

# THE PAST HAS CLAWS

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# The Past Has Claws

## Episode 12



“Anyone seen Billy?” Harriet breezed into the club dining room half an hour after Lulu and was greeted by a chorus of “Not me”, “Nope” and a shaking of heads from the assembled friends, family and staff.

“Not since the rain started” Lulu added helpfully. “He was covering some of the boats and then he was gone. Probably went home to dry off.”

“Hmm. Maybe, but he wouldn’t normally worry about that and would certainly pop in for a beer” mused Harriet.

“Well, I’m sure he’ll turn up, it’s barely lunch time” Lulu answered. Unlike Donald she thought.

The club dining room would normally have been rammed full of junior sailors and their hangers on desperate for their lunch but now racing had been cancelled for the day, the last of them had now disappeared back to their homes to play indoor games with their friends or some other amusement. There were a few locals on the pub side and a few walk-ins who had been caught out in the rain but generally it was quiet.

“Right, That’s it” said Lulu “Fuck everyone else. You sit there, Hats. I’m going to have lunch with my friends!” and with that she marched into the kitchen and physically grabbed Pippa. “We’re going to have a nice lunch! You can manage can’t you Johnnie” she shouted across to the chef, now grinning and nodding as she dragged a complaining Pippa into the dining room to join her daughter. “Tom you’ve got nothing to do so you can wait on us.”

Pippa giggled like a schoolgirl, removed her apron and sat at the table next to Harriet as instructed. “Yes Tom, it’s about time you looked after me.”

Tom’s first instinct was to protest but confronted with the three most formidable women in his life, he quickly decided to play along. He laid a tea towel neatly over one arm and bowed theatrically “At your service ladies. Now, firstly, what can I get you all to drink?”

When Tom had disappeared to the bar to get the drinks Emily and George walked through the door, hand in hand and soaked from the rain. “Wonderful” Pippa and Lulu shouted out in unison. “two more for lunch!”

The lunch continued nicely with Johnnie taking care to produce some family favourites and Tom joining them at the table for the meal. Lulu relaxed a little, coming to terms with her belief that Donald had had a change of heart and had headed to the airport. It had been a nice idea she thought - that she would meet someone nice at this time in her life, but she'd obviously been carried away with wishing and hoping when it had just been a nice chat and a little walk. A bit rude though, for him not to tell her.

Harriet joined in with the chatter, joking with her dad and poking gentle fun at her sister and at George who proved to be an easy target. She kept looking around for Billy and wondered where he was but, in the end managed to convince herself he must have gone home to his boathouse and was enjoying a rare day of rest.

Emily and George sat very close and slowly steamed dry. George was polite and deferential to everyone, especially Tom, who lapped it up and was completely won over by him. Harriet and Lulu rolled their eyes at each other and smiled. Emily beamed.

After he had dutifully cleared away the lunch plates and whilst everyone was choosing dessert, Tom sat back down and tapped his empty wine glass with his spoon to attract everyone's attention. "I've got something I need to say" he began, serious and sober. "Something happened to me..." He continued. Lulu looked at him with incredulity. Surely not? He can't be planning to tell everyone about what happened in London. Not even Tom could be that stupid. Could he? Lulu thought it would be unwise to tell Pippa, although she could sort of understand his reasoning but to tell his whole family and publicly was madness.

She managed to attract the attention of Harriet, who was sitting next to him. Lulu smiled but gave Harriet little shakes of her head and nods toward Tom. Harriet caught on just in time as her father started again. "Something I'm not proud of..." Harriet's arm casually brushed against the bottle of Cotes de Rhone on the table in front of her sending its contents all over Tom's white shirt and his trousers. It had the desired effect of stopping Tom in mid-sentence. Lulu jumped up "Quick, let's get you into the kitchen and that shirt into some soda before it stains" and bundled a confused Tom into the kitchen, shouting at Johnnie to make up some washing soda.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” she whispered to him as soon as the kitchen door swung closed. “You can’t tell everyone together. If you insist on talking about it at all, you need to talk to Pippa first and let her understand. This will be a big thing for her. It is then up to her what she shares. Can’t you see that?”

“I just thought it was a good opportunity, while everyone was together and relaxed...”

“... Yes, to completely ruin the moment and the lunch. Oh Tom. Sometimes you are such an arse” Lulu cut him off.

Johnnie brought Tom a fresh white shirt. Accidents with wine and food weren’t uncommon and there were always a couple of shirts hanging at the back of the kitchen, with the aprons.

“Thanks Johnnie” Lulu smiled and helped Tom on with his shirt. “Now you go out there and tell everyone what you were going to say is that you have realised you have been drinking too much lately so you have decided to have a break or to stop or give up or whatever.”

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“Where’s George?” Harriet spun around in her chair when she heard the familiar voice behind her, and such strong relief washed over and helped by the wine, her face flushed visibly. “Billy. I’m so glad you’re safe” she said, a little overdramatically.

“He’s only been gone a few hours,” laughed Lulu. “Isn’t he allowed to go home and change after being soaked to the skin in the rain?”

Billy had indeed changed and showered. He was as smart as Lulu could remember. His fall from the window ledge of Donald’s room had landed him on the grass made muddy by the deluge. He rolled on the ground on impact and his natural agility had saved him from more than a winding. He had lain there quietly, out of sight when he heard Donald’s mother scream and rolled closer under the ledge of her window as Perkins approached the windows to close the curtains. His arm had taken some impact but nothing a handful of painkillers wouldn’t help.

Something else had changed. For the last four years, the ghosts in his head which had plagued him since childhood had been mostly silent. Yes, they had awoken a little during the previous Friday's altercation with George but were soon quietened when Harriet turned up. It was probably her, her belief in him, her admiration, her love for him which was mostly responsible for their absence. Now though they were raging.

He had made his way back through the path he had made through the young trees - widening it where necessary as he went. He climbed the stairs of the boathouse and tidied and cleaned his little flat. He took the pictures down from behind the curtain and put them in a little safe he had made under the floorboards under his bed, along with his ketamine supply and some other things he didn't want seen. He picked up his stiletto, weighing it in his hand. He toyed with taking it - just in case but thought better of it. Only when everything was hidden did he remove his wet, muddy clothes before showering, washing his hair and cleaning his teeth. He changed his sheets and made his bed and dressed in clean clothes. Once he had double checked everything, he made his way to the sailing club, taking an umbrella as a precaution against any further rain.

It was around six o'clock when he arrived at the club. The lunch had continued in a relaxed fashion, assisted by the wine Tom had happily provided. Emily and George had made their excuses after dessert and had slipped away mostly unnoticed. Tom had made his little announcement about not drinking, which surprised no-one and had stuck to his word, having nothing but water, but was so relaxed following his recent epiphany that he was the same old garrulous Tom. Harriet a little tipsy, stood and proprietorially straightened the collar on Billy's polo shirt which didn't need straightening and brushed non-existent dust from his shoulders. "How's the arm?" she said as she stroked it, desperate to hold him, to touch him, to kiss him but painfully aware that to do so would make him freeze.

"It's a little sore but on the mend" said Billy softly, trying not to wince at her touch because it was actually a lot sore, very painful. "Does anyone know where George is?" He repeated his question, more insistently.

“He left with Emily a while ago. They didn’t say where they were going, but I could make a good guess” Lulu answered, helpfully, trying not to incriminate them and mouthed “sail lofts” to Billy who winked at her shyly.

The sail lofts were just that. A place above the club’s offices where sails were stored. They were a hangover from when the club itself owned a fleet of racing keelboats which had several sets of sails. Largely unused and unvisited by adults, they were only accessible by a rickety wooden ladder and were a favourite haunt of teenage couples seeking some privacy. Lulu had overheard Emily whispering in George’s ear and the latter had apparently, finally relented.

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“We can’t” George whispered to Emily for the fifth time as she tried again to unbuckle his belt. They had kissed, passionately, and cuddled but George had been reserved. Emily had, in the end, unfastened her own bra strap and exposed her breasts to him but he hadn’t taken advantage of what was clearly on offer. In fact, he hadn’t really looked. Instead, he pulled her towards him and just held her. And all that did was to increase her frustration.

“George, I want you. I really want you” In the half light of the sail loft she did her best to look sexy. George was having none of it. “We can’t. You are too young”

“I consent George. I fucking consent. I want you.”

“That’s the whole point” George said quietly “You can’t consent. In three-weeks’ time when you’re sixteen you can but until then you can’t, and I’ll be toast.”

“You weren’t worried last Friday. Don’t you fancy me now?”

“I know, I know, I hadn’t thought it through then and I didn’t really know how old you were - And your sister hadn’t read me the riot act.” He added without answering her question.

“And you hadn’t had the confrontation with Billy” Emily said under her breath. George didn’t hear.

Emily found herself frustrated and desperate for him but at the same time full of admiration for his reserve, his control. She knew he was interested in her and could see he was excited and yes, maybe it was fear holding him back but whatever, he was so strong willed she thought. Just then something caught her eye. She looked up in the gloom and let out an involuntary scream. Billy was crouching under the eaves, looking straight at her, less than two metres away.

As Billy made his way from the sailing club dining room to the bottom of the ladder leading to the sail lofts, he redoubled his focus. Apart from Matt, the old Bo’sun who had helped him learn many of his boatbuilding skills when he had been a boy and helped him recover and restore Sea Lion, he had never sought or accepted any help from anyone, and he was particularly reluctant to ask George to help him, but, he reasoned, it was George’s fault he needed some help.

George was fit and strong and in need of redemption. Anyway, who else could he ask who would follow instruction without question? Certainly, neither Lulu nor Harriet. Tom was just weak. No, there was only George. He climbed the steep ladder slowly, his arm hurting and reminding him why he was there. He squinted across to where he could hear voices to find Emily naked from the waist up, screaming at him.

George had seen Billy too and was in full panic. "I swear, I haven't touched her. I promise. Tell him you did that" George gestured to Emily's exposed bosom which she was now desperately attempting to cover up but without much success.

Billy averted his gaze from Emily and locked eyes with George. "I need you to be outside my boathouse just after dark tonight. Wear long trousers and long sleeves in dark colours. Oh, and bring your bat." And with that he was gone, silently back down the ladder. Not waiting for agreement. Emily had now managed to dress herself. She looked at George, he stared back. Neither spoke.

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Just before 9pm, George arrived at the boathouse, suitably dressed and equipped. Billy appeared similarly dressed and wearing a large black rucksack across both shoulders. "Thanks for coming" He said quietly, unusually polite, appreciative that George had done as instructed. He gave George a pair of gloves. "Put these on."

"Come on" he almost whispered, and he headed towards the path which led to Napiers. He briefed George with the minimum of information on their way through the trees.

They stopped at Billy's original hole in the fence and looked for lights. Billy removed his rucksack and, taking care not to let their lenses reflect the lights from the house, took out an elderly pair of field glasses and surveyed the scene. He could see light from the back, ground floor which he surmised must be coming from Mrs Napier's room and as before there was a bright light shining from Donald's room. "The driver is either with the old lady or up with the Australian. The front door has a handle, and I'll bet it's not locked. We can cut in close to the front of the house and try it. That will be the easiest approach."

Under clear but silent direction from Billy, George, crouched down, while Billy slowly pushed on the handle, holding his breath and hoping that the door would open and that it wouldn't squeak. They had made it along the rest of the path through the trees with only a few scratches. They both froze when one of the perimeter security lights had been triggered momentarily but there was no obvious reaction, and no-one came out.

Of all the people in her life, Billy was the one who made Emily feel most safe. She loved her father who could be charming and charismatic, but she knew now he was a little flaky to say the least. Auntie Lu was lovely but hadn't been around much. Harriet was a great older sister and Emily's *confident* and of course there was her mother who was generally OK, but there was something about Billy. He'd been around all her life and was ever present now. Always at the right place at the right time. Always seemingly watching out for her, like some guardian angel.

However, now she was worried. Maybe she was a bit possessive about George or maybe it was Billy's almost throw away request that George should bring his baseball bat. Whatever it was, now she was alone, Emily found herself anxious.

She knew George *had* to go with him, there was no question that he wouldn't - she and George hadn't even discussed it, they both knew. She smiled when she thought how George was showing himself to be such a good man now. She smiled and blushed as she remembered screaming when she saw Billy's face appear at the top of the ladder. What was funny, she thought was that of all people she was less concerned that it was Billy who got an eyeful - 'it was just Billy'. She smiled at recalling the little phrase she had heard so often since childhood and how he had always been underestimated.

Emily walked back to Harriet's flat above the club to find both Harriet and Lulu sleeping off their long lunch. Lulu on the sofa. She was bursting to tell them about Billy.....and George. Despite Emily's attempt to be quiet she managed to disturb Lulu, who woke up, fuzzy headed and struggled to understand the stream of words which poured immediately from Emily.

"Whoa whoa! Hold on miss. Go and put the kettle on for a cup of tea will you while I nip to the loo and then you can tell me slowly and quietly."

After Emily had told her all she knew, more calmly this time and she had finished her tea, Lulu thought for a moment and decided they would need to wake Harriet and then all go to Billy's boathouse. Emily was co-opted to take Harriet her tea in her room and Lulu followed a couple minutes later. Harriet didn't need any convincing she was up and ready in seconds.

The sky was clearing now, and the new moon shone gently through the remaining cloud. To the relief of both George and Billy, the handle of Napiers front door moved easily and noiselessly when Billy pushed it down. He felt the catch open and turned to George and needlessly put his finger to his lips and signalled for him to follow. George took a deep breath as Billy slowly opened the door and stepped into the house.

Suddenly the hall light went on. "Got you you little bastard" Perkins threw a rope over Billy's head whilst he was temporarily blinded by the bright light. Perkins had been alerted by the security light triggering and had stood in wait by the door. He pulled the noose tight around Billy's neck, so Billy choked, and his legs buckled under him. Not realising that Billy wasn't alone Perkins bent down to Billy and started firing questions at him. George saw Billy losing consciousness and panicked. He swung the baseball bat with as much strength as he could muster in the narrow hallway, and it smashed into the back of Perkins' skull with a sickening thud. Perkins collapsed to the floor.

George set about removing the ligature around Billy's neck. Billy lay motionless. George had no idea what to do and thought of running but, trying to calm himself, he pumped desperately on Billy's chest where he thought the heart was and tried to remember the lesson, he had had years ago on mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. He moved himself into position and prepared to start, when Billy coughed, and his eyes opened. George jumped back in surprise.

Billy came to and rubbed his throat. His head was throbbing. George was so relieved he nearly hugged him but remembered it was Billy and stopped himself. Billy threw some of the painkillers from his pocket into his mouth and stood up gingerly. He looked over at Perkins' slumped figure on the floor and knelt again to check for breathing or a pulse. There were neither. He rubbed his own shoulder ruefully and reflected that that's how he might have ended up if he hadn't managed to get his arms up in time the previous Friday evening.

He stood and turned to George "He's not going to bother us anymore" he said quietly.

George started to panic again. “Oh shit shit shit! I didn’t mean to....” Billy silenced him, putting one hand across George’s mouth and a finger to his own lips. “Help me take him up the stairs”

The two men struggled with the considerable weight of Perkins’ body but managed eventually to get it up the stairs and into a spare room next to the one Donald was in.

“We don’t know what we are going to find in here” Billy said quietly as he placed his gloved hand on the handle to Donald’s room. “You stay out here until I call you in.”

Donald was alive but snoring heavily through the ball gag. A half empty litre bottle of vodka was on the floor by the side of the bed from where Perkins’s had poured most of it down his throat through the funnel. Donald had clearly vomited some of it back up and more than once. Billy called George in. “You’re going to take him back to the boathouse once we’ve cut him free and woken him up. You’ll need to help him and walk him round a bit first. He’ll be very disorientated.” Whilst he was speaking, he checked Donald’s pockets and found the small brass key he had been looking for.

Billy then took a couple of sharp craft knives from his rucksack, handed one to George and very carefully started cutting the strap of the ball gag. He took the water bottle Perkins had brought up and emptied most of its contents over Donald’s face, slapping it gently as he did so. Donald came round with a start. Billy had to quieten him. He explained that they were there to rescue him. He gave Donald the remaining water to sip then he and George set about cutting through the luggage straps which bound him. Billy rubbed Donald’s ankles and wrists vigorously where the straps had been to get the blood flowing. “You’re going to need to take it easy. Your legs won’t work for a bit. George here is going to take you to my place to clean up and recover.” He packed some of Donald’s clothes into a holdall and gave it to George. “Take him, slowly. I’ll sort out everything here.

After he had heard the front door close behind the two of them, Billy set about tidying the room and removing any trace of Donald’s bondage. He then dragged Perkins’ now cold body to the top step of the stairs and hauled it to a standing position before letting it fall backwards all the way down, banging off several stairs and the wall as it did so.

He poured what was left of the vodka into its mouth knowing that his little reconstruction wouldn't fool a serious investigation or post-mortem but might satisfy some sloppy policeman into believing Perkins had fallen down the stairs whilst drunk.

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George navigated a drowsy and completely compliant Donald through the trees using the now bright moon as his guide. He half carried him where the width of the path allowed. Donald stumbled frequently but they arrived at the boathouse without incident where they were met by Lulu, Harriet and Emily.

Lulu was more than a little surprised to see Donald. She wanted to hug him and kiss him and welcome him back and apologise for doubting him, but instead her maternal instincts kicked in and, with help from George she walked Donald up the stairs of the boathouse, opened the unlocked door and helped him off with his clothes and into the shower, where Billy had provided fresh towels. She barked orders at George to get some clean clothes out of the holdall and only when Donald was washed and changed and laying on Billy's bed did she allow herself to put her arms around him. Donald had now come fully awake and asked if there was any food. Billy had foreseen this and there was bread and cheese and chocolate in the fridge which Lulu delighted in feeding to a ravenous Donald who gorged himself ignoring her pleas for him to eat slowly.

For her part Emily was so proud of her man she nearly burst and smothered George in hugs and kisses and told him he was so brave and so wonderful and her hero.

"Where's Billy?" Harriet asked as soon as she could get George's attention. George explained that Billy was just coming but had to tidy up a few things first. Harriet waited fifteen minutes, spending the time walking around Billy's flat, examining everything in detail and remarking to anyone who would listen on the minutiae that only she would find interesting: How clean and tidy it was. How it was much more comfortable than she would have imagined and even her surprise that he had a king size bed.

“It’s been too long. I’m going to go and find him” she said at last. George, worried that she might see Perkins’ body, tried to stop her with assurances that Billy would be back soon, but he soon realised the futility of his attempt. Harriet ran down the stairs and along the path.

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After packing up Donald's remaining belongings into the remaining holdall, Billy descended the stairs, carefully stepping around Perkins' crumpled body. He found the bureau easily enough and filled the holdall with the big wads of high denomination notes and put all the dossiers Perkins had so carefully and painstakingly created, into his rucksack before locking the bureau again.

One more room to visit before leaving. Dropping the holdall outside, Billy switched off the hall light and slowly turned the handle of the door to Mrs Napier's room. It was silent save for the deep breathing coming from the bed and dark except for the ghostly green glow of the monitors. Although Billy had nothing particularly against Donald's mother, she had, he reflected caused a lot of problems and pain for a lot of people, she was dying anyway, and she was a dangerous loose end. The ghosts in his head spoke louder and louder.

He took a few steps nearer the bed, looked at the sleeping figure and opened the morphine drip in her arm to full. Mrs Napier's eyes opened. She had been woken by the commotion at the Front door and heard everything. Frightened, she had pretended to be asleep when she heard Billy open her door. She sat bolt upright and screamed at a startled Billy. In her right hand she held the hypodermic syringe full of the powerful sedative Perkins had prepared for her and had left on the bedside trolley. She now stabbed Billy with it, plunging it into his neck again and again with surprising force for a woman so close to death.

By the time Billy managed to stop her she had injected him with most of the sedative. The ghosts howled now. He pushed the old lady back onto the bed and held his gloved hand over her nose and mouth until she stopped breathing.

He ran out of the room, collecting the holdall full of money at the door and stumbled out of the house.

Harriet was in a hurry. She fought through the trees and branches in her desperation to get to Billy, convinced he was in trouble. As she got close to Billy's hole in the fence, she saw bright lights shining through it from the garden. All the security lights had been triggered. Looking through the hole she saw the figure of a man with two large bags lying face down on the grass. "Billy!" she screamed and kicked down the fence panel and sprinted across the lawn.

When she reached him, she was relieved to find he was breathing but was alarmed at the blood pouring from his neck wounds. She tried to wake him, but he was out cold. She pulled off her vest top, exposing herself to the night and, cradling him in her lap she wrapped it around his neck, trying to staunch the bleeding. She stroked his head and held him tightly against her naked chest rocking gently and whispering to him, unable and unwilling to do anything else, reassuring them both that Billy would be OK.

They were still there when, sometime later, a much-recovered Donald, arm in arm with Lulu, and George and Emily found them, concerned neither had returned. After a good deal of persuading Harriet, the men gently prised Billy from her arms and carried him back to the boathouse. Lulu and Emily tried to cover Harriet, but she ignored them and ran after George and Donald. In the boathouse they carefully lay Billy on the bed and Harriet laid down with him, still half naked and oblivious, holding him to her chest, stroking him and whispering reassurances whilst the others discussed what they should do.

Whilst they were still discussing, Billy opened his eyes, smiled shyly at Harriet before closing them again. He didn't freeze. He didn't try to get away but surrendered himself to the situation. Harriet kissed his forehead.

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The End