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# THE ENDING WRITES ITSELF

EVELYN CLARKE



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

# Once Upon a Time

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## THE AUTHOR'S PHOTO FILLS THE SCREEN.

The world-famous Arthur Fletch, sitting in an office that looks bigger than Cate's flat. Surrounded by hundreds of his books, name flashing on every spine like a chorus. A stadium of fans.

The profile ran last year, one of dozens of articles that sprang up when the fifth and final Petrarch novel was announced.

Fiction's holy grail.

The long-awaited finale and, according to this piece, the last book Arthur Fletch will ever write.

She scrolls through the article, past the interviewer's praise, the talk of creative genius, the tallying of his accomplishments, beginning back with the Ashbolt books before she was even born. Then the films. The TV adaptations. The exponential growth. Fifty million book sales, which is more than the Bible in some countries.

And now—this.

The most anticipated novel of all time. Which is kind of hard to believe. But then again, maybe it's not? Everyone she knows has read at least one of his books. Even her flatmate, which was surprising, considering Cate has never seen her lay eyes on anything longer than a listicle.

She keeps skimming the profile, past the parts she knows by heart. How Arthur Fletch came from nothing. How he built his fandom word by word, book by book. His increasing reclusiveness, broken only by the occasional salons hosted on the Scottish island of Skelbrae.

She pauses at the photos.

Arthur Fletch, gazing out over the cliffs, wind in his white hair, tipping the brim of a wide-brimmed red hat.

Sitting in a high-backed chair with a leather notebook in his lap and a pen to his lips.

Standing in the open doorway of his house—which is practically a *castle*—one hand extended in a gesture that could either be welcome or goodbye.

In each picture, he has that same enigmatic look. Mouth quirking to the right. Not quite a smile—no one ever tells the men to smile—but like he's got a secret.

And then, toward the end of the article, she hits her favorite part.

Where he talks about spending half his fortune on a book made of *actual* gold.

The first time she read about it, she couldn't believe it was real.

And it's probably not.

But she wants it to be.

According to the interviewer, there's a twinkle in the author's eye when he mentions it. Which could mean he's full of shit. Or that it's totally true.

And what else is Arthur Fletch gonna spend it on?

He's already got the mansion.

And his very own island.

Meanwhile, Cate Newhouse can barely afford new underwear.

Cate Newhouse has pulled as many shifts as they'll give her in the café two doors down, and currently exists on a diet of day-old pastries and pilfered tea.

Cate Newhouse just got dumped by her girlfriend of two years and had to move into a shitty shared flat over a butcher shop, where a horrid smell wafts up on warm days, and the walls are too thin and her roommates are always either fucking or fighting, and they're constantly running out of loo roll, because she's the only one who ever buys it.

Cate Newhouse could really use a break.

And the wildest thing is—

She might have just been given one.

Cate taps out of the article, and back to her inbox. To the email at the top, the one forwarded by her literary agent—the impressive, and terrifying, Eleanor Vandenberg. Who also happens to represent the one and only Arthur Fletch. Which still blows Cate’s mind.

When her agent’s name popped up in her inbox that morning, she’d hoped it was news.

Eleanor, there to say her book was ready to go out to publishers. Or that somehow, she’d already sold it. The last time she’d asked, Eleanor had given her a light verbal pat on the shoulder and said “Soon.”

*Soon*—that had to be one of the most infuriating words in the English language.

But this email was something else entirely.

Cate—

You’ve so much potential.

It’s time to let others see it, too.

Do us both a favor and say yes.

—Eleanor

Attached was a message from Arthur Fletch himself.

She opens it again now, just to make sure it’s real.

And it is.

Not just a message but an *invitation*, summoning *her* to one of his exclusive and legendary literary salons.

On his private island, Skelbrae.

In Scotland.

In less than three weeks.

Cate’s knee bobs as she reads it for the hundredth time, excitement washing over her all over again. Followed quickly by terror.

The fear that Arthur Fletch—and whoever else he’s invited—will take one look at Cate Newhouse, twenty-two years old and plucked out of a slush pile by one of Eleanor Vandenberg’s assistants, and *know* she doesn’t belong.

She folds forward, head resting on her knees. And tries to remind herself what Eleanor said when she first signed her.

“You’ve a rare talent, Miss Newhouse. With a bit of work, I think you could be the next Arthur Fletch.”

Cate lifts her head off her knees, takes a deep breath, and opens her drafted reply, deleting a block of text about what an honor it is, and how she doesn’t feel worthy, and there must be some mistake. Instead, she types five short words.

Wouldn’t miss it!

Thanks,

Cate

She forces the air from her lungs, and hits SEND.

A fist bangs on the bathroom door, and she shouts back that she’ll be just a minute. As if her legs haven’t gone to sleep from sitting on the porcelain for nearly half an hour.

She sets the phone on the sink and goes to wipe only to realize—

Of course.

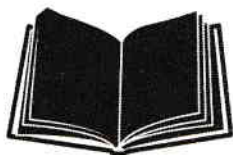
There’s no fucking loo roll.

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PART ONE

# The Players



# The Thriller Writers

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THE BOAT SKIPS LIKE A STONE ACROSS the choppy water.

Sienna leans her elbows on the rail, squinting into the distance.

She's of the mind that no trip should *ever* require three forms of transportation, and yet, here they are, on the far side of a red-eye flight (*plus* a layover), a three-hour drive, and thirty minutes at sea, and thanks to the fog, the end isn't even in sight.

The boat hits a swell, and somewhere behind her Malcolm groans and heaves his guts over the side. It is a wretched sound, as if with enough force he might successfully turn himself inside out.

Sienna lifts her chin, lets the damp air mist her tired face.

She hasn't been on a speedboat since Spring Break her junior year. She vividly remembers standing at the bow, her arms aloft, reenacting her favorite part of *Titanic* with her college boyfriend, Brody, which was great until he went and ruined it by sticking his hand down her pants.

No chance of that happening today, thank goodness. Malcolm's hands are otherwise occupied, clutching the railing as he loses what's left of his breakfast.

To be fair to Malcolm—not that Sienna has any great desire to be fair to Malcolm right now—the North Sea is *a lot* rougher than the Gulf of Mexico.

She's been in Scotland for approximately four hours, and so far her first impressions amount to gray, windy, and the kind of cold that paws at her clothes with about as much tact as Brody, all those years ago.

Malcolm, however, stepped off the plane, breathed in, and proceeded to let out a strange kind of roar, before bounding down the stairs and kissing the asphalt. Just like the pope.

“The boat skips like a stone across the choppy water.”

Sienna repeats the words to herself, pleased with the turn of phrase. Description has always been her forte. That, and plot. And pacing. Which begs the question, of course, of what *Malcolm* contributes. A quippy line of dialogue here and there, perhaps. The occasional twist. But she knows.

Of course she knows.

If she's the mind behind Penn Stonely, he's the face.

Not that Sienna has ever been considered unattractive—but Malcolm's photo was always the one at the back of their books, satisfying the public's expectation of a crime writer. Equal parts gravitas, mystery, and charm.

He's always had a power over people—including her. She used to shiver when he so much as looked at her with those dark eyes tucked beneath his brow. His voice, like rucked velvet, accent smooth until it snagged on the corner of a word and the Scottish brogue peeked out. A brogue that had grown thicker over the course of the three-hour car ride north, as Malcolm crooned about being back where his bones belonged. In the *old country*.

As if he missed it every day.

As if he hadn't sworn off his entire homeland fifteen years ago, after the Edinburgh Incident.

Ever since they'd met, Sienna had been trying to convince Malcolm to swallow his pride and take her to Scotland, to no avail, and yet a single email from Arthur Fletch, and here they are. The past apparently forgotten at the first sight of heather and gorse, Malcolm waxing poetic over the hills and the glens and every sighting of a *Highland coo*.

The *cows*, with their majestic horns and shaggy reddish-brown fur, were in fact disarmingly cute, but Sienna resisted the urge to snap a photo. He didn't need any more encouragement.

“Skelbrae, ahead!” the captain barks, his voice at once low and wind-whipped, less a caw than a hiss, like cold water over hot coals.

Another good line.

Sienna tugs out her phone, swipes open the notes app to write it down (her notebook is somewhere in her bag, but that's fine, she keeps a running file, capturing little snippets, turns of phrase to use in future scenes—though she always lets Malcolm think the lines come off the cuff), just as the weak sun chooses that exact moment to break through the clouds, illuminating the island up ahead.

A jagged chunk of moss-lined rock surging out of the white-capped water. At first glance it looks like a sinking ship, one side jutting up into a cliff, the other sloping down into the sea.

A dark stone house—no, *house* isn't the right word, more a fortress, a manse, a miniature *castle*—perches precariously at the top, so near the cliff's edge, it looks like a strong wind would topple the whole thing into the churning water.

"Is that not the most beautiful sight you've ever seen?"

The stench of vomit wafts toward her with her husband. Sienna grimaces.

"It's certainly dramatic," she says. "But who would want to *live* there?"

The answer, of course, is Arthur Fletch.

Arthur Fletch, who went and bought not just the house but the entire island on which it sits, christening it the House That Petrarch Built after his most famous series and proving once again that few things are as bottomless as the male ego. Especially considering the house itself has clearly been here for centuries.

Malcolm wraps an arm around her shoulders.

"Oh come on, admit it," he says, flashing her a cheeky smirk. "You're a wee bit excited."

Sienna is feeling many things right now, but excitement isn't at the top of the list.

She's tired from the flight, and the car, and the boat, and the fact that she didn't sleep for two nights before they left.

She's nervous about this whole weekend, though she'd never admit it to Malcolm.

She's worried about her dog—Edgar has really always been *hers*, not theirs, even if Malcolm insisted on naming him—a geriatric Chihuahua who's been at death's door no less than four times in the last year and will probably will give up the mortal coil out of spite while she's away.

And somewhere beneath those three pervasive feelings, as well as hunger, and thirst, and a nausea that clearly pales compared to Malcolm's, sure, she's just a little excited.

"Sisi," he murmurs, that pet name she's always hated. "We *are* on the same page, aren't we?"

Sienna turns in his arms and looks up, studying her husband of thirteen years.

The way his gray hair curls across his temples, in desperate need of a cut. He refuses, insisting it makes him look ten years younger like this. And the infuriating thing is that he's right. No one ever seems to notice the wrinkles around *his* eyes, the slight sag under *his* chin. They don't even seem to care that his teeth are crooked and several shades off white.

He's a notorious flirt, always has been. Sienna has watched women, and even a few men, proposition him at writing conventions and conferences—when she's standing right next to him. His co-author. His wife. She never minded much—in truth, at times, she even took some pleasure in it, knowing that for all that flirting, he was hers.

When she doesn't answer the question, his voice goes gravel-low. "You *promised* me."

Which is true. She did promise. Or at least, she agreed.

And she's already beginning to regret it.

"Mm-hm," she says, forcing herself to smile, a thin, tight-lipped thing, as she runs down one of her many mental lists, this one titled *Ways to Dispose of a Body*.

It soothes her more than meditation ever could.

And as the boat slices toward the island, and Malcolm squeezes her close and begins to hum a Scottish tune, Sienna wonders, not for the first time, whether she's capable of murder.

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SIENNA TURNS HER BACK ON HIM.

Annoyance flickers through Malcolm—she knows how much he hates that—but then she points to a figure on the cliff.

"Is that him?"

Malcolm squints, trying to make out the shape. He knows he needs glasses, now that fifty's in the rearview mirror, but it seems like such an acquiescence, a surrendering to age, and he's not about to go gently into that good night. To trade words like *handsome* for *distinguished*.

He *can* make out the man's long coat, the wide-brimmed red hat on his head, one hand raised to keep it from being torn away by the wind.

Hard to tell for sure at this distance, but who else would it be?

"Yep," he says, "that'll be Arty."

Malcolm waves up at the figure as the captain guides the speedboat toward the jetty, but the man on the cliff doesn't wave back; he simply turns and trudges back in the direction of the house.

"Hmm, must not have seen us." As Malcolm's hand falls, he feels a fresh swell of nerves, rising like bile, an anxiety that's been slowly mounting since they took off from JFK.

He's vaguely terrified of being back. Not that he'd tell Sienna.

As the familiar greens and grays of the Scottish countryside slid by the car window, and Sisi oohed and ahed over the long-haired coos, he kept replaying the incident that had precipitated his departure all those years before. One that had started with a bottle of Macallan smuggled into the author yurt at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, and somehow progressed to trading drunken insults with a Booker Prize winner, swinging a punch at said Booker Prize winner, then being manhandled out of the tent by a poet laureate before being permanently and unceremoniously banned from the festival. For life.

It had been a mortifying end to a terrible week—a poorly attended talk, a derisive comment about the state of Scottish fiction, his pride grievously wounded and his reputation in tatters.

But it's time to put the whole affair to rest.

To move on. To move *forward*.

And he can't think of a better way to close that old chapter, and start this new one, than in the company of Arthur Fletch.

A man famous for several things.

The first, of course, is his books, a mix of thriller and crime with his signature twists.

But the second, at least in bookish circles, is his salons.

Not for their frequency—he sometimes goes months, or years, between—but for the list of names that have come out of them.

“Who else do you think he’s invited?” asks Malcolm. “My money’s on that Pulitzer woman.” Sienna stares at him blankly. “You know . . . the one with the hair? Probably a National Book Award winner or two . . . maybe he’s thrown in a poet just for kicks.” He shakes his head. “Bloody poets . . . always thinking they’re better. Simply for using fewer words.”

“Hmm . . . And when was the last time *you* met a poet?” chides Sienna as the boat docks. For a moment he assumes she’s trying to taunt him, before remembering he never actually told her about the laureate’s involvement in the Edinburgh Incident.

The captain doesn’t kill the engine, only idles long enough for Malcolm to hoist their luggage onto the dock, which he insists on doing himself—Sienna’s always found him unfailingly chivalrous. His back twinges with the effort, but he doesn’t let on. Nothing a hot bath and a wee dram won’t fix, he thinks as the boat pulls away, having deposited the two of them on Skelbrae.

“All those fancy famous writers,” murmurs Sienna. “None of them are going to have the first clue who we are.”

“Hey now, we *deserve* to be here,” says Malcolm. “Penn Stonely has won awards!”

“No, we haven’t.”

“Of course we did. *The Black Road Home* won *Stack Attack’s* Thriller of the Year.”

Fine, it wasn’t the Edgars, or the Daggers, but it was something to be *chosen*. And by readers, no less. Sienna wouldn’t shut up about the fact it was only a blog, with 327 subscribers, especially when they asked for a video acceptance speech. He’d stepped up to the plate while she sat seething at his side like a feral cat, not even attempting to muster a smile for the fans.

Last time he checked—which he doesn’t do often—the video had twenty-nine views. And four comments. Only three of which were positive.

Sienna nods. “Right,” she says dryly. “How could I forget?”

Malcolm hoists up their bags and sets off down the jetty, shouldering

the burden the way he did that day, the way he so often does, as Penn Stonely, when Sienna refuses to do her bit.

There's one other boat moored at the jetty. Though it's about as fitting to call the vessel in question a boat as the castle overhead a house.

"Ha!" says Malcolm. "Classic Fletch."

The yacht's name is inscribed on the side in a font he recognizes as American Typewriter: *The Royalty Check*.

Sienna rolls her eyes. "Wow, classy," she says, and Malcolm catches the sarcasm—he always does—but he refuses to take the bait.

Then they reach the edge of the dock, and the real work starts.

He can't tell if the path ahead used to be a set of stone stairs and has since decayed into a rocky slope, or a rocky hill from which someone has chiseled out steps. Either way, it's treacherous. As they make their way up the slope, bits of rock and shale crumble under their feet, skittering back down the hill.

"Not exactly safe, is it?" says Sienna, but Malcolm doesn't answer. It's taking all his focus to keep his balance, and not let on that he's already feeling winded. In fact, his chest is getting tight, and his left arm is tingling, and oh god, he *cannot* have a heart attack. Not here, not now, on the cusp of everything he's worked so hard for, the doors to the inner sanctum of publishing in sight if not in reach.

"Are you okay?" asks Sienna, looking genuinely worried, and he musters a brave smile, as sweat runs down his neck.

"Peachy!" he says, as they trek upward toward the waiting house.

At last the hellish ascent is over, giving way to a flat pebbled drive.

He stops, mostly to catch his breath, and looks up, basking in the view.

Some great hand has swept the fog away, exposing a blue expanse of sea, the Scottish mainland in the distance. From here he can see not only the castle but a quaint little cottage across the drive, and a path—not a proper road but a swath of dirt wide enough for a cart, or two bodies walking side by side—unspooling like a ribbon down the gentler slope before curving out of sight.

The surrounding grass is overgrown, throwing runners across the path, and he catches a flash of movement, a small animal darting

through the tangled green—a rabbit, or maybe a stoat?—there and then gone, swallowed again by the grass.

Before Malcolm thinks to mention it—Sienna has a fondness for small creatures, hence the bloody Chihuahua, which as far as he’s concerned doesn’t deserve to be called a dog—his eye is drawn up to the castle.

My god, the castle.

It looked so impressive at a distance, Malcolm honestly feared it might lose some of its grandeur up close and be revealed as a modest if oversize house, locked in a battle with age and elements, sinking and, like a body, slowly losing.

But he needn’t have worried.

Up close it is even grander, all turrets and peaked roofs, two wings and a dozen windows and a stained-glass transom over the doorway, one of those ornate thresholds where the door parts in the middle, swinging open like a pair of gates.

Malcolm shakes his head in wonder. “So this is what fifty million copies sold will buy you.”

“Not how *I’d* spend the money,” says Sienna as they cross the drive.

“Speak for yourself,” says Malcolm, lifting the bags and trailing in her wake.

“I was,” she mutters, climbing the steps.

Fletch’s initials are carved into the wooden door, along with the same words that appear at the front of every book.

*He who holds the pen tells the truth.*

Magnificent, thinks Malcolm as he rings the bell, the sound echoing through the cavernous house. He shifts the luggage to one hand and clasps Sienna’s with the other, a silent reminder that they’re in this together.

“This is going to change everything,” he says.

Sienna’s hand tenses in his. She glances over, clearly about to speak, but to Malcolm’s relief, the door swings open first.

...

“WELCOME TO SKELBRAE!”

Sienna takes an involuntary step back, stunned by the pure force

of the enthusiasm coming off the young woman who opens the door. American, obviously, like her, tan skin marked by a smattering of freckles and a mane of blond curls piled on her head. She's pretty in that Girl Scout sort of way. And she really does seem closer to a *girl*, with that thousand-watt smile and boundless energy.

Sienna realizes she's frowning, like the young woman is a plot hole, something to be solved. She quickly rearranges her face.

"Hello!" she says brightly. "You must be . . ."

"I'm Millie!" says the young woman, as if that explains everything. She's bouncing lightly on her toes, as if she can't contain her energy, and as she turns that high-beam smile on Malcolm, Sienna waits to see which way he'll go: flirty or fatherly?

"Well hello, Miss Millie!" he says. Fatherly, then. "I believe you're expecting us. We're Penn Stonely."

Sienna grits her teeth. Malcolm knows full well that she doesn't like to be introduced like that—as if she's one half of a person.

"I'm Sienna," she amends, freeing herself from his grip. "This is Malcolm."

He winks. Maybe not so fatherly, then. "Sorry we're late. We missed our connecting flight . . . terrible fog. You couldn't see a bloody thing. Not. A. Thing! Anyway, we're here now! Better late than never and all that. You must be Arty's assistant."

Arty, as if they're old friends, when the truth is, Malcolm's met Arthur Fletch exactly twice in his life, the first time when Malcolm went to a book signing and the second time with her, five years ago, in a hotel bar where Fletch was holding court mid-conference. The third Petrarch novel had spent a month on the NYT list by then, the first was being filmed. He was surrounded by a dozen sycophantic writers, all hoping some measure of his talent or success would rub off on them.

Fame by osmosis.

Success through sheer proximity.

Malcolm had dragged a stool across the bar, and the sound of those metal feet on the tiles made Sienna want to disappear.

Fletch had patted Malcolm's arm in an indulgent way, but his eyes had lingered on Sienna as he spoke.