

A Short Story for Christmas 2025

Saving Edgar McBride – The second tale involving David & Emily Exeter.

About 9,300 words. There is a PDF to download at the bottom.

Quite a festive tale, though they are occultists who do some dark things to put food on the table.

A happy ending you ask ? Well, it is Christmas.

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One.....Where is Edgar ?

Two weeks before Christmas and London was looking very seasonal. Emily & David Exeter were moving to the USA in the New Year, but for now; Westminster in London was just a drive down the motorway from their home near Winchester. A long and tedious drive, but the colourful lights and festive decorations, made it worth it.

“Well, the McBride building is pretty much what I expected.” Said Emily.

They worked for Luther now since Sister Harmony had died. Luther Schneider, though he hated his second name. He preferred Luther the Hammer, which came with undertones of blood and violence. He was paying them well though, far better than Harmony ever had. Harmony had died by their hands and Emily still felt a little guilty about that. As David often said though, which was true; Harmony had it coming. They entered the lobby, which had two fully decorated Christmas trees just inside the door.

“McBride Accounting seem to be doing well.” Said David.

“I’ve yet to meet a poor accountant.” Said Emily.

They were expected, the man on the reception desk told them they’d be met on the top floor, the sixth floor. He gave them the PIN needed to get to the sixth. It was a relief that there was no music playing in the lift.

“Would be nice to know why a millionaire accountant needs our protection.” Said David.

“We always get just the information we need.” Said Emily. “Harmony was even worse at drip feeding us info. We pick up Edgar McBride and take him somewhere safe. Further orders to follow.”

“A babysitting job.....At least Luther pays well.” Said David.

They’d already agreed to book them and their client into a really nice hotel, probably something swanky in the Chelsea area. Harmony used to restrict their accommodation allowance. Often they ended up in a grubby motel in the worst part of town. Luther let them live a little, as long as they didn’t overdo the room service. The lift hadn’t moved.

“Crap.....I forgot to enter the PIN to get to the sixth floor.” Said Emily. “Don’t you dare smirk, David.”

“As if I would my love, as if I would.”

The lift didn’t exactly hurtle, but once the PIN had been entered, it rose at nice steady rate. They were there at start of business on a weekday and the lobby had been empty, there had been no fight to get in a lift. It was all too quiet; something was happening at McBride Accounting. A young woman met them at the lift. That was expected, but not the blood on her blouse.

“I’m Debra Wheeler, Edgar’s PA. Don’t worry about the blood.” Said Debra. “Come this way and I’ll explain.”

It should have been routine, plain sailing. The fact that it often wasn’t, was why Luther paid them well. Emily began to charge up a protection spell, just in case. She felt David building something far more aggressive and nasty.

"Is Edgar McBride injured ?" Asked David.

"Please.....I will tell you, once we're in his office." Said Debra.

Emily had expected an office turned inside out, maybe a dead body or two. In her experience, an injured PA usually meant you'd discover more mayhem. Edgar's office looked perfect, ready for him to commence a day's work. No disorder whatsoever, which gave rise to two obvious questions.

"We came to take Edgar to a place of safety." Said Emily. "Where is he ? And while we're at it, how were you wounded ?"

"Was he abducted ?" Asked David.

Debra looked at her bloody arm, as though she'd forgotten that she'd been cut. She had some reason for not calling the police and Emily would have bet it was because she was in love with her boss.

"I got one of them with a paperknife." Said Debra. "I really hurt him. During the fight the paperknife ended up in my arm. It seemed to be an accident, the man looked quite shocked. They even put a couple of Elastoplasts over the wound in my arm."

"This is important, have you called the police ?" Asked Emily.

"No, Edgar told me not to. They threatened his family you see.....They threatened me." Said Debra. Emily was good at listening, a rare skill these days. She asked all the right questions and sensed if Debra was telling the truth, or lying. Two men in suits had turned up, seemingly without an appointment. They wanted Edgar to go with them, threatening to hurt his family if he refused. They also threatened to kill Debra, the PA who was definitely Edgar McBride's lover. After answering all their questions, Debra had one or two of her own.

"I know Edgar was expecting you.....Who do you work for ?" Asked Debra.

"He must have mentioned Luther ?" Asked David. "Luther sent us to take Edgar to a place of safety."

"Yes, I know he trusts Luther." Said Debra. "I know so little.....Who might have abducted Edgar ?"

My Edgar was in her heart, an emotional subtext Emily picked up. Debra was deeply in love with a married man who had to be thirty years older than her. It happened and from experience, he'd run back to his wife as soon as they found him. And the chubby grandchildren of course, there'd be a few of those. Luther had given them one name for potential threats to Edgar McBride and he wasn't sure about that. It seemed Edgar had recently pissed off quite a few people.

"It doesn't make sense, but Edgar thought they'd come for him." Said Debra. "I think the men were sent by Ophelia Grainger who runs the Golden Serpent. Though why a top UK hedge fund company would want to grab Edgar ? That's a mystery."

"Debra.....You must know what Golden Serpent really do ?" Asked David.

"They're the most powerful occult group in the country." Said Emily. "Ophelia Grainger is totally ruthless. If she has Edgar, he's in serious trouble."

"I had no idea." Said Debra.

Emily sensed she was telling the truth. She wouldn't be the first PA with no idea about how her boss earned his living. Fake accounts for Golden Serpent probably; and dodgy tax returns of course. All signed off by a highly reputable accountant.

"I need to call my boss, Debra." Said Emily. "I'll use my phone, but I need somewhere private to call Luther."

"Tell him I want to come with you when you look for Edgar." Said Debra. "There's a private bathroom behind the door behind Edgar's desk. Lots of space, there's even a shower, Perfect spot for a private call.....Please ask him about me; I'll go crazy left sitting here and worrying."

"I'll ask, but he'll probably say no." Said Emily.

David stayed with Debra; she was in such a state that she might well do anything. The private bathroom was wonderful, better than the best hotels she'd ever stayed at. She was going to put the toilet lid down and sit on it, but what the hell.

"I'll never get the opportunity again." She muttered.

She pulled down her trousers and panties and it felt like peeing in some kind of palace. Emily had always had a thing about really nice toilets, though she had no idea where it had come from. Some of the motels she'd stayed at.....She'd become very good at squatting over the loo. Luckily Luther picked up her call on the second ring.

"Bad news.....It looks like the Golden Serpent grabbed Edgar McBride." Said Emily.

Not a long call, she didn't know that much to tell Luther. He gave her an address in Britain's second city, Birmingham. According to Luther the Golden Serpent had their headquarters at that address. As for taking Debra Wheeler with them ? Emily was sure Luther would say no, but he didn't.

"Take the PA with you; she might turn out to be useful." Said Luther. "Just.....Don't get her killed."

An abducted client and a lovelorn PA to babysit and keep out of trouble. It had all the markings of being a tough assignment. Mind you, as David kept saying; that was why Luther paid them well.

"Alright, you can come with us." She told Debra.

Debra couldn't have looked happier if she'd just won the lottery. Which was worrying, she ought to have been terrified.

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Two.....Second City

Decent hotels were a thing now they were with Luther. Debra seemed bemused by Emily driving, while David Googled a few sites for the best hotels in Birmingham. The second city had all the best known chains, even promises of twenty four hour room service.

"Look for one with a spa.....I fancy a little pampering." Said Emily. "After all, we're pretty close to Christmas."

"You two seem to like your comforts." Said Debra.

"Oh, if you could see some on the places we've stayed." Said David. "Our previous boss resented every penny spent on accommodation. Once we had to chivvy a rat out of our motel room."

"No." Said Debra.

"He's telling the truth, Debra." Said Emily. "Some of the motels should have paid us to stay there."

David remembered wind blowing yew leaves into their crappy motel room in Michigan. They had tried to put time aside to investigate those leaves before Christmas; mind you, they hadn't definitely said which Christmas. Then along comes the Edgar McBride problem and babysitting his PA. If the yew leaves weren't a sign of someone on their side, there might be unpleasant consequences.

"Head for the city centre." Said David. "I'll give you directions when we're close to the perfect hotel."

"Fine, I'll trust your choice." Said Emily.

"Do I get room service and spa treatments ?" Asked Debra.

"Of course you do." Said David. "You're one of us now, until all this is over. Do you know any spells ?"

"No."

"Not even a simple entangle spell ?" Asked Emily.

"No !"

"Then stay behind us if things turn nasty." Said Emily.

They were teasing her a little, but she had insisted on joining them. She was going to have the most memorable time of her life, or she was going to die. Not that David was going to tell her that. In his view, death was always around, even over Christmas and it didn't pay to antagonise it.

"I'll need a change of clothes." Said Debra. "I just have the clothes I'm stood up in. I have a credit card, but I need to do some shopping in Birmingham."

"You're not spending your own money." Said David.

"We have company credit cards." Said Emily. "By the time we get booked in to the hotel, it'll be too late to do anything. After breakfast in the morning we'll go shopping for your clothes....Then we'll see if Luther's seers have come up with a location for Edgar."

Luther's seers in Chicago who were some of the best in the world. It didn't matter where Edgar might be on the planet, they'd sense his presence there. It seemed almost an anti-climax to be heading towards Birmingham.

"How long until we get to Birmingham?" Asked Debra

"About another hour." Said Emily.

"We could stop for coffee if you want?" Asked David. "No calling people to say Edgar was abducted, that might get him killed, alright?"

"I won't call anyone, even my mum. A coffee stop would be nice." Said Debra.

David exchanged a look with his wife. Debra was obviously feeling fragile; they'd need to watch her. They came off the motorway at one of the services, almost identical to the other services they'd driven by. Everything would be ludicrously expensive, but David had never had bad guts from the food in motorway services. As they got out of the car, it was obvious that Emily had decided Debra needed a bit of care and attention. After all, the man she loved had just been abducted.

"After coffee and something to eat, we'll look in the shopping area." Said Emily. "We're bound to find a few things you need to be comfortable for the next few days."

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Three.....Dudley

The hotel was not quite in the city centre, but it was nice. They could have gone looking for Edgar, but Luther had told them to sit tight until the next morning. It seemed he had all his own seers working on finding the accountant, and a few extras he'd hired.

"We'll find him, Emily." Luther had said. "It might be just a building location in a town, so I'm relying on you and David to rescue Edgar McBride."

"And Debra, she's keen to help."

"Yes, very amusing, Emily." Luther had told her. "When I said useful, I meant to keep Edgar happy and docile. I'm sure you've realised they're lovers. Keep her well away from any action."

"We'll keep her safe, Luther.....I promise."

There had been a shopping expedition; even David had come with them. Debra Wheeler had ended up with a complete wardrobe and a nice suitcase on wheels to hold it all. David had given her a few looks, but it wasn't their money. Luther was paying, or more accurately his credit card was paying. There were all the festive decorations in the Bullring shopping centre; and as she told David a few times, it was Christmas. The Bullring was a mass of festive lights and animated decorations. It was hard to not get caught up in the whole festive spirit thing. The next morning, just as they were finishing their breakfast, there was a text from one of Luther's top seers.

'Edgar McBride is in Dudley. A care home facility on The Broadway.'

Seers that good never got it wrong, or at least they rarely got it wrong. A second text gave a description of the building and a street number.

"Do you think he's really there?" Asked Debra.

Debra wheeler looked ready for the catwalk somewhere. Give a young woman an expensive wardrobe and you can guarantee she'll have to wear it.

"No guarantees, but if they say Edgar is there.....He's probably there." Said David. "Of course, they might move him before we get there."

"Oh, do we need to rush? I can leave my breakfast." Said Debra.

"Eat.....We'll leave within the next half an hour, or so." Said Emily.

A care home in Dudley seemed the ultimate anti-climax, but made a pretty good place to hide a millionaire accountant. No one would think of looking for him there. Luther's seers were rarely wrong though, he referred to them as his bloodhounds. There were rumours that his bloodhounds had helped pin point where Bin Laden had gone to ground. Probably nonsense, though no one was sure. Dudley wasn't far from Birmingham, almost part of the city. They were there, driving past the address on The Broadway by mid-morning. A fairly dull and unimpressive building, but care homes weren't built to win design awards.

"We should have hired a car, rather than use our own." Said David. "We'll need to park some distance away and walk back."

One of their first extravagances after getting properly paid by Luther, was the purchase of a new car. Actually not brand new, but new to them, as the saying goes. Their old hatchback had been traded in for a nice second hand Lexus. Neither of them wanted it damaged, or the registration used to track them to their home. David and his wife weren't looking forward to selling the car when they moved to the USA. Debra had to choose that moment to chuck a spanner into an already rickety plan.

"I'm not staying in the car." Said Debra. "If the seers think Edgar is in there, I'm coming with you."

"We have our orders from Luther." Said Emily. "You're in the car when we go in there."

"No.....I'll make a diversion to help you, throw something at a window." Said Debra. "I'm not an expert, so I'll do whatever you want."

"We want you to stay in the car." Said David.

"Not going to happen." Said Debra.

Emily parked their Lexus under a tree, a good fifty yards away from the care home. She hated parking under trees, the sticky sap would make a mess and it was a pain to clean off. Short of putting a sleeping spell on Debra, there wasn't much they could do to keep her in the car. Then a well-meaning passer-by might call the cops, thinking she was ill.

"We're going to have to take her." Said Emily.

"I promise not to be a nuisance." Said Debra.

"Someone in there may recognise you." Said David. "Stay behind us and keep your head down."

"I will."

The care facility was pretty in a way, a well planted garden full of flowers. No residents sat on benches and enjoying the sunshine, which was a little strange. Emily stored a few common protective spells and sensed David was charging up a couple of fire spells. Always expecting trouble had kept them alive on a number of occasions.

"Head down when I ring the bell, Debra." Said Emily.

A sign on the door mentioned twenty four hour access, which was strange, because no one came to the door after about the fifth, or sixth time Emily rang the bell.

"They might be having a bad morning." Said David. "A riot over who gets extra toast for breakfast, or something like that."

"We're being ignored; I can sense several people just beyond the door, all of them anxious about something." Said Emily.

"Break the door down." Hissed Debra.

Emily exchanged a look with her husband, which spoke of the impetuosity of the young, without actually saying a word.

"We're more subtle than that." Said David. "I'll try a cantrip, a very old and reliable unlocking spell. It's silent and usually works quite well."

Emily had seen him do it so often, but she still felt he made that simple cantrip look like the highest form of magic. It was the subtle hand gestures, the quiet words in a language that had been old before magical tomes were written in Latin. There was a barely audible click and the door swung open. Not a soul there, but the short corridor ended at another door. Emily pointed at the door.

"Four of them, waiting for us." She whispered.

David nodded and for once, Debra was giving off a little fear. Emily caught her gaze and Debra nodded at her.

"Go ahead, I'll be fine." Mumbled Debra.

She had to hand it to the young PA; she was plucky enough for half a dozen people.

"Do it, David." Emily muttered.

Was it Debra's first experience of full on, heavy magic? By the look on her face as David used a force spell, it might well have been. Maybe McBride sheltered her from all that? As David's spell blew the door off its hinges and down the hall, Debra's eyes were wide with.....It looked like excitement.

"Whatever happens stay behind us, Debra." Said Emily.

Like a football team, they had plays that had often worked in the past. Four bad guys was a lot, especially if one of them was an adept. Luckily they rarely encountered one of them, though all four of the people facing them, began building battle spells.

"Looks like a three-two." Said David.

"Be safe, play it as a three-three, my love." Said Emily.

"Three-three it is."

David used a fire spell, trying for a quick kill. His target moved though, all of their enemies moved around, constantly. Fidgeting sounded silly, but it made a lot of aimed spells fairly useless. Instead of turning one of the bad guys to ash, it set fire to a notice board on the wall. A wailing fire alarm now added to the confusion, until Emily hit the fire panel with a disruption spell. Couldn't have the fire brigade arriving, not while the battle was still going on. Someone might actually believe what they'd seen. Emily was hit by bullet of all things, it entered her lower leg. Luckily it hadn't kneecapped her. Only arseholes brought guns to magic fights.

"Bastard." Emily yelled.

A quick pre-saved heal spell on her leg, and then a fire and ice spell at the man who'd shot her. He moved, but not quickly enough. Some magic users laugh at fire and ice, but her assailant was a pile of mushy ash on the floor. The burning notice board was beginning to make life unpleasant for their enemies.

"Wow." Said Debra.

Everyone on the field of battle is a target, everyone knew that. Even if the field was a kind of extended corridor in a care home in Dudley. One of them aimed a fire spell at Debra and David had to pull her out of the way. It caught Debra on the elbow, just a little. No real damage, but she yelled out.

"Now they all die.....Four injured, four dead." Yelled David.

David had a way of fighting that was merciless and usually fatal to any enemy in front of him. As far as Emily knew it was a unique style, which he'd developed by chance and kept on using. He crouched slightly and began to turn in a circle, his left hand held out, palm towards the bad guys. Fire came from his palm, long tongues of red and yellow fire.

"No, we agreed three-three." Yelled Emily. "Three hit and three dead. We need one alive.....We have to find Edgar McBride."

"Alright, one can live." Muttered David.

As a couple they'd had a lot of luck with fire spells, even if their luck as a whole was crap. David stopped hosing the room with flames, leaving one man stuck between the heat from David's spell and two burning colleagues. On his other side, the flames had spread along the wall to what appeared to be a trophy cabinet. He was trapped, but brought a gun out of holster on the back of his belt.

"Another gun.....Does no one have any standards anymore ?" Yelled Emily.

The man fired the gun, but unsurprisingly his aim was off. Debra threw a chair at him; there was a row of light chairs along the wall which wasn't on fire. Instinctively the man twitched to one side, straight into the burning trophy cabinet. Wow, did he yell. He kept on yelling, until David hit him hard on the chin. Her husband had a good right hook if the situation required it. The man was unconscious at their feet.

"We'll carry him between us to the car." Said Emily. "The emergency services are bound to turn up soon. A spell of hiding I think, and even if we're seen by someone, they won't remember us."

"Aren't we going to search the place for Edgar ?" Asked Debra.

"Edgar isn't here, Emily and I would sense him if he was." Said David. "This was a trap; our circle seems to have a traitor. We were lured here to be killed; maybe they wanted you dead too. Nice throw with the chair by the way.....Luther said you'd be useful."

"Really.....He said that about me ?" Asked Debra.

External validation, it could be a bitch when you were Debra's age.

"Yes, Luther really did say that." Said Emily.

Emily had been wondering if it was a genuine care facility. There were people in the main part of the building, but they might have been Golden Serpent members. A tiny and very fragile looking old lady opened a door; saw them and began to scream.

"Ahhhh, the sound of screaming.....Our cue to leave." Said David. "Is your leg alright ? I'm sure Debra and I can carry the unconscious guy.....He's not that big."

"I'm fine; the bullet just took a bite out of me." Said Emily. "I want to talk to this guy and then call Luther. I don't like being set up."

They were out of the door fairly quickly, for a lady with a limp and two people carrying an unconscious man between them. Emily's leg hurt worse than she'd expected, but her husband's wonderful medicinal unguents would sort it out. The sound of the old lady screaming was with them for quite some distance.

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Four..... Stourbridge

"How do I look ?" Asked David.

"Still a bit sooty." Said Emily.

There was always a clean-up kit in the boot of their Lexus and a bag full of his medical unguents.

Emily's wound had to come first and then a little cream on Debra's scorched elbow. Luckily it was a

quiet street and they were still covered by Emily's cloud of hiding. David had decided their current foe was good old fashioned soot.

"I need a little peace to talk to this guy." Said Emily.

"Come on, we can get out of the car and wipe each other down." Said Debra.

Debra was becoming one of the gang, perhaps a bit too fast for his wife. As she whispered spells into the ear of the injured Golden Serpent member, she gave him a definite glare.

"Fine.....We can hardly go back to the hotel covered in soot." Said David.

It worked and it was fun. Debra used wet wipes and a towel on the bits he found hard to reach. She then actually asked for his comb and combed his hair. David did the same for her, even using Debra's hair brush to get any bits of ash out of it. All the time, he could see Emily talking to the injured man.

"Well.....How do I look now ?" Asked David.

"Not bad.....Not bad at all." Said Debra. "And me.....Do I look alright ?"

A young woman with a bit of previous for going after older married guys. He had the definite impression she was flirting with him, just a little.

"Good enough to get back into the hotel without them calling security." Said David.

Emily left the guy in the back of their car and joined them. She looked sooty, unhappy and tired.

David began cleaning up his wife as she spoke.

"I'm guessing he told you some bad news." Said Debra.

"There are traitors in Luther's organisation, several of them." Said Emily.

"Call Luther, he'll ferret them out." Said David.

"I have the address of the Golden Serpent headquarters." Said Emily. "I'm worried that if I give it to Luther, one of the traitors will find out. We could walk into a far worse trap than four fairly low level members of the Golden Serpent."

"But he's the boss, we have to tell him." Said David.

More importantly Luther paid them, though mentioning that seemed a bit mercenary. To hell with it, he decided to remind Emily why bankruptcy was no longer ringing their door bell.

"Besides.....He pays us and pays us well." Added David.

"Where is their base ? Do you think Edgar is being held there ?" Asked Debra.

"According to our prisoner, he's there and in a room in the cellar." Said Emily. "Their base is a fairly large building, an old rectory actually. It's in Stourbridge, about two streets away from the Stourbridge football club ground."

Using an old rectory wasn't as odd as it sounded. David knew several powerful occultists who'd once been members of the clergy. He did chuckle though and soon all three of them were chuckling.

Again it was Debra who asked the question no one really wanted to discuss.

"What happens to him ?" Asked Debra, nodding in the direction of their prisoner.

"A shallow grave in a quiet piece of woodland." Said David. "We'll bury him on the way back to the hotel. You can help dig the grave if you like ? There's a shovel in the boot of our car."

"But.....He's still alive." Said Debra.

"We can't let him go, Debra." Said Emily. "He'll tell the leader of the Golden Serpent Ophelia Grainger, everything. She's not known for her mercy. We'll all be on her painful revenge list. She might even have her people kill Edgar."

"How will you kill the man we captured ?" Asked Debra.

"No more details.....It'll be quick and painless." Said David.

There were several pieces of woodland on the way back to their hotel and one of them felt right to Emily. David had learned to never she argue with his wife about such things. If she said it was the right place to bury their captive, it was the right place.

"I'm not staying in the car." Said Debra.

It was becoming like a stuck track on an old vinyl record. David looked at Emily and shrugged, who shrugged back at him. That meant the decision was left to him.

"You'll have to help dig a shallow grave." Said David.

"I don't mind."

Emily came into play again, checking that no one was near enough to see them commit the Golden Serpent guy to the ground. David found a decent spot with soil that didn't look packed down or muddy; both could be a nightmare.

"I'll start off, Debra." He said. "You can finish off."

By the time they had a decent size hole in the ground, Emily had done the deed; well away from Debra's gaze. One of his pain relieving liquids at double the right dose and the man had slipped away from the land of the living. Into the grave he went, after Debra had insisted looking at the contents of his wallet.

"I need to know his name." Said Debra.

"Trust me; it'll stay with you for life." Said David.

"Throw it in the grave with him." Said Emily.

For once she did as they'd asked and the man remained unnamed. David filled in the grave, which was always far easier than digging it. Before they saw the last of Debra, they'd emphasise the dangers of ever being tempted to visit the gravesite.

"What do we do now ?" Asked Debra.

"We go back to the hotel; shower and change." Said Emily.

She wanted to argue, but must have realised they usually knew what they were doing. Emily needed to talk to Luther about traitors in the organisation and all three of them needed a good night's sleep. No one at the hotel seemed bothered by the slight smell of smoke about them. Everyone seemed too busy with preparations for Christmas and Slade's Merry Xmas Everybody was top of the UK charts again. As for the fire at the care facility in Dudley ? It didn't get a single mention on the local news, TV or radio.

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Five..... Debra Wheeler is definitely useful

The next morning Emily's leg wound was aching a bit, but otherwise she felt fine. Debra joined them for a room service breakfast and the promised call from Luther. He was late, but waiting for the call had been worth it. Emily had put him on speaker phone. It seemed several members of their circle had turned traitor, but they'd been dealt with. David whispered to Debra that dealt with meant dead.

"Do you have someone else there ?" Asked Luther.

"Just Debra Wheeler.....She seems to be a bit of a fixture." Said David.

"Ahhh, good morning Debra." Said Luther. "Was she useful ?"

"She threw a chair at one of the attackers." Said Emily. "So yes, Debra has been very useful."

"I'm sticking with them like glue, until they find Edgar." Said Debra.

"You do that." Said Luther, while chuckling. "My seers think the address in Stourbridge is genuine. They're sensing a lot of occult activity for an old rectory in the British midlands."

There was a lot of general chatter, but Emily had the distinct feeling Luther was holding things back. It was worrying that he might be doubting their loyalty. Harmony's paranoia had been the main source of the problems in working for her. Luther cleared up the matter just before the call ended. "Call me if you need help, but we won't set a definite date, or time." Said Luther. "There might still be Golden Serpent people right here, among those I trust. I will ferret them out, but it's best if we keep calls to a minimum. Call me when you have Edgar McBride and I'll arrange to have him taken to a place of safety."

"We will, Luther." Said Emily. "I hope you have no further problems with the traitors."

"I hope so too." Said Luther.

It was Emily's turn to drive, but David was behind the wheel as they finally headed for Stourbridge. It would give Emily a chance to rest her wounded leg. The SatNav would get them to Stourbridge, but David knew the town well. He'd dated a girl there when he'd been in his teens and rode an old motorbike. He mentioned remembering the town as a picturesque and pleasant place in the summer, which tried to freeze him in the winter.

"Be honest, do you think Edgar is still alive?" Asked Debra.

"Yes, Luther's seers would sense his death." Said David.

Tempting to hire a car, using their own brought risks. Parking some distance away from where they wanted to go was another problem, but hiring a car meant leaving their beloved Lexus somewhere. No vote on it, Emily had decided they were going to use the Lexus and be careful, very careful. They parked near the Stourbridge FC ground and walked east, towards the old rectory. A quiet street, they were walking across an area of grass on Vicarage Road.

"Oh, not now." Said Emily. "We get regular annoyance from wind and rogue yew leaves, Debra."

"We still don't know if it's someone trying to help us, or an enemy." Added David.

The wind began first, though Emily usually sensed it was going to arrive. The wind seemed interested in Debra; pulling at her clothes and making a mess of her hair. The poor woman had been through a lot, the wind grabbing at her made her yelp.

"It won't hurt you." Said Emily. "It has never harmed David or myself."

The spikey yew leaves came next, swirling around all of them. The leaves seemed to like her rather than David or Debra, if like was the right word.

"What does it want?" Asked Debra.

"If only we knew.....The why and how for this phenomenon is a mystery."

An ethereal being appeared in the whirling leaves, which was new. Vaguely female, she was holding her hand up, as if trying to get them to stop reaching the old rectory.

"Luther can be trusted." Said the being. "There are still those working for him who cannot. Some of his circle have sold out to the Golden Serpent. There is a trap waiting in the rectory, many adepts. Try to enter the building and you will be killed. The one you seek, Edgar McBride is elsewhere."

"Who are you?" Asked Emily.

"One who had been trying to help you for some time." Said the being. "Harmony's aura lingered around you both, but now I can talk to you. Don't enter the rectory."

She was gone like morning mist on a sunny morning. They were all left at the centre of an almost perfect ring of yew leaves.

"Wow, is your job always this exciting?" Asked Debra.

"Sadly yes." Said David. "One person's excitement is another person's terror and confusion."

"It does pay well now we're with Luther." Said Emily.

"Yes, I'll give you that.....It does pay well." Said David.

"Sorry, I know I ask a lot of questions." Said Debra. "Who was that ?"

"My guess would be the essence of a long dead witch." Said Emily. "I picked up a lot of sincerity, so I'm sure we can trust her. I think she might be my great grandmother Maude, though I'm still far from certain about that."

"When we see her again we can ask ?" Said David.

"Wow, do you guys need a kind of occult apprentice ?" Asked Debra.

"You need to be born into the craft." Said Emily. "If you wandered around with us all the time, you'd probably end up dead in a few months."

While Debra looked a little glum and crestfallen, David asked the question Emily had been expecting Debra to ask.

"So, what do we do now ?" Asked David

"Back to the hotel and a little research." Said Emily. "We need the woman in Edgar's life to tell us where they go to be alone. I guarantee the Golden Serpent have placed him somewhere known to her. It's what I'd have done."

"I get it, they're not hiding, they want us to find them.....Another trap." Said David.

"Not a trap if we know about it and are prepared for it." Said Emily.

Poor Debra, Emily could almost see the clockwork ticking around in her head.

"Woman in his life." Said Debra. "Are you going to interview his wife ?"

"You.....You wear your heart on your sleeve." Said David.

"Even Luther picked up that you're sleeping with Edgar McBride." Said Emily. "We'll have a meal sent up by room service and I know a few ways to relax your mental defences. Then you will have the information we're after. Hidden among a lot of dross, but it will be there."

"Was I really that easy to read ?" Asked Debra.

"Yes you were." Said Emily.

Back at the hotel and there were a few messages for them, all from Luther and all neatly typed out by the hotel staff. He talked about sacking two members of his inner circle, which had to mean they were now dead. Why the occult was often so brutal was a mystery. Emily put it down to their being no recourse to the courts if thing went wrong, or even an ombudsman. If different circles had scores to settle, they tended to settle them in blood.

"Do we have to eat here, in the hotel ?" Asked Debra. "Couldn't we have our meeting in a nice restaurant. If I get a vote ? I quite fancy Italian food."

"A vote.....We're not a democracy." Said David. "Though I must admit that I'd quite like something Italian and a glass or two of Valpolicella."

"Fine.....A little booze will help the process." Said Emily. "We'll shower, change and meet back here in an hour. Everyone agreed ?"

"Yes my darling." Said David

Debra just nodded at her, while smiling a huge and excited smile.

They chose, or rather Emily chose the Soofi Restaurant; totally based on an enthusiastic recommendation by the woman on the hotel's reception desk. It wasn't too far away, close enough to walk to, or get a cab back if someone overdid the wine. It was one of those places where the staff were almost too attentive. Emily waited until they'd finished eating, to offer the waiter serving them a truly huge tip to leave them alone for an hour. His eyes had actually opened wide at the sum mentioned as a gratuity.

"We just need privacy to complete a deal." Said Emily.

"No one will disturb you, take as long as you like." Said their waiter.

"Now Debra Wheeler, look deep into my eyes." Said Emily.

Poor Debra, it had been a weird few days. She didn't know what to make of that and resorted to looking confused and a little nervous.

"Don't worry, she's only kidding, I think." Said David.

"Only sort of kidding." Said Emily. "You've had enough liquid analgesic to get you relaxed; I now intend to use a cantrip to look inside your mind. You won't be able to hide memories or lie about anything. You may refuse, but I'm hoping you don't. You're our last chance to find Edgar while he's still alive."

"Do what you want to me." Said Debra.

"You're sure?" Asked Emily.

"Yes, do it."

Spells to control the human mind weren't modern and sophisticated; most were ancient, dark and potentially dangerous. As Emily touched Debra forehead and spoke the first cantrip, the PA was hers. A few more spells to guarantee truth and Debra would tell her anything she wanted to know. Debra would look wide awake, but she was effectively massively sedated.

"We'll begin with your relationship with Edgar McBride." Said Emily.

David listened, while watching out for anyone getting too close to them for comfort. Emily was shocked that Edgar had promised to leave his wife and family, to set up home with Debra. It wasn't a fling; it seemed to be the real thing for both of them. It took an hour, but Emily was sure she had the nugget of information they needed. She removed all her controls of Debra's mind.

"I can't remember some of what I said." Said Debra. "Was it there? Did you discover where we go next?"

"I did, it's a love nest you've spent weekends at with Edgar." Said Emily.

"You mean the place in Kirkintilloch?" Asked Debra. "I did wonder about that house.....It's in a very secluded spot."

"I get a gut feeling about places; David will vouch for their accuracy." Said Emily.

"Emily's intuition is always right, always." Said David.

Nice of him to forget the rare times when her intuition had landed them in trouble, she'd reward him for that later. Edgar McBride's weekend place near Kirkintilloch was the ideal place to hold Edgar, the perfect place for his abductors to turn into a trap.

"In the morning we'll get a plane to Glasgow and hire a car to get to Kirkintilloch." Said Emily.

"They're there, waiting for us, I know it. A trap of course, so we have to be extra, extra, extra careful."

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Six..... Kirkintilloch

That close to Christmas, only the expensive seats on the planes were left, but David didn't think Luther would mind. It was a dull rainy morning as they took off from Birmingham Airport and it was still wet and miserable when they landed at Glasgow Airport. It was only nine miles to Kirkintilloch over decent roads, according to an internet search. They didn't need an off road vehicle, or massive horsepower, but David insisted on hiring a powerful SUV.

"Just in case we run into trouble." He told the others, which no one argued about.

They were looking for a large house on Waterside Road.

"We came here quite a bit, I can give you directions." Said Debra.

"I've never been here before, it looks nice." Said Emily.

"Better when it isn't raining." Said Debra.

No forgetting it was close to Christmas; every shop they passed had festive decorations in the windows. A few adventurous people had illuminated trees in their front gardens. It seemed odd to be heading towards an obvious trap, where someone was quite likely to die. David just hoped it wasn't one of them.

"Right.....Right at the next turning." Said Debra.

"Let me know in advance when we're close to the house." Said David. "We can get a good look and Emily can work her magic. I'll park just up the street a bit."

"They might sense us if there's an adept in there." Said Emily.

Now that wasn't exactly a comforting thought. They had no real responsibilities and life was good at the moment. Even their luck appeared to have changed for the better; David hoped their good luck was with them that day.

"There.....Big house with a tree by the gate." Said Debra, while pointing.

"They're blocking everything." Said Emily. "Never seen a block that thorough. I can't tell you anything about what's going on in there; but the blocks mean we're expected. On the plus side, the blocks will make it hard for them to see us coming."

"Next on the left, David." Said Debra. "There's grassland on the right.....There's always somewhere to park."

They parked up with the wind pushing rain at the side of the SUV. A deluge, the kind of rain that everyone talked about in the local pub. At least it wasn't freezing outside, or they'd have faced a trudge through snow.

"I have to say it, though you'll probably ignore me, Debra." Said Emily. "You really should wait in the SUV."

"No way, I'm coming to help." Said Debra. "You heard Luther; I'm a very useful person."

"Let her come, it's easier than arguing." Said David.

The truth was that he thought Debra would be useful, though whether she survived the day was questionable.

"Fine.....Ideal sneaking about weather, people." Said Emily. "Hoods right over your faces."

Can hired cars become a little home away from home ? David thought they could. The SUV was their small amount of safe space; he definitely wasn't happy stepping out into the cold torrential rain.

"Wow, is Kirkintilloch always this wet and miserable ?" Asked David.

"It's beautiful in the spring." Said Debra.

"I'll take your word for that." Said Emily.

No coming to them in the car, though an SUV full of yew leaves would have been hard to explain to the car rental company. Their new ethereal friend came to them in the usual way. Even more cold wind, full of spikey yew leaves. It was hard to see the woman at all, but David now trusted her.

"Are you Maude, my great grandmother ?" Asked Emily.

"Yes, I knew you'd sense who I am." Said Maude. "They're waiting for you at the house and intend for you all to die. Edgar McBride saw financial records he wasn't intended to see and they're worried he might have told Debra Wheeler about them."

"He didn't" Said Debra. "I knew very little about his dealings with Ophelia Grainger and the Golden Serpent."

"Never the less, you were only left alive as a lure to trap Emily and David." Said Maude. "You're all marked for death.....They're planning to kill Edgar quite soon now. He's tied up in the basement. There is one adept in there, hit him hard and fast with fire spells; I will give you as much help as I can."

With that Maude vanished, leaving them once again in a perfect circle of yew leaves. It was still raining and David could feel the cold rain getting between his neck and the collar of his coat.

"Still want to go, Debra ?" He asked

"Yes."

It wasn't far to the house Debra and Edgar had used as an occasional love nest. The three of them huddled near the front gate, looking at the house at the end of a path that went slightly up for about forty or fifty feet.

"Getting anything ?" Asked David.

"I can sense Edgar, but the others are just confused by the blocking." Said Emily. "I can't even tell who the adept is. The one good thing is that they won't be sensing much about us."

"How do we get in there ?" Asked Debra.

"We pick the lock and let ourselves in." Said David. "Now is the time to stay behind us, Debra."

The door was heavy, but just ordinary wood. David didn't need Emily's help to sense that the night time bolts on the inside hadn't been pushed across. The lock itself was a cheap mass produced job, probably fitted by whoever Edgar used for his minor house repairs. Kirkintilloch obviously wasn't a burglary hotspot, or some local thief would have cleared the place out. David didn't even sense an alarm.

"This is all way too easy." Said David.

They'd be expecting them to come in via the rear of the house. Opening the front door might just give them a tiny bit of an edge, for a minute or so. Blowing the door in would have been nice; there'd have been a little shock and awe effect. But one of Edgar's neighbours would probably call the police. David used a medium cantrip, the sort young witches used in training. The lock opened at the first attempt. They were definitely walking into a trap. In the hallway, the house smelled of coffee and bacon sandwiches. The blocking was less now they were inside the walls of the building. He pointed at the door at the end the hallway.

"Four of them in there.....Remember one is an adept." He whispered to his wife.

They went in hard, David was actually screaming as he went through the door. Occultists weren't used to battle cries; it could gain you another minute or so. Debra was right behind him, while Emily broke to the left. Three men and one woman in the room. Once it would have been four women. Maybe women didn't train their daughters in the old ways anymore ?

"Fuckers." Yelled David.

"We're going to kill you all." Shouted Emily.

"Yeah, bastards." Yelled Debra.

She was growing on him. One of the men was wearing a blue shirt, which wasn't remarkable. He had a yellow glow around his head, which was. David was happy to assume it was Maude, helping them identify the major threat in the building, the magical adept. David hoped his luck was good at that moment and used a fire spell on the man.

"Crap." Said David.

The man had moved and maybe David's aim had been a little off. The fire intended for the man was now turning a hall cabinet into an inferno. As for the adept ? He was building a spell that was probably immensely powerful and bad news for whoever it was used on. David had a blade in a pocket, though he rarely used it. Rather than anything clever, he fell to the ground; just as the Golden Serpent woman use a force spell on his left arm. It hurt; it hurt a hell of a lot, but the knife was in his right hand. As he hit the floor, David sliced the Achilles heel in the adept's right foot. Almost instantly he had company on the floor as the adept fell down.

"Nothing personal." Said David.

He cut the adept's throat, still unaware of the name of the man he was removing from the land of the living. Getting up was a struggle, the force spell had really damaged his elbow. They were in what looked like a reception area and as David looked around, he saw Debra use a heavy glass paperweight to hit another of the men on the back of his head. A nice paperweight, Caithness maybe. Anyway, by the amount of blood and the noise of breaking skull bones. The man was down, never to rise again.

"Debra Wheeler.....I knew you'd be damn useful." Said David.

"I try my best." Said Debra.

Emily definitely seemed to love using a spell that invoked a hardwood club. She hit the woman with it and then to make sure, she hit her over the head once again. David only had one working arm, but he only needed one. He turned the surviving male into a human torch; who stumbled across the room and crashed through a set of French windows.

"Fuck.....We need to get going before the police arrive." Said David. "Any more bad guys to worry about my dear?"

"No, the only living person in the place, besides us, is Edgar." Said Emily.

"Edgar." Yelled Debra, as she headed for the door to the cellar.

"We should go with her." Said David. "No telling how they bound Edgar."

"How is your elbow?" Asked Emily.

"To be honest, it's agony." Said David. "I'll use some unguents on it once we're back at the SUV."

David had always wanted to say it, but had never had the opportunity before.

"Ahhh, Mr Edgar McBride I assume?" Asked David.

He looked awful and the bucket they'd given him as a toilet was pretty smelly. Edgar had bloodstains on his shirt, from where he'd been beaten. He shouldn't have been smiling, but he had Debra's arms around him.

"Did you kill them all?" Asked Edgar.

"Yes. They're no longer a threat." Said Emily.

Edgar had a thick leather belt, held in place by a small padlock. A rope connected the belt to the basement wall. He could move around a little, enough to get to the bucket and the table where they fed him. David had the belt off him in seconds.

"Edgar.....my Edgar." Said Debra. "There was a moment when I wondered if I'd ever see you again."

"What happens next?" Asked Edgar. "Where do you intend to take me?"

"Take us.....Where you go, I go." Said Debra.

"First thing is to get you out of here and into our SUV." Said Emily. "I'll call Luther and arrange for fake documents for you both. After that.....My guess is that you'll both soon be on a plane to Chicago."

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Seven – Christmas Lunch

Christmas Day and it was just the three of them; sat around the table in their home near Winchester. Emily herself and her husband with an arm which was still aching. Emily was sure he was malingering to get out of kitchen duties, but she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. The ethereal being that once been her great grandmother Maude was there, and a place had been laid at the table, even though she couldn't eat.

As she'd suspected Edgar McBride and Debra Wheeler had left for Chicago pretty soon after being found. British Airways from Heathrow, David and her had driven them all the way to London to get

their flight. Debra had bought them a few gifts and Emily had bought a few for her. Despite getting under their feet quite a bit, she was going to miss Debra.

They'd eaten, drunk a little too much wine and were settling down to watch a movie on DVD; a movie from nineteen forty six, It's a Wonderful Life. Well, it's sort of traditional and it was Christmas. It was better than hearing yet more family nostalgia from Maude. She loved her long dead great grandmother, but there were only so many family related stories from the nineteenth century Emily could take in one day.

"A toast.....A toast." Said David. "To a job well finished and all safely home."

Maude couldn't drink, but she could hold her glass up and tilt it towards her mouth.

"To a job well finished." Said Maude.

"And a Christmas with us together around the table." Added Emily.

It was nice and as Emily settled down to watch the movie; she had the Christmas tree to her right, full of lights. The windowsill had no less than three poinsettias to add a bit of colour and every surface had a bowl of fruit on it. Even the Christmas cards added a certain something to the lounge in their cottage. Emily hoped they'd feel just as happy next Christmas in Chicago.

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'Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.'

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