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Paper Cuts



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Paper Cuts

Dave Turner

Aim For The Head Books

Chapter One

2 September 1666

London was burning.

A raging firestorm roared and shrieked through the narrow streets, consuming the tinder-dry wooden buildings. Thick, choking clouds of smoke rose into the sky, blocking the sun and plunging the city into a false night. Attempts at extinguishing the fire had been abandoned and people were fleeing the destruction with whatever possessions they could carry. Carts and panicking horses filled the roads making it impossible for the fire fighters to get through. The turbulence of the boiling air made the wind veer erratically and the flames spread insidiously in all directions. Soon they would creep to the paper warehouses and gunpowder stores on the riverfront and all hope of saving the city would be lost.

Four horsemen watched the inferno from its very heart. Embers and burning flakes drifted and danced

around them like a blizzard in hell. Their cloaks were not singed by the flames, nor their armour tarnished by the smoke. Their steeds remained calm as tongues of fire licked at their hooves. They'd seen this sort of thing before.

Shiny of hair and proud of bearing, Conquest sat sure and true atop his white stallion. On top of the red horse sat he who was known as War. Barrel chested, he looked as if he was made almost entirely of auburn hair and anger. Next to him, Famine shifted in the saddle of his black horse. Horseback riding was uncomfortable for one with a frame as slender as his.

The rider of the pale horse needs no introduction.

'Is this it, then? The end of days?' asked Famine in a thin voice.

'I don't know,' Conquest replied. It certainly had an end of the world vibe. He turned to the Pale Rider. 'Death, is this happening elsewhere?'

Death shook his head solemnly.

A fireball flew over their heads with a high-pitched whine and crashed into the thatched roof of a house. It collapsed in on itself and the explosion threw sparks onto the neighbouring properties. These, in turn, caught alight with a hungry crackle and rained down fire.

'I'm bored,' bellowed War.

Conquest thought for a moment, came to a decision and tugged on the reins. His horse obediently turned away from the blaze. 'Come on,' he said to the others. 'I'm going

to find an alehouse. If this is the apocalypse, I'll be damned if I'm doing it sober.'

The Four Horsemen made their way through the narrow and winding cobbled alleys until they reached London Bridge. The bridge was a haphazard jumble of shops and businesses that precariously balanced over the murky waters of the Thames. The crowds instinctively parted to allow the riders through. As they trotted over, Conquest noticed that the buildings that spanned either side of the road were beginning to smoulder at the edges.

After much delay and many assurances that they did not require any of the goods or services offered by the tradesmen, they finally passed through the Stone Gateway on the opposite bank and crossed into Southwark. They rode along the riverbank for a short while until they found a tavern that would suit them.

They hitched up the horses and ordered the stable boy to bring grain and water. Once the horses' needs had been met, the Four went in search of their own refreshments. The south bank of the river was congested with onlookers, the fire obviously the entertainment of the day. Despite the inn's popularity their armour, weapons and general demeanour meant that the Four found an outside table overlooking the conflagration with little difficulty. The first drink did little to quench their thirst, so Conquest was sent to the bar to see if a second would do any better.

Death looked out over the Thames. It was smeared

orange and seemed to burn like the River Styx that he supposedly guarded, if you listened to the more popular poets of the time. On the north side, families wrapped in blankets stood in pathetic huddles as they waited for the usually reasonably priced river taxis which, in a textbook example of supply and demand, had become a lot less reasonably priced overnight. A ragged flotilla of lighters, barges and rowing boats was making its way upriver from the East. Never underestimate a Londoner's ability to make a quick shilling from someone else's misfortune.

Conquest returned with four pints of cloudy brown liquid and bags of pork scratchings. Famine grabbed the snacks from the tray before he could even sit down. Conquest placed a glass each in front of his three companions and took a large gulp from his own. War eyed his glass's contents with suspicion.

'What's this?' he growled.

Conquest was now having trouble breathing. He wheezed, 'The innkeeper informed me that this was favoured by his most discerning clientele.'

'You mean the drunkards?'

'Yes.' Conquest wiped his eyes on the back of his riding gloves.

War beamed. 'Excellent!'

Conquest regained his composure. 'I was talking to a fellow named Samuel at the bar. Apparently, it all started in a bakery on Pudding Lane.'

'Don't talk about pudding,' Famine moaned, wiping

crumbs from his tunic. 'I could really go for some pudding.'

The Four settled in and sampled several more of the ales that the tavern had to offer. They all agreed that the beer was excellent and there was little chance that the world would end today, but tomorrow's hangovers would make them wish that it had.

The afternoon had turned into early evening when a tall, elegant man glided over. He was dressed in a long red coat stitched from the most exquisite material and balanced a wig the size and shape of a substantial bush on his head. He drank from a glass containing the finest claret while his eyes darted around like he was looking for something to steal. Probably souls. He tapped the silver tip of his cane on the table in a demand for attention.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen.'

War jumped clumsily to his feet. His hand grasped for, and missed, the sword at his side. 'Beezelbub!'

Beelzebub looked hurt. 'Do none of you have the courtesy to pronounce my name correctly?'

Conquest looked him up and down, his head wobbling. 'What are you wearing?'

Beelzebub pirouetted so that everybody had a good view of his marvellous garments. 'Oh, these rags?' he said with false modesty. 'Just a little something I threw together.'

'You look ridic-- ridic--. You look like a tit,' War said,

falling back into his seat.

'You were all wearing those same clothes the last time I saw you,' Beelzebub said with disdain. 'After the Battle of Bosworth.'

'Ah, yeah.' Conquest turned to Famine. 'How did we do in that one?'

'I don't know. I stopped counting after Agincourt,' Famine slurred.

'Look at you. It's like the Restoration never happened,' Beelzebub said. 'Everyone at court is wearing this style. In fact, I've just come directly from Whitehall. His Majesty has ordered the destruction of all the buildings in the fire's path. Travelling south of the river usually gives me a nosebleed, but this has the best view.' He gave a smile that War wanted to punch into the Thames.

'You did this, didn't you?' Conquest tried a dramatic sweep of his arm, but only managed to slap Famine in the face.

'Just passing the time. I really thought we were getting somewhere with that plague, but it seemed to just peter out. Most disappointing.' Beelzebub looked down the table. 'You're being very quiet, Death. I thought this would be your kind of thing.'

'He's sulking. It's been twenty years,' Conquest answered.

'Twenty-three years, to be exact, and it's starting to get on my bloody nerves,' said War.

'Famine ate the last of his biscuits,' Conquest

continued.

Famine stared at the ground. 'I bought him some new ones.'

'He's never been the same since he made that vow to never kill,' said War.

'How's that going?' asked Beelzebub. Death rocked his flattened hand. So-so.

Beelzebub looked at the empty pint pots that covered the tabletop. 'What's the cause for celebration?'

'The world made it through another day. That's reason enough.' Conquest raised his glass and the other three clinked theirs against it.

'But the end of everything is your raison d'être.'

'Don't mention bloody raisins. You'll set Famine off again. You know what he thinks about health food.' War laughed loudly at his own joke.

'Is it, though?' Famine asked quietly. 'Is it our responsibility? The end of the world, I mean.'

'It is our destiny,' War replied.

'Because they say so? Just because they believe it's going to happen doesn't mean it should. We don't bow to them on any other topic. We don't know why we're here. We've heard nothing.'

Beelzebub's face turned as red as his coat. 'He said so!'

'Did He?' replied Famine.

'There were burning bushes and prophets and all sorts.'

'Have you spoken to Him personally?'

'No. But...'

'I've been thinking about this for a while. We've been abandoned,' Famine said. 'If He put us here at all. Perhaps we only exist because they want us to. "Don't blame us," they'll say. "We didn't break the world. It was those Horsemen".'

Conquest thought this over. He had been leading them for millennia, but where was he leading them to? His memories of the early days were hazy now. He remembered the excitement, though. A whole world, new and green, that was theirs to explore at leisure. They had crossed continents and navigated oceans. They had been privileged to witness the rise of humanity, though they had stumbled many times on the way. They had watched the construction of the pyramids of Giza and the destruction of Babylon. They were instrumental in the rise of the Roman Empire and, after they had switched sides, had brought it to its knees. There would be more great achievements and, no doubt, great failures in the future. This wasn't the first city they had seen burn to the ground and he was certain it wouldn't be the last.

A scuffle broke out between two drunkards further along the towpath. 'They seem to do a pretty good job of breaking things on their own,' Conquest said. 'I don't see why they need any help from us.'

'What about that volcano in Sumatra? The ash cloud that killed off almost every living thing?' Beelzebub said. 'We didn't think they'd make it. They're a resilient bunch.'

They'll need a push.'

'I've kind of got used to having them around the place,' Famine replied. 'Think of everything we'd lose. Art. Music. Ale.'

There was a general murmur of approval at the mention of the ale. Conquest winked at a buxom serving wench. 'And the women. I'd certainly miss them.'

War rattled his scabbard. 'So this flaming sword is just for show, is it?'

Conquest patted him on the arm. 'I'm sure there'll still be plenty for you to do. Their wars will grow bigger and they'll think of more imaginative ways to be unpleasant to each other.'

War relaxed a little. If previous behaviour was an indicator of future action, then Conquest was right. Humanity had evolved from simply hitting each other over the head with blunt objects to intricate instruments of warfare with breathtaking speed. They really had a knack for it. Now that he'd had a few beers, the end of the world seemed like an awful lot of hard work.

Two thin wisps of smoke snaked their way out of Beelzebub's nostrils. 'I want my thousand years of glorious rule! I was promised!'

People were beginning to look over to see what the commotion was all about. Witnessing a bar brawl would be an excellent way to round off the day's excitement.

'Be a poppet and keep your voice down,' Conquest said.

'That's it, then?' Beelzebub asked in a more measured tone. 'Death. Talk some sense into them.'

Death merely shrugged and waved his empty glass. It was time for another round.

'What do you think you're doing?' Beelzebub hissed.

Conquest looked back towards the city. Against the bruised sky, London Bridge was an arrow of fire pointing to a future that was no longer clear. He gave one of his smiles that, in a few hours, would persuade the barmaid to accompany him to his chambers.

'I think we're retiring.'

Chapter Two

It was the last night of James McCann's life.

Unaware of this disappointing end to the working week, he was sat at his desk on the empty twenty-second floor of UberSystems International Tower and shouting into a phone clutched in his meaty, sweaty hand.

'You are an idiot wrapped in a moron inside another idiot. If I was there, I would punch you and I abhor violence, so you actually make me hate myself. You're going to hang the phone up, go and fix the problem and call me back tomorrow morning.' He slammed the receiver down several times, imagining it was the caller's head. A row of clocks across the wall told the time in each of the UberSystems International offices around the world, boasting the company's reach. James looked for the one showing London time. Midnight.

He thumbed through the MI reports and ERQ alert readouts until the RSI in his wrists screamed. He laughed bitterly as he considered how his life had been reduced to a series of meaningless measurements and indecipherable

three letter acronyms.

His had not been an existence worthy of note. He'd spent twenty years working in the Risk department of UberSystems International. He'd come to realise there had been something rotten at the heart of the company for some time and he was going to find it. Whenever he felt he was getting close to the unpleasant truth, though, it slipped away from him. All he had to show for his efforts was a divorce, a handful of grey hairs and an irritable bowel.

He opened an encrypted spreadsheet on his laptop and began to work on some formulas, but received only error messages in return. He was so tired it was like trying to change a duvet cover while wearing mittens. And there was a cat inside the cover. And the cat was pointing out all of his mistakes. He closed the file without saving the changes and rubbed his sore eyes with his aching hands. He thought about getting another coffee, but he'd drunk so much already he was pretty sure he could hear the building breathing. One more cup and he would be able to see time.

He thought he felt something move behind him. He looked over his shoulder, but saw only shadows. Definitely no more caffeine. No matter how often he worked late, an empty office was always eerie. The darkness and silence where there was normally light and industry made him uneasy.

He stared blankly at the computer screen's wallpaper.

It displayed the UberSystems International logo, which focus groups had assured the Public Relations department made them think of both 'family values' and 'the brutal decimation of enemies'.

He opened his desk drawer and took out his emergency packet of cigarettes and lighter. Perhaps five minutes away from the computer would clear his head. He took his crumpled suit jacket from the back of the chair and walked past the empty banks of desks towards the lifts.

Before he was halfway there, he stopped. Had he heard laughing?

'Hello?' he called out. Silence. Satisfied that he was alone, he continued to the lifts and pressed the down button. He impatiently tapped the lighter against the cigarette packet as he waited for the doors to open. Shadows shifted behind him. Double doors swung back and forth in the half-light. He was being watched. He was sure of it. His finger jabbed repeatedly at the lift button.

The doors slid open with a *ping* and James jumped at the sound. Inside the lift stood Conrad West, CEO of UberSystems International. West was a financial rock star and his story was told in hushed tones in boardrooms across the land. He had exploded onto the scene from nowhere during the boom years of the 1980s and had built an empire of glass and steel that stretched from New York to Tokyo. He had an uncanny ability to spot trends and patterns in the swirling chaos of the markets. His

competitors respected and feared him and his management team were unwaveringly loyal to his cause. James hesitated despite his unease with staying on the floor. It would be like getting into a lift with an immaculately tailored nuclear device. It never felt safe being in an enclosed space with so much energy.

James stepped into the lift, pressed the button for the lower ground floor and felt the smooth descent begin.

'Still here, James?' West asked with an expensive smile.

James tried to avoid eye contact. 'Yes, Mr West. It's the Meyer project.'

West groaned. 'Is that still dragging on?'

'I think we're nearly at the end.'

West looked at the cigarette packet. James could sense the disapproval. 'Those things will kill you, you know.'

'I've been meaning to quit, but work's been rather stressful recently.'

'I know. Don't think it's gone unnoticed. We run a healthcare programme for smokers. Maybe you should sign up for it?'

'I will, Mr West.'

The lift stopped its gentle fall, bobbed slightly and the doors slid open. West turned and rested a reassuring hand on James's shoulder. 'What's our most valuable asset, James?'

'That really big diamond you bought at that auction last year?'

'People, James. People are our most valuable asset. I don't like to see those assets eroded.'

'Yes Mr West. Thank you. Good night.'

'Good night James. Don't work too late.' West stepped out of the lift. The doors started to close behind him, but he turned and held them open. 'It really was a very big diamond, wasn't it?'

'Yes, sir,' replied James.

'Excellent.' West let go of the door and the lift continued its journey. James slumped against the wall. He could feel the warm stinging pricks of sweat on his brow. He stumbled out of the lift into the car park beneath the building and collided with a body on the other side of the doors.

'Steady on there, Mr McCann.' James looked up and stared into the face of Keith, the ancient night shift security guard. His skin was like thin white paper, dried and stretched across a stick frame. An origami version of a man, delicate paper folds and creases where limbs should've been. James thought he would snap and tear in half if someone grabbed him too roughly. He didn't understand why they just didn't let Keith go. Not that there was much for him to do. Danger didn't walk up to the front desk of major corporations. It was usually already inside the building. James knew this from experience.

'Off home?' asked Keith. 'I didn't see your car here?'

James held up the cigarette packet. 'Just getting some

fresh air.'

'Right you are. Just you, the document management guys and Mr West left.'

'He's just gone.'

'Really? That's a pity. I wanted to talk to him about the security cameras.'

James smiled. Wherever he'd worked, there was always one security guard who thought that he owned the building.

'See you later, Keith.'

'Good night, Mr McCann.'

A fluorescent light blinked and buzzed, making the shadows jump and dance around James. He walked quickly across the empty bays and pushed open the fire door. He was grateful for the cool spring air on his hot face. He rubbed a hand on his wet forehead, matting his thinning hair. He lit a cigarette and hungrily drew the harsh smoke into his lungs, listening to the crackle of the burning tobacco above the soft murmur of the traffic above him. He exhaled as the nicotine flooded his body. A thought dropped into his pleasantly spinning head. He knew what was needed on the spreadsheet. It was obvious. He stubbed the cigarette out on the ground, crunching it under his foot. He had to get back to his desk before the answer fell out and disappeared forever.

The shadows reached out, grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and threw him back through the fire door. He crashed onto the tarmac with such force he felt the dull

snap of the bone in his left arm. Pain and panic gripped his palpitating heart so tightly he thought it would squeeze the life out of him then and there. He heard somebody crying and realised it was him.

James pushed himself up onto his knees with his good arm, the other hanging limp and useless. He began to crawl towards the lift, agony running through his body with every heavy sob.

Whoever, or whatever, had attacked him lurked close by in the shadows. James could feel the heat of its excitement; hear its breathing and smell the stench from its exertion. It was stalking him, toying with him. He felt a boot under his chest and he was flipped over onto his back. He kicked and floundered like a newborn turtle unable to right itself.

James stared up with wide eyes. The tears had reduced his vision to nothing but dark smudges and smears.

'Please...!' James gasped. Then teeth were at his throat, ripping at the flesh, puncturing and tearing into his windpipe. Thick warmth filled his mouth. He couldn't breathe. James was choking on his own blood. It spilled out and pooled around his head like a dark halo. He could feel himself draining away, his body leaking life with every misfiring beat of his heart. The world grew darker. As James had always suspected, there were no Pearly Gates. No choirs of angels or family members waited to receive him into the afterlife. There wasn't even a guy carrying a scythe.

There was nothing.

Chapter Three

The sun shone down from a piercing blue spring sky, illuminating the sheer majesty and beauty of the world in all its form and splendour. It was Monday morning and the universe was basically taking the piss.

Dave woke slowly. A sunbeam punctured a gap in the bedroom curtains and hit him square in the eyes like creation's flashlight. As he shifted under the duvet, he remembered that somebody was in bed with him. Somebody who turned over and slid an arm across him. Somebody who murmured nonsense and nuzzled his neck.

Since he'd started going out with Melanie at Christmas, he knew that this was how he wanted every morning to start. This simple moment; this fraction of a lifetime that he'd fantasised about on a hundred conference calls and craved through innumerable sleepless nights was now his. His breath fell into rhythm with hers, his chest rising and falling beneath her embrace. She stirred and pulled herself closer.

The four months he'd worked for Death had taught him about the vast, frightening randomness of life, but love was a conspiracy of two. They were atoms clinging together, tumbling and spinning through the infinitesimally small gap between birth and the grave. Love was a binding force.

'Good morning,' Melanie said, her voice thick with sleep.

Dave smiled. 'Morning.'

'Sleep well?' Dave nodded. 'Excellent. Care to finish what we started last night before you fell asleep?'

'I'd had a really hard day at wor--' Dave began before Melanie's hand slid down Dave's chest and beneath the covers, causing him to forget the entire English language.

In the warm, sleepy glow afterwards, Dave knew that he would have to drag his heavy body from Melanie's embrace and mentally prepared himself for what waited for him in the bathroom. Since starting his new job, he had learned a great deal about quantum physics. Theories stated that reality was a delicate balancing act and all the universal forces tiptoed along a knife edge. There was a central pivot around which all possibilities teetered precariously, ready to plunge into the chaotic abyss at any given moment. Dave was pretty sure this point was on the hot and cold taps of his bath.

Melanie's hand instinctively slid up to her naked neck and then felt the surface of the bedside table. 'Have you

seen my necklace?' she asked, a sliver of panic in her voice.

'No,' Dave blearily replied.

Melanie sat up sharply. 'It's got to be around here. Oh, it was a christening present.' She leaned over the side of the bed and looked underneath. 'It's filthy under here.'

Dave struggled to a sitting position and ran his hands along the carpet beneath the bed. A finger caught the thin chain and he pulled it up with a flick of the wrist. She gratefully took it from him and placed it around her neck. She played with the silver cross, stroking it with her fingers, then let it fall against her soft skin. 'I couldn't lose this. The Watkins are big on Catholicism.'

'Are you?'

'Me? Not so much but once a Catholic, always a Catholic. I'm guessing you put Jedi as your religion.'

'Lapsed. I had a crisis of faith after Episode I.'

Melanie hugged her legs beneath the duvet. 'I think we should all just worship cake.'

'That's a religion I could get on board with.'

'I bet we'd still find a way to ruin it, though. We'd soon break into factions. Victoria Sponge worshippers fighting the Battenberg heretics.'

'The streets running thick with ganache.'

'Cake, hope and charity. But the greatest of these is cake.'

'Amen.'

Melanie leaned forward and wrapped her arms around

Dave's neck, pulling him down onto the bed. They kissed long and slow. Eventually, Dave's head reached emotional escape velocity from his heart's gravitational pull and he unwrapped his limbs from hers.

Dave negotiated the Quantum Shower of Doom with the minimum of shocked screams. He dressed in black jeans, black hoodie and black Doc Martens and checked himself in the mirror. It was a look he was trying out. He'd experimented with dark suits and smart shoes, but they lacked the practicality and comfort of a heavy pair of boots and hard-wearing trousers.

He carried out a handful of household chores, made two fresh cups of coffee and went into the living room. He handed one to Melanie and perched on the arm of the chair in which she sat. Gary, Dave's flatmate, was laid out on the sofa watching children's television; his natural state of being. Dave had seen many strange things, but was still in awe of Gary's almost supernatural ability to do absolutely nothing.

'I've put the rubbish out,' Dave said to him. 'That's your one area of domestic responsibility.' Gary had been playing Bin Jenga again, trying to balance the rubbish as high as he could before it collapsed on the floor.

Gary's eyes didn't move from the creepy toy mice singing a high-pitched song on the screen. 'And you've snatched it away from me. I feel I'm no longer the master of my own destiny.'

'I'm just saying--'

Gary put a finger to his lips. 'Shhh. Can you hear that? It's Monday morning. If we keep still and stop talking, maybe it will pass us by.'

Melanie patted Dave on the knee. 'Yes, we're trying to watch telly.'

'Are you two ganging up on me? Why don't you form a little club?' asked Dave. 'Oh God. You're going to form a little club, aren't you?'

'We'll need a cool secret handshake,' said Melanie.

'Oh, definitely,' agreed Gary.

'What are you watching?' Dave asked.

'Bagpuss. You know it?'

Dave sipped his coffee. 'It's a bit before my time.'

'It's very interesting. It was made at the height of the Cold War and is basically a metaphor for Communist Russia.'

'You what?'

'You see those mice? They're the workers, the proletariat. They happily sing "We will fix it! We will fix it!" to show that they are content with what they have with no need for obtaining new material goods. Make do and mend.'

Dave watched a bookend in the shape of a woodpecker walk stiffly across the screen. 'Who's that then?'

'That's Professor Yaffle. He represents the bourgeois intelligentsia.'

From a wicker chair, a rag doll looking down serenely

at the mice and woodpecker. 'That's Madeleine. She's the aristocracy,' Gary said before Dave could ask. 'It's all very simple.'

'And Bagpuss?'

'He's just an old, saggy cloth cat. Baggy and a bit loose at the seams, but Emily loved him.'

Melanie glanced at her watch. She jumped out of the chair. 'Oh, shit. Look at the time. I've got to get to work.'

'Yeah,' said Gary. 'That office window isn't going to stare out of itself.'

'Actually, it's hectic at the moment. We're ridiculously understaffed. Every department is haemorrhaging workers,' she replied. She turned to Dave. 'You remember James McCann?'

Dave did, vaguely. 'Yeah.'

'They say he was working late a few days ago, then just got up and left. Nobody's seen him since. Stress got to him, they say.'

'They always know these things, whoever *they* are.'

'They do, don't they? We're having to get a load of temps in. Nobody knows what they're doing. It's chaos. I've got to go in early just to clear some of the backlog. Anyway, see you later.'

She ruffled Gary's hair, who scowled up at her, and went into the hallway. Dave followed her.

'So, I'll see you tonight?' she asked as she pulled on her dark overcoat. 'Mum and dad are looking forward to meeting you.'

'I can't wait.'

'Eight o'clock. Let's not have another incident like Valentine's. Those computer networks are going to have to learn to look after themselves.'

Struggling for a suitable cover story, he'd told her he now did "something with computers", which he'd correctly assumed would be dull enough to avoid having to go into any specifics. As well as love, Death claimed that St. Valentine was also the patron saint of crushing disappointment, humiliation and Chinese set meals for one. That night, Melanie ticked all those boxes. Even though his heart fractured a little every time he lied to her, Dave couldn't tell Melanie what he was really up to. Like the fire brigade on Bonfire Night, Valentine's Day was one of his busiest times of the year. The afterlife was filled with yearning as spirits tried to contact their loved ones.

The dead had given up on the idea of keeping to office hours and Melanie had become used to the cancelled dates, forgotten rendezvous and nights dozing in front of the television. Dave stifled a yawn and stretched his tired, knotted muscles. He felt as clumsy and rigid as one of the stop-motion models on the television.

'Aw, babe.' Melanie stroked his cheek softly. 'I don't like what this job is doing to you.'

'I'm alright.'

'I still can't believe that you accepted a job from a man you met in the pub. For all I know, you're a henchman to

a criminal.'

'He's a good guy. He's taught me a lot.'

'You could always come back to UberSystems. Christ knows we need the help. Nobody would think any less of you.'

'Wouldn't you?'

She just smiled and kissed him. 'Eight o'clock. Don't be late.'

Chapter Four

Death's office was located in an affluent area of the city where the local economy was supported by boutiques and artisan bakeries. Rows of Victorian buildings were chaotically squeezed together, rising up over a shallow hill. God's finger could've pushed the last one over and they'd tumble into each other like dominoes. Behind them, cranes scratched the grey sky as steel and money travelled upwards.

With his hoodie pulled up against the early morning chill, Dave walked past rows of BMW's and Chelsea Tractors and turned into Crow Road. He buzzed himself into the last unit at the end of the alley and climbed the stairs to the first floor.

The office was a small room full of filing cabinets and Scandinavian self-assembly furniture. Three doors led off it. One was the door Dave had just stepped through and one led to Death's inner office. The Infinite Monkeys with Infinite Typewriters were behind the third. They'd just signed with the William Morris Agency and had secured a

three picture deal with Universal.

Anne, Dave's manager, was stood at one of the cabinets. With her shock of short blonde hair, long skirt, bracelets and bangles, she had a certain New Age quality about her, but he'd learned that she had a steely resolve and an edge that could only have been formed by something dark in her past.

'Good morning,' he said as he helped himself to a cup of coffee. 'What's today's plan?'

Anne looked up from her filing. 'Morning. First, I need you to finish the paperwork on yesterday's exorcism.'

Dave sipped his drink and shuddered at the memory. 'That was a messy one. Do you know how difficult it is to get ectoplasm out of clothes?'

'Then we're going on another field trip.' Anne passed him a newspaper and tapped an article with her finger. Dave skimmed it. Letitia Bowen, a thirteen-year-old girl who had recently moved into a house in East London, was at the centre of a series of inexplicable phenomena. Items moved in her presence without anybody touching them. She had been seen levitating above her bed and the walls of her flat ran with blood. This sort of thing unnerved the landlord as it hadn't shown up on the original property survey and wasn't covered in the rental agreement. He was threatening to evict Letitia and her mother unless all supernatural activity ceased immediately.

'Weird,' Dave said.

'Weird is what we do.'

'It's not going to take too long, is it? I've got plans this evening--'

'Anne! Could I get some coffee, please?' Death shouted from behind his door. Dave and Anne rolled their eyes at each other. Dave fetched a fresh cup and they went into the inner office. Death sat with his feet up on the desk as he read something on an old cathode ray computer monitor.

'Good morning, Death,' Anne said.

'Steve.'

'I'm not calling you Steve.'

'Try it. You'll get used to it.'

'I doubt it.'

Dave put the coffee mug on the desk. He was suddenly aware he still had his black hood pulled over his head and pushed it back down.

'Thanks, Dave. No, keep it up. It's a good look,' said Death.

'Anything to report from last night?' asked Anne.

'The world's oldest man died. Again.'

Anne tutted. 'He keeps doing that.'

'I'm surprised the newspapers haven't started calling it the curse of the world's oldest man.' Death and Anne smiled at their joke. At least, Dave assumed Death smiled. He had never seen what was beneath the hood. 'Then there was a food poisoning at an Elvis convention. Twelve Elvis. Elves. Elviseses. What's the plural of Elvis?'

Dave frowned as he pondered the question. 'Elvii?'

'Twelve Elvii. That'll do. Doomed to forever impersonate The King. They were all very impressed that I'd met him, though.'

'He's actually dead, then?' Dave made a mental note to challenge that particular conspiracy theory the next time Gary brought it up.

'Yes. What are you two up to today?'

'Looks like we've got something over in Stratford,' Anne replied. 'It shouldn't take too long and then Dave can make his evening plans.'

'What are you up to?' Death asked.

'Dinner with Melanie's parents,' replied Dave.

'Well, we'd better make sure you make that,' Death said. 'We don't want another Valentine's Day cock up.'

'Is that never speaking of it again?'

Anne tried to see what was on Death's computer screen. 'What are you actually doing?' she asked. She always felt uneasy when Death was on the computer.

'Just checking my emails. Now that I've managed to log in. Soon, passwords will need to contain at least eight characters, a story arc, a major theme, subtext and pass the Bechdel Test. And why do people use that handwritten font on their email signature? Do they expect people to go "oh, how sweet. He signed it himself?"' He sat bolt upright. 'Hey! I've won the Spanish lottery! I just need to give them some bank details.' He began typing on the keyboard then stopped. He looked up at Anne. 'Did I

enter the Spanish lottery?'

Anne leant over and hit the 'delete' key on the keyboard. 'No, you didn't. I'm constantly surprised by how stupid a centuries-old being can be.'

'I'll have you know that the other three Horsemen and I were the Wise Men in Bethlehem.'

'No you weren't,' replied Anne.

'Four Horsemen?' asked Dave.

'Yes,' said Death.

'As in Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse? You see, you say "Horsemen", I hear "Apocalypse".'

'Yes.'

'Death, War, Famine... ' Dave tried to remember the last name. '... And Ringo?'

The air between Death and Dave crackled. 'His name is Conquest,' Death muttered darkly, 'and I would ask you to say his name with the respect it deserves.'

Dave looked at the ground. 'Sorry,' he mumbled sheepishly. 'Wasn't there a Pestilence?'

'A human construct from the beginning of the twentieth century. An attempt to personify the guilt you felt for the disease and plague you carried with you in your attempts to civilise the world.'

'Right.'

'Conquest, Famine, War and I heard on the grapevine there was something going on, so we went to have a look. Those three only get mentioned because they brought presents. I couldn't find anything, but that's what happens

when you leave your Christmas shopping until the last minute. To be honest, if we'd known what a big deal you lot would make about it, we would've made more of an effort. I said to War afterwards, who buys a baby myrrh?' He sighed sadly. 'Good times.'

When Death talked like this, Dave was never sure whether he was telling the truth, misremembering or just plain making it up. He once told him that there was a curve in the space-time continuum on Friday afternoons, which explained why they went on for so long and nothing got done. Dave didn't mind. He enjoyed hearing his stories.

'I thought you said you'd never met God?' Dave said.

'Nope, never met the fellah. But, wherever he is, I'm sure he's looking down on you lot and shouting "Bloody hell! That's not what I meant at all!". The Ten Commandments? They're such a downer. Don't get me wrong. They're a very good starting point, but they're so negative. Thou shalt not do this and thou shalt not do that. What about things you shalt? Thou shalt have a nice cup of tea and a biscuit, for example.'

It wasn't even nine o'clock and Dave was dealing with the fundamental nature of humanity and the universe. He wouldn't be doing that if he'd stayed at UberSystems International. 'But he exists?'

'No idea, but I knew the other guy and I speak from personal experience when I say you lot are better off when their type doesn't get involved.'

Chapter Five

Anne and Dave headed east from the office in the Deathmobile. Clouds gathered above them and soon the patter of rain rattled off the car's thin metal roof. Anne was hunched forward, trying to see out of the windscreen.

'So, what happened to the other Horsemen of the Apocalypse? They decide they weren't needed, or something? That we're more than capable of throwing ourselves in the abyss?' Dave asked.

Anne simultaneously hit the car's brakes and its horn as a lorry pulled out from a junction in front of them. Dave gripped the door handle tighter. Anne was a terrible driver and he didn't want to deal with Death as a customer instead of an employee. 'I don't know the whole story,' she said, 'There was some unpleasantness. With Satan.'

'Wow. I'm sorry I asked.' Dave stared out at the crowded streets. He thought of the billions unaware of the bigger world on their doorstep. He was almost envious of them as he weighed up the burden of his ever-growing

knowledge. 'Anne?'

'Yes, Dave?'

'Are we henchmen?' he almost whispered.

'What makes you say that?'

'We work for a demon. One who was sent here to destroy the human race.'

'He's over that now. It was just a phase he was going through.' She made a rude gesture to a pedestrian running out into the road. 'I wouldn't call us henchmen.'

'Then what's my job title?'

Anne thought this over for a moment. 'Trainee With Afterlife Transition Senses.'

'That spells T.W.A.T.S.'

'Does it?' Anne asked innocently.

The car pulled up outside a mid-terrace house Dave estimated had been built some time before the Luftwaffe bombed large chunks of the surrounding area.

Anne got out and ran to the back of the car where she opened the small boot. She returned with a rucksack over one shoulder and leaned into the car.

'Come on. Just follow my lead. Keep your eyes open for anything unusual.'

They jogged down the front path, their jackets pulled up against the rain. Anne rang the doorbell as they both tried to squeeze beneath the small porch.

'It's the glamour that attracted me to this job,' Dave muttered as the rainwater ran down his neck. Through the

frosted glass, he could see a blurred figure approaching. The door opened and the blur solidified into a short, stocky woman with a kind face. She didn't just look tired, Dave thought. She looked like she had been drained of all her energy.

'Christine Bowen?' Anne said, thrusting her hand out. 'Anne Mitchell from Ghost Watchers Productions. We spoke on the phone yesterday about appearing on the show?'

Christine Bowen, caught off guard, limply grabbed at Anne's hand. 'Oh hello. Yes.'

'This is Dave Marwood,' Anne pointed a thumb over her shoulder. 'He's one of our junior researchers. May we come in?'

'Junior?' Dave repeated.

Before Christine could answer, Dave was carried into the hallway by the force of Anne's words.

'Let me get you a towel,' Christine said. She went into a cloakroom by the stairs and came out with two fluffy white towels. Dave enjoyed the warm fuzz of the cotton against his face and neck. When he was finished, he looked at the blank magnolia walls and sanded floorboards. He could detect the faint odour of fresh paint and remembered that the newspaper article said Christine was a relatively recent tenant.

'How are you holding up?' Anne asked with genuine concern.

'Not too well, actually,' replied Christine and she

gasped back a sob. Anne smiled sympathetically, giving her a second to compose herself. 'Look, I'm not sure about this. After the newspaper article...' She trailed off.

'I promise you we'll handle this with the utmost discretion. Isn't that right, Dave?'

Dave gave what he hoped was his most understanding smile. 'The utmost.'

'Is it possible to have a chat with Letitia?' Anne asked.

'Yes. She's in her bedroom. She doesn't come out of there much now.'

'Shoes off, Dave,' Anne ordered.

'Yes, mum,' Dave replied. He kicked off his scuffed boots. Christine, Anne and Dave climbed the stairs, Christine leading the way and Dave bringing up the rear. He smiled to himself. Forget about impersonating a police officer or a government scientist. These days, if you want to impress someone just tell them that you could get them on television.

Christine knocked on a door across from the top of the stairs. 'Letitia, love. The people from the telly are here. The ones who say they can help. Do you want to talk to them?'

Dave heard a muffled response and Christine turned back to them. 'Come in.'

Letitia's bedroom generally resembled that of most thirteen-year-old girls. Posters of well-scrubbed boy bands were stuck to the wall. Cuddly toys that she was too old for, but couldn't bring herself to get rid of, sat on

shelves. A surly teenager sat cross-legged on a pink duvet covering a metal-framed bed.

Where it differed was the collection of objects floating in the air. Hairbrushes, books and make-up boxes lazily orbited Letitia's head like tiny pastel-coloured planets.

'I think this counts as unusual,' Dave said.

'You see our problem?' said Christine. 'Nobody believes us, so nobody will come here to help.'

Acclimatised to the strange over the last few months, Dave was curious more than anything. 'Have you thought about filming it? Putting it online?'

'Whatever it is, it burns out whatever we try and use to film it. I went through three phones before I worked that one out,' Christine replied.

Dave took a step forward. 'How are you, Letitia?' he asked, trying to ignore the pencil case hovering into view.

'How do you think?' Letitia pouted.

'Letitia!' barked her mother. 'It started just after we moved in. It seems to centre around her.'

Anne took a computer tablet out of the rucksack. 'There are lots of poltergeist cases that focus on adolescent girls. We think they're attracted to the life force as they approach womanhood. Like moths to a bright light.'

Dave walked back over to Anne. When he saw what she was reading on the tablet he said, 'Can I have a quick word with you outside?'

They stepped out of the room and Dave pulled the door closed. 'Are you using Wikipedia?' he hissed angrily.

'It's worked perfectly well in the past,' Anne said defensively.

'We're not going to screw her up or anything, are we?' Dave asked.

'No. Poltergeists are rare and tricky to deal with. It's all a bit hit and miss. The problem is they have no form, so our usual methods don't work. They're angry energy. Trust me on this.'

Dave was in unfamiliar territory and Anne was the closest thing to an expert. 'Alright, but the moment that it looks like we're frying her brain you stop.'

'Of course.'

They plastered grins on their faces and walked back into the room. Dave's mobile started to ring. He took it out of his pocket and looked at the number. It was Melanie.

'Sorry. I need to get this,' he said sheepishly. He answered the call. 'Hiya. Fine. You? That sounds great.' He glanced up. 'Hold on a second.' He put his hand over the phone's mouthpiece and nodded to Letitia. 'Should her head be doing that?'

Letitia's eyes had rolled back up into her head, which was slowly revolving on her shoulders. Christine began to scream, but smothered it with a hand over her mouth. They watched in horror as Letitia's head reached a point

where her neck should've snapped, but it just kept on going until it had rotated a full three hundred and sixty degrees.

'I get the feeling that, whatever this thing is, it doesn't like mobile phones,' Anne said.

Dave remembered the phone in his hand and spoke into it. 'Look, I'm in the middle of something. What time tonight? No, I won't be late. I'll see you there.' Dave hung up.

'If we've all finished taking personal phone calls in work hours, let's get started, shall we?' Anne said.

Several hours later, it wasn't just the restless spirit that was cross. They'd tried everything from Pagan rituals to Christian prayers, but still the poltergeist refused to leave Letitia alone. Dave's frustration was coiled tight around an iron core of impatience. A teddy bear floated through the air and gently bumped into the side of his head. 'Oh, come on! I've got a date this evening!' he roared. He took a step forward and an unseen power swatted him to one side like he was an annoying bug. He crashed into the wall and slid down onto the floor. Dave groaned in agony. Sometimes, his job seemed like a fairground ghost train; scary and exciting but safe. Moments like this reminded him he was confronting the dead and he didn't know what they were capable of.

Anne was studying the tablet's screen and barely noticed the fuss around her. 'Here's something we haven't

tried. Apparently, burning fresh sage will cleanse the spirit.'

'We've got some mixed spices in the kitchen,' said Christine.

'I don't think that's going to work. Is there anywhere we can get some?'

'There's a Tesco Express at the end of the street.'

'Perfect. Dave, can you pop out?'

Dave rolled onto his back. 'I really need to go. I'm going to be late for meeting Melanie's parents.'

'Nothing less than the fate of a young girl's soul hangs in the balance this night,' Anne said.

Dave picked himself up off of the floor. If the stars and, more importantly, the trains aligned he might still be able to complete his task and make it to the restaurant in time. 'Alright. I know it's serious when you start sounding like a bad fantasy novel. Can I claim it back on expenses?' The look Anne gave him made him realise that this wasn't the best time to discuss this.

'You're not actually television researchers, are you?' Christine asked, passing a set of door keys to Dave. 'It doesn't matter anymore. Let yourself in. I don't want to leave Letitia.'

Dave went to the shop and bought some sage. He also picked up a chocolate bar because he'd learned you really shouldn't try to communicate with the dead on an empty stomach. When he returned to the house, the interior had darkened as the evening light grew fainter. He stood at the

foot of the stairs. The staccato sound of the rain against the window filled the silence of the house.

He mounted the first step and heard a low rumble. It grew in intensity until his whole body shook as if caught in an earthquake. He gripped the bannister to steady himself and could hear items in other rooms crash to the floor. Soon, the groans of the house died down until the only movement was the dust motes dancing in the thin shafts of light.

Dave relaxed again, and that was when the invisible energy punched him off his feet for a second time. He crashed to the floor, gasping as the wind was knocked out of him. Something in his head screamed for him to run out the front door and never look back, but he wasn't sure if the voice was his own. He stood up, dusted himself down and renegotiated the stairs. Dave climbed and turned the tight corner when he reached the top.

Uneasy, he opened the bedroom door. The room beyond was black and as silent as the grave.

'Hello?' His hand grasped for the light switch on the other side of the wall, but nothing happened when he flicked it. He stepped into the gloom and the door behind him slammed closed, plunging the room into total darkness. Dave fumbled in his pocket for his phone, which had a built-in flashlight. When he turned it on, he found himself staring into the blank eyes of Letitia floating an inch away from his face. Dave stumbled back and fell to the floor, screaming in shock and terror. In the

beam of the flashlight, he could see the unconscious bodies of Anne and Christine.

Her feet six inches off of the floor, Letitia drifted towards him. Dave shouted out the first thing that came to mind, 'The power of Christ compels you!'

Letitia stopped in mid-air, her face twisted in agony. 'Not that bloody film,' she said in a voice that wasn't her own. 'I saw that when it first came out in 1973. What a load of rubbish.'

'Wh-- What?' Dave stammered.

'Load of rubbish. I don't normally go in for that sort of malarky, but everyone else was goin' so I thought I should see what all the fuss was about.'

'What?' Dave asked again, because he couldn't think of anything else.

'That picture house 'as gone now, of course. Used to take my Dorothy there when we was courtin'. Everything's changed now. You can't stop progress, she'd tell me, but it'd be a bit bloody nicer if it didn't go so bloody fast. Like those phones you all carry around with you these days. Don't get a minute's peace, but I'm stuck 'ere.'

It was becoming apparent Letitia was possessed by a grumpy old man. 'It's not really fair on the girl, is it?' Dave said.

'I suppose you're right. She seems a nice enough lass. She just felt so warm and it's so, so cold when you don't have a body. Especially since the dark appeared.'

'What dark?'

'Can't you see it? Can't you feel it? It's bloody everywhere.'

'What does it look like?'

'It's drifting down the streets like a wind is blowing it around. It gets everywhere. It clings to everything. It chokes you. We used to get some right pea soupers back when I were a kid. Couldn't see your hand in front of your face.'

Dave took a step towards Letitia, trying to avert a trip down memory lane. 'That's incredibly fascinating, but I'm working in a time frame here. If you could possess me, please, I think I can help you now.'

'Really?'

'We can give it a go.'

'You're not as warm as she is.'

'It'll only take a second. If you don't like it, you can go always go back to her. Please.'

'If you say so.' Letitia's eyes closed and she slumped lifelessly to the carpet. Dave tasted rolling tobacco and his head felt uncomfortably full, as if there was something sharing the space. The pressure pushed against his skull and he worried that it might explode. Then there was a flash of magnesium white behind his eyes and he was alone in his mind. Exhausted, he dropped to his knees. The bedroom light flickered back into life. Christine, Letitia and Anne woke slowly and groggily.

'It's gone,' whispered Letitia and hugged her mother.

Anne rubbed her temples. 'How did you do it?'
Dave shrugged his shoulders. 'I asked politely.'
'You asked politely?' Anne repeated and then she
laughed.

'See?' Christine said to Letitia. 'That's where good
manners gets you.'

Christine saw them to the front door. She insisted that
they take some cake with them. It was the least she could
do to say thank you.

'Our boss will appreciate this,' Anne said.

Dave checked his phone. There was a collection of
missed calls and text messages from Melanie growing
exponentially in anger as he scrolled through them. He
tried calling her, thinking of an excuse as he waited for
the call to connect, but it went straight through to her
voicemail.

When they were back in the car, Dave told Anne what
the poltergeist had said.

'What's the dark?' he asked when he'd finished.

Anne shook her head. 'No idea. Never heard of it.' She
looked at her watch. 'It's getting late. Where do you want
dropping off?'

Anne drove Dave across town. The whole while, Dave
fidgeted in the passenger seat like a man being
transported to his own execution. Every nerve ending
fizzed with dread and terror, even more than when he was
contacting the dead. He rehearsed what he would say to

Melanie, but his mouth was full of teeth and tongue.

Sooner than he'd hoped, he was stood at Melanie's front door and he couldn't put off the inevitable.

'Good luck,' Anne called out of the car's window as she drove off. He pushed the buzzer for Melanie's flat.

'Yes?' a voice crackled through the speaker. Emma. Melanie's flatmate.

'Is Melanie there?'

'She doesn't want to talk to you, Dave,' Emma replied with undisguised glee. Since he'd met her, she had made it very obvious that she didn't like Dave. She'd probably said more words to him in that one sentence than she had in the entire time he'd known her. The shrug was her primary form of communication.

'I just need a couple of minutes. Can you let me in?'

There was a pause before Emma replied, probably while she consulted with Melanie. 'No.'

Dave sighed and pressed the button. 'Just tell her there was this work thing. Lives were in danger. It's all a bit complicated.'

'She says you're a terrible liar, Dave,' Emma said. 'Personally, I'm sure your employers wouldn't trust someone like you with that kind of responsibility. Just go home.'

The intercom went dead, leaving Dave standing miserably in the rain.

Chapter Six

21 October 1872

The ritual was about to begin.

The sigil of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse had been drawn with salt on the cold stone floor of the cellar; a diamond within a circle. Black candles stood at the four points of the diamond, their flickering light painting shadows across the blood red fabrics hanging from the brick walls.

Seven robed figures stood before the crude altar. Archibald Christou, occultist and self-appointed High Priest of the Righteous Order of Armageddon, clutched an ancient and heavy leather bound book to his chest. It had taken many years and a large chunk of his family's fortune to obtain the last remaining copy of *The Dark and Unusual Works of Cedric the Perpetually Baffled*. He savoured the moment. This would be an event to be remembered until the end of time which, if he'd interpreted the prophecies correctly, was about five

minutes away.

The group waited patiently until Christou felt the energies in the room align themselves. Satisfied, he opened the grimoire and, with great reverence, began to read the evocation from its dry pages.

'War, with your sword of flame, I summon you.
Famine, with your scales of judgement, I summon you.
Conq--'

'I really want a wee,' whispered one of the other cult members.

'I asked if anybody needed the bathroom before we started,' Christou replied testily.

'I didn't need to go then.'

'Maybe some of us shouldn't have drunk so much ceremonial wine,' suggested another worshipper.

'You're just going to have to hold on to it. I'm not stopping now.' Christou turned his attention back to the sacred text. 'Great. Now I've lost my place.' He ran his finger along the page. 'War... Flaming sword... blah blah... Famine... Right, here we are. Conquest, with your crown so that you may rule over the dominions, I summon you. And Death, with your scythe so that you may reap the souls of all men, I summon you.'

The ritual was complete. Cedric the Perpetually Baffled had been unclear about what should happen next, but Christou reckoned it'd be pretty bloody spectacular. The Righteous Order of Armageddon waited. Nothing. They waited a bit longer. The awestruck hush became an

awkward silence. Somebody cleared their throat. 'I don't think it's--'

The candles erupted into fountains of fire, the flames licking at the low ceiling. The air above the sigil ripped apart with a sound like all of humanity sighing. The room was filled with a light so intense the bones could be seen in the hands the onlookers used to shield their eyes.

When the flames, smoke and light had faded, four dark figures stood in the circle. The worshippers fell to their knees, their eyes cast down in supplication to their masters.

'What the bloody hell was all that about?' asked War.

Christou raised his head. The Four Horsemen were not as he had imagined them, especially War who was naked, wet, covered in bubbles and holding a rubber duck. The room was silent but for the soft hiss of a candle being snuffed out by the bath water dripping from his body. Slowly, all eyes in the room turned to him.

'What are you lot staring at? This is just how I like to unwind.'

Christou cleared his throat. This wasn't going how he had expected, but he pressed on regardless. 'In the name of my Lord and Master Beelzebub--'

'That idiot?' muttered War.

'--Beelzebub, I have summoned you so that you may carry out the sole task for which you were created.' He bowed his head with what he thought was the right amount of respect.

'We'd rather not,' replied Conquest.

'Pardon?'

'No, thanks. If it's all the same to you.'

Christou was confused. Had the ritual gone wrong somehow? 'Are you not the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?'

'Yes.'

'And are you not charged with the destruction of the world, bringing about the glorious rise of Beelzebub?'

Death coughed loudly. It sounded, to Christou, like a rude word.

'We're not into that any more.'

'What?'

'That whole wrathful, end of days, fire and brimstone thing? Not our bag.'

'Oh, I don't know. I still like a bit of wrath every now and again,' said War.

'Is this going to take long?' Famine asked. 'I've got tickets to the theatre tonight.'

'Famine makes a good point,' Conquest said to the room. 'This all a bit rude, isn't it? There we all were, enjoying our evenings and then, without so much as a by-your-leave, you babble some incantations and inconvenience us.'

'Well, pardon me for trying to end the world,' said Christou defensively.

'And why would you want to do that?'

'The prophecies said so,' Christou replied, a note of

doubt creeping into his voice.

Conquest gave him an understanding smile. 'They always do.'

'But we have been preparing for this day for years.'

Conquest placed a comforting arm around Christou's shoulder. 'It must be very disappointing. How about we go and have a pint and see if we can't sort this whole thing out?'

'That'd be nice.'

'Beer? Excellent,' said War. 'Could somebody get me a towel?'

Everybody shuffled out of the room and up the stairs.

'This is the worst end of the world cult I've been in so far,' somebody at the back muttered.

War, in a borrowed robe, dragged everybody into the first hostelry he found. The saloon bar was hot and cramped, the working classes trying some of the newfangled binge drinking that had been created by the recently introduced licensing laws. Thick grey clouds of tobacco smoke circled above the drinkers' heads, threatening to create their own weather pattern and rain down sweat and spilled beer.

The Righteous Order of Armageddon sat nervously at a large table at the back of the pub nursing their pints of ale. They were a small group of middle-aged men and Archibald Christou was the most middle-aged of them all, grey and bland. Most of the order saw it as an eccentric

gentlemen's club, and an excuse to get out of the house once a week. Not only was Christou a prophet, he was a prophet with an excellent wine cellar. They were more than happy to put up with a bit of chanting and incense as long as he opened a few bottles of claret afterwards, but they were totally unprepared for any of the rituals actually working.

They listened politely as Famine complained about missing his play and War told them stories of his victories in battle. Death sat there in silence. He was just happy to be drinking with his friends. Since fashions had changed, it had become more difficult for him to be seen in public without looking conspicuous.

Conquest sipped his pint and looked Christou in the eye. 'So what's all this nonsense about ending the world?'

'Have you seen the state of the place?' replied Christou. 'Wars in the colonies. Disease rife at home. Our cities are awash with the destitute, who we're choking with the coal we burn in the factories where they earn a pittance. We're killing each other and ourselves. We're too sick to survive. It seemed the kindest thing to do. Wipe the face of the Earth clean and start again.'

'So how long have you been trying to do this?'

'Twenty years or so. Since my fiancée died.'

'So you decided to end it all? That's a bit unfair on everyone else isn't it?'

Christou's nervousness turned to anger. 'She was the only good and pure thing in this filthy world and she'd

been taken from me. Is that fair? Without her here, there didn't seem to be much point to anything else. I looked for signs and I found them.'

'There are always signs if you look hard enough.'
Conquest turned to the other end of the table. 'Famine, do you remember that fellow in Hungary?'

Famine stopped his conversation about nineteenth century theatre. 'The one who thought that potatoes were the work of the devil?'

'They had eyes, you see,' Conquest said to Christou. 'If you ate them, he said, the devil could watch your soul.'

'That's just mad,' said Christou.

Conquest shrugged. 'One man's madness is another's philosophy.'

'So what do I do now?'

'Have you thought about getting a hobby? Some charity work, perhaps? Philanthropy is very popular right now.'

'I don't know...'

'You can't change the world with grand gestures. You have to do it in tiny increments. Now, who wants another drink?'

The drinking continued and once they let their hoods and their hair down, the Righteous Order of Armageddon were a decent bunch of lads. If you forgot that they'd tried to destroy the world earlier on in the evening.

When the singing started, Conquest excused himself and stepped out into the crisp autumn night. Once again, a

human had surprised him. Compared to the centuries that Conquest had walked the Earth, Christou's sad and lonely existence was but a blink of an eye. Yet he had experienced something that the Horsemen never had. Love. All the millions who'd lived and died in his time had too. They gave their mortal hearts to each other knowing that every romance was doomed.

And when the inevitable happened, this man would prefer that the world did not exist, rather than live in it without his lost love.

It was about a girl.

When it came down to it, it was always about a girl.

Chapter Seven

Death stepped out of his office. 'Why did the chicken cross the road?' he asked.

Dave looked up from his computer. He'd spent the day researching hauntings, grabbing snippets of information from newspaper articles, blogs and urban myth websites, but was finding it hard to concentrate. All he could think of was Melanie. She hadn't replied to any of his text messages or phone calls since the night before. 'Pardon?'

'Why did the chicken cross the road?' repeated Death.

Anne sipped her cup of tea. 'I visited a farm when I was a girl. Have you ever looked into the cold, unfeeling eyes of a chicken? Some things are best left unknown.'

'Seriously,' said Death. 'Do it properly. Why did the chicken cross the road?'

Dave exhaled heavily. 'I don't know. Why did the chicken cross the road?'

'To get to the other side.'

'Excellent,' Anne said. 'Is there a reason why you're telling us a joke older than you are?'

'Don't you see?' replied Death. 'To get to the other side.'

'It doesn't get any funnier if you repeat it.'

'It means that the chicken is dead. It never occurred to me before. It's blown my mind.'

Dave looked at his watch. 'I could spend the rest of the day talking about the spiritual life of poultry, but that's me done.' He turned the computer off and pulled an extravagantly large bunch of flowers from under the desk.

'Going to see Melanie?' Anne asked.

Dave brushed the heads of the roses. 'Yeah, I'm going to surprise her after work and take her to her favourite restaurant.'

'I'll never understand human displays of affection,' Death said. 'I want to see you naked. Here, have some dead foliage.'

'Don't listen to him,' Anne said to Dave. 'I think it's romantic.'

Dave picked up his bag and threw it over his shoulder. 'Thanks. I just hope she does too. Wish me luck.'

'There's no such thing as luck,' Death said. 'Just a series of probable outcomes perceived from a certain point of a certain reality.'

'You smooth talker,' Dave replied as he shut the office door behind him.

Dave stared up at the thirty floors of UberSystems

International Tower pointing up to the blue evening sky. The glass geometry seemed smaller than the last time he'd seen it. Over-caffeinated office workers spun in and out through the revolving doors. He followed a smartly dressed group into the foyer, his footsteps instinctively falling in time with theirs.

His boots squeaked on the polished marble floor as he passed Doric pillars stretching up to the glimmering lights on the high ceiling. The large space had been constructed to convince visitors that an intimidating slab of Roman architecture had been squeezed into the ground floor of a modern office complex. He asked for Melanie at the reception desk that seamlessly rose up from the floor as if the whole lobby had been carved from one solid piece of stone. He stood to one side and waited, self-consciously playing with the bunch of flowers. He watched the banks of lifts behind the reception as they whisked passengers up to the gladiatorial arenas of middle management. Soon, his attention was grabbed by the sound of a metallic tapping on glass. Death was stood outside, banging the tip of his scythe against the window. Dave looked around and, when he was satisfied that nobody else could see him waving from the street, he walked back outside.

'What are you doing here?' Dave whispered.

Death produced Dave's mobile phone from beneath his cloak. 'You left this in the office.'

Dave casually glanced over his shoulder and then took the phone. He held it up to his ear, pretending to talk into

it; a technique he'd developed as a way to hold conversations with Death in public.

'Thanks very much. I'll see you tomorrow.'

Death looked up and carefully examined the steel and glass structure stretching up into the sky. Dave could tell something was on his mind. 'What's bothering you?'

'You used to work here, right?'

'Yes.'

'Did you notice anything unusual?'

'Apart from everyone who worked in I.T.?'

'Unusual in a supernatural sense.'

'Not that I can remember. Why?'

Death started to push his hands against the window as if he was feeling for something and then looked back at Dave. 'I'm sure it's nothing.'

'What are you doing here? You dragged me out of a meeting,' a voice from behind Dave said. He span round to see Melanie, her arms folded across her chest and an unimpressed look on her face.

'I'll call you back,' Dave said into his phone.

Death patted him on the shoulder. 'I'll leave you to it.'

Dave felt a faint breeze behind him as the air rushed in to fill the gap where Death had stood.

He smiled and thrust the flowers towards Melanie. 'I got these for you.'

He felt foolish when she ignored them, but he continued with the speech he'd rehearsed on the way over. 'Look, Melanie, I know I haven't been the best--'

'Maybe you should let me speak first?' Melanie said. She sighed and played nervously with her necklace. 'I know this probably isn't the best time to do this, out in the street, but when is a good time?'

The mental scaffolding supporting Dave's fragile smile fell away and his face crumbled into a frown.

'At the start, it was all very romantic, with your declarations in the office and stuff,' Melanie said, 'but you've got to have something to back it up, y'know?'

'I'll make it up to you,' Dave replied, 'If you'll let me.'

'You've let me down too many times. My birthday...'

'I can explain that.'

'That weekend away...'

'I had a good excuse.'

'Valentine's Day, last night. Do you know how humiliating it is?'

Dave looked at the ground, ashamed. 'I'm sorry.'

'I can't begin to put into words how angry I am with you.'

'You could always try it through the medium of interpretive dance?'

Dave wanted to hear the sound of laughter; a sign that there was hope.

'You're not going to joke your way out of this one,' Melanie snapped. 'When you do show up in my life, all you want to do is sit around in your pants eating crisps.'

Dave looked up. 'That's not fair!'

'Isn't it?'

Dave looked back down at his shoes. 'It's not always crisps.'

'I want to go out with someone I can spend quality time with. I want to go out with someone because I like them and we have fun, not out of a sense of morbid curiosity wondering how they'll let me down next.'

Dave was reminded of his car accident a few months ago. Time slowed as he braced himself for the grim inevitability of impact.

Melanie took a deep breath. 'I think, perhaps, we need a break.'

The sound of pedestrians and snarled-up traffic reduced to a distant hum in Dave's ears. His stomach dropped as if he was plummeting from the top floor of the building he stood in front of.

A man appeared at Melanie's shoulder. 'Is this guy bothering you?' he asked in a cut glass accent. With his muscular frame, expensive suit and golden mane of hair, he looked like a lion that had been privately educated and given a gift card for Savile Row.

Melanie wiped a finger under her eye. 'No, this is Dave. Dave, this is Jeremy.'

'The mythical Mr Marwood!' Jeremy said, snatching Dave's free hand and shaking it firmly.

'Hi,' Dave managed to mumble.

'I was beginning to think that you were an excuse that Melanie uses when I ask her out.' Jeremy laughed; a braying guffaw that Dave wanted to stop by removing his

larynx. 'So, tell me, what brings you back to these parts?'

'If you don't mind, Jeremy, Melanie and I were in the middle of something,' Dave replied coldly.

'Of course. Very sorry to bother.' Jeremy touched Melanie lightly on the shoulder, looked into her wet eyes. 'I'll see you inside?' he asked, a note of concern in his voice. Melanie nodded and Jeremy took this as the signal to leave them alone.

When Jeremy was out of earshot, Dave said, 'I'll try harder. I'll be better.'

Melanie's voice caught on the edge of a sob. 'What you need to do is sort out what's important to you.' She looked at her watch. 'I need to get back.'

'Whatever,' Dave replied sulkily.

Melanie looked as if she was about to say something, but then turned and went back into the building.

Through the glass, Dave could see that Jeremy had waited for her. He offered her his handkerchief, touched her elbow to guide her towards the lifts. Each moment of contact sent a jolt of jealousy through Dave. He'd seen Jeremy's type many times before. Dave was already imagining him offering his well-tailored shoulder for Melanie to cry on, suggesting drinks after work if she wanted to talk about things. He'd tell her how she could do so much better, undermining her already shaken confidence in Dave.

Dave took a calming breath. Now was not the time for petty envy and rivalries. This situation required a mature,

measured approach. He knew what needed to be done.
He would get very, very drunk.

Chapter Eight

Needing the emotional anaesthetic that only alcohol could provide, Dave found a pub, went in and bought himself a pint. Then a second one to keep the first one company. A third followed. Then another because three's a crowd, while four is a gathering. He bought a fifth along with some pork scratchings, because he decided he might as well make a party of it.

A band were playing by the time Gary arrived. Tucked away in the corner, as if they were an embarrassment, they weren't so much murdering the songs as bludgeoning them to death and then violating the corpses afterwards. Sat across the grubby table from Dave, Gary listened to him drunkenly describe the events of the evening.

'Why didn't you call me sooner?' he asked as he slurped his frothy bitter.

'I needed some time to think.'

'Come to any conclusions?'

'Yes. The pork scratchings here are terrible. And I've written a haiku about relationships.'

He pushed a scrap of paper across the table. Gary picked it up and scanned the words. 'You've just written the word "AAARGH!" seventeen times?'

'I admit that it needs some work.'

'It's good to see you're taking it so well. As my mother always told me, if you love someone set them free. There's a possibility that they won't press charges.'

They sat in silence for a moment, listening to the band. 'Is this how you thought that life would turn out? Sat here listening to the wankers up there?' Dave nodded towards the musicians, tiredness creeping into his voice.

'I know they're not very good, but there's no need to be like that.'

'No, that's what they call themselves.' Dave picked up a beer-soaked flyer from the table and passed it to Gary. 'The Wankers. I was talking to the drummer. It's meant to be post-ironic or something.'

Gary put the flyer to one side. 'So, what are you going to do?'

'Well, I was planning on getting drunk.'

'I meant about Melanie.'

Dave winced. Just the sound of her name was like a stab to the heart. 'I don't know. Being a grown up is not the rich sophist-- sophist--' Dave took a long linguistic run up. '--Sophisticated experience I had been led to believe it would be.'

'I think the definition of a grown up is somebody who orders a hot drink with their McDonald's meal.'

'Very deep. You should put that on a tee shirt.'

Gary folded his arms. 'You know what you need, don't you?'

Dave shook his head. 'No. What do I need?'

'Drunken monkey sex.'

'Drunken monkey what?'

'We'll have a couple more here, a few shots, find a club and get you some action. Get back on the horse, so to speak.'

'No, besides I have work in the morning.'

Gary picked up the crumpled piece of paper with Dave's haiku written on it. 'If this is what I'm going to have to put up with - poetry - we need to get you laid as soon as possible, for my sake as well as yours.'

Dave put his pint down and looked Gary squarely in the eye. 'I am not going clubbing.'

Dave and Gary staggered up to the club. The owners had obviously taken the decision that it was too cool a venue to publicly advertise its location. The only clue that anything laid beyond the doors was the thick-set bouncer who stepped from the shadows. An unfortunate combination of stubble, interesting scars and green neon light made his round head look like an angry tennis ball. He gave the two friends the kind of intimidating smile that was usually followed by a request for the recipient's wallet and valuables.

'Evenin'" he growled as he opened the door for them.

The club was self-consciously hip and filled with second hand furniture, no one piece matching another. Behind a turntable and a laptop, a DJ was playing music at such volume it was as if he was waging an ideological war on the concept of conversation itself.

Dave was not a natural party animal. He was an inefficient mingler and often discovered that he had gone out with an insufficient number of conversational topics. As a child, on the rare occasions he was invited by classmates, he'd go to fancy dress parties dressed as a ninja. He would find somewhere quiet to hide and only emerge when it was time for the prize giving. As he had gone completely unnoticed by the adults, he had proved himself to be an excellent ninja and invariably walked away with the first prize.

The place was heaving with bodies; quick drinks after work that had spiralled out of control, and it was way past everybody's bedtime. Sweaty accountants filled the dance floor. Illicit couples hid away in the dark corners in unsuccessful attempts to avoid being tomorrow morning's water cooler gossip. While Gary was at the bar, Dave had found himself dragged into a conversation with a twenty-one-year-old UberSystems International sales assistant he vaguely knew named Sophie. What had started as a quick 'How are you?' had grown into a full-blown analysis of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend. At least that's what Dave assumed it was as she talked almost entirely in textspeak, shouting over a bass line so deep and powerful

it threatened to rearrange their internal organs.

'I WOZ ALL, LIKE, OMG, UR MAKIN ME H8 U. HASHTAG FACEPALM. U C WOT IM SAYIN?' She laughed. Dave didn't see what she was saying, but laughed anyway.

'STILL,' she continued. 'U NO. YOLO.'

'What-lo?'

'YOLO. You only live once.'

'You'd be surprised.'

'WOT?'

'Never mind.'

They fell into an awkward silence, but Dave could see that Sophie was preparing for another indecipherable rant. He smiled. 'Well, I'd better leave you to it. Good to talk to you. Hope it all works out with your boyfriend.'

'C U L8R,' she called back after him.

'NOT IF I C U 1ST,' Dave muttered under his breath.

He headed up to the bar's roof terrace. From there, London's lights shone like a thousand fallen stars climbing invisible towers, trying to return to their home in the empty black sky. Alcohol's warm hug protected him from the chill of the night. The low rumble of the city ebbed and flowed as it was whipped around them by the swirling winds. The sound of a sleeping monster breathing.

Dave remembered that he'd been here once before, in the early days of his relationship with Melanie. Her friend had organised a seventies disco night. They'd slipped

between the other dancers until they'd found a small piece of dance floor to call their own. Melanie moved with a grace and poise that suggested she could feel the music around her and shape herself around it. Dave, on the other hand, hopped and jerked as if the floor was made of hot coals burning through his shoes. Like so many activities with Melanie though, what he lacked in natural ability he'd more than made up for in enthusiasm.

The density of dancing bodies had forced Melanie and Dave closer together, until they brushed against each other. Dave had felt electricity between the two of them. Or it could've just been the static from the manmade fibres that surrounded them. His memories were hazy.

Right then, he didn't want to see ghosts. He didn't want to commune with the dead. He wanted to snog Melanie Watkins. He wanted to go for drinks with her, dance to terrible pop songs and look disinterested at gigs listening to challenging bands. He wanted to go on holidays and business trips. He wanted to make executive decisions, own a decent suit and impress people with his knowledge of current affairs. He wanted to do all the things that you're supposed to do when you're young and living in a big city. He wanted a normal life. He wanted Melanie.

Chapter Nine

Death looked up to the night skies from the flat roof of One Crow Road. He would come up here to gaze up at the silent majesty of the universe when he needed to think. He was saddened that the stars had dimmed and disappeared from the London skyline over the centuries, obscured by a veil of smog and light, but the city was his home now. Death liked the English. He enjoyed the real ale, biscuits and cricket. Any nation that could invent a game that went on for five days and invariably ended in a draw truly grasped the futility of existence.

Sometimes, though, he liked to travel to a desert far away from civilisation and lay staring up at the Milky Way's thick, glowing ribbon looping around the Earth. A galaxy that contained more stars than there were grains of sand beneath him and every atom of each of those grains was born out in the cosmos. Death didn't understand why humanity didn't spend more time and energy on space travel. It wouldn't be exploration. It would be going home.

Anne climbed up the fire escape, breathing heavily as she clambered over the rusting metal onto the rough felt roofing. 'I thought I'd find you up here. UFO spotting again?'

'Don't mock. Aliens are real, Anne. They show up every few years in their mothership, look down on humanity, go "Nah, they're still dicks" and bugger off again. Did I tell you I've got the deeds to the universe somewhere in the filing?'

It was true that Death held what appeared to be the deeds to the universe. He'd come across them while having a clear out, but had no idea where they came from. Perhaps Conquest had won them in a card game. One night after humanity had once again done something to disappoint him and he'd drunk too much cheap red wine, he decided that it all had to go and placed the following advert on an internet auction site:

"Due to an increase in running costs in these times of financial hardship, the decision has been taken to put the entire universe up for auction.

Started not with a Big Bang, but with a Big Sigh of Resignation 13.7 billion years ago, it's in need of some modernisation. There are some black holes, but these can be sorted with a lick of magnolia paint. Though it's quite roomy, we'd suggest knocking through an extension into a parallel universe.

Included in the sale:

30 billion trillion observable stars. We think there may

some more in the attic. If we find them, we'll throw them in.

A number of planets – Some rocky. Some gas. One – interestingly – made entirely of nougat.

Dominion over all living beings. If you can get them to do a bloody word you say. Good luck with that.

An indeterminate amount of dark matter. It's possibly Marmite.

Full deeds and meaning of life written on the back of a cigarette packet.

Instructions.

Would suit Pan-Dimensional Overlords of unspeakable horror.

Please note that the photo is not to scale. Buyer collects."

Some Pan-Dimensional Overlords of only moderate horror were the highest bidders, but the cheque bounced. Death left them negative feedback and filed the deeds away.

'So, what's bothering you?' Anne asked. She knew Death well enough to know this was where he came when something was on his mind.

'I went to Dave's old office today,' he said, not taking his eyes from the heavens. 'He'd left his phone behind here, so I thought I'd drop it off. He was in the reception and I was going to surprise him. Y'know, appear right behind him and there'd be screaming and stuff--'

'That's never been funny, by the way,' Anne

interrupted.

'--But I couldn't do it. It's like the building spat me out onto the street.'

'Spat you out?'

He looked down and back at Anne. 'Like a piece of chewing gum. It didn't want me to be there. That's the only way I can describe how it felt. I've not come across anything like that before. There's something going on in that building. Something sinister. Something dark.'

Anne stiffened at Death's words. 'Yesterday, Dave said that Letitia told him the dark was coming. I didn't know what she meant. Do you think it has anything to do with that?'

'I don't know, but I think we need to get in that office and find out.'

'How are we going to do that?'

'I've got an idea.'

'I thought you might.'

Anne and Death fell silent, the city humming in tune with the whistling wind the only sound between them.

'It's getting worse out there,' said Anne finally.

'How do you mean?'

Anne thought for a moment, looking for the right words. 'Usually, they're benign.'

'You know I don't like talking about them,' Death said.

'Lost and aimless,' Anne continued, ignoring Death's embarrassment at his past mistakes. 'Bored, even. But they're getting restless. Angry. They're starting to bleed

into the everyday. They're getting noticed.'

Death's shoulders slumped. The ghosts were a constant reminder of his failures and of what he had lost. Anne placed a comforting arm around him. It made him shiver in a way he didn't understand.

'You should get inside,' she said. 'You'll catch your death out here. Well, you know what I mean. Die Hard is starting on the telly. You like that, don't you?'

Death perked up. 'As far as I'm concerned, Die Hard is humanity's greatest artistic achievement. Hamlet and the Mona Lisa are fine in their own way, but do they have explosions in a lift shaft? No.'

Chapter Ten

Dave woke up alone. His brain thudded painfully against his skull in time with the kick drum of his heartbeat. Soon, his stomach joined in with a bass solo and the ringing in his ears added some treble. He rolled over to the other side of the bed, his limbs twisted up in the covers.

He looked at the alarm clock. This was the beginning of one of seven billion daily rolls of the dice. Seven billion games of chance where the odds eventually decreased to zero. The teenager in a car crash. The middle-aged man felled by a heart attack. His mother eaten away by cancer until it was burned away along with what remained of her. All of it played out in an apathetic universe.

He pulled himself up and looked around the bedroom. He had changed so much since the start of the year, it had taken on a strange yet familiar quality as if he had gatecrashed somebody else's life. The film posters and photographs of drunken nights out pinned to the wall

seemed juvenile now. The action figures and comic books sat on the shelves belonged to another, younger Dave Marwood. He threw the Star Wars duvet cover off his legs. As he stumbled towards the wardrobe to pick out the day's clothes, he decided that he'd buy some more suitable bed linen as soon as he could.

Dave was surprised to find he was the first to arrive in the office. He immediately headed to the kettle, filled it with fresh water and set it to boil. He carefully measured out two heaped spoonfuls of instant coffee granules and dropped them into a mug. When the kettle clicked off, he looked at the contents of the mug and decided that it wouldn't suffice. He poured the steaming water into the half-full coffee jar instead, stirred and drank.

Death and Anne arrived within a few minutes of each other. When Dave had made drinks for them both, he blurted out, 'Can I be frank?'

Death and Anne looked at each other. 'Only if I can be Steve,' Death replied.

'Stop that,' Anne admonished.

'I mean, can I speak frankly?'

'Sure.' Death sat back in a chair, waving a hand to indicate Dave should continue.

Dave suddenly felt nervous. He screwed his confidence up into a fist and he cleared his throat. 'First, I just want to say thank you for everything you've taught me. If nothing, this whole experience has been

educational.' He turned to Anne. 'Thank you for all your help and guidance, but I think the time has come for me to move on.'

'Oh,' replied Death. 'We'd be very sorry to see you go. Do you have anything lined up?'

'I was thinking about seeing if I could go back to work for UberSystems International, actually. I really don't think I'm cut out for this.'

'Don't worry. I thought the same when I started,' Anne said. 'In fact, I'm still learning. So far, I've been responsible for fourteen insurance claims, accidentally caused the deaths of all the squirrels in a Royal Park and I'm pretty sure the burning down of a stately home was my fault.'

'Well, I think it's a splendid idea,' Death said.

This wasn't the reaction that Dave had expected, but he realised that he shouldn't have been surprised by this. That was part of the problem. Lack of consistency. 'You think I should do it?'

'Yes. In fact, I've taken the liberty of updating your C.V. and sent it over to them this morning. Tamsin in Human Resources would like to see you today.' Death took a typewritten piece of paper from a drawer and passed it to Dave, who scanned it with a quizzical expression.

'Under other skills, you've written "good gaydar",' Dave said.

Death sipped his coffee. 'Yeah, well, I had to pad it out

somewhat.'

Dave scrunched the paper in a ball. He was angry and hurt that Death would go behind his back like this, that he would be so quick to dismiss both him and all that they had been through together. Those feelings, though, were quickly replaced by suspicion as he remembered who he was dealing with. He looked from Death to Anne.

'What's going on here?'

'There's something happening at UberSystems International,' Anne said.

'What?' asked Dave.

'Haven't the foggiest,' said Death. 'But it's supernatural and powerful.'

'So you want me to snoop around? See what I can find out?'

'See, that's what I like about you, Dave. You're on the ball.'

'Do I get any say in this? What if it's dangerous?'

'If it's dangerous, then everybody who works in that building could be in trouble,' said Anne.

'Melanie?'

Anne nodded. Dave sighed. He knew then that leaving this job wouldn't be as simple as handing in a resignation. Perhaps it was something he could never truly leave behind. 'You better tell me all you know about this. And then I want to talk about those squirrels.'

Dressed in a hastily selected suit and tie, Dave waited

in UberSystems International's HR department as young women with names like Jemima and Poppy bustled around him. He reckoned he could work in Human Resources. As far as he could tell, it mostly involved letting people go and eating cake. That wasn't too far off what he did already.

Taking in the clean lines and monotone colour scheme, he wondered what strangeness could've entered such a bland, vanilla world. The oddest thing that had happened in his time working here was a spate of stapler thefts about eighteen months ago. He didn't know what to look for and wouldn't know what to do if he found it. He guessed he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

More important matters weighed on his mind. Like what was he going to tell Melanie? Would she be happy that he'd apparently come back to work, or would she be disappointed that he'd seemingly given in? His train of thought was derailed by Tamsin, the Head of Human Resources. 'David Marwood?' she asked.

'Yes.'

'Mr West will see you now.'

The colour drained from Dave's face. 'Mr West? Conrad West?'

'Yes. He's taken a keen interest in your application. Follow me, please.'

Dave let Tamsin lead the way to the interview room. He hadn't seen his old boss since he'd walked out of his previous position to go and work for Death. He assumed

West now wanted to humiliate him in some way before kicking him out of the building. He decided to get it over and done with, so thanked Tamsin and let himself into the room.

Conrad West was sat at a small table. He indicated the empty chair opposite him, inviting Dave to sit down.

'The prodigal son returns,' he said with a warm smile. 'I can't begin to tell you how surprised I was when we received your curriculum vitae. What have you been doing with yourself, Mr Marwood?'

Dave sat down. 'You know. This and that.'

West folded his hands on the table and the atmosphere grew colder. Dave was grateful for the table separating them. 'I'm afraid I don't know,' West said. 'Please enlighten me.'

Dave could feel itchy pricks of sweat on his forehead. 'I've just been doing some administration for a small start up.'

'Financial services?'

Dave thought for a second. 'No, a different industry. It's got a few fingers in different pies.'

'That sounds very intriguing. Why would you want to return to us?'

Dave had been practising his answer. 'It's like you said to me before. UberSystems International is a family. I miss my brothers and sisters. Together we can be the best. One team striving towards a common goal. Synergy, Conrad. It's all about synergy.'

'That's a very commendable attitude. It's tough here at the moment, I'll be the first to admit it. How do you think you would handle the stress this time?'

'Once you realise life is a futile struggle against the inevitable, it's a breeze,' replied Dave with a smile.

'That's an unusual approach.' West sat back in his chair. 'I like you, Dave. Always have. Always will. You've got potential. One day you could be sat where I am, but I can't just let you stroll back into your old position. You need to prove your commitment to the organisation. You need to prove yourself to me. I want you to learn about every facet of this company. You'll start in the Document Management Centre, on the midnight to eight in the morning shift. If you perform well there, then we'll look to move you up. Do we have a deal?'

Dave considered the offer. West had offered him the perfect solution. Working the night shift meant that he'd have access to a virtually deserted building and the hours would allow him to avoid Melanie, at least until he'd figured out what to tell her.

'I'll take you up on it, Mr West.' Dave held his hand out and West shook it firmly. 'I won't let you down.'

'Excellent. Be here at midnight and ask for Kirsten.'

Chapter Eleven

17 June 1933

Death's head pounded behind his closed eyes. He was hot and sweaty underneath his robe. His stomach performed somersaults at such speed it was as if he'd swallowed a Russian gymnast during the night. He was hungover. Unsure of how much of a good idea it was, he opened his eyes. He was laying on top of a giant bed, its pillows and covers piled up thick and soft like marshmallow. He rolled onto his back. An expensive chandelier hung from the Rococo ceiling, the crystals sparkling and winking with a strange, otherworldly light. He realised he was in a very expensive hotel room. He tried to remember the events of the previous evening, but there was a supermassive black hole in the centre of his mind dragging all thoughts down into a drunken singularity.

War shifted next to him and began to snore; loud, skull splitting snorts and wheezes. Death prodded him, but War

was in his full armour and it made no difference. Death shoved with all the strength he could summon and War tumbled off of the bed and onto the deep cream-coloured carpet. He was immediately on his feet, sword in hand, but then he wobbled and staggered back until he collapsed into a mahogany Louis XVI armchair. The chair's legs creaked under the weight of man and steel, but held firm.

'Are we able to die?' War croaked as he rubbed his forehead. 'Because I think that would be the sensible option right now.'

Famine crawled out from under the bed. He looked even more pale and gaunt than usual. He hugged the carpet. 'The floor is my friend. The floor is not moving.'

Death sat up very slowly as if he was balancing a delicate glass bowl on his shoulders. 'Where's Conquest?' he finally managed to ask.

There was a thud from inside a white wardrobe across from the foot of the bed. Death noted it was in the French country style as the door opened and Conquest, a crown balanced on his head, flopped out onto the floor.

'Is he dead?' asked War. 'Lucky git.'

Conquest gave a groan muffled by the deep carpet fibres. 'I wish. This better be the only time I get married.'

It had been Conquest's stag night. He who had taught Casanova everything he knew was settling down and getting hitched. War had decided that this was worthy of note and celebration. They had worn the uniforms of their former office and gone for a couple of quiet drinks around

their old London haunts.

'Where are we?' Famine asked. War pulled himself from out of the chair and stumbled over to the window. He pulled the curtain aside and the room was flooded with a shimmering silver light. The other three cried out in agony and shielded their eyes with sleeves and pillows.

'Big. Shiny.' War dropped the curtain back and the cool darkness returned. He collapsed back into the chair.

'What?' asked Death. He gingerly crossed the room being careful not to step on Famine or Conquest, nor bump into War who was already snoring. He peered through a gap in the curtain. The sun hung in a powder blue sky. Boats lazily drifted along the flat mirror surface of a lake, framed by rolling green hills dotted with small towns and villages. On any other occasion, this would've moved Death to tears as he took in the sheer beauty sketched out on the world's living, shifting canvas. Instead, he just muttered 'Lake Geneva. It's Lake bloody Geneva.'

'What?' said Conquest. 'Are you sure?'

'I've been here a few times,' Death replied curtly.

Famine flopped onto his back like a dying fish. 'But we were in the Hen and Chickens yesterday afternoon. Why are we here?'

Before anyone could reply, the black Bakelite telephone on the bedside table began to ring. War, who had no truck with new technology, was back on his feet. 'Whatever is making that infernal racket, kill it. Kill it

with fire.'

'It's just the bloody telephone,' mumbled Conquest. 'Somebody please answer it.' War threw himself across the room and grabbed the receiver.

'What?' he bellowed into the mouthpiece.

'Bonjour, monsieur. Je suis vraiment désolé pour l'intrusion,' said the caller.

War offered the telephone to Death. 'It's some mad French bastard.'

Death took the phone from War. One of the perks of being the Grim Reaper was that he could converse in all of humanity's dialects. 'Bonjour?' said Death.

'I'm very sorry to disturb you, sir. There is a gentleman here at reception to see Mr Quint.' Quint was the name that Conquest was using at that time. 'He says that he has Mr Quint's order.'

'Merci,' said Death and he hung up the telephone. 'There's someone waiting in reception, Conquest. He says he's got something for you.'

Conquest climbed to his feet. 'I'd better see what he wants.'

'Good idea,' replied Death. 'I'd lose the crown, though. The Swiss might regard that as a tad ostentatious.'

Conquest was gone for around ten minutes, during which time War made a futile attempt to order some tea from room service. On his return, Conquest was carrying an envelope and a small wooden box. He placed the box on the bed and his three friends gathered around. He

opened the lid. Four silver Patek Phillipe pocket watches of unequalled design and delicacy were nestled securely in the black suede lined interior. This must've been why they had travelled to Geneva, home of humanity's finest watchmakers.

'What's in the envelope?' Famine asked in a hushed tone as he stroked the face of one of the watches.

Conquest tore open the envelope and took out a handwritten letter. His eyes scanned over the contents. 'It's addressed to us. From us. "Hi. If you're reading this, then you survived the night. You are blessed with infinite time and possibilities. These four watches are a gift and a reminder to each of you from the others. All the best, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Retired). P.S. War owes the landlord of the Hen and Chickens a new billiards table. They weren't built for what he did to it yesterday".'

They each took a watch from the box. They were all inscribed on the back. One with a picture of a scythe, one with a crown, one a pair of scales and the other with a sword.

'Thank you, gentlemen,' Death whispered.

'I'm sorry to ruin the moment, but are these watches accurate?' asked Famine.

'The most accurate in the world,' Conquest replied.

'That's a pity. Because that means you're getting married in Scotland in just under two hours.'

The castle sat squat and dark against the grey

Highland mountainside. In the bridal suite at the top of one of the towers, Conquest's bride Julia looked at her reflection in the mirror. Amongst the bustle of pageboys and bridesmaids, she was calm and cool. She was twenty-five and her groom a few years older, which had raised some eyebrows. It had been a whirlwind romance, but that was long enough for her to know that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. She examined every inch of herself. Her dark hair intricately sculpted upwards, the full red lips, the dress and down to the dainty shoes. She smoothed the ivory silk that clung around her hips and smiled. The dress. The dress was as perfect as the setting. She was a princess waiting in the tower for her prince. She had always dreamed of marrying in the church in the Cotswolds where her parents had, but Quint had insisted that the ceremony shouldn't be religious. She loved him and granted him this compromise. She was glad she had. This would be their moment and theirs alone.

Howard MacDonald, Julia's father, came into the room. He seemed as squat and wide as the building he stood in and the seams of his morning suit strained against the load placed in them. He stopped dead when he saw his daughter. 'Oh Julia. If only your mother could see you now,' he said with a lump in his throat. She ran to him and took his hands in hers.

'Is he here?' She bit her lower lip nervously.

Howard smiled, raising two of his three chins. 'Yes.

He turned up a little while ago with those two friends of his. They looked the worse for wear.'

'Well, boys will be boys.' She squeezed his hands.

'Are you sure...'

'Yes, father,' she said, cutting him off. 'He's a good man.'

'There's something about him. How does he pay for all of this?' Howard indicated the sumptuous fabrics and heavy antique furniture that dominated the room. 'Does he really have no family at all?'

'Should you be saying things like this to your daughter on her wedding day? And having no family just means that I don't have the burden of any in-laws. Unlike him, who's stuck with you.'

Howard laughed. 'True, true. I'll say this, though. He certainly knows how to throw a party.'

In a room in the other tower, Conquest was putting on a grey morning suit. He looked effortlessly handsome and smart, as if he had been poured into his clothes. War and Famine were dressed identically, with varying degrees of success. War looked as if he had been forcefully shoved into his top hat and tails, while Famine resembled a consumptive romantic poet.

Death sat against the stone wall drinking a fine champagne. As usual he was in, but not of, the moment. War tugged at his collar with thick fingers. 'I'm a warrior. I should be in steel and chain mail, not dressed like a

mincing dandy.'

'You look fabulous,' encouraged Death, topping up everyone's glasses. 'A toast, I think. To Conquest and Julia. I always feared that one of us would leave one day, but it couldn't happen under happier circumstances.'

'To Conquest and Julia,' echoed Famine and War. They all clinked their glasses and downed the contents.

Conquest checked himself in the mirror one last time and adjusted his shirt cuffs. He checked the new pocket watch hanging from his waistcoat by a thin silver chain. 'You two had better get downstairs. As my best men, you need to make sure that everything is in order. I'm sure they'll be serving nibbles and drinks by now.'

'Excellent,' said Famine. 'Aren't you coming?'

'I just want to have a word with Death. Do you have the rings?'

War patted his waistcoat pocket. 'Yes. We'll see you down there, then.' Famine and War headed out, pulling the heavy oak door shut behind them. Conquest and Death were left alone in an awkward silence.

'Do you remember the last time we were here?' Conquest asked.

'1374, I think. This castle would be yours if you'd accepted the Laird's daughter's hand in marriage.'

'I was not ready to take a wife.'

'And you are now?'

Conquest laughed. 'No, but she's who I've been looking for in all my years of walking this world. I just

didn't realise it until I met her. When I looked into her eyes that first night, I was excited, amazed, scared and unsure of myself. I knew what it was like to be human.'

'She's a fine woman. Not that we've been formally introduced.'

Conquest placed his hands on Death's shoulders. 'I'm sorry you couldn't have taken a more active role in this.'

'I will meet her in the end, though, and I can't give favours. Even to my oldest friend.'

'I know.'

Conquest, Famine, War and - unseen by anybody else - Death entered the castle's library. Conquest had suggested the ceremony was conducted in there so that Julia could be surrounded by the three things she loved; her family, friends and literature. Leather bound volumes lined the walls and filled the air with their thick smell. Two suits of armour holding swords guarded either side of the doorway and War regarded them with disdain. 'Cheap tat. They wouldn't stand a chance against a mace or battle axe.'

The wedding guests sat in rows facing the far end of the room where the registrar sat at a large oak desk. She was a round, joyful woman who constantly peered over the rims of her half-moon glasses. Famine, War and Death made their way towards her, while Conquest shook hands, laughed and joked with the guests.

'You must be the best men,' the registrar said in a soft

Edinburgh brogue that put everyone she spoke to at ease.

'Yes, just the three of us,' War replied.

'Just the two of us,' Famine corrected. 'Another one couldn't make it, but he's here in spirit.' Death shook his invisible head.

'And which of you is giving the reading?'

'I am,' bellowed War.

'Will it be something traditional?'

'I should bloody say so. Sun Tzu's "The Art of War".'

Famine turned to War. 'I thought we'd talked about this.'

Conquest slapped Famine and War on the shoulders and gave a sly wink in Death's direction. He shook the registrar's hand. 'Lovely to see you again. What are we talking about?'

'He's doing it again,' Famine complained. 'He's threatening to read Sun Tzu.'

Conquest put his arm around War. 'Well, Mr Warbuton and I had a discussion earlier and we agreed that he'd choose something more appropriate.'

'Alright. I'll read the bloody poem, but when you and your new wife are caught in a land war in Asia and don't know what to do, don't come running to me.'

A string quartet sat in front of the biography section began to play. Conquest had wanted a jazz band, but Julia had put her foot down over that.

'I think we're ready,' said the registrar. Famine and War took a pace back toward two empty chairs in the

front row. Conquest rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers. He could feel Julia and her father approaching, but he did not look behind him. He wanted them to be together, side by side, the first time he saw her.

Then Julia was next to him. She smiled and Conquest felt thousands of years fall away. He was new and reborn and the world was once again full of infinite possibilities. Howard MacDonald placed his daughter's hand in Conquest's and seemed reluctant to step away, as if he was surrendering the most precious thing in his life.

The registrar asked everybody to be seated. 'Thank you all for coming today,' she said. 'We are gathered here to join together Christopher and Julia in matrimony; which is an honourable and solemn estate and therefore is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly, but reverently and soberly. Into this estate these two persons present come now to be joined. If anyone can show just cause why they may not be lawfully joined together, let them speak now or forever hold their peace.'

Despite themselves, everybody looked around. Silence. The registrar chuckled. 'I always get a little nerv-

'I've got just cause and it's a doozie,' someone said from the back of the room. Beelzebub was leaning against the doorframe. He'd dressed formally for the occasion.

War leaped from his seat, sending his top hat skittering across the carpet. 'Beezelbub!' he roared.

Beelzebub winced. 'Really?' He took a sword from out

of one of the knight's gauntlets and made his way down the aisle until he stood in front of Conquest and Julia. He held the sword point down to the floor like a cane and looked as if he might break out into a soft-shoe shuffle. All eyes were focused on him.

'I'm very sorry. I know it's bad form to upstage a bride on her special day.'

Julia placed a hand on Conquest's arm. 'Who is this?'

Beelzebub looked hurt. 'You mean you've never mentioned me? I wonder what else you haven't told her?'

'I told you he was a fairy,' somebody muttered from behind.

'What do you want?' asked Conquest, taking a step forward to shield Julia.

'I just don't think it's fair on Julia for her to do this without all the facts. As the lady just said, it is not to be entered into unadvisedly or lightly. "Till Death us do part" is a rather hollow promise when he's your drinking buddy.'

'What's he talking about, Christopher?'

'Christopher? Is that what we're calling ourselves these days?'

Howard thought that he should step in and do something. 'What's going on? This is a wedding, you know.'

Beelzebub looked the father of the bride up and down. 'Is it really? How incredibly embarrassing, I don't appear to have brought a gift.'

Without warning, Beelzebub lifted the sword high above his head and plunged it through Conquest's chest. He buried it to the hilt and a good foot of the blade smashed into the desk behind, splintering the wood and pinning Conquest in place like an insect trapped in a display case.

Julia's high-pitched scream shredded the air and this was the cue for pandemonium to break out. Beelzebub pointed to the door and it slammed shut with a sound like a hand clapping with joy. He looked over to the suit of armour still holding the other sword and motioned with his hand. The sword broke free and flew over the heads of the guests. It landed in Beelzebub's grasp and, in one fluid motion, he pointed it at Julia's throat. Silence and stillness replaced the confusion and tumbling furniture.

Conquest writhed on the desk, trying to grab the handle of the sword. War ran over to help him. Famine took a step towards Beelzebub. 'What do you think you're doing?'

'Come on,' Beelzebub shouted out, ignoring Famine. 'Show yourself. It's not the same without you.' He pressed the point of the sword harder against Julia's neck. 'Come out, come out, wherever you are. Make it quick or the bride will be her own something blue.'

Death stepped out of thin air. A murmur of horror and shock ran through the room. Beelzebub smiled. 'There you go,' he said, his eyes twinkling. 'The gang's all here. It's just like old times. Julia, I'd like you to meet your

husband-to-be's oldest friend. Death himself.'

'Nice to meet you,' Death said. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

One of Julia's aunts screamed and then the pounding on the library door started. Guests crowded up against it, pushing and hammering, but it wouldn't budge. During the bedlam, it took the combined efforts of Famine and War to pull the sword loose from Conquest. After that, it slipped easily from his chest, leaving a ragged tear in the front of his shirt.

'Why are you doing this?' Conquest asked.

'You took from me what I most wanted. I'm simply returning the favour.' Beelzebub looked at Julia. 'I can actually feel the love leaving you. It's leaking out from every pore. It's glorious. Well, my work here is done.' Beelzebub dropped the sword and Conquest made a grab for him. Before he could wrap his hands around his throat, Beelzebub fell out of reality. Conquest crashed to the floor, snatching at the air.

'Somebody call a doctor!' a voice yelled from the back of the room.

Conquest picked himself up and perched on the table. He rubbed his bloodless scar. 'There's no need for that.'

The colour had drained from Julia's face until she was the same pale shade as her wedding dress. Her eyes were fixed on the chest wound. 'That... That should... should've killed you,' she stammered. Conquest reached for her hand. She snatched it back. 'Don't touch me. What are

you?'

'It's complicated.'

She turned and ran from the library, her dainty shoes falling from her feet.

All Death could do was watch.

Chapter Twelve

Dave woke with the smell of tweed in his nostrils. There was a moment of heavy-eyed confusion as he wondered why the whole world around him was juddering until he remembered he was on a train rattling its way through tunnels deep underground. The carriage was empty save for him and the ghost in the seat opposite. It was Fred Drayton, formerly of Finsbury Park and now resident of the London Underground system since a particularly troublesome incident on the Bakerloo line in 1957. He greeted Dave with a doff of his hat.

'Mr Marwood.'

Dave wiped his bleary eyes and nodded back. 'Fred. How are you?'

'As well as can be expected in this post-mortem condition. And how are you? It's been a while since our last conversation.'

'I've been busy. Sorry.'

In the early days of his job, Dave often came down and travelled the sprawling Underground rail network

where he found a small community of ghosts in the labyrinth tunnels and stations. Some were happy to accept the offer of Dave's services, whilst others like Fred were content with their half life amongst the bustle and commotion.

'How are things up on the surface? As baffling as ever?' Fred asked, smoothing his moustache with a thumb and forefinger.

'Even more so,' Dave replied.

'What brings you down at this time? It must be almost midnight. Business or pleasure?'

'Business, unfortunately.'

'That won't make the lovely Melanie happy, will it?'

Dave shifted uncomfortably. 'We're having some time apart.'

'Oh, I'm very sorry to hear that. I'm sure you can sort things out between you.'

Dave smiled. 'Thank you.'

Fred brushed a speck of non-existent dust from the lapel of his jacket. 'Of course, in my day we knew how to properly woo a lady. There'd be flowers, dancing and, if you were lucky, a quick feel in the back row of the picture house.'

'You little player, Fred. I had no idea.'

'What I'm saying is that perhaps today's youth should treat each other with a little more respect and dignity. A little romance never killed anybody. Maybe you'd all find it easier to find husbands and wives. You won't believe

what I see down here on a Friday night.'

'Hang on,' Dave huffed, 'I'm not taking relationship advice from a ghost.'

The train slowed down as it entered the station. 'Just because I'm dead doesn't mean I don't have an opinion,' Fred replied. 'I believe this is your stop.'

Dave signed his name in the logbook sat on the UberSystems International reception desk and took a temporary pass card from Keith, the night watchman who seemed to have been with the company since forever. He took the lift to the fifteenth floor and found his way to the staffroom where six other new recruits sat huddled around two cheap plastic tables lit softly by the orange and red lights of the vending machines.

'You must be new here,' said Dave. 'There's still hope in your eyes. They'll soon trample all over that.' Six quizzical faces looked back at him. 'It's not my first time here,' Dave explained.

'Can I get you a coffee from the machine?' asked one of the recruits. In his suit and tie, he stood out amongst the jeans and tee shirts of the others.

'No, thank you,' replied Dave, taking a seat at the end. 'As I said, it's not my first time here.'

'Good evening everyone. I'm Kirsten,' said a voice from the doorway. Kirsten's skin was so pale Dave wasn't sure whether it was a lifestyle choice or a serious medical condition. The pitch black hair framing her face reminded

him of Death's cowl and her red lips looked like a bloody gash against her white complexion. She glided into the room with a delicate grace. 'Before we begin, perhaps we should each say a little about ourselves? I'll go first. I'll be your manager in the Document Management Centre and I've been at UberSystems International longer than I care to admit.' Her lips parted into a smile revealing rows of perfectly white teeth. A smile that made Dave feel giddy. 'Who's next?'

'I will.' All eyes turned to the man in the suit and tie. 'I'm Christopher Love. I was a management consultant for ten years until they decided that there wasn't enough management for me to consult on. They let me go and I haven't been able to find anything since. So here I am. You need to be earning something, anything, if you've got a mortgage and children to pay for.'

'What do you have?' asked Kirsten.

'A three storey town house in Balham,' Christopher answered with pride.

'I meant your children.'

'Oh.' He hesitated for a moment. 'A boy and a girl. Eight and five.'

'That's lovely,' said Kirsten. 'Who's next?'

One by one, they introduced themselves. There was Jason Digby, a squat angry middle-aged man who had blundered through various jobs until he'd stumbled into this one. Dave could sense that Jason thought this company wouldn't be the last in the chain.

Sarah Barnes was twenty-six and had just moved to London to pursue a dream after working in provincial call centres. Quietly spoken, she told them that she hadn't really figured out what that dream was yet, but she was sure it would make itself know to her soon.

Young and ambitious Simon Austin and Jim Wilson were friends who were straight out of university. After hundreds of job applications for more senior roles had gone unanswered, their idealistic plan was to start at the bottom rung of the corporate ladder and work their way up to the very top through sheer force of will and character.

Emma Miller had travelled from Northern Ireland to study. A night job was the only way she could find to make money and keep up with her university work.

The last to speak, Dave told the others that he'd worked in a department several floors above where they sat now but had left to go travelling. He dropped vague hints of exotic experiences and tropical locations until Kirsten cut him off. She perched on a table, crossing her long legs, a high heel shoe dangling from her toes.

'The Document Management Centre is the beating heart of UberSystems International, pumping the lifeblood around the company. Would anyone like to tell me what the lifeblood of any organisation is?'

Christopher looked up from the notebook he'd been scribbling in. 'Information, Kirsten.'

He was rewarded with Kirsten's hypnotic smile.

'Exactly, Christopher.'

Dave drifted off. He knew what he was going to be doing. Even in the digital age, a company the size of UberSystems International generated a vast amount of paperwork. What came in needed to be collated, sorted and scanned onto the work systems ready for the administration teams when they came in the next morning. What went out needed to be packaged, franked and prepared for posting.

He found himself thinking of Melanie and what she'd be doing now. Would she be tucked up in her bed, or out with Emma? Or Jeremy? He pushed that thought out of his head with a shudder and gazed out of the window. He was surprised to see ghosts hovering serenely on the other side of the glass. After a second, he realised that they were just reflections of the room's occupants. He could see seven figures seemingly sat down on thin air, but the way the light was cast seemed to mean Kirsten had no doppelgänger. He stared back at himself floating free above the glow of the city and wondered what it would be like to swap places, to no longer be tied to gravity or responsibility.

'Are you joining us, Dave?' asked Kirsten. The others were heading out of the room.

'Yeah. Sorry,' he mumbled and got up to join them. As he headed deeper into the building, he looked back to see his ghostly double swoop away into the night.

The Document Management Centre was a large open-plan space filled with banks of workstations containing computers and scanning equipment. The only sources of light in the windowless room were headache inducing fluorescent strip lights that painted the sun-starved complexions of the twenty staff a sickly grey. They peered over their monitors like office-based meerkats as Kirsten led Dave and the other new recruits past them.

A big bear of a man waited by a row of empty desks. He smiled warmly as the group approached. 'Fresh meat.'

'This is Carl,' said Kirsten. 'He'll be your team leader. I'll leave you in his very capable hands. If you have any questions, he's the man to talk to. I'll come back later and see how you're getting on.' She spun on her heels and retraced her steps, stopping to talk to workers as she went.

Carl gathered his new team around one of the desks. He stroked a big slab of plastic and metal that looked like a printer with ideas above its station. 'I want to introduce you to a personal friend of mine. This is a ScanPro 3000 scanner and copier. Fifty sheet automatic document feeder with full file conversion capabilities. Respect this baby and it'll keep you out of trouble.'

Carl gave a brief overview of how the machines and the department worked and then gave each of the team a desk and a stack of documents to work through. He wandered between the desks fixing paper jams and answering questions with good-natured humour.

Dave took some comfort in the monotony of the mindless, repetitive work. Muscle memory soon took over as he scanned, processed and filed the work away. His brain switched off and shut out the thoughts of Melanie. Repression was the English way and who was he to fight hundreds of years of tradition?

He watched the others around him. Sarah and Emma worked silently through the pile of paperwork at their elbows. Jim and Simon talked animatedly about their plans for world domination. Christopher was already making suggestions to Carl on how the process could be made more efficient. Jason was regularly checking his phone and complaining about the lack of signal.

After a couple of hours of this, a long-haired teenager came around pushing a wire-framed trolley filled with more documents. As he replenished their piles of work, the music leaked out from the earphones he wore with an annoying rhythmic hiss of treble.

'What's your name, mate?' Jason asked him.

The youngster pulled one of the earphones out.

'What?'

'What's your name?' repeated Jason.

'Simon. Simon Dunnett. People call me Si'

'Good to meet you, Si. Like your music, do you?'

Si eyed Jason with suspicion, unsure where this was going. 'Yeah. It's alright.'

Jason leaned across the desk menacingly. 'That's great, but if you don't turn it down I am going to use those

earphones as Japanese love beads and insert them into your person.'

Kirsten appeared at Jason's shoulder. She placed a hand on the barely touched stack of paperwork next to him. 'Jason, I'm sensing what I can only describe as an attitude problem.'

Jason sat back in his chair, his demeanour becoming less aggressive. 'Me? Nah. Me and Si were just having a bit of banter, weren't we?'

Si shrugged. 'I suppose.'

Kirsten drummed her fingers on the documents beneath her hand. 'Jason, could you join me in my office for a moment please?'

The murmur of conversation died away and everyone turned to look. Kirsten beckoned Jason with a finger and walked towards her office. He followed behind like an obedient puppy. When the door closed behind them, the hum of chat returned.

Dave turned back around and continued working. After a few minutes, Kirsten's office door opened and Jason walked back to his desk next to Dave. He sat down and silently began working with enthusiasm. Dave shared a look with Sarah, eyebrows raised.

'Everything all right?' he asked Jason.

'Great, thanks. Good talk.' Jason didn't slow down, nor look up from the documents he was jamming into the scanner's feed tray. As Dave watched him diligently carry out his task, he noticed two small red spots on Jason's skin

just above his tee shirt's neckline.

'Nah,' Dave muttered to himself, shaking his head as if to throw out the idea that was forming there.

The shift continued without further incident until eight o'clock in the morning when Carl told them that it was time to clock out. Jason remained at his desk as the others packed their bags and pulled on their coats. 'You not coming?' Dave asked.

Jason looked up and smiled. 'No, I'm going to stay behind and do some extra work. Kirsten asked if I would.'

'What did she say to you in there?' Dave nodded towards Kirsten's office.

'Not much. She just put some things in perspective.'

Dave held his hands up. 'Whatever, dude. I'll see you tomorrow?'

'Certainly.'

Dave ran to catch up with the others as they were getting into the lift. As the doors closed, he turned to them. 'That was a bit weird with Jason, didn't you think? He was an dick one minute and then he became like a model employee.'

He was answered with noncommittal shrugs. 'Maybe that Kirsten's a good boss?' suggested Emma.

'Yeah. Maybe,' replied Dave as the doors slid open and the morning sun poured into the lift.

Chapter Thirteen

Dave was back at UberSystems International the next night. His body clock was broken. Between the daylight spilling through his curtains and thoughts of Melanie, he'd only managed to doze off for a couple of hours that afternoon. Then Anne had phoned to ask if he'd found anything out during last night's shift, to which he'd admitted he hadn't.

So, he found himself lurking in the foyer wondering what he should be looking for. Death said it felt like the building itself was rejecting him. Dave placed a hand on one of the pillars and was immediately struck by a wave of sadness. It was a palpable hurt and longing that hung thick in the air. Heartache and pain. But there was something else. As he let his mind wander, he could feel a quiet rage. Subtle, like a howl's echo, it drifted between the pillars and leather sofas. As he concentrated, he felt something relax in his mind. It ached and throbbed like a muscle that hadn't been used. He could sense a darkness creeping around the edges of the room. It flowed and

danced, as intangible as smoke from a hellish fire but so cold Dave could feel the chill in his bones.

'Are you okay, Dave?' asked Conrad West.

Dave lost his tenuous grip on the feeling and the darkness retreated. 'Oh. Conrad. I'm fine, thanks.' He noticed the suitcase West wheeled behind him. 'Where are you off to?'

'I'm just flying over to Paris for a few days. How are you settling back in?'

Dave, muddled by exhaustion and what he'd just experienced, rubbed his eyes. 'Yeah. Great. They're a good bunch of people.'

Conrad looked at the clock that hung above Keith sat at the reception desk. 'Shouldn't you be on your way up?'

'Yes. I was just going.'

'Have a good night.'

'Thanks. Have a good trip.'

Conrad smiled. 'I always do, Mr Marwood. I always do.'

Jason was already working away when Dave got to his desk. 'Have you been home yet?' Dave asked, jokingly.

'Just wanted to get ahead,' Jason replied.

The others arrived one-by-one. Jim was the last to turn up, munching on a sandwich between yawns. 'When I'm CEO of this place, I'm going to allow people to call up and say "I'm not coming in today. I just feel too good".'

Emma smiled. 'Yeah, they'll be all like "Yeah, Jim.'

We don't want you spreading that around the office. Come back when the existential dread has returned".'

'Exactly.'

Kirsten approached the gang. 'I see you've all decided to come back for a second night. That's--' She froze.

'What's in that sandwich, Jim?'

'Garlic chicken. Do you want some?' Jim offered it to her. She flinched and backed away as if he'd threatened her with a weapon.

'I'm allergic to garlic.'

'Allergic?' Sarah asked. 'To garlic? Is that even a thing?'

'It's very rare, but it is a thing I'll have you know,' Kirsten replied. 'Now would be a good time to remind you all that no food is permitted at your workstations, so if you could kindly dispose of your sandwich I would be most grateful.'

As the shift ground on, Dave couldn't stop thinking about what happened in the reception. It was one of hundreds of new experiences he'd had, but this had a power that touched a hidden part of him. He needed to find out where that power was coming from.

'I'm just going to the stationery cupboard. Does anybody want anything?' he said to nobody in particular. When no reply came, he went out into the corridor. He walked slowly, running a hand against the wall. He tried to open himself up to any spectres that might be present,

but soon felt foolish. He decided that the spirits, or disturbance in the force or whatever, weren't being receptive and so he went to the stationery cupboard.

He opened the door and switched the light on. Amongst the notepads and staples a couple were energetically necking, their limbs intertwined like the elastic bands on the shelf above them.

'I'm so sorry,' Dave said, trying to avert his gaze. One of the couple turned around and Dave saw that it was Jason. The woman beneath him had an enthusiastic love bite on her neck. Dave recognised Alice from one of the other DMC teams. They were both panting, their chests heaving with lust and arousal.

Dave smiled. 'Bloody hell Jason. You're a fast worker. I wouldn't let Kirsten see you like this.'

The way they stared at him made Dave feel like he'd interrupted dangerous wild animals. He reached up and grabbed a box of pencils. 'There we are,' he said, rattling the box. He smiled awkwardly. 'I'll leave you two to it.' He gently closed the door behind him.

When he returned to his desk, he said, 'You'll never guess what I've just seen.'

Before he could finish, Kirsten clapped her hands together and called for everyone's attention. 'I want all team leaders in the staffroom for a huddle in five minutes.'

'Ow!' Dave shouted.

'Something the matter, Dave?' Kirsten asked.

'Paper cut,' he hissed, waving a bloody, stinging finger in the air.

Kirsten was at his side in an instant. 'Let me take a look.' Her voice trembled with excitement. She held his finger tenderly and gently blew on it. Dave felt the pain subside. Then she placed her wet lips over the cut and gave a quiet low moan of pleasure. Horrified, Dave tried to pull away but her lips locked tighter and he felt her probing tongue run along the length of the wound, licking it clean.

'I... I... don't think that's very hygienic,' Dave stammered. Kirsten let a disappointed sigh escape and released her grip.

Dave wiped his finger with a tissue but the blood continued to flow. 'Is there anywhere I can get a plaster?'

Kirsten regained her self-control and said, 'In the kitchen. There's a first aid kit.'

Cradling his finger in his other hand, Dave jogged to the kitchen. He found the first aid kit in a cupboard next to the accident book. He rinsed the blood off under the tap and applied a waterproof plaster.

He absent-mindedly turned the pages of the dog-eared accident book as he tried to process what Kirsten had done. He was shaken by the way she'd looked at him. He'd seen the same look in Jason's eyes in the stationery cupboard; hunger and desire.

As he leafed through the book, he was struck by the sheer number of entries. Pages and pages of bloody

injuries, flesh wounds and lacerations. It read more like a battle report than a health and safety requirement.

'Have you suffered an injury in the workplace?' he said to himself. 'Maybe it wasn't an accident. Maybe somebody's out to get you.'

He put the book and the first aid kit back where he found them and headed back to the DMC. As he walked past the staffroom, he heard Kirsten's voice trembling again. In anger this time.

'And what happened in the car park the other night? That was clumsy and foolish. We are here by invitation and you cannot go helping yourselves to members of staff.'

There was a tap on Dave's shoulder. He turned round to see Jason eyeing him hungrily. 'Your finger alright?'

Dave gulped. 'Yes, thank you.'

'Then perhaps it's time we got back to work.'

'Perhaps you're right,' Dave replied, his voice cracking.

Back at his desk, Dave stared at his monitor. The paranormal feeling of anger and fear in reception. Kirsten's lack of reflection and her aversion to garlic. Jason's neck wound. The accident book full of bloodshed.

He was finally sure of what he was dealing with.

Chapter Fourteen

'Vampires?' said Death. 'What a load of bollocks.'

Ignoring his tiredness, Dave had rushed across the city to Crow Road when his shift had ended. He'd arrived to find Anne out on an errand and Death struggling with the coffee machine. After cleaning the filter and making Death an espresso and a cappuccino for himself, Dave told of his theories and the discoveries behind them. Death didn't accept them.

'I've been around the block a few times and I've never come across anything like a vampire. They're just stories,' he said.

'I thought you were a story once and now I'm stood here talking to you. It makes sense. They've put some kind of magic or something over the building that keeps you from entering or seeing what goes on in there. Then they can get up to whatever they want, helping themselves to employees and blaming it on high staff turnover. '

'Yeah, alright Mulder. I think you're leaping to conclusions.'

'There are conclusions all over the place. Conclusions are right in front of me. I'm simply ambling up to conclusions in a casual manner. There's something evil going on.'

'That's a notion as old as thought itself,' Death said. 'You tell yourselves that if there's pure evil in the world, then there must be pure good. You put your faith in absolutes. Good and evil. Heaven or hell. Blur or Oasis. You're so sure of the universe and your place in it and who put you there. I speak from personal experience when I say it's a lot more complicated than that. Take wasps, for example. Wasps are made entirely from bastard. Whose grand design are they part of?'

'But--'

'When was the last time you got some decent sleep?'

A wave of exhaustion washed over Dave just hearing the word. 'A while ago.'

'It's your imagination running away with you. I can understand this. You've had a tough time with Melanie and everything.'

'Then why don't you go back to before she dumped me and make sure that I make the date?'

'We've talked about this in the past. I can't do that.'

'You did it before.'

'That was a one time, never to be repeated offer. You can't keep trying again and again until you get something right. It's like cheating at patience. A life without consequences is no life at all.'

Dave kicked the leg of the desk. 'I guess.'

'Tell me more about what happened in the reception. The answer lies there. What was it like?'

'Angry. Very angry. And frustrated. Odd as it sounds, it felt like a broken promise.'

'I'm used to odd.'

'But not vampires?'

Death shook his head. 'No. That's silly, not odd. I want you to go back there tonight.' He watched Dave rub his eyes. 'Concentrate on the reception area, but now I want you to go home and get some rest. '

Dave slammed the front door of the flat and stomped into the living room. Gary was sat playing video games. It looked like a bomb had come in, thought about going off, realised that Gary had got it covered and wandered back out again. DVDs were grouped into toppling plastic islands on the faded carpet between magazines, half-drunk cups of tea and unidentifiable food items.

'You back?' asked Gary. His eyes didn't leave the television screen.

'Yeah.'

'How's that new job working out?'

'I think my boss is a vampire.'

'Dude, they all are.'

Dave didn't have an answer for that so he skulked off to the shower to try and wash some of the weariness from his body. When he'd dried himself and dressed, he sat on

the edge of the bed trying to work out his next move.

He picked up the phone on the bedside table and dialled Melanie's mobile phone number. He was unsurprised when it went straight through to her voicemail. He hung up and called her work number, which was answered almost immediately. He heard her laughter and the tail end of a conversation. Dave felt an irrational pang of jealousy knowing she was amused by somebody else.

'UberSystems International. Melanie Watkins speaking.'

He closed his eyes, at once enjoying the sound of her voice and hating that he wasn't there with her. 'Hi, Mel.'

There was a moment of silence before she spoke, 'Oh. Hello.'

Dave was trying to gauge the tone of her voice to sense whether this call was welcome. 'How are you?'

'Good. What do you want, Dave? I'm really busy here.'

That settled that. 'That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I think you need to get out of there. Like now. Just grab your stuff and leave.'

'What are you talking about?' I can't just leave. Some of us have to work for a living.'

He clenched his eyes shut, his brow furrowed. He knew it wouldn't work, but he had to try and persuade her. 'I know what this sounds like, but there's something bad going on here. Something dangerous.'

He heard Melanie let out a long breath. 'What are you

talking about? Bad? Dangerous? Is this some kind of anti-capitalist thing?'

'No, it's not anything like that.'

Melanie put her hand over the phone's mouthpiece, muffling her voice, and said something indistinct to somebody. He heard a deep muted laugh.

'Who are you talking to?' he asked.

'Nobody.'

'Is it that Jeremy?'

'I haven't got time for this, Dave. Just leave me alone.'

Her voice was replaced by the dial tone. Dave smashed the phone back down on the table. He was infuriated. He felt nine years old again when nobody believed him about Emily. When he was ignored and patronised and told to forget about his imaginary friend.

He reached under his bed and pulled out his laptop from beneath a pile of clothes. After years working in a dull office job his Google Fu was strong. He jumped from page to page, learning the names of the UberSystems International employees who had been listed as missing over the years. The high staff turnover and the constant flow of people in and out of London meant that nobody had made the connection until now. He knew that every one of them had walked into the UberSystems International Tower and had never left.

He spent a few more hours trying to gather evidence to back up his theories, heading further down the rabbit hole with every click until he fell asleep.

The sun sat low in the sky and stained the clouds blood red when Dave woke up under a blanket of printouts. He'd never felt more in control. He had a plan. He'd never had a plan before. Sure, he'd had ideas, dreams and fantasies but never anything concrete. He knew what he had to do.

'You're in early,' Keith greeted Dave as he swiped his card and pushed his way through the turnstile.

'I just can't stay away,' Dave replied with a plastered-on grin.

'Have a good night.'

'You too.'

The lift arrived while Dave was still wondering whether the thumbs up he gave Keith was a tad over the top. He stepped inside and the doors closed. Gripped by a moment of doubt, his finger hovered over the button for the fifteenth floor. The lift waited patiently until he made a decision. He jabbed the button and the lift shook into motion.

The lift slowed its ascent and the doors dinged open onto an empty corridor. He crept quietly along the tiled carpet until he reached the kitchen. He snuck around the door and, taking a piece of paper from his pocket, tiptoed over to the spare water cooler bottles. Checking over his shoulder, he read the text on the unfolded A4 sheet and then retraced his steps. He checked his watch. There was still a few minutes until his shift started, so he decided to

head down to the car park to see if there was anything he could find there.

He pressed the 'down' button and the lift doors beeped open. He found himself face to face with Melanie.

'What are you doing here?' they both asked each other at the same time.

'How did you get in? Are you stalking me?' Melanie asked. Dave felt a pang of longing. Once again, she was within reach, but untouchable.

'No, it's not like that. I work here now.'

Melanie checked the floor number. 'But there's just the DMC on this floor.'

'Yeah.'

'Oh. Right.'

'Conrad reckons I should learn about the company from the bottom up.'

'Why didn't you tell me? We only spoke a few hours ago?'

Dave noticed the packet of cigarettes and lighter in her hand. 'Have you started smoking?'

'I smoked before I went out with you. I've been under a lot of stress. It's just temporary. It's the end of the tax year, remember? That's why I'm here at almost midnight, but I don't think any of this is any of your concern,' she replied impatiently.

'You need to go. It's not safe.'

'Why? Why isn't it safe?'

Dave looked left and right down the corridor and then

leant in closer to Melanie. 'James and the others. I think they were murdered.'

She gave a shocked laugh. 'Murdered? Who by?'

'I don't know. I've got an idea. I'm working on it.'

Melanie placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Dave, I'm worried about you. I don't know what's happened to you recently. I think you might need to see someone. You're sounding paranoid.'

Kirsten poked her head around the door to the DMC office. 'Dave, you're here early! Could you give me a hand with something please?'

Dave turned to Kirsten. In that moment, Melanie stepped back into the lift and let the doors close.

Melanie rode the lift down to the basement. When the doors sprang open on the utilitarian corridor that led to the car park, she looked at the packet in her hand and pressed the button to return to the floor she had just journeyed from.

Why did it matter what he thought? She knew why. For all his faults, she still loved him and he was obviously trying to make amends by quitting that damned job that had taken so much of his time. His paranoid talk about the building unnerved her, but if she stopped worrying about Dave she wouldn't know what to do with herself. The lift doors opened. She stepped out and swiped her security card to pass through the double doors that led to her department. Her desk was an island of light in the half-

light of the office. Jeremy was perched on it, turning his head when he heard her approach.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' he said.

'Dave was downstairs.'

Jeremy crossed his arms, his lips pressed into a thin line. 'Oh, was he?'

Melanie assessed his reaction. 'Did you know he was here?'

'No.'

'I don't know why he didn't tell me.'

'Perhaps he was embarrassed.'

'Why would he be embarrassed?'

'I don't know, but it's not like they handed him back the keys to the executive office, is it?' He jumped off the desk and clutched her shoulders. 'You could do so much better than him. Tell you what, why don't we pack up here and go get a drink and talk about it. I think we've earned a night out.'

She shrugged his hands off and nodded towards her computer. 'I've still got to try and make those numbers work.'

'Maybe later, then?'

She smiled wanly and looked at Jeremy. Dependable, reliable Jeremy. 'Yeah. Maybe.'

Chapter Fifteen

Dave was starting to think that perhaps Melanie was right and he'd grown paranoid. Then two of his work colleagues exploded.

After he'd helped Kirsten carry some boxes of printer paper, he sat at his desk obediently carrying out his duties. His fellow workers arrived one by one, except for Emma and Jim who arrived together giggling and exchanging knowing looks. He kept one eye on the water cooler at the end of the room and, soon, the bottle was empty and a new one was fetched from the kitchen.

He watched Sarah fill a cup, take a long a swig and return to her desk opposite him. Curious, he ambled over to the dispenser as casually as he could, pulled a plastic cup from its holder and filled it up from the nozzle. He took a tiny sip, then a larger one and swished the cool water around his mouth. He let the liquid slide down his throat. It tasted perfectly normal.

He topped the cup up and carried it back to his desk. The plan wasn't working. He'd expected some kind of

reaction by now. Maybe he'd been wrong. Then Carl and another team leader helped themselves to drinks, leaning against the water cooler and making small talk. As soon as they gulped the water down, Dave knew something was wrong. Their happy smiles were replaced by confused looks and then grimaces. They scratched at their throats as if trying to rip out whatever poison had infected their bodies.

Then, without warning, they were no longer there. A fraction of a second after Dave's brain had processed this impossible fact, thick ropes of putrid black blood and stinking flesh splattered against the walls and floor with a wet, sickening thud.

Everybody stood frozen in shocked silence. Kirsten's office door opened and she walked over to where Carl used to be, her high heels squelching in the entrails. She picked up a blood-smearred cup and sniffed the contents. Her nose wrinkled in distaste and she let out a disappointed sigh. She turned to the rows of stunned faces.

'Now I don't want to create a blame culture, but who blessed the water cooler?'

Dave drew rapid, shallow breaths as panic took hold. He hadn't thought this through.

Kirsten repeated herself, slower, 'Who blessed the water cooler?'

Next to Dave, Alice sniffed the air like an animal sensing prey. She turned to Dave, breathing deeply to

drink in the fear. Dave watched her face shift, the bone and muscle beneath the skin reshaping into a demonic configuration. The smile turned to a snarl as the canine teeth lengthened impossibly, becoming weapons to puncture and tear.

Dave realised he was still clutching a pencil, his knuckles white with tension. With an instinct developed by years of horror movies, he plunged the pencil into Alice's heart. She stumbled back clutching at the thin shaft of wood protruding from her chest until she burst like an overinflated balloon. Dave turned, shielding his face from the worst of the gore with his arm.

Across the office, other workers were turning into something more evil and toothier. Dave could feel someone bearing down on him. Grabbing his cup of holy water, he spun around and threw it in the vampire's face. It screamed as if it had been attacked with acid, its hands flying up to its smouldering and melting face.

The slaughter had begun. Screams tore through the air as teeth tore through flesh and sinew. Half of Dave's co-workers were lost in a blood lust, ripping and biting at the other half.

'Behind you!' he yelled at Sarah, who stood wide-eyed with confusion and fear. Copying Dave, she emptied her drink into the face of a vampire running at her and it crashed to the floor with an inhuman wail.

Dave searched for a way out when his eyes fell on a heavy metal door in the wall nearest him. 'The fire

escape!' he shouted to anyone who could hear him.

He sprinted towards the door. He could sense that there were others on his heels, but he didn't know if he was leading the charge or being chased. He smashed the door open with his shoulder and crashed into the wall opposite. Chris, Simon, Jim, Emma and Sarah quickly followed him. The fear in their eyes told him that they hadn't been turned.

Simon and Jim pushed the door closed, but it sprang open, slamming against the wall and throwing them to the floor. Jason leaped through the doorway and fell on Jim, blood and drool dripping from his gaping mouth.

Emma rugby tackled him from behind shouting, 'Leave him alone!' The two of them tumbled down the rough concrete steps onto the landing below. With a swift snap of her neck, Jason exposed the white skin of Emma's throat, sank his teeth into the soft flesh and feasted noisily.

Coming to his senses, Dave pushed the door shut and locked it before anyone or anything else came through. As it shook from the heavy blows from the other side, he knew that it wouldn't hold for long.

'What the fuck is going on?' asked Simon.

'I don't know but I don't think we should stay here to find out,' replied Chris.

Sarah turned her eyes from the frenzied feeding below. Her voice quivered. 'How are we going to get out?'

Dave realised everybody was looking at him. 'What

are you looking at me for?'

'You're in charge,' said Simon.

'I think it's obvious that I'm not the sort of person you should give any kind of responsibility to.'

Still they continued to stare. Dave looked up at the loop of stairs stretching above them. 'We climb until we get enough distance between us and them and then call for help.'

Chris and Simon pulled a traumatised Jim to his feet. 'She saved me. She saved me,' he repeated to himself like a mantra.

Ignored by Jason, the five survivors ran up the stairs two at a time, pulling themselves up by the metal railings. A few storeys up, Dave suddenly came to a halt.

'What are you doing?' Simon said, his voice verging on hysteria.

'My girlfriend's down there. Well, my ex-girlfriend.' He felt their eyes burning into him. 'Look, it's complicated, alright? I've got to do this.' He started to head back down the stairs. 'Get to the thirtieth floor,' he shouted back up. 'You can get an express lift straight down to reception. If something goes wrong, regroup at the boardroom. It's got a solid, lockable door.'

Dave cursed himself as he flew down the steps, spinning around the stairwell. This need to prove himself right had put everyone in danger and now he was the only one in any kind of position to get them out of it.

His legs were burning when he reached Melanie's

floor. He took a second to catch his breath and was glad that he could still hear Jason busy below. When he remembered what was keeping him occupied, a wave of guilt and shame washed over him. He grabbed the door handle and tugged at it. It was time to see Melanie.

Kirsten wasn't angry. She was just disappointed. In the two hundred and fifty-eight years she had been a creature of the night, she had never aroused any suspicion. Hiding in plain sight, she had been careful and considered in her existence. Now all that had been destroyed in two minutes of homicidal madness.

Blood had ruined dozens of documents and a lot of the office furniture would need to be replaced. She dreaded to think what the Full Time Equivalent impact would be to get the team back on track.

Bodies littered the floor. Some would rise again while others were gone forever. Such a terrible waste. She'd have to get onto the recruitment agencies again and their commission would come out of her budget.

'How many are missing?' she asked.

Andrew, one of the team leaders, counted the bodies. 'Seven. Six newbies and that Jason guy.'

The fire escape door opened with a click and Jason appeared, his face still smeared with Emma's blood.

'Where are they?' Kirsten asked him.

'They went up,' Jason replied.

'What floor?'

'I don't know. I was busy.'

Kirsten pointed to her bottom lip. 'You've got something on your face.'

Jason wiped his chin and licked the smears of blood from his fingers. Kirsten turned to the office. It was time to manage the situation, to bring things under control. That's what she was paid for. 'I want you to kill the lifts servicing the floors above the twentieth. Cut the phone lines. I want a floor-by-floor search until we find them. We've got less than three hours before we have to stamp our time sheets, if you know what I mean.'

'Yes, Kirsten,' her staff muttered.

She waved a hand at the carnage around her. 'And somebody clean this mess up.'

Chapter Sixteen

Simon reached the thirtieth floor first. He cracked the door at the top of the stairs open and stuck his head through the narrow gap.

'It's all clear,' he whispered to the others as they crowded around him, trying to put as much distance between themselves and the horror several floors beneath them. He opened the door wider and the four slinked through, clutching each other like the world's most depressed conga line.

Simon jogged over to the nearest desk and picked up the phone. He pressed some buttons and growled with frustration. 'It's dead.'

'Have you tried pressing nine for an outside line?' Chris asked as he clambered onto a desk, waving his mobile phone in the air in an attempt to get a signal.

Simon gave him a withering look. 'Of course I've sodding pressed sodding nine for a sodding outside line.'

'I was just trying to help,' Chris replied. 'Hang on. I've got a bar!' Being careful not to move the phone out of

signal range, he dialled 999. Everyone held their breath as it rang. 'Hi. We're at UberSystems International Tower. We need the police. Some of our co-workers have gone crazy and attacked us. It was like they were zombies or vampires or something. They were eating each other... Yeah. They were running... What do you mean zombies don't run? What about "28 Days Later"...? Well, I suppose they weren't technically zombies... Look, I think we're getting off-topic. Can you just send someone? Sorry. You're breaking up.' He looked at the others. 'We got cut off.'

'Zombies?' asked Sarah. 'Really?'

'Come on. Let's get to the lifts,' said Simon.

They snuck past rows of desks sat like dark tombs in the dim light of the sleeping office. When they reached the lifts, Chris pushed the down button. No light came on. He pressed the up button. Nothing.

'Can they shut the lifts down?' Sarah asked.

'Apparently so.' Chris rubbed his eyes, trying to problem-solve his way out of the terror. 'I say we do what Dave suggested. Let's get as far away as we can from these things and just wait for the police.'

Defeated, they turned around and headed back the way they had just come.

Dave quietly made his way around the office looking for Melanie. She'd moved desks since Dave had left the company - UberSystems International's continual struggle

to find the optimal productivity model.

He decided that he'd complete a sweep of the floor and when he was satisfied that she'd left the office for the night, he'd get the fuck out of Dodge. Halfway through his search, he was disappointed to hear her voice.

'It's half two in the morning. I'm not going for a drink.'

'It's London. This place never closes.' Jeremy's voice.

Dave's concern was replaced by anger. He quickened his pace and rounded the corner to see Jeremy perched on Melanie's desk while she was at the photocopier. Unused adrenaline coursed through Dave's veins as he ran over and grabbed Melanie by the wrist. 'Come on,' he barked at her. 'We've got to go.'

'What are you doing?' she screamed, pulling her wrist free from his sweat-slicked grip.

Jeremy hopped up from the desk. 'What are you playing at, Marwood?'

Dave pointed a finger. 'Don't. Just don't, alright?' He turned to Melanie. 'We have to get out of this office now.'

'What have you got on you?' Melanie asked, frightened.

Dave looked down at his blood stained clothes. 'Oh, it's not mine.'

Melanie took a slow step backwards. 'Dave, what have you done?'

'I've not done anything!' Dave said as he reached out to grab Melanie's hand again. She batted him away as Jeremy ran forwards and shoved him hard in the chest.

Dave staggered backwards with a grunt.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you,' he told Jeremy. 'I'm a master in Feng Shui.'

Jeremy looked confused. 'The Chinese philosophical system of harmonising everyone with the surrounding environment?'

Dave realised that he'd got his Oriental references mixed, but decided to front it out. 'Yeah, well, I can kill a man with a well-placed vase of flowers.'

The lift across from them pinged a warning. Dave backed away, looking for a way out. 'Look, are you coming with me? There's some bad shit about to come through that door right now.'

The lift's doors slid open with a clunk and a round, middle-aged lady pushing a trolley laden with cleaning products stepped out. 'Am I interrupting something?' she asked with a friendly smile. Dave breathed a sigh of relief.

'Yeah, she looks absolutely terrifying,' Jeremy drawled sarcastically.

A second lift arrived. As soon as its doors parted, a blur leapt out with inhuman speed and knocked the cleaner to the floor. Blood splattered over Jeremy, Dave and Melanie, who screamed.

'See? That's what I've been trying to tell you!' Dave yelled.

Jeremy was already running towards the double doors at the end of the corridor when Dave grabbed Melanie by

the hand and lurched after him. Jeremy crashed through and slammed the doors behind him, locking the other two in. Dave beat the glass with his fists.

'Let us in!' he screamed, but Jeremy was already through the next set of doors. 'Jeremy! You thundering cockwomble!' Dave shouted after him. He turned to Melanie. She was lost in fear. He wiped a drop of blood from her cheek. 'We'll get out of this, but I need you to focus, Melanie,' he said in as soothing a voice he could muster. 'Can you do that for me?' He searched her eyes for a sign that she understood. A tiny whimper escaped from her lips, but she nodded her head. 'Good.' Dave held her hand and they ran.

Gasping, Jeremy staggered into the darkened toilets. The motion-sensitive lights flickered on grudgingly as if unsure that they wanted to get involved.

He shrieked at his own reflection in the mirror that ran the full length of the wall above the sinks. Streaks of blood ran up his crisp white shirt and onto his face in a smooth, continuous pattern.

Running the taps, he could scrub the blood from his skin but not the shame. He shouldn't have left Melanie behind. He dropped his gaze from the mirror, but just met himself staring back up from the chrome.

'They'll be able to take care of themselves,' he told himself. He turned his attention to his shirt and cleaning the dark red stains smeared over the fine white cotton.

He didn't notice the door open. It closed with a quiet click, but the mirror showed Jeremy that he was alone in the room.

Then something was close behind him. He could smell the metallic tang of bloody breath, could hear the inhalation as it drew in his scent like a fine wine's bouquet.

Unable to turn, he stared straight ahead into his own tear-filled eyes. The mirror lied to him, telling him he was on his own, but the panting on the back of his neck told him the truth of the situation.

'You look like you'll taste expensive,' a voice whispered in his ear.

Chapter Seventeen

9 November 1983

The early years of the nineteen-eighties were a terrifying and desperate time to be alive. The world was entering a recession and governments slashed welfare budgets so they could treat themselves to a nice war every now and again. The United States and Soviet Union stockpiled ever more powerful weapons in a game of Thermonuclear Chicken. Duran Duran walked the Earth unopposed like some New Romantic behemoth.

The world has faced annihilation on countless occasions, but it never came closer than 9th November 1983. The official versions are sketchy, but they say that forty thousand NATO troops were engaged in a Europe-wide exercise code named Operation Able Archer. The Soviet Politburo, made paranoid by decades of nuclear brinkmanship, became convinced that this was a smokescreen to disguise a first strike against the Warsaw Pact.

The United State's Pershing missiles, newly deployed in West Germany, could impact on Soviet soil within six minutes of launch. The Kremlin would have to pre-empt any aggression and unleash their arsenal first if they were to stand any chance of burying what was left of their enemies. Before the Soviet premier Andropov could press the button, cooler heads prevailed and the world stepped back from plunging headlong into World War III.

The true story, however, is buried deep in the underground vaults of the Pentagon and Kremlin, never to be released.

Beelzebub had been busy after Conquest's wedding day. The Second World War took up a large amount of his time. He hadn't been involved in the more heinous acts; humanity managed to be evil in ways beyond anything that even he could imagine.

In the last years of the conflict, he'd seen the awesome potential of the atom and had worked behind the scenes on the Manhattan Project. The bombs dropping on Hiroshima and Nagasaki signalled the end of the war and the birth of the Atomic Age. He regularly switched sides between East and West in the burgeoning arms race, his intention to make sure that neither superpower achieved superiority over the other. The odd blueprint would go missing and a piece of military intelligence would be whispered into the correct ear.

Intelligence. That made Beelzebub laugh. As far as he

was concerned, humanity and intelligence were mutually exclusive.

Now, thirty-eight years after Enola Gay took off on its historic flight, Beelzebub stood in the control room of a nuclear bunker buried deep beneath a large chunk of the Latvian countryside. It was small and windowless with two banks of computers facing a backlit map of Europe and a digital clock on one wall. It came with all mod cons: Command and control facilities, hardwired comlinks direct to Moscow and thousands of megatons of fiery nuclear death.

Beelzebub liked the Soviets. Ever since the Greeks had come up with the concept of democracy after a few too many glasses of ouzo, he'd thought it was overrated. While the mood took him, he was a marshal of the Red Army and enjoyed the power, influence and really big hats. Say what you like about Communist ideology, but the Soviets didn't muck around when it came to using headwear to show who the most important person in the room was. Right now, Beelzebub was *Le Grand Chapeau*.

A young lieutenant, Grishenko, turned from the Cyrillic figures dancing across the green screen monitor and addressed Beelzebub. 'Approval for Dead Hand has been granted, sir.'

Beelzebub gave a smile that made Grishenko want to be anywhere but there, even the front line in Afghanistan.

'Excellent news, comrade,' Beelzebub replied in perfect Russian. Dead Hand was Beelzebub's masterpiece.

He'd always fancied building a doomsday device and had taken full advantage of an unlimited research and development budget. Now the Kremlin had received his reports of unusual enemy troop movements on all borders, he took a step closer to revealing his work of art. This must've been how Leonardo Da Vinci felt when he had finished the last brushstrokes of the Mona Lisa.

A red light began to flash on the console in front of Grishenko. 'Sir, we have a perimeter breach in Sector Twelve.'

Beelzebub brushed a speck of dust from the long row of medals on his green tunic and smiled again. Grishenko considered requesting a transfer to a nice comfortable gulag somewhere in Siberia. 'That'll just be some old friends dropping in,' said his commanding officer. 'Be a good chap and pop the kettle on.'

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Retired) looked down from the crest of the hill. Their steeds' breath fogged in the frosty winter air and the snow crunched beneath their shifting hooves. Dark sullen clouds gathered around them. War looked up.

'Portentous skies,' he murmured.

The eighties were a particularly cruel decade fashion-wise. War had been watching far too much 'Magnum: P.I.' and had shaved his fiery red beard down to a moustache. He had gone through his wardrobe and chosen his best Hawaiian shirt for today. Famine favoured an all-white

ensemble of leather jacket and trousers. Conquest wore a wide-shouldered double-breasted suit from Savile Row, because the end of the world didn't mean you didn't have to look swish. Death was in his favourite hooded cloak because, as he always told the others, the classics never go out of style.

Chain-link fencing topped with barbed wire surrounded a square block of granite with blast shielded doors large enough for a couple of tanks to pass through side by side; the main entrance to the complex buried deep underground. War counted the conscripted soldiers sheltering from the cold in the guardhouse and patrolling the perimeter, cigarettes hanging from their chapped lips.

'Are we sure he's in there?' asked Famine.

'You saw the files that War's contacts brought back,' Conquest replied. Beelzebub had been hiding from them for the last fifty years and then, last week, he had appeared on the intelligence reports that War still received from MI6. He was now a high-ranking officer in the Red Army's Black Ops division and they'd all agreed that this was A Very Bad Thing. 'What do you think, Death?'

No answer. Conquest punched him on the arm. Death removed his Walkman headphones. 'Sorry. What were you saying?'

'You should probably take those off. You need to focus.'

'Yeah, I know. It's just that this new Billy Joel album is really good.'

Conquest shook his head. 'Are we all ready?'

They all agreed they were.

'Captain!' barked War.

A bush a couple of metres away stood up and became Captain Bill Hillier. He was in full camouflage, his face smeared with paint. He slung an assault rifle over his shoulder and quietly sprinted to War's side. 'Sir?' he asked, spitting bits of twig.

'I need your men to run interference. Engage at fifty metres. Do not attempt to detain the target. That's our job.'

Captain Hillier couldn't see how these fruity-looking Limeys were going to infiltrate a top secret Soviet military site and capture one of the Red Army's top officers. 'Yes, sir.'

War placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Make them think Judgment Day's come early.' His three friends looked at each other. They really hoped that it hadn't.

Hillier smiled grimly. 'With pleasure, sir.' He disappeared back into the undergrowth and fifteen identical bushes began to move silently down the hillside towards the main gate. The Four Horsemen were alone.

'So, what's the plan, then?' Death asked.

'Go in there and fuck shit up,' War replied.

Famine frowned. 'That's always the plan.'

'Hasn't failed so far.'

'How many times is this now? Saving the world, I mean?' Famine asked.

'This is different,' said Conquest. 'This is for what he

did to Julia. If I stop everything being reduced to ash, well, that's a bonus.' It had been half a century since he'd last seen Julia. She'd be an old woman now, probably married with the children and grandchildren that he couldn't give her. Whoever said it gets easier with time never had an eternity alone stretching before them.

'It also makes my workload a lot more manageable,' said Death.

On an unseen signal, the Special Forces troops sprung up and opened fire on the guardhouse. The air sang with gunshots and screams. Intruder alarms howled in the winter wind. Spooked by the sudden noise, the horses reared up.

'Where did you get these bloody things?' asked War as he trotted around in a circle.

'Do you know how difficult it is to hire horses in this day and age?' replied Famine.

Conquest stroked his horse's mane and, leaning forward, whispered something in her ear. She whinnied and calmed down. As she did, so did the others.

'It's a pleasure and a privilege as always, gentlemen,' Conquest yelled above the gunfire. He snapped the reins in his hand and galloped down the hill. The others chased him into battle with the fury of the righteous. The ground beneath them rumbled like an approaching storm. Swords drawn, the Horsemen dashed past the ghosts of the fallen. Death would see to them later.

Hillier's men had already secured the guardhouse and

were opening the gates when the Soviet reinforcements came up to the surface through the bunker's doors. The Four Horsemen were in the compound before the gates were fully open. When the guards saw Death charging towards them on horseback, most of them dropped their weapons and fled. Those that stayed fired bullets that passed straight through him. They were rewarded with a boot to the face.

War charged at a Russian firing indiscriminately from his Kalashnikov, but he couldn't reach him in time and bullets raked across his horse's neck. He was leaping through the air before she could hit the ground. He plunged his sword through the chest of the soldier, rolling when he landed. With the poise of a gymnast, War was back on his feet in an instant and pulled the sword from the dead man. He turned to the approaching guards. 'Come on then,' he roared, shaking his bloodied sword. 'One at a time or all together. Doesn't make any difference to me.'

None of them had signed up to fight what appeared to be a very angry and lost holidaymaker who had dressed completely inappropriately for the weather conditions. War returned to his dead horse and patted her flanks. 'Thanks, girl.' He strode towards the compound entrance unchallenged.

Conquest had finished dealing with an entire platoon that had been pinning Hillier's men down on the left flank. He cantered over to join War and jumped off his horse.

He fed her some sugar lumps from his suit pocket and then straightened his tie. Death appeared from thin air. Famine was last to join them. His white leather jacket was splattered with dark red spots. He looked furious.

'Do you know how hard it is to get blood out of leather?' he grumbled.

Hillier jogged over. 'That was impressive.'

'Thank you, captain,' War replied. 'I need you and your men to fall back before the next wave arrives. My friends and I will take it from here.'

'Yes, sir.' Hillier saluted. 'Good luck.'

Hillier gestured to his troops and they all ran back through the gate and vanished into the countryside.

The Horsemen crept into the compound and down the entrance ramp until daylight had been reduced to a small white rectangle behind them. They found themselves in a deserted servicing bay. The alarm whooped and bounced off the concrete walls. Army trucks had been left with engines exposed and wheels missing. The engineers had no taste for battle and had disappeared into the bowels of the underground base.

In the shadows, a nervous young private fumbled with the safety catch on his pistol. When he looked up to fire it, the intruder wearing a long coat and hood had travelled across the length of the bay impossibly fast. He plucked the gun from the soldier's hand and shook his head. The private didn't hang around to find out what else he might do.

The Horsemen snuck through a small door at the end of the servicing bay and into a corridor that had been carved into the rock itself. It stretched off in both directions and caged lamps that hung from the ceiling cast shadows on the roughly hewn walls.

'Which way?' asked Conquest.

'I don't know,' said War.

'I thought you had a plan?'

'I do have a plan. I told you it on the hill.'

'I thought that was bravado.'

'They don't exactly hand out schematics to these places, you know. I thought we'd blag it.'

Conquest rubbed his forehead. He could feel a headache coming on, which was the usual result of a conversation with War. 'You thought we'd blag breaking into a top secret Soviet nuclear missile silo? Alright. Let's split up. Death and I will go one way and you and Famine can go the other.'

'Why do I have to go with him?' Famine moaned.

'I don't want to argue about it.' Conquest spoke with the tone of a weary father addressing a sulking child. The pairs headed off in opposite directions. Before Death and Conquest rounded the corner, Conquest turned back.

'War?' he called.

'What?'

'Try and keep the body count to an absolute minimum.'

War pouted. 'You're no fun anymore.'

War and Famine watched Conquest and Death

disappear from view.

'Come on, you skinny streak of piss,' said War. 'Let's go and find this bastard.'

Keeping close to the wall, they made their way down the corridor. They turned left and right at various junctions, searching for clues to Beelzebub's location. Once or twice, they had to duck down tunnels and hide in doorways as troops ran in the opposite direction to join a battle that was already over.

Soon they arrived at a door covered in so many warning signs, it could only lead to the control room. Entrance was granted by swiping a security card through a keypad to the door's right.

'Do you think you can open it?' asked War.

Famine bit his lip and crouched down to inspect the keypad. 'I'm going to have to override the system. I'll need a pocket calculator, soldering iron, a twenty-five millimetre screwdriver, some chewing gum and a paper clip.'

The door slid open and a technician stepped out. The door hissed shut and he stared at Famine and War in stunned silence. War did the first thing that came to mind and punched him in the face. The technician slumped to the floor and War searched his clothes until he found a security badge with a magnetic strip. 'How about this?'

'Yeah, that'll do.'

War tossed the badge to Famine who grabbed it with one hand and swiped it through the keypad. The door

locks opened with a thud.

Beelzebub was stood with his back to them. He was sipping tea from a delicate bone china cup and saucer and studying a computer monitor. Hearing the door open, he said something in Russian over his shoulder.

War answered, 'I'm sorry, but I don't speak commie.'

Beelzebub turned around. He placed the cup back on the saucer. 'Gentlemen! I'm so glad you could make it. Do you like what I've done with the place?'

'How did you slime your way into this gig?' asked Famine.

'You know how it is,' Beelzebub replied. 'Dark forces. I am legion. It's not about what you know, but who you know. How have you been?' Famine and War brandished their swords. Beelzebub smiled politely. 'Done with the small talk, are we?'

War sneered. 'What are you up to?'

'I'm glad you asked. What's the point of coming up with nefarious plans if you don't get to show off about them? Have you heard of The Dead Hand?' War shook his head. 'It's a little project I persuaded the powers that be to invest in.'

'Can I put this sword down?' Famine whispered to War. 'It's really rather heavy.'

'Alright,' War whispered back.

'Have you two finished?' Beelzebub asked impatiently. They nodded. 'If a nuclear strike is detected on Soviet soil by seismic, light and radiation sensors, it will

automatically trigger the launch of all our ICBMs towards their primary targets. The Kremlin thinks that I designed it as a deterrent, but what's the point of building something if you're never going to use it?'

Famine was horrified. 'But if you launch all your nukes, then everybody else will launch theirs. Billions will die.'

'There'll be some collateral damage, I admit. You can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs. With governments left impotent, I shall take my place as ruler. True, it'll be Hell on Earth, but better to reign in Hell and all that.'

'But you need someone to launch a nuclear strike against you first,' War said.

'You're not as moronic as that ridiculous shirt suggests. If hostile forces attack a nuclear missile installation the highest-ranking officer is granted extraordinary powers up to and including the use of nuclear force, without requiring authorisation from Moscow. So, thank you for that.' Beelzebub looked over at the map on the wall. 'I was thinking London. Put those grumpy bastards out of their misery.'

Famine chuckled and raised his sword. 'Haven't you seen any movies? The bad guy should never reveal his plans for world domination until it's too late to stop him.'

Beelzebub tilted his head to the side sadly. 'Oh, but it is too late.'

The last sound War and Famine heard were the

triggers of the guns pointed at the backs of their heads.

Chapter Eighteen

Dave and Melanie were hiding behind a filing cabinet experiencing one of history's greatest awkward silences.

'Well,' Dave finally said. 'At least we're spending some quality time together.'

Melanie ignored his joke. 'Who was that?'

'John. No, wait. James. Or at least, that's who he used to be.' James Camp. That was his name. Dave had drunk coffee with him on their break less than twenty-four hours ago. He seemed like a nice guy. Now he was drinking blood from an office cleaner and Dave was trying to figure out a way to destroy him. You never really know your co-workers.

'What is he now?'

'A vampire.'

Melanie almost laughed at the suggestion. 'There's no such thing as vampires.'

'What bit is confusing you? The teeth? The pale skin? The blood sucking? That was a bit of a pointer. The way they get all explodey around holy water?'

'Holy water?'

'Oh yeah. You weren't there for that bit. I got ordained in an online church. One of the perks is that I can bless water.'

Melanie shook her head. 'I don't believe this is happening.'

'You get used to it after a while. Trust me.' Dave pulled himself up into a crouch, chanced a look over the top of the cabinet then ducked back down. 'I promise that I will tell you everything if we get out of here alive, but the coast is clear and we need to go right now.' Dave stood up. 'Are you ready?'

'No, but let's go.' She held her hand out and Dave took it, pulling her up.

'Head straight for the lifts. Whatever happens, don't stop,' Dave ordered. They left the safety of their hiding place and, half crouched, they dashed towards the centre of the office. As Dave passed a desk, he grabbed an aerosol can of compressed air and jammed it into his hoodie pocket.

'What are you doing?' Melanie hissed.

'I've got an idea,' he whispered back.

They reached the lifts and pressed the down button. Dave was relieved that it illuminated with a little ring of light. They waited, Dave impatiently tapping his foot on the stone floor.

The vampire James appeared at the end of the row of steel doors. Grinning, he slowly paced towards Melanie

and Dave; a predator stalking its prey. Dave held his hand out to Melanie. 'Give me your lighter.'

'I know it's stressful, but now's not the time for a cigarette.'

Dave pulled the aerosol can from his pocket and showed it to Melanie. 'Give me your lighter.'

Melanie understood and passed him the disposal plastic lighter from her suit pocket. Dave gulped and beckoned James. 'Come on, then.'

James broke into a sprint. As Dave fiddled with the striker wheel, he regarded this as one of a long line of questionable decisions. The lighter sprang into life. As James pressed his hands on Dave, he sprayed the canister into the flame and a plume of fire caught James full in the face. He fell backwards, his hair and clothes catching alight. Dave pressed forward, keeping his finger held down on the improvised flamethrower and engulfing the vampire in a blaze.

James floundered and waved arms of flames. The lift arrived and, as the doors slid open, Dave aimed carefully and with his foot shoved the burning monstrosity into it. It fell to the floor, thrashing and screaming like a wild animal. Scorch marks blackened wherever its limbs struck the interior. Dave reached around into the lift and jabbed at the button to send it down to the ground floor. As the doors closed, Dave looked at the can in his fist and shrugged his shoulders. He tossed the can into the flames. The doors sealed, creating an oven plummeting to the

ground.

Police Sergeant Graham Thomas was an old fashioned sort of copper who missed old fashioned policing of old fashioned crimes. He remembered a time before cyber fraud, tasers and - most recently - undead creatures engulfed in balls of flames.

The shift had started regularly. Graham and his partner P.C. Reynolds had been asked to attend an incident at UberSystems International Tower. A probable hoax call; someone claiming vampires and zombies were attacking office workers. Graham was betting on a bored kid.

Keith the security guard at the front desk, who was eighty if he was a day, was helpful. He'd let them have a look around and there'd been a bit of banter.

Then one of the lifts had exploded, sending burning shrapnel and glass over a wide area. The smoke cleared and a blazing figure ran out and collapsed on the floor. Graham tried to smother the flames by throwing his hi-vis jacket over the charred, writhing body. Soon, the only movement was a foot kicking pathetically against the stone floor.

Reynolds grabbed his radio as Keith impossibly leapt over the desk in a single bound. He clamped his jaws around Reynolds's throat and ripped his windpipe out, spitting it on the floor like an unwanted chunk of food. Reynolds gargled and clawed at the pulpy, bloody mess where most of his neck had been.

Graham barely had time to pull the pepper spray from his belt before Keith was biting down on him with incredible force. The initial sharp stab of pain and fear was replaced by a warm sensation flowing through his veins. He felt something important within him die at that moment, replaced by something stronger.

Hunger.

The blood pooling around Reynolds was fascinating. As the liquid shone darkly against the marble, Graham had never seen anything look more delicious and inviting.

Keith licked his own fingers clean. 'Take him. He's yours.'

Graham radioed back to the station. 'It's all fine here. False alarm. I'm just going to have a bite to eat.'

Chapter Nineteen

Dave and Melanie scampered up the stairs, nervously glancing behind them every few floors.

'This reminds me of that Bruce Willis film,' Melanie said between laboured breaths.

'Die Hard?' Dave asked, wiping the sweat from his brow.

'No, "Look Who's Talking" because this is also a very bad idea.'

Dave took his phone from his pocket and redialled Death's number. He listened to it ring a few times before it went to his voicemail. 'You're through to Death. I can't take your soul right now, but please leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can.'

'Hi. It's Dave. Nothing important. It's just that I was right and I'm being chased by vampires. No biggie. Give us a call when you get this.'

They ducked through the door to the thirtieth floor and skirted around the familiar layout quickly. This was where Dave's office had been.

He tried the handle of the boardroom's door and was relieved to find it was locked. Though the others hadn't managed to escape, some were still alive at least. He gently knocked on the door.

'It's Dave. Open up,' he whispered.

He heard the scraping of heavy furniture and the lock sprang open. Simon, about as pale as the creatures that were hunting him, opened the door. Melanie bundled Dave in from behind.

Chris, Sarah and Jim were slumped in the expensive leather chairs around the conference table. 'What kept you?' Sarah asked.

Simon and Dave pushed a sideboard back into place against the door. 'We ran into a friend.'

'Why didn't you get out?'

Melanie looked accusingly at Dave. 'Somebody's blown up the lifts.'

'I was improvising,' Dave said defensively.

Chris stood up and approached Melanie, his hand extended. 'You must be Melanie. Chris Love.' Melanie shook his hand. 'That's Sarah over there, Jim's the one having a nervous breakdown at the head of the table and Simon let you in.'

'Nice to meet you all.' Melanie gave a vague wave to the room. Manners were still important, even in survival situations. They were British, after all.

Chris turned to Dave. 'The police have been called.'

'I don't know how much faith we can put in the police,'

Dave said, sliding into one of the empty seats.

'So, what is this? You seem to have a better idea than the rest of us.'

'Vampires.' Dave said.

Simon gave a mocking laugh. 'There's no such thing.'

'We can go round in circles debating what does or does not exist, or we can make an assumption that the things out there that want to suck our blood are vampires.'

'If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck,' said Sarah.

'A duck that killed my new girlfriend,' Jim muttered.

'Alright,' said Simon. 'Let's say they're vampires. What do we do?'

'I've left a message with some friends who can help us, but until then we need to figure out a plan,' Dave said.

Chris realised that this was his moment to shine.

'Sarah,' he said. 'There's a coffee machine in the corner. Simon, I'm pretty sure there are some biscuits in one of the sideboard cupboards.' He leaned over and placed a hand on Dave's shoulder. 'There's not a problem I can't brainstorm myself out of.'

Chris set up a whiteboard while Simon and Sarah scurried around the table setting down cups and plates of biscuits around Jim, who simply stared off into the distance.

Dave looked down on the lights of the city. He sensed Melanie join him at his side.

'It's kind of beautiful, isn't it?' she said. Even now, he could almost believe it with her by his side. Her breath condensing on the window was illuminated by the city's glow. He felt her fingers tentatively brush his. 'Thank you.'

'For what?' he asked.

'Coming for me.'

Dave shrugged, faking nonchalance. 'No problem.'

'You said you'd tell me what was going on?'

'Do you trust me?'

Her fingers wrapped around his. 'I do now.'

Dave looked into her pale blue eyes, breathed deeply and spoke. 'London is full of lost souls. Not all of them belong to the living. I find them. I rescue those who were left behind. I bring comfort to those who are afraid.'

'You've been practising that, haven't you?'

Dave nodded. 'Yes.'

'Lost souls? Are you talking about ghosts?'

'That's one way to describe them. After the car accident, there were some - well - side effects. I've been able to see them my whole life, but since then I can help them if they haven't passed on in the usual way. That's what I do all day. That's why I've done so terribly at us. I had to choose between you and them. I think I chose wrong.'

Melanie placed a hand on his cheek. 'Oh, Dave,' she sighed.

'You believe me?'

'I wouldn't have before tonight, but once you see your boyfriend fight off a vampire with an aerosol and a lighter you tend to be a bit more open minded about things. So what's the usual way? A tunnel of light? A choir of angels waiting for you at the Pearly Gates? A guy with a big scythe?' She laughed, but stopped when she saw Dave's face. 'The Grim Reaper? Really? Have you--' she paused, as she tried to form the words to a ridiculous question. 'Have you met him?'

Dave let out a long sigh. 'Melanie, I work for him.'

'Why isn't he here? People are dying.'

'I don't know. There's something stopping him entering the building. If you were to die in here, then he wouldn't be able to do anything. That's why I'm here. To try and find an answer.'

Chris cleared his throat. Dave was annoyed by the interruption, but this would have to wait. They all gathered at the table. Dave munched on a biscuit and considered how relationships seemed more complicated when the undead got involved.

'I thought we'd try brainstorming exercises,' Chris said, popping the lid off a marker pen. 'What do we know about vampires? What are their weaknesses? There are no wrong answers here. We just want to get some ideas flowing and see if we can solutionise this.'

Dave put his hand up. 'Yes, Dave?' said Chris.

'I'm pretty sure that's not a real word.'

'What isn't?' asked Chris.

'Solutionise.'

'Yes it is,' said Sarah. 'It means to heat a metal alloy to form a homogeneous solid solution.'

'Every day's a school day.' Dave turned back to Chris. 'Is that what you meant? To heat a metal alloy to form a homogeneous solid solution?'

'Obviously not,' said Chris.

'Then please don't use it again.'

'Can we get back to the topic?' asked Chris. 'What kills vampires? Just say the first thing that comes to mind.'

'Sunlight,' Simon shouted out.

'Good. When's sunrise?'

'Half past five,' said Dave.

Chris looked at his watch. 'That's just over two hours away. Let's park that one and we can come back to it offline. Does anyone have any suggestions that don't rely on the Earth's rotation?'

'Stake through the heart?' said Sarah.

'Stakes! Good!' Chris wrote the word on the board.

'Anything else?'

'Holy water,' Dave said.

'Excellent! We've got real world evidence of that one.'

'Crosses,' Melanie said, playing with her necklace.

'Crosses. Good.' Chris scribbled the suggestions down.

'Garlic?' said Jim.

'Do we have any garlic?' Chris asked.

'We could use Jim's breath?' Simon said.

'Fuck off,' Jim said with a hint of a smile.

'If you kill the head vampire, you kill them all,' Sarah said.

'And any that haven't fed yet have their condition reversed,' Melanie said.

Chris stood back and read the short list. 'How do we make stakes?'

'There's a caretaker's cupboard. Wooden mops and broom handles. We can use them,' Dave said.

'Brilliant. Crosses?'

'There might be something in the stationery cupboard? It's just a case of putting two long strips together,' said Melanie.

'And holy water?' asked Chris. 'Dave's our subject matter expert on that.'

'I don't know,' said Dave with a shrug. 'The water cooler?'

'That's not very portable,' said Simon.

'What about the fire extinguishers? You can aim it and everything,' said Sarah.

'And how do we kill the head vampire?' asked Simon.

'Let's cross that bridge when we come to it,' said Dave.

Chris clapped his hands together. 'Good work, everyone. Sarah and Simon, you're in charge of going to the stationery cupboard. Dave and Melanie, you're on stake duty. Jim and I will get the fire extinguishers. Let's all meet back here in five.'

As everybody stood up Dave said, 'Remember, they're

no longer the people you work with. They're soulless monsters who will do anything to destroy you.'

'To be fair,' said Melanie, 'that pretty much sounds like the people I work with.'

Chapter Twenty

Melanie and Dave sought out the mops and brooms amongst the chemicals and cleaning products in the caretaker's cupboard. They discarded those with metal and plastic handles and were left with three mops with wooden ones.

'What's he like?' Melanie asked suddenly.

Dave was looking in an old ice cream box for anything that could be of use. 'Who?'

'Death.'

Dave stopped and smiled as he thought about him.

'Funny. Annoying. Sad. Lonely.'

'Can I meet him?'

'I don't know. I think I really have to stress the annoying bit.'

'Where are the ghosts? If he's not here to do his thing, shouldn't they be hanging around?'

'I don't know where they are. I've got a theory, but it's incredibly depressing. Death by vampire is utter destruction. Death of the body and death of the soul.'

They're psychic locusts. They leave nothing behind.'

Melanie silently contemplated this. 'We'd better be extra careful, then.'

'Too bloody right.'

'What you do is important, isn't it?'

'I think so.'

'I think you made the right choice. I wouldn't want to be left alone for eternity. I'd be pretty happy if you showed up even if it was just to say goodbye.'

They looked at each other. Nothing else needed to be said.

'Come on,' said Dave. 'We've got some vampires to destroy.'

Dave and Melanie rushed back with the mops under their arms. Everybody arrived outside the boardroom at the same time. Sarah and Simon carried rulers and rubber bands. Chris and Jim had a fire extinguisher each and they'd found a fire axe as an added bonus.

'Fire extinguishers are heavy,' Chris said, dropping the red canister to the floor and wiping the sweat from his brow. 'I think we got the raw deal.'

The attack came from the shadows. Six vampires jumped from all sides in a blur of teeth and claws. Dave's first instinct was to lash out with a fist. It connected sharply with the jaw of one and it went sprawling over a desk.

Melanie and Sarah held rulers together to make

rudimentary crosses. The vampires bearing down on them skidded to a halt and backed off, hissing like scalded animals. Simon and Dave impotently waved mop handles, failing to halt the attackers' advances.

A vampire leaped onto Chris's back, sending them both spiralling and bouncing off office furniture and onto a photocopier. Dave ran over to help, smashing the lid repeatedly onto the vampire's head, but its teeth were clamped tightly around Chris's throat. It lashed out an arm, sending Dave crashing to the floor.

Pulling himself back to his feet, Dave knew they had seconds to live unless he thought of something. A small object on the ceiling caught his attention. He clambered up onto a desk, kicking over framed photographs and ornaments, and pulled Melanie's lighter from his pocket. Stretching up, he held the flame to one of the fire sprinkler heads. The system kicked into life, spraying a fine rain down and soaking everything.

'Exorcizo te, creatura aquæ, in nomine Dei Patris omnipotentis, et in nomine Jesu Christi, Filii ejus Domini nostri, et in virtute Spiritus Sancti. Ut fias aqua exorcizata ad effugandam omnem potestatem inimici, et ipsum inimicum eradicare et explantare valeas cum angelis suis apostaticis, per virtutem ejusdem. Domini nostri Jesu Christ qui venturus est judicare vivos et mortuos et sæculum per ignem,' Dave shouted over the white noise of the water.

As soon as Dave finished speaking, the vampires

howled and screamed as the blessed water stripped the skin from their muscles like boiling rain. Soon, the sprinklers ran dry and the vampires' bodies lay still in the silence.

'Great. My phone's water damaged. That's the insurance fucked,' Simon muttered to himself.

'Yeah, that's the thing to concentrate on right now,' said Sarah.

'Don't have a go at me!' shouted Simon. 'It wasn't me that got us into this mess! We'd all be still sat at our desks if it wasn't for him.' He pointed an accusing finger at Dave.

'If it wasn't for him, we'd all be gotten to eventually,' Sarah said. 'You saw what they did to Jason.'

Dave jumped down from the table and ran to Chris's side. He was slick with diluted blood. He tugged weakly at his sodden tie. 'They're burning,' he gasped. 'My clothes. My skin. On fire. I can feel it. I can feel it inside me. I don't want to become one of them. I'm a vegetarian, for Christ's sake.'

Chris was soaked in holy water. It would be a painful, lingering death as the change took place. Dave looked up at the others gathered around in silence like a sombre, mourning family. He knew he would have to be the one that did this. In the bad days after his mother's death, he'd resented his parents for not giving him a brother or sister with whom he could share the burden of grief. He felt the same loneliness now. He took a mop from Jim's hand and

snapped the handle with the heel of his shoe. With a pen knife he whittled the sharp, splintered end to a vicious point. An executioner preparing his instrument of death.

He knelt beside Chris. He shifted the stake in his hand. Its weight was unbearable. He couldn't lift it up and do what was being asked of him.

'You're all going to die, you know?' Chris said through gritted teeth, his humanity slowly dying. 'You'll be sucked dry. There's no way out of it.' He gave a mocking laugh, blood bubbles popping from the gaps in his teeth.

Dave plunged the stake into Chris's heart and the laughter stopped.

The silence was worse.

'Shit. He had kids,' Dave said.

'Oh, Jesus,' Melanie muttered, placing a hand on Dave's shoulder. He shrugged it off.

He pulled the stake from Chris's chest, wiped the blood on his jeans and tucked it into his belt. He turned to the others. 'We need to get out of here. They'll know where we are now.'

Chapter Twenty-One

9 November 1983

Conquest and Death had just discovered that they had been walking around in circles. They'd decided to start an argument with each other when the countdown began. The concrete, flashing red lights and ear-splitting klaxon reminded Death of a New York nightclub he'd been to for a fancy dress party once. He translated the garbled announcement from the Tannoy system for Conquest.

'They're locking down the base in preparation for launch. We've got a couple of minutes.'

'He's launching missiles? At what?'

'How should I know?' Death snapped, 'but if we don't do something about it, I'm really going to get it in the neck from a lot of very annoyed people.'

Conquest weighed up the options and came to a decision. 'You go and find War and Famine and get to the control room. I'm going to the missile silos and see if I can stop them from there.'

'Do you know where you're going?'

Conquest breathed in deeply. 'I can smell their power.'

'What are you going to do?'

'I'll blag it.'

'Good luck,' Death said.

'You too.'

Death ran back in the direction he'd last seen Famine and War heading, the hem of his cloak dancing up and wrapping around his legs, until he came across the unconscious body of a technician. It could only be War's handiwork. Without stopping for the laws of physics, he glided through the door to the control room.

Red lights flashed, casting demonic shadows that pulsed against the wall in time with the blaring sirens. Beelzebub was stood over the limp bodies of War and Famine, cast crimson in the dim light. A bullet fired into the back of the head from point blank range will make an enormous mess and kill both mortal and immortal beings alike. Where mortals and immortals differed, though, is that immortals didn't have souls. All that remained were two large holes punched through the universe.

Death could grasp the distance between the farthest stars, but the idea that his two friends were gone forever was too big. An unfamiliar feeling balled up and knotted inside him. Death screamed with rage. 'What have you done?'

Beelzebub sipped his tea. Irritated, he said, 'I'm not explaining it all again.'

Death picked up War's sword from where it had fallen. He shifted the weight in his grip. He hadn't held a weapon in centuries, but at this moment it felt right. Beelzebub backed away. The cup and saucer slipped from his fingers and smashed onto the floor.

'Now, come on. Remember your oath. You vowed never to take a life. You won't do anything.' There was uncertainty in his voice.

Death ran a finger along the blade. A thrill of pleasure ran up his arm and through his body. 'Yes, I remember. I vowed never to take a human life.' He took a step forward. Porcelain shards cracked and splintered under his feet.

Beelzebub had backed himself up against the computer terminal on the far wall. He was panicking now. He'd gone too far killing War and Famine, but his pride had blinded him to the consequences. 'Guards!' he yelled. 'Fall back. Protect me.'

The soldiers stood frozen in place. What was happening in front of them went beyond their understanding. Some of them were offering breathless prayers, silent beneath the sirens. Death gave the sword a couple of practice swings, cutting the air around him. It was all coming back to him. Back to a time when he spilled blood alongside his three brothers.

A warning light flashed on Lieutenant Grishenko's computer terminal. He cleared his throat. 'Sir, the missile silo doors are jammed. We're unable to launch at this

time.'

Conquest had obviously thought of something. Beelzebub looked from Death to Grishenko. He was sweating, gasping for air and having difficulty multi-tasking. 'Get somebody down there and manually open them.' He turned his attention back to Death. 'I'm guessing that's Conquest interfering? Come on, Death. You were always my favourite of the group. You were definitely the smartest. You're different to the others. I always thought we had a lot in common.'

'One minute until launch,' Grishenko told the room.

Death held the sword up to Beelzebub's throat. 'Abort it.'

'I can't. I removed the override. Once the codes are entered, it can't be stopped. If those doors don't open, it'll blow up in the silo.'

Death headed for the door.

'I'm assuming that your normal mode of transport isn't available? I made sure there'd be too much electrical interference when they built this place. You'll never make it there in time. Maybe he's got out, maybe he hasn't. There's nothing you can do,' Beelzebub called out behind him.

Death turned back and pointed the sword back at the base of Beelzebub's neck. 'A very long time ago, when I was much younger, I assumed there must be something more than us. I mean, there you were; the embodiment of pure evil. I thought that, somewhere, there must be the

embodiment of pure good. But the universe doesn't deal in such absolutes. There's just shades of grey.' He leant forward; close enough for Beelzebub to see the true face of Death. It was pale and awful and terrified even the Devil himself. 'You're not needed anymore.'

Death stepped back and swung War's sword. It cut cleanly through Beelzebub's neck, separating his head from his body. The body fell to its knees and then forward onto its chest; an empty vessel.

For a brief moment Death was victorious, but then he felt less than nothing. The sword fell from his grip and clattered to the floor, but Death did not hear it.

Grishenko was pressing buttons and turning keys, but it was futile. With seconds to go, he was swept by a wave of calm that pushed him back into his seat.

Three.

Two.

One.

Boom.

Compression waves pushed their way through the rock between the missile silo and the control room. Files slipped from desks, half-drunk cups of coffee smashed and bodies were thrown around like rag dolls.

When the room stopped shaking, a fine shower of dust drifted down from the cracks splitting the ceiling. It coated everything in a layer of grey so it looked like a thousand years had passed in the brief moment of detonation. Grishenko climbed out from under his desk,

bewildered. Death had disappeared. 'We're still here,' he said with astonishment.

'The payload wasn't armed. That was just the conventional explosives and rocket fuel going up,' one of the technicians replied through the haze. 'We'd better evacuate, though, in case there's been any kind of leak.'

Grishenko agreed and sounded the alarm. The control room door opened with a hiss of compressed air and the dust wafted out into the corridor. The survivors stumbled and staggered over the three bodies in their way, and out towards the surface.

Conquest did not return. Death followed the corridor back until it became a narrow service tunnel leading to the missile silos. He saw a flash of silver catch the dim light. Conquest's pocket watch dropped in the rush to get to the missiles. Death picked it up and put it in his cloak. He carried on until he arrived at the silo's access hatch. A young soldier stared dumbly at his own crumpled body. The silo's walls had done their job and contained the firestorm, but the blast had punched the life out of him.

The soldier looked up. 'Oh, it's you,' he said with a resigned tone.

'Have we met?'

The soldier's voice trembled with shock. 'I thought I saw you once at my babushka's bedside. Does this mean I'll see her again? I'd like that.'

'Possibly. I hope you do. Before that, though, did you see anybody go in there?' Death pointed at the sealed

hatch.

'A guy in a good suit? Yeah. I thought I was seeing things. I mean, what's a guy dressed like that doing down here? I told him not to, but I don't think he understood me. He never came out.'

Death thanked the young soldier and did what needed to be done. He climbed through the access hatch and into a tall thin concrete tube. Flames crackled hungrily, consuming what little wreckage was left. The skeleton of the rocket, twisted and warped like some horrifying piece of art, pointed up towards the cracked hatch a hundred feet above his head. Conquest lay still in the corner, his clothes reduced to rags by the explosion. Death ran to his side. Conquest stirred and then rolled over slowly. He looked down at his body, checking that everything was still attached.

'Bloody hell. Do you know how much this suit cost?' he groaned. He looked up at Death. 'Where are the other two?'

Death found a tool shed, took a shovel and returned to the control room. He and Conquest carried the bodies of War and Famine to the surface. The storm clouds had passed and a thin plume of smoke split the clear, bright sky. They went to the top of the hill from where the Horsemen had last rode out together. Now that they were clear of the base Death could transport the bodies in an instant, but they carried them up the hillside. Their fallen

comrades deserved the effort and the two remaining Horsemen honoured them with every slip and stumble.

Two deep graves were dug in the frozen ground and War and Famine's bodies were placed in them. They would decay and be washed from here by the meltwater. They would be carried in the rivers and swim out into the sea until their infinitesimal remains had spread and wrapped themselves around the whole world. They would approve of that.

'I'm done with this,' Conquest said after a while. 'Once again we've saved humanity from themselves, given them another chance, but they'll learn nothing from it.'

'Maybe they will this time,' Death said.

'They crave order, but fight amongst themselves like spoilt children,' Conquest replied. 'It's not our duty to save these mortals. We've done so time and time again and all I have to show for it is pain and loneliness.' He extended his hand to Death. 'It's time to part ways.'

Death knew that this is what Conquest had to do. The Four Horsemen were no more. He shook his hand. 'What will you do?'

'Head west. That's as far as I've got.'

'Goodbye, old friend,' said Death warmly.

'Goodbye.'

Conquest headed down the hillside. Death watched him until he disappeared over the horizon. For the first time in his existence, Death was alone. He stared at the two mounds of dirt and wondered whether he could go

back and try to save them, but he knew from experience that it wouldn't work. He wasn't in control. The tragedy of life is that everything dies. The blessing of it is that nobody knows when. He wished the world would grasp that fact.

He didn't know how long he stood there. It might have been for a second, or maybe the whole of time had travelled full circle. He couldn't stay forever. He had work to do.

Death would always have work to do.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kirsten searched the Document Management Centre. Her hunger was a dull ache nestled in the bottom of her stomach. In all the excitement, she hadn't had a chance to feed.

She'd been saving the Marwood boy for tonight. She was careful to farm the new recruits, but he'd tasted so sweet she thought she'd treat herself. Now he'd caused her incredible problems. She'd wanted to savour him, drink him down slowly, but now she just wanted to rip his head from his spine.

A group of vampires were torturing a cleaner who'd unfortunately blundered into the department. The torment made the victim taste better. The adrenaline and fear gave the blood a unique piquancy. But who had time to properly prepare a meal these days?

Jason approached her. She had high hopes for him. He was still learning the ropes, but she'd been impressed by the improvement in his attitude and work ethic. He led a stranger dressed in a police uniform. That couldn't be

good, Kirsten thought. She sized him up. 'You're new.'

'Keith sent me,' he said. 'A fire alarm was triggered on the thirtieth floor. He's contacted the emergency services and told them it was a false alarm, but it might be a good place to start looking for the others.'

'Someone who uses their head as well as their teeth. You'll be handy to have around here. Take a group and see what you can find.' She signalled to those gathered around the cleaner. 'Stop playing with your food and go with...' She turned back to the ex-policeman. 'What's your name?'

'Graham, ma'am.'

'Go with Graham. We might know where the others are.'

'But, Kirsten, we were going to... y'know...' one of the group said, nodding to the cleaner begging for death.

Kirsten smiled. 'Leave it to me. I wouldn't let any of my staff do anything that I wouldn't be prepared to do myself.'

Dave searched around the twenty-eighth floor. It had been cleared of furniture for refurbishment and was an open expanse of carpet. All the doors were electronically locked so swipe cards wouldn't work. 'We can't stay here,' he said when he returned to the others. 'It's too exposed. Let's tool up and move on.'

They worked quickly and in silence. Mop handles were broken up and sharpened. Rulers were bound

together with rubber bands to make crosses. Dave blessed the two fire extinguishers they'd hauled down with them. He didn't know why his blessing worked and didn't want to question it. Perhaps its power came from his need.

Everybody armed themselves with stakes and crosses. Simon had found a couple of rucksacks containing sweaty gym equipment and they placed a fire extinguisher in each one, tucking the fire axe in with one of them. He and Jim took a bag each and pulled them onto their shoulders.

'We can't go up,' said Dave. 'Let's go down to the next floor, find a bathroom and hide until sunrise. It's not the most dignified of plans, but it's all I've got.'

They headed back to the door leading to the stairwell. When they were sure they couldn't hear any footsteps coming from the other side Dave cracked the door open. He searched the landing and, seeing that it was clear, beckoned the others to follow him out. They inched down the stairs, their wet shoes squelching with each step.

As Dave reached the next landing, the stitching on the straps of Jim's rucksack gave out under the weight of its load. Melanie and Sarah reached out, but the material slipped through their fingers. The extinguisher tumbled and spun down the stairs, letting out a loud metallic chime with every step it struck.

Everybody froze as they imagined a dozen pairs of vampire ears pricking up.

'Leg it!' Dave ordered in a hoarse whisper. They could already hear the footsteps heading in their direction from

above and below.

The five of them burst through the door to the twenty-seventh floor. They shimmied and danced between desks and reached the door leading to the next set of offices. They were fumbling for key cards to unlock the door when a snarling face appeared on the other side of the glass.

'How the fuck did they get in there?' Dave asked.

Reeling back from the shock, they fell over each other and headed back in the opposite direction as the vampire let himself in. Another vampire dressed in a police uniform flanked by three others blocked the exit back to the stairs.

'There's your police response,' Dave muttered.

Surrounded on all sides, Dave, Melanie, Jim, Simon and Sarah formed a tight huddle. They held their crosses out in front of them. The vampires backed off. They circled slowly, looking for a weakness to exploit and break the stalemate.

The fire door opened and, to everybody's amazement, Emma strolled in. Blood soaked and smiling lasciviously, she walked towards Jim with a seductive strut.

'Hello, babe,' she said. 'Did you miss me?'

Dave sensed Jim's mental defences drop. He grabbed him by the arm. 'That's not Emma,' he whispered.

His mind shattered, Jim broke free of Dave's grasp and walked to her in a trance-like state. The others bunched up to fill the gap he'd left.

'I thought you were dead,' Jim whispered as he stroked her cheek.

Emma smiled sympathetically. 'Oh, but I am.'

With lightning speed, she wrapped her mouth around his neck and drank deeply. The ruler and rubber band cross fell from his limp hand and bounced on the floor.

Graham, the policeman, took a step towards Dave. The cross in Dave's hand didn't waver and kept him at bay.

'We can do this the easy way or the hard way,' Graham said.

'What's the easy way?' asked Dave.

'You let us drink your blood.'

'And the hard way?'

'We still drink your blood, it just hurts a lot more.'

'Is there any way that doesn't involve anybody drinking anybody's blood?'

Graham shook his head.

Dave sighed and tightened his grip on the stake in his hand. 'I didn't think so.'

He leapt forward and drove the stake into Graham's chest with all his might. Stunned, they both looked down at it sticking out of the stab-proof vest he wore.

'You're an idiot,' Graham said. 'I'm going to enjoy hurting you.'

He picked Dave up by the throat and hurled him back into the group, knocking them over. Dave landed on the base of his spine. As he squirmed in agony, he wondered if he could go at least one week without being thrown

across a room.

The fight that followed was short and brutal. Simon activated the fire extinguisher and took out two of the vampires in a frenzy of spray and smoke. Sarah sprang towards a third and stabbed him in his heart. As she shielded herself from his gory end, Graham was on top of her. As if opening a pickle jar, he snapped her neck with a twist of his wrist.

Dave pulled the fire axe from Simon's backpack and spun round to face a vampire wearing earphones. Even though his face was contorted and feral, Dave recognised him as Si Dunnett, the kid with the trolley. 'They didn't get you, too?' Dave asked, disappointed.

'What?' Si asked loudly, taking one of the buds out of his ear.

Dave rolled his eyes. 'I said... Never mind. What are you even listening to?'

'Coldplay.'

'Bloody hell. You *are* evil,' Dave said and buried the axe in Si's head.

The extinguisher's spray had reduced to a trickle, so Simon threw it at a vampire's head. It connected with a hollow thud. Simon took advantage of the confusion, quickly dispatching the vampire with a stake he pulled from his waistband.

Simon flashed a smile. 'I'm getting the hang of this,' he said, just before a stake spiralled through the air and buried itself in his chest.

'Two can play that game,' Graham said smugly.

'Cock it,' said Simon as he fell forward.

Dave looked around for Melanie, who was keeping Emma at bay with her cross. At the right moment, she dropped her guard and Emma jumped forward. With one smooth movement, Melanie thrust her stake between Emma's ribs.

Graham ran at Dave, teeth bared. Dave adjusted the weight of the axe in his hands and swung like a cricketer looking for a match-winning six. The blow severed Graham's head from his shoulders, the sharp blade cutting cleanly through bone and tissue. His body crashed to the ground at Dave's feet.

Dave dropped the axe and ran over to Melanie. He felt his legs give way but she held him up.

'Look out!' she shouted and shoved him away. She caught the full impact as a newly reanimated Jim crashed into her. They rolled on the floor as Melanie tried to avoid his gnashing teeth and clawing fingernails.

Dave repeatedly kicked out at Jim's chest, feeling the bones shatter against the tip of his boot, until he released his grip on Melanie. Fighting to control the kicking and screaming vampire, he grabbed his shirt and dragged him away. Dave scrabbled for the stake in his belt and blindly stabbed at Jim until he went limp.

Dave pulled himself out from under Jim's dead weight and noticed he was quietly chuckling to himself.

'What's so funny?' Dave asked.

'The sun's coming up,' Jim replied, his laboured breath rasping.

It was true. The bottom edge of the sky was starting to lighten with the first signs of the new day.

'I don't think that's going to be a problem for you,' said Dave.

'No, but it will be for her.' Jim nodded towards Melanie. She was clutching her neck, trying to stem the flow of blood. 'It's only a scratch, but I think it should be enough.'

Dave didn't hear anything else. He ran over to Melanie and pulled off his hoodie. He placed it around her throat and kept pressure on it.

'I'm sorry,' she said with tears in her eyes.

Dave's world collapsed. He was lost, unsure what to do next. He tried to think his way through the confusion of grief and guilt.

'It's going to be alright,' he told her, but he didn't know how. Then a thought rang clear and true. He stood with purpose. If he died trying to save her life, so be it. He'd done it before and he'd got himself out of it just fine that time.

'Don't leave me,' Melanie said, clutching at his hand.

'I've got to do something.'

'What?' Melanie was shaking. Shock was setting in.

'I'm going to do what everybody has thought about some time in their life. I'm going to kill my boss.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

It had been a good life, Julia thought in her last few moments. She had filled her one hundred and seven years with friendship, art and travel. If she had one regret, it was that she'd never had children. She'd never married. Of course, that wouldn't have made a difference in this day and age, but things were different back then.

She often thought of her wedding day and Christopher Quint. After the violence and chaos in the library, she'd locked herself in the bridal suite and refused all visitors. Christopher had waited outside like an obedient puppy. He'd tried to explain what had happened, but his words had faded over the years and didn't make much sense to Julia now.

When she had shed all the tears she could, she'd packed her bags and left. He didn't try to stop her. Over the next few months, she'd shut herself away from everyone and everything, with only her books for company. Christopher's phone calls were ignored and his gifts and letters returned unopened until they finally

stopped. She never heard from him again.

Tired of sitting at home reading of others' adventures, she went out into the world and sought her own. In turn, she wrote them down and achieved moderate success at the end of the thirties. The war interrupted her travels. The men of Britain were shipped out across the oceans from which she had returned while she did her duty trapped on the small island.

After the fighting had finished, she returned to her wanderings. The books didn't sell as well as before and she slipped into a comfortable obscurity. In her fifties, she was rediscovered and hailed as a pioneer of the feminist movement. She was invited to debates and talks and gave lectures to the young women of the sixties' generation.

Retirement saw her busier than ever. Environmental protests and campaigns demanding nuclear disarmament. During the eighties, she was a regular outside Greenham Common or Sellafield power station.

There had been dalliances and romances along the way, but no mortal could come close to the monster she'd loved. Sometimes she thought she saw his face in a crowd, or a glimpse of him on the television screen.

When her health had started to deteriorate a decade ago, she had refused to move from her home into care. She had no desire for communal living. She had watched her friends die one by one. Books and the characters in their pages were the only company she wished to keep. She decided that she would die in her own bed and there

were no family members to dissuade her.

Now, here at the end, she wasn't afraid. She'd had more than her fair share of life. At least she'd tried and wasn't that the best one could hope for? Each breath came in a ragged gasp, every heartbeat in an irregular tempo. The orchestra of her body was out of time with itself and stuttering to a halt.

A dark, familiar figure stood over her, silhouetted against the winter sun. 'Hello, Julia.'

Julia squinted against the light. 'Long time, no see. Is that it, then? It's all over? I didn't feel anything.'

Death perched on the end of the bed. 'Not quite. I wanted to meet you in person. Properly, if you see what I mean, before we got on to the formalities.'

Julia held a frail hand out, which Death took gently in his. 'Julia MacDonald,' she whispered.

'Good to meet you.'

A cough rattled around Julia's chest. 'Don't expect me to get up and put the kettle on.'

'How's it all been for you? Life?'

'I can't complain.'

'That's good to hear.'

'How's Christopher?'

Death shifted uneasily, the bed squeaking beneath him. 'I haven't seen him for a while. We went our separate ways some years ago.'

'The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse have split up?'

'War and Famine died.'

Julia was surprised by her capacity to still be shocked at this late stage of life. 'I thought you were all immortal?'

Death chuckled bitterly. 'Not as immortal as we originally thought.' Julia tried to sit up, but Death rested a hand on her shoulder. 'Try and rest.'

'I don't think it makes much difference now, does it?' she replied. 'How did it happen?'

'We were stopping a nuclear missile from launching. They died saving the world.'

'You don't do things by halves, do you?' Julia said wistfully. 'Puts my banner waving to shame. I'll have to thank them when I see them.'

'Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way for us. They're gone for good. They gave their lives saving humanity and nobody will ever know. They'll always be the Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They'll always be feared. That doesn't seem very fair.'

'So you're all alone?' Julia asked, patting him on the wrist.

'Yes, but I'm getting back out there. I'm meeting new people.'

'Good. It's important to make friends. To keep busy.'

She closed her eyes. Small movements now. She could feel life slipping away from her, like grains of sand running through her fingers.

'Julia?' said Death.

'Yes?'

'By the end of it all humanity, generally, disappointed

Conquest. But not you. He always followed your exploits with great interest and pride. I don't think he was trying to save the world. I think he was saving you.'

Julia MacDonald died with a smile on her lips.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dave gently picked Melanie up from the floor and, with her arm over his shoulders, helped her to walk.

'Where are we going?' she asked weakly.

'The toilets.'

She managed to muster up some indignation. 'I'm not going to die in a toilet.'

'You're not going to die,' Dave said.

Melanie dragged her feet, scuffing the carpet until Dave ground to a halt. 'Where do you want to go, then?'

'I always fancied one of the corner offices, actually.'

Dave gave an annoyed sigh and changed to direction. He helped Melanie to one of the large empty offices.

'I want to see the sun rise,' she whispered.

He dropped her into the leather seat behind the desk and turned it so she could take in the panoramic view. The dark river lazily snaked between the sleeping monolithic buildings yet to be stirred by the new day. Blue flashing lights in the streets below bounced off the steel and glass. Anne or Death must have got his message. Even with

only a handful of vampires left, it would be a blood bath when the unsuspecting police reached them. He'd have to act quickly.

'Can I get you anything?' he asked Melanie.

Her eyes half closed, she shook her head almost imperceptibly. With fumbling fingers, she unclasped her necklace and placed it in Dave's hand. 'Give this to my mum and dad.'

He gave her a reassuring smile. 'I'll get you out of this. I promise.'

'Are you going to keep this one?' The corners of her lips rose in a smile.

Dave didn't answer. He stuffed the necklace into his jeans pocket and readjusted the fabric around her neck.

'Keep the pressure on this. I'll be back soon.'

'What are you going to do?'

Dave stroked his chin. 'Don't ask me. I'm making this up as I go along.'

Melanie placed a limp hand on his. 'You can kiss me if you like?'

He leaned forward and placed a gentle kiss on her cold lips, then pulled back suddenly. 'No biting!' he ordered.

'Spoilsport.'

Dave hobbled down the stairs for what seemed the hundredth time that night. His entire body complained. Every muscle ached and screamed at him to stop and rest. He told himself that, if he got out of this alive, he'd take a

holiday. And ask for a pay rise. And maybe look into health insurance.

He reached the fifteenth floor, where it all began and where it would all end one way or another. He ran through the plan in his mind. It was terrible, but it was all he could come up with. He gripped the DIY cross tightly. His hands wouldn't stop shaking. Walking through the door in front of him was walking towards complete death. Death of the soul. Head straight to oblivion. Do not pass 'Go'. Do not collect two hundred pounds.

The office was as quiet as a tomb. The night's carnage had been cleared up as if nothing had happened. Dave slowly approached Kirsten's office. The door opened and she stepped out as if sensing his presence.

'You're full of surprises, Mr Marwood. I don't think your monthly performance review is going to go very well, though. Not exactly a team player, are you?'

Dave continued to walk past the empty banks of desks keeping the cross aimed directly at Kirsten. 'I like to think I work well using my own initiative.'

'You don't need that cross, Dave. I'm not a monster.'

'I think you'll find that's exactly what you are,' Dave replied.

'We're just like you,' Kirsten said. 'We work hard. We pay our taxes. My one vice is that I enjoy feasting on the blood of innocent office temps, but who doesn't have their little quirks and foibles?'

'Foibles?' said Dave with incredulity. 'How many

people are dead because of you?'

'There are some productivity statistics that are best not dwelled on.'

Dave was getting closer and closer to Kirsten. It would be time to act soon, but he had some questions he needed answering first. 'How did you do it? How did you keep Death from the building?'

Kirsten eyed him quizzically. 'How did you know about that? Who are you?'

'Let's just say I'm an employee with some concerns about his work environment.'

He was around ten feet away from her now. Kirsten looked terribly ancient and monstrous under the harsh glare of the fluorescent light. The proximity of Dave's cross was causing her to sweat and shake as if a terrible sickness had infected her.

'It was like that when we got here. It came with the building along with the furniture and computers. We simply took advantage of the situation. We have a benefactor, shall we say?'

'Benefactor?' Dave repeated. The truth dawned on him. 'Are you talking about Conrad West? He knows about this?'

'My poor Dave. It was his idea. It's just business. We needed jobs and he needed people to work the night shift. An entirely practical arrangement and Conrad West is nothing if not a practical man.'

'So, if it's not for you, what's it for?'

Kirsten shook her head. 'Mr West has bigger plans, apparently.'

As Dave processed the information, Jason stepped out from the shadows to his right. Dave swore under his breath. He thought he was being so clever extracting information from Kirsten, but she was in fact stalling him so she could trap him.

'Clever girl,' Dave muttered.

'You can't hold both of us off with that relic,' Kirsten said with a satisfied smile.

Dave shook his head with a resigned sigh. 'No. You're probably right.'

He scratched the back of his head. Then he reached behind him and grabbed the plastic bottle of holy water he'd taped to his back. He squirted a jet of liquid into Jason's eyes. He hit the ground like he'd been shot, writhing around in agony.

With Dave's attention elsewhere, Kirsten covered the distance between them quickly. She slapped the bottle from his hand and grabbed him by the throat. He felt his feet kicking the air as she lifted him up off the ground.

'I really don't know what to do with you,' she said. 'I could happily tear your head from your spine, but I can't deny that you've got potential.'

'That's a popular misconception,' Dave squeaked. He could see stars and his vision began to darken as Kirsten squeezed the breath out of him.

She drew his face close to hers, admiring his features

like a gourmand examining a piece of well-prepared meat. 'How about it, Dave? We can escape the dawn. I'll need a new team and a new team leader. Would you like the position?'

Kirsten bared her razor sharp teeth. Dave thrust his hand in his pocket and rummaged around. He wrapped his fingers around the gossamer thin chain and pulled Melanie's necklace out. As Kirsten opened her mouth wider, he rammed the silver cross and chain down her throat.

'You can take your job and shove it,' he spat.

Gagging, she released Dave and staggered back. She coughed and choked. Thick plumes of smoke billowed from her mouth as if her internal organs were on fire. She looked at Dave with incredulous eyes one last time before every cursed atom in her body violently escaped in all directions.

When the dust - and Kirsten - had settled, Dave picked his wrecked and battered body up from where he'd been dropped. He surveyed the blood-splattered office and let out a low groan.

He was going to have to find that sodding necklace.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Melanie was curled up with her eyes closed in the chair where Dave had left her. She was bathed in the warm golden sunlight of the new morning. Dave checked that she was breathing and wasn't smouldering around the edges. Satisfied that she was alive and unlikely to burst into flames, he gently shook her awake. She fluttered and then opened her eyes. She stretched her limbs and saw the sun climbing behind the skyscrapers of London. She laughed and sobbed simultaneously in a sudden burst of overwhelming and conflicting emotions.

'Good morning,' Dave said softly.

'We made it?' she asked in barely a whisper.

Dave nodded. She stroked his bruised and bloody face. 'Are you okay?'

His heart swelled to bursting at her touch. 'Tough shift at work,' he said. 'I'm knocking off early. Do you want to do something?'

She smiled. 'I'd like that.'

'I've got something of yours.' He pulled the necklace

from his pocket and placed it in Melanie's hand.

'Thanks for looking after it.'

'No problem,' said Dave. 'You might want to give it a rinse under a tap.'

Melanie and Dave were hurried away in an ambulance as soon as they'd staggered out of the building. Dave refused treatment until the paramedics had seen to Melanie and confirmed that she would be fine. Now, as she slept in a hospital bed, it was his turn to keep a vigil at her bedside as she had for him.

Death casually wandered through the wall. 'Hello. I was just down the corridor. I thought I'd pop in.'

Dave looked up from the rack of machines monitoring Melanie's life signs. 'Oh, hi.'

'Is she going to be okay?'

'Yeah,' Dave replied. 'She's lost a lot of blood, but she'll be alright. Her parents are on their way down. It looks like I'll get to meet them after all.'

Death placed a hand on Dave's shoulder. 'And how are you?'

'I don't know yet. Numb.'

Death cleared his throat. 'I'm sorry for... Well, I'm just sorry.'

'You know something has gone terribly wrong in your life when Death is apologising to you.'

'Are there any biscuits?' Death asked.

Dave waved in the direction of the bedside table. 'The

nurse left a snack box. I think there might be some in there.'

Death rummaged through the small cardboard box. 'Urgh. Rich Tea. Has there ever been a more disappointing snack food? It must've been like when Dylan went electric when they introduced the chocolate Hob Nob.'

'I know who's responsible for keeping you out of the UberSystems building,' said Dave.

Death sat at the end of the bed and flicked through a celebrity magazine. 'Who?'

'Conrad West.'

Death looked up from the magazine and shrugged his shoulders. 'Should I know who he is?'

'My old boss.' Dave held his hand out. 'Give me your phone. Mine's still drying out.'

Death gave his phone to Dave who pulled up a picture of West on its browser. He passed it back. Death looked at the screen and then back at Dave.

'This is Conrad West?' Death asked.

'Yes.'

Death sighed. 'I know him.'

Chapter Twenty-Six

Conrad West watched the rolling news from his Parisian hotel suite while he waited for his car to take him to the airport. Footage of Dave Marwood with his arms around a young woman wrapped in blankets being led out of the UberSystems International building looped every fifteen minutes.

He turned the television off. It looked like Kirsten's little project had failed. The UberSystems International PR machine had already rumbled into motion. How would he spin this unwanted publicity? A terrorist atrocity? An unbalanced, disgruntled employee? Where could the money be thrown to make the problem go away?

He sat down on the sofa and picked up his iPad. He clicked on a link tucked away at the bottom of the news website's landing page. He steeled himself and read about the life of Julia MacDonald. A life from which he had been wiped clean. When he finished, he wiped a tear from his eye. He knew that this day would come, as it would

for everybody he had known, but still it crushed him. For humans it was relatively simple. They would meet someone and think 'Yep, you'll do. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I don't need to look around anymore.' It was not that easy for him. Their time together had been as brief as the flap of a butterfly's wing, but the consequences had rippled and grown until they were a storm in his heart.

Conrad took a scratched and beaten pocket watch from his waistcoat; a gift from three old friends, crafted by Patek Philippe & Company in 1933. Back when he was somebody else. He had been known by many identities over the years, but he had only one true name.

He had seen the best that humanity could do, but he had also witnessed them at their worst and now he despised them for it. Their hatred. Their cowardice. Their stupidity. The Billy Joel album, "An Innocent Man".

Especially the Billy Joel album, "An Innocent Man".

When he had left Death behind on that hill, he'd returned home. He understood who he really was. He had realised his true purpose. He knew what had to be done. He'd unpicked his financial affairs and then stitched them back together so that there was no trace of his previous lives. He took a new name, Conrad Q. West (a poor joke), and became the darling of the finance industry. Corporations became the new superpowers.

He built an empire on which the sun never set. Not with swords or gunfire, but with ones and zeros, secrets

and guile. You couldn't change the world with grand gestures. It had to be in tiny increments.

But his plan had not been without fault. He had realised too late the usefulness of the Marwood boy. He'd slipped through his fingers and had taken his place at Death's side. He would not make that mistake again. He would have to watch them all carefully. You never succeeded in business by underestimating the competition.

Now that Julia was gone, nothing remained of his old lives. He would return to his tower where Death could not touch him. He would give humanity what they craved. The Dark was coming. Soon, it would be time for his glorious rule.

He was waiting. He was good at that.

He muttered three little words.

'I. Am. Conquest.'

Old Haunts

Chapter One

Chapter One

11 April 1986

It was a sign. A messenger from the Gods.

Halley's Comet was a smudge against the infinite black that stretched above Nathan Christou. It was closer to Earth now than it would be for almost a century and he felt he could pluck it from the sky with one hand and hide it in his pocket.

Like his great-uncle Archibald before him, Nathan had learned to interpret the messages passed down to all of humanity but heard by only a special few. This comet was the final dispatch. Goodbye from the universe.

Ten years earlier, he'd been a different man. He'd worshipped only money and craved only the wanton pleasures of the flesh. His excesses had taken their toll and one day his bloated, sin-filled heart failed him as he himself had failed so many. The doctors told him he had died for several minutes and the news left him distraught. There had been no light, no peace, no ever-loving God.

He'd been alone in a single moment that could have easily turned into forever.

In the months that followed Nathan retreated to the family home; one of the few assets that hadn't been stripped bare and that remained in the Christou name. There he found Archibald's journals.

Archibald had been the black sheep of the family, dabbling in the occult before he'd had some kind of epiphany and dedicated the rest of his life to charitable works. His diaries had documented his attempts to bring about the end of the world and his reasons for doing so. He even claimed to have summoned the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse who were, by his account, jolly nice fellows. In those pages, Nathan had found a persuasive argument.

He, too, saw the omens all around. The Earth was due a reaping. He would be the herald of its destruction and his belief would be rewarded. He would not succumb to the cowardice and mediocrity that had stopped Archibald.

Bringing about the end of the world took longer and more effort than he'd thought. His rituals didn't work and his sermons fell on deaf ears. If people needed to hear about the Apocalypse, they wanted the words to come from someone with more charisma.

Nathan's life changed when his Master entered his life.

Nathan didn't know where he came from, but he knew

where they were going together. The Master performed miracles and spoke the truth and, in time, people listened. Soon they followed. They gave up their material possessions. There would soon be no need for them. They would be the pioneers; brave travellers setting off to an undiscovered country. The New Righteous Order of Armageddon moved into a disused warehouse in the docklands of London; a derelict land left behind by the march of progress. It was a fitting location for their ascension.

Now, Nathan looked for the last time upon the river and the city that had grown unchallenged along its banks like a virus. He smoothed his black trousers and white shirt. He was ready to leave. He would not miss this world. He turned his back on it and went into the warehouse.

The nineteen other Chosen were waiting for him in contemplative silence. They were all dressed in the same style as Nathan. Uniform and devoid of individuality as was humanity's proper station. Their Master stepped forward and took Nathan's hands in his. 'Brother Nathan. He who took the first steps along this seldom-travelled road. I trust you have said your goodbyes to this mortal realm?'

Nathan nodded, unable to speak. The Master turned to face the others. 'Then it is time.'

Twenty mats had been laid out in four equal rows on the vast empty floor. Next to each stood a small beaker

containing a clear liquid. Everybody took their designated place in front of a mat and picked up their drinks. They stood with their heads bowed solemnly.

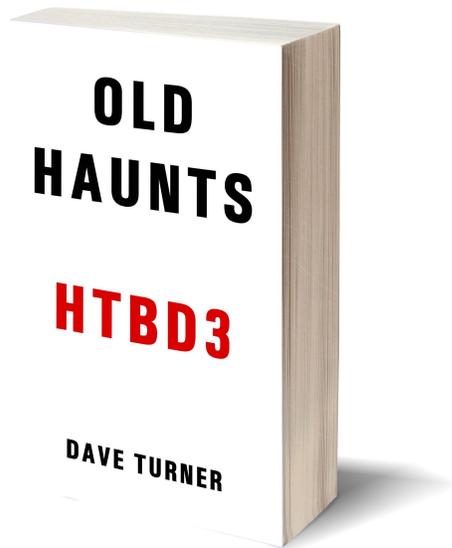
'Humanity is dead,' the Master told them. 'Like a cockroach with its head ripped off it crawls along on its belly, driven by instinct, too foolish to know it is doomed. It is no surprise. You have been sick for aeons. That sickness is freedom. You have no idea how to deal with it; like a baby with a gun. Take Jesus, your lord and saviour, for example. The first time someone comes along and suggests that maybe you shouldn't hurt each other and what do you do? You nail him to a big plank of wood. This is why you can't have nice things.

'You, to me, are prophets. I have made you no promises, but I make you this promise now. I will protect you from Death. He will not enter our home. You shall live forever. Now you will sleep and dream. When you wake, you will be the first to feel the joy of the new day's sunlight warm your soul, but the dream will not end. Let us drink.'

And, with that, twenty believers swallowed a cocktail of poisons and lay down. They crossed their arms over their chests. They were at peace with themselves and soon they would be at peace with the world. It had all been so easy.

Conquest, their master, pitied their foolishness.

Keep Reading 'Old Haunts'!



Death's not taking the news he received at the end of Paper Cuts very well. And Dave is still getting used to the undead trying kill him at regular intervals while he and Anne attempt to solve the mystery of the strange forces that continue to engulf London. And Melanie's still putting up with more than any person should in a relationship.

When the true nature of what lies at the dark heart of UberSystems International is revealed, can the team pull together and stop the impending bijou Apocalypse-ette?

Death's come to kick ass and eat biscuits. And he's all out of biscuits.

[Click here to download it now.](#)

About The Author

Dave Turner is an award winning writer whose work has featured on the websites of BBC News, The Guardian, The Daily Telegraph, The Times, The Huffington Post and FHM.

In 2011 he won the Best Screenplay Award at London Screenwriters' Festival with his short film script 'Everything You Need'. He lives in the south of England with his wife, three children and a crippling addiction to biscuits.

You can find him making poor quality jokes at these locations.

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Big List of Awesome

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