

ONE

Oscar hadn't been anyone special, or even anyone particularly good. He hadn't led a normal life—his crazy-money inheritance had determined that.

He was often disliked for it, *hated* at times, but it wasn't his fault he'd been left enough money to never have to work, and had been able to live the life of a hedonistic fool.

And the money had meant that he could pay for his second run at it. No one could do it without lots of money; the privilege was up there with the cost of a private jet or a second home in the Maldives.

Oscar had been left such a ludicrous mountain of money that he'd never appreciated the value of it. It was as everyday to him as having two arms and legs.

Neither did he appreciate the value of family. His parents had died in a car crash when he was just four years old, and he barely remembered them. His grandparents had brought him up, an only child, in a mansion in the middle of nowhere. Although old and greying, his grandma was wise and strong of character. Oscar believed she knew everything there was to know. His grandad was lively and never seemed to age—'young at heart,' people said.

Suffering the pain of their own loss, and feeling overwhelming pity for their grandson, they had utterly spoilt him. Without thinking about the consequences they had given Oscar everything he'd ever wished for, and that had set an ugly precedent for the rest of his life.

While he did love his grandparents, he didn't *appreciate* them, and as soon as he'd passed his driving test, Oscar was free. With all the money in the world, he went where he wanted and did what he wanted. He skydived over the desert. He seduced countless curvaceous women with his palatial yacht; Hugh Hefner had nothing on him. He owned a racehorse called Loaded. He even bought his own Virgin Island, where he spent a year alone—servants aside—on candy-floss sands, 'finding himself.' The world was his oyster, and he devoured it ravenously and with abandon. He had never settled down with anyone; all the women he met in his charmed life had only been interested in him because of his money, or so Oscar believed. Had any of them been genuine, his golddigger paranoia hadn't allowed him to see it.

The sad truth was, Oscar had lived his high-speed, fast-lane life all on his own. Of course there had been a stream of stunning and accommodating women over the years, and although he had come close, once, he had never allowed himself a real and lasting relationship.

As a sad and lonely old man, that was one of the things he vowed to do differently, the second time around.

TWO

Oscar had spent most of his later life alone. That he wasn't when death came for him was sheer luck.

His cleaner, Jeanne, had been pottering around with her feather duster, polishing the place to an impeccable standard, when she realised that the old man, who she'd left staring out at the heavy rain, had been silent for a remarkably long time. Instinct told her that he had passed away.

She held her breath as she moved around the sofa, slowly, to come face to face with him. Sighing in relief, she found that he still looked exactly the same. A wicked voice within her mocked, *And just what on earth were you expecting, woman? Maggots and eyeless sockets?*

Even though she *knew*, she followed procedure, just in case. "Mr DeHaven? Mr DeHaven? Have you fallen asleep, sir?" she asked, and although she was trying to keep it together, her voice shook as though she stood atop a washing machine, full spin cycle. Maintaining a professional relationship with Mr DeHaven, she had never been close to him, but life was life, and the passing of it was always sad. She placed a finger on his neck, trying not to flinch at the feel of his already cold skin. She pressed a little harder, just to be sure. Nothing. Not even the echo of a pulse.

Taking a step back, she looked at him. *Don't cry don't cry don't cry, you barely knew him.* But she was sensitive like that, and had always cried as a child when she'd seen an animal killed

in a hit-and-run, or when a bird had taken a neck-breaking final flight into a windowpane. Now, as an adult, she couldn't help but cry when she saw human tragedy on the news, the kind most people were desensitized to. Life was so precious—too precious to let it pass unmourned.

Her tears were just beginning to fall when her gaze fell upon his chunky silver bangle with its unmistakable design—the distinctive one that all Foundation clients wore. It reminded her of what must be done. She unclasped the bracelet, vacantly admiring its solidity and shine, and read the message inscribed on the inside: 'Upon my death, please call 001168462.' She shook her head. The message was so straight to the point it seemed vulgar.

Glancing at the old man, she whispered, "Here we go, then," before she turned and rushed for the phone. She dialed the number and was surprised by the immediate connection. Then again, time was of the essence.

A woman's sharp voice said, "You have called the Forever Foundation Emergency Line. What is the purpose of your call?"

"My boss," said Jeanne, "he's dead. He was wearing your bracelet, and we all knew what to do when the day came, he made..."

The woman on the other end cut her off. "Yes, madam, but we need to be quick, please tell me your boss's name, his whereabouts, and the nature of his death, in *brief*."

Jeanne felt herself flush, felt the blood pumping that much faster through her as she said, "Oscar DeHaven, 3 Great Oak Lane, Lake View, EHB 3DG. He passed away in his sleep."

"Excellent," the woman snapped.

Excellent? Jeanne thought. *I tell her someone has died and she says 'excellent'?* She uttered a quick goodbye, not wishing to be as rude as the woman she was talking to, and put the phone down before she heard anymore.

She went back to Mr DeHaven. This was her time to say goodbye; she knew they would come very soon. From the

numerous times Mr DeHaven had briefed her about it, she knew that there was very little time before the brain became too dead to be of use. Kneeling before him, she held his cold hands in hers. She wasn't afraid anymore; he was still the same old man, only no longer in the land of the living. Jeanne sat hand in hand with him, embracing the spirituality of the silence, until the doorbell sounded.

She got to her feet, took one last look at the old man she didn't know very well, but had nevertheless liked, and whispered, "Good luck, Mr DeHaven. *Oscar*." In life he had often insisted she stop being so formal and 'bloody well' call him by his first name. Of course, she never had, priding herself on her professionalism. But it felt like a gesture he would appreciate now. "Goodbye and Godspeed," she added, as she moved to the door.

As though opening the door to a whirlwind, two Foundation men stood before her; she indicated the room Mr DeHaven was in and they rushed past her, almost knocking her down in their urgency. She hovered in the doorway, unwilling to see the procedure, but not wanting to leave Mr DeHaven alone with them, either.

One of the men read her expression and said, "Don't worry, we do all that we need to do in the ambulance on the way to our chopper. He's not long gone." He smiled at her, and she shivered.

"But what will happen to his body?" she mumbled, and then almost wished she hadn't asked, for fear that the answer would be too terrible.

"Once we've completed the procedure, we will release the body, and he can have a normal funeral."

Not knowing what else to say, Jeanne remained in the room, feeling that she should stay by her boss's side until the last. With her innate decorum, she almost offered the men a cup of tea, but thought it might not be prudent, after all.

The men soon had Mr DeHaven on the stretcher. "We're

all done here. Do you have someone you can call?" asked the first man.

"I'm just the housekeeper. I'll be going home soon. Thank you for your concern," she replied.

"Of course. Well, goodbye, ma'am."

She liked the man's old-fashioned manners, and believed that if he'd had a hat on, he'd have tipped it respectfully to her. There wasn't enough good old-fashioned gentility in the world anymore, and she was surprised to be in its good company now. "Goodbye and Godspeed," she repeated, this time to the kindly man.

The two men bundled the stretcher into the back of the ambulance and roared away. The many Italian Cypress trees that lined the driveway, standing perfectly upright, sentries to the mansion, bowed forward in a violent gust of wind, as though offering their respects to the dead man. Pouring rain gave a glossy sheen to every leaf and blade of grass. *God has been busy with the varnish*, Jeanne thought, fondly remembering her grandma saying so whenever rain fell.

Jeanne stared after them for a while, not really sure what to do next. She didn't recall Mr DeHaven ever talking about his family. There were no photos around the house, and to her knowledge he never had visitors.

She supposed she should ring the police. But all the same she stood in the doorway for a while longer, thinking about what would happen to Mr DeHaven now. What were they doing in the back of that ambulance?

Despite her boss's disposition, Jeanne had never taken to the Foundation, and its supposed gift of a 'second chance.' She believed God had given everyone one chance to live on Earth before they went to join Him in Heaven. *One* chance to do it right, *one* chance to be the best and kindest person you could be.

Jeanne wondered whether Mr DeHaven's soul would make it to Heaven, now that they were extracting some part of his brain. Would it get trapped in 'cyberspace'—that was the word

the kids used, wasn't it? She didn't really know much about the Foundation, other than how important it was for a body to be recovered quickly. She didn't want to know, either; it wasn't something that she, or any of her family and friends, could ever afford. Not that she would consider it, even had she all the money in the world. *One chance*, she thought again.

Going back into the house, she closed the door to the chilly evening air. At the same time, she closed her mind to something she didn't understand, which left her colder still.

THREE

He feels like he is sleeping—a deep, eternal sleep from which he will never wake. As though he is underwater, and can't figure which way is up, toward the surface and the light.

Sometimes there are voices, although he thinks maybe he imagines them. Sometimes there is silence. He is somehow aware of himself, even though he can't see or even feel his own body. But he knows he is here, wherever here is.

Sometimes there are dreams. Sometimes there are nightmares.
They had said there would be no dreams.

In the most disturbing of the nightmares he is chased by a dark, spectral thing. He runs and runs, through some cold and sterile place—he thinks it must be a hospital. In his nightmare he can *smell* the place, the aseptic smell catching in the back of his throat.

Do I still have a throat?

He runs and runs. It chases him down bright corridors, past closed, numbered doors. He never sees what is behind those doors, but can well imagine, and envisions babies taking their first breaths, old people exhaling their last. The spectre chases him on and on. But it doesn't make any sound—there is no shriek or cry of the demented, and its silence makes it all the more terrifying.

Finally it chases him into a long, dimly lit room, past rows and rows of inert bodies lying on metal gurneys. They have reams of wires attached to them. Their eyes are closed. The

room is utterly silent, except for the soft hiss of mechanical breathing machines. Out of the corner of his eye he sees movement. He turns in terror to see one of the bodies as it struggles to sit up, seemingly blind and mute. He sees that the body and face is his own. He opens his mouth to scream—*Do I still have a mouth?*—but nothing comes out. He wakes with a jolt—only of course he doesn't wake. It is just that the nightmare has ended.

Will I ever wake up?

It drives him to the edge of insanity, because he knows he is here, wherever here is, because he can think and dream.

They had said there would be no dreams.

His name is Oscar.

Sometimes there are good dreams. He often dreams of an old girlfriend, Stacy. Being with her was the closest he ever came to real happiness. In his dreams they enjoy the things they had done together in the past: picnicking in the park, drinking expensive champagne from plastic flutes. Floating in his boat in a harbour, the lights from the shore dancing in her rich brown eyes. Laughing together as they lay in the white sands of his beaches. Stacy had given him a feeling that all the money in the world simply couldn't buy.

In these dreams he is happy again—that is, before the memory of what happened comes back to torment him. He had done something with Stacy that he had never done before, or again after. He had proposed to her, and she had said yes, which surprised him as much as it had surprised her, but they were happy and in love and it felt right.

They hadn't been engaged for very long when they had some close friends round to announce and celebrate their news. Stacy spent all day preening and cleaning the house—she was like that, even though they had a cleaner and there wasn't a speck of dust to be seen.

Their friends arrived perfectly on time, arguably to the minute. That always annoyed the hell out of Oscar, because if he and Stacy were late for anything their oh-so-perfect friends couldn't seem to stop themselves from commenting. Just once he wanted *them* to be late, so he could lord it over them for a change.

As soon as they were through the door, Colette pounced on Stacy to see the ring. Tom had a quick glance and made the obligatory noises, but having already put a rock on Colette's finger, he really wasn't that interested. Colette made such a fuss—she damn well couldn't shut up about it—and Stacy was simply glowing with pride at all the attention.

As the evening went on, Oscar noticed that Stacy couldn't stop looking at the ring. She glanced at it periodically, moved it a little to make the candlelight bounce off its myriad stunning surfaces, and smiled to herself.

That was when the poison began trickling and oozing into Oscar's mind: *She only wants me for the money after all. I should have seen it earlier. She's a gold-digging whore just like all the rest of them.* As the night passed, the trickle turned into a torrent, washing away all reason.

He kept his cool whilst their friends were there, but the second they had gone, all wine-fevered laughter and hugs, the floodgates opened and drowned poor Stacy in his rage.

He hadn't laid a finger on her, of course—he wasn't that kind of guy—but his words had been harsh and cutting and cruel. She had been stunned that he could even think that of her. Then she had been so sad, sobbing and crying and begging him to see sense. Finally, she'd been angry. How dare he accuse her of this? After all their time together, didn't he know her better? And she had her own money, why would she want any of his? Filled with indignation, she'd emptied her drawers and stormed out of the house.

He had been sorry the next day, of course, when reason and sense returned to him. But it was too late, she didn't want to

know, said he was an idiot and had broken her heart with his thoughtless words and that it was just too horrible.

He never loved again. Losing Stacy was the lowest point of his life, his biggest regret. But he will do things differently this time, the second time around. He has another chance and can find another Stacy.

His name is Oscar.