

a foggy night in london town

by Cameron Balloons

"It was a drak and stromy night, and all about the wintry city" – I sighed, and hurled the freshly-typed manuscript into the bin. This had gone far enough.

"Roberta Scratchit!" I yelled, stamping through to the unheated, uncarpeted hallway we optimistically called our reception-area, where I discovered the aforementioned Ms Scratchit crouched low over the office toaster, hindquarters aglow, "I've had enough. You're a lovely woman, you make a damn fine cup of coffee, you use the colour-photocopier like it was an extension of your own body, and if it ever came to wrestling naked for money in a Bangkok bawdy-house, I'd back you all the way – but when it comes to typing up dictation, you're about as much use as a dyslexic baboon in oven-mitts."

"It's not my fault", she moaned, as beneath her the toaster pinged and two well-singed

pop-tarts popped tartily buttockwards, "you *know* I can't hear as well as I used to. It's an industrial injury. By rights, I should sue."

"Getting the dictaphone muddled with your walkman does *not* constitute an industrial injury. I also object to everybody on the 59 bus now knowing exactly what I think of Steven Wells, given you left it lying on the floor while you ran screaming to the driver – some of them might even be his friends, he must have some somewhere, and the top-deck of a bus in south London between 9am and 5pm is more likely a place than most. But you're missing my point: I'm fed up, you hear? – fed up with my words constantly ending up garbled or even – on one memorably expensive occasion, for which I'm still paying off the monumental mason in monthly instalments, as I'm sure I don't need to remind you – marbled. We can't go on like this – how are people going to be touched, moved, shaken and stirred by my life-story if even *I'm* never sure what I'm saying, or whether or not I'm coming or glowing. Ah, you see what I mean??? Imagine if that had happened at a signing-session in Borders. No, I know it's nearly Christmas, but I'm afraid enough is enough. I'm kicking you out onto

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the streets. I'm sure you'll survive, a great big sturdy lardy-limbed woman like you."

She rose in silence, gathered her things, and walked to the door. And then she turned her head, pointed a bony finger – one of her requests when she'd first started working for me had been to ask if she could personalise her desk with favourite items from her late father's extensive collection of second-hand body-parts, her father having mysteriously gone missing one evening on the way back from the newsagents, it seemed – and said, in a voice that would've chilled a freshly prepared roast-beef platter in seconds without losing any of the taste or goodness: "I will have my revenge."

Like holl you woll, I muttered.



Chapter One

It was a dark and stormy night, and all about the wintry city the wind was doing its worst. And then, feeling pretty pleased and smug with itself, in the way only a really high-profile, A-list celebrity-status just-out-of-rehab style wind can – and this was a wind which had been puffed up and fluffed out of all proportion by all the top BBC forecasters – it was doing its second and third-worst too, just because it could. It was, to be blunt, rather full of itself.

It was also rather full of rain. In the street outside our office, the muck-splattered headlamps of homebound cars peered blearily through the murk like the eyes of giant sad cats, fidgety for fireside pouffes, while the oil-slicked tarmac glistened blue and green, as if recently re-paved with a freezerful of freshly caught trout. Newspapers flapped and fluttered, gusting up past the just-shuttered shopfronts and fluttering rapidly gutterwards before swooping suddenly earthwards again like Chinese fighting kites whose razor-flecked