

Wee Johnnie Norrie

By

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Chapter One

August 23 2003....

John Norrie was thankful that the elevator was empty when he entered. There had been no embarrassed or uncomfortable looks as he struggled with his walker.

The numbness in his legs seemed to override what he was willing them to do. He was sure that anyone looking at his effort to move about would consider him some kind of retarded spastic.

The one thing he could not stand was pity. He'd had enough of that as a child growing up. Undersized for his age; he was the butt of bullying at school. That was bad enough, but the look in his mother's eyes when he returned home from school dirty and bloodied was more than he could bear.

It was easier to live inside his head, to resist any urge to make friends, knowing that he would ultimately be hurt in the process. It made sense to him that no friends meant less pain. He'd be better off that way.

Books were his solace. He read everything he could lay hands on and it reflected in his school grades. Even to his face, his classmates referred to him as 'the brain'. He knew that it was as much because of his oversized head as it was his marks, but he successfully ignored them all.

The elevator was almost silent as it began its ascent to the 23rd floor. He leaned into the corner trying to take some strain off his arms. It was obvious to him that the disease was progressing, but so far, his mental faculties seemed to be in tact. That was something.

The elevator chime announced his arrival at his floor. The doors opened and again he was grateful that no one was standing outside.

He moved forward on his walker, but not quick enough; the doors began to close on him catching his shoulder and nearly knocking him off balance.

This was his great fear, he knew if he fell, he would be unable to get up by himself. Dependant on others again

The doors reopened and he managed to get himself clear before they closed again.

The hallway was well lit, but not designed for the handicapped. Handicapped, he hated that word. He gritted his teeth and began the arduous journey to his apartment. It was only six doors down, but it might as well have been six miles.

Holding onto the handles of his walker, he swayed from side to side making painful forward progress with his arms and shoulders doing most of the work.

He was almost there when the door across from him opened slightly. A woman's face peered out into the hallway, the mouth pursed in a disapproving way, eyes wide in observation. She didn't speak, but he could hear her wheezing breath, that was bad enough.

"What are you looking at you silly old bitch?"

The door slammed shut.

He smiled to himself; he took delight in shocking Alice Crumb, his nosey neighbour.

His keys were on a long chain attached to his walker. It took a few moments to locate the three keys needed from the many on the chain.

Finally, he pushed the door; it opened easily given the air pressure in the hallway. The ventilation system was one of the big reasons he had moved here. He had never detected any cooking odours in the hallway in the eight years he had lived here.

Once inside, he locked all three deadbolts and put the safety chain in place.

There, that's better. I can't be too careful. No one knows, I'm sure of that. It will all come out at some point but only when I want it to, then it will be too late to cause me harm

He was too tired even to microwave his dinner.

I need to lie down, maybe have dinner later, so tired.

The bedroom contained a specially constructed bed, lower than most to make it easier for him to get

in and out of it. There were side rails on the bed that could be raised and lowered to prevent him from falling out.

Everything was in easy reach from the bed. The telephone, a wheelchair with the brakes locked on. It had been specially constructed as a commode chair with enough clearance to pass over the toilet, eliminating the need for any kind of receptacle on the chair itself.

Occasionally Norrie used the chair in the apartment as an alternative to the walker. It gave him a chance to rest his arms and shoulders.

He flopped into it now and removed a briefcase from the carrier on his walker and wheeled over to the bed, he placed the briefcase underneath, pushing it out of sight with a cane that lay on the bed.

Shedding his clothes with difficulty, he dropped them on the floor next to the bed pulling himself naked into it. Exhaustion was overcoming him; he needed to sleep but first, the medication.

To his right was a night table and on it were a series of pill bottles, a thermal flask containing water and a plastic glass.

He counted out the eleven pills he took every night, not that any of them did any good; except of course, the sleeping pill.

He lay back after switching off the lights. He smiled in the dark.

Yes, I've got the sonofabitch.

Chapter Two

September 22 2005.....

Jean Norrie stood in the vestibule of the Calabria Apartments, buzzing suite 2336. In spite of the number of times she pressed the button, there was no response. Just as there had been no response to her, many telephone calls after she had returned to the city.

She had not talked to her Uncle John in all that time. Not that they ever did have a close connection; as she thought about it she couldn't remember having said goodbye to him before she left. Such was the state of their family ties.

Still, he was her only living relative and her experiences abroad seemed to have made her more aware of the temporary nature of most of her relationships. She had thought a great deal about her father, now dead, what is it, three years. She missed him terribly.

All the family I have is my 'Uncle John', such a strange little man, so different from my father.

The last time I saw him was at Dad's funeral. Is it really that long ago? He didn't look well then, as I remember. He was walking with the aid of a cane. He wouldn't tell me what was wrong, just said it was nothing.

She pressed the button again, still nothing. *Something is wrong. I just know it.*

She pressed the intercom button marked "Building Superintendent"; a voice responded.

"Yes, how can I help you?"

"My name is Jean Norrie, my Uncle John lives in 2336, but he doesn't answer when I buzz him and he doesn't answer the telephone either. I'm sure something is wrong, I know he hasn't been well."

"He's gone away somewhere. Haven't seen him for months, out of town I would say."

"That can't be, he would never have done that without telling me. Another lie."

"I'm sorry madam, there is really nothing I can do."

She was getting angry now, she knew he was trying to dismiss her and get back to whatever it was he was doing when she disturbed him.

"Look, I told you he is not well. For all you or I know, he could be lying up there sick or maybe worse. Please let me go up with you and we can check this out together. I have identification, I am his niece after all."

"Lady I have no right to go into anybody's apartment without their permission. I could be charged with "break and enter."

"Well if you want me to get the police in here and break down his door, I'll do it. You must

understand, I just know something is wrong.”

It was becoming more obvious to the superintendent that she was not going away, or if she did, it would likely come back with the police and he didn't need that hassle.

She heard the door lock being activated as he said.

"Come in."

Waiting in the lobby she saw a man approaching her, he was not what she expected. Much younger than she would have assumed and not bad looking either. She waited for some kind of confirmation that he was in fact the superintendent.

As he approached, he said.

"What did you say your name was?"

She extended her hand and said.

"I'm Jean Norrie. Thank you for letting me in."

"Did I have a choice?" He said, a smile played on his lips as he gripped her hand. She was certainly good looking, not what he had expected.

"Do you want to see my identification?"

"I don't think that'll be necessary."

But he thought to himself, *I wouldn't mind your phone number though. He finally let go of her hand and said.*

"The elevators are this way."

She had been in the building before; it was much nicer than her own apartment building. *I could never afford anything like this.* As they got on the elevator, she couldn't resist looking at the super's left hand. *Nope, no ring. Perhaps it would be interesting if I could afford to live here.*

He pressed the button for the 23rd floor, the doors closed almost without sound and they began their ascent. It didn't matter where she looked she could see him, all four walls were mirrored. She tried without success to avoid eye contact. His smile broadened.

The elevator stopped. "Here we are, just turn right."

He proceeded down the hall. She was a few steps behind him. She noticed a door on the right side of the hallway open slightly as they approached.

"Good Evening Ms. Crumb." The superintendent called out.

The door shut quickly without any acknowledgement from the person within.

He stopped at a doorway almost directly opposite the one that had just been shut.

"Godammit."

"What's wrong?" Jean asked.

"Look at that. There's three deadbolts been installed here. That's on top of the regulation lock we supply. I don't have any way to unlock those three. I only have a key for the one that came with the apartment. Tenants are not supposed to deface building property."

What the Hell has he got in there anyway? "

"So you can't open the door?"

"No, and I don't intend to kick it in either."

"But we have to get in, I'm sure something is wrong."

He looked at the genuine concern on her face and made the decision to help her. Besides, he was supposed to have access to all apartments, it was in the lease.

"The only thing I can do is call a locksmith, it's kind of late but there is one guy that owes me a favour."

"Oh please, if you could, I'd be eternally grateful. You know, I don't even know your name."

"It's Bruce. I'll go and see what can be done. In the meantime, what are you going to do?"

Before Jean could answer, the door across the hall opened and an elderly woman appeared.

"Would you like to come in and wait here my dear? Perhaps we could have some tea together while you're waiting."

"Ms Crumb, you don't miss much do you?" Bruce asked.

Jean looked at her with some surprise but responded. "Well that would be very nice, are you sure it

wouldn't be too much of an imposition?"

"Not at all my dear, please come in."

Bruce smiled, "I'll be back as soon as I can. I'm sure Ms. Crumb will let you know when I'm here."

Alice Crumb closed the door behind them. Jean guessed her age to be early seventies; it was a little hard to tell under all that make up. Some sort of chiffon turban covered her sparse hair. As they moved into better light in the living room Jean could see the heavy mascara, scarlet lipstick and rouged cheeks more clearly.

She looked like something out of an Agatha Christie novel, even to her matching chiffon peignoir and silver slippers. The apartment was decorated with furniture that Jean was sure came of an old forties movie, maybe Casablanca.

"Would you like herbal or English tea my dear?"

"English would be fine please, just black, no sugar."

"Just the way I like it too, the kettle's just off the boil so it will only take a moment."

Jean sat on the love seat in the living room while Alice busied herself in the kitchen. She wondered why Alice had such bright lights in her lamps.

It certainly isn't very flattering to the old girl; maybe she has cataracts and can't see very well. But she certainly isn't hard of hearing. She heard us coming down a carpeted hallway. I'll bet she knows all about my uncle.

Alice returned with a tray containing all the necessities for tea, including some "old country" biscuits.

"Here we are, may I pour for you?"

"Please do, this is very nice of you."

"Not at all my dear, not at all.

Alice sat opposite her, took a sip of her tea, and then asked Jean.

"So you've come to see Mr. Norrie then."

"Yes, I have, he's my uncle. I've been out of the country for quite a while so I just wanted to check up on him. Do you know my uncle?"

Alice coughed discretely before she answered.

"Not well, but we are neighbours as you can see. But I was led to believe that he was also on a trip somewhere; I haven't seen him for some time."

"I'm sure that's not the case Ms. Crumb, he would have let me know I'm sure."

"Call me Alice, please and your name is?"

"Yes, I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself. I'm Jean Norrie."

"Quite all right; how's the tea?"

"It's quite delicious as are the biscuits."

"You call them biscuits and not cookies; I take it that when you said you were out of the country, you meant England then."

"You're right, you're quite a detective aren't you Alice."

"Just observant, that's all."

"Tell me Alice, do you remember when you saw my uncle last?"

"It really was quite some time ago, but of course your uncle is a very quiet man, keeps to himself you know. If you say he isn't away then I can only assume that I have missed him. Two ships passing in the night and all that you know."

Jean persisted. "But you do remember the last time you saw him?"

"My dear, I may seem ancient to you, but I still have all my faculties. It is almost two years since I last saw your uncle. The poor man was struggling to unlock the door to his apartment. He isn't very well you know."

"I didn't mean to offend you Alice. But surely someone in this building has seen him since then."

"Well, I don't pretend to know all that goes on in a building of this size my dear."

"It's just that he's my only remaining relative. After having been away for so long I developed this urge to make the most of the family that I have left. I returned to this country only to find that my Uncle

John seems to have disappeared.”

“Tell me Jean, why did you leave this country in the first place?”

“My father was killed in a horrible industrial accident, I just needed to get away after the funeral. Running away from reality I guess.”

“Poor dear. Alice reached out and patted Jean's hand. Jean resisted pulling back from the touch; the hand was gnarled with blue veins contrasting with the long crimson nails.”

“The last time I saw my Uncle John was at my father's funeral. I know he was very upset by his death too.”

“The two were close?”

“I can't say that they were, or at least I didn't think so until I saw my uncle at the funeral. I was very close to my father; it was such a terrible waste.

“It didn't have to happen.”

“Do you want to tell me about it?”

“No, I'm sorry it's still so painful for me.”