



Auld Lang Syne

Should old acquaintances be forgot?



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVEL IN A DAY'
ON JANUARY 26th 2019

Auld Lang Syne

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



AULD LANG SYNE

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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 January 2019. 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.

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

Tim

January 26, 2017

Auld Lang Syne

chapter one

Dan Hallberg

JANUARY 2019

Time to see how I'm fucked today.

When I started at this job, I used to check my work email constantly when I was out of the office. I finally had to stop doing it. It was stressing me out too much, and my wife said I was always staring at my phone.

An unintended consequence of this policy is that for the last ten minutes of my commute into the office, every day, a knot the size of a softball forms in my stomach. I know that once I get out of my car, walk through the lobby, hop in that elevator and start up to the 20th floor where my office is located that I have to pull out my phone. Once I pull out the phone, I have to open the app that has my work email account on it. That's when I see the string of emails from people who work later than me and catch my mistakes.

Most of the time there isn't anything too bad. Mostly follow-up emails on accounts I'm working on, or my boss checking in on a client who had called. Occasionally though

someone will catch something I fucked up on a month ago that hasn't been caught until that night. That means an email to me with my boss's email address in the "cc:" line, chewing me out and asking me why I didn't do something that I should have known to do.

It also means that I have to start busting my ass the moment I walk through the door. No cup of coffee. No chit chat with Sasha at reception. No checking in on how the Bulls did last night. No scroll through Twitter to catch up on what the hell our President said last night. No quick Facebook convo with Lucy. Just a rush to pull my ass out of the fire.

I unlock the screen and swipe over three homescreens to where the app is hidden on my phone and fire it up. Two emails from our IT departments spam filter letting me know I could be making \$9,000 a day taking surveys for Google, and an alert from UPS letting me know that the report I yesterday had indeed gotten to its destination this morning. The knot in my stomach releases. Today is going to be a good day then.

"Hey Matt, how's the rugrat," Sasha asks me as she pulls the tea bag out of her cup and pours in a little cream, "I saw that picture you posted last night, looked like she had quite the art project going."

"Yeah, no kidding," I say as I roll my eyes. Hannah was working on some assignment last night. I don't know the details too well, but it involved a lot of glitter that ended up in a lot of places. Among those places was both my wife and I's Instagram feeds.

"I think I'm going to be coughing the stuff up for a month."

"At least it's Friday though, you'll have all weekend to clean."

"Oh yeah, that's exactly how I wanted to spend my

weekend: vacuuming glitter out of the vents before the blowers kick on and it looks like a disco ball went through a woodchipper in my living room.” Sasha laughed, and covered her mouth to avoid a spit take. She’s only 26, so when she doesn’t laugh at my jokes I feel old, and when she does laugh I feel hip.

I drop my coat and bag off at my desk, then head to the break room to grab a cup of coffee. As I pour my cup I see that the cleaning people hadn’t been through last night. There are still a few leftover copies of my proposed portfolio for our potential new client sitting in the recycle bin. I think the pitch went well. The new client was just a kid sitting on trust fund money, so a simple plan to make sure his piggy bank didn’t run out seemed to make the most sense. He looked bored mostly, but his lawyer seemed to be following and receptive. Must be nice to just be able to live off Mommy and Daddy’s hard earned money for your entire life.

I head to my desk, fire up my computer and pop open my Outlook to see if anything fresh has popped in since my trip to the break room. Nothing new. I lean back, sip my coffee, and do my standard catch up of everything on the internet. I make sure the Bulls are still terrible, and they are. The Pacers lost their best player for the season on Wednesday and Alison is still in mourning. I’m a little relieved honestly. The last time one of her teams won a Championship was when her Colts beat my Bears for the Super Bowl. It was a little over a year into our relationship, and frankly, I’m surprised it survived.

Over on Twitter it looks like the President is still an ass. Flip over to Facebook. Looks like cousin Phil went on a jpeg posting spree. Looks like Lucy went out last night for “Thirsty Thursdays” at the barcade in Wrigleyville. I see she’s active on messenger and decide to check in.

MATT GREEN: Lucy.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Yes Matt.

MATT GREEN: Manage to beat my Joust score last night?

LUCY WHITFIELD: I dunno, did you manage to get all of the glitter out of your ass last night?

MATT GREEN: So that's a no?

LUCY WHITFIELD: Correct, and you know it. Same for you as well?

MATT GREEN: Unfortunately yes. On the plus side, if today was the day I decided to bang a stripper today, I'd have a good excuse for all the glitter in my car.

The messenger window lets me know that Lucy is typing, which means she either started typing something and got interrupted by someone at her office, or she typed a dirty joke and is trying to decide whether or not to send it.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Aw shit, tonight's the only night? You know I only work the pole on Saturdays. Think you'll still have glitter all over your car then?

MATT GREEN: Lol. Sorry it'll all be cleaned up by then. You'll have to fill some other guy's back seat with glitter.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Lol. Missed my shot I guess. Next time.

MATT GREEN: Don't know if there will be one. Al thought it was funny until her black suit looked like something out of Rupaul's Drag Race. I think glitter is banned now.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Oh Al, so sensible.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Guess I should get back to work now.

MATT GREEN: Guess I should start work now.

LUCY WHITFIELD: Lol. Later.

I manage to get through the morning doing the bare minimum of work. Honestly, it's all I can manage after putting in so many extra hours putting together the pitch for the trust fund baby. My brain needs a break. Plus today's Friday, and on Fridays I get lunch out, which means my brain is thinking about nothing but a quality hot dog until after 1:00 PM. A few years ago eating out meant I'd hit up the build your own stir-fry place a block over for lean meat and veg over brown rice, but since we had Hannah that has devolved into the much more satisfying all-beef Chicago dog, plus a polish with grilled onions. I do skip the fries at least.

My favorite hot dog place is about 2 blocks away, so at 11:55 I get bundled up and head out.

"Hey, has Wendy gotten a hold of you? She just got in from a meeting across town and Josh said she was trying to find you." Sasha asks.

"No, not yet. I'll check in when I get back, she knows I take a lunch."

"I wish I could have that attitude. I'm always jumping at anything Wendy asks for."

"Honestly, that's probably the better plan, but what can I say, lunch is calling."

Sasha grins and goes back to eating something that I am sure is devoid of any kind of animal product. I'm not sure what diet she's devoted to now, but if it's that stuff or a heart attack, I'll take the heart attack.

My eyes and cheeks are the only uncovered part of my body at the moment and the wind cuts directly into them. I was hoping it would get above double digits today, but it looks like the weather has other plans. I tear up from the wind and

cold by the time I get to the hot dog place, which unfortunately has a line out the door.

I fiddle around on my phone. Lucy sent me a gif of glitter and another of a pole dancer. I forward the glitter gif on to Alison who responds with a thumbs down. I see my Mom reposted the picture of Hannah and all of her girlfriends are letting her know how cute she looks and how glad they are that it didn't happen at their houses. Lines moving slow. Looks like they're short behind the counter. Soon enough, I look at my phone and it's 12:40. I was hoping to eat in, but even if I was next in line, which I'm not, by the time I got my food and got back to the office, it'd be 1:00.

With my boss waiting for me, I know I should get back, but I worked hard this week, and I want my lunch. I fiddle on my phone some more. I send Lucy back a laughing emoji and let Alison know that Mom liked the picture from last night. Second in line. Just one octogenarian in between me and lunch. I look down at my phone to see it's 12:50 when the octogenarian is replaced by a guy whose suit looks like it cost more than my car talking on his bluetooth.

"Excuse me." I tap him on the shoulder and am ignored. "Hey, lines back there man."

The guy turns, he can't be older than Sasha, "First, I'm on the phone. Second, you weren't paying attention, so this is my spot now."

I feel the blood rush to my face. I haven't been talked to like that since high school. "Are you serious right now? I've been in line like an hour, wait your turn."

"Look asshole," he steps forward, puffing his chest out towards me, "I'm on an important call. Unlike some people, I don't have time to wait an hour for a hot dog."

"Next!" is the call from the counter, and this guy spins and

starts ordering. For a second, I tell myself I'm going to step forward and order in front of him. I even rehearse what I'm going to say to the cashier when I get there. Instead, I bitch about him to my 142 followers on Twitter and I stand and wait for him to order. I'm already late back I figure, what's a few more minutes?

As I walk in at 1:20, Sasha stops me: "Go to Wendy's office now."

I figured Wendy would probably be pissed, but the look on Sasha's face worries me. I hurry to my desk and drop off the food and unbundle myself. I head up one floor to Wendy's office in the executive's suite. Wendy's office is all glass with a glass door. I know she sees me coming. I still knock anyway when I get there. Wendy is quite possibly both the most professional and the most fashionable person I've ever met in my life. At 55 she could easily pass for 40, and I as far as I know has always looked that way. She waives me in.

"Sit down Matt. Just got a call from Mr. Mulvahill."

"Trust fund boy's lawyer?"

"Yes, Mr. Hagen's lawyer. Sorry Matt, they're going in another direction."

I sink a bit in the chair, "Well shit, that didn't take long." Normally a client would wait at least a week before making a decision like this, "did they say why?"

"No, but I can tell you way." Wendy shifts forward in her chair. I see that, in addition to a copy of my most recent pitch proposal, that she has a copy of my last two pitches on her desk.

"I looked over your proposal. Why did you think that Evan Hagen, a 25 year old with over \$7 million in capital would want to invest in low-risk index funds?"

"Well, I figured he's set for life and wouldn't want to

change that,” I say sheepishly, waiting for Wendy’s hammer to fall.

“Matt, if he wanted to just make sure he didn’t run out of money he would’ve hired H & R fucking Block. Guys like Evan Hagen come to us for something big. Something interesting. They have money, they want more money and they want it now. And, if something goes wrong and if this money runs out, guys like Evan Hagen can get more from Dad. They don’t want to play it safe. They want to blow it on some start-up that’s going to revolutionize some bull shit or another--not collect half a percent for the next fucking decade.”

Wendy takes off her glasses and rubs between her eyes before looking up at me to say, more in a tone of pity than anger, “honestly Matt, why can’t you see that?”

The color drains from my face and I feel my stomach drop into the soles of my shoes.

“I just...I just figured I’d pitch what I would do if I were in their position.”

Wendy sighs, again more with pity than annoyance, “Matt, they’re not you. They’ll never be you. They’d never consider a world where they are like you. You can’t keep making pitches like these.”

Wendy motions to the evidence of my last three failures.

“It’s not like all of these pitches are the same Wendy, I tailored these to each client.”

“Honestly Matt, there is more variety in your color choices on these pitches than in their contents. Hendrickson - index funds with low yield bonds. Pulaski - index funds with low yield safe bonds. Hagen - index funds with low yield safe bonds. Yeah, they’re different amounts in the two pots each time, but they’re the same fucking pots.”

I feel the blood that had drained from face rushing back to

my cheeks to the point that I break into a bit of a sweat from the heat.

“I’m...I’m sorry Wendy. I guess I just need to change my strategy. I’ll adjust my pitch for clients in the future.”

All I want to do is leave. Everything in my body is pulling me to leave. Unfortunately Wendy won’t let me leave.

“I don’t know how many more clients you’re going to get Matt,” Wendy’s voice broke a bit when she said that. Like how my Mom’s voice broke when she told me my dog had cancer when I was 10.

“Everyone likes you. I like you. I’ve stood up for you. The problem is, I’m not the only executive here. The other board members don’t know anything about you. They’ve never met your wife. They’ve never had Hannah sit at their desk and pretend to be boss. All they see is one accountant on a roster of a dozen accountants, and that one accountant hasn’t brought in a new client in a year.”

I don’t think I want the answer, but I ask the question anyway.

“Are you firing me Wendy?”

Wendy pauses. At least I think she does. It’s hard to really gauge how much time passes in a moment like this.

Wendy slides her glasses back on cooley and collects herself, “No. Not yet anyway. But if you put up another pitch like one of these, then I’ll be out of arguments to the board. Got it?”

I manage to croak out a “got it” and get up to leave.

“And Matt,” I freeze, “if you ever keep me waiting like this again, you won’t make it to the board.”

The walk back to my desk seems twice as long as normal. I walk by reception without stopping. Sasha wouldn’t ask what happened, but I’m an open book. She’d be able to tell

immediately and I don't want pity from someone 10 years younger than me and nearly at the same place professionally.

The smell of grease greets me at my desk. I go to the break room and drop the dogs in the trash there so I don't have to smell it at my desk. Suddenly I don't have an appetite.

Honestly, I don't remember what the rest of the day was like. I had another message from Lucy but didn't respond. I'd fill her in later, but I don't want to go over it all again right now. All I know is that at 5:00 pm I had no emails and there wasn't any new work on my desk.

As I bundle myself up to go out in the cold again I can't help but think, "Time to see how I'm fucked tonight." I don't know how I'm going to tell Alison about today. *If* I tell Alison about today. Maybe it's best just to sit on it. After all my next pitch might be a winner. No need to worry her I guess.

Before heading to my car I stop at the newsstand in the lobby and buy a Diet Coke. My throats been dry since meeting with Wendy. As an impulse buy I grab one of the little bouquets of flowers the clerk keeps by the register. Whatever I decide to tell Alison, I suppose having flowers with me couldn't hurt.

chapter two

Sanusha S Sritharan

“SHHHH!” HANNAH’S DELIGHTED LAUGHTER rang out loud and clear as I glanced anxiously at the open doorway hoping that Alison hadn’t registered it. Unfortunately, we were out of luck.

“And what are you guys up to in here? You better not be disturbing the centrepiece on the dining table,” she warned. We turned identical innocent looking faces in her direction as we said “nothing” in unison – Hannah had been thoroughly briefed on the need for secrecy earlier in the day and I made a mental note to tell her how proud of her I was for sticking to the agreed script once Alison had left.

Alison continued looking at us suspiciously and I quickly added, “We were just going over our agreement that Hannah would go to bed when she’s told and not cause a fuss in front of the guests. You know we agreed that the party is likely to go on way beyond an acceptable bed time for a seven-year-old.” She seemed to buy it as she nodded at us, already distracted by a stray flower in the dining table centrepiece. She adjusted it by what seemed like millimetres and then paused as she caught sight of the wad of paper causing the flower to be

out of place.

She picked it out, muttering to herself about incompetent florist delivery guys who could not even do their job without getting their trash in the delivery products, and then started to walk out of the room, no doubt straight to the rubbish bin in the kitchen to get rid of it.

“Aren’t you going to look at it?” I asked, my voice coming out higher-pitched than I intended. *Jeez, Matt, can’t play it cool can you?* Hannah nodded vigorously at my side, as Alison stopped in her tracks and turned around slowly. “Please don’t tell me this is your doing...” she trailed off, probably registering the sheepish expression on my face.

She opened it up slowly, fumbling with her newly manicured nails. *What was it she had said, gel tips? Though that had been a month ago, god knows what the latest fad is now, not as if she’s been saying very much lately.* I shook my head as my thoughts took a slightly bitter turn and focused on her face, taking in her tightly-pressed lips and barely suppressed eye roll.

“Really Matt?” She crumpled it up. “I don’t have time for this, there’s still a million other things to get ready for the party and I’m pretty sure something is going to start burning in the kitchen soon,” her voice trailed back to us as she left the room. “I better not find any more of these misguided love notes messing up the decorations for the party, I shudder to think what our guests might think of them.”

My heart sank. I had been sure that she would appreciate them. That had been one of my best ones too. All cheesy with rhymes about eyes and cornflower blue. Hannah and I looked at each other in dismay. Clearly our surprise hadn’t worked out the way we had wanted it to. I sighed, “Time to clean them up, I’ll get the living and bedroom. Can you get the bathroom please?” She nodded and we slowly shuffled off.

It's been an unmitigated disaster. Romance really is dead, not for lack of trying though. I mentally walked through all of my attempts that day as I mechanically collected the notes I had left in the various rooms and binned them.

Plan A: I had offered to let her style me for the evening. Her response: “Seriously Matt, I’ve already got to settle the catering, dress Hannah up and decorate the house. Can’t you take of yourself for one evening?” Matt – 0; Alison – 1.

Plan B: A playlist of songs we had danced to on our first few dates. “No, we are not subjecting our guests to bad 90s music. Please tell me that isn’t for tonight?” Matt – 0; Alison – 2.

Plan C: Attempting to sneak in a quick dance in the kitchen. “Stop getting in the way of cooking. I don’t have enough time as it is.” Matt – 0; Alison – 3.

Plan D: Setting the table as a surprise. “Matt, the blue bowls with the red plates? What were you thinking? Now I’m going to have to clear these away before resetting the table. Thanks for the help.” Matt – 0; Alison – 4.

Needless to say our 10th wedding anniversary hadn’t exactly been a celebration of our love. Giving up, I decided to stay out of Alison’s way till the party started in the next hour.

The doorbell rang and just like that the façade of the happy Green family slammed into place. I opened the door and Alison cheerily greeted John. *Of course he would be the first to arrive. Probably to make sure his catering staff had set up the food just right.* They headed straight to the dining room, just as suspected, and I could hear a low murmur – probably Alison walking him through how she had complemented some of his dishes with some home-cooked creations.

Lucy was the next to arrive and she greeted me with an

enthusiastic squeal and a hug as she breathed out “Happy 10th Anniversary!” in my ear. John and Alison chose that moment to reappear and I could hear Alison coughing at the sight in front of her. Lucy broke away and headed towards Alison to greet her while I turned away to welcome the next guest.

Soon, our house was full with family and friends all gathered to celebrate our 10th wedding anniversary. *Little do they know that everything hasn't been as hunky dory as it seems.* Still, we seemed to be doing well at maintaining the façade for the evening until Alison turned up at my side with a death grip on my arm.

“You left one,” she hissed through a forced smile. *One what?* “And of all people, Lucy found it. Do you know how embarrassing that is? She knows how we celebrated our 2nd anniversary because someone placed it in the bathroom for everyone to find.”

I stared at her in dawning horror even as I flush from the memory. “But we got rid of all of the notes, I swear. I cleared the living room and the bedroom, and Hannah cleared the bathroom, didn't you love?” Hannah nodded from where she had been standing by my side and said, “I cleared the note in the bathroom, threw it away just like you said. Mummy, why didn't you like them?”

Alison just looked flustered, unwilling to burst her daughter's rosy impression of our marriage. “Mummy was just busy today darling, she had too many things to concentrate on.”

I interrupted, “Hannah, you only threw away one note? But we hid 2 notes in the bathroom remember? One on the mirror and one on the toilet seat cover after I closed it.” *After all those arguments about leaving it down, one would think she would have appreciated that choice of location.*

Hannah's eyes widened. "I forgot about the one on the toilet seat cover, I'm sorry Daddy."

Taking in her welling eyes, Alison reassured her, "No, it's ok, Daddy should have known better." Turning to me, she continued, "This is all your fault. Why would you rope Hannah into this? You should have gotten rid of all them yourself. You know I don't like surprises. What possessed you to do this today of all days?"

"Today of all days? It's our 10th anniversary and you've just been so distant and I haven't been able to say anything to you for weeks. I've been trying to do romantic gestures the whole day and you just kept rebuffing all of them. I was at my wit's end." I huffed. "Honestly, Alison, I don't know what's been going on lately but all I wanted to do was bring back that spark that we once had. We've had some amazing times, all I did was write down my favourite memories because I thought you might enjoy the walk down memory lane."

"And you just decided to place them around the house in places the guests would find them?"

"Well, I know that you always do a final sweep of the house before the guests turn up."

"I would have, but I found myself running to the shops last minute because someone forgot to buy extra ice." I gulped. "And now, I have to face Lucy knowing that she knows about you-know-what. And she's drunk. You know what she's like, soon almost everyone here is going to know."

I nod, I couldn't fully disagree with Alison's assessment. "Hey, let me just talk to her okay? I'm sure I can talk her into keeping it to herself."

"You would love that wouldn't you. More excuses to spend time with her, as if it isn't already weird enough that you guys spend so much time together on your own."

I rolled my eyes. *Not this again.* “She is my best friend Alison. You know that.”

“Yes, your best friend who’s been in love with you since she was a kid. Women know these things Matt. She would have you in a heartbeat.”

Hannah’s shrill voice broke through, “Mummy, Daddy, why are you fighting? I’m sorry I forgot to clear the note. I promise I won’t disturb you next time Mummy.”

We realised, aghast, that our voices had steadily risen, upsetting Hannah. *How could I have forgotten she was right there?* I chastised myself even as we tried unsuccessfully to console her. The guests around us had fallen silent as well noticing the spat and Hannah’s distress.

“I’ll take Hannah back to her room,” I mumbled to Alison, “you take care of the guests.” Without waiting for answer, I reached down for our daughter and started shouldering my way to her bedroom.

I would eventually emerge and join the party but not a word would be exchanged between Alison and I for the rest of the night. Happy 10th anniversary indeed.

chapter three

E. Kinna

OH, HOW I HATE it when my plans go awry. Earlier that night I'd received a message from Alison claiming she was stuck in a client meeting and would be late getting home. I had hoped she wouldn't be too late, but by eight-thirty I'd given up. Mom and Dad had picked up Hannah from school for a weekend sleepover, and I had made reservations at our favourite restaurant. I'd planned the perfect evening, and in return I'd been rejected. It hurt.

Hungry, I opened the fridge to see last night's leftover stir-fry. Blech. No thanks. Time to hit the pub.

The temperature was well below freezing and it was snowing pretty hard, which was normal for Chicago in February, but I decided to leave the car at home and walk. That way, I could have as many beers as I wanted.

Putting on my parka I had to suck in my gut to get the zipper to close. That tempted me to forego a calorie laden meal, in favour of huffing and puffing my way to my old physique on Alison's treadmill. But I did need food and I would be walking to the pub and back. Surely that counted.

Jimmy O'Leary's was a few blocks away and one of those cozy neighbourhood places monopolized by young professionals on the rise. I'd been like them a few years ago, teetering on the precipice of carefree drunkenness before plunging into the mire of middle-aged moderation. Early 90's grunge music blared over the din of laughter and clinking dishes, and my stomach growled at the smell of charbroiled goodness wafting from the kitchen. None of the tables were vacant, so I slid onto a stool at the end of the bar.

I ordered a pint of pale ale and Jimmy's famous bacon cheeseburger with poutine, despite, or maybe because of, Alison once saying that anything covered with gooey cheese and gravy was disgusting. Anyway, it was a nice change from my last dining out experience, where my inner rebel should have been ashamed of himself.

"I don't like this restaurant." Hannah pouted, pushed the menu away and grabbed her Barbie doll.

"They have very good food here," I said. "I can't wait to try the steak sandwich."

Alison said, "I'm sure they'll make you a grilled cheese and cut off the crusts."

I nudged Hannah and pointed to a table across the room. "If you eat all your dinner, you and I can share one of those chocolate, strawberry sundaes. We'll get them to put two cherries on top."

Hannah smiled. "Ooh, yummy."

"Really, Matt?" Alison looked at the roll of fat above my belt.

"What? I'm starving. I didn't have lunch."

"So that's your excuse to overdose on carbs tonight?"

"Fine," I said and flipped the menu to peruse the healthier offerings as Hannah squeezed my hand.

"Daddy," she said, leaning to rest her head on my stomach, "I like your tummy. It's like a big pillow."

The bartender brought me another beer. I looked down at my plate, now empty except for a few specks of cheese curd and gravy smears. Then, I looked down at my waist. Yikes, it had grown quite a lot the past couple of years. Maybe I should have used the treadmill instead of scarfing back a burger and poutine.

Someone hiccupped next to me. It was a slim woman about my age wearing a black track suit with mussed auburn hair tied in a pony tail. She sat hunched over an empty highball glass and clenched a tissue. Her eyes and face were puffy, but she was still pretty. She looked at me but didn't smile.

"Howdy," she said.

I nodded. "Howdy."

She waved the bartender over. "I need another drink."

I wanted to ignore her, but also didn't want to come across like an insensitive ass. So, I said, "You okay?"

"No. No, I'm not." She choked back a sob. "My husband...he...he left me. He...he's fallen in love with someone else."

Oh Christ, I thought, why did people have to blurt their personal problems out like that? Now I had to pretend that I gave a crap about this stranger. I wondered how long before I could leave without looking like a jerk.

"Uh, wow. That...sucks." I said, grabbing my wallet from my pocket and sliding my credit card towards the bartender, impatient to pay my bill so I'd have the freedom to escape at a moment's notice.

I guess the crying woman didn't notice or care that her revelation made me uncomfortable, because she kept talking.

"You know the worst part? I knew he was having an affair. I *knew it*." As her voice got louder, her face turned redder. "For fifteen years I was the perfect wife. I gave up my job, had

two kids, I gave up carbs, and I even got Botox. Lemme tell ya, those needles bloody hurt.” She sniffled and grabbed another tissue from her purse. “Oh, but then, all of sudden he’s working late every night...and then he starts working out, starts wearing fancy Italian suits. Why? He’s a bloody dentist! Does your dentist wear three thousand dollars’ worth of Armani when he drills into your teeth?”

“No, he doesn’t.” I had been wondering how Italian suits proved that someone had cheated on their wife, but I had to admit she had a point.

“Oh, but it wasn’t just that, you know? He became so *different*. Like he wasn’t even the same person, like I was living with a stranger.”

Somewhere in the twisted corridors of my mind her last statement ignited an unwelcome spark, one I knew had been hiding there these many months. I’d smothered it because I was afraid of what it would awaken, but in that moment all my willpower drained into a quivering pool of doubt.

“No. I uh...no, I don’t know.” I replied, even as all the idiosyncrasies of the past few months with Alison exploded in the forefront of my mind.

“Did he think I was stupid? That I wouldn’t notice how he changed?” The woman blew her nose.

I remembered laundry day and putting Alison’s underwear away only to find her lingerie fresh and clean and folded, instead of shoved in the back of the drawer like it had been for so long.

“Did he think I wouldn’t notice he’s never home for dinner? How he’s never there anymore to help the boys with their homework?”

I remembered how Alison used to worry she’d lose her job because she left earlier than her colleagues, so she could spend

more time with me and Hannah. Now, there were days she worked later than anyone else.

“We used to talk, you know?” She turned her tear-stained face towards me. “We were partners, friends. But lately, it’s like I don’t even exist.”

I remembered Alison and I staying up late watching old movies, talking and laughing, sharing the small details of our day, and marvelling at Hannah growing up. Now, too often I would be in one room and Alison in another, or if we were together there was silence between us.

“Oh God.” The woman’s rant became a whisper. “How could he do this to me, to us? Why? What did I do wrong?” She started sobbing again.

The bartender gave her another drink at the same time he returned my card with the receipt for me to sign. My chest constricted. I couldn’t breathe. I felt like I was going to be sick.

“I’m sorry,” I said, not meeting the woman’s eyes “but I have to go.” I had to get home.

I was walking fast, but it felt like home was miles away. All I could hear was the sound of my footsteps crunching on the sidewalk salt, and all I could see was the frozen puffs of my laboured breath curling around the hood of my parka as I hurried along. I rummaged for my phone in my pocket, but it wasn’t there. Damn, I’d left it at home. All I wanted was to call Lucy. I wanted to hear her soft voice telling me that I’m crazy and everything will be okay. I wanted to hear her tell me that Alison can’t be having an affair, that I was imagining things. And yet, I knew it was the only thing that made sense.

The house was still dark when I arrived; Alison wasn’t home yet. Inside, I stood in the hallway trying to decide what to do. Should I call Lucy? No, I needed to look for proof first.

Logic took over as I walked into our home office and

clicked on the light. Because I took care of the finances, I knew that there was nothing unusual in our banking statements. No unexplained purchases, no restaurant charges, no clear evidence of an affair. I turned on the computer to check Alison's emails, dreading that I'd find a lover's secret message. But there was nothing.

I started to relax. The beer buzz was wearing off, and the comfort of home made it easier to feel distanced from the rantings of the woman at the bar. Life felt normal again, and then, I remembered Alison's old smartphone. She'd given it to Hannah to play with, but maybe it still had Alison's account information.

I found it on Hannah's night table, and the screen turned on when I picked it up. I sat on my daughter's small bed while I snooped through her mother's emails.

There were dozens of notification messages from Facebook and Twitter, and several sales offers from her favourite stores. Her inbox was full of all the usual stuff——no emails from secret lovers.

Next, I clicked on the text messenger app, and there it was in glowing green and white——the proof.

Alison: *Hi, I'm still at work, but almost finished.*

Unknown: *I want you here, now. When can you be here?*

Alison: *Soon, I promise.*

Unknown: *What are you wearing?*

Alison: *Cheeky bastard!*

Unknown: *Haha, yes, I am and you love it.*

Alison: *Maybe.*

Unknown: *Yes, you do. You also know what I'm going to do to you tonight.*

Alison: *Do I?*

Unknown: *Yes, you're mine. Always and forever mine.*

Alison: *I know.*

Alison: *Okay, I'm leaving now. Will be there soon.*

xaxaxo

Unknown: *I'll be waiting...*

I couldn't read anymore. It felt like someone had punched me hard in the centre of my gut, and it made me want channel the pain into slamming the phone on the floor and stomping on it, until nothing remained but little bits of metal and plastic. Instead, I smashed my fingertips on the screen to open up Alison's contact list. I needed to know his name, needed to know the name of the man I was going to kick the crap out of as soon as I knew where to find him, but his name and number were both recorded as UNKNOWN.

Oh no, screw that. There had to be a way to trace him, to learn his name and who he was, and I was going to find it.

The hum of the garage door opening told me that Alison was home. Damn, I wasn't ready to face her yet; the shock was too fresh. I took a series of deep breaths and slipped her phone into my pocket. I went into the living room and turned on the TV. I hoped the dim light would hide my fury and clenched fists as I watched Alison walk up the stairs and take off her coat.

"You're late," I said, careful to keep my voice neutral.

She startled and turned around. "Oh, I didn't think you'd still be awake."

"How was the meeting?"

"Um, it was fine. Long, but fine. Did you eat?"

"Indeed, I did. I went to Jimmy's pub."

"Alone?" She seemed surprised. "Well, as long as you had fun."

Fun? I thought. That wasn't quite how I'd describe it. "How about you?" I asked. "Did you eat?"

"Um, yeah. We just had some sandwiches delivered."

Each lie that came out of her mouth made my fists clench tighter.

"Listen," she said with an apologetic shrug, "that meeting left me exhausted, so I'm going to have a shower and then go to bed."

"Fine," I said, "you go ahead and do that."

chapter four

Jacqueline S Miller

IT WAS LUCY WHO told me something was up. Lucy Whitfield is her name, and I've known her since I was 10 years old, not that I'd seen her much recently. Once a man marries he finds he has little time for old friends— especially old girlfriends — although with Lucy it had just been platonic. We were good mates, nothing else.

Lucy said she'd seen them at the Chicago Art Institute. She hadn't wanted to tell me.

“Please, Matt, don't shoot the messenger,” she'd said with that nervous little laugh of hers.

Of course, I hadn't wanted to believe her, but when I'd looked into her frank, sincere eyes on the video chat screen of my Smart phone, I knew she wasn't lying. I mean, I've known her since we were both little kids. She's my oldest friend.

My Mum thought we would marry when we grew up, so did her mum, and her grandparents, and so did Lucy...

“How can you be sure?” I asked now, as Lucy stared worriedly from the screen.

“I just am,” she said. “But if you don't believe me, why

don't you ask Alison yourself?"

After the call, I thought about things for several days, but I didn't know what to do. I needed evidence, proof. I'm not one to go around making allegations.

I called Lucy back the next evening. Alison was out at some meeting or other. She worked long hours and was busy with some particularly complicated prosecution case. I'd got used to dining alone — the microwave had become my closest friend.

"Are you sure?" I asked Lucy.

"Yes, of course. They were all over each other. Standing in front of that painting, Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte, or whatever it's called."

"Did you take a photo?"

"No. I don't think you're allowed to."

"Not of the painting," I wailed. "Of them, her and this man."

"No. I saw them by accident. I'm not a stalker."

"Hm."

Could Alison be having an affair? It wasn't impossible. We lived such busy, complicated, frantic lives. Passing through the house like ships in the night. I never knew where she was most evenings.

"What did the guy look like?"

"I didn't get much chance to study him."

"You're sure it was a man?"

"Yes."

"And you're sure it was Alison?"

"Totally. We met at your wedding. And I've got loads of photos of the two of you."

"And he was tall, short? Dark, blond?"

"I think he was about medium height. Blond. I only saw

him from the side. I scuttled off in case she recognised me. Why don't you ask her?"

"I'll think about it..."

Like Alison, I had pressing work commitments, sorting out an account at Carodine Capital Management LLC where I work. January had been a difficult month for foreign tax returns, and the authorities had closed in on some irregularities with a major client. I'd been arriving home late, sometimes sleeping in the spare room so as not to disturb Alison. She was working hard too, often not arriving home until after I was in bed. Occasionally she looked in and said hello, but more often I just heard her shutting her bedroom door.

And then there was little Hannah to consider. Poor Hannah, our ten year old daughter. Days went by when she hardly saw either of us. That's why she had a nanny to take her to school and act as a substitute parent. Ingrid. What would we have done without her?

I let myself into the house that Tuesday evening, about a week since Lucy had raised the alarm. It was a nice house in the Lincoln Park area of Chicago. Shiny wooden floors, white walls, concealed lighting. No clutter or evidence that people lived here. It could have been photographed as it was for a Real Estate photo. Hannah's toys were kept in a Nursery and my few books were assembled neatly in my study. I had little time to read and Alison wasn't interested in fiction. She spent most of her time perusing the small print in legal documents. She went to the gym or the ice rink for recreation but, apparently, she had started visiting Art galleries too.

The only sign of the people who lived here were a few scattered framed photographs on a shelf in the dining room, and an enormous, blown up poster of the three of us on the

living room wall. I'm there, with my receding hairline, smiling down at Hannah, who was then a beautiful, blonde toddler. She looks nothing like me but she's the spitting image of her mother. Alison is there too: perfect, pearly white teeth gleaming, hair loose around her shoulders, wearing a black tee shirt. She's snuggling up to me, but looking straight at the camera. Her sharp grey eyes follow you around the room. There's a slightly smaller version of the print in the kitchen. I feel as if I'm under constant surveillance.

Maybe I shouldn't have had the prints blown up so big — or chosen one where she looked away.

Everyone said I was lucky to meet Alison.

"You're punching above your weight," my mates told me.

I thought I was too. I just happened to meet her at the right time. We were both at the University of Chicago and I'd seen her in the Harper Memorial Library a few times before we met. Alison's kind of beauty doesn't go unnoticed — and I've always had a thing for blondes. Of course, now I know the colour comes out of a bottle, but in those days I thought it was natural. So, I'd seen her, but never had the courage to approach her. Until I saw her at this dreadful party and she asked me to get her a drink. It turned out she'd just been dumped by some long-term boyfriend: Jeff something or other. Poor old Jeff. By the time he'd changed his mind she'd moved on.

I was shy with women, in my student days. Not like now. After the party we'd gone on a date to the Art Institute of Chicago. I remembered stopping in front of that Seurat painting that Lucy had mentioned: *A Sunday Afternoon On The Island of The Grande Jatte*.

"Those bustles are amazing," I'd said, and she'd laughed.

A discussion had followed about how fashions change.

Those incredible shoulder pads of the 80's, and the mini skirts of the 90's. Bee hives and crew cuts, we discussed them all. It was all very enlightening and friendly and I knew I fancied her like mad!

Years later, Alison told me she'd only gone out with me to annoy Jeff. Some of his friends were at the party and she wanted to make him jealous.

"I was on the rebound," she said matter-of-factly. "I just wanted someone to care."

I went upstairs. Peeped into Hannah's room, but she was fast asleep, her favourite teddy clutched tightly in her arms. I dimmed the night light and stepped back out into the hall. Ingrid appeared near the stairwell. She placed a finger on her lips.

"She's sleeping," she whispered. "I left the light on because she had a nightmare earlier She gets scared of the dark and the monsters that come in the night."

"Don't we all," I said. "Is Mrs Green back yet?"

"No. She rang to say she's been delayed at the office. She's got an important case on this week."

Ingrid disappeared into her own room and I returned downstairs. I poured myself a whisky and settled down in front of the tv to await my wife's return.

I must have dozed off but something disturbed me. The front door clicked shut. Footsteps padded across the wooden floor. She must have taken off her shoes. I saw her in the flickering light — a pale figure creeping past the doorway.

I switched on the table lamp.

"Matt?"

She wore a white wool coat and there were snowflakes in her dishevelled blonde hair. I guessed it must be windy out —

Alison is usually so well groomed.

“What are you doing up? It’s past midnight.”

“I was worried. I tried phoning you but you didn’t pick up.”

“Oh, the battery’s dead. I need to buy a new phone.”

“Get the battery changed.”

“It’s not worth it. These phones have built in obsolescence.”

Like me, I thought.

“It could be something to do with the new operating system,” I said aloud, but she’d stopped listening and had moved on into the kitchen.

I followed her and watched as she threw her shoes onto the floor, shrugged off her coat and left it draped over a stool.

“Do you fancy a coffee?”

“Nah. It’s too late.”

“Decaffeinated.”

“No. Have you eaten?”

“Not much. I had a sandwich for lunch at the court.” She took some plates out of a cupboard before turning and staring at me. “Aren’t you going to bed? You can relax now, I’m home and I don’t need an audience while I eat.”

“I just wanted a chance to talk to you. We get so little time to ourselves, these days.”

“I thought you liked it like that, Matt. Think of all the lovely money we’re earning. All those shiny green dollars.”

“But Hannah hardly ever sees you, or me for that matter.”

“She’s well looked after.”

“I’m sure she is, but by Ingrid — not by us.” I sighed. “You know, when I took her to the doctor’s last week, just before I dropped her off at the school, she said something that really shook me up.” Alison continued pouring out the coffee in

silence, so I continued. "She said, 'Bye Daddy. I suppose I'll see you around. Maybe, sometime next week.'"

"Well?"

"But, don't you think that's appalling?"

"She was probably just being facetious." Alison added cream and brown sugar and stirred the coffee.

"I don't think she was. I'm one hundred per cent sure she meant it."

"Well then, why don't you take some time off, or work from home. Spend more time with her."

"Why don't you?"

Alison shrugged. "I can't. I'm up to my ears in the Newman case. Maybe, next month."

"Next month?" I walked over and tried to put my arm round her but she flinched and moved away. "Come to bed?" I said.

"I can't."

She seated herself at the breakfast bar, directly under the poster of the two of us with Hannah, hugging and laughing together, a perfect happy family.

I said slowly, "You weren't too busy last Sunday. You found time to go to an Art gallery."

She flushed then grew pale again.

"Yeah. Answer that," I said. "You were with a man. Kissing him under that Seurat painting you love."

She shot me a venomous look.

"Says who?"

"I have my sources."

"You've been spying on me?"

"Don't be ridiculous. A friend saw you — by chance."

"Who?"

"Lucy. Lucy Whitfield."

“Oh, *her*.” Her face creased into a scowl. “I might have guessed. She’s always had the hots for you, hasn’t she? A schoolgirl crush, except she’s a bit long in the tooth now to call it that.”

“Don’t be stupid.”

“I’m serious. If I hadn’t met you on the rebound and dated you, you’d definitely have married her.” She sipped her coffee. “Yuk. This needs more sugar. Why don’t you go to bed?”

“Because I want to discuss it now. Tell me the truth.” I leant towards her. “Is it true?”

“Yes.” The words stabbed me like a knife. “I recognised Lucy, but when she didn’t acknowledge me or say anything I thought she probably hadn’t seen me. I might have guessed she’d sneak to you!”

“So, it’s true?”

There was a moment’s silence. Alison rose and put her coffee cup in the dishwasher.

She straightened up and stood leering at me almost as if she were drunk.

“I want a divorce.”

“No!”

Waves of fear crashed across my consciousness as my world collapsed around me. My whole life flashed before my eyes.

“You’re joking?”

“I’ve never been more serious. I was planning to tell you, but could never find the right moment. You must thank your friend Lucy, for making it so easy for me.”

Grabbing my keys, I dashed from the room and out into the night.

I unlocked the car and from its womb-like safety stared through the swirling snowflakes at the silhouette of the house

that contained everything I loved and valued. Everything I had studied and slogged my guts out to attain. Was it all about to be taken from me?

I thought about that old joke:

Husband: What would you like for your birthday?

Wife: I want a divorce.

Husband: Sorry? I wasn't planning on spending that much money!

Only then did I realise I'd forgotten to ask Alison who the new man in her life was...

chapter five

Mirela Vasconcelos

I PULLED THE DOOR shut in a quick burst behind me, not wanting to spend a moment more in Alison's proximity. I needed air, the cool crispness of winter on my face so I could think straight, I needed to get away from what had just been thrust upon me, I needed my life to go back to making sense before the sky fell around me and my world started ending.

Was there any chance this was a dream? I looked down at my white knuckles still gripping the doorknob. No. When you felt pain this intense in a dream, your body woke up as some sort of defense mechanism, but even though I was living a nightmare, I never before felt so solid, heavy, and stuck in my reality. I wouldn't wake up from this, if I was ever going to I would have as soon as the words left her mouth. My stomach churned at the mere thought and I forced myself to peel away from the door and move. It felt like an elephant were sitting on my chest and my legs wobbled beneath me as though my bones had been replaced with jello, but movement helped. I had no intended direction or destination, my legs just needed to keep it together enough to take me away from here. I barely

registered my surroundings, the few cars that drove along the street became blurs of color and noise. I thought about how the people within the vehicles were entirely oblivious to the insurmountable pain that was being experienced just beyond their reach. How lucky they were, to be living their normal lives, their worlds still intact, while mine crumbled.

I needed to think about something else, I needed distance not only from Alison but from the situation, from the reality that was coiling itself ever so tightly into a knot in the pit of my stomach and making me sick. The frigid air was no doubt biting to my exposed hands and neck, but I drank it in big gulps anyway, gasping for air as if I'd kept my head underwater just long enough to start feeling the panic and burning in my lungs. Temporarily at least, I was numb to the physical pain of a Chicago winter, it was no match for the cold I felt inside.

"Affair... Divorce." Her voice echoed clearly in my mind, the sharpness of her tone etched into my memory as I relived the moment again. Unable to help myself, I doubled over, resting my hand on the passenger side door of a grey Elantra parked along the curb of the sidewalk and took deep breaths, my free arm wrapped tightly around my abdomen. My mouth began to fill with saliva in the tell-tale sign I would soon dispel the contents of my stomach. I could sense the eyes of a passerby on me, but thankfully not many people took strolls during the winter and the stranger didn't stop to question if I was alright. No doubt they assumed an overweight man like myself was just having a difficult time with his exercise routine, no need to get involved. It was much too cold for the tears which burned in my eyes to fall, and it was doubtful anyone would question my red face in the bitter wind.

I lifted my head and saw the reflection on the car window of a young man walking away, his hands buried deep in the

pockets of his winter coat, head hunched down. Just as he was out of earshot, I retched. Each heave felt like my body was attempting to expel the memory itself from inside me. It worked for a short while in which all I could concentrate on were the contracting pulses in my diaphragm and the terrible burn in my throat. When it was done however, the sickly acidic taste in my mouth served only to remind me just how rotten things had become.

After a few moments of wallowing in self pity, I could no longer bare to continue looking at and smelling the pungent bile soaking into the pavement. The cold was also finally seeping into my bones. If I wasn't going to stay moving, I would need to be indoors. Using the help of the car to stand gingerly, I took in my surroundings with more attention, no longer wanting to close myself off entirely. There was an L station a few hundred feet down the street that could take me toward the Loop downtown. I made my way to it at a much slower pace than I'd previously been moving. Chicago was well known for this above ground train system that weaved its way through the city, but I hadn't ridden on it much since Hannah was born. We'd purchased a car then, for both safety and convenience.

God, how would Hannah handle this? She was barely old enough to even understand what the situation meant. Would she resent her mother for the affair, or me for letting them go? As I waited for the next train to take me downtown, a young family waited beside me. The parents seemed about my age, their daughter a bit younger than Hannah. I couldn't help overhearing their squabble, there were few people at the station and we were practically huddled together under the orange-ish glow of the heat lamps.

"What do you mean, you're not going to make it to her

recital? How many have you missed already since last year?” The woman’s voice was accusing and brittle as if she was close to a breaking point. I’d heard Alison sound similarly on numerous occasions. It started a year or two after Hannah was born. We’d begun to disagree on finances, Alison wanted to have an active lifestyle, to travel, and take more vacations as a family. I wanted to ensure we would be able to do those things once we secured ourselves for the future, but she wanted to live in the ‘now’. More often than not, we would argue about how I spent too much time in the office, and not enough with her and Hannah. Life must be cruel indeed to have shoved such an excruciating parallel in my face at that moment. “You have a *family*, Ron. Why don’t you act like it for a change?”

“Are ya kidding me, right now? As if I *don’t* act like it, working my ass off—”

“Watch your language!”

The man, Ron, I guess, threw his hands exasperatedly into the air after a brief glance to his daughter, then quickly crossed them tightly across his chest. “Working my *butt off*,” he continued through clenched teeth, “to feed and provide for this family. You’ll have to excuse me if I want to take some time for my self, which I *never* get the chance to do.”

“That’s the problem, Ron! You want to do things for your *self* and not *us*. It’s not just you anymore.”

The rumble of the approaching train muffled the rest of their conversation, and I welcomed the escape from this encounter, which could not have been a better personal torture technique than if satan had designed it himself. I made sure to sit in a different car than Ron’s family. The tightness in my chest had returned, and being seated felt comforting. I refused to look out the window at the city. For one, I was still feeling a little queasy and didn’t want to risk barfing again. But

more importantly, I'd made my life with Alison here. If one encounter with a random family was enough to floor me, I couldn't imagine how I'd feel if I looked out at the place that held all of our memories together. I had small respite in the knowledge that the closer we got to the Loop in the city center, the greater the likelihood I would find a place where memories of Alison wouldn't rush through me like water breaking through a dam. In fact, I was thinking of a particular place that would have a specific means of helping me clear my mind.

There was a bar not too far from the Loop I had been to with Lucy on a few occasions, I'd even taken John there for a few drinks one night, but never Alison. On the corner of a large building with pale bricks, its dark brown wood façade distinguished the bar from the other businesses on the block. It was the kind of place that wasn't too stuffy and would play good music but always felt a little too small.

"Whisky on the rocks, please," I paused. "Better make it a double."

The bartender nodded knowingly after glancing in my eyes. I wondered if he could see the distress behind them, but he didn't push any conversation, and I was grateful. He simply left to grab the bottle, poured my drink, placed it before me, and found some way to busy himself at the other end of the bar. I wasn't entirely certain this wasn't just typical bartender behavior, but I appreciated the space he gave me to cradle my whiskey and sit on the stool.

After a few steady gulps of Jack to wash down the lingering acidic taste from my mouth, I realised I hadn't progressed any farther than when I was leaning against the car in the street. Nothing made sense, and I had no idea how to handle this situation. What kind of man was I going to be in

this mess? It was all I could think about, but the only clarity I had was in the question, not the answer.

Ron and his family were still on my mind. I wasn't the only one going through difficulties with his wife, and that scene had made me think perhaps I had played more of a part in Alison's decision than I was making myself out to have. I could have done more to prevent it. Perhaps if I had been a better husband, father, man - one who hadn't let himself go, and sought solace in hot dogs far more often than I knew I should have. Alison had maintained her figure over the years, even after Hannah was born. She was as painfully beautiful now as when I first met her fourteen years ago. My mind instantly juxtaposed the image of Alison from when we were first dating to an image of her confirming the affair and letting me know she wanted a divorce. The psychological blow was brutal, and I might have gotten emotional again if I hadn't just been distracted by my phone buzzing in my pocket.

I grabbed at it feverishly, wondering if it was Alison, calling to apologize. To tell me she had made a mistake and she still loved me.

LUCY WHITFIELD - my phone flashed at me as it rang. Along with her name, an image of Lucy's smiling face covered the screen.

The disappointment was palpable, but there was also a certain amount of relief. It hadn't been too long since I'd last spoken to Lucy in late January, but she always knew how to help cheer me up, and work out difficult decisions - she'd been doing it for decades. Who better to discuss a mess like this than with my best friend? I was surprised I hadn't thought of it sooner. We saw and spoke with each other frequently enough that there was usually nothing new to report, and always called each other when big life events happened.

“Hey Luce.”

“What’s wrong?”

“That fast, huh?” It didn’t amaze me in the least she could tell I wasn’t feeling well from the tone in my voice. Then again, I wasn’t hiding it either. There weren’t very many walls between us.

“Look we can sit here and talk about how I can read you like a book all day, or you can just come out with it and tell me why your voice sounds like you’ve been crying. Matt, seriously, is everything ok?”

“In a minute, what did you call me for?” I needed her to talk for a minute about anything else while I composed myself enough to say what happened out loud in my own voice. I knew Lucy would understand, and give me the time I needed to prepare mentally. She wasn’t the type to push for information, if I hadn’t wanted to talk to her, I wouldn’t have answered the phone, and she would’ve understood that too. I’d never had an easier friendship with anyone. Lucy had grown up with me and not only watched but actively helped me figure out who I am, so there really couldn’t have been a better person to reach out to.

“Ok, well,” she sounded sheepish. “It wasn’t a big deal or anything, might be silly now, but I was just going to talk about how,” she took a breath and then her words came out all in a flurry like they always did whenever she was excited about something. “Did you know Lego Movie 2 came out!? I just found out about this, we should take Hannah ASAP!”

“Alison’s having an affair.”

Silence.

“And she wants a divorce.”

After another beat of silence, “What a bitch!”

“Hey, now!”

“Are you seriously ‘hey now’-ing me right now? That’s inexcusable, wretched, and unforgivable! You have a daughter! Has she thought about Hannah?” I knew Lucy stopped herself when she cut off. She could have continued railing on Alison for hours, using words that were far more colorful. But she knew I loved Alison and that the words she had chosen were a little too painfully true to hear. “I’m so sorry Matty, you deserve so much better. But she’s clearly not good for you, maybe this is for the best?”

I hung my head and circled my index finger around the rim of my glass before taking another large swig. “What would be best is if none of this had ever happened, and I was still blissfully married to my loving wife.”

“You don’t think *blissfully* is a little too strong?”

“The point is,” I noticed my voice had increased in volume beyond that of normal conversation and quickly lowered it again. “I just want to be with her. But I don’t know how to do that now that I know about this.”

“I don’t know how you would do that either, Matt... Please don’t be a cuckold, if she’s saying she wants to divorce you, why would you want to try and make it work with her? She’s already admitted she doesn’t want to put in the effort.”

I mumbled a smart-ass response, but Lucy didn’t catch it and asked me to repeat myself.

“I’m already a cuckold!” My head snapped up to check to see if anyone had overheard, but there was only one other man aside from the bartender in the bar and he was sitting across the room, unmoving. The bartender either didn’t hear or was playing coy.

“Come on, Matt, you know that’s not what I meant.”

Lucy had a quick tongue and a sharp wit, but she sometimes lacked delivery. It was only because I’d been her

friend for so long that I understood the message she was intending behind her words. “I know, you don’t want me to be a victim, Luce, I get it. You’ve said before how I need to know my worth.”

“You always get me.” We sat quietly on the phone for a bit, I imagined if we’d been together in person she might have had an arm around my shoulders, comforting me with gentle squeezes on the arm as she’d done many times before. It was her signature move. “You know, Matt, you *are* too good for her, and she isn’t worth any of your effort. You’re such a good father, you take wonderful care of Hannah. And you’re a good husband. She doesn’t see that, or doesn’t want to, apparently. You need someone in your life like me, Matty, who actually loves you and would spend the rest of her life with you and Hannah without ever questioning that.”

“I love you too, Lucy, thank you, but I’m not sure if I’m really either one of those things.”

“One of what things?”

“A good father and husband.”

“Oh, well, you are.” She paused again for a bit before continuing. “I guess... all I’m saying is that you should think about this with a clear head.”

“I know, and maybe you’re right. Maybe I can stop by? Are you home right now?”

“I’m in Osaka, Matty, remember? We’re going over final contracts so they can start construction.”

“Oh right,” my voice fell a few decibels, and hers rose to make up the difference. The extra cheeriness in her voice sounded a bit off, but I knew she was trying.

“You know, that shouldn’t stop you from coming! One of our senior designers is flying out from O’Hare tonight on the firm’s plane. I’m sure I could get you a seat. Why don’t you

come spend a few days with me- have you ever been to Japan?”

“No—”

“Well there you go, you don’t even need to stop at home. Just head to the airport now, and I’ll work out the details. What could be better for you? You can clear your mind, and not think about it at all, or if you want, we can talk about it in a space that’s totally neutral. It’s beautiful here this time of year.”

I considered it for a moment. Lucy could be right, I had just been complaining about how I needed a change of scenery from ones filled with memories of Alison. I hadn’t taken any vacation time in years, and it was a good time of year, there were still a few weeks before the spring rush began in earnest at work.

“I really do need you to make a decision though, because if you want to come, I need to make a phone call quick.”

“Ok.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, I’ll go. I’m heading to the airport now. Text me the details of where to go as you get them.”

After a quick goodbye, I placed the phone back in my pocket. Something still felt wrong in the pit of my stomach, but now I had a good distraction to look forward to, so I tried not to focus on the sinking feeling inside me. I asked the bartender to call me a cab to O’Hare and finished the final gulp of whiskey in the glass, which I then placed back onto the bar atop a good tip. You can never put a price on someone who gives you space when you need it.

Before no time, I was sitting in a comfortable first class seat of a small Embraer business jet. I wasn’t entirely certain if where

I was sitting could be called first class, or if there were any class differentiation in a plane this size, but I was sitting near the front, and the chairs were spacious and comfortable. Alison would say, ‘you know you’re in first class when you can recline your seat all the way back, and your feet all the way up,’ and she was right, I thought, as I lay the seat completely flat.

Neither of the two flight attendants bothered me about raising my seat for take off either, which I took as a mental note to tell Alison to add to her ‘how you know you’re in first class’ list before I fell to reality and remembered what had happened. Our plane begun picking up speed. She was going to leave me. Who knows what would happen with Hannah. My life was falling apart and I was on a jet to Japan. What was I doing running away? I needed to face what was going on here and ‘now’, as Alison would say. Each time I thought more about Alison, the less powerful the sting became and the easier it was to remember that I had a part to play in our marriage falling apart. After all, here I was, taking my first vacation in years, alone. The wheels of the airplane lifted off the ground and we slowly climbed to the sky.

Lucy had been right. ‘Blissful’ was the wrong word to describe my marriage with Alison. But that wasn’t only Alison’s fault, she’d done wrong, but I could have done better. Throughout the years I had had my own share of extramarital interactions, though I wouldn’t call them affairs. An affair is what you have with a lover, no, what I did with those women, I paid for. It was nothing but a business transaction between consenting adults. Having an affair was an entirely different thing, requiring entirely different emotions. And, I never wanted to divorce Alison. Hannah needed both of her parents, she deserved a loving family, not a broken one.

I still wasn’t sure how I was going to get past what Alison

had done, but I suddenly knew that deep down, I wanted to work to fix it. I wanted to be able to get to the point where we had moved on from this, because it would mean she would still be my wife. I never married her with the intention of ending our marriage, and I wouldn't allow this to end it now. I would use what happened as a way to fuel me into being a better husband and father. I suddenly believed I could live up to the image Lucy had in her mind about the kind of man I was, and all this time, I just hadn't realised how far I had strayed from being that person.

If I hadn't been blind to the damage I was causing my relationship with Alison by focusing more on my work than anything else, I may have been more attentive to her needs as a woman and she wouldn't have strayed. I thought back to Ron and overhearing him bicker with his wife. I wondered if he would realise how much she meant to him only after finding out she wanted a divorce. If Ron sucked it up and truly supported his family, by attending dance recitals or taking them on vacations, would he repair the relationship with his wife and be happy? I wondered if there was any way Alison and I might still be happy.

My eyes had started watering and tears were freely falling into my ears. I wiped them from my eyes and realised the depth of my mistake in getting on this plane. I would be over six thousand miles away in seventeen hours and would then need to wait another seventeen hours before I could get home, if there was even a flight available. I couldn't wait that long to speak to Alison. To have a real conversation, face-to-face and tell her I wanted to work through this. It needed to happen now, or she might run into *his* arms for comfort. My lip raised at the thought.

No, I needed to be here, I needed Chicago with Alison's

memories, and I needed to make this better. I was no longer going to run away! All these years, I hadn't been facing the truth. Running away was exactly how our marriage got to the point it had. I would often avoid and deflect our disagreements with work obligations and excuses. But starting now, that was no longer the man I was going to be.

I sat up quickly from the seat and stood all in one fluid motion. I had planned on speaking with a flight attendant to ask if I could please be let off of the plane, but as soon as I stood, I felt a sharp pain in my chest, like a strong punch from a clenched fist. It winded me and the room started spinning. I held on to the seat to steady myself. I felt my body break out into cold sweat as the nausea from earlier in the day returned in full force. It wasn't until my left arm started to feel a tightness that I realised what was going on.

My eyes widened in surprise and I made the effort to turn toward the end of the plane to face the flight attendant who was walking briskly toward me. Her frown told me she thought I was being disruptive to the flight, but as I turned more fully toward her, I watched her face morph from annoyance to abject concern. As it was morphing, my angle on it changed from top view to bottom, and it wasn't until I hit the floor that I realised everything was going black.

chapter six

Terence MacManus

FEBRUARY 1995

I opened my eyes to the cold, dusty light of pre-dawn filtering through my bedroom window.

But not *my* window, I realised as I shifted myself into a sitting position in the bed. And not my sheets, either, I noticed as my hand ground across the coarse, crisply-pressed fabric. I looked down, and saw in the blurry half-light—was it the light, or was it my eyes?—that the same hand was intubated with the unmistakable shape of a medical cannula.

I rubbed my eyes and looked around the room again, properly this time. Medical equipment lined the wall beside my bed; the door on the far side of the room was heavy and closed, only just visible around the corner of a railed curtain hanging from the ceiling. My bed, on closer inspection, had all the unique and mildly-horrifying features of a hospital—the standardised linens and blankets, the heavy-duty railings on the sides, and of course, the ominous clipboard facing away from me in its socket beyond my feet.

Christ. Just how bad had the accident *been*?

“Hello?” I called into the drab greyness. My voice was unexpectedly hoarse, and something about the pitch seemed off to my fuzzy mind. “Alison, are you—” I caught myself, and swallowed the question. It felt like eating razor blades. “Is anybody there?”

I grabbed the covers with my non-intubated hand and threw them back, meaning to swing my legs out of bed and go looking for someone who could start giving me some answers, but froze when I saw the horrific mess which had been hidden beneath.

There was a tube running straight up the inside of my gown, and beneath me, a thick, crinkled hospital pad thoroughly soaked with my own shit.

I cried out, a reflex so primal and unbidden that I couldn’t form words. I scrambled up the bed, trying to get away from the embarrassing, accusatory evidence of what I had unknowingly done. In the midst of my panic, however, I couldn’t help notice something strange. At the back of my mind, I knew it should have been harder to fit myself up the end of the bed. I pulled my legs close, and rocked myself to avoid staining the pillows with my soiled backside. I wanted to—I *needed* to get out.

I threw my legs over the side of the closest bed rail and jumped to the floor. But somehow, the floor was so much farther away than I’d anticipated, and my centre of gravity was all wrong. As though descending a stairwell and accidentally missing the next step down, I pitched forwards, smacking to the floor with a wet-sounding slap. The mess of tubes and wires connecting me to the equipment besides my bed pulled taut, and the intravenous stand clattered to the floor next to me. I flailed to regain my footing; my head pounded with an

intensity I'd never known, and the intubation points on the back of my hand and... elsewhere... ached from nearly being yanked out. The smell of the bed behind me assaulted my nostrils, though not as severely as I thought it should have. I reached up and found another soft tube taped to my cheek, worming its way up my nose. With a sense of mounting panic, I scrabbled at it, tearing the tape free and violently extruding the tube. At the back of my throat, I tasted bile as it rose out of my stomach, and I choked as my natural retch reflex threatened to make me vomit while I pulled the feeding tube clear and threw it to one side.

The heavy hospital door flew open, and a pair of nurses peered around it.

"Jesus!" one said to the other as I froze and turned to look at them. I couldn't imagine how the scene must have looked.

One of the nurses turned to the other. "Go wake his parents," she said before striding into the room with a confident, professional composure. I struggled to rise to my feet before her, but the pounding in my head must have masked something more serious. I thought I was standing up, but I couldn't have been—she towered over me as she drew near. Was I on my knees?

"Hey, Matty," she crooned with a soft, sing-song voice. "Let's get you back into bed, champ; you shouldn't be up and moving yet."

"What's happening?" I croaked, cradling my throbbing head.

"Shhhh, I know. It's very confusing, isn't it? Don't worry, you'll be okay." She grasped my shoulder with a firm hand and guided me—gently, but insistently—back towards the bed. She reached over and tapped a flashing button on the wall, then expertly flipped the sheets back and rolled the tainted mat into

a ball.

“What happened?” I asked again. “Where am I?”

“You were in a bit of an accident, buddy, but you’re okay now. How are you feeling?”

“My head hurts,” I answered, truthfully, leaning against the bed as the nurse checked the various readouts of the machines I was connected to. “The accident. How bad was it?”

The nurse pursed her lips. “Well, it wasn’t a small bump. I know it’s probably hard to believe, but it happens more often than you’d think. Those high bars are a real deathtrap.”

“High bars? What are you talking about?” I asked.

“You don’t remember? That’s fine, that’s normal, it might take some time for the details to come back to you. Look, the doctor and your parents are on the way, they’ll be able to explain things to you a lot better than I can.”

“My *parents*?” I said, incredulous. “Why? What *happened*?” It must have been something serious for them to have been notified. I sighed. “Is... are Alison and Hannah here?”

The nurse’s brow furrowed. “Who?”

“I—”

The room’s door burst open again, and a howling woman swept into the room.

“Oh, Matty! Oh, my sweet, sweet boy!” She said with the unmistakable voice of my mother. She fell to her knees and swept me into a crushing hug, rocking me back and forth with no care towards the soiled mess at the back of my gown.

I folded into the embrace and felt a chill worming its way into the depths of my gut. Something was very, very wrong. After a minute of her sobs, I pulled myself away and took a proper look down at myself, down my arms and where my legs and toes peeked out of the hospital garment.

The small, skinny arms and legs of... a child.

I looked up at my mother, to her impossibly young face without the wrinkles, smile lines and greying hairs I'd subconsciously come to associate with her. Beyond her, I saw my father and a vaguely-familiar man had also entered the room. Like his wife, my father looked impossibly young—built like he was in his prime, no late-age spread dragging at his stomach, and his distinctive male-pattern horseshoe had only begun to form; the crown of his head was still luscious with wavy dark hair.

I stepped backwards, bumping up against the hospital bed.

“What the fuck is going on?” I asked, between quick, uncontrolled breaths.

A reflexive scowl passed over my mother's face. “Language!” She clipped, before softening into a smile.

“Ha!” Dad said from the background. “Fair enough, kid, we'll give you that one. How you feeling, bud?”

“Stop. Stop it,” I said, looking around. “Whatever you're doing, stop it. Where's Alison? Where's Hannah?”

“You mean ‘Lucy’? Your friend Lucy?” Mum asked, cajolingly. “It's okay, Lucy's okay. She's fine, Matty; so are you. So are you,” she repeated, looking up to the doctor with the second statement. He stepped forward and nodded to her with a little smile.

“A bit of disorientation is normal even after a few days of coma, let alone three weeks,” he said, reaching for the chart at the end of my bed. “How's your head feeling, Matthew?”

My head pounded as I struggled to suck in air. “Three weeks? What... what is going on? Where's my wife?” I looked around the room, across their concerned faces. “What's happened to you? Why are you all so... where is my *WIFE*!?”

“Honey, you...” mum said, reaching out for me with a shaking hand. “You don't have a wife, love. We're here, okay?”

You've been very sick."

"Don't you condescend to me!" I snapped to them all. "I know what happened. There was an accident, I..." the memory slipped away from me like I was grasping at fog. "I know what happened. I... was... there was an accident," I repeated, emphatically. "Alison had just... she'd... she wanted to," I pressed the palms of my head against my temples. Why was it so hard to remember?

"That's right, honey, there was an accident, " mum said as she tried to grasp my shoulder. I winced away from her reach. "You were playing with Lucy. You remember your friend Lucy, don't you? You were climbing on the play equipment, and you climbed up the top, and you... you fell, honey." Her eyes shone with tears. "You fell, and she ran and got help, but there was some swelling on your brain, and—"

"I remember, " I said as an old memory resurfaced. "No, I remember this. We were, what... twelve? I dared her to come up with me, and she didn't want to. Then when she did, I started walking along the top of the bars, and..." I shook my head and immediately regretted it as a lance of pain shot through my skull. "But this isn't right. That's not what happened. I was only in the hospital for a few hours, I bumped my head a little, that was all. Like, a minor concussion or something. I was never in the hospital for three weeks. I was out, and better, and that was like *twenty years ago!* What's going on? What have you done to me? Why are you all so *young?*"

"Okay," the doctor said, stepping around the bed. "I see what's happening here," he turned to face my parents, both of whom were staring at me in confused worry. "It's okay, this is perfectly normal. Well, it's not *common*, but it's not unexpected. Your son is suffering from—"

“*I SAID, DON’T CONDESCEND TO ME,*” I shouted, reaching to spin the doctor around to face me. My ridiculously small arms had no pulling power whatsoever. Nevertheless, he turned to face me. His lips were pressed into a thin, hard line.

He took a step back so he could face my parents and me simultaneously.

“Fine,” he said. “It’s okay. The facts are: you *have* been very sick. The fall severely damaged your head, and you required a medically-induced coma while we worked on reducing the swelling. Now, in cases like this, where the brain is at risk and the patient is being held under by a variety of drugs and medical techniques, it’s not uncommon for that same brain to retreat into itself in those moments where the conscious pushes against those restrictions and tries to wake the patient up.”

I blinked, feeling even more confused than before. “What does that mean?”

The doctor smirked, and I could almost read *‘I thought you didn’t want to be condescended to?’* in his eyes. Something about his expression unlocked the connection in my mind, the reason why he had seemed so eerily familiar when he’d entered the room. This was the same doctor who’d treated me all those years ago when I had come into the hospital after that childhood fall.

“What it means,” the doctor said, “is you’re experiencing a phenomenon that we call ‘coma dreams’. This is when the brain concocts an imaginary narrative to make sense of the trauma it has sustained, both through injury and throughout the treatment process.” He looked down at the chart in his hands, flipping a few pages as though to remind himself of something. “Look, your son has been on an extensive cocktail of drugs and suffered quite an aggressive wound. Frankly, I

think he's done quite well to come through it like he has, but it's not surprising he's suffering some of these side effects."

"So, what?" I demanded, reeling at the implications. I leaned back against the bed behind me and finally allowed my mother to shuffle next to me and enfold me in a one-armed embrace. "You're telling me the div—my marriage, the last twenty years, my *daughter*, were all just... a dream? A fantasy?"

"That's right," the doctor said. "I know these experiences can be quite dramatic. They can feel quite real, and look, in a sense they are real—the brain is a remarkable organ, pulling in all sorts of fragments of data to construct the world it retreats into. Your ears, your sense of touch, smell; none of that turns *off* when you're under medication, it's just *suppressed*. These dreams, especially in kids, really can feel like lived experiences."

I frowned, thinking back on the life I had led. Could it really have been all a fantasy?

God, why had I dreamed myself stopping so many times at traffic lights, if that was the case?

"No," I said. "This isn't right. This isn't how it happened. I was in the hospital for a day, then I was back out like normal. I have a family, a job. You can't tell me my daughter doesn't exist. You can't." The horror of it clawed at my throat like a creature trying to escape my chest. Worse than being told she was dead. Being told she had *never existed*.

"A day?" The doctor asked. "I thought you said it was only a few hours last time?"

"You know what I—"

"Okay, look," the doctor said, slotting the clipboard back into its holster at the end of my bed. "Let's say you're right. Let's say this is all wrong, maybe *this* is the dream, this is what's not real. Can you remember what you were doing right before you woke up?"

I frowned, struggling to recall the accident. “I was... there was...”

Why couldn’t I remember it?

Why did I feel so tired?

I sagged back into my mother’s embrace. She smelled familiar, like the old perfume she used to wear. When had she stopped wearing this? I couldn’t remember.

The doctor smiled. “Okay, you have some time to think about it. Either way, we need to keep you in here for a few more days, just to make sure everything is working properly again. You’ve been through some serious trauma, and it’s going to take some time to fully recover. I’d like to get you back into bed while we run a couple of tests on your brain function, and—”

“Can we get a few minutes, doc?” Dad asked from the background, stepping up towards the bed. He yawned. “It’s pretty early, and he looks pretty tired.”

“Sure.” The doctor picked up the chart again and scribbled something at the bottom. “I’d like to get him started on another round of painkillers, though. Now he’s awake, it probably feels like a whole herd of elephant stampeding around inside that skull, doesn’t it?” he directed the final question to me.

I nodded, and the nurse gently moved my mother out of the way and helped me back into the bed. I didn’t have the energy to resist. I felt tired all over, wrung emotionally dry and exhausted by my bout of sudden, violent activity; almost like I *had* been lying in that bed for the past three weeks. I lay down, resting my head in the crinkly hospital-grade pillows, and stared at my mum and dad.

Was this really how they were, how they had always been? Had the last twenty years of ageing, and pain, and joy, and

misery all been the result of some mad fantasy?

“Mum?” I asked, testing the word in my mouth. It sounded familiar. Right.

“Yes, love?” she asked, leaning forward to stroke my hair.

I licked my dry lips, still feeling crusty from whatever was in the feeding tubes.

“Can I get ice cream for breakfast?”

chapter seven

Dañiel Garcia

THERE'S NOTHING WORSE THAN lying in a hospital bed, looking out the window, and being bored to death. At least for me, especially now. The night had been frustratingly busy but quiet. I'm sure you know what I mean: the typical hospital night, where there isn't much going on but you can always hear someone doing something. The kind of night where you just want to sleep and forget the persistent smell of disinfectant.

As the morning light shines through the window I wish I could leave this stifling room. Back to my job and my life. Neither the doctors nor my parents believed me when I woke up from the crash that I'm actually 36. Maybe I can convince them today. I push the thought aside as a knock sounds from the door.

"Come in," I say. It's probably just another nurse, come to take my temperature. At least in the 90s there are still more pretty female nurses than males, I think to myself as the door opens.

My face must have a serious look of disappointment to it as the head of a lanky girl pops in, looks at me, and asks: "Are

you still sick, Matty?"

I look at her for a moment before realising who it is. Lanky with long brown hair tied into a ponytail, 17 years before she cut it down to shoulder length.

I manage to say "Hi, Lucy, I wasn't expecting you," before her expression turns into disappointment.

"Why? I asked my mom to bring me here when they said you were in the hospital," she says.

"I appreciate the concern but right now I'm not in the mood for condolences. I'm waiting for the doctors to figure out what happened to me, so I can get out of this predicament."

"You sound kind of strange. What's wrong with you?"

Her genuine look of concern catches me off-guard. "I'm not supposed to be a kid anymore."

"Oh, I know what that is. It's puberty. My parents say that a lot lately," Lucy says with absolute earnestness. "I didn't know they keep you in the hospital for it."

I can't help but to chuckle a little. "No, that's not it. I'm an adult. I have an adult life as an internet investor."

Lucy looks confused. "Internet? Like the thing my daddy uses at home? That makes all the beeping noises and takes hours to show a picture?"

"What? No!" I stop my thought. "Yes! But different, faster."

"That doesn't make sense. How hard did you hit your head?" Lucy asks.

"I'm fine, Lucy." I rub my head to make the point but her look tells me it has the opposite effect. "Look, I'm actually 36 years old. I will be 36 again in 2019. I'm married and have a daughter." I pause. "I was married and have a daughter. Will have a daughter." This time travel thing is confusing. How do

they keep it straight in the movies?

"Are we still friends when you're married?" Lucy's brows wrinkle in doubt.

"Of course we're still friends. We've been best friends for ages, even as adults."

Lucy's face beams. "What are we like? What do I do?"

How do you explain over 20 years of struggling to a 12 year old? "We both work hard. I work in accounting and you're an architect."

Lucy's head rears back. "That doesn't sound like much fun or what I'd like to do."

I let out a sigh. "It's not supposed to be fun. It's work. I work so I can support my family... at least my daughter. Even though I don't like my job I work hard and long hours to give her everything she needs."

"Why don't you do something else?"

"I can't. I have stuff to do. I want my adult life back. I want to be back in my time."

She looks at me with her familiar tilt of the head that says: "I don't believe you but I'll let you keep bluffing."

"That sounds silly," she says.

"What sounds silly, dear?" says a familiar voice by the door. It's my mother, followed by Lucy's mother as they enter the room with a Tupperware box full of cupcakes.

Lucy puts her hands on her hips, prescient of her adult self. "Matt says he's old and married, and has a daughter."

"That sounds nice," Lucy's mother says.

My mother's face betrays a faint hint of worry for the merest fraction of a moment. The others haven't noticed. A pain jolts through my chest. I know my mother well enough to know that she'll start to worry and be restless for weeks. Even though I want to find a cure for my present condition and

think that all of this is probably just a dream, I can't help wanting my mother, real or not, to not worry about me.

"That was just my dream." I quickly say.

Lucy gives me a wide eyed pout. "That's not what you just said."

"A lot of people dream to get married, Lucy." Her mother opens the Tupperware box and hands each of us a cupcake with a thick layer of frosting. "Although it's usually girls that do that."

Lucy accepts the cupcake with a hungry look. "I'm a girl and I don't do that!" She finishes hers in three huge bites and looks greedily over to the rest of the pile.

"Planning for the future might not be a bad idea," my mom says. "I should make a savings account for your wedding. How about that, Matthew?" She lets out a relaxed laugh and shares a knowing look with Lucy's mother.

I look at the offered cupcake in my hands. I haven't eaten one in ages. Not since I started my diet to slim down together with Alison after Hannah's first birthday. Alison had been a little depressed that her body hadn't snapped back into the shape it had before. I told her it was fine but also noticed that I had gained a little as well. I suggested we could both challenge ourselves and try cutting down on the sugar together. It had gone surprisingly well. We both felt healthier and energetic. It felt like we could work hard, raise a child, and travel the world. All without breaking a sweat.

The sweet smell of sugary frosting breaks me out of my delirious memories. Sweet vanilla frosting on a lemon cupcake. Lucy is already on her second cupcake as I hesitantly raise the cupcake to my mouth. The aroma I remember from my childhood, my real childhood, wafts up into my nose. Mouthwatering pleasure beckons me to take a bite out of this

moist, luscious morsel of perfection. The craving I have makes me forget the gruelling years of calorie-counting, running, and all the frustrations that led to my divorce.

That first bite sends waves of joy through my mind, a familiar tingling rushes along my body. It feels like the closest thing to an orgasm my pre-teen self could ever hope to achieve. The third bite is already done as the feeling subsides. Without much thought I immediately ask: "Can I have another one?"

Lucy's mother hands me another cupcake. This one has chocolate frosting. "Sure, dear. Eat up till you feel better. They taste better than that stale hospital food."

"You can have all the cupcakes you want, but only for today," my mom says.

The second cupcake tastes as good as the first, if not better. Absentmindedly I count the calories of each cupcake, of each bite. I know I wouldn't be able to burn-off the calories as quickly as a child with my adult body. Might as well enjoy it now, although I know the cupcakes will catch up with me in my twenties.

In fact, I know a lot of things now. Things I didn't know in my twenties. Like the kinds of sports I'd actually like that I didn't do back then, such as martial arts. The taste of foods that don't consist of 50% sugar or that the internet won't always be a crawl along a gravel road. Maybe it's not a bad idea to start over and make a new beginning with the knowledge I have. Hell, I should invest in the stock-market now.

I look at Lucy for a long moment as she devours her fourth cupcake, occasionally glancing between me and the dwindling pile. I see her now with a more experienced mind, noticing things I never paid attention to as a child. We had always been close, like siblings. Or was it more? I can't

remember exactly, it's been over 20 years. I wonder what it would be like to date teenage Lucy or to marry adult Lucy instead of Alison. Would our marriage end the same way? What's the legal age in Chicago? Is it legal if a 30 something mind is in the body of a teen? My head hurts. That sounds creepy when I think about it.

Besides, if this is real what would happen to Hannah if I never married Alison? Our marriage didn't work but we made a perfect little girl. I can't just let Hannah disappear. I don't want to risk that happening.

But the allure of those sweet cupcakes also keeps me enthralled with the idea of change. Maybe I could work things out with Alison and avoid all the mistakes. Each bite fills me with confidence. I can avoid the bad decisions, make the promises I know will work. I can do it. I can make all the positive changes. I just have to convince everyone that I'm my healthy 12 year old self.

As I reach for the next cupcake the door opens again. This time it's the doctor. He notices the dwindling pile of cupcakes. A faint look of a disapproval crosses his face as he assesses the situation. He shrugs his shoulders as if arguing with two women, hungry children, and a pile of cupcakes were a hopeless cause this early in the day.

"Well, Mrs. Green, besides a few superficial scrapes there isn't anything physically wrong that we can find. But, we'd like to keep Matthew in for another few days for observation. Just in case there might be a concussion. If there are no other symptoms he'll be able to go home soon."

"I feel fine now," I say as I bite into my next cupcake.

The doctor raises an eyebrow, as if he would be the judge of that.

I give him the best frosting-smeared-smile my child-face

can manage.

chapter eight

Elaine Weaver

“YOU LOOKING FOR A way back to your home planet, Little Green Man?”

“No, I’m looking to see if any of those squirrels out there are related to you.”

That comeback earned me a slap from her, but not a hard one. It was about ten minutes before the first bell rang, and most of the other early students were still seeking each other out by the buses. I didn’t want to jostle my elbow any more than necessary, so I’d opted for the quieter courtyard. A lot would depend on what I did and said now, so I needed to think.

The cement table we sat down at was directly across the courtyard from the school library, and right outside the door to Lucy’s homeroom. For a moment someone in a bright orange shirt appeared in the library’s window and seemed to be staring at us, but the sunlight on the window made it hard to be sure. A shout from the open hall door caught our attention for a moment, and when I looked back at the library window the person in the orange shirt was gone. The distant

thunder of disquiet muttered in my mind. This whole weird situation had my paranoia cranked up. *Everybody* seemed to be scrutinising me.

“You okay?” Lucy tried for a casual tone as she went over her schedule for the hundredth or so time.

“Yeah, just not sure how I’m supposed to take notes with my writing arm in a sling.”

“You said they’re letting you use your PE period for an extra study hall, right? And they’ll give you outlines of lessons you can work from. Everybody’s gonna be too interested in hearing how you got hurt to worry if your schoolwork is perfect, so chill. I bet even crusty ol’ Mr. Griffin’ll wanna hear your war story instead of whether you can diagram a sentence or not.”

And how was I supposed to tell my war story to an English teacher...or to anybody? Telling it wasn’t even an option, I realised. Somehow my life had been “reset” and any attempt to describe it even to Lucy would make me sound crazy at the least. I had a chance here to go back, to put it right, and Lucy herself was a part of that. I didn’t dare screw it up. I couldn’t take a repeat of the heartache, the betrayal, or the stress of a disintegrating family life again. That stress was what had me behind the wheel of my car and not seeing the out-of-control van that had T-boned me. Next time it might be the morgue instead of a concussion and a dislocated elbow.

The three-minute warning buzzer for homeroom sounded, shaking me out of my reverie. Yes, this was definitely my old life I was living again. But this time, I was gonna do it *right*.

Mrs. Dover had been my homeroom teacher last year, and she was this year’s Global History teacher. A tiny woman with frizzy brown hair and the lunatic energy of a Boston terrier,

she buzzed around the middle of the classroom. She could do this because she insisted we arrange our desks in a “horseshoe” pattern, leaving her plenty of room to both pace and watch us closely. More than one kid’s stomach rumbled loudly this close to lunch period, but gastrointestinal sound effects stopped her not at all. However, she did pause by my desk and frowned at my pitiful attempts to underline certain words in the prepared lesson plan.

“Are you crossing out the names of those countries, Mr. Green, or underscoring them?” she asked. A snigger rippled through the classroom, and I couldn’t help grinning myself because that’s what it looked like.

“Underscoring, ma’am. They seem pretty important.” And they were, but not entirely for the reasons she thought. Dim ideas about putting things right in more than my personal life were stirring.

“*Excellent!* I’m glad to see you applying yourself to your studies more! Your accident must have awakened a new appreciation for learning within you.” Mrs. Dover bounded back over to the world atlas pulled down over the wall and I relaxed a little. It was imperative that I didn’t attract any undue attention to myself, but that was easier said than done, I was finding. The arm sling and fading bruises were attention getters as it was. Mrs. Dover finished the day’s lesson in her frenetic manner as the lunch buzzer sounded. I lingered in the hallway as the bulk of the hungry crowd passed, looking for Lucy in vain. I’d forgotten if she’d said she had English or gym before lunch but wanted to eat with her. She didn’t ask so many questions or stare the way others had this morning. Some of the other kids acted like I’d grown a third eye or something, and I couldn’t shake the feeling that things we..well, off. No Lucy in sight. Damn.

There's more to blending in than keeping your mouth shut, as I found once I sat down with my lunch. I'd settled on grilled fish with veggies, and all around me were kids chowing down on cheap burgers, fries, and shakes. It wasn't long before my 36-year-old lunch choices caught up with my 12-year-old self.

"Hey, Greenie, when'd you turn into a health food nut?"

This sally came from Stella Riley, who was on her second shake. Stella was nosy, nasty, loud, and ignorant. In my old life she'd been just as much of a holy terror with even the bigger boys avoiding her short temper and penchant for hair-pulling. Back then I'd been able to avoid her, but now she hovered over my table, breathing louder than Darth Vader, Jeez.

Blend in, I told myself relentlessly, blend in. Taking a deep breath (and regretting it immediately, Stella wasn't particularly interested in hygiene), I made an attempt to sound as casual as possible. "Fish isn't so bad, really. I had it a lot while I was in the hospital."

"*Didja?*" howled Stella. Heads swivelled around in every direction, and I found myself wishing I could disappear under my table.

"Excuse me." The voice was Lucy's, and her tone was chillier than Stella's milkshake. She stepped deftly around the table and Stella, sensing she'd been dismissed, went chugging up the aisle to torment some other kid. Lucy also seemed about to comment on my food but instead just asked, "You sure you're okay? You're acting pretty strange."

"It's fish, Lucy, it's not like I'm eating gator meat or something—"

"I don't mean that, I mean the way you keep looking around like you think you're being watched. You've been doing that since this morning. Did they give you some kind of meds in the hospital that make you paranoid?"

As soon as Lucy asked that feeling of...*off*, of things being not quite right, came to the front of my mind. It was more than just being somehow knocked back into my own past and living life over again. I was being watched, I even saw the watcher in the library window. He or she had been wearing orange. But I couldn't very well tell Lucy this if I wanted to re-write the script of my life. So I settled for a half-truth. "Look at me...I'm eating left-handed, writing left-handed, doing everything backwards. You'd be paranoid too if everything you did made people stare at you, Shorty!"

Invoking my nickname for Lucy seemed to satisfy her curiosity. It also earned me another slap. And I realised this is who I wanted to spend the rest of my life with, who I should have been spending my life with all along.

"You seem very interested in geography, Matt."

I stifled a curse as I straightened up...was there nothing I could do that didn't attract attention? But the speaker was Ms. Conners, who had served as the school's librarian as far back as anybody could remember. Ms. Conners was an amiable, fluffy-haired old lady whose sharp eyes missed nothing.

"Well, Mrs. Dover was talking about Afghanistan and the Soviets today, and it was interesting." That was true enough, even if the reasons for my interest weren't even completely clear to me.

"How pleased she will be to learn how's she's sparked your interest! But you know," Ms. Conners continued, "if you're truly interested in learning more on any subject, you should think about volunteering here. We could use a few strong young fellows like you, and you could study any subject you like to your heart's content."

In the previous version of my life, volunteering at the

school library seemed as abstract as selling Girl Scout cookies, or something. But now I felt the pull of something bigger than anything I'd ever felt as an investor, or even as a husband and father in the future. And it seemed right. If I could change my relationships in this life, I could also change my other life choices. There were a million stories in this book, waiting to be told. And suddenly, I wanted to know them all. I turned to Ms. Conners to tell her so when I caught a flash of orange in the library's foyer. Before I could stand up, I saw Ms. Conners turn to follow my gaze as the main door swung shut. Dammit, I'd lost my pursuer again!

“What are you looking at, dear?” asked the librarian.

“In the orange? I'd have thought you knew, but then again you had a pretty traumatic experience. That was Mr. Gerald, Matt. The school electrician. He saw that van hit you and knock you off your bike, but he didn't get the license number. He chose instead to get you immediately to the hospital.”

chapter nine

Kimberlee Gerstmann

LUCY AND I LET the large door swing closed behind us as our eyes adjusted to the return to light. We crossed the hall and sat down against the wall opposite the theater they'd just left. I sucked hard on my straw, the last drops of my Coke slurped out of the large cup.

"You're going to have to take a major leak soon," Lucy pointed out, reaching her arms around and circling her bent knees.

"Whatever. That popcorn made me thirsty," I replied, feeling oddly relaxed for the moment. I stifled a burp. "I just couldn't take any more of that movie."

"You were DYING to see that movie before it came out. You're lucky it is still in theaters. For months all I heard from you was 'We have to see Billy Madison!' Now you don't like it? I keep telling you, something about you is off. You're weird all of a sudden."

"Uh, yeah. I told you," I said.

"Yeah, you told me a whole lot of crazy stuff in the hospital," Lucy replied. "None of it made sense." She

hesitated. “My mom said that a lot of time when people suffer trauma, they act weird and say strange things.”

“I told you, it wasn’t trauma. I don’t know why you can’t just accept it.”

“Maybe because it is too crazy for belief,” Lucy replied with a chuckle. She thought for a minute, rocking her feet from heels to toes to heels. “This isn’t Big. You aren’t Tom Hanks.”

“I know. He was a kid in an adult’s body. I’m an adult in a kid’s body,” I splayed my hands out and then relaxed them. “And, I didn’t make a wish on some weird carnival machine.” I shook my head.

“The others don’t seem to notice it as much,” she looked at me and tried to discern what was different. “Have you said anything to anyone else?”

I contemplated the group of friends still absorbed in the Billy Madison movie.

“No. I can’t trust anyone else. Not when you don’t believe me,” I stated. I put my elbows on my bent knees and then rested my head in my hands.

Lucy rubbed the back of her neck. She bit her lip. She hated to see me frustrated. I felt horrible for letting it happen.

“Okay. Tell me more about the future,” she said. “Tell me something good this time. Something that will make me believe you,” she encouraged.

I looked over at her. She appeared sincere. I glanced at my watch. There wasn’t much time before the movie would finish. Then we would be swept back into the birthday festivities.

“Michael Jordan will be back to play for the Bulls,” I said.

“No way. He retired.” She leaned over and punched me in the arm. “That’s a bunch of BS. And you don’t even like basketball.”

“That’s why I can’t tell you exactly when, but I know that he comes back, and then retires again, and comes back out of retirement at least one other time.”

“That’s crazy talk,” she shook her head.

“I think he even tried to play baseball.”

“Shut. Up!” she stated laughing, still shaking her head.

I decided to take another direction.

“There are computers everywhere in the future. In fact, our phones are basically little handheld computers,” I said.

“I’ve seen a couple of those mobile phones,” Lucy said.

“They aren’t ‘little’ like you say.”

“They are in the future. They get really small. And then they get bigger again and everyone stares at them all day.” I smiled, thinking about the pull of the screen and how we established a rule in the house about the use of our phones.

“Next!” she barked, unimpressed by my explanation of cell phone habits.

“When we’re in college, you and I steal a microwave and a cat from your weird roommate,” I stated, smiling in spite of myself at the memory I’d conjured up. The night was absolutely vivid in my mind. I could almost feel the grime on my hands that transferred from the bottom of the small red microwave as I’d carried it to my souped-up Honda.

Lucy laughed out loud.

“Why would we do THAT?” she howled, rolling toward me and knocking me off balance.

“The girl you were living with hated cleaning. She left everything a mess. She would only clean the inside of the microwave, nothing else. She was obnoxious about it if you left even a spot of food in it. The microwave became a huge battleground between the two of you. I never fully understood it. One night you’d had it with her and wanted to move out.

She'd done a bunch of petty stuff to you, and you were sick of it. She owed you money for some bills and refused to pay you, so you took that microwave. It was probably only worth \$40 brand new, but that wasn't the point. You wanted to irritate her."

"And the cat?" she asked, her voice incredulous.

"Ah, Dempsey. Your neighbours left him behind when they moved. He was this scraggly white cat that had beautiful ice-green eyes. He liked to visit with you while you were doing homework. Your roommate took him in, but she didn't treat him very well. She never cleaned his litterbox, she'd forget to feed him, and she screamed at him if he got fur on her clothes. You didn't want him to suffer with her... so we stole him."

Lucy looked adorable. Her eyes were bright. Her mouth was open in an O of surprise. I didn't realise how much I had missed her.

"You just made that up," she gasped.

"Nope. One hundred percent truth," I replied.

"So what did I take in college? What am I?" she asked, enjoying my stories.

"You're a badass architect."

A laugh escaped from between her closed lips. "Lies. All lies. I don't even like math. There's a ton of math in architecture," she exclaimed, and then thought about it. "Isn't there?"

I smiled. "Yeah, there's quite a bit of math. But you're good at it. You definitely know what you're doing."

"What else?"

I wracked my brain for something definitive that I could tell her in order to convince her.

"What about my mom and dad? Do they stay the same?"

she questioned.

I felt like I had been punched in the gut. *Her mom*. It came flooding back in vignettes. I remembered the late-night phone calls during college. The conversations from the hospital. Then hospice. Her mother's funeral. Her dad falling apart. Tears stung my eyes. I looked in the other direction trying to buy myself a few seconds of time. I reached for my cup and slurped on my empty Coke again as a distraction.

I spoke, willing my voice not to shake. "They love each other so very much. Always."

Lucy smiled, not sensing my slight deception. She sat in silence for a moment.

"What about you? You're married?" she asked, her voice timid and quiet.

"Yes," I answered, thinking about the state of my marriage. *Could I still call it a marriage?*

"And do you love her as much as my parents love each other?"

"Yes, but... it's complicated," I responded. My voice trailed off, my eyes focusing on something in the distance.

Her face scrunched in concentration.

"Hey, that's how you can prove it," she started. "Tell me who your wife is. We can find her." A large smile beamed across her face. "Prove it, buddy." She gave me a sharp poke in the ribs.

An odd feeling crept into my chest at the idea of finding Alison. For a moment I felt stunned that I hadn't thought of it first. *Find Alison*.

There were so many movies about time travel and messing with the past, present and future. I wondered what sort of disruptions I could cause. *If that is even a thing*. I reasoned.

"Let's do it," Lucy said, enthusiasm causing her face to

flush.

The thought of Googling her parent's address instantly popped into my head. Then I remembered there was no Google. My family doesn't even have a computer. Neither does Lucy.

"I need to find a computer," I stated.

A sudden bustle of activity startled me. A group of people began pouring into the hallway. The movie had come to an end. Geoff, Rudy, Hunter, Julie, and Ramon staggered out of the door, bumping into each other, laughing.

"Dude... you missed some epic lines," Geoff said.

Rudy reached out a hand to pull me to my feet. Ramon did the same for Lucy. Julie gave Lucy a raised eyebrow. Lucy glared back at her. Julie threaded her arm through Lucy's and pulled her forward, away from us boys. Lucy looked back at me. When our eyes met, she nodded her head toward Geoff. At first, I didn't know what her point was, but then I realised that Geoff's family had a home computer. I smiled back, letting her know I understood. *Smart kid.*

As a group we walked to the theater's exit and headed to the L train. Everyone was laughing and shouting Adam Sandler quotes over each other on their way back to Geoff's. I remained quiet, thinking about how we could track down Alison's family. I scrolled through my mental rolodex of memories trying to pick out pieces of Alison's history that would be helpful.

After the cake and presents were finished, I found my way over to the Henderson computer.

"Hey Geoff, can I check this out?" I asked, acting like it was no big deal.

"What do you want to do?" Geoff replied.

"I'd love to look up my cousins," I lied. "I haven't seen

them in ages, and it would be cool to see what I could find.”

Geoff rolled his eyes, not sold on the “coolness” of my request. He turned on the monitor and wiggled the mouse to life. He clicked on the dial-up button and the sounds of AOL connecting filled the room. Lucy watched from across the room.

I shook my head in disbelief. How could I have forgotten that sound and the annoyance of dial-up.

WebCrawler was one of the choices on the screen. I clicked on People Search and entered NEIL BROADLEY into the search bar. There were no results. *Damn.*

Not expecting anything, I put Pamela’s name into the search bar. Nada.

My mind felt blank. *How did we do this back in the day?*

“No luck?” Geoff asked, looking over my shoulder.

“Nah,” I replied, closing the search window.

He hit the button to turn off the screen and we got back to the party even though it was winding down. The other kids started peeling off or getting picked up. Lucy and I left together, walking the few short blocks to our street.

“Were you able to find anything?” Lucy’s curiosity was piqued.

“No,” the stress I felt was evident in my voice.

“What are their names? What did you try?” she asked.

“Pamela and Neil Broadley in Indianapolis,” I answered. “I tried both in people search. Nothing came up at all.”

“Did you try Alison?” she asked.

“No. There’s no use. In 2018 there’s a chance that a kid would have an online presence, but not now.”

Lucy looked confused but didn’t ask.

“Sorry,” she said, her attitude shifting. “But you still have to prove it.” She gave a half smile.

“Just drop it, okay.” My voice came out sharper than I intended. Frustration roiled inside of me.

Lucy stopped mid step.

“Wow. Chill out,” she admonished.

I stopped and turned to look at her. Her light brown hair was hanging in her face and she looked vulnerable and hurt.

“I’m sorry.”

“It doesn’t feel like it,” she replied.

“I’m just frustrated,” I said.

“Because I don’t believe you?” she asked.

“It’s not just that,” I started. “I just don’t know what I am supposed to do. It’s hard to explain. I feel trapped, and... ”

“Okay,” she said, her voice quiet.

We walked in silence for two blocks.

“I’ll see you tomorrow?” she asked as we rounded the corner to our street.

“Sure,” I said.

“See ya,” she said over her shoulder as she crossed toward her house. Her voice sounded flat.

Saturday morning I woke to the spring sun streaming through the blinds and the phone ringing in the hallway. I sandwiched my head between pillows and tried to go back to sleep. It felt nice to sleep in without any worries. It was one of the only upsides to my current situation. As long as I did my homework and kept up with my chores, my parents did not care too much about how late I slept.

Moments later, I heard a soft rap at my door.

“Matthew. Phone. It’s Lucy.” My mom had opened the door a few inches to see if I was awake.

“Okay,” I replied, only slightly surprised.

I jumped out of bed and went into the hall to grab the

phone.

“Guess who?” Lucy asked.

“I know it’s you, doofus,” I said to her.

“No. Not me. Guess who I found?” she asked.

“What?”

“Guess. Who. I. Found.” She said again.

Granted, I just woke up, but I felt more than confused.

Lucy ignored my lack of response.

“Alison’s parents. I got their phone number.”

“What? How?” I asked. My mind was spinning.

“Directory assistance. Duh.”

“Ahhhh.” I replied.

“It isn’t proof though. You could be giving me the name of your dad’s dentist for all I know.”

“So you’re telling me that you found out they are real and you’re still hassling me?” I asked.

“Yep,” Lucy stated. “You deserve it for being an assclown.” I could hear the smile in her voice. “Well, do you want their number, or what?” she asked.

“Hold on.” I ran to my room to grab a notebook and pen. “Okay.”

“It’s 483-555-0146.”

“Cool.”

“So when do we call them?” she asked.

“You didn’t call them already?”

“Nah. It’s your case to prove.”

“How soon will you be here?” I asked.

“I’m on my way,” she answered.

I hung up and went to my room to throw on some clothes.

Ten minutes later I heard the front door and then Lucy’s feet bounding up the stairs.

“So, what’s the plan?” she asked.

“You’re going to call and ask for Alison,” I stated.

“No way. I told you that this was your case to prove,” she responded.

“Yeah, but she’s younger than us. It would be totally creepy to have a boy calling to ask for her,” I said.

“I didn’t think about that,” Lucy replied.

“And anyway, I was thinking about it, and most likely she will not be home. She should be at her ballet lesson. I remember her telling me that her mom forced her to take ballet for years and years. She was forever frustrated that she missed out on things because she had a standing appointment at Miss Elaine’s every Saturday morning.”

The left side of Lucy’s mouth was curled into a skeptical smirk.

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this,” she said. “Why do I feel like you are punking me?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“You’re the one who wanted proof,” I said.

Lucy flopped into my desk chair, picked up the phone and scooted the chair in my direction. I stood next to her, the phone between us, so I could hear too. She punched the numbers in and we waited as the phone rang. Four rings. *Ugh. No one’s home.*

Lucy was about to hit *end* when the ringing stopped.

“Lo?” a man’s voice and rushed breathing.

Lucy swallowed hard. “Uh, hello?” she said. There was a pause. I took a step back and looked at her, my eyes wide and pleading. “Is Alison home?” she asked.

“No. No, she’s not,” my father-in-law responded. His voice sounded the same, but obviously younger, less gruff, less officious. “Can I tell her who called?” he asked.

Lucy looked at me, panic evident on her face.

“Emily,” I mouthed. When Alison was pregnant with Hannah we had done all of the research on names for girls. Emily was the most popular name for many years. Alison had confessed to knowing many Emilys in her past.

“Okay,” her dad stated and was going to hang up.

I waved my arms to get Lucy’s attention.

“Uh, Mr. Broadley,” she started, looking to me for guidance.

“Ask for her address,” I whispered.

Lucy looked confused but continued. “Can I have your address?” she asked.

It caught my father-in-law off guard.

“Our address?” he asked bluntly.

Lucy shrugged and looked at me. I mimed writing.

“Uh, yeah,” Lucy stammered. “Uh. I wanted to send her an invitation to my party.”

“Ahhh, okay. It is 6601 East Hampton Drive.”

“Thank you,” Lucy said. She finished writing the address on my notebook. She hung up the phone.

“Wow,” she said. “That was intense.” She spun the chair around, her feet up as she whirled. She put her feet down and stopped. “Now what?” she asked, leaning forward, her hands pressed against the seat.

“Well, we found her. That’s the proof.” I said, unsure of what I was feeling.

“Yeaahhh, buuuuut,” Lucy argued.

“But what? She exists! That’s it. There’s the proof.”

“But are we going to go see her?” she asked. Her eyes sparkled from excitement.

“I can’t drag you to Indianapolis,” I stated. “You’re a kid, and it could be dangerous.”

“Uh, look in the mirror. You’re a kid too,” she reasoned.

She had a point.

The week passed in a blur. We spent lunch breaks plotting our alibis, pouring over bus routes, and arguing about potential scenarios. By the time Saturday morning arrived, I felt like we had already taken the trip and I was mentally exhausted. Neither of us talked much as we headed into the bus station. It was too early and I didn't feel fully awake. Our footsteps echoed across the marble floors. We stepped up to the counter and purchased our tickets. As we walked to the gate, Lucy appeared pale.

"We don't have to do this," I said.

"We have the tickets," she replied.

"But we can still back out," I answered.

She contemplated it for a minute.

"But then I wouldn't have proof," she smiled.

A little over three hours later we arrived in Indianapolis. The morning sunshine beamed down on us as we neared the ballet studio. Our timetable was slightly off, so we picked up the pace and put a little hustle in our steps. I could not imagine coming all that way and then missing Alison.

"It should be up in the next block," I told Lucy as I folded the map for what felt like the hundredth time.

I found myself bounding up the street. Lucy's legs weren't as long, so she struggled to keep up with me. We crossed the intersection and I started scanning the buildings ahead for signage. I spotted it about fifty yards ahead. Miss Elaine's Dance Studio. I half walked half ran to get there. Lucy fell farther behind, her backpack jostling against her, making a whooshing sound with each step.

I reached the studio and stopped short. There were windows across the entire front of the building. A full array of

girls stretched in front of the windows. They were all dressed in black bodysuits and pink leotards. A row of mirrors lined the wall behind them so it looked like there were even more bodies packed into the room. To the left, there was a small waiting area filled with parents. I spotted my mother-in-law almost instantly and found myself ducking before she could see me. I realised that was silly since she wouldn't recognise me, but still couldn't get past that feeling of being exposed. While other parents were talking amongst themselves, Pamela's stern face was turned toward the girls, intently watching Alison. I followed her gaze and spotted my wife. My breath caught in my throat. My vision blurred with tears as I looked at her. Innocent and beautiful. Just like Hannah. I missed them both so much I felt sick to my stomach.

Lucy caught up to me, panting slightly. "Where..." she started. She took one look at my face and had her proof.

I held up a finger and pointed Alison out to Lucy.

"Proof," she whispered.

chapter ten

B. Morris Allen

IT'S SATURDAY. A DAY for sleeping in, for pretending I've successfully played sick and avoided school, for luxuriating in having nothing to do. The sun is shining through the window, flickering shadows of new green leaves over the carpet and the clothes I didn't put away last night. There's a cardinal singing outside the window.

I'm tired already. What's the point of it all, other than to taunt me? Einstein claimed god is not malicious, but if he's not poking his finger in my eye now, what the hell *is* he doing? The cardinal's looking for a mate. I had one and lost her. Was about to lose her. Will lose her. Whatever the tense is. And spring? That's just sarcasm. *Take your damned metaphors and go back to Heaven, God. Leave me alone.*

"Buddy?" There's a knock on my bedroom door. God's got no sense of subtlety.

"Dad, I'm sleeping." I haven't been for over an hour. I just don't see any reason to get up. I got up today 24 years ago, and what good did it do me?

"Buddy, I made pancakes." He cracks the door open. "You

seemed a little down yesterday. Silver dollar pancakes – stacks of them, margarine, syrup. Glass of OJ.”

What you don’t remember about being twelve is how drive by your body you are. Not by hormones, the way you are later, but by your gut and your energy. I’m already sitting up by the time I remember that life is pointless and I don’t want to live it again.

“That’s the spirit, buddy. And your new friend already came by and said she’d come back around 10. See you downstairs in a minute.”

Lucy’s not my new friend. I’ve known her all my life. Even here (now?) in 1995, I’ve known her for a couple of years. But I don’t have a lot of friends, so to Dad she’s still the new one. And she’s the only one who knows what’s going on. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough to get me up and moving. Plus, I’m hungry.

“I asked your friend to stay for breakfast, but she didn’t want to.”

“Lucy doesn’t like pancakes, Dad.” How does he not know that? She came over for breakfast half of every summer during high school. Of course, that hasn’t happened yet. “She says...” what was it? “She says they’re like dish sponges soaked in sugar.”

He chuckles. “Should I be offended?” I know he’s not. I’ve already polished off a dozen silver dollar pancakes, and he’s loading me up with more.

“She’s a strange one, that girl.” I know Mom likes Lucy. She thinks we’d make a cute couple, and she’s not subtle about it. “I asked if you were going to play board games, and she said ‘I think Matt is too old for board games, Ms. Green.’ Well, she’s your age, isn’t she?”

“Three months younger,” I say between pancakes. It’s

funny how all this stuff comes back to me. Like it was yesterday.

“Well, there’s no need to smirk about it. Being older is not an accomplishment.”

“Just a merit badge you get by default.”

“I like that,” says Dad. He should. I heard it from him about twenty years from now. It’s weird, seeing him now, with a full head of hair, still in the prime of his life. It’s also weird that a twelve-year old thinks of his father as being in the prime of his life. Parents are always old, no matter how old they are. But he’s about the age now that I will be, when I screw everything up. Dad didn’t do that.

I can feel the tears coming – it’s so easy, when you’re young – and I scramble over to give him a hug and hide them in his shirt.

“You’re a good man. Dad.” He pulls me tight and says “You too, son. You too.” I can hear that tears aren’t that hard for fathers either.

I move over and give Mom a hug too, and then we’re saved by the bell.

“Got to go,” I say through a snuffle. “That’s Lucy.”

I can feel, behind me, the ‘What was *that* about?’ looks, but I can feel they’re happy.

“You were crying,” says Lucy. We’re down by the Hoeffner’s empty lot, where they’re going to build a new house, one of these days. Except, they never do, I realise. Their son gets sick and they move to Minneapolis to be near him instead. He’s in high school now, just down the street.

“Yeah,” I say, and I can see her eyes widen. Twelve year old boys don’t admit to crying, I remember. They do it, but they never say so. “My parents,” I say. “They’re just... They stay

together. They're happy."

"What about..." I can see the hope in her eyes. "What about mine?" she almost whispers.

They're having some trouble now, I remember. "They make it," I tell her in a rush. "They make it." It's not pretty; there's an affair, and a lot of fighting. But they stay together. "They argue, but it's not about you. They love you." I know it's a cliché as I say it, and for the parents it's never in question. But for Lucy it is, and I remember how it hurt her. She turns away now, because I guess eleven year old girls don't cry that much either.

"I don't." I'm trying to lighten the mood, but she flinches, and I kick myself for being stupid. "I don't make it, I mean. I get divorced." It sounded funnier when I thought of it, but now the pain comes back, and it's bad.

"You said you were *going to* get divorced," Lucy says. "Before the accident."

"What's the difference?" I turn off the road into our little path across the Hoeffner's lot that leads into the woods, and the little creek. There's a log/bridge we sit on, play on, talk on. "It was gonna happen. She already *said* so." Alison. My wife Ex-wife. To be ex-wife.

"But why? You didn't say, before. And what about your daughter, Hannah?" I can see she's still thinking about her own parents, and why not?

"You like her," I say. "You're her favorite aunt. You Instagram each other all the time." I remember, Hannah coming out of her bedroom one night, to show me a picture Lucy sent her. "She likes aardvarks."

"They're cute," says Lucy with a firm nod. "Like naked armadillos."

That's what Hannah said. Exactly that, and I can't take it. I

start crying again, and I feel Lucy hug me. It's strange – a 36 year old man being comforted by an eleven year old girl who's taller than he is. But she's also a lifelong friend, and ... Hannah's favorite aunt.

"It's hard being twelve," I say at last. "All this crying."

"Yer a reg'lar fountain o' tears," she says with some sort of Gaelic accent. I'm probably meant to recognize it, but it doesn't matter. I give her a hug and let her go, wipe some snot and tears off on a nearby birch. I guess twelve year olds don't have handkerchiefs. "We all are. Just don't talk about it, or Bettina Boholt will make fun of you at lunch."

"When did you get so wise?" I ask. "Were you always like this?"

She rolls her eyes, then turns serious again, and leads the way to our log. "I mean it, though. Why did your wife want a divorce. And don't get all weepy on me again." She brushes a damp shoulder ostentatiously.

We sit straddling the log, feet not far from the clear water below.

"I don't —"

"And don't tell me you don't know."

"You're bossy for an eleven year old."

"Whatever. Think about it."

"I don't — " But I can see her jaw set. It's not as intimidating as it is when she's older, when she's got a fight lined up with some city planner, but it works. "I guess... I guess I just..." It's hard to be objective about yourself, hard to put into words. "There's nothing special." I can see Lucy start to shake her head, and I realise where Hannah got it from. It's the same squint, tilt, skew of the jaw. "I'm nothing special, I mean. In 2019, I mean. I'm an accountant. How boring can you get?" I used to say that as a joke, and my wife Alison

always laughed along. ‘We’re the ultimate party couple,’ we used to say. ‘An accountant and a lawyer. Of course we’re fun.’ Now, though, I wonder.

“I was just average, I guess. Average guy, average job, average looks. Why wouldn’t she leave me?” There’s a bitterness to the comment that I can’t quite repress. It’s true, though. I guess most people face that ‘what happened to my dreams?’ moment in middle age. I get to have it when I’m not even a teenager.

“Well, was *she* above average?” Has she always had that way of cutting straight to the bones of the thing, of seeing what it’s made up of?

“That’s why you’re an architect, isn’t it?”

“What? I’m an architect?”

“Um, yeah. For ten years or so. Maybe more.” Should I have told her? What if it changes things?

“So?”

“So what?”

“Your wife. Alison. Was she above average.”

She’s got a knack for the hard questions. And an ability to focus. “I think so. I mean, I married her, and all. She’s good looking. She’s smart. Works hard.”

“What a catch.” Kids are really good at sarcasm. I remember that.

“No, I mean really. I... I don’t deserve her. She loves Hannah. She volunteers at an animal shelter. She’s vegan. She wants to make the world a better place.” The more I talk about it, the more I miss her. “I guess I’m just not part of it.”

“Not *more* crying.”

“No. Promise. I’ve got myself under control.” Mostly. “It’s just... Now I have to go through it all again.”

She thinks about that for a while. Peels a piece of bark off

the log and drops it into the stream to watch it float away. It gets trapped by a stone for a moment before a stray current whirls it to the left, past the obstruction. “Why?”

“Why what?” I’m still watching the bark. It keeps getting caught up. Sometimes it goes left, sometimes right, depending on the ripples.

“Why do you have to go through it again?”

I give her my best ‘what’s wrong with you?’ look. “Let’s see... I’m twelve. Again. I have to go through middle school. Again. And high school. And college. And all the rest. And then I get divorced.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s... That’s what *happens*. That’s what happened last time. That’s what’ll happen this time.”

“Don’t let it.”

“Time is fixed. That’s what all the stories say. You can’t kill Hitler. Or if you do, it doesn’t make a difference. It’s all the same in the end.”

She’s read the same stories I have. At least some of them. “Did Heinlein live through a time loop? You think his Unmarried Mother story was really a true confession? He *made it up*, Matt. So did the rest of them.”

That’s... true. I’m pretty certain none of my favorite writers was really a time traveler. Of course, I am, so who knows?

“Matt, why not try? You love Alison – I don’t know why – and Hannah. You want to keep them. Try to.”

“How?”

“I’m not the one that knows the future.”

“Yeah.”

“You said you’re average. Be better. Be above average. Be from Lake Wobegon.”

I chuckle. I hate that show, but her parents listen to it. Alison did too. Will. Will listen to it, on the radio, in podcasts, with me next to her, reading a book, playing with Hannah. Being happy. Not being divorced. I can see it now — Alison and me, on a porch in our old age. Reading an e-mail from our above-average child, who's now in the Senate, or on a space station, or fighting corruption in Turkmenistan, or something. A child whose parents *aren't* divorced. Just like mine aren't, just like Lucy's aren't.

“You're a smart girl, Lucy.” It feels odd to say ‘girl’, but that's what she is, just like I'm physically a boy.

“No, really?”

I look around at the fresh green of spring, and this time I see the obvious. It's a new year. Not the same year. The same tree, but growing new leaves, different ones. Maybe this year, that branch will grow taller, that leaf will flourish, will make it above the dark canopy to thrive through summer. If it can, I can, and I've got a head start.

“This time around, I'm going to do that studying thing.”

“The one where you actually open the textbook?”

“That's the one. Good grades, hard work, good college, all of it.”

“Uh huh.” But with a friendly tone.

“What's more, I'm going to do it with money. We both are. Google, Facebook, Tesla, Amazon. Remember those names. Invest in them.”

“Matt.” She's rolling her eyes again.

“What?” This is incredibly valuable investment advice.

“I'm eleven.”

“Oh. Well, next year, maybe.” I wink, reach out and squeeze her shoulder, and get up to balance on the log. “Right now, though, I hear the Hoeffners have a new puppy we could

go play with.”

“What?” She’s scrambling to her feet. “And you wasted all morning on this divorce stuff?”

I take off running for the Hoeffner’s place. Tomorrow, I’ll start studying. Today, I’m still twelve.

chapter eleven

Elizabeth Mead

MARCH 2005

Why do these interviews always come at the wrong time? This is NOT where I want to be right now, but here I am – stuck and locked into this session. And why can't they crank up the heat just a tad in this green room? Chicago in March is ugly enough, but do they have to keep the room temp the same as outside???

And what was I thinking when I put on this navy suit? Way too formal for a twenty-two year old writer. But, if I ditch the tie, maybe I can pull this off.... Too bad I shaved; scruffy would look passable... except, I keep forgetting, not much to shave yet. Must remember to sound like a twenty-two year old. Must not get into predicting. But, this guy, Jason, the moderator is from New Orleans. Katrina is coming this August...

No... I can't go there. The last thing I want to do is start rumours flying. "Young savant predicts disasters." No, that will just start the circus. Better to just close my eyes and keep my

head down. Don't even hint.

I need to grind out this interview and then I'm out of here. Keep it together and play it safe.

Keep reminding myself to act twenty-two -- be present -- be in the NOW... Christ... what garbage. I thought I'd come to grips with all of this. But it's all still there with me. Why? Why?

Take a breath. Okay. Come off as natural; no notes. Keep answers light and short. Look at the host, not the camera; keep it light.... keep it light.... Who am I kidding? My host, at twenty-eight, is younger than I am. I got this.

"Good morning, Jason. Yes. So glad you are having me on your show. Really excited to talk to you..."

"We're here with Mathew Green, the new young novelist phenom. Mathew -- how have you found the time to write three best selling books and you are just out of college? I've never seen anything or anyone quite like you?"

"Well, um, I guess you just make the time when you have something to write. And you, know, school just agreed with me and was pretty easy. I just used my time to plow through what needed doing. I saw a lot of my friends get overwhelmed by school because they didn't know what they wanted out of it. I guess you could say I was just ready for all of it.

"I mean, we're both Millenials, you and I... you're just a few years older than I am, Jason, and look at what you're doing. You're hosting your own show. I could say that you're pretty much of an phenom too, 'ya know?"

Jason thinks he really likes this guest...

"Millenials -- people are starting to use that term a lot to describe our generation. Do you think our generation is any different than previous ones?"

"Yes, Jason, I think we're very different. And we're not a

homogenous group. We're probably the first generation in a long time that will have significant polarization within our generation."

"What do you mean, Mathew?"

"Well... some of us, like you and me, are already blazing away and serious about our jobs and our future. And a whole bunch of our age group is still stumbling along wondering why they have to grow up and go to work in the first place. They still want to hang out at home and play video games. I just heard about a movie that is coming out next year called Failure to Launch."

"All three of your books speak about events that are pretty believable. A few of the events in your first book have, in fact, happened. Are you like some mystic with the ability to see into the future?"

Okay, careful here... dial it back here... laugh it off, and sound as surprised as he is about how close your book parallels what happened after it was published.

"Wow, Jason, you know, when you have a couple of coincidences it really makes you seem like a fortune teller, doesn't it? I mean, it's not hard to predict a few maniacs shooting up a place after seeing movie after movie showing just that same thing, right?"

"Well, tell us how you zero in on your stories and how you are able to construct such believable future worlds in your books."

"Um, well, when I was growing up, everyone kept telling me I had a vivid imagination. But, well, you know, I was pretty keen at playing SimCity and, I just liked to see how things played out when I tweaked different aspects of my different worlds. And I guess I just take things a little further in my books."

“So your new book, *The End of Democracy*, is about a United States whose citizens seem to be at war with each other and it’s pretty much civil war, with different states lining up against other states and very little federal authority. Is this a political commentary?”

“Well, I guess maybe so. But I remember how ugly things seemed after the 2000 election and different people in my school were talking about THAT was going to cause a civil war. And there was so much turmoil. But then, we had September 11th and everyone came together – at least for a while. And it all just seems to me like the politics is big business for politicians but we are so much worse off by getting involved and invested.”

“But you are painting a pretty grim story of things going really wrong here in the states. Don’t you think that might scare people?”

“Jason, do you remember that old movie, *Planet of the Apes*? And the ending, when the main character realises that he’s been on earth – and he was in what had been the United States all along? That we screwed it all up ourselves? This is just about the same thing, really.”

“Gee, Jason, don’t you think we take a lot for granted here? One of my minors during college was history. You know, there was a guy from Spain, Santayana, who said, ‘Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.’ And I keep thinking that we aren’t so good at learning from our mistakes, so....”

“Mathew, how did you get so serious at only twenty two?”

“When I was a kid, there was always that one guy who yelled “Do Over” every time he made a mistake. Everyone always gave him a real hard time but I always thought, “Why not? Go ahead and have your do-over... I mean, what does

any of it matter when you're a kid?

“So, in *End of Democracy* we see all these people who want continual do-overs because they don't like the way an election goes. And, even when they go through the courts and it's absolutely proven that the results were correct, they still keep that mantra going of a stolen election. Just like after the 2000 election. And, after every other election, there is always this big push to delegitimise the results. And people are so convinced that their way is the only way that you see that some groups will do anything to make sure they win an election and you have a giant increase in election fraud, and people begin to voting for personalities when they THINK they are voting for issues.”

“So, I don't want to have a spoiler alert here, but what about happy endings. You don't seem to believe in those. Why is that?”

“Jason – even when you have second chances to correct the mistakes you make, I am not sure you make the right choices. We can only hope we are making the right choices, but you don't know what other factors are in play.”

“Okay. So, why is the main character in each of your books an accountant? Was that, perhaps a missed calling for you?”

“No, not really. I mean, accounting makes a lot of sense as a discipline. Numbers are constant. One plus one will always equal two. Numbers don't make mistakes. That's been the same since the beginning of time. You can add in fancy algorithms, or algebraic equations, or calculus and you can do a lot of extrapolations, but when it comes down to the bottom line, you get the same sum time after time.”

“So – you can stand the world on its head, blow up entire countries, wipe an entire generation off the face of the world – numbers will always stay the same. And there will always be a

function for an accountant. The job might go by a different name – but there will always be the need for counting things. One and one is always going to equal two. ”

“You’ve put on your bio that you are an internet investor, not a writer. Why is that?”

“Well, uh, I like writing and it IS my profession, and I am having a lot of success right now. But there are a lot of starving and unsuccessful writers out there. And, well, I don’t really know how long my books are going to sell. I mean, it is really a rush to see a book of yours in print. But what I want to do is insulate myself and provide a hedge for a comfortable future. And, I don’t know... I think that investing in a few internet stocks just seems like a good idea right now...”

Easy there – don’t get ahead of yourself. It’s not going to take rocket science to predict the FANG growths, but everyone still has to get through the 2008 implosion.

“Changing the subject, Mathew, you just now heard that your first book, *Missed Call*, is being optioned for a motion picture. That’s got to make you feel like your future is pretty well set right there. It seems like you are hitting it out of the ball park, right? Twenty-two years old with three published books and a movie to boot???”

“Yeah, well, I’m pretty lucky. And I need to keep reminding myself that this is good now. Really good. But, you know, we don’t know what is going to happen tomorrow, or next week, or in six months that could change everything. I’ll be the Kanter Fitzgerald bankers that went to work in the World Trade Center on September 11th thought they had everything set perfectly too. So, I just try to keep my head down and manoeuvre around any potholes. You know?”

“So, you’re twenty-two. And you paint a pretty bleak future for people. What do you feel is in your future? Marriage?

Kids?”

“Um, yeah, well... my parents have a great marriage. They’ve kept their vows and their promises to each other. And that’s really solid. But I don’t think most people see marriage like that any longer. That whole inviolability of a vow doesn’t really hold people. We’ve become experts at disposability. And eventually that is going to just choke us. And, well, it’s got to be really shitty when somebody thinks you/re just not worth the effort any more. I don’t want to go through that again.

Shit! Change the subject, danger zone!

“I mean, like I’ve seen some of my friends in college get dumped really viciously and, man! I don’t want to go through that. So I think, that, for now, I will just wait to see what happens.”

“I have to say, Mathew, you are one cautious young man. And I think that people will look forward to your future interviews and future books. Thank you for joining me.

And, okay, we can cut there.”

Jason reaches out to shake Mathew’s hand and asks him if he’d like to join him for lunch across the street.

“Would really like to stay and talk some more, and will definitely take a rain check, but actually, I really need to catch a cab right now. It’s been really a great interview. Thanks for being so generous. Bye.”

And, home free now. So grab my backpack and let me get the heck out of Dodge!

chapter twelve

Greg Ray

WHEN I GOT TO the party things were already picking up. Alison would already be there. It was I who was later arriving than once I had. Music was playing too loud, people drinking, some dancing, folks crowded round tables of wine and niblets or hitting the keg which had to be stashed somewhere. Too cold for outside. Maybe the bathtub.

And there she was — standing alone by a refreshment table which was depleted of all but its pretzels — and watching the collegiate goings-on with a steady eye and a glass of wine.

That was about perfect, I thought. Away from the crowd, we could have our chance to meet for the first time — again — to make a new beginning, maybe a better one.

As I made my way around the room, I saw Alison with a kind of double-vision — seeing her then, seeing her now — so similar and yet not quite the same. I came in from an oblique angle, because I wanted to get the first word in just like before. For me that had been 24 years ago. If I could just remember enough of how this goes, I thought, I could make it

happen again.

"Who are you waiting for? Godot?"

"What? Oh, I get it. Very funny."

"Pardon my reach. Are these pretzels for everybody?"

"Wow, that was an ultra quick dive from high literature to finger food."

"I would defy even death for a pretzel stick. Also, I exhausted the only cultural reference I had."

"You've been stuck in a Beckett production since birth?"

"Well, all the world's a stage. But I've had my exits and entrances. More unstuck than stuck, really." I don't know why I said that. I shouldn't have said that. It was not as though she could understand what I was getting at.

"That's two."

"What?"

"Cultural references." She cuddled her wine glass.
"Busted."

"Ah. I overindulged."

She took a sip of wine like maybe things were getting interesting. But it was still my turn, and I didn't remember this part, so I had to extemporise.

"Unless I am Shakespeare. Then I'm only culpable for one."

"How Shakespeare?"

"Tired of the stuffed wigs of my time I have come to Chicago for a taste of modernity—"

"And what better place?" she chimed in.

"—than with the students of UC in their native environment."

That went well, I thought. Better than before maybe — though I only recalled snippets of what had been and I couldn't say how much of those were fables of my own

recollection.

The oddness of re-saying my own words did not ever go away. Like play-acting my own self, like a put-on. I felt it keenly again, but especially with this meeting, especially with her. The lines, silly to say now, needed to be genuine. But how?

"You want more wine?"

"Sure"

He grabs a bottle and tilts it up to her glass.

"Actually, I'm drinking red," she says.

He looks at the bottle and confirms it is indeed a bottle of white.

"Well, it all goes to the same place."

"God, I hate that expression!"

"I do too, to tell you the truth."

"It is so way too biological when you are about to eat something—"

"Or drink wine."

"Or drink wine."

"Like a biological insult to your humanity."

"Exactly! But then why did you even say that?"

"Just nervous, I guess. Plus, there isn't any more red. Those bottles are empty." He offers the bottle again. She shrugs.

"What shall we say instead?"

"Bottoms up," she says.

"You want more wine?" I grabbed that same bottle and tilted it up to her glass. I found myself slowing it down, making the time for her to stop me.

"Actually, I'm drinking red."

I didn't need to look at the bottle this time, I knew perfectly well it was going to be white.

"Well, there isn't any more red. These others are empty." I offered the bottle up to her glass again. "Bottoms up?"

Everything slowed down and I remembered the precise look on her face — from before — and it was not this look, but something different. Two expressions blurred and split from each other.

"No, I'm good," she said.

That was wrong. My heart pounded and I started to panic.

"It's Alison, right?"

Her brow furrowed. "Do I know you, stranger?"

"No. Someone just told me your name."

"And that's not creepy at all."

"No, really."

"Well, Mr. I'm-just-here-for-the-pretzels, since we all know who I am, who are you?"

"Matt. Matt Green."

"With a name like that you should be a housepainter or an artist."

I laughed too loudly, relieved to think things were still sort of on track. Somebody somewhere had turned up the music.

"What's your major?" she said. "Not art, I surmise."

"What's your major?"

"I'm between majors right now. I don't know, I'm okay at maths. I guess that's not much to go on."

"Nonsense. You don't have to be a number theorist or something. You could do accounting or something like that."

"What's your major?"

"I'm not really going to school right now," I said and followed up with something about investments and internet startups — trying to leave it vague and uninteresting.

"That explains the suit."

"What?"

"Nice suit."

"I had to come here from work."

"Does anybody still do that? I mean, invest their doubloons in college dropouts with digital pipe dreams? Didn't dotcom kill the internet star?"

"Really, the only reason the dotcom bubble burst is because no one knew what to invest in — it was all so new — and, yeah, it was bad a few years ago. But internet companies really are the future. New one just starting up we're investing in right now, they're calling it 'YouTube'. It's going to be big. You'll see."

But Alison wasn't really listening to this; I didn't really want to be talking about it, but I didn't know what else. What had we talked about before? The beat of the music was making it hard to think. Some Beyoncé fan had cranked "Baby Boy" way up.

Baby boy has been on my mind

I think about you all the time

I see you in my dreams

"What do you think of this music?" That seemed safe enough, I knew she wasn't a fan, not her style.

"I like it, it's catchy. What about you?"

That wasn't right either. My heart pounded. The negative comment I had prepared didn't fit anymore. "Yeah, I guess its okay."

"I'm not convinced."

"Don't you think its distracting? I mean who can talk?"

Baby boy not a day goes by

I think about you all the time

I see you in my dreams

I caught up some pretzel sticks and put one in my mouth, so I wouldn't have to say more.

"Matt Green." Alison replenished her tinged white wine. "Wait. Are we talking about Matthew Andrew Green? I know about you — the kid novelist. 'Missed Call' and that other one."

"404," I said.

She turned back and leaned back against the table in a posture I recognized all too well. Right arm crossed and sort of floating her filled wineglass somewhere around her left shoulder. This was not a good sign. What had I done wrong?

"It took me a minute," she said, "because, let's face it, someone who uses their whole, full name — Matthew Andrew Green — without even the concession of a middle initial — does not go by 'Matt'."

I forged on past that edge in her voice. "It was my publisher's idea. That and I didn't want people confusing me with a colour of wall paint." That got only a tight smile.

"So, your some kind of prodigy or something."

"It's not really like that."

"Oh really? Then what is it like?" That edge again.

Another question I could not answer. "You know, I have a new one out, new book: 'Democracy's End'.

"Sounds like a downer. I don't like dystopian fiction."

"But it's really important!"

"Said the author."

"No, I don't mean my book, I mean what it's about."

"Said the author."

"People don't realise how fragile democracy is! How a small group of unscrupulous people, with the right backing, could take to shreds so much of what we hold dear. It's closer than you think!"

"What is your next novel going to be about? The end of

life as we know it?" She popped a corn chip into her mouth.

I wanted to take the bait — there was a lot to say there, too — but I checked himself. This moment couldn't be about climate change or politics. I needed to stay focussed.

"I'm thinking of writing a romance. I don't mean like a romance novel — but about a real relationship — the real romance."

Alison raised her eyebrows — but not for my mention of romance. She was catching the eye of someone behind me. I turned my head and saw John Forde across the way — someone I knew as a friend, but who did not know me at all in this lifetime.

"Sorry," Alison said. "What were we talking about? But now I'm curious, what brings you here, Matthew, to our little party?"

I knew my time was short. And here came another question I could not answer, but all I could do was fumble for something. "I really wanted to go to college and get to know people — people like you." Too forward?

"That's very Shakespearean of you." Too sardonic, I thought. Then I think I said something — to try to defang the moment — something vague and made up about knowing somebody who said they were going to this party — but who didn't show after all. Alison looked unconvinced. It should not have been a surprise. She always had seen through me.

I desperately needed to jump tracks on this somehow, but I wasn't getting anything. Beyoncé was on again so all I was getting was the "uh-oh, uh-oh" from "Crazy in Love."

Uh-oh, uh-oh. Crazy right now.

I'm not myself lately,

I'm foolish, I don't do this

I've been playing myself, baby.

"Ever think about architecture?" It was John Forde stepping in. Having extricated himself from whatever conversation he was in, he had come to the rescue. Alison looked relieved. Delighted even.

"Not really," she said.

"Me neither, but I was talking to this girl outside the bathroom. I mean, there it is all around us and you never think about it."

"That's pretty deep, John Forde."

"Not really." He shrugged his shoulders.

"I know." Alison pushed his shoulder playfully. They smiled at each other.

"Oh. John, meet Matthew. Matthew is just here for the pretzels and culture. So, are you going to switch to architecture now?"

"No. But maybe I wish." He took a drink of his beer. "There might be something to it. I just never thought about it."

"Exactly. Not really a good reason to study something. But," she said, holding one hand out in front of him like a carrot on a stick, "what would be a good thing to study is....?"

"Business, I guess," he replied.

"Are you in finance, John—" I interjected.

"Business you guess?!" Alison laughed an inebriate laugh. "Not very committal, John."

"It was pretty much my parent's idea. Practical, you know? But also super boring, I guess. I really didn't have any other ideas, so—"

Alison hung her arm on his shoulder. "Do you always do what your parents tell you, John Forde?" She smiled up at him, waiting for him to catch up.

"Maybe not always," he replied.

—Alison snapped her fingers. "There you have it: a man who knows just what he's about — *maybe*." She laughed, and her eyes sparkled with an unkind satisfaction. "Why don't you take me for a walk, John Forde."

"Walk? It's like 35 degrees out."

"Then we'll just have to stay warm." She hooked his arm. He took the cue and they moved off.

The moment, if there had even been a moment, was gone and it wasn't coming back. I couldn't understand it. How had we jumped track? Sure things were different, but not right there, not there. We were two people meeting for the first time so whatever was different was outside that moment. But it wasn't. Somehow we had just met, married and divorced again all at once. Alison hadn't even met me. She had met the man she wanted to divorce.

Alison looked back over her shoulder. "It was nice meeting you, Matthew."

chapter thirteen

Claire Woodier

MY BREATHING IS *DEAFENING*. How hard must I look like I'm concentrating on this packet of.. what? Skittles? Jesus. Not exactly a tough consumer choice. Put. The candy. Down. Act *natural* for fuck's sake. Shit shit shit she's coming this way. Smile! NOT THAT MUCH! Holy fuck I am so bad at this. Okay, she smiled back. That's good! STOP GRINNING AT HER. Put something in your basket. Do something practical. You're supposed to be shopping.. shop Matt shop! Okay, so what would I need if I lived near her and was popping in? Milk? Cereal, coffee? She's leaving? Christ. GET TO THE COUNTER. Stop breathing so hard dammit. She's gonna run a mile; okay she's smiling; at me?

"Hi" I chuckle bashfully. *She's looking in my basket. She's got a sort-of-a smile on her face. What is that?*

"Hello." *Thats a wry smile. She thinks I'm pathetic. In a 'he's-attractive' way or a 'what-a-twat' kind of a way?* "Thats a very eclectic basket." She comments as she pays for her six-pack. I look down. Skittles, Milk and drain cleaner. Drain cleaner JESUS. Must've picked that up in the panic. Now she thinks

I've got blockages. Nice.

"Yeah, I'm, oh." She's gone.

Yep.

Twat.

"I'll take a Schlitz please." She's just cast one eye my way. She's been drinking that since forever; After and before. She's listening now. "COME on Wheldon". I utter, not too loudly. I think we're the only ones in the bar watching the race. Its a miracle they get the channel. Took some legwork finding somewhere to watch IndyCar in Chicago, but I knew she'd be here if I found it. Its her birthday soon and that ridiculous race makes her feel closer to home. She's squinting at the screen now, she's always had perfect eyesight.. she's trying to remember where she's seen me before.

"He'll do it." She said, taking that big man-sized gulp of beer. Just as she always did. She could drink a bottle of beer in three swigs flat.

"You think?" I smiled. He did do it. I should remember to start betting. Just another 'coincidence', like the one putting me and her in the same place at the same time; a contrived and contemptible 'meet-cute'. I am a 'Twat. She *did* marry me eventually though. It's not like I'm forcing her into anything she wan't going to do anyway. I'm just pressing fast-forward.. or is it rewind? Who the fuck knows. I'm here, she's her.. what? Where did she go?

"The Indy girl? Just left." The bartender motioned to the door.

"Shit. Did I say that out loud?"

"Yep." He let one eye look at me. "You might want to try playing a *little* bit more hard to get." My confused look asked him to elaborate. "Just turn the excited puppy dial down a

couple of notches.” He continued to wipe down the mahogany. ‘It’s embarrassing.”

“Hello?” Alison peered around her door.

“Hi!” *You’re grinning like an insane person. Stop it.* “I mean, hello.”

“Do I know you?”

“I’m erm, Matt..”

“You’re THAT guy! I keep bumping into you!” She pushed the door open and stepped into it, smiling. “Do you study here too?”

“Erm, no.” *God I hope I’m coming off as cute.* “I came to see you. Because well, I wanted to see if you wanted to, maybe go out sometime. Tonight! Maybe?”

“You came to see me?” She was still smiling, shaking her head in confusion, but amused. “Did you follow me here?”

“Not exactly.”

“Who is it Al?” Came a voice from inside.

“No-one!” She shouted back.

Hey! I thought. No-one?

“You didn’t follow me?” She shifted her weight and folded her arms while she was processing the situation. “*Then how did you know I was here?*”

My mouth dried out suddenly. “Erm..”

“WHO is it?” Shouted the voice from inside.

“It’s NO-one John.” She replied, not taking her eyes from mine. She wasn’t smiling any more. “You need to go now.” She commanded it, with her low and quiet voice. She always said that was the more effective way to make yourself heard. Much better than shouting she would say. She pushed the door towards me. Without thinking I stuck my foot in it’s way.

“Don’t shut me out.” I whispered, frightened of the words.

“What are you doing?” Alison cried, breaking her own rules. I had panicked her.

“I’m sorry I didn’t mean to frighten you.” I blurted out. “I would never do that.”

“What?” She was struggling with the door. “Get out! JOHN!”

I had no time left. I had to tell her.

“I just wanted to see you - to make a, um, connection with you? Oh goddammit.. YOU’RE MY WIFE FOR FUCK’S SAKE!”

Alison was still struggling with the door. “You’re out of your mind!” She blasted, still battling. I could hear footsteps coming towards us from within.

“I know it sounds crazy but we *were* married! Well, we *are* married-we *will be* married.. in the future.. your future.”

“What?! Shut up!”

“What’s going on here Al?” A man in his sweats stood behind her, scratching his belly,

“This guy is leaving John.” She spat, emboldened by her reinforcements.

“Hi John.” I waved,

“Hi.” He shook my hand.

“Stop it!” Alison spat.

“I mean, honestly, who IS this?” I asked, the husband in me kicking in.

“What the fucking hell has it got to do with you?” She cried.

“I mean... this guy? Are you SLEEPING with him?. He doesn’t even LOOK like me!”

“ARE YOU FUCKING DERANGED?”

“Hey!” Muttered John, insulted.

“What?” Alison looked at him. “Oh for goodness sake I

didn't mean..(she gave up) oh crap John SHUT UP!"

"Okay look." I said. "You are destined to be my wife. I have somehow managed to get myself transported back in time and I have a second chance at everything, but I don't want to do this again without you. You are THE person I want to spend EVERY life with. Not just the last one, but the next one. And the one after that."

Everyone was silent and breathless. Me with adrenalin, Alison from the door fight. Not sure why John was... maybe asthma? She was staring at me, I was staring at her. John couldn't figure out who to look at. "You know he seems sincere.."

"SHUT UP JOHN!" Alison snapped. "Go and call the police." John shrugged, and apologised to me with his eyes. "If you," She was pointing at me now, "do not leave this property in the next 47 seconds, I will get the cops to have a restraining order slapped on you quicker than I can down a bottle of beer."

"Three swigs.." John and I chorussed. Alison looked like she'd been bitten. "How did you?"

"How did I know that? Many years of marriage. You also secretly eat jelly from the jar with a spoon at night, and have a recurring weird long white hair that grows out the middle of your forehead." John winced and nodded in acknowledgement. Alison turned to him open-mouthed in disbelief.

"Call the police John, thats fine, I'm going. But we WILL be married Alison Broadley. It's done. Its already happened. You can bet your bottom dollar on it." And with that I walked away, wondering if I could find a bookie that would let me.

chapter fourteen

John Gray

I WASN'T REALLY THINKING straight as I travelled across town to see Lucy. There was this gnawing feeling in my gut that things were going off the rails; that the plans I'd made for the future were just going to fall apart. And there was the frustration of being unable to say "No, no! This is how it needs to be! This is what the future depends on!" I could understand the constraints of my mad situation but I didn't have to like them.

I'd taken the bus but didn't even bother eavesdropping on the conversations around me as I would have done normally. I was so fixated on my conversation with Alison that I nearly missed my stop and it was only a drunken student staggering down the aisle and bumping into me that brought me back to some version of reality.

Lucy came to the door quickly, with an ambiguous expression filled with sadness and ... something else.

"Oh, come here, Matt!" she said, arms wide and inviting a hug. I hugged her rather feebly while feeling the enthusiastic tightness of her grip around me. The perfume she was

wearing somehow made her seem slightly exotic that day; the brightly-coloured and complex geometric print of her dress only added to it.

“You can come in...” she said gently as I stood blankly at the doorstep. I came to my senses.

“Thanks so much for seeing me. Sorry for disturbing you when I’m sure you’ve got work to do. It’s just ...” I babbled as we walked down the hall.

“It’s not a problem, honestly. I’m grateful for the break.” She laughed nervously. “Only so much time I can stare at bundled tube structures.”

“Bundled tubes?”

“A popular construction technique for skyscrapers. The Sears Tower is the obvious example.”

“OK.” On another day I might have been more open to a discussion of architecture and buildings: I love filing away little nuggets of information. At this moment though my struggles over Alison dominated everything.

“Coffee?”

I nodded and sat down in the chair while she went over to the coffee machine; a full pot was waiting there and it only took a moment for her to pour it and take it back over. She sat on the bed, took a sip of her coffee and looked at me expectantly.

“Sorry again, but I’ve really run up against things this time. Alison is just not interested. I tried to be straightforward and to the point”

“OK...”

“...maybe I’ve been approaching it the wrong way. But it worked before, in the old timeline. She can’t have changed, I can’t have changed. So why won’t it work?”

“But we’re in a different timeline, Matt - and you’re not an

accountant here, you're an author. Who knows what else has changed?"

"Things seem so similar though. It's not as if this timeline can be so far away from the old one. So I can't be that different either?"

"What you've been through is bound to change you. It would change anyone."

"Oh, I know... But that's not I want to fix things. I want to get back to where I was."

"I understand that. But this is ... uncharted territory. We don't know if we can get back there. " She was looking at me earnestly. "Matt, I know this is a really difficult and complicated... thing ... this situation you've ended up in. If I could solve it for you I would... But ..."

"I can't just give up!"

"...but you could waste years of your life fighting this, becoming bitter about it. Instead you could move on. Accept that you've been landed in this weird situation and make the best of it. There *are* other people out there Matt - Alison's not the only person who could care for you, or that you could care for."

"Oh, Lucy, I know that. I know that makes sense. But losing something ...someone you've had. A whole life! It feels so hard to give up on it."

"I really do think you need to leave it behind you. And if you've become someone different now, or if Alison has changed, then maybe she isn't the one for you in the here and now and you need to think about what you're looking for — who you're looking for —afresh."

She took another mouthful of coffee, tipped her head slightly to the side and continued.

"One of the things our faculty are always drilling into us

about architecture is that it is a process, it's dynamic. You can't go into it knowing exactly what the end result is going to be. The clients change their mind, the technology moves on; you've got to deal with it. At each stage you're always saying 'What's the best way forward here? What can I do with this new information.' You've got to pick the right problem to solve."

She had become quite animated, reminding me why I loved her passion for her subject: her passion for improving the world. I couldn't help smiling despite my mood.

"Yeah, OK, so things might change ..."

"...and your response needs to change. Sometimes you need to push against things. Sometimes to go with the flow. And here... I think you need to reconcile yourself. Look around you again and see what your next step is. What the next relationship needs to be. Don't make your life a mess through banging your head against the same wall over and over. I care for you Matt, I don't want to see that happen. I really ..."

"I know. I know. You've always been there to listen to me, pick me up when I'm down."

She smiled nervously, and opened her mouth as if she was about to say something, then stopped. With hindsight I've run over that conversation again and, well, it's always the way of things that it makes more sense after. I imagine the sentence that she thought of saying, but didn't. I wonder why she didn't say it and I wonder whether if she *had* things would have been different. At the time I had a sort of tunnel vision that cut out all other thoughts —if I'd been bold would it have made a difference?

In that moment, though, the original timeline was everything. That had to be my focus. I had to get my life back

onto the right track.

“It’s not just about Alison. It’s about Hannah. If we don’t get together, what happens to her? Can I be responsible for her just not existing?”

“I don’t think you’d be ‘responsible’ for that. If you are into the multiple universes thing there are infinite timelines out there and all sorts of people are missing from all of them. We don’t grieve for them: they never existed.”

“I get it. Of course we don’t grieve for the nonexistent people. But I knew Hannah - she wasn’t just a cipher, a hypothetical person. She was ... she is my daughter. She was clever and proud and talented and I’m sure she’d go on to do wonderful things that would make me proud — and if I won’t see her again, I think I’m allowed to grieve, to feel crap about it.”

My frustration had got the better of me; I had started to get angry about things. And Lucy didn’t deserve that - she’d always tried to steer me towards the better version of myself. But now ... I just needed a bit of space.

I took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry I’m getting worked up about this and dumping all these emotions on you. But I still think I have to keep to the original plan. Or at least come up with some kind of a Plan B for the same goal.” She was about to speak but I got there first. “I’m not rejecting your advice. I know that you care and you’re trying to help me deal with this.”

“That’s all I’ve ever wanted, to help you ... to ...”

She trailed off; perhaps I saw the glint of a tear in her eye. I got up to go.

“I’ll keep in touch. Thanks for the coffee and the time. You might think I’m ungrateful and rude but at least for the moment I’ve got to ...follow my gut. I know it sounds, well,

corny.”

“OK, Matt. I do understand. But look after yourself.”

She got up from the bed, and slowly came across, opening her arms for another hug. I took it, though something felt oddly formal about it; some feeling then that I had let her down and that this was a hug for her disappointment rather than for my struggle.

She saw me to the door.

“Don’t worry”, I said, “I *will* give you a call and let you know what I’m up to”

“Yeah then. See you later”

She closed the door slowly; or so it seemed at the time. The moment lingered as I shuffled across the landing and headed for the stairs.

I don’t remember much of my journey home after seeing Lucy. My mind was buzzing; all the “what-ifs” mixed with a big dose of frustration and even anger. I was trying to understand where I had gone wrong - or, for that matter, where Alison had gone wrong. Of course I knew there might be someone else; in my old life I might have been jealous but this time it wasn’t that. It was all about the injustice, the sense that Hannah’s life was at stake.

When I got home, I poured myself a glass of nice Scotch, sat by my favourite window and looked out across the city as it started to get dark. I tried to place myself in other people’s shoes - thinking of Lucy and Alison as they started their evening. I sat here sometimes to remind myself of the breadth of the world when I wanted to write - all the people and all stories that were out there waiting to be written. This time though, there wasn’t the sense of detachment — it was all too close to home.

Was it really all about money for Alison? She had always liked her material comforts. Although I was doing what I'd always wanted to do, *she* might think that a starving author wasn't going to give her the gentle life she hoped for. In the old timeline my job (even if some people thought it was boring) gave us a comfortable existence: a nice house in a good neighbourhood, vacations in interesting places and the stability to give Hannah the best childhood experience we could.

If Alison thought that as a writer I couldn't provide for her, then she was being unfair. Nonetheless, if that was the obstacle then I had to get past it. I had to demonstrate the kind of business flair that would show that I wasn't just a drifter who couldn't be trusted to build and sustain a household. I topped up my whisky and got my iBook out.

How was this going to work though? Alison wasn't so naive as to believe that authors (even those with a couple of bestsellers) were necessarily rich. In any case, she would know that in the long term my income would likely only be as good as my last book. Maybe in ten years' time people would be talking about my novels as "strangely prescient" but by that point other fiction would have come along to win the hearts and minds of readers.

However, I reckoned that there were other ways I could use my knowledge of the old timeline. If I'd expected my jump in time to happen then (as every prospective time-traveller would) I'd have memorised lottery numbers, sports winners and all that. I hadn't known and so I had none of that detail to help me. And anyway, who knew what would happen with the tiny random things? Instead I had to look at the trends and trust that the big picture would play out the way I needed it to. What was going to be big? Where could I make

some smart investments and get in on things that were going to become really profitable?

When I started to do my research it turned out to be trickier than I expected. I pretty soon realised that the things that had been big in 2019 were going to be too late; I needed to pick things that were going to pick up significantly over the next couple of years. Realistically if I was going to save Hannah I had to be showing significant financial prowess over the next few years. Before the sub-prime loan crisis hit. Before Alison settled with someone else. The times from my old timeline that I had really vivid memories of were my teenage years and Hannah's early life—which didn't help me now. When I was 25 last time around I'd had little interest in speculative investment as I slogged away being reliable and building a career.

Coincidentally, for research a new book I'd read an article a few weeks previously looking at the performance of internet companies: it was fascinating to see which names leapt out as the ones that had made it big in the long term, and which ones were tipped as the next big thing, but had fallen by the wayside within years. I knew that Amazon was going to keep growing, but maybe it was already too big for my modest investment to yield a big enough reward. Netflix would become big but it would probably take too much time. There were probably dozens of better choices - startups that would get bought out by bigger companies; their names quickly forgotten by history but delivering a big reward to their initial investors on the way. But how did I expect to find them?

And in any case, what was I going to invest? Yes, I could say that I wanted to own a chunk of Netflix but where was the money to come from? I'd just have to sell what I could. Raise as much cash as I could manage. Sell up the nice house and

the car bought with the film advance— the Camaro at least was a stylish enough classic to fetch a reasonable sum. There was also some of the promotional material for the books and a bit of memorabilia from shows and tours. That was exactly the kind of thing that might be much more valuable in 20 years if I had kept it and stayed on top of my game as a writer — but it wouldn't persuade Alison now, or in the next few years, if she was sceptical about the wealth creation power of a novelist.

What I really needed was what she would see as “real-world” wealth. So I'd dispose of the trappings of being an artist, sell off the luxuries and focus on earning. Become the lean, mean money machine. I even said that to myself, knowing how cheesy it sounded, as I downed the rest of the Scotch.

chapter fifteen

Heather Lovelace-Gilpin

MAY 2019

“What are you staring at?”

I watched her stroll across the restaurant after the hostess, flashing a smile when she motioned towards the table. She placed a menu in front of her, her lips moved to answer the same question they ask every customer before she walks off.

“Can I bring you something to drink?”

Are they given special training on how to be bubbly and energetic when they ask such a question or do employers have a reference manual on how to scout out personalities that will fit with this kind of job description? Thinking back to the many restaurants I’ve frequented, the hostesses are all the same. All smiles, bright eyes, dazzling personalities. Not all, I have to say I’ve had my fair share of rude restaurant staff.

Lucy turned around in her seat. When it registered who had just walked in, her head snapped back.

“Shit. You want to leave?”

“Why?”

Her expression answered the question sitting between us and I shook my head.

“The restraining order was lifted five years ago.”

I sipped my drink, telling myself to look away. Not exactly my shining moment.

And now I want to talk to her. Say hello, maybe apologize for what transpired between us. We have history together. My wife, the mother of my daughter. Even if she doesn’t remember it. Or it never happened. Can’t say I understand it myself.

I set my napkin down next to my plate and pushed my chair back.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m going to say hello.”

Lucy’s eyes widened.

“Sit your ass down.” She turned to look at her again.

Alison is reading over the menu, biting the nail on her first finger.

I buttoned up my suit jacket, straightening out my sleeves.

“I will be right back.”

I didn’t wait for her words of advice, hearing her soft groan before muttering “idiot.” I took a deep breath and walked the short distance to her table.

“Hello, Alison.”

She lifted her head and there’s her pretty blue eyes. Eyes I have spent years trying to read, but could never quite figure out. I blamed her profession, lawyers are supposed to be hard to read. Makes it hard for opposing counsel to know what tricks she has up her sleeves. I told her once she would make a great poker player.

She cocked her head to the side before giving me a small smile.

“Do I know you?” She asked, her voice soft like silk.

Are you fucking kidding me?

“Matt Green.” I cleared my throat when my voice came out husky.

And now she remembers. Eyes darting around, the look of sheer panic before straightening up in her chair, her lips forming into a straight line. I took three steps away from her.

“I mean you no harm. I’m having lunch with Lucy.” I pointed towards the table and there’s Lucy, watching us like a hawk. “I saw you walk in and wanted to say hello.” I gave her a quick nod and my forced smile. “I didn’t mean to disturb you. Just like I didn’t mean to freak you out back then...”

I sighed. Lucy’s right. I am an idiot.

“Enjoy your meal.”

I spun around on my heels. Lucy’s eyebrows shot up when I returned to my chair. And yeah, I’m desperately trying not to drop my head onto the table and slam it down a couple of times.

“Well?”

“Scared the shit out of her.” I mumbled, grabbing the drink menu, my eyes perusing it, but not really reading the words. It’s more of a distraction. Something to curb the embarrassment. “Pretty sure she’s hightailing it towards the door right now.”

“Actually, she’s ordering.”

“What?”

I fought the temptation for a good two seconds before scratching my chin on my right shoulder. She is ordering, and she doesn’t look freaked out. And she should. Especially after what I did. Hell, she even glanced our way before dropping her eyes to read something she placed in front of her.

Our meals arrived, Lucy and I chatted about everyday

things. It's hard not to talk about it. My previous life Alison was a part of, along with Hannah. When I try to figure out where things went wrong. Why she wanted a divorce when she had everything a woman could ever want. The big house, the cars, the money. Which usually ends with Lucy telling me to fucking drop it already.

"Working on a new book?"

"A couple of ideas are floating around. Nothing concrete. What about you?"

She started in on her latest project, rattling off schematics, using fancy architectural words, telling me about the latest screw ups which is putting the entire project off track. Eventually, the conversation shifted to reminiscing growing up, laughing at the stupid shit we did. Not everyone can say they lived their life twice. Well, she didn't. I did.

I glanced around for the waitress to see if I could get a refill on my drink, but seems they're taking a break. I suppose the perky, helpful personality type is only required for the hostess since our waitress hasn't really done much.

Once our meals are polished, plates taken away, Lucy and I argued over who's paying the bill. Which I always seem to win since she can never pull her wallet out fast enough. I set my black AMEX card down onto the table, figuring it will be another ten, fifteen minutes before the waitress makes her way over.

"Matt?"

I lifted my head from the sound of her voice and quickly stood to my feet.

"It was nice running into you again." She smiled, a little on the bashful side, tucking blonde strands behind her ear.

Really? That's not what you said the last time we saw each other.

“Nice to see you too, Alison.”

Lucy cleared her throat.

“You remember my friend Lucy?”

“Hello.”

Lucy tilted her drink at her, plastering on a smile. And now shit’s awkward. Not just for me, but for her and Lucy.

“Take care.”

She headed for the door and I took two steps towards her.

“Alison!”

She glanced at me over her shoulder, rewarding me another view of those blue eyes.

“Would you like to go out sometime?”

She nibbled her bottom lip for a moment. She’s either trying to let me off easy, or she’s considering it. I have my doubts about the second, but sure would make my afternoon.

“What do you have in mind?”

“A movie? Drinks after? Maybe this evening?”

She hesitated for a moment, her eyes scanning me over.

“Sure. The AMC River East. I can meet you there around 7.”

I smiled, shoving my hands into the pockets of my slacks.

“Is there a movie you would like to see?”

She shook her head.

“We can pick one out when we get there.”

The movie was a brilliant idea. No conversation, no chance for me to bring up something she wouldn’t recollect. Like our life together, our seven-year-old daughter, our house, the millions we’d have to split if she followed through with the divorce. A life I need to forget. I’m getting my do over. Even if it means missing my little girl.

When we talked, we discussed her career, how it felt when my first book became a bestseller. She asked if I get recognized often, causing me to laugh since not once did someone walk over while we were together asking me if I'm Matthew Green, the author of *Missed Call* or *404*. I almost brought up what happened between us, the reason why she took out a restraining order, but there're things better left unsaid. If she isn't going to mention it, neither will I.

We took a stroll through the nearby park. I kept my hands to myself even though I wanted to grab hers. I only placed mine in the nape of her back when her foot slipped. We did a lot of laughing and yeah, a few times I almost brought up things I shouldn't. Like Hannah's favorite stuffed cat and the meltdown she had when she left it behind at the park close to our home. How we searched everywhere because she couldn't sleep without it. When it didn't turn up, and three sleepless nights later, we searched every store until we found one. When we tried to pass it off, Hannah already found Freckles. Or the night we conceived our daughter, we almost got caught skinny-dipping in the neighbour's pool. We never found her panties. I imagined the neighbour did though.

And it's hard. I know Alison. I know her imperfections, I know her quirks. I know she likes to nibble on her nail when she's reading something. How she bites her bottom lip when she's being flirty. And she used to know me.

"I had a great time." Alison said.

I chuckled.

"Don't sound so surprised."

She rewarded me with a soft laugh.

"When I agreed to go out with you, I wondered if I made the right decision."

I nodded, letting my eyes take in the sights. I'm not exactly

sure what to say. How do I explain what I did? How I scared her into taking a restraining order out on me?

Alison pushed up onto her tiptoes to place a kiss on the corner of my mouth. It's hard. Hard to keep my hands to myself, not to pull her towards me, and reminisce on the many ways we've made love.

"Would you like me to walk you to your car?"

Blonde strands of hair brushed against her cheek when the wind picked up, her hand automatically coming up to tuck it behind her ear.

"I took a cab."

I ran my hand over my chin. Dare I ask? Screw it. All she has to do is say no and I'll be on my way.

"I can give you a ride home."

Alison flashed me a smile, her blue eyes shining from the street lamp we are standing under. She reached for my hand, running her fingertips over my knuckles.

"That would be nice, Matt. Thank you."

chapter sixteen

Pete Becker

WE DROVE TO NEW Ali's apartment. Penny didn't like this kind of driving: her engine balked at low speeds. She'd much rather be out on the highway, or on the track.

As usual, Ali constantly gave directions that I mostly didn't need. Loving her meant accepting her back-seat driving; that would never change. Had never changed. Well, hadn't changed in the past. Maybe this time around she would be different.

"It's coming up on the left. Hard to find; there, see the driveway?"

I turned left into the driveway, then left again toward the three parking spots alongside the house. The right-hand spot was occupied by a twelve-year-old Chevy Impala that had seen better days. The other two spots were empty. I pulled into the left-hand spot, as far away from that clunker as I could get. Whoever owned it might come out at any time, and since they obviously didn't take care of their possessions, I didn't want them to come close enough to Penny to scratch her.

I shut off the engine. Ali didn't reach for the door handle, but half-turned toward me, with her eyes downcast. I figured

she wanted to talk a bit; she'd always liked sitting in the car and talking. Maybe she still did.

"So, you're from Indianapolis. Do you get back there often?"

Her eyes snapped up toward me, and I immediately feared that I had spoken from old memories and not what she knew that I knew. As I flailed about mentally to figure a way out of that blunder, the moment passed.

"No, not much any more. My parents still live there, and I visit them once in a while. But mostly my life is up here now."

"Do you have any brothers and sisters?" Of course, I already knew the answer. But small talk ought to make her more comfortable.

"No, it's just me. What about you?"

"I grew up here in Chicago. Like you, an only child."

"So we both have the same social pathologies! This relationship is doomed."

I laughed. "I hope not. So far I'm enjoying it."

"Me, too."

I knew so much about new Ali from my years with old Ali, but couldn't let on. I searched for something I could say that wouldn't freak her out. The silence stretched out, and she dropped her eyes again. This wasn't going well. I was afraid she would lose interest. I decided that inane chatter would be better than awkward silence.

"What do you do when you're not working?"

She paused. Then, "I'm a cyclist".

"It must be tough riding around here, with the streets so crowded. How do you stay safe?"

"Well, mostly I ride with a group of folks from work. We're located downtown, and the bike path along the river is just a block away."

“That’s convenient.”

“Yup. We ride a few times a week instead of eating lunch. Helps us keep trim.”

“That sounds like fun. Lawyers who ride together litigate together.” Okay, that was forced and corny. But it made her giggle.

“Yes, but it also creates problems.”

“How so?”

“Well, for example, there’s this brand new associate who thinks he can advance in the firm by hanging around with the more senior people. He’s a pest.”

“He rides with you?”

“We’ve never invited him, but he started tagging along. And I made a big mistake. I bought new pedals for my bike, and I gave him my old ones. Now he thinks I’m into him.”

“And you’re not?”

She scowled. “No. He’s just a kid. Nice hard body, but not enough experience. I much prefer men closer to my own age.” She looked me in the eye for a moment and I could see that she wanted to add “like you”. Or maybe not. Twenty-five years ago old Ali would have added it. But now isn’t then.

“A couple of weeks ago,” she continued, “he invited a couple of us to go to Bloomington to watch the Little 500. His brother was riding in it with a team from his fraternity.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of that. Didn’t they make a movie about it?”

“Yup. *Breaking Away*. It won a bunch of awards.”

“So, 500 what? Miles?”

“Well, no, there’s really no 500 in it. It’s just named for the Indy 500. You know, the Memorial Day weekend car race. This one’s a bicycle relay race, on a quarter-mile running track. The men do 200 laps. The women do 100. No fancy bikes, just the

standard ones that they provide. One speed. Coaster brakes. Real old school.”

“Do you plan on riding in it?”

“No, can’t. It’s only for students. Plus the cutters”.

“Cutters?”

“Townies. ‘Cutters’ is short for ‘stone cutters’, the quarry workers. The quarries are mostly gone, but the name stuck. They’re allowed to enter a team. They’ve won more times than any of the college teams.”

“Was the race exciting?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go.”

“Oh.”

She gazed out the windshield, off into the distance. I knew that that meant she was struggling to say something she thought might be awkward. I couldn’t encourage here, because I wasn’t supposed to know that.

She turned toward me. “I...”

She was interrupted by bright lights streaming in through the back window. The headlights of another car pulling in. It parked between Penny and that clunker. Ali sat primly in her seat, looking out through the windshield. “Those are my upstairs neighbours, Jim and Julia. They’re a bit nosy, but discrete.”

Jim and Julia got out of the car and walked to their door, discretely not looking at us.

Ali continued to gaze out through the windshield.

Finally she turned back to me and blurted out: “I have a daughter. She’s seven years old. Her name is Hannah.”

I froze. Thirty years ago we had named our daughter Hannah. But new Ali didn’t know that. Or did she? Maybe she was in the same kind of time loop as me. Or maybe it was just a coincidence. Then I realised it wasn’t either. We hadn’t

named our daughter Hannah; old Ali had. "I've always loved the name Hannah. Can we name her that?" and I had agreed. Apparently, she still liked that name.

"... just like all men. You find out that a woman has a child and you lose interest. What is wrong with you?" She was glaring at me.

I realised I had had a stupid look on my face for far too long. I had to salvage this.

"No, no, I'm so sorry, I didn't lose interest. It's just that you took me by surprise. There's so much more to you than I knew and I'm slowly digesting it. I'm sure Hannah enriches your life. I'd love to meet her sometime." I probably babbled some more, but eventually I noticed that the look on her face had softened, and it seemed I was back in her good graces.

She reached for the door handle. "Let's go inside," she said, as she opened the door and stepped out of the car.

I did the same, and followed her around the neighbour's car and the clunker. She fumbled in her bag for a moment, then the lights on the clunker flashed. "Just making sure it's locked," she said.

I continued to follow her as she walked toward a door in the building. I had always enjoyed walking behind her; the rhythm of her movements was soothing and sexy, both at the same time.

She stopped at the door and turned around to face me, like she was expecting a good-night kiss. But weren't we going inside?

"When we go in I want you to go straight into the living room, on the left. If the light isn't on, don't turn it on. Don't touch anything. And be quiet."

I had no idea where this was going, and my puzzlement must have shown on my face, because she explained: "The

baby sitter is my ex-husband's girlfriend. Well, she's a mutual friend, but she's seeing him now, and she's a bit of a gossip. I don't want him knowing any more about my personal life than he has to. He can get nasty. So when you go in, turn left and try to be invisible."

"I'll be in the living room, making no noise and pretending that I don't exist." Fortunately, there was a light on in the living room, so I didn't have to worry about bashing my shins on a coffee table.

The TV was on in the other room, with the volume turned up loud. I could hear the tinny piano version of "Chopsticks" played by Tom Hanks and Robert Loggia with their feet in the movie *Big*. One of my favorites.

The sound went away, and was replaced by low voices. I heard the front door open and close. Then Ali came into the living room.

"I'm really sorry about that. Like I said, I don't want her gossiping about me to him. If this goes anywhere, of course, she'll figure it out. She lives just up the street, so she sees everything."

"I don't want to cause any problems for you." Certainly not.

"Well, I do have my own life to live. I just want to minimize the friction as things change. I hope you understand. Not that things are changing, but if they do ..."

She was one of those people who hold their forearms horizontal and flap their hands when they talk. I had always found it endearing. I still did. I took her hands in mine. She looked up at me and I looked into her beautiful blue eyes, the eyes that had held me captive for so many years. She inched closer to me and I bent down and kissed her. Her tongue pushed between my lips and quickly retreated. Mine did the

same. She pulled away from me, still looking into my eyes. “Let’s go to the couch.”

As we moved toward the couch she stopped for a moment at the dimmer and turned down the lights. I sat down and she sat on my lap. We picked up where we had left off. Old Ali had always loved sex, and it looked like new Ali did, too.

I unbuttoned the top two or three buttons of her blouse and reached inside. Her breast perfectly filled my hand, just as I remembered. I slid my fingers along the top of her bra, down to the center, and discovered that the bra had a clasp in front: a “say yes” bra. But it wouldn’t say yes for me: I couldn’t get it open. She pushed away my fumbling fingers and with a quick flick released the clasp.

With her bra no longer in the way I rolled my fingers across her nipple and was rewarded with a quick gasp. “Oooh, you know just what I like.” Of course I do. I spent seven years learning what you like and don’t like. And I didn’t forget.

A few minutes later she slid sideways off my lap and reached for my belt. “Now it’s your turn.” Removing all the enclosing layers, she wrapped her hand around my pecker. She squeezed it gently and moved her hand up and down. I moaned.

Keeping her hand in place, she half-stood, then turned and knelt between my legs. As she began to apply her mouth I was swept up in a whirlwind of memories. I could see both of us naked, and remembered the sensations my Ali-cat could create. I was surprised, though: new Ali had some new moves. I tried not to think of her ex-husband. Lucky man.

She lifted her head slightly, looking up at me; I looked down at her. Our eyes met. I heard a loud thud through the wall, and someone started crying. Ali jumped to her feet and rushed out of the room, buttoning her blouse as she went.

I leaned my head back against the couch and reflected on the situation. Ali-cat had become Ali-mom. And that was okay, but it left me unsure about what to do. For a moment I considered finishing by myself, but if she came back while I was busy it would be awkward. Not to mention messy. And I was at risk of falling asleep, on her couch with my pants down to my knees. So I stood up and re-dressed myself.

I heard metal-on-metal squeaking coming from across the room. I went over to investigate, and discovered a hamster running in its wheel. So we had been observed!

There was a piece of paper taped to the hamster's cage. In a child's hand was the word "Squeaky". Squeaky seemed to be having fun, but hamster fun isn't very exciting once you're more than about ten years old, so I continued exploring. I came to a cabinet in the corner with little tchotchkes. Mementos of events in her life, no doubt. Among them was a small cloisonné box that I recognized from the olden days. I picked it up to look at it more closely.

I heard footsteps coming down the hall. I turned toward the door as Ali came in, looking concerned.

"Is Hannah okay?" I asked.

Her face relaxed a bit. "Oh, yes, she's fine. She falls out of bed occasionally, but she's young and mostly it's the jolt out of sleeping that's upsetting." Not to mention the jolt to whatever her mother is doing. But I knew what this was like; I'd been through it before.

"You're not mad at me, are you?" she continued.

"Of course not."

Time for some reassurance.

"This is a lovely box. Cloisonné, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's kind of a funny story. I was working in a greenhouse, and I made deliveries to this flower shop

downtown. The box was on a shelf in the back of the shop, and I really liked it, but I was in school and didn't have \$50 to spend on frills. Every time I went there I headed straight for that shelf to see if it was still there."

"So, you must have eventually decided that it wasn't just a frill."

"No, I'm more disciplined than that. One time my boss came with me for the delivery and saw me rush to that shelf. The store owner told him that I always did that. The next time I got a paycheck there was a bonus package for me. The box."

"Wow. Why did you ever leave that job?" Of course, I already knew the answer.

"Well, I decided to go to law school. They discourage outside jobs during your first year, so I had to leave. Once I had some legal skills to market, delivering flowers to retail shops looked pretty dreary."

We were interrupted by a voice from behind us.

"Mommy?"

I turned around and saw Hannah. Not new Ali's Hannah, but my Hannah. She looked exactly like my daughter who I hadn't seen in twenty-four years. But that couldn't be; I wasn't new Hannah's father. How could she look like my Hannah?

"Ali, what's Hannah's father's name?"

"John Forde. Why?"

And the awful truth hit me. My Ali had never loved me like I loved here. She had had an affair with our neighbour. And my Hannah wasn't my Hannah. Her father was our neighbour, the very same John Forde.

"Sorry, Ali, I just realised I have to go. It's nice meeting you, Hannah. Bye."

I got out the door as quickly as I could and sprinted back past the clunker and the neighbour's car. I jumped into mine,

started the engine, and turned the stereo up loud. Sirius was tuned to the Oldies channel, and I was blasting out “here he comes, that’s Cathy’s clown” at full volume. After a minute or so the neighbours turned on their lights and yelled for quiet; they weren’t so discrete any more. I didn’t blame them a bit. I turned down the stereo, threw Penny into gear, and sprayed gravel all over the parking area as I spun out into the road.

chapter seventeen

Angie Titus

AS I STOOD OUTSIDE of Lucy's apartment, staring at the modern and forbidding black door, I wondered how a man who was lucky enough to live twice could screw up both lifetimes. That's what I'd done. I knew it now. I had been so focused on Alison that I hadn't realised I was heading for disaster again. And then it had struck.

It hurt. It hurt a lot. That's how I'd ended up here. Everything else had fallen apart, but there was always Lucy. Lucy was the one constant I could always count on, and I really needed her.

I was reluctant to say it out loud. Not the needing her, of course. The screwing up. After all we'd been through. After all we'd done. After another twenty-four years of chasing the same dream, it had all been for nothing.

After several minutes of staring at Lucy's door, I shook my head and told myself to stop being such an ass. I'd wasted enough of my life—lives!--and I had to figure out what to do next. To do that, I needed Lucy.

I scowled at myself in annoyance and reached for the

doorbell. It was so loud that I could hear it through the door. It was also cheerful and bright, which made me scowl more.

The expression was still on my face when Lucy opened the door. She stood there in an old, tattered, no-longer-fluffy-robe with matching fluffy slippers. Her hair was in wet tangles around her face, and she wasn't wearing makeup. When she saw my scowl, both of her eyebrows shot up.

"I caught you in the shower?" I asked. "Sorry."

"No. I was done. I'm...I'm a little surprised to see you. Sorry about the mess."

I rolled my eyes as I passed her. A mess for Lucy was neat for anyone else. There was a cup of coffee and a magazine on the coffee table, and she'd left the pair of shoes she'd been wearing when I last saw her in the hallway, but, other than that, nothing looked out of place.

"Are you okay?" she said, glancing at me. "You look a little strange. Can I get you some coffee?"

"Coffee? Yeah. Coffee. Coffee'd be good."

She studied my face, and it felt as if she could see straight into my heart. I was grateful when Lucy didn't comment on what she might have glimpsed.

While she was gone, I wandered around the living room, looking at my familiar surroundings as if seeing them for the first time. Lucy's love affair with white and black. Her paintings by brilliant artists that no one but Lucy had ever heard of. The big, overbearing forms of her desk and bookcase. All of them seemed new to me. Maybe they were, really. I certainly felt like a different person.

Lucy came back in just a few minutes with a blue speckled mug in her hand. It was the mug I always drank from, and it made me smile. A small burst of warmth in my stomach made me realise that maybe things weren't quite as bad as they

seemed.

“What's bothering you, Matt?” she asked, concern heavy in her voice.

I walked over to the coffee table and put my coffee down next to hers without even taking a sip. With my back to her, I said, “She doesn't love me.”

“What?”

“Alison. She doesn't love me. Never did.”

“Of course she...”

“No.” I turned back to look at her.

“Oh.” She pushed a piece of hair that had dropped down onto her face back, and I realised the move was endearing. “How do you know?”

I shook my head and flopped down onto her couch. It was soft enough that I must have sunk two inches. “I just do.”

“Matt, I...”

She trailed off, and it was my turn to study her. I couldn't read her expression. It was jarring because I thought I knew all of her expressions.

“Are you going to say you're sorry?” I asked gruffly, pushing away a feeling of unease. “It's my own damn fault. How could I have been so stupid?”

“You're not stupid.” She settled beside me on the couch, her body warm and comforting.

“Then how did I not know?” I demanded. “I've wasted two lifetimes—two, Lucy!--on a woman who doesn't love me. Doesn't. Didn't. Couldn't. I had no idea. Tell me how that doesn't make me an idiot.”

Lucy sighed and looked down at her hands. “You've loved Alison for a long time.”

I slumped back and reached for my coffee, just so I'd have something to do with my own hands. I didn't want to face how

wrong I'd been.

"So, what are you going to do now?"

I shrugged and took a sip. It was still so hot that it burned as it went down.

"Matt?"

"Not chase after a god damned dream, that's for sure."

"Dreams aren't always bad."

I snorted but didn't reply. It was easier just to drink more of the scalding coffee.

Lucy reached out and took the mug from me as if I were drinking liquor. I gaped at her as her dark eyebrows met in a frown.

"What?"

"Matt, why did you come here?" She watched me intently, holding onto my mug. I absently wondered if it were burning her hand.

"What do you mean?" I matched her frown and snatched back my cup.

"What do you want from me?"

"What do I want?" I was surprised by the question. "Isn't it obvious? I need my best friend to help me figure out what the hell to do now. What's next? The world's gone crazy again. Except for you." Two lifetimes worth of affection had me finally releasing the mug so I could take her hand. "You're the only thing I can count on. Any time I need someone in my corner, I can turn to you."

She nodded slowly. "We've always been a team."

"I can't figure this out on my own."

"You're still you without Alison. You'll go on to write more books. Meet more people."

"It doesn't feel like it. It feels like all my time's been wasted."

She took her hand back and said firmly, “The first thing you have to do is stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“What?” I blinked at her.

“Matt, you've been given a gift...”

“Which I squandered,” I interrupted.

“But it was given to you. Most people don't even get that. So you screwed up twice. You've still had two lives. Some of us only live once, and the weight of that—of living with our mistakes and never getting a chance to fix them—is a heavy burden to bear. You've got to take the hit and move on. Accept that there's no going back and start living for you and not for Alison.”

I wanted to be mad at her. For one brief nanosecond, I actually was. It faded as soon as it flared because, deep down, I knew she was right. I'd wanted to wallow in my self pity a while and let Lucy sooth it like she usually did. In that desire, I'd conveniently forgotten she also always told me the truth.

“You say that as if you know what you're talking about,” I said.

Lucy's gaze dropped, and she refused to meet my eyes. “Of course, I do. Everyone's got regrets.”

I'd been focused on myself and on Alison for so long that I hadn't realised what a crappy friend I'd been. Seeing her look so uncomfortable made me reexamine our years together. Lucy had always been there for me, but had I been there for her? Had she been suffering in silence while I'd been throwing my pain around?

“What are some of yours?”

She turned away, picked up her own mug, and stood. “My coffee's cold. I think I'll refresh it.”

“Lucy?”

“I'll be right back.”

“Hey.” I got up and touched her arm. “Lucy?”

She was trembling just a bit, and my concern for her drove away thoughts of losing Alison.

I saw her throat work as she swallowed, and she didn't look at me.

“Talk to me. You can tell me anything. You know you can.”

After a very long, silent few seconds, she asked quietly, “You don't know?”

“I'm a thick-headed, self-absorbed jerk; of course I don't know.” I was only half joking.

She glanced at me then, and the sadness in her face stabbed me in the heart. I felt worse than the jerk I'd claimed to be.

Lucy's voice was barely above a whisper when she replied, “I love you, Matt.”

Puzzled, I automatically said, “I love you, too.”

Her eyes closed briefly as if she were gathering her strength. “No. You don't understand. I'm in love with you.”

I dropped my hand from her robe as if it burned. “You...?”

“I've always been in love with you. Always.”

“I...” I'd had no idea.

As I let the shock of this go through my system, I really looked at Lucy for the first time in a long time. I'd been looking at everything with fresh eyes except for her, but maybe it was time for that, too. She was certainly attractive. I'd always known that, somewhere in the back of my mind where I acknowledge things that didn't make that much difference. I'd have loved Lucy if she'd been missing an eye and her nose were crooked. The truth was, I'd always loved Lucy, too, but I'd never even considered the possibility of falling in love with her because she was just Lucy. Now I saw that she had big, expressive eyes with dark, pretty eyelashes, and young, fresh

features that made her look like an innocent twenty-six instead of the worldly, strong thirty-six that I knew she was. The robe fit her well, and if I'd been any other man—or she'd been any other woman—I'd have noticed the seductive pieces of skin that peeked out at me, showing she was naked underneath.

“It's okay, Matt. Just let me go hide in the kitchen.”

“No. Wait.” If Alison wasn't my future, maybe it was Lucy. The rightness of this thought hit me so hard that I could barely breathe for a moment.

Lucy bit her lip and stared at me. She looked a little frightened.

“Why don't you get dressed and let me take you for something to eat. I'm buying.”

“Are you...?”

I shrugged. “Yeah. A date. Why not? I need to start fresh, right?”

I smiled again as my heart lightened. I liked the thought of a fresh start with Lucy. The more I thought about it, the more I liked it.

“Oh, Matt.” I knew what she was going to say just from her tone.

Lucy returned my smile, but hers was soft and sad. She reached up to cup my face and caressed my cheek with her thumb.

“You're going to say no, aren't you?” My stomach felt like a heavy stone.

“I can't go on a date with you now,” she said gently. “You know that.”

“Why?” I asked, but I did know.

“You're still in love with her. As long as you're in love with Alison, there can't be anything but friendship between you and me.”

She continued to stroke my cheek with a tenderness I couldn't believe I'd never noticed before.

“When you get your life on track, when you've really let go of her, then, if it's something you truly want, ask me again. Maybe I'll say yes.”

She kissed my other cheek softly, and I sighed as the soft scent of vanilla surrounded me.

“I'm sorry,” I murmured. “I never knew.”

Lucy straightened, and her face was full of a fond kindness I didn't feel I deserved. “Hearts want what they want, and yours wanted Alison. I'm going to go refresh my coffee and pretend I didn't just tell you my deepest secret. Sit back on the couch, and when I get back we'll stream something fun and both forget.”

I nodded and let her go, but I already knew I wasn't going to stay. It didn't feel right to be leaning on her when my quest for Alison had brought her so much pain. I was an asshole. A blind asshole, to give myself a bit of credit, but still an asshole.

As soon as Lucy disappeared into the kitchen, I went to her desk and fished out a piece of paper and a pen. Quickly, I scribbled a note saying I had some things to think over she just couldn't help with. Since I was afraid she'd think I was escaping my new knowledge, I ended by telling her she was the best friend I'd ever had and not to worry. We'd figure it all out. I believed it. Things were going to change now that I wasn't blind anymore. It took two whole lifetimes for me to really see, but at least it had happened.

On this positive note, I let myself out and headed home.

chapter eighteen

Marc Cooper

IMAGINE AN AIRCRAFT HITTING a mountain. The sound of its grinding destruction. We only ever see the terrible aftermath, and that's enough to stuff our imagination with the terror. All of these things happened in my head when Wilma switched on the vacuum.

“You need to get your ass into gear,” Wilma yelled over the din, stabbing a finger at me. “Get your ass off that couch, and yourself out of here. You hear me young fellah?”

Wilma had been my backstop and partner in survival for the past ten years or so. She cooked and cleaned and generally took care of the place, and kicked my ass when she felt it needed kicking. Absent a delicate touch, Wilma cleared her path in the world by simply being there; that and a voice that could not be denied. She'd raised eight boys as a single mother, so I registered somewhere between breathing and walking on her scale of difficulty. She was the only living soul I would not cross.

The room was more of a mess than usual. I'd been working up to dating Lucy, and when she flicked me off, I

thought the best way to deal with it would be a night of alcohol, weed, and the company of those happy to spend my money in exchange for their company. If I got laid, that would be a bonus; I had no recollection of that happening.

The vacuum approached menacingly, so I hauled my ass off the couch and into the kitchen and shut the door. Evidently, Wilma had passed through and the reek of pine disinfectant burned at my eyes and throat. Cleaning the kitchen before waking me in the living room was the kind of thing Wilma did to show her affection. I saw it for what it was and felt the love.

The vacuum fell silent and Wilma burst into the kitchen.

“You been flushing your protection again,” she said casually. “I’m glad you doing right by your girl, but you gonna cause a blockage beyond the u-bend. I told you before. And it’s me that gets to fix it, and I have to call in that Mr Fuseblower, and I don’t much like him.”

When a grown man blushes to the point of sweat, he knows he’s out of his league. I mumbled an apology.

“So, where is Lucy?” Wilma went on.

“Not here. She knocked me back. I invited some friends round to party—”

“I can see that. Well, what’re ya gonna do about it? She’s a lovely girl, and she likes you. That’s clear to me. Lord knows, stranger things happen.”

“I missed my chance. All I ever wanted—”

“Yes, you’ve told me a hundred times: a lovely wife and child and a simply life. That ain’t your life; but you’ve time to make it. No point you living in a fantasy world even if you do go through this one like a dragon sleeping on his horde of gold.”

“Not sure what else I can do.”

Wilma's eyes narrowed, and I felt a stabbing behind my forehead, like she was burrowing into my skull with a corkscrew.

"Go big," said Wilma. "Do something no-one else would think of. Make it about her. It's one thing to tell her you care. It's another to show her. You've got the connections and the means."

"And you think that will work?"

"Sure, if you don't foul it up. So, there's an outside chance."

Within an hour, showered and fed, I was round at Clive's house cooking up Wilma's Lucy recipe. Clive and I had known each other since school, and it was together at our first startup that we made our first million. Between us, we knew every tech entrepreneur worth their salt. We'd mentored most, invested in many, and sat on the boards of a few. We made money together, mostly, but underneath we retained a love for exploiting tech in crazy ways. We knew the best would be up for a challenge. The idea we settled on came from Clive. We called it *The Grand Tour*. After we had a name, we started making the calls.

By early evening, we had a blueprint and the go ahead from all the main players. A few kinks needed straightening out and simplifying, but it was clear that the tech was available, albeit used in curious ways.

Over the next two weeks, we built the Grand Tour. Most of the pieces could be tested in isolation, which simplified things, and so special attention was given to the boundaries. With specialists deployed in every area, the quality was high, and the rate of progress astonishing.

After a fortnight, I was given the green light – the Grand

Tour was ready – and so I called Lucy to make a date.

“Matt, I thought we’d put the dating thing to bed. So to speak.”

“This isn’t dating. It’s just going out.”

“So other people will be there?”

“In a manner of speaking. Yes, they will.”

“And it’s just one night?”

“It’s a few hours in the middle of the day. I want to show you that you are special to me, and that I’m prepared to go that extra mile for you.”

“As a friend?”

“As a friend, of course,” I lied.

On the day of the Grand Tour, the sun rose and remained the only blemish in the blue sky. Then, half an hour before midday, an autonomous stretched limo rolled up my drive and threw open a rear door.

The car had been built by Billy’s company, Snesla, which specialised in multipurpose autonomous vehicles. A young genius, eager to break new ground, and with an uncontainable ego, Billy was central to the success of the Grand Tour, and he planned to squeeze everything he could from it. It was hard to like Billy, but he always delivered, which made him hard to walk away from.

“I hope you got more than a shiny black car to impress the lady,” said Wilma. “Them elastic cars look awful kitsch to me. Ugly as Hell. Wouldn’t find me inside one.”

“Plenty more, Wilma, I promise.”

“Well, that’s good then. Now, let’s take a look at you.” She flicked an imaginary blemish from my lapel. “You look pretty enough, sweetheart. You’ll do.”

“Thanks, Wilma.”

I kissed her on the cheek and went out to the car.

We circled Lucy's block until midday then picked her up. She looked far prettier than me in her summer clothes and somehow managed to look simultaneously formal and casual. Some women can do that, I've noticed. Men, not so much.

The car pulled away, and I quickly took a selfie of the two of us sitting in the back seat. In the picture, Lucy managed to create a "just friends" look despite our proximity. She'd allowed me a peck on the cheek on arrival, but otherwise an invisible yet tangible barrier remained.

Billy, who was watching us via a concealed camera somewhere in the vehicle, messaged me: "Nice chick, man!!!!!" See what I mean about Billy?

"So, where to?" said Lucy, who was watching nothing in particular out of the window.

"Thunderpidgeon."

"The theme park?"

Being on my best behaviour, I didn't say, "Is there another Thunderpidgeon?", but instead, "The very same."

Lucy continued to look out of the window.

We soon arrived at Thunderpidgeon and drove through its main gates with the vehicle slowed to a walking pace. A security guard in a sharp red and blue uniform and white hat saluted us into the park rather unnecessarily. I suspect that was Billy's doing.

We weaved through the park, which annoyed some of those on foot, who thumped on the sides of the vehicle to make their feelings heard. Billy messaged a suggestion of what I should say to them, but I thought it better not to. Lucy looked agitated.

"Here!" I said, as we pulled up at the Monster Death ride.

Lucy was looking up at the massive steel framework and

about to speak when the front, back and sides of the vehicle slowly peeled away and dropped onto the grass. This left the cocoon or cabin in which we were seated. The cabin moved forward onto the ride's tracks, and then the ride began to pull us into the sky.

"What? How?" said Lucy.

"A bit of Billy and a bit of Eric," I said.

At that moment, the seatbelts tightened and pulled us both back tightly, and a bar sprung up from the floor and settled in our waists.

"I don't like rollercoasters," said Lucy.

This discovery demonstrated a flaw in my planning. I realised this immediately due to the piercing sensation in my heart. I felt sad for Lucy, and I felt sad for myself, because the right thing to do was to hit the emergency stop button. I didn't want to because there was so much more of the Grand Tour to see.

"I'll stop the ride," I said sadly.

"Thank you," said Lucy with the brightest smile I'd seen on her that day.

Here I discovered another flaw in my planning. The large, bright red emergency stop button sat there in front of us, but it was far out of reach now that we were clamped into our seats. Lucy watched me struggle in my attempt to reach it and quickly understood the situation.

"Oh shit!" she said, because we had reached the top of the climb and were about to be hurled into an extended virtual free fall.

Billy messaged a long stream of crying face emojis, which was most unhelpful at the time.

The ride itself, I found, was very exciting. I missed having the wind in my face, cocooned as we were, and I missed

waving my arms in the air, feigning an absence of fear. I did manage to take a couple of selfies, though.

Lucy, for her part, screamed with all the might her lungs could muster. She was utterly terrifying to hear.

Despite these initial setbacks, I remained hopeful that the remaining part of the Gran Tour would win Lucy around.

Thunderpidgeon sits on the coast, and part of the Monster Death ride extends into the sea. As we hurtled downward once more, this time into the water splash, Lucy screamed again until the cabin hit the water and slowed dramatically, which stopped her screaming due to the expectation that the ride was soon to be over. For a moment, Lucy turned to me with a look on her face I'd never seen before – and I'd known her for a long time. That moment ended when she noticed that the cabin hadn't passed through the water and out the other side, but was now fully submerged beneath it.

"Submarine," I said quickly, hoping to calm any fear Lucy may have.

"Oh," said Lucy, which was music to my ears – despite them ringing on their own account.

With a clunk, the vehicle's wheels were discarded and the cabin shot forward and, mercifully, the waist bar retreated into the floor and the seatbelts relaxed.

"I can hit the emergency stop button now, if you like," I said.

"No, it's okay," said Lucy. "This is amazing."

The sun provided plenty of light at our shallow depth, and from the windows we watched shoals tumble and the teeming life of the ocean floor. Crabs scuttling, octopus searching, small fish darting and hiding.

After half an hour of exploring (a route carefully planned and programmed), the submarine headed a short way out to

sea. The added depth brought more movement in the water, but by then we believed we were experienced mariners at one with the sea; that's the kind of tranquillising effect the ocean has on people.

To add to our delight, a pod of dolphins took interest in us and swam alongside; nudging us curiously, making eye contact, and clicking excitedly. Lucy looked ecstatic. I was ecstatic for Lucy.

Soon after, the submarine came up beside a floating platform and, looking behind us, I could see the Monster Death ride which now looked quite puny. A mechanical arm stretched out from the platform and attached two weather balloons onto the roof of the submarine. As the arm retreated, the balloons took effect and, with a jolt, the submarine – no longer a submarine – lifted from the sea into the sky.

We began to rise faster, and soon only the larger features on the ground were visible. Still we rose. The curvature of the Earth became clear, and then the blue layers of the atmosphere started to emerge.

In my excitement at our surroundings and at Lucy's silence, I hadn't noticed she was sitting impassively with her eyes tightly shut.

"Are you okay?" I said.

"Are we going to die?"

I leaned forward and pressed the emergency stop button. Nothing happened, so I pushed it again; a bit harder. Then again harder still. Lucy, hearing my thumping, opened her eyes and, once again, immediately grasped our predicament.

"We're going to die!" she howled. "I don't want to die!"

I tried to converse with her a little, but she just kept repeating those two phrases. I explained that, I too, did not

want to die, but it didn't make a difference to her.

We kept rising, and the views were ever more spectacular. I confess that I hadn't expect the journey to be quite as long nor quite as high. In any case, at the designated altitude, the balloons were automatically jettisoned and the cabin went into free fall. At this point, Lucy began to scream once more.

I tried to explain to her the finer points of our current situation, and that we were in a controlled free fall. This stopped her screaming for an instant, during which her eyes told me all the things she wished upon me, and even I could tell they weren't nice things. That done, she returned to screaming. Even after the parachute opened, and we floated gently to Earth – into a field of golden wheat, no less – Lucy could not be silenced until the cabin was entirely still; whereupon she passed out, so I placed her in the recovery position on the floor of the cabin to keep her out of the sun, and I gently wetted her lips now and then.

Half an hour later, the team arrived to pick us up – a couple of Humvees and a recovery truck for the cabin. They made a mess of the crops, and I didn't feel good about that. Lucy was sitting up by this time, although she hadn't spoken a word to me. Then, as I helped her from the cabin to one of the Humvees, Lucy stood apart a little from me and slapped me hard across the face. She didn't say anything – she didn't need to – she barely looked at me. Seemed harsh to me, but I let it go.

While we were loading the cabin onto the truck, the farmer arrived. He was furious about the damage to his crops and demanded compensation. The guys just laughed at him, so he picked up his shotgun from the back of his truck and blew out the windows of the nearest Humvee. Thankfully, Lucy was in the other one. I spoke to the farmer and said I'd pay for the

damage, and he seemed pacified a little, but his eyes were still wild, so we got out of there as quick as we could.

Billy was furious about his windows being shot out. I couldn't find much sympathy in myself for him, though.

I had the guys drop me and Lucy at the hospital. I wanted her checked out, because she still wasn't one hundred percent.

After an hour or so, the doctor came and told me that Lucy had some sort of traumatic stress reaction, which was not the result I was aiming for at the end of the date. The doc said he'd seen worse cases, which didn't make me feel any better; though I had to admit to myself that I'd had a great time, and I guess that says something about me that I should think about.

They let me visit Lucy, as long as I was quick. I knew she was in the best place, but I wanted to reassure her. Maybe I was reassuring myself, I don't know. She was calmed some by the drugs, her eyes were back to normal, although sadder than usual. She told me she really did love me once, but it was the other Matt. This Matt is too different, even if he is very much the same in many ways. She said it would be best if we didn't see each other again and, although I don't fully understand why, I can see it a bit from her side, and I can see why that's not enough.

chapter nineteen

Nick Calvert

“YOU REALLY LIKE THIS place, don’t you, Matt?”

“I’m sorry?”

What with the susurrus of conversation, the clinking of glassware and cutlery, and the frequent barks of laughter from a table to our left, I was finding it had to concentrate.

“You like it here,” Charlotte said. “At Ink.”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Where we are eating, dunderhead. For goodness sake wake up, Matt.”

“Ah. Sorry, Charlie. I was miles away. But to answer your question, of course I do. I wouldn’t take you here so often if I didn’t.” I played with the napkin ring, rolling it around my index finger with my thumb.

“Besides, I kinda own it.”

“Oh.” Charlotte smiled, her eyes crinkling with good humour. “Interesting. That, I didn’t know. I thought it was because it was on the ground floor of your building. So, what would you recommend for afters?”

“Afters? You English never fail to amaze me.”

“Sweet then, and while you’re thinking about pud, please tell me why.”

“Because the paps haven’t found out I come here yet. So I get some relative peace and quiet. Also, John Forde is an exceptional chef who doesn’t serve up minuscule portions covered in sparkling fluff. And because it’s within walking distance of my office and home.”

“Why is it called Ink?”

I smiled. “John’s got tats.”

After a stellar slice of banoffee pie, a cup of rich dark Java and a brief chat with John, who had deigned to leave his kitchen in the hands of his trainee sous chef, I thumbed the bill. Saying goodbye to Jules, the *maître d’*, we crossed the atrium to the elevator bank and around the corner to the penthouse elevator where the building’s AI had the doors open before we arrived.

“That’s such a cool trick,” Charlotte said. “I wish Del-Ray would invest in something similar.”

“Best they spend their money on publicity for authors, Charlie. Not that I’m complaining. My first two novels did alright.”

“‘Democracy’s End’ will, too.”

“If you say so, Charlie. It’s a pity about the cover.”

“I do say so, and as you well know having Trump on the cover wasn’t my idea. On the next one I promise I’ll get you artistic oversight.”

“Hmm.”

Charlie’s cell rang. She tapped her watch. “Charlotte Wykeham.”

I watched as she began to look angry. I had no idea how old Charlie was. Probably close to sixty if her credits were anything to go by. She was one of the most sought after

editors around and I'd been lucky to get her, though it wasn't just my sunny disposition and slick badinage that had got her to offer a contract on my first novel, or the fact that I had a lot and a lot of money. At the time, she hadn't met me.

Admittedly I'd greased some wheels to get the manuscript on her desk, but once 'Missed Call' was in front of her she'd been captivated by it. Lucky me, as I'd submitted it under a pseudonym.

Charlie stamped her foot and frowned.

"Damn. Alright Margo, I'll be back as soon as I can." She turned back to me and shrugged. "I'm so sorry Matt. There's an emergency I can't avoid dealing with."

"Not a problem, Charlie," I said as I hugged her. "Call me when you're free?"

"You'd better believe it, kiddo."

I saw her into a cab, then went back to the elevator.

I'd bought the penthouse from the developers before they'd even broken ground, and employed my erstwhile best friend Lucy as my architect. The first floor of the penthouse housed the office for Carodine Capital Management LLC, my investment company, while the second floor was my home.

Josh was manning reception. I picked up my messages, decided to take the afternoon off, and went upstairs.

I disrobed, and had a swim. Recently, swimming had become a way to escape the dark thoughts that had begun to bother me as the anniversary of my 'do-over' fast approached. In the water the ennui I suffered seemed to evaporate. I felt more like my usual self and less like the subject of some weird experiment the universe had decided to conduct.

When I'd arrived back with the mind of a thirty six year old in the pre-pubescent body of a twelve year old I'd had a

lot of conflicting thoughts and ideas that had upset my parents far more than me. But what if it happened again? What if my life was destined to repeat ad-infinitem?

In my first life Hilary Clinton had been President and Donald Trump had been roundly ridiculed for destroying the GOP. This life saw Trump winning and Clinton destroyed. If I came back again then... then what? Would aliens from Alpha-Centauri invade? Maybe I'd end up joining the Musk brigade and living on Mars.

On the one hand living a loop was attractive. On the other... oh God.

I got out of the pool and collapsed onto what I liked to call my 'Mega Couch.' The Mega Couch ran for some twenty feet along the huge floor to ceiling glass window that faced out over the Buckingham Fountain and Lake Michigan. I might be in my thirties, but it didn't stop me using it as a trampoline when the mood was right. As a space to mess around on it was phenomenal. But best of all, if you asked Roger—the AI butler with a toffee nosed British accent—politely, the window morphed into a cinema sized TV, and Bob really was your uncle!

I'd invested heavily in the company that manufactured it—it being a spray on substance that, along with a control unit, could turn any surface into a display. Theoretically, I was informed, you could turn the moon into a TV. As the idea had been both mine and Lucy's, and the finance mine, the patent was shared equitably three ways. It was early days, but it looked like building into a huge revenue stream.

I was getting antsy.

"Scotch and soda please, Roger." The section of couch next to me melted into the floor, replaced by a table with a dewy glass of amber goodness.

I had everything I'd always dreamed of, except a partner to share it with.

I'd tried to resurrect my previous life, but it hadn't worked.

The first time I hadn't had the money, but then I hadn't had memories of the advance of the web.

Now, I was a silent partner in Google and Facebook.

The first time I'd had comparative little wealth, but I'd had Alison, my wife and Hannah, my beautiful daughter, and Lucy, the greatest best friend you could wish for. This time I had the wealth of Croesus, but no relationships. Lucy wouldn't talk to me anymore, and though I knew my daughter Hannah, could see Hannah, she wasn't mine. She wasn't mine....

I woke up to the twinkling of stars above and the lights of boats on the expanse of black that was Lake Michigan. I'd been crying, I remembered, then realised I'd been drooling in my sleep, too.

I had to do something. I had to change my life, somehow.

"Roger."

"Sir?"

"Book me in to see Tim as soon as possible."

"Tim, your shrink?"

"Yes, Roger. Tim my shrink. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No Sir," he said with a distinct snicker.

"I can have you re-booted, you know."

"Yes Sir... I've always fancied a holiday."

Wealth has its advantages. Tim, my shrink, had an office two floors below the penthouse. I had a shower and, rather than wearing my usual Gieves and Hawkes suit, I slung on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt Lucy had given me. It had a perturbed looking monkey with a laptop and the tag: Time is no substitute for talent. I wondered if I should wear a jacket

over it, then went with an old leather jacket from my university days. Oddly, looking in the mirror I felt happier than I had in a while.

I didn't bother with aftershave, put on my Nikes, grabbed my wallet, checked my watch was in sync with my subcutaneous comms implant, and trotted to the elevator. I felt light and airy, gleeful, almost as if I'd taken THC.

"Roger, did you dose me?" The pause was longer than usual.

"Sir?" He sounded too controlled.

"When I get back we are going to have words. But for now...."

"Yes Sir." Not malicious, just overtones of warmth.

Maybe I'd given the AI more control over my health than had been wise; certainly I ceded him more control than I'd been advised to by his designer. At the time I'd been riding the raw wave and excitement of a bull market and hadn't had time for anything else. I looked at my reflection in the mirror and smiled. I felt good. I felt better than I had in quite a while.

"I'm off to Tim's. Back soon, and Roger, thank you."

"My pleasure, Sir." In my mind's eye I could see him smiling.

The irony that I lived within The Chicago Loop had never left me. I pondered the fact as I made my way down to the office of Tim Rothwell, Psychiatrist to the rich and famous of Chicago. From the moment Lucy had introduced us Tim had always made time to see me whenever I had asked it of him. To begin with I'd blathered on about my parents and childhood, which, I'd read, was the meat and potatoes favoured by all the best psychiatrists.

Once I'd talked myself horse over the course of a couple

of months of sessions, I'd gone on to tell him about the 'theoretical' idea of a 'do-over.' Tim, of course, thought I was asking for help with the plot for a novel and, for an hourly fee that would have paid the monthly rent of quite a nice apartment, did his level best to help.

I found that seeing Tim did help, but then a girlfriend or a wife would have helped more. Perhaps I'd rescue a dog I could walk and talk to.

I hadn't seen him in a couple of months, The first thing I saw when his receptionist took me through was a canvas in pride of place on the wall facing his desk.

"Is that a Hockney?" I said, pretty damn sure it was a Hockney and that I was paying well over the odds to see a quack that my best friend, who wouldn't talk to me anymore, had recommended.

"Yes!" Tim beamed and squirmed like a schoolboy who'd just seen his first naughty picture.

"I'm paying you too much." I said flatly, sitting down in a leather club chair that hadn't been there the last time, either.

"Oh. Come on, Matt. What's a little bill between friends, especially as I'm sure you won't miss it, and our novel is bound to go on and make the New York Times."

"So sorry, for one moment I thought you said 'our novel.'"

"But Matt, it is our novel. We've been discussing it from almost the moment you walked through the door. It's going to be tremen..."

"Jesus Christ!" I leapt to my feet. "There are so many things wrong here I don't know where to begin. Firstly, if it is 'our' novel I wouldn't be paying you for your time, we'd be collaborating. Secondly, you idiot, do-over is common trope. There are more do-over novels out there than you could shake a stick at. Also, quite a few films. Duh! And there I was

thinking psychiatrists were intelligent.”

“Get out!” Tim snarled. Not wanting to be outdone he leapt to his feet too, and gestured wildly at the door. “Get out and....”

“Never darken your door again?” I hazarded.

“Quite!”

“My pleasure,” I said with as much gravitas as I could muster, and left, slamming his office door behind me.

“Finished for today, Mr. Green?” Tim’s receptionist asked. Ignoring my screaming irony detector I mumbled a semi-polite ‘yes’ and slammed the main office door behind me for good measure.

The bastard Rothwell’s office was on an atrium balcony. Still fuming I looked over the railing at the lobby, twenty stories below, as I waited for the elevator. Humans or ants? It’s all a matter of perspective. What was I doing with my life other than enabling gits like Tim bloody Rothwell to buy themselves Hockneys. If I were to vanish off the face of the earth who would honestly care?

The elevator pinged as its doors slid open. I was about to get in when I got another flush of the feeling I’d had earlier. I walked away and looked down again. That’s where I needed to be. With people. People I could talk to who wouldn’t know me from Adam. A few drinks in a bar on the Loop would do for a start. Ignoring the man who was keeping the elevator doors open, I took the stairs.

I didn’t want to be found by anyone that knew me, or run into any of them accidentally, either. So it took a while to find the perfect drinking hole. Eventually I stumbled into a quiet Irish pub somewhere off Van Buren, though if you asked me to take you there I’m not sure I could. It was odd, because I’d swear it wasn’t there the first time I walked by.

It was all dark wood booths with tables and benches down the middle. Sawdust covered the floor. At the far end an empty stage with an old piano on one side. Two chairs sat in the middle, one with a bodhran and beater sitting on it, the other with a fiddle and a flute.

Before I'd even got to the bar the barman was pulling me a pint of Guinness.

"No, sorry, I want a scotch and soda," I said.

"No ye don't. Ye might think ye do, but ye really don't. Have one after this glory if ye must, but get this pint of old blarney looser down yer neck first. Okay? Then we'll see what's what, and what ye need."

After that the night seemed to melt away.

Seán, the barman confused me. He tended bar well, was never discourteous to any of his customers, but whatever I ordered I never received. He seemed to know my requirements much better than I did. So after a while, as I got drunker and drunker, I let him.

Bearded and black eyed, Seán was short, powerfully built, wore a dark green jerkin and a green knitted bobble hat over curly black hair.

"So tell me, Matthew Green what it is ye need from the Tuatha?" He said in a singsong lilt, then dropped to a whisper, "though as a fellow looper I think I probably know better than ye."

"A fellow loo... what? When did I tell you my name?"

"Ye came through the door, Matthew Green. Of course I know your name." With that, he grabbed my hand and the world seemed to implode.

In the middle of a green, green sward, dancing motes of light rimmed dust spiralled around our heads as we sat nose to nose.

“Here’s what I know, Matthew Green. Ye’ve looped once you can remember. Ye crave the family that you left behind, ye yearn for yer daughter, but that can no longer be. Ye have to let go of the past, Matthew, but at present ye can’t. Why?”

“I have so much, So much. But I can’t help them.”

“Don’t be daft, man. Of course ye can. Ye want to provide for yer daughter and yer wife, so provide for them!” With that he rapped me hard on the head.

Stone cold sober I was back in the booth in the bar, a scotch and soda sitting in front of me.

I looked over to catch Seán’s eye, but he wasn’t there. Another barman I didn’t know was talking to three customers who hadn’t been there a moment before.

I stood up, left the pub and started to walk home.

It wasn’t that I couldn’t provide for Hannah’s college fund, it was the how. She didn’t know I existed. Neither did Alison. But with the multitude of possibilities Seán had gifted me it would be easy. From Crypto currency to a anonymous gift from a trust fund. The possibilities were endless.

Smiling, I let my previous life drift away as I walked. Typically, I wasn’t paying attention and trod on the heel of the person walking in front of me.

“Ow! Damn! That hurts,” the woman said as she turned around to berate me.

“Lucy!”

Like a slack jawed idiot I gaped at her. She was gorgeous.

“I’m so, so sorry. I’m an idiot, a clumsy idiot, but... you look so beautiful.”