



The Evil Within

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CHAPTER ONE

I squinted at the alarm clock trying to focus on the fluorescent numerals. One-thirty; I'd been in bed forty-five minutes and asleep for about thirty. Two hours less than last night and three less than the night before. At this rate I was going to die of exhaustion.

I wasn't sure whether it was the same goddamn awful dream; I could never remember much about it other than I wake up in a cold sweat, my sheets wrapped around me like a shroud. It was getting that I didn't want to go to bed.

Dragging myself into a sitting position I slumped back against the headboard and waited for my pounding heart to calm before swinging my legs over the side of the bed and staggering to my feet. I needed to sleep, but I didn't want to dream, though how I was going to manage that I wasn't sure. The strongest thing in my medicine cabinet was paracetamol, or possibly Night Nurse. When I looked, I had neither.

I padded into the lounge and over to what I laughingly called the bar. The bottle of Smirnoff had a dribble at the bottom, the gin had about two measures, but if I drank it, I would be sick to my stomach; gin and I didn't get along. The bottle of Grouse was fumes only. I should have known I'd be dry. My least-best friend had come to squat two weeks ago and had only left the day before yesterday. Waking him with my yelling two nights in a row had seen him off. I couldn't say I wasn't relieved. His constant 'Jim, it's been two years, mate, you're a young, good-looking fella, you need to get back out there, you need to get back on the pony' had me wanting to shout in his face: 'Shut the fuck up – what would you know? Have you ever fucked up your life so badly that you'd lost everything that meant anything to you?'

Of course he hadn't. He was a shallow, know-it-all, know-nothing prick and I was glad to be rid of him. Sad to say he reminded me too much of me. Me before I met Kat; me before I knew what it was like to care deeply about someone other than myself. Shame I didn't realise how much I cared until she was gone.

The empties went in the bin, which left me with a bottle of Baileys, two years out of date – I didn't need to look at the label – and a quarter-bottle of Amontillado sherry, probably just as old.

I sat down on the settee cradling the Baileys in my hands. If she'd been here she would explain the bad dreams away. She'd have made me feel better. I sighed and dropped the bottle down on the floor beside me. She wasn't here and never would be, so no point getting 'all my yesterdays'. She was gone, I was here, and I was maybe beginning to face

the consequences of my actions – ambitions – life. Hot fuck and buggeration. I didn't deserve this.

Feeling sorry for myself was definitely the pits and way down lower than I needed to go. Kat would have been ashamed of me; I was ashamed of me. I wiped my hand across my face, stood up and dragged my sorry self back to the bedroom.

If I dreamt the dream I would try and take control. Isn't that what the mind doctors told you? That's what she used to say. Take control. Yeah right, just like she did, then my eyes filled up and I whispered, 'Sorry, babe. I didn't mean it. You know I didn't mean it – right?' I prayed she knew, and I guessed she did. Didn't the inhabitants of the hereafter know everything? I hoped so. I hoped she knew.

And then, for the first time in nearly two years I began to cry, and I felt weak and I felt worthless and I wanted to go to sleep and never wake. I wanted to be with Kat.

I flung myself down on the bed, our bed, and thankfully I did sleep and there were no more dreams, at least none that I remembered.

I woke to the alarm. Just as well, I had a meeting. I'd had my best work suit dry-cleaned but forgotten about ironing a shirt. After a frantic throwing out of clothing from within my wardrobe I found a shirt that was clean, relatively unrumpled, but white. I hated white; it reminded me of funerals and I'd had enough of those.

I searched some more, but white it would have to be. The suit at least wasn't black but a charcoal grey. Not a lot different, but to me a relief. I didn't want to be seen as a grieving widower. Not that I was. We hadn't made it to

that one final step. Two weeks and one day it would have been different.

I looked in the mirror, took a deep breath, blinked back tears and tried to block all the bad thoughts out of my head. I at least looked the part: smooth, slick, a clean-cut, up-and-coming young exec. Today I had to act like one and be sharp and focused. This was what I was paid exorbitant amounts of money for. Two years ago, I'd have said I was worth every penny.

The meeting went on longer than it should have, but not as long as the clients would have hoped. How you could call businessmen whose legs you were about to cut out from beneath them clients I wasn't sure. After the meeting I guess they were ex-clients.

In this case the clients were a small family business. On the surface financially sound, but someone, somewhere within the organisation had decided not sound enough. After months of wrangling and solicitors' letters this was D-Day. The clients and their representatives walked into the room hoping there was a modicum of a chance of their survival. The suits sitting on the other side of the table, of which I was one, had already written them off. The meeting was perfunctory and for the first time it left me with a sour taste in my mouth. I couldn't do this any more.

'That went well,' Clement said as we left the room.

I glanced back over my shoulder at the clients' shell-shocked faces. 'You think?'

He frowned at me. 'Well, we all knew it was a waste of time.'

'They didn't.'

His frown deepened. ‘Don’t let Sir Peter hear you say that.’
I raised an eyebrow at him. ‘Maybe I should.’

‘What the fuck?’

‘Did you not read their file? Didn’t you go through the figures?’

‘The account was terminal,’ he said, clearly exasperated that we were still talking about it when as far as he was concerned there was no more to be said.

‘Only because of our punitive interest rates, yet they’d never missed a payment and in fifteen months the loan would have been paid off. With the loan repaid, on their current turnover, the overdraft would probably have been gone as well within five years.’

‘Five years is a long time – too long.’

‘When they came to us for help the loan was meant to be a lifeline, now they owe us a great deal less than they did at the outset and even so we’ve gone and pulled the plug on them.’ I shook my head in disgust. ‘I’ve had it, Clem. What we did in there was brutal. Immoral. Even criminal.’

‘What we did was our job.’

‘Makes it right, does it?’

‘The salary makes it right,’ he said and by God he meant it. From his expression he couldn’t see anything even mildly wrong with what we’d just done.

I looked back down the corridor; the clients were being shown out, shoulders slumped, faces slack, spirits broken. The father, the man who’d started the business over thirty years ago, looked frail, almost as though he’d aged ten years since the beginning of our meeting. When they entered the lift they shuffled around to face me. I had to turn away; I couldn’t bear to see the look of betrayal in their eyes.

Sir Peter was pleased. The fact he gestured for us both to sit down was the tell. He dropped the phone-book-thick file on his desk and buzzed his secretary.

‘Coffee?’ he asked us, although didn’t wait for a reply. ‘Pot of coffee and three cups,’ he said as he sunk down behind his desk.

A seat *and* coffee? I was surprised and when I glanced at Clem a self-satisfied smile was creeping onto his face. Was he expecting promotion? A pay rise? Sir Pete was hardly going to call us both in together for either of those things. Christ, if you were found to have even discussed your pay scale with anyone else within the company you were out on your ear.

The coffee appeared, brought in by a tall, slim, tight-arsed secretary, with a plastic smile. She served us and was dismissed with a nod from the great man and something clicked inside my head and it was as though a veil had been lifted from in front of my eyes. This wasn’t what I wanted to do. This wasn’t where I wanted to be.

Sir Pete started to speak, at least his lips were moving, though I didn’t hear a word he said. All I wanted was to get out of that room, and out of this life. I reached for my coffee, slopping some into the saucer. If I tried to drink it now I was going to drip it everywhere and the suit was fresh on today. Fresh on . . . I put the cup and saucer back on the desk and got to my feet.

‘James?’ Sir Pete said with a frown as I interrupted his speech.

‘I’m leaving,’ I heard myself say as I walked out of his office.

As I reached the lift Clem came up behind me and

grabbed hold of my sleeve. ‘Jim, are you OK? Jim?’

‘I’m leaving,’ I repeated as I stepped into the lift.

He stood there glancing about him as though he wasn’t sure what he should do, then, with a sigh, joined me.

‘You just walked out on the boss while he was in mid flow.’

‘So did you.’

‘He sent me after you, you jerk. What are you playing at?’

‘I’m leaving.’

‘So you fucking said.’

‘No, Clem, I’m leaving. Resigning, handing in my notice.’

‘No fucking way.’

‘Yes fucking way,’ I said and I started to grin. ‘Yes fucking way.’

Sir Pete couldn’t believe I was throwing away a successful career and was convinced I’d had some sort of breakdown. Maybe I had. The bank’s shrinks certainly thought so. Worried about lawsuits citing work-related stress, I was signed off on long-term sick leave and, if worse came to worst, would be let go after an appropriate period of time with a handshake good enough to deter any claim of unfair or constructive dismissal. Sir Pete’s biggest mistake; he should have accepted my resignation.

For the first week there were no more dreams and I’d more or less convinced myself they *were* down to stress. On night eight of my sabbatical they started again. And boy they were full-blown gorefests.

These I remembered. Nightmares so bloody and vicious and full of rage that after the fourth day I was wondering whether I hadn’t just had a breakdown but was going full-on

insane and heading for a long-term stay in the funny farm.

After a particularly harrowing night when I'd woken screaming Kat's name and for a moment could almost feel her cold, dead body lying within my arms, I went to see my doctor. Fortunately for me she was a no-nonsense, matronly figure who didn't believe in most of today's PC psychobabble.

'Mr Hawkes, all you need is a good, long rest,' she had said, her voice laced with sympathy. 'You've had three major events in your life within as many years. You lost your mother and father, then your long-term partner within a very short period. Having a highly pressurised job hasn't helped. Now that's behind you, I suggest you get away somewhere new. Somewhere you can relax.'

And that was it. No pills, no potions, just a prescription of rest, rest and more rest. So that afternoon I started scanning the classifieds for a country retreat somewhere. And this is when I found Slyford St James.