



LAST CHRISTMAS



George Osgood considered himself to be a very ‘respectable’ man. For all his adult life he had been ever mindful of ‘doing the right thing’. At school he made sure that he paid full attention, regardless of whatever chaos was being caused by the other children in his class. And at university he had deliberately shunned the company of those students who spent their time drinking, lusting, and taking drugs, preferring instead to stay indoors each night studying his enormous textbooks and immersing himself in the dry, dusty world of land law, contracts, and tort. Sadly, his diligence had not quite paid off and at the end of his studies he returned home to his mother’s house in Greenwich with only third-class honours to show for his efforts. A career at the bar, or even in a suburban solicitors’ office, having been thus denied him¹, George took a job in the editorial offices of Steven Hildyard & Co, a prestigious London legal publisher, and by the age of thirty-eight had risen from the lowly position of editorial assistant to the lofty heights of senior editor, responsible each year for reviewing and editing the content of several volumes of Hildyard’s most important encyclopaedia of English law.

Both in the office, and indeed outside, George believed in following the ‘proper process’. Attention to detail was his watchword. It could not be denied that in the work they were doing, any one of his subordinates had the potential to change

¹ Most unfairly, in George’s opinion.





the letter of the law with a simple slip of the keyboard, and George would simply not stand for it. On many an occasion he would find himself summoning some poor sub or other menial to his cubicle so that he might berate them for allowing careless mistakes to creep into their work. Why these people didn't take the time to read and re-read their copy before submitting it to him for checking, George did not know. It was almost as if they were doing it on purpose – just to spite him.

By and large though, George's colleagues weren't all that bad. There were quite a few young people in his team and their lively banter did sometimes amuse him. There was what he felt to be a healthy mix of men and women too, demonstrating Hildyard's admirable commitment to equal opportunities. His immediate line manager, Miranda West, was a woman and he was proud to say that this didn't bother him in the slightest. And nor did the fact that she, along with quite a few of the other women in the office, were awfully pretty in their own way. If you liked that sort of thing, that is. You see, George really didn't have that much time for girls and had never had a proper relationship with anyone of either sex, seeing his apparent lack of attraction to others and his low desire for any sort of romantic activity as evidence of what could only be an inherent asexuality. Or so he thought.

Recently, a new marketing executive had arrived at Hildyard's. Ellie Swanson was young, intelligent, funny, and exceptionally good looking. And she was prone to flirt outrageously with all the staff. At first, George took no notice of the petite blonde who, each month, met with him, Miranda West², and his fellow editors to discuss the arcane mysteries of key performance indicators and returns on investment. But when Ellie began to swing regularly by his cubicle with no other motive than to pass the time of day, he began to view her in a slightly different light. Perhaps it was the way she smiled at him with those startlingly blue eyes that seemed to look deep within his very soul? Or maybe it was the way she perched on the corner of his workstation, with legs crossed and back arched so that her sweater tightened across her chest and accentuated the curve of her...? Well, you know, don't you? Whatever it was, it had a profound effect on George and, as time passed, he found himself becoming more and more

² It should perhaps be noted here that Miranda West was one of those unfortunate people who could only ever be referred to by her full name.





attracted to this beautiful, overtly feminine, and devastatingly sensual creature.

But with this growing attraction came increased frustration. George would have dearly loved to ask Ellie to come to lunch with him, accompany him to dinner, or go with him to the theatre. But he knew that such things could never be. He wasn't brash and full of confidence like the gaggle of smooth young lads who would inevitably cluster around Ellie whenever the staff were required to attend one of those tedious after-work drinks sessions³. And, quite apart from that, what could she ever see in an aging, overweight, mummy's boy like him? She did seem to like that balding, middle-aged prick, Jim Collard from IT, mind. There were rumours that they were going out together, and often when George had cause to visit the third floor, where the marketing department and the IT mob were based, he would see Ellie sitting right up close to Jim so that their bodies were almost touching as they tried to sort out some problem or other that had arisen in Hildyard's creaky CRM system. Before Ellie turned up, George might have admitted, albeit grudgingly, that he quite liked Jim, but now the little weasel was playing up to the only girl for whom George had ever experienced any sort of feelings, he realised that he hated the smug little bastard with a passion. And Jim had no excuse. He *knew* that George was interested in Ellie – hadn't George told him as much himself in an uncharacteristically unguarded moment in the Lamb & Flag the other evening? It just showed that you couldn't trust anybody these days.



Hildyard's was situated in Long Acre, near to Covent Garden tube station, and during his lunch break⁴ George would, weather permitting, take a walk around the surrounding area, just for exercise. Because it's very important to get exercise, George maintained. The Government made that quite clear when the Covid was on. Sometimes he would wander over to the Covent Garden Piazza to browse the stalls in the Jubilee Market and watch the street performers, but most often he

³ The ones that are supposed to bring together people who would much rather go home so that they can get to know their colleagues better, bond with each other, and celebrate their achievements.

⁴ Forty-five minutes, no more, no less.





would make his way north to the cobbled streets of Seven Dials, with their heady mix of boutiques, cafes, restaurants, and bars. And while he walked, his thoughts invariably turned to Ellie. In his mind's eye George pictured all the things that might be if only she could be made to appreciate him in 'that' way. Oh, nothing inappropriate, of course. Just the two of them drinking cocoa by a cosy fireside, and a life together watching *Question Time* on TV or hosting intimate dinner parties for their closest friends, during which they would talk earnestly about art, literature, and the finer things in life. Well, on second thoughts, maybe a small measure of impropriety might be involved, for there was no denying that Ellie filled her sweater beautifully, and the way her tight jeans hugged the contours of her hips and thighs made George feel very 'hot and tingly' on occasion.

It was during one of these walks, on a crisp, cold Monday in December, that George discovered St Nicodemus'. He had ambled through the narrow passageways of Neal's Yard micro-village, beneath the festooned lights and colourful Christmas decorations, idly peering through the brightly painted windows of the shops and breathing in the sweet aroma of freshly baked cakes as well as the pungent smell of cheese emanating from the dairy, until he became aware that his meanderings had taken him into an area that he could not remember ever having explored previously. A garishly decorated covered avenue led through to a wider street, on the corner of which was a traditional Victorian pub with mahogany panelling, polished tiles, and cut-glass mirrors; its sign proclaiming it to be the Printer's Devil⁵. George noted with interest that all the other buildings overhanging either side of the street were of the same age and had similarly retained their period character. Clearly, this district had escaped both the ravages of the blitz and the continued blight of post-war development, so that it had been preserved as a delightfully rare time capsule in the heart of the modern city. Odd that there was nobody else about, George mused, still, perhaps that wasn't so surprising given that the place was a bit off the beaten track.

A little further along the street, George's curiosity brought him to a shadowy alley that led off from the main thoroughfare between two high red brick walls, pitted with age. The far end

⁵ Not the one in Fetter Lane, in case you're wondering. That one was knocked down in 2013.





of the alley opened into a small courtyard wherein he could just make out a tall, grey building which, as he drew nearer, slowly resolved itself into the shape of an ancient, seemingly disused, church encircled by the type of iron railings that in most other parts of London had long ago fallen sacrifice to the war effort. Having always been interested in architecture, George was unable to resist passing through the black gates of the churchyard to mount the steps up to the big wooden door that was set within what in his opinion could only be the original fourteenth century arch and supports. A faded plaque set into the wall proclaimed the building to be ‘Saint Nicodemus’ in the Garden, founded 655AD, the oldest place of worship in the city’ and, cut crudely into the stone directly beneath, George noticed that the words ‘God help us’ had been added⁶. Much to his pleasure, upon pushing gently on the door George found it to be unlocked, so that he had no compunction nor hesitation in entering to look inside.

To be honest, as the door closed behind him, George rather wished that he hadn’t bothered. The interior of the church was decidedly gloomy and unwelcoming, and a damp mist seemed to hang in the air, shrouding the rows of dark wooden pews that flanked the narrow nave on both sides. Beyond the crossing between the north and south transepts was a massive stained-glass window that obviously hadn’t been cleaned for years and was, in consequence, now far too grimy to allow much light to pass through. There were, however, a few oily candles positioned around the walls and the light from these served to provide at least a modicum of illumination, casting flickering shadows upon the low altar and revealing the imagery etched into the window above. And what imagery it was. Oh, there were the usual bunch of pious priests, and self-satisfied saints, of course, but there was also something else entirely. The central pane was filled with carmine-skinned imps poking several terrified, and very naked, men and women with various spiked implements to drive them like cattle towards a mass of dancing flames.

Good Heavens, thought George. That must have put the wind up the congregation back in the day. No doubt the priests were very pleased with the effect of that nightmarish depiction of the torments of Hell. Just

⁶ No doubt carved there by some modern graffiti artist with a complete and utter lack of respect for how important these old buildings are in our history, George thought.





imagine the number of good Christians it must have produced.

As George peered up at these X-rated scenes, he became gradually aware of an increasing level of background noise; a low, rhythmic chanting, reminiscent of mediaeval plainsong, filled his ears, though on looking all around he could see no sign of a choir. What he did see on the other hand was a tall, hooded figure standing to his right, partially hidden in the depths of the south transept so that his features were totally indiscernible, a figure whose appearance was accompanied by a strong sulphureous smell that threatened to choke George's nostrils.

"Oh, I... I'm sorry..." George stammered. "I didn't..."

"Do not apologise, my son," intoned the hooded man, in a voice as smooth and as cold as ice. "You are most welcome. I have been expecting you."

"You have?" said George tremulously, backing away slightly as the hooded man came closer. "But how could...?"

"I know all about you, George Osgood. I have known about you for a long time. A very long time indeed."

The priest (for surely the church was not disused after all, and this must have been the parish priest who now confronted George in such a bizarre way) was now very close. But try as he might, George was still unable to see the man's face beneath the voluminous cowl that covered his head and shoulders. George's mind was set spinning with outlandish visions of the Grim Reaper whilst at the same time he was stuck by an irrational and unexplainable sense of fear.

"I must confess that I am a little surprised not to have seen you earlier," continued the priest, his voice now resonating in George's head as if it were his own internal thoughts turned up to volume ten. "That little girl is very pretty, isn't she? And you do want her so very much, don't you? No, please do not try to deny it. You long to hold her in your arms and cover her with kisses. She's far too good for that oaf, Jim Collard. Why should he have her and not you? It is your bed that she should come to each night, not his. Your hands that should caress her lovely, silken skin. Your..."

"That's enough!" squawked George, suddenly released from that form of paralysis brought on by sheer terror. "I don't know who you are, or what you think you know about me, and





I don't care. Surely this is some sort of stupid prank. And if it is, it's in very poor taste, I can tell you. Especially in a church."

"This is no 'prank' as you call it, George Osgood. I know you to harbour secret desires and I want to know how far you would be prepared to go to make Ellie Swanson yours, and yours alone?"

"What? What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"You know me, don't you George? You know what I am and what I can do for you? All I would ask in return is a promise. A promise that when you depart this mortal realm – which event I can assure you will be long years hence – you will travel with me to the otherworld to bide there ever after."

And saying this, the priest pulled back his hood to reveal his face – a hideous, leering countenance split by a grin that was pure evil, with glittering yellow pupils set within a pair of coal black eyes, and a broad, scabrous forehead topped with what could only be described as a pair of angry red horns.

"Look here, I don't know who you are," George wailed, hot liquid beginning to run down his left trouser leg. "But this isn't funny. Fuck off you stupid bastard, I'm not having any more to do with your bullshit!"

Galvanised by the sight of the dreadful apparition before him, George took off like a rocket and ran for his life, the priest's manic laughter ringing in his ears.

"Think about it, George," the priest called, as his panic-stricken victim careered back along the nave and out through the door. "Think about holding that lovely young girl in your arms. Think about the feel of her softly yielding flesh as you undress her. Think long – and hard – about it, my fine friend. And if you change your mind, well, you know where to find me..."

George ran until he felt his lungs would burst, only stopping when he reached the hustle and bustle of Earlham Street where he slumped against the wall of the Rose & Crown to regain his breath, ignoring the curious stares directed at him from passers-by. As soon as he felt able, he pulled his phone from his pocket and dialled the office. In accordance with the proper process, the phone only rang twice before being answered.

"Hello, Hildyard's. Miranda West speaking. How may I help you?"





“Hi Miranda,” croaked George, trying to sound poorly, although he really didn’t need to try that hard.

“Hi George, is something wrong?”

“I’m so sorry, Miranda, but I don’t think I’ll be able to come back to the office this afternoon. I’ve had some sort of migraine come on and I feel like shit.”

“Oh... That’s not good. You seemed perfectly OK earlier.”

“I know, it came on out of the blue while I was walking.”

George knew Miranda West was suspicious, but that was just tough luck.

“I’m going to go straight home if you don’t mind. I’ll be fine once I’ve had a bit of rest and I’ll be back tomorrow without fail.”

“Yes... Hmm... That’s probably best... If you’re not well... I hope you feel better soon, and I’ll look forward to seeing you in the morning. Goodbye, George, thanks for letting me know.”

Even though it was still early afternoon, the tube was crowded and noisy. George was acutely conscious of his damp trousers, and it seemed an age before the train finally pulled into North Greenwich station. He arrived home at six minutes past three, much to his mother’s surprise.

“Georgie, what are you doing home? Are you all right, dear?”

“I’m fine, Mother, don’t fuss. It’s only a headache. I’m going up to bed. I’ll be OK once I’ve had a good sleep.”

Shutting himself up in his bedroom, George divested himself of his soiled clothes, quickly put on his blue and white striped pyjamas⁷, and clambered into bed, closing his eyes tight. At six o’clock, Mother knocked at the door to ask if he would like to come down for ‘a nice bit of dinner’ but George steadfastly refused all her entreaties until she was eventually forced to retreat down the stairs.

George didn’t sleep at all that night. His mind raced as he replayed the awful events of the day over and over, constantly telling himself that it was just some nutter hanging around in

⁷ For George, this was the ultimate high-end sleepwear that never failed to combine comfort with style.





the church trying to scare people. And he had certainly succeeded, for fuck's sake. He had scared George half to death. But what if the whole thing had been real, what then...? Surely it wasn't possible that he had actually been invited to make a diabolical deal with some fiend from Hell. That was ridiculous – it was like that *Simpsons* episode, where Homer signed away his immortal soul in return for a pink-frosted doughnut. Besides, there were no such things as devils and demons, they were just mythical concepts cooked up by early Christian clerics to make people reject their old pagan ways. But then, there were lots of supposed historical examples of people making such Mephistophelian deals. George had read about them. Pope Sylvester II, for one, was supposed to have made a pact with a female demon, not to mention old Doctor Faustus and his ill-fated bargain with the original Mephistopheles; and weren't even the musicians Tommy Johnson and Robert Johnson⁸ reputed to have sold their souls in exchange for the secret of the blues? There were literally hundreds of stories like these from all around the world. In which case, the offer put to him in St Nicodemus' church could have been real, couldn't it?



Notwithstanding his ordeal, George's sense of duty, and the strong work ethic of which he was so proud, ensured that he was back at his workstation at nine o'clock the next morning. It wasn't long before Ellie appeared at his cubicle, all sympathy and concern.

"Everyone was worried about you," she cooed. "Disappearing like that. We're all glad you're back. It would have been rotten if you'd had to miss the Christmas lunch on Friday."

"I'm fine thanks, Ellie. I only had a migraine, I get them sometimes, they're nothing to worry about."

"Are you sure? I don't like to think of you being ill, you poor thing. You've helped me out a lot since I came to Hildyard's, and I must confess that I've grown a little, tiny bit fond of you."

"You have?" George's heart soared with a degree of hope

⁸ No relation.





that must have shown quite plainly on his face.

“Oh, not in that way, silly,” said Ellie, rather too quickly for George’s liking. “You do know that I’ve been seeing Jim Collard, don’t you?”

“Everyone does,” George replied sullenly. “I wouldn’t have thought he was your type...”

Ellie leaned closer, kissed her fingertips and placed them gently on George’s cheek. The warmth of her body and the scent of her perfume threatened to overwhelm his senses.

“Don’t be like that,” she said quietly. “Jim’s a nice bloke. We get on well with each other. Anyway, I must be off. I’ve got a meeting with Accounts in a few minutes. I’m so pleased you’re feeling better. Look after yourself, George.”

As the day wore on, George found that all he could think about was Ellie. Whenever he tried to knuckle down and concentrate on editing the section in Volume Seventeen that dealt with the principles of set-off in commercial contracts, his mind refused to focus on anything other than her – the shape of her, the smell of her, the feel of her touch on his cheek like the tiniest brush of a butterfly’s wing. It was becoming an obsession. If he wasn’t careful, he would miss his deadline. But fuck it, he couldn’t give a rat’s arse about deadlines anymore! It was becoming blindingly obvious that he must find some way to get with Ellie or else his heart would burst.

When it came to Wednesday lunchtime, George set out for his usual walk. Though he certainly hadn’t specifically intended it, he soon found himself retracing his steps taken on Monday⁹. Through Neal’s Yard he went, and out onto the strange old Victorian street which once again seemed devoid of life. This time, however, there were sounds coming from the Printer’s Devil; muffled voices and the jangling notes of a mechanical player piano that reminded George of those atmospheric old black and white films that portrayed gruesome tales of Burke and Hare and Jack the Ripper. Absurdly, it even occurred to him that it was becoming increasingly foggy, as if he had strayed into the pages of a story by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. Turning into the alley that led up to St Nicodemus’ George stopped and stared for a while at the old church, wondering if he was doing the right thing, before eventually steeling himself

⁹ At least, George tried to tell himself that he hadn’t meant to do this.





to slowly climb the steps and push open the door.

The interior of the church was as dark and oppressive as it had been previously, and George felt a cold shiver run down his spine as he made his way along the nave. This time the so-called priest was making no attempt to skulk in the shadows but was sitting in plain view on one of the pews. George squeezed in to sit down nervously beside him. The priest made no effort to move, or to turn to face in his direction.

“Back so soon?” the priest said, assuming an air of relaxed urbanity.

“Looks like it,” replied George, with far more bravado than he felt.

“Have you considered my offer?”

“Look, what’s the deal here? Assuming you’re not some psycho, and assuming I’m not going mad myself.”

“The deal? You know who I am George; I am the one those less educated sometimes call ‘Old Nick’. Lucifer, the fallen angel, the shining star. The Devil, if you will. Believe me when I say that I can grant you your heart’s desire.”

“And then what? When I die, you’ll take me off to burn in Hell forever, I suppose?”

“Don’t be so melodramatic, George,” the Devil drawled, leaning back and resting one arm on the crest of the pew as he at last turned to face his interlocutor. “‘Hell’ is an emotive word. I much prefer to call it the otherworld. It’s not so bad, and there’s not that much burning involved really. If, as dear old Doris Stokes would have had you believe, Heaven is just like Surrey, you can think of the otherworld as being much like Hackney on a Friday night – all one long round of guilty pleasures with only the occasional mindless physical assault thrown in to remind you where you are, you know? And it would be a long way off yet. Imagine all those years you can spend enjoying the charms of the lovely Ellie.”

“If you put it like that...”

“What do you say then, is it deal, or no deal?”

And much to George’s shame, that was all it took. The Devil’s proposal proved too much for him to resist.

“Deal,” he said firmly.





“Then in that case there are a few formalities we need to complete.”

Seemingly from out of nowhere, a parchment materialised on the book rack that juttred out from the back of the seat in front. It was covered all over in tight, spidery writing.

“Just the standard contract,” the Devil explained. “My offer, your acceptance, consideration in the form of your promise to me, you know the sort of thing, I’m sure.”

“Yes, but... Can I take a moment to read through...?”

“No need, my boy, no need. Why, you don’t think I would seek to trick you, do you?”

All of George’s legal training as well as his every other instinct screamed at him to examine the document carefully before going any further. But before he had a chance to read what was written, the Devil reached out a bony arm to seize George’s left wrist in a vice-like grip, slashing a long, sharp fingernail across his palm. George gasped and watched in horror as bright red blood oozed from the wound. Fishing beneath his robe, the Devil produced an old-fashioned quill pen, jabbing it into the blood before pressing it into George’s right hand.

“Sign here.”

As he put pen to parchment George’s head span. A wave of nausea washed over him, and he felt that he might faint dead away.

“Pleasure doing business with you.”

A blinding light flashed in front of George’s eyes, followed by a feeling of rapid descent into total darkness.

George wasn’t unconscious for long. He came to after only a few minutes to find that he was now alone in the church. The atmosphere had changed completely. Wintery sunlight was streaming through the large stained-glass window, illuminating a myriad of dust motes dancing in the air. Everything felt fresh and new, and despite still being a bit groggy, George was filled with a sense of happiness, and above all, a strong feeling of confidence such as he had never experienced before. Glancing at his watch, George saw that it had just gone two thirty and he was over half an hour late back from lunch. He would have to stay late now, but it couldn’t be helped. If Miranda West didn’t





like it, well, she'd have to lump it, wouldn't she? But as it turned out he needn't have worried that much, because when he returned to the office he found himself so full of vigour that he not only finished off the section on set-off, but was also able to make a good start on the topic of settlements under the Settled Land Act 1925 (as amended) and was actually on the train home by six.

On Thursday, determined not to waste any more time, George made it his business to seek Ellie out so that he might commence his 'wooing' of her¹⁰. After a while, he found her in the third-floor kitchen. She was making coffee with Jim, and the greasy little toad had his arm around her slender waist – but the new George 2.0 wasn't about to let that stop him.

"Hi Ellie," he beamed. "I was hoping to bump into you. How's things?"

"Hello George," Ellie responded with a stunning smile of her own, executing a little wriggle to extricate herself from Jim's proprietary grasp. "I'm all good, thanks. What can I do for you?"

"I was checking my phone earlier and I don't think it's working properly. I thought maybe you could help?"

"Me? Well, I don't know, I could try, I suppose. What's wrong with it?"

"It doesn't have your phone number in it," said George.

"LOL. Oh, George! You're so funny," Ellie giggled. "That's the cheesiest line I've ever heard."

At that point, Jim stepped up to place his arm once more around Ellie's waist, pulling her closer to his side and clearing his throat noisily.

"Hi, George," he said, a smug smile playing across his face. "Looking forward to lunch tomorrow?"

"I am, as it happens. I think I'm going to have a very nice time this year."

"You know, so do I," said Ellie. "We're going to Sarastro in Drury Lane, aren't we? I love it there, it's so romantic. You must be sure to sit next to me. It will be such fun."

¹⁰ As George's mother might well have said, she being a woman of particularly old-fashioned ideas and values.





When George eventually left the kitchen, he heard Jim sneering at him behind his back.

“Off you go then, Georgie Porgy. I’m sure that Mother’s waiting for you so that she and Teddy can tuck you into bed.”

“Stop it, Jim,” Ellie chided. “You’re being nasty. I think he’s very sweet.”

“Sweet? That’s one word for him, I suppose,” growled Jim, before continuing in an affected, falsetto tone. ““Oh, Ellie, my phone’s not working, can you help me?” Huh, give it to me. I’ll help all right – I’ll help shove it right up his...”



The Hildyard’s party arrived for lunch at Sarastro on Friday at two o’clock sharp. Trooping through the impressive, mullioned entrance, they marvelled at the famous restaurant’s opulent floral displays, flamboyant artwork, gilt furniture, and wall mounted opera boxes. Ellie took off her long coat and adjusted her figure-hugging, lime green, ruched mini dress that brazenly showed off her shapely, tanned legs, before sliding sinuously into the seat next to George. Jim tried to make a beeline for the chair on Ellie’s other side but, as the rest of the party jockeyed for position around the table, he found to his displeasure that he had no choice but to fit himself in at the other end, between Miranda West and a spotty intern from Accounts called Clive.

“Budge up, Georgie,” Ellie trilled, moving her chair closer to George’s so that her thigh was pressed firmly against his.

Suffice to say, George had a wonderful afternoon. As he tucked into cheese filled puff pastries and pan-fried seabass with roasted cauliflower, and orange and saffron confit, followed by Christmas pudding and custard, Ellie flirted with him shamelessly¹¹. To complement the glorious food, they drank copious amounts of Pinot Grigio, and at one point Ellie could be seen toying suggestively with the neck of the bottle as she gazed into George’s gradually blurring eyes.

At five o’clock, the festivities having come to a natural end, the party piled outside in the gathering dusk to say their goodbyes and go their separate ways. A few stalwarts went on to find a pub in which to continue the evening, but poor,

¹¹ Much to Jim Collard’s disgust, it must be said.





miserable Jim had made such a good job of drowning his sorrows that Clive had to carry him off and pour him into a black cab so that he could be taken straight home¹².

“I’m not sure if I’m all that keen on that man, after all,” said Ellie as she watched the taxi’s taillights head off in the direction of the Aldwych.

“Forget about him,” said gleefully. “Do you want to go to the pub?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve had enough to drink. Shall we go for a walk? We could go over to see the Christmas Tree in Covent Garden, if you like?”

“I think I’d like that very much,” said George.

Linking arms, the pair strolled around Covent Garden for a while, giggling and making silly jokes, pointing up at the huge bells, bows, and baubles in the Market Building, and taking uninhibited selfies by the sparkling fir tree that lit up the West Piazza. Walking north along James Street they crossed Long Acre, and it was not too long before they found themselves in Seven Dials. Then, somehow, they ended up heading straight for the alleyway that would take them to the church of Saint Nicodemus’ in the Garden.

George stopped dead in his tracks.

“L... Let’s not go down there, Ellie,” he stuttered. “It doesn’t look very safe to me.”

“Don’t be silly, sweetie. Look, there’s no-one around to see us down there,” purred his companion. “Come on, I’ve got plans for you.”

Taking his hand in hers, Ellie almost dragged George into the alley and pressed his back against the cold brick wall. Reaching up, she gently brought his face down to hers and kissed him full on the lips. George’s senses exploded as the girl’s tongue explored his open mouth, and he responded with a passion that was of a level such that he would never even have suspected himself remotely capable. Fumbling beneath Ellie’s coat he brushed his hand tentatively over her breast.

“No. Not here, darling,” she whispered. “Let’s see if we can get into that old church. It’s bound to be empty, and we can

¹² Jim might have been cocky, but he was still a lightweight at the end of the day.





get properly... comfortable.”

George’s eyes widened. Heaven knows he did not want to set foot in St Nicodemus’ ever again, but his reservations were cast aside like an old, dog-eared copy of *The Bookseller* when Ellie kissed him again, this time with her slim hand resting firmly and wantonly on his crotch.

Of course, the door to the church was unlocked, and George was pleased to find that inside it retained none of the evil atmosphere that had characterised his last two visits. On the contrary, it was quite warm and welcoming; almost cosy, you might say. But there was nothing at all cosy about what Ellie said next.

“I want you, George Osgood, and I want you now. Let’s do it on the altar. It will be so deliciously wicked, like that old poet, Percy Shelley, fucking Mary Shelley on her mother’s grave in St Pancras Churchyard.”

Ellie propelled George across the transept until he stumbled backwards against the smooth stone pedestal to lay sprawled across the altar’s predella table. Then, tugging violently at his belt, she tore down his trousers and Y-fronts, before hitching up her dress and perching on top of him, cowgirl style¹³. A vision of that old painting by Fuseli depicting a woman with a demonic, ape-like creature crouching on her chest popped involuntarily into his mind, and he could almost feel the little red devils that cavorted in the window above ogling him and jabbing at him with their long, sharp sticks.

Ellie arched her back, moving her hips in a circular motion that finally caused George to lose all control in an amazing sensation of pent-up release, like the throbbing of a hose when a kink has been shaken out. But there was something wrong. When he looked up at her, Ellie’s face had changed – was still changing – into something else. Something awful. Her once lovely features were morphing into a long snout and snarling fangs. Her dress had split, exposing leathery skin, her fingers had grown long and were tipped with sharp claws, and from her back there had sprouted a great pair of bat-like wings. George heard the screams a split-second before he realised that they were coming from him, as the thing that was once Ellie

¹³ George could scarcely believe his eyes when he saw that Ellie was wearing nothing underneath her dress. He’d seen pictures of course, and stuff in films and on TV, but never such a thing in the wild, so to speak.





Swanson dropped down from the altar and dragged him violently out of the church, his head bouncing on the hard flags, his bare backside scraping along the floor, and his body battered as it collided with the angular bench ends of the church pews. Outside, he felt himself gripped by the thing's talons and, with a sound like a sheet tearing in the wind, he was carried up, flying high above the church and away across the London skyline.

At the back of the south transept, a hooded figure emerged from the shadows, rolled up a sheet of parchment and tucked it carefully beneath his robe.

"Oh dear, George," he sighed. "Perhaps you should have been more assertive and made sure you read the contract after all. Yes, Ellie is yours alone for as long as you live, but – I mean – nowhere did it state that she was a mortal girl, did it? And you know... you really can't trust anybody these days, can you?"

The Devil couldn't resist grinning to himself as he slowly melted away to leave only a lingering whiff of sulphur behind him.

George Osgood didn't come home that night, and nor did he come into work the following Monday. In fact, neither he, nor Ellie Swanson, were ever seen again¹⁴.

John Pitman is the author of several historical/paranormal novels full of bodice-ripping pleasures, murder, intrigue and a dash of the briny deep.

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¹⁴ George's mother missed him, of course, but his colleagues at Hildyard's soon forgot him – although, as is so often the case, this was only after a short period during which they found it convenient to lay the blame for any mistakes firmly at their erstwhile editor's feet. And oddly, when asked, none of the staff (not even Jim Collard the IT man) could recall anyone by the name of Ellie Swanson ever having worked at Hildyard's.

