

Joe looked away, a group of teenage men were engaging in an impromptu game of basketball. The competition between them was fierce. His eyes momentarily followed their game.

Refocussing his mind, Joe looked down at the open book in Trixie's hands. "Where the hell did you get that from? Jesus, it must be thirty-odd years old, I didn't think that there were any left." Trixie continued to stare at an increasingly uncomfortable Joe. "Irene gave it to me, the first time I met her. We read a section from it each time I visited her. It was a Mother and Daughter thing."

Trixie gave Joe a fixed smile.

Joe responded, "Look Trixie that was written a heck of a long time ago. I was young stupid, ignorant and probably stoned out of my head when I wrote it. It was nonsense then and it is still now, and you know it." Joe leaned forward and straightened his jeans. "Anyway, nowhere does it mention murder, and let's face it, that's what you've conspired to do with a vulnerable, confused old woman. I should report you to the authorities."

It was nearly midnight and Trixie had changed into her plain pink pyjamas. She settled down in the single bed in a room set next to Joe's bedroom. She lay face up staring at the plain white ceiling. Through the surprisingly thin partition wall, she could hear Joe grunt and sigh and then start to emit a rhythmic snore. She laid back, content and comfortable with the smell of freshly washed sheets and cosy duvet. She began to mull over the events of the past months.

It was the letter that had unexpectedly turned up at her flat written on behalf of her estranged mother, Irene, that had kicked it all off. The letter explained that Irene was prone to psychotic episodes and was now being cared for in supervised sheltered accommodation. She had her small ground floor flat but help was on hand 24 hours a day should she need it. The writer explained that Irene was prone to manipulation and that their view was that she could be in serious personal danger if left completely unattended.

No explanation was given for her condition, but Trixie said out loud one word – drugs. The letter continued. In one of the more lucid moments, Irene had informed her care worker that she would like to meet her only daughter, Trixie. The letter acknowledged the fact that Irene abandoned her very early on and now she wanted to try to make some sort of amends.

No mention was made of Trixie's half-sister, Jackie. It seemed that Irene had pushed her arrival out of her mind completely. Trixie wrote back immediately and agreed to visit.

It was during their chats that Irene introduced Trixie to Jordan's teachings, reading excerpts to her from his book that had been distributed to all Group members. It was like our bible, Irene explained. Enthralled and captivated by its contents, Trixie asked Irene if she could take the book away with her to read at home. Irene agreed to her request. It was during their third meeting that Trixie brought up the subject of the Jordan/Zurvanite attitude towards twins. She remembered asking Irene if anyone in the Group were twins, or if twins had ever been born into the Group.

"I don't fancy the chances of being the evil one," Trixie had joked. Irene just stared back at Trixie, her eyes glazed over. Trixie soon ended the visit with a cheery wave goodbye.

It was during their next encounter when the name Belle first bounced into their conversations. Trixie recalled that Irene was particularly vague that day; her care worker explained that Irene had been awake for most of the night, talking incessantly to herself and pacing the bedroom floor. Trixie was sitting next to Irene both were seated on a soft cloth-covered two-person settee.

Suddenly Irene stood up and burst out, shouting "Belle, Belle, where is my Belle? She must be found and dealt with." She had repeated this several times, her anxiety levels increasing with each outburst.

Trixie turned over onto her side, she was feeling sleepy; it had been a long day. Before she slipped into slumber, she smiled to herself at the plan that she and Irene had put together to eliminate her evil twin, Belle. She set up and quickly deleted a bogus Facebook page to send

just one message to Belle, now renamed Samantha. They knew she would respond. At first, they were a little concerned when Westminster Social Services got involved, but as Trixie had said to Irene, “Play them at their game, we’ll just have to be patient.”

As soon as the pesky social worker was out of the way, the rest of the plan was put into operation. Trixie deliberately got herself caught shoplifting, knowing that John Lewis always prosecuted shoplifters, this was her chosen store. With her conviction secured and her DNA now on record, the link between her and Belle would be established and the whole dramatic episode would be blown wide open. It was her idea to report that mice had got into Irene’s kitchen, with rat catcher’s back turned; Trixie slipped a bottle of his rat poison into the pocket of her jeans. Everything was now set, including their escape. She has even sorted out a passport and ESTA US visa for both of them.

Trixie closed her eyes. She slept soundly well into the afternoon.

Joe and Trixie had declared a truce. Sitting in the window seat of Philz Coffee, Joe and Trixie hammered out their position. Naturally, Joe was distressed at Trixie’s actions and how she had influenced and played on Irene’s vulnerability. But as Trixie had pointed out, it was his words that had started it all off and anyway it was what Irene wanted.

The other compelling reason to call this armistice was Joe’s situation. He had managed to live fairly unobtrusively in a fantastic part of the world and he wanted this to remain. He was sure that he was still wanted in the UK charges of fraud tax evasion and money laundering were still on file. He wanted them to stay that way. They agreed to keep respective silences and in turn, Joe had concurred to allow her to stay with him until she could sort out something for herself.

Joe looked across at Trixie, “Look just one last thing, how did you track down Samantha, I know you found her on Facebook, but how did you know Samantha Loveridge was really Belle?”

Trixie gave Joe a knowing smile.

“I overheard Rupert confessing to Doreen about leaving a baby called Belle at the Sisters of Charity Convent, I was about fifteen years old at the time. I didn’t register then that she was my twin or any relation to me, it only dawned on me when Irene brought it up all those years after.” Trixie sipped her cappuccino, a froth of cream formed on her upper lip, she seductively licked it away. “So I looked up the convent and off I went down there. I was hovering outside not knowing what to say, when I noticed a young nun was assisting a much older one onto a bench at the passage at the rear of the convent. The young nun disappeared back inside and I seized my chance.

It was easy really.

I sat down next to the old nun. She looked like she had dementia or Alzheimer's or something, so when I got her onto the subject of a baby being left on the convent steps, she had a surprisingly good memory. I knew my luck was in when she started to ramble on about the Loveridges, UNICEF and a girl called Samantha. Apparently, they regularly visited the convent. I managed to slip away just as the young nun returned; I simply smiled and said I had kept the old lady company for a bit. She even thanked me." Trixie drank the remainder of her coffee, placing the cup down with a flourish." Once I pieced all that lot together, bingo, Samantha Loveridge was soon in my sights."

Joe couldn't help himself feeling a bit of admiration for the tenacity of Trixie, even if tragic events had followed. Having finished their drinks, they both stood up, Trixie held out her hand, and Joe grasped it.

"Truce?" Enquired Trixie.

"Truce" agreed Joe.

"This subject is now off limits."

"Uncle Rupert, are you near a computer? Trixie's resurfaced, there's a picture of her up on Instagram," Jackie was speaking excitedly into her mobile 'phone. "I've shared it with you, go on have a look, where do you think she is?" Rupert opened up his laptop and clicked the Instagram app.

The image popped up.

Rupert stared at two people in the photograph. Trixie was instantly recognisable; her short black hair was still its spikey self and her oval face shone out. But Rupert's eyes were drawn to a man standing about two paces behind Trixie. He stared at the bearded man, much older than Trixie; his hands were in his pockets, looking away from the camera. "Are you there Uncle? You've gone quiet,"

Jackie was speaking loudly on her 'phone. Rupert hesitated then replied, "Jackie, the man behind her, I know him." Rupert paused. "That's the man who came round and helped me to get Belle away. He is quite a bit older now but I'd recognise him anywhere. It's him alright."

Two years later.

"Mrs Trixie Martinez, can you come through please,"

A blue-uniformed nurse's Texan drawl echoed around the waiting room of the Providence Health Center Hospital in downtown Waco. Trixie carefully lifted herself from the wooden chair and walked slowly towards the nurse.

“Mr Martinez not with you today?” drawled the nurse.

Trixie shook her head, “No, he’s had to go to work today; they’ve got an urgent job in Dallas.”

Trixie laid herself down on the paper-covered bench and lowered the waistband of her black jog pants. She pulled up her white T-shirt. Her stomach protruded upward, like a mini pink mound. Trixie patted it gently. The nurse was busy setting up the scanner; her left hand began smearing a cold jelly-based substance onto Trixie’s bump.

“Right, let’s get down to business, this is your second scan isn’t it Trixie, babe? The nurse was talking over the head of Trixie,

“You must due soon, yes?” Trixie mumbled back,

“A month or so yet”. The nurse stared at the ultrasound monitor, whilst smoothing the scanner over Trixie’s lower half. Suddenly she stopped and Trixie noticed a frown develop on her face. Trixie looked up at her,

“What’s up? Is there something wrong?

What have you seen?

The nurse looked down at Trixie and smiled.

Nothing to worry about here babe, I just hope you’ve saved up a few Benjamins, ‘cos baby, it looks like you havin’ twins. Congratulations.”

So here I am sitting in my cell. It’s not all bad you know, I’m left alone most of the time. Apparently, mothers that kill their children are still not popular with the other prisoners and I have been advised to keep a low profile. Of course, I couldn’t have done any of this without the help of Trixie; she was a star, a bright child, a chip off the old block. She even tracked down Jordan for me and at least I had a few days in his company.

He had changed though.

He wasn’t the Jordan I knew and revered (and slept with on more than one occasion!).

It was good to get back with Trixie, she writes to me regularly; she’s in the States now, married to a Yank. She says she’ll come and visit me when she’s back here and I’m looking forward to that.

A nice young lady, with long dreadlocks came to visit me shortly after I was sent here. She reckons if I behave myself and keep my head down, you know, be

cooperative and that, I could get moved to an open prison which she says would suit me better. Personally, I don't care either way, as long as I am left alone, I'm happy.

Should I say sorry to Rupert and those Loveridge people? Nah. It won't reverse anything, it had to be done and I did it. Anyway if I start chattering I might get Trixie involved and that wouldn't do, would it?

Anyway, that's it from me for the time being. Don't feel sorry for me. I'm not sorry.

The End