

Fall From Grace



Act One

Paul Finn's Flat, Broadstairs

PAUL GROANED AS his alarm clock buzzed loudly, yanking him rudely out of his dreams.

He'd only gone to bed – *what was it? Four hours ago?* A quick glance at the LCD display confirmed the worst: 06:55. He'd been watching some documentary on TV that had kept his mind whirring until three o'clock this morning, leaving him with just four short, stupid hours of fitful and restless sleep. He had no one to blame but himself, of course, but that didn't make him feel any better.

He groaned again as another yawn threatened to dislocate his jaw. He couldn't remember what he'd been dreaming about, but it had made his heart pump with adrenaline. He'd had these vivid, powerful dreams for as long as he could remember – and he *hated* them.

He forced his eyes open. He couldn't lose another job, especially now that only *his* wage was keeping the roof over his head. He *had* to get up on time. He absolutely *had* to.

A fist slammed down on the “OFF” button.

A second later, he was snoring again – and sucked into another dream. But not one of his regular, adrenaline-raising

dreams that he forgot the instant he woke up. *This* dream was one he knew well. It didn't make any more sense today than it had yesterday, or the day before that, or the week before that... but by now it no longer mattered.

He stood in the giant, high-ceilinged chamber, its vastness awe-inspiring. He knew, without needing to ask, that this was no ordinary place. This was the court of final appeal, which his father had presided over in cool, dispassionate judgement since time immemorial. And yet with every passing day, she grew closer to him, making his judgements ever more erratic, unpredictable and without compassion.

He looked up at the throne in the middle of the dais, where his father would soon sit to hear his appeal. Their relationship so often hinged on events like these... and every time, they failed miserably to understand one other. After so long, it had become tradition that the two should only argue.

Behind him, the raked seating of the auditorium was nearly full; word had quickly spread of his audience with his father. Everyone wanted to see the encounter. He could pick his friends out of the crowd, smiling at him encouragingly. He drew strength from their presence, knowing that they would always stand by him. He hoped they were proud of his willingness to speak up at last.

He wondered, as he looked back up at the still-empty dais, whether his speech today would actually make a difference. He hoped it would, but couldn't help doubting it. Nothing could truly change while she was still around, and even without her dark influence, he suspected that his father would still be

implacable. A wave of despondency flooded over him, and he looked down at the sparkling gold of the tiled floor.

Was he serving his world well? Could he make that judgement? And what of the other question: was he doing right by that tiny, insignificant blob of a planet so far away, whose destiny had become so intertwined with their own due to his father's meddling?

He glanced behind himself again, and caught the eye of one his friends. She smiled at him, and nodded once. She understood him, and her calm immediately reassured him. He smiled back, his resolve restored.

A susurration of noise from the assembled host drew his attention once more to the dais. His father had arrived, and now took his place on the throne. He swallowed, took a breath and stepped –

– Paul sat bolt upright, breathing heavily, bewildered by the sudden change of surroundings. Even after all these years, it still shocked him every time.

“Idiot,” he muttered. He ran a hand through his ruffled, jet-black hair, and forced a laugh.

He turned to check that he hadn't woken his girlfriend, and blinked in surprise as he saw the empty space beside him. It all came rushing back. Swallowing back a sudden rush of guilt, he blinked again, hard, to clear his eyes, and glanced at the hated alarm clock on the other side of the bed. 07:45.

“Shit!”

He was going to be late for work. *Again.*

Paul threw back his bedcovers and ran to the bathroom,

cursing his oversleeping, his work and his dream, in that order. He was about to curse his girlfriend as well, but remembered with another pang that Marie was gone – and had left him with several refreshing curses of her own.

Enough to last a lifetime.

Royal Mail Sorting Office, Ramsgate

PAUL WALKED BRISKLY through the main gates as his watch ticked over to 8:32am. Guilt fluttered through his stomach and he paused, glancing around the yard for any jobsworths who might get him into trouble. Only a few of his fellow posties were there, having cigarette breaks or preparing the wheeled containers for their deliveries. Most of them paid no attention to him, but those who did either looked at their watches and smiled (this was Paul, after all), or looked at their watches and scowled (it wasn't the first time, after all).

Paul resumed his quick walk, and had almost reached the doors that led to the depot when –

“Morning, Paul! Good night, was it?”

Paul grimaced at the voice, turned his head and quickly waved, all without breaking his stride. Roger stood halfway across the yard, smiling sickly and waving back.

Paul hastily disappeared inside the depot and began up the stairs to the locker room. Roger was one of those people who naturally rubbed Paul the wrong way. A lot of people

liked him, but Paul found him too... pally. He just tried too hard to be friends with everyone, and seemed to want to ingratiate himself into Paul's life.

I don't need any more friends. I like my private life just as it is: private.

As a result, Paul did his best to avoid him at all costs. He hoped he'd gotten away with it today.

He quickly stowed his coat and bag in his locker and turned towards the door, hoping he could get down to start work before he was intercepted again. He might have made it, had the door not opened at that moment to reveal the very man he most wanted to avoid.

"George," he said guiltily, stopping in his tracks. "Hi."

"Morning, Paul."

George leaned against the doorframe with his arms folded across his chest – or, rather, with his arms resting on his oversized stomach. He carried an air of weary resignation, but annoyance plainly showed across his face.

"I... uh... morning," Paul replied weakly. "How's it going? Did you have a good weekend?"

"I had a lovely weekend, thanks, Paul. Roger just said you were in. How was *your* weekend? Sleep well?"

Paul flushed. He didn't even consider lying, or thinking up an excuse – what would be the point? He'd never been renowned for his punctuality: he'd even been late for his mother's second wedding (which was especially atrocious, considering she'd asked him to walk her down the aisle). But his timekeeping had become progressively worse and, over the last couple of weeks, he had outdone himself: last week he hadn't made it in on time for a single shift. He could hardly

believe George was only confronting him for the first time.

“George, I...” he began, but trailed off. He couldn’t think of anything to say that wouldn’t sound weak and trite.

“Paul, what’s going on?” George asked with a sigh, stepping into the locker room. Paul couldn’t bring himself to raise his eyes and see the disappointment across his boss’ face.

I just don’t care about the job, Paul wanted to say. It’s just money into my bank account. I need to find a job that makes me feel alive again... and this isn’t it.

His thoughts returned to the recurring dream. As though he had actually *been* there, he felt things more vividly there than he ever did while awake. He always felt so confident and self-assured in his dreams; it put his waking self to shame. He still couldn’t understand what it meant, though, even after all this time. A snapshot, taken out of context.

“Paul?”

“I –” Paul struggled to find the words, and flushed. “I haven’t been sleeping well lately.” He held up his hands to forestall the retort he could see coming, and looked George in the eye for the first time. He saw anger, and was taken aback: George was *never* angry. It made Paul’s insides churn with guilt to think that *he* had been the one to change that.

Shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other, he continued; “It’s not just that, George, I’ve... I don’t know, I’ve just been struggling with – just with life. I can’t explain. I –” He cut himself off. “If our situations were reversed, I’d be as angry as I’d bet you are right now.”

George looked away at the wall, expelling a sharp breath. He shook his head and ran a hand over his rapidly balding

scalp.

“‘Angry’ doesn’t cover it. Disappointed and let down is probably nearer the mark. You’ve been here... what, nearly three months?”

Paul nodded, afraid to say any more. George started to pace up and down the locker room; Paul had never seen the man so full of frustration.

“And in all that time,” George went on, “you haven’t shown the slightest willingness to put some effort in. The fact is, I put my neck on the line for you. I thought I saw something in you. Instead...”

“George, I –”

But George waved away his next words. Paul wasn’t entirely sure what he had been about to say, so he was glad for the interruption. He *wasn’t* quite so glad after what came next.

“Sorry Paul, but I don’t want to hear it. I’ve had enough, I’m letting you go. Clear out your locker and leave. Now.”

Paul didn’t try to argue; the look on George’s face told him everything. There would be no appeal. He emptied the few items from his locker, and walked slowly out of the room.

Before this job and the six months of sporadic employment that had preceded it, his chronic lateness hadn’t been such a problem: he had travelled the world for a year, temping in pubs and offices and everything in between to get himself to the next destination. If an employer disliked his laissez-faire attitude, Paul had just moved on to a different job, in a different city. Before that, he’d had a job he had believed in and been passionate about, to the point that he had overcome his poor timekeeping. But, of course, he would

never go back to that now. He couldn't.

And although he couldn't have cared less about the post office, he hated that he had let down George, the man who had given him a chance despite his rather long and unimpressive CV. He had been desperate to finally re-establish his roots in the area he called home, and George had given him that opportunity. But now he had fouled that up, too. The guilt sank into his gut as he exited the yard.