Jeffrey Archer

Be Careful What You Wish For

A Novel
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FOR
ALSO BY JEFFREY ARCHER

NOVELS
Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less
Shall We Tell the President?
Kane & Abel
The Prodigal Daughter
First Among Equals
A Matter of Honor
As the Crow Flies
Honor Among Thieves
The Fourth Estate
The Eleventh Commandment
Sons of Fortune
False Impression
The Gospel According to Judas
(with the assistance of Professor Francis J. Moloney)
A Prisoner of Birth
Paths of Glory
Only Time Will Tell
The Sins of the Father
Best Kept Secret

SHORT STORIES
A Quiver Full of Arrows
A Twist in the Tale
Twelve Red Herrings
The Collected Short Stories
To Cut a Long Story Short
Cat O’ Nine Tails
And Thereby Hangs a Tale

PLAYS
Beyond Reasonable Doubt
Exclusive
The Accused

PRISON DIARIES
Volume One—Belmarsh: Hell
Volume Two—Wayland: Purgatory
Volume Three—North Sea Camp: Heaven

SCREENPLAYS
Mallory: Walking Off the Map
False Impression
To
Gwyneth
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THE BARRINGTONS

Sir Walter m. Mary
Barrington 1866–1942
1874–1945

Phyllis m. Andrew
1875–
Harvey 1868–1945
1878–1945

Nicholas
1894–1918

Hugo m. Elizabeth
1896–1943
Harvey 1900–1951

Giles
1920–

Emma
1921–

Grace
1923–

Jessica
(see facing chart)
Sebastian tightened his grip on the steering wheel of the little MG. The lorry behind him touched his rear bumper and jolted the car forward, sending its number plate flying high into the air. Sebastian tried to advance a couple more feet, but he couldn’t go any faster without running into the lorry in front of him and being squeezed between the two of them like a concertina. A few seconds later they were nudged forward a second time as the lorry behind them drove into the back of the MG with considerably more force, pushing it to within a foot of the lorry in front. It was only when the rear lorry hit them a third time that Bruno’s words *Are you certain you’re making the right decision?* flashed into Sebastian’s mind. He glanced across at his friend Bruno who was white with fear, clinging on to the dashboard with both hands. “They’re trying to kill us,” he screamed. “For God’s sake, Seb, do something!”

Sebastian looked helplessly across at the southbound traffic to see a steady stream of vehicles heading in the opposite direction. When the lorry in front began to slow down, he knew that if they were to have any hope of surviving, he had to make a decision, and make it quickly. He glanced across to the other side of the road, desperately searching for a gap in the traffic. When the lorry behind hit him for a fourth time, he knew he’d been left with no choice.

He yanked the steering wheel firmly to the right, careered across the grass verge and straight into the face of the oncoming vehicles. Sebastian pressed his foot hard down on the accelerator
and prayed they would reach the safety of the wide open fields that stretched in front of him before a car could hit them.

A van and a car threw on their brakes and swerved to avoid the little MG as it shot across the road in front of them. Just for a moment, Sebastian thought he might make it, until he saw the tree looming up in front of him. He took his foot off the accelerator and swung the steering wheel to the left, but it was too late. The last thing Sebastian heard was Bruno screaming.
HARRY AND EMMA

1957–1958
Harry Clifton was woken by the sound of a phone ringing. He was in the middle of a dream, but couldn’t remember what it was about. Perhaps the insistent metallic sound was just part of his dream. He reluctantly turned over and blinked at the little phosphorescent green hands on the bedside clock: 6:43 a.m. He smiled. Only one person would consider calling him at that time in the morning. He picked up the phone and murmured in an exaggeratedly sleepy voice, “Good morning, my darling.” There was no immediate response, and for a moment Harry wondered if the hotel operator had put the call through to the wrong room. He was about to replace the receiver when he heard sobbing. “Is that you, Emma?”

“Yes,” came the reply.
“What’s the matter?” he asked soothingly.
“Sebastian is dead.”

Harry didn’t reply immediately, because he now wanted to believe he was still dreaming. “How can that be possible?” he eventually said. “I spoke to him only yesterday.”

“He was killed this morning,” said Emma, clearly only able to manage a few words at a time.

Harry sat bolt upright, suddenly wide awake.
“In a car accident,” continued Emma between sobs.

Harry tried to remain calm as he waited for her to tell him exactly what had happened.

“They were traveling up to Cambridge together.”

“They?” repeated Harry.
“Sebastian and Bruno.”
“Is Bruno still alive?”
“Yes. But he’s in a hospital in Harlow, and they’re not sure if he’ll make it through the night.”

Harry threw back the blanket and placed his feet on the carpet. He was freezing, and felt sick. “I’ll take a taxi to the airport immediately and catch the first flight back to London.”

“I’m going straight to the hospital,” said Emma. She didn’t add anything else, and Harry wondered for a moment if the line had gone dead. Then he heard her whisper, “They need someone to identify his body.”

Emma replaced the receiver, but it was some time before she could gather enough strength to stand up. She eventually made her way unsteadily across the room, clinging on to several pieces of furniture, like a sailor in a storm. She opened the drawing room door to find Marsden standing in the hall, his head bowed. She had never known their old retainer to show the slightest emotion in front of a member of the family, and hardly recognized the shrunken figure now clutching on to the mantelpiece for support; the usual mask of self-composure had been replaced with the cruel reality of death.

“Mabel has packed an overnight case for you, madam,” he stammered, “and if you’ll allow me, I’ll drive you to the hospital.”

“Thank you, Marsden, that’s most considerate of you,” Emma said as he opened the front door for her.

Marsden took her arm as they made their way down the steps toward the car; the first time he’d ever touched the mistress. He opened the door, and she climbed in and sank into the leather upholstery, as if she was an old lady. Marsden switched on the ignition, shifted the gear lever into first and set out on the long journey from the Manor House to the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Harlow.

Emma suddenly realized she hadn’t rung her brother or sister to let them know what had happened. She would call Grace and Giles this evening, when they were more likely to be alone. This was not something she wanted to share when strangers might be present. And then she felt a piercing pain in her stomach, as if she’d
been stabbed. Who was going to tell Jessica that she would never see her brother again? Would she ever be the same cheerful little girl who ran around Seb like an obedient puppy, tail wagging with unbridled adoration? Jessica must not hear the news from someone else’s lips, which meant that Emma would have to return to the Manor House as quickly as possible.

Marsden pulled into the forecourt of the local garage, where he usually filled up on a Friday afternoon. When the petrol pump attendant spotted Mrs. Clifton sitting in the back seat of the green Austin A30, he touched the rim of his cap. She didn’t acknowledge him, and the young man wondered if he’d done something wrong. He filled the tank and then lifted the bonnet to check the oil. Once he’d slammed the bonnet back down he touched the rim of his hat again, but Marsden drove off without a word, not parting with the usual sixpence.

“What’s got into them?” murmured the young man as the car disappeared.

Once they were back on the road, Emma tried to recall the exact words the Peterhouse college admissions tutor had used when he haltingly told her the news. I’m sorry to have to tell you, Mrs. Clifton, that your son has been killed in a motor car accident. Beyond the stark statement, Mr. Padgett seemed to know very little—but then, as he explained, he was no more than the messenger.

Questions kept colliding in Emma’s mind. Why had her son been traveling to Cambridge by car, when she’d bought him a train ticket only a couple of days before? Who had been driving, Sebastian or Bruno? Were they going too fast? Had a tire burst? Had another car been involved? So many questions, but she doubted if anyone knew all the answers.

A few minutes after the tutor had called, the police had rung to ask if Mr. Clifton would be able to visit the hospital to identify the body. Emma explained that her husband was in New York on a book tour. She might not have agreed to take his place if she’d realized that he would be back in England the following day. Thank God he was coming by plane and wouldn’t have to spend five days crossing the Atlantic, mourning alone.

As Marsden drove through unfamiliar towns, Chippenham,
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Newbury, Slough, Don Pedro Martinez interrupted Emma’s thoughts more than once. Was it possible that he could have been seeking revenge for what had taken place in Southampton just a few weeks ago? But if the other person in the car was Martinez’s son Bruno, that didn’t make any sense. Emma’s thoughts returned to Sebastian as Marsden left the Great West Road and turned north in the direction of the A1; the road Sebastian had been traveling on only hours before. Emma had once read that in times of personal tragedy, all anyone wanted to do was turn the clock back. She was no different.

The journey passed quickly, as Sebastian was rarely out of her mind. She recalled his birth, when Harry was in prison on the other side of the world, his first steps at the age of eight months and four days, his first word, “More,” and his first day at school, when he jumped out of the car even before Harry had had time to put on the brakes, then later at Beechcroft Abbey, when the headmaster had wanted to expel him but granted Seb a reprieve when he won a scholarship to Cambridge. So much to look forward to, so much to achieve, all made history in a moment. And finally, her dreadful mistake when she’d allowed the cabinet secretary to persuade her that Seb should become involved with the government’s plans to bring Don Pedro Martinez to justice. If she’d refused Sir Alan Redmayne’s request, her only son would still be alive. If, if . . .

As they reached the outskirts of Harlow, Emma glanced out of the side window to see a signpost directing them to the Princess Alexandra Hospital. She tried to concentrate on what would be expected of her. A few minutes later Marsden drove through a set of wrought-iron gates that never closed, before drawing up outside the main entrance of the hospital. Emma got out of the car and began walking toward the front door while Marsden went in search of a parking space.

She gave the young receptionist her name, and the cheerful smile on the girl’s face was replaced with a look of pity. “Would you be kind enough to wait for a moment, Mrs. Clifton,” she said as she picked up a phone. “I’ll let Mr. Owen know you’re here.”

“Mr. Owen?”

“He was the consultant on duty when your son was admitted this morning.”
Emma nodded and began pacing restlessly up and down the corridor, jumbled thoughts replacing jumbled memories. *Who, why, when*. . . She only stopped pacing when a starched-collared, smartly dressed nurse inquired, “Are you Mrs. Clifton?” Emma nodded. “Please come with me.”

The nurse led Emma along a green-walled corridor. No words were spoken. But then, what could either of them say? They came to a halt outside a door which displayed the name *Mr. William Owen FRCS*. The nurse knocked, opened the door and stood aside to allow Emma to enter.

A tall, thin, balding man with an undertaker’s doleful visage rose from behind his desk. Emma wondered if that face ever smiled. “Good afternoon, Mrs. Clifton,” he said, before ushering her into the only comfortable chair in the room. “I’m so sorry we have to meet in such sad circumstances,” he added.

Emma felt sorry for the poor man. How many times a day did he have to deliver those same words? From the look on his face, it didn’t get any easier.

“I’m afraid there’s rather a lot of paperwork to be completed, but I fear the coroner will require a formal identification before we can think about that.”

Emma bowed her head and burst into tears, wishing, as Harry had suggested, that she’d allowed him to carry out the unbearable task. Mr. Owen leaped up from behind his desk, crouched down beside her and said, “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Clifton.”

Harold Guinzburg couldn’t have been more considerate and helpful.

Harry’s publisher had booked him on to the first available flight to London, first class. At least he would be comfortable, Harold thought, although he didn’t imagine the poor man would be able to sleep. He decided this was not the time to tell him the good news, but simply asked Harry to pass on his heartfelt condolences to Emma.

When Harry checked out of the Pierre Hotel forty minutes later, he found Harold’s chauffeur standing on the sidewalk waiting to
drive him to Idlewild airport. Harry climbed into the back of the limousine, as he had no desire to speak to anyone. Instinctively, his thoughts turned to Emma, and what she must be going through. He didn’t like the idea of her having to identify their son’s body. Perhaps the hospital staff would suggest she waited until he returned.

Harry didn’t give a thought to the fact he would be among the first passengers to cross the Atlantic non-stop, as he could only think about his son, and how much he’d been looking forward to going up to Cambridge to begin his first year at university. And after that . . . he’d assumed that with Seb’s natural gift for languages, he’d want to join the Foreign Office, or become a translator, or possibly even teach, or . . .

After the Comet had taken off, Harry rejected the glass of champagne offered by a smiling air hostess, but then how could she know he had nothing to smile about? He didn’t explain why he wouldn’t be eating or sleeping. During the war, when he was behind enemy lines, Harry had trained himself to stay awake for thirty-six hours, only surviving on the adrenaline of fear. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep until he’d seen his son for the last time, and he suspected not for some considerable time after that: the adrenaline of despair.

The consultant led Emma silently down a bleak corridor until they came to a halt outside a hermetically sealed door, with the single word, Mortuary, displayed in appropriately black letters on its pebbled glass pane. Mr. Owen pushed open the door and stood aside to allow Emma to enter. The door closed behind her with a squelch. The sudden change in temperature made her shiver, and then her eyes settled on a trolley standing in the middle of the room. The faint outline of her son’s body was visible under the sheet.

A white-coated assistant stood at the head of the trolley, but didn’t speak.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Clifton?” asked Mr. Owen gently.

“Yes,” said Emma firmly, her fingernails cutting into the palms of her hands.
Owen nodded, and the mortician pulled back the sheet to reveal a scarred and battered face that Emma recognized immediately. She screamed, collapsed on to her knees and began to sob uncontrollably.

Mr. Owen and the mortician were not surprised by this predictable reaction of a mother at the first sight of her dead son, but they were shocked when she said quietly, “That’s not Sebastian.”