



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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Novel-in-a-Day



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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

Gavin Danger

Joe looked up from the glasses he was drying as the door to the Filcroft Arms opened. The older white gentleman walking through the door wasn't a regular – in fact, Joe was certain he'd never seen him before. The way the man was dressed, he might be one of the rich locals, as self-assured and confident in their inherent superiority as any medieval noble. "Afternoon," he called out. There were a few regulars tucked away at their tables drinking, but otherwise it was a slow day, and Sue was upstairs dealing with the one or two American tourists who were getting their first introductions to English pub grub.

Edward was startled out of his reverie, realising that he was already at the bar. He wasn't brave enough to seek out his wife deliberately, but the same stubborn addictive behaviours that led to his workaholic lifestyle wouldn't let him meekly submit, either. He had not appreciated Margaret when he was alive; now, he would gratefully take a glimpse of her from afar. Haunting their neighbourhood felt like the right balance to strike. "No risk, no reward," he muttered.

Joe heard him speaking, although not the words. "Sorry, mate,

didn't quite catch that."

Edward looked at Joe and smiled tiredly. "No worries. Was just talking to myself. There was a time in my life I did that all the time, thinking it was the only way I could get any intelligent conversation."

Joe nodded, not quite returning the smile. There was an edge of wistfulness in the man's words that were at odds with his power-broker appearance. "Oh, that's all good then. I think we all have a go at it from time to time." He put away the last glass and slung his towel over his shoulder as he studied the man. "My name's Joe, and welcome to the Filcroft Arms. I'm pretty sure I haven't seen you here before."

Edward walked over to the counter and selected a stool to perch on. He offered his hand. "Edward," he said. "You're right, I've never been here, although if I had been it would have been before your time. I was visiting the old neighborhood and figured why not do something I'd never done before?"

Joe took the offered hand. "Thanks for coming in, then. What can I get for you?"

"Talisker, neat."

Joe pulled out a glass, selected the proper bottle, and poured a generous amount of the smokey scotch. He passed it to Edward, who took it and raised it to the light to examine the amber liquid. "To second chances," he said, and took a sip.

Joe began wiping down the spotless counter, keeping himself busy but ready to listen. It was easier, he thought, to bare one's soul with a surfeit of alcohol and wood paneling than with all the high trappings of the church. Sometimes, patrons walked in looking for confession and absolution, and quality bar staff soon

learned to balance the line between being too attentive and too detached.

Edward, though, wasn't in the mood to talk. He realised that he was heading toward a foul mood as he began pondering his recent interaction with Dr. Brooke. It did not take much imagination to see the parallels between them. Yet he suddenly found himself bitter, in a way that he had never before allowed himself to be, that she received at least a chance to redeem herself. A slim chance, looking at the odds, but one that was denied him forever.

Why her, Edward thought, and not me? He tossed back the first round, caught Joe's eye, and motioned for another. Joe brought the bottle over, poured a second round, and left the bottle.

Just then, the door opened again, and Joe looked over. His face broke into a wide smile. "Mrs. Myer, what a pleasure to see you!"

"And you, Mr. Waller."

Edward froze. He knew that voice; it was Margaret. Purely by reflex, he hunched over his drink and angled his body so that Margaret would not be able to see his face. He began to fill the air with his talent, erasing the evidence of his physical presence in a subtle way, before Margaret could focus on him and recognise him. *Stupid, he thought. You never did learn, did you? You always thought the rules were for others, that you could skirt them and flaunt them and even break them without consequences. This, Edward, is why you never got a second chance. One does not throw good money after bad, after all, and one does not waste second chances on people who will never see the need for them.*

"Another early dinner then? I'll ring upstairs and have Sue get your regular order put together. We'll have someone run it over to you, in fact, if you would rather not wait here – but we're always

glad of your company.”

Now that he was safely intangible again, he could turn to see her. He examined the lines on her face hungrily; she may be older, but she was precious to him. *Is that from real love, or is it only because she is now the one thing I cannot have?* He was honest enough to ask himself the question, but shied away from the answer.

Margaret smiled and nodded. “That would be lovely, Mr. Waller. If it’s no bother, I can go finish up a few errands and then enjoy my fish and chips.” She sighed. “My Edward would never have approved, you know. Said it was common food for commoners. I never saw the problem with that, myself.”

Joe laughed. “Just because something is common doesn’t mean it’s bad. Isn’t that right, Edward?” He looked around, confused, registering for the first time that Edward was no longer present. “Huh, where did he go? I didn’t see him walk back to the loo and he definitely didn’t go out the door.”

Margaret also looked around. “Oh, was he an Edward? I never realised how widely used of a name it was until I lost my Edward. Then I started hearing it all of the time. It took years to get over that little shock.” She glanced around the lower floor of the bar. “Well, he’ll be back, he left his drink. Isn’t that a coincidence – my Edward drank Talisker too!”

Edward sat, numb. She remembered him. Fondly, even, it sounded. He had not thought simply being in the same room with her would be so powerful, so emotionally charged that it would race through his nerves, cauterising and freezing him. He could not move from his spot if he wanted to, though, so sat as Margaret and Joe finished their conversation. She paid for her fish and chips and then left the bar after another assurance from Joe that Sue would

deliver the order as soon as it was ready.

Once she left, his paralysis released. He was flooded with anger and despair.

“What the hell are you playing at?” Edward nearly shouted. “Are you trying to mock me?”

“What? Where the hell did you go, mate? What are you going on about?” Joe turned, startled. He had no idea how Edward had left the room and come back, both without any trace of his passage, and he was starting to dislike the older man.

“That was my wife. The one I can never see again. The second chance I will never, ever earn.”

Joe shook his head. “I dunno what you’re going on about, Edward, but I think you’ve had enough. That woman’s husband died ages ago. Finish your drink, pay up, and leave my bar.” He reclaimed the bottle of Talisker. “It was lovely to have your visit, you should come again some other time.”

Edward couldn’t help it. With a wave of his hand, the bar faded, leaving only himself and Joe hanging in a white void. “I have had enough. Enough of helping ungrateful people just like me earn the chance I never had to change before it was too late.”

Joe looked around, bewildered. “Where are we? What happened?” He was trying to panic, but Edward had a grip on his mind.

“We, my friend, are nowhere. Or everywhere. I never really got the details straight, but it doesn’t matter. What matters is that I am not a liar, I am not deluded, and I am not crazy. What I am is DEAD.” Edward waved his hand again, and suddenly they were in the back of a chapel, watching a wedding from ages past. His and Margaret’s. With a flick, they were now sitting at a table in their

home, decades older – recognisably themselves.

“Oh, man. That’s you. That’s her!” Joe was shaking his head.

“Yes, Joe, that’s what I’m telling you. I want my second chance and I am never, ever, ever going to get it.” It was now a hospital room, with a crying Margaret talking to a doctor, Edward’s body still in the bed. The monitors and devices were powered down.

“Why are you doing this? What do you want from me?”

The rage drained out of Edward as quickly as it had come. “Nothing, Joe. I want nothing from you. This is not your problem. Just keep being yourself and never become the kind of person who needs a second chance. Or I might have to see you again.”

He restored them to the bar. The glass of Talisker was still there and he drained it, then erased his presence – and visit – from Joe’s mind as he walked out the door.

“Good thing anyway,” he muttered. “I have no money anyway.”

Chapter two

Tim Edwards-Hart

Edward stood with one hand on the wrought iron fence outside his house, looking in the window at his wife—his widow he reminded himself—watching TV. He knew he wasn't meant to be here, knew the consequences if she turned around saw him, but couldn't tear himself away.

He looked at the light from the TV flicker blue on Margaret's neck. No pearls there now. Just pale skin wrinkling and smoothing as she occasionally sipped her gin and tonic. If not for those sips, he might have thought her dead.

Dead. For a brief moment he thought about her being with him, but then remembered the deal. He could never be with her, in this life or the next. If reached out to her now, his corporeal existence would end and he would return to his personal purgatory, chained by, and to, his own sins. And there were so many! An eternity of memories. Memories of petty greed, of callous disregard for his impact on others. Even though, or perhaps because, he hadn't intended to be cruel, it was unbearable.

Edward wasn't sure that being a Marley was any better. He had soon realised that the sins of others were the same as his own. The

justified rage he had first felt as a Marley didn't last long. These people weren't monsters. They were just like him. And this filled him with despair. Just like him, they couldn't see — didn't want to see — the distress and the hurt and harm they caused.

He sighed. Almost half of them would never change. The rest might briefly glimpse the truth but of those most would look away, telling themselves the same self-protecting lies he had told himself for 40 years.

He did it for his family. But, other than Margaret, he had no family once his parents died.

He did it for Margaret. But she was always focussed on her animals, and would have been just as happy in a cottage in the woods. He knew this, but it took death before he could acknowledge it.

Truth is, he did it because his parents taught him to always have enough money in reserve. They taught him the old fashioned way — by not doing it themselves.

Until Edward left home to make his fortune, he lived in fear of the “rent man”. His parents were always tense the week before rent-day, and Edward was worried the rent man would come too soon. As a family, they'd go without fresh food for days before rent-day, making do with handouts and leftovers, spreading the dripping they'd captured from the meat the week before so there'd be something to spread on the stale bread they'd saved for now.

“Go and ask your father if he keeps dripping” his mother would tell young Edward as she prepared his lunch. “Go tell your mother ‘I have a good one and be done with it’” was his father's ritual reply from the kitchen doorway. Both his parents would laugh until tears came out of their eyes as he obediently, ears red with

embarrassment, repeated his lines.

For as long as he could remember, Edward had determined that he would *never* live like his parents. But he discovered that the more money he earned, the more he had at stake. The more there was to lose, the more he needed to earn to protect against that risk. A vicious cycle that seemed to have no end. Until he died.

But Margaret was different. Young Margaret Hopkins, or Maggie as she was known, caught his eye from the moment he first saw her. He wasn't an inexperienced man, but Maggie was different. Maggie came from proper stock, her parents never starved her of food so they pay the rent. But she wouldn't have cared if they did. As long she could care for her animals, she would willingly have gone without. And young Edward fell in love.

They were, briefly, happy. Who knows how long that was – a couple years? Maybe only a couple of months. But the stakes were higher once Edward had a wife, so he needed to put still more aside to cover the risks. So he worked longer hours, closed deals of dubious virtue, stripping assets from companies in order to protect his home and his wife. And as the cycle continued, Margaret focussed on her charities and he funded everything she asked, believing this made him a good husband.

Edward snorted at himself. A good husband indeed! As he watched his wife through the window, he wondered if she had always watched endless reruns between the hollow news. All those years of marriage and he didn't know what his wife actually *did* with her time.

A tear slipped from his eye, leaving a glistening snail-trail on his cheek.

He wanted to be with her again. He wanted to explain. To

apologise. To just sit with her and talk like when they first met. To be together.

He'd never been one to play by the rules. He'd grown up fearing the rules, and spent his entire adulthood ignoring them. "When their rules ensure you lose no matter how well you play..." he used to say, "then play your own rules." He was wrong when he was alive, but now he was dead he had nothing left to lose.

Edward let go of the fence and strode to his front door.

Dead men don't have keys.

It sounded like an aphorism his parents would say. Except that he *was* dead, and as a Marley he could have no keys. He couldn't get into his own house! Well, his wife's house. His *widow's* house.

He paused, remembering the true choice he faced: eternity with his own sins if he made contact with anyone he knew, or an eternity with other people's sins if he stayed a Marley.

He thought of the reflected light of the TV on Margaret's face. Muttering, "Play your own rules!" he reached for the knocker.

Time stopped.

Or rather, his hand did. It was moving through the air and just stopped. It felt like someone had grabbed it and was pushing it *into* the knocker so that he couldn't pull it back and let it drop.

After a confused moment, Edward realised that someone was doing exactly that. And that someone was John Huffam. John wasn't the rent man but, given that Edward hadn't worked for anyone other than himself since he was 22 years old, he was someone just as bad. He had another title Edward's parents used to mention with fear. John was the boss.

Although, to be fair to John, he preferred to be called “manager”, and had enough sense not to give people his business card (which described his role as “Supervisor of corporeal transactions”). John was also bigger, and certainly much stronger, than Edward.

“You don’t want to do that.” John’s voice was firm.

“Sorry John, but I do.”

“Edward, stop. You’re still fresh at this. Think about what will happen if you knock on this door. Margaret won’t even need to reach the door – as soon as she hears the knocker, you will have made contact. And once you’ve made contact, you will have to carry the chains of your sins for eternity. That’s *eternity* Edward. That’s a long time.”

“And if let go the knocker and walk away? What then? It’ll be another Scrooge. And then another one. And another, and another, and another. An eternity of Scrooges. Groundhog Day for Scrooge. They’re both pointless John. They both have no hope of redemption, no chance of escape, no love, no compassion, no kindness.

“Either way I lose. But as awful as my sins were, they were only mine. But here? Forever dealing with *other* people committing the same sins as me—reminding me every second of my sins—and then watching them pick themselves up and carry on regardless. As a Marley, I get my sins *and* theirs, plus the false hope of redemption, and the pain of seeing Margaret age without me.

“If I’m going to spend eternity reliving my sins, better to relive them alone.”

Edward felt the pressure change in John’s grip.

“There’s another way Ed.”

Edward dropped his hand from the knocker and looked at John.

“I’m listening,”

“Marley’s aren’t new. We’ve been around for centuries, probably longer. I’ve only been dead for 40 years, so my information on that’s second hand. But if we’ve been around so long, where are we? There should be millions, probably billions, of us by now. But there’s only a few thousand.

“Do you know where the rest are Ed? They’re gone. Some made the choice you were about to, but others made a different choice. A choice where the stakes were real. A choice where there was something to lose.”

“Go on.”

“It’s a bit early in your career for this, but I have the authority. You sure you want this?”

“You haven’t told me what it is yet.”

John smiled. “They told me you were smart. Come on. I’m going to offer you a choice for your next Scrooge.”

Edward sat in John’s car while John rummaged in the boot. Not for the first time he wondered how ghosts could have access to a car. Who paid for it? Who was John’s boss? He wanted to ask again, but knew any answers John could give wouldn’t be enough. He looked up as John got into the driver’s seat carrying two briefing packs. He handed one to Edward.

“This is your regular Scrooge: Claire McCaffrey – one of those kids who made a packet on the internet. The analysts reckon with her background, her education, financial resources, and connections she could educate the world. And they literally mean the world. She could bring the internet to children throughout the

third world.

“Convert her and you could completely transform the world’s economy in a generation.

“But, and this is important, she’s the *regular* Scrooge. Take on her case and win her over, you’ll do enormous good in the world but you’ll stay a Marley.

John handed over the second briefing pack.

“Here’s the alternative Scrooge. He’s Lucas Rennall. A slick city lawyer who’ll do anything – as long as it feels good at the time. He is, to quote one of the analysts, ‘a selfish misogynistic bastard’ and none of them could find any evidence that he would do anything of worth in this world. As a Scrooge, he’s the hardest to turn, with the least potential gain, I’ve seen.

“So here’s the deal. If you convert Rennall, then the slate is clean. Your sins are forgiven and you get to eternity in freedom. When your wife dies, she can join you.”

“So that’s your choice. Regular...” John tossed Claire McCaffrey’s file onto Edward’s lap, “...or impossible” Lucas Rennall’s file followed.

“The regular choice could have spectacular implications for the world, but for you it leads to a regular outcome – an eternity as a Marley. The impossible choice, however, offers you the chance of freedom and the chance of seeing your wife again. If you fail, your sins will settle as chains across your shoulders.

“The choice is yours.”

Chapter three

Astrid Stevens

The Filcroft Arms was much busier than it had been earlier in the day. Even on a cold December night, the drinkers and vapers were standing seven deep outside, pints and bottles in hand, the sombre impression of their black winter coats relieved by Santa hats, reindeer deely-boppers, and a general air of festive frivolity. Edward pushed his way through the crowd, still clutching John Huffam’s dossier binders under his arm, and walked through the door. If anything, there were more people crammed inside the bar than there were outside. Behind the hubbub of conversation and laughter, Edward could just hear music playing over the speaker system, almost lost in the general din. “Do They Know It’s Christmas?”, if he wasn’t mistaken. Music from back when he was alive. Many things about pubs had changed in the past twenty years—for a start, there was no reek of tobacco smoke any more, to mask the stench of spilt beer—but the choice of Christmas music certainly wasn’t one of them.

Elbowing his way to the far end of the bar, Edward caught Joe’s eye. The barman nodded his recognition, and finished serving a tipsy young woman, who was dressed as an elf in a green mini-

dress, her flushed face further heightened by red lipstick circles painted on her cheeks, and wired pigtails bouncing under a conical party hat. Joe dropped a maraschino cherry with a flourish into her pint of Cidre (not cider, oh no), took her money, then turned to Edward.

“Back again?”

Edward nodded. “Fraid so. Like a bad penny.”

“We like to call them ‘regulars’ in our line, not bad pennies.” Joe smiled, his teeth flashing white through his Viking beard and hipster moustache. “Same again? Remind me?”

Edward shook his head. “No, it’s late. I’ll just have a whisky, please. Single malt. What have you got?”

“Glenfiddich, Glenmorangie, The Macallan, Laphroaig...”

“I’ll stop you right there. Laphroaig is just the ticket. I’ll have a double, please.”

“Sure I can’t tempt you to a Waller’s Winter Wonder? Or a Flaming Festivity?”

“No cocktails, thank you. Just the Laphroaig. And no cherry, either.”

The whisky appeared, devoid of fruit, but garnished with a lilac paper cocktail umbrella. Pretending not to notice Joe’s obvious wind-up, Edward paid for his drink, then looked around for somewhere to sit. A group were just getting up from the corner table, so he worked his way over, poised to grab the banquette and table as soon as they were vacated.

Sliding sideways onto the slightly sticky velvet seat, tacky to the touch, he put the binders onto the table, then realised too late that they would now be contaminated with whichever of Joe’s elaborate cocktail concoctions appeared to have been dribbled liberally over

the scrubbed wood surface. He took a monogrammed handkerchief from his suit pocket, and wiped down the file, then wiped the table. The hankie was damp and gummy with sugar, and he didn't fancy putting it back in his pocket. Shrugging, he set it down on the table next to him, took the lilac umbrella from his drink, and pushed it and the the crumpled ball of cloth sideways, out of his way. Time to read the dossiers. He took a hefty swig of whisky, satisfied as always by the hit of intense, smoky peatiness in his nostrils as he raised the glass, then settled back in his chair to read what Head Office had to say about the potential clients.

First off, Claire, the safe bet. He picked up her binder and opened it. Probably redeemable, John had said, which would be good in the short term. But choosing Claire would mean that he would have to keep doing this for all eternity, being a Marley for ever and ever. Client after client, stretching off into unimaginable emptiness.

Edward raised his eyes from the page, and stared blankly ahead. The background music had changed: "Lonely this Christmas" — another oldie. Mud, wasn't it? Strangely perceptive he thought; it was as though pathetic fallacy had come alive in Marylebone. Edward admitted to himself that he was lonely, not just at Christmas, but in all seasons. In his previous life, he had worked away from home much of the time (too much, he now recognised with some regret), and had spent too little time with Margaret, but Christmas had been the one period of the year when he had nearly always found himself at home. Whether it was their first small flat in Bayswater, or their grand five-storey townhouse in Marylebone, Margaret had always "done" the festive season with style and a generous spirit, and he found that he missed his wife more with

each passing Christmas since his death.

He brought his attention back to the text in front of him.

Claire McCaffrey, 33 years old, computer programmer and internet entrepreneur. Bright, well-educated... Edward turned the page, and his eyes widened in surprise. Claire was clearly good at business. Not long after graduating from Cambridge in Mathematics and Computer Science, she had launched her own social media site called “OurLink”, which she later sold for £1 billion. It looks as though it hadn’t all been plain sailing since then, though, with a number of court cases brought by people who had been involved in the development stages of the company, and who clearly felt that they had been cheated of their rightful share when the site was sold.

Edward realised that he was holding his breath. The banker and investor that he had been in life was very impressed. Claire was very, very rich — and likely to get richer. She was now running a tech start-up called “Share”, based in London, and offering solutions for large multi-site teams and corporates, that focused on knowledge sharing (including highly intelligent automated tagging, filing and information mining algorithms). Very technical. An interesting business area, Edward thought, although fraught with issues related to privacy and data protection. Good luck to her.

There was certainly room for redemption in the facts present in Claire’s CV, and he could see why John Huffam had suggested her as a regular Scrooge for him to push back onto the straight and narrow. It was evident that Claire had diddled her university friends, conveniently erasing their contribution to OurLink from the balance books. And some of her pursuits with Share looked decidedly dodgy, too. Probably legal, almost certainly legal, but not

entirely moral. But she didn't seem to have done anything that could be described as deliberately evil. Self-serving, yes; criminal, no. She had plenty of good attributes in her favour, and was evidently hard-working, dedicated and talented. There was definite scope for redirection of energy.

Edward smiled. Who would have thought that he would leave behind his own days of asset-stripping, shady deals and opportunity-grabbing? Sometimes it felt strange to be a Marley tasked with saving others from the errors in which he himself had revelled when alive, in return for respite from the heavy chains of his own transgressions. Still, if he could change his ways in death, then surely someone young and sparky like Claire could change hers in life. The analysts in Head Office had written that Claire could have a great future as a philanthropist, and that she could use her skills to help the underprivileged and under-represented. Having read her file, Edward agreed that it might not take much to get Claire to take this path.

He turned to Lucas Rennall's binder. If John was right, this would be a different kettle of fish.

Lucas looked sharp. 31 years old. Sharp mind, sharp suit, sharp practice. He was a lawyer specialising in banking and private equity financing deals, and a partner in the legal firm Berry, Lawrence and Webb. Very wealthy, although not in the same league as Claire, and flash with his cash. Edward flipped through the pages of the dossier. There was no shortage of evidence damning the lawyer's integrity on a professional level, with financial return being used to justify the most illiberal of practices and the most abusive of business relationships. On the personal side of the scale, Lucas didn't come out much better. He was

obsessed with money and with living the high life, focused solely on his own desires, and vain beyond calculation. Edward had met plenty of young men like Lucas before, and he didn't want to meet another one now. He looked like hard work. Head Office reckoned that Lucas could, with the right direction from a Marley, become a better person, helping worthy enterprises on a *pro bono* basis and leading the fight to clean up the banking industry. He could settle down and become a responsible pillar of the community. Somehow, Edward doubted it. Lucas struck him as being someone who would agree to do the right thing, then immediately go back to being as bad as ever, without even a pinprick of remorse.

Edward finished the last of his Laphroaig, and cradled the glass between his two hands, wondering which client he should choose. Joe at the bar shouted, "Last orders, gentlemen, please!" and Lucas stood up. The speakers blasted out "I wish it could be Christmas every day", and he found himself humming along.

As he put on his coat, picked up the binders, and prepared to leave the pub, he allowed himself to indulge in nostalgic reminiscence about Christmases past. In his mind's eye, he saw himself come home from a business trip — from Sheffield perhaps, why not? From the very business trip that he never came home from, because a heart attack had stopped him in his tracks. So, in his fancy, he came home from Sheffield, and approached the front door of his house in Welbeck Street. He stood beneath the beribboned holly wreath that his wife Margaret used to fix to their Georgian front door a week before Christmas, then pushed open the door and went into the spacious hallway. He set down his briefcase and took off his coat, breathing in the smell of mulled wine and mince pies. A garland of Nordmann fir, artfully dotted

with white lights and cinnamon sticks, wound its way up the bannister of the sweeping staircase. And coming down the stairs was Margaret, elegant in black with pearls around her neck, ready to welcome him home.

Oh, how he missed Margaret.

The cold winter air caught his chest as he stepped onto the pavement outside. Funny how you could still react physically like that, when you were dead. The thermal shock brought him back to the task. Which would it be? Claire, the clearly redeemable, who just needed a nudge in the right direction? Or Lucas, the irredeemable? Edward couldn't imagine where to start with him. And even if he could come up with some wizard wheeze that would swing Lucas to the path of righteousness, there was no guarantee that Lucas would stay on that track. From a purely professional point of view, Claire was by far the safer choice.

Edward weighed up the personal impact of each option. If he picked Lucas, he would be playing for high stakes. Winning the gamble, and reshaping Lucas into a good man, would free him forever of the chains weighing him down. Losing the gamble, his chains would be made longer and heavier. He would be punished in perpetuity for choosing his own self-interest and the chance of freedom over doing the best for Claire, who needed his help although she was (as yet) unaware of this.

If he picked Claire, he'd be stuck as a Marley for the rest of time, which meant that he wouldn't be able to see Margaret ever again. But as he hadn't seen her for twenty years, and as he assumed that she was now perfectly comfortable in her retirement, then perhaps that didn't matter too much. It was just the *status quo*. Who knows how Margaret would feel about him turning up again anyway? The

couple had spent most of their life together in a state of splendid separation from each other, given his work commitments and her animal charities. Maybe she didn't even love him any more, although Edward was convinced that on his part he loved her more as a Marley than he ever had as a living, breathing husband.

It was an easy decision. Attractive though a chain-free future seemed, the risk of failure was too high, and the consequences too grave. He would choose Claire. It was Christmas, after all, and who needed a tough case like Lucas? Lucas could wait, and there would always be challenging cases like him in the future, if Edward wanted to take on a similar gamble later.

With the decision made, Edward's mind felt lighter. He was very close to being happy as he sauntered down Westmoreland Street. He thought of the film "Singing in the Rain" and almost wished it were raining, so that he could have an excuse to hop on and off the kerb, splashing in puddles and twirling on umbrellas. Not that he had an umbrella. He'd left the lilac paper one on the pub table.

It was too early to settle down for the night. And while he was in Marylebone... an idea came to him. Welbeck Street was only a step away, even for those who weren't able to travel like the wind as a Marley could. He wouldn't mind seeing his old front door again, to find out whether Margaret was still hanging her annual Yule wreath on it. What colour scheme would she have chosen this year? He could go and look.

On the other hand, what if Margaret appeared, and saw him? That would certainly count as "making contact with someone he had known in life", and the penalty for that was harsh and unforgiving. If Margaret saw him, or felt his presence, he would

instantly be barred from working as a Marley, and he would be deprived of the one useful perk of that job — the respite from carrying his chains. The weight of those chains was unbelievable, but he couldn't argue with the fairness of being laden with a burden in proportion to the weight of his wrongdoings in life. He may complain sometimes, but it was hardly unfair. Still, it was a crushing, soul-destroying force that drove the body and spirits downward, blanking out other thoughts until all that remained was the chains.

Edward hesitated, but only briefly. Although he had viewed his ostentatiously opulent townhouse merely as a trophy when he actually lived in it, he now looked back on it fondly. He did want to see his home again. It would be perfectly safe. It was late. Margaret would have been in bed for ages. She wouldn't see him, he would stay on the other side of the road, and he wouldn't try to look for her.

As he approached along Welbeck Street, his excitement gave way first to concern, then consternation, then panic. There was an ambulance outside his house. Initially, he thought it might be outside one of the neighbouring houses in the elegant terrace, but as he drew nearer, it was clear that it was his own house. Someone must be ill — *Margaret* must be ill!

In a flash, he transferred himself to the pavement next to the ambulance, just in time to see the green-clad paramedics emerge from the house carrying a stretcher, its occupant draped in a red blanket. It was Margaret. How old she looked! Was she just asleep, or was she unconscious or dead? He couldn't tell. Not dead, surely. They would have covered her face if she were dead.

A middle-aged woman whom Edward didn't recognise followed

them out, then locked the front door behind her, and walked to the open rear door of the ambulance. Margaret had been lifted inside, and the paramedics were preparing to leave.

“Where are you taking her?”, asked the stranger.

“St Thomas’ Hospital, to A&E. Would you like come with Mrs Myer?”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t, I’m afraid. I have the grandchildren staying. But I’ll phone in the morning to see how she is. Poor old thing. She has such a lonely life now. She’s been widowed for twenty years, with no children to come and visit. We’ve been next-door neighbours for half that time. I saw the light from her window shining out onto the pavement, and thought it seemed odd for her to be up so late. Just as well I’ve got a key.”

She stood and watched as the ambulance drove off, then turned towards the house next door and disappeared inside.

Edward flew swiftly to the hospital’s Accident and Emergency Department, and had an uncomfortable ten minutes’ wait until his wife arrived there, her stretcher rushed in on a wheeled trolley. She still seemed to be unconscious. He loitered nearby to hear her booked in.

“Mrs Margaret Myer, Welbeck Street, Marylebone. 71 years old. No next of kin. Collapsed with a massive stroke. We phoned from the ambulance.”

“Thank you. Yes, she’s to go straight to Radiology for scanning. Poor thing, all on her own. And with Christmas coming up, too.”

And with that, Margaret was whisked away.

By the time Edward had found the Radiology department, and had managed to sneak in through the code-locked door by slip-streaming behind a frazzled-looking young doctor in a white coat,

Margaret's scan had been completed. He was just in time to hear a nurse on the phone to the ward, arranging to move Margaret there for the night. "Margaret Myer, aged 71. Has had a major stroke. Probably only has a few days left, at most, so if you have a side-ward free, that might be best. ... Yes. ... OK ... Right, we'll book a porter, and send her up straightaway."

Edward's mind slipped into slow motion. A few days at most! Margaret was dying, and he had to go and save some tech entrepreneur from her own peccadillos, and after that there would be some other client demanding his attention, then another, and another. Meanwhile, Margaret would be here at St Thomas', fading from life. More than ever, he wanted to spend time with Margaret before she died, to hold her hand, to tell her how sorry he was for being so absent throughout their marriage. But if he went anywhere near her now, then he would immediately be removed and his chains heaped on his back, and his efforts would be for nothing.

The only way he could share Margaret's last days on earth would be if he were released from being a Marley and set free from his chains. And the only way he could do that would be to take on Lucas Rennall as his next client. Twenty four hours spent reforming Lucas would, he hoped, give him at least a couple of days by Margaret's side, so that she wouldn't die the poor, lonely old thing that others thought her to be.

Somewhat to his bewilderment, Edward found that he was still grasping the binder files that he had been given, tucked under his left arm. He took one in each hand, then closed his eyes and muttered to himself.

"Margaret, I'll do it for you. Wait for me. Don't leave till I get

back.”

And with that, he held Claire McCaffrey’s file aloft and squeezed it until it burst into flames and disappeared.

A nurse came bustling into the corridor as the last wisp of smoke petered out. “Do I smell smoke?”, she asked, staring belligerently at Edward. “This is strictly a no smoking hospital. If you want to smoke, you’ll have to go outside and leave the hospital premises.”

Edward looked at her, resolution firm in his heart. “I’m just leaving now,” he said. He walked away until he felt she had stopped watching him, then he opened the remaining binder and found Lucas’ home address in the databank section. He snapped the binder shut, then readied himself to transfer straight to that location.

“And now, Lucas Rennall, I’m coming to sort you out.”

Chapter four

Noé Ramalleira Fernández

“Surely we can’t be expected to control that, it’s just the natural ways of the market. If the shareholders are-”

“May I help you, Sir?”

“If they are selling, it’s their bloody fault, isn’t it?”

“Sir, excuse me; may I help you?”

“No, I’m at Rennall’s, we’re just going to fill it here- hold on a sec”

Edward had already crossed the whole reception hall and had almost reached the lift, but the porter had come from behind the desk to intercept him, so he had to finally stop pretending the phone call was so important he couldn’t even look up. He had almost pulled it off just like that.

He took the phone off his ear and turned his wrist, hiding the phone behind the back of the hand. It was just as good that that was quite a usual hand gesture to do when you need to talk to somebody else while on the phone, because he was actually talking to a remote control. They were skimpy like that at HQ, and they didn’t even get the irony. It didn’t even have batteries; they were lucky he was good at the job.

He glanced quickly at the porter, trying to convey the right amount of annoyance with the look. There was an art in that. Every detail counts in a negotiation. The porter seemed agreeable, smiling reassuringly, as if he was convinced it was only a misunderstanding. His demeanour looked harmless, but he was standing just close enough for it to be almost imperceptibly intimidating. Edward thought he was exactly where he needed to be, that he was playing his part admirably.

“Yes, lad, I’ll just let myself in, thank you”.

“Do you need me to announce you to any of our residents, Sir?”

“Yes, you go on and do that, lad. Phone Mr. Rennall and tell him that Edward Myer is coming up to see him. Tell him Santander is down for 3 in Spain and he has chosen a very bloody stupid day to take a holiday”.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Myer, Ed Myer” —Edward was now staring at the porter with an indignant look in his face. The receptionist wasn’t moving still, but he looked a bit doubtful.

Edward decided to lean slightly on his doubts. He wasn’t going to hypnotise the poor fellow completely, as that was frowned upon back at HQ, but nobody would mind if he just nudge him a little, just a tad, to make things easier. He lifted his eyebrows a bit and nodded slightly towards the desk—. “Go, call him. Tell him I’m his Marley, he’ll understand”

The porter was feeling increasingly more unsure. He hadn’t done nothing wrong, had he? He wasn’t supposed to let strangers in willy-nilly, that was just part of his job. But then again, that Mr. Myer had identified himself, and he was obviously in some kind of hurry. Or was it Mr. Marley?

“Mr. Marley, you said, Sir?”

“No, I’m Mr. Rennall’s Marley” —Edward started walking towards the lift. It was a done deal now, he just had to seal it—. “You don’t even know what a Marley is, do you? If I had the chance you have of meeting people as Lucas on a daily basis when I was your age, I would have grabbed it by the balls, son, I would have be sitting on my first million already. The heart of the City lives in this building, they talk to you daily, they trust you, and you haven’t even picked up what a Marley is! Listen, I give you this one for free: a Marley is, *I am*, his personal sherpa, you see, I deal with his futures”.

The porter nodded attentively. Edward reckoned he had probably overdone things a bit, and that he was likely to get in trouble with HQ, but he just walked past him and into the lift. He then resumed the phone call to his TV remote, as the doors were closing behind him. “Yeah, sorry about that. Anyway, I’m getting on a lift now, so I might as well just call you from his apartm- No, I’m losing you!”.

When the lift doors opened again, Edward found himself staring right at Lucas Rennall. Rennall had just received a call from the reception desk and, for some reason, instead of locking himself up at home, he had decided to rush out of his apartment, only to find himself face to face with the stranger he was trying to avoid.

Edward raised his hands slowly, trying to reassure Rennall that he didn’t mean to cause him any harm. Lucas did the same, not really knowing why. He was still holding the telephone with which he was talking to the porter. Edward was holding a TV remote.

“Look, I don’t know who you are, but I have no time for any...

mumbo-jumbo about sherpas and reggae. The porter has probably just called the security services of the build-. In fact —he interrupted himself and yelled to his phone—, “Tim! Tim! Just call security and tell them to come ASAP!”

“Oh, great!”

“There you go, you hear? He’s just hung up. He’s making the call. You’re fucked already. They are going to come here at any moment, and they’ll deal with you nicely.”

“Well, Lucas, that was uncalled for... somewhat called for, I’ll give you that; still, it was not nice of you, without even listening to me. Listen, there’s no need to make any more of a fuss, I’m just asking you to listen to me. I know your time costs money, but this is worth it.

Also, look at me, I’m harmless. You don’t need to call the security team on me; in fact you could take me yourself, if it came to that. You have a personal trainer and do Krav Maga twice a week, and I look at least seventy and I’m so fantastically ill-equipped to any sort of fight that my deadliest move would be to throw this TV remote at you and hope to get you in the head. And it doesn’t have batteries, so it’s not even that heavy.

Look, do you want Tim back at the desk to know you were so afraid by an old man that you had to call Security?”

“Yeah, of course I can take you” —said Lucas. He thought for a moment about Tim at the reception, the way he always seemed so put together, so... right in *his place*. He would hate him to have an upper hand, the bastard, always so full of smiles, surely he laughed at them when they were not around.

So he realised he should just call him and tell him everything was fine, and that there was no need to make any more of a fuss.

“Good to see you’ve changed your mind, Lucas. Now would you offer me a drink?”

“Ok, so what is it you wanted to tell me? Is it really anything about Santander? Because I don’t really deal in the stock market, you know? I’m basically just mergers and acquisitions”

“Listen, where would you like to be?”

“What? What are we now, bonding? Don’t blow your chance, I don’t have time for this shit”

“No, listen, really, listen to me; it’s just a question: where would you like to be right now?”

“What? What the fuck is this? I don’t know, fucking Barbados, I don’t know”

Edward took the remote control off his chest pocket slowly, like a magician performing a trick. “Barbados, are you sure?”

“Yeah, mate, I want to be in fucking Barbados”

“Barbados it is, then. Any city in particular? Hold on to that whiskey, this is going to be scary”

He pointed the remote to a great, white wall in the room, and clicked a button. Nothing happened. The wall stood empty, behind a chest of drawers.

There was a chest of drawers in front of the wall, with the bronze statuette of a horse on top of it; but apart from that, there were no family pictures, no art, no personality to the decoration. Edward thought that, at least, the statue might mean something to Lucas; maybe he liked horses when he was a kid. That would have been interesting to know, but he couldn’t ask him about it right now, as he found himself quite busy trying to avoid Lucas’ stare.

The bronze horse started glimmering, and Edward pointed at it.

“Look at that, you’ll miss it!”

There was definitely a light coming from inside the statue; and in that new light the horse looked as if it was moving, as if the mane was floating against the wind and the muscles were scintillating at the sun, and then the wall behind him turned into white sand and there they were, in a tropical beach in Barbados, looking at a brown horse galloping at full speed towards the sea.

Edward smiled at his creation. “Get up, Lucas, come with me”

Lucas got up and started walking besides Edward, and all of a sudden he was shoeless, and his trousers were rolled up, and he was feeling the softness of the sand between his toes, and the breeze and the sun and the lightness of heart. He reached his hands out and petted the horse on the withers.

“Do you like horses, Lucas?”

“What? Not that much, the statuette just came with the property.” —Lucas answered, distracted by the horse—. “I mean, I used to like them when I was a kid, that’s why I just kept it.”

“Did you have any horses?”

“No, we never had *that* kind of money. I mean, I now do, I guess...”

“Have thought about it?”

“What, buying a horse just for the fuck of it?”

“Well, yes, if it was a childhood dream...”

“Man, I liked horses, I had this bronze horse thing and the wall looked too big and too white, and that’s that”

“So that’s that?”

“Pretty much, yeah”

“And Barbados? What about Barbados?”

“I don’t know, man, I had to say something. Rihanna is hot, I

guess”

Edward shook his head, and all of a sudden the beach was gone, and the horse was just a statue, and the hot sand in Lucas’ toes was the floor heating.

“That was cool, though; I give you that”

“What? And that’s all? Look, kid, I might not like my job and my bosses, but I love this part. I make miracles, with a stupid remote control, or a banana, or whatever those arseholes back at HQ fish out of some unforsaken lost property box in an abandoned community theatre every time they send me down here. You don’t take that away from me. That was not just cool, that was a *miracle*; that was *witchcraft*, you understand? That was something that shouldn’t have happened, and especially not to you. You have just been petting a wild horse in Welches Beach in Barbados, and just a second after that you’re back in your flat in London, and your teeny-weeny materialistic brain has already moved on from it?

This is the most extraordinary thing that has happened to you, and all you can say is that it was cool. You don’t know how many people, and how big an effort it has been made, for you to have lived through that.

Only a few people in the history of the world have experienced what you have, and when they mended their ways because of the choice we gave them, their stories became the stuff of legend, of religion, of literature. You should be kneeling to me, you should be repenting, you should be promising to change your life.”

“OK”

“OK?”

“Yes, OK, yes, it *was* the most extraordinary thing that has happened to me. You have my full attention. I still don’t what you

want me to do, but I'm listening ”

“That will have to do, I guess.”

Chapter five

Claire Woodier

"I can pass you on the number of my Aesthetician if you like."

"Fuck you I'm dead."

Edward was looking at Lucas' eyebrows. They were ridiculous.

"How LONG does someone have to take in the morning to look like that?" he said with discernible disdain. "Who has that kind of time?" Lucas looked for errant hairs in his mirrored living room.

"Its all part of my brand. I look this good to make people want to be me."

Edward noticed that Lucas' home was as immaculate as his complexion. It was Christmas for fuck's sake. No-one would know here. White marble one, Christmas nil.

"If you're going to take me on some journey of discovery I'd appreciate it if you could get on with it. I have reservations for eight."

"Eight pm, not eight people though right?" Edward said as he wet his lips at a particularly good bottle of Brandy on an exquisite corner cabinet. Lucas blinked at him in response.

"You won't have any experience of arranging a dinner for eight

friends though." He was squinting at the label.

"What are you on about?" Lucas balked, "Of course I have. I've been to huge parties."

"Corporate affairs yes." Edward twisted the bottle round to get the label facing front. "But you haven't ever had more than one person agree to go to dinner with you at any one time."

Lucas blinked at him. "Of COURSE I ha..."

"Don't bluster at me, Kitten. I KNOW you haven't. In fact, name the last time you've actually done the asking yourself and not got your assistant to select some poor sod from your demographic of poor unfortunate random females."

Lucas narrowed his eyes and strode over to Edward's lusted-after Brandy and poured himself a generous glass out of spite.

"I don't have the time to go out and meet new people. I trust my assistant to select the correct companion for the evening at a venue I'll appreciate."

"Fuck me romance is alive and well and radiating out of that beautiful bleached butt hole of yours. These women must have the emotional depth of a petri dish to agree to go to a disgustingly expensive restaurant with a relative stranger."

"Everybody has a nice time."

"I'm absolutely CERTAIN that that is completely untrue. If you're lucky you'll use the opportunity to test your sales skills on whichever unsuspecting low-esteemed Fawn has succumbed to the 'amorous' advances of your scheduling staff. If by some miracle you can convince her to go to bed with you at the end of the night, you'll be celebrating another win for your climbing number of ejaculations, mistakenly thinking you've persuaded the lovely lady because of your contagious smile and irresistible wit. What you've

actually done is trained your assistant well enough to spot your perfect mark: beautiful but vulnerable, get her to show up to eat dinner with you so you can throw obscene amounts of money around to make her feel obliged to pay you back with some kind of sexual act that will, of which I have no doubt, involve little or no eye contact whatsoever."

"Ouch." said Lucas, managing to wince and smirk at the same time.

Lucas drank another fifty quid's worth of Brandy. It didn't taste spiked although he knew he probably deserved it if it was. There were a not-so-select few that would have no problem slipping him something fairly toxic. He drank again to show them he wasn't frightened.

"So are you a drug induced apparition or am I in the middle of a paranoid schizophrenic episode?" he asked.

"You're far too grandiose to believe you're either." Edward said, bored, before adding: "You don't believe for a second that there's someone out there with brain enough to outsmart you using drugs or anything else for that matter. Nor could any medical professional on an inferior income to yours, (despite their qualifications being four-fold) unravel your psyche enough to diagnose you with anything. There couldn't POSSIBLY be a condition found yet that could pigeon-hole your sociopathic traits. In fact even if you DID have fifteen personalities you sure as shit wouldn't let any of them tell THIS guy what to do."

Edward fiddled with his wedding ring. "You're one of our hopeless cases. If you were a Schizophrenic you'd at least have a chance for happiness. You Narcissists are fucked eternity-wise." Lucas shrugged a perfectly tailored shoulder and Edward flew:

"You see! You arrogant bastards even think you can beat THIS system! This ISN'T some 'Old Boys' public school vegetable insertion game of initiation. You're going up against the M.D! The Big Guy! Get OVER yourself you self-centred Cuntpuffin!"

Lucas leant against the drinks cabinet, legs crossed, glass in hand. It was as unnerved as he was prepared to appear.

"So," he drank."you're here to do what? Save me? From myself?"

"Yep. By some fucked-up irony, I'll be your Ghost of Christmas Past for the evening."

"My what now?" Lucas looked clueless.

"Fucking Ghost of Christmas fucking Past! Did you have NO bastard childhood?" Edward sighed furiously. "I take you back over moments of your life, identify the red flags, and recommend alternative courses of action with the hope of attaining some isolated 'Win-Win's' in your time-line which should contribute to our long game of achieving ultimately your ascension to the guy upstairs."

"Sounds like a fucking marketing meeting."

"Shit off Scouse-brow Boy."

Lucas went to drink, only his Brandy glass had been replaced by a bottle of Bud.

"What the actual fuck?" Lucas was no longer in his million-pound apartment, but in his first flat. Gillian was there, as was Anthony and his girlfriend Christine. Gillian had been his second long-term girl-friend.

"Remember this night?" Edward asked, looking around at the flat that was the polar opposite of the one Lucas was living in now.

It was chaotic. There wasn't much furniture. What there was was broken or stained, but there was an incongruous huge, beautifully decorated, real Christmas tree in the corner. There were empty bottles everywhere, ashtrays and marijuana paraphernalia. It looked sticky.

"I do." Lucas stared at the group. He watched his younger self conduct the group's activities. He had always relished the role of puppet master. Young Lucas was in the throes of whipping up a storm.

"What do you see Fucktard?" Edward asked. Lucas was transfixed.

"Look at the STATE of me!" Lucas laughed. "FUCK!"

"You shallow piece of shit stop looking at your hairdo! You had been planning for this to come to a crescendo on that night and you know it. You took all those kids' lives and you messed with them.

"Gillian got over it".

"She did! She went out and got herself a better life, but not before she had to go through and deal with the shit you dealt her. Not to mention the fact that you drove those other kids apart at the same time."

"There was an attraction. I wanted to see what would happen." Lucas still couldn't take his eyes off the group. They were drinking bottles of beer as well as very large, very sticky Vodka Red Bulls. They were taking pills as well as smoking cigarettes and weed. All were fed from one source who was ensuring that each guest's mood was rising and falling at his hand.

"You manoeuvred into that girl. You groomed her."

"Don't be perverse."

"What else would you call it? When you realised that you could make Christine laugh, you whipped that from a flirtation into a frenzy, culminating in what can only be described as a 'quick slip' of a sexual encounter. You tore open not only your own relationship but your friends' as well."

"I didn't know I was going to get caught!" Lucas sniggered.

He winced slightly as he watched the events unfold in his bedroom the following morning.

"Must've hurt that." said Edward as he watched Anthony punch Lucas three times solidly in the face as he lay in bed next to Gillian.

"Ssh." said Lucas. "You'll miss the good bit."

Edward chewed the side of his mouth as he watched Anthony leave followed by Christine entering stage right declaring to Gillian that her and Lucas were in love.

"What the actual fuck?" said Edward, incredulous. Lucas was laughing now.

"I know! She was calling on me to make a choice between them."

"They should have took turns to kick the shit out of you."

"Yep. Instead I'd still got the choice of who I wanted."

"You disgust me."

Lucas put the empty Brandy glass down on the white marble coffee table. "You're going to have to go a long way to find something that makes me regret shit." He sat down on the sofa and began to remove his tie and fold it neatly.

Edward shook his head at him. "You didn't get any comeuppance at all did you?"

"Nope." Lucas was unbuttoning his shirt at the neck. "No, well-"

"What?"

Lucas looked around his immaculate non-festive apartment as he removed his cufflinks. It was perfect, clinical, elegant. Unfussed by trivia. Edward noticed him noticing.

"Christmas cancelled is it?" he asked.

"I lost it in the divorce."

Chapter six

Ian Philpot

“It’s Macallan 18,” Lucas says holding up the bottle. “Are you sure you don’t want any?”

Edward shakes his head. “Neither of us should be drinking right now.” Edward steps in front of the kitchen sink and leans slightly backward against it. As much as he felt frustrated with Lucas, there was a part of him that understood this lifestyle. It was like Lucas was living the dream Edward had lived, though Lucas was enjoying the benefits far sooner. Edward wondered if maybe he and Lucas weren’t so different. And, if that were true, then there was the possibility he could reason with Lucas, help him to see life’s priorities.

Lucas pours himself a glass. “Can you drink at all? Would the liquid just fall to the floor? I don’t know all of the rules for ghosts.”

“I can drink,” Edward says, “I just don’t you should right now.”

“Are you kidding me?” Lucas says waving his arms in the air. “I’m talking to a ghost who just took me through my tormented past. You should be glad I’m not chugging the whole bottle.” And then, like a switch, Lucas goes from outraged to smiling. “Cheers,” he says as he raises his glass to Edward. He takes a sip and gives a

wink.

Edward heaves a sigh, turns his torso, and looks at the warped blob of his reflection in the immaculately clean stainless steel sink. That blob was a decent image of how he felt — amorphous and a misrepresentation of the truth. Though Edward could admit that he had not been the best person alive, now he feels like he isn't even himself. The sins keeping him trapped as a Marley for the last 20 years were so far away. He feels different now. He keeps his eyes on the warped blob. *I'm different now, right?* he asks himself.

“Are you sure you don't want a drink?” Lucas asks.

“No,” Edward says as he removes his gaze from the sink and turns it to Lucas. “There's something I need to show you.” He grabs Lucas by the crook of his arm and leads him into the recreation room.

“Let me guess,” Lucas says. “The present?”

“Yes,” Edward answers plainly. Edward knows that the present is usually a good setup to show a Scrooge exactly how bad their life is. The past can be nostalgic. The present is usually eye opening, because it shows us a different perspective on our current situation. It shows pain where people think there is joy, struggle where people think everything is easy. It just had to be impactful for Lucas.

“Can I just save us some time then?” Lucas asks. “In case you haven't noticed,” Lucas says as he turns in a complete circle looking around his apartment. “I've got the present really nailed down.”

“Is that what you think?” Edward grabs Lucas' glass from his hand and tosses the Scotch to the back of his throat. Edward had been a Hennigan's man in life, but the Macallan goes down smooth

and he wonders if maybe he should have slowed down during his life to try more things. “Let’s take a visit to that girlfriend of yours.”

“I hate to disappoint you,” Lucas says furrowing his eyebrows in disappointment that Edward really just drank the Scotch and nothing crazy and ghost-like happened. “But I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“Right,” Edward says putting the empty glass down on the coffee table.

“Do you mind?” Lucas says with his eyes wide.

“No,” Edward responds.

“No,” Lucas says, nodding at the glass. “Do you mind? That’s a £2000 Herman Miller.”

“Oh,” Edward says as he picks up the glass. “Where are the coasters?”

“I don’t use coasters. I don’t want them to scratch my £2000 Herman Miller.”

“And off we go,” Edward says, ignoring the issue of the glass and sending Lucas into a hypnotic state to show him the present.

Lucas’ eyes close, and he sighs. “Where are we?”

“We’re in Anna’s apartment,” Edward says as he decides to take a seat on the Italian leather sofa. He keeps the glass in his hand. It reminds him of the spare few minutes he used to get at home when he was living. He would come from a long day of swindling people out of their money. His wife would be sleeping, cold dinner would be on the kitchen countertop, and he’d grab a glass and a bottle of Hennigan’s and settle into the couch.

“Anna who?” Lucas asks.

“Anna Pickerington,” Edward says still imagining his life. Specifically, he was focused on the cold dinners that expired on the

kitchen countertop. Margaret had been so good to him in life. And she was good to other people, especially with her charity work. Now Edward wishes that he could be good to Margaret in death.

“I don’t know anyone by that name,” Lucas says. “But this apartment is...” Lucas squints his eyes, pained as he is trying to find the right word, “...small. I mean, it’s a tiny flat about the size of my bathroom.”

“You spent last weekend with her,” Edward says.

“Friday or Saturday? And this is why I always bring girls back to my place. It’s easier to kick them out in the morning than it is to deal with their apparent abject poverty.”

“For heaven’s sake,” Edward says as he stands, jolted out of his daydreams about a potentially future with Margaret.

“I hear keys in the door,” Lucas says. “There she is. Why didn’t you just say it was the blonde from last Saturday? Ya know, it’s a funny story about her name. She said it to me three times, but I couldn’t hear her over the football match at the pub. After the third time, I just smiled and nodded and went with it.”

“What about Emma?” Edward asks.

“Was she the redhead from Friday? Because I really should have gotten her number, so if we could go to her apartment so I could maybe find her phone number lying around somewhere, that’d be great.”

“So you would want to build a relationship with her?”

“No. She was a fit personal trainer.”

“Okay then,” Edward says with a sigh. “Let’s take a peek at the partners in your law firm.”

“Umm, are you sure?” Lucas says. “I mean, I can handle it. I knew about their party tonight.”

“What party?” Edward asks as he leans forward.

“Their annual, umm, *swinging* Christmas party.”

Edward scoffs.

“It’s not really my scene,” Lucas says.

“But their wives...” Edward says.

“Oh, they're there,” Lucas says with a smile. “It’s Berry’s wife who coordinates it every year.”

“Then let’s see your parents.”

“I take it you’re trying to show me people that mean something to me,” Lucas says. “And I have this nagging feeling that there’s a relational component to this too. But my parents are a horrible example. Let’s see them. Two cadavers in a morgue have more chemistry than my parents.”

Edward sits up, raises a hand to his nose, and squeezes the bridge. Lucas is so stubborn, and Margaret is spending some of her last hours alone in a dark hospital room.

“I need a minute,” Edward says as he stands.

“A minute for what?” Lucas looks confused. “Hello?”

But Lucas’ words just echo in the flat. Edward has used his ability to travel like the wind to rush over to St. Thomas’ Hospital. He needed to see her, to remember what it was like to have someone close at Christmastime. And here she is — wrinkled and with sunken eyes. One side of her face is drooping, as if the skin and muscles all decided to give up their responsibility to look presentable human. The room isn’t as dark as Edward expected — the primary light sources coming from the medical equipment in a semicircle around the head of the bed. And there are machines beeping and whirring. *When did death become an operation akin to a manufacturing facility?* Edward thought. *Where was the*

dignity in death? He tries to remember what his death was like. It's too long ago for him to recall.

"Well, I hope it was better than this," he says aloud.

One of the machines starts beeping faster, and he can see Margaret's eyes flutter.

"I'm here," he says, but there's the sound of a nurse coming down the hall. He considers his options. He can stay, pretend he's someone else, and get to spend as much time as possible with Margaret before Huffman finds out that he's abandoned Lucas and cuts off his ability to interact with people. Or he can go back to Lucas, explain the situation, and have an opportunity at spending a few more days with her — enough time for him to tell her how much he loves her and how thankful he is for everything she did for him.

In a moment, Edward is back in Lucas' apartment. Lucas is clearly frustrated and confused, rotating between saying "Hello" and cursing.

"Come back," Edward says, and Lucas opens his eyes.

"Where in bloody hell were you? I was stuck in that Anna girl's apartment. I tried interacting with her, but it didn't work. And she's so boring. She made herself a Cup o' Noodles and cried as she watched *It's a Wonderful Life*. Who does that?"

"Listen to me," Edward says. "I have to explain something to you. Have a seat."

"Can I get more Scotch first?" Lucas asks.

"No, just have a seat," Edward says authoritatively. Lucas sits on the sofa. "I was like you. I had a nice house with nice things and an expensive coffee table and old Scotch that I would only serve to myself. But, better than all of those things money could buy, I had

a wife who was the best companion anyone could hope for. She was good to me, and I wasn't so good to her. And now that I'm doing—" Edward put his arms up, "—this, I don't get to spend time with her. I had plenty of opportunities to spend time with her, but I put them off. And now I'm dead, and she's dying, and all I want to do is spend time with her." Edward hangs his head. "That's where I went when you were in that apartment. I wanted to be with Margaret. And I can be with Margaret longer — through to the end. But I need your help. My boss made a deal with me. I could've tried to save some woman who would've been easy enough to save, or I could go with you — a truly unpromising human being beyond redemption. And, if I succeed, if you choose to live a better life," Edward exhales deeply, "then I can be with my wife for her last few days and tell her all of the things I didn't get to when I was alive."

Lucas stands and walks directly in front of Edward. It's clear something has gotten through to Lucas. He looks serious, and his voice is stern. "You're saying that if I turn my life around right now that you get to spend time with your dying wife?"

"Yes," Edward heaves. He puts his hands on Lucas' shoulders. "You can avoid the trappings of an empty, shallow life, and I can make up for what might be my gravest mistake."

Lucas lifts his arms and places his hands on Edward's shoulders putting the two men in a sort of embrace. "In that case Edward..."

"Yes," Edward says with a hope-filled voice.

"In that case..." Lucas lets his words linger longer. There is a tension, and Lucas is drawing it out. Then Lucas lets out a chuff that turns into a chuckle that turns into a full-body laugh. "In that case, I need more Scotch. Tonight's entertainment is just getting good!"

Chapter seven

Adela Torres

Lucas looked, maybe, a little winded. Edward would have preferred 'overwhelmed' at this point, but he seemed more to be on the 'under' side of overwhelmed, if that.

Edward sat down. The white sofa was too clean and too low for his taste. He arranged his trouser's crease in an automatic gesture—he was reminded, again, of how nice it was to have his sense of touch—and looked at his objective, sprawled in one of the armchairs. He seemed to be in a bit of a contemplative mood. Edward hoped this was a good thing.

"We're not done", he said, in what he hoped was a stern, forbidding voice. Lucas looked at him.

"What now?", he said. "Trip's been fun, all things considered, but I'm getting a bit weary of all the goings around."

"Well then, luckily for you, we're not moving from here," Edward said.

It was night and the reception area was packed with people: outside it was dark, winter-night dark, with a distant fog of orange sodium street-lights and the rainbow glint of Christmas lights from nearby buildings. The air was a bit too warm and smelled of booze

and perfume and overheated silk. The party was in full swing.

Lucas blinked. He and Edward were in a corner looking at middle-aged, middle-weight, highly-strung guests, talking loudly and stridently. The men were tanned, well dressed and very slightly paunchy. The women were sleek and very slightly skeletal, and looked scarily alike: brown hair with blond highlights, worn long and straight and impossibly shiny, simple dresses of insanely expensive brands, necks all too taut, breasts all too perfect.

"What is this?" Lucas asked. He looked disoriented, no more. Edward pointed.

In the middle of a throng of laughing people was a man of Lucas's height. He was dressed in a blue silk shirt, unbuttoned at the neck, and beautiful black trousers.

"That's me," Lucas said. The man was still fit, a bit narrower in the shoulders and a bit rounder in the middle. The hair was longer, maybe too long, and showed some dignified streaks of white. There was also a salt-and-pepper goatee and a silver hi-tech watch.

"Damn. I look *good*," Lucas said.

Edward shook his head and steered young Lucas to another group of party goers.

"I don't know why I keep coming here," one of them was saying. "The man's a joke."

"You come here for the booze, same as us," a woman said, raising her brandy. "And for the gossip afterwards."

"God, he really has no idea, does he," the first man said, and took a piece of sushi from a nearby tray. "He thinks he's still the firm's golden boy."

"Last three cases were disasters, and not discreet ones," said another man. "I mean, if he still doesn't know he's either deluded

or an idiot."

"He's probably both," a different woman said. This one was younger, harder, intense. "He wants to convince us he still has it. I mean, look at this party. His partners will probably ask him questions about his expenses after this."

"He'll weasel out. He always has."

"So far, but not for much longer. I don't think he can keep this up, not at this rate. Besides, look at him."

They did. Older Lucas was laughing raucously now, but his small entourage wasn't, or only feebly and with a pained expression. A woman in particular looked affronted.

"Oh, come on, Laura," older Lucas was saying, "it was just a little joke!"

He put his arm around her waist and she went rigid. Her expression froze even further when he squeezed her against him.

"Don't take things so seriously, love," he said, his words slurred. "Don't be such a spoilsport. It's Christmas! Give us a kiss, eh?"

He bent towards her and she pushed him away, very firmly. He was taken by surprise and, too drunk to keep his balance, staggered backwards. His leg hit the armchair and he fell undignifiedly on his backside, brushing against the side of the armchair and pouring his champagne all over the silk blue shirt.

For a stunned moment no one reacted. Lucas tried to pick himself up from the marble floor, but slid on the champagne-covered tiles and fell on his back again in the general silence.

And then everyone started laughing.

Edward looked at younger Lucas. He was watching his older self, who was getting up from the floor in stages and trying to look like he also found the situation funny while all the guests joined in

the laughter, which was getting too loud, too harsh, too shrill. And was not subsiding.

"Bunch of selfish lampreys," Lucas said, watching himself try to joke the moment away and failing spectacularly. "Now they're laughing but I bet they would have amounted to nothing if not for me."

"If you say so," Edward said drily, and concentrated.

They were outside. The sun was shining, and the sky was blue, and birds chirped in the nearby chestnut trees.

"A picnic now?"

"For some," Edward said, and steered Lucas to a white building with a glass front and the words "RESPITE FIELDS" engraved in a white stone pillar by the entrance.

They passed through some sunny corridors with bright polished floors and tasteful abstract decorations and stopped in front of a tall white door. By the door a small plastic card read 'Rennall, L.'

It was a small room with upholstered white, beige and grey armchairs. On a side table there was a vase with a violently healthy bunch of lilies, and a funeral wreath of white and pink gerberas on a tripod. One of the walls was glass, protected by a curtain now drawn, and behind it there was an expensive-looking lacquered coffin.

Edward went to the wreath and showed the ribbon to Lucas. It said *We hope these flowers express what our words never will.* The back of the wreath had a small sticker with a flower delivery company logo, a red URGENT DELIVERY stamp, and "Public Relations Department, Berry, Lawrence & Webb" as the sender.

"Nice," Edward commented. "This must have cost all of 90

pounds, maybe."

"That's me?" Lucas was looking at the coffin.

"Do you know why it's closed?" Edward said. "You drowned in the bath. You were drunk and had a stroke. They found you nine days later and by then you were mostly soup".

"Worse ways to go," Lucas said, maybe a bit less cocksure now.

"You specified in your will that you wanted to be buried, but they're going to cremate you. Less fuss. Extended family, eh? Can't count on distant cousins up in Carlisle to do right by you." Edward went to the vase. "Oh. This one's from the funeral home. Nice of them. The room looks less empty like this."

A small man in a suit entered the small room. He looked at the coffin and touched something in an iPhone he was carrying. Then he put a bluetooth earpiece in his ear and waited for a few moments.

"Hi, Tamika? It's Josh. Listen, no one's coming to the guy in number two. What? No, the lawyer bloke. I think we can move him forward to the oven, don't you?" There was a pause while he listened. "Yeah, but it was for eleven and it's already half past one, if nobody's come yet I don't think—Yeah. Yeah, if we can. I can bring the lilies to Mrs. Woodward's after, they're still lovely and fresh. OK. OK, I will."

He hung up, rapped distractedly on the glass wall.

"Well, I guess it's up to me to say a few words, eh? Good-bye, mister lawyer whoever-you-were. You must have fucked up real good. Toodles!"

He went out, whistling. Edward looked at Lucas.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Lucas said. "It's shit, yeah. Hard to look at it

otherwise. But I can't say I didn't have fun on the way, and everybody has to go, right?"

"Lucas, look at all this. Your funeral flowers were practically an *afterthought*, for God's sakes!"

"So?"

"What do you mean, *so*? Does your life mean so little to you?"

Lucas shrugged.

"Hey, it's a life. I clearly had fun and I died rich. And I don't think dying is a particularly dignified process in any case. Was *your* death any less stupid?"

Edward didn't reply.

"Look. You mean well, I know. But it's a life, and for me it has the advantage of being mine. You've shown me things. Some of them were not so nice. That's fair. We're not saints, not one among us. I don't think you should be spending your time with me, I mean, what's the point?"

"I have explained—"

"Yeah, but you could be doing something useful with your life—death—afterlife—you know what I mean. Your wife's ill, right? Go be with her, tell her it's not the end, whatever. I know I'm going to die one day, and taking the suspense of the *how* is not exactly a big shock for me.

"So, why don't you do the same? The worst has already happened, hasn't it? You're dead. Take whatever you have left, man. Do what you want. You clearly are not getting anything you want here, so, why not go? Do us both a favour. Go be with your wife."

Edward, again, didn't say anything.

Chapter eight

Kelsey McIntyre

Once, long ago, when Edward was alive and his wife was not yet retired, Margaret had brought home a parrot. She had burst into the kitchen, rosy cheeks sandwiched between her scarves and hat, and held up a large object covered in a shawl.

“Meet our new little friend,” she said, and yanked the shawl away to reveal a wire cage, and in it a bright green living creature with feathers. Margaret looked the creature up and down as if it was her finest work. “A formerly homeless parrot!”

It was not even eight o’clock in the morning, much too early to meet a bird of any kind, let alone a shockingly colourful, formerly homeless one.

Edward stood by the stove, waiting for his toast to brown, one hand on his pocket watch and the other on the handle of his largest suitcase. He had a business trip today and was nearly late as it was. He had saved just enough time for toast. He had not saved any time for unexpected parrots.

Margaret set the cage on the kitchen table and took off one of her gloves to wiggle a finger through the wire bars. “His name is Cinnamon Stick. Isn’t he handsome? He’s been looking for a home

for a few weeks now, but he has a bit of a limp and some feathers missing.” She removed her hat, fading hair starting to frizz from the damp morning, and switched to the baby voice she used with small animals and small humans. “Don’t you? Don’t you, my little Cinnamon Stick?”

Edward estimated thirty seconds more on the toast. “Cinnamon Stick is a ridiculous name,” he said, unzipping his shoulder bag to make sure he had packed his earplugs for the train. “He isn’t even cinnamon coloured. He’s green.”

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Margaret said. She took off her other glove and unlatched the cage door to lift the bird out. “He’s spicy like cinnamon on the inside.”

Edward hardly heard her—although most likely he would have just snorted in response even if he had been paying attention. He had just remembered that he needed to make two important calls before 10:0AM. Best get a move on.

“Edward,” Margaret said, stroking the parrot on her arm.

Edward used a pair of tongs to transfer his toast to a small plate. He had to stow his watch in order to spread the jam.

“Come say hello to Cinnamon,” Margaret said. “Come on, just for a moment. We could teach him to talk. So far he hasn’t said anything to me, but we could teach him riddles.”

Edward closed the jam, glanced again at his watch. “Birds don’t need to know riddles. What’s gotten into you?” He ate half the toast in three bites and wrapped the other half in a napkin to take with him.

Margaret didn’t say anything and continued to pat the bird’s head. Thinking of his phone calls, Edward hoisted his suitcase and made to sidestep his wife, but at the last second she shifted and he

found himself face to face with the parrot on her arm.

Cinnamon Stick angled his head as if to say *where do you think you're going?*

Strange, feisty bird, Edward thought. He tried again to manoeuvre around Margaret, but the parrot edged sideways along her forearm so that it was still right in front of him. It bobbed its head, keeping its eyes on Edward the whole time.

“Margaret,” Edward grunted, lifting his suitcase a little higher, “I’m late—could you put your bird back in the cage? I really need to —”

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Margaret said, “he’s just—”

“I don’t care, just keep him out of my way. Here—” Edward pushed his half-eaten toast into her free hand. “Give him that, keep him busy.” And he forced his way out of the kitchen.

Edward couldn’t remember now, so many years—and his own death—later, whether Margaret had kept the parrot. He stood, in the dark, in the mist, gazing up at St. Thomas’ Hospital, and he thought he recalled seeing an empty wire cage now and then around the house. He thought he remembered hearing Margaret’s baby voice, coaxing and cooing, every once in a while from another room. Of course she would have kept the bird. She was sweet like that.

But he couldn’t remember, and not remembering gnawed at him. It numbed him like the chill that rose up from the river would have before when he still had flesh. And, after several minutes, the not remembering grew so terrible that Edward shook off the damp air that had settled around him and strode toward the entrance to the hospital, back to business again.

He located Margaret's floor and nodded wordlessly to the nurse who happened to be passing as the lift doors opened. She turned away and then looked back, a double take, but Edward had already breezed down the hallway.

"Hello?" the nurse said, scanning the area around the empty lift in his wake. Odds were she would never think of the graveyard shift the same way again.

Edward planned to make this a quick trip. Even if his wife was awake, he knew he couldn't talk to her; any attempt at contact guaranteed him an eternity of dragging his chains around. But he could look at her, really look at her so that he would remember, one last time.

He slowed as he neared the door of her room, finally coming to a walk. There was a small square window in the top half of her door. Edward was almost near enough to see in when he caught the sound of footsteps moving briskly toward the room, following him from the direction he had come.

"Excuse me, hello?" a young female voice called. The nurse who had seen him before—apparently not as afraid of ghosts as Edward had thought. He sprang away from Margaret's door, but then changed his mind and twisted the handle, slipping into the room just as the footsteps rounded the bend.

"Is anyone there?" the nurse said. Flattened to the wall just inside the door, Edward saw her through the window: short and petite with brown hair that didn't reach her shoulders and partially grown-out bangs pushed to one side. She moved so close to the room that Edward could read the name on her nametag—*Lucy*—but then she stopped. Her eyes had changed focus to something through the glass, within the room, and Edward instinctively

turned to look at it too.

Margaret. She lay in the bed, blankets neat, arms at her sides. Her hair was more grey, less frizzy, than when she had rescued the homeless parrot. A variety of machines huddled around her, whirring and beeping and blinking, like a crew of protective robots.

For a moment, Edward was oddly jealous of them.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he realised Lucy the nurse had moved even closer to the door so that she could rest her palm against the windowpane, and he had to flatten himself into the wall so that she wouldn't see him.

Muffled footsteps. Another nurse came into view on her way to somewhere else and paused when she saw Lucy. "Still no change?" she said, pinning her clipboard under her elbow so that she could bundle her curly hair into a tighter ponytail.

"No change," Lucy said. "Still unconscious. No family. If she's still no better by morning, they doctors are talking about taking her off life support."

If Edward had still had blood in his veins, it would have turned cold. As it was, he was fairly sure the shock coursing through his spirit form caused the temperature in the room to drop a few degrees.

"It's probably for the best," the second nurse said. "It must be difficult at her age with no family around, especially at this time of year, you know."

Lucy nodded, but didn't answer. Edward fidgeted.

"I'll check back in later," the other nurse murmured, and patted Lucy's shoulder before carrying her clipboard onward.

Lucy sighed and turned to go as well, and, with a last glance at Margaret, Edward drifted out into the hallway behind her.

Unfortunately, the nurse seemed to have a knack for sensing supernatural eavesdroppers. She whirled around as if Edward had slammed a door.

“Sorry to startle you,” he said hastily, making sure she would see him as the curly-haired, clipboard-carrying nurse instead of as the old man he was.

Lucy pressed a hand to her chest in relief. “How did you get over there so fast? You just went the other way a second ago.”

“I...ran,” Edward said. “Yes.” He heaved a breath and bent over to brace his hands on his knees. “I had to drop off that clipboard right away”—fake gasp for breath—“but then running just felt right so I kept going, and here I am.”

Lucy still had her hand on her chest, still startled, still staring at him as if she’d just seen a ghost.

“I think I’ll run back the other way now,” Edward said, and sprinted for the nearest bend.

He swung around the corner and almost ran through John Huffam.

“Edward, why in such a rush?” Huffam said, folding his arms. “Looks like its already too late for you. Your wife will be dead by morning and you blew your chance to be with her when you failed to save Lucas.”

“I know,” Edward said. Huffam wasn’t quite right—Edward suspected he had blown his chance to be with Margaret long ago, back in the days when he had been too occupied with work to notice her. Back in the days when he had been too busy to teach riddles to a parrot.

Huffam began to pace. “I don’t like to see you this way. It’s as if you were feeling weighed down by, I don’t know, chains. It’s not

good, Edward.”

“I know,” Edward said again, gritting his teeth.

“Do you have the time?” Huffam asked suddenly, plucking up his sleeve and showing Edward a wrist with no watch.

Edward felt in his pocket, his old pocket watch still there. He pulled it out, and if he had still had a stomach inside of him it would have sank. “It’s late,” he said. “As you said, too late.”

Huffam stopped pacing. “Maybe not. There is still a little night left, isn’t there? How about this.” He stepped forward and placed a hand on Edward’s shoulder. “Since it pains me to see you so upset, how about I give you another option? I’ll call off our deal, if you go to look at Claire McCaffrey before daybreak.”

They stood, very still, Huffam’s hand growing heavier and heavier on Edward’s shoulder. Then Huffam let go and stepped back. In his hand, a binder had appeared—the McCaffrey binder.

Edward hesitated, then took it.

“Best get a move on,” Huffam said.

Edward nodded. A second later he had hustled to the doors of the hospital and out into the chilly night.

Chapter nine

Kimberlee Gerstmann

Lucas poured two fingers of Macallan into a tulip-shaped tumbler and added a quick splash of water. He relaxed into his leather chair and swirled the glass around, smelling faint hints of oak and butterscotch. Lucas took a slow drink, enjoying the smoothness as it washed over his palette. He set the tumbler down and began to thumb through the files he'd pulled together and piled onto the corner of his desk. With the visions Edward had shown him, he had a hundred ideas swimming around his brain, all competing for attention. He grabbed a legal pad and started a list to capture some of the fleeting thoughts. The more he scribbled, the more ideas came to him, and he grew frustrated at the mess he was making trying to document it all. He flipped the page and started a mind map instead, instantly feeling better with the less-linear approach. It had been years since he'd mind-mapped anything.

A random memory surfaced, and he suddenly recalled how he had learned to mind map, and who had taught him. He hadn't thought about that in years. Claire had taught him much more than a trick of mapping his mind. In a few short hours she had also given him a sense of confidence and self... the major lesson he had

learned during the summer between his nineteenth and twentieth year. With just a chance meeting... because his friend Blaine had taken him along to a party in the Notting Hill neighbourhood.

The music thumped through large speakers, and the electronic beats seemed to thrum into Lucas' bloodstream. Blaine handed Lucas two open beers, took two for himself and instantly started drinking. Lucas watched Blaine's eyes scan the crowd and then light up as he found the host of the party.

"C'mon," Blaine elbowed Lucas and nodded toward a bloke with shaggy brown hair that hung down in front of his eyes. "I'll introduce you to Devin."

The two dodged their way through other partygoers and reached the lanky guy with bed head. He was wearing a dirty pair of cutoff shorts and a sleeveless white shirt with a large hole below his chest, displaying part of a brightly-coloured tattoo and a glint of metal which could have been a piercing. Devin had his eyes closed below his clumped hair and was grooving to the music.

"Dev," Blaine tapped a beer bottle against his arm.

Devin almost seemed to ignore it, but finally opened his eyes and tried to focus on Blaine.

"Dude..." Devin's voice was so low and quiet, it was almost a whisper.

"Dev, this is my buddy, Lucas. Lucas, Devin."

Lucas reached out a thin hand toward Devin, but that was ignored. Devin, swayed on his feet, looked Lucas up and down, and simply responded, "Sup?"

Lucas dropped his hand and raised his eyebrows. "Not much," he replied.

Devin ignored this as well, his gaze swimming around the room. “We have some business, my brother?” he stated nodding toward a hall off of the great room. Not waiting for a response from Blaine, he took slow steps and made his way through the room.

Blaine flushed a deep pink. “Uh. I’ll be right back,” he said to Lucas and followed the host to the hall.

Lucas felt like a large rock had suddenly been dropped into his stomach. He had no idea what Blaine was into, but he didn’t really want to find out. He was completely annoyed to be in a situation where he knew no one. Social niceties were not one of his strengths. He had a hard time meeting people, and he almost always felt awkward when he had to make conversation with someone he didn’t know.

Should I just leave his ass here?

Probably.

I’ll give him until I finish my beer.

Lucas drank about a third of the first bottle and looked for somewhere he could park the second. As he scanned the room, he felt eyes on him. A young blonde girl in a strappy blue sundress caught his eye as he turned his head. As soon as he made eye contact with her, she looked away at once. He looked away almost as quickly as she had, and he sighed, feeling foolish to think she’d been watching him. Lucas spotted a small occasional table against the wall, so he crossed over and set the untouched beer down, looking for a napkin or coaster to put beneath it. Not seeing anything, he searched his pocket and pulled out a receipt from earlier in the day and slid it beneath the bottle.

“Your mother has taught you well,” a soft voice stated from behind him.

Lucas turned and saw the blonde. He must have had a look of confusion on his face, because she followed up with, “The makeshift coaster.”

“Oh, yeah,” he replied. He felt a warmth rise in his face. “She’d have a fit if I ever set anything on the furniture.”

“I don’t think Devin is quite so picky.” Her mouth turned up in a smile that reached all the way to her green eyes.

Lucas didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t imagine this sweet-faced girl running in the same circles as glassy-eyed Devin.

She stepped into his space, reached a pale arm behind him, and moved the bottle off of the receipt. She took it in her hand and started off.

“Wait right here,” she commanded.

Lucas did as he was told and nursed his partial beer.

In less than a minute, the pretty blonde returned, receipt in hand. He could see that there was something written on it, in black marker. She folded the damp paper in half, then slid it into his front pocket, the warmth of her fingers casually pressing against his pelvic bone.

“I’m Claire,” she stated simply. “That’s my number, for future use, but why don’t you rescue me from this hell hole right now? I can’t take much more of this music.”

“Uh...I...” Lucas stammered.

“Don’t tell me you want to wait for the guy who ditched you?”

He barely registered the fact that she had been watching him.

“I can promise that I’m offering a better option, but it expires in 30 seconds.” Claire smiled again and started to walk toward the door.

Lucas hesitated for a few seconds, but when Claire reached out

for the doorknob, he bolted forward and nearly knocked over a drunk dancer in the process. He caught her as she crossed the threshold. She grabbed his hand and pulled him through, closing the door to Devin's world. They made their way into the sunshine, Claire still holding his hand and leading him. He'd said less than twenty words to her, but she didn't seem to mind his awkwardness and uncertainty.

She'd actually erased it.

It hurt to think about that day. It felt so much like a dream, there were times after when he wondered if it had really happened.

A sudden whistling in the outer office startled Lucas out of his remembrance.

"Who's there?" he barked, his previously serene face turned to a scowl.

"Sorry. Sorry. Just me, Julio. Sorry. Sorry, Meester, Meester..." a broad brown face poked through the open door. The man gave a wide smile revealing a large gold front tooth.

"Mr. Rennall," Lucas stated, his voice less of a bark now, but still stern.

"Sorry, Meester Rennall," the man continued, his friendly smile still warming his face in spite of Lucas' tone. "I not know you is here so late. I clean."

"You cannot be here right now. I have important work to do. You'll have to come back," Lucas felt unexplainable anger at the disruption. He felt like throwing his glass across the room. Even in his anger, he realised how ridiculous and unwarranted his reaction was, but he could not seem to control it.

Julio's smile disappeared and his eyes took on a worried quality.

He backed up a step.

“Sorry. Sorry. Sorry. Please. Sorry.” He slipped out and closed the office door.

“Shit!” Lucas clenched his hands into fists and slammed on on the desk. The whiskey tumbler bounced, the amber liquid sloshing. Lucas picked up the glass and drained it. Two of the top file folders fell off of the pile and onto the floor, papers scattering.

“I can’t freaking believe this,” Lucas growled, bending over to pick up the loose papers.

“That is no way to behave,” a voice admonished from somewhere behind Lucas.

Lucas jumped in his seat, banging his knee on the corner of the desk. “Damn it,” he shouted. “I thought I told you to leave.” Lucas yelled.

“Julio is gone,” Edward stated calmly.

Lucas whirled around, noticing that Edward had appeared in his office.

“What the...?” Lucas’ face was a mask of anger.

“Uh-uh...” Edward interrupted. “Language, Lucas. Don’t let loose with those dirty words. They should be so beneath you,” he lectured.

Lucas paled and shook his head several times, as if by doing so he could rid himself of the visitor.

“You thought that I’d give up so easily?” Edward asked. “Come now. You should have known better. I didn’t get to where I was in the world by giving up easily. That is a trait I recognise in you as well. And it is not always a flattering one.”

“I’m done with you,” Lucas shouted. “I’m happy with my life the way that it is, and I don’t need anyone telling me to change it.”

“Oh yes, let us return to that familiar refrain, ‘I’m so happy.’ What a cliché.” Edward stepped behind the leather chair and rubbed his hands across the back, feeling the buttery texture... one that he missed dearly. He gave the chair, and Lucas, a little shake. “Wake up, Lucas. I’m telling you to wake up before it is too late. Not everyone gets a second chance.”

“You can take your ‘second chance’ and shove it right up your...”

“So rude,” Edward clucked his tongue at Lucas. “I know your mother raised you better than that.”

Lucas felt a chill wash over him at Edward’s remark and the coincidence of him nearly echoing Claire from his memory.

Edward picked up on the sudden change and quiet in Lucas’ demeanour. Maybe I’ve happened upon something? Edward mentally scrolled through the dossier that he’d received on Lucas. Maybe his parents were the weak link in his ambition?

Lucas sat silently.

Edward thought about forcing Lucas to imagine what his parents’ life would be like if he didn’t mend his ways. He could show how they would be impacted by the financial drain of supporting Lucas through corruption charges, bankruptcies, and debt collectors. How would they deal with the public humiliation and the media that would never give them peace? What would happen if his mother was alone during a home invasion? One that was perpetrated by a horribly-angry victim of one of Lucas’ financial dealings... what if that nasty deranged man tortured her and she had to survive through it? What if Lucas ended up in prison, being a bitch to a burly Bubba... how would Lucas’ mother worry as her poor son was ravished by the angry inmate population. What would she go through if she had to identify her

son's body? Would these things even get through to Lucas? Edward had his doubts. He began to wonder if there was anything that could get through to the self-centered prick.

Edward glanced at the files on the desk and the legal pad in front of Lucas. It looked like he'd created some sort of web across the page.

Web... a visual recall from Lucas' file suddenly tickled Edward's mind. It could be a lame idea, but he was running out of options.

Lucas stood and plucked several files off of his desk, shoving them into a briefcase. He put the legal pad in and flipped the gold latches closed.

"I'm done with you," Lucas stated. His voice was strangely flat.

Edward tried reading him, but struggled.

Lucas swung his briefcase to his side and walked out of the office. He noticed that Julio had left the vacuum near the secretary desk and hadn't emptied the garbage. I guess I didn't need to rush him out after all.

Lucas pressed the button for the lift and looked over his shoulder, expecting to see Edward lurking behind him. He saw Julio walking toward him instead. As he stepped into the lift, the anger at Julio surfaced again.

"Get my office cleaned up now," he demanded.

"What?" Julio asked, coming to stand in front of the lift.

"You heard me. I want my office cleaned. Now." Lucas pressed the button to close the door on the lift. It didn't move. He started pushing it multiple times, his impatience evident. He looked up and saw Edward just beyond Julio.

Julio smiled at him. His gold tooth flashing at Lucas. "You da boss."

Lucas saw Edward smile as well, and that infuriated him further. He pressed the buttons in the lift again and the doors started to close. Right before they did, Julio's brown hand reached in and the sensor in the lift caused the doors to open again, revealing Julio's impossibly wide smile.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" Lucas hollered.

Julio smiled. The smile spread even wider. It looked as if his face would split open. Lucas pressed the buttons furiously.

Julio's smile continued to grow. Then Lucas thought he saw something. Julio opened his mouth, the gold tooth shining like a beacon that Lucas could not ignore. From the darkness in Julio's mouth, Lucas realized that there was no tongue, but there was movement in Julio's mouth.

Lucas stepped back and kept pushing the lift buttons. His finger hurt from the force, but he barely noticed. He just wanted to get away. Julio took a step forward, blocking the lift. The doors would start to close, but then stop. A bell on the lift started chiming, warning that there was something blocking the doors. The light in the lift went out. Lucas looked up at Julio and his gaping mouth. There was movement. The bell kept chiming, and Julio didn't seem to care. He leaned his head into the lift and opened his mouth wider. A black substance seemed to be dribbling out of Julio's mouth. Lucas looked frantically at Edward.

"Help me, buddy," Lucas called.

Edward stood back, leaning against the hall wall, watching the scene over Julio's shoulder.

Julio's mouth continued to leak and Lucas had no idea what was happening. Was it blood? The lift bell chimed. Julio breathed deep, coughing a little. The darkness seemed to swell out of Julio's

mouth. Lucas couldn't look away, and he could occasionally see Julio's gold tooth gleaming from the blackness. The lift bell was driving him crazy. The light flickered on and off. Lucas turned his attention to the lift floor to wait for the light to flicker back on. He wanted to determine if Julio was spewing blood. The light flickered on and before it flickered off, Lucas saw that the blackness on the floor could not be blood. It was moving. He felt panic rising from his stomach to his chest. He remembered the mythology of the X-Files and the black oil... maybe that was it. Lucas almost laughed.

The pile of blackness dispersed as soon as Julio let it pour out of him. It seemed like it would never stop. Lucas pressed against the back wall of the lift, trying to get as far away from Julio as possible, but the blackness continued to flow. Suddenly, it reached Lucas, and he knew instantly what it was.

Spiders.

Thousands of fat black spiders.

His one great fear.

They crawled over his 750 euro shoes and started up his legs. He began to jump back and forth, crunching as many as he could beneath his feet. He could feel their bodies popping during his frantic dance. Several got under his pant leg and started on his skin. He flailed and smacked himself, trying to keep his feet from being on the floor. The spiders continued to pour out of Julio's widespread mouth. Edward smiled and walked down the hall, hearing Lucas scream as he left.

"Maybe you'll see things my way soon," Edward called out to meet the screams.

Lucas rushed Julio and the door, but the stocky man was immovable. His thick arms were pressed against the doors of the

lift and there was no budging him. The arachnids spilled over his lips and dropped to the floor. Lucas started to cry. He was near hysteria. Lucas swung his briefcase and struck Julio in the head. Julio didn't flinch. The spiders continued. Lucas swung the case again and caught Julio on the side of the head. A piece of jaw broke off and fell onto the floor. More spiders poured out from the large hole. They were coming faster. They climbed up him and the walls of the lift. They covered the ceiling and were dropping onto Lucas as he turned to swing the briefcase again. He managed another blow and a chunk of Julio's skull fell away, thousands of spiders exploding outward with the pieces of bone. Julio's body fell toward Lucas, knocking him back and onto the lift floor. The doors closed and they were trapped together inside. The lift started to move, but came to a grinding stop. The spiders continued to spill from Julio. Hundreds of thousands of spiders in the lift. They were covering Lucas now. Their fast legs carrying them up the sides of his face and into his hair. Several squeezed themselves into his ears. He could feel the feather-light legs tickling his lips as they tried to get into his mouth. He felt his bowels loosen. His sanity wasn't far behind. One tried to make its way into his nose. He could feel them crawling beneath his shirt, on his thighs and even around his penis. Dizziness swelled.

The lift doors opened. He could no longer control his mind. He vomited and crashed to the floor.

Chapter ten

Alyssa Judson

This wasn't working.

Edward watched Lucas as his face hardened, unwilling to listen to anything he had to say. If Edward were honest, he would have done the same thing, the chains – if not the weight, the sound – reminded him every moment.

“Alright, then,” Edward said, his own voice hardening, “you want to be thick?”

Lucas looked up, raising one coiffured eyebrow. “I'm being logical. Everything you suggest is ridiculous.”

Keeping his temper checked, Edward shoot his head. “For you, it might be. But what about someone else?”

“Who?” Lucas queried wearily. He was growing tired of the Marley's games.

Hoping the curiosity that sparked in the younger man's eyes would be enough, Edward simply shrugged. “You'll have to see.”

When they had left Lucas' office, they headed North, but Edward turned them now, going into a fine mist. Lucas brushed at his suit, ensuring it wouldn't be tarnished by the damp, as Edward concentrated ahead. When the younger man looked up, his brows

rose in surprise. “Cambridge?” he queried, as students poured onto the lawn. One girl marched toward them, her hair springy and dark, brows knit in concentration for the phone she had pressed to her ear.

“No!” she shouted, drawing the attention of the others. Her eyes darted around nervously before going back to the conversation on the phone. “I developed this product, my name will be on it.”

“Who is that?”

“Claire McCaffrey.”

“And how is she important?” Lucas asked, dully.

Edward still found himself shocked at the lack of empathy this boy had. “She’s on the phone there, scheduling the launch of *OurLink*.”

Lucas’ dark eyes snapped back to the young woman, eyebrows shooting straight up. “I heard it was a girl from Cambridge. But she’s extremely successful, isn’t she?”

“As you well know, success has little to do with it,” Edward countered, still watching. He pointed to her as she flipped the phone shut with surprising aggression, particularly when she looked up and toward them, a smile lighting her features, smoothing her brow.

“Abigail!” she hooted, and another girl launched herself between them, followed by a taller, lankier man. Abigail and Claire collided in the type of hug that was only from old friends. When they parted, the man stooped to give the significantly shorter Claire a kiss. “What are you guys up to?”

“Well,” the man started, “I found the problem.”

“What problem?” Claire asked, quickly going into fix it mode, pulling out a notepad.

“The problem with *OurLink*, how it sometimes likes to duplicate information? It’s just a section of code that got fudged up.” He leaned forward, showing her something he’d drawn up on a piece of paper.

Lucas crossed his arms. “I really don’t see what this has to do with me at all.”

“It doesn’t.” Edward sighed. “These three developed *OurLink* together.”

Frowning, Lucas watched the scene. “But I thought she did it alone. Worked at it while taking classes.”

“No one gets there alone, Lucas. She had a chance here. She just organised the creation of the social media website – of a veritable empire – but she didn’t leave a space for them. Instead,” Edward waved his hands and the scene changed, no longer at the school, but rather downtown London, “she only left room for herself.”

It was raining now, the sparkling sun of springtime at college diminished into the murky grey of a London fog. Claire hurried across the street, a hood drawn up to keep out the elements. Her shoulder collided with someone else, stepping out of a restaurant. She didn’t apologise, and the person looked as if she didn’t care, until she realised who she’d seen.

“Claire!” It wasn’t a surprised tone to Abigail’s voice, but angry. “Claire, stop! Alan!”

The tall, lanky male from college came after Abigail as she chased Claire down, who had finally stopped, tapping her foot impatiently as she dug through her bag. “Claire, what are you doing?”

“I’m going to work,” she snapped, indifferent.

“What do you have crammed up your arse?” Alan asked as he

reached them.

Looking up, Claire looked as if she were fighting off tears. “You left me, abandoned me! Why am I talking to you?” She turned and started away but Abigail stopped her.

“Wait. You are saying we abandoned you?” There was silence, waiting a beat before Abigail continued. “*We* abandoned *you*, when *you* took our hard work and handed it to someone else?”

“I didn’t have a choice,” Claire defended.

“Both you and I wrote the code, Claire,” Alan chimed in, his soft tone enough to make her eyes swim. “Abigail developed the schematics. You knew the marketing. We were a team. And that’s not even considering the class we’d worked with. You had the idea-”

“Which makes it *mine!*” Claire took a breath to calm herself. “I found a way to implement the program that couldn’t wait.”

“We were right there!” Abigail all but screamed. “All you had to do was send a bloody text and I would have come running.”

“Why?” was all Alan asked, the hurt showing in his face, his eyes, even his posture looked defeated.

“It was perfect,” Claire finally said. “It had to stay perfect.”

“What a grade A Cow,” Lucas murmured. “Why couldn’t she have started it with them?”

“She touted that she’d done it herself, someone took notice...I’m certain you know the addictive nature of success.”

“Right, so why couldn’t they forgive her, then?”

“They had nothing to do with it.” Edward sighed as the scene shifted to nothing. “She was unwilling to forgive herself, to offer them what she had been unwilling to give them before. So their memories became little more than inconveniences on her

conscience.”

“Miss McCaffrey?” Claire was older now, the office she sat in was made of glass, and she didn’t bother looking up, just flicked a finger, encouraging the little assistant in an ill-fitted suit into the room. “Ah, there’s a...”

“Miss Claire McCaffrey, I have here a lawsuit that has been filed against you.” An older man in a dour black suit slipped past the assistant, dropping a manila envelope on her desk.

Picking up the corner of the envelope, she moved it to the edge of the desk, disgust on her features. “You need to refer to the legal department, 15th floor.”

“No. This is against you. Personally.”

Her eyes finally shifted to meet the solicitor’s. “Pardon me?” she queried, in a tone that was likely more appropriate for a hallway insult than such news. At the solicitor’s nod, Claire ripped into the envelope, pulling out the paperwork deftly, clapping a hand to her lips.

“A missus Abigail Charter is filing a lawsuit against Miss Claire McCaffrey in the amount of three million, five hundred thousand pounds.” Claire closed her eyes at the words.

She had been sued before, the company had. But this, she knew, was personal. “Probably pushed on her by the idiot bloke she’s married to,” she murmured. She shook her head. “Barry,” Claire called to the assistant. “Phone my private solicitor and have him handle this.” She stood, thrusting the envelope and its contents to Barry. “Is there anything else you require of me?” she asked the man that stood in her office, “A signature, I presume?”

She dashed a signature on the notepad he held out to her, and

then returned to work, as if nothing had happened,

“That’s all?” Lucas asked, frowning. “She didn’t even look to see why.”

“She knows why. *We* know why. But she’s crossed the line, she’s beyond caring.” Edward tipped his head. “Do you recognise the amount?”

Lucas nodded. “About a third of what she sold *OurLink* for, a veritable coup when it happened.”

“Right.” Edward paused, considering. “She, like you, is at a crossroads. Claire refuses to let her money be spent in frivolous places – the company has no hand in charity, and she has built herself a reputation, particularly in her new venture, of being careless. Her employees are mistreated – Barry, there, despite doing a good amount of workload, has to have a second job at Harrod’s just to keep his family’s flat.”

“In a second-hand suit, too,” Lucas said, watching him as he fixed his own, perfectly fitted suit.

Frustrated, Edward snapped his fingers, not bothering to be gentle with the transition now. The world spun and they stood in the middle of a field. Claire was there, smiling, satisfied as she filled her hands with earth.

“Where are we now, old man?” Lucas asked, unamused.

“We are in Africa. A little country you probably don’t know the name of. Starvation and thirst are two words that are commonplace enough to be considered normal. Claire, after deciding to settle out of court with Abigail, decided to partner with her and donate to this – a farm.”

Impressed in spite of himself, Lucas nodded. “They built those windmills?”

“The wells, too,” Edward affirmed. “This will be a self-sustaining farm, but she’s scheduled regular visits here every six months.”

A man approached her and she smiled before lobbing a hunk of mud at him. It landed on his bare leg and he laughed, a long, hearty laugh, and pulled her in for a kiss. The scene sparked with joy.

“Miss McCaffrey!” A woman, a journalist from the look of her, picked her way through the rows of turned up dirt and mud to get to her. “I’d love to talk to you, so we can pin down that article for the *30 Most Influential People in their 30s?*”

“Wow,” Lucas commented. “And this is her future?”

“It’s possible, certainly,” Edward said mildly as the scene slipped away. “But no.”

“Why?” Lucas sounded almost angry. “She has the potential to make it on that list, she has the potential to make that big of a difference, why wouldn’t she?”

“Because she has no idea she has that potential.” Edward closed his eyes. “It’s not about you or her at this point: it’s about me.” Looking to the younger man, Edward frowned, determined. “That won’t happen, Lucas, because I made a choice. I could have gone to guide her, to change her fate – but I chose to come to you. Because I believe the changes you can make, the difference you can have in the world, will be even greater than that.”

Lucas looked taken aback by this sudden vote of confidence. “And because she won’t be shown...she won’t do all of that? Make the difference for that third world country, be with that man, be *happy?*”

“None of it will happen.” And Edward turned away, trying

desperately not to scream in frustration, and hoping that Lucas would see what he'd been trying so desperately to show him.

Chapter eleven

Sue Cowling

Edward and Lucas stand outside the Myers family home . Edward looks up and feels a huge sadness well up inside of him, realising what he has lost, and mutters loudly to himself, “what a stupid selfish bastard I have been, I really did have it all.”

He turns to Lucas as he opens the door, and smiling says welcome to my humble abode.” He laughs, but it is a sad laugh.

Lucas standing next to him did not outwardly show any interest in the place, but even he was shocked at the pure size of the building. The fact it was situated in Welbeck Street within Marylebone Village, his first thought as usual was money, it had to be worth millions.

“Ten million actually.” Edward said as he walked in. “If your wondering did I read your mind, the answer is no, but I have been you, and that would have been my first thought too.” He smiles, “money made by deceit, lies and dishonesty, that in the end brought me no happiness.”

Lucas walked into a huge hallway, with a sweeping staircase that led up to the other four floors, which he guessed was equally as grand as the entrance hall in which they stood. He looked up at

the high ceilings, and the beautifully designed windows that allowed plenty of natural light, and added to the grandeur. They walked further in, across the hall, and he took in all those extras, the grand space, the ornate cornices and the huge open fireplace.

Edward kept walking, and eventually stopped in front of a pair of carved wooden doors, he opened it fully to show what must have once been his study.

“Let me show you what happened here in my past.” He swept his arms out wide.

Lucas found them both standing in the same place but now the study was decorated with floor to ceiling bookshelves, a rich carpet and a large walnut desk. It was difficult to actually see the desk because it was hidden, all he had a view of was, he guessed, Edwards bare bottom, pale and flaccid, with legs wrapped around him, the feet banging against his skin and grunting noises. Lucas was no prude and he laughed out loud, saying. “I hope you don't think this is going to shock me, my desk is well used as well. I thought that was what desks were for.”

Edward turned to him. “Wait.”

At that moment a well dressed, elegant woman walked in, stopping just in front of Lucas. He heard the catch of her breath, saw her body physically droop as she saw the scene in front of her. As she turned, he saw the tears falling, and the look of defeat in her eyes. Stopping, she brushed her tears away, stood straighter, taking a deep breath, and walked back out of the room.

Edward looked after her, and then turned to Lucas. “That is my wife Margaret, and that is one of the many times she must have come across me. Not once did she confront me and tell me what a selfish bastard I was, she never screamed or shouted, or kicked me

out. That woman truly loved me, and I never really understood or realised what a wonderful woman she was until I died.”

Lucas shrugged his shoulders, “and, I should care why?”

Edward looked at him with sorrow. Don't you see, that is you further down the line. You will find someone that you think will help your social standing, and you will treat her exactly like I treated Margaret, with contempt, as if she was my property to pick up and put down as I wanted. I showed her no respect, no love and I never even considered she might have feelings that I could hurt so deeply.”

Lucas turned away. “Anything else to inspire me?”

Edward plunged for him, then clenching his fists stopped himself. “You really want to be that person?”

Lucas carried on walking, “ I don't see that is such a bad way to live, why not use a person to get what you need, few bits on the side how can they harm anyone? They get a good life too, so where is the problem?”

The room was gone and they were in a shop, a baby shop, full of happy mothers to be, and new mothers, shopping for tiny clothes for their babies. There was a younger Margaret, standing lost and alone, a wistful and sad look on her face. A sales lady walked up to her. “Can I help you madam? “ the woman's eyes skimmed her body, seeing no suggestive lump, “You are looking for a gift maybe?”

Margaret flushed, “no, I love this shop, maybe one day I will be here to fill my own nursery.” The woman smiled and turned away, no longer interested in what was obviously not a sale.

Edward clenched and unclenched his hands. “You see what I have missed out on, I had no idea how much Margaret wanted a

baby, a family, with me. How different our life would have been.” He turned to Lucas. “You could have a family, find the right person and build a good life, know you are putting down roots.”

Again the scene changed, and now it was a heavily pregnant, and a happy, smiling, Margaret and Edward, hand in hand in the same shop. Sales women rushing around and helping them to choose a nursery. Edward smiled. “This is what our life should have been, not what it was.

Edward swept his arm again, it gave him a release of anger, stopping him punching Lucas in frustration. Then they were in another office, busier this time. They watched as Edward enter one of the rooms and saw the grins and whispers as his door closed. They could hear exactly what was being said

A tall guy with fair hair whispered to another shorter guy, “that man is a prize dick, he thinks he has a way with the woman, but all they want is his wealth and hopefully be wife number two.”

The shorter guy gave a smirk, “his wife is one good looking woman, she deserves better then him, and I know that there are plenty of men who would jump at the chance to know her better’ including me.”

Lucas looked at Edward. “Did you know that about Margaret, that the men fancied her, and that woman just were interested in your money.”

Edward did not reply because suddenly they were on a moving train, standing watching Edward sitting by the window, a bacon roll, half eaten in his hand and his computer open. Those same two guys sat opposite him, ignoring Edward and talking to each other. Edward dropped the roll, a look of intense pain on his face, he fell sideways, pulling at his tie. The guys sitting opposite him got up, in

no hurry, it seems. Edward could not even call for help, and for Edward watching himself, he felt that over whelming pain that was consuming him, all over again. “Those guys, they could have helped me more, I am not saying they could have saved me, but looking back I can see I had no friends, I had no family, just Margaret, who was loyal, kind and loved me.”

The next vision was stark, a hospital room. Laying in the bed was a pale woman, unconscious, surrounded by life support equipment that beeped and pumped. Edward went closer to the bed and Lucas followed. “Margaret, my wife. Earlier today she had a massive stroke that has left her unconscious. You know she is not going to make it, she is dying.” He sobbed. “That woman who has never done anything wrong is dying, and she will never know that I finally understand what she means to me. All those years of cheating on her, cheating clients, basically stealing their money, what was it all for because in the end I have nothing, I had nothing.” He corrects himself. “We could have had the world, shared our time together, built up friendships and family. Who has she got here with her, no one, just a dead husband and a man that does not care.”

Edward turns to Lucas, who for once is quiet, and says. “I might not have had much, not in the way of friends, or family, children, grandchildren , but I did have a wife that loved me no matter what I threw at her, she loved me right up until the day I died and still does. Her one hope I guess is that we will meet again.” His voice grew fiercer, “but you? What do you have? Lucas you have nothing, not a person that cares about you, or someone to try and help you along the right road.”

Edward went up closer to Margaret’ he was openly crying now,

and leant close to her ear. “I love you Margaret, I understand now what a sod I was, and how much I hurt you. For that I am truly sorry love, and if somewhere inside you can sense me, then know I will always love you, and regret all those years I wasted during our marriage.”

Lucas coughs. “Great performance, and is this supposed to make me want to change, to become a better person than I am now. I am happy as I am and don't see why I should change my lifestyle.”

Edward slumped his shoulders in defeat. He realised that Lucas was not interested in changing and his one hope of redemption was not about to happen. It would be morning soon, it was beginning to get lighter already.

“You know Lucas, no I can see you are not going to change, you have no inclination to. So why don't you just forget it. Let us just call it a bad dream. Just wake up and continue your pathetic life.”

Chapter twelve

Ron Ward

The starling banked hard left after noticing the fast approaching glass. The animal's momentum proved too great for the manoeuvre. The startled avian glanced off the glass then off the sill then crashed hard into a pile of freshly turned earth. The bird shuddered to wobbly feet under the azalea bush recently planted in the space vacated by a dying Japanese red maple.

Inside the bedroom, Lucas's eyes opened, frightened into wakefulness by the commotion at his window. "All quiet on the western front" he managed as a greeting for the day. "Sorry, private joke," he said just in case there was someone there. The silence made him feel silly, "Don't let it get you down lad, you have woken to more than one unknown guest."

The cover sheet stuck to Lucas' back. He pulled on it but the sheet was thick with sweat. Peeling the linen of his back required gyrations he had not tried since dating the yoga instructor. Finally, the bed released him allowing his hand to slide into a wet spot. An immoral grin widened on his face. He reached out with his as still developing psychic powers trying to discern who had deposited the juices. The bed was empty, except for the fluids.

A wave of nausea burbled in his nether regions. The hunt for his night partner could wait. Lucas melted back into the clammy sheets. Outside the bird chanced a short flight to a branch shading the bedroom window from the onslaught of mornings promise.

The dream Lucas was having, when the bird so rudely interrupted, dangled off the pier of his consciousness. Once he drifted back toward sleep dream images as real as the wet spot crowded round, jostling for position, trying to gain his waning attention.

The walls of two buildings, one old, one new, blended into one façade. Buildings built by expert artisans designed to make the new London bow toward the old London. Water in a puddle in the street, a pigeon flapping against the wind between the buildings towering above, a taxi speeding away from the curb, everything was as tangible as the hair on his arm. The dream had gravity pulling him back to sleep, more scattered images crowded in even while he slogged through twilight on his way to wakefulness.

The dream left him, empty. Lucas pushed up on top of his pillow mountain. With effort, he lifted his head to plop a randomly available throw pillow under his head. The embroidered cushion offered scant relief to the strain on his neck from the bad angle left by his bodily adjustments.

Absently he reached for the wet spot wondering why last night's guest was taking so long in the bath. Still, under the effect of the so real dream, he wondered if he might be able to discern the woman's identity from the scent of her seepage. Lucas moved his fingers slowly toward his nostrils preparing for a detailed analysis. The deep sniff revealed, curry and bile.

"Dammit I am ill," Lucas said.

“Sweating, vomiting in one’s bed, where is the tale-tell bottle,” Lucas asked his reflection.

“You forget, we stopped all that thirty-two months back, you have medallions to prove it.”

“We have not yet stopped talking to our reflection have we?”

“No, that we have not stopped”

“What are we going to do about the illness?”

“Dr. Gibbers would be glad to have us visit?”

“Liar he would leave us in the hall until the last available slot, just like he did last time.”

“We cannot exactly blame him for that can we, as we were the last to sign up for available slots.”

“I had an expectation that he would find a way to move us forward in the queue.”

“Unwarranted expectation is the root of all malaises.”

“Even this current illness?”

“No this is something different.”

“It is early the Urgent Care Centre won’t be open until 8 am”

“I have an idea, how about we drive over to the Accident and Emergency”

“They won’t see us we are not nearly ill enough for that.”

“How do you know?”

“Call 111, they should be able to help”

“No we are going to Accident and Emergency, I have a bad feeling we are in mortal danger.”

“All right then I will grab the keys, you find some clean underwear.”

Lucas stepped out of the tube dreading the walk ahead. He did not

feel well. He focused on the hospital's façade, it helped to see small increments of progress in most tasks. That was a bit of advice from dear old dad that always paid off. He strode into the A&E looking for the NIC. There was one in every human organisation, the one person who made the real rules. Not the corporate rules, the board handed down. The street rules the way things needed to mesh together if the day's tasks stood any chance of nearing completion.

The NIC turned out to be a six-foot four-inch ex-navy medic. The man had turned two years in the desert into a personal fiefdom in the middle of one of the NHS's gleaming jewels. Lucas turned to a young girl carrying an armload of folders. "Is that man the nurse in charge?" he asked.

"Maggie is at reception you will want to see her first." The child helpfully pointed at the reception desk. "Mitch is always busy, he answers lots of questions," the young lady answered, smiling shyly as she hurried away with her folders.

Lucas neared the man just as he was telling another penitent to sit down. That was to be expected. The Urgent Care Centre was set up for the kind of thing Lucas had and he knew it. Another thing he knew was his career was made up of moments like this when he steamrolled the system into delivering what he wanted. The negotiation took seven minutes and thirty-seven seconds. The stopwatch was a tick he developed in debate class. The NIC of the A&E was a marvel, easily outlasting the last three combatants he had faced. One of them recently won a seat in Parliament.

To Lucas's surprise, NIC Mitch was the one who pulled back the curtain, not the hoped for pretty smiling phlebotomist. "I called Dr. Gibbers, he apologised for your bullying. I am going to take some blood and you are going to fill this convenient beaker with your

urine. We will forward your results to your regular doctor for analysis patient zero. In the meantime, Dr. Hilbert will offer a pre-diagnosis just in case you have mutated a world-killing virus in your innards as you so colourfully put it during our previous discussion.”

“It pays to be sure of these things. You found out I am not an escaped nutter too, right?” Lucas could not resist a jab when it was so openly offered.

Lucas wiped the smirk off his face when Dr. Hilbert threw back the curtain further. NIC Mitch offered his data. The doctor scanned the chart, intently looking at specific spots on his anatomy. The discomfort he felt under the scrutiny generated some playful ideas for future negotiations.

“You should not be here.” The doctor said, offering nothing more for five full seconds. “Next time you feel a little under the weather wait for the Urgent Care Centre to open up. The phone number is 111 put it in your phone. It is extremely doubtful that you have a world-ending virus, more likely a common and highly treatable version. There are some signs of dehydration. I have asked Mitch here to administer some fluids. That alone may do the trick. Go home, get some bed rest and wait for Dr. Gibber’s call.” The doctor was gone leaving Mitch standing there holding a needle in his hand, looking happy with the world.

“Let me see if I can still find a vein. I may be a little out of practice but I should be able to find the sweet spot with only one or two stabs.” Mitch’s smile was less than reassuring.

It took four stabs to make a connection. Lucas stared at Mitch the entire ordeal after the third attempt failed the nurse’s demeanour changed. His confidence seemed shaken. Maybe he

really didn't do this that often. The joy evident on the fourth try dried up the vitriol Lucas had been churning in his mind.

Metal crashed, a plastic bottle skittered out into the hallway, a disembodied voice was shouting gibberish and other voices were calling out for help with a seizure. "I will be back," Mitch said. The commotion had livened his mood. "Just rest here, if you need to urinate walk the bag holder down two doors to the left."

The shouting lessened, boredom set in. His bladder complained offering something to do. Lucas thought about it then swung his legs toward the floor.

"You have been here before," his brain offered.

"Recently," his mind added as a qualifier.

"You are still a bit woozy lad," his stomach complained.

"Not exactly steady on your feet huh boy?" An applicable memory dredged up and presented in his father's voice.

"Steady on," Lucas replied out of habit.

Lucas walked on down the hall forgetting for the moment his bladder's complaints. Around a sharp corner, a set of elevators hawked rides between floors. He pressed the up arrow already knowing he was heading toward the third floor. Behind a bell rang, a door opened, inside was light and most importantly a way up to his destination. The ride up only deepened the dreamy quality of the day.

"You have been here before," his brain offered.

"Remember that broken sign, just down that hall, B13, blue broken, the U dark, and the E hanging down by a corner?" Memory asked.

"It doesn't mean anything." The mind said. "We have been over this."

“The door is still open” Lucas said into the air, wasting breath as a way to relieve tension. He pushed his face into the crack left by the unlocked door. The top sheet was muted medical blue. The sheet wrapped around the woman’s waist salubrious white. Wires connected to machines fought with tubes connected to pumps for real estate. He pushed his way into the room dragging his empty fluid bag on its stand.

A whiteboard offered Margret Myer as the woman’s name. Detailed below was the duty nurse, the names of three doctors, and a list of medications further detailed by time administered. Lucas could not dredge up anything about the woman. He reached out to touch her waxy skin. Cool to the touch, a shiver shook the lawyer. A chill climbed his fingers spreading until another shudder sent the goosebumps on their way.

“There you are,” Mitch said. “I came back from a real emergency to find you missing.”

“Why is it so quiet in here Mr. Donaldson?” Lucas asked reading the name from the nurse’s badge. “None of the machines are working.”

“Ever hear of pulling the plug?” Mitch let the explanation bloom in the man’s thick skull.

“I do not know her.” Lucas replied.

“How about we get that IV out and you can go home get some rest.” Mitch put a friendly arm around Lucas.

Once the IV was removed, all the paperwork filled out Lucas was guided toward the door. He pulled out his mobile on his way to the station. Looking at his task list he commanded the phone to connect him with his assistant. It was still early for business so the call went to voicemail. “You silly laggard, as soon as you get in, set

up a meeting with Claire McCaffrey. I want the meeting details as soon as I can get them. Include an explanation for your tardiness in an email as soon as the meeting is set.” Feeling more himself he stepped into the tube ready for the day.