

Forgotten Hearts

by

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DEDICATION

To my wonderful Mum.

To those lost and those found.

'What the caterpillar perceives is the end is only the beginning for the butterfly.' I read this saying and knew it was the only way to begin describing the events that so profoundly changed me and so many others. But before you read this book, please know that I'm not a writer, yet this is a story I *must* tell, for my sanity and the debt of love I owe. If you allow it, this story will change you too.

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PART 1

Chapter 1

Sunday 18th September

'If this is old age, then you can keep it,' Walter said to Ted.

The dog, stiff from sleep and arthritis, shook himself and then scratched the door, his claws insistent against the wood. Walter lowered his paper. Ted wagged his tail.

Walter didn't really feel up to a walk – come to think of it, he had been more tired than usual recently – but Ted was whining softly and had placed his head on Walter's lap.

Walter smiled wearily. 'Nearly time, boy. Sure you're better than the old clock.' He took off his slippers and put his feet into his leather shoes. He tried to bend to reach his laces but stopped on the way down to put his hand on his back and purse his lips. Ted barked in sympathy.

'There's life in the old dog yet,' Walter said when he eventually managed to knot the laces.

He picked up the dog's lead and Ted gave a quick joyful yelp. 'Calm down, boy! Neither of us is pups anymore,' Walter chided him. What was wrong with Ted today? It was as if there was an urgent reason they should be sitting at *their* bench at the Botanic Centre.

Just as Walter set his trilby on his head and wrapped himself in his great coat, he realised he'd forgotten to take his bitter-tasting iron tonic, now a daily ritual for him. As he went back into the kitchen to get it, he could hear 'Pennies From Heaven' playing softly on the radio. He decided to leave it on so it would sound like someone was home.

Walter opened the locks on the door, each making a heavy click. Once the door was open, Ted strained to get out. Walter had just enough time to grab his blackthorn walking stick before he was tugged out the door.

They stepped out onto the suburban street and trundled along the row of sleeping red brick buildings. The houses, built for the new professionals of the 1930s, were now crumbling and the street was littered with frost-covered rubbish. It smelled of decay and cats. Walter longed for the shelter of his secluded bench at the gardens. He looked down at Ted, who watched him with bright mischief before tugging his lead again.

‘Hold your horses, Ted!’ Walter said, and started to wheeze. ‘You’ll be the death of me yet.’

The dog waited. Walter reached down to pat him and could feel, through the cold, wet roughness of Ted’s fur, the warmth and softness of his skin beneath. If only Ted would let him put on the coat he had bought for him. But Ted was just as headstrong as his keeper and Walter was content that Ted would be fine until they reached the shelter of the Botanic Centre.

Once Walter had steadied himself, he shuffled on towards his bench at the Centre, the only place outdoors where an elderly person could sit without paying or freezing to death. It was more than that though: the huge steamy glass houses made him feel that he was holidaying in the sun. Walter had never owned a passport and relied on the television, on books and, most importantly, on his imagination to transport him to sunnier climes.

The day became a dull mist of rain and it was unseasonably cold; the splash of a red Sierra going past somehow made it feel even colder. Walter looked at the news headlines outside the local Mace shop: ‘Elderly Couple Die Of Hypothermia After Gas Turned Off.’

What would happen to Ted if he wasn’t here?

He hesitated and stroked the terrier’s soggy fur. The dog raised his head, enjoying the kindness. ‘Nearly there, boy. At my age, we’re nearly there all the time. No, it won’t be long, boy, for either of us.’

A teenager on a bicycle rode towards them on the narrow footpath. It was impossible to move out of the way without ending up on the road.

The teen stopped. ‘Shift it!’ he snarled.

Walter did what any gentleman would and politely ignored him. The boy rolled his eyes and swore under his breath. Suddenly, Ted shook his coat, spraying the teen with a fountain of water and contempt.

‘Hey! I’ll kill that mutt – and you, you old coffin dodger!’ the boy yelled.

‘Come on, Ted! We’ve got to go,’ Walter said, swallowing both his anger and amusement.

The teen glared at them for a moment before making a rude hand gesture and cycling on, his bike’s wheels skidding on the footpath. Walter patted Ted and noticed the mischievous look in the dog’s eyes. Walter chuckled and patted him some more. Ted tugged on the lead again.

* * *

Margaret set the oak table with the gleaming knives and forks and rubbed her hands down her blue apron, standing back to admire her handiwork. She glanced at the clock and in an instant felt the panic tighten in her chest. She bit her lip and rushed back to the old rust-bitten oven while the warm smell of a cooking turkey filled the dilapidated house.

She pulled the glazed, golden bird out of the oven, her thin arms straining with the effort, and placed it on top of the cooker. She put a fork in and was relieved to see the juices running clear. Glancing at the antique kitchen clock, she was suddenly afraid to take her eyes off the bird.

As it cooled, she forced herself away from her vigil to run a duster over the pictures of her family. Her late husband's dark eyes glowered at her from inside the frame. He had been a dependable man in an undependable world, they said; a great oak that towered over this town's history. By contrast, their grandchildren, with the same small mouths, giggled and laughed in Spanish holiday snaps that stood beside Mr Brooks's formal portrait, while in another photograph, Margaret's daughter Rebecca sat proudly on her new jeep. The vehicle had cost Margaret most of her savings. 'Not that I begrudge her a penny,' Margaret murmured aloud.

As if trapped in the space between the past and her eternal duties to her family, her hand hovered over the silver frame of her husband's photograph. She had respected Mr Brooks – she still did. Mr Brooks (as he liked to be called, even by her) had chosen not only all her clothes – pale floral dresses – but also her lavender perfume. It had added to the feeling she'd had all her life that she didn't really exist – at least, not in the way proper human beings did.

While he had been alive he had forbidden her to come into his study, even to clean; even now the door to his study remained closed. He wasn't bad in any way – she had often heard him praised to the moon – and she had felt secure with his old-fashioned ways; 'standards have fallen, how times have changed,' he would say. He was dead ten years but she still missed his firm guidance. She still didn't know what to think or say without showing her naivety. Fortunately, she had Rebecca to guide her – the only person left to whom she could anchor her small world. Mr Brooks would have been proud of Rebecca, for she was firm like him. Margaret placed her hand on her heart and was about to sit down to count her blessings when she remembered. Heavens!

She blew a lock of frizzy hair from her eyes and returned to the kitchen just in time to stop the pot from boiling over. Heavens! There was a hiss of water.

Panic rose like bile into her throat as she heard voices outside the front door. Rebecca and the children had arrived. Margaret rushed to open the door even though

Rebecca had a key. Her daughter had demanded one in case something happened to Margaret – in case she fell or ... Margaret had thought a long time about it.

The grandchildren slouched sullenly through the door first. Michael and Martin, nine-year-old twins, were slightly overweight, tanned from their recent holiday and kitted out in matching fashionable clothes and trendy haircuts. They were quiet and probably bored, but Margaret knew this would soon transform into devilment.

‘Hello Margaret,’ Rebecca said as she came through the door.

Margaret nodded her head, her eyes downcast, her dutiful hands pressed against her dress.

The twins sat on her sofa, their muddy shoes leaving their customary trail. They quickly became engrossed in their PSPs, merely grunting at Margaret by way of a greeting. Margaret noted, not for the first time, that Rebecca’s thick make-up and scanty leopard-print top would not have met with the approval of Mr Brooks.

Margaret thanked them for coming and quickly retreated to the kitchen as Rebecca inspected her mother’s living room. Margaret peeped through the crack of the kitchen door and wondered if Rebecca would find the house up to standard, the nerves in her stomach eating away at her and spoiling her appetite.

She watched Rebecca gaze around the room, then run her hand over the photographs, her nimble fingers flicking away an invisible piece of dust. Then she looked at the antique clock, as she always did when she visited. ‘I love that clock. Make sure it’s me that gets it in the will,’ Rebecca yelled. There really was no need to shout; her normal speaking voice could be heard in any room.

Margaret snatched the plates from a cupboard in the kitchen and slammed them down on the dining table that sat at one end of the living room. ‘You’re all I have. Who else am I going to leave it to?’ was all she said. She fetched two plates of vegetables, steam rising, and set them on the grey mats on the oak table. The plates were her best; the turkey had cost more than her entire shopping bill for the previous week. If Rebecca and the kids showed only a moment’s satisfaction with the meal it would be worth it.

‘Yes, well.’ Rebecca nodded, satisfied with Margaret’s response. ‘Boys, put down those games and come to the table! And try to remember – we’ve to be nice to Margaret.’

Margaret set a large plate of turkey down in front of Rebecca.

‘I’m on a diet! How many times do I have to remind you, Margaret? How many times?’

Margaret lowered her eyes and hunched her shoulders as she returned to the kitchen. Eventually she came back with a small portion for herself, and after casting a quick look around to make sure everyone had everything they needed, she sat down.

She closed her eyes in quiet prayer, thanking God for food and family. When she opened them again she found Rebecca looking contemptuously at her. Since Mr Brooks's death, their daughter had become scornful of religious faith.

Rebecca poured ketchup all over her meal and then added salt. She did the same for the twins.

'Maybe you should taste it first,' Margaret couldn't help saying. 'Just to see if you really need all that sauce – and salt is unhealthy.' As soon as she finished speaking, she put her hand over her mouth, trying to catch the words and force them back into her mouth.

'I know how I like your turkey and it's with plenty of sauce,' Rebecca barked back. 'Do you think I don't know my own children? And what the hell do you mean by unhealthy? Are you suggesting that I'm a bad mother?'

'I didn't mean any offence,' Margaret said, waving her hand in front of her as if to shoo the bad feeling away.

'I'm more of a mother than you've ever been,' Rebecca snapped. 'Anyway, I've been thinking what to do about you.' There was a long pause but she didn't go on.

'I don't want to go into a home,' Margaret said quietly.

'No, no, we wouldn't want you to do that. I've looked at the price of homes. You'd have to use my inheritance to pay for one!'

'Oh!'

'Something will have to be done though.' Rebecca screwed up her face. 'Why do you give me such large portions? It's very kind of you, but I need to watch my figure.' Nevertheless she continued to eat, her dinner disappearing in small mouthfuls.

Michael and Martin ate with their forks in one hand and their game consoles gripped in the other. The games beeped, trilled and made rude noises that unnerved Margaret.

'Yes. I'm the greatest monkey fighter of all time!' Martin yelled. He suddenly stood up on his chair.

Margaret's eyes widened. 'Oh, don't fall,' she shouted in her head.

'I can monkey you, Margaret,' Martin shouted.

Michael giggled and stood on his chair too. 'I'm the greatest monkey fighter of all time in the galaxy,' he pronounced.

'I'm the greatest in the universe,' said Martin.

'Don't be ruining Margaret's chairs,' Rebecca said giggling.

Margaret was more worried that the chairs wouldn't hold up to such treatment – they were antiques too. She pushed her own chair back from the table; it creaked and sighed as it slid over the worn carpet.

Then Michael jumped on to the table.

‘Careful, you’ll ...’ Margaret began just as Michael knocked the dinner plate off the table. It smashed on the floor, splattering food and tomato sauce all over the carpet like blood at a crime scene. Everyone fell silent as Margaret, ashen-faced, stood up and rushed off for a cloth in the kitchen. She got to her knees and scrubbed at the carpet as the boys stood over her.

‘Sorry!’ Michael said, spluttering and giggling.

‘That was a nice dinner – really ... tasty,’ Rebecca said, trying not to laugh. ‘Only you shouldn’t use so much sage in the stuffing. Sorry about the kids. They’re usually better behaved, but boys will be boys.’

The twins gathered up their games while Rebecca lifted her car keys off the table. She stared for a while at the old clock.

‘I might take this in to be cleaned. You wouldn’t mind?’ Rebecca asked as she scooped the clock off the wall.

Margaret struggled to her feet. ‘The clock? Well, if you think it’s for the best. Only I’ve had it for a long time.’

At the front door, Rebecca pointed the key fob at the car to unlock it and the twins raced each other to it, pushing each other as they ran. A short time later they yelled from inside the car; one of them sounded the horn. Rebecca waved at them.

She turned and spoke to Margaret, the clock tucked under her arm: ‘I suppose I’ll see you next week.’ She didn’t try to disguise the resentment she felt at the burden Margaret had become.

Once they’d left, Margaret sat back in her favourite chair for a moment. It creaked with age, seeming to say ‘Make do and mend’. It was her mantra. Then getting off the chair and onto her hands and knees, she began to scrub at the ketchup stain. But she already knew the carpet would never be clean.

* * *

Sundays were always difficult days for Rebecca. They were Margaret days. Why couldn’t she just hurry up and die? Rebecca gasped at the harshness of the thought, yet it was becoming a persistent wish. She needed the money.

She wanted her husband back. She had dangled the prospect of acquiring her father’s assets in front of Blake for a long time without it amounting to anything. Now, the economic downturn had ruined the desirability of property and, in turn, her desirability to her husband.

Rebecca gazed at her silent phone. She wished he would call. She checked that the volume was turned up, even though she had checked several times before. To distract herself she looked around the house with pride. Everything was almost as she wanted it. The house was clean and neat, the furniture modern and of the best design. Now she had an antique clock ready to sell. She needed a new television; her current one didn't have HD and the children needed an HD TV. And of course satellite was a must, and then the children needed Blu-ray – DVDs were so old hat.

One of the twins banged the DVD player with a biscuit, breaking her concentration. Her most prized possession, a colourful ceramic bird, wobbled precariously on the shelf above.

'Michael! Stop doing that – NOW!'

Michael's face flushed red. Eyes narrowed, he moved to the other side of the television and kicked the DVD player.

'Your father gave me that!' Rebecca shrieked as the ornamental bird rocked from side to side. She went towards him, but the shrill ring of her phone broke her train of thought. Michael banged the DVD with another biscuit in a rage at being scolded.

She reached for the phone. *Don't rush. Try to sound casual. It might not necessarily be Blake. It could be Margaret or any number of bores, and ... and ...* She picked up the phone.

'Hello?'

She held her breath and listened: 'Hi, this is Blue Horse Finance Payday Loans. May I speak to Rebecca Smith. You owe us—'

She slammed the phone down. The twins looked at her with bewilderment. The antique clock was suddenly ticking too loudly. She snatched up the phone and punched in her husband's phone number, prefixing it with 141 to disguise who was calling.

Martin joined Michael in bashing the DVD player with biscuits, wanting in on this new game that had attracted so much attention from their mother. But while their giggles filled the room, she had more important things on her mind.

'Hi, I just thought I'd call,' she eventually said into the receiver. She bit her lip. Oh God, she thought, I'm just as pathetic as a Margaret. 'I thought it might be a good time,' she went on. She clung onto the phone. 'Well, when can I call?'

His voice was clear and cool, sophisticated and callous: 'Darling, we've had this conversation before. It's over. I'm not interested in seeing you or those little brats again. It's time to move on. I don't want to make this into a joke.'

Nothing had changed, thought Rebecca. Yet like someone who keeps buying lottery tickets without winning anything, she refused to give up hope. She could hear

someone talking in the background and knew it was his bit of fluff. Rebecca sank onto a low chair.

But within seconds she recovered and leapt to her feet. 'I know I said I wouldn't call, but I had to. It's about the kids. No, they're not sick. Listen ...'

'Sorry, honey,' he cut in. 'You don't get to demand my attention any more. I married you and was kind enough to give your children a name. But you made me regret that kindness.'

'Sssshush, they'll hear! You're the only father they've known.'

Oblivious, he continued: 'And as for the money you owe me from the settlement, don't worry ...'

Rebecca couldn't help sighing loudly with relief.

'Don't worry about the money,' he repeated. 'My solicitor will talk to yours.'

There was silence. This was always the moment when she choked on the memory of his cruelty. Countless times she had been with him when he held the phone away from his ear, rolling his eyes and sneering as the caller talked on. She never thought she would find herself on the receiving end.

Seconds lengthened to a minute as she waited for him to speak. Unable to bear it, she found herself doing what she always did – filled the silence with her own humiliation.

'It was ... it was my fault,' she said. 'I never should have thrown you out when I found out about her. I shouldn't have asked you to leave.'

The silence held. Was he there?

'You want me to beg?' she whined, collapsing into the chair once more. She wiped her eyes and pulled herself together. 'When are you taking the kids out? You're still their father ... Look it doesn't have to be like this ... I still love ... Hello? ... Don't hang up' – her voice tailed off – 'on me.'

She'd done it again, forced him to walk away. She stared at the phone keypad, contemplating calling him back.

Suddenly Martin kicked the DVD player so hard the little bird fell and smashed on top of it. The twins stared at the pieces that had burst onto the shag pile carpet and said nothing.

'I'm meant to have nothing. Nothing ... nothing ... nothing,' she howled at no one in particular.

She began to gather up the pieces, the sharp edges cutting into her hand making her bleed. Still, she could not stop holding them. 'Nothing,' she repeated as tears streamed down her cheeks and her shoulders heaved.

The antique clock chimed midnight.

Chapter 2

Sunday 25th September

The sun hung low in the autumn sky. Walter twisted Ted's lead around his gnarled fingers, barely able to hold on to it as he bent over the grave. He lifted away last week's dying flowers and laid a fresh bunch on the grave, blessing himself as he did so.

With a J-cloth he cleaned the frosted green mildew off the headstone. It dated back ninety years; his own mother was the last person to be interred in this grave. She had passed away twenty years ago and the plot was almost full. He was the last of his line, so when he joined the others, the grave would be complete for eternity.

The gravestone, carefully inscribed each year it welcomed a new occupant, marked the graves of seven children – his brothers and sisters – and his mother. She had been the longest living relative in his family, and if he lived another year he would overtake her for that title. That was something he often thought about these days – dying.

His mother had had such a hard time. Each of her children had died in infancy. She had tried to hold on to them but they were born sickly and weak and no amount of nurture could save them. The doctor had recommended – for her health and her husband's sanity – that she should have no more. Yet she clung onto the hope that became Walter. His father's mission on earth complete, he died of a heart attack shortly after Walter's birth.

Walter was taught the names of his brothers and sisters as if they were a childhood rhyme: Isaac, Harold, Albert, Maggie, Annie, Kathleen and Sarah. Walter's mother often reminded him of each of them and told him that for their sake he had to make her proud. She had held tightly onto him. The song 'A Mother's Love's A Blessing' began playing in his head and he sang aloud 'Keep her while she's living, You'll miss her when she's gone.' His singing, though tuneless and feeble, was heartfelt and sincere.

Ted whined.

'I'll be done in a minute, boy,' Walter reassured him. 'It just takes a little longer to show care and attention when you're old.'

He squinted at the grave. It might have been better if he'd joined them sooner rather than later. Sometimes he appreciated the beauty of the world and found solace in Ted's companionship, but lately he'd noticed the harshness of the winters and, too often, wondered what he had achieved, what the point of it all was.

Ted pawed his leg. 'Right! I'm done now, Ted,' he said.

He had dedicated his life to caring for his mother when she was alive and now he dedicated himself to tending the family's grave. He tipped his hat down and shuffled back through the cemetery. A car slowly drove past. Ted barked at the wheels. Cars should never be allowed in here, Walter thought. Cemeteries aren't places for cars; it was wrong.

Walter often let Ted off the lead. In his younger years, he'd run off and all Walter could hear was his distant barking. Now Ted always stayed at his side, even when he was off his lead, though Walter worried that he would forget his doggy years to dart off after a stray cat.

* * *

As Walter entered the Botanic Centre gardens he could feel the temperature rise. The place seemed to have a weather system all of its own. He walked to their sheltered outdoor bench; mild air blew over from the garden. He scanned the empty path and iron benches. Only those who needed to escape their houses would come on a day like this. Who was interested in botany in these days of newfangled television and cheap flights to faraway places?

Like a pair of bookends, Ted sat at one end of the bench while Walter sat at the other reading the *Guardian*. He was methodical with the newspaper; he would read every word and then wedge it in the bench for someone else to read.

Ted was alert, his head tilting to one side and then to the other. Suddenly, he jumped off the bench and, with his leather lead trailing behind him, walked off. Walter dropped his paper as Ted made his way down to the main path and disappeared round the corner.

'Ted! Ted!' called Walter forgetting his age and dashing after him.

He arrived just in time to see Ted jump up at a lady coming up the path. For a moment the lady looked horrified, then her face flushed with pleasure and surprise.

Walter ran up and grabbed Ted's lead. 'Please accept my apologies,' he said. 'This is the first time he's ever done this. Are you all right?'

The woman said nothing – just stared at him.

Walter began to panic. He touched his chest and rubbed his arm. 'Please sit down a moment. There's a bench just over here.'

The lady didn't respond. Instead she looked down at her shoes and smiled.

'Well, as long as you're okay?' Walter said, tipping his trilby at her. Ted wagged his tail and sat down in front of her as if waiting for her decision.

The lady was wearing a coat that had seen better days and old-fashioned shoes. She looked down shyly at her feet and eventually nodded.

‘What a wonderful dog,’ she said as they began the walk to Walter’s bench. ‘I can’t believe he’s so ... *friendly*.’

Ted barked as if to say thank you.

When they sat down on the bench Ted barked again and pawed the lady’s knee. She tenderly stroked his fur and Ted licked her hand.

Walter cleared his throat. ‘My name, madam, is Walter and it’s a great pleasure to meet you.’

‘My name is Margaret,’ replied the lady, blushing. ‘And it’s an equal pleasure to meet you and your dog. What’s his name?’

‘Ted.’

Ted woofed as Margaret shook Walter’s hand.

‘I haven’t seen you here before. I would’ve noticed,’ Walter said.

‘How would you have noticed me?’

It was Walter’s turn to blush. ‘I come here every day. It gives the dog a chance to stretch his legs and saves on the heating bills. I love the smell of the plants and I get to see people even if they don’t speak to me.’

‘He’s beautiful that dog. What kind of dog is he?’

‘A Yorkshire terrier. He thinks he’s still a pup the way he gets on. You wouldn’t guess his age.’

‘I wouldn’t try,’ said Margaret, smiling.

‘He’s fourteen years old. In doggie years that makes him even older than my seventy-five winters.’

‘I wouldn’t have thought you were seventy-five!’

Walter was unexpectedly pleased by her remark but only raised his eyebrows.

Just then, Margaret stood up and began to shuffle away, her shoes barely making a noise on the paving. ‘I get things wrong all the time,’ she said apologetically. ‘If I didn’t have my Rebecca to help me, I don’t know what would become of me. I’d better go.’

Walter winced and got up too. ‘No, I’m sorry. Thanks for the compliment – I’m not used to them. Me and my dog walk here all the time and no one notices that we even exist – except for kids, who stare at me and Ted as if they’re wondering if mugging us is worth the effort.’

Margaret laughed and turning towards Walter said, ‘I’m not sure anyone would want to mug your wee doggie. He doesn’t have much to take.’

‘I’m pretty safe too,’ said Walter. ‘I’ve got the pensioner’s best protection – poverty. I’ve nothing worth stealing.’

Margaret laughed again.

Walter liked the sound of her laugh. Then she suddenly became self-conscious again. Her pale wrinkled skin flushed red. Ted barked and pulled on the lead.

‘Do you live far away?’ Walter asked. The rain began again, making a determined noise on the thick glass and Perspex roof.

Margaret didn’t answer.

An uncertain Walter tipped his hat.

Margaret nodded and then disappeared down the path.

Walter turned to begin his own drab journey home, but he changed his mind and set off along a different route home, a route he hadn’t taken since he was a lad. Everything looked vibrant and shiny and new in the rain.

