



3 Ghosts

Let your conscience be your guide



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVELLA IN A DAY'
ON JUNE 17th 2017

Praise for Novel-in-a-Day

“This was a GREAT exercise before NaNoWriMo! I most certainly want to participate with NIAD next year.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed being a part of this first NIAD... it was a fabulous experience.”

“It was a great deal of fun...I've never written and edited fiction at that kind of frenzied pace, but it was exhilarating.”

“This really was a fun project that I hope we can do again.”

“It was liberating to be given a précis and have to sit down and get on with the nuts and bolts of writing for a day, knowing that if I didn't get it done I'd be letting everyone else down. Liberating, because I have a tendency to fear the blank page and spend all my time arsing around with plans and notes and not getting on with the important part - the writing.

“This was wonderful fun. Wish I could do this again... This has been a good kick in the behind for NaNoWriMo.”

“It has been fun writing to a deadline and, well, actually just having to finish something. Because of this, I'm actually thinking that NaNo might be possible this year. So truly, thank you!”

“It's been brilliant, can we do it again?”

“I had fun... It got me thinking again about a true-crime piece that I've had in mind for years.”

“I was impressed by how smooth you made the whole experience for us. At least I felt like I had the information I needed, I knew the deadline, and the rest was up to me.”

“The final product (now I've finished it) is really a very good read!”

“This has been a lot of fun (I'm new this year), I hope it becomes a tradition!”

“I loved the whole exercise. It was great fun, and I enjoyed the challenge of trying to write stuff in such a way that it wouldn't clash with other chapters whose plotlines I didn't know... Thank you for a brilliant Novel In A Day experience.”

“This was as last year much fun... awesome.”

“It's very interesting to watch how different authors approach the same situation, and get an insight about what those briefs really said.”

“Wonderful time! Really did enjoy the process & loved seeing the insides of how scrivener can be so productive for a writer... This project showed how when the skeleton is in place, the actual writing part can be confined to a day for a chapter. I know, some were much longer than others, but seeing this in action made novel writing attainable - at least in my estimation.”

“Loved every minute. Thanks for letting me join in!”“I had so much fun writing AND reading this.”

“I have to admire the *structure*... with a 'normal' plot but somehow none of the writers could tell where in the plot arc they might be. I don't think even the ones writing the first or last chapters could have known that they were. Very clever!”

“The worrying thing -- a bit worrying unless you're running an MFA course in creative

writing -- is that it all seems to work as a book. I enjoyed it. Doing it, and reading it.”

“This is my first time participating in such an expedition and I had a lot of fun doing it! I hope to participate next year if we all do it again!”

“What a funny, enjoyable and fruitful experience this has been.”

“It's amazing how [it's crafted] allowing for continuity while making room for creativity.”

“I had a great time doing this! I really loved the info pack. It had just enough information to give you a framework but left enough room so you get creative.”

“A thousand thank yous for running this magnificent project for us again! It's a blast, and wonderful mental exercise... How can you come up with a book with a coherent plot line that even the people writing it have no idea that they are writing the beginning or a climax or even the end??? It baffles me.”

“What the heck?!?!? I was writing the last chapter and I didn't even realise?? I thought I was situated at the first 1/4 or 1/3 of the book! That's amazing.”

“I enjoyed it immensely once again.”

“Wow, it was an amazing experience again.”

“Thanks for making this happen! As always, a reason to wake up at Oh Seven Hundred on a Saturday and stew miserably over not-enough-coffee until I finally feel too guilty over how late I am. The briefing was well done and the scenes were a lot of fun to write.”

“I think next year I'm using my vacation days for this event.”

“Thank you! It has been invaluable to me in testing my understanding of story craft.”

“Thanks for another interesting challenge for me, and for bringing many people together in such a good way.”

“It is fascinating to see another person's take on your scene, that was a good idea.”

“Loved it. A genius idea and a very clever way to pull it off worldwide.”

“It was fun! I can't wait to read all the chapters and briefs!”

“I haven't written anything for a long, long time, so this was a great way to get back into it. Definitely count me in for next year... I'm so glad I said yes.”

“Quite a challenge. Exhausting and exhilarating.”

“I had a blast as always! I like the fact that for one day, I have absolutely nothing to do except work on a chapter.”

“By the way, that was a stack of fun. I really enjoyed it... Thanks for letting me be part of this.”

“BTW, when I got the assignment I could see how I could POSSIBLY write 1500 words for such a little action piece. So why is the final count 3900 words?”

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www.novelinaday.com

Time is no substitute for talent

There is a well-known saying that if you give a monkey a typewriter and an infinite amount of time then it will eventually produce the complete works of Shakespeare. In 2003, the staff at Paignton Zoo gave a computer to six crested macaques and categorically proved that what you actually get is five pages of the letter 'S' and a broken keyboard. Time, it seems, is no substitute for talent. But can talent substitute for time...?

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in June 2017. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

This is the sixth time we've run the event, but the first time we've done it as 'Novella-in-a-Day'... with just 12 chapters per book. Half the size, but double the fun!

I hope you enjoy reading the book as much as we loved putting it together.

Tim

June 17, 2017

Also by Novel-in-a-Day:

The Dark
Lunar520
Made Man
Section7
Marshal Law

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Chapter one

Kim Kneen

Although Edward was pleased Dr Brooke had responded positively to his suggestions, he felt a little shook up. It was the first time he'd seen his own inner ugliness reflected so keenly back at him. The doctor's casual disregard for her husband reminded him of how badly he'd treated his own wife.

Walking down Boston Place, he noticed a discreet plaque mounted on a wall. *Fertility Clinic. By appointment.* Running his fingers over the letters, he felt a searing sensation. Yanked his arm back.

"Ow, fuck me." He cradled his smoking right hand in his left. Some idiot had hung a bunch of mistletoe above the front door. The plant had the power to ward off spirits. Marleys included. He prayed no one would let Dr Brooke in on that little-known secret.

Margaret, his wife, had asked him to come to a place like this once. She'd longed for a child, her urgency seeming to reach a peak when Jane, her sister, gave birth to a son.

"Teddy, darling," she said at the christening party, spearing an olive with a cocktail stick and popping it in his mouth. "We're not getting any younger. If I made an appointment to see a specialist,

would you come with me?”

Edward played for time. Chewed on the olive far longer than necessary, making exaggerated gestures of apology for his lack of response.

He looked over at Jane and the furious, red faced baby propped against her shoulder. Despite being younger than Margaret, and quite the glamour-puss in her day, two months after giving birth, Jane looked like she'd aged ten years. Greasy hair, what looked like a tea towel thrown over her shoulder and a splash of sick on her blouse.

He pointed at his mouth and pantomimed spitting the olive stone into his hand. Walked away on the pretence of finding a napkin. Struck up a conversation with Jane's shell-shocked husband. Left Margaret nursing her martini.

It was his wife's birthday a week or so later. Edward ordered a chihuahua from the pet shop in Harrods. Paid extra so they'd tie a '*Many Happy Returns*' helium balloon to its Swarovski collar.

Margaret seemed to give up after that.

Edward shuddered, suddenly aware of the chug and hiss of the trains in Marylebone Station. The nasal tones of the announcer drifted over the red brick walls that formed the outer perimeter of the station and bordered Boston Place.

He began to sweat, tremble. Felt a tightness in his chest, a loosening of his bowels. As ill-advised as it seemed, he broke into a jog to get away from the station. God, he hated trains.

He found himself on Marylebone Road. It was thronged with Christmas shoppers. Edward forced down the panic and slowed to a walk, nursing a stitch.

He stopped to watch a street performer entertaining the crowds

outside Madame Tussauds. If someone chucked a few coins into the Gladstone bag at his feet, the man, dressed in Victorian garb, pretended to slit his companion's throat.

"Jack the Ripper. Well I never." A note in the briefing pack had mentioned the murderer was being punished in the area this week.

Jack swivelled on his heels and looked directly at Edward. Cocked his head on one side. Grinned. Released the stranglehold on his unfortunate lady friend and started towards him.

"Not bloody likely." He'd heard tales of how Jack tormented a series of Marleys at the time of the murders. The poor ghosts had been totally traumatised. This was way above Edward's pay grade.

In the rush to get away, Edward tripped over the Gladstone bag, sending coins spinning off down the street. Without thinking consciously about where he was going, he set off in the direction of his former home. Although desperate to catch a glimpse of Margaret, he couldn't risk approaching the house. If he made contact with his wife, his life, if you could call this a life, was over. Being close to her would have to suffice.

His throat was parched. He realised he would kill for a drink. A noxious combination of trains and coming face to face with London's most notorious serial killer tended to do that to a man. Besides, his meeting with Dr Brooke had gone so well he deserved a quick snifter.

A badly shaven man in a Father Christmas costume, no beard, approached him, ringing a handbell and thrusting a leaflet at Edward. *The Filcroft Arms. Bar Meals. 2 for 1 on a Tuesday. 4 Westmoreland Street.*

"Red's really not your colour," Edward said, once the man was safely out of earshot, shoving the leaflet in a bin.

He didn't need a map to show him where The Filcroft Arms was. The closest pub to where he once lived, on Welbeck Street, it was officially his local, but he'd never set foot in the place.

"Hey ho ho ho. Any port in a storm."

The Filcroft Arms was a far cry from the elegant Artesian Bar, once his usual haunt. Here, Christmas trees festooned with fairy lights, dangled precariously from brackets where gaudy baskets of cheap annuals hung in the summer months. Four CCTV cameras pointed in different directions. The cigarette bin was overflowing with butts.

The paint on the front door was chipped and the brass finger plates marred with greasy prints. He checked for mistletoe before deciding whether to go in. Pulled his sleeve down over his hand and pushed. Better safe than sorry.

He walked straight to the bar and climbed up onto a stool. Dug in his pockets for the cash Head Office had allocated to him.

"Yes, mate?"

The barman, who by the look of his straining shirt had enjoyed a few too many *Tuesday, 2 for 1s*, waited expectantly.

"Yes, what?"

"What can I get you, mate?"

"Hello handsome. You look pleased with yourself." Edward glanced sideways. A woman in a tight black dress and fur bolero, seated further along the bar, was talking to him.

"I'm sorry?"

"Like the cat that got the cream. Meeow." She formed her hands into claws and pretended to swipe in his direction.

She slid off her stool and dragged it along the floor, moving closer to Edward, purring all the while. Her spiked heels left little

indentations in the wooden floor and her ankles kept buckling under the strain of keeping her upright.

“Had a big win, handsome? On the ‘orses, p’raps?”

She licked her lips. Up close, Edward saw how her lipstick had bled into the deep lines around her mouth. She leaned forward, giving him the dubious benefit of her crepey cleavage.

She stage whispered, “Joe makes the best Negritas.”

Edward turned his head away, repulsed by the smell of her breath.

“Jean’s right, mate.”

Edward threw a twenty on the bar.

“A Negrita it is, then.”

“Make that two,” said Jean.

“One. And Joe, *mate*? Don’t forget my change.”

Jean pushed her stool back to its original position, grumbling under her breath.

The barman reached into a fridge and pulled out a shot glass. He carefully poured one third cold espresso, a generous splash of coconut liquor and one final layer of pisco.

He put the drink down in front of Edward, with a flourish that Edward felt would probably prove to be unjustified.

“I don’t suppose you’ve had pisco before.” The barman had the unmistakable accent of someone more at home in a cloth cap, running a whippet over the dales, than Marylebone Village.

Edward bristled. “Not since I flew First Class to Santiago. Popular drink in Yorkshire, is it?”

Joe raised an eyebrow and moved on to serve a group of office girls, out on a works do, already half cut.

“You’d be surprised.” A long, freckled arm reached around

Edward and put a fresh beer mat on the bar.

He swivelled on his stool. Found himself eye to eye with a statuesque blonde, who'd definitely look more at home in a teensy-weensy bikini than The Filcroft Arms polo shirt.

"Sorry about Jean," the Amazon said. "She's annoying as, but we're the closest thing she's got to rellies."

"Rellies?" Why didn't anyone speak proper English in here?

"Relatives. Family."

"Aah. You're Australian?"

"Kalgoorie. West coast."

"Never heard of it." Edward peered at the name badge pinned to her chest.

"You wouldn't have. And no need to stare at my jugs, *handsome*, I'm Sue."

Edward looked away, flustered. Necked his decidedly average Negrita.

"So, what's a girl like you doing in a dump like this?"

"Shush!" Sue lowered her voice. "Don't let Joe hear you say that. He's my boyfriend. Working here is part of his ten year plan."

Edward looked into his empty glass, then over at Joe. He was wowing the office girls with his prowess on the cocktail shakers.

Sue laughed. "He thinks he's Tom Cruise. Anyway, what do you fancy?"

You, thought Edward. "Chateau Lafite 1865?" He said.

"At The Filcroft Arms? Are you pulling my leg?"

Edward scanned the bar. "Blossom Hill it is, then."

Sue squeezed through the bar hatch, selected a tiny bottle of red wine from the shelf and unscrewed the cap.

"Shall I leave it to breathe?"

Edward laughed. "I doubt it'll make any difference. Have one for yourself."

Sue poured herself a rose. "Cheers."

"Cheers. You'll be going home for Christmas, then?" Edward winced at the first taste of the insipid tippie.

"Nope. We're opening up in the arvo. Treating the regulars to a slap-up turkey dinner."

"Jean, too?" The woman had kicked off her heels and was leading the office girls in a performance of *Knees Up Mother Brown*. She was draped in a purple length of tinsel that was doing a fine, festive impersonation of a feather boa.

"Yep."

"Rather you than me."

"Don't be too hard on her, handsome. She's fair dinkum. Just never got over losing her hubby."

"Hmm. I know how that feels."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You lost your hubby too?"

"My wife," Edward nearly spat his wine across the bar.

"Oops. No offence."

Edward fiddled with his cufflinks and straightened his tie.

"None taken."

"You know what? My ol' man died when I was just a kid. Mum said the best way to honour his memory was to make him proud. Treat others the way I'd want to be treated. Be generous with my time."

"Too late for that, Sue."

"For me?"

"No. Me. I wasn't a good husband – *hubby* – to Margaret. Wasn't a good son. Ripped off my business partners." Edward

picked at the beer mat. “Put work before my wife. Too late to redeem myself now.”

He nodded over at Joe. “Next year,” he whispered. “Persuade your boyfriend to take the time off. Spend Christmas in Australia with your Mum.”

The pub was getting busier. Filling up with employees from local businesses, shutting early, in anticipation of the Christmas holiday.

“Sue, lass?” Joe shouted. “Bob over ‘ere and gi’e us a hand?”

“Better go.” Sue leant over the counter and kissed Edward’s cheek. “Enjoy your wine, handsome. Happy Chrimbo.”

Sue squeezed past Joe to take a customer’s order. Her boyfriend fondled her buttocks. She squealed. The barman glanced over at Edward and smirked.

Edward left the pub shortly after, his overwhelming desire to humiliate Joe unexpectedly satisfied when Jean stuck a Santa hat on his head and dragged him out from behind the bar to perform a resounding version of *My Old Man’s a Dustman*.

Chapter two

Rebecca Schuster

Edward stumbled and only barely got hold of the low fence that encased the front of his old house. Now wouldn't have that been a pity if he had fallen and ruined his immaculate suit?

He giggled. Gosh, I'm sounding like a silly little schoolgirl, he thought, and the thought made him giggle even more. Before it could turn out to be a full-grown laughter, however, he saw something that choked him up instantly.

There she was. Just as beautiful as she had been twenty years ago. Good Lord, twenty years already - and still, every day without his lovely Margaret had felt like a little eternity. And he knew a little bit about eternities, alright. Even though his supervisors would surely tell him otherwise.

He leaned closer, pressed his hands and forehead against the window which he knew must be very cold but whose coldness he could not feel, and drank in the sight of his wife. Never in his life had he expected that he could miss her so desperately. He yearned to touch her soft skin, to kiss her neck, to talk to her. At least to tell her that he loved her beyond her imagination and that he was sorry for all the missed dinners and forgotten birthdays - when he had

been working instead of spending precious time with her. Edward felt like weeping and considered curling up like a cat on the pavement right now and staying there for the rest of his miserable ...

“Life?”, said a voice behind him, “Jesus Christ, Edward, you’re so pathetic sometimes.”

It took Edward quite an effort to withdraw his longing gaze from his wife and to turn to the owner of the voice. John Huffam was leaning against an expensive looking car and idly fiddled with a pocket watch he always kept in the chest pocket of his vest.

He pushed the lid open with his thumb and looked at the clock face. Edward suppressed the desire to roll his eyes impatiently. He couldn’t stand his supervisor’s tendency to add a touch of drama to everything he did. John Huffam would even floss his teeth with the attitude of a celebrated stage actor - if he had any teeth to floss, of course.

“Well, well, Edward, just look at the time. It’s quite spooky how it flies when you’re having fun, don’t you agree, Edward?”

“Leave me alone, John. I know I’m late.”

Huffam blinked, “Do you, now? That’s good. And I suppose you also remember what is going to happen if you don’t show up in time?”

Edward considered a snide reply but then thought better of it. He lowered his head, defeated.

Huffam sighed. He walked over and put his arm on Edward’s shoulder. “There, there, I was just pulling your leg, old chap. You did well with Mrs. Brooks. Quite well, frankly. I suppose it was alright for you to celebrate. Trust me, nobody appreciates a good drink just like I do. At least not one in our business...” He produced

another dramatic sigh, before he continued: “But drinking time is now officially over. So much to do and so little time. Besides...” He made a show of looking around, “This doesn’t look much like the right spot for a drink. What are you doing here, in the cold of the night, Edward? What...”

He broke of. He had spotted Margaret through the fogged window.

“Oh dear”, he said, “Again?”

Edward felt rage well up in the same spot that had harboured girlish giggles only minutes ago, „Of course, again. And again. And again. Until the day ... until the day she dies, I suppose. Isn’t that right?! That’s when she will move on and I will stay here and help terrible people to get their priorities in order. Am I not right, John?“

John looked him straight and unblinkingly in the eye and said: „Yes. That’s exactly how it’s going to be. And may I remind you how grateful you should be about the opportunity to do good and help people whose souls are not yet quite as stained as your own? Would you rather have the alternative?“

Huffam made a swift motion with his wrist. Edward saw himself, hazy and diffuse like a shroud of fog, appear in front of him. The illusion, which of course it was - he himself had used it a million times before to show people what they could expect if they kept on living their lives like they did - , showed him laden with chains of unimaginable weight that pulled him down. His back was bent as if he was right in the middle of a long lasting bow. An eternally lasting bow, to be more specific. His nose almost touched the ground. He etched forward, dragging his legs behind him, because of the big iron balls that were attached to his ankles with

even more chains. The chains, Edward, knew, had been forged just for him and were made of all the sins he had committed during his life.

Edward glowered and shook his head.

With a satisfied nod, Huffam flicked his wrist again, and the apparition resolved into thin air, “I didn’t think so.”

“But I don’t think I will be able to go on like this when she ... when Margaret’s time has come.”

Huffam squinted at him inquisitorially, “What do you mean?”

Edward shrugged helplessly, “I don’t think I would care about myself any more. For now, it is soothing that I can use my relative freedom to come here once in a while and be close to her, even though she doesn’t know it. When she’s gone ... it would be all the same to me ... being in chains or being all alone among the wretched living.”

Huffam considered this for a while. ‘I see...’, he said at last, “I’ve never met a more serious man than you, - therefore, I suppose, you are serious about this as well... I don’t normally do this..., but if I do lose a decent worker I rather see him off to the light than to eternal darkness.”

“Metaphorically spoken?”

“No, quite literally actually.” He inspected his fingernails, “What would you say, if I offered you a way out? What if I could help you spending your afterlife with your dear wife.”

Edward’s eyes widened. Please, don’t let that be one of his silly jokes, he prayed silently.

But obviously, it wasn’t.

“Look,” Huffam said hesitantly, “My offer may seem like a sweet and easy ‘Getting out of jail’-option at the first glance. But you

should know that once you've decided to take the risk, there's no turning back. Failing means failing forever. Failing means wearing those chains for eternity without any chance of redemption."

Edward was barely listening. The thought of him reuniting with Margaret and spending the afterlife with her was all-encompassing. "Where do I have to sign?"

"Okay, listen. And listen carefully. If you manage to accomplish the unfeasible task of saving an Impossible, then you are allowed to go on."

Edward looked at him incredulously. "Are you serious? An Impossible? As far as I know they are not called this just for fun?!"

"You are a well of unfathomable wisdom tonight", Huffam said. Here we go again, Edward thought, sourly, John Huffam the jester has returned.

"No, they aren't", Huffam said, after relishing Edward's face for a few moments, "Especially not the bloke I'm going to offer you. There's little to no chance that he'll change. I talked to the analysts and they all agree that Mr. Lucas Rennall's potential for redemption is about as high as the chance of me becoming prime minister. Although, I'd do a considerably better job than the clowns in Downing Street do right now." He sighed gravely.

"Alright", Edward said, "Let me get this straight: If I take on the case of Mr. Rennall and I succeed..."

"Which you won't."

"... I will be released and be with Margaret again once she moves on."

Huffam nodded.

"And if I fail, I'm going to wear the eternal armour."

"Chains as heavy as a mountain", Huffam confirmed, "Also, I

should probably remind you that there's still your next normal case waiting for you. A piece of cake in comparison to Mr. Rennall, that little devil. The bosses won't be pleased if you mess up this one, because the person in question has great potential to do great things in her life - once pushed on the right path, that is."

He straightened up, "I guess, you have a lot to consider. What will it be - the Lady or the Tiger? You decide. But do it quickly, time is money. Or sins. Or whatever. You know what I mean."

"Right", Edward replied lamely.

Huffam dug through the inside pockets of his coat and produced two identical looking binders.

"Here you go. Ms. Claire McCaffrey, who might actually make the world a better place... or... a lawyer. People who take this career path must surely know that they are destined to wear heavy metal - don't you think?"

Edward grimaced as he took the binders.

Huffam gave him a short nod and a wink. Then he was gone, leaving only a whiff of his favourite eau de cologne behind.

Edward looked back through the window of his old house - but Margaret had already retired to bed.

Chapter three

Alex Schuler

From far above, London looked peaceful, the millions of lives it contained erased amongst rows of ant-sized buildings. Edward glanced at the binders he'd been given and sighed; he was going to need some more drinks for this. In the blink of an eye he was back in front of the Filcroft Arms.

The scruffy bartender Joe was still there. Concern flashed across his face as Edward settled in at the bar. Of course he was concerned—the same customer twice in one day probably didn't bode well for him—but he quickly hid it and greeted Edward with a curt nod. “Back for more?”

Edward grunted. “Keep ‘em coming.”

He turned his attention to the binders and tapped his fingers indecisively before pulling towards him the one he knew he wanted to take. The name Lucas Rennall stared back at him in bright red lettering that indicated his status as unredeemable. How bad could it be?

Flipping through the pages, he grew paler and paler. Lucas' free time was filled with drugs, booze, and women. Edward had no idea how to convince him to give up living the high life to become (he

turned to the back of the briefing) ‘a tireless human rights lawyer who stands up for those who most need it and otherwise couldn’t afford it.’ Or whatever else he decided to do to change the world. Edward didn’t care much more about that now than he did in life, beyond his own selfish motivations.

Well, never mind that. He could surely figure out a way, with afterlife by his dear Margaret’s side at stake. The real problem was that Lucas just wasn’t a very nice person. An arse, as the short bio at the front put it. Probably an understatement, that. The briefing was filled with incidents of him taking his bad days out on anybody who happened to be conveniently nearby, including nine cases in the last year alone where he made little girls cry. Nine! Edward downed the remaining half of his third pint and put Lucas aside.

Claire McCaffrey. Clean white letters indicated her saveable status. Looking through her binder, the difference from Lucas was night and day. She’d even started out with good intentions. Her social media site, OurLink, started with a dream to help people keep, forge, and rekindle connections to their fellow human beings. But somewhere along the way she lost sight of that and when the offers to buy her out came flooding in she couldn’t resist. Now she ran a tech start up that could help millions, but she only used it to help large corporates.

Claire was one of the easiest assignments Edward had ever been given; she’d probably even end up one of the 5% whose conversion was long term, which would set him up to become an elite Marley and give him more chances in the future to earn his freedom.

Fed up thinking about it, he flicked his wrist and the files disappeared off the table. Out of sight, out of mind. He staggered upstairs and over to the game area and decided that after 61 years

of life and 20 years of death it was about time he took up darts. The first dart missed spectacularly, soaring past the board, bouncing off the wall, and nearly taking out the eye of a young woman who had to hold her date back from pummeling Edward. Shame, really. A good brawl might help clear his mind. Subtly manipulating the air, the same way he did to travel like the wind, he managed to hit the target on the next go. It didn't stick, though, preferring, apparently, to bounce off and tumble to the floor. A few more tries and he got the hang of it. He hit the bullseye every time while a crowd gathered to cheer him on, laughing with him as he made a big show of it. Maybe this is what rock stars feel like.

But nothing can last forever; soon it was early morning and the pub began to clear out as the patrons went home to their warm beds and their families. If Edward chose Lucas and failed he might never get to see *his* family again. His beloved wife. He'd get another chance at freedom eventually, but for now he had to play it safe.

He couldn't resist the chance to say goodbye, so he drifted over to his former home, planning to stand invisibly in the garden and watch Margaret, as he had many times before. When he got there, however, the bright lights of an ambulance flooded the grounds. He landed on the roof just in time for the vehicle to take off, sirens flashing, for St. Thomas' Hospital. He followed the gurney through the halls and when they arrived at a room he choked out a laugh, cut short when the nurses began looking around for the source. This was the same room where she'd sat by his side after his first heart attack, three months before the one that killed him. Her presence had been a constant comfort, reassuring them that no matter what happened he'd never be alone. How he wished he

could do the same for her now.

He hovered his hand beside her cheek and was considering whether he should stroke it—She was in such bad shape that surely she wouldn't notice, so how could those upstairs consider it breaking secrecy?—when concerning whispers began to float in from the hallway. “Stroke... coma... days to live”

As he entered the hallway, a young nurse's high pitched voice came into focus. “The paramedics said the poor thing was looking at her wedding photos at this time of night, an urn, her husband's I suppose, sitting beside her. I guess she never got over his death. At least she'll be with him soon.”

Not if he didn't help Lucas she wouldn't. John had made it clear that if she died before he earned his freedom they would never see one another again. Edward brought the files back out with another flick of his wrist, dumped Claire's in a nearby bin, and turned in the direction he knew Lucas' apartment to be. No more playing it safe. It was now or never.

Chapter four

Pete Becker

Tink

Mary grabbed Lucas's shoulder. "Lucas, did you hear that?"

"Huhh? Whaat? Ohh. It's you. Go back to sleep."

Tink

She shook him. "Lucas, there's somebody out there! Do something!"

"Huhh? Ohh. Stop it. You're dreaming. I've got a busy day tomorrow, and I don't need this nonsense. If you can't be quiet, get your clothes and get out of here."

"But Lucas..."

"SHUT UP. Don't make me mad. You'll regret it."

Tink

"LUCAS," she hissed.

He turned his back to her. Facing the door now, he saw the light coming in underneath it.

"LUCAS!"

"Shut up, you stupid cow! Can't you see? There's somebody out there."

He lay still for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Back in his

university days he'd been a star cricket player, and he still kept in shape; he could handle a random intruder. He slid out of the bed, walked quietly over to the closet, and opened the door. Grabbing a bat, he stepped to the door to the reception-room, threw it open, and leaped into the room.

The eruption of light dazzled him. He squinted, and as his eyes began to adjust to the sudden brightness he could just make out an emaciated figure seated across the room in his easy chair. An old man, holding a glass of wine. A second glass was on the end table beside the chair.

"How now," said Lucas, caustic and cold. "What do you want with me?"

"Much!" said the apparition.

"Who are you?"

"Ask me who I *was*."

"Who *were* you, then?" said Lucas, raising his voice.

"In life I was a financier, Edward Myer."

"Pah."

"You don't believe me," observed Edward.

"I neither believe nor disbelieve. What I KNOW is that you've broken into my home, in the middle of the night, and you're sitting in my chair, drinking my wine."

"Yes, and a very good wine it is: 2000 Mission Haut Brion, £1600 for the bottle, if I'm not mistaken. How I've missed the pleasure of a good wine all these years. Won't you join me? After you've put some clothes on, of course."

Mary, standing behind Lucas in a sheet that she had pulled from the bed, giggled.

Lucas slowly lowered the bat.

Mary said, "I was only looking for a one-night stand. This has gotten too weird. I'm leaving." She slid past Lucas into the reception room and quickly picked up her clothes that were scattered on the floor. She hurried back into the bedroom and began to get dressed.

Unlike Mary, Lucas hadn't yet decided what to do. Embarrassed and no longer driven by adrenaline, he lowered his head, looked down at the floor, and moved his hands to cover his groin. He slowly retreated, walking backwards into the bedroom. He closed the door.

Mary had finished dressing, more or less. She glared at Lucas. "Don't ever call me again." She threw the door open, scowled at Edward, and stomped through the reception room to the exit hall.

The crash as she slammed the door reverberated through the apartment. Lucas's head snapped upright. He paused for a moment, then leaned the bat against the wall and took his dressing robe down off of its hook on the back of the door.

Knotting the sash of his dressing gown, Lucas stepped back into the reception room. Edward hadn't moved from the chair. Lucas walked over to him and, glaring down at him, said, "Who are you, really?"

"As I said, the proper question is, who *was* I? And the answer, again as I said, is Edward Myer."

"Is, was, whatever. I'm not going to play that game. You can't be Edward Myer. He died twenty years ago."

"How is it that you know of Edward Myer?"

"I've studied many of the con artists of the past fifty years. Let's just say that some of them accomplished great things. Edward Myer was no Donald Trump, but he was one of the better ones."

"You flatter me. But one step at a time; what will it take to convince you that I am Edward Myer?"

"All right, I'll play along for now. If you really are Edward Myer you can tell me what happened to the twenty million pounds that went missing before the Privateer, Limited bankruptcy. I know what the financial press said, but I don't believe that Didion was smart enough to have made that much money disappear without leaving any traces."

"My boy, please sit down. I'm getting a crick in my neck. If we're going to talk like colleagues, the least you can do is to treat me like one. Join me in a glass of wine."

Lucas hesitated, then sat. He picked up the second glass of wine from the end table, swirled it around, and inhaled its bouquet. Then he took a sip. He sighed. "Yes, an excellent wine. Well worth the price, although I was saving it for a more special occasion. But the damage is done; its time has come." He took another sip, closed his eyes, and tilted his head back for a moment. He opened his eyes and looked directly at Edward. "Now, back to business. Privateer Limited?"

"Ah, yes, Privateer Limited. Very complicated. And very profitable. The thing is, the money didn't disappear. Quite simply, it was never there to begin with."

"Wait, you mean..."

"Yes. Didion thought he was running the con, but he was the mark."

"So he went to prison for twenty million pounds that he never had? That you had all along? Impressive. No wonder you decided to disappear. You must have faked your own death! But why come out of hiding now? Why here?"

"We'll talk about my death later. I'm here now because you're on a path to ruin. If you don't change your approach to life, you risk ending up broke and lost."

"It seems to me that you did pretty well; why shouldn't I continue the way I'm going, as you did?"

"Yes," Edward acknowledged. "It *seems* that I did pretty well. But things aren't always what they seem. As you well know, cons live on lies. And as lies are uncovered, more lies are needed. The lies have to become bigger and bigger, more and more complicated, harder and harder to maintain, until everything flies apart in centrifugal destruction. I know that first-hand: my cons were about to explode, and that would have ruined me. It was a close thing; if that heart attack had held off for a year everything would have been gone. My wife would have ended up a pauper."

"I'm not married," Lucas retorted.

"Is your life so mean that you cannot picture yourself with anyone you care about and who, more important, cares about you? How sad you must be."

Lucas closed his eyes. For a moment he was silent. His mouth worked as if he were struggling to say something and struggling not to. He picked up his wine glass and took a rather large gulp, swallowing it all at once. He set the glass down.

"Still, it doesn't matter, does it? When you're gone, you're gone. Nothing that you did during your life makes any difference. Your body goes into the ground and that's the end."

"Lucas, that's not the end. I'm here tonight to convince you of that."

"But you were a good man of business," faltered Lucas, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried Edward, wringing his hands. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

Suddenly Lucas was no longer in his apartment. He was in a car in the underground, a car whose other occupants were Mary, three young men talking among themselves, and an unkempt older man who seemed to be sleeping. The train stopped at a station and the three young men got out. Nobody got on. The doors closed. The older man's eyes popped open. He stood up and walked over to Mary. He demanded money. She said she didn't have any. He reached under his coat and pulled out a knife.

Lucas was back in his apartment.

"What the bloody hell was that?" he screamed.

"That was a vision I put in your head. Mary would not have been on that train if you had made her your business instead of your pleasure."

"But she's okay, isn't she? That's just something you made up? To scare me?"

"Lucas, everything we do affects others, often in ways that we cannot foresee. But we have to try; we have to imagine the effect of our conduct on others, and do what we can to improve the lives of others. In death I am doomed to try to do what I failed to do in life. That's why I am here tonight: to try to convince you, before it's too late, to change your ways. Are you willing to listen? After you've put some clothes on, of course."

Lucas decided he ought to be well dressed for this journey with a ghost, even though it was the middle of the night. He put on a

grey shirt with narrow black stripes, his bespoke dark blue shadow plaid suit, a subtly patterned maroon and white tie, and a matching pocket handkerchief.

He stepped out into the reception room. Edward looked at him.
"Nice suit."

Chapter five

Stephen Kittel

“So you’re a ghost here to convince me of the error of my ways and save me from the monster I’ve become,” Lucas said, casually placing a tray with apple wedges and Keurig-brewed coffee on the end table before flopping dramatically across the couch. “Then convince me.”

Before Edward could begin, Lucas swiped the remote and turned on Netflix. “Hmm, I planned to put on A Christmas Carol, but this works, too.” Jimmy Stewart’s image filled the screen. “Hey, I bet you were around when this movie was made, weren’t you, old man? Did you see it in the theatres?”

“Let’s stick to your past, Mr. Rennall.” Edward stood at the foot of the couch and gazed at Lucas, recalling one of the moments in his file. The apartment around the couch dissolved, replaced by the harsh light of a conference room. A group of men clustered around the table, all focusing on a second Lucas Rennall pulling papers from his brief. “This is—”

“Ooh, nice special effects, Gramps.” Lucas took a bite from an apple and sat up. “I remember these schmucks. First assignment the partners let me handle myself, because Webb had to have

surgery. I must've billed a good 600 hours to the client, all in a two-month period."

"These are the leaders of Paragon Prescriptions, a mail-order company that provided discount pharmaceuticals to the less fortunate," Edward said.

"Yeah, and they were screwing over my client," Lucas countered.

Edward walked into the centre of the board room, which carried him into the middle of the ethereal table. "They—"

"That's really trippy," Lucas blurted out. "You look like the man in the magician's show that got sawed in half."

In life, Edward hadn't always been a very patient sort, but he didn't rise to Lucas's petty baiting. Stepping forward enough to extricate himself from the illusory conference table, he resumed, "They weren't preventing Langstrome from turning a profit. Your client still made money."

"Not enough," Lucas noted, watching his previous self pass the settlement pages to the Paragon execs and delighting as each of their faces contorted in a mix of anger and outrage. "Those fockers got what they deserved. A business has a right to charge what people will pay, and these knuckle-draggers thought they could undercut that."

Edward bit his lip, recalling the time he foreclosed on the outstanding mortgage for a homeless shelter. "Paragon provided affordable prescriptions to 23,000 families who couldn't pay the pharmaceutical industry's cutthroat prices. In particular, they sold Budeziol for Langstrome, a miracle drug that stopped the effects of progeria. Hundreds of children who were ageing at more than ten times the normal rate now had a chance at survival. The average

progeria patient doesn't live to see their twelfth birthday. After you forced Paragon to close their doors, the families that couldn't pay Langstrome's prices have all watched their sons and daughters wither and die."

Lucas shrugged. "Then they didn't deserve to live." His bite into another apple wedge made a satisfying crunch. "This isn't a charity. Research's not free. Do you wonder why Langstrome was the only firm that had a product for progeria?"

"I can give you the names of dozens of families who attempted to pay to save their children," Edward stated, pulling a small notebook from his jacket pocket. "Mary and Charles Weiner of Bristol bankrupted themselves in two months. Thomas and Paula —"

"And I can give you the name of one young lawyer who impressed his clients and his firm enough to earn a promotion and a very sizeable bonus."

Edward saw why his superiors thought Lucas was irredeemable. There was no guilt in his eyes, no remorse. Lucas truly cared nothing for the lives he trampled. In fact, if anything he seemed triumphant. It was time to take a different approach.

The image of Paragon's board room faded back into the apartment. Lucas grinned, recognising Edward's surrender, until he sat back into the couch and realised it was occupied. He yelped and bolted back to his feet, wheeling around to where a version of himself sat at the opposite end from a gorgeous blonde. The rift between the two was evident, their conversation animated.

"Thea Hartley," Edward announced from over his shoulder.

Lucas scowled. "I know who Thea is."

“You left her six months ago, after this night.”

“Damn right, I did,” Lucas said. “She was a sponger.”

“She put you before her job,” Edward countered. “They transferred her position to Devon, and she decided to remain here in London with you instead.”

Lucas scowled. “She wanted a sugar daddy.”

“She wanted a future with you.”

Lucas circled around the table, bending over to inspect Thea. Edward wasn’t so certain he wasn’t simply trying to look down her shirt. “If she can’t pay her own way, I’m not going to let her milk my salary. Besides, she wanted kids. I fucking hate kids.”

Edward waved his hands over her cleavage, earning contempt from Lucas. “You’re telling me that Mister Young Gun, who paid cash for this multi-million pound flat, couldn’t afford to take on a woman who both loves you and would be happy to handle all your domestic needs?”

Lucas stepped back from the couch and marched into the spare bedroom to distance himself. “Not a matter of ‘can’. She was tying strings to me. In the year we were together, do you know how many other women I slept with?” Edward waited. “Nine. Just nine. She wanted all my time to herself. She was smothering me.”

“Smothering you so completely you still found time to take up nine other partners?” Edward raised an eyebrow, flipping a page in his notebook. “And you still found time for eighteen rounds of golf, eighty-six trips to the pub, and a week-long fishing trip with men from your office. In fact, according to my notes—”

“Damn your notes.”

“—you and Thea spent approximately 36% of your free time together. That’s not including time at work, sleeping – actual

sleeping – or taking care of important personal matters. It’s also worth noting that in spite of her own career, Thea ran numerous errands for you like collecting your dry cleaning, and regularly cooked you dinner. She even cleaned up after you.”

“I have a cleaning service,” Lucas retorted. “And why do I need someone to cook when I’m on a first name basis with every respectable restaurant in Marylebone?”

“You’re making excuses.”

Lucas’s eyes narrowed defensively. “I’m stating the truth. Whores like her are a dime a dozen. I’ve screwed at least two each week since I freed myself from that ball and chain.”

“You’re deceiving yourself.” Edward stepped in close to ensure Lucas felt his presence. “You stayed with her for a full year. You, a womanizer, remained mostly true to one woman because she was special. Those other women? Sure, they might have been nice in bed, with their skin against yours, but what about the other twenty-three hours of the day?”

Lucas smirked. “More like twenty-two. Plus the morning after.”

“Thea was a strong, affectionate woman that tempered you. You were growing so close you knew she was expecting a closer commitment, and that scared you. She didn’t even ask for your help! She suggested you move in together so—”

“So her unemployed ass wouldn’t have to pay rent.”

“—so she could spend more time with you while she evaluated her career options.”

Lucas pushed past Edward to look at her standing by the couch. She and Past-Lucas were now in a heated argument. “Just a ploy to work her way deeper into my life and my wallet.”

“And would that have been so bad?” Edward flipped through

the book. “You had sex together on 106 occasions, and—”

Lucas spun around. “You counted the number of times I had sex? That’s disgusting. You didn’t watch, did you?”

“I just have data,” Edward said.

“But you could, right? You could go back and have us relive any of those nights in bed, yeah?”

Edward lowered his notebook, not wanting to let Lucas change the subject. “I’ll show you something, all right.”

The apartment dissolved around them. They were now standing on a street a number of blocks away. Lucas spun around to check the traffic; he cringed when a bus drove straight through him.

“Bloody hell,” he cried, pulling himself off the ground. “You couldn’t have put us on the sidewalk?”

Edward pointed at one of the houses. Part of a row of homes five stories tall, Edward passed straight through the front door to the spacious ceilings and grand architecture inside. Spiral staircases, furniture worthy of an art gallery, and even a garden in the back, it made Lucas’s fancy condo look paltry.

“Where’s this? Mulbeck Street?”

“This is my home,” Edward said, turning back to let Lucas look around. “I know what it’s like to be you, Rennall. I know because I was you. And as you can see, I did quite well for myself. The house is fantastic. I believe it last sold for twelve million quid. But that’s now. This is when I was still here.”

Lucas gazed lasciviously at the fashionable rooms on the second floor. “What’s the moral here, Casper?”

“There’s no life,” he answered. “It’s a lot of pretty things, but it may as well be a museum.”

Lucas cocked his head to one side. “Yeah, well, my flat’s white and clean. Some might call it sterile. But it’s not like I have nothing in my life.”

“No,” Edward said. “You have your work, and you have your women, and you have your fun and games. But for how long? And to what end? You’re thirty-one now, but what about forty-one? Fifty-one? What happens when the sweet young ladies are no longer bedazzled by anything but your pocketbook? What happens when your body grows too tired to handle wild romps every other night, or the sex simply gets boring? What will you have left in this world, Mr. Rennall? What will you have left behind?”

Lucas continued his climb to the fourth floor, more interested in exploring than taking Edward’s message to heart. “I’ll have a lifetime of amazing experiences, and I’ll have left behind a legacy as one of London’s greatest lawyers.”

“So you want to be remembered as a villain?” Edward asked. “You want to only be known for the heartache you caused to so many by only ever looking after your own self-interests? And when you finally die, what will happen to all your money, your lifeless apartment, the yacht you’re saving up for? Who will there be to leave it to?”

“Not my problem,” Lucas said as he reached the bedroom on the fifth floor and froze. There, on the carpet, was Past Edward, the Edward of 1991, convulsing in the throes of a seizure. One hand gripped his chest while the other trembled and knocked aside the cordless telephone.

“That was sixty-one,” Edward said. “Nobody there to save me, and nobody to sing my praises when I died. I am scarcely remembered now.”

“Sucks to be you then, eh?”

The scene was a lie – Edward had died on a train to Sheffield for work – but a slight tremor quavered in Lucas’s demeanour, though he overcame it with bravado.

“Thirty years,” Edward said as they returned to Lucas’s flat. *It’s a Wonderful Life* continued to play on the telly. “I mostly lived like you for thirty more years. And then the end came, unceremonious and undignified. Who will care for you, Mr. Rennall, when you are lying on a slab?”

A wistful slant twisted Lucas’s cheeks. “Why should I care? I’ll be dead.”

Edward sighed. Lucas cared nothing of the future, except perhaps as it pertained to compound interest. Edward’s only success in plying Lucas’s emotion came on his reaction to Thea, which meant he had but one card left to play, and it was probably a losing move.

The condo faded away once more, replaced by the living room of another flat. Judging from the furnishings, the owners were modestly successful, though the ambience lacked a sense of the polish that Lucas’s had. A man sat at the dinette as a woman carried a dish toward him using potholders.

Lucas craned his head around the woman to get a better view of the man. “That’s Frank Mailer. He was in my graduating class. Works at Sotheby & Price. Looks like he’s got a nice broad, too.”

Lucas studied her ass appreciatively as she bent forward to set the casserole on the table, and slid into a seat across from Frank.

“We’re not here because of Frank,” Edward said, which put Lucas’s hackles up. The woman was a brunette, but already his

gears were turning as he realised why he recognised the woman's shape. Lucas circled to the side and looked at Thea. The contours of her striped dress betrayed the fact that she was visibly pregnant.

Lucas stormed forward, yelling at the illusory Frank Mailer. "You pig fucker! You literally fucked a pig! There she is!" He walked through the table and tried to take hold of Thea. "Goddamn sow. Decided if you couldn't have me, you'd shop around for a new breadwinner so you could sit on your lazy ass and crank out a bunch of whiny brats? Fucking gold-digger. I knew I did the right thing by throwing you out, you fucking cunt."

Edward took Lucas by the arm and guided him aside, and let the illusion bring forth the sound of conversation this time.

"Honey," Frank said, "this is really good. Even better than the last time you made it."

Thea offered him a cute smile. "You like it? I tried adding a new seasoning. Can you guess what it is?"

Frank smiled back. "Love."

Thea reached across the table and punched him on the shoulder. "Cumin, you big dork."

"Thea," Frank said, "I know I don't say this often enough, but I really appreciate all the things you do for me. It's so refreshing to come home to dinner, to have someone here to greet me. Even on the nights when work keeps me late or when I'm wrapped up in the stress of my current case. I want to make sure you know how much that means."

Lucas rolled his eyes and made a gagging noise. Thea, on the other hand, beamed at the praise. "Just to say it once is more often than I ever heard from Lucas. I..."

"Honey, don't go there."

She looked away and shook her head. “I’m sorry. It’s just, I gave him an entire year. I sacrificed so much to try to make that relationship work, and in the end he threw me out because he’s too big a commitment-phobe to realise that sometimes people do things for reasons other than money.”

Lucas goggled. “She said what? As if she ever did anything that wasn’t looking out for *herself*.”

Oblivious, Frank set his silverware aside. “Thea, I thought you were done with that loser.”

“I am, but...”

“Look at me,” Frank insisted. “Look at me. Lucas Rennall only cares about one thing in the world – the success and self-interest of Lucas Rennall. He was that way at Cambridge, he was that way when I spoke with him at a few events between our two firms, and if you were unable to get him to see something beyond his own ambitions, nobody can. You’re smart, and kind, and thoughtful, and capable, and I’m betting that those are the reasons why Lucas even kept you around for more than a one-night stand. You’re an amazing woman, Thea, and Lucas’s loss is my gain. I’m not so different in a lot of ways, and I understand him painfully well, but I’m thirty now. And unlike Lucas, I can see when it’s time to find room for more in life than unadulterated hedonism and crushing my enemies under heel. Lucas...he may very well be irredeemable. In the competitive, cut-throat world of law, he might have an edge on me, but trust me when I say that there isn’t a scrap of humanity in him.”

By this point, Frank had come around and kneeled beside Thea, taking her hand into his. He smiled, smoothed her hair away, and rubbed her pregnant belly. They continued to discuss, but Edward

ended the illusion and brought Lucas back to his own quarters.

Lucas leaned his back against the wall between two doors and chuckled at the ceiling.

“That’s rich,” he laughed. “Frank Mailer and Thea Hartley. Those two are perfect for each other. Cold, ambitious backstabbers who can’t realise that’s what they both are. After she has that kid, they’re going to come apart at the seams. He’ll think he’s landed the perfect trophy wife. She’ll think she found a replacement for me she can actually tame.”

Edward stood silently, mulling over Frank’s choice of words. Irredeemable? He couldn’t accept that. There had to be a way to get through to this arrogant little hothead.

“And once they give up that mock sentimental sympathy garbage, they’ll fight every night, but stay together ‘for the kids’ while they pop out two more. And in five years, they’ll finally separate, and it’ll be messy, and it’ll be costly, and it’ll involve Frank paying alimony and child support out his ass for the rest of his life, and she’ll probably never work again because she’ll be too busy with those miserable little spawn she insisted on breeding.”

Lucas located his snack and crunched into another bite of apple.

“You know what? I bet she found him off the rebound within a week of getting dumped by me. She had to be, what? At least five months pregnant. And I last saw her in June. That means he literally knocked her up on her next cycle. That just goes to show how dumb Frank is, if he wasn’t even wearing a condom.”

“Maybe they *are* meant for each other,” Edward said. Lucas opened his mouth to assert some pithy remark, but this time Edward cut him off. “She was looking for someone to care for, Lucas. Someone who shared her world. She thought you were that

man, until she realised you were a cold, heartless animal determined to live in the moment, up until the moment finally betrayed you. And so she found a man just like you, except with a scrap of compassion and a hint of gratitude – a man who was actually worth committing her time and her life.”

Lucas held up a finger as he attempted to speak with his mouth full of apple. “Counterpoint,” he mumbled. “I am worth spending time with, but I prefer for that time to be limited to the bedroom.”

“I showed you my past,” Edward said. “I showed you how it turns out when you put work and ambition first. I wish I had spent more time with my wife. I wish—”

“Whoa, you were married, Mostly Ghostly?” Lucas wagged his finger at Edward as he approached. “Then you are *nothing* like me. Marriage is for suckers who think they’re getting a servant to handle their needs, when in reality they’re the one who becomes the slave.”

Before Lucas could continue on his soapbox, Edward gestured toward the telly. “Do you want to end up like Henry Potter?”

Lucas paused, confused. “You mean, a wizard?”

“No, *Henry* Potter. The old man in the movie.”

Lucas lazily dropped onto the couch, the image of a veritable prince looking down his haunch of lamb at the peasants before him. “I’d say he did pretty well for himself. What’s Jimmy Stewart got going for him? A bunch of sappy emotional people convincing him not to kill himself. That Potter guy doesn’t need any convincing. Plus, he walks away with the money, and comes out on top of everybody else.”

“He’s an old crotchety man,” Edward replied.

“Just like you!” Lucas held up his coffee mug the way his

medieval counterpart would joggle a flagon of ale. “Sorry, Moaning Myrtle, but that’s all you seem to do. You moan and bellyache, but you don’t have an argument. Your mistake is thinking that any of that picket fence crap actually matters to me. Now where’s the Ghost of Christmas Future? Is he going to be just as pathetic?”

Edward reared up. “I am your only chance, Rennall.”

Lucas stood toe-to-toe with him. “No, *I* am my only chance. And unlike everyone else who makes weak, foolish choices, I’d say I’m the only one who actually knows what the hell I’m doing. Now get packing before I try to figure out how to issue a restraining order to a ghost.”

Edward glowered.

“Or maybe I can banish you? Some kind of exorcism? Maybe I’ll call one of those frauds on the Psychic Hotline.”

“I’m going,” Edward said. “I hope you enjoy your chains.”

Edward’s physical appearance faded, but he continued to watch Lucas for the eve. The man drank himself into oblivion, then shambled down to the nearest pub for more.

Irredeemable, they said. No wonder the bureau taunted me with my freedom over this case. They knew they had nothing to lose.

Chapter six

Nick Calvert

Edward Myer wandered slowly around Lucas Rennall's flat. Although it wasn't to his taste, he supposed he could see why the younger man had bought it. Modern living. Edward chuckled. In his day, 'modern living' had been the introduction of the television. Now it was the 'internet of things,' whatever that was. But two and a half million pounds for an apartment! Edward shook his head. It was ludicrous. It was insanity. Property prices kept on going up and up, and up. The Georgian town house he and Margaret lived in, on Welbeck Street, was apparently now worth ten million, and no doubt it would soon be worth a lot more.

Edward berated himself. He was dead, so factually he couldn't claim to have a house anymore. And Margaret was dying, so....

Edward snapped himself back to the here and now, and the Scrooge he'd taken on: Lucas Rennall. Normally Edward found Scrooges easy. They generally wanted to be saved, were desperate to be redeemed. But not Lucas Rennall. Oh no. Not bloody Lucas Rennall.

They'd just returned from 'The Roof Gardens,' a nightclub in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. In his day it had been a

rather sedate roof terrace and restaurant that belonged to 'Derry & Toms', a large department store. In bygone days it had been a pleasant place to take the family for a cream tea on a warm summer's day, before a genteel stroll around Kensington Gardens. Nowadays it was a 'full on' club, peopled by the youthfully rich and their enablers. A place where cocaine dealing waitresses seemed to be de rigueur, rather than the an exception. It had opened his eyes, but not Lucas', who was neither shocked, nor upset by his slanderous colleagues.

"What an arsey tosser that Rennall is," guffawed one, a slim bleached twink in a sharp mauve pinstripe.

"You sure that's because he's an arsey tosser, Simon, or because he doesn't want to take you over the boardroom table?"

"Oh, you bitch, Trev! And who says he hasn't anyway?"

"The entire office," the rest of the table's occupants said in unison and with raucous laughter.

Edward was watching Lucas closely, and not a flicker of emotion crossed his face at the slander.

Neither was he moved when his secretary fought for his honour, claiming he had the most beautiful of souls if only he'd realise it. She was battered into submission and fled in tears, yet on Lucas' face there was no emotion at all. Nothing.

It was at this point that Edward realised he should have thought more seriously about why John Huffam had given him the option. Perhaps he should have taken Claire McCaffrey as his Scrooge, after all.

"You do not care," Edward said, "you simply do not care."

"Finally he gets it!" Lucas said, perusing the wines in a

temperature controlled rack by the fridge. “It’s what I’ve been trying to tell you all along. But no. You’re so busy trying to convert me, or whatever it is you’re trying to do, that you don’t pay attention. You don’t fucking listen. I wouldn’t change for my parents. I wouldn’t change for my best friend, and I certainly wouldn’t change for those fuckwits from the office. So why you think I’ll change for a complete stranger is beyond me. Red or white?” He frowned, then smiled at Edward. “I suppose it doesn’t matter. Seeing as you’re dead.”

“Champagne.” Edward said. “A glass of champagne might cool your narcissistic demeanour long enough for something I say to get through to what remains of the thing between your ears you call a brain.

“Nice.” Lucas said, tugging sharply at his right ear and smiling. “Very nice. I like a chap who insults his mark. Though some might call it fucking stupid, I find it quite entertaining.”

“Do you.”

“I do.”

“Good. Then while you’re in such a receptive mood, let me tell you a story.”

Edward clicked his fingers. Lucas’ apartment swirled away into the void, replaced by a cream and blue hospital room. They were standing in a corner by the door. In the bed slept a small woman with sunken cheeks and heavily lined skin. An orderly sat beside her, humming quietly, and running a soft brush through her long white hair.

“Where are we?” Lucas said, with what seemed to Edward as complete indifference. He clenched his fists, then forced himself to relax. Hitting the man wouldn’t do any good, though it might make

him feel marginally better.

With a ‘pop’ John Huffam appeared, tapped Lucas on the shoulder putting him to sleep, then turned on Edward.

“What do you think you are doing, Myer? You stupid man. If your wife hadn’t been asleep... if she had seen you then the offer would be rescinded. Instantly, and nothing I could do about it. You’d be a Marley no more. Just another idiot living an eternity in chains.”

“I appreciate the warning, Mr. Huffam. I really do. But I read the small print. This,” he gestured around the hospital room, “isn’t reality. This is a hypnotic figment I’ve created, and brought Lucas into.”

“It’s a what?”

“A hypnotic figment. Not reality.” Edward walked over to the bed and ran his hand through the drip stand and the nurse’s body, a trail of multi-coloured ether dissipating in its wake. “See? I can’t remember the paragraph number, but it is in the small print at the end of the Marley contract. I can do what I like with hypnosis, but it is a no-no in reality.”

“Ah,” Huffnam said. “Yes. Clever.”

“I thought so.”

“Don’t get cocky, Myer.” Edward watched as Huffnam slowly walked around the figment of the hospital room, idly running his fingers through this and that, and chuckling to himself. He stopped, facing Edward. “No flies on you, Myer. Anyway, how are you getting on with him?”

“As you said, Sir. Not well. He’s as narcissistic as they come, and stubborn to boot. I’ve tried the past with no luck, and the fact that in the present his colleagues all think he’s an arse doesn’t seem to

upset him in the slightest.

“A quandary then,” Huffam said, pursing his lips.

“Indeed.”

“Best leave you to it.”

“Yes. Unless....”

“Unless?”

“Unless there’s anything else?”

“Such as?”

“Advice.”

“Ah, no. Sorry. That’s in the small print too.”

“Is it?”

“It is.”

“Well, goodbye then, Mr. Huffam.”

“Goodbye Myer, and... good luck.” With a ‘pop’ Huffam vanished and Lucas woke up.

“What did I miss?” He said.

Edward looked around the hospital room. He watched his wife for a moment and mouthed a silent prayer. He then spun around and glared at Lucas. “Enough is enough!” He said, and clicked his fingers.

Back in Lucas’ flat Edward sat on a leather sofa facing Lucas, across what was, he considered, a hideously expensive, glass topped coffee table. At any rate, it was hideous. On the table a bottle of Cristal sat in an ice bucket along with two glasses.

“You going to be mother, then?” Lucas said, nodding towards the bottle.

“My story, your bottle. You be mother.”

“Only because you’re mildly entertaining, old man,” Lucas said,

and poured.

Edward looked at the bubbles, then sipped. He pursed his lips. As champagne went it wasn't too bad, though it certainly wasn't worth the exorbitant price.

"What's wrong with Lidl's own?"

"Nowhere near expensive enough for the clients I have," Lucas said.

"Your honesty is refreshing."

"So's my arse, apparently. Along with my narcissistic character. Get on with it."

"Okay. Here it is then," Edward said, clearing his throat.

"I am what is known as a Marley. And you are what we call a Scrooge."

"Ah! A Christmas Carol, if I'm not mistaken. And I'm never mistaken."

"Or humble."

"Or humble," Lucas said, leaning forward to refill his glass. After a moment's pause he re-charged Edward's, too. "I don't need to be humble. I'm successful, I'm wealthy, I'm young. What's your credo, old man?"

"I am Edward Myer," Edward said formally. Edward Myer, a Marley. Which means I'm dead and carrying around chains for each and every sin I have ever committed. Worse, I've just realised how much I truly love my wife. I've realised that after years of neglecting her I miss her dreadfully. I miss her little ways, her smiles, even her frowns when I slurp soup or leave the seat up. I miss her so, so much, and you, Mr Rennall, you have the power to help me get her back.

"I have this power, do I?"

“Yes.”

“How?”

Those I work for, those ‘upstairs,’ offered me a choice. Either I could save a young woman - who admittedly needs saving, but who is an easy catch. Or I could save you.

If I could save you, they told me, I would be free. Free forever from the chains of my sins. Free to join my wife when she dies. Free to travel with her ever onward. Together.

Only when I save you can I have this.”

Edward waited. He watched as Lucas emptied the bottle as he topped up their glasses. Watched as he put the bottle, neck first into the melting ice. Watched as he held his out for a toast.

With trepidation Edward leant forward and their glasses clinked together. The room was silent. Edward heard the ticking of the clock in the lobby, then Lucas wheezed. It was a wheeze that grew and grew in volume as the man burst into gales of laughter.

Chapter seven

Greg Ray

"Now, there is a thing to miss. Scotch." Edward Myers tipped his glass.

Lucas gave a slight raise of his glass in agreement. The two had repaired to the dry bar. Scotch in hand, Lucas returned to theme. "You just need to consider seriously the possibility that I have exactly the life I want right here, now."

"It's not all that you think. I'm offering you inside information on this."

"I know you're saying that, but let's talk investment here. You're wanting me to make an investment, but I'm just not seeing the promise of the company you are pitching. Where's the lead in? What's the business model?"

"Sometimes you just have to venture the capital before that payday shows itself." Edward gestured with his glass at Lucas. He had the professional ease of a confidence man. "You can't know in advance what it's going to be — some breakthrough technology you never expected — but, if you played your cards right, there you are standing front of the line for the payoff."

Lucas smiled. "But you do know in advance. You always know

where the payoff comes. It's capital gains."

Edward tipped his glass again, but found it empty.

Lucas poured him another. "Look, I'm 31, my portfolio looks great and I'm on the winning track. Just look around you. I am standing in the sweet spot of Marylebone in the middle of my own flat with acres of living space and bedrooms I don't even know what to do with. The nearer the bone, the sweeter the meat."

Edward temporised. "It's nice, but is not all it could be. You know, I could show you what you could really do with this place — and will."

"Why do I think I should say no to that offer?" He hesitated. "So, you can do that?"

The floor trembled — once, twice — and then shook violently under their feet. Hangings rattled fell, walls stretched. The dry bar tipped backward as the wall nearest collapsed into a new hallway. An exposed stair fell from the ceiling and established itself to one side of the receiving room.

Edward walked Lucas through parts of his flat that hadn't existed moments before.

"I like it. It suits me."

"It should. You will design it. More mirrors, more empty space. More empty." Edward paused for effect. "More empty."

"Yeah, spacious. I get it. But how? It's huge. Multi-level."

"By this time, you own half the place."

"Bryanston Court?" Lucas considered this. "Well, smart move."

Lucas had found the spacious wardrobe closet off the master bedroom. He was looking over the array of clothing and accessories with approval.

"But nobody else lives in your part of the building. You got them all out, one after another. Not just for the expansion.

"Interesting. Real estate is not usually my ticket. So, what's my strategy there? Vacating more of the units, I mean." Lucas wandered out, Edward shadowing him like an estate agent.

"No angle" said Edward. "You're just a prick. With money."

Lucas frowned. "I should have known there was going to be a point." He spotted a new and fully stocked wet bar and moved to it.

Edward pressed forward. "Maybe you are more like me than you want to admit. I never realised that I missed out on a life with my own wife until after I died. Maybe you just started on that path earlier than I did." He paused again for effect. "You see, you're just missing out on having anyone around at all. And that's what you don't realise."

Lucas got behind the bar and set up a rocks glass. "Huh. Same whiskey."

Edward sat down at the bar. His own half-finished drink was already sitting there.

Lucas poured himself a fresh one. "I expected better whiskey"

"Eh?"

Lucas added to Edward's glass, too. "I thought my future self would be drinking better scotch. He can certainly afford it."

"You know this is you we're talking about, right?"

"Yeah. Sure. But it's odd, right? Why is it the same scotch whiskey?"

Edward shrugged it off. "Must be an old favourite or something."

A clock somewhere stroked midnight. The windows on the far side

of the room lit up under full sun. Shafts of sunlight gilded the casement, shifted and moved rapidly across the floor. Lucas ran to a window. It should have been Seymour Place, he figured, but Lucas found himself looking out from a considerable height on a cold but extraordinarily blue day. The assemblage corporate buildings, the whole scene, was reminiscent of the view from his office, only higher and nothing was quite right.

"You know I am really starting to enjoy this. What am I looking at?"

"The view from your future office. It's Christmas out there somewhere."

"A good strong view. I think I must become very successful."

Edward watched Lucas carefully. "No, Lucas, you're a failure. All you've got is money, lots of money. You're alone and unhappy!"

Lucas turned from the window and found himself inside a spacious office, sparsely furnished. At a standing desk nearby, Lucas saw himself working over some documents.

"That's you, Lucas. It's Christmas. This whole building is empty and that's you, Lucas. Working away on your next and biggest screw-thy-neighbour deal."

"It's a big one, eh?"

"Huge. Biggest deal Rennall and Webb ever made."

"Rennall and Webb. Hah!" Lucas walked round to the back side of the desk and leaned over for a look. "What happened to Berry and Lawrence?"

"You pushed them out. Lawrence lost everything. Shot himself."

"Lawrence I can understand, but why Berry?"

"What?"

"Berry's got chops. Why push out Berry?"

"You wanted your name to come first."

Lucas looked over at Edward. "Wow. No shit?"

"Yeah, Lucas. No shit."

"Christ, look at this. Leverage buyout. Their looking to pull in, after interest, maybe four billion with zero skin in the game. And short term! How am I even doing that?"

Edward stood at the other side of the desk, watching Lucas carefully. "No, your partner is in up to his teeth, but you now, you've got your own stake leveraged out on the side.

"Wait. That doesn't even make sense." Lucas snatched at the top document on the desk, but his hand came away empty. He leaned in for a closer look. "How come I can't make out more of what's on these pages?" Lucas startled when his own hands reached over from the other side of the desk and grabbed up all the documents. He looked up to find his own self staring back at him.

But he was looking at himself in the mirror, his bathroom mirror. He was wearing his best "closure" suit, just as his future self had been. Unusual attire for either of them just then.

"Crap." He grabbed a toothbrush from the cabinet and called out, "Help yourself to the booze! I am going to bed, goddammit."

That suit was always good on him. He looked sharp in the mirror. This was a suit he reserved for special occasions — when it was time to cinch the deal, lower the boom on a company they had taken over — for that special moment when you hold all the cards and you can turn some company into a cash cow: sell off assets, lay off employees, break everything up to dig out all the profitable nuggets hidden there.

He reached down for the tap and his hand touched something

that made him jump back. Where the wash basins should be he was looking down into an open casket. The deceased was wearing his suit.

Lucas collected himself. "Um, he looks good" he said volubly.

"That's you." Edward was right beside him. Funereal organ music played.

"I get it. He looks good. Nice suit." Lucas ran his hand along the casket. "All bronze. Very classy. I've got real taste."

Lucas turned around to leave, but found himself facing a hushed room of empty chairs. The dais where he stood with the casket was flanked by a profusion of large flower arrangements. A funeral director stood to one side behind a glass podium reading some dull words from a laminated page. No one else was there.

"Where is everyone?"

"No one came to your funeral. Not even the assistant who came over to approve the setup and signed off on the final paperwork stayed. Made sure everything was to your specifications and left."

"Lots of flowers, though."

"Not what you're thinking. You arranged that too."

Lucas stormed down the aisle only to find himself brought up short in his own bedroom. But it wasn't right. Where his bed should be was a sprawling desk. Someone was slumped over behind it. It was not hard to guess who. Behind the desk, big picture windows showed him the same scene he saw earlier. He was back in his future office.

Lucas knew who it was, knew what to expect, but he had to look anyway. The figure was slumped forward onto the desk on which were several empty file boxes. The scene was illuminated only by a

blank computer screen — a square cursor blinking at the command line prompt and that was all. Another document box, half empty, sat on the ground beside the shredder. The fingers of the man's left hand were in the shredder. There was blood there.

"Heart attack," said Edward right behind his ear. "The Feds have just entered the building downstairs."

Lucas exhaled. "So, I didn't get caught."

Edward was silent.

"And we got away with everything? Were charges ever filed?"

"Could you focus here? That is not the point!!"

Lucas rounded on him. "Of course it is!"

Edward jerked this finger back toward the death scene. "Look, look! You're dead!"

"Of course I'm dead — in the future. Was that supposed to be a surprise?! Everybody's going to die. Hell, you're already dead." Lucas turned back and stepped purposefully toward the dead body. "So, I die of a heart attack? What are we talking about here, myocardial infarction, cardiac arrest, what?"

"It— it's a heart attack. What does it matter?"

"Okay, whatever. You know how many guys in this business die of heart attacks? All of them! Did you think you were showing me something I didn't know? I am looking and I am seeing, but the only interesting question here is whether I got away with—" Lucas looked down at the half box of unshredded documents. "With whatever it was."

Something dark skittered out from under the desk at that moment. Lucas reeled back and lost his balance. As he fell, his foot hit and toppled the shredder, pulling the hand trapped in its teeth with it. His dead body swivelled in its chair and lurched down on

top of him.

"Ugh! Ugh!!" Lucas shoved the pillow away from him at full force. It slapped up against the glass pane of the gas fire and thumped to the ground. He was sitting on his own couch. The gas fire was lit. There was a glass of scotch on his side table and another empty on the coffee table in front of him. Edward sat on the other side of the couch looking at him as if they might have been sitting there all night. He had heavy chains around his ankles which wound away and trailed out of the room.

"But it doesn't have to be that way," Edward was saying. He produced a briefcase from somewhere. "That was one big deal, one big bad deal. And it wasn't the first." He opened the case and removed a folder of documents. "But it was the biggest and the last — your career, your life, your reputation. Gone in an instant." He set the case on the coffee table. "But it didn't have to end that way. You know what your problem was? Is? I'll tell you what your problem is. You are so hungry. You're young. You're like a shark. And that's good, you've got the edge and that's what it takes. But it can't be all leverage all the time, and you're always going for the big kill with nothing in between. Sooner or later the casualties start piling up and your dead body among them." Edward rubbed his hands together. "Now, I've been going over your work — I mean before you shredded most of it. My god, you were so outspent and over-leveraged! You can already see the signs in your portfolio today. And you kept operating that way — and mounting up leverage on the leverage on the one's that didn't pan out. So then you had to have them: the ever bigger, more dangerous, and dodgier deals to keep it all afloat. You talk about your fancy flat

and your portfolio. You've got nothing here but a disaster waiting to happen. That valuation you're building up is just grease for the fire. But it doesn't have to be that way. I can help you." Edward opened the folder he was holding. "With the right core of strategic investments early on, you could make killings like you never dreamed of. Enough to drive everything else you want to do — even a lot of the bad deals — without it swallowing you whole."

"Is that what this is? You came here to give me a pitch?"

Edward held up the file. "This is a portfolio of sure things and I am offering it to you."

"Sure things."

"I mean real sure things. What do we always say? Hindsight is the sharpest investor. But, just think about it. If you have the foresight you don't need hindsight. I can see the future, Lucas. Private equity investment is like child's play from where I am sitting. Except I can't do it, because, well, I'm a Marley, a ghost. But you can."

"I'm listening."

"This is a diversified portfolio of investment opportunities that could secure you for a lifetime. And opportunity follows opportunity, so who knows how high you could go beyond that." Edward started turning through the documents.

"Look at this." He held up what looked like a shiny piece of coloured paper. "Made entirely of vegetable matter. Why is that important? Not even the company who just stumbled on this knows the answer to that. But that, my friend, is the unprepossessing guise of a multi-billion dollar industry in the offing."

He turned through several sheets. "I've got loan-to-owns here

that would make you drool." Another sheet. "This one alone could turn enough to cover you for equity lost on some of your worst deals." More sheets. "But with a portfolio of options like this, you don't need to make those bad deals. These are sure things. You want leverage buyouts?" He held up a single page. "You have to sit on this one for a while, but this would net you three-quarters of what you were chasing with that last big deal. Not such a fast turn around, it's true, but this one's legal and it also won't be the death of you." Edward closed the folder again with one sure hand.

"I suppose if I asked to see any of those documents, it would be just like before. For some mysterious reason, I'd not be able to make out any details, just bits and pieces."

Edward's face was a mask.

"You know, I think I can see where this is going. But what's your angle exactly? Not money, obviously."

"I'm taking a big risk with you. This—" He closed the folder and brought his hand down on top of it. "This is not ordinary Marley operating procedure. If this gets out, that's not deep trouble for me, I am talking infinite trouble the likes of which you cannot even imagine. Look, I did the required with you. I showed you all the things, made the case just like always. But I know you. I know how you think. Because we're not so different you and I. I was just like you. No, I was you once upon a time. So, here it is." He placed the folder of documents back in the case and snapped it shut. "I'm offering you the inside deal of a lifetime. Literally."

"I'm listening, but I'm still not hearing."

"It's simple. Everybody wins. You get the portfolio upfront — every one a sure thing — and in exchange, you take a few simple steps toward being a better person. Six months, that's all I need.

Your heart doesn't have to be in it, I don't care. All I need is that you do the things — outwardly."

"You just want me to act like it."

"I've been a Marley for a while and I'm telling you, that is all anybody ever does! All that stuff about people changing overnight is hogwash. The best they can manage is act like someone else for awhile and hope the doing changes them."

"You mean like for six months."

"Hell no. Six months wouldn't make a scratch in what your made of." It's like this: you start changing your ways—"

"Outwardly."

"Outwardly. So I've done my job and I get what I want — chain-free and back with my wife. And if after six months you turn out to be a backslider, who gives a shit? You're already a hopeless case, so no surprise there. And look, I've run the numbers and after six months almost everybody is back to their old ways. You would be one among billions of backsliders." Edward paused for effect. "But you would also be making billions."

Lucas put this hands on his knees. "And that's it?"

"That's it."

Lucas rose from the couch and switched off the gas fire. "You're right, we are more similar than I like to admit. So I can see how you've thought this through for us. I think I would do the same if I was in your shoes, too."

"So, we have a deal?"

"No, we do not! Because what I would do in your shoes is anything I could to close that deal. And if I didn't have anything to offer, a person like me would just fake it out — concoct a deal out of thin air. Am I fool? The leads in that portfolio will all fizzle, but

long after the six months is up and Edward Myers has gotten what he wants. The answer is no. No!"

"You know, if you're not leaving, if you're just going to sit there and brood, I'm having a snack." Lucas stepped into the kitchen and set his glass in the sink. He pulled the double doors of the refrigerator wide — onto inky blackness — the howling gaping void. His chest burst forward as he was sucked toward the swirling dark before him. But the doors, pulled by the same gale, swung back and pinned him from both sides and held him fast — looking into the falling, twisting maw of darkness that wanted to take him. He screamed, but there was no sound.

But the void was not void of all things. There in the darkness he saw himself, but not himself — a wraith in chains — long, long chains. The doors closed and he fell back onto the floor.

"You see, we are not so different."

Lucas startled up, but Edward was nowhere to be seen.

"I know what you are trying to do," he ran from the kitchen, heaving. "But it is not going to work. It will not work!"

Edward stood in the middle of the receiving room, briefcase in hand. Ordinary.

"You can't win. You can't. Stop tormenting me! Go see your wife. It's your last chance."

Edward's face contorted beyond recognition. "I can't!" he howled. "If I go to her in life, I will be cast into chains for eternity."

"I don't care, just do it." Lucas clutched his chest, trying to catch breath. His heart pounded. "You have to try. Go to her and leave me out of it."

Chapter eight

Waleed Ovase

He wasn't a stranger to failure, in this life or his previous one. Not every deal made him money, and not every person could be changed. The success rates were well known among Marleys, and sometimes they had to suck it up and move on. Learn to love pain as much as joy.

Everything was a learning opportunity. And this time around, he was feeling something new. There was the guilt, there was the general sympathy, and of course there was the burning feeling of having failed Margaret. But something was hitting him deeper than all that. And that, of course, made him feel worse about Margaret.

He'd been doing this job for twenty years. And truth be told, if he was assigned to coax someone into changing their life, they were probably horrible people, but this time, this person, this situation, was messing with his emotions.

The night was waning and sunrise was mere hours away. He walked through the empty streets of London, invisible to the beggars, the drunks, and the stray cops that kept a watchful eye. Christmas was near, the decorations and lights were bright, and he was alone. He looked up at the few stars that were powerful

enough to break through London's grid, and let their beauty help him soak in the truth: he had failed. There would be no more time with Margaret. He would have to carry his burdens, his faults, his mistakes with him forever. Forever and alone.

He took off his coat, his suit jacket, and loosened his tie. He let himself wander aimlessly through the streets. If they could see him, he would fit in well with the others, except he would be dead from hypothermia. But that was the good thing about already being dead. He let the biting cold remind him of his fate as he let his feet guide him.

The problem, he realised, was that he saw too much of himself in Lucas. There was that same hunger, that same drive for money and power, and that same need to prove themselves over and over again without caring about how it affected others. There was no selfless quality about Lucas. And there had been no selfless quality about Edward.

They were eerily similar, in a way that most of the others hadn't really been. Lucas was a young Edward, and if Edward had been approached at that age he would have told the ghost to bugger himself too. Money had been at stake. There had been no time to consider who he was as a person. There had been no energy to care about his soul.

But they say youth is wasted on the young. And he had always wanted to spend more time with Margaret. But he hadn't been thinking about the future consequences - especially not in some metaphysical, mythical sort of way. They were all his choices, choices free and clear from any outside forces except his own greed. How could he regret them now when everything had been so clear then?

The bright glare of a sign made him finally stop. Night was turning pale, the sun slowly making its way toward the horizon. His feet and occupied mind had led him back to the Guys and St. Thomas. He looked up at the bulwark of a hospital, its concrete edifice and towering main building. She was in there somewhere.

Dealing with Lucas was like reopening half healed wounds in himself, poking them with a stick to make sure they still bled. And they did. He passed through the hospital, floor by floor, unnoticed by doctors and nurses, technicians and janitors, realising that they'd never be able to fix him or Lucas, but hopefully they'd fix Margaret.

He heard the beep of the EKG and leaned against the door frame, breathing a sigh of relief that she was still alive. He sat down in the only chair in the room, across from Margaret's bed. Maybe if he could just be with her for a few minutes, everything would be alright. He could muster another bucket or two of stamina and charge at Lucas once again. Until Huffam showed up, there was still a chance to redeem himself!

"Ole Margie is still in here?" asked a woman, outside the door.

"Yeah," came a reply.

Edward quickly got up from the chair and moved to the edge of the small hospital room, as a nurse and doctor came in. He recognised both of them, having seen them wandering the halls a little earlier. They both clutched mugs of coffee and what he assumed were patient's charts.

"Did you talk to Doctor Kernow?" asked the Nurse, putting her coffee down to check on Margaret's stats.

"Yeah, he's really pushing to pull the plug on Margie," replied the doctor. "He's a heartless ole nitwit though."

"It's his decision at the end of the day. There's no next of kin right?" asked the nurse.

"Yeah, that's right. I can't imagine that at all."

"What?"

"Not having next of kin. I don't think I want to die alone like that," said the doctor.

Edward scowled, realising that it would have been easier to just let them know his presence, rather than listening surreptitiously to their opinions on his and Margaret's choices. He had been too busy to have kids. That had been a good decision at the time. He gritted his teeth. All of his decisions had been good decisions at the time. But now, it all seemed like a wasted life. All he had wanted he had gotten, only to realise too late, much, much too late that it was a waste.

"She's gonna still be this way tomorrow morning," said the nurse, getting back to her coffee and heading for the door. "We've made her comfortable, at least."

The doctor nodded, following her out. "If she can't pull through by herself by tomorrow, then perhaps Doctor Kernow is right. It's time to let her go." She shook her head. "78 isn't young."

"Yeah," agreed the nurse. "But these days, it's not that old either." They closed the door behind them, leaving Edward once again to his thoughts.

He sat back down in the chair. This was the worst Christmas ever. Even worse than when he was cheated out of a hotel development deal in Chelsea. The millions of pounds he lost on that deal had been heartbreaking, but he was realising that nothing he had lived was the real emotion. He stared at Margaret, watching her chest slowly rise and fall.

Today was heartbreaking. Everything else was just make believe.

He had tried his best to explain these things to Lucas. But he wouldn't listen. He couldn't understand. Some things just had to be learned through the rough experiences, rather than being told. There was no replacement for experience.

He looked down at his hands, tracing his palm lines. In his younger days, some pretty girl at a party had reached out and grabbed his hands, exclaiming all the truths that laid in his palm lines. There had been something about living a long life, about having lots of kids, and after a wink and a drink, something about a great sex life. But none of that had come true. It had just been work, shady and otherwise, to reap the benefits of monetary wealth. Even she had been a means to an end: her father had owned a large construction company.

Could he try again with Lucas? Make him see the error of his ways? He had the experience. But how to explain it to someone so young. Someone at the beginning of it all.

There was a knock at the door. He looked up, surprised. No one knew he was here. The knob turned and John Huffam poked his head around the door. "Mornin'," he said. "May I come in?"

Edward waved him inside.

John had dressed down for the meeting, in a slim button down and jeans. He carried an over sized bag. He reached inside and removed two glasses and a bottle. "I think I've had this for at least, I would say, 40 years," he said, handing a glass to Edward.

"Is that when you died?"

"Something like that, I guess."

"How did that happen anyway?"

John popped the bottle open and poured a more than healthy amount for both of them. "That's a story for another time. We have other things to discuss." He raised his glass, meeting Edwards with a loud clink. "To failures, eh?"

Edward didn't respond, just sipped the whiskey. "Scotch?"

"Aye. I've always felt that a good scotch can heal whatever ails ya. In this case, that you'll be working for me for a good bit longer," said Huffam. He sat down on the floor, stretching his legs out in front of him. "So, you know what you have to do?"

"Convince Lucas that--"

"No, Edward," said Huffam, interjecting forcefully. "You don't understand. Take another drink. I wouldn't break out the scotch to give you courage to take another chance. You've blown the one chance you've had."

Edward took another sip, trying to let Huffam's words sink in. "So that's it?"

Huffam rolled the glass in his hands for a moment and then took another drink. "The sun isn't up yet. There's plenty of time left if you want to take a shot at McCaffrey."

"And just let Lucas go?"

"And just let Lucas go," said Huffam. His voice was laced with hard finality.

The little courage Edward had managed to muster over the course of the disastrous night melted away as he realised that his boss wasn't going to change his mind. He had no options left.

Lucas was a lost cause. Just like he had been. There was nothing else to do. All their choices had been freely made. And there were always consequences.

"Alright," he whispered. He stared at the floor, unable to look at

Margaret. "But I wish we could have done this away from Margaret."

Huffam sighed. "None of this is easy. You're living in perpetual agony and penance for your own actions. Don't blame me for purportedly being callous to your feelings." He reached inside his bag and took out a binder. "Here. This case'll be old hat to you."

Edward took the last of the scotch down in one gulp, enjoying the burn, and grabbed the binder. "So the scotch was just a failure present?"

Huffam took Edward's glass and stashed it back in his bag. "No, it was to help you toughen up." He gestured around the room. "I'll say it again: none of this is easy. Life wasn't easy. The afterlife is no different." He got up from the floor and went to the door. "Good luck," he finished, closing the door behind him.

Edward opened the binder and started reading. He looked out Margaret's room's window for a moment, realising that the sun was still rising, the night becoming paler by the minute. Time was running out. He had a job to do.

He got up, held Margaret's hand for a moment too short, and solemnly walked out of the room. He hoped this wouldn't be the last he saw of his wife. There had never been enough time. He shook his head. He had never made enough time, he corrected himself.

He kept his head down as he passed the nurses and doctors, technicians and janitors, and out into the still dark morning.

He had failed everyone. But he had a chance to not fail Claire McCaffrey. Maybe that would be enough of a consolation prize.

Chapter nine

Ryker Hayes

Edward stood before the door to Lucas' office. Reading the gold plaque on the door with Lucas' name and title made his blood boil. One way or another they were done with this impasse today.

Lucas was at his desk typing away on his computer when Edward floated through the door. The clicking clatter of the keys grated against his ears. The sound was as pretentious as the charcoal grey designer suit Lucas wore.

"Lucas," Edward forced through his teeth. He couldn't lose his temper. He had more control than that. No scrooge could get to him. "You're coming with me."

Lucas continued to type as he replied. "Hello, Edward. I can't go with you today. As you can see I'm busy using the very interesting information you gave me last night. I believe this will be my best year yet." He grinned at Edward over his laptop.

"You know that's not why I gave you that information." Edward said shortly.

"I know," He agreed. "But since I have no interest in, how did you put it? Turning my life around this is the only way I could put the information to good use." He stopped his typing and leaned

back in his chair.

Edward took a deep breath. “This information won’t change your future. It’s already set in stone. It can only change if you change, Lucas.”

“I really must thank you, Edward.” He continued unfazed. “After all, if it weren’t for you I wouldn’t have this information. A proper thank you is of the order. I think I’ll send you a...”

Edward couldn’t hear Lucas’ words over the sound of the blood rushing through his ears. The papers in the room lifted up and began to swirl through the air in response to his rage. “Lucas!” He bellowed. “You are coming with me.”

“No, I am not!” Lucas rose from his chair and slammed his hands against the desk. “I like the person I am and no one is going to change that. Especially an old, dead, cursed, miser. I am done talking with you.” He waved him away.

“That is it!” Edward was done being the nice guy. No one, especially a scrooge, talked to him like that. The office around them melted away. The nice oak desk dissolved into a small cardboard box, the bookshelves into mildew covered brick walls, the wooden floor to cracked and broken concrete. Lucas’ suit melted into tattered rags held together more by sheer will than fabric.

“W-what is this? Where am I?” Lucas reached out and touched the box that use to be his desk. “This isn’t part of my future.” He looked around the dirty alleyway. “ I know it isn’t. Tell me!”

Edward grinned. “You’re right Lucas. This isn’t part of your future.”

Lucas took a deep breath and smirked at him. “Fear tactics? Really? I thought you better than that.”

“But I can keep you here for as long as I like.” Edward continued. “How would you like that, Lucas? Trapped in this filthy, disgusting hallway?” His grin broadened as the smirk faded from Lucas’ face. “Of course, we both know you’re not really here. This is all happening inside your head.” He sighed and looked around the alley. “Now, if I keep you trapped here in your mind, what will happen to your physical body? Do you think your business acquaintances and wife will keep you at your house or send you off to an institution? Personally, I believe the latter.”

“Y-you can’t do this!” Lucas stumbled back from the box. “You can’t trap me here!” He ran his hands across the brick wall. “This isn’t real.” He beat his fists against the wall. “This isn’t real!”

“If it makes you feel any better, Lucas, I can stop by from time to time to visit you here. Why, I can even alter your vision.” Dark clouds amassed above the alley. With a loud boom rain began to pour down in sheets, flooding the ground and washed away the only cover Lucas had - his box.

The rain bent around Edward and pooled away from his shoes. “Lovely, isn’t it?”

Lucas held his arms over his head and squinted up at the sky. “It’s fine.” He stared Edward in the eye. “Really, it’s lovely.”

“Really?” Edward grit his teeth together. He jabbed a finger at him.

Lucas stumbled back from the wall. A moan rose from his lips. He wrapped a free hand around his stomach and slowly sank to the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Edward asked. “Are you hungry?” With a sweep of his hand a red and white checkered picnic blanket appeared covered in food - a steaming bowl of clam chowder, a

heaping plate of spaghetti, a basket of breadsticks, a bottle of Glenmorangie Pride 1981 Highland Single Malt Scotch Whiskey and a single shot glass. The delicious smell wafted through the air.

Slowly, Lucas reached out a hand towards the food. As his fingertips were about to touch the edge of the picnic blanket it slid a few inches away from him. He turned his head away and curled into a ball on his side. His lips moved.

“Hu? What was that?” Edward cupped a hand around his ear and leaned closer. “Say it again?”

“I’m fine,” Lucas said his voice barely more than a whisper. He moaned again and tightened his arms around his stomach.

Edward straightened up. His eyes flashed. From the sewer large black rats crawled out and raced towards Lucas their beady red eyes fixated on his tattered jean legs.

“Ah!” Lucas screamed. He lashed out landing a few solid kicks, but there were too many. He scrambled to his feet and tried to flee but the mouth of the alley kept out of his reach until he was running in place. The rats swarmed up the back of his legs, digging their claws into his skin and sinking their fangs through his clothes into his flesh. Lucas fell to the ground under the weight of the vermin.

“What do you think, now?” Edward shouted over the noise. “Is this what you want?” He walked over to Lucas and looked down at him. “What do you think?”

“Stop!” Lucas screamed. “Make it stop!”

“Come again?” Edward leaned closer to him. “I’m sorry, I can’t hear you over the sounds of the rodents!”

“Make it stop, I beg you!” Lucas thrashed under the rats. A rat sank its fangs into his nose and he screamed as he yanked it off

along with a chunk of flesh. "Please!"

At a nod from Edward, the rats scurried over to the picnic blanket, devoured all of the food and drink before disappearing back into the sewer their mission complete.

Lucas sat up his whole body shaking uncontrollable. His ragged clothing was torn to pieces and his skin was criss crossed with scratches like a quilt. Blood ran from bites and dripped off the ends of his fingers and chin. "Please," He whispered his teeth stained red.

Edward crouched down and put his face close to his. He locked eyes with him. "What do you want to do?" He asked.

"I-I want t-to go with you."

"Excellent."

The sound of rain faded as the alleyway dissolved around them. Lucas' posh office re-appeared. Lucas was clutching the edge of his desk so hard his knuckles had turned white. His face turned as white as his knuckles and he released the desk. He barely had time to turn his face away from his computer before he threw up his lunch.

Edward turned away and paused before the door. "I think we're making progress. Don't you?"

Chapter ten

Jaysen O'Dell

“Fine, you can waste your time. I don’t care.”

“This damnable prick!” Edward couldn’t tell if he said that out loud or to himself. “I’ve got to remember my training. Explain, connect, emotion, convince, close. But this c*** has no emotions. He doesn’t give a rip about anyone, let alone me and Maggie. I have to think...”

Lucas had walked to the office door and was deriding some underling. “Are you trying to make me look like a fool?! If I didn’t care so much about my shoe I’d have my foot so far up your arse... GET IT FIXED NOW!!”

“Keep that up. You’re one good hissy fit from an aneurism. We need more workers to lighten the case load.”

“F*** off! If I wasn’t tired of these idiots I wouldn’t have tolerated your prattling. I make more money with every heart beat than you’ve ever made in a year.” Lucas walked over to a hidden closet and opened the door. Smoothing his hair and jacket he slowly reached for his overcoat. “Julia does not deserve the treat she’s going to get tonight.”

Edward started to see an opening. Maybe, just maybe, there was

a way to break Lucas. There wasn't much time. He needed to get started.

"You know, we really need to get going. We're headed to the offices of Share. It is..."

"Claire McCaffrey? That bitch? We've spent so much time prepping and filing suits against her I know when her monthly is. We can have some fun with her... this week. Great timing, Edward." Lucas had a very unflattering sneer twisting his mouth.

As Lucas pulled his coat over his suit, Edward started to fade. He wanted to reach that delicate balance between "nothing" and "something" so that only Lucas would see him. That state where the slightest tweak would make him solid enough to interact with the real world but no one would see him if they didn't already know he was there.

"Then I don't need to give you the address. You're busy I'll talk while we walk. You should call us a cabby, and don't be a tosser when you do it."

"Really Eddie, my boy? Did the worms eat your brain? I do NOT do the things you... *would* have done. Taxis, tube, busses... really? Did you forget who I am? You, phone girl!"

"Sally, sir."

"I don't bloody care! Tell James I want the Rolls immediately."

"You fired James this morning, sir. Robert is the new man and..."

"DID I ASK YOU HIS NAME? GET THE ROLLS! AT THE DOOR! NOW!"

Luckily for Lucas the elevator walls were mirrored. Looking at his reflection he adjusted his hair, checked for any lunch in his teeth and adjusted his tie. As the door opened Edward reached out

and flicked a bit of hair out of place. Robert opened the lobby door with a somber “Good day sir” only to be shunned by Lucas. The door to the Rolls was already open and as Lucas climbed in Edward broke a few threads from the back of his over coat.

“Sir, your coat is...”

“Did I ask for your evaluation of my coat?”

“No sir but...”

“Then shut the f*** up and drive. Take us to Share.”

“Us?”

“Did I stutter? Stop talking and drive.”

As the car started to move Edward said “Tell me what you know about Claire’s life.”

“Busted home... I think she was 5. No legal bond between mum and pa. Pa had the income and the new hottie. Mum worked multiple jobs, no lovers, but managed. Claire managed Cambridge on scholarship. Built OurLink based on tech developed by some fellow students. She’s the smart one and they are jealous that she’s gotten rich while they haven’t. We’ve represented a few of them. Being the smart person she is, and I have to admit she’s brutal with her business timing, she sees more market in corporations than low end social media. She has a brain that’s almost as sexy as that body. I bet she’s a great lay.”

“I’d agree with you, sir, if I knew who we were discussing. Should we stop for some... prophylactics on the way?”

“What the... Who the hell are you to be butting in our conversation? Drive the bloody car and mind your own business!”

“Yes sir. It’s just... who are you talking too?”

“F*** off you tosser!”

Edward slapped Lucas on the back of the head.

“What the f*** did you do?”

“Sir?” As Robert looked in the mirror at Lucas, he saw his one passenger shadow boxing violently. Alone.

“Don’t you do that again!”

Robert texted a buddy on the security team at Share. “In bound w/ possible issue.”

Edward smiled. It was working.

“Lucas, did you ever look into what her childhood was like? How she lived? What happened to her?”

“Who cares about bloody children? They should all be kept in cages with their nasty smell and sticky hands...”

Robert texted his friend again ... “In bound w/ actual problem. Drugs?” Robert was taking the bait.

“I didn’t ask about children... only Claire... what do you know about the details of her life?”

“Too young to really know what happened to parents. Pa pretty much vanished. Mum’s men friends the very few there were, were kept clear. Not well off, but never hungry. Nothing really there.”

“Then you need to let me show you.” Edward started what he called “the vision”.

Edward and Lucas found themselves standing in a 1 bedroom apartment. It was clean but everything about it said “poor”. Mismatched, heavily worn furniture what would have been old in 1980. The only decorations were hand made or broken nicknacks. There was no TV or radio to be seen. Three children, somewhere between 8 and 10 sat on the floor. The fair haired and light skinned boy and girl were obviously siblings. The dark child “belonged” to the room judging by the patched denim pants and the thread bare

elbows in her long sleeved shirt.

“You’re poor!” the boy said to the dark girl.

“Yeah. Mum says it’s hard to find work that pays enough.”

“We aren’t poor” the fair girl said.

“It’s not so bad” said the dark one.

“It sure isn’t good. You don’t have a TV. Or even a radio.”

“I don’t need one.”

“Our pa says that you poor people will never do anything, never be more than a drain on the national economy.” The boys words lit a fire in the dark girl.

“I will not be poor. I will make something and show everyone. Poor people just need jobs!”

The fair children laughed. The dark girl cried.

Lucas’ laughing made Robert nervous. Robert’s job was to drive. But this guy was... wrong. Talking to himself about some woman. Then three kids. Crazy hair and that hole in his jacket. Something wasn’t right.

“Unlike you Claire worked for what she has.” Edward’s comment hit the target.

“You arrogant c***. I’ve worked just as hard as she has. Sure I started off with more, but that’s just chance.”

Could there be a domestic disturbance, Robert thought to himself. “Inbound needs watched 2 men. Woman involved” “who?” “Lucas Rennell”

“Are you f***ing texting and driving? If I wanted to risk death I’d take public transit!”

“Settle down, Lucas. Traffic isn’t moving. Some piggy is blocking traffic.” Edward’s plan was progressing perfectly.

Robert's phone vibrated on the seat. "Bullocks! That will be for Claire. 2x plain clothes for escort when you land." Robert was glad that his time in the service had helped him build a network in London.

"It's only four blocks! Drive through the park." Lucas was tired of Edward.

"Sir, the road is closed to all but government vehicles."

"Grow a pair and drive! Know what, we'll walk. Meet us at Share. And once we are back at my office you're fired."

"Yes sir."

Robert typed, "LR on foot. 4blk. Expect to arrive hot. GdLk"

A crowd had gathered to investigate the car/pig fender bender. It's not every day that a pig gets loose in London. As Lucas started to push his way through the crowd Edward started phase 2 of his plan...

Edward flicked Lucas' ear with his finger. Lucas spun around. "What the f***!"

Edward shrugged. "What's wrong?"

"Don't screw with me!"

"Mummy, who's that man talking to?" a girl asked her mother.

"Ignore him sweetie".

Lucas glared at the pair and pointed at Edward. Just as Lucas took his first step, Edward kicked Luca's foot sending him stumbling, hands outstretched into the woman.

"Get off me you pervert!" She yelled. Several men approached.

Lucas' look of shock at finding his hands inexplicably covering a strange woman's breasts convinced the men it was an accident. The woman was less convinced. She landed one fist on his cheek

before he collected himself enough to step back.

“I honestly did trip.” He muttered as he pushed past her and on toward the office. A few teenage boys, noticing Lucas’ behaviour followed him.

“Hey mister, I got a sister. Better cushioned... 5 quid for a handful!” “I’d give you that Johnny!” “For 10 my mom would be willing too.” “You like the young or old?” Lucas moved as fast as he could trying to outpace the boys. Edward glided along realising that his plan was going much better than he could have hoped.

When Lucas arrived at Share he was sweaty, his hair was ruffled, the back of his coat was open, his shoes were untied and spoiled, and he had a bruise starting where the woman had struck him. Catching a glimpse of himself in a passing building he shuddered. This was not how he should be seen in public.

As he approached the front door two men in suits approached.
“Mr. Rennall?”

“Bugger off.”

Edward smiled.

“Mr. Rennall, Ms. McCaffery is expecting you.”

Lucas spun toward Edward. “Did you do this? Did you!?”

The two security men looked at each other. Edward Smiled

“Sir, come this way.”

Lucas followed them through a side door. As the door closed, his right shoe lace got caught. At the sound of him hitting the ground the guards spun around. Only one of them succeeded in suppressing the chuckle. “How often do you see a man dressed in clothes worth more than your annual salary face down on a dirty entrance carpet?” he was latter heard to say at the pub.

They took Lucas into a spartanly appointed room with a mirror

on one wall. “If we could have some ID, we will get your visitor badge issues while you wait here.”

As he handed over his ID, the head of security watched through the mirror. “Ma’am, I don’t like this. It looks like he’d been in brawl with some blokes from the Red Lion.”

“He’s normally perfectly groomed. How bad is it?”

“If I didn’t know it was Lucas Rennall, he could be any lower office worker out there. You’d never let your employees look like this.”

“This is perfect. I get the advantage for once. Send him up. With two men please.”

“Yes ma’am.” Roger knew that Robert’s warning was serious. “Samuel! Bart! You guys clean up fast and take him up to Ms McCaffery. Who is he talking too?”

“I don’t know why you think this is important” Lucas was saying, “she’s just another slut with lot of money. Nothing in her life can make a difference.”

“And Grab two tasers each” Roger told Bart. “I don’t like this.”

“While I have you with no distractions, let me show you something.”

“I have a headache” Lucas complained. Edward didn’t care and started “the vision”.

Edward and Lucas found themselves standing in cramped, dark room in stifling heat. The sound of a generator running near by pounded in Lucas’ ears. The walls looked to be some rough made brick and the ceiling, which may have been the roof based on the exposed rafters, was made of corrugated tin. The smell of livestock,

freshly butchered animals, and human sweat made the motionless, damp air seem like a leaden coat pressing their clothes into their suddenly sweaty skin.

“That’s perfect Aman. Using that method you’ve reduced memory consumption. This means you can use the old control system with the new software. You’ll be able to get the solar power you need and get rid of the generator.”

The woman talking to Aman was in her late forties. Streaks of grey in her black hair made her already light brown skin seem lighter. “That’s Claire!” exclaimed Lucas. “What the f*** is she doing in a place like this?”

“Just watch.”

“Udray!” Yelled Claire.

A 30 something man in a polo walked in through the door.

“Yes Claire?”

“Udray, he fixed it. I told you he was the guy we needed. Let’s make sure the village has supplies to make it through the training period. Then make arrangement for Aman, his wife and children to stay at the main compound while we train him on the new power systems and pumps. This is the man that will bring clean water and clean power to this village. Make it happen.”

“Yes ma’am. I’ll get right on it. How much training has he had?”

“Just the core for the last generation solar platform and basic programming for support. He taught himself the rest. We need him.”

“Done. Aman, come with me please. I need to see how much space you will need”.

“What am I looking at?” Lucas asked.

Claire walked over to the 20 year old system Aman has been

typing lines of code into.

“You are looking at Claire’s ‘village 42’. She left Share to start an organization that designs clean power systems to provide power to village well pumps. Part of her plan is technical training for village men and women to maintain and support these systems. All the money for the systems and the training comes from ... her.” While Edward was explaining the scene to Lucas he approached Claire. “Look at the smile on her face. She looks much younger than she really is. Unlike me... I looked 20yrs older than my actual age when I ...”

“Shut it dead man. Why am I here?”

“You need to see what Claire could have.”

Just as Edward finished that sentence a dozen children under the age of 10 ran into the room. A man of about 50 stood in the doorway laughing at the riot of swirling colors and loud voices. As the children clamored for her attention she knelt down to hug them all. One at a time, each child got a hug and a word of encouragement. Eventually there was only one left.

“Mum, we aren’t poor are we?”

“No, we are not” Claire whispered.

“Then why are do we spend so much time out here?”

“Because I was poor and then I was not. But I still felt poor. Then I met your pa and I felt less poor but I did not feel rich. Your pa and I realized helping people would make us even less poor so we started doing ... this. But we still felt poor. Then you came along. And now we are rich. Riches only come when you use the resources you have to help others. I’d rather be poor with you and pa, spending time here helping people, than have all our money”

“That’s a lot of bullocks” Lucas said.

“Who **is** he talking too?” Roger wondered aloud.

“Is it?” Edward asked rhetorically. “How would you know? When have you ever helped anyone? Or had a relationship for more than someone to shag?”

“Go to hell.”

“Someone get him out of there. He’s bloody mad and I don’t want him going off in our room.” Roger’s team went into action.

Walking down the hall Bart started the introductions. “Hello Mr. Rennall. I’m Bart and this is Samuel. We will be your guides and escorts for your time with us today.”

“Bartholomew, I would...”

“It’s Bart sir. Just Bart. That’s what you will call me.”

Edward slapped Lucas in the forehead hard enough to make him take two steps backward.

“Son of a ... Why did you do that!?! That was uncalled for! You apologise!” yelled Lucas

“Sir, I’ll not apologise for correcting you when you call me by a name that is not mine.”

“You stupid...” Lucas started to get angry.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you, they can’t see me right now.” Edward smiled as he told Lucas the reality of the situation.

“I’m a stupid what?” asked Bart.

For the first time Lucas actually looked at his escorts. If Bart wasn’t a black man and Samuel an Irishman, they could have been brothers. Both stood at five foot ten but had to weigh at least 18 stone each. Close cropped military haircuts, suit jacket with a 48” chest but trousers with a 32” waist. The sleeves and trouser legs

tightly fitting the body beneath. It was the stare that really bothered him. It wasn't the typical "steely" or "cold" stare you think about, but a stare that just begged for a chance to fight. These men were alive and eager to use years of training to "control a situation".

"I should be the one to apologise. I'm not feeling myself suddenly." Lucas's uncharacteristic apology stuck in his throat.

"As far as we can tell, you are acting entirely in character sir. You have a reputation that proceeded you into our place of business. And while you are welcome here, Samuel and I are here to make sure you do not live up to your reputation. Do you understand?"

"Would you like me to say yes or no?" Lucas tried to smile.

Edward recognised real fear in Lucas. It was working. An emotion other than anger.

"We are prepared for either." Bart replied.

"I'll go with 'yes' if that's ok" Lucas replied.

"I'd have preferred 'no'" Samuel mumbled to himself.

"Hello Lucas. I assume you're here to inform me of a new action?" Claire stood up behind her desk. Her fit business suit showed off her modest, but very feminine physique. "Have a seat" she said as she motioned to sitting area next to her desk. "You look awful today."

As Lucas walked toward the offered chair, Bart and Samuel moved to opposite sides of the room. They made it clear to Lucas that "no" was still an option if he wanted to risk a confrontation. Lucas nodded to each with a sheepish smile and said, to on one in particular, "I'm not sure why I'm here yet, but I promise to leave

my reputation at the door.”

Claire laughed and poured two glasses of water.

Lucas thanked her and lifted his glass to take a drink. Just before he was able to take a drink, Edward tipped the glass spilling its contents on Lucas. Everyone stared at him waiting for a reaction.

“It’s been a long day. May I have a towel please?”

“Sarah, bring us a towel. Lucas, let me send for a new shirt for you. Who’s the tailor?”

“That’s not needed Claire. I don’t think this will take long.”

“Ask her she is happy” Edward said to Lucas.

“What the hell are you thinking?” Lucas replied.

Bart and Samuel took a step forward.

“I meant to ask... What are you thinking about? Are you happy?”

Claire looked around the room. “Are you talking to me? To these two ... apes? Or to an imaginary friend?”

“You. I need to know, are you happy?”

“Who the f*** are you to ask me that question? You file civil suit after civil suit. You suck me dry and ruin my reputation. I trust no one because I don’t know what you will dig up next. I have no friends, and at this point, I don’t want any because you will turn them against me. I’ve worked my arse off to get here and now you and every other moron wants to take it away! The nasty beggar out front, the dirty children and their social services, the ungrateful employees demanding ‘compensation’ for work I’ve already paid them for. You can all go to hell! And do it fast so the world will be rid of all of you!

“I used to think all I needed to be happy was to be rich. Here I

am. I'm one of the richest single women in London. I eat alone. I sleep alone. I live alone. And you want to know 'are you happy?'" The tears in Claire's eyes could have been from sadness if there wasn't so much anger behind them.

"So you aren't happy?"

"Are you?"

In the private elevator Edward decided it was time. Time for the final set up. He could see that Lucas was trying to understand something. Something that Lucas was just not able to wrap his mind around. Edward made his move.

Lucas was standing in front of Bart and Samuel. Edward positioned himself between them and flipped both Lucas' ears.

"Stop that!" Lucas yelled.

"We've done nothing." Bart replied calmly. Samuel's eye twinkled.

"The hell you didn't!"

Edward did it again.

"I SAID STOP IT!" Lucas' face was red with frustration. He was confused. Why were they doing this.

"Sir, I don't know what you think is happening, but we have not moved." Bart was a bit more forceful. Samuel smiled.

Edward knew this would be the one with fireworks. He flipped both ears as hard as he could.

"YOU F*** C***S!!!" Lucas spun around with his fist already heading toward Bart. Samuel already had one of his Tasers out. Lucas' fist bounced harmlessly off Bart's oversized pectoral muscle. Samuel pulled the trigger.

As they stood over Lucas' limp body Samuel looked at the Taser

in his hand.

“These things take all the fun out of it.”

“Pretty ballsy for him to take a swing at me though.”

“You ever miss the fight?”

“Did you listen to any of what they said? The fight is all around us. At least we got to kill our enemies. ... So yeah. I miss it.”

“Me too.”

“Ma’am I’ve reviewed the tape. It was clean. Unprovoked attack on Bart. I’ve uploaded a copy to your private site. I’ve kept a copy for the company vault.”

“Load that bastard in his car and send him ... anywhere. Our doors are closed to him. Next time he shows up, call the bobbies. And ... send that Irishman back up here. I’m lonely.”

“Yes ma’am. Bart, put him in his car. It’s out front. Pulled up about 10min after he got here. Samuel, the old lady wants you. Grab a cover from the top drawer.”

Lucas started to recognise the inside of his car.

“How did I get here?”

“They said you attacked a security guard, sir, and they tasered you. I saw that man. I saw the tape. Are you feeling ok sir? You’ve been acting ... oddly.”

“How would you know if I’ve been acting oddly you twat? You only started this morning and I’ve already fired you.”

“Oddly as a general rule, sir. People don’t normally try to hit a man like that. Not with his buddy right next to him. And not without a bit of backup.”

“He’s right you know. You’ve been acting oddly to everyone

around you. Talking to yourself, starting fights, groping women in public. Is that really you?” Edward needed to get the anger focused on Lucas’ life, not on a chauffeur.

“Bugger off! Both of you!”

“Both of us sir?”

“She asked you a question. You didn’t answer it. Are you happy?”

“I don’t know. What was that I saw of Claire in ... where the hell was that?”

“Sir, you were in her office building but I’m not sure what you actually saw.”

“SHUT UP. Oh god my head hurts.”

“What you saw was a picture of what ‘could be’ if Claire changes her ways to become a better person. You saw how bitter and angry she is. It’s eating her from the inside out. Just like your arrogance and self absorption has eaten you into the shell of man you are. Emotionless except for anger and hatred. Unsatisfied by anything not realising that what you are missing is your own humanity.”

“Sir, we should go to a hospital. You could be seriously injured.

“So there’s hope for her?”

“Hope for who sir?”

“SHUT THE F*** UP!”

“Do you see? He’s trying to help you even though you’ve already fired him and all you can do is see him as an inconvenience....” Edward said. “No, there’s no help for Claire, not anymore.”

Lucas looked at Edward not comprehending.

“I had a choice. Take an easy job and save Claire or... save the ‘impossible’, that’s you, and decide my fate. If you saved, I’m saved too and I see my Maggie again. If you fall ... So do I.

“You abandoned her?”

“Her who sir? I’ve been with the car all night?”

“Why do you keep talking?” Lucas’ voice had lost an edge.

“Come now... we are both men of the world are we not? Which move would you make?”

“The one that benefits me the most.”

“Sir, I’m taking you to hospital. I think you’re injured.”

“Ken right?”

“No sir, Robert.”

“Robert, if you just shut up and drive you can keep your job for tomorrow. You take me to hospital and you’re done. Your call.”

“To the office sir?”

“Thank you Robert, the office would be wonderful.”

Edward smiled.

Chapter eleven

Luscinia Evan

Situated in the heart of Marylebone, the Myer Home stood, tall and proud. Edward glanced at the building, face carefully devoid of expressions, but Lucas had been around people enough to tell glimpse the turmoil of sadness, guilt and—above of—regret.

Lucas averted his eyes.

Edward cleared his throat, a scratchy sound that grated on Lucas' nerves. The mere presence of the older man—*ghost*, he corrected mentally—already pained him. It was as if Edward went out of his way to make his life difficult.

"Let me tell you my story," he began, "when I was young—"

Lucas scowled, folding his arms across his chest and disagreeing immediately, "—I don't really *want* to know—"

"Just shut up and listen," Edward interrupted, waving a hand at him in dismissal that only served to deepen his scowl. "Now, when I was young..."

The scenes rippled.

He was eighteen when he saw his mother lying in the hospital bed, half a dozen needles poking in her arm. It had been a nasty disease,

not exactly incurable, but, *it's expensive, and we don't have the money. What about his education, dear? I'd be fine.* She did not survive that day, and his father did not survive that night. His eyes were dry throughout both funerals. Relatives extended offers to take him in, and he refused every single one.

He grew, *twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two*, and graduated from the university with first class honours and top of the class. He secured a job as a banker in a prestigious bank with fairly high pay but not quite enough, so he worked his way up. His new work colleagues whispered behind his back, *look, another of those overachievers.* He pretended not to hear.

He met the woman of his life by pure chance at the age of twenty-three, filling the holes in his heart with warm smiles and kind eyes and cheerful laughter that he did not deserve. He was like a bee drawn to honey, desert man drawn to an oasis, and he was greedy and selfish and couldn't—*wouldn't*—let go.

He knelt down on one knee and presented her with a beautiful diamond-crusted ring that could never hope to match her beauty and *asked.*

He married the woman of his life at the age of twenty-five, and threw himself back to work. Because he could never repay her enough, not with how unworthy he was, so he looked at the only thing he was capable of—making money.

They said money could buy happiness. He wished for her happiness. No matter how dirty the means.

(They also said happiness couldn't really be bought. He chose to believe the former.)

He spun lies and muted truths and stripped companies and companies for profit. He ripped off his co-investors and hired the

best lawyers to defend himself. He was gaining power and influence and money.

He realised one day, coming back from work late at night, that the house was empty even though it was filled with fine possessions. Too big, too grey, desolate. He reached for his phone, contacts filled with acquaintances he kept at arm's length. No friends. No family. His wife was already asleep in the room across his.

Is this really worth it, he thought, but he was already too far gone so he could only work and work and *work* until he had exhausted himself to the point that he was just too tired to think. Colleagues sniggered behind his back, *look, it's him, the guy who plays dirty*, and he ignored them.

He was *thirty, forty, fifty*, and he wondered if there was really a point to this. His wife pleaded for holidays overseas together and breaks from work and a child. He asked *what for?*

His wife fell silent and put the dishes away. She did not mention that again.

He was *working, working, working*. He did not remember his age. He thought he should be past sixty when he died that day. He wouldn't quite know. He never celebrates birthdays.

When he died, he was just a dirty, selfish, *worthless* man. Back then, he was not given the privilege to repay what his parents had done for him, and now, he was going to lose the chance to repay what his wife had done for him.

What can money buy, except for a silent house that echoed his footsteps whenever he came back late at night?

What can money buy, except a first class ward for his beloved wife to lie in on the verge of death?

What can money buy, except regret for a lifetime?

What can money buy, except—

What can money buy?

...

What do you think, Lucas?

There was a ringing in his ear and a pounding in his head. For a moment he was confused. Until he blinked. Once, twice.

Lucas, he thought almost breathlessly. I'm Lucas, alright. That was some weird imagery memory-travel shoved right into my mind. Talk about warnings.

Edward only snorted at his apparent discomfort, sparing him no sympathy.

"You think that you are special. You think that you are some special snowflake," the ghost drawled, each word purposefully icy and intended to *hurt*. "Wake up. It isn't. Your life is just as pathetic as mine. You are as *worthless* as I am."

He let them sink in.

"But—" Edward held up a hand to quell any incoming protest. "—Unlike me, you are still alive. You still have the opportunity to change."

You have quite the flair for the dramatic, don't you, Lucas would have retorted, but he held his tongue. Edward—his memories when he was alive—had affected him more than he would like to admit, and he could feel something stir in the pit of his stomach. He tucked them away carefully. Those emotions were vulnerabilities—weaknesses to be exploited.

The Myer Home still stood tall and proud before them, but if he were a bit more poetic he would have said it looked lonely. It was

more of a house than a home.

Lucas huffed, trying to gather his thoughts. He was getting swayed too much. "Yes, yes, break out the pep talk," he crowed instead, gesturing wildly for the effect. His voice did not shake, but it was a near thing.

Edward's lips thinned. *Brilliant.*

"Then where's your wife now?" Lucas questioned, trying for a jab at Edward's sore spot. "Still alive?"

The older man gave him an unimpressed look, clicking his tongue with a disapproving shake of his head, "you clearly need to learn your manners."

Lucas glowered. He knew how to be polite—it was required in his life of work. He just didn't like to be polite very often outside of it.

He shrugged, and prompted again, "so?"

Edward regarded him. "She—" He started, but there was a pause in his voice. He hesitated. He was wavering. But the moment was gone again when he closed his eyes and took a breath (—Lucas was sure it was more of a habit rather than a need. Edward was a ghost anyway—) and he continued,

"Margaret is in the hospital."

Lucas stuffed his hands into his pockets as he strolled through the corridor. The air in the hospital smelt of antiseptic and felt bit too cold for his liking. Eyes scanning through the names indicated on the front of each door, Lucas finally stopped at one which read, *MARGARET MYER*. He pulled the door open without knocking and strode in.

Aside from the beeping of the machines, the room was silent.

An old woman with greying hair and wrinkled skin as pale as the shade of death lied on the hospital bed. Upon seeing her, Edward walked over, strides measured and unhurried, but Lucas could tell the desperation in his steps and yearning in his eyes.

Must be his wife, Lucas decided. He did not think he could feel the same way as Edward to another person, even if he had taken a trip in the ghost's memory.

There were at least half a dozen of needles stuck in the arm of the old lady, and Lucas wondered if it reminded Edward of his mother's death. Maybe it did. Of course it did. Lucas wondered if being reminded of it had stung.

He could only lean against the doorway, watching for what felt like an eternity. He hated this intimate moment that he was forced to witness. "Are you done? My time is precious," he grumbled.

There was a shift in the air.

Lucas straightened, now alert. From where he was, he realised Edward's mouth twisted into what could be disdain.

"I might not have much," Edward admitted softly (dangerously), fingers hovering over his wife's hand but not close enough—not daring enough to touch. He drew himself away, and turned to look at Lucas in the eye. "But you. You don't even have that."

Lucas snorted with false bravado. "Is this supposed to convince me to be a better person?"

"No—forget it. Let's just call it a bad dream. Just wake up and continue your pathetic life."

Chapter twelve

David Johnson

Lucas Rennall wakes up in his apartment. It's Saturday morning on the 23rd December 2017. The opening scenes of '28 Days Later' are playing on the 65 inch 4K TV that's wall-mounted opposite his bed. The volume level wouldn't have been loud enough to wake him, and he's momentarily confused. He feels awful, and consciousness is having a tough time pulling him from slumber. What had he been dreaming? As Lucas glances at the TV screen, he focuses on the film's main character wandering through the deserted streets of London outside St. Thomas' Hospital. Had he been walking around London too? Details of his dream are rapidly slipping away, and he cannot grasp any significant elements before they've eluded him entirely. Looking down at his Rolex Cellini, he can see it's only 6:30am. As he tries to turn, the 1,000 denier cotton sheets of his bed cling to his lean body. The whole area around him is saturated in sweat. More worryingly, Lucas can smell the acrid stench of vomit.

Although he'd had more than his fair share of wild Friday nights, in truth, he'd had more than a fair share in everything, he'd been working late last night at Berry, Lawrence and Webb. A city

law firm where he was a partner. It could only be a matter of time before the good family name of Rennall joined Berry, Lawrence and Webb on the corporate letterheads. Lucas came from money, with it having been lavished upon him throughout his life. This, in part, probably explained but didn't excuse his hedonistic proclivities. His father had been a city lawyer before him, rising to become a Conservative Member of Parliament. Regardless, backstory shoeorning aside, how could Lucas have vomited during the night and not woken? Indeed, why had he been sick? He'd eaten nothing unusual, and hadn't even knocked back a few brandies from his well stocked office cabinet whilst concluding private equity finance deal paperwork.

Feeling panicked, Lucas gingerly rose from bed, swinging both feet into a thick pile carpet. His apartment was stunning. The lush carpet giving way to exquisite underfloor heated tiling as he made his way along an expansive corridor to the main bathroom. The glossy ivory coloured tiles were heated uniformly, so his feet didn't have to bother seeking the elements, attempting to avoid any contrasting cold spots. He'd only bought the three bedroomed apartment six months earlier at a cost of £2.5 million, and it typically filled him with enough unadulterated pleasure to start each day afresh, but he couldn't shake his feeling of uneasiness, compounded with the worry that he could be seriously ill. Showering under a downpour akin to a tropical rainforest storm, Lucas decides that he'll go directly to A&E at St. Thomas' Hospital. From his apartment in Marylebone, it was only a short 20 minute drive directly past Hyde Park (through which he typically ran each Wednesday evening), around Green Park, through Westminster and then across the Thames using Westminster Bridge to the

hospital. He definitely paid HMRC an exorbitant rate in taxation, and these nationally free services were naturally immediately available to him too. Although Harley Street clinics were geographically closer to his genteel neighbourhood, the private insurance paperwork would be a chore. Rather than opening the Uber app on his iPhone 8, the building naturally had 24 hour porter services, so Lucas simply called down for a taxi to be arranged on his behalf.

After 50 minutes of ignoring the driver, this is London with regard to civility and traffic density after all, the taxi pulled up outside A&E. Lucas was immaculately dressed in a Savile Row tailored 3 piece suit, jarring with everyone else standing and sitting within the hospital's waiting area. Although he strode with assuredness to reception, he soon feigned enough concern for himself that he didn't have to wait too long until he was seen by a doctor. The doctor couldn't entirely veil her irritation at Lucas' situation being neither an accident nor an emergency, but kept an air of professionalism, proceeding with a barrage of innocuous tests. They all returned negative, and Lucas was summarily dismissed, only being instructed to rehydrate after a night of profuse sweating.

It was probably more to do with the psychology of undergoing tests, rather than there actually being anything wrong, but Lucas was feeling uneasy again. Not quite the confusion and alarm with which he had woken, but something wasn't sitting right with him. He was now fairly unsteady again, and rather than having the necessary gumption to face the outside world, he decided to explore the halls of St. Thomas' Hospital. It was though he was being drawn along, and as he worked his way further into the

warren of corridors, his dream, the imagery from the film and an odd sense of déjà vu were all mixing together, causing an almost fugue-like state. With a sense of self eventually returning, he was outside a private room. He'd been there before hadn't he? Stepping into the antiseptic (literally) and starkly decorated room, he took the patient's chart from the end of the bed and Lucas read the name Margaret Myer. The name meant nothing to him. Although the elderly lady occupying the bed was attached to all sorts of life support machines, it was immediately evident that none of them were switched on. No alarms were sounding, and Margaret lay perfectly motionless, with a dead waxy face. Lucas' feeling of uneasiness was suddenly and significantly magnified, as a chill ran through the entirety of his body.

Lucas had met Claire McCaffrey through contacts at Berry, Lawrence and Webb. They'd represented Claire during a number of rather messy lawsuits involving "friends" that had been around during the development stages of OurLink. Claire had been working on the social media site for many years during her studies at Cambridge University. Selling the company behind OurLink for £1 billion appeared to have attracted anyone that she'd so much as shared a cup of coffee with during the idea gestation period. Although Claire was still incredibly wealthy, even after all the bogus lawsuits, and was fortuitously gifted to be naturally beautiful along with having the academic smarts, there had never been anything beyond a professional relationship with Lucas. Lucas by nature coveted luxurious and expensive things, but Claire was too immersed in her next entrepreneurial tech start-up called Share. Share was very different to OurLink, having nothing to do with the

social media market, focusing instead on knowledge sharing for large multi-site teams and corporations. Claire had never even had a relationship that extended beyond a few months, attributing this norm to the breakdown between her parents when she was five, and the lack of time that her ambition permitted.

It had been a while since Lucas had seen Claire. They'd previously talked at length about Share over coffee. It would seem she hadn't learned since her days at Cambridge. Claire had been coding the infrastructure for quite a while now, and was absorbed in the utility the tech could offer. Most of the detail regarding highly intelligent automated tagging along with filing and information mining algorithms had mainly gone over Lucas' head as he drifted into thoughts revolving around the specification level of the Maserati Ghibli he intended to order the following week. So, Claire had been talking, and Lucas had been sitting there with an intent look on his face that she'd mistaken for interest. Claire didn't need any of the private equity Lucas could facilitate, but he enjoyed the shallowness of looking at her, and she enjoyed talking about Share with someone safe. Lucas was hardly going to lay claim to a facet of the application down the line, or patent any of the fundamentals. She was astute enough to know he wasn't really that interested in Share, but she needed to talk through the nuances. It somehow made returning to the code easier.

Lucas had remained at the foot of Margaret's bed. The chill he'd experienced had dissipated some time ago. He'd been standing there for at least half an hour without anyone disturbing his thoughts, or coming to cover the ashen countenance of Margaret that his position afforded. Lucas had been thinking fairly intently,

and not related to something as frivolous as the cavernous cubic dimensions of the double door stainless steel fridge in his kitchen. He'd been thinking about Claire and Share. Even though it was the Saturday before Christmas, Lucas called his assistant's number at Berry, Lawrence and Webb. It went through to voicemail, but he left a message asking that a meeting with Claire McCaffrey be arranged for when he was back in the office. He's got a business proposal that might change her life.