

The Truth Inside The Lie

Waterstones, Manchester. March 14 2007.

The queue seemed to stretch for miles. Marcus searched for a glimmer of the old satisfaction, but lately it was getting harder to find amidst the irritations and discomforts, and the increasing sense of loneliness; hundreds of faces peering round each other to get a better look – every one of them a stranger. No doubt some were under the fond impression he remembered them from some other signing, or town, some other country even, but they came and went like dreams; some temporarily vivid for any number of reasons, but ultimately fading, passing into the realm of never was.

Chatter reached him in snippets, some good, some speculative, little worth remembering.

“... characters in this one are really deep ...”

“... not read it yet, but heard it’s ...”

“... cat food on the way home; you can bet Gary will forget ...”

The books passed before his eyes, virgin-white bricks appearing at his left hand, passed on by his right, defaced with a meaningless scrawl and received with hunger as his fans searched for something they could claim as personal. There would be scanned images of these, identical in all but quality, appearing on chat forums and blogs all over the Web before suppertime.

Marcus felt the pen gain weight as he scribbled and smiled, smiled and scribbled, politely blanking requests for personalised entries – he’d be here all day. His arm ached, the edge of his hand felt raw where it had rubbed against the paper constantly

for the past two hours, his eyes itched and burned, and still the queue stretched out of the door.

He'd dreamed of this for so long; readers desperate for his name on their newly purchased books and the chance to say they'd seen him. Long nights throughout his University years and beyond, a little financial outlay at the beginning - it had paid off and finally driven him, blinking, into the light cast down by the literary world.

So where was that satisfaction now?

His musings carried him through the worst of the afternoon - *worst? When did this turn into a chore?* And with the end of the line in sight he deliberately made an effort to connect on a more personal level with the excited fans. One girl was actually shifting from one leg to the other as he signed.

"Thank you so much, Mr Cooper, you've no idea how brilliant it is to see you!"

"That's nice of you, thank you ..." *oh, why not ...* "What's your name?"

"Claire. With an 'i'. Wow, you never do that!"

So someone goes away happy Marcus thought, as Claire took her book and waltzed away to meet her friends. Suddenly there was that little zing of satisfaction. At last. He felt a smile tug at his own lips and for a moment he battled it without knowing why, then let it broaden. It felt good.

The rest of the line got the best of Marcus Cooper. Relaxing, able to enjoy the prospect of a hot bath and a cup of coffee in his hotel room, he wrote full messages in the remaining books, talked to aspiring writers and gave them the age-old advice; never give up if you believe in your work, and scrawled "Happy Birthday, Tony! All the best, Marcus," in a book bought as a gift.

Two people left now. For a second there was even a twinge of disappointment, then he remembered the coffee and the bath, and smiled up at the person in front of the desk.

“Hi, thanks for buying ...” a cold finger slipped up his spine and pressed at the nape of his neck. The man standing there was not a fan, that much was obvious. Okay, so the kid buying the book for his dad hadn’t been a fan either, but that was different; this bloke was ...just wrong. His expression was calm enough at first glance, but Marcus found himself staring at eyes that held a disquieting mixture of emotions; fear, pleading, accusation. Hate, even. Marcus recoiled at the realisation but yes – hate was in the driving seat in this man’s mind.

And he looked vaguely familiar.

“Do you have something for me to sign?” he asked, and was relieved to hear he sounded normal, despite the coldness that had turned his heart into a chilly little rock.

“I do, Mr Cooper. I hope you don’t mind but it’s not your latest novel.” The man’s voice was that of a man used to being the superior intellect, but the distaste was underlaid with audible anxiety. Familiarity tugged once more, but Marcus dismissed it; he wanted this man out of the shop as much, it seemed, as the man himself wanted it.

“That’s fine,” he said. The customer reached into the bag at his feet, and withdrew a tattered paperback which he placed on the table. Marcus looked at it, surprise mingling with a deep pleasure that pushed his misgivings to the back of his mind.

“Where did you get this?” He picked it up and turned it over, then laughed. “I’ve not seen any copies of this for years! Not since –”

“Not since you got picked up by your agent, I imagine,” the customer said.

“No, indeed. My own copy had to be thrown away after I got flooded.”

“Then why don’t you take this one?”

“Oh no, this is yours, I couldn’t possibly –”

“Please, I insist. After all, if anyone should have this copy it’s the man who wrote it.”

Marcus looked at the book, feeling once again the weight of all that had gone into producing the short run of Castle’s Comet. The story was neither here nor there, he harboured an affection for it but it was no masterpiece. He’d even grown to dislike his lead character intensely in the end, but the destruction of his own copy had left him strangely saddened.

“At least let me buy it from you?”

“I imagine it cost you enough money the first time,” the customer said. He seemed more relaxed now, in fact his voice had taken on a mocking tone Marcus resented, and he bristled with rekindled annoyance. Yes, it had cost him – all his university grant and then some, but it had worked; this book had given him what he needed to catch the eye of his agent, and now he was sitting here with an aching right arm because people wanted to read what *he* wrote.

“Then maybe I can give you a copy of my new novel,” he said, unable to keep the ‘so what, look at me now’ sub-text from his voice. The customer looked at him steadily, then dropped his eyes to the book in Marcus’s hands. He had the relieved, satisfied look of a man who had offloaded a particularly unpleasant task.

“No, Mr Cooper, that’s quite alright. Not to my taste at all. I’m glad to reunite you with your first novel. I do hope you ... enjoy it.”

Marcus glared after him as he left, annoyed that his pleasure at finding this copy of Castle’s Comet should have been tainted by the manner of its discovery. He looked down at the paperback with its dark cover depicting the night sky, his name in broad

silver letters, the title slightly smaller, as he'd seen on "real books." Castle's Comet had put him here, no matter what Mr Superior liked to think. Still, he felt unsettled and that familiarity niggled.

"Mr Cooper?"

He looked up, relieved to see nothing more threatening than a woman in her fifties, wearing a hopeful smile and brandishing a copy of best selling novel number eight.

His name was in much larger print than the title.

The hotel room welcomed him with freshly aired, lightly scented arms. No more dingy little hotels; since the success of his most recent books it was five star all the way.

Marcus threw his jacket on the bed and sat down, pulling Castle's Comet out of the side pocket of his laptop bag. He studied the cover again, then opened it.

This book is dedicated to my own future; I owe it that much.

Marcus lay back on one elbow and started to flick through the pages, alternately groaning and smiling as his eyes skipped over the sentences; much of it was dire, but there were parts that were better than passable – maybe he could work them into the book he was struggling with at the moment.

Unwilling to put the book down down he sat on the edge of the bath to read while it filled, and was still reading when the water rose to the lip of the bath and soaked, boiling hot, through the leg of his jeans.

"Christ!" he leapt away and only stopped the book from tumbling into the water by grabbing the cover as it fell, tearing it. His heart seemed to have doubled its beat as he

wrenched at the tap; he absolutely *knew* he'd have plunged his hand into that scalding water if he'd had to ...

Hand shaking, he pressed the silver button to release some of the water into the drains, keeping one eye on the book as it lay on the floor. How could it have become so important?

He'd felt that old dislike for the story's leading character creep back in, this man he'd created so long ago with the naïve intention of launching him as the Intergalactic James Bond – he'd been self-centred, had little depth and engendered even less sympathy once his flat little tale was told. Doubtless a reflection on Marcus's own writing skills, but the fact remained: Daniel Castle was not a likeable character.

Later Marcus lay propped up in bed, reading through a printed copy of his current work, correcting steadily with the different coloured pens he kept in the file; red for typos, blue for questions of character behaviour, green for plot queries. Time and again he found himself crossing through in blue and green, sensing something wrong but unable to pinpoint it.

Must be tiredness, the page was swimming in front of his eyes, doubling, tripling, wavering ... Marcus laid his manuscript aside, about to turn out the light, and instead picked up the torn copy of his very first printed work. Just a few pages to banish the problems of book number nine, at least 'til morning.

An hour later he checked the clock. His alarm call was set for 8 o'clock, and it was already after midnight. He needed to sleep, but the lure of the Daniel Castle and his adventures among the stars was proving too strong. He found himself reading like a reader for the first time in far too long; every time he picked up a book these days he picked fault with the style, or consciously appreciated a sentence structure or a hook. Now, despite his awareness of the book's shortcomings, he sank happily into the tale.

Another hour passed. Inexplicably energised, Marcus got out of bed and opened up his laptop. His scalp tingled and his heartbeat had picked up. Lines of text no longer bent and twisted in front of exhausted eyes, now they marched across the screen in front of him, appearing as fast as he heard them in his head.

A man had appeared, just leaning on his lead character's car. Where had he come from? It didn't matter; Marcus knew he'd be an important part of the story, and he put the questions to one side, letting the new character talk his way into the spotlight. He fitted in perfectly. His name was Daniel Castle.

Marcus was faintly aware of the smile on his face as he worked. He was also aware that the night was disappearing in a flood of words that caught hold of his mind, and gently led him into the world Daniel had infiltrated. How had he believed this book could work before? He typed long into the night, feeling layers peeling away from his increasingly jaded viewpoint, leaving everything crystal clear.

When he could keep his eyes open no longer he checked his word count, grinned a tired, satisfied grin, and fell back into bed.

Grainy eyed next morning, he succumbed to the temptation to check last night's work again, just to enjoy the leap in word count. He opened his document and scrolled to the end. He frowned, did a keyword search, nothing; the story was exactly as he'd left it before the signing yesterday.

Cold all over, Marcus closed his eyes tight for a second, then checked the file details:

Created – 17 January 2007 08:24:16

Modified – 14 March 2007 04:39:56.

Accessed – 14 March 2007 08:18:04

Madness ... No matter how tired he was the prompt would have forced him to save, it was impossible to think otherwise. Absurdly he felt tears threatening, and let out a low, angry snarl to offset them. He slammed the laptop shut and thrust it into its bag, trying without success to put this blow to the back of his mind. Worse things happen, stop over-reacting ...

The thought reverberated in his mind as he collected his few belongings together, but it didn't help; yes, worse things do happen, but right now they were unimportant the way a looming operation, however major, seems unimportant when you've just stubbed your toe.

"I hope you enjoyed your stay, Mr Cooper," the smiling receptionist said. He knew he was behaving unforgivably, but was unable to prevent himself from sending the girl a venomous look that drove the smile from her face. The foyer was full, he was a highly visible celebrity – by the time the implication of what he'd done set in he was halfway to the cab and it was too late.

When he logged on from home late that afternoon, the chat forum on his official website was buzzing with it;

"No more Mr Nice Guy" "Coop The Poop!" "Marcus Cooper is a sour-faced git."

Marcus groaned. There were, of course, other posts. Loyal ones insisting he was probably tired after a gruelling tour that had taken him the length and breadth of the country, but these were in the minority; it was clear most people were happy to see their suspicions about his stand-offishness confirmed. And they were right – he'd been a complete pig at just about every signing he'd attended this time.

And there was the other thing. All that work – gone. Marcus switched from battery operation to mains, then opened up the document on his laptop again and closed his

eyes. He pictured Daniel leaning on Steve's car. Fine. Good enough. What had Daniel said? How was he dressed? What had Steve's reaction been?

"Hell!" Marcus smashed his fist into the coffee table, only distantly registering the ache that powered up his sore writing arm. All he could think about was how it would feel to lie back on a cool pillow and close his mind down, let himself float to the stars that Daniel had explored in the first book ...

He sat up straight; last night he'd been beyond exhausted, unable to see straight – then he'd picked up Castle's Comet and been inspired enough to write for four straight hours. In the mesh pocket of the laptop bag, the book lay waiting, and he took it out and removed the hotel breakfast menu he'd tucked in as a bookmark.

Momentarily distracted by the words "Full English with toast and cereal," he remembered he'd not eaten since last evening – his stomach reacted predictably to the acknowledgement, but his eyes were drawn to the page in front of him.

Food could wait. He read, and then he wrote.

Daniel was back, and so much better than before. He had back story, feelings – mostly anger, but that worked – and a solid role to play in the new piece. His self-centredness could be utilised rather than hovering in the background, something to create conflict with the lead character.

Deeply satisfied, Marcus read back what he'd written, saving every couple of minutes along the way despite the minimal need for editing, and then, to be on the safe side, e-mailed himself the updated copy.

"Belt and braces," he murmured. He was tempted to upload it to a remote server but at that point his stomach gave a growl that was almost painful.

Another glance at the breakfast menu made him wish he was back in the hotel – at least all it would have taken was a phone call. He stood up and the room wavered. For the first time since he'd begun, he looked at the clock and his eyes widened. Ten fifteen... no wonder he felt like a creaky old man. And he needed the bathroom.

He moved out from between the sofa and the coffee table, his mind already on the contents of his freezer, and glanced back. Then stopped in horror; the words were vanishing. Bloody virus!

Marcus grabbed the laptop and turned it to face him, repeatedly pressing 'save' and 'close' but nothing happened, it was as if an invisible finger was holding down the backspace button.

"No," he breathed, "no, no-no-no you little sod ..." Then he remembered the e-mail and relaxed. In any case, he'd been saving religiously; he'd lose a few sentences at most.

He picked up the copy of Castle's Comet to move it out of the way, and at that moment the gradual elimination of his work stopped. The next letter in line flickered alarmingly but remained visible.

"Thank God ..." Marcus put the book on the coffee table, taking a deep, shaky breath. The letters began to disappear again. Helpless, furious, he watched all the work he'd created that afternoon disappear letter by letter, word by word, sizzling paragraph by ...

Black screen.

"You're going back to the shop, you pile of crap," he told the slim grey laptop. His stomach griped again – he'd print out the hard copy from the e-mail, then get something to eat. Then sleep. Marcus reached out to power up again and drew his hand back with a hiss. On the table, Castle's Comet had flipped open. Hunger

forgotten, his heart a spinning lump crashing against his ribs, he looked up but he already knew there was no window open.

The pages turned lazily over, drawing his eyes back down. He found the courage to reach out and pick the book up, it fell obediently still in his hand, and with a hum the laptop screen flickered into life. Marcus swore and dropped the book, but it did not revert to its previous, terrifying behaviour. Instead it lay on the floor as if patiently waiting for him to pick it up, understanding, forgiving him even, for letting it fall.

He already knew what he would see when he looked at the screen – the password process and login information all flashed past him and there, without his intervention, was the manuscript for his new book. He ignored it and opened up his e-mail, checking for the newly arrived version of his manuscript.

As the download completed, the network connection light blinked rapidly and the message popped up telling him the connection had been lost. No matter, he had the document there. He half expected it to have been corrupted but it opened with no problems. The first surge of relief gave way to cold despair, as he realised it was in exactly the same stage as the wiped version.

Marcus felt his gaze pulled back to the book again, and breathing became a struggle. He wanted to pick it up, something told him if he did he would find the words he'd lost – but he was so tired. Then the book moved again, bringing him back to wakefulness with a painful surge of adrenalin. Fear was replaced by anger, and a kind of hurt outrage.

He stopped just short of bringing his foot down on the slowly flipping pages, but they fell still; they'd served their purpose. Marcus leaned forward and picked up Castle's Comet, hating the feel of it, the look of it and, for the first time, the fact of its existence.

But again, his tiredness began to recede, along with the physical needs of his body, and as he looked at the page where it had fallen open, the words began to re-form themselves to fit the story he was working on. He hunched forward and began to write.

Arms aching, back on fire from holding this uncomfortable position, hitting the save button and uploading to an independent server every twenty minutes or so, Marcus Cooper wrote Daniel back into life. At one point he printed out the entire manuscript, leaving it stacked neatly on the printer tray. He remembered being struck by a quote: fiction was “the truth inside the lie,” and the accuracy hit home; Daniel Castle was the most terrible truth Marcus had ever known, born from the most accomplished and entertaining lie he would ever write.

Another night slid by under his flashing fingers. Once or twice he rose from the sofa to stretch his muscles, and stepped towards the kitchen for food. Each time, the cursor tabbed backwards until he sat back down. Nothing would reverse the process, only his presence halted it.

“You are not going to do this to me,” he said, meaningless, slurred words in what was little more than a bitter croak. He wondered what would have happened if he’d left the laptop running on batteries, and as the idea struck he took a notebook from his bag to write longhand. But as he stared at the paper his mind turned into a sluggish mass of confused images, no words formed no matter how hard he struggled for them.

He checked the uploaded copies, not too surprised to see that whatever happened locally was reflected in those distant, electronic files. This was not real. It was a writer’s worst nightmare, that was all – a clumsy, unimaginative dream, mate, that’s what you’re dealing with here – it would be laughable were it not for the physical discomfort that threatened to escalate into real pain before too long.

He discovered he was permitted a bathroom break. Just that. Desperation had brought him to his feet and the letters had begun their vanishing act, but his needs were too strong and, as he'd veered towards the tiny bathroom instead of the kitchen the steady deletion of his work halted. He supported himself with one hand on the wall, and the stream seemed to go on for hours.

He even found dark, bitter amusement in the fact that he was allowed to starve, but not to soil himself in the process. Presumably that would be distracting, and distraction was the last thing Castle needed of his creator. Longingly, Marcus eyed his shelf for anything edible but even his toothpaste was still packed from his trip. All that remained on his bachelor's bathroom shelf was an electric shaver, and only a few grooming items lay along the bath's edge.

Back on the sofa, he brushed his hair back from his forehead, took a short breath and blew it out harshly, before starting to type again. He wrote the name Daniel, and as he looked at it, all his frustrated anger boiled up through his chest and came out as a wordless, bellow of rage. He typed faster, driving Daniel Castle into a storyline that would see him dead before the end of the chapter.

He was panting as he wrote Castle closer and closer to death. Castle fought him, he could actually feel the wrong words trying to come from his fingers, but he resolutely ignored them and pounded the keyboard into submission.

The room grew hot. Horribly, uncomfortably hot. Marcus wore only light travelling clothes, and it was late at night, but he felt sweat pasting his shirt to his chest and back. Hunger clawed at him, exhaustion strapped lead weights to his arms and his head, but it would soon be over.

A sudden, light touch brushed cold against the back of his neck. Marcus screamed and jerked upright. A shadow hovered by his left shoulder where there should be only

empty space, but when he turned to look properly it vanished. He felt sick, trembly and light-headed. His heartbeat pulsed heavily in his throat, in his forehead, seemingly in every inch of skin.

His attention fell on the neat stack of paper on the printer tray and he saw, with a sense of dull inevitability, nothing but pristine white sheets. He felt the sweat cool on his skin and his scalp seemed to shrink around his skull, but his thoughts cleared suddenly, shedding a mindset twenty three years in the making.

“I don’t have to do this,” he said, and uttered a short, humourless bark, acknowledging the abrupt end of a career he’d sweated blood for. Writing wasn’t everything; he could live comfortably off the proceeds of the work he’d already produced.

Marcus stood up on legs that barely supported him, picked up Castle’s Comet and reached into the middle of the book to grasp a handful of flimsy pages. He pulled, feeling the paper tear in his hands, and for a second he felt the warm, soft breath of freedom bathing his skin. Relief swept across him.

Then ...

Pain. Crippling, breathtaking pain, an impact in his chest like a doubled fist, striking hard enough to knock him backwards and he fell to the floor, the horrified thought as clear as a cold voice against his ear: heart attack, dead at forty two ...

The pain vanished as quickly as it had struck. Marcus lay still for a moment, breathing heavily, his hands clasped over his heart, terrified to move in case the reprieve was temporary.

The book lay at his side, the half ripped out pages turning again with an angry, snapping sound – it focused the mind, and Marcus carefully rolled onto his side, and then to his knees. He crawled back to the computer. So, Daniel wanted out of the

doomed wilderness that had claimed Castle's Comet, and into the public glare of a best-selling Marcus Cooper? Well, he'd get it. But Marcus was the *writer*, for God's sake, he was in charge.

He pulled himself onto the sofa, hatred pounding in his temples. He knew what he had to do – the only question was, could he do it fast enough? He flexed his fingers, preparing himself; a mistake might prove fatal for the wrong protagonist in this insane nightmare. He typed faster than he ever had in his life:

“Castle's death was instantaneous.”

Marcus immediately knew he'd failed. Pain hit once again, crushing his chest in its ruthless grip. He groaned and tried to reach the keyboard to correct his typing, but it was unnecessary; with blurred, half closed eyes he saw Castle's out of context death had simply been deleted.

When he could breathe again he began to write, slowly, each movement a supreme effort, but the more Daniel Castle appeared on the screen before him, the quicker the pain faded. Marcus was hazily aware, as he typed, that tears of helpless fury were trickling down his cheeks.

At some point during that endless night, Marcus belatedly recognised the man in the shop who'd given him the book. Lanky, grey-eyed, cold intelligence that had no time for human failings – the man who'd delivered death to Castle's Comet before it had time to see the light of day; Professor of English, Clive London, who'd stood in for his regular tutor for one term only, and destroyed his confidence with a few well chosen words. He'd looked down at the paper in front of him with an expression of fhaughty distaste.

“Mindless drivel. I hope your tutor never encouraged you in this pointless endeavour. Take my advice and bin it.”

“But it’s taken two years –”

“Then I suggest you don’t let it waste any more of your time. How old are you – eighteen?”

“Nineteen.”

“High time you woke up to reality. Get a job in a library. Dream your life away there, just don’t do it on my time.”

The treasured manuscript, painstakingly typed on Marcus’s second-hand electric typewriter, had made a sad, rustling little thud as it landed in the waste paper basket.

In the silence that followed Marcus had looked steadily at it, then, as his gaze fell on a sweet wrapper stuck to it a dull anger had begun to uncoil in his chest.

He’d bent down and retrieved his work, and left the lecturer’s room without another word. That afternoon he’d gone to the library, but instead of looking for a job he’d found a list of printing firms.

A few small adjustments to the manuscript, the decimation of his bank account for a short print run, and now – here was that damned book once again, the very copy he’d mailed to Professor London; he could almost feel the disgust leaking from its pages, giving them their greasy, animated feel.

He didn’t know how long he’d been typing. Hunger was sending spikes of real pain through him now, and his neck ached with the effort of supporting his head. But the words came easily, his fingers skipping over the keyboard, pulling the story from his mind and laying it all out before him.

Whenever his hands fell away exhausted, his heart tightened and speeded up, and the terror came back; he’d thought he was going to die here on his floor, he knew now that he would not. At least not until the book was done.

“But what then?” he asked aloud, “when I’ve given you what you want?”

Silence.

“You finally trip my heart into something it can’t cope with, is that it?”

It crossed his mind that if he died on completion of this novel it would sell better, and faster, than any other thing he’d written. But would that be enough for Daniel? Marcus’s fist struck the table again – what the hell was he thinking?

“You’re not real!” he yelled suddenly, furiously. “*I made you!*”

God, so tired ... lead in his veins instead of blood, his head fell forward onto his chest, and he tried to ignore the incessant griping as his stomach clamoured for food.

His head snapped up, the sudden movement setting flares off behind his eyes. The phone was at the far end of the room – could he make it that far? He swayed as he climbed to his feet expecting at any second to be smashed to the floor by that terrible, cramping pain in his chest. For a split second he thought he might even welcome it, but life is a strong argument for its own existence and he knew he would fight for it.

He reached the handset and snatched it off its base, pressing 999, sobbing with relief at the connection. Then his blood froze as a distant voice cut in on the emergency operator.

“You killed me.”

Marcus’s vision wavered, heat washed over him – he felt faint.

“What?” he whispered.

“You killed me. You put me in that book, and used me. Used me to get famous then just left me to rot.”

Marcus groaned; the poor dialogue that had peppered Castle’s Comet was coming out in this freakish manifestation of the leading character. He was exactly as he’d been written, how real could it get?

“How –”

“Your professor. He tried to destroy me but now he understands. He woke me up, he didn’t like me, but he was useful. Like you.”

As the voice droned on, and in the clumsy sentences dictated by his own unpolished writing, Marcus could see how it had unfolded; Professor London, sorting through his belongings, had found Castle’s Comet and been about to throw it out but instead opened it, maybe to see if the brazen, upstart student had made a better job of it before sending it to print.

Castle’s voice took on an amused note when he described the now elderly professor’s terror as the pages had begun their twisted little performance. Of course, instead of writing, the compulsion had been to deliver the book to its author, and his relief as he left the shop must have been indescribable, a freedom beyond Marcus’s comprehension. Marcus hated him for that freedom, with a bright silver hate that sliced into his mind and brought his vision to a pinpoint.

“You used me,” Castle was saying again, “and you owe me. You dedicated the book to your future, that future is mine.”

Marcus seized on this chance, finally, to discuss what was happening.

“Look, I don’t understand all this, but I’ll do it, I’ll bring you back. Just, please ... let me sleep. God, let me *eat*.”

“No time, taken too long already. Has to be now.”

“I can eat and work at the – ”

There was a click and then silence. Marcus was holding a dead phone. He threw it across the room, yelling wordlessly in frustration, and scabbled in the pocket of the jacket that hung on the back of a chair. His mobile showed no battery life, no signal. He threw that too, and sank to his knees, drained.

Behind him the pages of Castle's Comet started to flick over, a sharp little voice icily reminding him he had work to do. He shook his head, groaning at a savage twist of hunger. The pages flipped faster, and Marcus felt his heart speeding up to match. There was only one way to assuage the pain; he stumbled back to the sofa.

Marcus raised bleary eyes and looked around his flat, seeing the ordinary trappings of a life he had taken for granted; a couple of letters ready to post on the sideboard, the TV remote controls on the arm of the chair, a half full cup, with coffee long since gone cold and floating with thick, milky scum. He knew if he could reach it he would gladly drink the sludgy stuff just to ease the ache for a split second.

His throat ached as he imagined the bliss of cold liquid trickling down, and he tried not to look at the sideboard, which housed a few bottles of wine and at least one half bottle of Glenmorangie. The idea of getting cataclysmically hammered, obliterating this horror, brought more tears, this time of longing and he blinked them back.

He determinedly turned his mind away from food and drink, back to the screen in front of him. Daniel Castle. Waiting for his birth into the real world. But what would he do once he was there?

...Used me to get famous then just left me to rot.

You dedicated the book to your future, that future is mine

"And you'll have it," Marcus whispered. He sat up straighter, felt the relentless hunger grinding and tugging at his insides, and ignored it.

He wrote.

A passer-by, had they been able to look in through the window of this third storey flat, would have seen a young-ish looking man with thick dark hair, hunched over his

laptop keyboard, eyes wide and fixed on the screen. They might have seen someone they recognised from the dust jacket of eight books; a man with a strong, pleasant face, now too pale to be healthy, dark shadows under his eyes and weariness and pain creasing his brow.

They would have watched his hands work the keyboard; long, slender, well-practiced fingers now drawn up like claws. They would have seen him stop now and again and fold his arms across his waist, expression blank, teeth cutting into his lower lip as he waited for some discomfort to pass.

They would not have seen what he was writing.

Marcus felt the urgency in the room, buffeting the air around him. He was at the end of his endurance, his computer clock told him he'd been writing for two straight days and three nights. His fingers spasmed every time they brushed a key, his shoulders sent flares of agony down across his back, and his eyes felt full of grit, scratching and watering every time he blinked.

Stiffness and pain combined to drive him to the edge of a scream each time he shifted position, and weakness was gradually washing up from his numbed feet and legs, settling in his gut in the form of a helpless flutter that only tensed when fresh pain skewered his empty stomach. After a couple more visits, his need for the bathroom had tailed off; his body felt dried out, husked, nothing left to expel but his breath and his talent.

And Daniel was becoming more real. Marcus could sense that as the story neared its end; Castle was solidifying, and he was doing it here in this room, pacing, waiting for

the moment when he would exist in his own right. True to his character he paid little attention to the remainder of the story, none of it mattered as long as he was alive.

Marcus felt his strength flowing out into the laptop, pulling deep in his veins, drawing off all that had made him the living, breathing man he had once been. And the fear was going with it.

Even the pain seemed to fade as his fingers came down on the keys, the words spinning the best story of his life without conscious effort. He was on his knees now, the ache that had wrapped tight bands around him something that was happening to someone else, someone with his face but without this new sense of completion and serenity.

Daniel Castle had the last scene in Marcus Cooper's last book. A book destined to be a best-seller, not only because its author would never write another, but because it truly was the best piece of work he'd ever created. Many people would be heard to say it was as if he'd put his entire soul into it.

In his flat, Marcus hit the print button and looked up, and as his printer started to chunter and whirr he finally saw the face of the man who'd killed him; Castle looked just like Clive London.

"You used me, Cooper. But now you've given me what I deserve, and I've taken what you do not."

Marcus's own smile would, had that hypothetical passer-by seen it, have been described as sudden, unexpected, and quite startlingly beautiful.

"Your dialogue's crap," he whispered. "I suppose you're stuck with what I gave you twenty years ago. For now."

“I’ll learn the new way,” Castle agreed. Marcus nodded weakly and his body slumped forward over the coffee table, but he managed to raise his head again to look at Castle.

“Just take the manuscript to my agent.” The pain was back now, and he felt a moment of fear and regret, but as his eyes focused on the corner of the room by the kitchen door, he found what he was looking for and his heart eased. He laid his head back down, accepting the cool hand of death on his brow, and his smile returned.

Daniel Castle stood in the pool of light thrown down by the street light outside the window, and wondered what would happen now. He was in the real world, no friends, but by the same token, no enemies either. It could be a good life for someone like him, and he deserved it after all he’d been through. A sound made him turn; the printer had finished its run, and he picked up the manuscript, flicking straight to the last page to see what Cooper had left for him.

Castle’s Revenge – by Marcus Cooper.

Epilogue.

Daniel Castle stood in the pool of light thrown down by the street light outside the window, and wondered what would happen now. He was alone in the world, no friends, but by the same token, no enemies either. It could be a good life for someone like him, and he deserved it after all he’d been through. A sound made him turn; perhaps he wasn’t alone after all?

Out of the shadows stepped a man; dark haired, familiar. He held a gun loosely in his right hand. Castle stared, feeling his new world tilt beneath his feet ...

Out of the kitchen stepped a man; dark haired, familiar. He held a gun loosely in his right hand. Castle stared, feeling his new world tilt beneath his feet ...

The dark haired man smiled. It was sudden, unexpected, and, though Castle hated to admit it, startlingly beautiful. The gun came up as the man glanced at the body lying across the coffee table – for a second his features creased in grief, then the smile returned, brighter than ever.

“I don’t think we’ve been properly introduced, Mr Castle.”

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