

Broken



Billy Washington sat back in his computer chair and sighed heavily, letting out a long slow breath. He had given up trying to turn on the computer for the umpteenth time in the last five minutes. It was broken, and there was no denying it. It was broken and Billy was pissed. There'd be no Twitter or Facebook and the biggest bummer of all, there'd be no Sasha Grey. Not that he would have needed Sasha Grey if he still had Natasha.

Natasha Gordon was the most amazing girl he'd ever met and the prettiest one he'd ever dated. For the six months they had dated, he had been walking on air, until one day he hit the ground again, hard.

One evening while they were out enjoying a milkshake at a 1950s retro diner, after taking a sip of her strawberry milkshake she looked up at him. She said it as simply as though she had asked how his day was or how his new book was coming along.

'Billy, I don't think we should see each other anymore.'

Suddenly the red chairs and white walls became a blurred pink as the room began to spin. Billy felt as

though he was riding the hearts and diamonds at the fairground. When the room stopped spinning, the seat in front of him was empty. He sat there for a good while not listening to the golden oldies floating from the juke box, just replaying the last words that the best woman he'd ever known had said to him.

'I don't think we should see each other anymore.'

For the past six months, he replayed that phrase over and over in his head, hoping that she would rethink it and come back to him. He checked her Facebook and Twitter pages almost daily, for a hint or a sign that she was thinking of him. Maybe she would put up a quote or a picture that they shared together. However, over the last six months, there hadn't been anything. There were lots of pictures, posts, and tweets, but nothing that gave him the glimmer of hope he'd been looking for. Now that this stupid thing was broken, he couldn't even do that.

Billy had tried everything to get the computer working again. He took out the plugs from the mains and waited a few minutes before putting them back in and then tried turning it back on. Nothing. At the recommendation of his best friend, Huy, Billy removed the cover of his tower and carefully removed all the dust with the hose of a vacuum cleaner. He pressed the power button again and still nothing.

Billy drummed his fingers on the desk and then reached for his phone and called the last number dialled. He put the phone to his ear and waited for an answer.

“Sup dude, did it work?”

‘Nope, nothing.’

‘I’m gonna have to come over and take a look at it then, but I can’t do that ’til the weekend,’ Huy said.

‘That’s okay. I can hold out ’til then. I still got the telly and a shit load of movies to watch. That should keep me going ’til you get here.’ Maybe this is a good thing. It gives me a good excuse when my agent calls asking me how far along I am with the new novel. I can then give her the reason, ‘Not far at all because my computer conked out.’

‘And how far along are you with the new novel? I hope you saved it on a USB because if the computer is dead, you might have to start all over again,’ Huy said, with worry in his voice.

‘I haven’t written a word.’

‘No way, dude! Why the hell not?’

‘I haven’t written anything since Natasha—’

‘Oh, please don’t start with her again. I’m surprised that you wrote anything while you were stuck up her arse. Too busy trying to keep her happy.’

‘I was not. But she was the best girl I ever had. She was my muse—’

‘If she was your muse, you would have written something. You would have been turning stories out as big and fast as Stephen King, instead of looking starry-eyed at everything she said and did.’

‘She was the most amazing girl I ever met and—’

‘Wait there one second. As your best mate, I’d like to say this. A, love is a two-way street, and B, wait

another second while I log onto Amazon and buy you a pair of balls, as yours seems to have fallen off,' Huy said, with mock seriousness.

'This is no joke, Huy. Maybe my first book was a fluke. It seems like I have nothing to say anymore.'

'That's because you've been cooped up in that house, moping over a girl who doesn't want you anymore. Look, get back to taking those long walks you used to take.'

'Yeah, but every route I used to take with Natasha.'

'Find another route and rediscover the pen and paper and go sit in a café. Lots of writers write in cafés, don't they? Listen, I have to go. I'm almost at work. But I'll check in with you on Friday,' Huy said.

'Okay, see you and thanks.'

'And remember to get out of that house for once. I'll bet you some inspiration will hit you at some point, and you'll find something to write about. You still have something to say. I'm sure you have a couple of good ones in you yet. You just need to forget that silly woman and get on with it,' Huy said laughing. 'Later, dude.'

'See you,' Billy said, laughing for the first time that morning.

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When billionaire businessman, Dean Grey, is found dead in his study, Detective Philip Cain is put on the case. When Cain gets back to the station from

the crime scene, an old friend is waiting for him, who confesses to the murder. After hearing his friend's confession, Cain has no choice but to arrest his old school chum. But Cain hasn't even finished writing the first line of his report when another man he knew comes in and also confesses to the killing. With both men giving information only the killer would know, they take Detective Cain on a ride of lust, greed, and murder.

'The best crime novel this decade.'

Bert Thompson, *The Gazette*

'A gripping page-turner. A great debut.'

Heather Wright, *Daily News*

'Smart, sexy, and cool. An intense debut thriller.'

Carl Peterson, Storytelling.com

More like a third-rate Harper Lee, but at least she most likely chose not to write another book, unlike myself who just can't think of anything, Billy thought. He stood in the crime section of his local bookstore, holding a copy of *Killing Mr. Grey*, his debut novel. Billy crouched down and slid it back into its slot with all the W's and stood back up. It annoyed him to see that he only had one title on display, whereas all the other authors had several.

He walked over to the stationary section where he picked up a red leather-bound notebook and a gel-grip roller pen and took them to the counter.

Great, cut me open and pour salt on it, why don't you, Billy thought, as he got to the counter and saw the man behind it reading Stephen King's *Misery*.

'Hello, John.'

'Hi, Billy, how's it going?' John asked him as he put the book down and stood up.

'I'm good, John. How are you?'

'Can't complain. Well I could, I own an independent bookstore, for Christ's sake. Believe me, I could. Sometimes I think it would be better to just shut up my shop and go work for one. But then I remember I did that, and at least now I own my own shop. If a customer comes and gets rude, at least...' John glanced to his left and right to make sure there were no kids present. '...I can tell them to fuck off,' John said quietly.

'True.' Billy said, nodding.

'And that in itself must be rewarding. But all the other stuff that comes with the store causes you to get one of those,' Billy said, pointing to John's hairless head.

'That's cool. At least you don't need to worry about the barber. I hate having to go and sit in one chair for an hour only then to sit in another.'

'Being thirty-five and bald is no joke. I liked my hair. Anyway, how is the new book coming along? It's been a while.'

'Don't remind me. I'm trying, and nothing is coming,' Billy said, rolling his eyes.

'It will come. Just give it time.'

‘Thanks. Can I get these?’ Billy asked, placing the notebook on the counter and changing the subject.

John picked the notebook up and flipped it over so that he could see the price sticker.

‘That’s sixteen ninety-nine,’ John said, entering the price into the cash register. Billy took his wallet out and tapped his debit card on the reader.

‘You want a bag?’

‘No thanks, John. It was nice speaking to you.’

‘You too. Good luck with the new book. When it’s finished maybe we can do a reading or a Q&A one evening,’ John said happily.

‘If it gets done, I’d love that. Have a good day, John. See you soon.’

‘You too,’ John said, smiling as he sat back down in his chair and picked up his book.

Billy left the bookshop and walked down the street. He stopped as he felt something wet fall on his head. As he continued down the street, the heavens opened up as a light, but steady, rain began to fall.

‘Fuck,’ Billy mumbled as he turned on to Church Street. He didn’t have an umbrella with him or a hood on his jacket.

Billy turned into the first café he saw. He stood in the doorway for a moment, watching the scene before him, which resembled something from the floor of the stock market. Too many people, too much noise, and nowhere to sit, let alone think. Billy let the door slowly close as he left, shutting out the noise as the door clicked shut. Billy watched the scene inside the café for

a moment longer and then continued walking down the street, trying to avoid the onslaught of people with their umbrellas up. Billy bobbed and weaved his way through the umbrellas. He stopped when he reached another café.

Peering through the window, he saw only three people scattered about at tables. As he pushed open the door and stepped inside, the only noise he heard was coming from the coffee machine and a classical piece of music coming from the speakers behind the counter. The café itself wasn't much to look at; not like the posh contemporary one he had passed on. This café was a 'builders café.' It had eight tables for four people; four on each side of the café, a glass chiller display filled with sandwich fillings, and behind that, a grill, a fridge, and a coffee machine.

Billy walked up to the counter where a tired-looking plump woman in her late forties was wiping down the counter. She stopped as Billy got to the counter and smiled half-heartedly.

'Hi, what can I get ya?'

'Hello. A hot chocolate, please.'

'Sure. That's two-twenty, please,' the woman said, ringing the amount up on the cash register. Billy took his card out of his wallet.

'Sorry, love. It's cash only,' the woman said apologetically. Billy flipped the coin compartment of his wallet, opened and poured the change into his hand, and began counting it out.

'Just about,' Billy said, more to himself than to the

lady, as he gathered together the correct change with just a few pennies to spare. Swiping the change with one hand from the counter and into the other, Billy handed her the money.

‘Sorry.’

‘It’s okay. We’re a café. We need the change,’ the woman said, as she put the change into the till and prepared his hot chocolate. The woman handed Billy his drink.

‘Thanks,’ he said cheerfully.

‘You’re welcome,’ the woman said, offering Billy the same half-hearted smile she did when he first walked in. Billy nodded, smiling back at her and turned in search of a seat.

It was the book that first caught his attention. The woman came later. To come across someone reading one of his favourite novels was rare. It’s not like it was *Harry Potter* or *The Notebook*. To come across someone reading James M. Cain’s *The Postman Always Rings Twice* was rare. Billy walked towards the woman who sat reading at the table by the door.

‘Just so you’re not disappointed, the postman never does come knocking. Nevertheless, it’s a great book.’

‘I know,’ the woman said without looking up, her nose still stuck in the book.

‘Mind if I sit?’ Billy asked, putting his cup down on the table. As the cup hit the table, the woman lowered her book and looked up at him.

‘Maybe I should get back to work? I mean, with it being so busy and all that our customers have nowhere

to sit,' the woman said, staring up at Billy. Billy picked up his cup and looked around, feeling more than a bit awkward.

'It's okay. You can sit down. I'm just messing with you,' the woman said, smiling. Her light-brown eyes danced mischievously, and Billy stood there for a long moment as his breath caught in his throat and his mouth went dry.

'What? Have you changed your mind?' she asked.

Billy sat down, pushing in his chair and placing his items on the table.

'I'm—' Billy began.

'William Washington. I'm Eva,' the woman said, cutting him off.

'You know who I am?' Billy asked, genuinely surprised.

'Of course. You wrote *Killing Mr. Grey*. The best-selling novel of 2016.'

'It wasn't the best.'

'Well, one of the biggest. According to what it states on the cover of your paperback editions, you've sold three million copies worldwide,' Eva said, folding the corner of her page, and putting her book aside.

'Everyone has one good story in them. It's having a second and maybe even a third that counts,' he said drily.

'Are you working on anything of late?' Eva asked, biting into her muffin.

'It would seem that I have only the one. I feel like Vanilla Ice or MC Hammer. Hell, they may be

remembered for only one hit, but at least they had other songs that made the charts. I only have one book. I was thinking earlier today that I'm a third-rate Harper Lee and even she wrote more than one book.'

'*Go Set a Watchman* was just a cash grab if you ask me,' Eva said.

'That may be so, but my point is that she had something else to write. I've been racking my brain for something decent. If and when I do think of something half decent to write about, a few chapters in I find out it's a load of crap.'

'Have you ever thought of writing a prequel to *Killing Mr. Grey*?'

'A prequel?'

'Yeah!' the woman said, leaning forward excitedly, her eyes bright. 'Think about it. *Killing Mr. Grey* was about a love square among friends who had actually been enemies for a long time, right? Well, you can—'

'Eva! Your break's over,' the woman from behind the counter called.

'One minute,' Eva called, looking at her boss and then back at Billy. 'Think about it. You tell us what happens to lead up to the murder and we find out why it happened but not how, or really when. I think you should let us see when and how their love for each other turned to hate.'

'You know—' Billy began but was cut off when Eva's boss called her again. This time she held up her hand with her wristwatch on it.

'Sorry. I have to go because we are so busy that the

last customer who got served, I've been talking to for the last five minutes. You know, as soon as I finish my degree, I'm leaving this dump. I'm off to Hollywood.'

'You gonna be a screenwriter?'

Eva shook her head. 'Makeup artist, but if the makeup thing falls through, who knows. After all, I think I just came up with an idea for a bestseller.'

'I owe you,' he said, smiling.

'I'll take twenty percent.'

'I was thinking more along the lines of a dedication.'

'That too. Unlike most, I don't just buy my cake and let it sit there.'

'You know, I've never understood that phrase.'

'Me neither. I don't understand most of them. But listen, it was nice talking to you. I hope I've given you something to write about,' Eva said, smiling at him.

'More than enough. I'm sure you'll see your name in print pretty soon.' He said, watching as Eva gathered up her cup, saucer, and book.

'And a check in the mail,' she said, winking at him.

She turned and Billy watched her walk away, observing her slim but shapely hips sway from side to side. He sat there dumbfounded that in five minutes, he just had a better conversation with her than he'd had in six months of dating Natasha. Billy tore the plastic film from his notebook and began making notes.

Billy's cup of hot chocolate sat untouched as it went from hot to warm to undrinkable. He worked his pen across and down the page, ideas flowing like a tap that couldn't be turned off. He stayed hunched over

his notebook, filling page after page. He didn't notice Eva smiling every time she glanced in his direction while she delivered food or wiped a table. Billy filled five pages of notes before he was satisfied that he had written enough. He closed his notebook, put the cap back on the pen, and stood up. Picking up his cup, Billy made his way over to the counter where the owner stood serving a customer. Eva was wiping down the top of the glass display counter.

'Thank you,' Billy said, holding out the cup. Eva took it from him with a smile, which faded as she saw the contents had not been touched.

'Was there something wrong with it?' she asked as Billy turned to walk away.

Billy turned back to face her and shrugged his shoulders. 'I wouldn't know. Other than it's way too cold to drink,' he said with a smile.

'One second,' Eva said, holding up one finger, indicating for him to wait, and she turned and quickly busied herself with making him a fresh one.

'You don't have to do that...Well, I suppose it was your fault,' Billy said jokingly, as Eva poured hot water into the paper cup and mixed it up with a wooden stirrer. She put a plastic lid on it and turned back to face him, holding it out for him to take.

'I would pay,' Billy said as he caught the grim look on the face of Eva's boss. 'It's just that I don't have any cash on me.'

'It's alright, I don't want my customers leaving unsatisfied,' she said with that weak smile of hers.

‘Thanks, Eva,’ Billy said, raising the cup almost as in a toast. ‘I’m glad the other café was full.’

‘Me too,’ Eva replied, smiling.

There was a long silence before Billy realised he was standing there a bit too long.

‘Bye,’ he said, feeling a bit awkward as he turned and walked out of the café.

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Who needs Facebook, Twitter, or even Sasha Grey when you had a notebook, a pen, and inspiration? Although the morning was a shitty one, the day had turned out to be his best day in a long while.

Billy decided to celebrate with a movie. What better way to celebrate than with the King of the Blockbusters, Mr Spielberg? Billy got a big bag of sweet and salty popcorn from the cupboard, poured himself a glass of Coke, and grabbed the half-empty bag of M&Ms. Billy spent the next twenty-five minutes staring at his Spielberg collection, trying to decide which he was more in the mood to watch. After going back and forth between *Jaws* and *War of the Worlds*, Billy pulled *War of the Worlds* from its place. After a long day of writing, Billy could do with something not so taxing on the brain and, although not better than *Jaws*, still a fun movie. Billy popped the disc into the Blu-ray player, grabbed the popcorn, and made himself comfortable on the sofa.

As a leaf with a drop of water on it filled the screen,

and Morgan Freeman started narrating, Billy stuffed a handful of popcorn into his mouth. Without taking his eyes from the screen, Billy reached down and found the Coke, picked up the glass, and took a gulp. He smiled with contentment, thinking to himself, *'Who indeed needed a PC and all that stuff that comes with it when you have the magic of Spielberg, the soothing voice of Morgan Freeman, and a thirty-two-inch flat screen? Yes, all was right with the world, thanks to my brother from another mother. And a new favourite girl, Eva. Not only pretty but pretty damn great in every—'*

Suddenly Billy's thought was broken as he realised that what he thought was a dissolve was too long to be a dissolve. Morgan Freeman was still narrating, and the screen was still blank.

'You've got to be shitting me!' Billy mumbled in frustration. Removing the popcorn from his lap, he pressed the on/off button on the remote control and the room went silent. He pushed it again and sighed with relief when the television came back on. Not only could he hear the narration, but he could see the picture to go with it. Billy picked up his popcorn again and settled back on the sofa as the film started.

Twenty minutes later, Billy was shovelling popcorn into his mouth and pouring Coke down his throat while Ray Ferrier ran down the street with the rest of the neighbourhood, trying to avoid the alien's death rays. Suddenly the living room went dark.

'You have to be shitting me!' Billy jumped up in frustration, causing popcorn to fly around the room.