

## By Invitation Only

‘Welcome home, George,’ the uniformed lift operator smiled. ‘Good day?’

George loosened his tie and grinned. ‘Always,’ he said, stepping into the lift. ‘And yourself?’

‘Can’t complain.’

‘Glad to hear it. Twentieth floor please, Clarence.’

Clarence chuckled and pressed nineteen. ‘Nice try, buddy.’ He casually pointed to the brass-plated sign next to the number twenty. **ACCESS BY INVITATION ONLY.**

‘Can’t fault a man for trying,’ George replied good-naturedly.

‘Your day will come, young man.’

The twenty-six-year-old stockbroker adored and trusted the affable, elderly gentleman who’d greeted him every morning and late every evening since he moved into the Somerton almost three years prior. He’d confided in Clarence about how to deal with a problematic colleague. Celebrated with him when he received his last promotion and pay rise. Shared his dream of someday having enough wealth to buy whatever his heart desired. But no matter how friendly George believed he and Clarence had become, Clarence remained tight-lipped about the goings-on on the twentieth floor and what one must do to secure an invitation.

George imagined the entire floor was a penthouse flat occupied by a lone screenwriter or an eccentric artist. A retired politician hiding from a scandalous past, perhaps, or a wealthy recluse. How else could he explain why he’d never heard movement—not a floorboard creaking nor a door shutting—from the floor above. Surely, even in a building as old as the Somerton, he’d hear *something*.

Then, on the third year anniversary of his living in the Somerton, it happened. Someone slid a note under George’s door. His hands trembled with excitement as he tore open the envelope and drew out a plain white card.

*Dear George Bailey,*

*Your presence is requested this evening at precisely 20:20.*

*Clarence will kindly escort you from your floor to the 20th.*

Delighted though he was, anxiety set in as disturbing thoughts invaded George’s mind. For all he knew, the mysterious occupant could have nefarious intentions. He could be a killer; a real-life Hannibal Lecter with a taste for young blood.

*Or worse.*

What if the coveted ‘invitation’ was a guise to lure enterprising hopefuls into a get-rich-quick pyramid scheme?

He’d have to move.

George banished these unpleasant thoughts and pressed the call button at 20:18. Moments later, the lift doors opened, and Clarence, smartly dressed in a tailored suit, waved him in.

‘You made it!’ he smiled.

‘Wouldn’t miss this for the world,’ George said, stepping into the lift. He shook Clarence’s hand. ‘Now can you tell me what this is about?’

‘Patience, young man.’

In his wildest imagination, George never would’ve guessed a collection of vintage penny arcade games would be waiting for him when the doors opened. Amusements, from Zoltar, the fortune-telling automaton to coin-operated phonographs and upright pinball machines filled the vast, high-ceilinged space.

George’s eyes darted here and there. ‘Fairground games?’

Clarence shrugged. ‘I’m a bit of a collector.’

‘You? This is your flat?’

‘Guilty as charged.’

George laughed; surprised but relieved.

‘Here, this way,’ Clarence said, leading his guest by the elbow. ‘I’ve something to show you.’

Beneath the bay windows overlooking the city stood a large, wooden cabinet.

‘What’s this?’ George asked.

‘An Edison kinoscope—a moving picture machine. My prized possession. I’ve had it specially modified for you.’

‘For me?’

‘I’ve always liked you, George. There’s so much good in you.’ He pointed to the viewing mechanism on top. ‘It’s my gift to you. Have a look.’

George bent over the cabinet and peered inside. To his bewilderment, the film that played showed... *George*, but older, stepping out of a palatial home in a tropical paradise then speeding away in a luxury sports car.

‘A glimpse of your life twenty years in the future on your current trajectory. It’s everything you’ve dreamed of, isn’t it?’ Clarence asked.

*Sure.* The mansion and the fancy car were things George often fantasised about. Who doesn’t?

‘I... I can’t believe it. It’s great, but....’ He gazed into Clarence’s sagacious brown eyes. ‘Do I end up alone?’

A hint of a smile appeared on Clarence’s face. ‘Keep watching.’

George watched his older self playing in the back garden of a modest country home with three happy, adorable children. A charming, smiling woman wraps an arm around him and plants a kiss on his cheek.

George stepped away from the machine with teary eyes.

‘Ambition and diligence are admirable qualities you possess, but position and material objects don’t guarantee happiness,’ Clarence said, placing a hand on George’s shoulder. ‘To obtain what your heart truly desires, you must change direction, starting today. *It is the heart that makes a man rich. He is rich according to what he is, not according to what he has.* Understand that, and that wonderful life... could be yours.’