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STEPHANIE



Gordon Edgley's sudden death came as a shock to everyone – not least himself. One moment he was in his study, seven words into the twenty-fifth sentence of the final chapter of his new book *And The Darkness Rained Upon Them*, and the next he was dead. *A tragic loss*, his mind echoed numbly as he slipped away.

The funeral was attended by family and acquaintances but not many friends. Gordon hadn't been a well-liked figure in the publishing world, for although the books he wrote – tales of horror and magic and wonder – regularly reared their heads in

the bestseller lists, he had the disquieting habit of insulting people without realising it, then laughing at their shock. It was at Gordon's funeral, however, that Stephanie Edgley first caught sight of the gentleman in the tan overcoat.

He was standing under the shade of a large tree, away from the crowd, the coat buttoned up all the way despite the warmth of the afternoon. A scarf was wrapped around the lower half of his face and even from her position on the far side of the grave, Stephanie could make out the wild and frizzy hair that escaped from the wide brimmed hat he wore low over his gigantic sunglasses. She watched him, intrigued by his appearance. And then, like he knew he was being observed, he turned and walked back through the rows of headstones, and disappeared from sight.

After the service, Stephanie and her parents travelled back to her dead uncle's house, over a humpbacked bridge and along a narrow road that carved its way through thick woodland. The gates were heavy and grand and stood open, welcoming them into the estate. The grounds were vast and the old house itself was ridiculously big.

There was an extra door in the living room, a door disguised as a bookcase, and when she was younger Stephanie liked to think that no one else knew about this door, not even Gordon

himself. It was a secret passageway, like in the stories she'd read, and she'd make up adventures about haunted houses and smuggled treasure. This secret passageway would always be her escape route, and the imaginary villains in these adventures would be dumbfounded by her sudden and mysterious disappearance. But now this door, this secret passageway, stood open, and there was a steady stream of people through it, and she was saddened that this little piece of magic had been taken from her.

Tea was served and drinks were poured and little sandwiches were passed around on silver trays, and Stephanie watched the mourners casually appraise their surroundings. The major topic of hushed conversation was the will. Gordon wasn't a man who inspired, or even demonstrated, any great affection, so no one could predict who would inherit his substantial fortune. Stephanie could see the greed seep into the watery eyes of her father's other brother, a horrible little man called Fergus, as he nodded sadly and spoke sombrely and pocketed the silverware when he thought no one was looking.

Fergus's wife was a thoroughly dislikeable, sharp-featured woman named Beryl. She drifted through the crowd, deep in unconvincing grief, prying for gossip and digging for scandal. Her daughters did their best to ignore Stephanie. Carol and

Crystal were twins, fifteen years old, and as sour and vindictive as their parents. Whereas Stephanie was dark-haired, tall, slim and strong, they were bottle-blonde, stumpy and dressed in clothes that made them bulge in all the wrong places. Apart from their brown eyes, no one would guess that the twins were related to her. She liked that. It was the only thing about them she liked. She left them to their petty glares and snide whispers, and went for a walk.

The corridors of her uncle's house were long and lined with paintings. The floor beneath Stephanie's feet was wooden, polished to a gleam, and the house smelled of age. Not musty exactly but... experienced. These walls and these floors had seen a lot in their time, and Stephanie was nothing but a faint whisper to them. Here one instant, gone the next.

Gordon had been a good uncle. Arrogant and irresponsible, yes, but also childish and enormous fun, with a light in his eyes, a glint of mischief. When everyone else was taking him seriously, Stephanie was privy to the winks and the nods and the half-smiles that he would shoot her way when they weren't looking. Even as a child she felt she understood him better than most. She liked his intelligence and his wit, and the way he didn't care what people thought of him. He'd been a good uncle to have. He'd taught her a lot.

She knew that her mother and Gordon had briefly dated (“courted”, her mother had called it), but when Gordon had introduced her to his younger brother, it was love at first sight. Gordon liked to grumble that he had never got more than a peck on the cheek, but he had stepped aside graciously, and had quite happily gone on to have numerous torrid affairs with numerous beautiful women. He used to say that it had almost been a fair trade, but that he suspected he had lost out.

Stephanie climbed the staircase, pushed open the door to Gordon’s study and stepped inside. The walls were filled with the framed covers from his bestsellers and shared space with all manner of awards. One entire wall was made up of shelves, jammed with books. There were biographies and historical novels and science texts and psychology tomes, and there were battered little paperbacks stuck in between. A lower shelf had magazines, literary reviews and quarterlies.

Stephanie passed the shelves which housed the first editions of Gordon’s novels and approached the desk. She looked at the chair where he’d died, trying to imagine him there, how he must have slumped. And then, a voice so smooth it could have been made of velvet:

“At least he died doing what he loved.”

She turned, surprised, to see the man from the funeral in the

overcoat and hat standing in the doorway. The scarf was still wrapped, the sunglasses still on, the fuzzy hair still poking out. His hands were gloved.

“Yes,” Stephanie said, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. “At least there’s that.”

“You’re one of his nieces then?” the man asked. “You’re not stealing anything, you’re not breaking anything, so I’d guess you’re Stephanie.” She nodded and took the opportunity to look at him more closely. She couldn’t see even the tiniest bit of his face beneath the scarf and sunglasses.

“Were you a friend of his?” she asked. He was tall, this man, tall and thin, though his coat made it difficult to judge.

“I was,” he answered with a move of his head. This slight movement made her realise that the rest of his body was unnaturally still. “I’ve known him for years, met him outside a bar in New York when I was over there, back when he had just published his first novel.”

Stephanie couldn’t see anything behind the sunglasses – they were black as pitch. “Are you a writer too?”

“Me? No, I wouldn’t know where to start. But I got to live out my writer fantasies through Gordon.”

“You had writer fantasies?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Oh. Then that would make me seem kind of odd, wouldn’t it?”

“Well,” Stephanie answered. “It would *help*.”

“Gordon used to talk about you all the time, boast about his little niece. He was an individual of character, your uncle. It seems that you are too.”

“You say that like you know me.”

“Strong-willed, intelligent, sharp-tongued, doesn’t suffer fools gladly... remind you of anyone?”

“Yes. Gordon.”

“Interesting,” said the man. “Because those are the exact words he used to describe you.” His gloved fingers dipped into his waistcoat and brought out an ornate pocket watch on a delicate gold chain.

“Good luck in whatever you decide to do with your life.”

“Thank you,” Stephanie said, a little dumbly. “You too.”

She felt the man smile, though she could see no mouth, and he turned from the doorway and left her there. Stephanie found she couldn’t take her eyes off where he had been. Who was he? She hadn’t even got his name.

She crossed over to the door and stepped out, wondering how he had vanished from sight so quickly. She hurried down

the stairs and reached the large hall without seeing him. She opened the front door just as a big black car turned out on to the road. She watched him drive away, stayed there for a few moments, then reluctantly rejoined her extended family in the living room, just in time to see Fergus slip a silver ashtray into his breast pocket.

2

THE WILL



Life in the Edgley household was fairly uneventful. Stephanie's mother worked in a bank and her father owned a construction company, and she had no brothers or sisters, so the routine they had settled into was one of amiable convenience. But even so, there was always the voice in the back of her mind telling her that there should be more to her life than *this*, more to her life than the small coastal town of Haggard. She just couldn't figure out what that something was.

Her first year of secondary school had just come to a close

and she was looking forward to the summer break. Stephanie didn't like school. She found it difficult to get along with her classmates – not because they weren't nice people, but simply because she had nothing in common with them. And she didn't like teachers. She didn't like the way they demanded respect they hadn't earned. Stephanie had no problem doing what she was told, just so long as she was given a good reason why she should.

She had spent the first few days of the summer helping out her father, answering phones and sorting through the files in his office. Gladys, his secretary of seven years, had decided she'd had enough of the construction business and wanted to try her hand as a performance artist. Stephanie found it vaguely discomfiting whenever she passed her on the street, this forty-three-year-old woman doing a modern dance interpretation of Faust. Gladys had made herself a costume to go with the act, a costume, she said, that symbolised the internal struggle Faust was going through, and apparently she refused to be seen in public without it. Stephanie did her best to avoid catching Gladys's eye.

If Stephanie wasn't helping out in the office, she was either down at the beach, swimming, or locked in her room listening to music. She was in her room, trying to find the charger for her

mobile phone, when her mother knocked on the door and stepped in. She was still dressed in the sombre clothes she had worn to the funeral, though Stephanie had tied back her long dark hair and changed into her usual jeans and trainers within two minutes of returning to the house.

“We got a call from Gordon’s solicitor,” her mother said, sounding a little surprised. “They want us at the reading of the will.”

“Oh,” Stephanie responded. “What do you think he left you?”

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow. You too, because you’re coming with us.”

“I am?” Stephanie said with a slight frown.

“Your name’s on the list, that’s all I know. We’re leaving at ten, OK?”

“I’m supposed to be helping Dad in the morning.”

“He called Gladys, asked her to fill in for a few hours, as a favour. She said yes, as long as she could wear the peanut suit.”

They left for the solicitor’s at a quarter past ten the next morning, fifteen minutes later than planned thanks to Stephanie’s father’s casual disregard for punctuality. He ambled through the house, looking like there was something he’d forgotten and he was just waiting for it to occur to him again. He

nodded and smiled whenever his wife told him to hurry up, said “Yes, absolutely,” and just before he was due to join them in the car, he meandered off again, looking around with a dazed expression.

“He does this on purpose,” Stephanie’s mother said as they sat in the car, seatbelts on and ready to go. They watched him appear at the front door, shrug into his jacket, tuck in his shirt, go to step out, and then pause.

“He looks like he’s about to sneeze,” Stephanie remarked.

“No,” her mother responded, “he’s just thinking.” She stuck her head out of the window. “Desmond, what’s wrong now?”

He looked up, puzzled. “I think I’m forgetting something.”

Stephanie leaned forward in the back seat, took a look at him and spoke to her mother, who nodded and stuck her head out again. “Where are your shoes, dear?”

He looked down at his socks – one brown, one navy – and his clouded expression cleared. He gave them the thumbs-up and disappeared from view.

“That man,” her mother said, shaking her head. “Did you know he once lost a shopping centre?”

“He what?”

“I never told you that? It was the first big contract he got. His company did a wonderful job and he was driving his clients

to see it, and he forgot where he put it. He drove around for almost an hour until he saw something he recognised. He may be a very talented engineer, but I swear, he's got the attention span of a goldfish. So unlike Gordon."

"They weren't very alike, were they?"

Her mother smiled. "It wasn't always that way. They used to do everything together. The three of them were inseparable."

"What, even Fergus?"

"Even Fergus. But when your grandmother died they all drifted apart. Gordon started mixing with a strange crowd after that."

"Strange in what way?"

"Ah, they probably just appeared strange to us," her mother said with a small laugh. "Your dad was getting started in the construction business and I was in college and we were what you might call normal. Gordon resisted being normal, and his friends, they kind of scared us. We never knew what they were into, but we knew it wasn't anything..."

"Normal."

"Exactly. They scared your dad most of all though."

"Why?"

Stephanie's father walked out of the house, shoes on, and closed the front door after him.

“I think he was more like Gordon than he liked to let on,” her mother said quietly, and then her dad got into the car.

“OK,” he said proudly. “I’m ready.”

They looked at him as he nodded, chuffed with himself. He strapped on his seatbelt and turned the key. The engine purred to life. Stephanie waved to Jasper, an eight-year-old boy with unfortunate ears, as her dad backed out on to the road, put the car in gear and they were off, narrowly missing their wheelie bin as they went.

The drive to the solicitor’s office in the city took a little under an hour and they arrived twenty minutes late. They were led up a flight of creaky stairs to a small office, too warm to be comfortable, with a large window that offered a wonderful view of the brick wall across the street. Fergus and Beryl were there, and they showed their displeasure at having been kept waiting by looking at their watches and scowling. Stephanie’s parents took the remaining chairs and Stephanie stood behind them as the solicitor peered at them through cracked spectacles.

“Now can we get started?” Beryl snapped.

The solicitor, a short man named Mr Fedgewick, with the girth and appearance of a sweaty bowling ball, tried smiling. “We still have one more person to wait on,” he said and Fergus’s eyes bulged.

“Who?” he demanded. “There can’t be anyone else, we are the only siblings Gordon had. Who is it? It’s not some charity, is it? I’ve never trusted charities. They always want something from you.”

“It’s, it’s not a charity,” Mr Fedgewick said. “He did say, however, that he might be a little late.”

“Who said?” Stephanie’s father asked, and the solicitor looked down at the file open before him.

“A most unusual name, this,” he said. “It seems we are waiting on one Mr Skulduggery Pleasant.”

“Well who on earth is that?” asked Beryl, irritated. “He sounds like a, he sounds like a... Fergus, what does he sound like?”

“He sounds like a weirdo,” Fergus said, glaring at Fedgewick. “He’s not a weirdo, is he?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Fedgewick answered, his paltry excuse for a smile failing miserably under the glares he was getting from Fergus and Beryl. “But I’m sure he’ll be along soon.”

Fergus frowned, narrowing his beady eyes as much as was possible. “How are you sure?”

Fedgewick faltered, unable to offer a reason, and then the door opened and the man in the tan overcoat entered the room.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, closing the door behind him. “It was unavoidable I’m afraid.”

Everyone in the room stared at him, stared at the scarf and the gloves and the sunglasses and the wild fuzzy hair. It was a glorious day outside, certainly not the kind of weather to be wrapped up like this. Stephanie looked closer at the hair. From this distance, it didn't even seem real.

The solicitor cleared his throat. "Um, you are Skulduggery Pleasant?"

"At your service," the man said. Stephanie could listen to that voice all day. Her mother, uncertain as she was, had smiled her greetings, but her father was looking at him with an expression of wariness she had never seen on his face before. After a moment the expression left him and he nodded politely and looked back to Mr Fedgewick. Fergus and Beryl were still staring.

"Do you have something wrong with your face?" Beryl asked.

Fedgewick cleared his throat again. "OK then, let's get down to business, now that we're all here. Excellent. Good. This, of course, being the last will and testament of Gordon Edgley, revised last almost one year ago. Gordon has been a client of mine for the past twenty years, and in that time, I got to know him well, so let me pass on to you, his family and, and friend, my deepest, deepest—"

“Yes yes yes,” Fergus interrupted, waving his hand in the air. “Can we just skip this part? We’re already running behind schedule. Let’s go to the part where we get stuff. Who gets the house? And who gets the villa?”

“Who gets the fortune?” Beryl asked, leaning forward in her seat.

“The royalties,” Fergus said. “Who gets the royalties from the books?”

Stephanie glanced at Skulduggery Pleasant from the corner of her eye. He was standing back against the wall, hands in his pockets, looking at the solicitor. Well, he *seemed* to be looking at the solicitor; with those sunglasses he could have been looking anywhere. She returned her gaze to Fedgewick as he picked up a page from his desk and read from it.

“To my brother Fergus and his beautiful wife Beryl,” he read, and Stephanie did her best to hide a grin, “I leave my car, and my boat, and a gift.”

Fergus and Beryl blinked. “His car?” Fergus said. “His boat? Why would he leave me his boat?”

“You hate the water,” Beryl said, anger rising in her voice. “You get seasick.”

“I *do* get seasick,” Fergus snapped, “and he knew that!”

“And we already have a car,” Beryl said.

“And we already have a car!” Fergus repeated.

Beryl was sitting so far up on her chair that she was almost on the desk. “This gift,” she said, her voice low and threatening, “is it the fortune?”

Mr Fedgewick coughed nervously, and took a small box from his desk drawer and slid it towards them. They looked at this box. They looked some more. They both reached for it at the same time, and Stephanie watched them slap at each other’s hands until Beryl snatched it off the desk and tore the lid open.

“What is it?” Fergus asked in a small voice. “Is it a key to a safety deposit box? Is it, is it an account number? Is it, what is it? Wife, what is it?”

All colour had drained from Beryl’s face and her hands were shaking. She blinked hard to keep the tears away, then she turned the box for everyone to see, and everyone saw the brooch, about the size of a drinks coaster, nestled in the plush cushion. Fergus stared at it.

“It doesn’t even have any jewels on it,” Beryl said, her voice strangled. Fergus opened his mouth wide like a startled fish and turned to Fedgewick.

“What else do we get?” he asked, panicking.

Mr Fedgewick tried another smile. “Your, uh, your brother’s love?”

Stephanie heard a high-pitched whine, and it took her a moment to realise it was coming from Beryl. Fedgewick returned his attention to the will, trying to ignore the horrified looks he was getting from Fergus and his wife.

“To my good friend and guide Skulduggery Pleasant I leave the following advice. Your path is your own, and I have no wish to sway you, but sometimes the greatest enemy we can face is ourselves, and the greatest battle is against the darkness within. There is a storm coming, and sometimes the key to safe harbour is hidden from us, and sometimes it is right before our eyes.”

Stephanie joined in with everyone else as they stared at Mr Pleasant. She had known there was something different about him, she had known it the first moment she saw him – there was something exotic, something mysterious, something *dangerous*. For his part, his head dipped lower and that was the only reaction he gave. He offered no explanations as to what Gordon’s message had meant.

Fergus patted his wife’s knee. “See, Beryl? A car, a boat, a brooch, it’s not that bad. He could have given us some stupid advice.”

“Oh, shut up, would you?” Beryl snarled and Fergus recoiled in his chair.

Mr Fedgewick read on. “To my other brother, Desmond, the lucky one of the family, I leave to you your wife. I think you might like her.” Stephanie saw her parents clasp each other’s hands and smile sadly. “So now that you’ve successfully stolen my girlfriend, maybe you’d like to take her to my villa in France, which I am also leaving to you.”

“They get the villa?” Beryl cried, jumping to her feet.

“Beryl,” Fergus said, “please...”

“Do you know how much that villa is worth?” Beryl continued, looking like she might lunge at Stephanie’s parents. “We get a brooch – they get a villa? There are only three of them! We’ve got Carol and Crystal! We have more! We could do with the extra space! Why do *they* deserve the villa?” She thrust the box towards them. “Swap!”

“Mrs Edgley, please retake your seat or we shall be unable to continue,” Mr Fedgewick said, and eventually, after much bug-eyed glaring, Beryl sat down.

“Thank you,” Fedgewick said, looking like he had had quite enough excitement for one day. He licked his lips, adjusted his glasses, and peered again at the will. “If there is one regret that I have had in my life, it is that I have never fathered any children. There are times when I look at what Fergus and Beryl have produced and I consider myself fortunate, but there are also

times when it breaks my heart. And so, finally, to my niece Stephanie.”

Stephanie’s eyes widened. What? *She* was getting something? Leaving the villa to her parents wasn’t enough for Gordon?

Fedgewick continued reading. “The world is bigger than you know and scarier than you might imagine. The only currency worth anything is being true to yourself, and the only goal worth seeking is finding out who you truly are.”

She could feel Fergus and Beryl glaring at her and she did her best to ignore them.

“Make your parents proud, and make them glad to have you living under their roof, because I leave to you my property and possessions, my assets and my royalties, to be inherited on the day you turn eighteen. I’d just like to take this opportunity to say that, in my own way, I love you all, even those I don’t particularly like. That’s you, Beryl.”

Fedgewick took off his spectacles and looked up.

Stephanie became aware that everyone was staring at her and she hadn’t a clue what she was supposed to say. Fergus was again doing his startled fish impression and Beryl was pointing one long bony finger at her, trying to speak but failing. Her parents were looking at her in stunned surprise. Only Skulduggery Pleasant moved, walking

behind her and gently touching her arm.

“Congratulations,” he said and moved on towards the door. As soon as it clicked shut behind him, Beryl found her voice.

“HER?” she screamed. “HER?”