

# The Devil's in the Detail

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*Make friends quickly with your accuser, while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge, and the judge to the guard, and you be put in prison; truly, I say to you, you will never get out till you have paid the last penny.*

**- Matthew 5:25-26.**



## CHAPTER 1

It was the silence that woke David. After living in the same house in London for the best part of twenty years, he found it difficult to sleep without the Number 19 bus gently shaking the bed as it passed in the street below.

Why was it so quiet? Was it a bank holiday today? The city always seemed to have a collective hangover on bank holidays. All except for cab drivers of course. *Somebody* had to ferry the hordes of foreign shoppers around the West End. Shopping, excessive drinking and cold weather were a cab driver's livelihood. That's what made December his favourite time of year. And then David remembered why it was so quiet. It was Christmas Day.

He swallowed and opened an eye. This certainly wasn't his bedroom. For starters there was a metal toilet without a seat in the corner of the room. Next to it, a washbasin below a cracked mirror. The bed squeaked as he sat upright and opened his other eye. This certainly wasn't his bed either. A single mattress rested over a simple metal-framed bed. What would Sarah have said? Where the hell was he?

He swung his feet over the edge to the floor and rubbed his temples, partly to dull the headache he seemed to have woken with and partly to try and encourage his memory. It seemed that once he'd hit 40 a couple of years ago, most parts of his body needed a little more encouragement than they used to.

For some reason he recalled seeing the smiling face of a giraffe. Had he been on the whiskey last night? He remembered sitting in his cab, waiting in the cab rank outside Hamleys on Regent Street. Parking out the front of the city's largest toy store on Christmas Eve was always a safe bet. He'd been waiting for the obligatory, flustered parent to bundle into his cab, complaining that the shop had ran out of whatever the latest craze was this year and demand they go to Harrods at once.

Instead he got the grinning face of a giraffe in his rear-view mirror. It was quickly replaced with the face of a young woman dressed in what appeared to be every winter garment she'd ever owned. A muffled Australian accent fought its way from beneath her scarves.

'Do you like my Christmas present for my baby brother?'

'He's a beauty, where to love?'

The right to refer to any female between the ages of five and fifty as "love" was one of the few perks of the job; although it did make his daughter Lucy cringe every time she heard him say it.

'Willesden Green.'

He'd driven down Oxford Street and up past Baker Street, talking to her as they crawled past buses filled with other last minute shoppers. She was from Sydney and he'd mentioned that his Luce was living in Melbourne with her fiancée. Fiancée? He still wasn't entirely sure if he was comfortable with that. The 23-hour flight to Australia for the upcoming wedding would give him plenty of time to at least try.

The girl's name was Helen and she was living in London with her boyfriend. Like every other Australian it seemed that Helen and her boyfriend were here on a working holiday. With so many Australians in London nowadays, he often wondered just who was left living over there. She'd been telling him all about

their plans for their first white Christmas and offered him Clementines whenever they stopped at the lights.

The bed gave a relieved squeak as he stood up and walked over to the small basin. He tried the hot water. Nothing. He turned on the cold water and cupped his hands, splashing his face to try and elicit what had happened next.

Willesden Green.

That's right. Now, there *were* good parts of Willesden Green, but the street where he'd driven this young lady and her pet giraffe certainly wasn't one of them. She'd been as good as gold though and given him a tip that would have put most City bankers to shame. He'd almost finished his three-point turn to drive back into the West End when he heard the sound of the breaking bottle.

He felt the cold water dripping from his face as he slowly opened his eyes.

The rest was somewhat patchy. He remembered hopping out of his cab and opening the boot. He remembered pulling out the crowbar that he kept hidden underneath the spare tyre. He remembered seeing Helen's blood staining the snow covered path and walking calmly towards the group of boys, dressed in hoodies and chugging down bottles of Stella. He even remembered his foot slipping on a blood-spattered Clementine.

He strained to remember the rest. As if piecing together a jigsaw, David had the edges and corners mapped out, but the middle was frustratingly empty. There was the crunching sound of the steel of the crow bar on the first kid's jaw, and he recalled how the sound of teeth clattering upon the icy pavement had sounded like rolling dice. A loud cracking sound that ripped through the night air. And then everything went very, very black.

He looked up into the mirror, his reflection disjointed by the crack in the mirror that ran across his throat. He paused a moment and tried to make sense of the room again. A single bed, a washbasin, a cracked mirror and no windows. Realisation trickled down his spine.

'Jesus, I'm in the cells,' he said to himself.

He spun around and walked over to the cold metal door behind him. A ray of hope rising from the fact that there was a door handle. Cells don't have door handles do they? As he pulled down hard on the handle, he also discovered that this particular door had a lock.

He clasped his hand over his mouth to stifle a series of expletives that could presumably be used against him in a court of law and sat down on the protesting bed once more. Questions fired through his mind in varying levels of importance.

Did British Airways accept "incarceration" as an acceptable reason for a refund? Who would walk Lucy down the aisle? Had he seriously injured one of those boys? Christ, had he *killed* one of them? No. Surely he hadn't. He hadn't meant to hurt anybody. He'd just wanted to scare them. They'd hurt that young girl. *Somebody* had to stand up to them. He had to explain that to somebody. He needed to make a phone call. He needed to get himself a lawyer.

It was precisely at that moment that he heard the sound of a key being inserted into the door and the metallic click of a lock being slid back. With his mouth still covered by his hand, he sat there frozen as the heavy metal door swung open. He was confronted by a stocky woman, with a scruffy flock of snowy hair, who was dressed in a simple grey gown. She carried a folder and had a pair of bifocals perched on her nose.

'Mr Shepherd?'

Unable to swallow, let alone speak, he nodded.

'My name is Olivia, I'll be representing you in your case'.

He slumped back onto the bed - his worst suspicions now confirmed. He must have killed one of those boys. He suddenly went white with the realisation that maybe he hadn't just killed one. Perhaps he'd killed two or three. He could imagine the headlines that his daughter had woken up to this morning: "London Cabbie goes on violent killing spree". Perhaps one of the savvier papers would have gone with "Where to mate? Jail". He needed his phone call.

'Don't worry. I have read through your notes and think that we have a relatively good chance.'

A good chance would have been quite positive had it been a meat tray raffle, but given that it was his chance of escaping charges for multiple homicide he didn't share her optimism.

'How many? How many of those little buggers did I murder?'

'You didn't murder any of them, Mr Shepherd.'

Irrespective of the fuzzy eyebrows and subtle moustache, David could have kissed her.

'So what am I doing in here if no-one was murdered?'

'If you'll just let me explain. Whilst you didn't murder anyone, I'm afraid there was one fatality.'

His nausea returned.

'Manslaughter? They're charging me with manslaughter? Can't we claim self-defence? My wife and I used to watch all of the American legal shows on the telly; LA Law, Law and Order, that sort of thing. I'm happy to plead insanity. I have a few mates that could probably testify.'

'Mr Shepherd, I really do need you to listen. None of the boys died. And your actions saved the life of that young girl.'

'Then why am I still going to bloody court?'

Her shoulders slumped a little.

'Oh, I'm terribly sorry to be the bearer of such bothersome news Mr Shepherd. But the person that died ... was you.'

He could have died, had he not just learned that he already had. Olivia simply stood there, her hands folded in front of her, not sure of what to say next.

'I'm dead?'

'I'm awfully sorry.'

He suddenly smiled and a wave of relief came over him.

'This is one of them bloody TV shows ain't it?'

'TV?'

'Where's the camera then?'

He stood up and searched the corners of the ceiling for cameras. He then walked over to the washbasin and pointed to the mirror.

'It's behind here, ain't it?'

‘This isn’t a television program. I’m afraid you really are dead.’

He held up his hands in mock resignation.

‘Alright, alright, I’m dead. I’ll go along with it. So how’d I die then?’

‘Look, I think it best that we focus on your case Mr Shepherd.’

‘What’s the matter, you didn’t get any mock-up photos created? What channel is this on anyway? Channel 5? I’ll tell the boys on the cab rank to tune in.’

Olivia sighed.

‘Very well,’ she said as she joined him on the edge of the bed.

She opened her folder and handed him a photograph. As soon as he saw it he realised that he wasn’t going to be on television after all. This didn’t seem to bother him given that he had now realised that he actually was dead. He wondered how many people had experienced the surreal feeling of looking at a photograph of their dead selves. He was wearing the same clothes he had on now – a pair of jeans, some white trainers, a green t-shirt and a black polar-fleece. But whereas his clothes were now clean, in the photograph they were soaked in blood. *His* blood. Undoubtedly from the gaping hole that appeared above his right eye in the photograph. He instinctively rubbed his own head as he looked at it – transfixed by the ragged hole in his head and the small flaps of skin it had produced.

‘I’m afraid one of the boys had a gun,’ said Olivia.

A gunshot to the back of the head? That explained what the cracking sound had been. He hadn’t even seen it coming, which seemed somewhat unfair. Had it been something like being attacked by a shark, he’d at least formulated a game plan. “Punch their little black eyes”, was always going to be his strategy. Something that he’d seen on the Discovery Channel. But given London was without a beach and swimming in the Thames probably would have killed him anyway, this had always seemed an unlikely way to go. And then there was the fact that he didn’t swim.

Okay, so he'd determined the how. He now had more pressing questions for Olivia.

'But why?'

'It was simply your time.'

He buried his face in his hands. The idea of this being some kind of drunken dream was starting to feel less plausible.

'And this?' He motioned to his small, grey cell. 'This, is Heaven?'

'No.'

'Oh God - I'm in Hell, aren't I?'

'No.'

'Then where the hell am I?'

A pause, to let the ridiculousness of the unintended pun evaporate.

'This is Purgatory, Mr Shepherd. The place that souls visit before they pass through to the Above or the Below.'

Neither sounded particularly enticing. David simply wanted to be in his bed – his *real* bed, waking up to a cup of tea, a couple of eggs and the Sunday paper.

'So how do I get out of here? How do I go home?'

'You can't go home. This can't be reversed.'

'It has to be. We'll find a way, yeah? Just give me a pill, click your fingers... whatever it is you need to do. I just want to go home, alright?'

Olivia placed a hand on his shoulder.

'I realise that this is awfully difficult, but we really must prepare for your case.'

He sprang up off the bed.

'Why do you keep going on about that? What case? You said yourself, that I didn't murder any of those boys. I was protecting the girl. I didn't commit any crime. So what bloody case?'

Olivia gave a patient smile.

'Anger is a common reaction here in Purgatory,' she said, before lightly tapping the folder in front of her.

'We must ensure that you are suitably prepared for your case with the Court of Saint Peter.'

Olivia could see that David still didn't follow.

‘The case to see whether your soul will go to Heaven or Hell, Mr Shepherd.’

He swallowed.

‘There’s a bloody court for that?’

‘Well of course there is. Don’t you remember what Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16:19?’

Seeing that he didn’t, she gently placed her hands together and tilted her head up as if looking at an imaginary teleprompter. She cleared her throat and began reciting.

‘And I will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’

David now understood even less.

‘So let me get this right. Every time somebody dies, there’s a court case where Saint Peter decides if they should go to Heaven, or go to Hell?’

‘Well not every person, no.’

‘Some people go straight through?’

‘Of course. Children, for example, almost always go through to Heaven automatically. Lawyers are another one.’

‘Lawyers automatically go through to Heaven?’

‘Not heaven. No.’

She quickly moved on.

‘But in some instances a person has lived their life in such a way that Heaven and Hell both feel that they have equal claim to the soul. And in those cases, the Court of Saint Peter is convened to adjudicate on the matter.’

‘So God and the Devil are having a fucking custody battle over me?’

‘Well I’m not sure Heaven will want custody if you persist with that kind of language, Mr Shepherd.’

He sighed.

‘Apologies – it’s been a killer day.’

He winced again. Why did everything in Purgatory lead to an unfortunate pun?

'The court simply wants to clarify certain aspects of the life your soul has lived and based on that, they will make a recommendation.'

'And what are you?'

'I am your defence counsel.'

'No I mean, what actually *are* you? Are you an Angel?'

She smiled and gave a proud little nod.

'Indeed I am.'

David slowly walked around her, his eyes scanning up and down.

'Where are your wings then?'

'Well the Dominions passed a motion many years ago that prevent any angel within the Third Sphere from wearing his or her wings in Purgatory or Earth.'

She gave an embarrassed smile.

'It seemed that we were intimidating people.'

'Who are the Dominions? What's the Third Sphere?'

She looked at him in disbelief.

'Your file says that you attended a Catholic School, yet you know nothing of the Three Spheres?'

'I wasn't much of a reader,' he replied sheepishly.

'Clearly,' she said with a raised eyebrow. 'The Third Sphere refers to the Third Sphere of Angels. Although things are constantly re-structuring, there are essentially three spheres of Angels in Heaven. The First Sphere is made of the Seraphim, Cherubim and the Ophanims. These Angels are responsible for looking after the Throne.'

'Senior management, yeah?'

She gave a pained smile.

'If you like. Now, the Second Sphere of Angels are the governors of Heaven. They are made up of Angels known as the Virtues, the Powers and the Dominions. These angels regulate the Kingdom.'

'So the Dominions are your bosses?'

'Angels don't have "bosses", Mr Shepherd. The Dominions merely regulate how the Third Sphere should conduct

themselves and pass on the tasks which the First Sphere has passed to them.’

Unbelievable. It seemed that even Heaven had middle management.

‘And then there is the Third Sphere – the Principalities, Archangels and the Angels. The Principalities liaise with the Powers and pass on their wishes to us.’

‘So you’re an Archangel?’

She shot him a look that a boarding school headmistress would have been proud of.

‘I most certainly am not. I am an Angel.’

‘But do you know many Archangels?’

‘Several.’

‘So what are they like?’

She sighed.

‘What is behind this fascination that people seem to have with Archangels? Archangels and Guardian Angels seem to be the only Angels that people take notice of anymore.’

As Olivia continued, David sensed that he’d struck a raw nerve.

‘Michael and his Archangels have been riding the coat tails of banishing Lucifer to Hell for millennia. People seemed to have forgotten that Lucifer had actually been an Archangel in the first place. The only miracle that Michael achieved was somehow turning a career-ending embarrassment into a legacy that he has hung his halo on for far too long. It’s amazing what a little PR will do for you.’

Although it had been many years since David had read a bible, he couldn’t remember Heaven having publicists.

‘As for Guardian Angels,’ continued Olivia, ‘they are simply a Catholic myth. There may be a handful of souls that the First Sphere take a close interest in, but the very idea that every soul has an Angel watching over them is simply preposterous. Heaven simply doesn’t have the resources.’

Olivia was about to go on, but caught herself. She blushed.

‘Apologies, but I am a keen advocate of Equality within the Third Sphere, Mr Shepherd. Forgive me, what was your original question?’

‘I was just wondering what Archangels are like.’

‘They are .... theatrical,’ said Olivia through a pained smile.

Her response reminded him of when people asked him what he thought of illegal mini-cab drivers. Although “theatrical” was not probably a word he would have used.

He rubbed his temples. His headache was getting worse.

‘So what happens now? When is this trial supposed to begin?’

She snapped the folder shut and smiled.

‘Now.’

