

Excerpt: < 200 words

George was the first ghost Cally had ever met. At least, he was the first one she had ever realized was a ghost. He looked like a typical teenaged black man, tall and thin, with wide eyes and even wider cheekbones, and he spoke with an accent that could have been Jamaican or could have been Haitian but was neither. Today he wore his hair in a short, natural style and was dressed in a white button-down shirt that was not tucked in, with a red-and-yellow polka-dot tie knotted loosely outside the collar. George had always been very concerned with his appearance and liked to try a different style every day. This was easy to do, for someone whose hair and clothing were made of aether.

“Well,” George said, in a voice dripping with honey, “you can afford to buy me a guitar, now. Now that you’ve got your check. The advance on that book you wrote. After all, it *is* about me.”

“You’re in it, George, but it’s not about you. And anyway, how are you going to play a real instrument without...hands?”

Excerpt: Chapter 1
The More You Change the Less You Fear

“I want to learn to play the bass guitar,” said the ghost.

Cally continued to frown into her computer monitor, tugging her sweater around her shoulders to fend off the chill drifting through the screen door. “Why can’t I get this thing to... George, what?”

“I said I want to...”

“I know what you *said*. I meant, well, for one thing, it’s called a bass, not a bass guitar.”

“How do you know that?”

“My son is a drummer.” She looked around the antiques-decorated Reception Hall of the Vale House Bed and Breakfast, making sure nobody was nearby to hear her apparently talking to herself. Guests had been coming down the stairs for breakfast over the past half hour or so, and Bethany Chase, whom she was relieving at the reception desk, was due back any minute.

“Look, George,” she said presently in a softer voice. “I admire that you love to learn, but how are you going to play the bass when you can’t touch things?”

George gave her one of his angelic smiles, and she forgot about the program she was trying to update on her laptop (and about how it was refusing to cooperate.)

“Is your son as good as Neil Peart?”

“Nobody is as good as Neil Peart,” she stated flatly. “But Brandon is as good as Mick Fleetwood. How’s that?”

“Does he have a band? Does he need a bass player?”

“No. Yes? I don’t know!” She shut her laptop a little too roughly. “Georgie, just because he’s related to me doesn’t mean he can see ghosts, and anyway, how are you going to play a real instrument without...hands?”

He stood up straight and took his hands out of his pockets, holding them out to her. They looked quite solid, to Cally, but she knew they weren’t really. “I can learn to touch things,” he insisted. “I’m getting better at it.” He nodded and flicked at a pen on the old

wooden desktop. It did not move. “Anyway, as you know, I am very good at electronic things. I don’t have to touch those. You can just get me an electric bass.”

“Can I, now?”

George was the first ghost Cally had ever met. At least, he was the first one she had ever realized was a ghost. He looked like a typical teenaged black man, tall and thin, with wide eyes and even wider cheekbones, and he spoke with an accent that could have been Jamaican or could have been Haitian but was neither. Today he wore his hair in a short, natural style and was dressed in a white button-down shirt that was not tucked in, with a red-and-yellow polka-dot tie knotted loosely outside the collar. George had always been very concerned with his appearance and liked to try a different style every day. This was easy to do, for someone whose hair and clothing were made of aether.

“Well,” George said, in a voice dripping with honey, “you can afford it now. Now that you’ve got your check. The advance on that book you wrote. After all, it *is* about me.”

“You’re in it, George, but it’s not about you. And anyway...” She opened her laptop again and frowned at the screen. “It looks like I’m going to have to use that money to buy a new computer. This one is so old, I can’t update my word processor anymore.” Ordinarily, she was proud of being a luddite and of never having adopted most of the new technology, the games and apps and all the video streaming nonsense that was so popular with young people these days but, well, she was a writer. She needed a reliable word processor.

“When you get your new computer, you can give me your old one!” George grinned and offered her a high-five. She gave him a steady look from under one raised brow. The thought of George having unlimited access to the internet made her nervous. He was over four hundred years old but, somehow, he still seemed to her to be young and naïve, and she felt protective of him.

“I had *really* hoped to use the money as a down payment on a house in town, or maybe even open a small business...”

“You don’t need a house,” George told her. “You live here.”

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted them, and George thoughtfully waited for Cally to turn her head and look away

before he vanished. A slightly built man with a briefcase in his hand was just reaching the bottom stair.

“Good morning!” Cally greeted him in a voice that sounded more cheerful than she felt.

He came to the front of the desk and stood his briefcase on it, resting both hands on its handle. “Am I to understand,” he said, flashing a toothy smile, “that you are the famous Callaghan McCarthy?”

Cally took a deep breath and said carefully, “I am Callaghan McCarthy, but I’m not famous.”

“I would beg to differ!” he said. “I’m your biggest fan!”

“How nice.” Her shoulders tightened. She always felt she had to be careful around *Biggest Fans*, as most of them tended to ask a lot of awkward questions. “Thank you for reading my book. The next one will be coming out in time for Christmas.”

“Oh, I’ve never read your book,” the man said. Cally couldn’t help giving him a puzzled look. “I know you from a different fame,” he explained. “I’m Eddie Tiene!”

He pronounced his surname ‘*teen*’ and held his arms out at his sides as if he expected her to applaud.

She looked carefully at his eyes, which were greenish, and his hair, still wet and combed straight back over his head. It had apparently once been light brown or dark blond, but was now streaked with gray. None of his features triggered any memories. “I’m sorry, I don’t...” She cast about in her mind trying to unearth a clue as to who Eddie Teen might be, but came up blank.

“We went to high school together.” He smiled, and when understanding still did not dawn on her face he added, “I had a huge crush on you.”

And then she did remember, but she didn’t smile. In fact, she took care not to show what she was feeling at all. She suddenly found herself back in school, being laughed at by an entire troupe of young males who had thought it funny to send their ringleader, this Eddie, to feign romantic interest in her only so they could then ridicule her for believing anyone as popular as him could ever find her attractive. Few memories of high school were pleasant for Cally, but she had managed to relegate most of them to the cobwebs of her subconscious.

“Oh. Yes. Eddie Tiene.” She pronounced his surname ‘*chen-a.*’

"Yes. How have you been?" Her forced smile made her teeth hurt.

"Can't complain," he said, "though sometimes I still do." He threw his head back and let out a laugh so sharp, people in the dining room to put down their forks to look through the wide doorway into the Hall. "My goodness, you have become more beautiful than ever," he added in a quieter voice. "Did you ever find that Arkenstone, Kili?"

Even now, this remark tied Cally's stomach in knots, and she hated herself for that. She had read the works of J. R. R. Tolkien when she was in middle-school, and had spent the next several years trying to convince the kids around her to do the same. She'd even made up quests for them, to seek the Arkenstone in the shale hillsides around their neighborhood, or to destroy an evil artifact by questing through the corn fields, but of course none of them had ever participated. Instead, they had teased her by morphing her name to Kili, after one of the characters in *The Hobbit*. She might have actually enjoyed that, but the jokes about how she frolicked with goblins in the woods had only grown nastier as they all grew older.

Time and geographical distance had given Cally perspective on the whole thing, but she still sighed when she answered the grown man and his good-natured (she told herself) teasing.

"I'm afraid I never found the Arkenstone," she said. "But I did finally meet some Elves."

He laughed at her joke that was not a joke, then he asked, "But I don't understand: why has such a pretty girl never married?"

"I did marry." She didn't bother to point out she wasn't a girl anymore. "I married Wes Rayne. You should remember him. He was second string on the football team. I took my real name back after the divorce."

"So sorry to hear it didn't work out." He didn't sound sorry. "You must have moved away after you graduated. We... I lost track of you for a long time. And tell me, did this union result in any offspring?"

Cally frowned while he continued to peer earnestly at her. Though it was a personal question, it was a common one for people to ask of acquaintances they had not seen in many years. It was just that the way he'd worded it sounded less like friendly inquiry, to her, than like he was collecting statistics for a breeding program.

She felt uncomfortable answering it, so she answered a different question instead.

“I did move away, back then. I guess I’ve always had a bit of wanderlust.” That sounded better than, “*I’ve always been restless.*”

“I’m alone now, too,” he informed her. “Maybe it’s not mere chance that we’ve met again. Perhaps it’s fate telling us we should pick up our old friendship where we left off.” He leaned over his briefcase and gave her a wide smile. He was a handsome man, by the usual criteria, but she could think only of a wolf lunging for the throat of a deer. If the way he and his cohorts had harassed her in the lunch room all those years ago had been his idea of friendship, she thought, she had been fortunate indeed he had not considered her an enemy.

“It’s funny how people’s memories can differ,” she remarked at last. “But I believe it’s always best to leave the past in the past.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way.” He stood back and reached into his briefcase, withdrawing a business card and a key with a picture of a white lily on the fob. The card he placed on the desk in front of Cally, but he held up the key, jiggling it in the air. “I wonder if I might extend my reservation in the Daylily Room for another night? It turns out my business in this town has gone better than I expected.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Cally said. “But as far as I know, we are fully booked, it being October and all.”

She didn’t have to lie about this. She had even relinquished her own room, the Dogwood Room, in order to make it available for paying guests, and had been sleeping on the sofa in her office for over a week.

“Ah, yes. October must be a busy month for a B&B with a reputation for being haunted. I didn’t see any ghosts last night, myself, though. Do I get a discount for that?”

Cally struggled to maintain her friendly expression as she shook her head. “Sorry, hauntings are not guaranteed, but a good breakfast is. Katarina has made egg strata this morning. You go enjoy your breakfast, Mr. Teine, and I’ll check about extending your stay.”

“Thank you.” He took his bag from the desktop and turned toward the dining room, then turned back. “I’ve been hoping for a very long time to catch up with you again. You...” He looked around the Hall, into the parlor at his left and up to the top of the stairs

Excerpt: Chapter 1
The More You Change the Less You Fear

opposite it. “You seem to have landed in a place which suits you.” He reached over the desk and shoved his business card closer to Cally before heading for the dining room. “But I won’t let myself lose track of you again.”

Excerpt: Chapter 15

Friend of the Devil

“I just needed someplace stay,” Foster was saying. “I’m not ‘up to something.’ I’m literally sleeping on the floor in a store-room!” Foster spoke defensively as he turned slowly to face all the people surrounding him. Cally was momentarily dismayed to see that Eddie Tiene was one of them, but not nearly as dismayed as she was by the sight of Foster himself.

“I’m not hurting anyone,” he was insisting. “Don’t worry, I’ll only need to stay here a few days longer, and then I’ll be out of everyone’s way for good.”

“You already had a place to stay,” said Merv. “All expenses paid by the state. Three meals a day.”

The people gathered around the loading dock laughed at this, and Foster pushed up his glasses and tried to respond. His voice was drowned out by the ongoing outrage.

“You’re a generous man, Jud,” Luke snorted. He had his pizza delivery hat gripped tight in his fists, and it didn’t look like it was ever going to be able to resume its original shape. “But you better keep an eye on your stock for the next few days, I think.”

“Now that’s not fair,” Jud replied. “Foster and my boy grew up together. He wouldn’t do anything to hurt me or my business.”

“Better keep an eye on your boy, too,” said Doc.

“When you step out that door, you pass too close to my coffee shop!” Andi complained. “I’m sure it’s in violation of the restraining order.”

“I checked,” Jud said. “Well, my son did. On Google Earth. The door of my storage room is three hundred and nineteen feet away from the foot of the stairs to Ms. May’s apartment. I think that addresses the restraining order more than adequately.”

“Now, I am sorry about that,” Foster said, putting his hands into his pockets and taking them out again to push up his glasses. “I didn’t know Nell was living there. I had no idea she was starting a business of her own. She never takes my calls. I would have been happy to help her set up her studio, too. I’m a successful business man and...”

“That’s not what I’d call you,” muttered Ignacio, who had just

emerged from under the oak trees of the residential district to join them.

“Look, I’m sorry to have bothered you all so much,” said Foster. “I’ll just go back inside. I thought I could reason with my former neighbors about what I’m supposedly accused of.” He threw Ignacio a particularly dark look. “But I can see nobody wants to hear my side of the story. Everyone just automatically assumes I’m guilty!”

Cally’s jaw dropped. She didn’t need to hear his story. She’d been there, with his hands around her throat. “Foster,” she said, “I think those last two words: ‘I’m guilty,’ are the only true words I’ve ever heard you speak.”

He hung his head as if crushed by the harshness of her words, but the sideways glance he cast at her was like a dagger and sent a chill through her heart.

“Goodnight, former friends,” he said. Pushing up his glasses with a sigh, he turned away and started down the street toward the hardware store.

Sheriff Mahon cleared his throat. “No, that takes you too close to the coffee shop,” he said. “Go around the back way.”

Foster turned around and passed through them again so he could follow Church Street to the railroad yard behind the feed store. He had to walk by Ignacio, who did not step aside to let him pass. As Foster went around him, Ignacio said in an uncharacteristically harsh voice, “If you go near Nell – if you go near anyone I care about – I swear to you, nobody will ever find your body.”

“Not that anyone would bother to look!” Merv added, strumming a minor chord. Foster didn’t look back, but continued into the darkness between the buildings.

Silence fell on the crowd around the loading dock. When they felt enough time had passed that Foster was probably safely back inside the store room, the crowd began to disperse.

When only a handful remained, the sheriff said, “Um, Ignacio, just a hint. Maybe you shouldn’t threaten to kill people when an officer of the law is standing right beside you.”

That broke the tension. Merv laughed and strummed a chord on his guitar, and Doc sat down, lifting his mandolin into his lap. They played a few bars of “Friend of the Devil” and everyone nodded at the appropriateness of the title. When the men began to sing, Cally

thought they harmonized as well as the Grateful Dead ever had, but Ignacio headed home stating, to her amazement, that singing wasn't one of his myriad talents.

Cally tried to sing along, attempting to pick out a harmony somewhere between Phil Lesh's and Bob Weir's, but a discordant high note from somewhere threw her off. Merv paused his playing, pressing a hand against the guitar strings to silence them. Sheriff Mahon held up a forefinger and said "Listen!"

It came again – a high-pitched screech that Cally at first took to be more of the phantom railroad-track noises she and Danya had heard earlier. Then the screaming began to form words: "Oh my god! Oh my god!"

Cally let out her breath and rolled her eyes. "Ghost hunters," she said. "Am I right? I'll go see what she's on about." Turning the corner around the side of the building, she hurried along Church Street toward the tracks. Danya's screaming rose in pitch, and Cally grew alarmed as she remembered that Foster had just gone this way. "Hang on, Danya!" she called. "I'm coming!" She broke into a run.

As she neared the end of the alley, she could see the young woman on her knees in the moonlight just beyond the railroad tracks. Danya's hands covered her face and she rocked back and forth as she frantically screamed, "Oh my god!"

Keeping her eyes on Danya as she ran, Cally tripped over something in the dark street and went sprawling to the pavement. She jumped up again quickly as other footsteps joined behind her, but the ground was wet, and she slipped again. She landed on something soft, and the sheriff appeared at her side to lift her up. Wiping her wet hands on her jacket, Cally glanced down to see what had tripped her.

It was Foster. He was covered in blood.

That wasn't what Danya was screaming about, though. She was screaming because Foster's head was lying beside her on the other side of the tracks.

