



3 Ghosts

Let your conscience be your guide



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVELLA IN A DAY'
ON JUNE 17th 2017

Praise for Novel-in-a-Day

“This was a GREAT exercise before NaNoWriMo! I most certainly want to participate with NIAD next year.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed being a part of this first NIAD... it was a fabulous experience.”

“It was a great deal of fun...I've never written and edited fiction at that kind of frenzied pace, but it was exhilarating.”

“This really was a fun project that I hope we can do again.”

“It was liberating to be given a précis and have to sit down and get on with the nuts and bolts of writing for a day, knowing that if I didn't get it done I'd be letting everyone else down. Liberating, because I have a tendency to fear the blank page and spend all my time arsing around with plans and notes and not getting on with the important part - the writing.

“This was wonderful fun. Wish I could do this again... This has been a good kick in the behind for NaNoWriMo.”

“It has been fun writing to a deadline and, well, actually just having to finish something. Because of this, I'm actually thinking that NaNo might be possible this year. So truly, thank you!”

“It's been brilliant, can we do it again?”

“I had fun... It got me thinking again about a true-crime piece that I've had in mind for years.”

“I was impressed by how smooth you made the whole experience for us. At least I felt like I had the information I needed, I knew the deadline, and the rest was up to me.”

“The final product (now I've finished it) is really a very good read!”

“This has been a lot of fun (I'm new this year), I hope it becomes a tradition!”

“I loved the whole exercise. It was great fun, and I enjoyed the challenge of trying to write stuff in such a way that it wouldn't clash with other chapters whose plotlines I didn't know... Thank you for a brilliant Novel In A Day experience.”

“This was as last year much fun... awesome.”

“It's very interesting to watch how different authors approach the same situation, and get an insight about what those briefs really said.”

“Wonderful time! Really did enjoy the process & loved seeing the insides of how scrivener can be so productive for a writer... This project showed how when the skeleton is in place, the actual writing part can be confined to a day for a chapter. I know, some were much longer than others, but seeing this in action made novel writing attainable - at least in my estimation.”

“Loved every minute. Thanks for letting me join in!”“I had so much fun writing AND reading this.”

“I have to admire the *structure*... with a 'normal' plot but somehow none of the writers could tell where in the plot arc they might be. I don't think even the ones writing the first or last chapters could have known that they were. Very clever!”

“The worrying thing -- a bit worrying unless you're running an MFA course in creative

writing -- is that it all seems to work as a book. I enjoyed it. Doing it, and reading it.”

“This is my first time participating in such an expedition and I had a lot of fun doing it! I hope to participate next year if we all do it again!”

“What a funny, enjoyable and fruitful experience this has been.”

“It's amazing how [it's crafted] allowing for continuity while making room for creativity.”

“I had a great time doing this! I really loved the info pack. It had just enough information to give you a framework but left enough room so you get creative.”

“A thousand thank yous for running this magnificent project for us again! It's a blast, and wonderful mental exercise... How can you come up with a book with a coherent plot line that even the people writing it have no idea that they are writing the beginning or a climax or even the end??? It baffles me.”

“What the heck?!?!? I was writing the last chapter and I didn't even realise?? I thought I was situated at the first 1/4 or 1/3 of the book! That's amazing.”

“I enjoyed it immensely once again.”

“Wow, it was an amazing experience again.”

“Thanks for making this happen! As always, a reason to wake up at Oh Seven Hundred on a Saturday and stew miserably over not-enough-coffee until I finally feel too guilty over how late I am. The briefing was well done and the scenes were a lot of fun to write.”

“I think next year I'm using my vacation days for this event.”

“Thank you! It has been invaluable to me in testing my understanding of story craft.”

“Thanks for another interesting challenge for me, and for bringing many people together in such a good way.”

“It is fascinating to see another person's take on your scene, that was a good idea.”

“Loved it. A genius idea and a very clever way to pull it off worldwide.”

“It was fun! I can't wait to read all the chapters and briefs!”

“I haven't written anything for a long, long time, so this was a great way to get back into it. Definitely count me in for next year... I'm so glad I said yes.”

“Quite a challenge. Exhausting and exhilarating.”

“I had a blast as always! I like the fact that for one day, I have absolutely nothing to do except work on a chapter.”

“By the way, that was a stack of fun. I really enjoyed it... Thanks for letting me be part of this.”

“BTW, when I got the assignment I could see how I could POSSIBLY write 1500 words for such a little action piece. So why is the final count 3900 words?”

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Julia Pierce, J.D. Eckstrom, N.D. Robitaille
Keith Blount, Stephen Kittel, Conrad Gempf
Linda Weeks, Sam Pynes, Heather Lovelace-Gilpin
Wendy Christopher, Eric Christiansen, B. Morris Allen
Story by: Tim Rogers

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www.novelinaday.com

Time is no substitute for talent

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in June 2017. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

This is the sixth time we've run the event, but the first time we've done it as 'Novella-in-a-Day'... with just 12 chapters per book. Half the size, but double the fun!

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

Tim

June 17, 2017

Also by Novel-in-a-Day:

The Dark
Lunar520
Made Man
Section7
Marshal Law

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Chapter one

Julia Pierce

Post-work on the run up to Christmas, hordes of shoppers thronged Marylebone's streets. Laden with bags full of presents and giddy on the highs of consumption, they fed off each other's desire to buy more than they could afford. Up on their wires suspended between the heaving shops, neon angels blazed overhead in the late afternoon gloom as the clouds released their burden and rain hammered down onto the pavement as though a hail of bullets, leaving the crowd to pull their heads down into their coats like soldiers caught without cover in a shallow foxhole. Between them, the ghost-man Edward Meyers walked, grey head down, almost invisible, sending tendrils of cold into those he brushed against on his way up the road.

On a corner of Westmoreland Street stood the Filcroft Arms. Edward pushed his way through the heavy door into the warmth of the pub, grazi past raucous huddles of tinsel-clad customers in his path to the bar. The barman, a young luxuriantly bearded type with rolled up sleeves and the look of an Edwardian boxer, was serving a group of women at the other end of the drinkery, skewering fruit on a stick to decorate balloon glasses filled with multicoloured

liquids. ‘Christmas cocktails’, announced a board to his side. Oh Christ, thought Edward. He might as well make himself comfortable. Whatever happened to simple drinks; the shot of whiskey or brandy poured from bottle to measure to glass? All this blending, straining and shaking. It was a pub, not some sort of theatre involving fruit, cinnamon and half a kitchen’s worth of utensils.

His mind turned to Chloe. His last case, and a decent person, once you stripped back all that brittleness and intolerance. She had so much to give - it was criminal that she’d wasted her many skills sculpting the unwanted blubber of the overindulgent - or tinkering with the insecure ones who thought all their personality flaws and neuroses would be shaved away along with the bump on their nose. He hoped she’d got the message - that there were far more deserving, if a lot less lucrative, outlets for her.

Finally, the barman appeared. Edward ordered a double whiskey - then noticed the women at the end of the bar already looking hopefully in the their direction, empty glasses in hand.

“Make that two.”

This was definitely the best part of his post-death employment - the solitary victory drinks that filled the time between closing his case and the recall to base. But really, the job wasn’t all that. You didn’t get holiday pay. You didn’t get holiday. Oh - and you never got to retire. Then there were the people who were hard to convince. They liked being bad. You tried to warn them, but even Chloe and his other successful cases invariably went back to their original selves, once the shock of the foresight had worn off. Once their brains had rationalised and forgiven their behaviour, they persuaded themselves they weren’t so bad after all and Edward

was the one in the wrong; picking on them and singling them out from a sea of city-dwellers whose crimes must be much worse than anything they'd managed. It was hard to explain to them that punishment wasn't the point - they were chosen for their potential. The things they would be able to do and the lives they'd be able to improve, if only they'd turn their talents outward to something less selfish than amassing piles of cash.

He nursed his second drink - whiskey was one of the perks of the job. They'd fought hard for that. If they had to be sent back here and put on the clock, why couldn't they enjoy a little of the local produce? It took the edge off, especially as he had to stick to the rules. Margaret. Maggie. The one thing he missed about living in this awful human soup. She was just around the corner, tucked up in her house. His house. Their house. The fire would be lit. He hoped she thought of him from time to time. He was definitely taking a risk by being here. If she caught sight of him then it was all over. Fast tracked to eternal punishment. Not that Margaret was the pub-going type, which was exactly why he considered the risk was manageable. He glanced across the bar. The cocktail women had moved on, replaced by a stony-faced couple who seemed to be arguing. Their friends stood in silence, staring at their drinks. He felt a gust of wind and a group of braying men entered, pink faced and drunk. They staggered upstairs to the restaurant, laughing as member of their party stumbled on the steps. Really, humanity deserved everything it got - though he'd give everything he possessed to be a part of it again, rather than a wraith, trapped in a miserable plane between existence and oblivion. He was here to save himself, as well as them. Anything but face the chains and their soul-crushing weight... the awful knowledge that you'd

brought all that suffering upon yourself and there was no going back. No revision. No second chances. You'd died, been judged, and it was done.

“How's the weather out there? You're a bit damp.”

The voice cut through his thoughts. He looked up to find the barman gesturing at his shoulders. Why was he talking? Edward hadn't invited this inane chat. There were plenty of customers about - though he supposed he was the only one who wasn't tipsily obnoxious. The man probably thought he was lonely - which he was - though the hows, whys and wherefores of his present misfortune wouldn't make for a believable conversation.

“Oh... it's not too bad. Doesn't seem to put people off going out.” Edward gestured towards the half-frosted window, where a steady stream of foreheads marched past above the divider.

“Looks like you've been organised.” The barman waved a hand towards the empty floor next to Edward's feet. “You all done?”

“Yes.” A closed answer. Surely that meant he'd be left alone?

“I haven't done a thing - my girlfriend...” The barman picked up a glass to dry and launched into a monologue about a long-suffering woman called Sue, who had apparently crossed the globe, only to be rewarded with a personal blight in the shape of this rather unambitious maker of drinks, whose goal was apparently to own a bar and make yet more of the same drinks, night after night. Edward felt for Sue. He thought of Margaret's disappointment, and how she would have described her life, back when she was shackled to him; a workaholic operating on the border of legality, gaining people's trust and then stripping their companies for profit. He'd kept the details of his work hidden from her, making sure she felt permanently excluded, patronising her with talk of

how it was complicated and she wouldn't understand. Except she would have. She was decent. She would have seen his deceptions only too clearly for what they were. He was ashamed and angry - it was time to go off on a tangent and save this one from himself. Unlike Edward, he wasn't deliberately choosing the wrong path, just coming to it through a process of personal neglect. This wasn't strictly Edward's case but there were no rules against it and it might earn him some extra points back home. Plus he had time to kill before his midnight curfew. Edward reached out a finger and touched the barman's hand, freezing him mid-polish. The hand with the glass began to shake.

"Oh god, I don't feel right. It's the end. Something's missing. Gone away. I'm alone. Everything's gone. I don't want to be alone... Why can I see it...? Make it go..." His voice grew pleading. Edward drew back his hand. It was time to be kinder. He hoped there would be something in that head that would be useful - that was the norm, though once he'd searched a soul and found nothing of any use to anyone. He shuddered.

"Where do you want to be?" His finger pressed the barman's knuckle again, and the man closed his eyes. This had to come from him, thought Edward. The process was all about that. "I'd like to cook. Not the standard pub stuff that's on the menu. Proper food... and I want to be with Sue forever, except her visa runs out soon and I don't think she's that bothered about me. Why would she be? I don't do anything..."

That was more like it. They were getting somewhere. Edward smiled. "You need to get out of this pub. As soon as I go, you'll put down your glass and walk out of here. You won't look back." He touched the barman on the temple. "Seafood," the barman said.

Some brains were easier to unravel than others, Edward thought. Less resistant. Intentions lying just below the surface, waiting to be uncovered and examined. He realised that he was still touching the man, whose mouth was hanging open, corners turned up with revelation and delight. He pulled back his hand, reanimating the barman, whose mouth closed in slow motion as Edward rose, pushed his empty glass across the top of the bar, and walked to the door, before disappearing into the night.

Chapter two

J.D. Eckstrom

Edward swore at the taxi as he crossed the street. It wasn't the taxi driver's fault – it wasn't like he could see Edward – but by now it was habit. Taxis were there for swearing. At his advanced age, Edward had learned quite a few good words. If he was stuck doing this for eternity he'd pick up quite a few more. He tried out some of his newest ones.

Sometimes he couldn't tell if these new words he heard were proper swears or only some sort of internet slang said in an angry voice.

He stopped in front of the nicest house on the street. The lights were on downstairs. A woman's silhouette moved through the front window. Edward pressed a hand to his chest. Heartburn. Never could trust pub food. No wonder he'd so rarely gone to Filcroft while alive.

Inside, the woman's silhouette bent over a side table. Edward crept closer. She'd be going around the house collecting the day's flowers and putting them in the compost. Tomorrow morning, before her coffee finished brewing, she'd go about and set out the new flowers.

Margaret had always taken such care of the house.

“You should have taken a flower arranging class, Margaret,” Edward murmured to himself. His forehead creased. “Or did you?”

He couldn’t remember any more if she *had* taken such a class. She might have. She might even have told him about it over coffee, as he prepared to rush off for his day’s work. He might have said something back to her, something blandly encouraging – or worse, something sarcastic. He might even have told her he didn’t have time to play with weeds.

He had been unfortunately prone to saying such things when he was alive.

“Well, if I bugged it up then, you should still take it up again now,” he decided. Margaret straightened up with a handful of baby’s breath. She walked toward the kitchen at the back of the house. Edward headed for the corner. He felt a bloody fool, stalking his own wife. He didn’t think he’d chased her so desperately when he’d been courting her.

More fool, him. He peered through the kitchen window. Margaret put the baby’s breath in the compost bin on top of some orange peels. She brushed off her hands on a kitchen towel before patting the pins in her white hair. Edward smiled, resting his forehead against the glass. She was beautiful even now in her seventies. Why hadn’t Edward appreciated it when they were both young and full of life?

If only Edward had a little more life in him now ... He chuckled to himself. Who was he kidding? He had too much beer in him to do anything, alive or dead.

Margaret turned her head toward the window. Edward swore and ducked out of sight. His feet slipped in the flower bed and he

landed on his arse. Why did he keep doing that? She couldn't see him right now. How long would it take him to get used to being invisible?

When he peeked back over the window frame, Margaret had left the kitchen. Edward craned his head. Was she off to fetch more flowers?

He crept around the house, peering in every window, to find her again. When she'd finished with all the flowers on the ground floor, he floated to the upper windows to keep on watching her. He went on talking to her, too, complimenting her on how beautifully she kept the house and herself and how elegantly she moved. When she took a cup of tea into the garden, he found a perch on top of the wall.

"Ah, Margaret," he sighed, "an old man like me shouldn't be so pleased you haven't remarried yet, but I can't help--" He reclined on the wall, his head brushing the trees. A wood dove cooed in alarm behind Edward's left ear. Edward jerked upright as the bird fluttered past his ear to the garden path. "Bloody creature!"

"Oh, look at you!" Margaret exclaimed. She put her tea gently on the table. The dove fluffed its wings and bobbed its head. It paced toward her. Margaret leaned slowly forward. Edward stopped cursing and rubbing at his ear to smile instead.

Margaret had always had a way with animals. She'd loved volunteering at the animal charities. She would have loved having a pet herself, but Edward had been too busy to consider it.

Always too busy.

He leaned forward on his knees to watch Margaret coo at the bird. The dove came remarkably close to her, bobbing its head this way and that, before it finally flew off. Margaret sat back in her

chair with a look of disappointment.

“Can’t have that!” Edward declared. He narrowed his eyes at the trees. If Margaret enjoyed animals, she’d have animals. He climbed carefully to his feet and stalked down the wall. Those stupid pigeons would never know what hit them.

Half of them flew away before anything hit them at all. Edward managed, by leaping and flapping his arms, to shepherd the rest of them toward the garden. Some flew straight over without stopping, but enough landed to adjust their feathers and coo indignantly to keep Margaret smiling.

“I must add a bird bath,” Margaret said. “In fact, I shall buy one tomorrow. I believe I shall put it just there, by the dahlias. Would you like that, dears? And perhaps a bird feeder – though I can’t say I’m as fond of the squirrels, and it is so very hard to feed you sweet birds without also feeding the squirrels.”

Edward rested his hands on his hips and looked proudly down at her. He was too out of breath to say anything. He didn’t know why he ought to be out of breath. Surely he didn’t still breathe. Maybe it was habit, too, like the cursing.

Out on the street, a cat caterwauled. Edward found his second wind. A cat would be even better than birds. A cat would let her pet it. Edward would simply have to find the creature and pop it over the wall. He closed his eyes and jumped off the wall. He still hated looking while he did that.

His shoes drifted gently to the ground. Edward opened his eyes.

“Now then, pussy, where did you go?”

No response.

Edward tapped his chin, screwed his mouth up, and took his best guess at the right direction. Not that it mattered either which

way. He was bound to find a cat any direction he went. He tripped over them all the time when he was trying to work.

He caught sight of a tail disappearing under a car by the corner. He hurried toward it, but must have gone too fast; the cat darted from the car to the park with its ears pinned back. Edward swore. Animals always knew when a ghost was about. Cats seemed to take it as a personal affront. Edward had to get around on its other side and scare it back toward Margaret. He may not have been the best husband when he was alive, but he was capable of handling one little cat.

Fifteen minutes later he was still chasing the cat and beginning to worry he'd have a second heart attack.

"Myer!" a voice barked. Edward yelped and grabbed at his chest. "What are you doing?" A man strode into sight, his face creased in a frown.

"Huffam!" Edward massaged his chest. "Don't bloody sneak up on a man!"

"Sneak up?" John Huffam's frown turned to a scowl. "You're *late*, Myer!"

"What?" Edward cautiously took his hands away from his heart. John tapped his watch.

"Late! I expected you back half an hour ago to discuss your next case. And here you are sneaking about your old home. You haven't forgotten the rules, have you?"

"No, old boy, I haven't forgotten. I've no contact with my wife. I only come when I'm invisible again." Reassured no heart attack loomed on the horizon, Edward scanned the park for the cat.

"It's still not wise to spend so much time in the places you lived. It creates too much temptation." John followed him along the path.

“Yes, yes, you’ve said.” Edward bent over to peer under the bushes.

“Besides which, you’ve work to do. You still haven’t finished the paperwork for your last case.”

“Oh ...” Edward flapped his hand over his shoulder.

“You can’t dismiss it that easily. Myer, I’ve *told* you and told you, there are no secretaries in this job! You have to do the paperwork yourself, and I want it done on *time*,” John said. Edward grunted. Where had that damn cat run to? “Are you listening to me, Myer?”

“I’m a Marley,” Edward said. “You didn’t think I got this job because of my polite manners?”

“I did think it had been long enough for you to change at least a little.”

“I have, I have. Look, old boy, I’m busy right now. Come back when I’ve finished and I promise – aha, there you are, you damned thing!”

“What *are* you doing?” John bent over to see what Edward was looking at. Edward shoved a hand in his chest.

“No, no, you’ll frighten it off again. Hold still. Move over there. I’ll go around this way and...” Edward tiptoed around the bush, holding his breath. John obediently moved to stand under a tree. On the other side of the bush Edward took a deep breath then jumped toward where he’d last seen the cat.

It yowled and shot out the other side. Edward yelled himself and chased after it, hollering and waving his arms. The cat darted back and forth with its tail streaming behind it. Edward knew he could move faster than a mortal creature, but he didn’t usually have to be agile about it.

“Do you need help?” John called.

“Get it over the wall!” Edward shouted.

“Which wall?”

“Which wall d’you think? My garden wall! Go left, *left*, you stupid thing!” Edward flung himself to the right. The cat screeched and switched direction. John floated up, flapping his hands and clucking his tongue. Edward rolled his eyes.

At least the cat aimed at the wall. With two scrabbling bounds it reached the top and leapt into the garden. Edward rushed over and floated up to peer inside. The cat stood in the middle of the garden, fur up all along its back, and hissed at him.

Margaret was nowhere to be seen.

Edward held on to the top of the wall and stared at the house as the lights went out, one by one. He’d taken too long about it. She’d be going to bed now, to sit and read one of her mysteries. She wouldn’t even know a cat was in her garden. Like she didn’t know her rotten old husband was trying to mend his ways.

He floated back to the ground. John fidgeted next to him.

“That’s right,” Edward said dully. “I’ll get the paperwork in. Did you want me to do that before or after the next case?”

“You know,” John said suddenly, “you know, Myer, I’m going to give you a choice. It’s not – I dare say it’s not ideal, but it’s something. You can choose your next case.”

“Choose?” Edward tried to focus. He’d never had a choice of cases before.

“Yes. You can take the usual case – Claire McCaffrey, internet entrepreneur, could be doing much more to help the third world countries – and continue on as a Marley for, well, for eternity. Or you can take a different Scrooge.”

John said it in an ominous tone. It wasn't sounding like much of a choice yet.

"We have on our files a – rather difficult man," John said. Edward raised his eyebrows. Scrooges were by definition not pleasant people. Marleys as well, for that matter. "He's ... well, we're not sure what he's good for. But everyone has to have a chance. And if you take this case – if you succeed at saving this man – you'll be done as a Marley."

"What!" Edward took a step back. He hadn't worn his chains long after his death, but the memory still lingered. Lingered with enough potency to keep him from trying to talk to Margaret.

"I mean, you'll be released from your punishment. You can join your wife when she dies," John explained.

Edward held still. He hadn't had that choice since he died. As soon as he knew what was going on he was wrapped in chains that burned as they dragged him down, and a somber woman in a suit was explaining that his sins were too heavy to let him walk freely. Even when he was told he could become a Marley, and be rid of his chains for as long as he saved others, he hadn't been allowed the hope of joining his wife. He'd be a Marley forever, while Margaret's soul went effortlessly up.

But if he had a chance now to rejoin Margaret...

"The analysts aren't hopeful about this man?" he asked cautiously.

"They'd disqualify him but," John said, shrugging, "everyone has to have a chance." Edward winced. He'd met some bad Scrooges in his time, and every one had some potential the analysts spotted.

"I don't suppose, if I fail...?"

John shook his head. Edward sighed and held up his arms in his best zombie impression.

“Misery and torment for eternity, then?”

“It’s not something to joke about, Myer.”

“No need telling me, I remember those chains. I promise you, Huffam, I’m not taking this lightly.” Edward rubbed his arms. His sensible mind was telling him not to touch this case. Even Edward had had some potential in him. He wasn’t such a persuasive Marley he could hope to tackle a man like this. Better to continue on, status quo, and avoid the eternal damnation. It was exactly the same position he’d been in that morning. What had he lost?

His less sensible mind said simply ‘Margaret’ over and over again.

“I’ll leave the binders with you, then,” John said. He pressed them into Edward’s hands. “Think it over carefully. And for fuck’s sake, get out of here before you get in trouble and muck it all up.”

John vanished. Edward held the binders against his chest and looked up at Margaret’s bedroom window.

Margaret.

Chapter three

N.D. Robitaille

Edward walked into Filcroft Arms for the second time today, feeling weighted by the choices ahead. A Marley may lose their chains for an assignment, but guys like John don't need physical restraint to keep a man down. Choose Claire and potentially have longer chains, or choose Lucas and likely never be unburdened. And what about poor Margaret? Edward failed her for so many living years, could he risk failing her in death as well?

Business had picked up as the holiday shoppers and exhausted tourists regaled stories of the perfect gift and adventures at Winter Wonderland, causing Edward to realise how much he had missed in life. Instead of ice skating with Margaret or visiting the shops at Oxford and Regent, he had his assistant take care of this chore each year and until now, he hadn't any regrets. Head down, Edward made his way to the staircase.

The upstairs restaurant was a more somber experience as the staff diligently removed all traces from the dinner rush. Edward found a window table where he placed the binders side by side, but couldn't yet bring himself to open them. Instead, he placed his hands on his lap and stared blankly to the slush covered street

below. Even the snow seems heavier in London tonight.

After a few minutes, a young waitress bounded over to the table rattling off the days specials. As she paused for a breath, Edward muttered, “Sunday Roast and pudding, please.” With the flick of a ponytail she was off to the kitchen reminding him of Margaret and their first years of marriage.

That first Christmas he was in the middle of his Mutual Funds training, and he set up a makeshift office in their tiny living room for weeks. Margaret never once complained, bringing him the occasional sandwich or covering him with a blanket when he fell asleep on the couch. Eyes blurry with exhaustion, Edward looked up on Christmas Eve to see his new bride with a plate of Sunday Roast and Yorkshire Pudding, made with his mother’s recipe. She had taken care of him and Edward vowed from that moment on, he would always take care of her.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth but before it could materialise, Ellen returned with his order. With each spoonful, Edward felt closer to his wife than he had in years, and by the time he reached the end of the pudding, he was ready to open the binders.

“Okay, Claire McCaffrey, age 33, computer programmer,” he mumbled as he ran his finger down the page. According to the file, Claire created a social media app called “Our Link” while in University. She recently sold that platform for £1 billion. In recent years, she has been in the media spotlight for the seemingly steady stream of lawsuits filed against her from disgruntled peers claiming to have a right to some of that money, but Claire has moved on to a new project called “Share” that is expected to revolutionise the way we save and share knowledge. It won’t be

easy to convince her to change her ways, especially considering that even receptive participants often revert to their old practices after the initial shock of meeting a Marley.

Switching folders, Edward skimmed the information for Lucas Rennall, the cog in his plan. Rennall is a 31 year old partner in the Firm of Berry, Lawrence, and Webb. A lawyer in the financial sector with a bad reputation. Edward knew the type. Old money, pressed suits, most evenings with a different girl on his arm, and every evening with a bottle of Macallan and Oban. Edward hadn't started out that way, but with Margaret wanting more time, and competitors breathing down his neck, it didn't take long before Edward learned to churn accounts to pad his income. Lucas Rennall, he started out with money, so it isn't about the need at all. Lucas is in it for the thrill, the rush of adrenaline, the power. He learned to sharpen his teeth in the best schools money could buy. As a partner at only 31, he'll have to fight to stay on top. He isn't going to change. In fact, he'll probably just cut back on the scotch and assume hallucinations are a result of a high pressure job. Lucas is a long shot at best, but anyone who has ever gambled knows that you can't win big without taking big risk.

Still undecided, Edward pays the bill and rides into the wind. Time is running out and a decision needs to be made. A few minutes later, a gust of wind tussles the hair of a well-dressed brunette exiting a car near the intersection of Oxford and Duke. Upon closer inspection, Edward can see the frown lines beginning to show through as she rounds the corner toward Selfridges. After a few steps, she turns toward the car, "Come with me! I'll only be a few minutes, that's all."

A resounding NO is heard from the car and the door slams shut.

Edward, remembering that he can't be seen, moves closer to the car to get a better look. "Here's a card for one of my drivers. He'll come get you. I have things to do," Lucas says handing the girl a business card. Before her first tear can roll down her cheek, he is gone. She stands for a moment, silently crying as passers-by stare as they navigate around her. Edward decides he has seen enough and as he rides off with the wind, the girl wipes her eyes and takes the first brave step to a new life on her own.

As Edward arrives, Claire sits at a desk piled with paperwork and electronics, staring intently at the computer screen. She is being served with another set of subpoenas and the dates are beginning to interfere with the launch dates for "Share".

She takes a sip of coffee before ranting, "Imbeciles. The whole lot. Do they really think they would have gotten anywhere without me? I did them a favour. Catherine, Catherine? Can you get my lawyer on the line?"

After a minute passes, Claire smooths her curly black hair into a pony tail and storms out to the reception area. "You," she says grabbing the arm of a small grey haired woman, "Where is Catherine?" Confused, the lady explains that Catherine is on holiday, which only seems to anger Claire. Edward silently watches as Claire pulls the woman toward Catherine's desk, "That's okay. Catherine is out. You are in. What is your name? Never mind, can you call my lawyer and hold any other calls. I have things to do."

Before the elderly woman could form a rebuttal, Claire turned to shut her office door, ending the conversation. Claire storms right past invisible Edward and collapses into her desk chair. Head in hands, Edward watches as she silently sobs. Soon the intercom

buzzes and the new Catherine announces, “Lawyer on line one.”

With a big breath and the swipe of a tear, Claire lifts the receiver, “This is Claire McCaffrey.”

The confusion lifts from Edward’s mind like a slow London fog. He could see the pain in Claire’s eyes and it reminds him of the looks of sadness that he put on Margaret’s face all too often. He can help her. Besides, this will give him extra time to prepare for Lucas. If he fails this one, he at least will have another chance to make things right, even if failing means additional chains.

Claire hung up the phone and a draft blew through her office and she thought she heard a faint sound of someone apologising.

Although he should have been happy with his decision, Edward felt restless and more than ever he wanted to see Margaret. He needed to tell her sorry. He would be with her soon, and that she shouldn’t fear the end of her life when it eventually arrives. He had so many things to tell her, but he knew that would take away his only means of escaping this purgatory.

He walked for hours, into the night, until he found himself standing outside his former home on Welbeck. Staying invisible to keep from breaking the rules, Edward went into the central garden and stared at the window hoping to catch a glimpse of Margaret. He just wanted to see her once more and then he would go help Claire.

Edward realized how much he enjoyed the peace of the garden, but as soon as he began to relax an Ambulance stopped near the front side of the building, sirens screaming. Wondering which of his former neighbours might be injured, Edward rode the wind to the front of the building just in time to see a familiar face behind the closing doors of the ambulance. It was Margaret and it

certainly didn't look like she was breathing. Panic overcame the need for decorum, and Edward rode the wind behind the ambulance as they pumped the heart of his wife.

When the ambulance doors are reopened, Margaret is rushed to surgery but she doesn't go alone. Edward follows, making sure to stay cloaked from everyone while he watches from the teaching gallery. The hours stretch into the wee hours of the night and finally Margaret is taken to her hospital room where Edward can finally be with his wife.

Edward talks into the night, reminiscing and promising his wife the future that he didn't give her during his lifetime. He tells her of the places they will go and of the wonderful experiences they will have, and when his spirit is exhausted and the night is almost over, Edward's judgement begins to lapse and he makes himself visible so that he can once again hold his wife's hand.

Margaret remains unconscious from her surgery, but she smiles at the lovely dreams about her husband coming back to hold her hand. It isn't her husband as most people remember him though. He comes back as the man she first married. The man that loved her and knew that together they could make it through anything. The attentive man who kissed her good morning and came home for dinner. She missed him so much.

A nurse walks into the room, startled to see Edward, "I'm sorry sir, I was told there wasn't any family to contact after surgery."

Edward quickly changed the subject, nervous that he would break the rules before he had a chance to prove himself to Margaret. "Any word on her prognosis?"

The nurse looked up at Edward, "I'm sorry sir. She has a few days, possibly a week. She suffered a major stroke today. We were

lucky to get her back at all.”

Trying to keep his emotions under control, Edward thanked the nurse and took a seat on a waiting room bench. Pulling out the two binders, he sat holding them on his lap. They look so similar, yet the contents are so very different. For twenty minutes he sat in thought on that bench, then in one fluid motion, Edward rose to his feet and threw away one of the binders.

After exiting the hospital, Edward walked through the early morning streets of London as a living person would do. He wandered through the streets as early morning employees unlocked doors and raised their gates. He walked to the arch of the lead Madonna and Jesus, and eventually made it to Bryanston Court and the home of Lucas Rennall.

Chapter four

Keith Blount

The red brick mansion block on George Street was undeniably impressive; the elderly man standing before it undeniably less so. What made the mansion block so impressive was just how imposing and solid and *there* it was. By contrast, the elderly man standing outside was not there at all—not in body, anyway. He was dead, to begin with. Dead as a particularly deceased dodo.

If he wasn't there in body, then how could he be there at all? Without a physical presence, how was it possible to exist at a particular location in space? These were two of the many questions that plagued Edward Myer's brainless mind. (One of the myriad irritations of being a wraith was that it turned out you could still get headaches even without a head.)

So no one could have seen Edward standing (insofar as it is possible to describe something without form—and thus legs—as “standing”) and looking eyelessly up at a window on the third floor. Not that there was anyone around to see him anyway—it was the middle of the night at the tail end of December. A sliver of moon scarred the sky above. If Edward had had skin, it would have been gooseflesh from the biting cold. If Edward had been in possession

of lungs, his breath would have been visible in vaporous puffs at his lips. He might even have shivered. But he was in possession of neither lungs nor lips, and shivering was left strictly to the living.

Edward floated for a bit. He floated through brick walls, through plaster ceilings and hardwood doors. Edward loathed the floating—it made him nauseous (“floatsickness” they called it)—but it was always better to materialise only once you were inside the subject’s home, to avoid any unnecessary clamour.

Presently, he rose through the plush carpets of Lucas Rennall’s lounge and lurked in an insubstantial manner, getting his bearings. Lucas’s apartment was what estate agents called “spacious”, an epithet often used more hopefully than factually, but in this case it was, for once, an understatement. Edward might have been reminded of a hangar at the Smithsonian had he not spent much of his own life in similarly large accommodation. Everything in Lucas Rennall’s apartment was immaculate, as though the photographer for *Good Homes* magazine had just stepped out for a cigarette.

Edward floated some more until he was in the bedroom. He hovered at the foot of the bed in the way that only an impossible, nonexistent thing can hover.

The blinds were open, letting in the amber glow of street light. A clutch of stars struggled to assert their existence over the light pollution of the city. Edward felt a weary kinship with them.

In the bed lay the slim form of Lucas Rennall, beneath silk sheets and velvet covers. His pyjamas were silk, too—sky blue, although everything seemed blue or orange in the dim light of the night and street lamps. His eyes were hidden by a frilly face mask, and he was snoring with self-satisfied abandon.

The covers were tangled from an earlier entanglement. Edward knew a great deal about Lucas, and one of the things he knew was that Lucas's bed was still warm (not that Edward could feel warmth) from the body of a young woman. One of Lucas's many girlfriends, Lucas had called her after a late night whiskey and asked her over. In his usual charming way, not long after leading her to the bedroom Lucas had tapped the woman's thigh and said, "Excuse me. I'm finished, actually. Would you mind seeing yourself out quietly? I really need some sleep."

After her anything-but-quiet departure, Lucas had checked the frown the woman's insults had prompted in him in the bathroom mirror, searching for any permanent damage to his beautiful complexion. There had been a moment in the middle of her verbal assault in which Lucas had almost seen things from her point of view—a terrible, vertiginous sensation that was mercifully short-lived. He had frowned, momentarily doubting his own amazingness. This doubt was a crack that Edward hoped to prize open.

Satisfied from his inspection in the mirror that he was as gorgeous as ever, Lucas had moisturised, climbed into bed and immediately fallen asleep. And here he still was, sleeping the sleep of the dead.

Which, when you thought about it, was a stupid phrase, reflected Edward, because the dead didn't sleep. At least, not those with chains, not the Marleys. Restlessness was his resting state. What he wouldn't give to sleep like Lucas.

Edward sighed (he had long since given up worrying over the impossibility of sighing without lungs or breath). It was time to get to work.

The one thing Edward hated more than floating was materialising. You had to go from a state of near-nonexistence to a state of near-existence through an exertion of nothing but pure will. It was a matter of focus. (Actually, it wasn't a matter of anything, there being no actual matter involved.) It was a process that felt precisely like the strain of forcing a compacted, rock-hard, tennis ball-sized turd through a sphincter that had shrunk to the dimensions of a pin hole. Which happened to have been a familiar experience for Edward back in his corporeal life.

Edward focused and strained, balling up his whole being into a tight, trembling knot of tension. There was a faint popping sound. A chill deeper even than the December night gripped the room. A whiff of over-boiled cabbage permeated the air. And then there he was: a shadow at the foot of the bed, growing brighter, contours finding definition, like a lens pulling into focus, until he was no longer entirely nonexistent. What looked like an elderly man now stood surveying Lucas's sleeping form—albeit a somewhat transparent elderly man, diaphanous like the wings of a cabbage white butterfly (why this whole materialisation business had to be quite so cabbagey was beyond Edward). It was always best to introduce yourself in this transparent state before taking on full corporeality, Edward had learned. It let everyone know where they stood and served as a declaration of exactly what you were—otherwise the subject tended to mistake you for an intruder, and before you knew it you were fending off blows and getting into all sorts of embarrassing explanations as to why the blows didn't land, why your body kept dissipating like a summer mist.

“Lucas,” Edward said in his best spooky voice. “Lucaaaaaas.

Lucas Rennaaalls.”

Lucas muttered something in his sleep and shuddered as though a shadow had passed through his dream.

Edward repeated his name, louder this time.

Lucas sat up. He pulled his sleep mask up off his eyes and blinked at Edward. His eyes went wide. Then he closed them again, put his sleep mask back on, lay down and went back to sleep.

This sort of behaviour really rather riled Edward. “Wake up!” he snapped. And then, with a touch of inspiration, he thought, he added: “...to yourself.”

Lucas remained supine and somnolent.

“This is not a dream, Lucas Rennalls.”

Lucas shuffled—a little irritably, perhaps.

Edward had done this any number of times, and was practised in rousing the reluctant. He began to run through his usual routine—repeating the subject’s name, calling him a sinner, scorning his wasted life, that sort of thing—until he got the result he wanted. Lucas sat up, sighed, and flung his sleep mask on the pillow, resigned to being kept awake. His dark hair stuck up at odd angles from yesterday’s gel. He yawned, swung his feet over the side of the bed, and marched straight past Edward and out of the room.

As if Edward didn’t exist.

Which was just rude.

For someone confronted with an emissary of the unliving, Lucas was confoundingly unconfounded.

Edward followed as Lucas padded into the stainless steel kitchen, gleaming even in the dark. He maintained his tirade, his litany of Lucas’s lamentable leanings, staying inches from Lucas’s elbow as they walked. Lucas took a glass from the cupboard and

went to the fridge. Edward hadn't even engaged the subject in conversation yet and already he was feeling dispirited—he felt like a journalist poking a microphone in a politician's face, hopelessly trying to get an answer as the smug bastard strode silently from front door to chauffeured car. (Feeling dispirited is one of the worst sensations for a spirit, of course.)

Even so, on he went with his diatribe as Lucas held down the button on the fridge's water dispenser and the cool, clear liquid trickled into the glass like the strained micturition of an old man with a urinary tract problem (something else the embodied Edward had known a little bit about). Lucas acted entirely oblivious of Edward's existence, but the static-raised hairs on his hands and neck told a different story.

Finally, after the glass was full (which seemed to take an eternity), Lucas leaned back against the fridge, turned to Edward and said, "Look, I don't mean to be rude or anything, but I'd rather not speak to you. Speaking to a figment of my imagination would be tantamount to admitting that I've gone stark raving bonkers. So if it's all the same to you, I'm just going to go and lie down on the sofa and have a nice quiet breakdown instead. Hopefully wake up in the morning right as rain. *Capisce?*" (Yes, Lucas was the sort of person who said *capisce*.)

"Oh, I'm not a figment of your imagination, Lucas." Edward was reaching for his most portentous inflections now. "You know what I am..." He let these words float on the air, like a newspaper flitting away on a gentle wind.

Lucas looked at the older (transparent) man, a head-to-toe appraisal of the sort that he was no doubt accustomed to giving, evaluating the potential usefulness to him of his interlocutor. He

gave another sigh. “You’re not a ghost. An apparition, yes, but not a ghost.” He frowned thoughtfully, and then his face brightened with apparent epiphany. “You’re my subconscious! That’s it. I’ve been working too hard. Or playing too hard,” he winked. It was a curious sort of wink, though, as he apparently thought better of it and turned it into a blink halfway through—the sort of adjustment you might make upon realising you are winking at your subconscious. “I bet I sat next to some old fart on a train recently, and now my subconscious has conjured his image to tell me I’m working too hard. Work hard, play hard, though, that’s my motto.” Originality, it might be noted here, was not one of Lucas’s special talents. All the same, he grinned as though he had just said something strikingly incisive.

At the mention of a train, a glimmer of death flickered through Edward’s recently-materialised head. A seat in the first class carriage, a soggy ham sandwich still clogging his oesophagus like wet paper, and then the foggy tendrils of death and a strange feeling of spreading out, of becoming simultaneously wider and flatter until there were no dimensions at all.

“You don’t believe me,” he said, recovering himself.

Lucas shook his head and took a sip of water. “Uh-uh.”

It was Edward’s turn to sigh—this time with something that sounded like real breath. This was the worst part about being a Marley. Oh, he hated the floating and the materialising right enough, but it was the mind-numbing repetition of having to prove your own existence that was the most unbearable. The utter weariness of a job where you spent half your time trying to convince people that you existed—knowing full well that your existence was an impossibility.

The unbearable dullness of explaining your being.

What was needed, thought Edward, not for the first time, was a script. A flow chart, like they had in call centres. If subject X says Y, pick answer A; if subject X says Z, pick answer B. *Please hold. Your redemption is important to us.* But no, the spirit world was scornful of all corporeal conveniences (and a special circle of hell had been reserved for the man who invented the call centre). All things considered, Edward preferred the subjects with superstitious tendencies. True, all that wailing and gnashing of teeth jangled one's nerves, but at least you didn't have to go through the dance of trying to prove your own existence.

Lucas wandered through to the living room and Edward followed him. "You doubt your own senses, then?"

"I did a few lines of coke last night, that's probably it. And I did drink a fair bit before wotsername came around." This last was said apparently apostrophically to a potted aspidistra, but now Lucas turned to Edward. "I downed a good few whiskeys. Yep. There's more of Johnny Walker than the walking dead about you." He laughed, childishly pleased with his own *bon mot*. He leaned against the dining room table, on which sat a bowl of perfectly-arranged fruit, drained of all colour in the semi-dark. Not that Lucas ate much fruit—he had a cleaner who came in every week and replaced it. It was more still life than snack.

Edward persisted. "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy—"

"Please not the bard. Anything but the bard. I refuse to have a pretentious subconscious."

"I am *not* your subconscious. We both know that you know what I really am. I can hear your heart racing; I can see the hairs

standing up on your neck. But there's no need to be afraid. I have come with good news. I am here to save you, Lucas."

"Oh God. My subconscious is a Jehovah's witness now, too."

"Will you please stop saying that? I am not your subconscious." This came out more peevish than he intended. For a moment, though, Edward himself was unsure. It was a hazard of the trade: people doubted your existence enough, you started doubting it yourself.

"Look, I hate to break it to you, but ghosts don't exist. Ergo, you are a product of an overtaxed mind. *My* overtaxed mind." Lucas took another sip of water.

Edward tried the silent-but-menacing treatment now. He simply stood in front of Lucas, staring deep into his dark soul. Lucas shifted uncomfortably and refused to meet his eyes.

"Okay," said Lucas, breaking the awkward silence. "Prove it, then."

This again. It always came down to a request for parlour tricks. "How?"

"I don't know." Lucas looked around. "If you're real, pick up that orange." He moved aside and indicated the fruit bowl.

Edward picked up the orange, like a seal performing a trick. Who'd have thought such a simple act could have felt so humiliating? "There. Believe me now?"

"Of course not! Ha! You fell into my trap. Ghosts are nonphysical, right? But *nonphysical* things can't have any effect on *physical* things. That's just science. Only the physical can interact with the physical. Anything else would break the first law of thermodynamics, as anyone knows. You can't introduce energy into a closed system! In fact, something nonphysical can't even be

a *thing*, when you think about it. If you're nonphysical, then for a start you can't exist *anywhere*, and for another, you can't pick up an orange. But you just picked up an orange, proving you're not nonphysical and therefore not a ghost. But as you're clearly not a real person either, what with being see-through and everything, then we have to rule out you being either nonphysical or real. See? Logic. Q.E.D. Elementary, my dear wots-yer-face. Now do you accept that you are just a figment of my imagination?"

It was at times such as these that Edward wished his ability to interact with the physical world weren't so limited. With effort, he could pick up an orange, but he was unable to make any mark on the world of the living. He couldn't, for instance, punch Lucas right on his smug button nose.

"I can pick up an orange because I have materialised," he explained patiently.

"So you're saying you can dematerialise? Disappear into thin air?"

"I can."

"Then I don't suppose you'd be a good little apparition and do that now, would you, and leave me to get some sleep?"

Edward threw the orange forcefully to the floor in an attempt at intimidation and immediately regretted it. For one thing, evidence for the efficacy of citrus-based intimidation is flimsy at best, and for another, this was how it started. First you let the breathers frustrate you until you started throwing things in exasperation. Then, before you knew it, you lost the concentration required to materialise and joined the crazies—the poltergeist, those petulant spirits who had long since abandoned all hope and who spent their nights throwing fits of pique at the lunacy of the living.

Lucas was unimpressed. “You see. I bet I threw that orange. I only imagined a leathery old fart did it.” He plucked an apple from the bowl and settled himself on the expansive leather sofa, the sort of sofa you normally only see in art galleries so that visitors can sit back and admire a Rothko, only here, instead of a Rothko, the wall was mounted with a 55-inch flat screen television.

Edward tried another tack. “I know all about you, Lucas Rennall. I know the lie you told your parents when you were ten years old, when you blamed your best friend for the ten pound note you stole from your mother’s purse. I know how—”

“Right, only I know all that, so you’re really just telling me stuff I already know. If you want to convince me you’re real, tell me something I can’t possibly know. But something I can confirm, of course.”

Edward was starting to see why Lucas was pegged as a hopeless case. And why his file (his nonphysical spirit file) had the word “arse” scrawled across it in ethereal handwriting.

“We have rules. I’m not allowed to tell you much you wouldn’t otherwise know...”

“Bit convenient that, isn’t it?” He juggled the apple between his hands for a few seconds, then slumped back into the hungry leather. “Bloody hell, though. I’m having a breakdown. I’m talking to myself and seeing things. I need to get a grip. It happened to Charlie in accounts. One day he’s boasting about taking his wife to Helsinki, and the next he’s claiming to be a KitKat. ‘Take a break,’ he kept saying, over and over again, only of course he’d already had a break, a mental one, and now the same’s happening to me.”

Edward stood over Lucas—imposingly, he hoped. “Lucas Rennall, if you choose to see me as a fragment of a dream, a fiction

of your own warped mind, so be it.” Now he was striking the right tone, he felt. “Your perception of me is of little consequence. All that matters is that you listen. That you listen and see what I have to show you—and learn. There’s still good in you, Lucas Rennall.” This came out a little too *Star Wars*, and he cursed the incessant repeats of those films he had seen on hotel televisions with nothing better to watch and no one to talk to on his many business trips. “You are capable of doing much good in this world, Lucas, but you are squandering your talents on transient pleasures.”

“Doesn’t sound so bad.” But Lucas’s voice was meeker now, less sure.

“I’m here to save you, Lucas. The way you are going, you will end up like me. A wraith whose every moment is to be endured, not enjoyed. Most of my time is spent bound in chains, chains whose every link was forged in the choices of my life—just as you are forging yours. Links forged from greed, from selfishness. But it’s not too late for you. You can change and free yourself from your bonds. You may not see them, but they are already there.”

“Why, though?”

“Why?”

“Yes, why? Why save me?”

“Well...” This wasn’t the sort of thing people usually asked. Most people simply assumed they were worth the attention.

“What’s in it for you?”

“For me personally?”

“If you like.”

Edward felt deflated. He had just been getting into his stride. He was also a little disarmed by the question. Disarmed and deflated. He found himself giving an honest answer. “Well, to be

perfectly honest, I have the chance for redemption too. My employers believe you are such a hopeless case, such a selfish little egotist, that you are already lost. They made me a deal. If you change your ways, we are both saved. We will both be free of our chains forever. Win-win.”

“Ah, so really you are doing this for yourself?”

“Well, er...”

“See, that sounds exactly like me, exactly the sort of thing I would do. It’s pretty much what I’d expect from a figment of my imagination.”

Edward felt his anger rising. “Look at me.” He said this through gritted teeth, teeth that were no longer quite so transparent.

Lucas looked at him.

Their eyes met. And now the power of the Marley started to take effect—a hypnotic pull like that of the moon on the sea, those cool foggy tendrils of the other world brushing the nape of Lucas’s neck, making him swallow involuntarily.

“Commit to change, Lucas Rennall. Come with me and I will set you on your path. Change, and you can be a force for good. Or don’t change and be bound by the irons of a wasted life for eternity. Change. Change and become truly free for the first time in your life. Change.” Edward could feel Lucas falling under his spell. His eyes were black glossy pools. “Change. *Change.*”

“Nah,” said Lucas. “Repentance isn’t really my gig.” He sank his teeth into the apple with an irritatingly loud crunch.

“Apoplectic” was one word you might have used to describe Edward’s subsequent outburst. It was certainly a word Edward’s acquaintances in life might have used to describe similar outbursts, outbursts which followed a business deal gone bad as surely as

thunder followed lightning. (If his acquaintances had never actually used this word, it was perhaps only because they were too busy putting as much distance as possible between themselves and Edward at the time.)

This was the most important deal Edward had ever struck—his one chance to escape his chains—and this cretin was not about to ruin it for him. It couldn't happen; he wouldn't let it happen. And yet he was powerless. He felt the black despair, the impotent rage of the poltergeist descend upon him like smoke from a pyre, but instead of throwing objects, he fell back on old habits and showered Lucas in expletives.

“Lucas Rennall, you are a fucking shit schnitzel.”

“A shit schnitzel?”

“An acne-puckered arse. A curled turd. A curled turd so pathetically soft that bluebottles slip and slide and sink beneath its shitty surface. Shitsand.”

“Shitsand?”

“You're a discarded foreskin of a human being. Even your best friends think so—not that you really *have* friends. ‘Oleaginous offal’ would be a compliment. You're shallower than a puppy's first piss. You're a pinky-penised shitball with a soul that resembles nothing so much as a semen-soaked tissue. So fuck you, Lucas Rennall. You want to keep your chains and spend eternity traipsing around the soulless apartments of yuppies, trying to convince them you're real, like an estate agent with an identity crisis, go for it. I'll be right here waiting for you, and whenever you look around you'll see me, swinging from your chains like Miley fucking Cyrus.”

Lucas—at last—was trembling now. His face was as pale as the moon. In fact, you might have said that he looked as though he'd

seen a ghost. “You—you really are a ghost?” he said, tremulously.

Edward nodded.

“Why—why aren’t you a ghost of someone I know? My uncle Raleigh, for instance... He never liked me much.”

“Not how it works.”

“Who are you then?”

“It matters not who I am. Only what I was.” This would definitely be in the script, thought Edward. This sort of material was gold. “And what I was, was like you. All I cared for in my corporeal life was money and worldly comforts. I lived for the next deal, and I always got a good deal, no matter how corrupt it made me, no matter who I had to shit on. I lied, I cheated, and that was on the good days. I spent my life thinking only of what I could get and never of what I had or who I was. I did nothing but shore up for a perfect future that I never reached, barely ever seeing my wife, the only real happiness I knew. Now I limp through the afterlife, laden with chains and regrets.” His voice shook with rehearsed emotion as he recited this speech, but he still felt a very real pang at the thought of his beloved wife. “Who am I? I am you. I am what you will become if you don’t change. And that is why I am here, because the chance of change is what I offer.”

For a while there was only the electrical hum of appliances, the distant sound of car engines. Sounds that seemed to come from another world.

“So what now?” asked Lucas at last. “Three ghosts show me my past, present and future?”

“It’s just me, I’m afraid,” said Edward with a little shrug.

“Cutbacks, eh?”

Edward ignored this. He ambled to the door and beckoned

Lucas with a spectral finger in what he calculated to be a chilling closing gesture. “You must come with me.”

“Where are we going?”

“To see what you need to see. The truth.”

“Are we...” Lucas smiled sheepishly. “Are we going to *fly*?”

It was Edward’s turn to be sheepish. “Actually, in my materialised state, I have to rely on public transport. I can only fly when I’m invisible.”

“Worst. Ghost. Ever.” But they both knew this was bravado. Lucas was truly terrified now. They all got there by a different route, but eventually, they all came—to this state of terror and anticipation.

As Lucas stood up, dropping his apple onto the sofa in his daze, Edward asked him: “Just out of professional curiosity, what was it that convinced you? That I was real, and not a figment of your imagination?”

“Oh, it was the insults. I know myself. I’m a pretty confident guy. My subconscious knows I’m amazing. It would never call me a shit schnitzel. I’m pretty sure of that.”

Edward sighed for about the billionth time that night. Typical. “Ready?” he said.

Chapter five

Stephen Kittel

“So you’re a ghost here to convince me of the error of my ways and save me from the monster I’ve become,” Lucas said, casually placing a tray with apple wedges and Keurig-brewed coffee on the end table before flopping dramatically across the couch. “Then convince me.”

Before Edward could begin, Lucas swiped the remote and turned on Netflix. “Hmm, I planned to put on A Christmas Carol, but this works, too.” Jimmy Stewart’s image filled the screen. “Hey, I bet you were around when this movie was made, weren’t you, old man? Did you see it in the theatres?”

“Let’s stick to your past, Mr. Rennall.” Edward stood at the foot of the couch and gazed at Lucas, recalling one of the moments in his file. The apartment around the couch dissolved, replaced by the harsh light of a conference room. A group of men clustered around the table, all focusing on a second Lucas Rennall pulling papers from his brief. “This is—”

“Ooh, nice special effects, Gramps.” Lucas took a bite from an apple and sat up. “I remember these schmucks. First assignment the partners let me handle myself, because Webb had to have

surgery. I must've billed a good 600 hours to the client, all in a two-month period."

"These are the leaders of Paragon Prescriptions, a mail-order company that provided discount pharmaceuticals to the less fortunate," Edward said.

"Yeah, and they were screwing over my client," Lucas countered.

Edward walked into the centre of the board room, which carried him into the middle of the ethereal table. "They—"

"That's really trippy," Lucas blurted out. "You look like the man in the magician's show that got sawed in half."

In life, Edward hadn't always been a very patient sort, but he didn't rise to Lucas's petty baiting. Stepping forward enough to extricate himself from the illusory conference table, he resumed, "They weren't preventing Langstrome from turning a profit. Your client still made money."

"Not enough," Lucas noted, watching his previous self pass the settlement pages to the Paragon execs and delighting as each of their faces contorted in a mix of anger and outrage. "Those fockers got what they deserved. A business has a right to charge what people will pay, and these knuckle-draggers thought they could undercut that."

Edward bit his lip, recalling the time he foreclosed on the outstanding mortgage for a homeless shelter. "Paragon provided affordable prescriptions to 23,000 families who couldn't pay the pharmaceutical industry's cutthroat prices. In particular, they sold Budeziol for Langstrome, a miracle drug that stopped the effects of progeria. Hundreds of children who were ageing at more than ten times the normal rate now had a chance at survival. The average

progeria patient doesn't live to see their twelfth birthday. After you forced Paragon to close their doors, the families that couldn't pay Langstrome's prices have all watched their sons and daughters wither and die."

Lucas shrugged. "Then they didn't deserve to live." His bite into another apple wedge made a satisfying crunch. "This isn't a charity. Research's not free. Do you wonder why Langstrome was the only firm that had a product for progeria?"

"I can give you the names of dozens of families who attempted to pay to save their children," Edward stated, pulling a small notebook from his jacket pocket. "Mary and Charles Weiner of Bristol bankrupted themselves in two months. Thomas and Paula —"

"And I can give you the name of one young lawyer who impressed his clients and his firm enough to earn a promotion and a very sizeable bonus."

Edward saw why his superiors thought Lucas was irredeemable. There was no guilt in his eyes, no remorse. Lucas truly cared nothing for the lives he trampled. In fact, if anything he seemed triumphant. It was time to take a different approach.

The image of Paragon's board room faded back into the apartment. Lucas grinned, recognising Edward's surrender, until he sat back into the couch and realised it was occupied. He yelped and bolted back to his feet, wheeling around to where a version of himself sat at the opposite end from a gorgeous blonde. The rift between the two was evident, their conversation animated.

"Thea Hartley," Edward announced from over his shoulder.

Lucas scowled. "I know who Thea is."

“You left her six months ago, after this night.”

“Damn right, I did,” Lucas said. “She was a sponger.”

“She put you before her job,” Edward countered. “They transferred her position to Devon, and she decided to remain here in London with you instead.”

Lucas scowled. “She wanted a sugar daddy.”

“She wanted a future with you.”

Lucas circled around the table, bending over to inspect Thea. Edward wasn’t so certain he wasn’t simply trying to look down her shirt. “If she can’t pay her own way, I’m not going to let her milk my salary. Besides, she wanted kids. I fucking hate kids.”

Edward waved his hands over her cleavage, earning contempt from Lucas. “You’re telling me that Mister Young Gun, who paid cash for this multi-million pound flat, couldn’t afford to take on a woman who both loves you and would be happy to handle all your domestic needs?”

Lucas stepped back from the couch and marched into the spare bedroom to distance himself. “Not a matter of ‘can’. She was tying strings to me. In the year we were together, do you know how many other women I slept with?” Edward waited. “Nine. Just nine. She wanted all my time to herself. She was smothering me.”

“Smothering you so completely you still found time to take up nine other partners?” Edward raised an eyebrow, flipping a page in his notebook. “And you still found time for eighteen rounds of golf, eighty-six trips to the pub, and a week-long fishing trip with men from your office. In fact, according to my notes—”

“Damn your notes.”

“—you and Thea spent approximately 36% of your free time together. That’s not including time at work, sleeping – actual

sleeping – or taking care of important personal matters. It’s also worth noting that in spite of her own career, Thea ran numerous errands for you like collecting your dry cleaning, and regularly cooked you dinner. She even cleaned up after you.”

“I have a cleaning service,” Lucas retorted. “And why do I need someone to cook when I’m on a first name basis with every respectable restaurant in Marylebone?”

“You’re making excuses.”

Lucas’s eyes narrowed defensively. “I’m stating the truth. Whores like her are a dime a dozen. I’ve screwed at least two each week since I freed myself from that ball and chain.”

“You’re deceiving yourself.” Edward stepped in close to ensure Lucas felt his presence. “You stayed with her for a full year. You, a womanizer, remained mostly true to one woman because she was special. Those other women? Sure, they might have been nice in bed, with their skin against yours, but what about the other twenty-three hours of the day?”

Lucas smirked. “More like twenty-two. Plus the morning after.”

“Thea was a strong, affectionate woman that tempered you. You were growing so close you knew she was expecting a closer commitment, and that scared you. She didn’t even ask for your help! She suggested you move in together so—”

“So her unemployed ass wouldn’t have to pay rent.”

“—so she could spend more time with you while she evaluated her career options.”

Lucas pushed past Edward to look at her standing by the couch. She and Past-Lucas were now in a heated argument. “Just a ploy to work her way deeper into my life and my wallet.”

“And would that have been so bad?” Edward flipped through

the book. “You had sex together on 106 occasions, and—”

Lucas spun around. “You counted the number of times I had sex? That’s disgusting. You didn’t watch, did you?”

“I just have data,” Edward said.

“But you could, right? You could go back and have us relive any of those nights in bed, yeah?”

Edward lowered his notebook, not wanting to let Lucas change the subject. “I’ll show you something, all right.”

The apartment dissolved around them. They were now standing on a street a number of blocks away. Lucas spun around to check the traffic; he cringed when a bus drove straight through him.

“Bloody hell,” he cried, pulling himself off the ground. “You couldn’t have put us on the sidewalk?”

Edward pointed at one of the houses. Part of a row of homes five stories tall, Edward passed straight through the front door to the spacious ceilings and grand architecture inside. Spiral staircases, furniture worthy of an art gallery, and even a garden in the back, it made Lucas’s fancy condo look paltry.

“Where’s this? Mulbeck Street?”

“This is my home,” Edward said, turning back to let Lucas look around. “I know what it’s like to be you, Rennall. I know because I was you. And as you can see, I did quite well for myself. The house is fantastic. I believe it last sold for twelve million quid. But that’s now. This is when I was still here.”

Lucas gazed lasciviously at the fashionable rooms on the second floor. “What’s the moral here, Casper?”

“There’s no life,” he answered. “It’s a lot of pretty things, but it may as well be a museum.”

Lucas cocked his head to one side. “Yeah, well, my flat’s white and clean. Some might call it sterile. But it’s not like I have nothing in my life.”

“No,” Edward said. “You have your work, and you have your women, and you have your fun and games. But for how long? And to what end? You’re thirty-one now, but what about forty-one? Fifty-one? What happens when the sweet young ladies are no longer bedazzled by anything but your pocketbook? What happens when your body grows too tired to handle wild romps every other night, or the sex simply gets boring? What will you have left in this world, Mr. Rennall? What will you have left behind?”

Lucas continued his climb to the fourth floor, more interested in exploring than taking Edward’s message to heart. “I’ll have a lifetime of amazing experiences, and I’ll have left behind a legacy as one of London’s greatest lawyers.”

“So you want to be remembered as a villain?” Edward asked. “You want to only be known for the heartache you caused to so many by only ever looking after your own self-interests? And when you finally die, what will happen to all your money, your lifeless apartment, the yacht you’re saving up for? Who will there be to leave it to?”

“Not my problem,” Lucas said as he reached the bedroom on the fifth floor and froze. There, on the carpet, was Past Edward, the Edward of 1991, convulsing in the throes of a seizure. One hand gripped his chest while the other trembled and knocked aside the cordless telephone.

“That was sixty-one,” Edward said. “Nobody there to save me, and nobody to sing my praises when I died. I am scarcely remembered now.”

“Sucks to be you then, eh?”

The scene was a lie – Edward had died on a train to Sheffield for work – but a slight tremor quavered in Lucas’s demeanour, though he overcame it with bravado.

“Thirty years,” Edward said as they returned to Lucas’s flat. *It’s a Wonderful Life* continued to play on the telly. “I mostly lived like you for thirty more years. And then the end came, unceremonious and undignified. Who will care for you, Mr. Rennall, when you are lying on a slab?”

A wistful slant twisted Lucas’s cheeks. “Why should I care? I’ll be dead.”

Edward sighed. Lucas cared nothing of the future, except perhaps as it pertained to compound interest. Edward’s only success in plying Lucas’s emotion came on his reaction to Thea, which meant he had but one card left to play, and it was probably a losing move.

The condo faded away once more, replaced by the living room of another flat. Judging from the furnishings, the owners were modestly successful, though the ambience lacked a sense of the polish that Lucas’s had. A man sat at the dinette as a woman carried a dish toward him using potholders.

Lucas craned his head around the woman to get a better view of the man. “That’s Frank Mailer. He was in my graduating class. Works at Sotheby & Price. Looks like he’s got a nice broad, too.”

Lucas studied her ass appreciatively as she bent forward to set the casserole on the table, and slid into a seat across from Frank.

“We’re not here because of Frank,” Edward said, which put Lucas’s hackles up. The woman was a brunette, but already his

gears were turning as he realised why he recognised the woman's shape. Lucas circled to the side and looked at Thea. The contours of her striped dress betrayed the fact that she was visibly pregnant.

Lucas stormed forward, yelling at the illusory Frank Mailer. "You pig fucker! You literally fucked a pig! There she is!" He walked through the table and tried to take hold of Thea. "Goddamn sow. Decided if you couldn't have me, you'd shop around for a new breadwinner so you could sit on your lazy ass and crank out a bunch of whiny brats? Fucking gold-digger. I knew I did the right thing by throwing you out, you fucking cunt."

Edward took Lucas by the arm and guided him aside, and let the illusion bring forth the sound of conversation this time.

"Honey," Frank said, "this is really good. Even better than the last time you made it."

Thea offered him a cute smile. "You like it? I tried adding a new seasoning. Can you guess what it is?"

Frank smiled back. "Love."

Thea reached across the table and punched him on the shoulder. "Cumin, you big dork."

"Thea," Frank said, "I know I don't say this often enough, but I really appreciate all the things you do for me. It's so refreshing to come home to dinner, to have someone here to greet me. Even on the nights when work keeps me late or when I'm wrapped up in the stress of my current case. I want to make sure you know how much that means."

Lucas rolled his eyes and made a gagging noise. Thea, on the other hand, beamed at the praise. "Just to say it once is more often than I ever heard from Lucas. I..."

"Honey, don't go there."

She looked away and shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s just, I gave him an entire year. I sacrificed so much to try to make that relationship work, and in the end he threw me out because he’s too big a commitment-phobe to realise that sometimes people do things for reasons other than money.”

Lucas goggled. “She said what? As if she ever did anything that wasn’t looking out for *herself*.”

Oblivious, Frank set his silverware aside. “Thea, I thought you were done with that loser.”

“I am, but...”

“Look at me,” Frank insisted. “Look at me. Lucas Rennall only cares about one thing in the world – the success and self-interest of Lucas Rennall. He was that way at Cambridge, he was that way when I spoke with him at a few events between our two firms, and if you were unable to get him to see something beyond his own ambitions, nobody can. You’re smart, and kind, and thoughtful, and capable, and I’m betting that those are the reasons why Lucas even kept you around for more than a one-night stand. You’re an amazing woman, Thea, and Lucas’s loss is my gain. I’m not so different in a lot of ways, and I understand him painfully well, but I’m thirty now. And unlike Lucas, I can see when it’s time to find room for more in life than unadulterated hedonism and crushing my enemies under heel. Lucas...he may very well be irredeemable. In the competitive, cut-throat world of law, he might have an edge on me, but trust me when I say that there isn’t a scrap of humanity in him.”

By this point, Frank had come around and kneeled beside Thea, taking her hand into his. He smiled, smoothed her hair away, and rubbed her pregnant belly. They continued to discuss, but Edward

ended the illusion and brought Lucas back to his own quarters.

Lucas leaned his back against the wall between two doors and chuckled at the ceiling.

“That’s rich,” he laughed. “Frank Mailer and Thea Hartley. Those two are perfect for each other. Cold, ambitious backstabbers who can’t realise that’s what they both are. After she has that kid, they’re going to come apart at the seams. He’ll think he’s landed the perfect trophy wife. She’ll think she found a replacement for me she can actually tame.”

Edward stood silently, mulling over Frank’s choice of words. Irredeemable? He couldn’t accept that. There had to be a way to get through to this arrogant little hothead.

“And once they give up that mock sentimental sympathy garbage, they’ll fight every night, but stay together ‘for the kids’ while they pop out two more. And in five years, they’ll finally separate, and it’ll be messy, and it’ll be costly, and it’ll involve Frank paying alimony and child support out his ass for the rest of his life, and she’ll probably never work again because she’ll be too busy with those miserable little spawn she insisted on breeding.”

Lucas located his snack and crunched into another bite of apple.

“You know what? I bet she found him off the rebound within a week of getting dumped by me. She had to be, what? At least five months pregnant. And I last saw her in June. That means he literally knocked her up on her next cycle. That just goes to show how dumb Frank is, if he wasn’t even wearing a condom.”

“Maybe they *are* meant for each other,” Edward said. Lucas opened his mouth to assert some pithy remark, but this time Edward cut him off. “She was looking for someone to care for, Lucas. Someone who shared her world. She thought you were that

man, until she realised you were a cold, heartless animal determined to live in the moment, up until the moment finally betrayed you. And so she found a man just like you, except with a scrap of compassion and a hint of gratitude – a man who was actually worth committing her time and her life.”

Lucas held up a finger as he attempted to speak with his mouth full of apple. “Counterpoint,” he mumbled. “I am worth spending time with, but I prefer for that time to be limited to the bedroom.”

“I showed you my past,” Edward said. “I showed you how it turns out when you put work and ambition first. I wish I had spent more time with my wife. I wish—”

“Whoa, you were married, Mostly Ghostly?” Lucas wagged his finger at Edward as he approached. “Then you are *nothing* like me. Marriage is for suckers who think they’re getting a servant to handle their needs, when in reality they’re the one who becomes the slave.”

Before Lucas could continue on his soapbox, Edward gestured toward the telly. “Do you want to end up like Henry Potter?”

Lucas paused, confused. “You mean, a wizard?”

“No, *Henry* Potter. The old man in the movie.”

Lucas lazily dropped onto the couch, the image of a veritable prince looking down his haunch of lamb at the peasants before him. “I’d say he did pretty well for himself. What’s Jimmy Stewart got going for him? A bunch of sappy emotional people convincing him not to kill himself. That Potter guy doesn’t need any convincing. Plus, he walks away with the money, and comes out on top of everybody else.”

“He’s an old crotchety man,” Edward replied.

“Just like you!” Lucas held up his coffee mug the way his

medieval counterpart would joggle a flagon of ale. “Sorry, Moaning Myrtle, but that’s all you seem to do. You moan and bellyache, but you don’t have an argument. Your mistake is thinking that any of that picket fence crap actually matters to me. Now where’s the Ghost of Christmas Future? Is he going to be just as pathetic?”

Edward reared up. “I am your only chance, Rennall.”

Lucas stood toe-to-toe with him. “No, *I* am my only chance. And unlike everyone else who makes weak, foolish choices, I’d say I’m the only one who actually knows what the hell I’m doing. Now get packing before I try to figure out how to issue a restraining order to a ghost.”

Edward glowered.

“Or maybe I can banish you? Some kind of exorcism? Maybe I’ll call one of those frauds on the Psychic Hotline.”

“I’m going,” Edward said. “I hope you enjoy your chains.”

Edward’s physical appearance faded, but he continued to watch Lucas for the eve. The man drank himself into oblivion, then shambled down to the nearest pub for more.

Irredeemable, they said. No wonder the bureau taunted me with my freedom over this case. They knew they had nothing to lose.

Chapter six

Conrad Gempf

Lucas's face was lit dramatically as he leaned into the SMEG and felt the cold. "Stella, old man?" he shouted from the kitchen, with a wry smile on his face.

"Can't," Edward called back, "But thanks."

"Does it run right through you to the floor, like in *Pirates of the Caribbean*?" chuckled Lucas, walking into the living room, sipping from a tall glass that looked like an opening lilly.

"Never tried it," Edward replied, "When I'm not on duty, I wouldn't be able to even hold the glass."

"Hmm," Lucas smirked, "I'm not sure I really want to hang with someone who can't hold their liquor."

"You don't really have much of a choice where I'm concerned, Mr Rennall. And you need to prepare yourself. Some of the things I'm going to show you now might be hard for you to bear."

"Really? Do they involve losing money?" Lucas asked, settling himself on the soft white sofa.

"You've been around long enough to know that lost money can always be replaced," said Edward, "But I've been around long enough to know that there are some things you can't replace if you

lose 'em.”

Lucas swallowed some beer and laughed softly, “And I’ve been around long enough to know that people who’ve been around as long as you lose their edge, their sharpness, their taste for risks.”

“You don’t have many friends, do you?” Edward said easily, undeterred.

Lucas recovered quickly from being wrong-footed, “No, I guess not. A few of the guys from work... a few lovely ladies.... That’s about all I need.” He eyed the other warily. He needed something on this guy. Some leverage. But how?

“You imagine you have their ... respect ... do you?” Edward asked, as if “respect” were a foreign word he had get his mouth and tongue around carefully.

“Oh, I can hold my own with the best of them,” he replied, staring over the rim of the glass and then taking another long pull.

“Put down the glass,” commanded Edward, “We’re travelling. I’ve got things to show you.”

Projected into Lucas’s mind, a memory Edward had collected. The back bar at The Tooth & Nail, with Gregor at the piano, softly torturing Christmas carols into notes and phrases of acid jazz that jilted lovers might cry into the night, yet each stanza ending with an edge of straight powdered sugar. There were three men on tall stools at a tiny round table. Two held wide-mouthed crystal glasses of clean amber scotch that almost glowed. The other had a similar glass containing a darker liquid that no one else will have heard of, and for which the bartender had to ask his superior. This was one of Lucas’s most groomed contacts — a Webb — not THE Webb in Berry, Lawrence and Webb, but a brother. A connection to be

nurtured. A toe hold to greater things in the future.

One of the other men was asking, “I thought you took him on one of your fishing weekends!?”

The other scotch-drinker nodded, “In November, with Harry and Lloyd.”

The Webb nodded, mouth full of spirits.

“We were all surprised, and a little jealous, I can say.” The guys with scotch were peers of Lucas’s — people to hang with sometimes but not important like the Webb. He hadn’t known that they were close enough to Webb to drink; he thought he had that on them at least. This one was Deacon — a quirky first name, not a title — the other, Ian. Webb’s tongue no longer occupied with the thick viscous liquid, he said, “You should’ve seen the equipment he brought to the party — a brand new Shimanu and *the* best lures. Hooked a catfish after all that,” laughing at the memory, “The next week, I said to Benny: smart stick with a dumb beast on each end.”

All laughed heartily, as they had when Edward first witnessed the event. He didn’t need to doctor it much in his memory before projecting it into Lucas’s, but he did loop a few microseconds of the laughter, replaying them at just slightly slower than real speed to make the whole thing last longer and be a touch more sinister.

Edward looked to Lucas’s face. Most other “client’s” faces would have betrayed anger and self-doubt to hear themselves talked down by a connection from which they’d expected so much. That was always a promising sign. But Lucas looked vaguely interested to hear more, rather than feeling any need to run, or to confess. Edward detected no discomfort, much less repentance.

“So Webb was with *Benny* from Chase the next week, then?” Lucas said to himself. He looked at Edward’s eyes, “*That’s* useful

information, that is.” He nodded to himself, “I can use that.”

A blur, then Edward induced another recent projection. A hospital room. He hadn't had to risk St Thomas's, thank God. Edward had traced Lucas's cousin's wife and new son to the more down-market St Simeon's. Flora Carter was lying exhausted in the hospital bed. Bob, the eldest son of Lucas's Aunt Tilly, was looking into an incubator at his premature son, Tim. Flora turned her head to watch. “Isn't he tiny?!” she said.

“So tiny,” agreed her husband, “And so helpless.”

Unseen, since this was just another projected memory, Ghostly Edward looked into the incubator too. Ghostly Lucas just stood near the door.

“Will we have to change our diet, too?” he asked softly.

“The nutritionist said it's not necessary,” she said, “but many families do, at least a little.”

He nodded.

She opened her mouth, shut it, opened it again. “Sorry, Bob, but can't you ask him again? It would make a huge difference. Now.”

“Honey, we've been through this,” Bob turned to her, “Lucas didn't have to get me the job in the first place. He took my call, he knows how we feel; I'm sure he's putting in a good word for me, I'm sure he's looking out for us.”

Flora turned her head away. “It's *useful* to him to have someone in the mailroom, that's all.”

“Darling, it was just those two times, and he could have gotten any of the other guys to do it, he doesn't need”

But she'd started to cry, and Bob spoke no more, but went back toward the bed to stroke her hair.

Before he got there, the two ghosts were in a different scene.

The Christmas menus were out at Swan's Nest, and the women had already ordered cocktails and were considering the unusual lunch menu.

One of them women, a blonde, was putting away a notebook. "No more planning, let's enjoy lunch. Our New Year's Party is in the bag — I'll still be with George though."

"Look! Quail's eggs!" Penn Jones said from behind the red and gold menu. Penn was one of Lucas's latest interests, and the reason Edward recorded this conversation.

"Yeah, and look at the prices!" the blonde woman replied, "We should have invited that man of yours to lunch, as well as the party."

Penn laughed, "He is good for that, for sure, Betts."

The other two women looked a bit embarrassed. One said, "I'm getting the Spanish thing, anyone want to share?"

But Bette wasn't willing to let it go. "He's good for a *lot more than that* by the look of him," she said, winking at one of the others.

"Yeah, you'd think so," Penn replied without much enthusiasm, "But mostly, he's good at paying."

"You don't mean that," said one of the others.

"Oh, hon," said Penn, dropping the menu to the table with a clap. Edward's ghostly heart beat a little faster "Here it comes!" he said to himself, just as Penn said, "I've been treated much worse, but Lucas Rennall, for all his flash and charm, will only ever truly love one person. Until someone else comes along, he takes me places, but...." She sighed through her nose, shook her head a little

and looked back at the menu.

Edward looked to see how badly Lucas was taking it. But Lucas wasn't looking at Penn. Lucas was sizing up blonde Bette, who didn't look convinced by Penn, and whose party Lucas would be attending in a few days' time. He'd *arrive* with Penn.

And just like that, Lucas found himself back in his own living room, on the sofa, forgotten beer glass on the side-table.

"You really feel nothing, Mr Rennall?"

"Well, perhaps you think I should feel grateful? I really am picking up some useful information," said Lucas.

"No, that's not what I expect you to feel at all — these people, people closest to you... they all...."

Lucas interrupted, "You keep talking about what I should be feeling or thinking. What do you care? What do you care how I feel or what I think?"

"Oh, what you feel and think is of the utmost importance to me, actually, Lucas," said Edward.

"Well, that's interesting. Ed-ward." said Lucas, drawing out the name and with a trace of superiority in his smile. This might be it: leverage. "And why is that? I don't get it."

And then Lucas added, with an air of something like resignation, "I'm lost here. Help me out." He raised his hands, miming helplessness, eyebrows raised, eyes wide — the picture of a man waiting for enlightenment.

And like a big ol' catfish dizzied by a Mepps Anglia Spinner, Edward opened his big fat mouth.

"I chose you, you know, Lucas. My boss gave me a choice. And I chose you."

“Wait, now. Ghosts have bosses?”

Edward nodded, “..and assignments. I could have taken on someone easier. But I chose you, Lucas.”

Lucas considering, then said, almost as if sympathetic, “Because bigger pay-off for harder cases, yeah?”

“Yes,” Edward admitted. “Instead of an endless succession of assignments, if I redeem you — help you redeem yourself — I can be with my Margaret.”

Lucas leaned forward, head tilted, like a stalking tiger sighting prey through the tall grass and only said, quietly, “Your Margaret.”

“My wife. She’s dying,” said Edward, a ghost of a glistening tear in his eye, “A ‘win’ here, and my chains are off and,” he swallowed, “I can be with her.”

Suddenly, explosively, Lucas’s body relaxed. He clapped his hand on the sofa’s armrest, collapsed back into the soft white cushions and he laughed and he laughed and he laughed.

Chapter seven

Linda Weeks

“But I don’t want to see my future! Just leave me alone.” Lucas began to take off his dressing gown as he re-entered the bedroom, with Edward following him. “I’ve seen enough already!” He threw the maroon silk dressing gown onto the floor and moved back towards the bed. The dragon across the back of the dressing gown slithered and settled, as though ready for sleep. “For Heaven’s sake, just let me sleep now.” But Edward was already lying there, in Lucas’ space in the bed. Laughing.

“So, what did this cost you then?” Edward spread his hands slowly across the soft and velvety chocolate brown and cream duvet, tracing figure of eight patterns in it with his finger, though leaving no trace in the fabric. “Six ninety nine from Tesco Direct, I suppose?”

Lucas cursed under his breath. “None of your business, Ghost! Anyway, I thought you knew everything.” He stomped off towards the window. The curtains swished effortlessly open at the touch of his hand on the control, revealing the panoramic view of Portman village. He shivered even though his bare feet could feel the warmth of the under-floor heating through the thick pile of the

luxurious carpet.

The church clock face wasn't visible from this distance but Lucas could see the familiar floodlit spire rising above the buildings around it. A string of multi-coloured lights adorning a little houseboat moored alongside the steps beside the old warehouse reflected upwards towards the night sky and downwards to the river below, shimmering on the dark ripples.

Whatever time of night or morning it was, people were still coming and going from The Mason's Cat in the High Street, their raucous shouts bouncing off the nearby buildings as they came out singing and laughing, still dancing to the sound of the live band whose music throbbed even through the apartment's double glazing. One woman slipped as her high heels had trouble coping with the pavement and she slipped and shrieked with laughter as her partner caught her. Lucas watched them support each other as they headed towards a dark alleyway, listening to the trit-trot-scrap of the woman's shoes until the sound faded.

Bryanston Court was higher than all the other buildings in the village, though nearby County Hall came a close second and Lucas watched as the first few snowflakes of the night began to fall on the golden cockerel weathervane on top of County Hall, known irreverently among the locals as The Yellow Chicken. The wind had made it swing round to the North; the rest of the night would be bitterly cold. The moon was a small, impassive hard ball of grey-whiteness hanging in the black sky.

"You still here?" Lucas sighed as he turned away from the window, leaving the curtains open. He dragged himself across the room and picked up his dressing gown. With an exaggerated air of weary resignation he moved to the little armchair and flopped

down into it, not bothering to put his dressing gown on but wrapping himself up in it like a blanket. He raked his hand through his hair.

“Go on then, you might as well get it over with. What’s my future?”

“Open your eyes, and look out of the window.”

“I’ve just looked, okay? You saw me. There’s nothing out there but the village. And the chicken. And the snowflakes.”

“Look again. You want me to do the spooky bit? Looooook agaiiiiiinnnn, Luuuucaaaaaas!” Edward was suddenly out of the bed and standing in front of Lucas, waving his hands slowly in front of Lucas’ face in the manner of a music hall hypnotist and snaking his ethereal body from side to side. Then he stopped suddenly and flung his arm out, pointing towards the window. “Looooook!”

Lucas opened his eyes wearily and blinked as daylight flooded through the window and into the room, replacing the darkness. He stood up involuntarily and, almost against his will, moved a couple of steps closer to look outside.

The church had gone. In fact, the whole village had gone, and in its place was a ship, bizarrely level with the window.

Lucas blinked and turned back to look at Edward. “What’s happening there?”

“Take my hand and you’ll find out.”

“What?!” Edward’s hand was still outstretched, and when Lucas didn’t move the hand twitched in an impatient gesture. “Come on! We haven’t got all night, you know.”

Reluctantly Lucas moved his hand towards Edward’s, and the next thing he knew he’d been transported onto the quayside, looking up at the cruise liner.

“Ah! The *Skimming Petrel*! This is the Harperline flagship! You know I practically own this boat, don’t you?”

Edward nodded, thoughtfully. Lucas wondered whether the ghost could take his head off and put it under his arm, but decided not to ask.

“You mean, you did a shady deal to push the MD to the edge of his finances, got your buddies to give him a loan at an extortionate repayment deal and then stepped in and got him to sign his company over to Berry, Lawrence and Webb to get himself out of the trouble that you got him into. Hmm. And a nice fat bonus from your employers for you into the bargain, of course.”

“And why not? If Harper wanted to get himself into hock up to his gizzards, silly old fool, who was I to stop him? And then of course I come along as his rescuer, and he’s none the wiser, and doesn’t have to go bankrupt. So he thinks I’ve saved him. Besides, he’s still the owner, at least on paper. So what if I got a new car out of it?”

“While your company take eighty per cent of his profits after paying for his staff and running costs. Don’t pretend otherwise - it takes one to know one, you know. And I do know everything about you.” Edward raised his right eyebrow and gave Lucas a penetrating stare.

Lucas spread his hands wide in a gesture of innocence. “We leave him enough to live on, don’t we? Win-win, that’s what I say. And soon-” he said, with sudden realisation, “I’m going to be travelling on this boat to some far-flung exotic location, aren’t I? As a major shareholder, of course, not a paying customer. Anyway, where’s it going now?”

“Madrid.”

“En route to-?”

“New Zealand, stopping at all ports.”

Lucas smiled in anticipation. “Come on, then, what are we waiting for? Show me everything. I want to see it all, so that I can pick out the best cabin. Port Out and Starboard Home, and all that.”

Edward remembered his mission and how important it was to save this particular one, so that he could be with Margaret. So instead of telling Lucas what he thought of his sharp practices he ignored the young man’s smirking grin and led the way up the gangplank, past the fluttering green and yellow bunting on the handrails. Other people were milling about but nobody noticed the two figures moving effortlessly up the steps and onto the deck. Lucas was suddenly aware that he was still only in his pyjamas, though he was not cold.

“Can they see us?”

“No, of course not! None of them are here yet, are they? They’re all still in December 2017. Now, just come with me.”

Lucas followed Edward through the magnificent entrance hall with its huge staircase, past what looked like a room with a stage, piano and bar and through a dining room, white-clothed round tables set out with bowls of fruit of various recognisable and exotic kinds. Lucas swiped at an orange from a display as he passed but was unable to feel it and his hand passed right through. They continued through several doors and corridors throughout the ship until he was completely disorientated. Finally they stopped outside door 220.

“Surely I should have cabin number one?” Lucas went to open

the door but found that he didn't need to, because they both appeared on the other side of it.

Lucas put out his hands instinctively as he saw himself, fully dressed in evening wear, lying half in and half out of the bed, head almost touching the floor. The blood from a single bullet wound to the chest was already drying on his clothes, and frozen onto his face was a look of surprise. He turned to Edward.

"Ok, now what kind of trick is this? Are you trying to tell me that this is me? Or will be me, in the future?"

Edward nodded. "fraid so, young man."

"Oh, I get it - unless I change my ways, of course! What, do you want me to take holy orders or something? Do penance for all my sins? Become a fine, upstanding member of the community, and all that?"

"Well, it would be a start..."

"Fat chance! Anyway, if it's Harper or one of his men come to take revenge on me it's too late, isn't it? The deal's already done. Unless you can transport me back in time to undo everything, which I doubt, so there's no point in me becoming a reformed character."

"What makes you think that your death is anything to do with that deal? Just because it happens here on this ship? It's from a deal you haven't made yet. Anyway, we've seen enough here."

"Good! Take me back home now."

"Oh no, not yet. Not quite yet."

Lucas groaned. "Where next?"

Edward floated towards a porthole and somehow sucked Lucas through it behind him. They didn't land in the water but instead Edward opened his eyes to see that they were standing on the

balcony at the base of the church spire. Lucas glanced over the edge and stepped backwards, trembling.

“Not afraid of heights, are you? Living so high up in your posh flat and all. I thought you’d be used to looking down on all the little people, going about their daily lives.”

Lucas coughed, embarrassed. “No! Just - the edge is a bit close here. And I don’t want to fall onto that bloke or into that hole.”

“Well, that hole is actually yours, waiting for you. And the bloke is the vicar, saying a few words over you.” The only other people that Lucas could see were two male figures, standing in the shadows. A long black car was speeding away from the churchyard.

“What - you’re telling me that nobody comes to see me off? Not even those girls who declare their undying love to me?”

Edward shook his head. “Believe me, I’m not enjoying this, either. But it’s how you’ll end up, unless you start making some changes - not only to the way you conduct business but the way you live, think and love. You need to take a good, hard look at yourself. And I’m the one who can help to put you back on the right track. Just listen to what I’m trying to tell you, and think about it. Please.”

For a moment - just a moment - Lucas looked apprehensive. “Can we get closer?” No sooner had he spoken than the pair of them were on the ground, in time to hear the vicar saying a few last words and look sorrowfully at the coffin in the grave before beckoning over two men standing in the shadows, who came and began shovelling earth back in as the vicar walked away.

“So that’s it, then? The End?”

Edward nodded. “That’s it, for all of us. The difference is in how we are remembered by those we leave behind.”

Lucas was silent for a long time, watching the men working and listening to the birds singing.

“So, who was this geezer, then?” The younger man paused to lean on his shovel, while the older of the two stopped and took a cigarette packet out of his pocket.

“No idea!” he said, cheerfully. “Poor old sod. ‘Ere, Dave, you coming down The Cat tonight?”

Dave lit his cigarette and took a deep drag before answering. He considered tapping the ash into the grave but decided to flick it to one side instead. He blew out a long puff of blue-grey smoke. “Nah! On a promise, ain’t I?”

“Go on! Not that one with the long legs and short skirt again?”

“No, her friend!”

“You old dog! Come on, let’s send this fella on his way to Heaven, or the other place, wherever ‘e’s going.”

Suddenly Lucas’ hand was in Edward’s once again, and in the blink of an eye he was back in his apartment, and it was still night time.

“Well, if that’s how we all end up, and we do, obviously, then the only thing to do is to be happy while we can, isn’t it? So I don’t see any point in changing myself.”

“But surely-“

Lucas strode out of the bedroom, down the corridor past the two Venetian red glass bowls on the onyx table and into the kitchen. The smell of last night’s takeaway still hung in the air. He poured himself half a glass of water and fumbled in the cupboard over the sink for a paracetamol, and downed them both in one gulp. Edward appeared in front of him and Lucas turned his back on him as he thumped the empty glass onto the draining board.

“Look! I don’t believe any of this! I don’t know who’s put you up to it, or how you’ve managed to pull off all these - these stupid pantomime tricks, but I’ve had enough. You’ve probably drugged me. Yes, that’s what’s happened!”

Lucas paced up and down, waving his arms with fists clenched as though he was banging them onto a table top. “Yes of course! I’m hallucinating. I shall wake up in the morning and I probably won’t even remember any of this, and will wonder why I’ve got such a thumping headache. So just clear off and leave me alone. If you’re real, go and float over to St. Thomas’ while you still can, and spend your last few hours with your precious wife.”

He looked at the bedside clock. Still a couple of hours of night left. Time to sleep off this drug, whatever it was, and wake up free of this exhausting dream. He’d ring in sick tomorrow and take the day off work, and spend the day at home. After all, they were hardly likely to sack him, were they? Not when he’d just brought them that big contract from Harperline.

Chapter eight

Sam Pynes

Edward left the lavish flat in very different spirits than he had come. It wasn't as though he had never failed before, there was a plentitude of bull-headed people in the great, wide, living world - he should know - but the stakes had never been quite as high. He was given a chance he could have never expected and he had bungled it, just as he had bungled his whole life, and by extension, his death. Maybe Margaret would recover, but either way at least he could go see her one more time before she died and was truly lost to him forever. He ambled down to the station, midnight air whipping about him, though he could not feel it. He could just fly to where he was headed, of course, but the etherial experience of flying made Edward feel even more disconnected from living, breathing humanity. He thought the notion was a bit ironic, considering that he was now passing through the turnstiles doors to get onto the tube, without bothering to open them.

The London Underground is neither the swiftest, nor the most comfortable way to get around London in the middle of the night. Ghosts have even less of a reason than most to take the quiet midnight train. Edward looked around at his fellow riders as the

carriage lurched slowly forward. A few kids who looked like they were too young to be out so late, if indeed they had a home to go to, sat on one end of the carriage, while a well-dressed young couple sat on the other end, looking tired and more than slightly tipsy, but happy. Edward sat dejectedly in the middle. Should he have gone to save Claire? He hadn't really had a choice, there was so much to gain and so little to lose. His chains were long enough as it was, so he would hardly notice the extra links, especially if he were allowed continued work, but he still felt the weight of abandoning her. Maybe John would send someone else to help her instead. How was ghost-life any less cruel, or indeed any different, than the real-world of investment and finance had been? It was still a high-risk high-reward business.

"Hey mister," said a voice at his elbow "where did you get that tie, 1992?"

Edward gave a start: he had forgotten he would still be visible. One of the kids had come over with a mischievous grin that wasn't entirely unkind, but wasn't innocent either. Edward glanced down at his wide, polyester tie, then fished a cough-drop out of his coat pocket.

"Nah, the tie is older than that, though this could be from 1992." He handed it to the kid. "Merry Christmas." Then he shot up through the roof like a rocket, leaving saucer-sized eyes on the kid behind him.

He didn't have time for self-serving introspection. Time to get to the hospital. He wouldn't fly, so he split the difference by gliding along the ground like an ice-skater, if the skater wore rocket-propelled skates. He made a bee-line through St. James Park and past the statue of Boudica before crossing Westminster Bridge and

coming to rest within the grounds of St. Thomas Hospital. He remembered to make himself inconspicuous as he made his way up the stairs to his wife's room.

Two young nurses, one male, one female were talking quietly as they checked her vitals in the darkened room.

"The On-Duty says that this one needs to wake up by tomorrow morning or they're switching her off," said the young man.

"That's putting it delicately," the woman reproached.

"It's not as if she can hear me," he countered, rolling his eyes dismissively, "she was gone days ago anyway."

"You don't know that," she whispered a bit more sharply, "I know there is practically no hope in these cases, but it is still an awfully morose thing to say. Especially so close to Christmas." Resolving to have the last word, she walked quickly out and on to other duties.

"Look," said the young man, turning back to the bed, "go ahead and prove me wrong, just do it quietly enough after our shift that she doesn't find out, or I'll never hear the end of it, ok?" He gave the unconscious invalid a wink and followed his fellow out into the florescent-lit hallway.

Tomorrow. Why couldn't John Huffam have given him more time? Why couldn't Lucas just see where his life of selfishness would lead him? Then again, the young Edward hadn't seen the error of his own ways. He and Lucas were not so substantially different at that age.

He stared at Margaret, willing her to wake up, so he could see her one last time. So she could see him. He knew the consequences, and he no longer cared. He would just wait here until she woke up or he was compelled to leave, eternal suffering

be damned. It was what he deserved anyway.

But would she even want to see him? The warm shame of this notion was starkly displaced by a familiar chill. No matter how long this penitential subservience persisted, he would never become fully accustomed to that uniquely unsettling feeling that heralded the approach of another spectre.

“Edward.” The voice was a deep baritone, or at least sounded like it once had been, but now had cracks and wheezes, like a leaky accordion.

“He wouldn’t listen to a word I had to say,” Edward replied without turning, “what was this all anyway? A lesson in letting go?” He looked away from the sleeping figure and into the eyes of John Huffam, who was standing so close that their noses would have been touching, if indeed they could really touch anything. It occurred to Edward that such an invasion of space would have been rude while they were living, even from a superior and elder.

“Perhaps.”

The obliqueness of the response, like the confusing and misty transparency of his entire world was suddenly and simply too much. Edward’s eyes set as his frame settled back into visible focus.

“Why did you bother to give me hope? I know we are here to make up for our lives, to lessen our burdens by helping others to escape theirs, but I’ve had enough I tell you! I’m going to wait here for my wife to wake up then go back to my well-deserved chains and leave you and all the rest of this infernal nonsense behind.”

He was fuming with about as much dignity as a cold, white spirit in a well out-of-style suit could manage. John continued to stare at him, through him, in a way that was infuriatingly neither

kind nor unkind, complacent nor interested. Instead of answering, John reached into a too-small pocket of his jacket and produced a too-large binder. Stamped on the front in large letters was 'McCaffrey'.

"You've failed. But the night isn't yet over. You can still put one life's journey on a corrective course tonight. If you attend directly to our Ms. McCaffrey here, you may consider yourself released from our little bargain."

Just then the male nurse returned, and his eyes immediately skipped the saucer stage and went right on up to the size of dinner plates.

"What in..."

Edward addressed him like he had been previously part of the conversation and had only just stepped out for some air. "What do you think? Should a man be given false hope when all is lost, and not only that but has been lost for some time? All to try to save someone who is such a long-shot that biking to the moon would be far more plausible? Does that seem fair to you?"

Without even looking at him, John raised a hand toward their shocked intruder. As his expression slackened, the befuddled nurse blinked a few times and shook his head before exiting back out into the hallway, probably in search of a head-clearing hot beverage.

Seething, Edward's eyes seized about the room for somewhere to redirect his righteous indignation. He settled upon a picture on the bedside table. It was Margaret and he, early in their marriage and evidently at an event for rescued dogs, given the three-legged poodle near their feet. She had given so much time for such things, not that he ever agreed to actually take in any of the animals. But now he was the one in need of the help, much more like the injured

poodle than the sharply-dressed young man in the photo.

With that, it all clicked into place. Maybe he was being calculatedly manipulated, but maybe like the confused nurse, it really was in part for his own good as well. It was still all a second chance, and again a chance he didn't even deserve. Edward thought about Lucas and wondered who would be sent next to try to save him. Would anyone? He had a duty to perform, whether or not he ever saw Margaret again. He owed it to the human race. There was good that he could have accomplished in life that he would never know, with farther-reaching effects than any measure of good deeds could now fully recompense, but he could still do something. He looked down at the thick binder in the still unflinching spirit's hand. It's what Margaret would do; it's what she would want him to do. He gave one last long look at the prostrate figure on the bed, no noise emanating from her but the rhythmic whooshing and beeping of the life-support.

Edward snatched the binder from John's outstretched hand, gave a curt nod, and strode resolutely from the room, past the still slightly confused-looking nurse pushing a trolley stacked with clean blankets, and out of the hospital, into the crisp and unfeeling yuletide air.

He flew.

He again crossed the path of Boudica's statue, once proposed as a testament to Victoria's youth and vitality, but not erected until after her death. Edward had been given a similar lease on life, and even in death he would not leave this new opportunity wasted.

Chapter nine

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

With his lower lip tucked between his teeth, Lucas jerked off to the financial spreadsheets in front of him. He's seen what the future holds, he knows the way it sits now, the way it reads on his screen, he's taking a risk. A risk that involves his own money, but the profits he will reap in the end, it's just another thing he can flaunt in his father's face. He's already made more than the bastard ever has.

He caught movement in his peripheral vision, slowing his pace to scan his office. He twisted to look behind him and then shook his head. Don't let him get to you, Lucas, you're untouchable.

Curling his fist and lengthening his strokes, he found his release. His head dropped against the leather chair to bask in his moment of pleasure. Had his night gone the way he planned, he would have had suitable companionship.

When the high faded, he stood to his feet, and cleaned himself up. Fixing strands of hair that didn't sit perfectly on his head, he smoothed his eyebrows with his forefinger, flashing himself a grin.

"You are one sexy son of a bitch." He gave himself a wink before returning to his desk, stopping in his tracks when he spotted

Edward standing in the middle of his office.

"I told you before..." Lucas said arrogantly, moving towards his chair. "I have no interest in what your selling."

"You really are an egotistical wanker." Edward stated in disgust. "I want you to go with me one more time. Let me show you what could become of you..."

"Get lost." Lucas' eyes rested on his computer screen, minimising the window. The last thing he needs is Edward figuring out he's using the information he provided to improve his position. "I spent the entire evening with you. If you couldn't convince me then, what makes you think you can convince me now?"

Edward moved quickly, causing the papers on his desk to drift to the floor. Lucas shot him a glare, jumping out of his chair. Edward grabbed him by the throat, lifting him until they're eye to eye.

"I'm not done here."

"I am," Lucas snapped. "You've wasted enough of my time. Get the hell out of my office."

Edward's eyes darkened, there's something in the depths, and even though his mind is telling him to look away, he can't.

"If I can't persuade you to to change your egotistical ways..." He heard Edward whisper. "Then let's see how you handle when everything is taken away from you."

Lucas opened his mouth to laugh, the question "What can you possibly do to me, old man?" on the tip of his tongue when everything shifted.

Light flickered off of a sharp steel blade as it's thrust into his skin, blood spilling onto the floor, pooling around his feet. Lucas lifted his head to plead with his assailant, but before the words can

slip off of his tongue, the blade slid easily across his lips. He didn't get a chance to scream when it came at him again. Pop. The tip of the knife took out his left eye. The pain, it started off as a dull throb intensified, his entire body trembling as he collapsed onto the cold concrete, and puked what's left of his lunch on a pair of slacks that costs more than an average person makes in a week. The last thing he heard when darkness washed over him, is the sound of Edward's laughter.

Lucas' eyes snapped open. It's cold. Too cold since he tends to keep his apartment on the warm side this time of year. Only he's not in his apartment, he's sitting on a street corner, holding an aluminium mug in a dirty hand, pleading for anything they can spare. He dropped it, the metal clanging to the pavement.

"This is my corner." A rough voice hissed, shoving his feet at him.

Lucas turned to stare at him in confusion. He opened his mouth to ask him where he is, but any answer he's going to give, Lucas doesn't want to hear.

"Get your ugly ass out of here."

"Who the hell are you calling ugly?" Lucas snapped, lifting his hands to keep him from closing in on him.

His breath hitched in his throat when he spotted the scars. Long jagged scars that ran the length of his hand. Shifting back the sleeves of the thin jacket he's wearing, one he's never seen before, one he definitely would never own, he found more scars. All deep, all jagged, all healed. He stumbled back in surprise, feeling someone push him from behind. He spun around, catching the disgusted expression from a man in a business suit.

"Christ." He muttered and picked up his pace, rounding the corner in a hurry.

"No." He breathed, shaking his head. "This isn't happening. This isn't me."

"Who are you then?"

"Lucas Rennall. I'm a partner at a law firm..."

The bum laughed, flashing him a toothless grin.

"Sure you are."

Bits and pieces drifted into his head. The knife. He remembers it cutting him. He remembers...

His hand shot to his left eye and he rushed towards the store window. It's gone. Fucking hell. There's nothing left of his face. Just a series of jagged lines, missing teeth, and the tip of his nose is gone. How is it even possible? How the hell is he still standing here? Lucas let out a soft cry, turning away from the hideous monster he has become, causing the people on the sidewalk to move away from him.

Lucas grabbed the arm of the first man that dared to walk past him.

"Help me."

The man shrugged him off, picking up his pace, turning to look behind him. Lucas bit his bottom lip, he split it open, and blood filled his mouth.

He spotted a woman with her daughter, he blocked her path, and her eyes shot up to him. She tucked her daughter into her side.

"You have to help me."

"Go away." She pushed his hand away when he reached for her.

"I'll call the police."

Lucas' eyes rested on the little girl, she hid her face into her

mother's arm, letting out a soft cry as her mother led her away. And now, people are crossing the street, murmuring, pointing, laughing. Even the bloody bastard sitting in his spot, holding his aluminium mug, shook his head at him.

He moved towards the alley, keeping his head down, moments away from panic. This can't be real. This can't be fucking happening. He's playing a trick on me. Wait it out. Yeah, that's all I have to do. He'll get bored and move on to the next sorry bastard. I'll be back in Bryanston Court in no time.

Resting on a milk crate, he drew his knees in, wrapped his arms around himself, and rocked. The sky opened up, ice cold rain dripping down the back of his neck.

"Not such a pretty boy anymore, are you?"

Lucas' head snapped towards the voice.

"You bloody asshole. How many times do I have to tell you to get lost?"

"Still not convinced?" Edward clucked his tongue.

"This isn't real. It's just some mind fuck you put over me."

"That's a shame."

The sky darkened, Lucas glanced around to see the buildings morph into a mixture of colours. Heart racing, he stood, his shoeless feet sinking into the concrete.

"No!" He screamed, struggling to pull his feet free, only he couldn't get them to budge.

The darkness ate its way up the length of him. First, his ankles, then his knees, and when it reached his waist, Lucas screamed incoherently into the void, the sound echoing around him. Voices from the sidewalk faded off, the dog he heard barking a little while ago ended abruptly, and horns blaring from the street died out.

Lucas opened his good eye and now he's in a room. Mirrors covered the walls, the ceiling, the floor. Every time he caught sight of his reflection, it exploded. Shards of glass flew across the room, cutting into his skin. He covered his head with his arms, blood oozing from the new lacerations, shredding what's left of his calm demeanour. There's no hiding from the grotesque disfigured monster he's become.

"I can make it all go away," the voice whispered in his ear.

"What do I have to do?"

"One more time, Lucas. That's all I ask."

Lucas threw his hands up in the air.

"Fine. Just get me out of this fucking nightmare."

Chapter ten

Wendy Christopher

Lucas glanced down at his expensive watch and then back up at the window of his office on the third floor. “You have one hour, tops,” he said to Edward, “so you’d better give it your best shot, because that’s time I could be giving to a *paying* client.”

“You make more money in one month than most people earn in a year. You can afford an hour.” Edward swept his hand forward, gesturing along the street. “Follow me.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

Edward turned on his heel and headed away from the building, and after a moment Lucas huffed and trailed after him. “Well how far is it? We could take my car — it’s a Lexus, latest model. Shit-hot. Might as well arrive in style.”

“It’s not *that* far. And the exercise will do you good.” Edward gritted his teeth and carried on walking. He wasn’t sure this was going to work, but it was all he had left now. Why did he ever think he could help this arrogant little prat turn his life around? Chasing the big prize again, just like he did when he was still alive. And look where that got him.

Lucas rolled his eyes. “Well, try and stay in the business area, okay? Otherwise we’ll end up walking past shops and stuff.” He shuddered, tugging at his suit lapels as if trying to pull them in closer. “And tripping over bin bags and homeless people is not my idea of a good time.”

Edward ignored him and continued towards the end of the street, leaving Lucas to scuttle along behind him, ducking and weaving through the conveyor-belt of people passing up and down the grimy pavements with heads down and minds locked in the private bubble of their own worlds. Edward slipped through them with ease, but every now and then someone would plough into Lucas, spinning him off sideways with a knock of the shoulder. The look of annoyance on his face deepened with every impact. “See, *this* is why I don’t walk around London,” he said.

“Well try moving out of *their* way for a change,” said Edward, “instead of always assuming they’re going to move out of yours.”

“They bloody should. My suit probably cost more than their monthly mortgage payments.”

No-one cares, you idiot. Edward felt the weight of his chains as he pressed his fists to his temples. Of course he could remember saying something similar in his younger days – probably at the same age as Lucas now. He tried to picture the house he and Margaret shared. It was beautiful, if memory served. And so it should have been; he’d hired the best interior designers money could buy to transform it into a suburban palace fit for a man of his status. So why could he only remember white walls and neutral colours, and none of the furnishings and intricate details that made it a home he’d lived in for thirteen years? Even Margaret was missing. He tried to place her mentally in the blank spaces, but as

soon as he did her eyes closed, and the background of complimentary colours morphed into a hospital room...

He shook the visions from his head and pointed to an anonymous-looking office block at the end of the street. "That's the place," he said. "Come on. There's someone I want you to meet."

Lucas stared up at the building, his lip curling upwards. "And what are you thinking he could teach me, if that carbuncle is the best he can do for himself?"

"*She*, actually. And in answer to your question, quite a lot." Edward stopped outside the main entrance to the building. This was far enough for his purpose. Turning to face Lucas, he reached up and tapped his fingertips on the younger man's forehead.

The world flashed out in a blast of white light, and then the washed-out greys of partition walls and office furniture took form around them. Lucas blinked and shook his head. "What the hell-?"

"It's alright, we're not really here. Well, not physically, anyway. I thought it best to make this a virtual meeting – a mental journey, if you like." Edward gestured towards a gap in a battered-looking cubicle wall ahead of them. "After you."

The woman on the other side tapped on the keyboard of her laptop with one hand, frowning as she muttered into the smartphone held to her ear. "Look," she said, "if she calls again just block her, okay? Stop taking her calls." She listened for a moment and then rolled her eyes in response. "Well don't reply to them then! If nobody answers her emails or talks to her she'll soon get the message and give up. Jesus..."

She stabbed at the 'end call' icon on her screen and slapped the phone on the desk beside her, before slumping forward over her keyboard with her palms pressed against her temples.

Edward glanced sideways at Lucas. “This, he said, “is Claire McCaffrey.”

Lucas frowned as he stepped towards her desk and waved his hand from side to side in front of her. “Does she know we’re here?”

“No. She can’t hear us or see us. But that’s probably just as well.” Edward stepped in front of him and blocked his hand. “It’ll make it easier for us to get to know her.”

“And why would I want to do that?”

“Because I’m hoping you’ll learn something. You two actually have a lot in common, so if you’re not prepared to listen to anything *I* tell you” – Edward arched an eyebrow – “perhaps you’ll listen to her.”

Lucas shook his head at her as she resumed tapping at her computer with a look of grim determination on her face. “A stressed-out secretary? What could she teach me?”

“She’s not a secretary, she’s a businesswoman. She was the founder of ‘OurLink,’ a highly successful social media site, before she sold it at a huge profit to focus on a new business.” Edward pursed his lips. “Or at least, she was *one* of the founders. That’s a small detail she seems to have forgotten in recent years.”

“Oh yeah,” said Lucas, “I heard about that. She started it up in uni with two of her friends, but then screwed them over when the business took off. I don’t know all the details, but it sounds like she was pretty ruthless about it.”

“Interesting observation, coming from you.”

“Hey, when *I* bend the rules I do it because it’s the smart thing to do. She was just a bitch by all accounts. Took advantage of the fact that the business contract they drew up wasn’t worth the bog-paper it was written on and ripped them off big time.”

“Well, let’s find out, shall we?” Edward waved his hand in front of Lucas’s face.

The white-out was faster this time, and when it cleared they were standing in what looked like a library. Claire looked younger, probably late teens, and she was sitting at a table with two other girls of a similar age sitting either side of her. One had curly red hair down to her shoulders, and the other wore round-rimmed black glasses. The three of them had bunched their chairs up close together, so they could see what Claire was writing on a lined A4 pad in front of her.

“So that’s how we’ll do it then,” said Claire, crossing a ‘t’ with a flourish. “I’ll handle all the technical stuff, ‘cause that’s my area, Jane, you deal with the accounting and business admin, and Lisa, you can take care of the marketing side.”

“We’re going to need proper contracts for this eventually though,” said the girl with glasses. “You know, if we’re going to run this as a genuine business. We can’t just write a bunch of promises on a bit of paper.”

“I know that and we’ll get round to it, don’t worry, but for now let’s focus on divvying up the roles between us.”

“Well shouldn’t *I* sort the contracts out,” said the redhead, “if I’m in charge of the business admin?”

Claire shook her head. “I’ll do it.”

“But—”

“It’s *my* business, okay? I’m the one doing most of the work, you two are just doing the easy stuff.” Clare threw down her pen and glared at her friends. “This entire project wouldn’t exist without me. I designed it, I built it—”

“Not on your own,” said the girl with glasses. “Me and Lisa

helped.”

“Well it was my idea in the first place. I came up with the concept – you just did what I told you to do.” Claire’s shoulders slumped as she sighed. “It’s my baby, and my responsibility if it all goes tits-up, so it’s only natural I want to be in control of the important stuff. You can’t blame me for that, can you?”

Her friends swapped weary-looking glances and shrugged in defeat. Claire beamed, and the three of them resumed their discussion, with Claire doing most of the talking while her friends nodded in compliance.

Lucas clicked his tongue. “Wow, talk about a control freak,” he said. “And I’m guessing those two just caved in and trusted her?”

“They saw no reason not to,” said Edward. “They’d been best friends for years, even before they all went to university.”

“Hah! Friends and business don’t mix, anyone with a brain knows that. That’s why I don’t have friends.”

Edward’s eyelid twitched, and he took a deep breath before responding. “Well, that was where it all went wrong for them, because Claire made sure the contracts that were drawn up put her very much in the driving seat. The business flourished, but Claire wanted more and more control over the running of it, and when the partnership inevitably turned sour and Jane and Lisa wanted out, they were left with nothing – not even a share of the business profits.” He glanced back at the girls with a sigh. “They eventually consulted lawyers and filed suits against her, but it’s taken years to settle, and could end up costing them almost as much in legal fees as they’ll receive in damages. The biggest casualty is their friendship though. No amount of money will ever repair that.”

“And how is all this relevant to me?” said Lucas. “She was a

manipulative cow who got slapped with lawsuits for shafting her business partners, and damn right too. I'd have sued the ass off her if it'd been me."

"I'm sure you would." Edward turned back to Lucas. "But aren't you curious as to how she became that person? We're all polished by the rocks we bump against. Maybe we should look a little deeper before we pass judgement?"

The library vanished, and his time they found themselves in a small kitchen, with Claire and an older woman standing on opposite sides of a blue Formica dining table. They faced each other down, their expressions of defiance as identical as only a mother and daughter's could be, and Claire blinked back tears as she waved a letter at her mother. "Why can't you just be happy for me?" she shouted. "You're always complaining he never takes enough interest in my life, and now he finally has you want to take it away from me—"

"If he was any kind of father to you," yelled her mother, "he'd think about what's best for your future, instead of dragging you away to some bloody third-world country. He left me to raise you on my own while he went charging off to save the world, and now he thinks he can walk back in and turn our lives upside down—"

"He'll pay my air fare, and it's a proper job, not just a volunteer position. Please mum, it's an amazing opportunity—"

"You've got a place at Cambridge! *That's* your amazing opportunity, not building mud huts in Africa!"

"I can defer it—"

"No Claire, I won't hear of it. I didn't work two jobs for the past fifteen years trying to keep a roof above our heads so you could turn into your father."

“But mum—”

“If you don’t tell him to take his offer and shove it, I will! He has no right to derail your future like this. I’m the one who’s spent time and money on you all these years, not him, and you might want to remember that before you go throwing away a perfectly good university place and a solid career.”

Another white flash cut the argument short, and then they were back in Claire’s poky little cubicle again. Lucas shoved his hands into his pockets as he studied her. “She did listen to her mother, right?” he said with a frown.

“Yes,” said Edward.

“Good. Best thing she could’ve done, if you ask me. Imagine what might have happened if she’d gone off with him instead.”

Edward raised an eyebrow at him. “Do you think she’s never tried to do that?”

“Well...” Lucas looked confused for a moment. Then he flipped his hand. “What would be the point? It’s too late now. She made her choice, and she chose to follow the money and throw out her ethics.”

“Back then, yes. But not all choices are set in stone.” Edward reached up and tapped Lucas on the forehead again. Everything vanished in a flash of white, and then they were back outside again, standing in the shadow of the shabby grey concrete building. Lucas bounced his heels on the pavement and looked at Edward out of the sides of his eyes. “This is real now, right?” he said.

“It is,” said Edward. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handwritten envelope, holding it up to show Lucas. “But this isn’t, and won’t be unless Claire writes it at some point in the future. It’s a letter to her father, telling him she loves him, she wants to follow

in his footsteps and she's just accepted a leading role in a new initiative to bring affordable education resources to the third world."

Edward looked up at the shabby grey building behind them. "She's a remarkably talented woman, with a flair for solving complex problems using minimal resources. If she were to write this letter, it would be the first step towards bringing her closer to her father, giving her a new sense of purpose in life and enabling her to put all the nasty business of the past behind her. And of course, changing thousands of lives for the better."

Lucas gazed at the envelope. "Wow. So when does she write it?"

"She won't. Not now."

Edward crunched his hand into a fist, and the letter crumbled to a fine black ash that poured through his fingers. Lucas jumped like a startled rabbit. "What? Why?"

"Because I was supposed to persuade her to write it. I was given the job of talking to her, helping her to see the error of her ways and go toward the path that would bring her true fulfilment. But I chose to help you instead, so now that will never happen. She loses."

Edward turned away, his eyes misting over as images of Margaret blossomed in his mind and then melted away. "Everyone loses," he whispered. "Including me."

Chapter eleven

Eric Christiansen

The coach squealed as the brakes were rudely applied.

“Fifteen pound even.” The driver turned in time to see Lucas scowling at the empty seat next to him.

“This is literally the worst dream I’ve ever had.” Lucas mumbled. “I only have a 50.”

“First run of the night, guv. No change to break something that large. We got that Square thing. You have a card?”

“Do I *look* like I have my wallet? I’m lucky I have what I have.”

“There’s a pub round the corner - maybe five miles. Course that’ll run you another 10 quid.”

“*Just pay the man.*” Edward stated.

“Are you insane?” Lucas almost screeched.

“No guv, but I have a length of pipe and a willingness to deal with those that are, which you, being the reasonable man, dressed as you are sir - no offence meant, guv - but I’ll be getting my call in the next minute, and my boss don’t take kindly to the meter not running.”

“*Give it to him and wish him well, Lucas.*”

Lucas threw the cash towards the driver, “Just keep it. Unlock

these bloody doors.”

“Right you are sir, and pleasant night to you, I have to say, thank you and again say thank you. The wife’ll be pleased to know my charming ways are paying off.”

Doors unlocked, Lucas found himself in the chilled air.

“I don’t know this place.”

“Always good to see people seeing new things, I say.” And with that last word, the coach pulled away.

“Ghost, where are we?”

“Lucas, this stately mansion was mine. From the ant hill in the south-west corner, to the bird’s nest on the roof. Every brick facade. Every car in the garage. This used to be all mine.”

“Oh, you’re making me pay to go down *your* memory lane? What fairness in this world is this damn-“

“Quiet, boy.” Edward gave a little mental push and Lucas became silent. “Follow me. I don’t take pleasure in showing you this. In fact, if you’d like to know, it pains me that a worm like you is even walking on my drive. But maybe, your thick block of a head can see a shadow of life in your own path. Follow.”

Edward ambled toward the main door and pointed, “There, that off colour brick. Push the left side.”

The mental block was wearing off of Lucas, but he was caught up in the scene now. Pushing the brick, the opposite side swung out and a large house key lay within.

“Once you open the door you’ll have 30 seconds to disable the alarm. Do not argue or you’ll find yourself not just in a torturous eternity, but a police room with quite a few angry officers as to what you were doing breaking and entering my home.”

“Like this night can’t get any better, right?”

Once in the house the alarm panel lit up in a soft glow.

“One. Nine. Three. Seven. Hash. Hash. Enter. Hurry, time wastes.”

“For us all.”

“Truer words were never said. Follow, boy.”

“Stop it.”

“Grow up.”

Passing from the foyer into the sitting room, Edward pointed.

“Notice the mantle?”

“Yes. Lovely.”

“You looked, but did not see. What pictures do you see? A younger, more foolish man than you see before you now. His beautiful bride, that he should have cherished more. And?”

Lucas scanned the mostly empty mantle, “Dust?”

“To dust. Yes, very apt...come, to the hall. What do you see?”

“Are we playing cross-eyed pictures all night?”

“Don’t even think you know how much I don’t want to be here, the next stop is calling me as siren song to a sailor.”

“Is that a Matisse? A few modern pieces. Some sort of dog portrait.”

“Lucas, where are the other pieces?” Edward waved his arm, and gave a little push that made it seem as though the hall extended to infinity. Well lit, and full of pictures and paintings in exquisite frames.

One wall sized picture showed a younger Edward flying a kite with a boy that could be nothing except his son. The kite tail slithered oily across the scene.

“Or here.”

Lucas turned and saw year after year of birthday pictures.

Edward. His wife. Their children. Rooms full of people laughing, drinking, eating. All of them ageing as Lucas turned his head down the hall.

And endless supply of memories.

And endless record of a man's life. Edward Myer's full and comfortable life.

"Lucas."

The younger man turned to the shade.

"They aren't real."

Lucas turned and saw the few modern art paintings, and a door leading to what he assumed to be a dining room.

"What are you doing to me?"

"That was me - me if I could have seen what was truly important. This house...worth millions. My account at my death worth tens of millions more. If I'd known then what I know now, I'd have traded it for one sunny afternoon with a son. A boy I'll never meet. Not in life. Not in death.

"Instead, I had a wife that knew me by reputation. Colleagues that laughed after I passed by. Made jokes after I passed away. Dreamers envious for the corner office that might come available soon."

"So! So? You wasted your-"

"No! I did not. Or so I thought. Or so you think, of yourself."

"Take me home, foul shade!"

"If only I could - perhaps to never see you 'gain. But, no, we have one more stop."

"How? I have no cash?"

"We don't have far to go. Six blocks, maybe less."

"The weather-"

“Will surely clear your head, I hope. Follow me. Replace the key as we leave.”

Lucas couldn't fight the compulsion to follow the ghost, but he muttered incessantly about the cold.

“My ears are turning to ice!”

“If only your tongue had! Truly you are the worst of the lot.”

“What do you mean?” Lucas asked.

“Room 300. Be there quickly. I will be waiting.”

Edward floated up and slid through the concrete walls.

Lucas noticed he was standing outside a hospital. St. Thomas if he should hazard a guess.

He sighed, but started round to the emergency entrance.

Eventually, after a short escape from a nurse that had too much tea, he made his way to room 300, where he found the ghost looking down upon a sleeping woman. Her skin sallow and hanging.

“My Maggie.”

Lucas shuffled over quietly. Edward noticed - perhaps the boy had some empathy after all.

“You needn't worry, she'll not hear you. These machines keep her mortal remains pumping the blood - breathing the air, but my Margaret is gone.”

Lucas felt ill. He hated hospitals.

“I can't take much more of your life, Edward! I have my own.”

“You have nothing, boy! Don't you see? At the house - I didn't have the pictures I should have. I didn't have the memories a proper man should. But I had her. I don't know how, God bless her, I don't know how she stayed with me. We barely spoke. Barely even shared a meal. But there she lies. Mrs. Margaret

Myer. My name, boy. She was my wife, as much as I should have been her husband.”

Lucas sighed. “And?”

Edward made to strike the man, and gleaned a slight satisfaction at seeing Lucas flinch.

“You think your life full? Boy, as much as I should have been a better partner to her I at least had her as a partner. I see you. I know you. I see your future, and it is bleak. Boy, it is bleak. You will never know the fleeting love I shared with my Maggie.”

Edward again swept his arm out and pointed to the woman in the bed.

“This vessel was once full of life! Such life you wouldn’t believe. Her smile lit a room, and her eyes sparkled like crystal. And for a very short time, she was mine.”

“Old man, all I see is an old woman soon to die.”

Edward felt the rage build inside of him, but as quick as it came, it was reduced to cold dark emptiness. A pit of despair. His one chance to see his wife in death as he never had in life was being squandered all because this fool of a man could not listen.

The ghost’s shoulders slumped and he whispered, “All too true, boy. Come, let’s get you home. Wake from this nightmare and live your empty life. Perhaps as you lay in your death bed you will remember that once you had a choice.”

Chapter twelve

B. Morris Allen

Lucas could feel warm satin sweat against his cheek, and his fingers curled slightly, moving through slick stickiness to a little node of firmness. It was curiously cool, curiously crumbly. Crumbly? But... already it was gone, the details of the dream fading with the night. It had been so clear, so vivid – so real. And now nothing but a lingering feel that something important had happened, something life-changing.

He opened his eyes to a dawn barely peeking through the windows of his bedroom. And why should he change? Life was good. He was young, he was single, he was wealthy, and he had the clothing and the women to prove it.

His sheets were clammy now, their dampness cold against his skin. Had he been running, in his dream? Or with a woman? There had been something... But now it was just sweat and cold. And something sticky, he realized, though what had been slick now felt more like ooze, a gooey paste with lumps and chunks. And a smell.

He pushed himself away, feeling foul wetness squish beneath his palm, seeing the glistening strands of it drip from his fingers. And then he was fully awake, and somehow on his knees above

blue satin sheets, retching against the smell and the look of vomit on his bed.

An hour later, he was himself again. Clean, dressed in neatly-pressed grey slacks and a tailored shirt, and with the reassuring chunk-chunk of the washer faintly in the background, washing his sins away.

What sins? He took a sip of orange juice – fresh-squeezed from Selfridges twice a week – and rolled the sweet tartness of it round his mouth, and let it chase away the lingering remains of last night’s dinner. A bite of toast and blueberry jam to give his palate something new to think about. It was a sin what had happened to his sheets, certainly. And a nasty way to wake up. But why? He’d not been drinking; it had been years since he drank to excess. Had he caught something? From Nadine, maybe, who’d just been to ... somewhere tropical. Or Ju Yin, who was always flying about. Though they’d seemed fine when he last saw them.

Best to go to hospital, in any case. Get thoroughly checked out, just to be safe. The Princess Grace was so close, and perhaps the walk would clear his head. He could stop in, have the doctors give him something, then go watch the dogs in Regent’s Park. Or stop by Daunt’s for that book on travel in West Africa. Or call Angelique. They could sit in the little key park above the Regent’s Park station and she could tell him how fine he looked.

It was only once he reached the High Street that he remembered that the Princess Grace was closed for refurbishment. The emergency room, at any rate, though he was less and less convinced that this was an emergency. The walk was doing him

good; he felt stronger, his stomach more settled.

He'd been walking in his dream, he remembered. Somewhere in London, though perhaps not here. He turned down the High Street. He'd walk down through Mayfair to St. James' Park, and across the river to St. Thomas' Hospital, assuming he still felt at all ill. Then maybe back across the river to the office. Even as a partner in the firm, it never hurt to spend some extra hours in front of the associates. And there was that leveraged buyout of the fruit company to consider. Had the managers secured the financing they needed? He'd had some ideas on that front.

He put them to the back of his mind. For now, the walk. It was a fine day, and even the tourists, once he'd passed the chaos of Oxford Street, seemed sparse. He was in fine spirits when he reached the park, and he spent a good half hour lingering by the lake. There was a Pakistani family there, and he and their youngest played Pooh Sticks on the bridge until she'd won twice in a row. He gave her an elaborate bow of submission, and turned away as she ran giggling back to her parents.

He felt better now, under the cool of the trees, and the calm stayed with him as he left the sanctuary of the park and passed by the tourists crowded round the Abbey. No real reason now to see the doctors, but he'd come this far. And surely midnight sweats and vomiting were a serious issue?

He crossed the river, wrinkling his nose at the boxy modernity of St. Thomas'. It was a shame, really, that the hospital had such a fine view, while across the Thames, MPs had this ugly lump to look at. All that work reclaiming land from the river, and they'd built this NHS monstrosity. Perhaps it encouraged the MPs to focus, while the ill looked out their windows and convalesced.

It was a quiet morning at the Accidents and Emergency ward, but the doctors had given him nasty looks anyway. “Drink some water,” they’d said. “Raise your fluid levels. But water, mind you. Or tea. No beer, no hard alcohol.” And they’d written on their charts and sent him away.

Fine. He was officially fine, pronounced well by sages and mystics and green clad witches in white capes. He found himself in an unfamiliar hallway, turned around somehow in the maze of signs and swinging doors. There was a lift ahead, just disgorging a picture-perfect family of father, mother in a wheelchair, and a gurgling, bundle of newborn. On a whim, he took their place, and pressed a button for the top floor. He’d look out at the view, see Parliament from an unusual angle. And then to work. It was one thing to treat illness, imaginary as it might be, quite another to shirk responsibility entirely. He should call his assistant now, in fact.

The doors opened for his floor, and he stepped out. Stephen could wait. Deals could wait. This morning was for quiet contemplation.

He turned right at random. Either it would lead toward the river view or it would not. It felt right, though, felt familiar. That was odd. He’d never been above the second floor of St. Thomas’ before. He’d had that thing, when they’d made him drink some chalky substance for hours, then done X-rays or something to check his appendix. But it had been in and out, aside from the waiting.

He turned left at an intersection. He’d turned down just this hallway ... when? Never, that he could recall. Yet here, second door on the right, a room open to the river view, as he’d somehow

known it would be. And on the bed, an elegant older woman, with softly waved white hair. Her skin had been white, he presumed, before it had taken on its chill, yellow pallor, like the waxworks at Mme Tussaud's. How long had it been, he wondered, since he'd been there? Years.

The woman didn't move, her features perfectly still, the grey, waffle-weave blanket atop her never moving. She was still hooked to machines and meters, their white and red and clear tentacles of wire and plastic snaking along the bed to burrow suddenly under corners and covers and savage her unsuspecting innocence. They were turned off, it appeared, yet still they assailed her, their grip relentless, even in death.

He turned away abruptly, a cold wave running up his arms and down his back. He was fine. Fine. The doctors had said so. There was no reason to be here, when he had deals to do, plans to make. He retraced his steps to the lift with determination.

"Stephen," he said to his assistant's voicemail as he watched the lift indicators slowly climb to his floor. "I'm coming in now. A bit late," but not too bad; it was barely 8:00. "Set a meeting with Claire McCaffrey for later this morning. I've got a business proposal for her. Tell her it will change her life. And ring those fruit packers. If they've got the funds, let's get the paperwork going. If not, I've some ideas."

The lift came, and he hung up his phone to step aboard. As the doors closed, he looked back out at a hospital corridor much like any other. No more familiar, no less, and nothing to do with still, old bodies and river views. He would take a cab to the office, he decided. He'd had enough wandering for the day.