



Also by S.C. Loader

Helping Hands

The Realm

Three Wishes

The Last Chapter

Remains of The Past

Remains of the Past II

Remains of the Past

III

*The Future is
a Consequence
of the Past*

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Love

does not dominate,

it cultivates.

Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe

*Für
Maxi Mädei
unsere kleine Puppe*

Preface

Remains of The Past:

Silently and without warning, the first wave swept away civilisation. On a carefree Sunday morning in early June, most of the world's population suddenly died, falling instantly dead where they stood. There was no opportunity to express any loving sentiments and no famous last words to fill future history books, just silence. A second wave one week later reduced the number of survivors even further.

Remains of The Past II:

Some of those who had outlived these cataclysmic events formed two communities: the larger one in Weyhill Castle and a smaller one, a short distance away, in Lower Nieder Castle, a former five-star hotel. Max's intimate links with both groups helped establish cooperation between them, allowing for the sharing of technical skills, knowledge and, inevitably, personal relationships.

Remains of The Past III:

Despite the fast-approaching seventh anniversary of the waves, members of the two communities are still discovering the grotesque depths to which some survivors have plummeted. To ensure their own long-term survival against these deviants and those who covet everything they possess, both castles initiate a program to strengthen their defences, but with the restricted availability of materials and transportation, this is no easy task.

Chapter One

Maja and Mary, Max's future wives, wandered off to discuss which one would be the honeymoon bride, an issue they had overlooked in their meticulous planning of their joint marriage to Max.

The prospective groom breathed a sigh of relief. For the time being at least, he had not been expected to step into the veritable minefield and make the decision himself.

Left alone and wondering how the two women in his life could possibly resolve this latest conundrum, Max stared vacantly at the hot wax making its way down the side of the candle, the only form of lighting in Lower Nieder Castle once the sun had gone down.

Suddenly, two grinning faces appeared on the opposite side of the candle's flame, breaking Max's reverie.

'We've got a problem, mate!' announced Justin, one of the five men within the Lower Nieder group.

'We have?' queried Max.

'We have!' confirmed Ray, 'Most of the women want to attend Liam and Lisa's wedding this weekend—'

Max interrupted, 'If it's still going ahead, there's talk that baby Maja's surprise arrival may necessitate a change of plans.'

'Even so, your wedding is a week later, and literally everyone wants to attend your nuptials, but we only have one saloon car, which means we can only ferry three people over to Weyhill Castle at a time.'

'Why only three?'

'Because, like your group, we also have the rule that no one travels alone. Someone has to ride in the shotgun seat.'

Max made a hurried calculation, 'There are twenty-two of you here, so that's seven trips back and forth to transfer the guests from one point to another, half if we use the Weyhill pick-up.'

'Twenty! Two will remain to keep guard,' Ray informed him.

Max mulled over the options, 'Shame we don't have something larger. That would make life a little easier.'

Justin grinned, 'Strange you should say that because we do ... sort of!'

'What does "sort of" mean?'

'It's a GCC multi-personnel carrier, seats ten, thirteen at a squeeze, plus driver.'

'Wow, they're nice motors. I suppose it's petrol-driven?'

'No, second generation electric, with a solar charger and cables on site and compatible with the charger J.D. installed for us here in the castle.'

'No key?'

'It's on the hook in the manager's office.'

'So what's the problem? Ha! I know, the tyres are shot, and the rims have locking bolts.'

'Admittedly, the tyres have passed their use-by dates, but the rims are removable and easily replaced with any standard five stud rim fitted with an R sixteen tyre.'

Ray took over, 'And as luck will have it, there are four such items fitted with brand new winter tyres on-site.'

'So what's the problem? Are the garage doors welded closed or something?'

'No, it has a fully functioning, chain-operated roller-shutter door.'

'Okay, I give up. What the problem?'

'We'll show you tomorrow morning!'

Mary rolled onto her side and lovingly smoothed her fingertips through Max's short beard, 'You're quiet. What's troubling you?'

'What makes you think something is?'

'Max, this is not the first time we've shared a bed is it? And when we have, you have been the most incredibly attentive and, if I may say so, the most passionate lover any woman could wish for. Yet tonight, you seem a little absent-minded, and those hands which would cause a nun to abandon her vows, her habit and her inhibitions have fallen unusually still. So what's wrong?'

'Sorry, I feel a little uneasy knowing Maja is within these walls.'

'There's no need, you know the agreement. While you're here, I'm your wife, and you'll sleep with me. In Weyhill, Maja is your wife, and you'll sleep with her. For Maja and myself this is the simplest way to avoid causing any undue jealousy, even when our paths cross like tonight. You have two wives, enjoy us!' A short silence passed before Mary thought to add, 'Although preferably not at the same time.'

'This is weird, talking about swapping wives when we're not even married yet. Have you two resolved the issue over the honeymoon yet?'

'Yes, and we've also agreed you'll start the first fourteen-day wife-swapping-rotation from tomorrow with Maja, and as we will marry during her rotation, she will be your honeymoon bride. My turn will come later when you begin your two-week rotation with me on the fifteenth.'

'Which of you two came up with this fortnightly rotation idea?'

'Maja.'

'Why not longer, like a month, for instance?'

'You know Maja's objective, as she cannot have children, she wants me to fall pregnant by you, and the timing of the rotation is intended to aid that outcome.'

'And you're still okay with that?'

Mary snuggled tightly up against Max, 'I would sell my soul to the devil rather than be without you, Max. Since that day in the barn, you have been my reason for living. When you left to find Lenny the pig farmer, I cried like a lovelorn schoolgirl for days. Now that I have you back in my life, I would agree to anything to keep you there.'

'But you could end up pregnant.'

Stretching up, Mary placed a series of faint but highly sensual kisses on his lips, 'And I would burst with pride knowing I'm carrying your child.'

Max drew her into the security of a comforting embrace then quietly corrected her, 'Our child.'

Brandishing a shotgun each, Ray and Justin led the way up the gently inclined street. Following them and accompanying an unarmed Mary were Max and Maja, both sporting nine-millimetre pistols and knives. Bringing up the rear of their party were Diana, Lower Nieder's hunter and her partner Kay, both armed with rifles.

Casting an eye over all the weaponry prompted Mary to admit to Maja, 'I'm beginning to forget what it was like to walk down a street alone, now we dare not. Now we move in pairs or groups, automatically watch every window, door and alleyway, assume every large object is hiding someone hostile to us, and we carry a multitude of weapons, but despite all of these precautions, nothing eases the apprehension induced by the eerie silence that surrounds us.'

Maja sighed, 'Once upon a time, I would have held one of my son's hands while out walking, simply for the

comfort of knowing he was safe. Now I feel for my pistol for the comfort of knowing I'm safe, but I must admit, it doesn't always work. Who knows, perhaps one day we'll be able to walk alone again.'

Max accessed the overturned three-and-a-half-ton, curtain sided truck blocking the forecourt of the Lower Nieder Coaching Company where the multi-personnel carrier was garaged, 'Okay, I'll agree it's not worth righting the truck because without compressed air, the brakes won't release, but why not use your forklift to shift the whole unit out of the way?'

'Our forklift is only rated to lift one ton,' replied Ray.

'It doesn't need to lift it. Clear the cargo to reduce the weight, and your forklift could easily drag or shunt the back of the truck away from the garage door.'

Ray smiled and nudged Justin, 'Do you want to tell him, or shall I?'

Justin rapped the bottom of an exposed steel bollard with his boot, 'That's a hint.'

Max examined the wreck a little more thoroughly. Puzzled, he looked up and down the street, 'Okay, pray tell. How does a truck travelling along a perfectly straight road end up on its side impaled on three retractable security bollards?'

Ray shrugged his shoulders, 'Practice?'

A smirk crept onto Justin's expression as he suggested, 'Ask the driver. He's still in the cab, or what's left of him is.'

'I suppose I should be grateful, at least he missed the fourth one.'

'Hopefully, this shouldn't take too long,' stated Max confidently. 'Okay, let's get organised. Kay can you escort

Ray back to the castle to fetch your forklift? Maja, you're with me and Justin. Mary, please stay with Diana.'

'Why can't I come with you?' she asked.

'Confined spaces like the inside of a building are dangerous. If we are attacked, you do not have the raw strength or the hand-to-hand combat skills to fight off an adversary, but you do have twenty-twenty vision, which makes you an invaluable lookout.'

'Where are we off to?' asked Maja.

'The garage's workshop, where Justin assures me there are some oxyacetylene tanks. If we cut through those bollards, we will be able to shift that truck.'

'Why didn't you do that?' Maja asked Justin.

Justin laughed, 'Lass, in my job, the only metal I ever came into contact with were staples and paperclips.'

'What job was that?'

'I worked as an accountant for a small company producing cardboard packaging, and in my department we didn't have much use for oxyacetylene welding equipment. Shame really, it might have proved very useful in seeking revenge on that sadistic vending machine that frequently refused to cooperate or return our money.'

While Maja kept watch, Justin watched Max run through the safety checks on the tanks, their cylinder valves, pressure gauges and regulators, the hoses and various points on the torch, 'Okay, everything seems in order. Grab those gloves and visor, and I'll drag this lot out to the truck.'

Once Max had set up near the first bollard he intended to cut, he advised everyone to stand well back, not to watch the flame or breathe in the fumes.

Maja kissed his cheek, 'Please be careful. I've heard those cylinders can explode.'

Max looked puzzled by Maja's comment, 'You've seen me do this countless times, and you've never once asked me to be careful before. What's so special about today?'

'We're getting married soon, and I want you in one piece when we do, and I suspect Mary would also prefer you intact as well.'

Mary nodded in agreement.

Looking at the oxy torch in his hand and then to Justin, Max asked, 'How did women hone to perfection this ability to make one nervous without meaning to?'

'Beats me, Mate. Is it true they can explode?'

'Yes, poor working practices, incorrect gas pressures or a kink in a hose can lead to a flashback.'

'Flashback?'

'That's when the flame travels backwards up a hose from the torch towards the cylinders, commonly resulting in a burst hose or, less frequently, an explosion.'

'Christ! I don't feel so bad about that vending machine now.'

Two hours later, Max finished cutting the bollards off at ground level, enabling the forklift to shunt the lorry away from the shutter doors, allowing their prize, the GCC multi-personnel carrier to escape its prison. Maja and Mary found relief in Max completing his work without incident, or worse, an explosion. Justin, however, found amusement in the fact he returned the cutting equipment to its place in the workshop.

'Why did you bother Max? You could have saved yourself the hard work and left it outside.'

'One day it might be needed, and if I had left it outside the hoses would have deteriorated beyond use.'

'So? You have a set in the castle workshop.'

Max double-checked the cylinder valves were closed before giving an insightful answer, 'It's a valuable resource, Justin. Think how many generations will come and go before we have the raw materials, the power supply, the transport network, the labour force and even the knowledge required just to produce the gases for these two cylinders, let alone manufacture an entire set. We are the custodians of everything that has survived the waves, and it's our duty to look after these things for the sake of the generations that follow us.'

Justin passed an eye over the oxyacetylene equipment, 'Okay, point taken. But don't hold your breath if you're expecting a thank you from those who follow us, we inhabit a different world now.'

'There's no denying that. Come on! Show me what all this work was in aid of.'

Heather, the leader of the Lower Nieder group, welcomed Max, Maja and Mary on their arrival back at the castle. Looking past them, she asked, 'Where are the others?'

'The boys have a new toy, and Diana and Kay are making sure no one takes it away from them,' answered Maja.

'They only have two days to get it roadworthy. Do you think they'll manage it in time for Liam and Lisa's wedding on Saturday? Providing they're still getting married, that is?'

Max nodded, 'They'll have it ready in no time. It only needs charging up, a change of wheels and a good wash, but unfortunately, there's a question mark hanging over Liam and Lisa's wedding.'

'They haven't changed their minds, have they?'

'No, no,' answered Maja, 'in fact, they are even more determined to get married now that baby Maja is here, but

her birth has taken its toll on Lisa, and she's not sure she'll be up for walking down the aisle so soon after giving birth. We'll let you know what's happening tomorrow evening.'

'That would be appreciated.'

Tom, the Weyhill beekeeper and Alice, the Lower Nieder beekeeper, joined them.

'Heather, you do know of Liam and Lisa's ... family ties, don't you?' asked Tom.

Heather grinned, 'If that was a subtle way of asking whether we knew they're brother and sister then the answer is yes, we do. We suspected as such when they first arrived here, and of course it's been confirmed since.'

Heather's answer piqued Max's curiosity, 'Then why do so many of the women here want to attend their wedding?'

'Their relationship maybe incestuous, but theirs is a delightfully beautiful love story, and their wedding is the next chapter in that story, just as baby Maja was.'

'So that explains the enormous interest in mini Maja, sorry, baby Maja.'

Heather nodded, 'We have inherited a world where violence rules beyond the walls of our respective castles, so when something beautiful happens, we want to celebrate it. Anyway, we digress. Tom has something he would like to ask.'

'Would you mind if Alice comes back to Weyhill with us later? She'll return after the wedding.'

Max looked to Maja, 'I'm okay with that, are you?'

'No problem here. I can't think of any reason to object to one beekeeper wanting to show another beekeeper his ... bee collection.'

Mary nudged Maja, 'I think it's his ... beekeeping equipment he wants to show her!'

'Given that they kept half the castle awake last night, I think he already has,' added Heather dryly.

Tom and Alice blushed heavily, everyone else grinned.

After she had said her goodbyes to everyone else, Max stepped up to Mary to give her a parting kiss, a particularly intimate kiss that demonstrated how they felt about one another without the need for words, but on catching sight of Maja a short distance away, he hesitated.

'What's wrong?' queried Mary.

'This feels really awkward. If I kiss you the way I want to, it will probably upset Maja. To avoid upsetting her, I should avoid kissing you, but that would then upset you,' after letting a sigh have its freedom, Max added wearily, 'If this is a foretaste of what married life will be like, then I'm beginning to question the wisdom of agreeing to marry you both.'

Mary beckoned Maja to join them, 'Max won't kiss me goodbye because you're watching.'

'Why not?'

'He thinks it would upset you.'

'Max, do you think that the emir who once owned Weyhill Castle would have worried about such things when he kissed one of his four wives?'

'Had one of his wives voiced or shown any hint of displeasure, the emir would have done what all ridiculously rich men tended to do back then, tossed her to one side and replaced her. I'm not the emir, and I would never treat either of you like that. I want to treat you both equally, with respect, and avoid doing anything that would upset either.'

Maja kissed his cheek, 'We will hold you to that!' then she turned her back to them, 'Okay, I'm not watching! Do whatever it is you're going to do, but no sloppy wet ones.'

Mary immediately grabbed Max and drew him into their goodbye kiss.

A short while later and still a little breathless from their kiss, Mary informed Maja, 'It's safe to turn around now.'

'I'm glad about that. The view in that direction is really boring.'

'I think the view in the opposite direction would have been even less to your taste,' suggested Max.

Mary nudged Maja, 'All this fuss over a kiss! What do you think he'll do when he realises he's called one of us by the wrong name?'

'Run screaming from the room before throwing himself in the moat, I expect.'

'Then let's hope he does that in Weyhill.'

'Why?'

'Your moat is dry! Ours is full of water and four metres deep.'

'Then let's hope he can swim.'

As Max was about to climb aboard the Weyhill pick-up truck, Heather rushed over, 'Ray has just contacted me on the walkie-talkie. Could you stop off on your way past? He has something he would like you to pass on to J.D.'

'Of course.'

'See you on Saturday ... hopefully!'

'Likewise!'

Chapter Two

A welcoming committee met the pick-up on its arrival back at Weyhill. Jack, Arthur and Karl, three of the four Weyhill farmers, beckoned Max to drive on through to the garage rather than, as was their usual practice, stop in the porte-cochère. Maja hung her head out of the passenger window to enquire, 'What's going on?'

Meadow, Maja's deputy security coordinator, rode the pick-up's running board while Max drove across the castle's quadrangle, 'Hi boss, it's good to have you back again. Our glorious leader Sophie has discovered there are insufficient mattresses to go around should all the Lower Nieder group attending Liam and Lisa's wedding stay overnight, and consequently has got herself in a bit of a state. So the three men have volunteered to go and find some more!'

'We don't know if there will be a wedding yet.'

'There will be. Lisa is adamant that she will marry Liam on Saturday, even if she has to crawl down the aisle.'

'Love conquers all.'

'So they say.'

'Who's acting as security for this trip?'

'Lilith and myself, but you can go in my place if you prefer.'

'No, that's okay, but make sure the men take a shotgun each and Lilith wears her utility belt. She's a far better shot with a pistol than with a bow and arrow.'

'Aye, aye, boss!'

Tom and Alice made for Tom's beekeeping workshop, and after Max had helped hitch the trailer to the pick-up, he headed off to see J.D. As Maja made her way towards

the security office in the porte-cochere, Elisa, who had accompanied them to Lower Nieder, joined her.

'Maja, I need your help with the Weyhill Chronicle.'

'In what way?'

'Until now, I've been unsure how to start it, but after speaking to Heather, she explained how she intends to start theirs. She'll begin by introducing everyone who's there and listing their roles within the group. I would like to do something similar.'

'But there are only twenty-two of them! There are over fifty here.'

'And I don't know all of them or the roles they perform, hence the reason I need your help.'

'Sophie would have been a better choice of person to ask for this information.'

'I would have, but she never stands still long enough for me to ask.'

'She can be difficult to pin down at times. One thing though, I don't know anyone's surname.'

'It doesn't matter. I just need an overview for the time being. Take me through who's who, their roles, and any other information you think might help.'

Maja nodded, 'Okay, if you have a few minutes to spare, take a seat in my office, and once I've secured the gates, I can take you through the "who's who" of Weyhill Castle.'

Tom: Elected registrar and beekeeper.

Bill: Carpenter.

Ralph: Vegetable farmer and Louise's father.

Daniel: Poultry farmer.

Alex: Plumber, Amelia's husband and Kathy's father.

Karl: Farmer and Alexandra's long-term partner.

Jack: Farmer and Linda's long-term partner.