

Episode One of the Watchtower Series

# JOOLS BARNETT

a modern day  
sci-fi thriller

# WATCH The start of something beautiful TOWER

# **Watchtower**

## **Episode 1: The Start of Something Beautiful**

Jools Barnett

**Sample**

The Start of Something Beautiful by Jools Barnett

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“The mind is its own place, and in itself  
Can make a heav’n of hell, a hell of heav’n”

- John Milton, Paradise Lost

# Prologue

**I**t was the perfect night for a suicide.

The sky hung in the air like a blanket wrapped around the world. There were no sights, no sound, nothing but the completeness that comes from the absence of everything. The perfect night.

Oakfield Industrial Park was deserted. A handful of abandoned trade outlets huddled together in the silence, paint peeled and crumbled since 1995. One building, Sgt. Ramirez's Sofa Warehouse, had the honour of displaying the Oakfield Industrial Park sign to passers-by. It perched on the open roof, completely unaware that the letter O had fallen off four months earlier.

Beneath the sign, the windows for five floors down were nothing but smashed and discoloured. Shards of broken glass protruded from underneath the wooden boards. All except one window on the sixth floor. It was ajar, with a healthy Goat's Horn cactus nestled on the windowsill. It even had curtains.

Six floors down was the pavement. Puffs of dust from the decaying cement swelled and released every few feet to the rushes of the wind. The puffs continued unabated along the pavement, until they reached the corner of the building. There they found a skip piled high with mattresses, patches of stuffing sprouting through the rips. And standing next to it, was Markus.

Drenched in corduroy, he looked older than his years. In fact, he was on the right side of forty, but no one would have guessed. Markus peered up and down the street. The lone streetlamp twenty metres away flickered like a cheap burlesque sign in the crisp autumn air.

There was nothing. Nobody in sight.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out his mobile from the inside pocket. A fat brick, the device was larger than his open hand, and so bulky its removal caused Markus's jacket to spring upward, before resting on his slender shoulders.

He checked the time. The dim light from the LCD display illuminated the wrinkles between his eyebrows, and lit up the lens of his horn-rimmed glasses.

This wasn't good. It was quarter to one in the morning and he had a schedule to keep. Every *i* was dotted, every *t* slashed through with rigour. It had taken years to reach this apex, but here he stood on the precipice of success, everything reliant on this dank street, devoid of life and seemingly everything else.

Markus popped the mobile back in his pocket and the jacket gravitated towards the floor. He rubbed his eyes with his fists and tapped his fingers on his thigh. Unsure where to put his hands, Markus leaned against the skip. Then he spied the green gunge decorating his elbow and leapt back. He didn't know what it was. He didn't want to know. All he knew was that even the cockroaches marching across the contents of the skip refused to go near it. That was enough.

Markus produced a cigarette from the other pocket, and grabbed the cheap lighter from his trousers. He flicked to ignite it but nothing happened. No flame, no light, just the prick of pain when he scratched his thumb against the

metal wheel as it clicked in defiance. He tried again. Nothing. But the third time was good. He neared the flame to the cigarette and began to char the end, waiting for the cherry to appear.

Suddenly, he felt something. Something light and faint danced across the top of his head. Was it rain? No, it couldn't be – the industrial park was as dry as the cigarette.

It happened again.

Markus put his hand to his head. There were flecks of dirt and plaster splintered across his balding scalp. There was more pattering. He looked up.

A woman.

Markus's eyes widened. There was a woman on the roof. She dangled herself over the side.

Markus's quick breaths froze like arctic wind as they travelled up and stung inside his nostrils. Why here? Why now? If this stupid woman had any inkling how exigent his time was, all the important work necessary for him to conduct at such a mature and lonely hour, would she have chosen now to interrupt his schedule with such a selfish and deluded exercise as taking her own life? He had to stop her.

She swayed left and right. Then she edged to jump.

It seemed like it took no time at all. Markus had no memory of running to the fire exit, nor climbing the stairs. The next thing he knew, the roof's entrance door thundered open on its hinges and the woman was right in front of him.

"Hang on! Wait!" Markus said. "Just hold on a second!"

The woman didn't turn. "Get back! Just get away from me!"

Markus halted. She was still wearing slippers, her feet half balanced on

the edge of the crumbling brickwork. Her cinnamon hair draped over the shoulders of her Hello Kitty dressing gown, suspended above the hundred-foot drop.

Markus extended both his hands and approached.

“Not a problem,” he said. “Just asking that you put the gearshift in neutral for a moment. So we can-.”

“What? Talk? About what exactly?”

“I had a topic in mind,” Markus said, eyeing the drop.

“This the part where I spill my guts, right?”

“Not exactly the metaphor I’d use.” Markus tried a soft smile, but her attention remained focused on the concrete below.

“The old *Dad never loved me, Mum always criticised* – that spiel?” she said. “Or maybe *the cigar is not a cigar?* Wait. I got it. *Hey, you know what happens when your skull hits the concrete from one hundred feet?*”

“Your body will fall through the air, and for every second you fall, the velocity will increase by thirty two feet.” He edged nearer. “On impact, your neck, limbs, back, they’ll all suffer massive fracture – the force causing all that bone and sinew to protrude and pierce through the skin. Your heart is violently thrown against the chest cavity, severing the various feeder arteries. Then, as your head hits the pavement-.” He paused for a moment, unsure whether to continue.

As if cued by the dawning silence, she turned around. The lavender mascara was running down her cheeks where the tears escaped, painting the grim picture of years of pain on to her face.

Her eyes were fixed to his. Markus knew to continue. “Human beings are



largely made up of water, and when that water hits a solid object it dissipates in the direction of least resistance. What that means is, your skull, it will explode like an overripe melon as brain, blood, fat, all that organ tissue, as it spurts out and paints the wall.”

Markus saw it now. The trembling fingers, the sharp breaths - she was scared. Really scared. But he needed just a little bit more. He edged a step nearer. “But before that, you’ll lie there, only seconds to feel the pain. Spikes of agonising torture shooting through your nerves. And then you’ll die.” He shrugged. “I sincerely advise against it.”

The woman half-snorted. Then she glimpsed the crucifix around Markus’s neck; rolled her eyes. “And God wouldn’t want me to?”

“This isn’t about God.” Markus brought his hands down to his side. “It’s not even about you.” He could see her still trembling, but she was listening. That was all that mattered. “It’s people. The people in your life,” he said.

“People?”

“Yeah. The ones that laugh at your quips, listen when you’ve got something to say. And when you don’t. They make this world seem just a bit smaller. Easier. And these people won’t be thrilled when it looks like Picasso snapped the coroner’s photos.”

Silence. She turned back to the drop and forced her eyes closed. He saw her mind thrashing in thought, her fear almost tangible. Markus inched forward once again. He was only a metre away, but he needed to get just a bit closer.

“He...my son, “ she said, her voice breaking the ear-piercing quiet. “I can’t. He deserves better than this. But I don’t...I can’t...”

“And what would you venture are his feelings on the matter?”

More silence. "Everything's just shattered," she said. Her eyes opened and she turned to him. "How do you even go about fixing something like that?"

Markus extended his hand. "Just one shard at a time".

She stood there, a maelstrom of thoughts whirling and spinning in her mind. Her eyebrows arched and she stared at his open palm. She let out a large sigh, and turned to take his hand.

Suddenly, the brick underneath her heel crumbled away. Her foot slipped off the edge. She tried to regain her balance but her other foot slipped. She threw both arms out toward Markus. He ran to grab her, but her body overbalanced. The woman screamed once.

And tipped over the edge.

She saw him appear above her. His hand whipped out and caught her arm.

The woman ventured a look below and saw the left slipper plummet toward the pavement next to the skip. Markus heard no sound but the dull patter of cotton against concrete.

Her shoulder joint screamed in agony, and she grimaced. Markus strained to lift her back on to the rooftop.

"Your other hand," he said. "Throw it up".

She threw it upward and he grabbed her arm with his other hand. He pulled her up on to the roof.

"Whoa. Thanks," she said. She tried to catch her breath, but it had long since disappeared. The woman glanced down and saw Markus's hands still clutching her arms. "I'm alright. You can let go now."

Markus raised his head. Inches apart, their eyes met. She peered into his

vacant orbs and worry entered her face. Those eyes. There was something wrong there. Something terribly wrong.

Markus's mouth curved into an eerie smirk.

"Was planning on it," he said.

He released her arms and thrust his open palms against her chest. The push. The force. It was too much. She catapulted backwards off the edge of the building.

She looked up with a mixture of surprise and terror at the man looming above. But he was getting smaller. And smaller. She could just make him out. Then there was darkness.

## **Episode 1:**

# **The Start of Something Beautiful**

# 1

**D**arkness. The starless night contained within a box. Lucas pulled away the lid and peered inside.

“Huh” Lucas said. A quizzical look spread across his face like warm margarine. He shifted one of the three “Happy Birthday” balloons tied to the desk to make room for the cardboard box.

Normally in one of these modern offices, the eyesore of a boring-brown box stood out, but not in Lucas’s office. Here, it fit in among the stacks of muddled papers and overturned tomes of *Civil Law & You!* Twenty-nine years old, but ever the public school boy. Still, he knew where everything was located, and if anyone, for some ungodly reason, wanted a copy of *The E to U of European Regulations and Directives Ninth Edition* then they’d have to go through him. And he liked that. He wasn’t tall, and his lithe figure lent to many previous birthday presents of unused gym memberships, but he liked that too.

Lucas scanned the inside of the box. The Monday morning light from the adjacent window cascaded through the shutters and illuminated the contents. He thrust in both hands and pulled out a plastic device. It was small and disc-

like, with a blue studs on the top, and a white wire trailing from the back.

He weighed it up, perplexed as to what the hell he was holding. “Wow. That’s a big-“

“It’s a USB powered massage ball,” Sam said. “Blue.”

Lucas wasn’t sure whether it was her youth or cheery demeanour, but he didn’t remember being so chirpy in his own early twenties. It *was* nice that at least someone was enjoying themselves, even if it did look like she’d slept with a coat hanger in her mouth. Lucas saw the words piling up as she tried to restrain herself. He figured it was better to let open the dam rather than have the villagers drown, and motioned for her to continue.

“I was going to get you one of those RSI cushions, for your keyboard, you know, but the shop said one of these new USB massage balls would be a great idea, but they can only be bought online.”

“Online. Check.”

“So, I went home and Google’d *massage balls* and after going through a bunch of sites I hope to God I can purge from my browsing history, well-.” She gestured towards the massage ball.

“Well, thanks, Sam,” he said. It wasn’t enough. She wanted more. He searched for the words. “As birthday presents go, it is one”.

“It looks like a sperm,” Dwight said. He was a hefty man, and anyone in their mid forties who liked their red meat as much as he did always needed to look up *smile* in the dictionary. Lucas kept schtum. Sam didn’t.

“What? No. Urgh. That’s the lead.”

“If you say so,” Dwight said. A broad grin began to mount his face.

“That’s ridiculous. It’s for Lucas’s RSI. If you’re suggesting...I mean, I

wouldn't..."

"Yep, that's a bunch of stuff I don't care about that you're saying there," Dwight said. He picked up another box and chucked it to Lucas. "Here."

The umber box glistened in the sunshine still breaking through the window. It wasn't heavy at all, so it couldn't be a book. Maybe it was a cutting-edge pamphlet on police procedures, or a brochure about finding your way around the Houses of Parliament.

Lucas reached inside and pulled out a barrister's wig.

"A wig?" Lucas said.

Dwight's pupils glinted for a moment. An amorous grin spread from cheek to cheek. "Observe," he said, and traced the wig's hairline with his fingertips. "This here? One hundred percent hand stitched. Smell that?" Dwight glided his nose over the wig and inhaled the musky scent like an industrial sized Hoover. "Mmmmm. Mongolian ponies."

"Ah, the finest of all ponies."

"Not to forget," Dwight said, completely ignoring him, "treated, bleached and sterilised to the highest standard. Keeps those bastards in Brussels schtum with their damn safety regs."

Lucas gave the hairpiece a once over from the cotton weaved interior to the outer clumps of horsehair.

"I dunno, Dwight. Thanks, but I kind of prefer my old one."

It's true. Lucas's current (make that previous) wig had seen him through his LPC, L'Estrange and Chamberlain's underpaid training contract, and every parking ticket to technically-slander-but-who-is-really-that-sensitive case that slid across Lucas's desk. Not that his old wig didn't suffer from its own sort of

Dino-damage, but its wispy and dishevelled strands hardly gave it a look one step away from bringing in a dead sparrow. "Not that I'm not grateful."

"Shhh," Dwight said, one palm open in the air as if he were directing traffic. "You're unsure, I get that. Take five to decide. But you got to admit, your old one is starting to don some bake bean fuzz up top."

"I guess." Maybe Lucas was wrong. Maybe the Dino-damage was fatal.

"Guess no longer." Dwight plopped the wig on Lucas's scalp, and spun him to face the three-foot wall mirror perched against the velvet sofa. "Eh? How d'ya like 'dem apples?"

"It's very becoming," Sam said, one hand ringing the other in her lap.

"Listen to the girl," Dwight said. "See? You light up the room."

Lucas stood motionless. He gave the reflection a cursory head to foot glance. "Must be an economy bulb."

Lucas was halfway through formulating another witty comment that no one besides himself would find remotely humorous, when Felix came bounding in through the door.

Felix was shorter than the room's other occupants, like Napoleon without the inferiority complex and ability to wear hats. Felix scratched his grizzly chestnut beard as he stumbled backwards. His eyes were still focussed outside the doorframe and into the busy room on the other side.

"Hey, sorry for the epic late-itude," he said. He started to turn. "But there was a girl in the lift with the most perfect bu-". He came face to face with Sam. "...ndle of puppies."

"Bundle of puppies?" she said, waiting for an answer she'd never be happy with.



Felix racked his brain for a second. "Yeah...it was really weird". It was enough. He turned to Lucas. "So, Lucas, mate – Happy Birthday! Look at all those-." Felix caught sight of the open boxes adorning the desk. "Presents...I so got you one of those." His eyes searched the room. "It's just-."

Felix's ears were struck by the answer to his prayers: the creak of the post trolley wheeling along outside the door. "In the post trolley. Outside. Over there."

He watched the trolley man wheel his goodies into Lucas's office. The sweat dribbled from Felix's temples.

"And now it's here," Felix said. "But, you know, sometimes the post can be delayed. Bloody postal service, eh? Bastards."

No such luck. The trolley man handed Lucas another cardboard box.

For some reason, Felix carried on. "But not today. Evidently. I mean, I'm not sure if you'll like it, or, in fact, have any idea I had anything to do with it, but here it is. A surprise birthday present. Delivered by the postal service. For a surprise." Felix was running out of words. "Surprise!"

"You're a very strange little man, Felix," Lucas said.

Felix blushed a pale red, a wide smile plastered across his gums. "Thank you," he said.

Lucas gave Felix a look that was a combination of confusion and acceptance.

He'd had a lot of practice donning such a face over the last decade of their friendship. Sometimes they were compadres – Felix, the excitable nerd eager to show off the newest recruit to his Warhammer 40k collection, but Lucas having no idea what an Elder Wraithlord was, beyond sounding like the founder of a 70s

progressive rock supergroup. And sometimes they were alter egos, completely unable to breathe in the unified laughter as they watched Arnie upper cut the clearly-a-guy-in-a-bear-suit in Hercules in New York for the forty-seventh time. Today, however, Lucas felt like his carer.

Lucas opened up the cardboard box. Inside, he found a bible black shoebox with a copper post-it note affixed to the lid. It read "*Thinking of You*". The penmanship was fantastic. Lucas picked up the shoebox, ready to open it.

Then there was nothing. Nothing except Lucas. The world, reality, it had all turned to complete darkness. It was as if the universe had fallen away and all light had been sucked from existence creating an eternal void, hollowed out of everything except the emptiness. Lucas stood there alone in the abyss of nothingness, frozen. He tried to move, but even movement didn't exist in that place. Hundreds of voices whispered into his mind. There were so many of them. The din should have made their words inaudible, but the whispers were as clear as his own inner voice swimming inside his brain.

*"DON'T OPEN THE BOX DON'T OPEN THE BOX DON'T OPEN THE BOX."*

Then he was back. Lucas stumbled and his legs began to give way, but Felix was there to grab him. Lucas was out of it. The jumbo jet that took his brain back to reality had made a crash landing. What the hell was that?

Felix was still grasping his arm. Dwight and Sam kneeled on the floor and studied his pupils.

Felix steadied Lucas. "Whoa, easy there," he said. "Taken to those B-day drinkies a little early, ain't ya?"

Lucas took a deep breath and batted off Felix's hand. "I'm alright." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and index finger. Maybe the

pressure might ease these needles in his forehead. "Just must have stood up too fast, I guess."

He rose. It was over, but they were still looking at him. The pressure in his head still swaying from ear to ear like a galley on troubled waters, Lucas opened the box.

He let out a sharp breath and dropped it to the floor. The smell. He jolted back against the desk.

The box was littered with purple packing that spilled out on to the surrounding edges. Amidst it all sat a human heart.

Lucas, Dwight, Sam and Felix stood around it in a perfect circle. All eyes down, they towered over the heart.

Felix peered down at the open box. "Yeah, that's not mine."

**This was a two-chapter sample of "The Start of Something Beautiful" -- Episode 1 of the modern day sci-fi thriller series "Watchtower". A twelve episode novella series by Jools Barnett.**

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