

*The Town Drunk*

*Presents*

# It Could Happen

*Tina Connolly*

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*The virile mutant werewolf was ravenous again.*

*On the prowl, he searched for a hapless victim. Nubile girls in tiger-striped lingerie were his first choice. But anyone would do. Anyone at all. As long as he feasted on fresh human flesh before the full moon rose, he could remain human. Not have to suffer The Change. Not have to rampage through Miami, hellbent on a bloody whirlwind of destruction.*

*He was doing mankind a favor.*

*Just one human...*

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Chuck Greene sighed. His shoulders slumped, and his fingers sunk to the keyboard with a “dlkk // .”

It had actually been a good year.

*Hellwhore Rides the El* had slaughtered through 32 weeks on the NY Times Bestseller List and been published in 36 countries around the globe. *Their Teeth Again Glistened with Evil*, sequel to the runaway bestseller, made an amount of money more obscene than the Things with the evilly-glistening teeth.

So why did he feel jaded, disgruntled, and envious?

He knew.

He called up his ex-wife’s website with one click. (It was his home page.)

There it was, *The Reason*, in offensively modest black Arial font. Thea Pradner, author of *Their Willows Laughed at Dusk*, winner of the National Book Award.

Oh, she hadn't made any money off that book. If it weren't for his alimony checks—half the money from *Hellwhore Rides the El* had gone to her—she'd be back working retail at B&N.

But at least she had respect.

At least she had the admiration of her peers, and her friends (*their* friends, once), and of both their mothers. “Gleaming, glorious fiction” (Adjunct Professors' Monthly Magazine), powered by teeth-glistening evil. It was a contradiction she was apparently able to live with.

Chuck clicked back to his Word document and skimmed it. His lip curled in self-loathing. Another bestseller. Another reworking of his magic formula. The “things” this time? Werewolves—a mutant strain that must consume human flesh, while in human form, to stop themselves from The Change. The girl? A curvy young kindergarten teacher. The unsuspecting place? The humid streets of his new hometown, Miami. All the scary words were there, italicized and capitalized to portray their True Horror.

He was rich. He had everything his inner geek had ever desired. *Except R-E-S-P-E-C-T*. He remembered Thea, calm and curvy, sneering at *Hellwhore* during their divorce proceedings. “A man who writes about demon prostitutes—fantasies too juvenile for *Penthouse!*” Even his own lawyer had laughed. The memory consumed Chuck. Feasted on him.

So Chuck called on a friend.

The entity who had gotten him his start in the horror biz.

Mezuel.

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“What do you think?” Chuck asked when he had finished outlining his problem.

The demon rolled all three of his eyes. “You’ve already promised me two and a half centuries for your current status. What’s wrong with being the richest horror writer in the field?”

“That’s exactly it,” said Chuck. “When I made the bargain, I told you I wanted to be a *rich* writer. Not a rich *horror* writer.”

Mezuel snorted a tiny, sulphurous puff of smoke. “Don’t tell me you mean *literary*.”

“Ding ding ding!” Chuck intoned, tapping his nose like a doorbell. “I want to be respected.”

“I thought you wanted to be rich.”

“Of course I do. I want both. I used to write straight fiction. I didn’t think you’d change that—just make me rich off of it.”

“Mmm-hmm,” said the demon. He bent down to brush some ashes off his polished hooves. “Look, there are about two slots in the world for rich non-genre authors, and both of them had to do B-movie tie-ins to actually get the dough.”

“Uh-uh. No tie-ins. Not unless it’s Miramax.”

“And they certainly weren’t cheapo Scrooge McDucks.” Another smoky snort. “250 years, my cleft hooves! You want the near-impossible, you pay the full price.”

“No.”

“Then you settle.”

“Not likely. I know you want more time from me. If you were rolling in clients, you wouldn’t have settled so low last time. I’ll give you another 250 years if you can make it happen.”

Mezuel’s eyes narrowed at the slur on his business, but he remained calm. “I’m not omnipotent, you know. I’m just a broker. It’s all black market and barter. The strings I’d have to pull... getting you a publisher would cost me a thousand years alone.”

“300.”

“Are your ears working? Look. You want to be a literary writer. A rich literary writer.”

“Right. No more genre. Fiction only. The day-to-day stuff. The stuff people respect.”

“You’d enjoy writing that boring *New Yorker* tripe? Right now you get to write thinly disguised revenge fantasies about your hot ex-wife. Be content.”

The demon had a point. But those revenge fantasies weren’t winning him any points with his hot ex-wife, either. “‘Boring tripe’ is what I did before you made me a horror writer. I wrote about reality.”

“Making you genre was the easiest way to get what you wanted. You get what you pay for.”

“You could have at least made my genre ‘True Crime.’ 325.”

There was a pause. Mezuel stroked one of his shiny red horns thoughtfully. A small fiery gleam lit his central purple eye.

“You’ve thought of something.”

“Maybe.”

“I knew it.”

“Let’s get this straight,” said the demon. “You want to be a rich writer. Non-genre. One of those spineless twerps who writes stuff that could actually happen.”

Chuck ran Mezuel’s words through his mind. He saw almost no holes. “Yes. That’s what I want. Minus the spineless twerpy part.”

A double puff of smoke. “There might be a way.”

“I knew it.”

“It’ll cost you four millenia. Four thousand years.”

“What? No. Four hundred.”

“I’m leaving.” Mezuel gathered himself into a preparatory ball of flame.

“No! All right, I give in.” Now that he was committed, his stomach knotted. For a brief moment he wondered whether it was worth it. But the image of a clipping his ex-wife had sent him, a pixellated photo of Thea air-kissing the ambassador of Finland, fired into his brain like a pistol shot. He burned with jealousy. “All right. Like you said, 3500.”

Mezuel’s head reformed from the blaze. “3600 and you have a deal.”

“Well...”

The demon’s head became blurry.

“Deal! Fine, deal. But no tricks this time.”

“I try to give good service, and look at the thanks I get.”

“So when will it happen?”

“I’ll have to pull the strings, run some programs... instantaneous, in your time.”

“Then go.”

“Yes, boss,” the flame said icily, and then it was gone.

Instantaneous, Mezuel had said.

Chuck smiled. He rolled his chair back to the computer desk, flexed his biceps, and cracked his knuckles. He poised his fingers over the dull khaki keyboard, ready for the fountain of deathless, literary, yet accessible prose that was about to come streaming from his fingers.

His fingers touched the keyboard. It was sensuous, somehow. Erotic. Hypnotic. Anticipation

in the warmth of the touch.

Chuck hit the return key, and typed.

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*Just one succulent human...*

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“Dammit, Mezuel!” He calmed himself. Perhaps “instantaneous” to an immortal was not quite what it was to a mortal. A matter of perspective, after all. He would wait. Five more seconds. He reached across his desk and turned on a small fan, pointing it at the superheated air Mezuel had vacated. He should remember to summon demons only in the winter; Miami summers were wretched enough without bringing Hellfire into his heavily air-conditioned apartment. Of course, if Mezuel didn’t cheat him again, there would be no need to re-summon the demon. Unless it was to thank him. Invite him over for some devilled eggs and devil’s food cake.

Chuckling, Chuck returned his fingers to the keyboard and cautiously typed a ‘T.’ His fingers took off at their normal velocity, clattering over the keys.

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*The mutant werewolf sniffed the air. He could hear a human working in the apartment next door, smell human flesh in the humid Miami air. Was this too close to home? he wondered. Might he get caught, feasting in his own apartment complex? But the Need was too great. He had put off feasting for too long. He must consume Human, and soon.*

*Out into the shadowy hall he stepped, thinking up an excuse to get into the apartment. Perhaps he would affect a snobby accent, ask to borrow a cup of sugar. That usually worked.*

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Chuck snatched his fingers away from the keys, breathing heavily. Nothing was different. He was still writing the fantastical, not the merely fictional. Anger surged through his brain and curled his fingers. He reached for the bottle of sulfuric acid, ready to summon Mezuel again, ready to yell and scream and damn him to wherever it was you damned demons. But the bottle was empty.

His swearing was interrupted by a knock at the door. In the past he would have ignored it, but now there was always the hope that Thea had relented. Sent him a special package, or showed up herself in a tiger-striped négligée—a farfetched hope, but there it was. He went to the door, running his deal with Mezuel over in his head, looking for where the demon had betrayed him. A fiction writer, he had said. Who wrote about stuff that could actually happen.

A large, burly man stood in the dimly-lit hallway. “Yes?” Chuck said. *Stuff that could actually*

*happen...* “What is it?”

The man breathed quickly, as if tormented by inner demons. “Pardon me...” he began.

It was a reassuring voice, the sort of voice you could immediately trust. Chuck opened the door a little wider. Wait, hadn’t he written...

“Might I borrow a cup of sugar?” asked Chuck’s neighbor.

Chuck slammed the door and threw the bolt home.

His spine was a snake of ice. *This* was what Mezuél had meant. Writing about things that could actually happen, indeed. Mezuél meant not only to cheat him but to get him started on those 3600—no, count them all—3850 years.

His heart thudded in his chest. The doorknob clicked back and forth like a metronome. The virile mutant werewolf was still out there—couldn’t he just make up his mind to barge in?

Chuck laughed. It was a shaky, deal-with-the-devil-gone-south kind of laugh, but it was laughter.

Of course—Chuck was the writer.

He tottered over to his cushy chair and let his knees buckle.

Click. Click.

How much control did he have over this story? Since Mezuél had made him a horror writer, he had been unable to write litfic. He could control the minutiae of the plot, the trappings—but mostly he just let the pen take him wherever the horror genre muse led.

It was a genre that included Hell itself...

Inspiration glimmered in Chuck’s head. But first he had to deal with the werewolf at his door.

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*The man slammed the door in his face. Must not have any sugar. The mutant werewolf clicked the doorknob back and forth, figuring the odds. The man was short and pudgy—*

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*Hey!* thought Chuck.

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*—surely he could overcome such a pitiful human. But on second thought, breaking the door in*

*might call too much attention to himself. Frail, old, trusting Mrs. Cheevy lived in 214. She had once invited him in for Lorna Doones.*

*The mutant werewolf would go there.*

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Chuck leaned back, flexing his fingers. Too bad for Mrs. Cheevy and her shortbread. But it was every man for himself these days.

He was out of sulfuric acid—but he knew someone who wasn't. Time to see how far his power extended. Feed the trusting writer to the virile mutant werewolves, would Mezz?

Chuck opened a new Word doc.

“[Insert horrific hook here],” he typed. Then...

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*The Horror Writer pulled his last pint of sulfuric acid from the dusty cupboard, dumped it all into his ex-wife's ex-mixing bowl, poured in the canister of Secret Ingredients and added a soupçon of dill. As the dill hit the surface, the smoky form of a familiar demon flickered into being.*

*“Really, Mezzel,” said the Horror Writer. “Did you expect to finish me off that easily?”*

*“One can always hope,” said the demon. He shook out an asbestos handkerchief and blotted a drop of acid from his forehead. “Did you call me for anything in particular?”*

*“Rich non-genre,” said the Horror Writer.*

*The demon spread his thirteen fingers and chuckled.*

*“I'm a funny guy,” said the Horror Writer. “I can take a joke.”*

*“Is that so?”*

*“But I didn't give up 3500 years so you can kill me quicker.”*

*“3600. It doesn't matter how fussy you are. There's still only two slots, and they both—”*

*“Both were turned into vehicles for Mark Hamill. I know.”*

*“So if we're done here...?” The demon prepared to whisk himself back to flame and smoke.*

*“Not so fast.” The Horror Writer grinned, anticipating the shock of his next words. “I'm the*

writer here, see. And this is all happening in my latest bestseller.”

Two of the demon’s eyes widened in realization. It was quite gratifying. “Your carpet was better in your real life,” the demon murmured.

“You dare take my writing and turn it into stuff that could happen.” The Horror Writer raised his keyboard menacingly. “I’ll show you stuff that could happen.”

“Could happen, not is happening. I didn’t give you that much control.”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

This was undeniable. The pudgy balding Horror Writer had that much on the demon.

“Only because you could have a spare bottle of sulfuric acid doesn’t mean I’ll bargain with you,” said the demon. “If you think you can write dreck into my purple mouth you’re mistaken.”

Blood rushed into Chuck’s face, distending his cheeks. His pudgy figure shook.

The demon smirked. “You see? So I’ll just be going. Thanks for the chat. Oh, and see you soon.” He fluttered seven of his fingers at the Horror Writer.

The Horror Writer might be pudgy, but he was no mental slouch. “Not so fast. If you’ve turned my writing into stuff that could happen, then I ought to be able to write myself out of horror and into a new genre. Declining sales, bad cover art, stores who won’t face your books—it happens all the time. A redemption arc, if you will. The Horror Writer, faced with deadly peril, turns to a life of—”

“Christian Inspiration?” sneered the demon. “You won’t save your soul that easily.”

“No, it wouldn’t pay,” said the Horror Writer. “I’ve been studying the market. I’m going into Romantica.”

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then the demon started laughing. Tears of blood ran from the corners of his eyes.

“What’s so funny?”

“No, no, stop,” said the demon, convulsing in and out of flame in his hysteria. “You’re saving me.” His pointed tail lashed the ground as he struggled to control his laughter. “Don’t tell me—you think you’ll have beautiful women dying to have X-rated fantasies with you. Blondes and brunettes, knocking at your door—your ex-wife, even.”

“It could happen,” protested the Horror Writer.

The demon went into another silent spasm of laughter.

*The pudgy man ran a hand over his balding scalp. “Not now, maybe. Not with werewolves roaming the halls.”*

*The demon wiped at his reddened eyes. “And here I thought you wanted re, re...respect.” His words were punctuated by sulfurous hoots of laughter.*

*“Oh, stuff respect! I’m talking girls. Anyway, what do you have to do with it? I can write myself into a new career. It could happen. And then those eager, bouncy girls will be things that could happen. You just watch.”*

*“Suit yourself,” said the demon, and he went up in a cloud of cheap cigar smoke.*

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*And as the dying sun set on the bloodied remains of his dead neighbor’s curvy young granddaughter, the Horror Writer sank to the ground and swore to dedicate the rest of his career to making women happy.*

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One level up, Chuck leaned back in his chair with a satisfied sigh. Old life out, new life in, and *Charla Greenerie* would soon be climbing the charts of the hot, young, sex-in-the-city bestsellers list, catering to lusty women’s deepest fantasies. He rubbed his hands together. Thea would see. She’d come crawling back.

And now for the payoff. If he was signing over nearly four millennia to the demon, his next four decades were going to be memorable. So what if his office wasn’t much of a love den—the sulfur-stained carpet had seen better days—the nubile young women of his fantasies wouldn’t mind. They’d want him regardless. They were strong and passionate and always up for something just a little bit naughty, those modern girls of the genre.

Chair.

Word document.

ASDF, JKL:.

And now the fun part...

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*“I’m leaving you,” said Lea Lander, the hot young editorial assistant clad only in her tiger-striped lingerie.*

*“What? But...” stammered the fat bald guy.*

*“That’s right,” said Lea. “It’s the first day of the rest of my life, and I’m free. My love life is going to change, and the first thing I’m going to do is something I should have done a long time ago. Walk out that door!”*

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*“And stay out!” said Rhea Radner, the hot young stockbroker in the half-buttoned black Prada suit and Jimmy Choos.*

*“This isn’t what I wanted!” said the fat bald guy. He clutched desperately at the hem of her pantleg.*

*“Ew! No peeping tom landlords!” Rhea said, and threw her celery martini all over his shiny head.*

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*“Why don’t you come back to my place?” said Mia Madder, the hot young starlet with the pink handbag full of dog.*

*“This is more like it,” said the fat bald guy, climbing into the limousine.*

*“Raoul likes to warm up by tying up some guy before we do it.” Mia pointed a pink fingernail at the muscled bulk filling the backseat of the limo. “And, whatever keeps Raoul happy...”*

*The muscled bulk smiled and reached a ham-handed fist towards the fat bald guy.*

*“It isn’t supposed to happen like this,” squealed the fat bald guy. “I’m supposed to be the hero. I’m supposed to be the one getting the chicks.”*

*Raoul’s hand closed on the fat bald guy’s collar. His handsome tanned face, so near to the bald guy’s fat one, was manly and rugged, yet sensitive and poetic. Now on his lips there was a hint—barely a flicker—of a demonic smile.*

*“Nah,” he said easily. “That couldn’t happen.”*

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**Tina Connolly** is a face painter in Portland, Oregon. Her credits include *Son and Foe*, *Andromeda Spaceways Inflight Magazine*, and *Ideomancer*, and she attended Clarion West 2006. She has a large grey cat and a medium peach husband.

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