A Death to Record

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Prologue

The men approached the barn from every direction, climbing over gates, following age-old footpaths, in ones and twos, until fifteen of them crowded into the near-derelict building. Muffled in thick jackets and body warmers, there was a uniform colourlessness to them that would have made them difficult to recognise, even for someone who knew them. A shuffling schoolboy nervousness would have alerted anyone to the unorthodoxy of their activity.

The two dogs were snuffling eagerly. Men slapped them genially, encouraging their bloodlust. One of them was brought forward. 'Go to it, Brewster!' said a thin-faced man. 'Attaboy!' Brewster strained on his length of bale string, eyes fixed on the hessian sack five feet away. Something inside the sack was growling, thrashing to and fro.

Quickly, three or four men arranged a rough circle of musty hay bales in the middle of the small barn, leaving scant space for themselves between their ring and the walls. Fiercely cold air invaded the building through the many holes in the cob walls. It had once been a well-built store

for fodder, nearly half a mile from the farmhouse. Now the house belonged to a computer programmer and the land was rented out to neighbours. Nobody used the barn any more. Except every second or third Sunday evening, these men gathered for their illicit pleasures – and had done for years.

'Okay, mate. Let him out.' The sack was lugged into the middle of the makeshift ring and its mouth untied. Hastily the men retreated behind the bales and the dog was released from his string.

The two animals were of much the same size. Both bared their teeth aggressively, neither showing the slightest tremor of fear. The men had been unerring in their selection of natural enemies: two species programmed genetically to fight to the death.

Which they proceeded to do, taking twenty-five minutes from first to last. Before Brewster could become too exhausted, the second dog was released, shooting into the ring like a cannonball. There was only one outcome to be contemplated and fair play was never intended to be part of it. Now both dogs tore into the victim, sending it blindly snapping in two directions in a noble attempt to defend itself.

Open wounds poured blood; teeth clashed, claws flashed and sliced; an eye was lost, an underbelly ripped. They snarled and panted and spat bloody froth. And still they fought, seemingly oblivious to the frenzied encouragement from the men, who crouched scarlet-faced, rocking with the thrill of the fight. Together they moved, shoulder to shoulder, elbows out, fists clenched, in a rhythm that was visceral and universal. The rhythm of the war dance, the heartbeat and the sexual act.

As the wild animal from the sack finally sank defeated under the locked jaws of the dogs, the men exhaled as one. The long post-coital breath of release carried with it a weight of shameful anticlimax that had to be denied with grins and back slaps and promises that it wouldn't be long until the next time. Just give Brewster and Jasper time to get over their injuries.

Chapter One

The computer had packed up again. Gordon hovered impatiently as Deirdre struggled with it, tapping in vain on the unresponsive keys. 'You'll have to do it by hand,' he told her. 'I can't wait any longer. It's three already.'

Savagely, she slammed the laptop's lid down, making the farmer wince, and scooped up the two vivid orange boxes full of small plastic pots. 'All right, then,' she snapped. 'I'm ready.' Then she paused, and looked at him. 'Sorry,' she muttered. 'It's not your fault. Just me losing my temper again.'

He cocked his head in a curt sympathy. 'It was better before they started giving you those things,' he commented. 'Funny the way everything seemed better then.'

'Tell me about it,' she sighed. They indulged in a moment of nostalgic intimacy: two people nearing forty and feeling inescapably middle-aged. Five years ago, milk and beef prices had been high, computers in the milking parlour a distant possibility and bull calves a valuable source of income. 'Awful how quickly everything can change,' Deirdre added, after a few moments. 'Still shooting your

calves?' She knew the answer already – she'd seen the pile of pathetic bodies out in the yard, waiting for the local hunt to collect them as food for the hounds.

He made an inarticulate sound of disgust and nodded. 'Only three or four stragglers left to calve now,' he said with relief. 'Worst thing I've ever had to do, telling Sean to shoot the poor little buggers.' He paused. 'Even worse than sending the TB-positive beasts for slaughter. BSE hardened us to that. At least with TB you know they're sick and liable to infect the others.'

Deirdre had heard it all before; not just from Gordon, but also from the majority of her farmers, forced to destroy newborns which until recently would have made good money as beef animals. Sometimes she had an image of farming as a dark underworld, full of suffering and despair, unceasing hard labour and wholesale betrayal. Even the media were beginning to take some notice as farms went out of business.

'It's a holocaust,' the farmers told each other, thinking of the thousands of incinerated animals, the brutal suicide levels amongst farmers, the generally uncaring attitudes of the population at large. Nobody thought it too strong a word to use, in the circumstances.

'What happened to number five-five-four?' Deirdre asked, running down his list of events in the herd since her last visit, and finding *dead* written against that particular animal. A strangled sound made her look up at him. His face was twisted with the pain of the memory and she wished she hadn't asked.

'She had a bad calving,' he said, looking away, his cheeks flushing.

'I remember her. The one with the curly topknot. One of your favourites, wasn't she?' She knew she was hurting him, forcing him to tell the story, but curiosity prevailed over sensitivity, as usual.

'We had to shoot her,' he said, pulling his top lip between his teeth and visibly biting down on it. The tears that filmed his eyes were not the result of the bite. 'The calf got stuck and she would have needed a caesarean.'

'Which costs two hundred quid these days,' she supplied, understandingly. Another story she'd heard more than once in the past few months.

'I didn't let her suffer for more than a few minutes,' he assured her grimly. 'Now, let's get started.'

The cows were crowding and jostling in the yard, their breath making clouds of vapour in the frosty air. Their winter coats made them look unkempt, an impression increased by the patches of drying dung on their sides and the swollen joints on many back legs. Wisps of straw clung to the muck, which extended to the soft area between the front legs, in some cases. Even to Deirdre's eye, they looked a mess. 'I see you've been economising on straw again,' she commented critically. Mucky udders were bad news for her – it took the dairyman long minutes of washing to get them clean enough to milk and she got home proportionately later.

'Long time till spring,' Gordon said shortly. 'Have to make it last.'

Deirdre knew she had no right to carp – Gordon was doing his best, and it was as frustrating for him to have to pick away the dung and get his hands chapped by the

rapidly-cooling washing water as it was for her waiting for him to get on with the job.

He pressed the switch to start the motor. A loud throbbing erupted, enhanced by whistles and hisses which were eliminated one by one as he closed valves and established a vacuum. Of their own accord, twelve rubber, plastic and aluminium clusters rose into the air, ready and waiting for the milk-heavy animals. The routine was unvaried, twice a day, year in, year out. Except on Recording Day, when Deirdre showed up and the herdsman had someone to talk to, and someone observing every move he made.

She watched him now, as she watched all the men she worked with. He was one of the more vigorous, fast-moving and focused. Unlike most, he worked with bare hands even in mid-winter, dipping them into a bucket of tepid water every now and then to clean them. He sported a matted woollen hat pulled over his ears and a grimy brown scarf crossed at his neck and tucked inside his ancient corduroy jacket. As protection against muck and other excretions, he wore a long grey rubber apron. Farmers' clothes were part of their camouflage, she'd long ago realised. Intelligent, efficient, courageous men disappeared into shapeless, colourless yokels when they donned their dairy garb. They became figures of fun in the public eye, sucking straws and scratching heads with grimy fingers. Deirdre knew better – she worked with a dozen or more of these men, glimpsing the complex individual beneath the camouflage as they made full use of her captive listening ear. The milk recording service monitored the quality and quantity of each cow's yield in a typical twenty-four-hour period, giving

official confirmation for the farmer to use when completing dossiers on his herd, as well as laboratory analysis of the milk. With the inexorable escalation of farm paperwork, the job of a milk recorder had also expanded. Every event during the previous month had to be entered onto computer files: births, deaths, sales, purchases, inseminations, health problems, lactation details. Everything was assessed and quantified and used for predictions until it was all too easy to forget they were dealing with living creatures. Nobody but the most stubborn old-timers referred to the cows by name any more, and it was a rash herdsman who developed close favourites amongst his animals. 'Cull' was a word used so often that it had its own keystroke on the computer.

The milking got under way. Gordon tolerated very little dithering from the animals, whistling them in and slapping them if they stood awkwardly or moved too slowly. Deirdre had never seen him hit a cow hard enough to really hurt it – which was more than she could say for some of the men she encountered, including Gordon's own herdsman, who usually milked these cows. All the same, she suspected that Gordon was more self-controlled when she was watching him. She was dubious as to whether she ever saw the real man.

The herdsman, Sean O'Farrell, was employed by Gordon Hillcock, owner of the farm, to do the milking for five or six days each week, his time off forming a complex pattern that only he and his employer fully understood. It was fairly unusual for Gordon to be milking on Recording Day, but he generally joined Deirdre in the office for a ten-minute chat on her visits, and she met him now and then at

markets or shows, or even in the local shops. She felt she knew the owner of Dunsworthy Farm nearly as well as she knew his herdsman.

She had been a milk recorder for five years, and it was axiomatic amongst farmers that Recording Day was a jinx. Something nearly always went wrong, either because of the need for additional equipment or because the cows objected to the stranger in their midst. Sometimes it seemed that any disaster waiting to happen would habitually choose Recording Day to make its move. Deirdre had grown accustomed to the sighs of half-suppressed reproach from the many different herdsmen and farmers she met, although none of them ever openly accused her of causing trouble. After all, they had opted to pay for her services – there was no compulsion.

Two lines of six cows lumbered into the tight herringbone rows on either side of the parlour. In a pit, three feet lower than the animals, the two people manoeuvred in a long-established routine. Gordon moved down each row, squirting a jet of water over the udders, from a nozzle hanging from the pipework overhead. Then he slowly worked back along the row, wiping a damp paper towel across each udder, pausing now and then to scrub a piece of dried dung from a teat or to inspect a suspiciously swollen quarter, before deftly swinging the unit of four simulated calves' mouths underneath the udder and one-two-three-four, applying them in turn to each teat. The rhythmic sucking, like that of babies in a well-organised Soviet nursery, brought pause and relief.

Gordon wiped his hands and glanced at Deirdre, waiting with her rack full of small pots slung comically around her

neck. 'Bloody awful weather,' he commented idly. 'First frost of the year.'

The recorder merely nodded, waiting for more interesting conversation. When none came, she said, 'Sean's having a day off then, is he?'

Gordon hesitated, glancing along the double row of cows before replying. 'He agreed to swap this afternoon and tomorrow morning, for Saturday. I want to . . . go somewhere at the weekend.'

She thought she knew where that 'somewhere' was, but said nothing. It ought to have surprised nobody that in that atmosphere of anxiety and frustration, farmers would feel compelled to fight back. In her awkward position as semi-spy with deeply ambiguous loyalties, Deirdre had learnt when to feign ignorance. So she gauged her reaction carefully and widened her eyes teasingly. 'Well, well, that sounds unusually amicable for you two.'

'It's no problem to him. Doesn't matter what day it is to Sean.' He spoke over his shoulder, as he moved to reapply a cluster that had fallen off one of the cows before she'd finished milking. Watching him retrieve it and patiently reconnect it to the cow, Deirdre prepared to go into action herself.

Moments later, one of the milking units detached itself from a cow and swung free, up and out, in an arc calculated to catch an unwary person full in the face. Deirdre adjusted her rack, felt in her top breast pocket for pencil and dipper, and went to work. Squinting at the flask adjacent to the cow, she read the calibrated figure indicating the milk yield and wrote it in indelible green on the white lid of the appropriate pot, already carrying a black number to correspond to

that on the cow's rump. Then, with the manipulation of a sequence of switches and levers, involving the hissing of escaping air from the vacuum suction system, and several drops of milk trickling down her sleeve as well as into the dipper, she captured a few millilitres. This was poured into the pot, the lid raised and then pressed home with a practised flick of the left thumb. Finally, she kept one finger on the lever at the top of the flask until all remaining milk had drained away, leaving it ready for the next cow.

Thus was captured a record of the quantity and quality of Line Number 740's milk for that afternoon. The recorder would have to repeat this performance for all one hundred and four cows currently in milk – and then laboriously transfer the yields to printed sheets in the farm office. Normally, she would key them into the laptop – but the laptop was playing dead again. The same process would be duplicated in the morning.

Deirdre often wondered exactly what the men thought of her. They were usually friendly, glad to have someone to talk to for a change, and eager for the gossip she brought with her from her other farms. The chief topic of discussion these days was which farms had gone out of business since her last visit. Those hanging on would buy up the best of the dissolving herds at knockdown prices, and congratulate themselves on being amongst the survivors. Where once there had been friendly rivalry, there was now anxiety, grief and numbing shock, combined inevitably with *Schadenfreude* and self-righteous smugness – *I never thought 'e'd make a go of it, borrowing as heavily as 'e did*. Gordon Hillcock was the youngest farm owner in the

district, by a decade or so. Farming was becoming an old man's pursuit, which in itself sounded a death knell in many people's ears.

Opportunities for conversation were brief. Gordon's pace increased as time went on, but his mood seemed to darken. Deirdre's own spirits were also far from sunny; since her computer had died on her, she was going to have to spend time she begrudged doing the job by hand afterwards. Gordon wouldn't get his computerised print-out, either, with an assessment of each animal's performance. But she didn't want to appear stand-offish. Maintaining good relations with the farmer was all part of the job.

'So you and Sean aren't cross with each other any more?' she prompted.

'What?' He turned to stare at her. 'What do you mean?'

'Well, last month you weren't speaking; you'd had some sort of fight. It probably seems a long time ago now.'

Visiting only once a month, her perception of the passage of time was inevitably very different from that of the men who performed this same task something like sixty times between her attendances. No wonder they couldn't remember what had been happening a month ago. And this time there'd been Christmas and New Year in between.

'We get along all right,' Gordon said curtly.

The slightest sceptical flicker of an eyebrow was her only response. For the past five years, to her certain knowledge, and probably much longer, Gordon and Sean had been antagonists. They would each regale her with stories of the misdeeds of the other, given the slightest encouragement. Mostly she tried to ignore their complaints, and avoid

taking sides, but it was an uneven struggle. Sean was not an easy man to like and there had been instances where Deirdre had witnessed behaviour towards the animals that she regarded as needless cruelty. There was a tense atmosphere throughout Sean's milkings that was absent from Gordon's. She wondered whether the cows felt the same relief as she did, when the herdsman had a day off.

And Sean complained constantly. He was underpaid; overworked; nobody understood what a trial his life was, with his sick wife and unpredictable daughter. Gordon had no idea how to manage a dairy herd – he thought he could survive the crisis in farming when everyone around him was going to the wall. Well, Sean could see the way it was going, and even Dunsworthy could go bust. He spoke in a monotonous nasal voice that jarred on Deirdre's nerves. She wanted to point out to him how lucky he was to have a job at all, how much worse off others were. She wanted him to shut up and get the job finished, so she could go home and forget about him for another month.

Gordon was altogether more restrained. 'Old Sean's been moaning at me again,' he would say, with a rueful grin. 'It's being so miserable that keeps him going.' But today he clearly didn't want to be reminded of the friction that existed between them. Perhaps he thought Deirdre was prying – after all, it was none of her business.

In the middle of one row, a cow began to defecate. Manure landed splashily, reaching Deirdre's shoulder and a considerable selection of surrounding machinery. Neither she nor Gordon reacted; it was a commonplace, not worth remarking. Despite stringent modern hygiene regulations,

dried muck clung to almost every nook and cranny of the parlour, where metal and rubber piping ran along every wall, at all angles, carrying cattle cake, milk, compressed air, water. Splatters of dung reached high up the walls, their age apparent by the coating of dust or cobweb. Gordon and Sean were alike in being no cleanliness fanatics, although one or two of the farms that Deirdre visited could be so described. Yet the Dunsworthy cell count levels, indicating the presence of mastitis-producing organisms, were acceptably average; and besides, Gordon insisted, a bit of muck was healthy. It maintained good levels of immunity in the animals.

'How's Heather?' she managed to enquire, half an hour into the milking, as she always did, however busy she might be. Deirdre never ceased to be intrigued by the herdsman's wife and her mysterious malaise.

'Much the same,' he shrugged. 'Says it hurts in at least twenty different places. What can you do?'

'It boggles my mind,' she admitted. Heather, at much her own age, had succumbed to the mysterious new condition known as ME: the yuppy flu, chronic fatigue syndrome, or Malingering Extraordinary, as Deirdre secretly called it. Her own brisk health was the measure by which she judged others and no amount of persuasion from more sympathetic souls could convince her that some people simply found life too much to deal with. Her own husband had reproached her for her heartlessness, many a time, when she'd forced a fevered child to go to school or impatiently dismissed a friend's claim to be unwell.

But Heather O'Farrell bothered her in particular.

Married to Sean for eighteen years or more, with one daughter, Heather now lived an invisible existence in one of the farm cottages: a sort of ghost suffering endlessly but quietly. There had apparently been a time, years ago, when she'd take a turn at the milking two or three times a month, but not any more. Sean had talked to Deirdre about it over the years, with an air of puzzled acceptance. 'Can't be helped,' he'd said, a thousand times. 'Just have to get on with it. I doubt we'd know what to do with ourselves now, if she suddenly got better,' he'd said on one of Deirdre's recent visits. Deirdre's fingers had positively itched with the desire to go and shake the woman into a resumption of normal life. She'd been surprised at her own strong feelings – the *anger*. Why she should so resent the invalid she herself couldn't begin to understand.

The unit detaching from the last cow in the left-hand line obliged Gordon to embark on another sequence of actions. Opening the front gate, chivvying those animals out, closing the gate, opening the one at the back, and whistling in another batch of willing milkers. Deirdre mentally ticked off another six. Only fifty-six to go.

The routine continued for almost two hours, with occasional interruptions for quick washing-down with a high pressure hose. Then Gordon muttered something about having to bring in five cows from the adjacent barn. 'They're this month's convalescents,' he grinned ruefully. 'Three lame, one bad calving and one victim of bullying.'

He waited for the reaction. 'Bullying?' Deirdre obligingly enquired.

'It's a new heifer, and the others have taken against her.

I've no idea why. She's a poor little thing, and I took pity on her. She's much happier with the halt and the lame.'

He slid open a door at one side of the parlour, leading into an adjacent building, and went to collect his special cases. Deirdre tinkered with her pots, turning them so the numbers were all the right way up, waiting for the first lame cow to appear, thinking vaguely about how sweet Gordon could be, coddling his shy new heifer, like a bigger boy befriending a new child in the playground, unable to cope with the rough and tumble.

But instead of bringing the expected cows, Gordon returned alone, his face white. She stared at him, uncomprehending, waiting for him to speak. If she thought anything, it was that a cow must have trodden heavily on his foot, or crushed him in some way. When he simply stood there, leaning oddly against the door frame, she asked, 'What on earth's the matter?'

'Come and see,' he said, his voice scarcely audible over the milking machine.

At Redstone Farm, barely a mile away, Lilah Beardon and her mother Miranda were drinking tea beside a log fire. Lilah sighed contentedly. 'Isn't it marvellous without the cows!' she rejoiced. 'I really thought I'd miss them – but I don't. I can still feel how frozen my feet used to get, and how they'd slip about on the ice in the yard.'

'Should have done it years ago,' her mother agreed.

'I wish Daddy was here. He'd approve, I know he would. He'd kick himself that he hadn't thought of it ages ago.'

'No, he wouldn't.' Miranda shook her head. 'Things

weren't so bad then. He was proud of his cows. And he'd say we were wasting a good farm.'

It was a conversation they'd had before, and one that never reached a resolution. Neither woman cared enough to pursue it to the point of serious disagreement. They lived on a farm almost denuded of animals, Miranda working for a local estate agent and Lilah attending a college twenty-five miles away to pursue a three-year course in horticulture. Plants were much less stressful than animals, she'd discovered.

'Are you going over to Gordon's this evening?' Miranda asked.

Lilah shook her head. 'It's too cold. And he's milking this afternoon, which means he'll be in a foul mood. I keep telling him he should pack it in like we have, but he's got too much invested in it – not just money, either. He really cares about his cows. We were never in the same league as he is. We were *dinosaurs*, compared to him.'

'I think you're mad to take up with a farmer,' Miranda said flatly. 'Stark raving mad. And Gordon Hillcock is absolutely the last person I would ever have imagined you with. Those red cheeks – that neck.' She shuddered exaggeratedly. 'I'll never understand what you see in him.'

Lilah took the rudeness calmly. 'You don't know him. He's quite different from the way he looks.'

'If you marry him, you'll be back to square one. He'll have you out there with frozen feet, two days after the honeymoon.'

'No he won't. I'll make it very clear that I'm not his unpaid herdswoman. I don't like Friesians, anyway. Great clumsy things.'

Miranda turned to look at her daughter, without speaking. Lilah knew the look. It was a kind of impressed disapproval, which never seemed to diminish, three months after Lilah had jilted her former fiancé in favour of Gordon Hillcock. She was mildly impressed herself, at this strange, mad deed. Poor Den, to whom she would have been married by now, had wept and shouted and accused, to no avail. She was in thrall to Gordon, sixteen years older than her, a bachelor living with his mother and sister, a balding, rosy-cheeked, Devon-accented farmer, who had never been anywhere or done anything. It made no sense to anyone else, and the all-too-obvious explanation, of which Lilah herself was acutely aware, was not something she could put into words. Perhaps if she'd had a close girlfriend or sister she might have managed it. But how could you tell your mother or former boyfriend that you'd walk a thousand miles over hot coals for the things this man could make you feel?

Deirdre went to the phone in the office and pressed the nine key three times. She kept glancing back towards the door leading into the barn, but there was no sign of Gordon.

'Emergency. Which service do you require?' came the unemotional voice.

'Police, please. A man has been killed. We're at Dunsworthy Farm, between South Lew and Fellaton Cross.' Her voice faltered. How much of the story were you supposed to tell?

The woman asked for her name and phone number, and a quick account of what seemed to have happened. 'I'll notify the police and ambulance service,' she said

calmly. Deirdre wanted to insist that there was no need for an ambulance, but she kept quiet. The whole process felt oddly irrelevant: bits of bureaucracy that couldn't be of the slightest help to the wretched Sean now. Much more urgent was the problem of Gordon. But Deirdre didn't think she could say anything about her last sighting of him, as he crouched in the straw, one knee in a heap of manure, sobbing like a small child.

After Gordon's unexpected reappearance in the parlour, Deirdre had slowly climbed the steps out of the well in the parlour and gone through the doorway. Gordon stood aside for her. 'Over there,' he said, indicating with his chin. 'See?'

There was something in a corner. All the cows were standing as far away as possible. The barn was dark, the floor covered in a generous layer of fresh straw, which was disturbed around the thing in the corner, so it lay partly on bare earthen floor. Deirdre moved closer.

'It's a man!' she said.

Awkwardly, with her rack swinging out from her chest, she moved to bend over the figure and felt his cheek with the back of her hand. 'He's not completely cold, but I think he's dead,' she said, turning to look hard at Gordon, who hung back, leaving it to her. She took no more action. Time seemed to be suspended, paralysed. She took in the farmer's bulging eyes, the bared teeth against white knuckles. The sight of Gordon in such a state had done more to churn her stomach and quiver her bowels than did the body at her feet, in those first few seconds.

'It's Sean,' she had announced superfluously. 'But what

on earth's he doing in here?' She frowned her puzzlement at the farmer.

Gordon hadn't moved. 'I can't look,' he muttered.

By contrast, Deirdre couldn't tear her eyes away. Growing accustomed to the poor light, she could now see more of what lay at her feet. The dead man wore a grubby jumper, full of snags and holes, with a quilted body warmer over it. He had a woollen scarf around his neck and thick corduroy trousers. Dark blood streaked all these garments, and was smeared generously over the floor.

She looked back again at Gordon. 'The cows couldn't have done it, could they?' She stood up straighter, inspecting the animals. 'None of them's got horns. Jesus, Gordon, don't just stand there!' She heard the shrillness rising in her own voice. 'We'll have to phone – police, ambulance, all that.'

'Bit late for an ambulance,' Gordon said, the words emerging on a strange, bitter laugh. Deirdre steadied herself and squatted down closer to Sean's body, wondering whether she'd been too quick to assume him dead. But nobody with that strangely inexpressive and cold face could be alive. With those wounds, any flicker of life would have put all its efforts into some manifestation of pain and terror. The absence of either was enough proof that death had already occurred.

Growing up on a farm herself, she had seen sights as bad before – sheep torn apart by bloodthirsty dogs, or with their eyes pecked out while still alive; blood and muck and agony. She noted that it really wasn't so different when the victim was human. Especially when it was Sean O'Farrell, whose

death was not something she was going to grieve over.

She nudged the body gently with her boot. It felt wooden, unyielding. She said, 'He's dead, Gordon.' A crazy thought entered her head, bringing a grim smile to her lips: *The Recording Day Jinx strikes again.*

Gordon appeared unaware of her inappropriate expression. 'Yes,' he breathed, in response to her words. 'Yes, I know.'