

WHEN THE BELL TOLLS

Ian attempted his most reassuring smile as he passed the china mug filled with hot tea into the unsteady hands of the lady sat before him. It was a smile he was well accustomed to wearing. He sank back into his wingback chair, its upholstery a rich mahogany colour. Between him and his client was a low coffee table, strewn with barely-thumbed magazines.

Ian studied her for a moment. She was attractive, with sleek, angular features, and for a 43-year-old, skin notably devoid of lines. From the combination of her light brown complexion and surname, he presumed that she was of Pakistani heritage.

'Mrs Khan.' At the sound of her name she met his eyes, giving an almost imperceptible nod. He noticed the whitened knuckles of her hands clutching the mug of tea. He continued. 'Before we proceed, I need to go through some routine matters with you. These were mentioned in the documents that you were sent, and while I apologise for repeating what I assume you have already read, it is very important that I do so.'

'Of course.' She spoke quietly but clearly, with a cut-glass home counties accent.

'First of all, what you may be about to learn, whether it is better or worse than you are hoping for, or somewhere in-between, *will* profoundly affect you. Think about the closest comparable situations you have experienced in your life — finding out your exam results; waiting for the outcome of a crucial job interview;

taking your first pregnancy test . . . all those previous experiences cannot adequately prepare you for this moment. My assistant Miranda has a list of highly recommended therapists, and should you decide to proceed, I strongly advise that you seek professional help to work through and come to terms with the impact of your knowledge. I am not seeking to be melodramatic, or, God forbid, drum up business for anyone. This advice is simply based on what I have learned from the many people that have sat on that sofa before you.'

Mrs Khan nodded again, her eyes fixed on him. 'Yes, of course, Mr Mason. If you think that would help . . . of course.'

'Secondly, it is not yet too late for you to change your mind. I'm now going to give you five minutes to make a final decision. If you decide that you don't want to go ahead, your ten percent deposit will be retained, but you won't have to pay the balance. I cannot stress enough, that once you have learned this information, you will not be able to unlearn it. So please, even if you think you are already sure, use the five minutes.'

Ian stood up from his chair. Mrs Khan lent forward, reaching out a hand in supplication.

'Please Mr Mason, I'm ready now.' Her voice contained a note of desperate urgency.

Ian's reply was patient but firm. 'Mrs Khan, use the five minutes. Please.'

He walked over to the window of his office, four floors up. It was drizzling outside, a typical London October. A pair of damp pigeons were perched on the gutter of the building opposite, dopedly preening each other's feathers. How long

did pigeons live for? He had no idea. It didn't work with animals. That was why he had two dogs and a cat.

Ian's musings were interrupted by Mrs Khan. 'Mr Mason? It's been six minutes.' He pulled a white envelope from the inside pocket of his blazer, and returned to the chair. He cushioned his question, the crucial question, with a pause and a soft tone. 'So . . . what's your decision?'

'I'm ready. I want to know.' Her voice had taken on a sheen of resolve, but her hands — and not just her hands — were now shaking violently. She sat on the board of one of the city's largest investment banks. Her daily reality involved the kind of constant pressure that would crush an ordinary person. It made no difference. It never did. She was trembling like a leaf in the wind.

Ian looked her squarely in the face. 'The date of your passing will be April 15th, 2068. That will make you 94 years' old.' He spoke steadily and without inflection. He might have injected a cocktail of heady drugs directly into Mrs Khan's brain, such was the reaction. She emitted a sound somewhere between a squeak and a yelp, unconstrained tears rolling down her cheeks.

'My . . . Christ . . . thank you . . . thank you so much.'

Ian, who had been watching her reactions closely, allowed his lips an upwards curl. He passed her the envelope. 'Written confirmation,' he said.

Now that the moment of truth had passed, and despite the unparalleled nature of the situation, Mrs Khan's remarkable self-control mechanisms were kicking back in. She wiped at her face with a tissue taken from her Louis Vuitton handbag. 'Another 51 years. I . . . I just never dared to hope for that long. I really can't thank you enough.'

'I'm glad you're happy with the outcome,' Ian said.

'Happy?' Mrs Khan giggled. First the tears, then the laughter. 'Happy's an understatement! I mean — 94 bloody years!'

Ian was smiling a little more freely now. 'People have widely varying expectations, I've found.'

He gave Mrs Khan some time to compose herself, before seeing her out of his office, her effusive expressions of gratitude ringing in his ears.

Walking to his plush, oak-finished desk, he poured a small measure of single malt whisky, his tradition after delivering the news to a client. Sometimes he was rather more generous with the amount, but today had been straightforward, relatively speaking. He absent-mindedly fingered a two-inch long gouge in the surface of the desk, the remnant of a much more difficult conversation. It was that incident which had prompted the installation of the panic strip around his office, subtly designed so as to blend in with the wallpaper.

Moving around the desk, Ian picked up the uppermost black file from a small, orderly pile which Miranda had placed there earlier. Another lucky client.

File in one hand, whisky in the other, he settled into his chair again. Opening it, he was greeted by a large, glossy photograph of a beautiful young family, all beaming grins and sparkling eyes. Ian instinctively smiled in response. It had been taken at some sort of theme park. The clear blue skies were some contrast with today's weather, he thought, glancing over at the window. There were three in the picture: father, mother, and their young daughter, about five or six years of age. Which was it to be?

Flicking through the other contents of the file he found what he was looking for: the standard application form. The last vestiges of his lingering smile vanished. It was the daughter. Lily Roberts. Lifting the glass to his lips he drained the rest of the whisky, feeling its smoky burn against the back of his throat.

He was governed by a number of strict regulations, one of which related to forecasting for minors. The child themselves could not be told until they reached the age of eighteen — if applicable. Ian looked at the section of the form where applicants were asked to provide the reasons for seeking his services, a crucial part of the screening process.

Prior experience led him to suspect disease, and his suspicions were confirmed. Neuroblastoma, a rare type of cancer. A child killer. The parents were pulling out all the stops to raise money for specialist private treatment, but had decided to find out the agonizing truth of whether this would be better spent on palliative care, and packing the remainder of their daughter's life with as much joy as possible. He'd had similar cases before.

The rest of the file contained personal paraphernalia — more photographs, drawings, schoolwork, a favourite teddy bear, and other effects — which Ian needed to make the subconscious connection which would prompt the forecast. In the solitude of the office he felt a sudden sense of isolation pressing in. He had no more appointments scheduled that day. He'd take it home.

Ian could never be sure when the due dates would come to him. In most cases it was 48-72 hours later. Occasionally it was sooner, very rarely longer than a week. Usually he'd be awake, and the date would suddenly materialise in his mind,

lodging itself there, as if spoken to him by a firm voice which circumnavigated his ears and went straight to the brain. Other times, such as now, the dates would come to him in a dream.

He was woken by his own anguished cry in the night, propping himself up unsteadily on one elbow and fumbling for the bedside lamp. With a *click* the darkness was pushed back into the corners of the room, and his heart rate gradually began to slow, primal panic replaced by a deep sense of unease. A sheen of cold perspiration coated his face and upper chest. Doddie, one of Ian's two golden retrievers, had risen from the dog bed which lay at the foot of his own, and was licking his left hand.

Ian kept a notepad on his bedside table for moments like this, to record due dates before they faded away like a plane's contrail. Except he'd never had a moment like this, he thought, as he scribbled with an old black biro. This was unprec-a-fucking-dented, going-where-no-man-has-gone-before stuff. He stared at what he'd written in disbelief. 20/10/17. October 20th 2017. Ten days' time. No, wait. It was after midnight. Nine days' time. That wasn't even the most fucked up thing about it. Next to the date he had written an 'X', and next to that, the number '3'. Times three. The whole Roberts family.

Sinking back into his pillow he rubbed a hand slowly across his eyes, as if by doing so he'd wipe not only the sweat from his brow but somehow clear his dazed, addled head. The date had flashed up three times in his dream, a different face appearing next to it each time, as vividly and as clearly as if the people to whom they belonged had been standing before him. First, the daughter. Then, the mother. Then, the father. 20/10/17. Part of his 'ability' was that he never had any

doubts about interpretation — he just knew. The entire family was going to die in nine days. But how had he forecast for the parents? Certain contents of the file naturally related to them, so had he inadvertently formed connections beyond the intended? He swore loudly, and made for the kitchen.

He never usually ate past 10 PM, but tonight was proving to be one of firsts, so sod it, he thought, opening the fridge door, and going straight for a leftover slice of cheesecake. He sat at his kitchen table, eating and pondering.

The closest due date he'd ever had to give anyone had been two years' away, and *that* was hard enough. Compared to nine days, two years was a great passage of time stretching off into the distance, plenty of time to fill with rich experiences and love, to say goodbye. Under other circumstances one saving grace might have been that the parents were at least already steeled against the possibility of their daughter's tragically premature death; but not their own.

His stomach tightened. He looked down at the mostly-demolished slice of cheesecake and pushed the plate away. Some sort of accident, it would have to be. As the parents had not requested a forecast for themselves, the regulations forbade him from informing them. Legally it would be the same as announcing to someone on the street the date of their demise, and carried a minimum eight-year prison sentence. In solitary. Not that there was any point him warning them, even if he'd been able to.

Ian's eyes drifted to a framed photograph on the kitchen wall. His mum. She was a picture of happiness there, sat outside a picturesque Cornish pub with half a pint of lager in hand, glittering sea behind. Four years before the cancer had claimed her. It hadn't been easy growing up knowing exactly when he was going

to lose the person he loved above all others, every passing day a ticking of the most terrible kind of countdown, but at least he'd been able to value that time, and come to some sort of peace. His father, consumed by grief, resented him for it, resented him for not sharing the awful burden of that knowledge, and had never forgiven him. The last words they had exchanged, angry ones, were seven years ago.

Something brushed against his legs under the table. His cat, Aila. People tended to find the idea of hanging around with someone who could tell them when they needed to go coffin shopping rather unnerving, as if he were somehow wielding the scythe himself rather than simply acting as the messenger, and friends were in short supply. His pets went some way towards plugging the void. Vets' bills could be a bugger though. Despite his repeated protestations that he couldn't forecast for animals, the insurance companies refused to play ball.

Ian reached down and scratched Aila under her chin, eliciting an appreciative purr. 'No, I don't know when you're going to snuff it, do I miss? Not for a long time, hopefully.'

Perhaps that was another reason Ian felt such a kinship with his four-legged companions — he was as blind to his own fate as he was theirs. He'd often used to wonder if in his next vision the face which materialised would be the one he was used to seeing in the mirror, but thus far it never had.

Ian watched as Mollie returned from the bar and placed a generously-proportioned glass of red wine on the table in front of him, some of the burgundy liquid sloshing over the side and dribbling down the stem.

'I need a large one after *listening* to that story, so in your case I asked for an extra splash or two,' she said, sliding into the booth across from him, tightly clutching her own drink. As always she was immaculately made-up, only the presence of a few shallow wrinkles on her face hinting at the fact she'd passed her fiftieth birthday some time ago.

'Cheers,' Ian said, tilting the glass towards her and taking a sip. Not exactly a connoisseur's choice, but it went down a little easier than the first one. For someone who usually had a taste for the finer things in life, when it came to drinking establishments his agent was entirely unencumbered by snobbery. This dimly-lit bar down a Waterloo side street, complete with cheap wood panelling and chewed up dartboard, was a particular favourite. It suited Ian fine too: it was quiet.

He put the glass down. 'So, what do I do?'

'What do you do? You don't *do* anything. Apart from fulfilling the contract that is.'

Mollie leant forward. 'It's shit, it really is. Completely and utterly shit. But the law doesn't allow for any wiggle room here. You provide the due date for the daughter, and God knows I don't envy you that fucking job, but you provide it, and you do it as soon as possible so that they can enjoy the time she has left. The time *they* have left. Fuck.'

Mollie's shoulders slumped a little and she let out a prolonged sigh. It was as if while in full flow she had briefly forgotten the worst part, the vile cherry on top of Hell's own cake. Ian didn't blame her. He was used to focussing on one person, one death, and as night had turned to morning, and morning to afternoon, he'd

made the same mistake himself several times. And each time he remembered, it was like a fresh sledgehammer blow to the gut.

'I know what the law allows, Mollie,' Ian said, looking at her pointedly, 'but I'm trying to work out the *right* thing to do.'

Mollie shook her head sadly. 'When I first met you I used to think how bloody fortunate it was that the fickle hand of fate had chosen someone with such a good conscience. These days, I wonder if it isn't the cruellest fucking joke I know. Thanks to you I can retire whenever I want. Perhaps that's something you should think about.'

It was Ian's turn to shake his head. 'This isn't something you can retire from.'

For a few moments there was silence between them, the only sound the faint music of the latest ubiquitous chart-topper playing in the background. They both took a deep pull from their glasses.

'OK,' Mollie said. She spread her hands flat on the table, manicured nails painted a rich royal blue. 'Say you tell the parents about their forecast as well. What will it achieve?

'I—they'd have a chance . . . ' Ian's voice petered out as he realised the futility of what he was suggesting.

'Come on Ian. You're a rational person and I know you don't really believe that. Do you need me to remind you of the numbers?'

Ian stared into the depths of his glass, twirling it as he did. His response was barely audible. 'No.'

Mollie did anyway. 'The calendar has flipped past 127 due dates since you started. One hundred and twenty-seven. You've never been wrong, not once.'

Mollie paused for a moment, as if weighing up her next choice of words very carefully. 'Adam Aysel.'

Ian knew the numbers, and he certainly hadn't forgotten Adam Aysel. The self-made millionaire had been one of the early ones. Ian didn't even have an office then, and had delivered the news while sat on Aysel's patio. It had felt somehow like a betrayal of his hospitality. Aysel, ruddy-cheeked and wearing an open-necked white shirt, had laughed in his face. 'Forty-eight! Sorry mate, but there's no way I'm shuffling off this mortal coil that early!' Back then, Ian had almost believed him.

Several years passed, and as Aysel's due date drew nearer his air of invincibility began to erode. He had a panic room built, complete with padded floor and walls, and hired bodyguards to watch him around the clock. At midnight on the date itself he walked into the panic room alone, with instructions to open it if more than 20 minutes passed without hearing from him. At first he remained upbeat, even telling knock-knock jokes to his family over the intercom as they ate breakfast. As the day wore on, the jokes dried up. At some point in the early evening, the intercom went silent for the last time. Aysel's wife and bodyguards opened the panic room, to find him dead. Brain haemorrhage. The pathologist said the stress probably helped bring it on.

Mollie's voice brought Ian back into the present. 'All you'll achieve by telling them is to make their last days, which will be hard enough already, a living nightmare.' She placed her hand on his arm and squeezed it. 'I'm sorry Ian, but you know I'm right.'

He said nothing, simply nodding slowly.

More silence while they both drank. When Mollie began talking again she was a little brighter, as if a temporary pall had lifted from her.

'I have another client for you. This one's a real A-lister.' She took a photograph from her bag and showed it to him. Ian raised his eyebrows. He didn't get to the movies much these days, but even he recognised the face he was looking at. 'You're going to him, so that's a trip to Florida included.'

Ian started to protest, but Mollie held her hands up.

'I've already spoken to Miranda about your availability. She's booked the tickets and you fly out next Thursday. I know you're not a fan, but we need these kind of clients from time to time.'

As usual, Mollie was right. Ian's fees were charged on a means-tested basis, a practice he insisted on but which meant that, with the cost of running the office, in many cases he actually made a loss. The 'blue-chip' clients, as Mollie liked to call them, were what really paid their wages.

'You should think about staying out there a few days,' Mollie said. 'Lie on a beach, read a book. Heaven knows you've earned it.' She drained the last of her wine. 'One more for the road.' she said, a statement rather than a question, 'but first I'm going for a smoke.'

Ian watched as she walked away. He wondered what she'd say if he told her she had less than three years left. Probably shrug her shoulders and say that was the way it went sometimes. He could tell her to cut down on the cigarettes and alcohol . . . but it wouldn't change anything.

An hour later, walking to the office, Ian phoned Miranda. 'I need you to make an urgent appointment with the Robertses.'

'To discuss the due date?' Miranda asked.

'Yes,' said Ian.

'Oh, well they popped in earlier today. They've changed their minds. They've decided to use the money for a family holiday.'

Ian had to stop himself from crying out. Such relief. So utterly selfish, but so brilliant. 'Are you sure?'

Miranda sounded bemused. 'Yes, of course.' Short pause. 'Erm . . . Mr Mason?'

'Yes?'

'I returned their deposit. I thought it was right . . . you know—because of their daughter.'

'Miranda.'

'Yes Mr Mason?'

'You are a wonderful human being.'

Ian wasn't a fan of flying. It was the take-off and landing which he found particularly taxing. Fortunately, even a nine-hour flight to Florida only featured one of each. He sat back in his seat, hands tightly gripping the armrests as the plane climbed up and away from the lights of Heathrow, trying desperately to concentrate on the music playing in his headphones. Finally, after what seemed an interminable wait, the plane levelled out and the seatbelt signs went off.

He spent fifteen minutes trying to bury himself in a novel, but the pre-flight beer he'd had was pressing against the sides of his bladder. Eventually he succumbed

to the inevitable and got up to go to the toilet. As he made his way along the aisle, his eye caught that of a attractive woman. She smiled warmly at him, and then returned her attentions to a skinny young girl sitting next to her. The other side of the girl a man, presumably the father, had his head propped against a travel cushion, eyes closed and mouth slightly agape. Ian noted this with envy — he could never sleep on planes.

The nearest toilet was occupied, and as he waited outside Ian felt a twinge of recognition nagging at him. Something about the way that woman smiled at him . . . and her family. Being recognised was nothing new — a number of the other passengers had done double takes in the queue for the plane — but this was different.

In the cramped space of the toilet Ian unfastened his trousers and enjoyed the delicious first few seconds of pressure being relieved. Then the stream of piss suddenly dried up and he felt as though he was about to vomit. It had come to him. That woman. Her husband. Their daughter. The Roberts family.

He'd tried to cast them out of his mind since last week, knowing he'd hear of them again in the news. He hadn't forgotten their due date though — October 20th. Today. Even as the plane began to judder unnaturally and the vomit which had been threatening sprayed out of his mouth, his mind was racing, doing sums. The plane was due to land after midnight UK time but taking into account the different time zones was there a chance OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod . . .

That was when the screaming started.