



# The Letters

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*Does anybody truly have no regrets?*



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# Dedications

For my beloved wife Lesley who had the faith and fortitude to push me to completing a long-desired result; I am eternally grateful.

In loving memory of Sandy.

# Driftwood

I am like driftwood,  
With as many scars –  
Mementos of sand, sea and time,  
Soothed and engrained  
By experience,  
Dreams and false expectation,  
Regrets and exaltation,  
Love and loss  
    Of all that time can offer.

Time is scant,  
When it comes to these ideals –  
Yet, I have roamed  
From shore to shore  
And moved with many a tide,  
I have dived in and out  
    Of hearts and minds,

Now left abandoned  
To weather the final storm  
Mayhap you come across me,  
And see into my dying soul,  
You may reach out  
    As I reach out to you,

Love me one last time  
As I yearn for your love  
And your gentle touch,  
Take me from this isolation,  
Place me upon your mantelpiece –  
    And let us warm by your fire

WSD



# Prologue

Anxiety hits at different times, affects people in different ways.

There can be the gripping of the heart dreading an attack, chills and fevers, deathly silence and screams, even out-of-body experiences. The latter may be scary, but not as scary as the fear of not surviving the experience.

Like most people of his age, he had experienced anxiety at one time or another, but for him, it was still a passing phenomenon. His worst experiences were far behind him. He had experienced the *phenomenon* only once or twice in his lifetime. Even then, they usually related to the stress of advising companies on multi-million dollar deals. Was this his nadir? Perhaps, and if that was the case, he had only experienced something like it a few rare times.

Instead, his life was one of peace and control. Very much one of control.

And yet, this was such unfamiliar territory; the terrain was rough with jagged edges in his mind. He was out of his depth for the first time since - well, he couldn't quite remember when. That invoked a different kind of fear.

God. Should I have believed in God more, he wondered. He smiled wryly at his own parody.

He had learnt much about different religions, having dealt with many cultures over the years, but he had lost his own sense of faith eons ago, it seemed. His trust in Catholicism



died for many reasons and at one stage he had considered the simplicity of Hinduism. It was a good fit for many reasons; belief in one god, plus it recognised Adam and Eve, or at least a variation thereof. Actually, that was taking it a bit far, but he had read of Manu and Shatrupa and so arrived at some kind of delusional comparison. Ultimately, he had decided against all religious chicanery.

If he be heaven-meant or hell-bent, the so-called gods would work it out. As a colleague had once said, "You have to believe in hell's existence to go there." He thought he had seen enough of hell over the years, but he also thought the hellish moments had never outweighed the good times. And he had indeed, had some very good times.

He did believe in turning ash to ash, dust to dust. But then again, he liked the Greek mythology concept of the phoenix rising from the ashes. In his mind, a second chance. Next time round he would come back as a cheetah. Sure, he might get shot down by an evil, money-hungry trophy hunter, but at least he would have the advantage of speed to make a decent race of it.

Regardless of his musings, he had no affection for religion, and he suspected one needed some level of passion to believe.

Yet worry about the afterlife – or lack thereof – was not where his anxiousness was rooted. Anxiety, fear, anger, passion and most other emotions come from the decisions you make or choose not to make. That was his belief, without the validation of any religion.

But in reality, it was only three months ago when the pain, short breaths and, sometimes, that unsettling feeling of not being in his own skin started its disturbing journey into his being. That was his personal novena. The wakeup call to pray to whoever and whatever religion or belief system could possibly be listening.

It took several board meetings across a portfolio of companies, where he was president, chairman, director or esteemed past president, to bring things to a head. His

comments, especially at one particular recent presiding, came so far out of left field that they were brought into question.

The fact was that some comments - albeit remarks which he would stand solidly by - were not considered in the best interests of the business at hand. They were deemed irrelevant.

In his own thinking, his comments, while not considered complimentary to a board of fuckwits who had no other interest other than collecting their quarterly dispensary, were more than adequate.

He thought back to one encounter where he had openly said, "You may not think my comment relevant, but do the sums just once, and you will find the company seven million dollars better off, compared with last year."

The directors who had voted him down were made to eat humble pie and everything could have been left alone, except he'd told them to: "Hand in your resignations along with your balls and for those without, your clitoris." Another clearly minuted meeting to regret.

But he knew the audit to be falsified. He had a strong background in such matters. He also knew his target was a corrupt chief executive officer, who would need to forge a career anywhere else, anytime, preferably immediately.

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Stopping the past reflections and coming to grips with the people around him, he forced himself to focus and come back to the present. Pulse taken. Equipment shuffled into place. Hushed tones offering calm platitudes with no purpose.

It was all happening around him and for a man always in control, firmly at the helm, there was nothing he could do. He felt completely out of sorts - a new experience and like being out of sorts, not one he was comfortable with.

In his heyday, a simple wave of a hand, a finger pointed, a smile or grimace gave his directions, and all would be done without question. Now, the tables had definitely turned.

He laid back; the bright lights tilted so as not to totally

blind him and yet, he felt like a 'roo caught in fast, onrushing headlights'.

He had made commercial decisions. Personal decisions. Final decisions that tempted fate or, at the very least, brought impending fate to his door.

Then many images passed his mind, ever so rapidly.

Faces and names seemed to float in circles within the bright lights.

He was both a scholar and an educator. There were meetings with presidents and despots. He had led business conquests, written books, helped to develop communities, and now a smile came through his pursed lips.

He had loved beautiful women and been, at times, loved by them. And now a bright light, what did it all mean?

What had Vincent said to him? "You are making a big mistake; you'll be back bigger and better, so why close down?"

"Just in case someone else thinks they can make a decision without me in my absence," was his reply.

"Besides, Vincent," he added, "I'm tired of being on top of the deck; time I reshuffled the deck and did something different."

Suddenly, with all of these thoughts, a deep breath and all anxiety seemed to peel away. Contentment is a strange feeling, but that was how he felt at that moment.

Now, the count-down. Ten, nine, eight, seven.... blessed sleep and sweet dreams.



## Part One

# Reacquainting *Emily*

*I measure every grief I meet  
With narrow, probing, eyes –  
I wonder if it weighs like mine –  
Or has an easier size  
I measure every grief I meet*

Emily Dickinson



# Chapter One

Eyelashes. Interesting devices of the human body. They flutter to avoid dust. They express emotion, quicker than any other part of the body. They dip to hide shame and fear. They celebrate intention and fan lust.

Right now, the eyelashes of one Desmond Jamieson were brushing his skin, not wanting his eyelid muscles to move but then, reluctantly, those muscles pushed his lashes upward and what seemed to be so heavy began to move.

First, at slow camera shutter-speed. Then a blink and then another. The blur slowly resided. He was awake. His throat parched, utter nausea wracking his body.

But he was awake. That was a relief in itself.

He closed his eyes to the dazzling white light which had decided to bounce off the sterile and equally white walls like a ping pong ball off a bat at high speed.

Closed eyes helped stem the nausea but not the reality, so he gradually allowed them to open again. One eye at a time, slowly. Very slowly.

He moved, ever so gradually, attempting to take in his surrounds but this also proved difficult. No, actually painful. Very, very painful. The tubes stemming in and out of his body pulled sharply, adding to his discomfort and nausea.

A female voice sounded from somewhere in the room. A nurse at the foot of his bed spoke softly, warning him to not make sudden moves.

*Geez, now you tell me.*

"Just lay still, Mr Jamieson," she said. Still on his side, he looked towards the direction of the voice, finally able to see an upper portion of the nurse scribing something on a chart, clipping it back into place at the end of the bed.

"So what's the verdict?" he asked, grimacing. Talking was also painful, as if every syllable was being yanked out of his head, one tooth at a time.

His question, however, was flatly stated as if in a rehearsal. His voice was devoid of quaver or feeling of his current pain. His question was suddenly irrelevant, fearing an answer that was inevitable.

"Mr Chan will be in to see you soon."

At that, he shut his eyes momentarily. The eyelashes performed their duty. He knew what it meant.

There was nothing left to be done. Of course, while he had tried to remain positive, even chirpy, leading up to the operation, his worst fears had now been realised, with a simple, "*Mr Chan will be in to see you soon.*"

And indeed Mr Chan was soon there in front of him, maybe a half hour after the nurse had left. He was well acquainted with Mr Chan, or Leon, as he had come to know him.

Leon Chan stood five foot nothing. His face was as creased as a rumpled, unironed shirt, and yet, in complete contrast, he bore a bald head as smooth as a baby's bottom.

Not that Jamieson had anything against a bald head. He had only just started to regrow his own hair, following the last bout of chemotherapy a little more than twelve months prior. It was now at a sharp bristle and it amazed him that it was darker than the salt and pepper beard he had. The beard was cropped short, neatly following his facial contours to the new growth on his scalp.

He had been very specific with Shelley at the barber shop he frequented. Shelley definitely had talent but he wondered who actually did her hair. Bright, rusty red with a huge streak of purple; simply, Desmond couldn't quite get the colour

combination. Then again, he never understood the nose ring and the number of tattoos she, and others of her age for that matter, chose to inflict upon their bodies.

"No probs, Dezzo, you're in good hands," Shelley chirped. And indeed he was. She had completed the task to perfection.

Now his precisely trimmed beard and slightly bristled hair was before the gaze of the wonder surgeon, Mr Leon Chan.

When they first met, Desmond had thought Chan may have come straight out of a P.T. Barnum circus but was soon to realise that even the adored Phileas Barnum could not have had the magic touch of such an excellent and renowned surgeon.

Mr Leon Chan had already saved Desmond's life. But salvage comes with no guarantees and a few months later; the remorseless cancer took a different direction.

Desmond had always referred to his surgeon as Doc or Leon, but in reality, he was always a Mr.

Desmond never had a lot of time for titles, regardless of his own business status. He had once given a lecture to a university of would-be business graduates and made a very clear point of saying, "If you are going in to make millions or make a name or title of yourself, you might, *just might*, become a leader; or equally, you may become nothing more than a sheep amongst an immensely competitive flock."

Leon Chan, whilst normally impersonal in the way he spoke to his patients, sat gently on the edge of Jamieson's bed.

In normal cases he would be apologetic but curt, as he felt it helped the patient *get to the point*. There was no benefit to sugar-coating medical facts.

Before Chan started to speak, the patient feebly raised his hand and said, "It's okay."

"Desmond, my... can I call you a friend and not just a patient?" asked Chan.

Desmond nodded.

"I know we both knew of the probabilities but until we operated, regardless of the scans, we didn't know how much

damage, or how far-spreading, the cancer was," Chan said.

The cancer had spread into other areas of his stomach, the lining of his intestine was eroding, and his pancreas would soon be under threat.

Desmond just asked one question; "How long?"

At that point - and he had never done so with any other patient - Leon Chan took the hand of Desmond Jamieson.

"We have formed a bond over our time," said the surgeon.

"It's okay; how long?" repeated Desmond.

"The time you have is up to you, to a certain extent. You can choose to go into an induced coma, or you can choose to sit it out a little longer. I can't make that decision for you, but I must warn you, Desmond, that decision may come with growing, and at times, very sharp pain. Morphine is going to be a very good friend," said Leon.

Desmond Jamieson, at the age of sixty-eight, would ultimately be going into palliative care, and await the meeting with his maker, if in fact, the maker existed. There were times over the preceding months he had hoped there would be a God, or at least somewhere nice that he could live a life of solace. He would soon return as a cheetah, after all.

He imagined scenes of clear streams and lush grass, and perhaps a fishing rod, its line dangling with the odd bob in the water signalling a fine catch. He didn't give a damn if there was a fish nibbling at the bait; they were fed, and he was relaxed on a riverbank. Perhaps a place where he could catch up on all the books he never got to read, just like the movies he always said he would hire from the DVD shop but never did.

He loved old westerns in particular.

Henry Fonda at his best, John Wayne with his rip-roaring voice, and Jimmy Stewart, with a purposeful drawl, particularly in that film with Lee Marvin - gee, what was it - the Man who Shot Liberty Valance, yes, that was it. That was a John Wayne movie, but the other stars grabbed the limelight. It was only one of a couple that Des recalled in which John



Wayne died but in this case, only by reference; the film never showed him dying, not like in *The Alamo* or *The Cowboys*.

He was very much a fan of Eastwood, all the way through the spaghetti western phase and through to eternity. Having recently seen *Pale Rider* again, Des was a happy man.

He was still hanging on to the visual and realised his mind had drifted while Mr Chan explained the next steps, the month or few weeks he may have left. Desmond Jamieson was not really paying that much attention, but he gave the courtesy of pretending to listen. The surgeon's words seemed to be washing over him.

"Thank you Leon. I know you have done your best. I think I might just wait it out for a little while before I ring upstairs to see if there is a vacancy," said Desmond, his eyes looking upward to the ceiling.

*I told you Vincent, double or nothing; aren't you regretting not taking up the bet?*

A carer would be appointed to his ward which was on the other side of the hospital. He did hear that.

Of course the ward may not be his final room before eternity dawned. It would be a weighing station, a stop-over, a place before another place when he could no longer stand or think for himself.

*A ward, far away from those who would live well beyond the here and now,* Des thought to himself.

He closed his eyes again, to shut out a single tear but he didn't know exactly what was upsetting him. He had known, deep down in his soul, this was the way it was going to end.

He had consented to entry to the ResiCare hostel regardless of Vincent's challenges but in reality, deep-down, Desmond always knew of the inevitability of death. His gut instinct that had served him so well for decades was, most unfortunately, still mercilessly accurate.

Vincent, to his credit, knew of the mastery of Jamieson, his ability to manage the most ridiculous of outcomes. Vincent had also challenged Desmond to a ridiculous bet of three

hundred thousand dollars on his survival. A bet that they would later share some mirth over, but never any actual exchange of currency.

Vincent had questioned his choice. "Let's wait and see Desmond, let's wait and see." But he had told Vincent to prepare for the worst and then celebrate the victory if in fact, the worst was defeated.

But Desmond had made a clear decision that if the news was not in his favour, then it would be in no one's favour, personally or from a business perspective.

The decision to go into hostel mode was an uneasy one. He had to have a lot of his personal things placed in storage, but again, Vincent would cater for this just as Vincent had catered for so many things in Jamieson's life over the past few decades.

A key factor in Des' decision was there were so few to worry about him, regardless of all he did or had done. Most importantly, he did not want to die alone in any of his houses or apartments.

Of course, beyond the hostel which, all in all, was only temporary accommodation, he would have to face those final stages of life in palliative care. Something he was not yet ready to contemplate.

He had deliberated for weeks but realised it would be best for all concerned that his affairs were in order and that his business interests and holdings were in a healthy position to continue in his absence. His decision had been partly made in memory of those before him who had not organised their lives as well as he had.

Now, the reality was coming home. His absence this time would be one from which there would be no return.

Vincent had said he was becoming Murphy-like. Jamieson said that he was wrong; that according to O'Neill's Law, Murphy was an optimist. Vincent conceded and they had both laughed.

Now, there were sudden thoughts and faces flooding

through his weary mind, of so many people, some already departed, others he was not so sure about. Their very existence had escaped him. Time had escaped him.

His tear, and he knew there would be other tears, was about the inevitability of it all. The inevitability of mortality.

*"I could not stop for death, so he kindly stopped for me."*

Emily Dickinson's words came rushing in. He did not understand how his mind could cite such works after all of these years. Images and words enveloped him, smothering him to such an extent that the nausea overcame him, causing him to vomit, which inflicted its own torture as the catheters pulled hard on both sides of his lower body.

*"The carriage held but just ourselves, and immortality."*

Of course, vomiting is easy until there is nothing there to vomit and so dry retching followed until pure bile spilled through his lips. The mustard-yellow liquid drooled, then continued with another wave, and another, wracking his body with pain at every convulsion.

Mr Chan called for the nurse to wipe away the fluid from his craggy-lined mouth. Then the surgeon shook Jamieson's hand and left without another word, his head bowed.

The nurse just looked, a little sympathetically, but then left just as the good doctor had.

Desmond Jamieson was alone, and that reality was a sudden slap. No, a right hook to his jaw, so hard he imagined hitting the canvas and bouncing. Rocky 1 to 7 or however many sequels there were. He had lived on and off with companionship for all his life; he was comfortable in his own skin, but this was different.

This was the first time he had felt lonely for decades. A sense of reality, permanency, suddenly filled the void.

*So this is it, Des,* he thought. His second wife had said he would die a lonely old man. She won that bet. Of course, he wasn't *that* old – sixty-eight is hardly old.

*Fuck, what have I done with my life?*

The nausea lifted again, and he started to dry retch just as the nurse returned. His head thumping, his body resonated with pain as he heaved.

*Fuck, is my head caving in as well? Bet she thinks I'm a right bastard too.*

But the nurse did her job, lifting his head and placed the bowl under his chin until this last wave of total nausea subsided, the yellowish liquid dribbling into the receptacle.

"I'm going to get the floor doctor," she said.

"Really, is the floor sick too?" Jamieson replied, a feeble attempt at humour, managing a weak smile.

"I think you may be having trouble with the morphine," she replied, denying the mirth of his quick wit. *Unbelievable*, she thought. *Poor bugger.*

A few minutes later she returned with a young man in a white coat. Des looked up without a murmur, thinking how very young they are. Perhaps at that moment, he was an old man after all.

This 'kid' looked just that, a kid. But he must have done his time, the eight years plus they required to be here in the first place. Funny, Des thought suddenly, his apprenticeship was much more of hard knocks and yet this kid was going to make it all right, even for a moment or two.

"Considering there was only exploratory surgery done and that we have you on morphine for the pain, I think we may get you off that," the child doctor announced.

"Fine," responded Jamieson, "I'd rather not be heaving all over the sick floor." While that got a quizzical look from the doctor, the nurse certainly gave a light chuckle.

"Just the same," said the child doctor, "We will need to dose you up pretty high on pethidine to help with the pain."

Weariness started to succumb.

*"We slowly drove, he knew no haste, and I had put away my labour, and my leisure too, for his civility."*

Desmond Jamieson saw a gaunt female, clad in a white linen dress. She gently swayed back and forth, whispering,

*"Parting is all we know of heaven and all we need of hell."*

His eyes gradually closed. This time, both doctor and nurse were still in the room.



## Chapter Two

Lauren Black read the charts, well skilled in doing so after the past eight years. Here she was, in her grey skirt and vibrant magenta blouse. Colour in her perspective counted.

Another life chapter to be concluded here, within the boundaries of these walls.

These walls, of course, would change from the private hostel quarters to the less appealing but still private quarters of palliative care known in the hospital as PalCare. Her job was to be part of that journey, a mere crossing of corridors and hallways.

The thought was brief and customary. She recognised inevitability more than most people would in their lifetime. No. All their lifetimes.

She also knew that some of her acquaintances thought her job was nigh on as macabre as any job could be. They did debate whether the job was any different, better or worse than that of an undertaker.

Her closest friends, however, held nothing more than admiration; if not, they held her in some false sense of awe. Then again, she could count her closest friends on less than one hand, if not two fingers. The question remained, out of friends, did majority count?

Undertakers, in her mind, however, were a breed of their own and a breed she respected. After all, they actually dealt

with life, helping those left behind, far more than dealing with death.

Her job was somewhat tougher. Her psychology PhD didn't always count and sometimes she wondered if she wouldn't be better off counselling other sick souls, rather than those souls soon to leave this world.

When it came to *soul-talk* as she described it, there were too many discussions where she had to *comply* and understand the individual's need, love and at sometimes hate for their own existence. So often it was a time of immense confusion, depending on their mental frame of mind.

The most placid could become filled with aggression; the outspoken often became sullen; the religious sometimes gave up believing and the non-believers cried out for forgiveness from God.

She thought herself to be an atheist but wanted to think there was something else more worthwhile. So many of her clients needed that reassurance at the end.

She smiled to think of the occasions, more than once, when a Catholic priest had given last rites to an undeclared Jewish person. The parents were horrified of course, but no more so when a rabbi spoke at the head of one bed and recited the Vidui for someone who had never reached out to a church of any kind; not even a shared olive branch.

Of course, she was not always present; in fact, most had left her charge and moved to those final steps of PalCare – some in induced coma state; others soon after. There were seldom final rites served.

But what good does religion do if you do not believe? Her thoughts always remained on the disappointment of religion; the endless discrimination, the endless wars and the violence that religion seemed to take some kind of intrinsic pride in.

Her thoughts turned to a stirring patient, a new client on the block.

The case files for the person in front of her, however, were somewhat scant.

She was also used to that, having to do her own research from time to time, more so when there was no family present to fill in gaps.

The file included all the *vitals*. There was a name, current address and a mobile number for immediate contact with a name -'Vincent' scribbled beside it. His medical condition complemented those notes on the bed chart. *Terminal*.

Other notes read, *"We know who he is, seemingly no real connection to family. No greater level of information from the patient. He appears that he has full insurance coverage for his needs."*

She then noted what was written in the special comments column. *"Take care of this patient; a major supporter of this facility,"* was scribed. Signed off with the initials of AS.

AS. She tried to guess who that may be. *"A major supporter of this facility."* It didn't ring a bell but AS was now firmly stuck in her mind.

She sat there waiting for Des Jamieson to awaken. She knew he would be anxious about his new surroundings. It was always an interesting factor, even if they knew of the consequences of time and place.

She would provide an overview of his surroundings, his final weeks ahead. As hospice-palliative case-manager, she had done this some twenty-six times in the past six years.

She knew if the patient denied the outcome, it was hard work. She thought of Jim Trevallis. He denied the inevitability. He refused death until the last, never communicating more than two words in any conversation she had with him.

She remained troubled about Jim, unsure she had done enough to make him as peaceful with the outcome as she had wanted to. Her training was of one to make a difference; she knew deep down, she couldn't have done any better.

Sometimes, it didn't work out and that was a threat to her own sanity, but she exercised belief in herself and her patients concurrently. Jim's demise was not one of those bright or pivotal moments in life, not in her life, anyway.



When she put her head on a pillow at night, she came to grips with the very real fact that her job was to work with people in their final stage of life.

This new patient was lying there, and she hoped his journey would be different. Less painful. And not like Jim Trevallis'.

She considered her position. She was good at her job. She constantly fumbled to describe that satisfaction to anyone.

In that inability for people to accept the role she played, she felt lonely too, not just for her patients.

*Damn. I'm nearly 40 years of age. I need to dance. I need to party.*



## Chapter Three

Des Jamieson didn't just stir from a deep slumber, his body bolted as if lightning had struck. The pain that came with the jolt up into mid-air also brought him back to earth just as quick, back to the confines of white sheets and sterile surroundings.

The dream had surfaced, incomplete and unwelcomed. Before he could get a train of thought, he was looking up with still bleary eyes, at a very attractive, young woman.

Her smile was calming enough, and it was complemented with a, "Just settle back, Mr Jamieson, you're in good hands." However, his focus on the young woman moved beyond the smile. He felt he was still in dream.

"Where am -" he muttered almost inaudibly, stopping abruptly.

"You are in good hands, Mr Jamieson, in the best hands that City General's transition quarters have to offer," she said.

"Really," he said gruffly, "so who are you?"

His eyes still transfixed, realising the drugs, whatever they were, must be having their due effect.

"My name is Lauren, see on my badge, Lauren, Lauren Black," she said in a purposeful and deliberate manner. She knew he may be still coming out of a dream extended by the change in medication which they had introduced during his sleep.

"Lauren. Lauren's a nice name," he stumbled with his words, transfixed upon the young woman's face.

"Thank you."

He momentarily moved his gaze from this young beauty before him, a beauty he had not seen for a very long time.

Lauren was tall and slender in a most elegant and very business-like way. Her magenta-shaded blouse hugged her fine features, while her grey skirt equally followed the contours of a very fit and healthy figure. She had high cheekbones, a petite nose and light emerald eyes that would make all of Ireland proud; they simply sparkled and smiled with character.

He then chose to take in the broader landscape, his eyes searching the small room. There was a window, with what appeared to be, beyond the curtains, some greenery; perhaps a garden. And there was a door leading out adjacent to that window.

There was no longer a bright, white light and the walls had been magically replaced by the palest of egg-shell blue.

On the other side of the room, there was another door. An ensuite, perhaps. And then there was a door that led to what he considered had to be the rest of the hostel.

After the visual roaming of his confine, Des Jamieson's pale-blue, almost steely-grey eyes met again with those of Lauren Black and he thought, the Irish eyes were indeed smiling.

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Lauren knew her script. Understand their needs, give them an opening. An opening that would amass fears and acclamations; time given and time lost.

She had watched his gaze and then searching eyes. Those eyes could have equally belonged to a first-time criminal looking for an escape. Indeed, in her experience, many would have wished a far greater escape.

She waited for the inevitable question of "Where am I?" which she assumed was coming when he first awoke. To

her surprise, her patient responded somewhat indifferently. Instead his eyes again darted around the room, taking in his new living quarters.

"So, we are in the south wing of the Gerry Hampson building," said Des. Not a question, but a statement.

"Yes, but how did you know?" said Lauren.

Jamieson did not respond, but rather gazed again around the room again and then darted back to meet her eyes. With that, she decided she should push on with induction.

"Again, I'm Lauren and yes, you are right about where you are," she said, blushing because her patient already knew that.

She caught herself in doing so. *Keep it flowing, Lorrie, keep it flowing.*

"You know, and I know," she started, with that inevitable tremble she felt inside absolutely every time. She took a deep breath to steady herself.

"You are dying, and it is my job to make your final journey as comfortable and meaningful as I possibly can."

Jamieson considered her words carefully. As she spoke, he considered the words to be rehearsed, yet eloquent and precise.

*Eloquent and precise.* Not sure that's how he had imagined it, but there it was - *Eloquent and precise.*

"So, Miss Black, what exactly do you consider to be comfortable and meaningful?" he asked in a matter-of-fact fashion.

Her further blushing told him he had caught her off guard with his direct question, but she rose to the occasion. She had expected the normal dramatic pause or trembling reality.

Yet, she also knew from looking at the monitor, understanding the high pethidine ration, this was a man fighting for his time to understand - also, the fight against fatigue, which was kicking in, big time.

"Comfortable is with as little pain as possible," she replied, knowing this to be an increasingly impossible feat as time went by.

"Meaningful, is to help you fulfil your days with any last wishes that help you have peace of mind."

"I see," he pondered, adding, "So, Miss Black, you will take me away from here so we can go fishing?"

"Mr Jamieson, please call me Lauren. And no, you know I am not taking you fishing."

With a very brief smile, he replied, "Yes, I do know. And please call me Des."

He looked again, directly into Lauren Black's eyes. A very faint memory, perhaps. There was something special about this well-rehearsed woman; something for the memory bank whilst he could still hold onto it.

*"The carriage held but just ourselves."*

He closed his eyes just for a second to savour whatever that memory may have given a glimpse of. It came up empty; perhaps, just a wish for recollection and he suddenly wondered if this was the beginning of the end of both sweet and sour memories.

When his eyes took on those of his allocated new carer before him, he saw a young woman doing what he thought to be a most difficult job; putting up with arseholes like him. Those deep-pooled, yet pale green eyes of Ms Black got a gaze of admiration.

"So," she began to speak again but was interrupted once more.

"So, let's start with the comfort stakes, shall we?"

"What do you mean?"

"Get rid of all these damn tubes," he said. "I am most capable of walking over to that ensuite, brushing my teeth, even having a shower, who knows, perhaps even walking out to that garden past that door".

"I know that's how you feel now but..."

Again, he interrupted.

"Yes I know about the but, but but is not now – let's wait

until but time kicks in, or when it indeed kicks me in the butt," he said adamantly.

"OK," Lauren conceded softly. "But it can't happen for a day or two. There are still blood tests and ensuring we have you on the right strength pain killers."

"Right." Desmond started but it was her time to interrupt.

"And regardless, Mr Jamieson..."

"Des."

"Des, you need to have the drip in all of the time. I can't have you here in pain when it can be avoided," she finally finished.

"OK, understood," he replied with a sigh, giving in to her assertiveness.

"We need to keep up some heavy dosage of pethidine, considering your nauseous reaction to the morphine. So, the drip will need to remain but if the nursing staff are OK with it, you can walk with it and it can be tapped for you to have a shower if that is your desire. But there will come a time when that won't work, and I need you to be aware."

"Understood."

This time it was her turn to look into her patient's eyes. She did so with a flicker of admiration, acknowledging his stance for his own dignity.

"You will be drowsy; you will need plenty of rest."

"Yes." He was already feeling weary.

"It's eleven o'clock. I'm sure we can have you unplugged and hopefully unwired by tomorrow afternoon."

"Thanks."

"I have to do some other work right now, but I will be back to see you this afternoon, if that's alright with you."

"Sure. I'm not going anywhere," he responded with a slight grin.

"In the meantime, I want you to think of anyone you need to see – your wife, your family, your friends – anybody you want me to contact."

"I think I may have a little rest now and see you this afternoon," he said, evading what she had just said.

Lauren Black left the room wondering if he had actually heard her or just chose to dismiss the thought of outside contact. Perhaps, she would know in the afternoon.

But Jamieson did hear Lauren's words. He closed his eyes and started to think and saw a myriad of people floating in his mind. Some he genuinely considered he should talk to; others were ghosts he was unsure of the need to reacquaint with or in fact, whether they needed to be woken at all.