



# 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?”

# 3 Ghosts

written as a  
Novel-in-a-Day



### 3 Ghosts

Originally published: 2017

Copyright © 2017 Various Authors  
Julia Pierce, Wolf Baginski, Astrid Stevens  
Kate Stuart, M. Peyton Culbertson, Jacqueline S Miller  
Mike Devitt, Gil Rognstad, Ryker Hayes  
Jaysen O'Dell, Michael Bywater, David Johnson  
Story by: Tim Rogers

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication are  
fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living,  
dead, or somewhere between the two... is purely coincidental.*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons  
Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.  
You are free to share (to copy, distribute and transmit the work)  
under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified  
by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that  
they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work.

For more details, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Original cover photograph by Tim Rogers

[www.novelinaday.com](http://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

[www.novelinaday.com](http://www.novelinaday.com)

sponsored by  
**Literature & Latte, creators of Scrivener**





## 3 Ghosts



## **Chapter one**

*Julia Pierce*

Post-work on the run up to Christmas, hordes of shoppers thronged Marylebone's streets. Laden with bags full of presents and giddy on the highs of consumption, they fed off each other's desire to buy more than they could afford. Up on their wires suspended between the heaving shops, neon angels blazed overhead in the late afternoon gloom as the clouds released their burden and rain hammered down onto the pavement as though a hail of bullets, leaving the crowd to pull their heads down into their coats like soldiers caught without cover in a shallow foxhole. Between them, the ghost-man Edward Meyers walked, grey head down, almost invisible, sending tendrils of cold into those he brushed against on his way up the road.

On a corner of Westmoreland Street stood the Filcroft Arms. Edward pushed his way through the heavy door into the warmth of the pub, grazi past raucous huddles of tinsel-clad customers in his path to the bar. The barman, a young luxuriantly bearded type with rolled up sleeves and the look of an Edwardian boxer, was serving a group of women at the other end of the drinkery, skewering fruit on a stick to decorate balloon glasses filled with multicoloured

liquids. ‘Christmas cocktails’, announced a board to his side. Oh Christ, thought Edward. He might as well make himself comfortable. Whatever happened to simple drinks; the shot of whiskey or brandy poured from bottle to measure to glass? All this blending, straining and shaking. It was a pub, not some sort of theatre involving fruit, cinnamon and half a kitchen’s worth of utensils.

His mind turned to Chloe. His last case, and a decent person, once you stripped back all that brittleness and intolerance. She had so much to give - it was criminal that she’d wasted her many skills sculpting the unwanted blubber of the overindulgent - or tinkering with the insecure ones who thought all their personality flaws and neuroses would be shaved away along with the bump on their nose. He hoped she’d got the message - that there were far more deserving, if a lot less lucrative, outlets for her.

Finally, the barman appeared. Edward ordered a double whiskey - then noticed the women at the end of the bar already looking hopefully in their direction, empty glasses in hand.

“Make that two.”

This was definitely the best part of his post-death employment - the solitary victory drinks that filled the time between closing his case and the recall to base. But really, the job wasn’t all that. You didn’t get holiday pay. You didn’t get holiday. Oh - and you never got to retire. Then there were the people who were hard to convince. They liked being bad. You tried to warn them, but even Chloe and his other successful cases invariably went back to their original selves, once the shock of the foresight had worn off. Once their brains had rationalised and forgiven their behaviour, they persuaded themselves they weren’t so bad after all and Edward

was the one in the wrong; picking on them and singling them out from a sea of city-dwellers whose crimes must be much worse than anything they'd managed. It was hard to explain to them that punishment wasn't the point - they were chosen for their potential. The things they would be able to do and the lives they'd be able to improve, if only they'd turn their talents outward to something less selfish than amassing piles of cash.

He nursed his second drink - whiskey was one of the perks of the job. They'd fought hard for that. If they had to be sent back here and put on the clock, why couldn't they enjoy a little of the local produce? It took the edge off, especially as he had to stick to the rules. Margaret. Maggie. The one thing he missed about living in this awful human soup. She was just around the corner, tucked up in her house. His house. Their house. The fire would be lit. He hoped she thought of him from time to time. He was definitely taking a risk by being here. If she caught sight of him then it was all over. Fast tracked to eternal punishment. Not that Margaret was the pub-going type, which was exactly why he considered the risk was manageable. He glanced across the bar. The cocktail women had moved on, replaced by a stony-faced couple who seemed to be arguing. Their friends stood in silence, staring at their drinks. He felt a gust of wind and a group of braying men entered, pink faced and drunk. They staggered upstairs to the restaurant, laughing as member of their party stumbled on the steps. Really, humanity deserved everything it got - though he'd give everything he possessed to be a part of it again, rather than a wraith, trapped in a miserable plane between existence and oblivion. He was here to save himself, as well as them. Anything but face the chains and their soul-crushing weight... the awful knowledge that you'd

brought all that suffering upon yourself and there was no going back. No revision. No second chances. You'd died, been judged, and it was done.

“How's the weather out there? You're a bit damp.”

The voice cut through his thoughts. He looked up to find the barman gesturing at his shoulders. Why was he talking? Edward hadn't invited this inane chat. There were plenty of customers about - though he supposed he was the only one who wasn't tipsily obnoxious. The man probably thought he was lonely - which he was - though the hows, whys and wherefores of his present misfortune wouldn't make for a believable conversation.

“Oh... it's not too bad. Doesn't seem to put people off going out.” Edward gestured towards the half-frosted window, where a steady stream of foreheads marched past above the divider.

“Looks like you've been organised.” The barman waved a hand towards the empty floor next to Edward's feet. “You all done?”

“Yes.” A closed answer. Surely that meant he'd be left alone?

“I haven't done a thing - my girlfriend...” The barman picked up a glass to dry and launched into a monologue about a long-suffering woman called Sue, who had apparently crossed the globe, only to be rewarded with a personal blight in the shape of this rather unambitious maker of drinks, whose goal was apparently to own a bar and make yet more of the same drinks, night after night. Edward felt for Sue. He thought of Margaret's disappointment, and how she would have described her life, back when she was shackled to him; a workaholic operating on the border of legality, gaining people's trust and then stripping their companies for profit. He'd kept the details of his work hidden from her, making sure she felt permanently excluded, patronising her with talk of

how it was complicated and she wouldn't understand. Except she would have. She was decent. She would have seen his deceptions only too clearly for what they were. He was ashamed and angry - it was time to go off on a tangent and save this one from himself. Unlike Edward, he wasn't deliberately choosing the wrong path, just coming to it through a process of personal neglect. This wasn't strictly Edward's case but there were no rules against it and it might earn him some extra points back home. Plus he had time to kill before his midnight curfew. Edward reached out a finger and touched the barman's hand, freezing him mid-polish. The hand with the glass began to shake.

"Oh god, I don't feel right. It's the end. Something's missing. Gone away. I'm alone. Everything's gone. I don't want to be alone... Why can I see it...? Make it go..." His voice grew pleading. Edward drew back his hand. It was time to be kinder. He hoped there would be something in that head that would be useful - that was the norm, though once he'd searched a soul and found nothing of any use to anyone. He shuddered.

"Where do you want to be?" His finger pressed the barman's knuckle again, and the man closed his eyes. This had to come from him, thought Edward. The process was all about that. "I'd like to cook. Not the standard pub stuff that's on the menu. Proper food... and I want to be with Sue forever, except her visa runs out soon and I don't think she's that bothered about me. Why would she be? I don't do anything..."

That was more like it. They were getting somewhere. Edward smiled. "You need to get out of this pub. As soon as I go, you'll put down your glass and walk out of here. You won't look back." He touched the barman on the temple. "Seafood," the barman said.

Some brains were easier to unravel than others, Edward thought. Less resistant. Intentions lying just below the surface, waiting to be uncovered and examined. He realised that he was still touching the man, whose mouth was hanging open, corners turned up with revelation and delight. He pulled back his hand, reanimating the barman, whose mouth closed in slow motion as Edward rose, pushed his empty glass across the top of the bar, and walked to the door, before disappearing into the night.



## **Chapter two**

*Wolf Baginski*

Edward thought “Bloody oik!” as the two young men let the pub door slam shut behind them, not even noticing him. They were talking, loudly, about the election campaign, the third confused by election since the world had turned upside down. He knew so much had changed since 1997, and so much hadn’t changed, but he had a different perspective now. He took a deep breath and walked through the door.

As usual, it tingled, more than usual on this day when he had to deal with physical people. And, as usual, the doorman didn’t notice him. He probably didn’t believe in ghosts. Edward hadn’t, when he was alive, but he knew better now. He drifted into the Gent’s lavatory, concentrated, found the full stench had not yet developed, and walked out, another, rather elderly, businessman.

He didn’t like the music, and the barman almost had a fetish for bizarrely-contrived cocktails, but all he got was the taste anyway. Ghosts can’t get drunk. There’s nothing permanent about alcohol, but ghosts are not supposed to forget.

Sometimes that can be good. There was, for instance, his wife, over twenty years a widow. But he knew he forgot things, and it

hurt when he remembered them again. He forgot things, and remembered them again. He found himself sitting in a corner, looking at a strangely-coloured cocktail, and telling himself that he should have expected to forget this one, just so he could repeat the shocked discovery of the chasm between looks and taste.

It was folly to trust the looks of something in this game. He had two ring-binders in front of him, the sort of anonymous office paperwork thing that you could buy and see anywhere but there was more to these. They were a different sort of binder, the embodiment of those heavy chains in that old story. He wasn't sure if anyone still-living could even read them. He opened the first and started reading. He had always had a binder, and had always read it. It was a carryover from life, but he had never had a choice before. No, he had had choices in life. That was why he was here now.

And now this choice, a fairly easy young woman, nudged into the downward spiral of a scrooge by what looked like some genuine talent and a lot of luck. And, he considered, the fallout from a broken home. 'Easy' maybe wasn't the right word for her path, but the talent was real enough, a foundation on which to challenge her assumptions. She wasn't like some people, profiting from ruthless incapacity. She was young, and knew the downsides, and she could be safe with all that money and do things that made a difference. She'd been the one that had pulled the standard tricks, and seen them pay off.

He found himself wondering what had happened to her teachers, or what would happen. For a moment he tried to remember how he had started. That never seemed to work. He wasn't sure he could trust her, but that problem was for upstairs.

Could this cocktail be worse than he remembered?

He couldn't quite blame Hallam for how upstairs seemed to be acting. It felt like blackmail, the proverbial offer you couldn't refuse. It wasn't the first time he had wonder just what upstairs really was. It was just slang, after all, and in life the upstairs was sometimes a gold-plated penthouse suite on the road to damnation. And what sort of threat could they make against his wife? What had she even done? Yes, he forgot things, and remembered again, but surely they would want him to remember things that damned her.

No, they were threatening him, but how could the threat be real? He smiled thinly, sipped at his drink, and was newly reminded of the taste. He grimaced, and wondered who the barman was really working for.

Lucas, on the other hand, was one of those super-efficient corporate-law bastards, well paid, and worth what they were paid if you worked at that level. He knew the breed, though they were out of his class, in all sorts of ways. He had never needed that sort of help. The idea of leaving a scrooge like that as a whimpering guilt-ridden heap was certainly tempting but every page that he read was setting out why he would fail. He arranged deals that were rock-solid legal. His follow lawyers took big fees for telling clients how hopeless a challenge would be. He was a sociopath, and how can you haunt a sociopath? Just walking through a wall ought to be enough of a credential, but the scrooges tended to say 'Nice camera trick' and then quote that line from 'Ghostbusters'. Always the original too, never the recent movie. That managed to say rather a

lot about the Scrooges.

He looked through the summary, almost the first page of a CV, and there wasn't anything unusual there, no sign of a hard-scrabble history, nothing like the life of that Claire McCaffrey. She had what looked like an obsession to escape her past, while Lucas had nothing to escape. He had to be smart or he wouldn't be where he was, but there was nothing obvious driving him. He had got his qualifications, and his father must have known somebody to get him in the job, and he had fitted in very well.

There was nothing to hang on to, no cracks in that facade. He would marry, because that was what you did, and there would be a son who went to the same public school as he and his father had.

Edward chuckled softly and wondered if Marleys had to be outsiders. Lucas was a Head Office type, not quite the anonymous bureaucrat but he fitted so much of the pattern.

He looked across the bar at the clock. Well, he was being encouraged to check on his wife before he decided. Maybe he should. But did they want to hurt him? He couldn't make sense of it? What was the word? Ineffable?

He rolled the word around his tongue as he left, physically this time. At least it wasn't far to walk.

Edward sometimes wondered why his wife had stayed on in the house on Welbeck Street. It had been expensive when he had bought it, and it had always felt a little bit too big. Now, for an old lady on her own, it must have felt gigantic. And it would have been so good to release the equity, put the money in an offshore fund out of the reach of any government. Maybe it had been a bit of luck that she had still owned it in 2008, you only lose money on a house

if you have to sell it. It was worth more now.

He mused about the options as he walked past the Hospital, a slow-moving FedEx delivery van pacing him. It was one of those London streets where keeping a car was a bit of a bad idea. There was a Mews for streets like this, but it was usually high-rental flats now, It was silly to keep a car, that was what cabs are for.

“Hold on a moment, sir.”

A policeman. Well, he was physical, and it didn't look like an arrest. There was an ambulance, doors and ramp open, and that was why the FedEx van had stopped, and an open front door, and he could see one of the ambulance crew backing out, looking over his shoulder.

“Of course,” he murmured. After all, this was London. But it was the door of his house, and that must have showed on his face. He asked the obvious question. “Has something happened to Mrs Myer?” He added quickly. “She was still living here, the last I heard.”

“I wouldn't know, sir,” came the reply. The policeman was taking out his notebook. “Myer? How do you spell that?”

Edward spelled the name. He was watching the trolley, and at least the old woman was still alive, face only covered by a disposable transparent oxygen mask. And it was Margaret. “I think that is Mrs Myer,” he said. He added, “I used to work with her husband. He's dead now.” This was getting close to the limit. He added, “I can't be sure.”

“Thank you, Sir, we can work with that.”

“Yes,” agreed one of the Ambulance crew. “We'll be checking all sorts of things,” She didn't look cheerful. “Having a name gives us something to compare to. Do you know anyone in the family?”

“There was a sister,” said Edward. “No contact details, and it was twenty years ago. I did go to her husband’s funeral.” He should have kept his mouth shut, he decided, “A million to one chance I was even here.” There were pictures in the house, and of course he looked like them. “It’s bad”, he murmured.

“It always looks bad at this stage.” She paused. “Look, I’m driving. Headed for the A&E at St Thomas.” She turned away, The doors were closed now, house and ambulance.

“Thanks,” said Edward into empty air.

The policeman asked for a name, and Edward said “Lucas McCaffrey” which was probably safe enough, but how could he know an address? He gave one anyway. All he had to do was get around a corner and he could vanish. But questions would be asked. He’d been stupid.

He was standing at the shoulder of the Doctor who diagnosed a stroke, and explained to the Foundation Doctor that they didn’t know enough about the timing to risk some treatments.

“Will she recover consciousness?”

“I don’t know,” was the answer. “It’s not the way to bet. I would expect some signs of recovery by now.”

Most of the jargon was beyond Edward, but he had heard enough.

It was symbolic, nothing was real, but he watched the McCaffrey binder break up and scatter after he threw it out over the Thames. And he wished Claire McCaffrey all the best. She had her reasons, and there was still hope for her.

Lucas Rennall’s binder felt heavier than it had in the pub.

What was Head Office playing at?

Was there even anyone upstairs?  
All he could do was play the game.

## **Chapter three**

*Astrid Stevens*

The Filcroft Arms was much busier than it had been earlier in the day. Even on a cold December night, the drinkers and vapers were standing seven deep outside, pints and bottles in hand, the sombre impression of their black winter coats relieved by Santa hats, reindeer deely-boppers, and a general air of festive frivolity. Edward pushed his way through the crowd, still clutching John Huffam’s dossier binders under his arm, and walked through the door. If anything, there were more people crammed inside the bar than there were outside. Behind the hubbub of conversation and laughter, Edward could just hear music playing over the speaker system, almost lost in the general din. “Do They Know It’s Christmas?”, if he wasn’t mistaken. Music from back when he was alive. Many things about pubs had changed in the past twenty years—for a start, there was no reek of tobacco smoke any more, to mask the stench of spilt beer—but the choice of Christmas music certainly wasn’t one of them.

Elbowing his way to the far end of the bar, Edward caught Joe’s eye. The barman nodded his recognition, and finished serving a tipsy young woman, who was dressed as an elf in a green mini-



dress, her flushed face further heightened by red lipstick circles painted on her cheeks, and wired pigtails bouncing under a conical party hat. Joe dropped a maraschino cherry with a flourish into her pint of Cidre (not cider, oh no), took her money, then turned to Edward.

“Back again?”

Edward nodded. “Fraid so. Like a bad penny.”

“We like to call them ‘regulars’ in our line, not bad pennies.” Joe smiled, his teeth flashing white through his Viking beard and hipster moustache. “Same again? Remind me?”

Edward shook his head. “No, it’s late. I’ll just have a whisky, please. Single malt. What have you got?”

“Glenfiddich, Glenmorangie, The Macallan, Laphroaig...”

“I’ll stop you right there. Laphroaig is just the ticket. I’ll have a double, please.”

“Sure I can’t tempt you to a Waller’s Winter Wonder? Or a Flaming Festivity?”

“No cocktails, thank you. Just the Laphroaig. And no cherry, either.”

The whisky appeared, devoid of fruit, but garnished with a lilac paper cocktail umbrella. Pretending not to notice Joe’s obvious wind-up, Edward paid for his drink, then looked around for somewhere to sit. A group were just getting up from the corner table, so he worked his way over, poised to grab the banquette and table as soon as they were vacated.

Sliding sideways onto the slightly sticky velvet seat, tacky to the touch, he put the binders onto the table, then realised too late that they would now be contaminated with whichever of Joe’s elaborate cocktail concoctions appeared to have been dribbled liberally over

the scrubbed wood surface. He took a monogrammed handkerchief from his suit pocket, and wiped down the file, then wiped the table. The hankie was damp and gummy with sugar, and he didn't fancy putting it back in his pocket. Shrugging, he set it down on the table next to him, took the lilac umbrella from his drink, and pushed it and the the crumpled ball of cloth sideways, out of his way. Time to read the dossiers. He took a hefty swig of whisky, satisfied as always by the hit of intense, smoky peatiness in his nostrils as he raised the glass, then settled back in his chair to read what Head Office had to say about the potential clients.

First off, Claire, the safe bet. He picked up her binder and opened it. Probably redeemable, John had said, which would be good in the short term. But choosing Claire would mean that he would have to keep doing this for all eternity, being a Marley for ever and ever. Client after client, stretching off into unimaginable emptiness.

Edward raised his eyes from the page, and stared blankly ahead. The background music had changed: "Lonely this Christmas" — another oldie. Mud, wasn't it? Strangely perceptive he thought; it was as though pathetic fallacy had come alive in Marylebone. Edward admitted to himself that he was lonely, not just at Christmas, but in all seasons. In his previous life, he had worked away from home much of the time (too much, he now recognised with some regret), and had spent too little time with Margaret, but Christmas had been the one period of the year when he had nearly always found himself at home. Whether it was their first small flat in Bayswater, or their grand five-storey townhouse in Marylebone, Margaret had always "done" the festive season with style and a generous spirit, and he found that he missed his wife more with

each passing Christmas since his death.

He brought his attention back to the text in front of him.

Claire McCaffrey, 33 years old, computer programmer and internet entrepreneur. Bright, well-educated... Edward turned the page, and his eyes widened in surprise. Claire was clearly good at business. Not long after graduating from Cambridge in Mathematics and Computer Science, she had launched her own social media site called “OurLink”, which she later sold for £1 billion. It looks as though it hadn’t all been plain sailing since then, though, with a number of court cases brought by people who had been involved in the development stages of the company, and who clearly felt that they had been cheated of their rightful share when the site was sold.

Edward realised that he was holding his breath. The banker and investor that he had been in life was very impressed. Claire was very, very rich — and likely to get richer. She was now running a tech start-up called “Share”, based in London, and offering solutions for large multi-site teams and corporates, that focused on knowledge sharing (including highly intelligent automated tagging, filing and information mining algorithms). Very technical. An interesting business area, Edward thought, although fraught with issues related to privacy and data protection. Good luck to her.

There was certainly room for redemption in the facts present in Claire’s CV, and he could see why John Huffam had suggested her as a regular Scrooge for him to push back onto the straight and narrow. It was evident that Claire had diddled her university friends, conveniently erasing their contribution to OurLink from the balance books. And some of her pursuits with Share looked decidedly dodgy, too. Probably legal, almost certainly legal, but not

entirely moral. But she didn't seem to have done anything that could be described as deliberately evil. Self-serving, yes; criminal, no. She had plenty of good attributes in her favour, and was evidently hard-working, dedicated and talented. There was definite scope for redirection of energy.

Edward smiled. Who would have thought that he would leave behind his own days of asset-stripping, shady deals and opportunity-grabbing? Sometimes it felt strange to be a Marley tasked with saving others from the errors in which he himself had revelled when alive, in return for respite from the heavy chains of his own transgressions. Still, if he could change his ways in death, then surely someone young and sparky like Claire could change hers in life. The analysts in Head Office had written that Claire could have a great future as a philanthropist, and that she could use her skills to help the underprivileged and under-represented. Having read her file, Edward agreed that it might not take much to get Claire to take this path.

He turned to Lucas Rennall's binder. If John was right, this would be a different kettle of fish.

Lucas looked sharp. 31 years old. Sharp mind, sharp suit, sharp practice. He was a lawyer specialising in banking and private equity financing deals, and a partner in the legal firm Berry, Lawrence and Webb. Very wealthy, although not in the same league as Claire, and flash with his cash. Edward flipped through the pages of the dossier. There was no shortage of evidence damning the lawyer's integrity on a professional level, with financial return being used to justify the most illiberal of practices and the most abusive of business relationships. On the personal side of the scale, Lucas didn't come out much better. He was

obsessed with money and with living the high life, focused solely on his own desires, and vain beyond calculation. Edward had met plenty of young men like Lucas before, and he didn't want to meet another one now. He looked like hard work. Head Office reckoned that Lucas could, with the right direction from a Marley, become a better person, helping worthy enterprises on a *pro bono* basis and leading the fight to clean up the banking industry. He could settle down and become a responsible pillar of the community. Somehow, Edward doubted it. Lucas struck him as being someone who would agree to do the right thing, then immediately go back to being as bad as ever, without even a pinprick of remorse.

Edward finished the last of his Laphroaig, and cradled the glass between his two hands, wondering which client he should choose. Joe at the bar shouted, "Last orders, gentlemen, please!" and Lucas stood up. The speakers blasted out "I wish it could be Christmas every day", and he found himself humming along.

As he put on his coat, picked up the binders, and prepared to leave the pub, he allowed himself to indulge in nostalgic reminiscence about Christmases past. In his mind's eye, he saw himself come home from a business trip — from Sheffield perhaps, why not? From the very business trip that he never came home from, because a heart attack had stopped him in his tracks. So, in his fancy, he came home from Sheffield, and approached the front door of his house in Welbeck Street. He stood beneath the beribboned holly wreath that his wife Margaret used to fix to their Georgian front door a week before Christmas, then pushed open the door and went into the spacious hallway. He set down his briefcase and took off his coat, breathing in the smell of mulled wine and mince pies. A garland of Nordmann fir, artfully dotted

with white lights and cinnamon sticks, wound its way up the bannister of the sweeping staircase. And coming down the stairs was Margaret, elegant in black with pearls around her neck, ready to welcome him home.

Oh, how he missed Margaret.

The cold winter air caught his chest as he stepped onto the pavement outside. Funny how you could still react physically like that, when you were dead. The thermal shock brought him back to the task. Which would it be? Claire, the clearly redeemable, who just needed a nudge in the right direction? Or Lucas, the irredeemable? Edward couldn't imagine where to start with him. And even if he could come up with some wizard wheeze that would swing Lucas to the path of righteousness, there was no guarantee that Lucas would stay on that track. From a purely professional point of view, Claire was by far the safer choice.

Edward weighed up the personal impact of each option. If he picked Lucas, he would be playing for high stakes. Winning the gamble, and reshaping Lucas into a good man, would free him forever of the chains weighing him down. Losing the gamble, his chains would be made longer and heavier. He would be punished in perpetuity for choosing his own self-interest and the chance of freedom over doing the best for Claire, who needed his help although she was (as yet) unaware of this.

If he picked Claire, he'd be stuck as a Marley for the rest of time, which meant that he wouldn't be able to see Margaret ever again. But as he hadn't seen her for twenty years, and as he assumed that she was now perfectly comfortable in her retirement, then perhaps that didn't matter too much. It was just the *status quo*. Who knows how Margaret would feel about him turning up again anyway? The

couple had spent most of their life together in a state of splendid separation from each other, given his work commitments and her animal charities. Maybe she didn't even love him any more, although Edward was convinced that on his part he loved her more as a Marley than he ever had as a living, breathing husband.

It was an easy decision. Attractive though a chain-free future seemed, the risk of failure was too high, and the consequences too grave. He would choose Claire. It was Christmas, after all, and who needed a tough case like Lucas? Lucas could wait, and there would always be challenging cases like him in the future, if Edward wanted to take on a similar gamble later.

With the decision made, Edward's mind felt lighter. He was very close to being happy as he sauntered down Westmoreland Street. He thought of the film "Singing in the Rain" and almost wished it were raining, so that he could have an excuse to hop on and off the kerb, splashing in puddles and twirling on umbrellas. Not that he had an umbrella. He'd left the lilac paper one on the pub table.

It was too early to settle down for the night. And while he was in Marylebone... an idea came to him. Welbeck Street was only a step away, even for those who weren't able to travel like the wind as a Marley could. He wouldn't mind seeing his old front door again, to find out whether Margaret was still hanging her annual Yule wreath on it. What colour scheme would she have chosen this year? He could go and look.

On the other hand, what if Margaret appeared, and saw him? That would certainly count as "making contact with someone he had known in life", and the penalty for that was harsh and unforgiving. If Margaret saw him, or felt his presence, he would

instantly be barred from working as a Marley, and he would be deprived of the one useful perk of that job — the respite from carrying his chains. The weight of those chains was unbelievable, but he couldn't argue with the fairness of being laden with a burden in proportion to the weight of his wrongdoings in life. He may complain sometimes, but it was hardly unfair. Still, it was a crushing, soul-destroying force that drove the body and spirits downward, blanking out other thoughts until all that remained was the chains.

Edward hesitated, but only briefly. Although he had viewed his ostentatiously opulent townhouse merely as a trophy when he actually lived in it, he now looked back on it fondly. He did want to see his home again. It would be perfectly safe. It was late. Margaret would have been in bed for ages. She wouldn't see him, he would stay on the other side of the road, and he wouldn't try to look for her.

As he approached along Welbeck Street, his excitement gave way first to concern, then consternation, then panic. There was an ambulance outside his house. Initially, he thought it might be outside one of the neighbouring houses in the elegant terrace, but as he drew nearer, it was clear that it was his own house. Someone must be ill — *Margaret* must be ill!

In a flash, he transferred himself to the pavement next to the ambulance, just in time to see the green-clad paramedics emerge from the house carrying a stretcher, its occupant draped in a red blanket. It was Margaret. How old she looked! Was she just asleep, or was she unconscious or dead? He couldn't tell. Not dead, surely. They would have covered her face if she were dead.

A middle-aged woman whom Edward didn't recognise followed



them out, then locked the front door behind her, and walked to the open rear door of the ambulance. Margaret had been lifted inside, and the paramedics were preparing to leave.

“Where are you taking her?”, asked the stranger.

“St Thomas’ Hospital, to A&E. Would you like come with Mrs Myer?”

The woman shook her head. “I can’t, I’m afraid. I have the grandchildren staying. But I’ll phone in the morning to see how she is. Poor old thing. She has such a lonely life now. She’s been widowed for twenty years, with no children to come and visit. We’ve been next-door neighbours for half that time. I saw the light from her window shining out onto the pavement, and thought it seemed odd for her to be up so late. Just as well I’ve got a key.”

She stood and watched as the ambulance drove off, then turned towards the house next door and disappeared inside.

Edward flew swiftly to the hospital’s Accident and Emergency Department, and had an uncomfortable ten minutes’ wait until his wife arrived there, her stretcher rushed in on a wheeled trolley. She still seemed to be unconscious. He loitered nearby to hear her booked in.

“Mrs Margaret Myer, Welbeck Street, Marylebone. 71 years old. No next of kin. Collapsed with a massive stroke. We phoned from the ambulance.”

“Thank you. Yes, she’s to go straight to Radiology for scanning. Poor thing, all on her own. And with Christmas coming up, too.”

And with that, Margaret was whisked away.

By the time Edward had found the Radiology department, and had managed to sneak in through the code-locked door by slip-streaming behind a frazzled-looking young doctor in a white coat,

Margaret's scan had been completed. He was just in time to hear a nurse on the phone to the ward, arranging to move Margaret there for the night. "Margaret Myer, aged 71. Has had a major stroke. Probably only has a few days left, at most, so if you have a side-ward free, that might be best. ... Yes. ... OK ... Right, we'll book a porter, and send her up straightaway."

Edward's mind slipped into slow motion. A few days at most! Margaret was dying, and he had to go and save some tech entrepreneur from her own peccadillos, and after that there would be some other client demanding his attention, then another, and another. Meanwhile, Margaret would be here at St Thomas', fading from life. More than ever, he wanted to spend time with Margaret before she died, to hold her hand, to tell her how sorry he was for being so absent throughout their marriage. But if he went anywhere near her now, then he would immediately be removed and his chains heaped on his back, and his efforts would be for nothing.

The only way he could share Margaret's last days on earth would be if he were released from being a Marley and set free from his chains. And the only way he could do that would be to take on Lucas Rennall as his next client. Twenty four hours spent reforming Lucas would, he hoped, give him at least a couple of days by Margaret's side, so that she wouldn't die the poor, lonely old thing that others thought her to be.

Somewhat to his bewilderment, Edward found that he was still grasping the binder files that he had been given, tucked under his left arm. He took one in each hand, then closed his eyes and muttered to himself.

"Margaret, I'll do it for you. Wait for me. Don't leave till I get

back.”

And with that, he held Claire McCaffrey’s file aloft and squeezed it until it burst into flames and disappeared.

A nurse came bustling into the corridor as the last wisp of smoke petered out. “Do I smell smoke?”, she asked, staring belligerently at Edward. “This is strictly a no smoking hospital. If you want to smoke, you’ll have to go outside and leave the hospital premises.”

Edward looked at her, resolution firm in his heart. “I’m just leaving now,” he said. He walked away until he felt she had stopped watching him, then he opened the remaining binder and found Lucas’ home address in the databank section. He snapped the binder shut, then readied himself to transfer straight to that location.

“And now, Lucas Rennall, I’m coming to sort you out.”

## Chapter four

*Kate Stuart*

The doors of Bryanston Court swished open and Edward strolled into the building. Swanky, and not without perks, but not to his taste. He turned to his left and quirked an eyebrow. The porter stared at him, open-mouthed and coffee mug in his hand completely forgotten about. It seemed the young man had encountered him before. Edward searched his memories but drew a blank. No matter, the chains of damnation hadn't suddenly reappeared on his arms and he had work to do.

“Hello, my boy,” he said pleasantly. “You will take me to Lucas Rennall's apartment.”

The porter continued to gape at him.

“You're one of them,” he hissed, a green tinge creeping across his bloodless face.

Ah, so that was it. Edward sighed. It wasn't a surprise really; a place like this was probably chock full of Scrooges. At least that made things easier in some ways. It was always much simpler to convince someone who had already had dealings with the Marleys that they should offer their assistance.

“Yes, my name is Edward and I am here to see a Mr Lucas

Rennall. You will forget our interaction after you have granted me entry to his apartment. Please,” he added as an afterthought.

The eyes of the porter began to glaze over. His mouth snapped closed and he marched off to the lift, one hand pulling out a master key card from his pocket and the other jabbing the buttons so violently that Edward couldn't help imagining them snapping. He shrugged to himself and loped in after the porter. He couldn't complain about efficiency.

The porter didn't look at Edward as he opened the door to Lucas Rennall's apartment. Actually he didn't really look at anything, staring blankly ahead even as he carried out the instructions he'd been given. Edward grumbled to himself, well aware of the fact that he'd probably be expected to file some sort of report about this one. While repeated interactions with Marleys did make someone more pliable, too many encounters could turn them into brainless drones with the slightest effort and risked leaving them unable to function permanently. Convenient for him but frowned upon by the bosses.

“Thank you... Stop. Tell me your name!”

The retreating porter froze in place like some sort of pretentious avant garde statue. This place was probably full of them.

“Colin Sanchez.” The words forced themselves out of clenched teeth.

Edward quickly scrawled the details of their encounter in a little notebook before slipping it back into his breast pocket. Then he stepped into the apartment and closed the door behind him, smirking widely as he wondered how long the porter may be held by his instruction. Naughty, yes, but his life as a Marley needed to

provide him with a little fun now and then.

Edward whistled to himself as he explored the empty apartment of his newest assignment. Gleaming whites and creams everywhere, everything screamed new and expensive. He couldn't see himself ever living in such an excessively modern place – he could almost hear Margaret complaining that it was too sterile – but it was actually fairly understated. He trailed from room to room, trying to focus on gathering information about this Lucas Rennall rather than judging his choices in décor.

A cat eyed him from a high shelf and Edward found a genuine smile stretching across his face. He clicked his tongue at the fluffy tortoiseshell and it jumped down onto the kitchen counter to rub its face into Edward's outstretched hand. He liked cats. And he could hope that this increased the likelihood that he would successfully redeem this Lucas fellow. He snorted and lifted the cat to sit on the couch together. He and Margaret had had Mr Ponsenby but that hadn't saved him from an eternity in chains. Then again, the tabby may have actually added a link or two – especially when it came to the unfortunate circumstances that led to Mr Ponsenby's demise - rather than indicating any sort of goodness in his soul. The cat purred loudly in his lap as they waited for its master.

Lucas frowned as he was forced to step around the porter to get out of the lift. He'd demanded that the other man move but the idiot just stayed where he was, hand hovering near the lift button. His nose curled. The man even appeared to be drooling a little. How unprofessional.

His frown deepened as he let himself into his apartment to find

all the lights on. He was sure he'd switched them off before he left this morning – why waste good money on unneeded electricity?

“Good evening!”

Lucas yelled out as he finally noticed the man looking quite at home on his couch. He'd even let Cat onto the furniture. Lucas threw his briefcase with all his might at the man. The cat streaked off into one of the other rooms but the man just leant back, crossing his legs and stretching his arms behind his head.

“Who are you?!” Lucas demanded, picking up an ornament from the sideboard and throwing that too. “Get out of my apartment!”

The intruder smiled widely at him as everything Lucas threw somehow missed him. It was like he was some sort of anti-magnet and nothing could actually make contact. Lucas screamed in rage and ripped a picture frame from the wall, throwing it with all his might. The glass coffee table shattered with a crash. He grabbed one of the arm chairs, struggling with the weight, and heaved it with everything he could. It slammed against the couch just where the man had been... but he was now sitting on the other arm chair right next to him, still smiling widely.

“Are you quite finished?” the man asked.

Panting, Lucas retrieved his phone from where he'd thrown it near the wreckage of the coffee table – the screen had shattered but it seemed to still work - and waved it at the stranger.

“I shall call the police if you don't leave.”

“I don't advise that. They'll only think you've gone mad. It's not unusual for your type,” the man said, shaking his head. He stood and thrust out a hand. “I am Edward Myer, your Marley. Do you agree to change your ways and start doing good in the world?”

Laughter spilled out of Lucas's mouth like water from a spout.

“So, who put you up to this prank? One of the boys from the office, right? They want me to slow down so that I stop over-taking them, yeah?” Lucas straightened his tie and pushed Edward's handshake out of the way. “You can tell me friends that you managed to catch me off guard but it'll take more than that to throw off Lucas Renall.”

“No one put me up to this. You don't have any friends.”

Lucas froze.

“Wha-”

“You don't have friends. You also don't have siblings or really any relationships that go far beyond a quick screw. Girl's nowadays would rather be single than always being the last priority in a relationship. You're not even really that close to your parents.” Edward sat back in the arm chair and folded his arms. “You are alone.”

“Who are you?” Lucas asked. He wasn't laughing any more.

“I am Edward Myer. I am the Marley to your Scrooge, giving you one last chance to avoid an eternity in chains.”

Lucas snorted and perched himself on the couch.

“Are you lost? It's not Christmas, you halfwit.”

“Stupid Dickens, ruining everything for us Marleys. Don't believe a thing that man says!” Edward grumbled.

“What? So no visit from three ghosts in the night?” Lucas leaned back, warming to his theme. “No Christmas turkey or Tiny Tim? Is God not going to bless us, every one?”

“No. Just me, trying to save you from my fate. Arrogant prick.”

Lucas laughed until his stomach was sore, swiping tears from the corners of his eyes. He shook his head and reached out, patting



Edward's shoulder.

“Look mate, this has been a good laugh but I'm just not gonna go for whatever you're selling. What if I book you a night in a hotel or something so you can sleep off the... what ever this is, and we'll just forget the whole thing?”

Edward leapt to his feet, simmering with rage. He let it fill him, staring into the eyes of his pathetic charge. Lights throughout the apartment flickered and Lucas actually felt a twinge of fear as the old man seemed to grow larger. Heavy metallic clanks echoed around the spacious apartment and suddenly the stranger was draped with endless chains, each link thicker than a finger, so long and so heavy that they scraped the floor.

“Lucas Rennall, you are an ignorant and selfish prick who will come to doom if you fail to change your ways. You will listen to what I have to say. You will watch what I have come to show you. And you will change.”

Lucas gulped but stood to face the demon in front of him.

“I haven't done anything wrong. Please, just leave!”

Edward's laugh boomed and chills raced down Lucas's spine.

“If you are so sure that you are guiltless then you will have no fear about what I have to show you. Or do you admit your failings and make the necessary changes in your life?”

“You can show me whatever you like but there's nothing wrong with how I live my life,” Lucas said, voice steady even as his body shook from fear.

“So you, Lucas Rennall, agree to see all that I have to show you?” Edward demanded, thrusting a heavily chained hand out into the space between them.

“I do. It won't change me.”

Lucas clasped hands with Edward and then screamed. The chains slithered eagerly over his wrists, twisting and tightening like burning snakes. He collapsed to his knees as his skin blistered and the weight came over him.

“Wonderful,” said Edward, withdrawing his hand.

The chains vanished and Lucas was left staring in horror at his unblemished skin. Edward smirked at him, clicking his fingers in readiness.

## **Chapter five**

*M. Peyton Culbertson*

Edward places his hand on the bedroom wall of Lucas' apartment. Lucas squints and tilts his head to one side as the Victorian style, floral print goes out of focus then starts to move in a slow, swirling motion.

“You do realise that this isn't helping me to think that you are anything more than a side effect of alcohol poisoning, don't you?”

“Enough of that, now.” Edward glared at him to show his inpatients. “You know what I am. You know that I am as real as your own greed.”

“Perhaps, but I also know that my stomach is about to object to this light show in a very real and messy way. What is the purpose of all this anyway?”

“I'll simply need you to give me one more moment and I'm sure it will all be much more clear to even you.” Edward moved his hand around in a circular motion and pulled it back quickly. The swirl of patterns on the wall coalesced at the centre point, formed a ball and leaped into Edward's hand.

The surface of the wall would have been left bare save for the new image that had replaced the wallpaper pattern. Lucas

recognised it from many years ago. It was a posh villa owned by a former business partner of his. He had been a guest there during some negotiations with its owner.

“Why would I care about this. It’s a nice house but I could afford three exactly like it if I wasn’t so attached to living in the city.”

“Perhaps,” said Edward knowingly, “but you might learn something if you just take a moment to let things unfold.” Edward pointed at a second story window that was just now opening up.

The man opening the window had the sum total of his clothing bundled up in his arms. Extending one leg out he felt around with his foot for some kind of traction on the outside wall. Fumbling around for his footing, he lost his balance and fell, soundlessly, into the bushes below.

Lucas laughed hysterically at the site. “You can’t be serious!” He turned to Edward. “You travel all the way to the world of the living, interrupt my sleep, and attempt to dazzle me with parlour tricks so you can make me feel bad about a youthful indiscretion?” Lucas walked out of his bedroom and straight to the bar in his living room. He picked up a bottle of scotch. He paused for a moment, then filled the glass to the brim with the golden liquid. He turned around to find Edward standing behind him, right where he expected him to be. “Besides,” he pointed an accusatory finger at Edward, “What young man hasn’t had his fair share of indiscretions?”

“Plenty,” Edward said sombrely. “You didn’t seem all that young in what we just saw, now did you?”

“No.” Lucas let a dark grin take over his face. “But she made up for that for the both of us.”

“She was home from college, visiting her parents.”

Lucas gazed back on the memory with his imagination. “Man, she was naive.”

“And you liked that?”

“Who wouldn’t?”

“And you took advantage of that?”

Lucas looked perplexed. “Who wouldn’t.”

Edward said grimly, “A lot of people.”

Lucas took a long pull on his drink. “You’re jealous. That’s it, isn’t it. You’re jealous that I know how to enjoy my life. You can’t stand that I’m having fun in the land of the living while you’re trapped being some kind of cosmic stick in the mud.”

“This isn’t about me, Lucas.”

“Isn’t it? Isn’t this all about some warped sense of moral superiority that you think you have just because you’ve moved beyond the land of the living?”

Edward had enough experience with negotiations to easily recognize when his opponent was attempting to verbally parry. It was generally best to side step it and move on. “What was her name?”

Lucas was taken aback for a moment. “Her name?” He mulled it over for a moment like the question had been on par with asking the meaning of life.

“Yes,” Edward paused for a moment to make sure Lucas was following along. “You do remember her name, don’t you?”

Lucas tried to look as innocent as he could. It was one of the few skills that he had never even come close to mastering. “Now why would I do a thing like that?”

“Yes,” Edward’s voice betrayed a level of frustration that

surprised even him. “Why would you remember the name of somebody you had promised the world to. You filled her head with such visions of grandeur that she would have followed you to hell and back. And then...”

“And then...” Lucas interrupted. “And then I left. I slipped out in the middle of the night. Lots of guys do it. Is that what this is all about. Am I supposed to feel bad about how I left things?”

“Don’t you?”

Lucas looked at Edward in awe. “I guarantee you, that hurt me worse than it hurt her. You saw the fall. Do you want me to show you the scar?” Lucas started to pull at the waist of his silk pajama bottoms.

“Whoa! Whoa! Whoa there! I’d rather embrace the full wait of my chains and have them drag me to the depths of hell. I think I’ve seen quite enough of you. Thank you very much.” Edward blocked his eyes to be on the safe side. “Jillian.”

“What?” the name clearly triggered something in Lucas.

“Her name was Jillian.”

“Oh yeah.” It was like Lucas’ mind was taken to a place of joy by just saying the name. “Jillian.” He let it hang in the air for a moment. “I wonder what ever happened to her,” he said wistfully.

“You don’t know?”

“Why would I? My business with her father was finish at the same time I was done with her.”

“Wow. That’s a cold way of putting it. You might be more dead than I am, where it counts.”

“Is that what this is about? How I broke a young woman’s heart. It happens all the time. It’s almost meaningless.”

Edward stared with nothing but contempt. “You might want to

answer that.”

Confused, Lucas began to ask, “Answer wh...”

Lucas jumped, startled by the doorbell ringing before he could finish asking his question. He looked around and saw that he was suddenly alone in the room. The doorbell rang again. He walked to the door of his apartment and waited for the bell to ring one more time before he cautiously opened the door.

A young woman stood there in his doorway, staring him square in the eye. It was her. It was the woman that he had just been reminiscing about with Edward. She hadn’t aged a day. He had remembered her as this lovely flower, but now she was gaunt, looking as though the life had been drain out of her. It was then that he noticed her wrists. They were dripping blood from the jagged opening in each of them.

She fell into his arms and he eased her down to the ground, holding her tightly as they went down. Shock gave way to crying as he tried to wrap his mind around why she would do something like this.

He felt a cold hand on his shoulder and looked up to see Edward looking down at him with compassion. “Why?”

“Don’t you know?”

Lucas realised his arms were empty and sprang up off the floor in an outrage. “No,” he yelled at the top of his lungs. “You can’t put this on me. You can’t blame me for her being weak. Peoples choices are their own.”

“Exactly.”

“Exactly what?”

“You’re choices are your own. It’s that simple. How you treat people is entirely up to you.”

“Exactly,” Edward counter back, somewhat confused.

“Likewise, the consequences for your choices, how you treat people, are just as much your responsibility.”

Lucas takes on that dark grin again. It almost consumes him. “Great show, but I don’t buy it. I gave her a bright moment in a dreary existence. What she chose to do with it was her business, not mine. Which, by the way, I might add, I only have your word that she did that. For all I know she’s alive and well living happily ever after.”

“But you saw with your own two eyes.”

“Really? Did I? You mean like how I saw my bedroom wall melt away into another time and place?”

“Yes, but...”

“No,” Lucas said in the tone of a disapproving parent. “This is all an attempt to trick me into feeling bad about decisions that I can’t change and, at the end of the day, am pretty happy with.”

Edward started to open his mouth to speak.

“No. I’m done. There’s nothing you can say about my past that will make me feel bad. Even if you can show that I made a bad choice here and there, those choices are a part of who I am. In case you haven’t noticed, I really like that person.” Lucas gestured to the door. “I think we’re done here.”



## **Chapter six**

*Jacqueline S Miller*

Lucas awoke. Darkness enclosed him like a fog and beads of sweat broke out on his forehead as he wondered where he was.

He coughed, reaching out for the switch and blinking in the harsh fluorescent light. He stared at the familiar bedroom furniture. He was back in the flat at Bryanston Court. What had made him think he was somewhere else?

Lucas peered at the Rolex on his wrist: twelve thirty am. How could this be? It was still the 17th of December 2017...

It must have been a bad dream, but he hadn't had a nightmare for years, not since he was a child. Lucas felt hot, as if in an anxious sweat. He shouldn't have eaten cheese and chocolate before bedtime. The three beers that followed hadn't helped either.

Lucas' mouth felt dry as sandpaper in a budgie's cage. He swung his legs out of bed and was about to venture into the kitchen for a glass of water when he caught a glimpse of his attire in one of the full length mirrors: he was fully dressed in a grey pinstriped suit, black shirt and silver tie. He even wore his black shiny Claude La Ponce shoes and Pierre La Designer cuff-links. What had he been thinking of? Had he been drunk when he went to bed?

Oh well. He shrugged: at least no one would know he was a slob.

Out in the hallway, the lights were on. Lucas frowned. He never left lights on at night. He was too much of a Scrooge for that; and he never wasted money on electricity or other utilities. Cold showers were good for the soul, and Berry, Lawrence and Webb paid for his car and his mobile phone.

Lucas turned the light off and entered the kitchen. There was a strange, silver glow coming from the ceiling. He switched on the light and—

"Aaaargh!"

Lucas couldn't help it. He hadn't meant to scream as if he had seen a ghost...

"Nice place you've got here," Edward said wistfully.

The open-plan, spacious flat reminded him of the London home he had once owned. Edward thought his house in Welbeck Street was far superior to this bland apartment with its brown bedroom and cream living room suite. Edward's house had been, and arguably still was, one of the finest properties in the whole of Marylebone.

"Or anywhere else, for that matter!" Edward muttered, allowing himself a little self-indulgent pang of regret in the manner of Mr Toad. "This is a flat for the nouveau riche, while my place had proper class."

Edward's house, which was still owned by his widow, Margaret, consisted of five floors with an enormous back garden. The outside space was a rarity in the urban, overpriced sprawling capital city of 2017. Edward reckoned conservatively it must be worth well over

ten million pounds now, which was at least twenty times the price Edward had paid when he purchased it several decades ago.

For many years, Edward had tried to block Earthly thoughts from his ghostly consciousness, for it had been materialistic values like these that had got him into his predicament in the first place. It was undeniably true, however, that even though he was dead and a gruesome apparition, Edward Myer still loved money. He regretted not being alive and able to capitalise on the increased value of all his worldly assets. Moreover, Edward suspected that John Huffam, his evil mentor, was aware of this and took a perverted delight in threatening to torture him for Eternity. Huffman had revealed that Edward's one way to escape eternal ghostliness would be to persuade Lucas Rennall to repent his miserly ways; but it seemed that Lucas was not prepared to play ball.

Edward let out a little moan of despair.

"All right, all right." Lucas decided to acknowledge the ghostly visitor's question. "If you must know, this apartment cost me two and a half million when I bought it in June of this year." He smiled condescendingly. "It must be worth at least twice that now –and it's only December!"

"Really!" Edward was impressed, despite himself. He knew that a man who loves money can never have enough. Clearly, Lucas was such a man, just as Edward had been when he was alive. Edward could not but regret the loss of all his possessions, but he also knew he must suppress such thoughts or he would be doomed and cursed forever.

Edward coughed and lowered his voice. "I mean –really?" he repeated. "That's your problem, Lucas. You only care about how

much things are worth. Money's not everything, you know."

"Huh!" Lucas scoffed. "I think you are a hypocrite, Mr Ghost who I can see because I'm drunk.. Material things are of no use to you if you're dead, but I'm still alive. I live, I breathe, I love and I have lots of money — loads of it. Money with a capital M, and it's the most important thing in the whole world."

"Money is the root of all evil," Edward observed sadly. "If I'd been poor, I'd not be standing here today."

"And why are you standing here, old fellow?" Lucas asked, with forced bonhomie. "Why don't you sit down? Or, better still, why not disappear like the sensible ghost I'm sure you are. Can't you find someone else to bother? As I keep telling you, you're wasting your time and energy, haunting my apartment and trying to influence me!"

Lucas stretched out on the sofa and yawned. He was pretty sure this Marley apparition was only a figment of his imagination brought on by too much alcohol at last night's pre-Christmas party, not to mention the cheese, pickle and sardine sandwich he had consumed when he arrived home with his doggy bag. He didn't possess a dog of course. Apart from Lucas being too mean to pay for the dog food or the veterinary bills, animals were not allowed to reside at a plush residence such as Bryanstan Court; but Lucas always pretended he had a dog, particularly when he attended expensive restaurants and parties. He supplemented his shopping bill with caviar sandwiches and Foie Gras on toast which he'd pilfered from various venues. Lucas also insisted that his girlfriends always went Dutch and paid their way on dates, insisting that he was a modern man and totally in favour of women's equality. He never objected when they paid for him

either, which they often did as he frequently forgot his wallet. He had so many suits and kept leaving his money in his "other jacket." For this very reason he insisted that his girlfriends pay for their own taxis home after they'd stayed the night. They usually had to pay for the condoms too, and complained that the water in the taps was stone cold. If Lucas gave his girlfriends chocolates or flowers they were usually purchased at the pound store in the sale or were recycled gifts he'd received from clients at work. The bottles of champagne or whisky he received from the said clients, he usually kept for himself.

Lucas stared at the ghost and recalled that his latest, casual girlfriend, Lavinia de Rothsfield had taken him to a charity showing of the musical, A Christmas Carol, last week. He'd only gone because she paid for the tickets. He had dozed off during the third act, waking up just as the theatre lights came on. He was fairly sure it all ended badly for Scrooge: wasn't he forced to pay his workers and to throw his money around? Scrooge bought enormous turkeys for some poor family and saved a dying child. The stupid plot and the moral tone made him want to vomit. Everyone knew Christmas was just a commercial exercise. Berry, Lawrence and Webb always put their fees up at Christmas. Lavinia had not been pleased when he'd complained of being bored and had interrogated him about the message in the plot. Fortunately, Lucas had studied Dickens at school.

Thinking of Lavinia, reminded Lucas that he was supposed to phone her to check that she'd arrived home safely and to arrange another date. She said she could get him some football tickets for his favourite team. If he could just get rid of this intruder and have some privacy...

Lucas fingered his mobile phone.

"Put that down!" Edward screeched.

To Lucas' surprise and consternation the phone flew out of his hands, precipitated by some unknown force. It flew across the room, whereupon Edward caught it and put it in his pocket.

Lucas dashed after it, but was stopped mid-way. He stood transfixed, his mouth open, eyes bulging, hair on end. Edward almost laughed --something he rarely did since being stuck in the dim, after-life, a feeble existence between night and day: neither dead nor alive.

"You'll get your phone back after we've finished," Edward said calmly. "Now, I'm going to take you on a little journey, into the world of Christmas Present."

"Uh-uh!" Lucas moaned, but somehow he didn't think Edward was going to give him a present for Christmas...

Edward used his mind power and he and Lucas were transported to a large mansion house.

"Ah, where are we now?" Edward asked, smoothing his Victorian frock coat and removing his top hat to scratch his head. His mentor had insisted he dress the part of a Marley.

"Kensington Mews Parade," Lucas said with a sigh.

"And whose abode is this?"

"A girlfriend of mine lives here."

"Girlfriend?" Edward thought John Huffam had insisted Lucas was unattached.

"Lavinia de Rothsfield. And she is a sort of girlfriend. One of many." Lucas glared at Edward. "May I say, you're extremely nosey for a ghost?"

"That's the only advantage of being a ghost," Edward said. "Don't knock it."

Edward snapped his fingers and a split second later he and Lucas were standing in a marble hallway, surrounded by statues and a pillars in front of a grand staircase. They passed through a doorway and into a drawing room decorated in understated cream and gold. A tall, thin woman with red hair and alabaster skin, stood in the centre of the room. She wore a low cut, green silk evening gown. A portly, middle aged man sat on the chaise longue next to her, drinking whiskey.

"Pour me another, Lavinia, darling," he said. "So, tell me, how's your affair with Lucas going?"

"So-so."

"Well, you'd better hurry up and get him to marry you. You're not getting any younger and we're in debt up to our eyeballs, my dear."

"Yes, Daddy. I know. I'm working on it. But it's costing me money. Lucas never pays for anything..."

Lucas smirked at Edward and the scene faded away. Now they were outside again, soaring up into the night sky over North Kensington. Up and up they went until they reached the very top of a high rise, concrete, tower block. They were now almost level with the roof.

"This isn't a Penthouse!" Lucas exclaimed. "Take me away. It's a council flat and I don't like heights." He tried not to look down.

"You must know someone who lives here." Edward said. "Or I wouldn't have brought you to this location. I must admit I don't particularly like heights, either." They passed through the walls and into a one-roomed studio on the twenty third floor. "I believe

you know the person who lives here very well."

A young woman was in the room. She was thin with long brown hair, and was dressed in a blue nightgown. She peered into a cot where a small boy lay. He wore some kind of oxygen mask and was attached to a breathing apparatus.

"Poor little Timmy," the woman said. "I've called the doctor. He should be here soon, my darling. Try and be brave for Mummy." The child moaned and his large blue eyes stared helplessly up into her face. Lucas cringed and turned away.

Now they were in a hospital ward. The boy lay on a bed, still attached to a ventilator.

The consultant was talking quietly to the nurse and the registrar.

"Ideally, the child would be moved to better living accommodation," the consultant said to the child's mother. "There is a treatment but it's not available on the National Health Service."

"Oh dear," Lucas said as Edward gave him a piercing stare. "But it's not my responsibility. He's not my child."

He recognised the girl of course: Penny. Penny Platter. He vaguely remembered having sex with her in the broom cupboard at the Christmas party, after he got her drunk. "Well, it's her own fault. Why doesn't she get a proper job instead of working as an intern in my office?" He looked a little shifty eyed.

"She's a single mother," Edward said. "Widowed tragically last year. The boy, little Timmy, is all she's got."

"She should get a proper job," Lucas repeated. "One that pays her a decent wage."

But his words sounded unconvincing, even to himself.



Moments later, they arrived back at Lucas' flat.

"Now can I get some sleep?" Lucas moaned.

"You just don't get it, do you?" Edward snapped.

"Get what?"

"This is your one chance to change and save yourself, for all eternity. You don't want to end up like me!"

Lucas simply laughed. "Oh, yeah! Tell me, why do you care, old man? Correction — old ghost? What's in it for you?"

"Well... if you must know." Edward began telling him about how John Huffam had mentored him and told him he could be saved but only if he made Lucas repent and change his ways. "And then I can be with my wife, Margaret." He lingered lovingly, caressingly, over her name. "Margaret. My Meg." If Edward had still been alive, he would have shed a tear. "My darling Meg, who is dying in hospital. But I can't visit her while I'm a ghost because she knew me in my real life."

He looked expectantly at Lucas. Surely the rich lawyer would have some empathy?

Lucas merely shrugged, laughed and poured himself a glass of wine.

"Why don't you wait until she dies - and then she can be with you for ever," he said as he made his way towards the bedroom. "Goodnight. I'm sure you can find your own way out."

Edward coiled his stiff fingers into fists. Looking down, he saw fragments of metal chain beginning to form around his wrists. He was losing the quest — failing. Maybe he should have gone after Claire McCaffrey instead, after all...

## **Chapter seven**

*Mike Devitt*

"You're a terrorist's dream, Lucas. Everything about you smells of the West: your clothes, your expensive cologne and your stinking approach to those less fortunate than yourself."

"Did much for the poor yourself did you, before you became... this?" Lucas replied trying to avoid the voice in his head, he was convinced this was one of the alcoholic soaked conversations he had with himself. He didn't believe in ghosts and was convinced that this moment was just one of those dreams he had, a nightmare, before a huge business deal. But here he was, slumped in his luxury bathroom (not knowing how he made it home) talking to something that had told him that if he changed his ways not only could Lucas save himself but that this...thing...could spend the last few hours with his dying wife. He really didn't have time for this sort of introspection during his working day, so why did his imagination choose to agitate him with such ridiculousness when he topped himself up with gin. He allowed Edward's features to stay blurry as rubbing his eyes would only cement the nagging notion that this was actually real. But he was good at living life this way, suspending the news in another world as if news segments

were fanciful media creations to keep them all employed.

"The poor? Let me show you the poor."

Edward leapt forward and watched as Lucas tried to defend his face with his hands. They all did this, all the Scrooges, allowing Edward to grab their fingers and remove them from their reality.

"Where are we?" Lucas asked.

"Cyprus. 2018. A small village called Sotira, near the larger town of Paralimni," Edward replied. "I want to show you what you may consider to be poor."

"Well, if it doesn't have a 12 cylinder turbo-charged engine that I can strap a woman to then I'm not interested."

"Let me show you the place."

Edward took him into a nearby cafe. There were no women sitting in the cafe, they were scurrying between chairs ferrying trays of espresso and water to tables of old men playing board games.

"What's this, Playschool for geriatrics?" Lucas laughed.

"It's how other people live. In 2018. It's a different side of life and it's where you could be in 9 months."

"Not me, not here. Not with this lot."

"It's this type of 'lot' as you call it, that you meet."

"Well, I can't even understand what they are saying?" Lucas was standing next to a group of men. Each of them were heavily engaged in a game of chess. They all wore similar clothing, blached open neck shirts, long grey flannel trousers and faded black shoes. Their skin had a tan that sunk all the way into their bones. They were all white, but not a hint of that colour existed on their bodies.

"You don't need to know village Greek to understand these

people. They don't rely on smartphones. They don't start their day scrolling through the 500th edition of Carpool Karaoke to see the next pop star trying to sell more of their records or watch the next action hero trailer. They don't head onto Twitter to hashtag condemn every person of note that makes any mistake, as if that, somehow, is going to make things better. Tell me what that achieves? They live in a real world. One full of family. When was the last time you saw your parents? Your world is alone. These people, however, have each other."

Edward let his tirade sink in for a moment. "Let me take you to a funeral."

"Oh, really?" Lucas sighed.

The scene changed. The village was gone but crowds of people were walking along a road.

"Where's the cemetery then?"

"Over there." Edward pointed to a field.

"Where are the gravestones?"

"There are none. Many Cypriots cannot afford them."

"So, what happens then? And can you stop that bloody noise?"

Edward and Lucas were in the centre of the cortège. Hundreds of people walking slowly but sobbing, wailing loudly and holding hands. All dressed in the darkest colours they could find.

"You'll see."

Edward kept Lucas waiting. Clearly this man didn't live in any kind of reality. Thirty-one year old's rarely do with no kids, no wife, and parents that haven't succumbed to any of the top three diseases, he thought. Their lives are blank, nondescript. Money and materials consume them; love and sharing are countries that simply don't exist. To Edward, John Huffam, his supervisor, had

given him the impossible job. Time was running out. Mary's life was being counted in hours now. Somehow, he needed to convince this blinkered, arrogant boy (for although he had years, he had no maturity) that richness forms in the heart and flows into every action we take. Yes, Edward had his own regrets. He'd hardly led a saintly existence, but he did know love, and if he could show Lucas another part of himself as yet unseen, he had a chance of being with Mary one last time. Huffam would have to free him then. This was the ultimate exterior that needed cracking.

As the crowd began to form a wide circle, Edward floated with Lucas above them all. At the head of the throng, six men, the same men from the cafe, were carrying the body of an old woman.

"Where's the coffin?"

Edward didn't answer.

They lay her down on the ground. Her body had been bound in bandages wrapping her limbs tightly to her thin frame. Edward landed next to her and Lucas stepped forward to see the only part of her that had been left exposed: her face.

And with that, the scene changed. The blue sky was the same though, the floating essence of the sea the same, the miles of craggy scrub and houses with water tanks on the roofs eclipsing the scene, but it was an empty road, outside the village. An old woman trundled along its edges sometimes slipping on the rust coloured stones thrown up by the traffic. Dressed in the same black as the villagers from the funeral, she held a shawl tight over her head to protect her from the Mediterranean heat. In the distance, Lucas could see a car approaching at speed. As it came closer, he could see two people in the vehicle. It was a jeep, open topped, its occupant's hair flailing in the wind. It took a wide circle past the

woman, and, as it did so, Lucas saw himself in the driver's seat. He then saw the figure of a young woman sitting in the front next to his other self and Edward felt him inhale deeply. He recognised that breath.

"You meet her in Deryneia" Edward offered softly.

"I don't even know what that is?" Lucas replied, staring.

"It's a village close to here"

The jeep's brake lights lit up and it came to a stop about 100 yards ahead of where the old woman (who Lucas had completely forgot) was still struggling along under an unforgiving July sun. His other self hopped out and made his way toward the frail figure stumbling toward him.

"Can we help you?" He asked.

"Lucas, honey, just get her into the car. She probably doesn't speak English."

Lucas stared at his other self and the hardness he saw in the mirror every day was gone. It had been replaced by a face he had only seen in films with romantic leading men.

"That's not me," he mumbled to himself, but Edward heard him.

"It is you. In a future you could have."

"What's that in the back of the Jeep?"

"Pool cleaning equipment. You clean swimming pools for a living. You and Ksenya (she is rather beautiful isn't she?) also raise funds for local widowers like Stavroula here to keep them from walking 8 miles to work every day. You see, she was up at 4 a.m. this morning and walked to the small potato field her family owns and has been working the ground all day in a tractor that barely starts. She may look small but her stature here, in the village is huge. She is 85 years old. There is no retirement here, no pension

fund.

The old woman pointed and said something in Greek. The loved-up Lucas nodded, smiled at Ksenya and helped her into the front seat of the jeep next to his approving girlfriend.

Edward and Lucas hopped into the rear of the vehicle as it restarted.

"Oh, what's that smell?" Lucas asked Edward.

"It's the old woman"

"It's a mixture of urine and sweat" he shouted holding his nose as he did so.

After a couple of miles the old woman who had been chuntering away in the front seat made a proclamation as they came to the outskirts of Deryneia.

"Stamata, Stamata!" And Lucas slowed the vehicle to a stop and she thanked them in Greek and made her way slowly out of the jeep.

"Look at her face!" Edward insisted.

As Lucas did so, they were transported back to the funeral. Her body was being laid to rest in the shallow hole that the old men had dug.

"It's hard to dig holes here in August" Edward observed, answering the question on Lucas' face. "It's even harder for old men armed only with blunt spades. See anyone you know?"

And with that Edward lifted them both into the air so that Lucas could get a better view. It was hard for him pick anyone out amongst the throng, but he did see one person: Ksenya.

"Why is she on her own? Where am I?"

"You told her that you don't do funerals. Your relationship with Ksenya doesn't last."

"Why not?"

"She gets to know you. She tells you that it's not her job to train you to become a better person. That you should see what you are in the mirror every day and question your existence. She sees you staring at pictures of naked women on your phone. She sees you talking down to people as if you were born royal. She sees the rudeness, the brashness that you tried to hide but cannot conceal. She leaves you."

As Lucas digested this information the sky changed to one he was more familiar with: grey clouds with more than a promise of rain. They were now standing outside a church. A solitary coffin was perched on two wooden blocks as if waiting for a congregation.

Edward guided Lucas forward.

"You need to see what's inside, Lucas that doesn't 'do' funerals."

As they drew closer Lucas could see the lid was on.

"Everyone does funerals, Lucas. But some do it better than others. This ceremony has already taken place."

"But where are the people?"

"There are none. Poor chap."

"Ok, Jim, Time to bury the bastard." Lucas heard a voice and two sets of footsteps coming round the corner. There were two middle aged men both in gardeners uniforms heading toward them.

"What was this one's name then?"

"Hang on, got the paperwork in me pocket." Lucas watched him pull out a scrunched piece of paper with his muddy hands.

"Pennall, no, hold on a second. Rennall, Loo-c-as Rennell."

"How did I die?"



Edward removed him from the scene. They were back in London.

“Victoria Station. Rush hour. Tube Stations been closed. Threat level has been raised to Severe, but you’ve got a deal to close. Police have told everyone to stay away, but you’re on your way to the banking district ignoring the world around you, as usual. Here you come now.”

“Hang on, I don’t look that much older. A little rounder in the face, maybe.”

Edward sighed as a grim faced Lucas rushed past them. He’s approached by a Police officer.

“Not this way, sir. You are not permitted through here. We have had to close this thoroughfare as there has been an incident that we are still dealing with.”

“But, I’ve got a meeting to get to. You’ll make me late. Get out of my way.”

“You can see the concern and shouts between the officers as you evade the loose line they have created. They can’t keep everyone out. You make your way across town, taking back alleys, side streets, to avoid any more confrontation with the constabulary. Look at you. It’s as if no-one else exists. But your so called cleverness leads you into the path of the people the police have tried to protect you from. When they announce the death toll a few days later, another number is added to the list. You, Lucas Rennell: the terrorist’s dream.”

“I’m not having any of this. What did you say your name was?”

“Edward. Edward Myer.”

“Well, I think you should leave. Get away from me. Go and spend the last few hours with your wife.”

## Chapter eight

*Gil Rognstad*

*“Mind the gap.”*

How long had it been since Edward had last heard that? He hadn't heard it often in his later years, for certain. For quite some time a limousine with a professional driver had been his preferred mode of transportation—once he could afford such things. A tube ride would have been unheard of in those days.

Of course, he *had* taken that train to Sheffield...

But why was he in the tube now? Where was he going? He couldn't seem to remember. Things were fuzzy. Wherever he was going, he could certainly have whisked himself there in a few heartbeats if it were anywhere in London. He was still a Marley, after all. No reason to take the tube — unless he had meant to have the trip take more time for some reason...

Maybe that was it. Maybe he had needed some time to think. To clear his head. To figure out what to do next.

There *was* nothing to be done, of course. He had failed. He had probably wandered around for a bit and found his way to the nearest tube station, hoping to take some time to come to terms with his failure—and its consequences.

It was dangerous, he realised — riding the tube — now that he paused to give it some thought. What if he should be seen by someone he had known in life? He was still visible to people—the day had not yet entirely run its course—and anyone could step in through the doors at any stop.

What did it matter, though? Edward's doom had been sealed. He had failed. Lucas Rennall had been offered to him as an impossible case, and an impossible case was exactly what he had proven to be.

Edward's own brother (if there had ever been such a person) could walk onto the train right now and recognise him, and the punishment would be no worse than what he already had coming to him. He could even spend the last few hours of his mission window with his widow, Margaret, for all the—

Margaret! Of course! He actually *could* see her. What was there to keep him from her now? Nothing.

As if on cue, the tube's ubiquitous, utilitarian voice announced, "Westminster".

Edward saw that he must have had that very plan in the back of his mind from the start. He had wanted to visit Margaret. That's how he had ended up on the tube.

It was a self-imposed death sentence, of course. Well, not quite; the death part had come to him some time ago. But it *was* an invitation for his chains to be put back on, which was even worse. But those chains were already his destiny. They only existed because he had forged them himself. He had failed Margaret and countless clients during his lifetime, and he had failed Rennall as a Marley. He was only going back to what he deserved...

He took his time walking across Westminster bridge. He could have whisked himself into the hospital straight away, but it seemed appropriate, somehow, to go to this one last sin a bit more... reverently than that.

St. Thomas' Hospital stood off to his right as he crossed the bridge. It seemed to be saying, "There you are, then. Knew I'd see you before long." The imagined voice of the hospital had the tone of a displeased butler who would never voice disagreement in the presence of his employer, but was quite good at allowing disapproval to drip from his every polite word.

Inside the hospital, he found his way to Margaret's floor and room easily. One of the benefits (or side effects?) of being a Marley on a mission was that while people could see you, they seldom paid any attention to you. Then again, maybe that had nothing to do with being a Marley, but was simply something Edward had kept with him from life. He had always believed in acting like you knew *exactly* what you were doing and as if you belonged *exactly* where you were. People never question an air of authority and purpose.

Two hospital workers stood outside the door to her room. They weren't doctors. They were nurses, perhaps. Volunteers. Edward paused a little way off and listened to their conversation.

"It's a shame, is all," one said to the other. "Simply a shame."

"Nothing else for it," the other replied. "Doctor said there's no point in keeping her going. They've done everything they can, and then some. If there's no improvement tonight, she's to be...well, the equipment should be used for someone who has a hope of recovery. Tomorrow morning they'll discontinue life-support and let her go."

"She was a good woman. Did you know that she once chained

herself to a whaling ship somewhere in Asia, to keep it in port? That was back in the day, of course, before she married. She made appearances on the television, as well. She did so much to protect the environment and wildlife.”

“She’s *that* Margaret Myer?”

“She certainly is. Such a giving person. It’s a shame to see her lying there, seventy eight years old, alone — without a single soul to hold her hand during her last night in this life.”

“Married money, I heard. Not much charity work after that. Goes to show you: What does money really get you in the end? Nothing. She’s got millions, but she’s ended up in the same hospital bed you or I will die in one day.”

“You’re a morbid one.”

“I’m a realist. Let’s get some tea. We have another half-shift to go, and we aren’t going to get anything done standing in the hall wagging our tongues.”

Margaret’s room at St. Thomas’ was plain. Simple. Ordinary. Not at all the sort of place befitting the wealthy widow of a successful investor. It contained two doors—one to the hall and one to the loo; a bed, of course; three wooden shelves for personal effects—all of them empty, but too small to be of use holding anything meaningful anyway; and an uninviting guest chair that might have cost the hospital all of thirty nine pounds. There weren’t even any flowers on the windowsill.

Edward couldn’t think of a worse place to die. At least the train to Sheffield had been going somewhere. This place was nothing but a dead end. A place for people who wouldn’t be going anywhere ever again.

He approached the bed and looked down at the face of the woman he had loved. *God, she looks old*, he thought. How long had it been since he had last seen her? He wasn't sure. Time was a slippery thing once you had passed from the old life into the new...

But he could see that his Margaret was still in there—beneath the deep lines on her face, the medical equipment, and the nearly transparent powder-white skin. His Margaret was there all right. If not for all of the wires and tubes hooked up to her, she might have simply been sleeping. She exuded an aura of absolute peace. She seemed utterly content.

*She's ready to go*, Edward thought. *I was nowhere near ready, but everything about her says that she'll be perfectly at home in any world that's lucky enough to have her.*

"Margaret," he said. "I'm so sorry. I have missed you so. When I was alive, I know that I...well, I treated you far worse than anyone deserves to be treated. I neglected you. I thought that working day and night at digging fortunes out of people was all that I had to do to fulfil my responsibilities towards you, but what I was really doing was building up walls between us. I didn't even know what love was until it was too late—"

"This is all very touching, Edward," came a man's voice from somewhere near the window, "but you know that this is strictly forbidden."

Edward pulled his gaze away from Margaret's face. John Huffam stood on the other side of the bed. Edward offered him no response.

"You've earned your chains back in two ways, it seems," Huffam went on. "You've blown it with Rennall — and now this. You know that contact with a loved one instantly draws the ultimate penalty.

It's the first thing we—”

“What contact?” Edward asked defiantly. “She’s a corpse. She can’t hear me. She can’t speak to me. She has no idea that I’m here. She’s to be ‘disconnected’ in the morning. How does this fit *any* definition of ‘contact’?”

“I'll concede that point,” Huffam said, “but that doesn't change Mr. Rennall’s situation. He's still headed for an afterlife in chains.”

“Exactly as you knew he would be!” Edward shot back. “His was a hopeless case from the start! You knew that I had no hope of turning things around with him.”

Huffam didn't deny it. He stood as still as the woman lying on the bed between them. Edward finally broke the silence.

“Take me away, then. I've got chains waiting.”

“Let’s not be so hasty,” John said. “Might I make a suggestion?”

“I'm all ears,” Edward replied.

“Claire,” John said.

“What about her?”

“Why not have a go at her? You have a bit of time, yet. The day isn’t over. If you can turn her onto the right path, it might go a considerable way towards keeping those chains of yours—”

“You're just trying to get some extra work out of me before chaining me back up and tossing away the key. No thanks.”

“It's not like that, Edward.” Suddenly John was holding a packet in his hand with the name ‘Claire McCaffrey’ inscribed upon it. He held it out towards Edward. “Do you honestly believe that Ms. McCaffrey needs your services any less because you blundered the job with Rennall?”

Edward stared at Huffam in silence for several long seconds before replying.

“Let’s assume I take the packet. What happens to me if I’m successful?”

“We’ll discover the answer to that if can you pull it off, won’t we?” suggested John. “Besides, I don’t see that you have much of a choice.” He extended the packet towards Edward insistently.

Edward looked at Margaret as if he hoped that she might offer him some advice. She took no notice of him. The machines continued breathing for her. There wasn’t even the flutter of an eyelid to suggest a course of action to him.

Edward reached over Margaret and took the packet from John. Nodding sagely, he turned without another word and left the hospital.



## **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 it's 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

*Michael Bywater*

She wasn't in. Everything was in order, everything as he'd left it last time he'd visited. Last time he'd had the chance to visit. She'd been in then. He hadn't seen her, of course. Rules were rules and you couldn't complain that you didn't know them because, here as well as there (now as well as then) ignorance of the law was no defence. In any case it was hard to plead ignorance when, in this particular case, the law was spelled out explicitly, publicly and before witnesses. *Till death us do part, according to...*

Yes. Well. We all know according to whose ordinance -- *holy* ordinance, oops, bugger, apologies, you might as well be working for Schroder Wagg or Lazards or Fred the fucking Shred for--

"Who?"

"Who what?" said Edward.

"Fred the Fucking," said Rennall. "You said 'Fred the Fucking'."

"Fred the *Shred*," said Edward. "Things get blurred. Syllables drop out. You think you've said something when you've only thought it, and with no breath to speak of -- no breath to speak *with* -- well... the line gets hazy. Did I, didn't I say it? You know the score."

“Glad to say I don’t. Fred the Shred though - yeah, know who you mean, my kind of guy, come out of a clusterfuck like that *with the money*, that’s the sort of talent we need.”

“I imagined that’s how you would feel. But let me give you a heads-up: you *will* know the score, in due course, because you *will* end up in my position. You won’t have to lie, you won’t have to rig your PR, you won’t have to canvass behind the scenes or call in any favours, because there won’t be any to call in and you wouldn’t need them anyway. The job’s waiting for you. Full-time, open-ended contract. You’re on the list. They’ve...”

A thought, half-formed, blurred, gauzy, came into Edward’s mind and they both simultaneously saw it: a grey mound, a rust-eaten, greasy, vast metal coil, hawsers, chains, strips of scorched and twisted metal cladding, hulks of server-racks, a smashed and distorted Maserati cylinder-block, razor-sharp torn stainless steel Colosseo Oro kitchen fittings, a crown of hand-forged Japanese damascene knives, all rearing forward with a screech of metal sliding forward on an inadequate lubrication of blood. Rennall lurched backward.

“That’ll be human blood,” Edward thought.

“What the—”

“Perks of office,” said Edward.

The intolerable chain dissolved into a mist again.

Knowing she would not be in, Edward stepped into the kitchen. The same Colosseo Oro kitchen, intact, winked back at him under the computer-controlled lighting.

“It should normally follow my movements,” he said, “and there should be music. It knows my taste. *Knew* my taste. Pretty advanced for 1997. The only other one belonged to Paul Allen. I



had a standing invitation to go over to Seattle. We were going to play a game. Follow each other round the place and listen to the house. First his music, then mine, then his, room-to-room, you get the picture?”

“Sounds like hell.”

“Oh dear me no. That’s a very different sound. No; this would be merely chaos. Except I had the edge.”

The kitchen dissolved into the vast drawing-room; the windows slid open, the quiet, civilised, *expensive* sounds of Marylebone Village muted by the green perfection of the private garden where, now he was... now he was *other*, Margaret’s dog Fix played. Played and pissed and barked and ran around and shat in the bushes, and Edward wondered how much he would give, and if anyone had ever had enough to give, to have the chance to step accidentally in dog shit again. To see a dog look at him with hopeful curiosity instead of a frightened imperious yelp, tail tucked under, backing away.

“What was the edge?” said Rennall. “Nice place, matey. Nice gaff. Ten mil, give or take, right, yeah?, today’s prices, wicked. My own place, bachelor apartment, interior designed, Bryanston Court, two and a half mil, only a stopgap but I’m on my way.”

“You are.”

“What was the edge?”

“*My* system,” said Edward, “could track twenty house-guests with their own pre-programmed choice of music. *Tristan und Isolde* following them from room to room, and then the next guest comes in and it’s Hendrix, and the one after that, Vilayat Khan playing rāg Manomajari, then Messiaen, then Floyd... it would be chaos. Never found out, though. Never had anyone in the place.

Oh, the odd catered dinner party -- Filipinos..."

"They do anything. Those Filipino women. Well up for it. I should know."

"I'm sure you should know," said Edward, looking around the bedroom, as they climbed the sweeping staircase, admired the long first-floor windows, the unmistakable proportions of the façade which declared "London: West End" to anyone who caught a glimpse of it.

"Nobody walked here," he said, as they stood in the garden. "Not now, as the sun is rising on a winter morning, nor now." It was dusk, midsummer, the air heavy with jasmine.

"You were busy," said Rennall. "Thing to do, people to see, places to go, you get judged by that, your black Amex, your motor, your tailor—"

"Who is your tailor?" said Edward.

"Why?" said Rennall.

"Nothing. I just thought we'll probably be seeing him soon, too. Not Savile Row?"

"Rome. Little place—"

"It always is a little place, isn't it? I've been there. I was so far ahead of you, your kidneys would ache if you knew it. This is just one of my houses. There are others. Central Park South. Oriole Way, looking down on LA and Beverly Hills. A Doric villa on an Ionian Island. A simple fisherman's cottage on St Lucia, southwestern side of course, couldn't get the land now for love or money. String of deaths. Chap's wife committed suicide and he took it badly, took his daughter's face off with one of his Purdeys, then sliced his wrists with a Tang dynasty jade knife but what was I to do? Once in a lifetime opportunity to buy into his market and if he

couldn't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen. Not what the guy said."

"What guy?" said Rennall.

"The *guy*. What he said was not 'If you can't stand the heat get out of the kitchen.' What he said was 'If you can't stand the stink, get out of the shithouse.' I was good in the shithouse. I was king of the shithouse. I'd lie — tell them what they wanted to hear — and they'd smile at me, grateful, submissive as one of your Filipina — 'a', not 'o'; they're woman; it's a little courtesy — and 'Oh thank you Mr Myer, I knew we could count on you' and so they could. Only not in the way they thought."

"Thinking? That's for losers," said Rennall. "We need men of action. Not arseholes with muscles. I mean *action*. Telephone action, share price action, spreading the rumour action, *do the opposite* action. Everyone says no, do yes. Everyone says bad, means it's good. This is *nature*. The weak go to the wall and the strong get houses like this —" He waved a hand. "Hey. Where the hell...?"

They weren't there any more. It was a small room. Four beds. A hissing of ventilators, a bipping of monitors, syringe driver lights blinking, nurses padding quietly about.

Three people lay in three beds, profoundly unconscious. "Life-support" they called it but it was really death-prolonging. Nobody would walk out of here, not this time.

She was here. He'd wondered where she'd have gone. She wasn't working for the dog charities any more, not now she'd got Fix. A russet Hungarian vizsla. They adored each other. He was never more than a foot from her, even in bed. Closer than Edward had ever been. Always moving. Always away. Building up,

strengthening his power, and now... one of the weakest creatures in the universe.

He couldn't see her.

Four beds. Three bodies. One... sort of pixellated. A kind of blur. He couldn't see here because *death us do part*. And those were the rules but he missed her. He missed her every day since...

Since the train. To *Sheffield* of all places. To die on a delayed train to Sheffield and never to see his wife again. Unless Rennall...

But Rennall was a lost cause.

"You showing me all this — the house, the missus — to..."

"You can see her?"

"Yes. She looks bad."

But Edward could see Fix. The dog was looking at him, calmly. He couldn't be there, but his spirit...? Did dogs have a spirit?

"Fucking hell," said Rennall.

"What?"

"Nah. Nothing. Thought I saw a dog. You're giving me the willies, you."

"Oh, there probably was a dog. Her dog. Fix. First thing she did when I died: a dog. Can't blame her. She was right. This one's the third. You know with a dog when you take it on, you might as well love it full-on because it's going to go."

"But here? This is—"

"ITU at St Thomas's. Yes. The woman I can't see is my wife. The dog you can't see is—"

"There *was* a dog?"

"There's always more than you know. Look up from your money, and you might see it. Two hundred aromachemicals in a tomato and we can smell six of them. A dog can smell them all.

We're there. We're the trace of movement in the corner of your eye. We're what the lorry blasts his horn at, we're why the cat arches its back. We're the thing you swerve to avoid but there's nothing there; we're the tap on the window, the footsteps in the hallway, we're the inoffensive man on the bench, gone the next moment. We're why the drummer misses a beat, why the horse shies, the sudden smell of ashes of rose, the broken twig that looks like a fingerbone, scorched yet moving. We're all those things. We're there. We can see you. Like through a steamed-up greasy window. But we can see you. We're watching. It's what we do."

"This fucking *Christmas Carol* shit. You think I'm going to see the light. Change my ways. Yeah?"

"No. They were right. You're not. You can't. You don't have it in you. You were born without it, or it was burned away. You're..."

Edward looked at Rennall, who was already beginning to blur.

"What?" said Rennall. "*What?*"

"You're one of us."

## **Chapter twelve**

*David Johnson*

Lucas Rennall wakes up in his apartment. It's Saturday morning on the 23<sup>rd</sup> 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.