

# 1

Andrew sat on the pavement. Breathing hard, absently wiping at his mouth.

*Not a dream. Not a dream. Not a dream.*

The phrase was stuck, like when CDs were still a thing.

The bus had pulled away ten minutes earlier, after some cursing by a soiled overweight man, a pissed off bus driver, and cries of “gross” by horrifically delighted teenagers.

Now he sat on the side of the road a few stops earlier than he needed to be. He should be walking because he should have unlocked the theatre two hours ago. But, he couldn’t get the boy’s face out of his head.

Jeremy Lakeland.

10 years old.

Presumed dead.

Except, Andrew knew with a certainty he couldn’t, and didn’t want to, explain that there was no ‘presumed’ about it. Jeremy Lakeland was well and truly gone. Taken apart piece by piece.

Something bubbling noxious in a pot.

A knife glinting blood red as it cut.

And, the book.

Andrew rolled to the side and dry-retched in the gutter.

“Are you okay?” A lady asked, business suit, manicured finger-nails.

Andrew waved her on, “Fine” he said huskily.

The lady returned to her phone call, keeping an eye on the guy hunched over on the sidewalk.

His brain couldn’t reconcile what he had read with what he had dreamed. This had to be a coincidence. Nothing else made sense.

But, the man in his head disagreed, a man that had the tone he remembered his father having. Dry pragmatism. *This is no coincidence Andrew my boy, and there's no use pretending it's so.*

So, what then? He'd had some kind of vision? That sounded all kinds of crazy, and struck at a fear that Andrew had ignored for years. Crazy did run in the family after all. Was this a case of like mother, like son? Was he coming down with a case of crazies like his mother had, and not the talk to your twenty cats kind of crazy either but the 'burn your husband to death' kind of crazy.

No. Andrew was not crazy.

It was just a coincidence. A crazy dream combined with a lack of sleep and poor nutrition and his mind taking pictures from newspapers and merging the two together.

He got to his feet, waited for the world to steady itself around him, and began the two kilometre walk to work. Each step he took his resolve firming up that it had only been his imagination, a carry-over effect from the night before. There was no connection.

None at all.

The Court Theatre stood on Fleet Street, a two hundred and fifty seat art deco affair from the nineteen XXX. It was a stately, if somewhat tired, remnant of a time when local theatres were a popular community hub. Over the years it had been a movie house, a church, a squash court, sat vacant for years and had finally been bought by the local city council for protection and renovation which had now secured its future, at least for the foreseeable future. While it enjoyed the protection of the council, the renovations were slow in coming. But, in the last five years, community theatre had been on an upward curve and the theatre was growing into a revival.

And now, it largely fell under the watchful care of the lowly-paid Assistant Manager who, as the clock in the theatre awning clicked over to ten thirty-five in the morning, was shuffling down the road with a slightly crazed expression on his tired and pale face.

Andrew pulled out his keys and unlocked the security gating and then the tall French doors that fronted the theatre. To one side a small boutique coffee shop had been installed to encourage people to stop by and linger. It was little more than an oversized coffee machine placed behind a small counter. Andrew doubled as both Theatre Assistant Manager and Barista, something he had not foreseen in his career.

The actual manager was a lady named Suzanne Cho, a sixty year old stalwart of the theatre scene for the past forty years. She'd taken the Court Theatre gig as a way of easing herself into retirement, so she left most of the day to day running of the theatre to Andrew, showing up usually on Fridays for a check-in and if there were any opening nights. Her main focus was the Court Players, the resident theatre company of which she was President. The company was currently in rehearsals for *Fiddler on the Roof*, due to open in three weeks, so she was particularly preoccupied. Which all meant, that Andrew was largely left to himself.

As a theatre that did not double as a cinema, there wasn't really much happening in the day during the week other than those who needed a coffee fix and didn't want to wait in the busier cafes down the road. So, Andrew was not too worried about being late. They used to run some tours of the theatre, or if there was a show packing in or prepping there might be some technicians or stage crew working around, but as *Fiddler on the Roof* was not due to pack in for another week, the building was largely left to himself. Now that the theatre was owned and managed by the city council, through the Crown Theatre Corporation, it was a public facility and it did however need to be open to the public in case they wanted to have a look around. So, that meant someone still needed to be present, with doors open in welcome.

It was a pretty cruisey job, and one Andrew had held for the past two years, ever since working with Suzanne as assistant producer for a few of the Court Players productions. After she had seen that he had nothing much else going on in his life she had suggested he come work with her. So he did. And he'd been here ever since.

Andrew's headache was back as he fastened the doors open, and turned on the coffee machine and put out some tables and chairs on the sidewalk in front of the theatre. He pulled the pamphlet holder out filled with flyers for up and coming productions and local events.

It was at that moment that he realised he'd forgotten something.

"Crap."

He rushed down the little alley way that ran between the Theatre and the bookshop next door to the back of the theatre.

"Oh what the hell!"

He ran over and dispersed the flock of seagulls that had descended on the five catering boxes left on the back doorstep. One of the sides had been pried open and the contents of pastries and cakes was now a

pile of torn apart paper and crumbs.

"Bloody hell!" Andrew cursed again at the birds that were dancing around, not quite willing to let their free morning tea go yet. Andrew picked up one of the massacred muffins and threw it at them. "Piss off!"

The birds jumped, then realised what it was and descended.

Andrew inspected the damage, and was thankful to see that it was only the top box that had been breached. That left four boxes of sandwiches, muffins, cakes and slices for the rest of the day.

Should be all right. He was often left with things to take home or throw out. That would teach him for being late. No doubt Ronaldo would have been wondering where he was for the morning delivery at 8.30. The normal time Andrew was due to be at work.

Just then he heard the faint rising of the office telephone.

Hoisting all five boxes onto his hip, and kicking at the birds as he hurried past, Andrew rushed back around to the front of the theatre, heading for the office.

"Hello, Court Theatre, Andrew speaking."

"Oh Andrew good, you're there. I tried calling earlier, but there was no answer."

"Hey Suze, yeah sorry was just talking with a customer and missed you." Andrew probably didn't need to lie, but he also couldn't be bothered going into too much of an explanation.

"I just forgot to tell you, Mark is coming by this morning for a key. They want to pack-in later this week."

Mark was the producer for the Fiddler production. "This week? I thought they were coming the following week."

"No, Andrea wants to come early, to get a few more technical rehearsals under belt. You know how she is."

Andrea, the Brazilian director of the production, a passionate woman who was never satisfied with one week's venue rehearsal when she could do two, or three.

"Gotcha."

"Oh and that means you'll probably need to be there for pack-in. I can't make it, I have a thing." Suze could never make it. Andrew was always the official presence for venue hireage, unless he had some extra staff on for the week. But, he didn't make a point of it. It's not like he had anything else going on.

"Yeah, that's fine. What day?"

"Not sure. Maybe Thursday. Check with Mark. Thanks Andrew."

Gotta run.”

And then she was gone. Andrew could almost smell her perfume wafting over the phone as she bustled away, no doubt onto some other creative endeavour.

Andrew looked at the time. Ten forty-five. Hopefully Mark hadn't already been by.

After putting the food in the cabinets next to the coffee machine, Andrew placed a small 'back in 5 minutes' sign on the counter and went off to quickly do his rounds. He could have been worried about theft, but Mission Bay was a relatively quiet little township, and most people used cards to pay these days so they actually carried very little cash. And that was still locked away. Of course, they could have a go at the food cabinet but, again, that had never happened before and he was only going to be gone for 5 minutes.

Andrew first unlocked the main auditorium doors and stepped into the cool, dark quiet of the theatre proper.

Eleven rows of red velvet seats extended away from him, down towards the stage. There was no centre aisle, just two aisles down the side of the auditorium. Following tradition, a single lamp with a bare bulb was on the stage, it's light on. As with most theatres, there was a strong tradition of superstitions and the Court was no different. The ghost light was meant to ensure that the resident ghost, an entity with the unlikely name of Beatrice, was kept happy during the long night hours, because apparently ghosts could not see in the dark. The story went that Beatrice was a member of the original members of the Court's resident theatre company when it first opened in the early twentieth century. Beatrice had apparently died after falling into the orchestra pit during a final dress rehearsal and was forever doomed to haunt the theatres environs watching shows she could no longer be a part of.

Andrew was not sure of how true this was, but there was record of some accident happening during the theatres opening season, though details were sketchy. Andrew suspected that time and the eager imaginations of thespians through the years had exaggerated the story.

Regardless, the ghost light remained on every night when the theatre was unoccupied. Andrew suspected it was more related to safety issues rather than anything supernatural.

As he walked down the aisle and stepped onto the large stage area, he breathed in the familiar smell of paint and make-up that were the theatres constant companions. For a local theatre, the stage was

remarkably large, with a full proscenium and fly tower. Unlike many small community theatres, the Court was one of the few that was built to purpose so had the height that stretched into the darkness above his head.

Andrew turned to face the auditorium, the light beside him casting little illumination onto the scene, so that only the first few rows were visible before fading away into the darkness.

He had always found the theatre the one place in his life that he found comforting, more so than his own little flat and he enjoyed the quiet hours when no one was here.

A memory came to mind, one of the few he still held onto. Andrew was around six years old. His father was sitting at his bedside and had just turned on the night light after kissing Andrew good night.

*"No need to be scared son. Light holds a special kind of magic. It will always push away the darkness. Even the smallest of lights. So, all you need to do is create a little light and focus on it and the dark has to give way."*

*Six year old Andrew had thought about this and spotted what appeared to be an obvious flaw.*

*"But what if I don't have a light."*

*His dad had looked at him for a moment, and then smiled. "Oh, there's always light son. Wherever there's a beating heart and a will to see, there's light."*

It was the last time he had seen his father alive. In the dark of that night, and in an apparent psychotic break, his mother had poured gasoline over her husband's sleeping form and lit a match. She'd then crawled into bed with Andrew, holding him close and whispering his name over and over again.

Andrew remembered the hungry glow of the fire as he stood shivering on the sidewalk later that night, shades of reds and blues adding to the cacophony of colours and sound. Some lights, it seemed, could be worse than the quiet of the dark.

Andrew turned to the bare bulb casting its light out into the dark auditorium and reached to turn it off. Which was when he noticed a faint flicker in one of the seats, a row just outside the sphere of the light.

*"Hello?"*

He stepped down from the stage, peering into the gloom.

A flicker, in the corner of his eye, like a piece of transparent cloth shifting in the gloom.

*"Who's there?"*

There was no response. Not that he expected one because he was fairly certain that he was alone. There had been no one there when he walked down the aisle. He was sure of it.

A soft whisper of cloth, a faint rose perfume.

Andrew spun, peering around the large and now not so certain empty space.

Nothing.

He was alone.

And yet...

Just then he heard someone call out from the foyer, and he almost jumped out of his skin.

"Bloody hell! Get a grip Andrew."

The lack of sleep and the troubled morning were obviously still playing with his head. First dreams coming to life in newspapers and now he was seeing theatre ghosts.

As he walked up the aisle back the foyer he shook his head at his foolishness. But as he pulled open the door, he could still smell the distinctly feminine **smell** of floral perfume.

Mark was standing in the foyer waiting for him, a thirty year old IT guy who'd been with the Court Players for nearly five years.

"Oh, there you are."

"Hey Mark."

Mark looked at Andrew, an eyebrow raised. "You good? You're looking a little pale."

Andrew laughed weakly, "Yeah, I'm fine just a bit tired, didn't have a great sleep." Which was an understatement. "Suze said you were wanting the key."

"Yeah, Andrea is cracking the whip. Wants to pack-in later this week. You available for that?" Mark asked following him across the foyer and into the office behind the Café.

"Yeah, haven't got much else going on. What day?"

Andrew opened the cupboard where the extra keys were kept and pulled out a the key register which he handed to Andrew to date and sign.

"Thursday about 5pm. Don't think anyone else can make it before then."

"Sweet."

Mark took the key and turned to leave. "When you gonna jump onto the stage man? We could use more guys."

Andrew shrugged, "Oh, I think I'm better off stage. Don't wanna throw anything off."

"I heard you sing remember. You're good. You should give it a go."

"Yeah maybe," Andrew offered noncommittally.

"Well, I'll catch you Thursday. I'll let you know if anyone needs to get in earlier. Stacey might wanna come by and have a look at the lighting rig. I think she has some creative ideas." He turned to go before looking back. "You sure you're good man?"

Andrew waved him off. "I'm fine, maybe just a bit of the flu. If Suze shows up, I might get her to take the rest of the day."

Mark shook his head. "Yeah, good luck with that."

Andrew watched him leave before heading back to man the Cafe counter. Occassionally he had a part-timer that would show up for a few hours mid-morning to after lunch, but today he was on his own.

The morning went smoothly. Which was a relief. He didn't think he could handle too much more excitement after this morning's dramas. And the night.

As he served the occasional coffee to some regulars, chatting with them while the idled away their time, images from his dream kept coming to mind. His head just didn't seem to want to let it go which was frustrating because today was Tuesday and that was the day the caterers supplied their famous Cinnamon rolls, a weekly treat that Andrew indulged in. But when your mind was filled with images of blood and terrified children, it became hard to look at food without wanting to bring something up.

So, instead he sipped a Coke while just trying to get through the morning.

At around twelve-thirty an unexpected group of Chinese tourists showed up, and he found himself interpreting twenty coffee orders through a pretty young Chinese lady. The group unfortunately didn't seem to want to use her too much and busied themselves with asking questions about seemingly every item in the food cabinet. After fifteen minutes of explanations, Andrew thought he might have explained the apple and custard brioche twenty times. In the end, he found himself rushing through twenty coffees, with a mix of slices and sandwiches thrown in.

Which was why he didn't notice that guy in the expensive suit until he had been standing at the counter for a good ten minutes.

"Excuse me."

Andrew looked up from the coffee machine just his elbow knocked

a saucer to the floor where it smashed.

"Shit! Sorry mate, be right with you."

Amidst the noise of twenty Chinese tourists chattering and taking photos, Andrew quickly knelt down and scooped the broken crockery into dustpan.

Coming up for air, he turned back to the guy. Maybe mid thirties, dark blue suit with a faint pin stripe. Perfectly trimmed hair.

"Sorry. What can I get you?"

"Are you Andrew Firth?"

Andrew cocked his head. "Yeah?"

"Gre-"

Just then the guy was interrupted by a Chinese lady who came up to the guys elbow. She said something in Chinese and waved her hand at the large posters of previous shows hanging on the walls in the foyer of the theatre.

"Sorry, she's asking if they are allowed to take photos in the foyer?" The young pretty tour guide asked.

"Sure thing, just make sure no one goes into the theatre itself, for safety reasons."

Tour girl gave him a smile and spoke to the old woman, who smiled at Andrew and nodded her head before happily bustling back to her friends, cameras already out and ready.

Again, he turned back to the guy. "Sorry, yeah I'm Andrew. Do I know you?"

The man extended his hand over the counter. "I'm Duncan Grieve. I'm a lawyer with Addison and Pratt. Do you have a few minutes to chat?"

Andrew frowned and racked his brains for what he could have done that would have got him into legal trouble. Surely not the bus company.

"A lawyer? Is there a problem or something?"

Duncan Grieve the lawyer shook his head. "No, no nothing like that. It's good news actually. I'm here to discuss an inheritance."

Andrew paused confused until the steam wand began to burn his hand and he flinched.

"Crap - uh, sorry. I don't understand. What do you mean inheritance?"

"Your inheritance Mr Firth."

"Inheritance from where?"

"Our law firm represents the estate of Mr Firth," Mr Grieve said.

“Your father.”

The group of Chinese tourists were gone now, having chatted their way down the street, cameras clicking at things that Andrew thought was nothing extraordinary. Perhaps shop fronts were different in China. The pretty tour-guide had thanked Andrew and given him a shy smile as she led the group away. Andrew would have perhaps tried to talk to her more, had he not been distracted by the news of his father’s estate.

He now sat at one of the small coffee tables with Duncan Grieve, the man with the expensive suit and neatly trimmed hair. A cool afternoon breeze blew up the street from the harbour.

“So, what, my father has an estate of some kind, leaving me an inheritance?”

“That’s correct.”

Andrew sat back in his chair surprised and not quite sure how to feel.

“And it’s been left to me?”

“Correct.”

“Okay then. So, what’s in this inheritance?”

Mr Grieve opened his briefcase and pulled out a few papers, laying them on the coffee table. He picked up the top sheet and began to read.

*“I Malcolm Xxx, being of sound mind and body hereby confirm my last will and testament on this the twenty second of December 2009.-”*

“Wait. He created this 22 December 2009.”

Mr Grieve looked at the paper. “Yes it appears so.”

“The day before he died.”

“I guess so.”

“Quite lucky that.”

“Your father was a uniquely prepared man Mr XXX. Shall I continue?”

Andrew waved him on, his head filling with questions.

*“Where was I... ah here. ‘the twenty second of December 2009. In the event of my death, and in the case of my wife Annika XXX being the cause of my death, I hereby leave all my assets and worldly possessions to my son Andrew XXX.’”*

“Hang on. My father knew that he was going to be killed by my mother.”

Mr Grieve shifted in his seat. “Ah, I couldn’t quite say what he

knew for certain Mr XXX but he did suspect something and, as I said, your father was a very prepared man."

Andrew's thoughts were whirling.

*"My son is to come into possession of these assets at the time when the signal is given. Until such time, my assets shall be administered by Addison & Pratt which are entrusted to ensure the greatest care of said assets. Signed Malcolm XXX."*

Questions ran through Andrew's mind and he plucked out the most obvious one.

"Signal? What does he mean by signal?"

Mr Grieve reached into his briefcase and pulled out a heavy signet ring. He placed it on the table between them. Andrew eyed it suspiciously. It was quite a large ring, the type of ring Andrew had seen on the fingers of some sports people, heavy things that were too flashy for his liking. It looked like it was made out of gold and a green gem had been set in the centre. Around it were some words that looked like Latin.

"Your father instructed us to contact you and give you control of his assets when that ring became activated. The signal."

"Activated how?"

"The stone Mr XXX. It used to be a clear quartz crystal. As you can see it has clearly changed."

Andrew shook his head. "This is making no sense. Stones don't just change."

"Your father was also a man of peculiar talents. I don't profess to understand them but I know that they are real. But Perhaps I should go through the list?"

"The list?"

"Yes. Of his, or rather your assets."

Andrew nodded for him to continue.

My Grieve pulled out a second sheet of paper

"The assets of Malcolm XX to be left in their entirety to his son Andrew XXX including:

- all money left in bank accounts under my name or in my businesses.
- ownership of Olde bookshop including all stock and chattels and the land
- ownership of the house and land at 82 Mockhan Drive."

Mr Grieve looked at another piece of paper and continued. "So Mr XXX according to our understanding you now have control of your

fathers accounts of which he has two. In one there is \$20,090 and in the second there is \$652,467.89 bringing the total to \$672,557.89.”

“Over half a million dollars?” Andrew was stunned. “And a bookshop?”

“And a house. The bookshop is not really worth much as a business, unfortunately, but we estimate the combined value of both the bookshop property and the house to be approximately three million dollars.”

*Three million dollars.* . The thought rocked Andrew. He was now a millionaire. This was not how he had thought the day was gonna go.

“I’m not sure what to say. And this is for real, it’s not some sort of weird prank.”

Mr Grieve smiled and shook his head. “All I need is a signature Mr Xxx. Then you will be the owner of said properties and we’ll transfer the money to an account of your choosing. Simple. “

Simple. It definitely sounded simple. And yet Andrew feelings were anything but simple. His murdered father now back in his life from being the grave. More money than he had ever hoped of having. It was all a bit much especially considering the night he had had.

Mr Grieve pulled out another piece of paper and slid it across the table. “All we need is your signature and then your bank account and this states that you are now in possession of the properties and the money will be transferred from your father’s accounts into your own?”

Absently, Andrew reached over and signed the form.

“Oh, and I shouldn’t forget this. Your father instructed that this was also to be given to you once you accepted the properties. He said that it was very special and you should keep it on your person, which I guess means to wear it.”

Mr Grieve pushed the ring across the table to Andrew who picked it up. It was lighter than it looked, and felt slightly warm to the touch. “And the stone changed or something?”

Mr Grieve nodded. “It was previously green. As I said Your father was a man of peculiar talents. “

“What does that mean, peculiar talents?”

Me Grieve looked at Brandon for a while before he spoke. “I’m not sure that it is really for me to explain. I’m sure things will become clear soon. Now, I almost forgot. “

Once again Mr Grieve reached into his bag. He pulled out a set of keys and ordered them to Andrew. “The keys to your properties. They now belong to you.”

Andrew took the keys and held them staring at them for a moment. It was all so unexpected he wasn't sure what to think or how to feel about it.

"Well, I think that about concludes our business."

Mr Grieve collected his papers and stood. He extended his hand to Andrew.

"If you have any further questions my information is on the documents." Mr Grieve stood and Andrew had a sudden desire to ask him to sit back down, to stay and explain things further. This had all gone much too fast for Andrew's liking. An inheritance, more money than he'd expected to see in his lifetime, some weird ring. It was a lot.

Mr. Grieve must have noticed something in Andrew's face.

"If I might offer, perhaps visit the bookshop. Your father used it as something of a workspace. You might find some answers there. And, we are more than happy to continue to manage your affairs Mr. Firth. The firm has represented your family for a long time and we hope that this relationship will continue." He paused, checking that Andrew had understood.

Andrew could only nod.

"As I said, you have my contact details. Please call should you require any further assistance. You will find that our services go beyond mere inheritances."

And, with that Mr Grieve was on his way. Disappearing as fast as he had shown up.

Andrew remained seated. He didn't know what to think. His brain was moving sluggishly, unlike earlier where it had gleefully served up images of the previous night's dream. Now, it felt packed with wool again, the cogs struggling to turn, caught on the questions that were rising.

What bookshop? Andrew didn't ever recall hearing his parents ever mention a bookshop. His father had sold insurance. And, what house? Their house had burned down, along with everything else in Andrew's life. It had all gone up in a bonfire of angry reds and oranges, black smoke billowing into the night sky.

And now he finds out that that was not quite true.

He turned the ring in his hands, the green gem glinting dully in the sun.

He slid it onto his finger. It fit perfectly and again, felt warm to the touch. The gem shone briefly, but he was sure it was just the sun catching on on polished stone. Gems didn't glow, nor did they change

colour.

He pulled all the papers together and went back behind the counter. He would deal with this later. After he had got through the day. He'd figure it out.

No glowing gems, theatre ghosts weren't real and last night was only a dream.

But, as he worked he heard his father's voice in his mind.

*There's no use pretending it is.*