

THE LAST LAUGH • STRANGEWOVEN

THE LAST LAUGH

Collected Stories

STRANGEWOVEN

Different worlds. One imagination.

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Collection note: The expanded edition of The Empty Chair is included as a bonus alternate version alongside the original short story.

The Last Laugh

The Origin of the Skeletal Jester



Long before anyone feared the sound of bells after midnight, there was a man named Lucien Vale.

And Lucien was very good at making people laugh.

He had been born with nothing worth inheriting except a quick tongue, quicker hands, and the peculiar ability to discover something funny in nearly every terrible situation.

When hunger came, Lucien joked about the emptiness of his bowl.

When winter froze the windows from the inside, he performed puppet shows with his fingers against the candlelight.

When his father died owing more money than he had ever possessed, Lucien stood beside the grave and whispered:

"At least now they'll have to dig pretty deep to collect."

His mother slapped him.

Then she laughed.

Lucien considered that a successful performance.

By twenty, his talent had carried him from muddy village squares to the marble halls of Castle Veyr, where King Aldren maintained one of the grandest courts in the northern kingdoms.

Lucien became the king's jester.

He wore black and crimson.

Silver bells hung from his cap.

And unlike the jeweled nobles surrounding the throne, Lucien possessed something extraordinarily dangerous.

He could tell the king the truth.

He simply made him laugh while doing it.

For years, it worked.

When taxes became cruel, Lucien mocked the royal treasurer.

When generals exaggerated victories, Lucien reenacted their battles using spoons.

When nobles whispered lies into Aldren's ear, Lucien turned those lies into jokes so ridiculous that even the king recognized them.

The people began calling him the Fool Who Spoke Wisely.

The nobles called him something else.

A problem.

Then King Aldren died.

His son, Edric, inherited the crown.

And Edric did not enjoy jokes.

Especially true ones.

Under the new king, the kingdom changed.

Prisons filled.

Taxes doubled.

Public executions became entertainment.

And every evening Lucien was still expected to dance beneath the throne.

So he danced.

He jingled his bells.

He bowed.

And slowly, carefully, his jokes became sharper.

One night, Edric demanded a new performance.

"Make me laugh, Fool."

Lucien looked around the banquet hall.

At nobles drowning themselves in wine while families outside the castle walls went hungry.

At soldiers standing silently beside doors.

At servants afraid to raise their eyes.

Then Lucien smiled.

"I would, Your Majesty."

The hall became quiet.

"But I fear someone has already told the greatest joke in the kingdom."

Edric leaned forward.

"And what joke is that?"

Lucien bowed deeply.

"That you are a king."

Nobody laughed.

That was the problem.

Had even one noble laughed, perhaps Lucien's fate might have been different.

Instead there was only silence.

Edric ordered him imprisoned.

For seven days Lucien disappeared beneath Castle Veyr.

On the eighth night, the king summoned him again.

A great feast had been prepared.

Hundreds attended.

And in the center of the hall stood Lucien.

His costume was torn.

His face was bruised.

But someone had carefully placed his jester's cap back upon his head.

Edric smiled.

"One final performance."

Lucien looked at the crowd.

He understood.

This wasn't entertainment.

It was an execution.

So Lucien performed.

And he gave them the greatest performance of his life.

He mocked the king.

The nobles.

The executioner.

Death itself.

Against their better judgment, people began laughing.

First servants.

Then guards.

Then nobles desperately trying to hide their smiles.

Soon the entire hall shook with laughter.

Everyone except Edric.

Lucien finally turned toward him.

"One last joke, Majesty?"

Edric's face burned with fury.

"One."

Lucien removed a tiny bell from his costume and held it between two fingers.

"A king and a fool walk into eternity."

He let the bell ring.

"Only one discovers which one he really was."

The executioner stepped forward.

Lucien's final laugh echoed through Castle Veyr.

Then the bells stopped.

For almost a century, Castle Veyr stood abandoned.

Edric's reign collapsed within three years. Rebellion consumed the kingdom, and the castle eventually became a blackened ruin overlooking an empty city.

But travelers began telling stories.

On certain nights, especially beneath a full moon, bells could be heard somewhere among the towers.

Soft at first.

Jingle.

Then another.

Jingle.

Then laughter.

One winter night, thieves searching the ruins discovered an old chamber beneath the throne room.

Inside sat a skeleton.

Still wearing black and crimson.

Still wearing the jester's cap.

One thief reached for the silver bells.

The skeleton raised its head.

"Careful."

The thieves froze.

The empty sockets turned toward them.

"I've become rather attached to those."

They ran.

The skeleton laughed until dawn.

Lucien eventually walked out of Castle Veyr for the first time in nearly a hundred years.

He discovered that kingdoms had changed.

Names had vanished.

Nobody remembered King Edric.

Statues had crumbled.

Books had forgotten him.

But stories about the fool remained.

That amused Lucien enormously.

He no longer knows precisely why he returned.

Perhaps it was a curse.

Perhaps death simply couldn't tolerate him.

Or perhaps somewhere between his final joke and whatever waits beyond life, Lucien had laughed at something that should never have been laughed at.

Whatever the reason, he wanders now.

Ruined cathedrals.

Forgotten castles.

Abandoned streets.

Places where cruelty once believed itself immortal.

Sometimes people see him sitting atop a gargoyle beneath the moon.

Sometimes they hear bells following them through the fog.

Sometimes Lucien appears before someone powerful who has become particularly cruel.

He never attacks them.

He doesn't need to.

He simply begins telling jokes.

Jokes about their secrets.

Their lies.

Their fears.

Things nobody else could possibly know.

And eventually he asks each of them the same question:

"Would you like to hear the last one?"

Nobody knows what happens if they say yes.

Because afterward, they never speak about it.

And somewhere in the darkness, the bells begin ringing again.

Lucien Vale still wears the grin death gave him.

But beneath the ruined velvet, tarnished bells and empty eyes, one thing remains exactly as it was centuries ago:

The jester can still tell the king the truth.

And sooner or later - everyone gets the joke.

The Man Who Never Laughed

A Last Laugh Short Story



Mayor Silas Crowe had never laughed in public.

He considered laughter an undignified habit.

Children laughed.

Drunkards laughed.

Fools laughed.

Silas Crowe was none of those things.

He was the mayor of Bellgrave, and for twenty-three years he had ruled the little city with the solemn authority of a man who believed every room became more important when he entered it.

His portrait hung in the courthouse.

His name was carved above the library.

A bronze statue of him stood in the town square.

The statue had cost enough to feed half the poor district through winter.

Silas considered this unfortunate.

The statue needed a larger pedestal.

The first bell rang at 11:43 on a Tuesday night.

Silas was sitting alone in his study when he heard it.

Jingle.

He looked toward the door.

Nothing.

He returned to his paperwork.

Jingle.

Silas stood.

"Who's there?"

No answer.

He opened the door.

The corridor outside was empty.

He checked the staircase.

Empty.

He checked the front entrance.

Locked.

Then he heard something behind him.

Not a bell.

A chuckle.

Silas spun around.

Nothing.

He didn't sleep that night.

The next morning, Bellgrave woke to discover that someone had decorated the mayor's statue.

A jester's cap had been placed on its bronze head.

Nobody knew where it came from.

Silas ordered it removed immediately.

By noon, it was back.

By two, someone had painted a red nose on the statue.

By three, a wooden sign hung around its neck.

THE BIGGEST FOOL IN BELLGRAVE.

Silas was furious.

The townspeople were delighted.

For perhaps the first time since its construction, the statue served a useful purpose.

People laughed at it.

Silas ordered guards stationed around it that night.

At midnight, every lantern in the square went out simultaneously.

The guards heard bells.

When the lanterns relit, the jester's cap had returned.

Nobody had moved.

Silas did not find this amusing.

He ordered every bell in Bellgrave removed.

Church bells.

Shop bells.

Dinner bells.

Even the little brass bell on the desk of the innkeeper.

By sunset, Bellgrave was silent.

Silas slept beautifully.

Until 2:17 in the morning.

Jingle.

His eyes opened.

A tiny brass bell sat on his bedside table.

Silas stared at it.

He had never seen it before.

Then a voice came from beneath his bed.

"Good evening."

Silas screamed.

He leapt from the mattress.

Nothing was underneath.

Then -

Jingle.

The bell was gone.

Silas backed toward the wall.

Something moved in the mirror.

A figure sat on the bed behind him.

Black and crimson velvet.

Tattered sleeves.

Long curled shoes.

Little tarnished bells.

And a skull wearing a grin far wider than any living man could manage.

Silas turned.

The bed was empty.

He looked back at the mirror.

The jester remained.

"Who are you?"

The skull tilted sideways.

"That's complicated."

"What do you want?"

The jester considered this.

"A laugh."

Silas stared at him.

"You've broken into my home for a laugh?"

"Technically, I haven't broken into anything."

The skeleton pointed toward the mirror.

"You're looking at me through a piece of glass."

Silas swallowed.

"Leave."

The jester sighed.

"Tough audience."

Then the mirror went black.

For the next six nights, Lucien Vale followed Mayor Crowe.

Never threatening him.

Never touching him.

Never hurting him.

He simply appeared.

Silas opened a cupboard.

Lucien was inside.

"Tea?"

Silas screamed and slammed it shut.

He opened it again.

Empty.

Silas climbed into his carriage.

Lucien was driving.

"Where to?"

Silas jumped out.

During a council meeting, Silas looked toward a darkened window.

Lucien stood outside.

Three floors above the ground.

He waved.

Silas stopped attending meetings.

Then Lucien began telling jokes.

They weren't particularly funny.

That was because they were true.

"A mayor raises taxes to repair the streets."

Lucien appeared atop a chimney.

"The streets remain broken, but strangely his house gets larger."

Jingle.

"A mayor builds a statue of himself."

Lucien sat on the statue's shoulder.

"Apparently mirrors weren't expensive enough."

Jingle.

"A mayor closes the town bakery for unpaid taxes."

Lucien appeared beneath a streetlamp.

"Then purchases the building from the city for half its value."

Jingle.

Silas began to understand.

These weren't jokes.

They were accusations.

And worse - people were listening.

On the seventh night, Silas entered the town square carrying a pistol.

The streets were deserted.

Fog crawled between the buildings.

"COME OUT!"

His voice echoed.

Nothing.

"VALE!"

A bell answered.

Jingle.

Silas turned.

Lucien sat atop the mayor's bronze statue.

"You know my name."

"I've researched you."

Lucien placed a skeletal hand against his chest.

"I'm touched."

"You died three hundred years ago."

"So I'm told."

"You're a ghost."

"Possibly."

"A demon."

"Rude."

"A curse."

Lucien considered that.

"Some people have called me worse."

Silas raised the pistol.

Lucien looked at it.

Then at Silas.

Then back at the pistol.

"You haven't thought this through."

"Leave Bellgrave."

Lucien slowly climbed down from the statue.

"Gladly."

Silas hesitated.

"What?"

"I'll leave."

Lucien approached him.

The bells on his clothing barely made a sound.

"But first..."

He produced one tiny brass bell.

"...you have to hear my last joke."

Silas remembered the stories.

Every account of Lucien Vale ended the same way.

Would you like to hear the last one?

"No."

Lucien stopped.

"No?"

"No."

Silas smiled triumphantly.

"You can't tell it if I refuse."

For several seconds, Lucien said nothing.

Then his shoulders began trembling.

A tiny chuckle escaped his skull.

Then another.

Then another.

Soon the skeletal jester was doubled over, laughing uncontrollably.

Silas stared at him.

"What?"

Lucien pointed toward him.

"You actually think..."

He struggled to speak between laughs.

"...this is about the joke?"

Silas's smile disappeared.

Lucien immediately became silent.

"The joke doesn't matter, Silas."

He stepped closer.

"The audience does."

Around them, windows began opening.

Lanterns appeared.

People stepped from their homes.

Dozens.

Then hundreds.

The citizens of Bellgrave silently surrounded the square.

Lucien bowed.

"Your audience awaits."

Silas looked around.

The baker was there.

So were the families whose homes he had seized.

The merchants he had taxed into bankruptcy.

The councilmen he had threatened.

The workers who had built his mansion.

The people who had paid for his statue.

Silas finally understood.

Lucien hadn't come to kill him.

That would have been easy.

He had come to make sure everyone stopped being afraid of him.

Lucien climbed onto the pedestal.

"Citizens of Bellgrave!"

Every face turned toward him.

"I promised your mayor one final joke."

Silas whispered:

"Don't."

Lucien grinned.

"Once there was a very powerful man..."

Silas closed his eyes.

"...who believed everyone respected him."

Someone in the crowd chuckled.

Lucien continued.

"He built statues so people would remember him."

Another laugh.

"He carved his name into buildings."

More laughter.

"He demanded silence whenever he spoke."

The laughter grew.

"And after spending his entire life making certain everyone knew how important he was..."

Lucien leaned toward the crowd.

"...the poor fool never noticed they were only quiet because they were afraid."

Silence.

Lucien looked at Silas.

Then finished.

"So one day..."

He rang the bell.

"...they stopped being quiet."

The square erupted.

Not with violence.

With laughter.

Silas Crowe stood beneath his own enormous bronze statue while an entire city laughed at him.

For the first time in twenty-three years, he possessed no authority over them whatsoever.

Lucien sat on the pedestal and watched.

Eventually, something unexpected happened.

Silas laughed too.

It began as a strange little noise.

Then another.

Until Mayor Silas Crowe sat down in the street and laughed harder than anyone.

Lucien's grin remained unchanged.

But something about it seemed softer.

Silas wiped his eyes.

"Was that the last joke?"

Lucien stood.

"No."

Silas looked up.

"What is?"

Lucien began walking into the fog.

His bells jingled softly.

Silas called after him.

"Lucien!"

The jester stopped.

"What's the last joke?"

Lucien looked over his shoulder.

Moonlight filled the empty sockets of his skull.

"Oh, Silas..."

He disappeared into the fog.

"...you'll know when you hear it."

Jingle.

By spring, the bronze statue was gone.

The metal was melted down and sold.

The money reopened the bakery and repaired several homes in the poor district.

Silas Crowe remained mayor for another two years.

People said he became surprisingly good at the job.

He also developed an excellent sense of humor.

But he could never tolerate the sound of bells.

And sometimes, very late at night, Silas would awaken and find a tiny brass bell sitting on his bedside table.

He never touched it.

He would simply stare into the darkness and say:

"Not tonight, Lucien."

From somewhere outside his window came a faint chuckle.

Then silence.

Because somewhere beyond Bellgrave another powerful man was sleeping peacefully.

And Lucien Vale had just thought of something funny.

The House on Marrow Street

A Last Laugh Short Story



Nobody in Bellgrave liked Mr. Edrin Voss.

That did not bother him.

He owned three apartment houses, two warehouses, a slaughterhouse he had never once entered, and half the shops on Marrow Street.

People did not need to like him.

They only needed to pay him.

And if they could not - they left.

Winter had come early that year.

By the first week of frost, Edrin had already evicted six families.

By the second, nine.

By the third, a widow named Mara Ellison came to his office carrying a small wooden box.

She placed it on his desk.

Inside were her wedding ring, her husband's pocket watch, and a silver locket containing a faded photograph of their daughter.

"This is everything I have," she said.

Edrin looked at the box.

Then at her.

"It isn't enough."

"My husband died in the mines."

"I know."

"I need two weeks."

"No."

"My daughter is sick."

Edrin sighed.

He had heard every version of this conversation.

"I am not a charity."

Mara stared at him.

"No."

Her voice was quiet.

"You're not."

Edrin smiled.

"Good. Then we understand one another."

She left.

He kept the box.

That night, Edrin woke to the sound of a bell.

Jingle.

He opened his eyes.

Darkness.

The fireplace had gone cold.

Wind scratched branches against the window.

Jingle.

Edrin sat up.

"Who's there?"

Nothing.

He lit a candle.

The room was empty.

Then he noticed something on the chair opposite his bed.

Mara's wooden box.

He stared at it.

He had locked it inside his office safe.

Slowly, he approached.

The lid was open.

The ring was gone.

The watch was gone.

The locket was gone.

In their place sat a single brass bell.

Edrin touched it.

The bell rang by itself.

Jingle.

From somewhere beneath the floorboards came a laugh.

Edrin froze.

A soft, breathy chuckle.

Then silence.

The next morning, the box was gone.

Edrin convinced himself he had dreamed it.

Until he reached his office.

His safe stood open.

No lock had been broken.

Inside sat the ring.

The watch.

The locket.

And another bell.

He called the police.

They found nothing.

No footprints.

No broken windows.

No signs of forced entry.

"You probably forgot to lock it," the constable said.

Edrin nearly struck him.

That night, he slept with a pistol beneath his pillow.

At 1:12 in the morning, someone knocked on his bedroom door.

Three slow knocks.

Edrin sat up.

"Who is it?"

No answer.

He reached for the pistol.

Three more knocks.

He crossed the room.

Opened the door.

The hallway was empty.

At the far end stood a figure.

Tall.

Thin.

Motionless.

A jester's cap hung from its head.

Tiny bells glimmered in the moonlight.

Edrin raised the pistol.

"Who are you?"

The figure tilted its head.

Then disappeared.

Edrin ran into the hallway.

Nothing.

He returned to the bedroom.

The jester was sitting on the edge of his bed.

Edrin screamed.

The figure was skeletal.

Black-and-crimson velvet hung from its bones in ragged strips.

One hand rested politely upon its knee.

The other held a brass bell.

"Terrible weather," it said.

Edrin fired.

The bullet passed through the jester and shattered the mirror behind him.

The skeleton looked over its shoulder.

"Oh dear."

Then back at Edrin.

"That was expensive."

The room went dark.

For the next four nights, Lucien Vale never touched him.

That was worse.

Every room became uncertain.

Edrin would open a wardrobe and find Lucien standing inside.

He would turn away.

Turn back.

Empty.

Lucien appeared in mirrors.

In polished silver.

In dark windows.

Once, Edrin looked down into a bowl of soup and saw the jester smiling back from the surface.

He threw the bowl across the room.

The servants quit.

On the fifth night, the bells began following him.

Down hallways.

Across staircases.

From beneath tables.

Always just out of sight.

Jingle.

Jingle.

Jingle.

Then came the voices.

Not Lucien's.

Others.

A child coughing.

A woman crying.

An old man begging.

A mother saying:

"Just until Friday."

A laborer saying:

"I'll pay you when the mill reopens."

A boy saying:

"Please don't put us outside."

Edrin covered his ears.

The voices continued.

Lucien appeared at the foot of the stairs.

"You know them."

"Stop this."

Lucien lifted one finger.

A bell dangled from it.

"No."

Edrin pointed the pistol.

"I'll kill you."

Lucien's grin widened.

"Again?"

The following morning, Edrin discovered every door in his house locked.

From the inside.

He could not open them.

Windows would not move.

The fireplace would not light.

The house had become silent.

Then the walls began knocking.

Three knocks.

From the kitchen.

Three more from the parlor.

Three from upstairs.

Three beneath his feet.

Soon the entire house seemed to be knocking.

Edrin backed into the center of the foyer.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT?"

Everything stopped.

A bell rang behind him.

Jingle.

Lucien stood beside the front door.

"You keep asking me that."

"Then answer!"

Lucien gestured toward the staircase.

"Come along."

"No."

Lucien shrugged.

The front door vanished.

Not closed.

Vanished.

Where it had been was wallpaper.

Edrin stared.

Lucien began climbing.

After a moment, Edrin followed.

They reached the attic.

Edrin had not entered it in years.

Lucien opened the door.

Inside were dozens of objects.

Edrin stopped.

A child's wooden horse.

A wedding dress.

A miner's helmet.

A violin.

Shoes.

Photographs.

Letters.

Tools.

Jewelry.

Possessions taken from tenants who could not pay.

Edrin recognized them.

He had sold many.

Others he had kept simply because they were worth more than the debt.

But all of them were here.

Every one.

Impossible.

Lucien walked between them.

"Interesting collection."

Edrin said nothing.

Lucien picked up Mara's locket.

"Do you know what's funny?"

"No."

"You always say that."

"Say what?"

Lucien imitated him perfectly.

"I am not a charity."

Edrin's face tightened.

Lucien opened the locket.

Inside was the photograph.

"Do you know what I find amusing?"

Edrin backed away.

"You collected pieces of people's lives..."

Lucien looked around the attic.

"...and convinced yourself they were just numbers."

The attic door slammed shut.

The candles extinguished.

Then every object in the room began whispering.

Names.

Hundreds of names.

People Edrin remembered.

People he had forgotten.

People who had slept under bridges after losing their homes.

People who had buried children.

People who had left Bellgrave entirely.

Edrin covered his ears.

"STOP!"

Lucien's bells rang.

The whispers stopped.

Edrin looked up.

The skeletal jester stood directly in front of him.

"Would you like to hear the last one?"

Edrin went pale.

"No."

Lucien leaned closer.

"Good."

Edrin blinked.

"What?"

"Because I'm not here to tell it."

For the first time, Lucien's voice held no amusement.

"I came to make sure you understood the joke you're already living."

Edrin swallowed.

"And what joke is that?"

Lucien smiled.

"You spent your whole life building walls between yourself and everyone you harmed."

The attic door creaked open.

Behind it was not the hallway.

It was Marrow Street.

Snow covered the ground.

Families stood outside the apartment houses.

Children shivered beneath blankets.

Mara Ellison held her daughter.

Every person Edrin had evicted stood silently in the street.

Lucien whispered:

"And now there is nowhere left for you to hide."

Edrin woke on the floor of his office the next morning.

The house was normal.

The doors opened.

The windows moved.

The fireplace lit.

There was no jester.

No attic full of belongings.

Only one brass bell on his desk.

Beside it sat Mara's wooden box.

Edrin stared at both for nearly an hour.

Then he walked to Marrow Street.

He returned Mara's belongings.

Then her rent money.

Then everyone else's.

Over the following months, people noticed strange changes.

Rents dropped.

Debts disappeared.

Evictions stopped.

Several families were quietly repaid for property Edrin had taken years earlier.

Nobody understood why.

Edrin never explained.

He also never again slept in complete darkness.

Every mirror in his house remained covered.

And he removed every bell from every building he owned.

Years later, when someone asked why, Edrin would simply say:

"I dislike the sound."

But sometimes, on bitter winter nights, he would wake suddenly.

The room would be silent.

Then -

Jingle.

Edrin would sit upright.

A tiny brass bell would rest on the table beside his bed.

And somewhere in the darkness, Lucien Vale would whisper:

"Still funny."

By morning, the bell would be gone.

The Empty Chair

Original Short Story



Judge Alistair Wren believed fear was useful.

He had seen what it did to defendants.

Fear made people stammer.

Fear made them contradict themselves.

Fear made innocent people look guilty and guilty people look pathetic.

Most importantly, fear made people easier to control.

Judge Wren had spent thirty-one years behind the bench learning exactly how much fear a room could hold before someone broke.

He considered it one of his talents.

The newspapers called him severe.

His colleagues called him uncompromising.

The people brought before him used other words.

Cruel.

Vindictive.

Corrupt.

But never where he could hear them.

Judge Wren had powerful friends.

And powerful friends could make almost anything disappear.

Evidence.

Complaints.

Witnesses.

Sometimes even people.

The chair appeared on a Monday.

Wren entered his courtroom at precisely eight-thirty in the morning and stopped.

There were twelve wooden benches for the public.

Two tables for counsel.

One witness stand.

And directly opposite the judge's bench sat a chair.

An old one.

Black wood.

High-backed.

Empty.

Wren frowned.

"Who put that there?"

His clerk looked confused.

"Put what where, Your Honor?"

Wren pointed.

"The chair."

The clerk stared at the exact spot.

"There isn't a chair there."

Wren looked again.

There was.

He walked toward it.

The chair's surface was scratched and weathered.

A tiny brass bell rested on the seat.

Wren reached for it.

The courtroom doors opened.

He turned.

A bailiff entered.

When Wren looked back - the chair was gone.

That afternoon, Wren sentenced a young man named Daniel Rusk to twelve years in prison.

The evidence against Daniel was thin.

Wren knew that.

Everyone in the courtroom knew it.

The prosecutor had privately admitted that the investigation had been rushed.

But Daniel's family had publicly accused one of Wren's political allies of fraud.

Someone needed to be taught a lesson.

Daniel stood trembling before the bench.

"Please," he said. "I didn't do this."

Wren stared down at him.

"Everyone says that."

Daniel's mother began crying.

Wren ordered her removed.

As the bailiffs escorted Daniel away, Wren heard something behind him.

Jingle.

He turned.

The black chair sat in the corner.

Someone was sitting in it.

A skeletal figure dressed in torn crimson and black.

Long bells hung from its jester's cap.

One bony leg crossed casually over the other.

Its skull rested against one hand.

Watching.

Wren shot to his feet.

"Who are you?"

Everyone stopped.

The prosecutor stared at him.

"Your Honor?"

Wren pointed.

"There!"

The chair was empty.

Then it disappeared.

That night, Wren dreamed of the courtroom.

Every seat was empty.

Every candle had gone out.

He stood behind the bench alone.

Then one person entered.

Daniel Rusk.

He sat in the black chair.

Another person entered.

A woman Wren remembered from a case fifteen years earlier.

Then another.

A factory worker.

A shopkeeper.

A teacher.

A father of three.

People Wren had sentenced.

People whose cases he had manipulated.
People whose appeals he had denied without reading.
The courtroom slowly filled.
None of them spoke.
Then Lucien Vale entered.
He walked down the center aisle.

Jingle.

Jingle.

Jingle.

Wren tried to leave.
The courtroom doors vanished.
Lucien stopped before the bench.
"Quite a crowd."
Wren woke screaming.
On Tuesday, the chair appeared in Wren's dining room.
On Wednesday, it waited beside his bathtub.
Thursday morning, it sat at the foot of his bed.
Always empty.
Always accompanied by one brass bell.
And every time Wren tried to touch it -

Jingle.

The chair vanished.
By Friday, Wren stopped sleeping.
His servants whispered that he had begun talking to empty rooms.
Wren dismissed them.
All of them.

He locked every door.

Covered every mirror.

Removed every chair from the house except one.

Then he burned that one in the fireplace.

At midnight, someone dragged a chair across the floor upstairs.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

Wren stood at the bottom of the staircase.

"Vale!"

Silence.

He had learned the name from old books.

Lucien Vale.

The fool who had died centuries earlier.

The jester who supposedly appeared to cruel men before their lives fell apart.

"COME OUT!"

At the top of the stairs sat the black chair.

Lucien occupied it.

His skull tilted slightly.

"That was dramatic."

Wren's hands shook.

"What do you want?"

Lucien raised one finger.

"A better question."

Wren clenched his jaw.

"What?"

Lucien leaned forward.

"What do you think I want?"

The candles went out.

The next morning, Judge Wren entered his courtroom carrying a pistol beneath his coat.

He had ordered the building searched twice.

Nothing had been found.

The black chair was absent.

For the first time all week, Wren smiled.

Court began.

The first case involved an elderly man accused of stealing food.

Wren barely listened.

He reached for his gavel.

Jingle.

His hand stopped.

The black chair stood at the back of the courtroom.

Empty.

Wren swallowed.

The defendant waited.

Wren dismissed the case.

The chair vanished.

The second case began.

A woman accused of assaulting a wealthy businessman claimed she had acted in self-defense.

Wren knew the businessman.

They belonged to the same club.

Normally, that would have been enough.

Jingle.

The chair appeared closer.

Wren ordered the evidence reviewed.

The chair vanished.

By lunchtime, rumors spread through the courthouse.

Judge Wren had become fair.

People found this deeply suspicious.

That evening, Wren remained alone in the courtroom.

He stared at the empty gallery.

"I know what you're doing."

Nothing answered.

"You think you can frighten me into changing."

A bell rang somewhere above him.

Jingle.

"I've done nothing illegal."

Lucien's voice drifted from behind the judge's bench.

"That wasn't the question."

Wren turned.

Lucien sat in Wren's chair.

The skeletal jester slowly tapped the gavel against one palm.

"You shouldn't be there."

Lucien looked around.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"You've said those exact words to so many people."

Wren reached beneath his coat.

Lucien sighed.

"You really should stop carrying that thing."

Wren froze.

Lucien pointed toward him.

"People become careless when they're frightened."

Wren lowered his hand.

Lucien smiled.

"There. You're learning."

"Why me?"

Lucien's grin remained fixed.

But his voice lost its playful tone.

"Would you like a list?"

The courtroom changed.

Not suddenly.

Slowly.

As if darkness itself were remembering something.

People appeared in the gallery.

Dozens.

Then hundreds.

Every seat filled.

Wren recognized some.

Others he did not.

Faces from thirty-one years.

Lucien stepped down from the bench.

"You enjoyed this room."

Wren said nothing.

"You enjoyed watching people become afraid."

The gallery stared silently at him.

"You knew some were innocent."

Wren backed away.

"You knew evidence had been altered."

Another step.

"You knew favors were being exchanged."

Another.

"And whenever someone begged you to listen..."

Lucien raised the bell.

"...you called it weakness."

Jingle.

Every person in the courtroom spoke at once.

"Please."

Wren covered his ears.

"Stop."

Again:

"Please."

"STOP!"

The voices ceased.

Lucien stood inches away.

"You always liked that word."

Wren lowered his hands.

"What are you going to do to me?"

Lucien seemed almost puzzled.

"Do?"

"Yes."

"Nothing."

Wren stared at him.

"You expect me to believe that?"

Lucien wandered toward the black chair.

"I don't have to hurt you, Alistair."

He sat.

"You've spent your whole life teaching people to fear this room."

Lucien crossed his legs.

"I thought perhaps you should finally understand the lesson."

Wren looked toward the gallery.

Every face had disappeared.

The courtroom was empty again.

Except for Lucien.

And the chair.

"What happens now?"

Lucien lifted one shoulder.

"That depends on you."

Wren laughed bitterly.

"So this is redemption?"

Lucien immediately began laughing.

Loudly.

Wren flinched.

The jester continued until his bells shook.

Finally, Lucien wiped an imaginary tear from his empty eye socket.

"Oh, no."

His laughter stopped.

"I don't do redemption."

Wren went pale.

"Then what do you do?"

Lucien leaned forward.

"Reminders."

He held up the bell.

"You can ignore guilt."

Jingle.

"You can bury evidence."

Jingle.

"You can intimidate witnesses."

Jingle.

"You can even convince everyone around you that you're respectable."

Lucien stood.

"But fear..."

He placed the bell on Wren's bench.

"...is remarkably difficult to bribe."

Wren stared at it.

Lucien stepped backward into the shadows.

Before disappearing, he asked:

"Would you like to hear the last one?"

Wren whispered:

"No."

Lucien's grin widened.

"Then give me no reason to tell it."

And he was gone.

Judge Alistair Wren resigned six months later.

Officially, it was due to poor health.

Unofficially, those six months became the strangest period in Bellgrave's legal history.

Cases were reopened.

Convictions were reviewed.

Evidence thought lost somehow reappeared.

Several powerful men suddenly found themselves under investigation.

Daniel Rusk went home.

Nobody knew why Judge Wren had changed.

He never explained.

Years later, he lived alone in a small house far outside Bellgrave.

There were no portraits on the walls.

No servants.

No courtroom.

And no chairs.

Wren stood whenever possible.

Visitors thought this eccentric.

They did not know that whenever he sat for too long, he sometimes heard wood scrape across the floor behind him.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

And if he turned quickly enough - there would be nothing there.

Usually.

But every few months, Wren would wake in darkness and find the black chair beside his bed.

Empty.

Waiting.

A brass bell resting on its seat.

He never touched it.

He simply whispered into the darkness:

"I remember."

For years, nothing answered.

Then one winter night - from somewhere beneath the bed -
Lucien Vale chuckled.

"Good."

The Empty Chair

Expanded Three-Chapter Edition



Chapter One: The Chair Nobody Saw

Judge Alistair Wren believed fear was useful.

He had spent thirty-one years watching it work.

Fear made defendants forget rehearsed answers.

It made witnesses question what they had seen.

It made jurors glance toward the bench before deciding what they believed.

Most importantly, fear made people obedient.

Wren had cultivated it carefully.

He never shouted.

Men who shouted lacked control.

He never slammed his gavel unnecessarily.

One strike was enough.

He spoke quietly, forced people to lean closer, then made them regret doing so.

The newspapers called him severe.

Senior barristers called him disciplined.

Politicians called him dependable.

People who had stood before him used other words.

Cruel.

Vindictive.

Corrupt.

They simply had the good sense not to use them within earshot.

Judge Wren preferred it that way.

At eight-thirty on Monday morning, he entered Courtroom Three and saw the chair.

He stopped.

It stood directly opposite the bench.

Black wood.

High back.

Narrow arms polished smooth with age.

It looked older than the courthouse.

That was impossible.

Wren knew every piece of furniture in Courtroom Three.

He had ordered most of it himself.

His clerk, Thomas Vale - not related to anyone important, as far as Wren knew - was arranging documents on the counsel tables.

"Thomas."

"Yes, Your Honor?"

Wren pointed toward the chair.

"Who put that there?"

Thomas followed his finger.

His expression remained blank.

"Put what where?"

Wren frowned.

"The chair."

Thomas looked again.

"There isn't a chair there."

Wren stared at him.

Then at the chair.

A tiny brass bell rested on the seat.

He could see the reflection of the courtroom candles along its curved surface.

"Don't be ridiculous."

Thomas swallowed.

"I don't see anything, sir."

Wren stepped down from the bench.

The chair remained.

He crossed the courtroom.

Nobody stopped him.

Nobody reacted.

He stood directly in front of it.

Up close, he saw scratches in the wood.

Dozens of them.

Some deep.

Some faint.

A small symbol had been carved into the top rail.

A smiling face beneath three points.

A jester's cap.

Wren reached toward the bell.

The courtroom doors opened behind him.

He turned sharply.

The bailiff entered.

"Morning, Your Honor."

Wren looked back.

The chair was gone.

His hand hung in empty air.

Thomas stared at him.

"Are you feeling all right?"

Wren straightened his robe.

"Perfectly."

He returned to the bench.

Court began at nine.

By ten fifteen, Wren had almost convinced himself the chair had never been there.

Almost.

Then Daniel Rusk was brought in.

Twenty-three years old.

Thin.

Pale.

Accused of assaulting a shipping clerk during a warehouse robbery.

Wren had read the file the night before.

The evidence was weak.

No weapon.

No stolen goods.

The clerk had originally described an older man with a beard.

Daniel had neither.

None of that mattered.

Daniel's father had spent the previous year publicly accusing Councilman Harrick of embezzlement.

Harrick was one of Wren's oldest friends.

Sometimes the law served justice.

Sometimes it served order.

Wren had always considered order more useful.

Daniel stood before him.

His hands shook.

"Mr. Rusk," Wren said, "you have been found guilty by a jury of your peers."

Daniel swallowed.

"My Lord, I didn't -"

Wren lifted one finger.

Silence.

Daniel's mouth closed.

"Your inability to accept responsibility does not improve your position."

"My Lord -"

"One more interruption and I shall add contempt."

Behind Daniel, his mother began to cry.

Wren looked toward the bailiff.

"Remove her."

"No!"

Daniel stepped forward.

The guards seized him.

His mother's voice rose as she was led toward the doors.

"He didn't do anything!"

"Mother!"

"He wasn't even there!"

Wren struck the gavel.

Once.

The room went silent.

"Twelve years."

Daniel stopped struggling.

The color left his face.

Then Wren heard it.

Jingle.

His eyes moved toward the back of the courtroom.

The chair had returned.

This time someone sat in it.

Too far away to see clearly.

A thin figure.

Head bowed.

Long pointed cap.

Something metallic glinted beside one shoulder.

Wren rose halfway from his seat.

The figure slowly lifted its head.

White.

Not a face.

A skull.

Black sockets turned toward him.

And smiled.

Wren stood.

"Who are you?"

The courtroom froze.

Daniel looked over his shoulder.

The prosecutor frowned.

Thomas whispered:

"Your Honor?"

Wren pointed toward the chair.

"There."

The figure raised one skeletal hand.

A brass bell dangled from one finger.

Jingle.

Then the chair was empty.

Then it was gone.

Wren remained standing.

Dozens of people stared at him.

Thomas approached carefully.

"Sir?"

Wren lowered his hand.

"Remove the prisoner."

Daniel was taken away.

Court continued.

Wren did not hear a word of it.

That night, Alistair Wren dreamed he was sitting alone in Courtroom Three.

There were no candles.

No clerks.

No bailiffs.

Only moonlight.

Someone sat in the black chair.

Daniel Rusk.

He said nothing.

Another figure entered and sat beside him.

A woman Wren remembered from seventeen years earlier.

Then another.

A factory worker.

A shopkeeper.

A schoolmaster.

A boy barely old enough to shave.

People Wren had sentenced.

People whose files he had skimmed.

People whose appeals had irritated him.

People whose guilt had been convenient.

The gallery filled.

Nobody spoke.

At last, footsteps echoed from the corridor.

Slow.

Measured.

Accompanied by bells.

Jingle.

Jingle.

Jingle.

A skeletal jester entered through the courtroom doors.

Tattered crimson and black velvet hung from his bones.

Small tarnished bells decorated his cap.

He walked down the center aisle as though arriving for a performance.

Wren tried to stand.

He couldn't.

The jester stopped below the bench.

His skull tilted.

"Quite a crowd."

Wren woke screaming.

The chair appeared in his dining room Tuesday morning.

Empty.

Bell on the seat.

He called his housekeeper.

"Do you see that?"

She looked toward it.

"See what, sir?"

He dismissed her before breakfast.

Wednesday, the chair stood outside his chambers.

Thursday, it appeared in the reflection of his shaving mirror.

Not in the room.

Only the reflection.

Wren smashed the glass.

Friday morning, it sat at the foot of his bed.

That was when he stopped pretending.

He spent the day in the courthouse archive.

There were old stories.

Too old to be credible.

A fool named Lucien Vale.

A royal court.

An execution.

A jester who continued appearing long after his death.

Most versions contradicted one another.

Some called him a ghost.

Others a demon.

Others a curse.

The one detail repeated in every account was the bell.

And a question.

Wren read it three times.

Would you like to hear the last one?

He closed the book.

Somewhere deep in the archive -

Jingle.

Wren did not turn around.

Chapter Two: The Audience

Wren removed every chair from his house.

Servants carried them into the courtyard while he watched.

Dining chairs.

Writing chairs.

Armchairs.

Benches.

Even a small stool beside the kitchen hearth.

"Burn them."

His butler hesitated.

"All of them, sir?"

"All."

By sunset, smoke rose over the garden.

Wren watched the last chair collapse into embers.

That night he slept standing against the wall of his bedroom.

At 1:14 in the morning -

Scrape.

His eyes opened.

Something moved overhead.

Scrape.

A chair being dragged across the floor.

But there was no room above his bedroom.

Only the roof.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

Wren took the pistol from his bedside table.

He entered the corridor.

Dark.

"Vale."

Nothing.

"I know who you are."

A faint chuckle answered from upstairs.

Wren stopped.

There was no upstairs.

At the end of the corridor stood a staircase.

He had lived in the house for twenty-six years.

There had never been a staircase there.

Moonlight spilled across black wooden steps.

At the top sat the chair.

Lucien Vale occupied it.

One skeletal ankle rested across the opposite knee.

His skull leaned against one hand.

"Good evening."

Wren raised the pistol.

Lucien glanced at it.

"Oh."

His tone carried mild disappointment.

"You've brought that."

"What do you want?"

Lucien lifted one finger.

"A better question."

Wren's jaw tightened.

"What?"

The jester leaned forward.

"What do you think I want?"

The candles went out.

Wren fired.

The muzzle flash filled the corridor.

For one instant Lucien was illuminated - still sitting.

Still smiling.

Then darkness returned.

Jingle.

Wren ran.

The following morning the staircase was gone.

There was a bullet hole in the far wall.

His servants insisted they had heard nothing.

Wren dismissed the rest of them.

By the end of the week, he was alone.

The chair continued appearing.
Sometimes empty.
Sometimes occupied.
Never when anyone else was watching.
Wren attempted to ignore it.
Lucien seemed to enjoy that.
During breakfast:

Jingle.

While dressing:

Jingle.

While reviewing evidence:

Jingle.

During court:

Jingle.

Always just loud enough for Wren to hear.
Then the whispers began.
The first came during sentencing.
A man accused of stealing food stood below the bench.
Wren had already decided on six months.
"Please," someone whispered.
Wren stopped.
The defendant looked confused.
"Did you say something?"
"No, Your Honor."
Wren glanced toward the gallery.
Nothing.
"Please."

A woman's voice.

Soft.

Close to his ear.

He looked behind him.

Empty.

On the final bench sat the black chair.

Lucien was nowhere in sight.

The bell rested on its seat.

Wren looked down at the defendant.

The man's clothes were worn.

Hands rough.

His file showed no previous convictions.

Wren swallowed.

"Case dismissed."

The prosecutor stood.

"My Lord?"

"Did I stutter?"

The chair vanished.

The next case concerned a woman accused of attacking a wealthy merchant named Cedric Bale.

Bale belonged to Wren's club.

They had dined together several times.

The woman claimed Bale had cornered her behind his warehouse.

The investigating constable had written that her injuries were consistent with her account.

The prosecutor had somehow overlooked that page.

Wren knew how these things worked.
Normally he would have accepted the omission.
Then -

Jingle.

The chair appeared beside the witness stand.
Closer than before.

Wren's mouth went dry.
"Produce the full investigative file."

The prosecutor hesitated.
"My Lord, I don't believe -"
"Produce it."

The file was brought.
Wren read the missing page.
Then another.

And another.
Bale's face changed.
Wren looked toward the chair.
Lucien sat in it now.

His bony fingers tapped together slowly.
Wren dismissed the charges.

Ordered an investigation into Bale.
Lucien gave him a tiny mock bow.
Then vanished.

By lunchtime, rumors spread through the courthouse.
Judge Wren had become fair.
People found this deeply suspicious.
He stayed late that evening.

Courtroom Three emptied.

Wren sat behind the bench.

"I know what you're doing."

Silence.

"You think you can frighten me."

A voice answered from behind him.

"I can."

Wren spun around.

Lucien sat in the judge's chair.

Wren was no longer in it.

He looked down.

Somehow he stood below the bench.

Where defendants stood.

Lucien held the gavel.

"You shouldn't be there."

Lucien examined the polished wood.

"Interesting."

"What?"

"You've said that to so many people."

Wren reached beneath his coat.

Lucien sighed.

"You really should stop carrying that."

Wren's hand stopped.

"People become careless when they're frightened."

Lucien tapped the gavel once.

The courtroom doors slammed shut.

Wren flinched.

"There," Lucien said. "You're learning."

"What do you want?"

Lucien's grin remained.

"Still the wrong question."

The candles nearest the bench extinguished.

One by one.

"What question should I ask?"

Lucien stood.

"What did you do?"

Wren stared at him.

Then laughed once.

Harshly.

"I've served the law for thirty-one years."

Lucien nodded.

"That's one version."

"I've sentenced criminals."

"Some."

"I protected this city."

"From inconvenience, perhaps."

Wren's face tightened.

"You know nothing about me."

Lucien stepped down from the bench.

His bells remained silent.

That was somehow worse.

"I know about Daniel Rusk."

Wren said nothing.

"I know about Evelyn Marr."

A woman Wren had convicted seventeen years ago.

"I know about Tomas Reed."

The factory worker.

"Samuel Pike."

The shopkeeper.

"Margaret Ellis."

The teacher.

Each name landed harder.

Wren backed away.

Lucien followed.

"Stop."

"Which part?"

"The names."

"Why?"

"You don't know what happened."

Lucien's skull tilted.

"No?"

The gallery lights slowly brightened.

Someone sat in the first row.

Daniel Rusk.

Second row.

Evelyn Marr.

Third.

Tomas Reed.

More figures appeared.

Dozens.

Then hundreds.

Some Wren recognized.

Others he had forgotten.

Every seat filled.

Nobody moved.

Nobody blinked.

Wren whispered:

"They aren't real."

Lucien looked toward them.

"That must be comforting."

"They aren't."

"Does it matter?"

Wren looked at the crowd.

Every face watched him.

Lucien raised a hand.

"You liked audiences."

The courtroom doors vanished.

"You liked being above them."

The judge's bench seemed taller now.

Impossible.

Towering overhead.

"You liked watching people become afraid."

Wren turned.

The black chair had appeared behind him.

"Sit."

"No."

Lucien's voice remained pleasant.

"Sit."

Wren did.

The wood was ice cold.

A brass bell rested beneath one hand.

He jerked away from it.

Lucien stepped closer.

"Now."

His grin filled Wren's vision.

"Court is in session."

Chapter Three: The Last Question

The first voice came from the gallery.

"Please."

A woman.

Then another.

"Please."

A man.

Then dozens.

"Please."

Wren covered his ears.

The voices grew.

"Please."

"Please."

"Please."

He shouted:

"STOP!"

Silence.

Lucien stood directly before him.

"You always liked that word."

Wren lowered his hands.

His breathing shook.

"What are you going to do?"

Lucien looked genuinely curious.

"To you?"

"Yes."

"Nothing."

Wren stared at him.

"You expect me to believe that?"

Lucien paced between the rows.

"I've noticed something about men like you."

"Men like me?"

"Very fond of punishment."

He turned.

"Especially when you're the one deciding what someone deserves."

Wren rose from the chair.

"You think you're better?"

Lucien laughed softly.

"Oh, no."

"Then what gives you the right?"

"Nothing."

That answer stopped him.

Lucien approached.

"I don't need a right."

The bell in the chair rang.

Jingle.

"I need your attention."

Wren's eyes moved toward it.

Lucien continued.

"You can ignore guilt."

Jingle.

"You can bury evidence."

Jingle.

"You can frighten witnesses."

Jingle.

"You can make favors look like procedure."

He was close now.

"But fear..."

Lucien picked up the bell.

"...is remarkably difficult to bribe."

Wren looked toward the gallery.

The figures were gone.

Empty benches.

Ordinary courtroom.

Only Lucien remained.

Wren's voice dropped.

"What happens now?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"You."

Wren laughed bitterly.

"So this is redemption?"

Lucien froze.

Then began laughing.

Not a chuckle.

Not a theatrical little laugh.

A deep, delighted howl that echoed from the rafters.

His bells shook violently.

Wren backed away.

Lucien doubled over.

Finally he straightened and wiped an imaginary tear from one empty eye socket.

"Oh, Alistair."

The laughter stopped instantly.

"I don't do redemption."

The room became very still.

"Then what do you do?"

Lucien held up the bell.

"Reminders."

Wren looked toward the courtroom doors.

They had returned.

He took one step toward them.

Lucien spoke behind him.

"Daniel Rusk."

Wren stopped.

"What about him?"

"You know."

"He was convicted by a jury."

"You know."

Wren said nothing.

Lucien moved closer.

"You knew the witness description didn't match."

Silence.

"You knew the prosecutor withheld evidence."

Silence.

"You knew why Harrick wanted him imprisoned."

Wren turned.

For the first time, his anger was gone.

Only exhaustion remained.

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth would be novel."

Wren closed his eyes.

"I knew."

The bell rang once.

Not loudly.

Jingle.

Lucien nodded.

"Again."

"Evelyn Marr."

"I knew there were problems with the testimony."

"Tomas Reed."

"I denied the appeal without reading it."

"Samuel Pike."

Wren swallowed.

"He couldn't afford the right counsel."

"Margaret Ellis."

"I protected the man who accused her."

Lucien remained silent.

Wren stared at him.

"How many?"

The jester's expression could not change.

Yet somehow the grin seemed colder.

"You tell me."

Wren looked across the courtroom.

Thirty-one years.

Thousands of cases.

Some just.

Some not.

Some he remembered.

Some he had deliberately forgotten.

His knees weakened.

He sat on the floor.

Lucien did not laugh.

That frightened Wren more than anything.

After a long while, Wren whispered:

"Would you kill me?"

Lucien crouched beside him.

"Would that help them?"

Wren looked up.

"No."

"Then why would I?"

The answer came so simply that Wren had nothing to say.

Lucien stood.

He placed the brass bell on the judge's bench.

Then walked toward the darkness beyond the gallery.

Wren watched him.

"Lucien."

The jester stopped.

"What happens if I don't change?"

Slowly, Lucien turned.

"Ah."

His voice became light again.

"There it is."

"What?"

"The right question."

He walked back.

Stopped inches from Wren.

Then whispered:

"Would you like to hear the last one?"

Every candle in the courtroom went out.

Wren could hear his own breathing.

"No."

A long silence.

Then Lucien spoke somewhere in the dark.

"Then give me no reason to tell it."

Jingle.

The candles relit.

Lucien was gone.

Judge Alistair Wren returned to work the following morning.

Thomas stared when he saw him.

Wren looked ten years older.

Court began at nine.

The first thing Wren did was request the complete file for Daniel Rusk.

Then Evelyn Marr.

Then Tomas Reed.

By the end of the week, he had requested forty-seven cases.

Within a month, the number exceeded two hundred.

Investigations followed.

Convictions were overturned.

Officials resigned.

Councilman Harrick fled the city and was arrested at the border.

Daniel Rusk went home after fourteen months in prison.

Wren met him once.

Daniel stood across from him in an empty office.

Neither man knew what to say.

Finally Wren spoke.

"I knew there was reasonable doubt."

Daniel stared at him.

Wren continued.

"And I sentenced you anyway."

Daniel's jaw tightened.

"Why?"

Wren looked down.

"Because it was useful."

Daniel said nothing for several seconds.

Then he left.

There was no forgiveness.

Wren did not ask for any.

Six months later, Judge Alistair Wren resigned.

Officially, his health had deteriorated.

Unofficially, nobody quite understood what had happened to him.

Some said conscience.

Some said blackmail.

Some said madness.

Years passed.

Wren moved into a modest house outside Bellgrave.

No portraits.

No servants.

No courtroom.

And very little furniture.

He never kept a chair in his bedroom.

Visitors found this strange.

He preferred standing.

At night, he slept poorly.

Sometimes he woke convinced he had heard wood moving across the floor.

Scrape.

Pause.

Scrape.

He would light a candle.

Nothing.

Most nights.

One winter evening, nearly twelve years after leaving the bench, Wren woke at 2:03 in the morning.

The room was dark.

Cold.

He heard breathing.

Not his own.

He lit the bedside candle.

The black chair sat beside the bed.

Empty.

A brass bell rested on the seat.

Wren stared at it.

He did not scream.

He did not run.

After a moment he whispered:

"I remember."

Silence.

Wren waited.

Nothing.

Then, from beneath the bed -
a quiet chuckle.

Wren closed his eyes.

"Good evening, Lucien."

No answer.

The candle flame bent suddenly toward the floor.

A skeletal hand slowly curled around the edge of the mattress.

Wren stopped breathing.

The hand disappeared.

Then the bell rang.

Jingle.

And Lucien Vale whispered from somewhere in the darkness:

"Good."

The Door at Number Nine

A Last Laugh Story



Chapter One: The Knock

Mr. Gideon Thorne did not consider himself cruel.

Cruelty, in his opinion, required enthusiasm.

He had never enjoyed another person's suffering.

He simply found it useful.

There was a difference.

Gideon owned a private lending office on Saint Orison Street, squeezed between a jeweler and a narrow bookshop whose owner had owed him money for four years.

His customers rarely entered through the front door smiling.

They came carrying watches.

Wedding rings.

Deeds.

Tools.

Sometimes photographs of property they hoped to keep.

Sometimes letters from employers promising wages that had not yet arrived.

Gideon accepted almost anything of value.

He also kept meticulous records.

Names.

Dates.

Interest.

Collateral.

Missed payments.

Additional fees.

Penalty fees.

Fees for discussing the previous fees.

He did not threaten anyone.

He did not need to.

The contracts did that for him.

When people complained, Gideon tapped the signature at the bottom of the page.

"You agreed."

It was his favorite sentence.

On the first Thursday of November, a woman named Clara Morrow entered his office fifteen minutes before closing.

She was perhaps fifty.

Gray had begun creeping through her dark hair.

Her coat was too thin for the weather.

She carried a small leather case beneath one arm.

Gideon continued writing.

"Take a seat."

She did.

"What do you have?"

The woman placed the case on his desk.

Gideon opened it.

Inside was a violin.

Old.

Dark wood.

Well cared for.

"Family instrument?"

"My father's."

"Professional?"

"He played."

"That wasn't the question."

Clara looked down.

"Yes."

Gideon examined the label inside.

Italian.

Old enough to be interesting.

Possibly valuable.

"How much?"

"Twenty pounds."

He almost laughed.

The violin was worth considerably more.

"Ten."

"I need twenty."

"Then you need something else to pawn."

"My rent is due."

Gideon shrugged.

"I don't collect rent."

"My landlord gave me until tomorrow."

"Then tomorrow sounds important."

Her hands tightened in her lap.

"My son sends money when he can. His ship -"

"Ten."

She looked at the violin.

Then at Gideon.

"My father gave it to me before he died."

"Then perhaps he should have given you twenty pounds."

Clara stared at him.

For the first time, Gideon looked up fully.

Something in her expression irritated him.

Not anger.

Disappointment.

As though she had expected better.

People who expected better usually paid late.

"Ten pounds," he repeated.

She nodded.

He prepared the paperwork.

When Clara reached for the pen, Gideon turned the contract toward her.

"Repayment in fourteen days."

She read.

Her eyes narrowed.

"This says twelve."

"Administrative adjustment."

"You said fourteen."

"I changed my mind."

She looked at the interest rate.

"That can't be right."

"It is."

"If I can't pay by then?"

"I sell the violin."

"For ten pounds?"

"For whatever it brings."

Clara's face went pale.

Gideon tapped the signature line.

"You are not obligated to accept."

Outside, sleet clicked against the window.

Clara signed.

Gideon counted ten pounds onto the desk.

She took the money.

Before leaving, she placed one hand on the violin case.

"Please don't damage it."

Gideon continued writing.

"Then come back on time."

The door closed.

A moment later -

Jingle.

Gideon's pen stopped.

He looked toward the entrance.

Nothing.

The bell above his door was a flat brass chime.

It did not jingle.

He continued writing.

Jingle.

This time the sound came from behind him.

Gideon turned.

On the shelf beside his ledger sat a tiny round bell.

He had never seen it before.

Antique brass.

Small enough to fit in a child's palm.

He picked it up.

No clapper.

He turned it over.

Empty.

Gideon frowned.

Then the bell rang in his hand.

Jingle.

He dropped it.

It hit the floor.

Rolled beneath his desk.

And stopped.

Gideon waited.

Nothing.

He crouched.

Looked underneath.

No bell.

He straightened slowly.

The shop was empty.

"Ridiculous."

He locked the violin in the back room and went home.

Gideon lived at Number Nine Bellweather Row.

Three stories.

Stone facade.

Black iron railings.

A narrow garden that he paid another man to maintain.

The houses on either side stood close enough that Gideon could hear his neighbors cough through the walls.

He disliked this.

He disliked neighbors in general.

That night, he ate alone.

Read alone.

Drank tea alone.

At eleven thirty, he checked every lock.

Front door.

Kitchen door.

Windows.

Study.

Upstairs rooms.

He had developed the habit after a debtor once threw a brick through his office window.

At midnight, Gideon went to bed.

At 12:17 - someone knocked on the front door.

Three slow knocks.

Gideon opened his eyes.

He waited.

Nothing.

He closed them.

Three knocks.

He sat up.

No carriage wheels outside.

No voices.

No footsteps.

Three more.

Gideon put on his robe and descended the stairs.

The hallway was dark.

Moonlight leaked through the frosted glass above the door.

He stopped several feet away.

"Who is it?"

Silence.

He approached.

Opened the door.

Bellweather Row was empty.

Rain shone on the cobblestones.

Gas lamps flickered.

No one.

Gideon stepped outside.

Looked left.

Right.

Nothing.

He went back in.

Locked the door.

Turned around.

A tiny brass bell sat on the floor behind him.

Gideon stared.

He did not touch it.

Instead, he fetched the fireplace poker.

He nudged the bell.

Nothing.

He lifted it carefully on the end of the poker and carried it to the kitchen.

Dropped it into the stove.

Closed the iron door.

The bell immediately rang from upstairs.

Jingle.

Gideon froze.

Another bell answered from the parlor.

Jingle.

Then one from behind him.

Jingle.

He spun.

Nothing.

A soft chuckle came from the hallway.

Gideon ran to the stairs.

Empty.

Then - three knocks sounded from the front door.

He did not answer.

The following morning there was no bell in the stove.

Gideon searched the house.

Nothing.

He convinced himself exhaustion had been responsible.

At the office, he found Clara Morrow waiting outside.

"You're early," he said.

"I need the violin back."

Gideon unlocked the door.

"You have the money?"

"Not all of it."

"Then you don't need the violin back."

She followed him inside.

"My landlord extended the rent. I can repay five now and the rest next week."

"That is not the agreement."

"Please."

Gideon removed his coat.

"You agreed."

Clara stared at him.

Then toward the back room.

"My son returns next month. I'll pay everything."

"Twelve days."

"I understand."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Gideon sat behind his desk.

"Because I dislike repeating myself."

Clara remained standing.

For a moment, Gideon thought she might argue.

Instead she nodded.

As she turned to leave -

Jingle.

She stopped.

Gideon's stomach tightened.

Clara looked toward his desk.

"You have a jester bell?"

"What?"

"That sound."

"I heard nothing."

She looked puzzled.

"Of course you did."

"No."

Clara glanced around.

Then shook her head.

"My father used to have little bells like that sewn onto a costume."

Gideon said nothing.

"He performed in traveling theater before I was born."

She smiled faintly.

"He said bells should make people look toward something."

Gideon's mouth felt dry.

"Your business is concluded."

Clara left.

Gideon locked the door after her.

From the back room came:

Jingle.

He did not go in.

Not for nearly an hour.

When he finally did, the violin case sat exactly where he had placed it.

But on top of it rested a black-and-red scrap of fabric.

Old velvet.

Frayed.

Attached to one corner - a brass bell.

Gideon backed away.

This time, the bell did not ring.

That night, nobody knocked.

That was worse.

Gideon lay awake waiting.

Midnight passed.

One.

Two.

Nothing.

At 2:31, he finally drifted asleep.

He dreamed of his office.

Every shelf had been emptied.

Every ledger was open.

Pages turned by themselves.

Names filled every line.

Thousands of them.

People Gideon had loaned money to.

People who had lost shops.

Homes.

Tools.

Wedding rings.

He walked between the desks, trying to close the books.

Every time he shut one, another opened.

At the far end of the room stood a door.

There was no such door in his office.

Painted black.

Numbered in white.

9

Someone knocked from the other side.

Three times.

Gideon approached.

"Who's there?"

A voice answered.

Cheerful.

Male.

Close.

"Collection."

Gideon woke standing in his hallway.

Barefoot.

One hand gripping the front-door knob.

The door was open.

Outside, Bellweather Row vanished into fog.

And across the street - a skeletal jester stood beneath a gas lamp.

Red-and-black tatters hung from his bones.

His head was bowed.

Tiny bells swayed from his cap.

Gideon could not move.

The jester slowly lifted his skull.

He raised one hand.

And waved.

Gideon slammed the door.

Locked it.

Bolted it.

Backed away.

Then someone knocked from the other side.

Three slow knocks.

Chapter Two: Terms And Conditions

Gideon did not go to the office the next morning.

That had not happened in nineteen years.

He sent a boy with a note claiming illness.

Then he checked every room in Number Nine.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Nothing unusual.

By noon he almost felt embarrassed.

At one fifteen, somebody slipped an envelope beneath the front door.

Gideon watched it slide across the floor.

No footsteps followed.

He waited ten minutes before picking it up.

His name was written on the front.

MR. GIDEON THORNE

Inside was a contract.

Old paper.

Black ink.

Elegant handwriting.

At the top:

TEMPORARY LOAN AGREEMENT

Borrower: Gideon Thorne

Lender: ---

Principal: One night's peaceful sleep

Interest: To be determined

Security: Conscience

Due date: Upon request

At the bottom:

YOU AGREED.

Gideon tore the paper in half.

Then quarters.

Then smaller pieces.

He threw them into the fireplace.

The pieces burned.

The room filled with smoke.

When it cleared, the contract lay intact on the mantel.

A bell rested on top.

Jingle.

Gideon left the house.

He went directly to the police.

Inspector Hale listened without interrupting.

That was almost worse.

"So," Hale said eventually, "someone is entering your home."

"Yes."

"Without breaking locks."

"Yes."

"Leaving bells."

"Yes."

"And contracts."

"Yes."

Hale looked at him.

"Any enemies?"

Gideon almost laughed.

"No."

Hale's eyebrows rose.

"None?"

"None who matter."

The inspector leaned back.

"How many people owe you money?"

"That is irrelevant."

"I'll decide that."

Gideon stood.

"This was a mistake."

"Mr. Thorne."

Gideon stopped.

Hale's expression changed.

"People who make a living from desperation tend to accumulate enemies."

"I provide a service."

"So do undertakers."

Gideon left.

Outside, a street performer was juggling apples.

Children laughed.

Gideon walked past.

Then stopped.

Among the small crowd stood the jester.

Not skeletal.
Not at first glance.
A man in old theatrical clothing.
Black and crimson.
Face shadowed beneath a cap.
Gideon stared.
The performer tossed an apple.
Caught it.
The crowd applauded.
The jester looked directly at Gideon.
Then smiled.
The skin fell away from his face.
For one instant, a grinning skull stared back.
Gideon stumbled into the street.
A carriage driver shouted.
He leapt aside.
When he looked again - the jester was gone.
Nobody else had reacted.
That afternoon, Gideon finally opened his office.
He needed familiarity.
Ledgers.
Numbers.
Ink.
Things that stayed where he put them.
He worked until sunset.
Then noticed Clara's repayment date.
Three days.

He opened the back room.

The violin was gone.

Gideon's heart lurched.

He searched the shelves.

Nothing.

Then a single violin note sounded from the office.

Long.

Soft.

Perfectly clear.

Gideon stepped through the doorway.

The violin rested on his desk.

Its bow floated above the strings.

No hand held it.

Another note.

Then another.

A slow melody began.

Gideon knew it.

His mother had hummed it when he was a child.

He had not thought about the tune in forty years.

The room darkened.

The lamps went out.

Only moonlight remained.

A voice came from the customer chair.

"Lovely."

Gideon turned.

The skeletal jester sat there.

Cross-legged.

One elbow on the armrest.

Lucien Vale.

Although Gideon did not yet know the name.

He knew only the skull.

The grin.

The bells.

"Who are you?"

The jester lifted one finger.

"Very traditional opening."

"Get out."

"Less traditional."

Gideon reached beneath the desk for a revolver.

Lucien's empty sockets lowered.

"Oh, don't."

Gideon aimed.

"Leave."

Lucien sighed.

"Everyone does this."

Gideon fired.

The gunshot exploded through the room.

The chair was empty.

The bullet buried itself in the wall.

Behind Gideon:

Jingle.

He spun.

Lucien leaned over his shoulder.

"Expensive wallpaper."

Gideon screamed and stumbled away.

Lucien moved back.

Not threatening.

Almost polite.

"What do you want?"

"There it is."

"What?"

"My favorite question."

Gideon pressed himself against the wall.

Lucien wandered toward the ledger.

He opened it.

"Clara Morrow."

"Stay away from that."

"Ten pounds."

Lucien flipped a page.

"Estimated violin value: one hundred forty."

Gideon's face tightened.

"That is none of your concern."

"Isn't it?"

"No."

Lucien turned another page.

"Peter Alms. Borrowed eighteen pounds."

He looked up.

"Lost his carpenter's tools."

"He defaulted."

"Maribel Shaw. Six pounds."

"She signed."

"David Pell. Twenty-two."

"He agreed."

Lucien closed the book.

"Ah."

The jester's grin seemed wider.

"You agreed."

Gideon froze.

Lucien reached into his costume.

Produced a folded contract.

Set it on the desk.

The same one from Gideon's house.

"Fair is fair."

Gideon's throat tightened.

"I signed nothing."

Lucien tapped the paper.

"Neither did half the people you trapped."

"They signed contracts."

"After you changed terms."

Gideon said nothing.

Lucien's bells chimed as he tilted his head.

"After you hid fees."

"They could read."

"Some couldn't."

Silence.

"They could ask."

"They did."

Gideon looked toward the door.

Lucien followed his gaze.

It was gone.

Where the entrance had been stood a black wooden door.

White number.

9

Gideon backed away.

Lucien smiled.

"Shall we?"

"No."

"Oh, good."

Lucien stood.

"I prefer reluctant audiences."

The door opened by itself.

Beyond it was not Saint Orison Street.

It was a hallway.

Long.

Dark.

Doors lined both walls.

Each carried a name.

PETER ALMS

MARIBEL SHAW

DAVID PELL

CLARA MORROW

Hundreds more faded into darkness.

Gideon shook his head.

"This isn't real."

Lucien stepped through the doorway.

"No."

He glanced back.

"But neither was half the hope you sold them."

Gideon remained where he was.

The lights behind him began extinguishing.

One by one.

He followed.

Every door contained a room.

Not torture.

Not monsters.

Something worse.

Consequences.

Behind Peter Alms's door, Gideon watched a carpenter trying to work without tools.

A landlord stood behind him demanding rent.

Children ate bread dipped in water.

Behind Maribel Shaw's door, a woman removed her wedding ring.

Placed it on Gideon's desk.

Then returned to an empty apartment where her husband asked where it had gone.

Behind David Pell's door, a shop closed.

A sign came down.

Workers stood outside.

Gideon became angry.

"This proves nothing."

Lucien walked beside him.

"No?"

"People make choices."

"Yes."

"They make poor ones."

"Also yes."

"I didn't create their problems."

Lucien stopped.

For the first time his voice lost its playful edge.

"No."

He turned.

"You simply learned how to make them worse."

Gideon said nothing.

From somewhere farther down the hallway came violin music.

Clara's door stood open.

Gideon did not want to enter.

Lucien gestured.

"After you."

Inside, Clara sat in a cold apartment.

No fire.

Her landlord waited at the door.

She handed him ten pounds.

The exact money Gideon had loaned her.

The scene shifted.

Days later.

Clara returned to Gideon's office.

In this version, Gideon watched himself refuse partial payment.

Watched her leave.

Watched an auctioneer examine the violin.

"Enough."

The scene continued.

"Enough!"

Clara stood outside the pawnshop window weeks later.

The violin displayed inside.

Price:

165 pounds.

She touched the glass.

Gideon turned away.

Lucien stood directly behind him.

"How much was the loan?"

"Ten."

"I'm sorry?"

"Ten pounds."

Lucien leaned closer.

"And how much did you intend to sell it for?"

Gideon clenched his jaw.

Lucien waited.

"One hundred forty. Perhaps more."

The bell rang softly.

Jingle.

The room vanished.

They stood again in Gideon's office.

The door was normal.

The lamps burned.

The contract lay on the desk.

Lucien sat in the customer chair.

"So."

Gideon shook.

"What happens now?"

Lucien brightened.

"Better question."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Much better."

Gideon looked at the contract.

"You want money?"

Lucien laughed.

A quiet little sound.

Then louder.

Then uncontrollable.

He bent forward in the chair, bells shaking.

Gideon's fear briefly became irritation.

"What is so amusing?"

Lucien finally straightened.

"You."

"Why?"

"You still think everything has a price."

The laughter stopped.

Lucien leaned forward.

"I don't want your money."

"Then what?"

"I want you to understand that tomorrow morning, Clara Morrow will come through that door."

Gideon waited.

"And?"

Lucien's grin remained fixed.

"You'll decide what happens next."

Gideon stared.

Lucien rose.

Walked toward the wall.

"That's all?"

"Tonight?"

He looked over his shoulder.

"Oh, certainly."

"Tonight?"

Lucien stepped backward into shadow.

"You didn't think we were finished?"

The darkness swallowed him.

Then his voice returned.

Soft.

Close to Gideon's ear.

"We haven't even discussed the house."

Jingle.

Chapter Three: Number Nine

Gideon reached Bellweather Row shortly before midnight.

He did not want to go home.

He considered a hotel.

Then remembered Lucien's words.

We haven't even discussed the house.

That decided it.

Whatever was happening, he would not be chased from his own property.

Number Nine stood exactly as he had left it.

Gideon unlocked the door.

The hallway lamp was burning.

He was certain he had extinguished it.

On the floor lay another envelope.

He did not open it.

He stepped over it.

From upstairs - three knocks.

Not at the door.

Inside the wall.

Gideon stopped.

Three knocks came from the parlor.

Then the kitchen.

Then beneath the floor.

Three.

Three.

Three.

The entire house seemed to be politely requesting entrance.

"Vale!"

Silence.

"I know you're here!"

A voice from the sitting room:

"Obviously."

Gideon turned.

Lucien sat beside the fireplace.

One leg crossed over the other.

"Make it stop."

Lucien looked around.

"Your house?"

"The knocking."

"Oh."

Lucien lifted a hand.

Everything stopped.

The sudden silence was suffocating.

Gideon swallowed.

"What do you want with my house?"

Lucien stood.

"Nothing."

"You mentioned it."

"I did."

"Why?"

Lucien walked toward the staircase.

"Come upstairs."

Gideon did not move.

Lucien looked back.

"Mr. Thorne, if I intended to murder you, this would be a remarkably elaborate way to procrastinate."

Gideon followed.

At the second floor, Lucien stopped outside a small locked room.

Gideon's expression changed.

"No."

Lucien touched the door.

"Why is this one locked?"

"Storage."

"Excellent."

Lucien held out his hand.

"Key."

"No."

The jester sighed.

Then reached one finger through the keyhole.

The lock clicked.

Gideon backed away.

The door opened.

Inside were shelves.

Boxes.

Trunks.

Objects.

Hundreds of them.

Collateral Gideon had never sold.

Things too sentimental to be worth much.

Photographs.

Letters.

Medals.

A child's carved horse.

A wedding veil.

A soldier's coat.

Clocks.

Books.

A wooden music box.

Lucien entered.

"Storage."

Gideon's shame came out as anger.

"These are mine."

Lucien picked up a small portrait.

"No."

"They forfeited them."

"There's that word."

"They signed."

Lucien set the portrait down.

"You really do hide behind signatures beautifully."

Gideon stepped into the room.

"What would you have me do? Give everything back?"

Lucien turned.

"Yes."

The simplicity of the answer stunned him.

"That's impossible."

"Why?"

"I don't know where half of them are."

"You kept records."

Gideon looked toward the shelves.

Lucien grinned.

"You always keep records."

The door slammed.

The room went dark.

Then the objects began making sounds.

A music box played.

A clock ticked.

Pages turned.

Someone whispered a name.

Then another.

Then dozens.

Not accusing.

Simply identifying themselves.

"Thomas Bell."

"Rebecca Hurst."

"Jonah Reed."

"Lydia Marr."

Gideon covered his ears.

The voices continued.

Lucien stood among the shelves.

Silent.

Watching.

"STOP!"

Nothing stopped.

Gideon dropped to his knees.

"Please."

The voices ceased instantly.

Gideon lowered his hands.

Lucien stood inches away.

A bell hung from one finger.

"Interesting word."

Gideon looked up.

Lucien crouched.

"How many times have you heard it?"

Gideon did not answer.

"How many times did it matter?"

Silence.

Lucien lifted the bell.

"Would you like to hear the last one?"

Gideon's face drained of color.

"No."

Lucien remained still.

"No."

"Then listen carefully to this one."

He lowered the bell.

The room changed.

No walls.

No shelves.

Gideon stood in darkness.

Ahead of him was the front door of Number Nine.

Someone knocked.

Three times.

He opened it.

Nobody.

Then another knock came from behind him.

A second door had appeared.

He opened that.

Another door.

Another knock.

Then another.

Each door led to another.

Number Nine repeated endlessly.

Hallway after hallway.

Door after door.

Knock after knock.

Gideon ran.

Every exit returned him to the same place.

He began shouting.

"LET ME OUT!"

A bell rang somewhere beyond the walls.

Jingle.

He ran faster.

"VALE!"

Knocking surrounded him.

Three knocks.

Every door.

Every wall.

Every floor.

Thousands.

Gideon fell against one door.

"PLEASE!"

Silence.

He opened his eyes.

Lucien stood on the other side.

Normal room behind him.

The storage room.

Gideon remained on his knees.

Lucien's voice was almost gentle.

"That feeling."

Gideon breathed hard.

"What?"

"Standing at a door and realizing the person on the other side has complete control over whether your life gets worse."

Lucien leaned closer.

"You've sold that feeling for years."

Gideon looked at the shelves.

Something inside him finally collapsed.

Not dramatically.

No sobbing.

No grand confession.

Just exhaustion.

"What do I do?"

Lucien stood.

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes."

"Give Clara her violin."

"And the debt?"

Lucien stared.

Gideon nodded quickly.

"Cancel it."

"Good start."

"And the others?"

"You have records."

Gideon closed his eyes.

"Yes."

Lucien walked toward the door.

"What if I don't?"

The jester stopped.

Gideon immediately regretted asking.

Lucien turned.

"Then we renegotiate."

Gideon's gaze dropped to the bell.

Lucien smiled.

"I have excellent terms."

Then he disappeared.

Clara Morrow arrived at nine the following morning.

Gideon had not slept.

The violin case rested on his desk.

She entered cautiously.

"I don't have all of it."

"I know."

Gideon pushed the case toward her.

Clara stared.

"What is this?"

"Yours."

She did not touch it.

"I can't pay yet."

"You don't owe me anything."

Suspicion replaced confusion.

"Why?"

Gideon looked toward the corner of the room.

No chair.

No jester.

No bell.

"Administrative adjustment."

Clara nearly smiled.

Then saw his face.

She picked up the case.

"Mr. Thorne..."

He looked up.

She hesitated.

Then left.

At the doorway she stopped.

"My father used to say something about bells."

Gideon stiffened.

"What?"

"That they aren't meant to frighten people."

She looked back.

"They're meant to make sure you're paying attention."

The door closed.

Gideon sat very still.

Somewhere outside -

Jingle.

Over the next year, Saint Orison Street witnessed something extraordinary.

Gideon Thorne began returning property.

Not publicly.

He would have found that humiliating.

Letters arrived.

Debts vanished.

Contracts were revised.

Interest rates dropped.

A carpenter received a package containing tools he had lost eight years earlier.

A widow received her husband's watch.

A former shopkeeper received money anonymously.

People assumed Gideon had found religion.

He had not.

He had found paperwork.

And terror.

Number Nine changed too.

The upstairs storage room slowly emptied.

Shelf by shelf.

Box by box.

Gideon kept one thing.

A brass bell.

Not because he wanted it.

Because every time he threw it away, it returned.

Eventually he stopped trying.

He placed it on a shelf beside his bed.

Years passed.

The knocking never completely stopped.

Sometimes three quiet taps came from the front door late at night.

Gideon never opened it immediately.

First he checked his records.

He asked himself whether there was something he had failed to correct.

Usually there was.

Then one winter evening, long after Clara Morrow had moved away from Bellgrave, Gideon sat beside the fire reading.

Three knocks.

He froze.

The ledger on his lap was clean.

Every debt settled.

Every object returned that he could find.

Three more knocks.

Gideon approached the door.

Opened it.

Lucien Vale stood outside beneath falling snow.

He wore the same torn crimson and black.

The same grin.

The same bells.

Gideon stared at him.

"I've done everything."

Lucien nodded.

"Mostly."

Gideon's stomach dropped.

"Mostly?"

Lucien held something out.

An old leather violin case.

Gideon stared.

"What is that?"

Lucien opened it.

Empty.

Inside the lid was written one name.

GIDEON THORNE

Gideon looked up.

Lucien's skull tilted.

"Don't worry."

A tiny bell appeared between his fingers.

"I've come to discuss refinancing."

Gideon's face went white.

Lucien waited.

Then - after all those years - Gideon laughed.

Not because it was funny.

Because it was either that or scream.

Lucien's grin widened.

"Ah."

He stepped backward into the snow.

"Now you're learning."

Jingle.

And he was gone.

THE LAST LAUGH

*Lucien does not hunt the innocent. He haunts the
guilty.*

STRANGEWOVEN