

REVERB
by J. Cafesin



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REVERB
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*For men, and women
who love them.*

REVERB **PROLOGUE**

JAMES

“Get ‘em, Ian!” I held the mud covered kitten and paced the water’s edge trying not to cry.

“No. You get them.” Ian stood on the grassy hillside several feet up from the pond. “It’s your fault they’re in there. I wouldn’t have tripped if you hadn’t been chasing me.” He shrugged his gangly shoulders and held up the empty shoebox home I’d made for them.

“I can’t swim. Get ‘em Ian, please!”

Two kittens struggled to stay afloat, clawing at the washcloth moving towards the center of Miller’s fishpond. Their whimpering sounded like children screaming in the distance.

“I’m not drowning in that scummy water over some feral cats.” Ian just stood there, watching. “Get them if you want to, but I’m not. They’re probably rabid.” He held the shoebox away from him like it was diseased then flung it into the pond.

I paced. I was so excited to see my teenaged half-brother, only the second time in all my seven years, but I hated Ian right then. Never should have shown off the Lynx kittens I’d found near the marsh behind Miller’s farm. I looked at the barn on the hill. Mr. Miller was away at work all day. It would take too long to go back to my house for help.

I clutched the muddy kitten I’d plucked from the bank and held it against my mounting terror as I stepped into the murky water. My feet sank into the soft, slimy bottom. Cold water rushed through my socks and around my ankles, then seeped into my sneakers and weighted me.

“You’d better learn to swim fast because you’ll never reach them from there.” Ian’s rosy, full face was suddenly angular and hard in shadow as clouds hid the morning sun.

I shivered and waded deeper, the water to my knees, then my waist but I still couldn’t reach them. Then one of the kittens

disappeared below the surface and I lunged for it, then I was suddenly kicking water, searching for ground. Sharp pain pierced my shoulder from the kitten's needle claws, then my neck as it scrambled up me. I screamed but it was garbled as I gulped in mouthfuls of grimy water. I couldn't get air, my lungs felt as if they were bursting. I kicked and grabbed at the surface above. The excruciating pain in my chest became numbing, almost relieving, and my vision tunneled as I sank. I saw Ian standing at the edge of the pond watching me with the exact same blank expression he wore watching the kittens drown.

What I recall happening next seems impossible, even cliché, but the memory is vivid and visceral. I could see Ian from under the water, then something burst behind my eyes and everything went white. Then my view was from above my body, maybe six feet up, and I was looking down on myself sinking in the pond, watching Ian come in after me, the pain gone. I watched, but didn't feel my limp body being dragged to the shore. And though I saw Ian kneel beside me, I did not feel him pounding on my chest.

"Come on, you little shit." Ian yelled as he practically pounced on me. "You die on me and I'm screwed. Come on! Get up!" He put both his palms on my ribcage and pounded again.

Blinding pain shot through my chest and up my throat as the water was forced from my lungs. And suddenly I was back in my body on the ground, gritty water burning my throat and nostrils as it poured from my nose and mouth. When I finally stopped choking and sat up everything was quiet. The kittens were gone. The pond was still.

"You tell and you'll regret it." Ian stared down at me with a sinister grin plastered on his face. "I'll make it all your fault. It'll be easy too. I could almost tell the truth. And father will believe me, since I'm his only *real* son."

Not anymore.

Fast forward twenty years, and now I'm the only one left.

Damn you, Ian.

I stare at the pine casket that lays perched at the edge of the hole in the ground. I picture Ian lying in there with that smirk fixed on his face. The priest is saying something but I don't hear and don't care. I want to be someplace else, anyplace else.

Damp, dead air. Then a hint of an icy breeze stings my cheeks. Brown leaves dance across the clipped lawns of the High Halden Church graveyard as I watch them lower my half-brother into the ground. "All the leaves are brown, and the sky is gray..." 'California Dreaming' with its ubiquitous 1-4-5, progression, mirrors the scene before me. "*I'd be safe and warm if I was in L.A...*" I'd be surfing, working with The Zone, finishing the remix for Caravan, arguing with Julia, instead of freezing my ass off in this graveyard trying to figure out why I agreed to come.

The casket is settled in the hole and I want to feel something, but I don't. Most memories around Ian focus on him taunting me—stupid shit, like putting razor cuts in my guitar strings so they'd snap when I played, or threatening to slam the piano cover closed while I was practicing. First day I came to Castlewood, six years after the kitten incident back in the States, Ian walked into the music room blasted on something, came within inches and whispered, "Do you ever dream about dead cats?"

I tried to avoid him, but he sought me out at first, angry I was there, or maybe just bored. We came to a head when I trashed his stash after he put LSD in my iced tea at our father's appointment to the Shadow Minister. Dumped his shoebox full of weed, speed and assorted pharms into the Thames the next morning. After that, Ian left me alone.

The priest hands me a shovel filled with dirt. I pour it onto the casket. The noise is surprisingly loud, and hollow. I wonder if Ian is really in there. Perhaps he's given up all those millions

for the warm Sicilian sun. “*All the lonely people, where do they all come from...*” And a young Paul McCartney is in my head singing Eleanor Rigby. I hand the shovel back to the priest and step back, keeping my eyes downcast, consciously avoiding my father. Again the question of why I agreed to come strikes me, but I can’t hear an answer above McCartney’s rich tenor.

The priest crosses himself and wipes his hands as he walks from the grave. “*No one was saved.*” McCartney’s melodic voice unveiled the story of the lost. That was Ian. The man had no center. Maybe he felt that and couldn’t live with it. I stand with my hands in the pockets of my overcoat, hold it closed against a gust of biting wind, feeling the music resonate in my body and shroud me against the cold.

Everyone starts milling about, coming up to me and shaking my hand with the canonical sympathies. What am I supposed to say to these people? Am I sorry Ian is dead? Won’t affect much either way. It was expected really. There isn’t a person here who could deny Ian was on self-destruct, except maybe dear dad, who spent a lifetime denying it, or just couldn’t be bothered. Ian was screwed from the start. “*All the lonely people, where do they all belong...*”

Gray domes the sky and feels suffocating. I want out of here. Now. But how? Everyone’s watching me, checking me out.

I hate that. No sanctuary with everyone always watching.

The limo that brought me is just across the lawn, not fifty yards away. The driver that picked me up at Heathrow is standing next to it, smoking a cigarette. I can just walk over there, get in, and go. But I don’t. I’ve no interest in shaming my father in front of his constituents. Instead, I pull up the tune for the Zone’s lead track, and composed it in my head while I shake hands and nod.

Open with all power, hard and fast—like a freight train coming: G-C-F-A- then back off, G5, sustain 1-2-3-4, and pick it up, and faster, and faster, hold the rhythm with the change to E—

“James Michael Whren.” The priest extends his hand. Tall, thin, gray hair, trim beard, simple black suit with a thin white collar. His smile is warm, but affected. “How many years has it been? My word, look at you.” He clasps my hand in both of his and shakes firmly. “Welcome home, son.”

This is not my home, and I am not your son.

“Hello, Father.” I reclaim my hand. Can’t remember the priest’s name to save my life.

“James, you may remember Father Tenant?” Edward Charles Whren XXI comes up behind me and I’m chilled straight through. “It has been quite some time, Albert.”

“Of course, Edward.” The priest turns back to me. “Father Albert Tenant. It has been a long time, hasn’t it?” He sticks his hand out again and I shake it again. “I know your father is glad you found your path here today. I’m sure Ian would have felt the same.”

Ian wouldn’t have cared less. And my father required me for display.

Again, I wonder what the hell I’m doing here. *I want to get out of here.*

Priest and my father exchange glances. Then the priest looks at me. “How long will you be staying, son?”

“I’m leaving in the morning.”

Another quick exchange with my father then the priest looks back at me. “So you’ll be staying at Castlewood this evening then?”

An involuntary shiver at the notion of entering the cold stone walls of Edward’s estate. “Actually...some colleagues are performing at a pub in Canterbury later. It’ll be a late night, and my flight’s very early...and, well—”

“I’d like you to come to Castlewood this evening, James.” Edward’s phrasing masks the command as a request.

Fuck. “Well, my flight’s at like five in the morning and—”

“Stefan will get you to the airport in ample time for your

flight in the morning.” Edward keeps his green eyes fixed on me.

“Yeah... Okay, I guess.” What else can I say? My father just buried his only other child. The priest nods approvingly. I feel like flipping him off, but manage to refrain.

“Good.” Edward nods just once. “I’ll see you back at the house soon.” He turns back to Father Tenant. “Albert. Join me.”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, James. I’m sorry for the circumstances, and your loss.” Priest sticks his hand out, and I shake it, again. Then Father Tenant and Edward walk across the misted lawn to the cobbled road and the waiting limousines.

“Master James.” Curtis Weston, one of my brother’s strung out cronies mocks me. “It’s been a while, man. Too bad about Ian, huh.” An anorexic model-type clings to his arm wearing a little black dress so short you can almost see the cheeks of her ass. “How ya doing?”

“Okay, Curtis. How you doing, man?” Curtis looks like crap. Emaciated, with vacant eyes peering through long, greasy hair.

“Getting’ by. You still making the L.A. music scene?”

“Yeah. What about you? You still with The Ravens?”

“Na. Don’t play much anymore. Hang out mostly. You know...”

No. I don’t. And I don’t ever want to know a life without music. Take away music and I’d have no life at all. Probably end up like Curtis. What a waste. He used to be a damn good bassist.

“Weren’t you in that remake of Wuthering Heights a couple years back?” the woman asks.

“No.”

“Oh. You aren’t that British actor that played Heathcliff?”

“Nope.”

“Well, you sure look like him—same cheekbones; the tousled hair, wild-child thing you’ve got going; same tall build,” and she scans mine, from my arms to abs, or lower, it’s hard to tell. “You should consider acting, or modeling. Lots of money in it for your look.”

Curtis laughs condescendingly. “James doesn’t need money, love. You know who this is? May I present Ian’s Whren’s little brother—Sir James Michael Whren, the Fifteenth? Sixteenth? What’s ya all up to now?”

“I don’t know, Curtis.” I look away, at Edward walking with the priest.

“Still have that killer place in Zuma, man?”

“Yeah.”

“You should see his crib, Alexis—totally secluded, overlooking the Pacific, the latest and greatest studio set-up. This man is famous in the music world, baby. He’s the best of the best, an amazing player. Master James and I used to work together way back when.” His accent is thick, East End. “Remember Red Rocks, man?”

“Yeah.” I lie. Don’t have a clue what he’s talking about. I’d backed up Tull to Incubus at Red Rocks but have no recall playing with the Raven’s there. “Look, I’ve got to go, man. Take care.” We shake hands. I flash a quick smile at the woman and turn away, move across the misted lawn towards the limos, following my father’s path.

“My God, Curtis, he’s brilliant. I mean, *perfect*. Do you have any idea how much a face like his is worth...” I hear her say as I walk away, and shake my head in bewilderment at the value so many place on physicality—an accident of birth, over achievement—an accomplishment of will.

Edward is talking to the priest by the waiting limousines. He glances at me across the lawn, then turns away with a sweep of his cloak and gets into the first limo lining the old road. I watch it drive away, pull my coat tighter around me.

Agreeing to go out to Castlewood was a bad idea. *Stupid*. The sonofabitch arranged this whole thing, set me up to meet with him by ‘requesting’ I attend the funeral. I’m an idiot. What the hell does he want? Clearly more than a show of family solidarity. I never should have agreed to come.

I've nothing to say to Edward, especially after so much time. We never got on. The rare times he graced me with his attention our dialog devolved to his list of commands: "Diligence is the only path to excellence. I expect both of you." Yes, sir. "Paul Michelson, the pianist, will be your tutor for the duration of your holiday. You'll have the full eight weeks to work with him before returning to school." Yes sir, though I had no interest in the piano, or attending the suffocating Royal Academy of Music in London through my teen years. My father didn't give a damn what I wanted, needed. In the beginning, I resisted, or outright disregarded Edward's wishes and schedules for me. That first summer with him, I took off with a punk band to tour Europe. He had me arrested in Munich. I was fourteen, a minor, a runaway, without parental consent to travel. The man is maniacally controlling. And I'm an idiot. Should have said I had a red-eye, or a session in London.

I get to the limousines frustrated and freezing. "Stefan, right?"

"Yes, sir." Maybe twenty, adorned in an ill-fitting black suit—a beanpole, with clear blue eyes and white/blond spiked hair peeking from under his black cap. He opens the door of the now first limousine in the long row. "I'm sorry for your loss, sir."

"Thank you." I get in. Apparently Stefan knows where to take me because he doesn't ask.

The door shuts and I am entombed. Driving through the rolling hills of Kent, the ancient walnuts and aged oaks are black sentries against the matte gray sky. Gets harder and harder to breathe. Try pulling up the tune for The Zone I'd been working on at the grave site, but it's impossible to hear anything beyond the war in my head. Between the faded memories of living here, aching for home, and Julia, I curse myself all the way to the estate for agreeing to come.

Glimpse the stone turrets of Castlewood through the endless row of Italian spruce and my skin starts to prickle. Then the

gravel drive pops and crunches under the tires and my heart pounds so hard it's reverberating in my throat. I'd walked away from here the day I turned eighteen, leaving behind my father, Ian, and the five years I'd been forced to live with them. That was almost ten years ago. And I'd most likely never have come back had Ian's overdose not given me an easy excuse to put a few days between me and Julia.

Julia. Flash on my last image of her, standing in the studio doorway in her lavender silk camisole and purple panties, mad as hell that I was still working. I grimace with humor in mock shame. I'll make it up to her when I get back—take her on a date she swears we never go on.

Limo finally stops. Stefan opens my door. Dread is so pervasive I just sit there, paralyzed. Nothing good can come from this encounter. I shouldn't have come.

Stefan stands shivering by the door in the cold, wet air and waits. I sit in the car feeling angry and trapped until I can't take the absurdity another minute. "What are you waiting for?"

"You to get out, sir."

"Well, what if I don't?"

"Well, then, I have to wait here, sir, until you do."

"Any chance you'll take me back to Heathrow?"

"None, sir. My instructions were to bring you here."

I figured as much. Edward usually gets what he wants, and it would be unwise of the driver to cross him if he wants to stay employed, anywhere in Britain, at least. No point in arguing. I get out of the car, even manage, "Thank you, Stefan. That will be all for now," as I cross the gravel drive to the house. Jesus, I can't wait to get back to L.A. where the people are normal. I hear Stefan slam the door to the limousine and stomp away as I move under the vaulted stone, marble-columned portico. Deep breath, then release it slowly as I come through one of the heavy arched wood doors and onto the checkered floor of the entrance hall gallery. The massive oak-railed marble staircase, like the

tongue of a giant mouth, sits across the large, open space and splits in opposite directions onto the second floor landing.

“Your father would like to see you in the study at six PM. Sharp,” Howard says the moment I set foot in the house. Dressed in his impeccably tailored dark wool suit, he looks virtually the same, except maybe more gray around the temples, perhaps less hair there as well. His thin lips are set in a straight, unreadable line, his gray eyes impassive as ever. He says nothing else, not even, “Good to see you after all these years, James.” He turns away, walks through one of four, double-arched thresholds with that ivy-league stick up his ass.

“Nice seeing you, Harvard,” I call after him as he disappears down a hallway. My father’s personal secretary since their Harvard days, for the five years I lived on the estate, Howard was, if not attentive, at least more available than my father ever was. Perhaps I owed him for that alone. It’s just, well, why did he have to be such a cold prig?

Turn around. Walk away.

Edward can’t stop me from leaving, though it’s past five. Dark. Cold. Wet. And two hundred and thirty acres to the next estate. At this point, only way out’s a taxi.

Check my cell for the tenth time since leaving the church. No connection. Lost it after Ashford and haven’t gotten it back since. No phone in the gallery...or the adjoining parlor...or in the library. Still searching, I go up to my old room, but the phone that used to be on the huge antique Partners desk isn’t there anymore. It’s cold in the cavernous room, even though there’s a fire blazing in the carved marble-mantled fireplace. My travel bag is on the double bed. Several plush, violet bath towels lay next to it. I’m expected to stay.

Damn.

No phone. No taxi. I can take one of the horses to Hythe, find a ride from there. Fat droplets of rain hit the long French windows. Don’t have a clue how to navigate a horse, through

mud, at night. I can try bribing Stefan to get me out of here. Probably cost a lot, if he'll do it at all, which he's already indicated he won't. Smart dude. No way out until morning. I shiver at the notion.

I glance around the opulent room, the coffered ceiling now sporting halogen lights in every other square, highlighting the polished antique Renaissance furniture in surreal blue/white. I'm trapped in the seventeenth century, except for the custom Hiwatt 100 watt amp, the Fender electric and an Ibanez bass I never liked the sound of, and left here the day I moved out.

Inhale deeply, exhale slowly to chill. An hour with my old man in ten years probably won't be near the deal I'm making it out to be. Crashing from all the Adderall and Didrex I've been doing lately is making me edgy. Julia's right. Been using too much for too long now. Gonna have to knock it off, even if it means working less.

The digital clock on the Louis XV writing table displays 5:55 in deep red LED. I grab a towel and take a hot shower, then shave. Stow my black suit in my bag then put on worn jeans and a hoodie. *Screw formality.* I pull my tablet and sit on the bed with it, turn it on and input the chord progression I'd created earlier. It's close to six thirty by the time I finally make my way down to Edward's study.

My father sits at his mahogany desk, focused on his laptop. He's wearing glasses but takes them off and stands as I come in, though he does not extend his hand. He's still in the black suit he wore to the funeral. He looks exactly the same as a decade ago, hasn't lost one hair from the mass of thick peppered gray that sweeps across his forehead, still cropped short on the sides. Remarkably, he's retained his tall, imposing stature, and even more remarkably, he is still trim and looks fit. Though he's almost eighty, he can easily be mistaken for early sixties. He hasn't changed one iota in ten years. Perhaps he sold his soul to the devil.

Edward walks over to the bar, pulls a dark brown bottle from the fifty or more terraced along the smoked mirrored wall. “Would you care for a whiskey, James?” The puppeteer is still orchestrating the scene.

“No.” *Back off. Keep it light.* “Thank you.” I stand a few feet from his desk, caught in one of the many circles of recessed lights. About the last thing I need to add to my messed up chemistry is alcohol. I tuck my hands under my arms, shifting from one hip to the other, edgy to the extreme.

My father opens the beveled glass cabinet, selects a crystal tumbler, and pours himself a drink. Neither of us speak, and the silence between us becomes the rhino in the room. I cram my hands into my hoodie pocket, wander over to the walnut bookshelves that line the walls and randomly scan titles. *Pillars of the Earth. The Principles of Mechanics. The Prince.*

Okay. Breathe. Relax. Loosen your shoulders. Say something. Say anything. “I’m really sorry about Ian,” is the best I come up with.

“It is your loss too, James. It would serve you to recognize that.”

Here we go. “Yes sir. It is my loss, too. I’m sorry Ian’s dead. It’s really a tragic waste.”

“Yes. It is.” Edward speaks as if to himself. He leans against the bar and takes a sip of his whiskey. “A tragic death—a tragic waste of a life. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“As you know, Ian and I weren’t that close. I’m not in any position to judge how he lived his life.”

Edward takes another drink. “It’s unfortunate that you and your brother were never able to cultivate a relationship. Perhaps by your example, Ian could have developed some focus, some self-discipline.”

“I doubt I could have provided the influence that would have saved Ian, sir.”

“Of course not.” A sardonic laugh. “Ian’s issue was not a

lack of discipline, but a lack of self. Most assuredly, neither of which are your issues.”

Like you have a clue what my issues might be. “What is it you want to talk with me about, father?”

Edward swirls the whiskey in his glass and takes another sip of his drink. “It is time to discuss your upcoming role in our family’s future.”

Prickling rush sweeps through me, like the kind that follows just barely missing the Mack truck. “Let’s not go down that road again, Edward. I told you I wasn’t interested ten years ago. I’m still not.”

“We’re meeting to discuss obligation, responsibility, not choice, James.”

“Not a choice for Ian, maybe, but it is for me. I’m just lucky, I guess, that I wasn’t your first born, or legitimate.” *Watch out.* I’m letting him get to me.

Edward’s eyes narrow. “Your arrogance is only surpassed by your ignorance.” He shakes his head slowly, then takes a gulp of his drink, moves from the bar and begins circling me. It’s unnerving. “Your brother was a lazy, spoiled, contentious, undisciplined brat. I had no expectations of him managing the family estate since he could not manage his own behavior.” Edward stops a few feet in front of me, close enough to smell his sour breath.

Every part of me tenses. It takes considerable effort to relax my balled fists. Flex my fingers discreetly. We’re the same height. I’m almost fifty years younger, and in good shape. But I’m still afraid of him. “Why am I here, Edward? What do you want?”

“An easy transition,” Edward takes another sip of whiskey, “Though that seems unlikely.” He drains his glass in one final gulp. “James, did you honestly expect to walk away and sever all ties to your family? If you did, I’m afraid you were sadly mistaken.”

“What ties?” He has to be kidding. “We have no ties. We haven’t spoken in a decade. You know nothing about me. When you had the opportunity the five years I lived here, you chose your constituents, your agenda, other commitments.”

“I had two sons.” Edward almost shouts. “Now I have one.” He goes back to the bar and pours himself another drink, then takes a long, slow draw and looks at me. “Am I to expect the same petty contempt from you as from your brother?”

My heart’s coming through my chest again. All I want to do is get out of here, away from him. “What do you want me to say? What are you looking to hear from me, father?” It suddenly strikes me what Edward wants. I have to laugh. “I can’t give you what you want, Edward. I won’t. I’m about the last person to grant you absolution.”

Edward laughs heartily. “Absolution?” He shakes his head with a twisted grin. “You are young, and naive, so you are forgiven.” Then raises his glass to me, brings it to his lips and drains it, goes back to the bar and pours himself another.

“I don’t need your forgiveness, Edward.” *I need to get out of here.*

Edward stands at the bar studying me, then finishes his drink and places the glass down gently. Never seen my father drink so much. Worries me. I’ve never got on with drunks. Anxiety suddenly consumes me. This could turn into a very bad scene.

“Please, sit down, James.” Edward indicates the steel and leather chairs in front of his desk as he goes behind it and stands waiting.

I glance at the door then look back at my father.

“Please.” Edward is casual, somehow making the command sound like a request, and again he motions to the Van Der Rohe chairs with a sweep of his hand.

I don’t sit until he does.

He presses a few keys on his laptop and closes it, arranges some papers on his desk then folds his huge hands casually in

his lap and looks at me.

“With Ian’s passing, you will become the sole heir to the family estate upon my death. The estate is currently valued at over two billion in assets. Most of it is tied up in real estate holdings, though a good percentage is incorporated into a variety of business ventures, some of which—”

“I can’t believe you are insisting on this conversation.” I stand abruptly and my chair slides back silently over the polished oak floors. I back away from the desk, move behind the chair and grip its steel bar with both hands. “I told you I’m not interested. I don’t want any of your money. If this is all you wanted to talk to me about, then we’re done, Edward.”

“This isn’t about money, James.”

“Well, excuse me for being vulgar, father, but whatever it’s about I’m not interested in any part of your estate. This is absurd. You can’t honestly expect me to walk away from everything I’ve established, worked for my entire life.”

“I’ve not suggested you abandon anything. I am expecting you to absorb your additional obligations, and invest the time necessary to become effective at overseeing our collective assets—not overnight, of course, over time. You have lived a lifestyle known only to the privileged few. Do not minimize the role your heritage has played in your accomplishments.”

You pompous, self-aggrandizing prick. “I have devoted my entire life to music. I work my ass off, round the clock, since well before you came along. I’ve made millions on my own, without your money or connections. And somehow, according to you, I owe all my success to this family. Well, that’s bullshit, Edward.”

“It’s not my intention to minimize your achievements. Your dedication is beyond reproach. But your commitment to this family will be equally fulfilling when you invest some of the energy you’ve given so exclusively to your music, and redirect it into managing the Trust.”

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