



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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for Montrée

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, 2019

Auld Lang Syne

chapter one

Sue Cowling

JANUARY 2019

“It was at times like this that I wished I had been anything other than an accountant, I could have been a lawyer, or maybe a teacher, even an explorer, anything but a damned accountant.” Taps on the window pull my attention away from work, the scene outside mesmerises for a moment, making any anger and frustration temporary forgotten. Snow flurries racing across the sky gather momentum and through the pane the whole of the Chicago Skyline appears covered in an ever-thickening dusting of snow. Knots in my shoulders begin to loosen, thank god it’s Friday, the whole weekend not to think or worry about work.

Hannah would be on about going to Montgomery Park with her sledge, she might only be coming up seven but bloody fearless child that she was, we would have to go up the steepest inclines we can find. The possibilities for the weekend were endless, I could call Lucy maybe meet for lunch, perhaps Lucy would want to go sledging too. I can remember us

sledging as kids together, Lucy being every bit as fearless as Hannah is now, they could almost be mother and daughter. Lucy would listen and understood what I was going through, just thinking about Lucy gave me a warm feeling, I try not to think about that too much. Then there was Alison, I am sure Alison had some plans made, that did not include sledging or snow, and what Alison wanted she dammed well got. I could feel my irritation rising again this was not good, I needed to get through today. Life was bloody complicated and getting more so.

The screen scrolled through numbers and figures working away on its own, making me feel even more irrelevant. The pile of documents on the desk seemed to be growing instead of decreasing, adding to my angst.

The phone vibrated, I took a long gulp of coffee, the bitterness just what I needed to clear my mind and think of a solution. Hannah's short message and use of emojis danced across the screen, brightening my thoughts.

my book remember to pick it up???

Will do, I pinged back, adding some pink hearts to make her happy.

I was holding it together but those knots in my shoulder were tightening again, the other three occupants of the office worked at their desks purposely ignoring me, of course they were, dam it all I could smell their relief it's not them that was hauled up in front of the boss. Rolling my shoulders to release some of the tension, all I can think is, "got to keep it together Matt, it's just a job," like a mantra I repeated it under my breath until I could breathe again.

I play it all through my mind once more. The door was open, and a faint banging of draws and books reached out to me, and the rest of the office. I can see Sam is not in the best

of moods. Pulling my shoulders back, telling myself “Matt your good at this job, show him.” I walked across the room towards him, and any confidence I had felt seemed to drain out of the room. Whatever I had planned to say went straight out of my mind. I could see it in his face, he was not happy with me, what could I say that would change his decision, he had already made up his mind, I could see that.

I wanted to stay calm but all I could hear was his voice droning on about “poor results, not committed to the job, mind elsewhere, and no drive,” and all of this while his face got redder and his voice louder.

“Shit” I should have closed the door behind me, everyone heard him, and me. Just thinking about that raised my blood pressure.

Sam’s voice seeps back into my brain. “What the fuck is going on with you Matt, you have lost three pitches in as many months. Your heading for redundancy, and I can’t do anything to stop it only you can do that. Now unless you want to say something useful, get the fuck out and get some bloody results.”

It kept playing over and over in my mind, and every retort I could think of was too late, because I never said any of them to him when I had the chance.

“Fuck you too Sam” I can’t stop the words coming out loud once I start. I kick my desk and kick it again. Its burning me this anger, I want to hurt someone or something, this frustration that’s building inside me, it has to go somewhere. I need to calm down before I do something stupid. I know that, I do, but I can’t stop myself.

I look about the room, everyone has eyes on screen as if I don’t exist, god dam it these are my friends and colleagues, what does that say about them. Not one of them has the

decency to say anything to me. Fuck them all, something flips in me, I feel mental, I will show them all. I make a few mistakes and suddenly I am no one, well fuck them all. My anger grows, I stand, my chair banging against the wall, making everyone look up at me.

All work has stopped, the silence feels like I have stepped out into a snow-covered field, covered with a dome, total silence for miles around me. Its absolute silence, they hold their breath, waiting for me to do something.

Fuck them all, something flips in me, I feel mental, I will show them all. I make a few mistakes and suddenly I am no one, well fuck them all. My anger grows, Now I have their attention, there was Rich, the quiet one, a family man, desk covered in family photos, looking uncomfortable, not wanting to make eye contact. Sally, conscientious Sally, nothing on her desk, just paper and good results, she actually does not seem bothered, she looks at me blankly, probably wondering why I had disturbed her train of thought. Then there is Rachel, with a small family, and a large mortgage, I glance at her and I see it in her eyes, fear, raw fear. I feel something then, remorse? But it's too late I have to do something.

I am sure I know what it I need to do, I feel alive with anticipation and I walk over to Sam's office and kick open the door and walk in.

He looks at me, surprised, maybe not, maybe he expected this, he opens his mouth to speak, but it's my turn and I don't want him to speak. I want to act, I need to release this frustration that has been building inside me for weeks.

I shout at him, "Don't say a word, not one fucking word." I see it in his eyes he does not need to speak, he is frightened of me.

"You write me off like I don't matter, well I fucking do

matter and you need to know that.” I see it he wants to speak, but I hold up my arm, my hand curled into a fist, and he closes his mouth.

I want to put my thick hands around his throat and squeeze, keep squeezing harder until he stops breathing, unable to criticise me anymore. I want to punch him in the face, see his nose bleeding and broken, anything to take that look of disappointment off his face. I want to, but I can't. I don't know why I can't do it. I scream out in frustration, and turning, I punch the door, leaving an indentation of my fist, then and only then I walk out. I hear him shouting behind me as I go, “Dam it, Matt, go home and sort yourself out.”

I need to get out of the office, or I will do or say something else that cannot be taken back. Grabbing my coat and phone I deliberately slam the door behind me, before stopping to put my coat on, it's so dam cold, and still snowing.

The metal handrail feels cold on my skin as I step down to street level, the ice sticking to my skin. I push my hands in my pocket as soon as I reach even ground. I look up at the sky full of unfallen snow, it promised a good weekend, yes, a good weekend and all I needed to do was calm down, sod work, sod Alison's plans, I will get Hannah's book, flowers to appease Alison and go home, start the weekend early and I would have lunch with Lucy, yes I would defiantly have lunch with Lucy.

My mind still feels messed up. I look behind me back at the office doors, and see Rachel peering through with a worried expression on her face, I smile up at her, and not waiting for a response I turn walking in the direction of the bookstore. I am not even sure how I got to there, but I did, and walk straight through the store looking in the YA section for the book Hanna is so desperate to read, I spy one copy on the table but before I can pick it up its grabbed by someone else. This was

not good; this day had just got worse.

I can feel my anger ignited so quickly, and I know I am going to make a bad decision, but before I can react the book is back on the table, and I grab it before it gets taken again. I feel a sense of peace as I pay for the book, one good thing today, next stop flowers. With the book safely tucked in my coat pocket and humming to myself I walk to the flower stall on the corner and buy a bunch of flowers for Alison, even in middle of winter it amazes me of the choices. Grabbing my loose change, I pay and with book and flowers I turn towards home, and that weekend.

chapter two

L.P. Masters

I STILL WOKE UP early, even though I'd been sure that the alarm was turned off. Damn biological clock. I lay in bed a few minutes, trying to pretend I could actually fall back asleep. Almost half an hour later I sighed and rolled over. It was a quick movement, so sudden I almost could have missed it. Alison's eyes had been open, but as she came into view, her eyelids dropped shut. Her face remained impassive, and she breathed gently. Pretending to be still asleep.

I stared at her to remind myself what it was I had fallen in love with all those years ago. She was still in good shape. She didn't let an office job get the better of her physique. A strand of her blonde hair had fallen across her brow and I swept it back behind her ear. She didn't flinch, didn't even change the rate of her breathing. I pulled myself up on my elbow and kissed her on the cheek. Still no response, still this pretence of being asleep.

I began to move down, kissing her on the neck the way I knew used to always turn her on.

She turned over and brushed her hand over her neck,

pushing my lips away from her skin. "I'm still sleeping," she said drowsily.

I bit at my bottom lip. I could hear the lie in her forced sleepy voice. She was awake, just like me. Office work apparently does that to a brain, even if we don't want it to. I slid across the bed and laid my head on her pillow, my elbow resting on my own hip and my hand barely touching her flank. I felt as if I couldn't touch her.

There we stayed for another twenty minutes until her breathing changed enough that I knew she couldn't pretend any longer.

"Good morning, Alison," I said quietly.

"Good morning," she gave me begrudgingly.

"Happy anniversary."

At least she turned her head enough to kiss me. I went in for another kiss, a deeper kiss. She returned the gesture like it was her duty, but it was our anniversary. I'd take duty. I ran my fingers down her arm and smiled at her. She took a long, patient breath.

"Do you remember what happened ten years ago?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said, and though her expression didn't move I could hear in her voice that she wanted to roll her eyes. I could feel that frustration rising again but I tamped it down.

"Well?" I asked and raised my eyebrows.

She sighed and rolled away from me.

"What?" I asked.

"Hannah will be up soon."

I shrugged. "So let her be up. Our door's locked." I reached out and touched her hip again and she shoved my hand away.

"Not this morning, Matt. We've got to get ready for the

party.”

She climbed out of bed. She went to the bathroom to get dressed.

I went down to the kitchen after a hot shower and a shave. Alison was just putting a plate of steaming eggs on the table. When Hannah saw me she jumped over to me with the excitement that only a seven-year-old girl can have. “Daddy! The party’s tonight! Are you sure you invited Shiloh’s mum and step dad?”

I smiled down at her. “Yes, Hannah. Shiloh’s parents have been invited. They said they’re planning to be here.”

“Yea! Yea! Yea! Shiloh’s coming tonight!” She hopped up and down. I wrapped her in my arms and gave her a hug, more to stop the energetic movement.

“What did you make me for breakfast this morning? It smells amazing?”

“Scrambled sunshine, Red-only rainbows, and shredded rainclouds.”

“Yum!” I said. “My favorites.”

Hannah giggled. I sat down and poured myself a cup of coffee.

“Oh yeah,” she said, all excitement disappearing from her voice. “I also made you hot unicorn poo.”

I took a deep breath of my coffee then a noisy sip. “Mmmm! You make the best hot unicorn poo in the world!”

“Ugh! Gross.”

Alison set the plate of hash browns on the table, but there was no smile on her face at our daughter’s silliness. I buried my face in the coffee cup to hide the disappointment. It seemed like nothing could make her smile these days.

“Well, are we ready for breakfast?” I grabbed a spoonful of

eggs and was about to put it on my plate.

Hannah yelled, “Stop, daddy!”

She climbed up on the chair next to me, dished up two small servings of hash browns like clouds. She arranged my red rainbow bacon strips to cross the plate, then gave me a little “sun” of eggs up in the corner.

“There. Now you can eat,” she said, as she worked on decorating Alison’s plate. I looked across the table at her and flashed a smile. She blinked at me and hid her own face behind the coffee cup.

I took a deep breath. “So what do we need to do before the party?”

“A lot,” Alison said. “There’s a list on the fridge. I think I should go shopping first thing. You can fix that patio swing in the back. You know the one I’ve been asking you to fix for weeks now.”

I caught her jab and clenched down on my teeth so I wouldn’t say something rude back. It was our anniversary. I was determined to have something nice. I nodded. “Sounds good. I’ll get to it right after breakfast.”

“Hannah, are you going shopping with me?”

“No, mum. I want to stay with dad.”

Alison didn’t respond. Just picked up her red-only rainbow and tore it in half with her teeth. I drank a little more unicorn poo.

I tightened the last screw and looked over at Hannah. “Now we get to find out if daddy did this right. You ready to try it out?”

“Yeah!” Hannah yelled.

“Are you sure? Because if I did it wrong and this swing breaks again, you could end up falling all the way to My Little

Pony Land.”

Her eyes widened. “Well now I hope you did it wrong!”

I laughed and picked her up, setting her down gently on the swing. I looked around dramatically, then swung her with pretend caution. “Well,” I said. “No wormholes opening up to take you to another dimension. I must have done something right.”

“Oh, darn!” Hannah folded her arms over her chest and made a pouty face. I sat down next to her and started us swinging. It was nice and warm in the little sun room we had, and even though the clouds kept covering up the sun, it was usually pretty bright in there.

“Dad, does mum still love you?”

I’d been wondering that myself lately, but it wasn’t for a little girl to worry about. “I’m sure she does. Mum and I just have a few things we have to work out.”

“Cause Shiloh’s mum didn’t love her dad anymore. Now they don’t live together.”

“She’s got her step dad.”

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “Blaire’s weird. Shiloh wants her daddy back.” She thought a moment as we swung back and fourth, then her eyes lit up. “I know! What if Shiloh’s dad came and lived with her mum and Blaire? Then they could all raise Shiloh.”

I almost choked on my own air. I coughed a few seconds and shook my head. “I don’t know, Hannah. People don’t usually do that.”

She shook her head. “Parents are weird. You and mum aren’t going to live in different houses, are you?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. I didn’t want that to happen for Hannah’s sake, but sometimes there were things beyond our control.

“Daddy?” Hannah pressed.

“We’ll try not to, babe. We’ll really try.”

Hannah frowned but nodded her head. “Okay.” She hopped down off the swing. “Can I watch a show?”

“Sure.”

She ran off. She knew how to turn the TV on by herself now. How was I going to deal with a little girl who was growing up way too fast? I pushed myself one more time on the swing and was about to get up when I heard Alison’s voice. “Did you get it fixed?”

I looked up at her. “I’m sitting on it, aren’t I?”

“Yes.” She eyed me a moment then said, “That’s a very good test of its strength.”

I chuckled then patted the seat next to me that Hannah had just vacated. “There’s room for two. We could really test out its strength.”

She hesitated a moment as if trying to decide if she wanted to join me, then she sat down.. It was nice to have her beside me. I put my hand on her thigh.

“You know, Hannah’s watching a show,” I said.

“I saw.”

“So we got half an hour at least,” I said, moving my hand a little higher up her thigh.

“Not right now,” she said.

“Why not? Right now is perfect.” I kissed her on the cheek.

“We have to get ready for the party.”

I sighed. “A party to celebrate our anniversary. We can take a couple minutes out of the day.”

Alison stood up. “I have to get the little smokies started.”

“I’ve got some little smokies I could start for you.” I winked at her.

Alison cleared her throat. “Why don’t you start setting up the chairs?”

“You want a chair dance?”

“Oh, come on, Matt.”

“Come on, what, Alison? You seem to forget what we’re celebrating here.”

She didn’t say anything. She just walked off. I stared after her and worried about the promise I’d made to Hannah.

“Well, congratulations Matt, Alison. Ten years already! That’s quite the feat.”

I shook John’s hand and smiled at him. “Thanks.”

“How’s the restaurant?” Alison asked.

“Oh you know,” John said. “Hot as usual.”

Alison smiled. “Hot’s good in January, right?”

“I suppose so. Except that I sweat in the kitchen then step outside and turn into an ice pop.” John looked around the room at all our guests and asked, “How’s the accounting? You’re getting busy, right? Tax season and all that.”

“Oh...” Alison said, knowing what my response would be.

I let my eyes roll back in my head and pretended he’d just hit me with a knockout blow as my knees sagged slightly. “Please don’t say the T word in my home, John.”

He laughed, his big, gutty laugh that he’d had since we went to school together. A moment later Lucy was in our group, standing to my left. “Ah. John. Now I found you.”

“However did you do that?”

“Matt told a joke.” She looked at me. “What was it?”

I shook my head. “It wasn’t a joke. I actually mean it. That word is worse than the F bomb.”

“Is that the F bomb I’m thinking of?” John asked.

“Yes. Finances.”

Lucy giggled and pushed my arm. “You’re such a nerd,” she said, then leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “For an accountant, you have some pretty weird forbidden words, Matt.”

I smiled at Lucy. She was being a bit of a flirt tonight. This wasn’t the only time this evening she’d done something like that. I didn’t think anything of it. She’d always been a flirt. Ever since we were kids.

John interrupted my thoughts. He shook his head and stated, “That wasn’t the F bomb I was thinking of.”

“Oh, yeah. You can say that word as much as you want. I mean—no one around here is getting any of that, so no real taboo to talk about it.”

It came out before I could stop it and I knew as soon as the words left my mouth I was in trouble. I looked toward Alison who was pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. It seemed like a natural thing, but I knew it was her way of getting ready to land a punch.

And then she did. “Some people around here are getting it,” she said, and her eyes burned into Lucy.

The insinuation took me by surprise, and I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “What? You think Lucy and I are—”

Alison cut me off, “Oh, don’t even deny it, Matt. She’s been in love with you since you were fourteen.”

I looked at Lucy to see what her response would be. She had her head down like she didn’t want to be part of this conversation any longer. I turned back and sneered at Alison, angry that she would cause such hurt to someone who was only my friend, who had been my friend for so long. “I’m not cheating on you, Alison.”

“Oh, sure. You just like hanging out with this slut cause she’s got such a great personality.”

“Alison! What the hell is wrong with you?”

“What the hell is wrong with me? Maybe I don’t like sharing my husband with his childhood sweetheart.”

All the frustration of the morning, all the pent up anger and sexual tension came out in a burst that I shouldn’t have let happen and Alison didn’t deserve. “You don’t share anything with your husband. I’ve never slept with Lucy. You might have realised that. Maybe if I had slept with her, she would at least satisfy me. When all I get from you is—”

“Daddy?”

My heart stopped. My vision tunneled until all I could see was Hannah standing there, pushing her way between John and Lucy. She looked up at me with her big blue eyes that showed her aching soul.

“Hannah, I...”

She shook her head. “Never mind.” She turned around. “Come on, Shiloh.”

They left.

I took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

Lucy looked at Alison and said, “I’m sorry. There really is nothing going on between us. I’m just a bad flirt, Alison. I’m sorry.”

Alison swallowed hard. “I’m sorry too, Lucy. It’s just been a stressful week.”

Lucy nodded. She turned to me and said, “Congratulations, Matt.” Then she walked away.

Alison looked at me, her lips a straight line. She looked like she was about to cry. She turned and left without a word to me.

I scanned the room for Hannah and found her across the room, sitting on the chair by Shiloh. They held hands together and Shiloh was talking quietly with her head leaned in against

Hannah's.

Yeah. Happy anniversary to me.

chapter three

Adela Torres

HE HAD PROMISED HIMSELF he wouldn't keep score. But he was keeping score.

This was the third time she'd said she wouldn't be home for dinner this month. The fifth in the last six weeks. And she had cancelled a couple of times when he'd offered to do something together.

At home, she always said she was tired when he proposed sex. It was variations of 'We're having a tough time right now at work', but the dry spell went from weeks to months and now he was gauging her answers based on how convincing they sounded, unconsciously assuming their falsehood.

The realisation of the nature of his fears crept on him slowly, so slowly that by the time he put a name to it he had been convinced for a while: Alison was cheating on him.

He nursed this conviction for a few days as if it were a vague flu: now rejecting it with contempt, now embracing it with a sort of lumpy cold feeling in his stomach. During breakfast, while they shared some minutiae about the upcoming day, he felt like an idiot for even considering it. But

by the evening he was so convinced that he'd lose track of whatever conversation was taking place at the dinner table as his brain was taken by an ugly, slimy bubble of certainty. He tried to hide it, but he *had* been keeping score. Alison was definitely avoiding him, deflecting every potentially meaningful conversation and feeding him a soft pap of small talk. He went along, mostly because Hannah was there during these times.

And this week had been especially bad. So bad that finally he gathered his nerve and arranged to have a couple of free hours at midday at work, then called Alison.

"We could go for lunch," he'd said. "A quiet lunch in a nice place, a sit-down place by the waterfront. We've both been working too hard, we deserve a treat."

"Sounds nice," she'd said. "Let me check if I can sneak off. I'll text you."

She had, shortly after: "Sorry hon, can't make it today. Unexpected meeting! Rain check? xoxo".

He'd texted back a 'no prob' but her text spelled G-U-I-L-T-Y to him so clearly that he'd taken the rest of the day off and went home early. To think, he told himself, though he was too angry to think.

He sat in the living room looking stupidly at the text message, ideas circling each other in his head like competing vultures. He didn't hear the door when Hannah returned from school and he was only aware of her presence when her exasperated "Dad!" grated in his ears. He jumped, startled.

"Hi, sweetie! I didn't hear you come in. How was school?"

"Fine. How come you're home already?"

"Not feeling so good," he said. Hannah considered this for a moment, apparently weighing the pros and cons of this turn of events.

"Oh," she said. And then: "Can I go do my homework at Janice's? So you can rest," she added, virtuously.

He said yes, offered to make her a snack, was rejected, and then called Janice's mom to make sure that everything was on the level. Then he insisted on walking Hannah there despite her protests. Janice lived only a couple of blocks away, but better safe than sorry.

"You call me at five and I will come pick you up, OK?"

"But Dad, I can—"

"No 'buts', Hann. You call me, hear me? Not walking the city by yourself, that's the rule. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Dad."

"That's my girl."

When he got back home he took the phone out again.

Unexpected meeting.

Rain check.

This is not, he thought, how you talk to your husband when everything is all right. This is a casual acquaintance text, a 'leave me alone' text. This is, in text, what Ali had been telling him without words all this time. Conviction was ascendant over doubt in his head.

He drank little, but now he poured himself a drink. Beer seemed too easygoing for his mood: a finger of bourbon went down his throat and found a lump in his stomach. While the bourbon worked on the lump, he worked on his next steps.

He could confront her. Hell, he should. If she was cheating he had to know. She should have the guts to tell him, right?

Except he didn't know, not really. What if he made an utter fool of himself? Arguing with Ali was generally a bad idea. When she was pissed she used to bring the lawyer out, confuse him with arguments and counterarguments, turn everything he said on its head, and that would piss him more because his

initial conviction that he was in the right ended up filled with cracks.

He couldn't be made a fool, he thought. Not on this. He was certain but he needed something else, he needed proof. If she was cheating on him there should be something to show for it.

Maybe it was the bourbon talking, but this seemed to him a perfectly logical line of action: he went to their room.

They had an old chest of drawers, relic from their previous apartment: a horrible thing from the eighties that Ali wanted to replace but that he had never paid attention to, as an object; it was merely a convenient way of storing socks.

Feeling a bit embarrassed and a bit excited, he rifled through the drawer where she kept her underwear. Ali was messy and mostly practical; cotton panties, some bras and bralettes, a tanga, all jumbled up in a tangled mess. Scrunched up against one side was a pair of blue silk panties edged with black lace; he remembered those and spent a very uncomfortable minute fingering them, imagining them full. Then his hand went further up the drawer and touched something with smooth hard borders.

He took it out: a plastic case, disagreeably, medically beige. Inside, a foam outline of something a bit like an incomplete cross baffled him for a while until he remembered that after Hannah Alison had had a IUD implanted. He had marvelled at the time at the small, almost absurd little object, and had thanked her for taking on the contraception side of things. A folded prospect nestled uncomfortably against the inner side of the lid. Matt left it where it was.

He put the case back in its place but couldn't make it go all the way back against the drawer board. Thinking that a pair of panties had gotten in the way he slid his hand as far as it would

go to pull it out and found something else; it felt, against his fingertips, like a small cardboard box. He took it.

It was a box of condoms. Latex, ribbed, mango-flavoured. They used condoms even after she got her IUD, because one never knows and because she still asked him to use one just in case and he didn't mind. But he kept staring at the box.

He was allergic to latex. *Very* allergic, in fact: hives, itching, the works. So he was the one who bought the plain, non-flavoured, polyurethane condoms he liked, and he kept them in his nightstand drawer.

Still with the mango-flavoured condoms in his hand, he went to check. Yes: there it was. A box with two condoms missing. He remembered the last time they used them.

There were three condoms missing from the box in his hand. The expiration date printed on the cardboard was 2022. He kept looking at it, numb at first.

After a while he returned the box of latex condoms to the back of the drawer and went back to the living room, where he poured himself another, stiffer bourbon. Certainty was now the only thing in his mind and the enormity of it didn't leave space for much more. Eventually a tiny lava plume of anger started at the pit of his stomach and started making its slow way upwards to what he knew would be a rather spectacular outburst. Would she, *could* she react with the coolness she always showed during their fights? He didn't go that far in his mind; picturing her against the backdrop of his current anger level was a bit too much. He finished his drink and went for the bottle again.

His phone chimed. He nearly jumped out of his skin until he realised it was Hannah. It was a quarter past five.

"Hi, Dad, we're done, can you come pick me up?"

"Sure, Hann, I'm on my way now."

"Are you all right? You sound weird."

"Just a bit fluey, I think. I'll be there in just a sec, OK?"

"OK."

He went to pick her up and suggested, seeing as how he wasn't feeling so good, picking some pizza for dinner. And yes, she could eat it in her room, and yes, she could watch TV, but she had to go to bed at 8 and not make a fuss like always, all right? She agreed to everything wholeheartedly, as he knew she would, and once he had left her in her bedroom, happily munching on pizza and watching She-Ra on Netflix, he went back down to another bourbon and a silent, increasingly angry wait.

chapter four

Conrad Gempf

YOU KNOW, I'M NOT really sure what I thought it would accomplish. I was thinking of a romantic dinner at Tony's; I tell her I've found out about her affair... And then... what? Did I expect her to repent: "I'm so sorry; how could I have done this to wonderful you? How could I think of leaving our ideal marriage?! Please forgive me.?" Yeah, right.

But yeah, stupid romanticist me — maybe there was a bit of that hope. Or maybe the hope I'd get a clearer idea of what we'd broken in our relationship and an idea of how we'd fix it. I mean, surely that was Alison all over (I thought): mutual responsibility, talk it through, move on together.

And the idea of doing that over pasta at good ol' Tony's? Well, how could reminding ourselves of better times be a mistake? Not that it mattered. When I rang for a reservation, the recording told me. Closed. Six weeks. Will re-open under new management. Not an auspicious opening to the operation, but I persisted.

On the evening, I arrived at the Maharajah 15 minutes early, not wanting to risk ire by being late again, and hoping to

feel at home and natural when Alison arrived. They seated us in a booth, which was good atmospherically, but, well... I don't fit into close seating as comfortably as I did ten years ago. Ten years... wow. In my mind, I saw her all over again at that party in Marko's dormitory. "I'm Alison," she said simply, shaking her hair slightly. Oh, Alison...

"Good evening, sir; I'm Navim," said the waiter, handing me the giant tasseled folder they used for the menu, and beginning to gather up the glasses and cutlery from the other places.

"My wife will be joining me," I said, and he left a place set opposite with a second menu.

"Very good, sir. May I bring you anything while you're waiting?"

I had him bring water. Twenty minutes later, he suggested poppadum, I said no. Then five minutes after that, having looked at my watch four times, I called him back.

Between the two set places, without a word, he left a basket of the crispy fried bread/wafers, and the usual tray of sauces and pickles. I went to snap off a piece of poppadum, and the whole wafer jumped and shattered, a little piece in my hand, and fragments scattered here and there everywhere on the table. I ate my piece, and brushed the fragments with one hand into my other hand, and left them in the basket, just as she walked through the door.

I stood when she arrived at the table. "Sorry I'm late," she offered, leaning forward for an almost-hug and peck on the cheek. She smelled good, and her blonde hair brushed my cheek. How I wished at that moment for the impossible, movie moment, "You thought *that*? Oh, I'm so sorry — he's actually my long-lost twin brother and we were hugging because we thought each other dead these last 30 years. I love

you, only you, Matthew Green, and I always will.”

I heard myself asking, “Is Hannah ok?” and instantly despised myself for what might be interpreted as a passive-aggressive criticism of her tardiness: do you have a good excuse like that for being late? At least I hadn’t looked at my watch before speaking.

“Tanya was a few minutes late, but agreed to stay after 10 if we need her,” she said, sitting down, arranging coat and bag on the seat next to her. “You ok?”

“Um, yeah,” I said, “Or actually, not really. Alison, I...”

“Good evening, Madam. I am Navim. Do you know what you’d like, or shall I give you a few more moments?”

I spoke, “Give us another few minutes, would you please, Navim. Thank you.”

He bowed slightly and moved off to another table to pour some tea.

Alison smiled slightly and raised one eyebrow, “Really? What’s up, Matt?”

“Let’s order first,” I said, studying my menu, though, of course, I’d decided what I wanted way before she’d arrived.

“Have you thought past your Prawn Puri?” she laughed softly. I’d often confessed that to be my favorite dish, although just a starter.

“I was thinking either the Jalfrezi or Chicken Tikka,” I said.

“Sounds perfect; why not get both and we’ll share them? You have your puri by yourself, though,” she smiled.

I couldn’t quite smile, but nodded to her and glanced over to Navim, still nodding.

He came, and I ordered the puri, the Lamb Jalfrezi, and chicken. Alison asked for the chili-spiced vegetables for her starter.

“Pilau rice for two?” Navim suggested and I agreed.

“And darjeeling tea?”

“Why not?” I said, closing the menu and handing it over.

Small talk during starters. Her work, my work, Hannah’s teacher. The prawn puri was excellent, but my stomach was already acidic before I’d started.

It felt like several centuries later of vapid conversation later, Navim brought the main dishes, and our plates, wiping them with a towel — “Careful. Very very hot.” — and spooned some rice onto them for us. I could delay it no longer.

“Alison. I *know*.”

She looked at me blankly, feigning ignorance.

“Your affair. I know.”

She dabbed her napkin against her lips before answering. “I see. I’m sorry — I’ve been wanting to tell you. It’s not been easy to find a time.”

“Who is it?” I asked “Another lawyer?”

“Matthew, I never wanted to hurt you.”

How do you react to that? You didn’t want to hurt me?, lady? Then don’t sleep around! What did you think this was going to do to me?

“Who is it?” I asked again, stupidly.

“We’ve been... It’s not been the same, you and I.”

Is that my fault? Is she blaming me? Is it something as simple and superficial as no longer fitting into the little bathing suit she’d bought me? I said nothing, stared dumbly, probably looking as perplexed and numb as I felt.

“Alison, wh...”

I was just about to ask “what can we do to fix this...” but suddenly, unbidden, I heard Lucy’s voice in my mind... from a conversation from 10 or 11 years ago, when my courting Alison didn’t seem to be working, “You are such a *man*,” I

remember Lucy laughing, “Your first impulse is always *how do I fix it* when a woman usually just wants you to stop and listen. We’re not talking about external situations we want changed, we’re talking about internal feelings we want to share.”

“Alison, wh... what happened? Why...?”

Alison looked thoughtful before answering... “I don’t know, Matt. We’re *not* the same, though, are we? Don’t you feel it too? Maybe since Hannah, I don’t know.”

“You haven’t been cheating on me since Hannah was born, have you?”

“No, no, no. This is only really been going on about a year. We’d flirted for a while, but it was only when you were in the hospital that...”

I exploded. “Hospital? I was only in the hospital because you...”

“I know,” she said, shaking her head slowly, “Maybe it was trying to take my mind off of the guilt, the whole roof thing was such a mistake...”

“So while I was in a hospital bed, you were...”

“Oh, that’s not *why*, Matt, it only made more convenient something that was going to happen anyway...”

“You make it sound like something that’s inevitable rather than something that you and I vowed in church 10 years ago would never happen. ‘Til death do us part,’ ‘forsaking all others,’ remember any of that?”

“Oh, Matt, don’t be so ...”

“Ok, this needs to stop. Tell me what you think is wrong with our relationship and we’ll work on it. We’ll look for a good counsellor and”

“Matthew, no, honey,” she said, “You need to look for a good lawyer not a good counsellor. I was thinking I’d use Jerry from the firm. Scott’s the best, but Jerry doesn’t know you.

You can ask Scott, but I do think it'd better to have someone who doesn't know us as a couple."

"What are you talking about? It's not 'too late' ... we can fix this ... we still love each other ... and there's Hannah. Who is that you've been seeing? You've still not told me."

"It doesn't matter who, Matt. What matters is that I think I want a divorce."

"Just tell me who he is," I said.

She put her fork down and looked at me with that irritating "I'm so funny" hint-of-a-smile she uses, "I don't believe I ever said it was a *he*..."

"Not a ...? What?" I watched her half-smile, "Is this a *joke* to you?! Are you actually *enjoying* this?"

"No, honey, I'm not. The Jalfrezi is even saltier than usual, and you know I never have tea with meals."

If there was more I didn't hear it. I didn't swear, I didn't hurl insults, I didn't say another word. I threw my napkin at the table and walked quickly to the exit, managing to put three 20s into the hand of Navim before crashing through the doors and out into the miserable February Chicago night.

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

Ioa Petra'ka

FEBRUARY 1995

Something didn't smell right.

I opened my mouth and a stream of tasteless, odourless foam with the consistency of coagulated milk pumped through my throat, streamed urgently around tooth and tongue, down chin and chest to splatter thick between my bare feet. I found myself not horrified, but marvelling at the quantity of granular black and red matter accumulating on the floor. Giddy with rare pleasure, a wholly unexpected sense that if one continues for much longer, they will decant their entire body to the floor. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to dampen the laughter that was bubbling around my fear, burning my torso.

My eyes snapped open to a formless sheet of white light. I found myself reflexively taking stock of my mouth with my tongue, it whispered like dry leaves over my lips.

Something didn't feel right. A gap, tender gum with the hint of something hard beneath, persistent and patiently

growing up out of the jaw.

“Endotracheal tube removed, respiratory response normal.”

Another voice responded from the right, “Hello there dear, can you hear me? Blink twice if you cannot speak.”

Dust and breath scraped out of my throat, ending in a weak cough that kept ticking, beat after beat until it merged with my ongoing attempts to restrain the laughter. I felt a hand wrap itself gently around my elbow, but even as I wondered at how long their fingers were, the convulsions gradually subsided, replaced by a jarring but powerful sense of comfort, and nostalgia.

“That’s good enough,” the voice was accompanied by a gentle squeeze of my too thin arm. There was a pause and someone moved across the room. As I stared into the impermeable whiteness before my eyes, I realised it was gradually fading into form and colour, emerging from the room like one of those old instant photographs, flapping it against the leg, beating an image out of the fog.

“Have a sip of this”, the nurse let go of my arm and reached for something beside the table. I tried to take hold of what he was offering, but everything moved the wrong way, too quickly, and before I could figure out how to open my fist the mug was before me.

I sucked the warm broth through the straw, felt a twitch as it flooded around that oddly missing tooth in the back. Before I knew it, and nearly oblivious to the pain of swallowing, I was gulping and coughing, trying to drink every drop, but no matter how I sloshed and swallowed it felt as though everything was still dry.

“Can you tell me your name?” the kindly voice asked around the deafening sound of a straw vacuuming the final

drops from the mug. I looked up, now able to see the ghostly impression of a face pressing through the ever thinning gauze around me. A halo of unfashionably out of style hair cradled his face, reminding me of thickly hairsprayed local news personalities from my childhood.

“Matth...” I started and abruptly stopped. My throat was raw, every muscle felt like it was bleeding, but instead of the usual subterranean rumble I would have expected my tortured voice box to sound like, my voice came out clear, melodic, unnatural—but somehow despite all of that, strangely familiar. I tried again, trying to find any speaking register other than falsetto, until in desperation I shouted, “Matthew Green”. Something popped in my throat on “Green”, sending my voice into an even shriller octave. “I think I swallowed some helium,” I giggled.

The nurse cocked his head, shifting the way the light fell through his hair, “Why do you say that?”

“Uhm, isn’t it obvious?” I squeaked, and erupted into another fit of mirth.

“Does my voice sound ordinary to you?” the nurse asked.

“I guess so?” I tentatively reached up to touch my throat, so flat it felt. And the attendant must have shaved me ridiculously close.

The nurse glanced over the bed, and after a moment I turned to share his point of gaze; to look into an area of the room yet still shrouded in white gauze. If shadows could be white, came a terrifying thought. I became gradually aware of the scratching of graphite over paper, loops and slopes, coming from within this milky shadow. It seemed like something from a film I’d seen years ago. A doe disappearing into the sedge, something like a twilight and an ancient mythology. I stared fiercely into the blur, but could discern not

one detail from it.

I shook my head and everything inside of me sloshed. I hadn't even noticed before, hadn't been able to see, but I was rails thin beneath the white linen I was swaddled in. How long had I been here?

“What is your date of birth?”

“What happened to me, where is Hannah?”

“Something bad happened while you were walking down the road, do you remember?”

“The last thing I remember was driving to the school to pick—” the words got all tangled with panic, “—where is Hannah!”

The room felt more silent than it had been a moment ago, even though the scratching of the pencil had not waned. I turned back and forth between the halo of hair and the milky splotch.

In that moment I wasn't sure what frightened me most, that my girl might be hurt (or worse!) or that the emotions I should have felt could be best described as incomplete, or maybe it was that they were anchored to older memories, some I had thought forgotten? I became aware of a warm hand on my shoulder, so frail and small was I beneath it, and wondered why it was there.

It was the whiteness, it was coming back. I felt cold. Colder than a lake effect blizzard in the darkest winters. I was shivering violently, and even that felt *wrong*. My elbows were rattling against my hipbones, when was the last time I could feel those? I looked down at my arms, they were so short.

“What is happening?” I came to myself screeching over and over. The louder I got, the more disjointed my voice sounded inside my own head. The nurse reached above my head and fiddled with something. And like a hot late summer

air, and the next thing I knew was a strange taste of strawberries in the back of my throat, and the realisation that I was suddenly quite high. I sunk back into my pillow. Calm, almost just.

I came awake from a feverish sequence of noticed things going on around me, events jumbled out of order, oftentimes dubiously mixed in with dreams. Things were being said around me, but they didn't seem to matter. I felt my foot being stretched at one point. Clipboards clicking. Where were all of their computer screens and tablets?

As some medically induced naps do, my confused state collapsed swiftly and cleanly. Moments later I was awake, and felt more alert and capable than I had in years. Astonishingly so, in fact. The light had shifted golden, through a window that was just out of sight, but I felt as though I could see the sky with my own eyes.

I could also still feel that indescribable wrongness in everything, even down to how I think. But if anything could be said about it, I was less distracted by the wrongness by this point.

The nurse came over to the bedside carrying a cup of tea, and I smiled to myself at how even tender care can be synthesised into routine. Now that I could see the nurse's face, I was puzzled to find a much older person than I was expecting. In turn, that got me to wondering why I thought *that*, at all. From his face he was clearly younger than me, so why the offhand impression that he was ancient? My stare must have lingered too long, for I caught a look of reproach as he turned away, as though he were used to people staring at him oddly.

“Do you know what year it is?” It was Milky Shadow, aloud

for the first time, but hands in pockets now and standing at the foot of the bed.

“Nineteen”, I muttered automatically and with a little huff, even though I knew it was just routine. I became distracted, enraptured still by how twilight had been smeared across the white brick wall. And for those bricks themselves, each crisp and unique, the mortar squished here and there between them. When was the last time I could see across a room like that, or with this clarity at any range? I flicked my gaze back into the eyes of Milky. As it turns out, Milky has clogged pores, and tends to miss a spot around his right nostril when shaving.

“Yes, nineteeeen-what... go on,” he coaxed with a smile.

“Just nineteen, what are you stupid?” it all poured out of my mouth before I could stop it. Mortified, I shook my head and said in a gentler tone, “February, Twenty-nineteen”. I could feel looks being tossed around the room, but I was running out of patience with the name and date routine.

“Look, I’m sitting down,” I gestured at my prone body. The nurse chuckled after a moment, caught off guard. “What has happened to Hannah, I need to know”, I could feel my throat closing, and a hot flush needled its way up my face. Great, crying. I didn’t mean to start in on that.

“May I at least have my phone, that must have been in my pocket”, I managed.

The doctor took a seat beside the bed and stared for a long moment, then reached over to hand me the now drinkable tea. “A phone in your pocket you say? I don’t think we’ve seen anything like that. But we’ll get somebody to check on this Hannah, is she a friend of yours, do you have a last name?”

“Hannah Green, of course, you must have that on file. She’s my daughter!” I squeaked into the quiet room.

Eyebrows raised, chin tucked, the pencil was scratching

across the clipboard again. “How old are you?”

“I’m thirty-six, it’s February 2019, and I want to know if my daughter is alive! Where’s my phone?”

I knew in that moment that I should be mad, by all rights, but the way *mad* felt to me right now felt... delicious. Screaming and weeping, I found myself drifting away from myself, up toward the middle of the room, and then in a great rush I was sliding off to the floor, caught and rolled back into the bed. Bustling and urgency all around me. People shouting in codes.

Filled with anger and the taste of strawberries, I tried again to sit up, but lost it all to the mist.

I wasn’t sure whether to call them days, my periods of strange lucidity, but it gave me a certain comfort to think of them that way. This time I awoke to silence. It had grown darker outside, and only a feeble dash of pink light still stained the wall. I smiled at the memory of yesterday’s glory, and gingerly went through the act of sitting up.

I began to examine myself. I’d gone from horror to acceptance to a powerful need to understand. I thought to proceed about it in a meticulous fashion, that is after all what I’m good at, what I’ve trained myself for years to be good at. My fingernails were long, maybe a month long, but embedded in fingers that I could *remember* having. I reached out for the cup of water that had been left for me, and stared at my hand when my arm could reach no further, unable to grasp what I clearly should be able to.

Breaking my startled state, I could hear footsteps approaching the door. I risked swiftly lying back down, my head pounding with a furious headache all of the sudden, and so it was in this distracted state of pain, on the third day of

this strange dream, that my two dead parents burst into the room.

Dad was wearing his typical flannel all buttoned up, he never had a sense of cool, and mother looked somehow my age. Both were red-rimmed and pensive, and then it was all a rush of weeping and old forgotten smells.

I couldn't understand how, with nothing around me making any sense at all, that despite all of that I still felt that I was home. I sobbed into their shoulders until collectively we all ran out of breath, and subsided into a quiet huddle.

There was a tapping on the door, and the moment was lost, Milky politely pushing the door open. We broke apart, and as their contact left me, the strangeness of it all tipped back up the fulcrum, and I was once again lost. There was an accident, and I woke up in this strange world that seems to presume to be my past. I must remain meticulous, I chided myself.

“Mr. and Mrs. Green, Matthew,” he walked over to the bed and held out his hand, “we haven't been properly introduced. My name is Dr. Poole. Shall we all take a seat?”

I laughed at the prior joke, and looked up to see Dr. Poole hastily looking away from me. My heightened level of sense from “yesterday” still persisted, and again I found it difficult to not become distracted by the amount of detail my eyes, ears, nose and even skin was able to detect. Chairs scuffed across the floor, pieces of clothing were rustled, and Dr. Milky Poole spoke.

“Matthew has, it seems, had an interesting experience. To start from the beginning,” he nodded in my direction, “you were hit by an car three weeks ago, Matthew, you were walking back from your friend's house, and the driver was drunk. It was your head that took the worst of it. You've been in a

coma since then, one that you've just awoken from."

I found myself reaching for the back of my head, the pain from the headache still lingering. "But that's not right," I said, "well okay the accident maybe, but I was driving. I was driving to pick up my daughter, as I told you yesterday!"

I looked over at my parents, irrationally thinking they would surely have my back on this, but found my pleas trailing off as I met their gaze of sympathetic shock. "Yesterday," my father looked up confused, and I caught Dr. Poole trying to discretely quiet him with a gesture of the hand.

"And this brings us to the present day," Dr. Poole continued as though there had been no interruption, "it has been known for some time now that patients in a coma can sometimes experience vivid dreams, and sometimes those dreams can even take an ongoing narrative."

"No, that's enough," I said, "this isn't real you see, I am just a regular guy. I'm an accountant, I have... well, I had..." everything suddenly felt strange coming out of my mouth.

With that voice.

How could I speak of Alison while sounding like a little brat version of myself?

"Some of these ongoing narrative dreams have been known to span decades of perceived time, upon awakening. Imagine it as though your whole life, as you lived it thus far, were suddenly shattered by waking up from a dream you were having as a kid.

"Well, in this case the cause itself for the dream is extraordinary, but then is that not more reason to accept such an extraordinary dream?"

"I want to know that my daughter is okay!", I interrupted loudly, and for a moment, a strange look flickered within and through the faces of the doctor, his father, his mother.

Dr. Poole straightened his shoulder slightly and began again, “As I say, imagine a lived life like that, all gone.”

I collapsed back in bed and sighed, “This is so fucked, wait till I tell Reddit.”

“Matthew Andrew Green,” came down the voice of mother. The surreal took over my mind again, that strange overlapping of long lost instincts taking over thoughts and actions. Before I knew it I was muttering an apology into my paper robe. I felt her hand wrap around mine, and I clung to it. “Who’s Redding?” I heard father whispering. Mother shaking her head. How could I explain.

“We have a special program that I think would help Matthew out. Let me just get you the pamphlet, so you can look over the details.”

I closed my eyes to hide the forming tears. The pillow scarcely eased the pain, but I relished the way it felt despite. I let the words of adults wash over me as I slipped my tongue between the missing tooth. Nobody would believe me, how could they.

So if they never will, I’ll just have to learn how to play along.

After all, one of these days, I’m going to wake up.

chapter seven

Luscinia Evan

THERE WAS A SHARP pounding in the back of my head, threatening to split it into two. As I shifted, I became very, very aware of just how painfully my entire body ached, and it seemed as if there were cotton balls stuck right in my throat, giving it a scratchy, parched feeling. It was like having a particularly nasty hangover combined with the aftermath of an intense workout.

As I lied on what seemed to be a bed, just taking it all in and gently rubbed my temple to coax the pain into something duller, the smell of antiseptic and artificial cleanliness invaded my nose, and muffled sounds rang harshly against my ears and brain.

I peeled open my eyes.

Light pierced through immediately, and I had to shut them with a hiss. On reflex, I rapidly blinked a few more times, and gradually, my vision became less blurry and the lights less painful.

White ceiling, white walls, white machines.

It didn't take me long to deduce that I was in a hospital.

I struggled to a sitting position despite the throbbing protest of my body, and squinted my eyes.

The bed was too big; the blankets swamped me. The hospital walls here were terribly outdated—sterile plastic panels, rather than the glass-like enamel resin typical of hypermodern medical establishments. The machines were big and bulky rather than the thin, sleek ones I'd known.

Everything seemed fine yet so, so wrong at the same time.

It wasn't the bed that was too big in size— no, it was me that was too small.

I had shrunk, was my conclusion as I stared down at my small hands and their now chubby little fingers in incredulity.

How?

Two knocks rapped against the door, and a nurse holding a plastic clipboard entered.

“How are you feeling?” She greeted politely, but the edge of monotone in her voice suggested it was a commonly repeated default phrase. Without waiting for my response, she continued, “you have a young visitor.”

From beyond the doorframe, a head with light brown hair peeked in shyly. When our eyes met, she brightened, and scurried over in a quick burst of speed.

Did I... know this child? I was almost sure we had never met, yet her face was familiar in the way an old acquaintance would be, her name at the tip of my tongue, just out of reach.

“Hi!” She chirped, running a hand through her hair as she reached the side of my hospital bed. “Are you feeling okay now? Mommy said you got hurt really bad.”

Twisting my brows into obvious puzzlement, I opened my mouth to speak, but what came out was a painful cough instead. A glass of water was pushed into my line of sight, and I didn't spare another thought to down it in greedy gulps.

“I’ll leave you kids here, alright? If there’s anything, make sure to press that button with the bell sign.” And with that, the nurse left us alone with the privacy of the room.

“I-I’m,” I began, but stopped abruptly at the high-pitched, pre-pubescent voice. I froze, with my mouth hanging, and took another good look at the child before me.

All of the myriad clues seemed to slip into place, and my breath seized in my chest.

I had know this girl before. I’d known her for decades. But the last we had met, both of us are well into our thirties.

“Lucy?” I tested cautiously, and I couldn’t help the tinge of nervous tremble. Fortunately, Lucy did not seem to notice it. “What is today’s date?”

Lucy rocked back and forth on her feet, a finger on her lips as she pinched her eyebrows together. “It’s... February eleventh, I think.”

“The year?”

“It’s nineteen ninety-five, why?” She tilted her head curiously.

Nineteen ninety-five. More than two decades into the past.

...*Impossible.*

“Did I really time travelled?” The words left my tongue before I could rein them back.

“Time travelled?” Lucy echoed. “What’s that?”

I winced, but Lucy— she had been my best friend all this time. There hadn’t been a secret we had not shared, so I closed my eyes, and took a leap of faith.

“I’ve travelled back in time, Lucy. This might sound crazy, but I’m actually from the future. I’m thirty-six, and I’ve time travelled from two thousand nineteen.”

A frown twisted her feature. “Silly Matt, time travel is impossible.”

“I— We’re childhood friends all these time, Lucy. You know that I would never lie to you.”

Lucy giggled, “sure, Matt. I’ll go and find Mommy now, okay?” and dashed out of the room just as abruptly as she had came.

I shook my head. There was no way I could convince anyone of this if I couldn’t even succeed with Lucy. The disbelief had hurt, and honestly, I wouldn’t believe myself either.

Maybe pretending everything was fine would be a better option?

The doctors say they’ll keep me in for another few days for observation, but if there are no other symptoms I would be able to go home soon.

Home.

Huh. What was home anymore?

chapter eight

Alex Brantham

MONDAY MORNING CAME ROUND, and there was no escaping the awful truth. I was going to have to go to school. It had been pretty shit the first time round, and I really couldn't see how it would be any better on a second attempt.

I tried, I really did. Headache. Sore throat. A fake sneeze. But Mom wasn't having any of it, just like before.

"Matthew, you know you have to go back," she said, in that whiney voice used by adults when they have complete moral certainty and, more importantly, all of the power. "Just take it easy, the teachers will understand. Stick with Lucy and you'll be fine."

It wasn't the teachers I was worried about.

Sixth grade. I wasn't completely sure about this, but wasn't that the year when Bruce McCulloch had been around? Twice the size of everyone else, and half the brains?

"And all your friends will be waiting to see you." Mom hadn't given up, even as she handed me my coat. "Johnny and Manuel and Consuela and all the rest."

There was more, but I wasn't listening. I was trying

desperately to remember who she was talking about. Johnny, yes, that was fine. I knew who Johnny was, though I'd hardly call him a friend. But who the hell was Manuel? And what did we actually do in school during sixth grade, anyway? My head hurt just thinking about it.

Lucy was waiting for me at the sidewalk. I stepped alongside her and we started to walk to the bus stop. I wasn't sure which was most disconcerting: the fact that she was taller than me (had that really ever been the case?), or that I was aware of her emerging shape in a way that I'm pretty sure I hadn't been before.

She prattled, I listened, and we got to the stop just as the bus arrived so there was no time to get into conversation with anyone else.

A verbal chorus greeted me as we walked down the bus to take a pair of seats. Some friendly, some teasing, some hostile. One boy with intense red hair and glasses, sitting across the aisle, leant over. "Hey, Matt, you okay? We heard you got pretty busted up?"

I was pretty sure I was supposed to know his name, but hadn't a clue what it might be. I mumbled something and hoped he wouldn't notice. He looked puzzled.

Lucy leaned across me. "Hey, Johnny, it's okay, Matt's not himself yet."

So that was Johnny. Recollections dribbled into my consciousness, fragments that steadfastly refused to assemble themselves in the right order, like a jigsaw puzzle consisting only of sky. He was the kid who liked baseball, whose life had been turned upside-down by the players' strike.

When exactly had that ended? Sometime about now, I thought. For a millisecond my hand started the movement to where my phone should be, so I could Google it. Then I

stopped: that wasn't going to happen. How did we manage back then? I was going to need to work on that. But I was pretty sure it was soon.

I turned to him. "Still fretting over the baseball strike, Johnny? Don't worry, it'll be over before long."

He looked at me like I'd just landed from Mars. But before he had a chance to speak, someone else wanted to extend a warm hand of greeting.

Only this hand was balled into a fist, and struck me hard on my shoulder.

I spun round, to find myself staring at the ugly face that I immediately recalled as belonging to Bruce McCulloch, now sitting in the seat behind mine.

"Why'd you come back, Green? We were all hoping you'd die. Then we'd get an afternoon off school to go to your funeral."

The features of his face were almost exactly as I remembered them. The slightly flattened nose, the eyes just a fraction too close together, the tiny ears. And yet, although I recalled him as having been huge, this was just a boy. Bigger than me, granted, but still a kid.

I felt Lucy's hand on my elbow, gently pulling me back. "Ignore him, Matt, it's not worth it," she muttered.

I shrugged off her restraining hand and faced him, my body twisted in the seat and out into the aisle.

"The thing is, McCulloch," I said, my nose only inches from his, "I'm back and I'm staying. You weren't here last year, and next year you'll be somewhere else. So wind your neck in and mind your own business." I stared him straight in the eye, not wavering a single muscle.

The bus fell silent as we faced each other down. Crazy, really: if he'd really wanted to, he could have flattened me. But

he didn't.

Our confrontation ended with a lurch as the bus pulled up outside the school, and disembarkation began from the front. Lucy and Johnny both slipped in line behind me, creating a buffer to Bruce in case he changed his mind.

“Are you mad?” hissed Lucy after we'd stepped off.

“Don't give in to bullies,” I said. This was what my Dad had said a million times, but I'd never previously taken it to heart. Now it was different, and I stepped confidently towards the school, following the line of kids towards the door.

“Matt!” called Lucy, by now a few steps behind.

I stopped and turned.

“Where are you going?” she asked. “That's the fifth grade entrance.”

I looked around. The stream from the bus had split into several lines, each heading in a different direction. Damn. I'd forgotten that little detail. What else was waiting to trip me up?

Having survived the usual morning rituals – which came flooding back to me even as I lived through them – we had our first class of the day, math.

It would be fair to say that I was almost looking forward to this, my first real test of how much I had remembered from Before.

Quite a lot, it turned out.

Our teacher, Mrs Hernandez, had a knack of making simple things seem complicated, and her explanation of the methods for solving equations involving inequalities had most of the class scratching their heads.

I guess that having studied university-level math might have been something of an unfair advantage in this context, but when it came to the short quiz she gave out at the end,

there really wasn't much to detain me. I had it finished inside about three minutes and had time to look around as everyone else sucked their pencils and stared at the ceiling in case the answers were written there.

She saw me twiddling my thumbs and came over.

"It's all right, Matthew, no need to worry. I understand you've missed some classes and this might be a bit difficult for you. But just do your best."

I smiled and handed her the paper.

Her eyes creased as she took it from me and then, as she flipped through the pages of flawless answers, turned into a frown. "This is very good, Matthew. How did you –"

Much as I was enjoying my little moment of triumph, I wasn't ready to turn this into a drama just yet. I certainly didn't want to get into an explanation of what I'd been doing for the last thirty-six years.

So I kept it simple. "Oh, my Mom's been doing a bit of home-schooling while I was off," I said. "I guess we got lucky about the topic." I smiled, and she smiled and walked back to the front of the class still clutching my answers and shaking her head in disbelief.

Lucy looked over at me as this transaction completed. She had a frown of her own, which was a lot more disconcerting than that of Mrs Hernandez.

After lunch, I was hanging around with the kids in the yard. Johnny, Manuel, Mikey, and a tall kid whose name I hadn't caught up with yet. It felt strangely familiar as we talked about baseball (or rather the absence thereof) and basketball and other subjects expressly designed to exclude the girls.

Lucy, therefore, was elsewhere, in a group of her own. Every now and then I caught a glimpse of her looking in my

direction as if checking up on me. I could only afford to give her the very fleetest of glances back, otherwise this would have been seized upon by my comrades as evidence of ... well, they didn't really know what, but something.

On the far side of the yard, a gaggle of kids centred around Bruce McCulloch was shooting hoops. As the tallest by far, he dominated the group in every way. And yet there was something about the scene that disturbed me, though I couldn't put my finger on it. A memory, wrestling its way through the folds of time. Perhaps it would come to me.

Manuel was banging on about Michael Jordan. "Did you see the game on TV yesterday? They think he might be coming back! Boy, do the Bulls need him—"

"Horseshit," snorted Mikey. "I saw that too, and that other guy said there was no way he'd make a comeback. Why should he? He's done it all, no way he can be that good again."

More memories stirred.

"What date is it?" I asked.

They all stopped and stared. Finally Johnny broke the silence. "Wow, you really did get a bang on the head, didn't you? It's the thirteenth."

"Of March, right?" I was pretty sure it was, just checking.

The boys looked at each other and nodded, slowly.

"He'll be back," I said. "This coming weekend. Playing for the Bulls."

"No way," said Mikey.

"Dead cert," I said.

"Betcha he won't," said Mikey.

"How much?"

Mikey frowned. This wasn't our usual conversation, I was certain. But in the circumstances... "Five bucks," he said.

"Done." I held out my hand and we shook on it. "You

guys are witnesses, right?” I smiled at Mikey. “Just remember to bring the money in on Monday.”

The guys continued the debate but my mind wandered. This could be big. All I had to do was hang onto a few key memories – Superbowl results, election winners, that sort of thing. Stock market trends. When to buy bitcoin and, more importantly, when to sell. As long as I could remember enough details, I’d be made for life. Probably not a good idea to get too greedy, that would attract attention I wouldn’t want. Not enough to distort the market, just enough for me.

I was getting excited at the thought of it all, my happiness tempered only by the thought that I was going to have to live through those wretched teenage years all over again. But this time it would be different.

From across the yard, the shouting was louder. We all looked over, to see Bruce McCulloch showing off by hanging onto the basketball hoop and waving his feet about, encouraged by the shouts of his acolytes.

Another memory.

When I’d told Bruce on the bus that he wouldn’t be here next year, I knew that I was right without remembering why, exactly. And now it was coming back to me. An injury. Playing basketball in the yard at school. A freak accident that kept him out for months, after which we’d never seen him again.

The details of the incident eluded me, no matter how hard I reached out for them. I couldn’t form an image, at least not one that would hold steady for more than a second. But I was sure that the pole supporting the hoop was about to fall, and that he was going to break his arm in a particularly messy way.

Even a shit like McCulloch didn’t deserve that.

I broke away from my friends and sprinted across to the hoop. Bruce saw me coming: presumably he thought I was

coming to wind him up, or have a go at him. Whatever. He just swung all the harder, his gang cheering him on, as the pole began to move more and more, following his movement back and forth, not just bending but breaking.

“Get down, Bruce,” I yelled. “It’s going to fall.”

The boys standing around him turned to face me – I was making enough noise for a small army – but didn’t move aside. I bounced off first one and then another before finally wriggling through, trying to grab hold of Bruce.

But he still only saw an attacker, and kicked his legs at me, putting even more strain on the benighted pole, which I could now clearly see was about to snap.

I closed my eyes and threw myself at his knees, wrapping my arms around them. Just as my hands joined up behind him, a thunderclap struck and the pole gave way.

I fell, he fell, and the pole came down on us both. Bruce’s legs, having been caught in mid-flail, were bent behind him at an awkward angle and when we all came down I heard another fearful crack, almost as loud as the first. Bruce screamed in pain and I pushed myself up, taking the weight of the pole.

Unseen hands grabbed it and took it away, leaving me kneeling on the floor while Bruce waved his arms and shouted for help.

All I could do was stare at his leg, protruding at a nauseatingly unnatural angle.

One of the teachers, Mr Cervantes, was the first adult on the scene.

On either side, groups of kids were shouting their own version of events at him. It was all my fault, I’d attacked him. No, the pole was breaking and I’d been trying to help. I guess it all depended on where you were standing.

What was indisputable was, one, that the pole was rusted

and broken and, two, that Bruce was badly hurt and needed to be in hospital.

While the ambulance was on its way, I was escorted to sit outside the Principal's office to rest and, no doubt, face an inquisition. I didn't care about any of that. What mattered to me was that this had gone all horribly wrong. My memory of Bruce having hurt his arm was really clear, I was in no doubt of that at all. But my intervention had changed the outcome. Not for the better, granted, but it had changed.

So what did that mean?

Did it imply that actions I took now would change the course of events as I had first experienced them? Could I fix it so that things turned out better with Alison? If I didn't make whatever mistakes there had been, would she no longer want a divorce?

That would be good.

But, it might go the other way. Suppose I made things worse, as I had just done for poor Bruce? What if I messed things up so badly that I never met Alison in the first place? Would I be manipulating Hannah out of existence?

That was a future not to be contemplated under any circumstances.

There was more. What if I had the chance to stop catastrophes from happening? The Oklahoma bombing would be coming up soon.

9/11.

For a second I visualised calling the police about it, closer to the time, obviously. There were only two possible outcomes: either they'd dismiss me as a crank, or they'd believe me, in which case I'd be locked up as a conspirator. Either way it could do no good.

No, I was just going to have to keep my interventions to an

absolute minimum, if only for Hannah's sake.

At last the Principal, Mr Collins, emerged. "I've spoken with Mr Cervantes," he said. "He tells me that you were trying to help Bruce."

I nodded.

"Well done. I'm glad you did your best, especially when you've been, ah, unwell yourself. It'll be time to go home soon: I suggest you wait here until the bus goes. You can skip the rest of class this afternoon."

I sat quietly for the rest of the time, re-running the scenarios and options in my head. It didn't get any clearer.

When the final bell rang, I got up and headed for the bus lines, where Lucy soon found me.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "We were worried about you. I hope you didn't get into trouble, we all told Mr Cervantes what had happened."

"I'm fine, thanks."

There was a brief silence. She was clearly expecting me to say more.

"The Principal was fine, there was no problem," I added.

More silence, as we shuffled our way onto the bus and sat down.

After we'd been driving for a minute or two she'd had enough and turned to me. "So, Matt, are you going to tell me what's going on?"

chapter nine

Jaysen O'Dell

“ARG! WALK THE PLANK!” Lucy moved my Lego™ pirate figure down across the Lego™ ship we built from the kit mom and dad got me for my birthday.

“Damn it Lucy!” I was so frustrated I actually spit a little at her. This wasn’t the hardest thing for her to understand

“You know your parents don’t let you talk like that! They talk about your uncle and say ‘you will just as bad as George is!’ but I don’t know what’s so bad about your uncle George.” I knew she was right. But if she knew what they found in George’s house when he died she wouldn’t have thought he was such a great guy.

“I’m sorry... why won’t you believe me?” I didn’t want to upset her.

“Because you are 12. I don’t know why you think you aren’t.”

“BECAUSE I’M NOT!”

How does a 36 year old man in the body of a 12yr old boy explain this to a 12 year old girl who isn’t currently showing any signs of the super intelligent woman that she would be in

10 years? I had been married. I had a daughter. I was more successful than my parents. Now here I was, days after nearly dying, back on that mundane suburban street, arguing with the “girl next door” about how old I really was.

“Ok... if you are *really* that old, why do you look so young?” She seemed genuinely curious. Almost like she didn’t understand the how an old person could be in the body of a child. Thinking about it, I realised that it sounded absurd.

“I don’t know. Honestly. I don’t. In college we joked about SpaceX getting us closer to the speed of light and how relativity stipulated slowed ageing, not traveling back in time. We all figured we should short any stock involved with Musk then use the products to get to the point where ...”

Her eye’s looked like they were going to burst out of her head. “Are you sure you are ok? Now you are saying you’ve gone to college!”

“I’ve told you, I grew up. You grew up. We both go to college. You really grow up and become an architect. I got a really good paying job as an accountant. I got married, had a daughter, start working my way up the corporate ladder and ... my wife decided to leave me.” Saying it out loud was hard. I hadn’t really **loved** Alison. Really it was lust. She was exactly the type of wife a “future CFO” should have in their bed every night. We did meet right after my internship turned into a really good paycheck. She rocked my world with her ... prowess ... in the sack. Yeah, I loved her as the mother of my child, but now... sitting here with Lucy... Is this a chance to make a better future? Am I starting an alternate timeline where nothing I’ve done will exist outside my own memories of future that will never happen?

“You keep saying that, but seriously. How can you PROVE all this stuff that hasn’t happened?”

“The Dolphins didn’t win a super bowl this year. Or next year or any of the coming years.”

“Your dad is all about Miami Dolphins football so you knew the didn’t win this year, and the other part is the future.”

“Damn... that brain will serve you well.” Knowing she will eventually become one of the premier architects made it much easier to see how smart she always was. When I think back to high school she was always right there next to me. A bit mousey but sweet to the point of, well, nerdy. But right now, in this moment, what I’m seeing is the friend that I shared my favorite Legos™ with.

“Sorry about swearing” I said.

“My parents swear all the time. I just don’t want your parents to think I’m making you bad. Then I won’t be allowed over and I’d have to hang out with Amy or Sara.”

It suddenly dawned on me, Lucy was my best friend... BFF in the yet to be used world of internet shortcuts... but I was her ONLY friend. She was always there when I was bored. How did I never notice that before?

“So, if you really are 36, married, and you have a daughter, how can you prove it?” It was the way she said it that bothered me. Like she was starting to give up on something really important.

“It isn’t about *them*, but about the fact I’ve already lived a life. I could drink, smoke, have sex...” She blushed at that last one. “Sorry, but where do you think my daughter came from?”

“If I wanted to believe you, which I’m not sure I do, how can you prove it TODAY?”

“Apparently I’m not smart enough to figure that out.”

“Let me think” she said.

The way she said that bothered me. I thought forward to a

time from my real past. We were 16 and the prom was coming. I asked her who I should invite. She said “Let me think” with the exact same tone. I invited Emily to the prom and got laid. She accepted an invite from James and nearly got raped. Was that my fault?

“If you somehow managed to get a girl to marry you, then you should know who that girl is...”

“My wife is Alison Green.. Wait... it would be Alison Broadley today. She’s only 10 now.”

“Gross!”

“She was 19 when I met her. And very much NOT gross. But what has she got to do with this?”

“If she’s real then she has to be... somewhere, right?”

“YOU. ARE. A. GENIUS.”

“Yeah. Whatever. You know they told me to be nice to you so I’m only doing this so you will see that none of this is real.”

“So, she moved to chi-town to go to UC with us. That’s where I met her. At a frat party. You were there, but I don’t remember if you met her there or not. She grew up in Indy. Neil and Pam Broadley. If I had my iPhone I could look up their address and phone number. It hasn’t changed since the 80’s when Neil bought the when Pam got pregnant. They still have land lines.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If I can remember the little suburb we can look up their phone number and CALL ALISON. I can PROVE that this is all true.”

“You’re serious.”

“We go to their house every Christmas. We go there for Neil and Pam’s anniversary. For Alison’s birthday. I can tell you EVERYTHING about that house. Including how far the bed as to be from the wall to not wake up Pam when we are...”

Sorry”

She was blushing again.

“Fine. Here’s what we do. You try to remember the address or phone number and we will call information and confirm it.”

“God damn GENIUS” I kissed her on the forehead.

“Gross!”

It took me a bit to remember the exact street. The house number wasn’t happening. I couldn’t remember anything about the phone number. It’s amazing how dumb we are without our phones. I wrote what I had on a PostIt and put it in my pocket. Lucy’s mom worked for AT&T so they had free long distance. We ran over to her house to use the phone.

“Hello Mrs Whitfield”, I said.

“You feeling better?” she asked me.

“Yes ma’am”.

“Lucy, get your friend a soda pop. If you want to keep him you need to treat him right”. Looking back on it now, I think Lucy’s parents may have liked me as much as I now realise Lucy would apparently like me in high school. What a fucking idiot I was. How did I not see it then? Lucy was always there for me. She always looked good. Maybe if she did a bit more with makeup the shallow ass that fell for Alison’s perfect makeup and high maintenance physique would have seen what I’m seeing now. She’s always been beautiful. Physically. Mentally. The literal girl next door could have been mine. Too bad it took the lens of an ended marriage for me to see. Fuck. Me.

“Thank you ma’am. I’m all set. Can we use your phone?”

“The perks of working for AT&T! You kids stay out of trouble.”

“Sure thing mom.” Lucy asked, “Do you know the number for information in Indianapolis?”

“What do you kids want in indy? Never mind. It’s probably best I don’t know. What’s the worst that could happen? Just all 411 and tell them you want Indy and they will transfer you.”

“Thank you Mrs Whitfield.”

We headed to the kitchen phone.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” I had a sudden regret about pushing Lucy to believe me. If I was stuck in this “timeline” should I try to have the same future I already lived making the same stupid mistakes? Marrying a woman that would leave me because I wasn’t successful enough? Walking away from Lucy for a couple years of fantastic sex? If Lucy makes this call she will know that I left her. She will ask “what happens to me?” Do I tell her she’s alone. Waiting for someone, maybe me, to sweep her off her feet. I barely call her because Alison gets angry when I do. Lucy is too smart to not realise that proving Alison is real means there was no future for Lucy <3 Matt. Would she hate me for something that hasn’t happened to her yer? If she learns my future is real, do the mistakes I have already made ruin any chance of a possible future with Lucy?

“You’re the one who says you’re 36, married to a 10 year old and have a 7 year old daughter.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“If you’re crazy, then let’s find out. If your not then... something is really wrong.”

“I’ve made mistakes. Maybe this is a chance to not make them.”

“Oh. My. God! What is wrong with you?”

“Call. I deserve what will happen.”

She picked up the phone. “Hello, can I have information for Indianapolis please?”

A memory of carrying new born Hanna to Pam’s open

arms on the front step flashed into my mind. I take out my PostIt and write down the number I see beside the door.

“I’m looking for information, phone and address for Neil and Pam Broadley”

My mind goes to a hospital room where Alison is saying “Call my mom from the pay phone in the hall... the number is...” I write it down.

“Thank you.” Lucy scribbled an address and phone number. She put down the phone. I hand her my PostIt. She stared at the pieces of paper in her hand.

“How is this possible?”, she mutters. “I don’t understand...”

I picked up the phone and dialed from memory.

“Hi. This is Matt from school... is Alison there?... Thank you...” I handed the phone to Lucy.

I could hear the little girl voice from the receiver “Hi Matt! This is Alli! I’m so glad you called.”

Lucy dropped the phone.

I hung it up.

Now the story Alison tells about “the day a hot guy named Matt from grade school prank called” makes sense.

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

Tim Edwards-Hart

MARCH 2005

I stared at myself in the mirror. The young man in the reflection was beginning to look like me even though his body was still only 22 years old. The person looking out of those 22 year old eyes *was* me. I figured I had to be about 46 now: 36 when I had the accident, plus the 10 years since I woke up as a 12 year old. I still haven't reconciled going through adolescence twice, it does my head in.

At least I had some idea what was going on the second time around. But while that helped a little, it's hard to be a normal teenager when you can remember the birth of your daughter, your thirtieth birthday party, and the failure of your marriage. The memories of a man approaching middle-age don't fit with being a High School sophomore.

Dating was a catastrophe best avoided. I was in my early-teens when I had my 40th birthday. Odd enough, but this also meant that *all* the girls who might be interested in me were less than half my age. That never felt right. And of course, adults

don't take the words of a 16 year old seriously, and even when they do it's hard to think like a middle-aged man when you have the brain of a teenager. I didn't fit in. On the plus side, even though my repeated adolescence was lonelier than the first, I discovered that high school is a lot easier when you already know the content. It's not surprising then that I started to write as a way to reconcile the disconnect between mind and body.

But now, in my early 20s, the physical me was catching up to the mental me. At that stage, I still liked to think of this as the "real me". Yet even then the shadow doubts were forming. I think I already knew that the "me" that was there was all the "me" there was. If that wasn't real, then I didn't exist. Life is hard enough without such existential doubts. I sometimes had to remind myself that non-existent people don't publish books. Non-existent people aren't reviewed in national newspapers, radio and TV. Non-existent people don't get interviewed by Steven O'Reilly on "Meet the Author". That interview was today and I'd bought a suit in preparation.

I liked my new suit. The navy blue jacket and trousers, offset against a crisp white shirt, made me seem more authoritative. The man in the mirror was a man who looked like he knew who he was and what he was doing. On my good days, this was how I wanted to view myself.

On my good days.

As I gazed at my reflection, I hoped the suit would make this a good day.

I was on the way to the TV station when my agent called.

I was expecting Cheryl to say something about the interview, and almost didn't take the call. I was already so nervous, I didn't think I could remember any of the things I

was sure she would tell me to say. I'd been a middle class accountant and then a teenage author – what did I know about TV interviews? I was worried I'd forget the names of my own books, or piss on my shoes at the urinal. I couldn't take on anything new that Cheryl would say.

But I was also worried that the TV station would cancel the interview. After all, I was just some “young guy” who wrote “realistic science fiction” to quote a review from USA Today. Maybe Cheryl was calling to tell me to go home. Sick with trepidation, I took the call.

The TV station wasn't cancelling. Instead, Cheryl had called to let me know that the film rights for my first novel had been optioned. She said the studio were keen and already had a director and script-writer in mind. Although there was a long way to go before the project could be confirmed, she said the early signs were promising.

Then Cheryl told me the studio and the TV station were owned by the same company, and so the film might get mentioned as an early form of promotion to help raise awareness. If I interview well, it might result in enough funding to progress the film to the next stage. This was a rare opportunity she told me.

I asked her what I should do. Her answer was simple: “Whatever you like, just don't fuck it up.”

Oddly, Cheryl's call worked. Or maybe it was the suit. Either way, by the time my cab arrived at the TV network my anxiety was gone. I was still as hyped as a cat on speed, but without the doubts and questions I'd had before the call.

I vaguely remember arriving at the studio, being introduced to Steven O'Reilly, then staring blankly at the wall reflected in the mirror while they applied TV makeup. I don't remember

what I was thinking, other than my mind was buzzing. But that changed when I entered the studio. I remember the moment I sat on that chair in front of the cameras. I remember the coldness of the air conditioning competing with the heat of the lights; the bored gaze of the crew; the pre-show mannerisms of O'Reilly. When the cameras started, I was alive. In that moment, and maybe for the first time in my life, I was totally present. I remember everything from that interview.

It's a pleasure to welcome to tonight's show one of the hottest young authors around. Matthew Green is only 22 years old, but already has two best-sellers to his name. His first book, "Missed Call" was a stunning success, it's nuanced exploration of the impact of mobile phones on our relationships and culture is already proving to be eerily prescient. But what lifts the book beyond clever prognostications is the beautiful relationships it contains, and a feeling of warm nostalgia for the landline phone which, in the novel, becomes virtually extinct.

His second novel, "404" explores how the new genre of online friendship websites that are taking over the internet could impact our relationships, the internet itself, and our society more generally. Like "Missed Call" it is set in the near future, but the picture it paints is almost dystopian. And yet, despite the dark undertone that pervades the novel, there remains a generosity of spirit that simultaneously offers great hope.

It was a dream introduction. I knew that Steven had like the novels — Cheryl had shared transcripts of his early reviews — but I didn't think he'd liked them this much. It seemed that getting funding for a film meant selling the author as much as

his books.

Most remarkable of all, Matt is here tonight to discuss his third novel, "Democracy's End", due to be released next month. So Matt, welcome to the "Meet the Author".

It's a pleasure to be here Steven.

Before we discuss "Democracy's End", could we talk a bit about your first two novels?

Of course.

Is there any truth to the rumour that "Missed Call" is going to be made into a movie?

There have been several queries about converting Missed Call into a film, and I believe a major studio is working on it right now. Although no final decisions have been, I certainly hope something comes of it.

Well I can imagine big names like Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie starring in this, so I hope it goes well for you.

Now both of your novels so far are beautiful, and told in a way that seems to belie your age. But what I really want to know is how you go about making making your predictions. For example, when you were writing "Missed Call" as a teenager in 2000-2001, it must have been hard to imagine a world without answering machines.

In a moment, I decided to wrap the unbelievable truth in a believable lie.

I use a process that I guess I developed with Missed Call. I imagine people like me using technology and then push myself to think beyond just me and my friends, and to think what would happen if it was everyone. And if it was, how would technology companies respond? I keep repeating that

process over and over with different aspects of society, exploring how it all interrelates. Always, I imagine myself in that world, until it's so real it's like a memory. And then I finish by imagining that that future-me comes back here in a time machine, and I write it all down. And then, of course, I send it to my publisher!

Oh if only it were that easy. So what's in store with "Democracy's End"?

Well my first two novels really focussed on the impact of technology on interpersonal relationships. In Democracy's End, I extend this to explore the broader societal implications of a world where people interact mostly online with like-minded peers. Simultaneously, internet search engines will begin optimising results to match each individual person's interests — because, of course, giving people what they want maximises profit. This restriction of "trusted" sources makes it easier to demonise people with different views and feeds into the broader themes of dislocation and distrust. As people become increasingly isolated, there is a corresponding decrease in local community. Without that sense of self belonging to a place, then there is little left to connect a person to those around them other than their ideas. But since ideas are mainly shared and reinforced online, then society becomes ideologically tribal, threatening democracy itself.

Hence the title?

That's it. If people are ignorant of each other, it's a lot easier to stir hostility and suspicion. But I hope, like with "404", that my readers will find a thread of hope running

through.

There was more of course, and I was perhaps lucky that I had a interviewer with had a vested interest in helping me look good. But by the time we'd finished I'd moved from still being considered a "young writer of soft science fiction" to an author of substance and insight. My future, it seemed, was bright.

I left as the cameras were off. I had to be somewhere even more important, and time was ticking...

chapter twelve

Noé Ramalleira Fernández

WE TALKED ABOUT TODAY when we came home from Alison's tenth year reunion. She was feeling wistful that night, I guess.

“That was your glory day, do you know that?”

“What, because I met you? I mean, granted, that was very important in our lives, for sure.”

“I don't mean that, Matt. I mean you were at your peak, the most charming, the most charismatic you've ever been. Like, you're not charismatic at all, but that night you were dancing with everybody, and laughing. You'd move from group to group making jokes and then going to the next, like spreading the joy around.”

“I don't remember any of that, Ali.”

“No, of course you don't. I saw you before you saw me; you went to the kitchen to get a beer and you found Forde there — I didn't know it was Forde at the time, right? — and you left him laughing at the kitchen and moved on to whoever it was that was manning the iPod and whispered something to his ear, and a bit after that ‘Seven Nation Army’ started playing and you told everybody that was in the couch to get up and

dance on the chorus, and, like, I get that you didn't realise you were in the center of it, but I had been watching you for maybe 10 minutes straight when you first came by and talked to me, Matt. You were just hypnotic; so happy and so... in the moment, so alive, you know."

"I don't know what to say, Ali. I don't think that's really what it was like."

"Yeah, no, but it was. I remember thinking, after one of our first dates, and of course they didn't go that well, I remember coming back to my dorm and thinking if I have to give him another chance, he's got it in him to be much better than he has been today."

"After one of our first dates, already?"

"You were not as great as I was hoping for, you know. You looked like you'd be so fun, just like a bolt of... And you were alright, of course, and there was a spark there, but without that day at the party, and like, the promise of it, I don't know that I would... It kept me going, is what I mean. It eventually rubbed off, of course"

When I was coming in through the threshold I heard steps behind me, so I held the door open. This voice came from behind, saying "thanks, man", and I suddenly realised that going to the party had been an awful idea. I turned around and saw Scott Cliff. He was looking for a place out of the way where he could leave his helmet. So he already had the motorbike.

Memory is amazing, I wouldn't have thought in a million years that I would recognise Scott Cliff's voice. I never knew him that much when he was alive.

I went to the kitchen to grab something to eat, mainly because I was shaking and I needed to hold something in my

hands. I asked this girl who was leaning on the fridge door if she could let me open it. She was a bit drunk, or maybe stoned, and she started moving morosely, but then stopped and stared at me. Her glance turned focused, suddenly intense, as if she knew me.

It's not the first time I've had that feeling. *Déjà vu* doesn't bother me these days, because I can easily shrug it off by thinking that there's always a chance that I'm actually reliving my life, but, as a trade-off, every now and again, someone looks at me intently, and I can't help but feel that they might be recognising me.

The problem this time was I really did remember her. She was Danielle Wright, a friend of JJ's. She was a year younger than me, her dad was a dentist in Gary. He had an uncle down in New Orleans that was going to lose his house in the Katrina in a couple of months, and end up living with them in Indiana.

"I'm sorry. It's just that... You look a lot like Matthew Green, you know that?"

"I am Matt Green," I said, before I caught myself. I coughed a bit. "Do we know each other?"

"Oh, no, no, I'm so sorry. My name is Dani, and I'm such a huge fan. I've read 'Missed Call' hundreds of times, I love it, especially the- with the dolphins... Man, I can believe you're here!"

"Oh, thank you, Dani, that means a lot, thanks." She did love reading, I had forgotten that. She was actually quite a good writer, but she was going to stop doing it after taking over her father's practice.

"No, but actually, what are you doing here? Who are you with?"

"I'm with this friend." All of a sudden, I remembered I hadn't seen Alison yet. "Listen, I don't want to blow you off,

but...’

“Oh, OK”

“No, I mean... I’m sorr- Listen, do you want an autograph, maybe? Let me see, I always carry a sharpie, give me your cup”

“Yeah, yeah, sure, whatever.”

“I’m sorry, I’m really not in the mood for talking right now about my books”, I mumbled. “I have just seen someone, I’m a bit rattled, and also I have to look for-”

“Yeah, OK, man, no problem.” She started walking away, visibly disappointed. She raised her red cup. “Thanks for the autograph, anyway.”

I went into the main room and scanned through the crowd to find Alison. I couldn’t find her, and the crowd seemed to be dispersing. There were a bunch of guys, Forde and some of his friends, who were daring each other to go jump in the pool, and on the other side of the room another group was going to pop up outside to check out Scott’s new bike.

I didn’t remember any of that happening. I felt it wasn’t supposed to. The first time around weíd all stayed in the same room, I think, in a way that everybody, even those like Alison who didn’t party, were included in the fun. She had been in a corner, just sitting and sort of calmly controlling everything that went down. That had been what first attracted me to her. I had gone over to her because she’d looked like a queen, or like an oracle. So composed, so elegant, so much a part of everything and yet sort of above it all. We talked a bit and I realised she did really want to mix with everybody, and dance and just let go, so I went and talk to my friend Brian, and told him to play ‘Take me out’ by Franz Ferdinand, and took her to the center of the room and danced with her and jumped around.

I kept looking at the same corner where she was supposed

to be, but she wasn't. The room was emptying, fast.

"What's even going on?" I asked aloud.

"We're going outside, they're gonna jump in the pool!", someone answered. I didn't recognise her, but I did remember her boyfriend. He would end up having a small company that I kept the books for, for a couple of years.

"But it's freezing outside!"

"Well, duh. That's the whole point. The water is not frozen, somehow. I bet you it superfrees as soon as the first guy jumps in."

Her boyfriend interrupted her. "Well, actually, that's not how that works."

"Yeah, but imagine if it did." They went out, but I suddenly saw Alison, coming out of the bathroom. She looked around, surprised. "Where is everybody?" she asked.

"They're all outside, Forde and his friends are going to jump in the pool." I answered. I thought about introducing myself, but she wasn't really looking at me.

"What? That's so random, why?"

"Just 'cause, I guess"

"Sounds like fun". She started walking towards the door. "Aren't you coming?"

"I... My name is Matt Green, by the way."

"Like the writer? Oh, shit, sorry, you are him. I saw Dani Wright and she told me she'd been talking to a writer, but I was imagining, like, an old guy, like a divorced guy in his forties, ogling at young girls."

"Whoa, there."

"I'm sorry," Ali smiled. I had forgotten her smile; memory is amazing.

"It's been a weird evening, tell her I'm really sorry."

"Ah, don't worry, she'll be alright. So, first things first, I'm

Alison. And now that we know each other, are you coming with me or what? We're missing all the fun."

"Yeah, sure"

"So you're friends with Forde, right? That's why you're here?"

"I mean, who doesn't know him, right?"

"Yeah!" she yelled, just a tad too enthusiastically. I felt a sudden pang of anxiety. Did she... did she like him?

"Anyway, why aren't you jumping inside then, with all the rest of them?"

"I... am not dressed appropriately"

"I mean, that's for sure, you look like a banker or something, who told you to come here in a suit?"

"I'm dressed like a divorced forty-something who goes to a party to ogle at girls, ain't I?"

"Don't be hard on yourself, you don't look bad in it. I don't know why your wife left you, to be honest. Anyway, I'm already freezing just by being here outside in a corner of the party, so I might as well just jump in," she said.

And I should have followed her. I should have been the one to tell her to jump in, actually. But I hadn't, and I didn't. I stayed in the border of the pool, while a bunch of young kids at their peak splashed and spread their joy around. They were hypnotic, Alison was right. They lived in the moment. I didn't feel capable of that anymore.

I think Alison left with Forde, at the end of the night. I left alone. Scott Cliff sped away in his bike, and I lost sight of him in the darkness.

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

Julia Ward

A TYPICAL SPRING FLURRY began as I hurried across the quad toward the university cafe.

The door was nearly wrenched from my hand as a sudden gust of wind tried to push it closed again. Once inside, rubbing my hands together, I scanned the room as I breathed in the familiar scent of the coffee shop. So many years spent in this place. Waiting.

This time I was waiting for Lucy.

Lucy would be late. She was always late.

But Alison might be there with her friends.

My gorgeous Alison.

God, how I missed her.

I will make this happen.

And I had an idea how.

Lucy had always been my sounding board. She would help me.

I ordered black coffee for me and an extra hot vanilla latte for Lucy. It should be drinkable by the time she got there.

As I walked through, looking for a table, my gaze fell to

Alison's favourite spot. Funny how after all these years, and all the added intervening years, that habit still held sway.

There was no sign of Alison however. Through the window, I caught sight of a few blondes hurrying cautiously from one building to another as the flurry turned to rain, but none of them was Alison. Hell, who knew what her hair would look like anyway. It could be cranberry red and bobbed short for all I knew.

"What are you looking at?" Lucy huffed as she slid into the chair next to me. "Is this mine?" She grabbed her hot drink without waiting for an answer, warming her bare hands with a sigh. "Thanks. So what's the big emergency?"

"Luce..." Turning to her, I offered her the most sincere look I could muster. "I need to do it right this time. I need to get her to marry me again so I can get her to stay. And I think I know how."

"Oh, for Pete's sake, Matt." Shaking her head, she leaned back in her chair, staring at her drink. "Get over it. She left you." Sitting forward, she propped her elbows on the table, her brown eyes spearing mine. "Let. It. Go. Move on."

"But she married me, Luce. She loved me, right? I mean, you don't marry someone you don't love. She *loved* me. I know she did. We were happy. And I want her back. And I know how to make it stick this time." I was almost giddy, heady with the brilliance of my plan.

But Lucy wasn't listening. "Matty, look out that window. How many women do you see out there? How many?"

"I don't know." I didn't look out the window. While I wanted to see Alison, I didn't want to see her with John Fucking Forde.

"Dozens, Matt. I mean, hell. Look at *me*. I'm available." She wiggled her eyebrows at me, her lips curved in a half smile.

“Come on.” Laughing, I spread my hands. “You? Stop joking around.”

Had a dark look crossed her face? If it had, it was gone as fast as it came. “Fine,” she said. “Not me. But look around. There are dozens of eligible women. Ones who won’t leave you in fourteen years. Ones who’ll appreciate a man who’s had two best sellers by the age of twenty-two. And another one on the way.”

“I can do better. I can offer more.” My drive was fuelled by a roaring intensity inside me.

But Lucy cut me off, her eyebrows arched. “Matthew. Listen to me.” She gathered my hands in hers. “You have a chance to do it all over, Matty. Isn’t there anything you wish you’d done differently? I mean, yeah, Alison is pretty, relatively smart, athletic. But she left you.”

“She left me because...”

“Matt, the reason won’t change. Who knows how long she’d wanted to leave. Maybe she’d only stuck around because she felt sorry for you.”

“Nice, Luce. Thanks for that vote of confidence.” Best friend or not, that was a low blow. I stood, but her hands held mine, tugging me back down.

“We’ve been through a lot together, Matty. By your experience, we’ve done it twice. You deserve better, Matt. You deserve a woman who’ll love you just as you are. One who won’t leave you after fourteen years because... because... Why did she leave?”

With a shrug, I put off the answer, unwilling to say the words aloud or admit them to myself. Or let Lucy know how right she might be.

“Well, the thing is... Look at our parents. Both sets are still together. That’s love, Matt. Sticking it out through thick and

thin. If Alison wanted to, she'd have stayed.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about.”

When she pulled her hands away, she slapped them on the table. “Would you listen to me? You need to stop this. We’re friends because we can be honest with each other. Well, I’m being honest with you. Chasing after her again is setting you up for another smack down. Even if you get her to stay longer than fourteen years this time, she’s still going to leave.”

Feeling sick, I swallowed. Fighting a rising gorge and trying to calm shaking hands, I grabbed my cup and managed a drink of coffee without spilling. My eyes burned.

“Matt.” Lucy’s hand covered mine as she almost whispers my name. “I’m sorry, but you can’t deny that it’s likely.”

“I have to, Luce.” I fought the tears. “I have to because...”

Lucy started to argue, but I stopped her. “Luce, don’t say anything. Just... Just let me... Hannah, Lucy.”

“You know, you can still have kids with someone else. This time around with someone who’ll stay with you.”

Adamant to be heard, I growled. “Hannah is my light. She’s my little ray of golden sunshine, Lucy. Until I felt my baby girl’s fist wrap around my finger, I had no idea what love was.” With my sleeve, I swiped away tears, pretending I was rubbing my forehead. “It’s not just about Alison, Luce. It’s about my family. My wife *and* my little girl.”

Lucy was quiet as she held my hand.

Finally, she let go and leaned back. “Fine. Tell me your idea.”

There was only one sure way to get my wife to stay. “I’m gonna get rich.”

Lucy rolled her eyes so hard, I thought they were going to spin all the way around. “Seriously, Matty? How is this different from, I don’t know, you’re whole life plan for as long

as I've known you? Besides, you're a two time best-seller. You *are* rich, aren't you?"

"Modestly rich. But I don't think it's enough. I mean, I've made some good money, and have had a lot of women hitting on me. So that had to be what was missing right? I did okay as an accountant, but if I'd made more... If I make more now, I'll be able to take her all over the world. Hell, we'll be able to give Hannah the best education by travelling." Leaning forward, I lower my tone so only Lucy can hear me. "I know things, Luce. I'll be able to make a bundle." My face hurts, I'm smiling so big. "She won't leave me if I'm filthy stinking rich. Why would she? I'll be able to give her anything and everything she wants."

Silent, Lucy stared at me, her face a myriad of different expressions before she shook her head. "Fine. What's your plan?"

Grinning, I squeezed her hand. Good ol' Lucy never would let me down. "You remember when you made me watch that dumb chick flick where the girl and the guy are getting a divorce and she faints and ends up back in time to her senior year?"

Scrunching up her face in thought, Lucy shook her head.

"Come on, you have to. I think it was like your mom's favourite or something."

"Peggy Sue got Married?"

I thought a moment before nodding my head vigorously. "Yes! That's it. Well at one point, she invents pantyhose and tells people to invest in Xerox. That's what I'm going to do, Luce! I'm going to invest! I'll make millions. Hell, billions!" I had to stifle my own excitement as people scowled at me interrupting their zen conversations over lattes.

With a snort, Lucy slapped the table. "Really? I think it's a

little late to invest in Xerox, Matt.”

“Not Xerox exactly. But all the companies that *will* start or go public, a myriad of little startups. Or the ones that will simply grow over the next few years. Facebook, Amazon, Walmart, Disney. I’ll be able to amass a fortune because I know things, Luce.”

Chewing the inside of her cheek, Lucy’s thinking face was anything but attractive. But she *was* thinking.

Before she could unthink, I needed to reel her in. “I can make some suggestions to you too. If you want.”

This time, I know I saw a dark look.

I wondered why, but not for long. There were too many things to put into motion. “I’ll need seed money. A lot of seed money. All the things I’ve bought with the advances and royalties—the house, the cars—I need to sell them all. Maybe you know someone at that architect firm? Will you help me, Lucy? If not for me, for my daughter?”

With a sigh, she sat back in her chair.

She was going to help me. And I was on top of the world.

chapter fifteen

J.D. Salt

MAY 2019

I walked through the door of Stella's at the tail-end of the lunch rush and spied Lucy at a table half-way back. The waitress deposited two steaming plates before I could get there.

"Hey, Luce, sorry I'm late." I gave her a quick squeeze and a peck on the cheek then settled in. "Thanks for ordering."

She shrugged it off with a smile. "How'd the call go?"

It was my turn to shrug. "We'll see."

"Ah, things not turning out as expected?" Her face had that same mix of amusement and feigned surprised it often wore when I talked about my business challenges the last two years.

"These guys cut their teeth at Amazon. They'll get it figured."

"You know, you could just focus on your writing. No one who mattered would think any less of you."

"Yeah, I know," I protested, "but this is Chicago we're

talking about. I want to bring some of that tech magic here.” But with it appearing that another start-up venture was on the path to its demise—the sixth in a row—my cachet was running out a whole lot faster than my fortune. Maybe my magic *was* limited to the extent of knowledge about my original timeline.

“And that would be great. To think of all the buildings that would need to be designed . . . I might strike out on my own, even if they made me a partner, if tech took off here.”

“And I couldn’t think of an architect with a finer sensibility than you to contribute to a future Chicago.” The only question was whether her firm would reward her talent and dedication before her fish-or-cut-loose agreement expired at the end of the year.

The crowd was dwindling, our own conversation heading toward its end, when the door opened and the May wind blew in a heavenly vision of a woman—near-blond, athletic, eyes of haunting blue, and draped in a business suit that exuded personal conference in spades. She looked familiar, but I couldn’t place her face.

When the hostess led her to a booth in the back of the diner, a closer look confirmed her heavenliness, but provided no extra clues about who she might be.

Halfway through lunch, the pieces clicked into place with such force that I felt like my head and my heart were suddenly squeezed in a vice. I looked at where the woman sat—once, twice, finally a third time. She was older, her hair was a different style than I’d ever seen, but the emotional surge in my heart confirmed it was her: Alison—at least this Alison from this timeline.

“Matt? *Matty?*”

I looked back at Lucy.

“You haven’t heard a single word I’ve said in the last five minutes.”

“Sorry, I’ve just gotten a little distracted.” I stole a quick glance back to the woman. Could it really be Alison, now, after all these years, and here? What were the odds?

Lucy followed my gaze. “So who is she?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s Alison.”

Lucy glanced at the woman, no doubt summoning her memories of Alison from the old timeline—the dinner parties, the outings, our engagement party and wedding, playing Auntie with Hannah until my accident.

“I’ll be damned.” She looked back at me and bored into me with eyes keener than a hawk. “And you, my dear Matty, are thinking of doing something stupid.”

“No, I—“

She dropped her voice to a whisper again and leaned across the table. “Remember, this is not *your* Alison—”

“I know that”

“This is a woman you haven’t spoken to in almost 15 years, since the day before she slapped the restraining order on you. Whose concern almost led a judge to issue a 72 hour psychiatric hold on your butt.”

“I know—”

She help up a hand. “Let me finish. Look, what you two had in another life And I guess you haven’t noticed her ring finger, by the way.”

I felt my heart sink. “Engaged?”

“You’re ever the optimist.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Wedding band.” She studied me over the top her

glasses. “Look, for your sake, don’t go there.”

I tried to look innocent. “Where?”

“You know where. You missed that ship years ago, if you ever really had a chance to catch it again.”

Even though I’d been trying to live with the truth of those words for the last six years, Lucy’s words still stung. “I just thought I’d go over and apologize.”

For the next 15 minutes, I tried to focus on my conversation with Lucy. But my mind kept returning to Alison—this Alison. Lucy was right—my initial, foolish reaction had nothing to do with an apology. I was twenty-two again, struggling with the concept that while this woman was Alison, at the same time she wasn’t, different in numerous small and subtle ways that, in combination produced a woman who was not my Alison, one who I could, hopefully, marry again and start over. I’d gotten love-stupid, or maybe loss-stupid, ignoring all I’d learned since the jump about the subtle changes in this timeline. I’d made a fool of myself and, in the process, alienated this woman as I paraded knowledge of her life in order to convince her that we were meant to be together. I really did owe her an apology.

Finally, I looked at Lucy and stood up. “I’ve got to apologize.”

She simply sighed and shrugged.

I approached Alison’s table, uncertain whether my legs would obey my mind and stop when they reached her, or keep up their stride until they arrived at the bathroom. But I reined them in before they became runaways.

Alison nibbled away on her BLT while perusing a thick file spread open on the table. The satchel next to her, the file in front of her, and the power suit suggested lawyerliness, perhaps a high-dollar one at that. I stopped on the far side of

her booth, an extra-healthy socially-acceptable distance away. When she didn't notice me, I cleared my throat.

"Excuse me, Ms. ... ?"

She looked up, her face suggesting mild perturbation that she'd been interrupted. But there was no recognition in her eyes. "Yes? I'm a little busy as you can see."

"You probably don't remember me—"

Her eyes narrowed as she studied my face, trying to place it in her life. "The Barrow's case? Look, it will be better to make an appointment. A conversation now would still be billable and," she gestured toward the other diners, "far from private."

I shook my head, the doubt gnawing at my gut. It would be far easier to just claim mistaken identity and move on. But if we weren't meant to be, if Hannah was never meant to be in this timeline, than an apology might provide that final closure—this was never the Alison I had loved, the one I thought I could start over again with.

"No, this isn't business. At least not professional business."

She regarded me with the keen eye of a lawyer cross-examining a witness of suspect character in court. She must have been a formidable presence in the courtroom or at the negotiating table. Possibilities flit across her eyes, but still no recognition. "Look, as you can seem, I'm very busy, so you'll need to get to the point, Mr. ...?"

"Green," I replied, my voice suddenly just a dozen or so decibels above a whisper, "Matt Green."

Her face changed as the slot machine of her memory returned seven after seven. When the last one snapped into place, her shields rose while she powered up her lawyerly weapons.

I held up my hands to communicate that I came in peace, not seeking a confrontation. "All I want to say is that I'm

terribly sorry. I was mistaken in my conviction. I apologize for making you uncomfortable and for the scene I caused with John.”

I turned away, not wanting to alarm her any further. But before I could take more than a step, she called out to me.

“Mr. Green?”

I turned back toward her.

She studied my face for several seconds before she sat back and took in all of me in a single glance. “Apology accepted. It looks like you’ve done well for yourself.” She glanced past me to where Lucy sat. “And it appears you got your love life sorted out.”

“Oh, Lucy? No, she’s a childhood friend.”

I followed her gaze as she took a second look at Lucy, who had quickly turned her attention back to her phone. “Does she know that?”

I found myself blushing slightly. “We worked all that out a long time ago.”

“Well, again—thank you.”

I gestured to the file and to her wedding ring. “And I’m happy you’ve done well for yourself.”

“Oh, this?” She twirled the wedding band on her finger. “Divorced. But keeping up appearances has its professional and personal advantages.”

I nodded, thinking of the engagement and wedding bands Lucy had inherited from her Grandmother, how she’d sometimes wear them to client meetings or when she went out with her girlfriends to minimize unwanted male attention. “Thank you for accepting my apology.”

Back at our table, Lucy gave me an appraising look. “Well, that went surprisingly well. Feel better?”

To be honest, I wasn't sure what I felt. The apology gave me some sense of closure with this Alison, the doppelganger of the woman I had loved so long ago, but who was different enough that our lives weren't meant to merge in that way. But that she *was* a doppelganger, well, that was a keen reminder of everything I had lost. I shrugged.

Lucy reached over and squeezed my hand, sympathy in her eyes.

Ten minutes later, while Lucy was boxing up her leftovers and I fished two twenties from my wallet to cover the cheque, a female voice calling "Matthew" caught my attention.

I was surprised to see Alison standing there, her satchel strap draped over her shoulder. She patted the phone case attached to her bag. "I see you *have* done well for yourself. Should you have any legal needs," she continued, handing me her business card, "our firm has extensive experience in the business and financial areas."

I glanced at her card, noting her maiden name under the marquee of Potter, Stone, and Chambers, one of Chicago's powerhouse firms, and filed it in my shirt pocket. Her expression had softened to ninety-five percent professional cordial, with a dash of personal friendliness. Was she a partner yet? If not, she certainly appeared to have the charm.

"Thank you. It never hurts to know too many lawyers in my line of work."

She nodded. "Just call me and I can arrange an introduction."

As she walked away, I was struck by a sudden, unexplained urge. I resisted until Alison neared the door, then the urge became overwhelming.

As I stood, Lucy touched my arm. "Matt, don't."

I glanced at her, the concern evident in her eyes. She was probably right, but I felt it in my bones that I had to do this.

I hustled to the door, “Excuse me, Ms. Boardley?”

Five minutes later, we had agreed to a potential client meeting that evening, just she and I, at The Bentley—the five-star steak place overlooking Lake Michigan that all the top law firms used to woo their richest prospects.

When I filled Lucy in back at the table, she just shook her head. “It’s your funeral.”

At 6:45, a limo arrived at my office, complete with a choice of wines, and ferried me to The Bentley. Alison had been delayed, the driver informed me, and would meet me there.

Over dinner, she did a thorough interview about my business and its needs, then gave a complete, yet efficient overview of how her firm was positioned do a stellar job meeting those needs. From there, the conversation progressed to professional schmoozing. She learned about my rise to fame and fortune and my more recent struggles. I learned that she was two or three years from making partner, presuming she could bring in the requisite new business.

“You would be quite the feather in my cap,” she confided, as she finished her second glass of wine.

Over dessert, and the dregs of our third glasses of wine, the conversation turned to more personal matters. She told me about her divorce from John, almost five years earlier, and I fabricated a history about my own failed attempts at romance since the restraining order.

“What about you and Lucy?” she asked. “She appears to be a fine woman.”

I nodded. “And she is. But I just never felt that spark with her.” I shrugged. “We’ve been friends forever, but it just wouldn’t be fair to her. The mysteries and tragedies of love I guess.”

“So you’ve never been married?” she asked, a quizzically amused expression on her face.

I gazed at her, trying not to think of my Alison on our wedding day. “Not in this lifetime. But how about you? Any promising romantic prospects since John?”

She laughed, but there was a hint of pain behind it, carefully concealed by her quickly applied lawyer’s facade. “Right now, the pursuit of a partnership isn’t very compatible with what a successful relationship needs ... at least that’s what John told me as we began to fall apart. But I’m sure you’ve heard something similar in your line of work.”

I nodded to keep up appearances. “It can be a lonely life.”

We filled the pause that followed with a little more wine.

“You know, I thought you were nice at first, and I was flattered at how you seemed to know me. But when you got pushy and all woo-hoo about fate and destiny”

I cringed, my face turning a few degrees warmer than the wine had already made it. I shook my head and buried my face in my hands. “I know, I know. I can’t believe I was so stupid.” I looked back at her, the pain of that time fresh again. “I thought I knew more than I actually did. I’m so sorry I put you through that.”

“So what do you believe now?” Her expression was quizzical, with no hint of accusation or reproach.

I took a deep breath and thought for a moment. “I don’t know ... maybe that you can’t force love, and that you can’t capture time in a bottle.”

She studied me for a moment, her face non-committal. “I

can drink to that,” she said, and raised her glass.

It wasn't until we were in the limo again, another glass of wine freshly poured, that I noticed she wasn't wearing her ring.

“Where to, Ms. Boardley?” the driver asked.

“Let's stop by my place first, George. There's something I'd like to show Mr. Green.”

chapter sixteen

Kaide Li

I LINGERED A LITTLE behind Alison as we walked up to her door, a strange feeling overwhelming me. Was it fear? No, it could not be. Our first date went well, fabulous in fact, if I might say so myself, even better than our first date the last time. There were literally sparks flying everywhere; they could have seared the people around us and we could not have noticed. Whatever was in the grand plan for our lives on this Earth, there must had been something in it for the both of us, together. It must had been the reason why I was able to come back and fix up my old timeline again, to get the stars aligned right this time. My eyes fixated on the small of her back, then wandered to the nape of her neck peeking from behind the hair she had kept swept to one side, to all those other familiar curves I used to hold...

"So, this is it." Alison turned around suddenly waving her arm at the door behind her, her bracelet jiggling a little, distracting me for a second and broke me out of my trance-like stare of her back. That bracelet... it looked like something I was going to buy her for one of our wedding anniversaries

but I did not do it in the end. The strange sensation came over me again. Was it a pang of guilt? Regret? Or was it just this being our first date and I was eager to find out whether she would be inviting me into her house?

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" I asked.

"There's nothing to see in there. Besides, it's such a mess, really." Alison seemed to fumble a little as she said that.

"I don't mind... There will be you to see and besides, I love a good mess." I replied with a sly smile on my face. I took several steps forward and backed Alison towards her door. I placed my left hand on the door behind her slightly above her head and gazed down into her eyes. She looked back up at me intently, her breathing increasing as I noticed her chest rise and fall more rapidly. Time seemed to have stopped as we stood frozen on the spot in silence except for the thumping of our hearts. What was wrong with our last marriage? How did we end up in divorce? I reached down desiring to kiss her lips but changed my mind at the last minute, giving her a badly planted quick peck on the cheek instead.

"Well, good night then!" I said abruptly and turned to leave. After I had gone for several paces, I heard the sound of running footsteps behind me. From the corner of my eye, Alison appeared and grabbed me by the arm.

"I guess you could come in for a cup of coffee." Alison called out as she caught her breath.

"For just one cup of coffee? How about two? How about..." I teased.

"You don't bargain with a lawyer. Those are my terms." Alison cut me off and replied in mock haughtiness. We both laughed. Linking her arm with mine, we walked back slowly together and paused outside her door once more. She turned to face me.

"As I've mentioned, my house, it's kind of in a mess... Also, I don't live alone..." Alison spoke slowly, as if she were searching for the right words to say. For a lawyer, she did not seem particularly smooth and at ease with words tonight. It was like she wanted to hide something from me yet felt that I should know about it. She dug around her bag, took out her keys and waved them in front of me.

"Are you ready?" Alison asked softly.

"I'm ready." I whispered. I was not sure why I answered with such seriousness. Perhaps it was because of the way Alison had asked it, her quiet tone, like it was something I needed to give some thought to and to be prepared for. Or perhaps it was because I had wanted to see how she had been living in this timeline without me.

As Alison pushed open the door, a musty smell filled my nostrils. She walked around and flipped on an overhead lamp, flooding the living room with an amber glow that was just sufficient to see your way around with but barely enough to read the print on the newspapers left at the countertop with a stack of unopened letters without straining one's eyes. The furniture in the house was sparse with just two sofas in the middle of the living room, their fabric clearly worn out and even torn in some places due to age and use. A coffee table sat between them with one corner of the glass broken off into fragments and taped back together. There were few other items in the house. In fact, it was impossible for them to have collectively even formed any type of a mess.

Alison looked embarrassed and uncomfortable when she saw the expression on my face. She stood still by the door where I must have stopped, surprised with a tinge of shock at the spartan state of her house. I went inside quickly before she thought I was being rude.

"The heater had broken down for a while now but I haven't had the time to get it fixed." Alison said, as if by way of explaining the weird musty smell. They must not have opened the windows in a while.

"Don't worry, we'll heat things up in a while." I chuckled, reaching out to pull Alison close. She laughed uneasily and pushed me away.

"I'll go get you your coffee as promised."

"Shaken, not stirred, please." I called out after her as she disappeared into what was probably her kitchen.

"Make it yourself!" She shouted back.

Just as I was about to follow Alison into the kitchen, I saw something on the shelves which piqued my interest. There was a neat row of kids' drawing, proudly framed and signed, "BY: HANNAH" in block letters at the bottom corner. One was a picture of a cat or was it a tiger? Another was a family of three holding hands with probably little Hannah in the middle together with her parents and huge beaming smiles on all of their faces.

"I didn't know you collect." I joked and gestured towards the framed drawings as Alison came back out from her kitchen with two mugs of hot coffee. I was not sure if she heard what I said. If she did, she made no attempts to reply. Wordlessly, she walked towards the coffee table, set down the two mugs of coffee and settled into the far end of the sofa. I went over to sit beside her. I sank into the cushion the moment I sat down, there was hardly any support. Before I could say another word, she pushed a steaming mug of coffee towards my face.

"Don't say anything. Let me speak first." At first, Alison looked me in the eyes but then she lowered her gaze to her hands rested on her lap and started fiddling with them.

"I...", Alison began but trailed off and then started talking again. "I haven't had such an enjoyable night as tonight's had been in a long, long while. I really had fun and it was nice talking to you. You seem like such a sweet person. I hope it's not just me but I feel that there's some good chemistry going on between us, it's almost electrifying and I feel it in my skin."

"I felt it too." I blurted out, put down the mug and took both of Alison's hands in mine but she brushed them off and continued.

"This is just our first date and I had a magical time. A part of me doesn't want to say things that will sabotage this relationship. Yet, I believe that I need to be honest with you in order to bring this relationship to the next level, if you have the same intention..." Alison finally glanced up at me again.

"Of course I do! When do we start? Here, on this couch?" I shoved my face into her entire line of sight.

"Will you please be serious for a moment?"

"Yes, sorry... You were about to tell me something important."

"As I was saying, I'm actually..."

"A man!"

"No!"

"A criminal on the run?"

"NO!"

"A.."

"WILL YOU PLEASE LISTEN TO ME FOR A SECOND?" Alison shouted out and a deafening silence followed immediately after. I guess I took the joke too far and decided it was safer to stay mute for a while. She glared at me and her cheeks looked flush. I just wanted to make her feel more relaxed and comfortable. That kind of backfired. After a short moment of evidently trying to calm herself down,

resuming with her fiddling, she spoke again.

"I'm actually married but we divorced a few years ago."

"Okay... I have no problem with that. That was in the past. Do you have any..." I was not sure why but I actually felt afraid to ask.

"Yes, we have a daughter, Hannah. She's seven years old now and she lives with me."

I quietly contemplated about the fresh pieces of news laid out in front of me. I surely had not thought that she might actually be married in this timeline. Well, currently divorced but still once married. Married to someone else. Someone else that was not me. And they had a child. A girl named Hannah. The very same name as our daughter, Hannah. And the same age too. Were she not supposed to marry me? I caught myself in my thoughts and reminded myself that they were divorced. We were the ones having a good time now. Our paths were now crossed, everything was as it were meant to be.

"I am fine with all that. I had a wonderful time with you too and that is all that matters." I reassured her and took her hands in mine again. This time, she did not resist. We locked eyes for a moment but that connection was rudely broken suddenly by the ringing of the doorbell. Alison jumped up from the sofa.

"That must be the babysitter bringing Hannah home." Alison absentmindedly ran her fingers through her hair and hurried over to open the door. I looked over from where I was seated, wondering if I should join her at the door. Would I scare the kid or perhaps it was me who was worried? Cautiously, I stood up and walked over to the side where I could peek out the door without being easily noticed.

"Hi Mrs Forde, I brought little Hannah home. She had a short nap earlier but I think she's ready to sleep some more."

Hannah was still holding the babysitter's hand in one hand and rubbing her eyes with another. Why was Alison still using her husband's name? Alison bent down, ruffled her daughter's hair and gave her a peck on the forehead. She thanked the babysitter and led Hannah back into the house.

"Aren't you a sleepy girl?" Alison cooed and tried to tidy up her hair which she had just ruffled into tangles earlier. Hannah raised her arms up and wrapped them around her mother's waist, resting and snuggling her head against her stomach. Watching the warm sight before me, I had a sudden urge to rush over and put them both in my embrace, like how the three of us used to, Alison, our daughter, Hannah and I. As I went closer, a weird sense of familiarity hit me. This Hannah, daughter of Alison and her ex-husband, looked so remarkably like my dear Hannah, OUR Hannah, the Hannah whom Alison and I had. How was this possible? It was one thing to go back in time but surely Alison's daughter with another man shouldn't look so much like our daughter? My chest tightened unbearably as a thought came to mind. Unless... unless my dear Hannah was not my dear Hannah but Alison's love child with another man. She had been cheating on me behind my back with this Forde guy! How could she! Just moments ago I had wanted to stay and keep Alison close but now, all those held-back emotions had dissipated. I only felt a sense of betrayal and a rising temper inside me. I must leave immediately before I holler at Alison and scream out all the hurt she had caused me. I must keep it in. Not in front of innocent Hannah. I HAD TO LEAVE NOW.

"I see Hannah's tired. I better go and leave the two of you." I started taking large strides towards the door without a second glance at them, muttering under my breath to stay cool.

"But you haven't even finished your coffee." Alison tried to come over towards me with Hannah in tow but I was already outside in a few swift steps, the door behind me. I took in a few deep breaths of the chilly night air. Then, I started walking. I had to get away. I needed some time to clear my thoughts. I wandered around aimlessly, not caring where I was headed, the same thoughts recurring in my mind over and over again. Was our Hannah mine? Did Alison cheat on me with this Forde guy then? If she did, why did she do it? I could not think straight and finally slumped onto a park bench and clutched my head with my hands in defeat. It seemed to me then that I was wrong. Our destinies were in fact like two parallel lines, meant to travel together and not meant to cross.

chapter seventeen

Tammy Coron

“COME ON, LUCY. ANSWER the damn door.”

I’m not sure why I went to see Lucy that night. It was late—well past midnight—but I knew this is where I needed to be. Lucy was my person. My best friend. If anyone could help me knock the cobwebs in my head loose, it was her.

The porch light clicked on, and there was movement inside.

“Hey, Lucy, Matt. Are you up?”

The door opened. “Jesus, Matt. You look like shit. Are you OK?”

Lucy stood there, staring at me. I wasn’t sure if she wanted to smack me or hug me. “I’m sorry. I know it’s late. Alison and I...”

“Late? I think you mean early.” She moved aside and motioned for me to enter, “Come on, let’s get inside.”

I walked past Lucy and into the kitchen. On the table, was Lucy’s most recent project. “Working late?” I asked.

“You know how it goes. Sleep when you can, work when you can’t.” She gathered her things and pushed them aside,

“Want some tea?”

“Sure, Luce.”

“Luce? You haven’t called me that in years. Hmm... this thing with you and Alison must have you all worked up.”

The last time I called her “Luce“ was when I found out Alison was getting married. I couldn’t believe it. Why? How? It was supposed to be me. I was supposed to be her husband. Not him! And of all people—John! I mean, why him?

“I think it’s finally over with Alison and me. She, she... “ I lowered my head. I couldn’t get the words out. I loved Alison. “She’s gone, Luce. We’re finished. Just like that. Done. And the worst part is, she never loved me. Not then and not now.”

The pain buried deep in the pit of my stomach, like an angry old man pulling and tugging at my insides. She never loved me.

Her small hand squeezed my shoulder, “I’m so sorry, Matt. I know this isn’t what you wanted, but,” Lucy’s grip tightened, “did you ever think that maybe you two weren’t supposed to be together? Maybe, just maybe, the Universe was trying to give you a second chance?”

Her eyes locked onto mine. Was she right? Am I wasting my second chance?

Lucy smiled; it was the first time I noticed—mean really noticed—her smile. It was beautiful; she was beautiful. She smacked the side of my head, “Stop being a bonehead. Do you know how many women, in this town alone, would enjoy your company? Stop killing yourself chasing that woman. You’re better than that, Matt.” She walked to the other end of the kitchen and grabbed two mugs out of the cabinet. She wore modest nighttime attire: sweatpants, baggy t-shirt, and no bra. Jesus, Matt. What are you doing? She’s your best friend.

“Green or black?”

“Huh?”

She glanced back, her almond-shaped eyes peeking over the top of her glasses, “Do you want green or black tea?”

“Oh, green.” Did she notice? Did she see me looking at her?

“You know what I think, Matt?” She turned away and to tend to the tea, “I think you’re afraid.”

I walked toward Lucy, “What? You’re crazy. I’m not afraid. I’m in love. Alison and I were meant to be together. We have a daughter together.”

“Matt,” Lucy, said quietly, “You have to let that go. You have to stop doing this to yourself.”

Before the accident, before whatever this is, Lucy and I talked a lot about Hannah—my Hannah—not his, not John’s! But Lucy didn’t agree. She thought Alison and John shared more than just a night together. Had I just seen the proof? Could it be that John is—and only ever was—Hannah’s father?

“What you and Alison have isn’t love, Matt. It never was. Besides, you’re too good for her. You deserve to be with someone who loves you.”

Lucy dropped a spoonful of honey into the tea and placed it in front of me. It smelled sweet, but it wasn’t the only sweet scent in the air. Is that Lavender I smell?

“Give up, Matt.” Lucy grabbed my arms, “It’s time to stop living in the past... or,” Lucy’s face twisted up, “whatever you want to call it.”

She sat beside me, and we talked for hours until the sun came up.

“Lucy, thanks for talking me off the ledge tonight,” I smiled, and she laughed. “What’s so funny?” I asked.

“You are,” she said. “You just don’t realise how lucky you are.” She leaned over and her lips pressed into my cheek. “I love you, Matt.”

“I love you, too, Luce.” I grabbed her hand, “You’re my best friend.”

Lucy stood up from the kitchen table, “That’s not exactly what I mean, Matt.” She chewed on her lower lip, and continued, “I mean... I love you. I always have.” She poured herself a coffee, “For years, I listened to you tell me the stories about Alison, about you. I can’t do it anymore, Matt. I just can’t.”

Are those tears? Did I make my best friend cry?

“Luce, what’s wrong? What’s the matter?”

“I love you, Matt. I love you. I’m here for you. I’ve always been here for you. But it’s like I’m invisible. It’s like you don’t see me. All you see is her.”

Wait, what? Lucy? In love with me? No way! How can this be? She’s my best friend. “Lucy, I’m sorry. I... I never knew.” I put my hand on her back. She turned around, and we hugged.

“It’s OK, Matt.” She leaned into my shoulder, “You’re clueless. But I knew that from the moment I first laid eyes on you.” We laughed, and she pulled away.

“Hey, Luce. Let’s go on a date together.” She laughed, even louder now. Not the reaction I was hoping for, “What’s so funny?”

“I can’t go out with you, Matt. Not yet.” Lucy kissed my cheek and started toward the front door. “Maybe one day, Matt. But you need to get over Alison and come to terms with your past, both of them.” She opened the door and stepped aside, “I’ll see you soon, Matt. I’m not going anywhere.”

I held Lucy’s hand. Smiled, and walked out the front door. Lucy loves me. Now what?

chapter eighteen

Victoria Griesdoorn

I OPEN THE REFRIGERATOR and grab a Zombie Dust. As the fridge door shuts, I twist the cap off the beer and take a swig. I set the bottle down on the counter a little too hard. Froth wells up and with a gentle fizzle, flows down along the neck. I roll my shoulders back and forth, and unbuttoning, shrug my suit jacket off my shoulder with one hand. I take the jacket off, and with my free hand snatch the beer, as I make my way to my office.

I slip my suit jacket onto the back of my desk chair and take a seat. I take another sip of Zombie Dust as I perch forward and slide a notepad and pen towards me.

I take another mouthful and run my free hand through my hair. I set the bottle down. My fingers move, one after the other, in a circular stretching motion; then ball into a fist. My hands bend inwards and I feel a taut sensation along the top of my forearms. With closed eyes, I gently rotate my head until my neck cracks.

I open my eyes and rather than starting up my computer, I take my cell phone out of my pocket. In the Google Maps app

I search for ‘cat café’. The results show that there is one called *Windy Kitty* on West North Avenue. I put my phone down, turn used notepad pages until I reach a blank sheet and write:

- *cat café*

I sit for a moment, eyes directed at the white, lined paper but seeing a different picture in my head. Below that I write:

- *adopt a puppy*

I purse my lips and lightly bite the inside of my cheek, my lip curling inwards. Taking pen to the sheet again, I add:

- *concert in the park*

- *movie in the park*

I pick up my phone and click around the Millennium Park website until I find out that these events won’t be on until June. I sigh and strike out the last two ideas. I look at the pad. Then vigorously cross out the first two lines as well.

“I’ve got to think more classy!”

I sit back in my chair and finish the lukewarm drink in front of me.

Eyes at the ceiling, they widen and snap back down. I complete the list and smirk.

~~— *cat café*~~

~~— *adopt a puppy*~~

~~— *concert in the park*~~

~~— *movie in the park*~~

- *boating lake michigan*

- *cocktails @ aviary*

- *dinner @ signature room*

I have some calls to make.

Fighting the urge to step back into the restroom and check my appearance, I see Lucy approach on the dock. She looks great in copper-coloured slacks and a sky blue knit top. Looking at

the names of the yachts as she walks by, I wave and see her face curl into a smile. I step toward the gangway plank and offer my hand when she arrives.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

I let my arm fall to my side nonchalantly and take a step back to give her room.

“As you wish.”

She walks to the sitting area at the stern of the boat and puts her purse down on one of the seats. She turns around and looks quizzically at me.

“So... We’re not going out on the Erie?”

“No, I didn’t want to be busy sailing. I’d much rather give you my full attention instead.”

I gesture vaguely around me.

“So I chartered this for a few hours. Without looking for her reaction, I offer, “do you want a drink?”

“Sure. Club Soda would be nice,” Lucy says, as she takes a seat next to her purse. She sits back, the sun hitting her face from behind the piloting deck. Lucy blinks and peers into her bag.

“I’ll get you that drink and let the captain know we’re ready to go”, I say.

Lucy nods, as she slips her sunglasses onto her nose. I turn to walk down the gangway and up the ladder to the steering area. The captain, a middle-aged man with neatly combed hair and wearing a pressed shirt and pants, turns around as he hears me steps into the ladder. Without going all the way up, I give him a thumbs-up and hear him shout, “Ready we are, Sir.”

Inside, the cabin has a second sitting area and a kitchenette with a large fridge. I take a glass out of a cabinet and with the thongs from the icebox on the counter I place two cubes in the glass. I grab a soda water and savour the fresh scent as the

can fizzes with the release of pressure when I pop the tab. The bubbles continue as I pour the contents out. I take a beer for myself out of the fridge, before I head back to Lucy.

“Here you are,” I say, as I extend her drink towards her.

“Thanks.”

I sit down and take a swallow from my own beverage. It’s no Zombie Dust. But the Revolution Anti-Hero is a solid option too.

We hear the motor start up as Lucy takes her sunglasses off and asks: “Did you ever hire a yacht in your previous life?”

I burp softly as I remember the parties I used to throw on the water before I bought the Erie for myself, and further back to before the accident.

“No. We booked a few ferry trips. And we did some boat tours in the city.”

Lucy sips her soda as we pull out of the marina. She looks at me and tilts her head ever so slightly, waiting for me to say more.

“She wasn’t the yachting type,” is all I want to add.

“Hannah might have liked it.”

I remember Hannah’s excitement. Even at that young age she was already an explorer and a joy to travel with.

“Yes, I think she would have,” I say, smiling at the thought.

I look out over the lake that stretches out around us, with small vessels scattered around and making craggy the horizon.

“Do you miss her?” Lucy asks, probably taking my gaze for wistfulness.

My head jerks back to her. Lucy’s look is direct.

“I do...”

I take a sip of the Anti-Hero to have a few more seconds to rationalise my emotions before I continue, the crisp bitterness of the beer turning into a floral aftertaste.

“...but you have to understand it was 24 years ago,” I pause again. “Almost half a lifetime ago. And I was only her father for a few years.”

Lucy raises her eyebrows.

“I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

Lucy takes a sip of her soda and smacks her lips. She raises her glass with a frown.

“If we keep it up with such profound reality checks, I’m going to need a stronger drink.”

I laugh, tempted to throw my bottle overboard in solidarity.

“No shortage of those.”

“Did you have a nice day so far?” I ask, adding ‘so far’ as a qualifier, hoping to pique her curiosity.

Lucy pours a handcrafted cocktail out of a small bottle that seems to be filled with miniature topiary and real flowers. She smells the content before she takes a tentative sip, letting the mixture roll gently over her tongue.

“This is great.”

Her eyes tell the same story. She takes another swallow. “Yes, I did,” she continues. “If it was warmer I would have gone for a swim.”

That doesn’t surprise me in the least.

“That’s why I made sure we had some bathing suit options onboard for you. I wasn’t kidding when I said you could have kept any or all of them.”

Lucy looks incredulous.

“That’s what they’re there for,” I added, to assure her. “And the captain would have charged me for whichever ones you picked.”

Lucy sets her drink back down.

“I would hope so...” She clears her throat. “Maybe next

time.”

My heart lifts at the possibility. I take a sip of my own glass. The variation on an Old-fashioned is expertly executed with a very nice mezcal as a base note. I grin at the foursome sitting in the quarter-circle seating arrangement opposite us as they fawn over one of the cocktails that comes out under a glass cloche filled with white smoke.

“How is your portfolio going?” Lucy brings my attention back to our table. The voluminous crystal chandelier above our heads casts a perfect glow on her brown hair.

“Real estate?”

Having an architect as a best friend means we talk about our shared interest quite a lot.

“Yeah. Did you win the bid on the three-flat you were interested in in Logan Square?”

“Nope. Overbid at the auction. It’s fine. I hear there are a few more coming up in that area soon. I’m happy to wait and learn since this a new investment avenue for me,” I say, while another tug of mescal goodness courses down my throat.

Lucy grimaces with amusement before taking another draw of her cocktail too.

“Some would say that about cryptocurrency,” she snorts.

I feel my smile widening as far as it goes.

“True. But for me the uncharted territory is only just starting,” I say with a wink.

“Soon you will figure out whether you’re actually an investor worthy of his reputation.”

Exactly the reality I have foreseen for a long time.

“The Bitcoin bull run is much less interesting to watch for me now. But the market is promising. Blockchain is not going away anymore.”

“With your crystal ball shattered, I’m not making any

predictions,” Lucy shrugs.

“Have you heard about Golem? It seems promising. I might go into that.”

“The only golem I know is in *The Lord of the Rings*.”

“And Jewish folklore,” I huff, then drain my glass and reach for the menu. “Do you want another one?”

Lucy looks dubious.

“No, I think I’m calling it a day.”

“But...” My eyebrows rise in slow motion. “It’s not that late,” I say, as I reach into my pocket for my phone. “I have a dinner reservation for us.”

My phone tells me it’s just after 7 pm.

“I only planned on spending the day.”

I should have been more explicit. But where’s the surprise in that? “Do you have plans? Can you change them?” I try.

“I have dinner in my fridge,” Lucy says.

“So no plans then?” I counter.

“My alone-time is important to me,” Lucy bristles, sounding more determined than I like.

“I didn’t mean to say that. But I have a very spectacular dinner prepared,” I hint, wagging my eyebrows.

“I’m sure you do. Though you did not really *prepare* it, did you?”

I don’t like the defiant tone that is seeping into her words. “What do you mean?”

“Nevermind. I think it’s time to get the check,” Lucy says, as she looks around for a waiter.

“No. Tell me.”

She turns back to me. “Your lifestyle is just very different from mine. When was the last time you did any of the mundane things in life?”

“This morning, when I tied my laces,” I say, bringing a

twinkle to my eyes, to break the tension.

Lucy rolls her eyes.

I relent. “OK. We don’t have to go to The Signature Room. We can do something else.”

“Not really the point,” Lucy says, as she signals a waiter for the check.

“I found a cat café this morning. Or I can take you to the shelter and you can adopt a puppy. You always said you miss a dog in your life,” I suggest.

Lucy’s mouth opens. Literally. I didn’t know people actually did that.

“Do you hear yourself?”

At least that last utterance closed her mouth.

The waiter interrupts us, while placing the check on our table. “When you’re ready,” he added, with a smile.

“Thanks.” Looking back at Lucy, who doesn’t look any happier, I say, “It’s OK if that’s not what you want to do right now. I was also thinking about the concerts in the Millennium Park and getting one of those picnic baskets and blanket. But it’s not on for a few weeks yet.”

Lucy does not seem to hear me. She puts a few bills in with the check. I hadn’t even noticed she had reached into her purse.

“No! Don’t be ridiculous,” I say, as I reach for the check to give her her money back.

Lucy pushes my arm away and gets up, with her purse in her hand. “*I* am ridiculous, am I?”

She looks glorious when irritated.

“No. Of course no...”

“Because if either of us is, it’s you,” she interrupts me. “You’re so out of touch with reality. With who I am. With what our friendship is supposed to be about.”

“Eh...,” is all I can interject.

The most normal suggestion you have made for today was the last thing you thought of.”

“The park?” I ask, as I stand up to get back to around the same eye level.

“Yes, the park!” Her frustration clear in her voice and on her face now. “That you have to ask!”

Lucy turns to leave.

“Luce.” I start, following her to the door, and taking her over so I can open it for her. She sighs loudly in protest but doesn’t fight me on it, choosing to make her exit.

Noting her point of needing alone time, I suggest, “I’ll call you tomorrow so we can talk when we’ve had some time.”

Lucy turns back to me. It strikes me how the evening light that touches the sky with pink creates a perfect backdrop to her ensemble of copper-brown and pale blue.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” She clutches her purse strap with one hand and looks down at her shoes. But then looks up, at me, decidedly. “I don’t like who you’ve become. I think I would like the person you used to be before your accident in the alternate timeline. But not *this guy*...”

That stung.

“...not who you have become,” Lucy finishes.

“Please.” I swallow, convulsive.

“We probably shouldn't be friends anymore.”

My stomach lurches.

Dumbfounded for a few seconds, I say, “Let me call you a cab.”

Lucy, unblinking, slings her purse strap back over her shoulder. “No, thanks. I need air.”

chapter nineteen

G.B. Retallack

THIRTY-SIX WAS NOT a good age for me.

Last time around, I lost my wife and my daughter at thirty-six. Not to mention the rest of my life — no thirty-seven for that Matt Green!

I thought things would be different this time. Different career, different life path, and someone different to love. Lucy. The same Lucy I'd left in the dust in my first life, now my best friend and, I'd thought, a lot more.

I was wrong. The minute I told her how I actually felt, how I wanted to move forward with our relationship, she pulled away. Not harshly or abruptly, of course, just sadly. Even before she spoke, I knew what she was going to say. I'd broken some unspoken contract. We couldn't see each other any more. She smiled at me so gently I felt my heart would implode. Then she kissed me on the forehead and walked away.

I stayed and drank until closing time. I didn't remember getting in a cab, but I must have, because I woke up in my own bed, hungover and disoriented. I just lay there for a while,

chasing after the tendrils of my dreams. Dreams of Alison, mostly, although sometimes Lucy, sometimes the two of them morphing back and forth, reaching for me, smiling, crying. Walking away.

I slung myself out of bed. Forced myself to focus on the day ahead. There was nothing I could do about the past. About either past, in point of fact. It was time to let it all go and work on the future.

Maybe this time I'd make it to thirty-seven.

I padded to the bathroom and had a long shower and a shave. I considered the man in the mirror and decided he looked pretty good for a guy pushing forty. Certainly a hell of a lot better than the pale, pudgy accountant who had become too complacent and ended up losing it all. Losing Alison. Losing Hannah.

Enough.

I threw on some slacks and an old sweater and headed down to my study. I'd found out early on that being a writer meant you had to write. A lot. Especially when you had a signed book deal, complete with a deadline. My agent was already nagging for some draft chapters. I'd made it a firm rule to get in at least four hours of writing every morning, and another four either in the afternoon or evening, depending on my schedule. So I sat myself down at the computer. I stared at the screen for long while before I managed to get a grip. I started typing.

I filled a lot of screens with a lot of words over the next few hours. To this day, I don't know what. I never bothered checking.

Lunch time finally rolled around, and I could legitimately give it up. More than anything, I just wanted to get out of the house, take a walk, go have some lunch. Anything but rattle

around inside.

I went up to the bedroom to pick out some clothes. A cream linen shirt shot with minuscule threads of butter yellow. *To emphasise the tan, Lucy had patiently explained.* A pewter grey Savile Row suit in summer-weight wool *to show off your lovely shoulders and trim waist.* A silk tie of Delft blue. *Resonates with your eyes.* And finally a pair of thousand-dollar trainers to show how hip and individualistic I was.

Suddenly, I couldn't remember the point of it all. I already had more money than God, certainly enough for a single guy to live on quite comfortably. And single, apparently, was what I was going to be.

Unless there's another accident. The thought ambushed me out of nowhere. I almost stopped breathing. What if my life was in some kind of endless loop? So far, age thirty-six was batting 1-for-1. What if it all happened again, and I wake up as a twelve-year-old and have to do those twenty-four years all over?

What would happen to Alison and Hannah? As long as I was around, I could keep an eye on them, make sure they were okay. But what if I disappeared again? I felt panic setting in, like I was running out time. I stood frozen in the closet for a long minute. And then I tore it all off. Popped a few buttons from the shirt. Maybe ripped the tie. Who the fuck cared? Why should I look like one of those pop-successful guys who only live to work? I was a writer, for God's sake, not an investment banker! It was time to start looking like one.

I grabbed a pair of black jeans and a blue V-neck that (yes, Lucy) brought out the colour of my eyes. Black calfskin boots. A light nylon jacket in case the weather turned.

I stood back and examined the results in the mirror. With a shock of surprise, I realised it looked really good. *I looked*

good. Maybe this was the new me for the new future.

A weight seemed to fall from my shoulders. This whole thirty-six thing didn't have to be all doom and gloom. For the first time in twenty-four years, the future was uncharted territory. I could choose to bury it prematurely under the past, or I could grab it with both hands and go for the ride.

I chose the ride.

But first, I had things to do. I didn't know if there would be another accident, but I couldn't afford to wait and find out. Alison might not my wife in this time, and Hannah was someone else's daughter, but I still needed to make sure they would be alright, no matter what happened. And fortunately, I had the means to do it.

My first call was to my investment broker. I'd never worried about how much money he was making for me — the original capital was more than enough to carry me through, even without the very comfortable revenue from the books. Now, however, I needed to confirm that what I wanted to do would actually work.

I listened to fifteen minutes of the Edward Jones company's banal telephone music before Frank came on the line. I told him what I wanted and asked if I was generating enough annual cash flow to do it. He laughed.

"Mr. Green," he said. "You can do triple that easily. More if I realign your portfolio."

"No, that's fine. I'll let you know when everything's finalised, and we can start scheduling the transfers."

"Sounds good," he replied, and hung up. Time really is money for some folks.

With that taken care of satisfactorily, I put in a call to my lawyer, Gordon Naugler. More wretched on-hold music. But at least he was in the office today. You never knew with lawyers.

“Naugler,” he responded at last.

“Gordon, it’s Matthew Green.”

“Matty! Nice to hear your voice. What can I do for you?”

He was never one for chit-chat.

“I need to talk to you about something. Can you do lunch?”

He hemmed and hawed and finally allowed that he might manage a short one around 1:30. I said I’d make a reservation and let him know the location, and we hung up. A couple more calls and I’d booked us a patio table at the Acanto restaurant, not far from Gordon’s LaSalle Street offices. It had a spectacular view of the park and the kaleidoscope of people that flowed through and around it. I texted him the details and headed out. There was still tons of time, but I wanted to clear my head, and nothing was better for that than a brisk walk.

I loved Chicago in May, especially days like this one — blue skies, a high of 70°, and a light breeze to ruffle the fresh leaves. They’d already turned on the fountain in Millennium Park, the traditional signal that summer was on the way.

I got to the restaurant early, partly to enjoy some people-watching, but mostly to run through the plan again in my head. Gordon was a lovely man, but he doled out his time very small increments. It was a miracle he’d agreed to lunch at all, and I didn’t expect it would last very long. I had to get to and through the point as quickly as possible.

I ordered a bottle of Pouilly-Fumé, and was still sipping on the first glass when Gordon blew in.

“Matty!” he cried from ten feet away, startling some nearby diners. “How are you? You look great!” He extended his hand and I shook it.

“Can’t complain,” I said dutifully, and offered the next line in the established sequence. “Yourself?”

“Same old, same old,” he said. “You know how it is. You order yet?”

“No. I was waiting for you. You want some wine?”

He shook his head. “Water for me, I’m afraid. Day’s still far from over.”

We grabbed our menus and ordered quickly — risotto for him, lobster ravioli for me, salad for both.

“So,” he said, the moment the waiter left. “What’s this all about?”

“I want to open a trust fund.”

He raised his eyebrows but didn’t speak.

“The proceeds are to be paid out in the form of a full college scholarship. Tuition, books, accommodation, the whole works.”

“That’s pretty liberal, Matty. How much are we talking here?”

“Fifty-five thousand a year.”

He whistled and started to say something, but I cut him off. “Let me finish. It must look like it’s coming from some non-profit educational organisation who pulled a name at random from a pool of recommended candidates. You can make up a suitably vague corporate name, I’m sure.” He smiled faintly and nodded. I gave him the paper with Hannah’s name and contact information. “This is the lucky winner.” I sat back and waited for the questions.

“Where’s the money coming from,” was all he asked.

“Taken care of. Just let me know where and when to start sending the transfers.”

“No problem,” he said and stood up, ready to head back to his office.

“There is one more thing,” I said. He sat back down. I pulled out the other folded piece of paper from my pocket

and handed it to him. “I want you to open an account in your own name. I will deposit a million bucks in it as soon as it’s set up. In the event of my death, I want you to have a cashier’s cheque issued to that person for the full million. Any capital gains, you keep.”

“You’re putting a lot of trust in me,” he said evenly, but I suspected he was actually touched. He opened the paper. “Alison Broadly. Who is she?”

“Someone I care about a great deal. But like the other one, she can’t know this is coming from me. It has to look like an anonymous bequest from someone she helped in the past. She’s a lawyer too, so she’ll find lots of candidates among her previous clients. So, what about it?”

He shook his head, but it was more in wonder than negation. “It’s all very strange and mysterious, but basically straight forward from a legal perspective. I’ll have somebody draft everything up and have it couriered to you in the morning. That be alright?”

“Perfect,” I said, and meant it.

“Okay, then.” He checked his Rolex. “I gotta run. Talk to you soon.”

We shook hands again and he left. I finished my meal and sat sipping the Pouilly for a while. Then I paid up and headed back outdoors.

As I left the restaurant, I suddenly realised I was in better spirits than I had been in a very long time. There were still some ‘I’s to dot and ‘T’s to cross, but essentially it was a done deal. Hannah could go to college for as long as she chose to. In the event of my death (or apparent death, I reminded myself, thinking about the accident), Alison would receive the anonymous bequest She’d undoubtedly spend a lot of time trying to figure out who it was from, but it didn’t matter. She’d

have the money.

And Lucy? Lucy would be sole beneficiary of everything apart from the investment fund. That might change at some point, but I'd make sure she would always be well looked after. She deserved that much.

Now that the wheels were all in motion, I was free for the rest of the day. No, it was more than that. I realised with a shock that I was felling really free, fundamentally free. Free of all the baggage, free of entanglements. Free to find out what age thirty-seven had in store for Matthew Green.

I rode the wave of euphoria through Millenium Park, stopping occasionally just to take it all in. I wandered around for a couple of hours, trying to get a handle this new feeling. Eventually, I decided it was time get myself home, so I headed over to Columbus and walked north across the bridge.

I was waiting for the light at East Lake Street to change when I caught sight of a familiar figure on the far side. It was Lucy, elegant as always in a grey-and-black striped pantsuit, her pale hair lifting in the breeze. My daydreams shattered and my heart almost stopped. I couldn't face her. Not yet. I was just about to walk away when she lifted her head and saw me. She hesitated, just for a moment, but it was enough for me to catch that fleeting look of panic. I recognized it very well. Then she smiled and the light changed and there she was, striding confidently across the crosswalk towards me. I marvelled again at how beautiful she really was.

And I couldn't help myself. I knew, better than most, the futility of trying to hang on when it was over. But this was still too fresh, too aching.

"You look so beautiful," I blurted, and watched her smile fade.