

Sample Chapters from: The Devil in Me by Philip A. Oldfield



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One

Four weeks. I'm dreading it. The party.

Jess has invited me and a ton of others. If I say no ... everyone will know why.

'Another engagement party and Roslyn hasn't met the perfect one.'

No one has to tell me why. The mirror says it all. It can see all of me. It speaks the truth when I look into its eyes. Black hair, pulled back. When not put up, it's flat, like an ironing board. My skin is desperate for sunlight ... if I could find the time to get some, I would. And why can't baggy clothes ever be in fashion? I could hide away underneath them ... I could be anybody. Eat anything.

My dream faded. I don't let them last long. I leant forward and poked my tongue out. Swollen and white. Ugh. Who'd want to have that in their mouth? Three years and counting. None so far. Well, none since Jason. He's one of those men whose name definitely doesn't match the man it's attached to. Why did I let him kiss me? Let alone ... talk about desperate. No, that's not it. Sad. That was it. Letting that loser anywhere near me had been a *big* mistake.

'Thought I'd find you in here,' said Anna, pushing the self-closing door open and leaning into the office toilet to catch my eye in the mirror.

I pulled my tongue back in quickly, hoping Anna, my gossipy clerical assistant, hadn't spotted me acting like a cat after milk. Thoughts of Jason disappeared down the plughole as I let the water out of the sink. A wash out. Anna raised an eyebrow, but said nothing about my erratic behaviour.

'Mary's after you. Wants a letter re-drafted. She doesn't look happy. Thought I'd warn you.'

The door closed behind her and the few precious moments of peace I had left, went with it.

Mary, Mary. The nursery rhyme was accurate about her. Quite contrary. One day, the work I did would be done just right for her. The next ... well, looks like this is one of them.

Sometimes being a PA is great. Especially if you're the assistant to the CEO. Everyone, and I mean, even the fellow directors, treat you with respect. An air of caution. If you know what I mean. Because they know, I can say an *innocent* word in my boss' ear about a comment they had made, or an action they'd taken and it would be my word over theirs. And they knew, like I knew, who Mary would believe. Well, on a good day.

The thing is I may look like a bitch. My hair pulled back into a bun, so severely, my eyebrows lift. My black, heavy framed glasses perched on my nose in just the right place. When anyone walks into my room, next to the seat of power, the first look they receive is from me over the roof of my glasses. I practiced it for hours in my flat, until it became second nature. I can make men tremble with one superior look of disdain. *What now?*

The trouble is, it's not me. It's what people see, what I show them, but it's not who I am. It's the only way I survive and make it through this bitch takes all life I live in.

I wear pencil thin skirts, cropped jackets to match and Louboutins. A woman, no matter what she earns, should always aspire to the best. I am almost the perfect example. That's why I got this job.

When I walked into the interview with Mary and George, the HR manager, three years ago, my dress style matched Mary's. She'd met her soul mate in style and she knew it. The whole hour had been a breeze. And it came as no surprise to me when Mary called, with her soft, eloquent voice, purring down the phone, and offered me the job as her personal assistant.

Only the purring was good on the best of Mary's days, but it was something else on her worst. Believe me.

I walked passed Anna, who kept her eyes on screen lock mode as she peered into her computer screen. I knocked on Mary's office door, just below her nameplate, Mary Argyle, Chief Executive Officer.

'Come,' a lioness' growl clawed at the doorframe, I opened the door and entered her den.

'Ah, Roslyn. Good.' Bad you mean. 'This letter just won't do. The middle part is all wrong. It is just not what I said this morning is it?'

Rhetorical questions bait me. Somehow, I suspected, Mary knew it.

'This is not what I said at all. Would I ever say, get the clothes order over to my office by nine tomorrow morning or else, in a letter? What's got into you? Yesterday you were fine. On the ball. Today? Well, just look at you. Now sort the letter out, pronto ... with the *actual* words I dictated to you.'

Mary held the letter out. Her arm outstretched as she twisted her chair in the opposite direction to take in the view over the Thames. But she did not move quickly enough to avoid me seeing the emergence of a dew drop of a tear in the corner of her right eye as she turned away.

Two

The rest of the week, I was on a water-park slide.

Definitely not one where I could shriek, laugh, and let gravity take me and take over ... if only. The freedom of nothing holding me back. I've always wanted to be that kind of woman. Impulsive. Free-spirited. Feisty. But something always stopped me.

The week had been something else. I thought it couldn't get any worse. But it did. And Mary followed me down to the very bottom. Determined to take me under. Like one of those mines used in old war films. She was set for destruction.

Splashdown Friday. Thank God.

It was 5.30 p.m. Everyone had stampeded towards the weekend. Which just left me to join the weekly migration. In-tray cleared. Filing. Anna's job on Monday. Pull the left-hand desk drawer open. Slide one forearm over the pencils and pens and yes, in – in one go. Not one had rolled onto the floor. I hate it when that happens.

Screen off. Computer left on. Quick start Monday. Scan the office. Nothing out of place. Looking good. Voila! Just grab my taffeta trench coat (Burberry's, naturally) and I'm out of here.

Mary's office door snapped open.

'Ah, Roslyn. Good. I want a word.'

A word? You never have just one word. Can't it wait 'til Monday? It's the weekend. The weekend. Sacred. Precious. Mine. Not yours. I have things planned. Friends to see. I have a social life. Flat, shower, change, out. Wine bar, Michealo's. That's just the Friday starters.

I pulled my heart back from the stairwell. Intent, like me to leave. Grudgingly, I took hold of a pen and notebook and joined Mary on the red leather sofa in her office.

She normally briefed me each Friday at 3 p.m. Without fail. This gives me two hours to plan for the week ahead. Today, the routine had been broken. Oddly, I had felt freed from slavery. No more chain-gang. Freedom beckoned. Maybe, I thought, just maybe, she'd let up on me. After all, I had had a pretty miserable week. All dished up by her.

No letter was accurate. Reports produced by me were redlined in the most bizarre of places. And the dots and ts she added, as if sprinkling salt and pepper liberally over a meal, looked to have procreated and multiplied in the zillions on the page. OK, I'm exaggerating. But honestly.

My work over the past three years for her has never been criticised. Until *this* week. Dew tear on the Monday, breakdown by Friday. Roslyn makes a good anger cushion. Bring it on.

'Again. Again. Do it again. What's got into you this week, Roslyn? This is the fifth time I've had to pick you up on something. A PA of your calibre should...'

By that time my ears were ringing and I was wishing I had a pause button for her mouth. Stop her midstream. Mouth wide open, gaping in shock. I would promptly pivot on my heels and show her my soles as I left.

Everyone could hear what she'd been doing. I knew that. Her rants. Mary's office walls and door may be soundproofed, but when she raised her voice, which wasn't often, until this week, no barrier could stop her cutting tone piercing through ears within a 1km radius.

But I couldn't speak about it. Moan about it. Blow a fuse about it. Of course, I wanted to. Who wouldn't? But, come on, the boss' PA going off on one. A big fat no-no.

So, when I had positioned myself and looked expectantly at her, and she smiled at me, I thought, yes, she's actually going to apologise. And I will be gracious. Tell her it's OK, you've had a rough week Mary, I could see. For one brief moment, she's going to say sorry.

'Roslyn,' she smiled at me again, 'you've been a loyal worker with me for three years and never put a foot wrong. This week, I've been...'

I'm right. Here it comes. Massive apology. Wish me a fun weekend. Might make the wine bar after all. No time for a shower, quick wash with disposable moisturising cloths and yes ... fresh for a wicked night out.

It's funny, when you think something good is going to happen, when your boss, gone super bitch, suddenly reverts to kitten, life in those small, expectant seconds, lasts longer. The sun

illuminates a spotlight on you, you can feel its warmth, bathe in its light; a heavenly choir sings “Hallelujah” in the background. Wishes, hopes, take on wings. You’re about to fly.

Reality hurts.

‘... extremely busy,’ she continued, ‘and when I needed you most, you haven’t cut it.’

What? Which body have you been in this week Mary? Have you not heard yourself?

‘Cut it? I don’t know what you mean,’ I replied.

‘Exactly. And that’s just it. You’ve been tested. And come up short. Very short.’

‘Short. My work’s been short.’

‘I’m glad you see it my way...’

Your bloody way. No way. You’re not getting away with this. I’m going to see a union rep. Then, I remembered. I’m not in a union. And there isn’t a union in the building. See a lawyer. That’s what I’ll do. Constructive dismissal. Abuse. Bullying.

But I might not get a good reference if I try that route. I might not anyway. Yes, but if I do push it with lawyers, the chance of me getting a solid recommendation ... no chance.

‘... which brings me to the main point of talking to you tonight, now that everyone’s gone home...’

Oh, I see. No witnesses. What a bitch.

‘... Today, I took a direct call on my mobile from Kabat Zing, MD of Zing Health Foods and Beverages...’

Zing. Zing. The name rang a bell in my head. An alarm bell. A Big – bloody – Ben bell. Lunch presentation. At their offices. Major publicity deal and...

‘You’ve messed up, Roslyn. You hadn’t prepared the presentation. You hadn’t booked the meeting in my diary. Correction. You had. Two weeks from now. October 21st. We’ve lost the contract. Million pound commission, gone. Just like that. And it’s all down to your incompetence.’

Mary had the controller now. I sat there muted. Shocked and unable to speak. I just hoped my mouth wasn’t wide open and I was dribbling foolishly onto the red rug beneath my shoes.

I felt as if I was having an out of body experience. Everything slowed down. The room swirled. A sickening ride on a playground roundabout. No matter how much I willed, it just wouldn’t stop. Nor did Mary.

‘So it gives me no pleasure, no pleasure at all, to let you go. You’ll get four-weeks’ severance pay on top of your normal salary. You’ll not lose your company pension, such as it is. And I will give you a good reference. That, I promise.’

Ice cold. Skin clammy. Underarms wet with sweat. This can’t be happening.

There was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ Mary commanded. The door opened slowly and the shadow, then the shape of our security guard, Les, came into view as he moved to stand in the doorway.

Mary nodded to him, a balding man, in his 50s, with a paunch to match. He was waiting to escort me off the premises. I am not a criminal. But I can’t speak, apart from a quiet, hesitant

reply, whispered dryly from my lips, and oh, how I much I regretted saying it, on auto-pilot mode, 'Thank-you.'

'I would like you to take your personal belongings with you as you leave the office, tonight,' Mary said with a finality that ran icily through my veins.

She stood up. A hardness, no a great sadness crisscrossed her face. And the trouble was, this wasn't about me at all. Her eyes were empty of life.

She couldn't hide the hurt that I could see. I knew her too well for that. That's the reason why you're getting rid of me, Mary. I'm not the problem.

How could you?

Three

A plastic pale blue box full of my belongings. Great.

I held it tight, feeling sorry for myself. I was in shock. Too tired to be angry. That would come later. And how. But right now, numbness and tingling clung to me like an unwanted boyfriend. So annoying. Get off me.

I walked down the office steps for the last time. I looked at my office life that I'd just piled into this tub. So much junk. The only things worth keeping were the photo of my niece, Kimberley and some pencils. The frame tilted side to side against them. Each had large yellow sunflower rubbers on top. Such a sweet birthday present. Ten years old. Another two, she and my older sister, Virginia, would be at each others' throats.

I couldn't face the underground. Not this evening. Knowing each sideways look, strangers would be thinking, 'Has she been sacked? An open box. Photo frame. Pencils. Nail varnish. Eyeliner. Mascara. Lipstick.' And a hint of a smile would cross their eyes. An assumption confirmed. Prejudices would bubble. They'd look at my clothes, my shoes, my style.

'Bet she slept with the boss and they got caught.'

Taxis were my best bet. My phone whistled several times. Messages, one after the other.

I turned to look back and look up. One last time. The fourth floor. No longer *my* office. I stifled a tear. A whimper escaped from my lips and I caught a sharp intake of breath. And next to mine, was hers. There she was. Looking down from her window. The discarded ant on the street below. Acid anger: 'Ugh. You ... you ... if I see you again.'

The taxi rank wasn't far. I kept one arm over my belongings. Guess all you like. You're not getting a look in. There was a cab waiting. I gave the driver my address and got in.

Cocooned in the back, I put the box on the seat as my ride joined the traffic's steady stream. Brightly lit shop displays pulsed and flickered their passing calls ... 'Come inside.' Clothes shouted out, 'Buy me ... and me, and me.'

I closed my ears to them all and let the tears tumble from my eyes and down my cheeks. This was the worst day of my life. I should have been full of that fun Friday feeling. I hated her. And

the thought of spending a whole weekend in my flat with Applejack for company didn't brighten the journey home either.

My phone whistled again.

Stephanie

Hey Roz, what's up? Me and Debs are on our second ☺ xxx

Jan

I'm on my third. Come on girl X

Melissa

I'm running late. Tell everyone. I'll have whatever ur having x

Mum

Hi Roslyn, not heard from you. Is everything alright? Had a funny feeling. Love you xxx

Jess

Hi all, won't be there. Toby and I are having a nite in ... miaow xxx

Rub it in, why don't you. I know, I know. Jealousy. Envy. That's the truth. Well, that's not it. If I can't be truthful with myself, who can I be?

I have a secret. Well, lots of them, but this one is big. Not even Melissa, and she's my best friend, knows. I can't face thinking about him now. I don't want to. Go away. Jack. Please...

Me

Hi everyone, can't make tonight. Ugly cold doing me damage ☹ See you next Fri xxx

My message stayed as a draft. The taxi pulled up and I got out.

'£15,' said the cabbie, as I leaned towards the driver's window.

I pulled out a twenty-pound note and handed it to him, 'I've only got this.'

'Ta,' he replied with a cheeky grin and drove off.

'Hey, my change...'

I watched as the black cab's tail lights disappeared right at the traffic lights.

I had plenty of luck. Always had. But as mum often said, 'All bad. It's a family curse. You'll see.' Tonight, for the first time, I was beginning to feel she could be right.

Me

Hi Mum, your intuition is fine-tuned. Don't want to talk right now. Will call you next Saturday. Don't worry. I'll be fine. Just need to work a few things out. Love you, say hi to Dad, Roslyn
xoxox

A few things out. Understatement? Absolutely. Don't worry. I must be kidding. £1200 a month rent and rates. I'd better get another job PDQ. All I could see were bills. Utilities. Mobile.

Food. Social life. Clothes. Shoes. Transport. All a must on my checklist. City life? Not on the cheap. Not in London.

I opened my flat door and Applejack padded over to me, curling his body around my legs as I walked in. He whined. The call of a cat for food, no human can refuse. At least not at risk to their hearing.

Pale blue box down in the kitchen. How I hated its colour. It had to go. In anger and hatred, with Mary clearly in my sights, I tipped all of its contents, except the photo and pencils, into the bin. The box I stamped and jumped on until it collapsed. Flat packed. And I thought of Mary's face. And a satisfied, maniacal smile smothered my lips. Take that. Bitch.

I fed Applejack before his whine became unbearable. 'Now what? That bloody phone!' I needed to put it on silent.

Mum

Understand darling. Don't let whatever it is, get you down. It's not worth it. Never is. Love you lots, Mum xoxoxox

I cried then. A wail of a cry. Long and hard and painful. My body shuddered and I shook myself to a standstill. Mum was right. Not often. But this time.

Me

Love you Mum xoxoxoxo

Where were those moisturising cloths? Coz this woman was going out.

Four

When you drink, tomorrow doesn't exist.

'Hey, Roz, slow down. First, you arrive late from work and in your *work* clothes. You're racing with those tequilas. There's only so much in a bottle,' screamed Stephanie, who knew when to stop. The music in Angelina's – the bar they had moved on to – drowned normal conversation.

'Wahoo!' I shouted. 'Line another one up. Let's celebrate.'

'Told youz,' exclaimed Melissa, 'didn't I tell you ... I know my Rozzy. She's had a pay rise and a big, fat bonus. Nothing that she doesn't deserve, I bet.'

Melissa scanned our group of friends, a triumphant look painted on her face. 'I know my best friend. Don't I, Rozzz?' she slurred, before biting down on a lemon slice and pinching her nose.

'S'that's right,' I replied, my voice booming above the music, 'Liddle ol' Roz gone and got herself a big opportunity. No holding me back. S'that's for sure.'

One of my drunken legs went left instead of right and I fell against Stephanie. 'Whoops!'

Jan pulled me back up and propped me with her hips into a semi-upright position against the bar. My body was intent on sliding to the floor.

‘Let’s go,’ shouted Melissa, ‘Rozziz hadz tooz much.’

‘Too much,’ I protested, I’ve just lost my jobz. Got the zack. S’that’s what. S’that’s my big opportunity. Freedom with a big ugly F.’

Even drunk, there was no hiding the disappointment on Melissa’s face. I hadn’t told my best friend of three years since moving to London. She let me into her group, Stephanie, Jan and Jess and I held back something this big. The hurt was written on her face. Her eyes narrowed; her thoughts bitterly clear: how could you not tell me?

What could I say? It was too late. And no story told when drunk sounds sensible or believable.

‘I’m szorry. Szorry everyone,’ I said as our jumble of legs and shoes made it out onto the wide pavement of Covent Garden.

‘I’m going home,’ said Melissa, the slur in her voice erased. ‘Go home, Roz, we can talk tomorrow.’

‘Group hug,’ Melissa called her little troupe together; Stephanie and Jan brought me into the huddle and held me up. Was it an omen? Me in the eye of the storm.

The heat from our bodies was too much. I felt nauseous and pulled myself away, stumbling backwards. My day had fallen apart and I had just collapsed the balloon on the evening. Great job, Roz.

Melissa headed off towards King Street. Stephanie and Jan, after double-checking I’d be alright, headed off, arms coupled, towards Russell Street. I wandered off down Southampton Street towards the Strand. I couldn’t face Applejack and the quietness of my one bedroom flat and empty bed alone, just yet.

Left seemed as good as any place to go along the Strand. Zigzagged metal railings on the corner lined the outside. I knew how they felt. My line was anything, but straight. As I found out when the inside of my coat tore open across a protruding wire. Bloody hell. Not my Burberry.

Road works. A jagged hole and a channel in the street was being worked upon. Men with spades and jackhammers drilling and digging. The noise. No ear protectors. Idiots. One workman looked up, mud smeared his face and grinned. Knob.

I stumbled forwards and pushed and shoved my way through crowds of smiling, talking, laughing faces. All employed. Well off. And that’s how they saw me. I was one of them. Well, not anymore. How easily my clothes deceive.

As I attempted to cross Exeter Street, my eyes were drawn to the Lyceum Tavern’s lights, near Waterloo Bridge. The pub’s light radiated through the amber coloured windows and spilled out onto the pavement. Black wire divided the small rectangular panes of glass that together, spanned the building’s front. It was beautiful. Mesmerising.

I didn’t see the red warning cones surrounding the broken covering on a man hole. I fell forwards, grazing my hands and knees on the ground. My tights ripped open. I sat up, dazed and

looked at my shoes. A heel had snapped off. My best Louboutins. It was all too much. Waterproof mascara doesn't always work.

I rose unsteadily to my feet. Revellers looked on, but did nothing. So that's how it is. When you're down. All eyes kick you where it hurts. With indifference.

Limping up and down, the view ahead, rising and falling, I reached the window of the tavern and peered in. The night darkened. With my forehead pressed against a pane, careless of the warning looks drinkers inside gave me, I spotted the one woman I hated most. Miss bloody contrary, sat all alone with a bottle of wine and a glass for company.

It was time to face the enemy.

Five

Wine bar lovers don't get on in taverns.

I had no idea what I looked like. Although I was pretty sure it couldn't be good. It's not easy to see yourself without a mirror. And the reflection I could see through the tavern window, was marred by the miseries staring back at me.

I don't carry a makeup counter at the best of times. So a repair was out of the question. That night my trench coat pockets served a purpose for what I thought I would need. My purse and key to the flat.

As I pushed open the tavern's door, my dad's advice popped into my head. Not now dad. 'Always be prepared.' A phrase he drummed into me. The trouble was whilst *he* was prepared for any emergency, *I* wasn't. If he was ready, I didn't need to bother. Right?

Besides, nothing happened when I was with him, despite his preparations ... 'Just in case, Roslyn.' So, in my mind, when I'd left home, his wise words, didn't seem in the least bit logical. What was the point?

Mary was still hunched over a full glass of red wine. She showed no sign of leaving, so I made a quick, skip, hop to the loo to check out the damage.

My reflection in the mirror looked as shocked as I did. Oh, my god. Mascara had run downwards in several tramlines from each eye. My face appeared locked behind bars. Black blobs and residue had dripped onto my trench coat and splattered onto my white top underneath. Disaster.

My tights were way past fashion. Torn and uneven holes might look good on some legs. But gaping gashes, and stains from bloodied knees? No.

My shoes. My dear, dear shoes. What was the best look? I held the broken one in my hand, bobbed up and down, and then walked towards the mirror. Gracious. Elegant. Well, yes, before the accident. Louboutin's black patent leather and red soles are simply, perfection. If you own a pair. You'll know what I mean and understand how heartbroken I was.

Of course, the other reason why I adore them ... the 4.7 inch heels. What more do I need to say? Height matters. The style makes the legs look so very long.

I removed my other shoe and the toilet room and ceiling took on another dimension. It took me a few seconds to adjust to my lowered horizon.

The shoes had to stay off. No matter how good one shoe looks on you, there is a reason why they are paired. Reluctantly, I squeezed each shoe into the separate pockets of my trench coat, with a slim hope in my mind that a shoemaker might possibly work a mini miracle for me.

Tights removed. Binned. Wet some tissue and dab, dab and dab my face. Hmm. Better. Not brilliant. There was no way of cleaning the white top. So I pulled up my coat collar and drew the flaps across. From the stumble outside, a lock of hair had flopped forwards over one eye and I left it there. The detective look suited me. Mean eyed and angry. Oh, yeah. I tightened the coat's belt. I felt ready for the fight.

Mary hadn't moved. I would catch her unawares. Surprise. Alcohol still flowed through me; still fuelled by anger and a desire to hit back.

Crowds edged around the bar, jostling to get served. One guy, not bad looking (given another day, given another me, given another mood, I might have been more gentle) glanced my way. He quickly avoided my steely gaze. Raging Roz.

That's right, son. It takes a man. You don't wanna try me punk. He sure didn't. Those shoes you see in my pockets, ain't no shoes. They're rootin' tootin' pistols. And I mean to use them. I'm the fastest draw in the West End of London. I whizzed past, a blatant, crushing smile spread evenly across my lips.

Now for the scrap. How should I do it? Call her out? Hey, you. She'll lift her head. *Not me, surely. No one knows me here. I'm out for a quiet night. Not looking for trouble. Definitely not a fight.* Then, she'd turn and see me from the corner of her eye. And she'd realise there was no escape. The whole bar would fall silent. All eyes would flit back and forth between me and Mary. *Who would win?* In their heads, they would be laying bets. I'd stare Mary down. That's right, you, the bitch in the corner. Step outside. I'd place my hands on my shoes' heels and rub them in a menacing fashion. These want to do some walking. Your face will do for starters.

Or what about that pint of lager to my right? That guy in his 20s, with a beer gut on its way has gone off to the toilet. His mates were distracted. Humiliate her. Walk up behind and tip it slowly over her head. Watch her react in anger. Cringe in embarrassment. Swing round to confront her attacker. Freeze in shock. *Roslyn.* And I wouldn't have to say a word. The lager would say it for me. It would reach parts other beers couldn't reach. Probably the best revenge in the world. Funny how being drunk heightens a false belief in the originality of our wit.

How would I exit? I would pivot on my feet. Walk out. Head held high. Justification, my new make-up for the night.

But as I came nearer to Mary, my anger flaring in the furnace of my mind, my feet quiet upon the floor, the loud surround sound banter masking my approach, I saw the sides of her back shuddering.

The throng of revellers around her were caught up in their own world. This was their wicked night out. Not mine anymore. Definitely, not Mary's. She hid in that bubble. The perfect escape.

Only a few steps away. The wine in her glass. Untouched. Surface ripples. Drips, unmistakably from her chin.

I cupped one hand gently on her nearest shoulder. When only moments before, my desire had been to do the exact opposite. Mary moved. Took an age. Her hands lumbered drunkenly from corner to corner across her face.

Her fingers fanned out, brushed her eyes, cheeks and under her chin. Slowly, she turned.

Surprise and recognition. A double act dancing on her face. What did I look like? Her eyes, drowning in tears, more red than my kitchen tiles. Mascara had let her down, too. She looked bad. And I'm talking, nightmare. We both needed a new brand.

Smear and smudged blotchy lines ran in a chaos of directions and had splattered across a white Alexander Wang French terry sweater. I know my clothes well. Beyond recovery. A tragedy.

In an instant, Mary broke down. My boss. Well, my ex-boss if you want to be picky.

'Roz! I'm so glad you're here,' she blubbered, her words almost incoherent, 'I can't make it through this without you.'

Six

First contact, an alien feeling when angry, is easier than you think.

Compassion. Immediate. Heartfelt. I was the one surprised. I was the one caught out. My plan to humiliate her unravelled. Completely.

Over the years, we had put in some long hours together. You get to know someone in ways others don't see. In ways even they don't see. And *I* knew Mary.

The office iceberg, as the staff called her, though never in my presence (you cannot be a good PA without knowing employee gossip), had a softer centre than her cold exterior betrayed. Pressure to perform as the head of the company had taken its toll. Looking at her now, more than I had even realised.

She stood up and faced me. Not a gunslinger at a showdown as in my anger I had imagined she might be, but a friend, she hoped I could be and one who wasn't lost before she explored if it might begin.

In bare feet, my height only reached her shoulders. She hesitated. Doubt about my warmth flickering like a candle in her eyes, nervous that the distance she had created by firing me would blow her light out. Extinguish, perhaps the one friendship she could have left.

I smiled, but felt suddenly unsure of myself. Her ex PA, was I now in command of what to do next?

Maybe it was intuition. Perhaps she could read my mind, or it was just the obvious fact of the height difference between us. Whatever it was, she removed her Valentino black court shoes and slipped them under her table. Our eyes met, almost on the same level.

When you can't find the right words. Sometimes a hug is all it takes. I stepped forward, holding my arms out wide. Bear hug time. Any hesitation she may have felt, melted. I held her close and Mary sobbed her heart out across my shoulder.

I whispered in her ear, inaudible to everyone but her in the loud, bouncing ball banter around us, 'It's alright. I'm here. Whatever it takes, we'll be in it together,' I said.

Mary remained silent, unable to speak, I guess. 'Come on, let's find a quieter place to talk.' But where? Then a brainwave came to me. It might just be the right place to have a heart-to-heart. 'Freud café is a 10 minute walk away on Shaftesbury Avenue. It's open late, 'til 2 a.m. Sound good?'

Mary nodded. A friendship had just been forged. We both knew it. It was time to move on.

Seven

Divine guidance. The kind of surprise we both needed.

Outside, the night's chill haunted the Strand's pavements. Mary carried her shoes in one hand and linked arms with me. The heels of her shoes tapped together as we walked. We were 'sole' sisters on a journey of discovery, barefoot and barely friends. That was about to change.

We didn't talk much, nothing important anyway. Maybe it was because we both had our own demons to think about; mine, I knew only too well: Halloween, the engagement party, and Jack. My heart had never let him go.

Arriving at Freud café, we made our way down its steps and into its basement interior. The warm lights, and gentle simmering conversations inside had a calming influence on the both of us. Mary looked happier; her eyes were less red, though still puffy. Her face streamed with dried lines of black make-up, we'd taken to calling it *miscara* on the way over, its claim to be waterproof had been proved hopelessly wrong.

'What do you want to drink?' Mary asked.

'I'll get them. Your face needs serious attention,' I replied.

'Do I detect my first compliment? I'll find a mirror in a minute, let me buy you a drink first. Why don't you find a place for us ... for a catch up,' her eyes sparkling, appealing to something deeper within me.

'I'll have a coffee,' I said. 'Hmm...' I scanned the choices chalked on a board behind the bar, 'an Americano.' The young barman, with a white apron wrapped around his waist over a black tee shirt and jeans, nodded. Mary ordered mocha and headed off to clean up.

I turned away and looked around at the collection of people socialising and philosophising on their night out. I chose a table, with what looked like, shortened pews, it had probably been taken and adapted from a closed down church. Before long, Mary returned, transformed. Her hair now loose, flowing behind her, freed from hair clips, is enviously thick, like rope, and full of a glorious shine. I pulled on the strands of my limp hair. Do I ever need help.

The waiter brought over our coffees, including several amoretti biscuits.

‘Thought you two would welcome a sugar boost,’ he said, ‘complements of the house.’

‘Cheers,’ Mary said as she picked up her cup.

‘You, too,’ I replied and enjoyed the first sip of my coffee, desperate for that first hit of caffeine. ‘Mmm, lovely. So, how can I help?’

Mary wiped away a mocha moustache. ‘Hold on, I owe you a massive apology.’

I took another sip of my Americano and raised my eyebrows, desperate to hear her story. Get a to-do list going. Tick off the actions. Sort out the problem. Kick ass.

‘One,’ she started.

Oh, no, she is in work mode. As if, she’s briefing me for a task. I can’t take this. I don’t work for you anymore. Be normal, Mary, my mind begged. *Normal*. What the hell is that?

Relax. Give her time, if you want this friendship to work. *Friendship*? Maybe I’d gotten ahead of myself. OK, back to Mary before I lose track.

‘Two,’ she continued.

Oh, god, I can’t say, sorry, I missed what you just said, could I. Could I? Roz! Stop.

‘It started on Sunday morning,’ she went on. ‘I woke early, 6.30. Always do. Creature of habit. I was lying in bed thinking of Roger ... my husband,’ she added, so I could keep up.

If only.

‘My mobile started to ring and it was Roger.’

She’s telepathic. Wonder if I am? I might be. That time when Aunt Carol fell off her horse, I knew before the phone call. Ah, that’s our connection: phones.

Mary hadn’t stopped for my thoughts. Not that telepathic, obviously.

‘I remember thinking, how adorable he is, our anniversary. It’s 1.30 in the morning in New York, he was on a business trip in the States, and he’s stayed up to tell me he loves me.’

‘I answered the phone, and before he had a chance to speak, I spoke excitedly, “hello stranger, happy anniversary. I love you so much. I’m still in bed; your call is perfect timing...” Only he didn’t reply.’

I didn’t need to read her mind to see what was coming next. Forming teardrops in her eyes gave the game away. I stretched a hand out across the table and squeezed both of hers.

‘You don’t have to say it all now. I understand, I said.’ And I did, in my own way. I’d been there under different circumstances. Trust betrayed. The shock. The hurt. The anger. But my love for Jack had never gone away.

Mary sniffed, as if she had the start of a cold.

‘All I could hear were muffled voices and other sounds ... well, you know what I mean,’ she added. ‘In his rush to be with this woman, his phone must have rung mine by accident. I was speechless. I wanted to shout down the phone at him, but nothing came out. I should have ended the call, but I couldn’t. I was drawn to that call. That bloody call.’

I got up, sat beside Mary, and put my arm around her shoulder. A hug is all it takes. My mantra for the night.

‘After 10 minutes, I couldn’t take anymore and left the phone on my bed, still connected, but this time recording every little sound coming from the other end. Let him rack up a huge phone bill. I didn’t care. He’s got a much bigger expense coming his way!’

Her voice was getting louder. Oh no. Everyone around us was within Mary’s 1km ear killing zone. She was seriously about to explode! People were facing our way, their eyes staring, getting closer by the gaze. The oh so friendly waiter, looks upset. A really mean look scarred his face. I kept my head down. What to do? I grabbed several amorettis and nibbled on them furiously. Hamsters have nothing on me when I get going.

‘I’ll take him to the cleaners,’ Mary ranted, her voice growing in volume. ‘Tell the chairman of his board, my father’s best friend.’

Our coffee cups were vibrating, Mary was pounding the table with her fists. The decibels of her voice were about to shatter the glasses behind the bar. I could feel my own glasses, perched on my nose, responding to Mary’s high pitch ... they’re going to crack. Louder. Louder. I have to. Sorry Mary, before it’s too late.

In one frantic move, I placed a hand over her mouth.

‘And I’ll rip his bloody balls off and throw them to the dog!’

That’s not what everybody heard. It was more like ... ‘Un I’ll vip iz buggy balls off un throw them to the log.’

The waiter came over and asked us to leave. Any hope of another amoretti was dashed when he wrestled the plate from my hand with a very short sounding thank-you.

‘Phew! Sorry about that,’ said Mary as she turned to face me. ‘Don’t know what came over me,’ she added.

‘It’s the devil in you,’ I replied.

‘You’re right. It got you fired. I’m sorry. I didn’t want to let you go, but I had already been given the sack, my hand was forced. A CEO can’t stay on after losing a million. No matter how good she is, can she?’

I shook my head in disbelief.

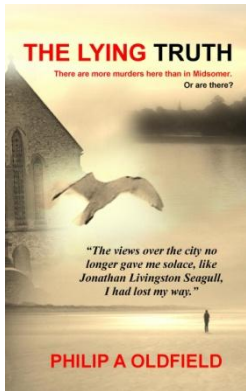
‘Besides,’ she continued, ‘I couldn’t let the best PA I have known, work with someone else. I need you ... Come on,’ she added, ‘Let’s get out of this hell.’

Amazon Links to The Devil in Me:

<https://www.amazon.com/Devil-Me-Chick-Lit-Romantic-Adventure-ebook/dp/B071FC6W32>

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Devil-Me-Chick-Lit-Romantic-Adventure-ebook/dp/B071FC6W32>

Other books by Philip A Oldfield



The Lying Truth (2016)

This story, comparable to 'Girl on the Train' is much more than a fast-paced psychological thriller. It is about twisted relationships and the lengths people will go to uncover the truth or live a lie. At times, the story treads lightly across characters' lives, at others, it plumbs despair, fear and the dark borders of insanity.

Living in Exeter, England, Kate Bevoir finds herself entangled in a web of deceptions. What is buried deep in the Bevoir's family history? Very soon, Kate's love turns to fear, then hate when Niall threatens to kill her and their two children. Kate can no longer stay silent. Her life depends on it. As she travels the length and breadth of the country, facing treachery and pursuit by the police, Kate must make the ultimate sacrifice.

'There are more murders here than in Midsomer. Or are there? The story opens in Exeter where Kate Bevoir is a crime writer. Her husband is kidnapped and has retrograde amnesia jettisoning Kate into a web of terror, deceit and betrayal. Is all life a lie? Is love about truly accepting someone as they are?'



My Dream Mother (2014)

It would have been the easiest thing in the world for Ben to have given up. He had lost his mother at birth and although his father loved him, he was distant. His grandmother was just mean and selfish. Too much of her and Ben might have given up, but that's when Hope played her part. That's when Ben's dream began. In the world that belongs to sleep, Ben meets his dream mother, but when he achieves his life's ambition, the one person who has stood by him, helped him to master his gifts, disappears. Must success come at such a cost?

'This is a beautifully written book. Partly written from a child's perception, it has charm and freshness. Philip Oldfield paints the scenes vividly with his poetic description and is adept at creating such a contrast between wakefulness and the world of dreams. The dreams feel like those that are hard to leave behind, that one just wants to sink back into, as they are full of joy, lightness and visual appeal. The story creates a gentle intimacy with the central characters. This is a moving and uplifting story, and well worth reading.'

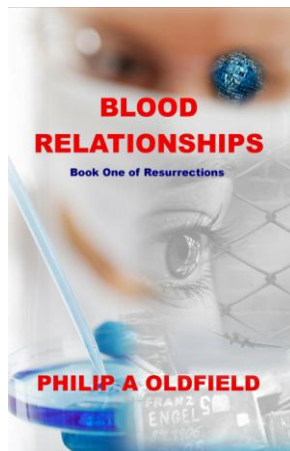


Flash Fiction 25 (2014)

Twenty-five tales spring to life, right at you, in your face, jumping off the page in an array of genres. The choices are divine.

Dip into one every night. Carry them in your dreams. Plunge into several over lunch; enjoy the bite-size titbits. Take the trips into another world with you on your travels, make strangers wonder what lays within which intrigues you, for this is flash fiction at its finest, packed with punch for your delight, your emotions and your fright.

‘I love this book. Each story is a tiny glimpse into the lives of others: a taste of the dramas that are played out all around us day by day. The stories tap into that curiosity we have about the people we see in the bus queue or the man who walks his dog in the park. What lies behind the public face? What do people go home to? The beauty of the stories is that they are so easy to fit around busy lives. A five minute read was enough to feed my imagination, to dwell on what happened next, or what came before. The stories are rich and varied. Some poignant, some humorous and others thought provoking and quirky.’



Blood Relationships (2013)

You should know that I have met some of the people in this story. For Claire Yohanus and Tom Abimelech, the only way forward was back. Those history dubbed as vanquished never gave in. London witnessed their experiments bear fruit. Across these pages unfolds one of history's darkest secrets. The past is not dead. It has a heartbeat.

‘Fast paced, breath-stopping, tear-jerking, masterpiece ... Blood Relationships is the first book that I’ve loved for a very long time. It is the kind of story that engrosses you. I found myself thinking about the characters and the plot, wondering what would happen next whenever I wasn’t reading it. When I was reading it, I didn’t want to put it down. It’s one of those walk along with your head in a book books. I expected a normal historical thriller and was met with something so much more. Thriller, history, conspiracy - cunningly intertwined with a love story (or two); with philosophy and poetry beautifully juxtaposed and resonating with the story. It is a book that speaks to you on so many levels - and a book that should be read by all. You won’t be disappointed.’