

Prologue

The glowing sleeves of the toaster cheerfully tossed two slices of crispy bread into the air at the exact same moment as the chrome kettle started to whistle and the clock struck 8am.

At a small square table with a blue and white checked cloth slung protectively over it, the young man with untidy brown hair registered these three occurrences and looked across at the woman who should have been his wife, but wasn't. She looked like her, spoke like her, used the same mannerisms as her, wore her dressing gown and smelled of the moisturiser she used, but it definitely wasn't the girl he had married five years ago.

Across the table, the pretty young woman in the dressing gown had a puzzled expression on her face. She was dead, but her husband was looking at her as if it was a regular Sunday morning and she was about to go and brew the coffee. Admittedly he had a slightly odd look about him today, but not the sort of look a man would be expected to carry as he studied his wife's corpse.

Keen to avoid eye contact with each other at this peculiar time, the couple looked down at the table and the incongruous array of objects laid out upon it. The cereal bowls, cups, knives, forks, spoons, salt and pepper made sense, as did the ketchup, napkins and pretty single red rose in the white china vase. But what were a saw and a gun doing on the breakfast table?

The man reached out and placed his left hand on the gun. But it wasn't his hand. He looked further up and saw that the whole arm didn't belong to him. Scared, he looked at his right arm, but that was okay, that was his. But this left arm, who did that belong to and why was it attached to his body?

It clicked. One month previously he had been head-hunted by a very big and important company. They had been so keen to secure his services that they had flown him out in a private jet, and then a helicopter, to their headquarters in Geneva. There had been questions, lots of difficult questions, and they had warned him that there would be tests. Bizarre tests, they had said, which would determine whether or not he was really worthy of employment.

How cunning, he thought. Nothing for a month and now the most unusual test sprung upon him at the weekend breakfast table. They had done a great job in finding a replica wife and smuggling her into his home, but the false arm, that really was something else.

The saw was the test. They wanted to test his nerve, his resolve and his trust. He knew his left arm didn't belong to him, but did he have the strength, courage and conviction to remove it?

Well, he thought, they'd have to come up with something harder than that to defeat him!

He was wearing a T-shirt, which he pulled off over his head and folded neatly on the table.

The woman who looked like his wife studied his bare chest but remained non-committal and motionless.

With a smile, he picked up the long saw with his right hand and placed the teeth nearest the handle just above the bicep on the foreign left arm.

He looked once more at the woman opposite him then clenched his right fist and tugged down sharply, pulling the length of the saw across his left arm.

There was a tremendous feeling of pain, but that couldn't be possible because it wasn't his arm. There was also a river of crimson flowing over his body, onto the table cloth and down onto the tiled floor. He

frowned and pushed the saw in the opposite direction, then pulled it back and forward, back and forward. There came a nasty scraping sound and the motion slowed as the saw laboured through the humerus, before it emerged the other side and carved through the tricep and last few millimetres of skin. The saw then hit thin air as the arm dropped away from the man's shoulder, caught the edge of the table and landed on the floor with a wet smack.

Concerned, the man clutched at the red fountain hosing from his shoulder where the brachial artery had been sheared. This was a nasty fucking test and if they'd somehow grafted a donor arm onto him how come it now felt like all the life was spraying out of his whole body? And why was the woman opposite just fucking staring at him?

The woman was actually feeling mystified. She knew she was dead, so why were there energies pulsing around her as she looked at the scene across the table that could only be described as emotion? She was dead. Emotions and feelings were not possible.

Exasperated, she picked up the gun, wedged the barrel into her mouth and blew her brain out the back of her skull.

The man witnessed this and watched the woman's occipital lobe dribble down the kitchen window before he passed out and died from blood loss four minutes later.

There was a click and the lights went out in the kitchen as a single bulb came on to illuminate the adjacent room. After a stunned pause and shuffling there was a sober ripple of applause from the four men and four women who had just observed the scene.

"Incredible. Were they really husband and wife?" asked one of the women.

"*Oui, ils étaient mariés depuis cinq ans,*" replied one of the men.

"And how long have they been exposed?"

"*Juste pour deux mois, mais la dose a été très concentré.*"

"That is excellent. Inform the Director that we are ready to proceed to Phase Seven. And please instruct the sanitation division to arrange for the room to be cleansed."