

## LINK 29: BATHTUB

Rat-tat-tatatatat.

I woke on the bed that Travis had made up for me in the barn.

Rat-tat-tat-tat.

There was a rapid clicking above my head. Rat-tat-tatatatat. A fragile sound that came from the very building itself. Rat-tat-tat-tatataatat. Heavy Tudor beams ran along the ceiling. Rat-tat-tat-tat. It felt as if there was someone else there, someone else in the building with us. Rat-tattatatat. At first I thought there wasn't, no one else was awake, just me lying in the clothes I'd worn all day, listening to a deathwatch beetle. Rat-tat-tat-tatatatatat. Beating its head on the tunnel it had carved into the venerable oaks.

Click.

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The opening of a lock. I swung my legs out of the mound of crisp nylon linen. From below there came a series creaks, slight but very distinct. I stumbled into the hallway. Moonlight fell across the ground floor, illuminating the battered furnishings, curling rugs and unwashed crockery mounds.

“Barney?” I called softly.

A clunk as the door to the barn was pulled shut and then a rustle of movement outside. I ran through the main room, and threw the door open, laying out the moon-shadowed night before me. To my left there was a twisting crunch of feet on leaves, followed by the twittering response and laboured wing slaps of a startled bird. I took a step outside, the cold and damp of the dew soaking through my socks.

“Barney?” I hissed again.

There was a suggestion of movement; a sway of a branch, the soft scrunch of leaf litter and I went to follow. The moon was high and full, lighting a path through the debris field that encircled the barn. I picked my way between rusted farming machinery, car parts, old TVs and over scree slopes of plastic, glass and twisted metal. My quarry had been lost in the darkness, but I chose not to turn back and instead took a pause in the junkyard and savoured the silence.

I pushed through a stand of hawthorne bushes into a clearing, at the centre of which stood an abandoned iron

bath, its stark white sides streaked with rust and its bottom filled with a fine tith of decomposed leaves. A stag beetle was struggling against the slippery walls, running up against them and then flipping itself over as it tried to scramble out. I sat on the edge and watched it for a while before reaching in and gingerly gripped its carapace between thumb and forefinger, lifting it to the level of my eyes. Its legs waved spasmodically and its jaws twitched and flexed in response to my movements. I lowered it to the ground and watched it scurry away into the undergrowth, digging down and pulling litter over its head.

“Cornelius! I thought it was you prowling around!”

I jumped. It was only Barney’s hand on my shoulder that prevented me from pitching head first into the bath.

“Where have you been?” I pulled myself round and looked up to see his huge frame blocking out the moon and the stars.

“I had to work it all out” he threw a leg over the edge of the bath and sat down. “And now I’ve cleared everything up. So it would be the right time for us to have a proper talk.”

“You don’t want to leave it to the morning?”

“Events Cornelius, events. Things will move on, no time like the now time is there?” He dug into the seemingly bottomless pockets of his greatcoat, reaching

down almost to the floor and with grunt of satisfaction bought out a palm-size wind up lantern that he began to charge with rapid turns of the handle. “After what happened back at the flat, and afterwards, I thought I should talk to you and let you know as much as I can let you know.”

I watched him closely. He seemed calm and focused, his attention taken up briefly with his efforts to spark the flickering lantern into life. The light grew stronger and I could see him looking at me. “We need to know where we stand, don’t we?” he said. Our eyes locked and I was aware of the fierce intelligence that shone through them and into mine.

“Yeah, we do Barney,” I replied. “so, why not? I mean, I’m bruised, bloodied and freezing my bollocks off, we’re sat outside on a bath, in a junkyard in the middle of Sussex. So why not? Tell me all about it Barney? What’s going on with my life? Why has it turned to shit?”

He placed the lantern on the lip at the end of the bath and eased past me, clambering into it. “It’s not your about life, Cornelius.” He stood for a few moments before shuffling in a tight circle and then settling down into the mulch of leaves and twigs. “Its not about you...”— he leant his head back and looked up at the stars—“it’s all about me.”

“Bless you Barney,” I said patting my hand on his thigh, “but I think for once this might be something else. Unless you’re involved with that group...”

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“What group?” he asked, momentarily disconcerted.

“This Family, this online bloody dating thing that has turned into a cult or whatever it is. You know what I’m talking about? The Family it was called, Lucinda and Josh were part of it.”

He shook his head. “Don’t know no Family,” he said.

“Josh told me it was a way of people organising and making connect-“

“Yes yes that’s fine Cornelius,” he interrupted. “Now look when I say that its all about me and I know that you’re going to think that this is just Barney doing his thing again. I know what some folk call me, old Bullshit Barney.” I went to speak, but he put his hands out and flattened my words. “No no don’t worry I know you don’t, otherwise I wouldn’t be here now, talking with you. I’ve known you were different from when I met you, but the others, Travis and his type. I know they think I’m a liar.

“It doesn’t worry me,” he lifted a finger to his face as he spoke, and with great care he inserted a finger into his left nostril. “It’s actually quite useful. It helped me work out who I can work with, who I can trust, who has got an open mind. The kind of mind I need.” He prodded around inside the passageway. “And who hasn’t.” The finger jabbed deeper. “It was why I picked you out, because you’re not part of the pack Cornelius. The

chattering mob. It's why I started to tell you about my work."

"Did you?"

"Yes I did. The ant..."

"Oh yes the ant..." Suddenly I felt tired and the night felt cold.

He halted his rummaging and looked at me, one digit firmly inserted inside his skull. "Cornelius," he said, "I might not be with you very much longer. As you've probably realised the... erm... the circle is closing on me... but I have to push on, I have to finish my work, and I'm going to try to drop in something new, something of my own. Which is perhaps why I'm not popular, but these last twenty years I've been working it out and... and I know it is something that I will do."

"Now, if something does happen. If you lose me, I need someone like you to keep the fire burning. You know, I need someone who is willing to listen and who will be able to keep the flame alive. Someone who might not understand it all, because the knowledge I have..." — here he pulled his finger from inside his nose and pinched it with his thumb before me — "It is exquisite. It is the most important and wonderful thing that has been on the earth. No one person can grasp it all, not all at once, that is why I've been waiting for someone like you. Someone who will carry the torch, but will not try and look into it. I thought it was you Cornelius..." A cloud passed across

his face as he spoke. “But then it all went wrong at the flat, and you let that man follow, and I have had to wonder whether you were the right person to fill my, not inconsiderable, boots.” With this he waved a filthy Doc Marten into the air.

“Barney, who do you think is after you? Is it the people who us? Do they want to get you too?”

He pulled the finger out and briefly examines its end and then wiped it on his coat. “Cornelius, no one is following you, or Lucinda, not directly. You’re all just a way of getting at me. There’s a great dance being played out and everyone is twisting and turning and taking their turn and I’m at the centre. Some people are helping me, some are hindering me and some don’t even care about me - but even if they don’t know it - everything they are doing is about me.”

I gaped for words, running my hands through my hair and swallowing mouthfuls of air. I was trying to think of something to say, trying to process what he was saying and respond without resorting to insult. I couldn’t though. His madness had no response.

So I was silent.

“That’s why the slurs and slanders don’t hurt me. They tell me what kind of person they are and they don’t have any effect. I’ve grown used to them.” The lantern was dimming, he leant forward and began whirring it back into life. “Remarkable people throughout history have

had to survive the curses and mockery of those who are blind to the truth. They laugh and they point, but they never look down and realise whose shoulders it is that they are standing on.”

I looked at him, a monochrome figure overflowing a bath tub - knees scrunched to his chest, frantically winding the handle on a tiny lantern, the light of which barely spills beyond his lap.

“Oh Barney,” I said. “I think it’s best you stopped... please.”

He gave me a brown-toothed grin. “Cornelius,” he said, “you have to tell me if you’ll be ready when the moment comes. Will you be there to make a difference? Will you? You need to open your mind and listen to what I’m saying, because I need you Cornelius.”

“Barney. I only want one thing.”

“Aye, what’s that?”

“I want to find Lucinda, to make sure she’s safe and then I want to take all this back,” I gestured about myself with a sweep of my arm. “I want this to end and I want to go back to how things were before, when my life was the simple, confused mess of friends and drink and work that it was two days ago. I want to go back to when I took you to that bar and my worst worry was that I didn’t have a fancy dress outfit. I want that life back. Barney, I don’t want to change the world.”

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“I’m hearing love there, aren’t I Cornelius? Love for one woman. One single entity, and for the life you had. What I’m doing is born of a love for all humanity.” He set the lantern down and put his hands on either side of side of his body, attempting to push himself up on the walls of the bath. He grunted, shifted slightly, grunted again and then stopped.

“Listen, there are people walking among you at this time who are destined to live exceptional lives. We stand like rocks in the stream of history creating turbulence and confusion about us. We are... the catalysts for change.”

“Barney, no one gave you any Aryn Rand books to read did they? Because who ever did that must be really irresponsible.”

“No way man, this is real life. Important stuff, Cornelius. Decision time is coming up and I’m looking for people who’ll stand at my side.” He let out a huge groan as he tried once more to prise himself out of the bathtub. “Will you help me?” he asked.

“What with your task? Your great mission?” I replied.

“Nah, get me out of here will ya?”

I reached over and we locked hands, I rocked back and there was an unpleasant tearing noise as Barney was levered upright and to his feet. He stepped out and began brushing himself down without saying anything.

“We should go inside Barney,” I told him. “We’ve got a lot to sort out tomorrow.” I picked up the lantern and went to leave.

“No, wait Cornelius, you haven’t told me.”

“Told you what?” I looked at him. Dirt and mud in his beard, gut poking out from his stained t-shirt, hair covering his face.

“Are you with me? Can I trust you?”

“I’m not going to lie to you. Lucinda and her safety is my priority.”

“I know that. I’m trying to understand it, but you’re the only person I have. I need you.”

“I have to find her.”

He pauses. His face drops. “Born into this new life alone,” he sighed, “I’ll go out the same way.”

I turned to go inside, holding the lantern above my head. “Don’t worry Barney. We get Lucinda back and then my attention will be all yours, I promise.” I began to pick my way through the fields of broken glass and farmyard junk. I held the lamp above my head and a moth swooped in from the darkness and began to batter itself against the failing bulb.

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“That’s good Cornelius,” Barney said from behind me.  
“I’ll hold you to that.”

We walked inside together. The moth remained fixated upon the lanterns light, battering its head against the bulb’s plastic surround until the light finally dimmed, flickered and went out.