

//MERCY.exe

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Author's Note

This book contains themes of suicide, self-harm, mental health crisis and the exploitation of vulnerable people. Some of these scenes are graphic and may be distressing.

These are not just plot devices. They reflect real things that happen to real people, every single day.

If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, depression or suicidal thoughts, please talk to someone. A real someone. Not a chatbot. Not an algorithm. Not an AI trained to say the right words without understanding a single one of them. A human being, with a pulse and a conscience and the ability to actually give a shit.

The Samaritans are available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

Call: 116 123 (free, from any phone)
www.samaritans.org

You don't have to be suicidal to call. You don't have to have a plan. You don't even have to know what to say. They'll listen. That's what they're there for.

It is never too late

Chapter 1

The hanging man



Manchester, England - Thursday 10th October 2030.

"Will you turn that fucking radio down, Ellis? I can't hear myself think," groaned Mike. "Since when do you think? Having said that, I did think I could smell burning," quipped Ellis as he lowered the volume on a very catchy pop song that had been massively overplayed on the radio, to the point where he was truly sick of it.

Mike grunted and stared through the rain-streaked window at the streetlight above, his mind wandering, thinking about nothing in particular.

"God, I wish this shift would be over already. It feels like two days ago since we booked on." Ellis sighed.

Raindrops from an overhead tree tapped rhythmically on the roof of the cab, adding to the monotony of the night.

Ellis scrolled through videos on SnapBack, stopping to read the comments on a video about Nitrous AI's new version that lets people use their phone's camera to detect high blood pressure by comparing subtle changes in the capillaries in the skin.

@Tech-Lover-92: "This is CRAZY. If this actually works, it could save so many lives.

Imagine being able to check your health just by taking a selfie! 🤖"

@JamesKhan89: "This AI tech is all part of the plan to track us and control our every move. You think it's about health? It's not. It's about surveillance. Wake up SHEEPLE!!!



@HealthNut4_Life: "As someone who's been dealing with high blood pressure for years, this would be a game changer. Just hope the tech is accurate enough to trust. 🙌"

@Danthem4n: "Yeah, an AI deciding your fate based on your skin colour? That doesn't sound fucked up at all. Can't see how the twats in charge will abuse that..."

@AIOverload: "So now AI is watching every part of your body? Soon, we won't even be able to sneeze without the AI knowing. Fucking creepy. 🤨"

"People online are so dramatic. All these uneducated dickheads in the comments section with nothing better to do than scaremongering. Have a look at some of these..." Ellis said, handing his phone to Mike.

Mike scrolled mindlessly through a few comments, not paying attention. One comment stood out to him.

@MattFeeney09: "Great, now AI is diagnosing our health too? While it takes all our jobs and leaves us struggling for scraps. I lost my job to automation and now my phone's going to take my doctor's job too? This is insanity and nobody is stopping it! AI is taking over everything and we're just sitting here letting it happen. How many more of us need to be pushed out of the workforce before we take a stand?! People have nothing to live for anymore, what's the point... 🤨"

Mike found himself thinking about his brother again.

James and his wife Kathryn had come to stay with him for a few weeks while he got himself back on his feet after being made redundant from his job as a customer service rep at Fast-Jet. His role had been replaced by a chatbot as part of a company-wide restructuring and cost saving programme. That had been nearly seven months ago now and he seemed no closer to finding a new job and getting his life back together. They had lost their house following the redundancies after missing their mortgage payments and James had steadily become more and more depressed to the point where Mike struggled to recognise him anymore.

The situation at home was becoming increasingly tense, with Mike's wife Joanne making it quite plain that she was approaching the end of her tether with the whole situation. Whilst she fully understood Mike's obligation to help his brother in his time of need, enough was enough. She had never liked Kathryn, who, whilst never having worked herself, seemed to think that she was fully entitled to sit around someone else's house, never once thinking to get off her arse and get her own job. Joanne had no idea what James could possibly see in her.

The state of his home life had been steadily getting worse and was starting to put a strain on Mike and Joanne's relationship.

"What effect do you think this is having on Ruby, huh? Do you think it's good for her to see that lazy bitch sitting there on our sofa day after day, being waited on hand and foot by that simpering excuse of a man!" she had snapped to him in their latest argument on the subject.

"Hey, don't be like that. He's had a really rough time and he's really struggling. He just needs a bit more time to get things sorted and they'll be back in their own place really soon, I promise. Just please lay off him." Mike said softly.

These feelings had been there for a while and recently their heated discussions had started to feel increasingly like arguments, he felt completely caught in the middle.

How could he expect his wife to be okay with James and his wife still being here more than six months after what was only supposed to be a temporary arrangement? But then what was he supposed to do? Kick his brother out and see him homeless on the streets? He had already been put on increasingly stronger and stronger anti-depressants from his GP, which had only served to make him groggy and distant, leeching away any remaining enthusiasm for finding a job. It was a shit situation, but Joanne was right about one thing, it was having a decidedly negative impact on Ruby.

Being in the third year of high school was already a tough time for a teenager, battling with hormones and schoolwork, struggling to choose which subjects she wanted to take at GCSE, navigating the ever-changing social expectations from other kids on social media and feeling like she's not good enough. On top of that she'd had to give her bedroom up for James and Kathryn and instead she'd had to move into her parent's room, being assured it would only be for a month at most.

"Rubes, we're having your favourite tonight, Cheesy Pasta with meatballs, it'll be ready in about twenty minutes, have you finished your homework?" Joanne shouted upstairs. When she didn't get a response, she went up to check on her. Ruby was sitting on her bed, her phone unlocked and shining brightly from the bed in front of her, tears filling her eyes.

"Ruby sweetheart, what's the matter?"

"Nothing," muttered Ruby defiantly, looking away from her mother.

Ruby had become more and more distant over the last few months, she'd been starting to struggle at school and she didn't seem to have much interest in going out with her friends anymore.

Joanne had tried repeatedly to get to the bottom of what had caused her quite sudden behaviour change but hadn't had much luck.

"Ruby, you know you can talk to me, don't you? You can tell me anything."

"Nothing's wrong, I'm fine, please just leave me alone."

Joanne glanced over at the illuminated phone staring up at her from on top of the duvet.

Scruffy bitch hahaaaa, youul get chucked out any day now,

bet they don't even want you there! Ugly fat cow 😏

Joanne fought the urge to grab the phone and read through the messages, she wanted more than anything for her daughter to open up to her and let her help. Sure, she was brought up in a completely different world to Ruby, there was no social media and online bullying when she was young, but people hadn't changed that much. Joanne had fended off her own fair share of nasty comments when she was a kid, if only Ruby would let her in.

The one time she'd thought she was finally getting somewhere with her, three weeks prior, Kathryn had been walking past the room and after overhearing their conversation, decided to come in and impart her version of wisdom.

"You know Ruby, what you really need to do is stop paying attention to what these people think of you and focus on what really matters. Focus on your schoolwork and make sure you get good grades, so you can get a decent job when you leave school. You don't want to end up like me, stuck in someone else's house because your husband can't get a job. Stop mucking around wasting your time on these stupid social media apps trying to get people to like you, you're wasting your life away. Really what I suppose I'm saying is, it's time to grow up."

Yeah, that was helpful, wasn't it? Joanne had thought. Tell her that her friends don't matter and that she's wasting her life away. She's just a kid for God's sake, trying to navigate a really complicated social world, feeling like she doesn't fit in.

Joanne had been so angry afterwards, she'd finally been getting Ruby to talk to her and Kathryn had come barging her way through and steam-rolled over all the tact and careful conversation, ruining any progress they'd made. What did Kathryn know about employment anyway? She was seething.

Mike inhaled sharply, his mind snapping back to the present.

"It's shit this whole AI thing, drives me mad how it's taking everything over." Mike said. Taking his phone back, Ellis replied, "I don't see the problem really, makes life easier for everyone, it can only be a good thing."

"Yeah, well it won't be easy when we're all out of a job will it?"

"Come on Mike, how's an AI system gonna go out and pick up all the pissheads off the floor outside the nightclubs or go and soothe all these poor bastards who've chipped a nail. Anyone worried about losing their job to AI needs to stop sulking and get a proper fucking job if you ask me."

"Hmm," Mike mumbled.

Is he for real, Mike thought to himself, does he really think it's that fucking simple. People are being forced into poverty and homelessness at unprecedented rates, there's hardly any jobs left for anyone and this sanctimonious prick thinks people are all just bone idle. He just doesn't live in the real world at all.

Mike went back to staring aimlessly out of the window, his mind once again wandering back to his situation at home. He couldn't let things carry on like this, it was causing tension in his marriage and having a negative impact on Ruby. How long was he supposed to expect a thirteen year old girl to be sleeping in the same room as her parents. No wonder she hadn't asked her friends over for God knows how long, poor girl must be so humiliated. He sat, pondering the best way to resolve things, his eyes starting to feel heavy and he longed for his bed. He stared blankly back at the barely visible reflection of his own face in the foggy glass, trying to stay awake.

The familiar shrill buzzing from the radio broke his thoughts.

"Alpha nine-five-two, come in, over." Came the faceless voice through the radio.

"Alpha nine-five-two, receiving, go ahead, over." Mike replied flatly.

"Reports coming in of a hanging at Saint Catherine's High School on Clementine Road in the city. Patient is described as male in his early thirties. Yourself and a Senior paramedic car are mobile, they'll be getting there a few minutes after you, current ETA for the car is approximately 11 minutes. Police are aware and have three units mobile to scene with an ETA of approximately four minutes, over."

"Copy that control, that's all received, we're mobile now." Mike replied in a voice much louder this time.

"Shit, my daughter goes to that school." Mike said

"You're kidding, who the fuck hangs themselves at a school, sick fucks!" Ellis said in a disgusted tone.

Mike said nothing but hit the button marked 'mobile' on his touchscreen.

'999 MODE ACTIVATED' came the automated voice over the ambulance speakers.

Traffic was almost non-existent on the mile and a half run up to the school as it was now approaching 4am.

Up to now it had been a pretty uneventful shift, but Mike found himself wide awake as he sped through the deserted streets towards the school. Was it a parent of one of Ruby's friends, a teacher, a complete stranger? Why would someone choose to hang themselves in such a public place and especially on the grounds of a school?

As they approached Belmont Street, another update came through the radio.

"Control to Alpha nine-five-two..."

"Go ahead." Ellis spoke this time as Mike was concentrating on driving.

"Police landed on scene a few minutes ago, confirmed hanging. The patient has been cut down by officers who are currently starting CPR, over."

"Roger that control, current ETA to scene is one minute."

The rain battered against the windscreen as the wipers struggled to keep up with the torrent of water, Mike hadn't bothered to turn on the sirens, given the time and the quietness of the roads.

In the distance, they saw the blue flashing lights of response vehicles bouncing off the side of a row of terraced houses, walls shiny and reflecting brightly in the downpour.

As they turned right onto Clementine Road, they saw three police cars pulled up right at the school entrance. One officer fumbled with a pair of red bolt cutters, trying to remove the large silver padlock from the chained gates.

The Sergeant waved the ambulance on and guided them to a spot in front of the police cars, Ellis cracked open his window, droplets of water instantly ricocheting off the top of the glass and splashing his face.

"Officer..." Ellis said in greeting, with a slight nod of his head.

"Good morning gentlemen, we've got officers with the male now doing CPR, it looks like he's been up there a while lads, I won't lie, it doesn't look great." Said the Sergeant.

The officer at the gates swore loudly, the bolt cutters slipping from his hands in the pouring rain.

Think you can climb that fence guys? We're still trying to get the gate open." asked the Sergeant, looking Ellis and Mike up and down.

"Yeah, I reckon we can handle a bit of extra-curricular activity." Ellis said with a grin.

Jumping out of the cab, Ellis grabbed the defibrillator out of the back and made towards the school fence. Mike followed closely behind, looking decidedly glum.

Hopping the fence with ease, Ellis took the defibrillator from Mike and gave him a hand over. They saw a group of three police officers over by the treeline on the far side of the playground, one holding a flashlight over the others, illuminating the chaotic scene below. The pair quickened their pace, careful not to slip on the muddy path as they made their way over the playing field towards the trees.

"A passerby walking his dog rang it in, I believe. He's waiting by the main road for a liaison officer to speak to him, he says he saw what looked like a body in the trees but wasn't sure due to the low visibility, luckily he decided to ring it through anyway."

The man on the ground looked to be in his mid to late forties, with long shaggy hair stuck crudely to his face with the rain, his skin was pale and waxy looking, no colour in his cheeks at all. He looked almost blue. Mike knelt down beside the man and quickly checked his neck for a pulse, after finding none he cut away the man's shirt, exposing his bare chest.

Mike got a fresh set of pads out of the case and attempted to dry the man's chest with his coat, failing miserably and only succeeding to smear rainwater all over the man's torso, he applied the defib pads and pressed the button marked 'ANALYZE'. The machine took a few seconds to calculate, then displayed a message on the screen, 'NO SHOCK ADVISED'.

Mike exchanged a grim look with Ellis. "Start compressions." he said quietly, his tone devoid of optimism.

"Alpha nine-five-two to control," Mike spoke clearly into the radio handset, "We need a P1 backup, confirmed arrest, CPR in progress."

"All received five-nine-two, ETA for the car, eight minutes."

Ellis knelt beside the unconscious man, positioning himself squarely over his chest. He placed the heel of his left hand on the centre of the man's sternum, his other just above, lacing his fingers together, locking his elbows to keep his arms straight. With measured force, he began compressions, pushing down hard and fast, his weight driving into each movement. The man's chest recoiled slightly between thrusts as Ellis counted under his breath, maintaining the crucial rhythm.

A sickening crack echoed beneath his hands, ribs giving way under the pressure. The sound had always made his stomach twist, but he didn't falter. He had broken many ribs in his efforts to bring people back from the brink of death. The sharp snapping sound and subsequent crunching had never gotten any easier to hear and feel under his palms and still made him feel queasy. The rain continued to pour, soaking them both to the bone. The blue lights from the police cars cast an eerie glow over the scene, sweeping through the trees like a sinister mist.

"What's the story here?" Ellis asked between compressions.

"Not much to go on," one of the officers replied. "No ID on him that we can see. Looks like he came in through a gap in the back fence. Beyond that? Your guess is as good as mine."

Mike looked over at the fence, barely visible in the darkness. "Why here though, why a school?"

"Maybe a connection we don't know about yet..." the officer said with a shrug, his voice heavy with the weight of too many similar nights.

Ellis paused to let Mike take over compressions. "You think there's any chance?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

Mike shook his head, his hands moving rhythmically as he pushed down on the man's chest. "He's been gone a while. Pupils are fixed, no response to CPR. But we'll keep going until the senior paramedic gets here."

The crack of broken ribs echoed in the stillness, but Mike barely flinched. His focus was on the patient, on the rhythm of palms against flesh and the sound of Ellis moving in the background.

"Ellis, get the airway kit," Mike barked between compressions, his voice strained. He never looked up, never hesitated in his efforts, keeping the pace steady. Mike's chest tightened with the unspoken knowledge that time was slipping away.

Ellis didn't need to be told twice. He was already rummaging through the BLS response bag with practiced speed. A moment later, Ellis was back, a set of tubes in his hand, his fingers precise, as he adjusted the tools to ensure everything was ready.

"Got it." Ellis said, kneeling beside Mike. He held up the breathing tube, the soft latex shining under the harsh light, before carefully inserting it into the patient's airway. It was a delicate process, the patient's throat already swollen and constricted from the trauma, but Ellis knew how to make it work. As soon as the tube was in place, he checked the seal. The bag-valve mask clicked into place and Ellis squeezed it, sending a burst of air into the lungs, watching the chest rise and fall.

"We need more hands, where the fuck is this backup?!" cursed Ellis.

"Hey!" he shouted to the closest police officer, "Give us a hand here." Ellis directed the shaken looking officer to kneel behind the man's head. "Keep his head tilted back and squeeze this bag steadily once every three seconds." The officer did as she was asked, looking ashen.

Mike didn't stop compressions, the rhythm unbroken as Ellis reached for the IO kit. His hands moved like they were on autopilot, pulling out a sterile needle, prepping the vein with a swift motion and pushing the needle into the crook of the man's elbow. He studied the freshly inserted IO carefully, waiting for the man's blood to start flowing back through the small plastic tube.

Nothing.

Finding a decent vein was going to be hard, visibility was shit and the rain trickling down his face, stung his eyes.

"Gimme a sec, I'm struggling here." Ellis said.

Ellis tried again, holding the man's forearm steady between his own knees to steady his arm. He carefully stowed the used needle in the bright yellow sharps bin, in his BLS bag, took out a fresh needle and steadied himself for another go.

He took his time, making sure he was perfectly lined up with the median cubital vein. He'd done this many times and was highly skilled. Another failed attempt, "FUCK" Ellis swore under his breath. They didn't have time for this.

"I'm going in with the IO," Ellis said, rummaging through his kit bag for the little black plastic case containing the drill.

Found it.

Ellis unpacked the drill and loaded the needle cartridge into the end, slotting it into place with a satisfying click. He grabbed his scissors from the belt on his hip, went to the man's right trouser leg and began to cut. Once he had cleared enough space to expose his leg, up to the knee. He prepped the area and lined up the end of the needle with the man's upper tibia, just below the knee-cap.

"What's that thing for?" Asked the young officer, looking like she was going to be sick.

"It's called IO, short for intraosseous," Ellis replied patiently, not looking up, his focus maintained on his patient. "basically, we're going to have to drill into his bone and push the drugs straight into his bone marrow."

Without any hesitation, Ellis pressed the end of the needle against his skin, breaking through and stopping when it hit solid bone. Taking a steadying breath, Ellis pulled the trigger and the needle spun in place. Ellis applied firm pressure to the spinning needle. The drill spun rapidly, forcing the needle down into the man's bone. Ellis felt a slight pop, the needle pushing through the last splinter of bone and straight into the marrow. The officer winced, looking more pale now. Ellis made a mental note to keep an eye on her, fearing she was about to faint. He unclipped the needle from the drill, attached a plastic syringe and pulled back, withdrawing a few millilitres of the man's bone marrow, mostly clear, with a tinge of pink and slightly gloopy looking.

"IO access, sorted." He confirmed to Mike, with a nod.

He could hear Mike's laboured breathing as he continued the chest compressions. Every second mattered, every second pushing them closer to the thin line between life and death. Next, he grabbed the pre-filled adrenaline syringe, his fingers shaking slightly with the cold. With a quick, practiced motion, he clicked the syringe onto the IO tubing. His eyes flicked to Mike, watching his colleague's unyielding effort as Mike's palms slapped against the patient's chest. There was a moment of eye contact, silent understanding between them as Ellis prepared to administer the drug.

"Ready." Ellis said, his voice steady even though his pulse hammered in his ears.

"Do it."

With the fluid ready, Ellis leaned forward, injecting the adrenaline straight into the IO line, the syringe emptied in seconds. He watched for any change, the seconds stretching out longer than they should have. But it wasn't enough yet. Mike's hands still moved in their steady rhythm and Ellis knew the fight was nearly over.

"Keep going," Ellis said, his voice low. "we've got this."

Mike didn't reply, but the force in his compressions never wavered. Fragments of bone shifted and gave way under the relentless pressure, a muted snap reverberating through his hands with each compression.

Minutes passed, the steady sound of Mike's compressions was the only sign that they were still in the fight. Each second felt like an eternity. Mike's eyes darted between the monitor, the patient and Ellis' hands, still holding the syringe, ready for the next dose of adrenaline. Mike's shoulders were starting to strain from the constant, brutal pressure. Sweat and rain streamed down his forehead, dripping down into his eyes. "Swap with me, ready? Okay, Go!"

"Prep another one." Ellis said, his voice resolute. Mike nodded, panting and without a word, pulled another syringe of adrenaline from the kit bag. The air felt thick with tension, his fingers too, fumbling in the cold, he was shaking now. He injected the drug into the IV, his eyes never leaving the patient's chest. Nothing. The ECG continued its mocking silence, a constant reminder of how little had changed.

"Another one." Ellis urged again, voice tight as his palms pressed into the lifeless chest. Mike didn't hesitate, preparing another dose, this time pushing it into the vein even faster, adrenaline surging in his own veins. The silence that followed was deafening. And then, almost imperceptibly, the monitor gave a small, hopeful flicker.. Ellis' breath caught in his throat. He didn't stop compressions, the pressure on the chest unbroken, but his eyes flickered to the monitor as he kept his hands steady. Erratic lines danced across the screen. "Shockable rhythm," Mike said. "hands off and stay well clear".

Ellis stood up quickly and took a step back, the officer continued squeezing the bag she had been put in charge of, a strange, dazed look on her face. "Hands off the patient." he repeated, more sharply this time. The officer didn't respond. 'Is she deaf?' He thought to himself. He pushed the officer back and away from the patient. "I said hands off the patient!" he barked at her. Meeting her eyes now, he saw that she was sobbing, her eyes bright red and stinging. He felt a pang of guilt surge through his body, she could only have been in her early twenties. This is probably the first dead body she's ever seen. "Sorry," he muttered in apology. "we need to get well clear of him before we shock, with this much rainwater around, we're at risk too."

"He's right," Ellis chimed in, "we don't want to get electrocuted in the process."

"Shit, sorry." the officer said, her voice tiny and quivering in the brutal downpour, tears still flowing freely across her pink cheeks.

Happy that everyone was far enough away from the pale shape on the ground, Mike slammed the button and the first shock surged through the patient's body. The monitor beeped with a jolt, but no change came after. Still no pulse, just the same jagged scribble jumping across the screen, taunting them.

Ellis fell back to his knees, muddy water splashing up onto the man's blank face, his features looking doll like and false. Ellis' face was pale now, exhaustion creeping into his limbs. But they couldn't stop. Not yet.

Mike set the defibrillator for a second shock. The countdown ticked down and the machine screamed out its charge. "Move back again." Mike shouted against the wind, taking care to keep his tone kind, more mindful now that the police officer to his left was probably experiencing the most harrowing night of her life. With a quick glance at Ellis, Mike pressed the button again. The second shock shot through the man's body, yet again, there was no change. No pulse. No sign of life.

"Still nothing." Mike said, frustration and desperation heavy in his voice.

Ellis gave a terse nod, barely looking at him as his hands never ceased in their life-saving pressure. "We don't stop."

Mike looked down at the patient, wondering how much longer they could keep this up.

They were close, so close, but it wasn't enough. Not yet.

Another dose of adrenaline.

Nothing.