



**H O W**

**T O B E**

**D E A D**

**DAVE TURNER**

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# **How To Be Dead**

**Dave Turner**

Aim For The Head Books

*For Zoë*  
*For everything*

## CHAPTER ONE

Death watched the city sleep.

He gazed down at humanity's glow from the top floor of the office block. A sleek and thrusting tower made from glass, chrome and undisguised wealth.

He was waiting. He was good at that.

He checked his pocket watch. A gift from three old friends. Crafted for him by Patek Philippe & Company in 1933 with a movement as complicated and precise as the dance of the stars that he had counted for millennia.

Sometimes, as he gazed up at the night sky, he wondered if the universe was some kind of in-joke that had got out of hand and was working up to an awkward punchline. He had explained his theory when he and Einstein had briefly met. Nice guy. Good hair. That was back in 1955 and Death had not seen anything since to change his mind.

He did not know how long he had existed. He thought he remembered the dinosaurs. An asteroid killed them, hadn't it? Was he there? Or had he merely read it in a book? All he was sure of? It's the sort of thing that

happens when you live in a world without Bruce Willis.

Then humanity arrived. They loved. They fought. They died.

He had seen the worst that they could do, but he had also witnessed them at their finest and he loved them for it. Their compassion. Their bravery. Their wisdom. The Billy Joel album 'An Innocent Man'. Cake.

Especially the cake.

He took his mobile phone from the folds of his cloak and dialled the only number in his contacts.

'Did I wake you, Anne?' The groan at the other end of the phone answered his question. 'Who would win in a fight between Bruce Willis and Billy Joel? I mean, Billy Joel used to be a professional boxer. I think he'd be a bit tasty.'

'No, I don't know who would win, but the fact that we're even discussing this at half past two in the morning means I'm pretty sure I know who the losers are here. What do you want?'

'Today is the day. Are we sure he is the one?'

'You should know that Death isn't allowed to doubt.'

'Are we sure?'

'Yes.' Anne sighed.

'There are portentous skies. I haven't seen them like this since Beezelbub was defeated.'

'I'm sorry. Who?' Anne stifled a giggle.

'Satan. Lucifer. Beezelbub.'

'You mean Beelzebub?'

'Yes. Beezelbub.'

'Repeat after me,' she said. 'Bee.'

'Bee.'

'Ell.'

'Ell.'

'Zee.'

'Zee.'

'Bub.'

'Bub.'

'Beelzebub.'

'That's what I said. Beez-el-bub.'

'You're an idiot,' she said. 'Shouldn't you be working?'

'I will be. Stockbroker. Heart attack. Another one who'll tell me how much he regretted spending so much time here. They never bloody learn.'

'How are you going to play it?'

Death drummed his fingers against the window, considered his options. 'Old school, I think.'

He heard a thump from the office next door. 'I have to go. You should get some sleep.'

'Do you think?'

'Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit.'

'Oh, is it now?' asked Anne, sarcastically.

'Touché.'

Death switched the phone off and looked again at the infinite blackness. This was all created from stardust, born in the furnace of a long dead sun. Humanity. Earth. The city below. The stapler on the mahogany desk. One day,

the sun would expand beyond the realms of the inner planets and consume it all in its burning belly. Which was a shame. It really was a very nice mahogany desk.

He glided through the wall into the equally splendid office next door. A well dressed, yet confused, middle-aged man looked down at his own limp body.

The dark figure stood in front of him and whispered three little words.

'I. Am. Death.'



## CHAPTER TWO

Some days you are Godzilla. Other days you are Tokyo.

Beneath the office lighting scientifically engineered to both increase productivity and crush the spirit, Dave Marwood stared out of the window. At twenty-five, he had learned that there were three key stages to employment:

- A) 'Oh. This is new!'
- B) 'I don't know what I'm doing.'
- C) 'Could someone please stab me with this pen?'

Dave was toying listlessly with a chewed biro when he noticed Fiona marching over to his desk like some corporate Stormtrooper. A rictus grin carved into her face, she brandished her phone like a weapon.

'No fancy dress, Dave? Did you not get my email?'

Dave looked over at a nervous zombie using the photocopier for personal business, then down to the calendar on his desk. 31st October. Halloween.

'I think I've made my feelings on enforced wackiness in the workplace clear,' he said.

'Remember, last week, I asked you to compile the weekly ACR figures into a report?' Dave had perfected the art of the non-committal shrug. 'You appear to have provided me with this.' Fiona held up a drawing of a pony. Dave winced. It wasn't his best work.

'Is that not what you wanted?' he asked. Fiona's smile intensified. Dave was sure the temperature in the room rose with the corners of her mouth.

'I've noticed that your KPIs are in the horizontal rather than the vertical. I think we both know what that means.'

Confident that her point was made, Fiona sat on the desk and knocked over the action figures that Dave had spent most of the morning arranging. Something shifted inside of him, rising up from the pit of his stomach and spilling out of his mouth.

'Have you ever wondered if there might be more to life than this?' he asked.

'I'm sorry. I don't know what you mean?'

'My life feels like a Bruce Springsteen song.'

'Well, who doesn't like the Boss?' Fiona smiled.

Dave turned from his keyboard and looked Fiona squarely in the eye. 'It's not that I don't like my job. It's more that I have absolutely no opinion about it.'

Fiona considered this. One of her flock had questioned the faith. A corporate heretic. She licked her lips and leaned forward.

'Can I pass onto you what I have learned over the years?'

'Please.' Dave sighed.

'Take all this doubt, fear and anger, screw it up into a tight ball of rage and bury it deep down.'

'But...'

'Deep, deep down.'

'I never thought I'd say this, but I think I'd like to get back to work,' said Dave. Fiona visibly relaxed. Her smile stretched even further. Dave thought he could hear tearing.

'My door is always open,' Fiona said, beaming. 'Except for when it is closed. But when it's closed, I'm usually shouting at someone so you wouldn't want to come in anyway.'

'Thank you. That's very... reassuring.'

Fiona's phone beeped. The call to prayer. Targets and milestones. Paradigms and synergies. Forever and ever. Amen.

'Good talk,' she said, and marched off towards one of the meeting rooms.

Dave spent some more time arranging his action figures so that they were returned to rows of military precision. He then took a moment to try to figure out exactly how many fucks he did not give, but the calculator's display ran out of digits, so he just watched his fellow drones. They danced around the open plan office to the rhythm of tapping keyboards and ringing telephones. The administrative ballet was soon halted by a

stack of paper dropping onto his desk.

'These need to be done by the end of the week,' said James. Or was his name John? Did it really matter? Dave needed a break. He picked up a spreadsheet printout from the top of the pile and walked away.

Melanie Watkins stood by the vending machine as it spat out its acrid brew. She was no moon. She was a space station. Even dressed in a cheap witch's costume, the very air around her seemed to glow. Dave had never been in love before but, if love felt like a fat man - on a space hopper made of pure misery - bouncing on your heart until all that was left was soul-crushing pain, he was pretty sure that this was the real thing.

'Nice hat,' Dave said as casually as his crippling self-doubt would allow. His heart was beating like John Bonham and Keith Moon locked in a devastating heavenly drum war.

'Thanks.' A tight smile. No teeth.

'How's the coffee today?'

Melanie took a sip and grimaced. 'It's like there's a party in my mouth and everyone is drinking creosote. Can I get you one?'

'Sounds awesome. Please.'

'What are you having?' she asked.

'I like my vending machine coffee like my women. Cold and of mysterious origin.' Dave considered the series of poor life decisions that had led up to him uttering that terrible line.

Melanie pressed a button and the machine spluttered and whirred into life.

Dave tried again. 'How's your day going?'

'There's rumours of cake in the office, so it's all gone very Lord of the Flies. The IT department have barricaded themselves in the kitchen and the accounts and marketing teams have formed an alliance and have laid siege.' She pointed to the piece of paper in Dave's hand. 'Anything important?'

'I have no idea,' said Dave, 'but if I carry it, I can walk around the office for hours without anybody questioning what I'm up to.'

'Impressive.' Dave relished the compliment. 'Are you going to the Halloween party tonight?' she asked.

'UberSystems International-endorsed employee-focused entertainment set between pre-defined boundaries?' Dave quoted from the employee handbook. 'Don't you think it's a bit lame?'

'No,' said Melanie, 'but, then, I did organise it.'

Dave could feel his face redden, hot needles of embarrassment pricking his cheeks. He hoped, briefly, that the ground would open up and swallow him, but then he remembered that he would just wind up landing in the Human Resources office on the floor below. That would probably make things more awkward than they already were.

'Thanks for the drink,' he said with a smile as weak as the coffee. He spun on his heels and headed back to his

desk, forgetting to take the cup from the machine.

That afternoon, Dave watched an axe-wielding maniac attempt to unjam a printer. He had been temping at UberSystems International for two years now. In his opinion, there were three types of people who did this kind of work: those that were trying to find a job, those that had just lost a previous job and those that couldn't think of anything better to do. Dave was concerned that he had become the latter. Some mornings he laid trapped in his bed, crushed under the weight of his own apathy. He was stuck on amber. What if he just stood up, walked out and never came back? Would anyone notice? Would anyone care? Would Melanie?

He played their last conversation over again in his mind. An infinite loop of humiliation. Squeezing his eyes closed did nothing to shut out the image and when he opened them again, he saw Melanie striding purposefully across the office. Another drone tried to engage her in conversation and she deflected him by holding a spreadsheet up in his face. Dave allowed himself a smile. Of course he would come in tomorrow. What else was he going to do?

At precisely five thirty, Dave stepped from the glare of the office into the soft phosphorous glow of the streets. He sidestepped a family staring at a mobile phone as they slowly spun around trying to align themselves with

Google Maps.

'Bloody tourists,' Dave muttered under his breath.

Some people are born in London, some move to London and some have London thrust upon them. The city had lost its charm for Dave. Like the seaside pebbles he had collected as a child, what once sparkled with pretty promise had quickly faded to dull stone. The cynicism hung in the air like the commuters' breath. It stuck to them like the grime pumped from the idle engines of the gridlocked cars. The unknown soldiers in the city's war of attrition against the soul.

He followed the path of least resistance and was swallowed by the anonymity of the crowd flowing into the underground station; a waterfall that splashed down the escalator and pooled on the platform. He jumped on the first train and, as it pulled away, he put his wrap-around headphones over his ears. Normally the warm cocoon of sound would be his one chance to unwind, but not this evening. Something was distracting him in the corner of his eye; almost imperceptible, like a smudge on a photograph.

It was the young man stood across from him. At first, Dave put his spectacular moustache, fedora hat and tweed suit down to a hipster affectation, but he seemed out of place. More than that, he seemed *out of time*. They made eye contact. A schoolboy error. The man said something to Dave, but was muted by the music. Gripped by the traditional English fear of awkward social situations, he

reluctantly removed his headphones.

'I'm sorry?' said Dave.

'You can see me?' repeated Fedora Man, who seemed genuinely relieved.

'Of course.'

'You're looking at me. Not through me. At me.'

'You're not trying to sell me something, are you?'

Dave felt the woman next to him take a step away. Looking around, he could sense that all the other people on the carriage were deliberately avoiding looking his way. He turned back to the man but he was no longer there. Dave knew that he hadn't been in the first place. He had been talking to the dust motes dancing in the air.

This was not the first time that this had happened. As a child, he soon learned not to mention to others what he saw for fear of ridicule or worse. It started with his imaginary friend, Emily. His parents had been concerned with the amount of time he spent in his room playing on his own – playing with Emily – but she had disappeared from his life as he grew older and the matter was eventually dropped. Dave sometimes wondered where in his unconscious she had gone to play hide-and-seek.

The visions had increased since he had moved to the city. Dave often saw and heard things in the dark shadows of the architecture. Things that nobody else noticed. Odd things. Odd even for London. He originally put it down to working too hard, but conceded to himself that that theory was probably unlikely. As with everything in life, Dave



took a pragmatic approach to his hallucinations and decided that, as long as they weren't telling him he was the Messiah or that he should hurt himself or others, he would treat them as a mere inconvenience, like a delayed train or a poor mobile phone signal.

Once he was back on the surface, Dave joined the hordes of vampires and zombies roaming the East End streets where he lived. Rows of Victorian houses that had somehow survived the blitz and slum clearance, but not the property developers. Their interiors ripped out, shifted, squeezed and reshaped into barely affordable flats. After his conversation with the man who wasn't there, Dave wondered whether he should relax a little. As he reached his front door a plan began to formulate. A two birds, one stone interface as Fiona would probably have called it.

He let himself into the flat and walked into a living room that would have tested the euphemisms of the most devious estate agent. His housemate Gary was sprawled on the sofa, staring blankly at the television. A grunt and a fart was his acknowledgement that Dave was home and welcomed.

'Remember,' said the show's presenter. 'You can get in touch by phone. Or text. Or email. Or Twitter. Or Facebook.'

'Television has turned into my mum,' Gary shouted. 'That's how they track you. It seems innocent enough, but

that's how they know what you're thinking. Where you are. What you're up to. Where's the remote control? I swear there's a wormhole in time in this house through which all my stuff disappears. A prehistoric tribe probably worshipped three remote controls and nineteen odd socks as Gods.'

Dave believed that Gary was a man who would start an argument with himself if left alone in a room for long enough. As far as Gary was concerned, the glass was not only half empty; it also contained a mind control drug placed there by the military-industrial complex. He had recently split up with his girlfriend by telling her: 'It's not you. It's them.'

Dave rolled his eyes, took a deep breath and asked the question that would change everything. 'Do you want to go for a drink?'

## CHAPTER THREE

Number Fourteen, Meadow Close was a deceptively large and well-appointed three bedroom semi-detached house situated in a sought after location. Close to well-regarded schools and within walking distance of the local amenities and railway station, the property benefited from a south facing rear garden, a newly refurbished kitchen and an unspeakable horror lurking within.

Sarah Davidson tripped over the collection of sour milk bottles left on the doorstep. She attempted to hide them behind a dying pot plant. It disappointed her that, in this market, some vendors still did not make an effort. She was the fourth agent to take the property onto her books. Stories had begun to spread through the local industry that it was unsellable, but nobody could say exactly why. It happened from time to time. A house doesn't sell for a while, the price is dropped and buyers become suspicious. This did not deter Sarah. She was not one to back away from a challenge.

She let herself in, shoving the door against the pile of mail that had gathered on the hall floor, and turned the

lights on. They flickered, hummed and crackled. Sarah did not like evening viewings. Lamps and downlights were less forgiving than the natural glow of the day, no matter what the property shows on the television might tell the public. She swept the envelopes and flyers up into her arms and dumped them on the hall table.

Sarah gave the house a quick inspection. Half drunk coffee cups on the kitchen sideboard, books scattered on the living room floor. She began to suspect why this was a difficult property to sell. It was structurally and aesthetically fine, but the vendors took no pride in it. Why should others imagine they could? She put away what she was able to, sighed and saw her breath on the air. She looked for the thermostat and turned it up until she heard the dull, distant thud of the boiler starting up.

The house was filled with a welcoming warmth by the time the viewers arrived. A young couple, Peter and Victoria. Sarah was happy to see that Victoria was pregnant. The nesting instinct always helped a sale along.

'Shall we start in the lounge?' Sarah asked. The couple nodded and followed her into the room. Sarah looked down on the floor in horror.

'How embarrassing. I'm sure I put those books back on the shelf.'

'Not a sign of subsidence, I hope,' said Victoria. Sarah laughed too hard.

'As you can see the room is generously proportioned...' The television burst into life. The three of

them jumped as if they had been physically slapped by the noise. Sarah picked up the remote control from the coffee table and began punching buttons at random. Nothing seemed to work, so she ran over and yanked at the plug socket until it came loose and the television winked into a dark silence.

'Are the electrics safe?' Peter's face was a picture of concern.

'Fine,' said Sarah, trying to sound reassuring. 'I'm sure it was just on a timer. To deter burglars. Not that there's any problem with crime around here,' she said, breathlessly. 'The vendors must have gone away without informing the office. Shall we move through to the kitchen?'

Sarah scanned the plug sockets. She was relieved to see that they were all switched off.

'This has all been refurbished. Built-in dishwasher and dual sinks...'

'It's freezing in here. I thought there was central heating.' Victoria shivered. Sarah would later find it hard to describe, but it wasn't just cold. There was a palpable absence of warmth, as if it had been locked out of the room.

'Can you hear that?' asked Victoria. Whispers. Indecipherable and innumerable voices brushing past each other. The memories of every conversation ever held in this house being played back at once. Sarah looked around, but they were coming from everywhere and

nowhere. The fear sat heavily in her chest, like a shard of ice had been plunged through her ribcage. She focused on what she knew. The sale.

'Shall we try upstairs?' she asked, enthusiastically. They hurried out of the kitchen and back into the hallway. Sarah went first, up the stairs and onto the landing. She listened carefully and was rewarded with silence. She sighed with relief.

'It's Halloween, isn't it? It's probably just some kids playing pranks,' she reasoned. Peter and Victoria replied with nervous smiles. 'Let's start with the master bedroom. It's en suite.'

Sarah placed her hand on the brass handle of a bedroom door, her body heat warping the shine of the cold metal. Her unease returning, she tentatively opened the door. It creaked open slightly, but then closed again as if someone on the other side had pushed back.

Sarah pushed again with her full weight. The door slammed back, throwing Sarah across the landing. Then the scratching started. An insistent scraping like nails chipping away at Sarah's soul. Victoria, Peter and Sarah looked at each other with wide eyes and scanned around for the source of the noise. Victoria saw it first and let out a scream that sang along with the rasping in a harmony of fear.

An invisible hand was slowly carving thick lines into the wall at the top of the stairs. As the dust and plaster fell to the floor, Sarah realised with growing horror that the

marks were forming words.

GO AWAY.

This was not a childish prank. The estate agent and her clients ran down the stairs, their feet thumping as fast as their heartbeats. They fell out of the front door and began fumbling for car keys.

'We've thought about it,' said Peter, gasping, 'and we've decided not to make an offer.'

'Is there any way the vendor could improve the property?' asked Sarah, always keen to hear feedback.

'Fire. Lots of fire,' Peter replied as he lunged into his car and started the engine. The couple sped off, neither of them looking back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

'Do I want to go for a drink?' Gary asked himself. He ran the unfamiliar sequence of words around his mouth to see if they were a good fit. 'But "My Big Fat Geek Wedding" is on. Your favourite. Footage of brides crying because they can't find a vicar who speaks fluent Klingon.'

'But we never go out. We never meet new people.'

'You know my motto,' said Gary. 'A stranger is just an arsehole I haven't yet met. And, anyway, we went out for your birthday.'

'That was a terrible night.'

'It was a brilliant night! We gave you the bumps!'

'You pushed me down the stairs!'

Gary sighed. It had been two years since Dave had moved in, a new arrival to London. He had seemed the safest choice from the parade of artists, graduates and hipsters that came to look at the small room. Gary had only been looking for help with the rent, but - as it is with men who care for each other - their conversation soon dissolved to nothing but personal abuse. He would



grudgingly admit that he had also found a friend. He had learned from bitter experience that, if he refused Dave, the inevitable outcome from this conversation would be his friend sulking for the rest of the evening.

'If you want to go out, I know somewhere holding a pub quiz,' Gary suggested.

Dave could feel the evening slipping from his control.

'I'd be useless. I don't know anything about pubs, but my work is holding a Halloween party.'

A knowing smile broke out over Gary's face.

'I presume that girl from your office going to be there? Melissa?'

Dave was prepared for this, but still tripped over his words.

'Melanie? I think so. Maybe. Perhaps.'

'I knew it. I don't know why you just don't admit you like her.'

'I do not. That's ridiculous. What makes you say that?'

'Every time you tell a lie an angel punches a unicorn in the face with a kitten.'

'I am not lying!'

'Whenever I bring this up, you react in the same way as when I ask if you've eaten the last biscuit. I'm not judging you or anything. All I know is that it's been a long while since I had a custard cream.' Gary sighed. 'We'll go. What are we going to do about costumes?'

'We'll get something on the way.'

Dave always ate the last biscuit.

And so Dave found himself back on the streets, surrounded by people so desperate to have a good time that he feared they may burst a blood vessel. He and Gary stopped at the corner shop on the way to the tube station and discovered their costume options were limited. Gary suggested that he could go as a zombie victim who had been bitten but had not yet turned, going so far as to try and bite a chunk from his own hand. Dave felt that this would not be in the spirit of a Halloween party, so he picked out some flashing devil horns. Gary settled on a pair of fluffy pink bunny ears because, according to him, both of them wearing the same thing would make them look 'fucking stupid'.

'Dave!' someone called above the noise of the crowds. He turned around to see Melanie and an unimpressed friend forcing their way through the tide of bodies. Her face painted like a cat's, Melanie teetered on high heeled shoes. Dave gazed at Melanie like Professor Brian Cox eyeing up a particularly thought-provoking mountain range. Suddenly the night was bursting with promise and opportunity.

'Is that her?' Gary had an impressed tone to his voice.

'Yes.' Dave's voice revealed his nervousness.

'Just be yourself. Actually, don't. You're a dick. Try and be someone cool and interesting.'

'No, you're right. I should just be honest with her.'

'What? Be honest? With a woman? And start a

dangerous precedent?' Gary decided to ignore Dave's implicit admission that he was attracted to Melanie. There would be plenty of time for ridicule later.

Dave adjusted his devil horns to what he believed to be a jaunty angle. *Can devil horns ever be jaunty?* he thought. *Yes. This is the area to focus on right now.*

'Nice devil horns. Very jaunty,' said Melanie. 'What are you up to?'

'Oh. We're just on our way to the party.' Dave shrugged.

'UberSystems International-endorsed employee-focused entertainment set between pre-defined boundaries?'

He smiled sheepishly. 'I can't get enough of it.'

Gary cleared his throat. Dave supposed he was asking a lot to hope to avoid introductions.

'Melanie, this is my housemate Gary. Gary, this is Melanie.'

'Hi,' said Melanie. 'This is Emma.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Emma, the iciness of her voice indicating that she was nothing of the sort. The four of them began to walk in silence. Dave decided to blunder blindly into the world of small talk.

'So how do you two know each other?'

'We went to university together,' said Melanie.

'Mel's crashing with me since she and her loser boyfriend split up.'

'Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.' He wasn't.

'Don't be. We'd been drifting apart for a while. He was... Well... He made things complicated, shall we say? He tried to make an effort at the end but it was all too little, too late. As opposed to his bedroom proficiency, which was too little too early. Clitoral stimulation? Give it? He couldn't even spell it. I'm not entirely sure why I told you that. I may have had a drink.'

Dave opened and closed his mouth a few times, but no words came. He was slightly relieved when Melanie stumbled over on her ridiculous heels. But she continued to stagger and slipped off the kerb into the road. Dave saw the oncoming headlights, like the bright eyes of a predator bearing down on its prey. He heard the brakes squeal. He stepped into the glare, as if an unseen force had propelled him towards the inevitable. He instinctively shoved Melanie out of the path of the oncoming car.

Everything was a blur. Sound. Space. Time.

Then.

Stillness.

Dave barely felt the wet tarmac beneath his broken body; a rag doll thrown by the petulant child that is chance. He was surprised by how uneventful his last moments were. There was no tunnel of light. Nothing flashed before his eyes.

With as little fuss as he had lived, Dave Marwood died.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Dave opened his eyes. He could not feel any pain. He could not feel the ground beneath him, nor the cold night air against his skin. The only sensation was panic. He remembered a TV show in which a paramedic asked a road accident victim to wiggle their toes. This little piggy went to market. He went through all the piggies and their activities. Somehow, it was the world that was numb, not his body.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows. A fog had descended, reducing everything to a ghostly presence. The streets were empty. No traffic. No people. No life. After the noise of the crash, the silence screamed in his ears. How long had he been lying there? He couldn't understand it. Surely his friends wouldn't have abandoned him?

The mists parted and a figure that haunts all of humanity's nightmares glided ethereally towards him. Its black cloak absorbed the street light. The scythe in its hand glimmered with the memory of a thousand dying suns. This guy had really made an effort with his

Halloween costume. The image was ruined, though, when he crashed to the ground like he had been shot. His feet waving in the air, Dave could see the roller skates.

'A little help, please?' the figure cried out.

Dave pulled himself up and helped the struggling and swaying man to his feet.

'Sorry about that. I was just trying something new.'

'Good night? Had a few drinks?' Dave asked slowly and loudly. He searched for a face under the cowl, but all he found was an all-consuming darkness that tugged at the loose threads of his being.

'Oh dear, Dave,' replied the grim stranger. 'This is going to be awkward. I am Death.'

Dave looked confused. Death pressed on regardless.

'The whisper on the lips of the damned? The dark companion who walks in the shadows of humanity's souls? But that's terribly depressing. I'm thinking of calling myself something else. Steve, perhaps.'

Dave knew somehow that the words the stranger said were true. The shock hit him harder than the car, a punch to the gut that caused him to double over.

The Living World crashed down around him. Dave saw that a worried crowd had gathered around his own shattered body lying in front of the car. Gary frantically paced back and forth, shouting into his mobile phone. Melanie, smeared with Dave's blood, pumped his chest with her fists. She locked her lips over Dave's in a kiss that he would never taste.

'What? I'm dead? But there were so many things that I wanted to do.'

'Really?' asked Death.

Dave wondered if it was worthwhile taking offence to things when you were dead.

'Well, I hadn't finished watching all my DVD box sets.'

'You're not going to cry are you? Oh, I don't like it when you lot cry.'

Dave decided that it was worthwhile to take offence to things when you were dead.

'No!'

'I shouldn't worry,' said Death, in what Dave assumed was an attempt at a reassuring tone. 'This is what you Meat Puppets call a Near Death Experience. You'll be up and about in no time. If it makes you feel more comfortable, I'm thinking of this as a Near Dave Experience.'

Relief flowed through Dave's body in exactly the way that his blood currently did not.

'Oh. Right. Lovely. Sorry about the shouting. So, what happens next? Do we just...?'

'Pretty much.'

Dave was standing before Death. He could ask him anything right now. Questions on the fabric of space and time. The past. The present. The future.

'You know you're a lot shorter in person?'

Death shrugged and nodded as if this observation had

been regularly made to him since the dawn of creation. He then took a very expensive pocket watch from his cloak and examined it.

'Do you fancy a quick pint?'

Dave was having an out-of-body experience. More accurately, Dave was having an out-of-body-down-the-road-and-in-the-nearest-pub-with-two-pints-of-bitter-and-some-bar-snacks experience. This was not how he had imagined his evening would turn out; having a drink with Death. Actually, Death was the only one doing the drinking. Being a ghost, whenever Dave went to pick up his pint glass, his hand passed straight through it with the sensation of running his fingers through water. The pub was tatty and so dark Dave wasn't sure where the barmaid's nicotine stains ended and her fake tan began. Ignored by the customers, Death was just another drunk muttering to himself in the corner.

'This is the only night of the year when I can go out for a drink,' he said. 'Halloween has become so commercialised now. You lot have forgotten the true meaning of the undead walking the Earth.'

As Dave concentrated on picking up the beer in front of him, he remembered his last living thought. 'I'll be honest with you. I was expecting a tunnel of light or something. My life flashing before my eyes at least.'

Death choked on his pint. He wiped his hidden face with the sleeve of his robe. 'Tunnel of light? Load of



rubbish. I got bored and held a toilet roll close to a few people's faces while shining a torch down it. Do you want to see your life flashing before your eyes?'

Did he? Perhaps Dave could learn something from this. His past actions could give an insight into his destiny. His old life replayed and reset before his rebirth. Also, he might get to see Lisa Daniels naked again.

'Yeah. Alright.'

Death clicked his fingers and reality lurched aside.

Dave found himself watching the Long Dark PowerPoint Presentation of the Soul. His achievements had been reduced to a series of slides smashed together with every kind of heavy-handed dissolve, transition and clip art file.

And written in Comic Sans.

Dave saw himself aged seven years old, winning a cuddly toy from a seaside grabber machine. Then time jumped forward ten years and he was successfully parallel parking a beaten up car into an impossibly narrow space. Then a fruit machine hitting the jackpot, coins cascading everywhere. Star swipe to Dave sitting at his desk at UberSystems International. Late at night, he throws a screwed up ball of paper across the length of the office. It bounces off of the wall into the waste paper basket. Dave punches the air.

End of slide show. Click to exit.

'Is that it?'

'What are you talking about? That was a really good

piece of parking.'

'And nobody saw it. That's the sum total of my existence?'

Dave wasn't expecting much, but that was pitiful. He resolved to become a better person, to look at this second chance as a gift. He turned to Death to tell him this, but he was concentrating on his mobile phone.

'What are you doing?' Dave asked. 'I'm having an existential crisis here.'

'I'm just updating my Twitter.' Death showed Dave the phone screen. 'I am currently talking to the world's most miserable man.' He pressed the send button.

'I am not the world's most miserable man!'

'I'm sorry, but you must be. It says so on the Internet.'

Dave never imagined that death would be like this. Tragic? Yes. Devastating? Inevitably. Annoying? Not so much.

'I am Death. I am merely a ferryman between your world and the next. I am not here to judge. I will mock, though.' Death looked at Dave's untouched drink. 'You not drinking that?'

Dave shook his head. Death picked up the glass and quaffed the contents with noisy gulps. He slammed the glass back onto the table and let out a supernaturally long burp.

'I'm going to let you into a secret. Magic exists in your world, Dave. The way shopping trolleys stop at supermarket car parks should be evidence enough.'

Though the bags for life are a source of constant disappointment to an immortal being.'

Dave had no idea what to do with this information so just let Death continue. 'If there's one thing I've learned in this job, you always cut the blue wire, never the red one. Another thing is that life is hard. People are cruel. But remember that... Nope. I don't know where I'm going with this. That's it. Life is hard and people are cruel. But you have an untapped gift, Dave. You're a good man. You could be the best.'

Death slid a business card across the table. Dave picked it up and turned it over. Expensive, weighty and black. It was embossed with simple white text that said: '1 CROW ROAD'.

Dave was aware that something important had happened here. The moment was heavy with expectation and meaning. Then Death's mobile phone began to ring. Dave had never considered what Death's ring tone would be, but if he had, 'Uptown Girl' would have been pretty far down the list.

'Do you mind if I get that?'

Dave shook his head and Death answered the phone.

'Steve speaking... Well, I didn't agree that it was a silly name... Really...? I'll be there in a minute.'

Death threw the phone back down on the table.

'Busy?' Dave asked.

Death let out a long weary sigh.

'I'm always busy.'

'How do you find the time to do it all?'

'Time is relative. In fact, he's my cousin. Who owes me money.'

'Time travel?'

'It's not time travel as such. It's more that I exist simultaneously at all points in time. Or something. I wasn't really paying attention. Quantum physics was put together on a Friday afternoon. That's why humanity will never figure it out. Some of the bits are the wrong way round.'

An ambulance siren cut through the awkward silence.

'Sounds like your taxi's here.' Death nodded towards the door.

Dave could feel himself being pulled from his seat. The voices in the room grew dim and the walls faded away. Before he went, Dave realised that he should probably ask at least one metaphysical question.

'Answer me this. What's the one true religion?'

Death seemed disappointed.

'It's not a bloody competition.'

Dave's heart kick-started and he slipped back into the warm embrace of life.

## CHAPTER SIX

The pain reminded Dave that he was alive. He did not know exactly how long he had been in the hospital bed, but the antiseptic smell had become familiar and the electronic pulse of the machines reassuring. He opened his eyes and saw a dark blur standing over him. Since he had arrived on the ward, Dave's dreams had been haunted by an anonymous black figure always looking over his shoulder. For a moment, Dave worried that this unknown creature had stepped into reality to take care of whatever business he had with him. The world swam and snapped into focus. Melanie smiled down at him.

'Welcome back,' she said. 'How do you feel?'

'I am never drinking again.' Dave licked his cracked lips.

'Don't say that. I owe you a pint. What was it like?'

'What was what like?'

'You know. They said you were clinically dead. How was the afterlife?'

Dave tried to remember that night, back to a time when he was apparently between worlds. It was like his

tongue probing where a lost tooth had been in his mouth. He could feel the shape of what was missing, but couldn't see it.

'I don't know,' he said. 'I think there were pork scratchings.'

Then he decided to slip into something more comfortable, like unconsciousness, and the world was dark.

The next time Dave opened his eyes he was alone. His memory staggered like a drunk bouncing from one recollection to the next.

His name was Dave Marwood. He had been dead. Now he was not. His mind stumbled further back. He was born twenty-five years ago, the only child of Bob and Susan Marwood. He had a happy childhood, but there had been bad dreams and strange occurrences. His mum and dad would come to his bedroom and comfort him and he knew that they would always protect him from the monsters in the world. They knew, as all parents do, that they could not. His father had died when Dave was seventeen; a heart attack brought on by a job that did not deserve that kind of a reaction. Six years later, cancer ate away at his mother.

Once he had smiled bravely at her funeral and taken off the only black suit that he owned, he had taken his father's ashes from the cupboard, mixed them with his mother's and scattered them. Somewhere that had been

special to them. He remembered green, but no more than that. Maybe it had been a forest. Perhaps they had seeped into the earth, or had been gathered up by the roots of a tree. Maybe it stood there now, tall and proud amongst the leaves. Maybe some small part of them remained in this world, entwined together. This gave him comfort. He would visit their resting place, wherever it was, once he was out of the hospital.

His mind moved forward, sure-footed now. Like a homeless Dickensian orphan, he decided to seek his fortune. With a media studies degree and the small amount of money his parents had left him, he had taken a train to London. He'd thought it a romantic adventure. It'd turned out to be a series of tiny disappointments. He'd found himself at Gary's door. Soon after that, he'd started at UberSystems International. Later, Melanie had joined the company and he had fallen in love. Then he was hit by a car, which hurt slightly less. That brought him back to the present.

He was tired now; so tired that even his eyelashes hurt. He closed his eyes, drowning in the darkness, and felt the black figure once again at his shoulder.

'No matter how you look at it, Emperor Palpatine was the democratically elected leader of the Senate. Then the Rebel Alliance comes along without any mandate and starts blowing up anything within a twelve parsec radius,' Dave said. He was sitting up in bed now in his own

hospital room. Melanie was perched on an uncomfortable plastic chair.

'You've obviously been thinking about this a great deal,' she said.

'I've had a lot of time on my hands. The way Luke, Yoda and Obi Wan kept banging on about their religion, it's obvious they saw it as a holy war.'

'Yeah, but those space teddy bears were cute.'

'Ewoks? Ewoks cook their prisoners and use the helmets of dead Stormtroopers as drums. You call them space teddy bears, I call them war criminals. And another thing. Even though he can backflip and lightsaber duel, Yoda claims he needs to use a walking stick. What's that all about? Apart from claiming disability allowance?'

Melanie laughed. 'Are you saying that the Rebel Alliance were religious terrorists and Yoda was a benefit cheat?'

'I'm just saying that when it comes to intergalactic civil war, nobody is squeaky clean.' After a brief silence, Dave decided to say something that had been on his mind. 'You don't have to keep coming here.'

'I enjoy our theological debates,' Melanie said, smiling warmly. 'Do you want me to stop?'

'No! I mean, I don't get many visitors. Probably why I chew your ear off. Sorry.'

'Does Gary not drop by?'

'No. He thinks that the MRSA bug is exactly that. A bug. A genetic tag released by the government to mark



and monitor the weaker members of society.'

'Right.'

A bell rang in the corridor to indicate that visiting hours were over. Dave had a sinking feeling in his stomach. She would be gone in a moment. He should say something.

Melanie got up from her chair, causing it to squeak against the polished floor.

'Is there anything you want me to bring next time?' she asked.

*You're all I need*, Dave thought. 'No, I'm good, thanks.'

She squeezed his hand and he squeezed back, feeling her warmth against his cold skin. Then she was gone.

He should have said something.

Dave recovered quickly and the doctors were baffled by the fact he'd not sustained any permanent injuries. His interior had been ripped out, shifted, squeezed and reshaped. There had been operations and procedures. Metal had been grafted onto bone. Dave didn't mind this too much as it technically made him a cyborg and therefore fulfilled a childhood ambition. The police came and questioned him about the accident. It was a formality so that they could put a tick in a box. The car had been stolen earlier that night and the driver had fled the scene. No accurate descriptions and no evidence.

One morning, Dave was woken up by a rhythmic

clicking. He pulled himself up in bed, tangling himself in the wires that were stuck into his skin. The door to his room was closed against the bustle of the corridor. An old lady in a dressing gown sat knitting in a small armchair by the window. Her knotted leathery hands moved the needles nimbly, yet the garment she was making did not seem to grow in size at all.

'Hello,' said Dave. As an opening gambit, it was a tried and tested method. The old lady looked up over the frame of her glasses, smiled and returned her attention to her work.

'You're awake, then? Your friend has been worried about you. Nothing good ever came from worrying. I tried to tell her that, but I were wasting my breath, so to speak. She comes here when you're asleep, that Melanie. She says she owes you.' Dave knew he owed her more. He had stopped her leaving this life, but she had brought him back. They were forever bound while they were in this world.

'Are you a patient here?' he asked.

'I was, but that's by the by. I heard about what you did to help that pretty young thing. What you did to end up in here. It was either very brave, or very stupid.' Dave shifted his weight and felt a sharp pain shoot up through his legs.

'A little from column A and a little from column B,' he replied through gritted teeth.

There was a sharp, efficient knock on the door and a

nurse briskly stepped into the room.

'How are you this morning, Dave?' she asked.

'Good, thanks.'

'Talking to yourself again?' She consulted his notes at the foot of the bed. Dave looked over at the empty armchair by the window. The nurse tapped the clipboard. 'Looks like we'll have to sort out that medication if we're going to send you home.'

The medication. That was it. Seeing ghosts at his bedside? It was understandable considering what he had been through. Pills and potions telling him what he wanted to hear.

Doctors and nurses came and went throughout the rest of the day. Forms were updated, waivers approved and prescriptions signed. Dave's thoughts soon drifted away from the old lady to plans of watching box sets of 'My Big Fat Geek Wedding' on the sofa.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Death stood at the back of the small church. A plaque over his shoulder informed visitors that it had been built in the mid-fourteenth century, funded by the wealthy town elders as an appeasement to their Lord in the hope that they would avoid the Black Death. Those same town elders had all been buried in the graveyard outside before the construction had even been completed. *You pay your money and you make your choice*, he thought.

The congregation shifted awkwardly in their seats and stared at the cold stone floor while the priest spoke from the pulpit. Some furtively glanced at the coffin in front of them, imagining their own lifeless body within, and shuddered. When the priest had finished, a piper wrestled a set of bagpipes like he was dealing with a drunk and surly octopus. Death was glad that he had stood at the furthest point that the room would allow. He was deeply suspicious of any instrument whose sound was improved the greater the distance between the performer and the listener.

'Play Free Bird!' Death chuckled to himself,

disappointed that nobody could appreciate his wit. Every joke was a private joke these days.

Death drifted through the wake. After he had met the deceased, he thought it was important to spend a little time with those who had been left behind. He eavesdropped on small talk. He'd always considered the British reaction to the loss of a loved one slightly odd. While other cultures wailed and gnashed their teeth in sorrow, or celebrated the life that had touched them, the British always stared into the dark abyss, gave a collective shrug and went back to talking about the weather.

The buffet table was spread before him.

'Look what I've been reduced to.' He sighed. 'Once, I vanquished barbarian hordes. I destroyed vast armies. Foes dropped their swords at the mere sight of me. Ooh! Cheese and pineapple on sticks!'

He had not always been alone. He had not always had to hang out at funerals to remind himself that he hadn't been forgotten. There had been three others: Famine, Conquest and War. They didn't have much in common to begin with but, as is the case with humans, before they knew it they could not comprehend life without each other.

They had but one task. Wait for the Apocalypse. Nobody, not even the Horsemen, knew when the end of the world would come. Some had believed that it would happen when the Mayan calendar ran out. Others held onto the Judeo-Christian texts. Death was sure it would be

when the sale at DFS ended.

They had tried to fill the days. Death was kept busy. There was the French Revolution. Whatever you think about the French, they gave violent insurrection a certain *je ne sais quoi*. He had stood at the dock when the Titanic set sail. Nobody that day could imagine the horror that awaited. 'My Heart Will Go On' by Celine Dion. The four friends grew to like humans and all their eccentricities and foibles. They did not relish the fact that they would one day be responsible for their destruction.

Conquest even fell in love. The relationship was short lived, though, when his bride-to-be found out who he really was. 'Till Death us do part' is a rather hollow promise when he's your drinking buddy.

Throughout history, men had tried to force their hands. Their reasons differed. Some were religious, others mad, a few simply saw profit. In a few cases, it was all three. The results were always the same.

But mostly, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse were bored.

That had changed sixty years ago. Satan, once again, made a claim on the mortal realm. There had been fiddle contests from time to time. Death could handle the fiddle contests, but this was a more organised campaign than the previous attempts.

The skies roared and the ground shook with every blow and scream. The battlefields ran thick with the blood of both the mortal and the immortal, including Famine

and War. Beelzebub had learnt the harshest of lessons. One does not anger Death. For the one and only time, he took satisfaction in the snuffing out of a life.

After they had buried their dead, Conquest and Death shook hands and parted ways. They had decided that they had no right to bring about Armageddon upon those that had fought alongside them. Death had had a few problems adjusting as a solo artist. Mistakes had been made and he knew that these needed to be put right. He did not know what had happened to Conquest, but sometimes thought of him. He hoped he would see him again some day.

Death looked at his watch; a gift from three old friends. Perhaps it was time to make new ones.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

November turned into December. London was ablaze with lights as if a city-sized mother ship, crewed by drunken office workers, had crash-landed on the banks of the Thames. When Dave's money and patience with daytime television had run out he'd drifted back to work. He was happy to be busy. He had spent the last two Christmas days on his own. He'd walked the quiet, deserted streets and it had felt like the aftermath of the Zombie Apocalypse. It made sense; at that time of year people hoarded food, barricaded themselves in their homes and wanted to hit family members over the head with a shovel.

Offices thrive on private drama so it stands to reason that Dave's first day back at work was filled with handshakes and pats on the back. He smiled and modestly downplayed his involvement on that evening over a month ago. He just wanted to get back to his desk and be near Melanie. With no reason to call around to his flat, Dave hadn't seen her since he'd been discharged from hospital. He had missed her and over the next few days,



they slipped into the conversational rhythm of old friends.

Melanie looked over from her seat opposite Dave. 'How's it going with the Meyer project?'

'It's been better.'

'Is all not well in the Shire, Frodo?'

'I think we may have a very big problem with the systems upgrade.'

'Remember what Fiona says,' said Melanie. 'There are no such things as problems, only opportunities to shine.'

'Okay,' said Dave, 'I think we may have a very big opportunity with the systems upgrade.'

Dave clicked a button on his mouse and the printer behind him chugged, whirred and spat out paper. He pushed himself away from the desk and glided along on his chair. When he reached for the printout, his left foot brushed the floor.

'Gotcha!' Melanie punched the air with her fist.

'What?'

'Your foot touched the ground.' Melanie looked at her watch. 'You've got no lives left and there's three minutes to go.'

'This game is so rubbish.' Dave sighed and shoved himself back towards his desk.

Melanie pouted. 'It was your idea!'

Dave shook his head as his phone began to ring. He picked up the receiver.

'UberSystems International... I don't know about that,

Mr Meyer. I'll just need to grab the file. Please hold.' He pressed a button on the phone.

'Who's got the Meyer file?' he shouted across the room.

Over the other side of the office, on another bank of desks, John (or was it James?) held the file above his head, an evil smile on his face. Dave looked from James (or was it John?) to a smirking Melanie and, finally, to the clock on the wall.

He carefully pulled his feet up onto his chair and, wobbling, stepped onto his desk. He leapt onto a vacant chair. The momentum wheeled him across the floor until he reached the other island of workers. He scrambled up and trod carefully between computer keyboards, telephones and notepads. He snatched the file from his stunned work colleague and spun on his heel. Another leap back onto the chair and he sailed back across the ocean of stain-resistant carpet like a victorious pirate captain grasping plundered booty.

His battered joints aching, Dave clambered up onto Melanie's desk and stepped back over to his own. People began to applaud. Dave allowed himself a smile in his moment of triumph. Pride comes before a fall and physics is a harsh mistress. He stepped too heavily on the chair and it rolled away from under him. Dave hit the ground hard, paper exploding everywhere.

Worried, Melanie jumped up from her desk. She ran around and pulled Dave to his feet. Crouched down, the

two of them gathered up the filing. She flashed him a smile.

'Very impressive.'

'Thank you.'

'I think you'll find I've won, though.'

Their eyes met over a spreadsheet. A memory emerged from the fog of Halloween night; jumbled fragments of a promise he had made to himself. The words tumbled out of his mouth.

'Do you want to go for that drink? You and me?'

'What? Like a date?'

'Not like a date. An actual date.'

The words hung in the air like subtitles on the paused DVD of Life.

'I think I'd like that.' Melanie tucked her hair behind her ear and Dave's heart came close to exploding. An office drone leaned over the desk.

'Dave?'

'Yes?' Dave looked up.

'Fiona's office. Now.'

Dave looked back at Melanie.

'You go. I'll take care of Meyer,' said Melanie.

Dave stood outside Fiona's door. As he knocked, he thought back to their last conversation before the accident and what a closed door meant.

'Come in!' A deep breath and Dave stepped into the room, attempting to exude a confidence he did not truly

feel. Initially, the view from the window commanded his attention; the stark lines of glass and steel brutally etched against the crisp blue sky. Below, the Thames snaked like a predator ready to wrap itself around the city and consume it in its dark belly.

Then Dave realised that Fiona was not alone. A middle-aged man sat across from her. He was tailored to within an inch of his life and seemed to have been chiselled from some kind of tanned stone.

'Thanks for coming, Dave. I'm sure you know Mr West,' said Fiona. Conrad West. CEO of UberSystems International.

'Please. Call me Conrad,' West said. Though he smiled, his handshake felt like a threat.

'Good to meet you,' Dave said nervously.

'Take a seat. Fiona and I are just finishing some business.'

Fiona grinned. 'As I was saying, I took the initiative to crunch the numbers and, by my calculations, changing the vending machine suppliers and charging the staff for refreshments could save the company almost five hundred pounds a year.'

'Jesus, you're so tight that you'd probably skin your own farts for the grease.'

'I'm sorry, Mr West?'

'Let them have their free tea and coffee. It tastes like shit, anyway.' West rolled his eyes at Dave. *Get a load of her.* 'What do you think of the coffee, Dave? Do you

drink it?'

'Yes, and now I know what regret tastes like.' West barked a big, harsh laugh and slapped the desk, causing pens and notepads to jump across the surface as if terrorized.

'I love this guy!' he boomed. 'Dave, I suppose you want to know why you're here?'

'A bit.'

'Firstly, I wanted to come down here to thank you for what you did to save Melanie.'

'Not a problem.'

'Not a problem?' West looked over to Fiona. 'He throws himself in front of a car to save a fellow team member and it's not a problem? I love this guy! But, anyway, I'll get to the point. Fiona's being reassigned.'

'There's a problem in Tokyo,' Fiona explained.

'Godzilla?' asked Dave hopefully.

'No.'

Dave sighed. 'It's never Godzilla.'

'Ha!' West clapped his hands together. 'Where have you been hiding this guy? That's why we want to know if you'd be interested in moving into Fiona's role? We need someone like you. Someone who can lead from the front. Someone who thinks outside of the box.'

'I think that if you always have to think outside of the box, then you probably need to get a different box,' Dave found himself saying.

'See? This is exactly the kind of blue sky thinking that

we need. I love this guy!' West slapped Dave on his bruised shoulder. Dave winced. It was tough love.

'When do you want me to start?' he asked.

'Five minutes ago. Fiona's really got to get moving on her project. You wanna try her chair out for size?' Fiona slipped from behind the desk, relinquishing her authority to Dave.

He crossed from one side of the desk to the other and sunk into the expensive, ergonomically-designed chair. Within the space of ten minutes, he had arranged a date and secured a promotion. Though he did not miss the irony that he had to die to begin to live, none of it had seemed that complicated after all.

But you don't have to make life complicated. Sometimes it can get that way all by itself.

## CHAPTER NINE

She wandered through the house. She drifted past the landslide of letters up against the front door and around the islands of books stacked haphazardly on the floor. She knew she didn't belong here, but she had nowhere else to go. She was cold and alone. People used to come and live here in her home. She didn't like the people. They ignored her. This made her angry and she broke things. They noticed her then. People did not come here any more.

A boy used to live here. She missed the boy. She liked him. He didn't ignore her. They talked and played games together. Hide-and-seek was her favourite. She always won. Then he left. That was a long time ago. Now, she waited at the top of the stairs. She had turned it into a game. She told herself she was hiding and, one day, he would find her again.

The boy would come back.

The boy would find her.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sunlight tumbled down through a canopy of leaves above Dave's head. He had been here, in Green Park, once before during his first summer in London. It had been a good day with old university friends. He hadn't seen them since. They had been swallowed up by their new lives.

He was reminded of that day now. Young families picnicked on tartan rugs. Hipsters threw frisbees at each other. At the end of the path that cut through the trees he could see Buckingham Palace. Tourists scampered excitedly around it like ants around a greying lump of sugar. Behind him he could hear the hum of traffic on Piccadilly. He was sitting on the shady grass across from Death; a chessboard between the two of them. Death contemplated his next move.

'This is a dream, isn't it?' Dave asked.

'You don't have to worry if you dream of Death. No, you only have to worry if Death dreams of you.' Death moved a rook.

'We've met before, haven't we?'

'You recall that night?'



'A bit,' said Dave. 'I recall being annoyed. Is this going to take long? I've got work in the morning.'

'Oh, yes. Your new job. I've heard about that.'

Dave shrugged. 'You've got to pay the rent somehow.'

'Have you thought about getting a job you enjoy?'

'A job I enjoy? I'm sorry, I don't get you. I mean, I understand the individual words. Just not in that order and not in that sentence.' Dave picked up a bishop from the board. 'How does this move again?'

'Diagonally. I think. It's been a while. Mostly people want to play Hungry Hippos.'

Dave leaned back, his hands clutching at the green grass beneath him. Green. He thought of his parents again. Had they met this creature? Did they try to bargain or reason with him? Did they accept their fate or did they fight for a few more moments in this world?

'Do you remember my parents?' he asked.

'I'm sorry, but I don't. I have met so many of you. My time with each soul is brief. I'm basically just admin. Your myths and legends bestow upon me responsibilities that I do not possess.'

'Oh, that's a shame.' Dave sighed with disappointment.

'Let me explain something to you. Bodies are just meat puppets for the soul.'

'Meat puppets?'

'If Star Trek has taught humanity one thing, it's how to bang hot alien chicks. If Star Trek has taught humanity

two things, it's also that you will transcend your corporeal forms and become entities of pure energy. I don't know where you'd put your bloody car keys, though.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'I could show you so much. But you never write. You never call.' Death sighed as he pushed a pawn along the board.

'I don't know how to.' Dave moved a knight to capture Death's pawn.

'I think you do,' said Death.

'Checkmate,' said Dave triumphantly. A confused Death looked down at the board.

'What the fu--'

Throwing off his sweat-soaked bed sheets, Dave gasped awake as though he had surfaced from deep, cold, dark water.

Unable to get back to sleep, Dave showered and put on his best suit. He was checking his reflection in the chrome kettle when Gary stumbled into the kitchen, bare feet padding on the laminate floor.

'You vain bastard,' he said.

'It's not vanity, it's damage limitation.'

Gary peered blearily inside the fridge.

'Shouldn't you be at work?' he asked.

'I'm going in a bit.' Dave's head ached. It felt as if somebody had pushed their fingers into his brain; probing and stretching, pressing it up against his skull. He had

thought about phoning in sick, but it was the first day in his new role and he was pretty sure the personification of death invading your psyche wasn't on the list of acceptable reasons for absence. He told himself that it was just a dream. Nothing more than a subconscious manifestation of his anxiety about work, but it had felt so real. Death had seemed so close.

Gary removed a pizza box from the fridge and sniffed the contents. His nose wrinkled.

'That's disgusting!' He shoved the box back in the fridge.

'Why did you put it back, then?' Dave asked.

'Because there's no room left in the bin.' Gary pulled out a cheesecake.

Dave grimaced. 'Cheesecake for breakfast?'

'What's the problem? It's dairy and cereal. It's practically a bowl of cornflakes.'

'Can I ask you something?'

Gary's eyes widened. 'I'm not explaining where babies come from again.'

'What do you think happens when you die?'

'That accident's opened a whole can of philosophical whoop ass, hasn't it? Honestly? I don't know.'

'That's unusual for you,' said Dave.

Gary thought for a moment, then said, 'Life is like a box of chocolates. It doesn't last very long if you're morbidly obese.'

'That's not very helpful.'

'All I know,' said Gary, arms outstretched, 'is that God is dead and I am an insignificant speck in an uncaring universe. But there's cheesecake. So, y'know, swings and roundabouts. Cheese and cake. You have to admit, as a concept it's flawless.'

By ten o'clock that morning, Dave had settled himself into his new office. He had failed to set up his laptop and smartphone and had been unable to programme his extension into the desk telephone. He rearranged his action figures for the ninth time that day. He looked proudly at the business cards printed with his name and a job title he didn't quite understand. He stared out of the window that stretched from the ceiling to the floor. His fingers gripped the soft leather armrests of the chair. He imagined he was Captain Kirk ordering the Enterprise to swoop over a previously undiscovered civilisation; one whose society was based on the service industry.

'Permission to come aboard?' asked Conrad West, his knuckles rapping sharply on the door. Dave pushed himself back to his desk and grabbed a spreadsheet.

'Oh, Mr West. I was... just... '

'Please, call me Conrad. How are you settling in?'

'Good.'

'Everything working?'

'No. They're all just very expensive paperweights.'

'Have you told IT?'

'I spoke to a guy on the floor below us who put me

through to someone in Newcastle who phoned a support engineer in Mumbai who emailed another bloke who sits next to the guy I originally spoke to on the floor below us.'

'At least the process is becoming more streamlined, but I'm not here to discuss our poor business decisions. How are you feeling? Nervous?'

'A little.'

'That's good. It's just another type of fuel for the engine. I have high hopes for you, Dave. You're a good man. You could be the best.'

A memory stirred. The pressure behind his left eyeball grew until he thought it would pop out of his head and roll around the desk. He put a hand out to steady himself.

'I'm sorry? What did you say?'

'I don't enjoy repeating compliments. I said you could be the best. Are you alright?'

'Just a headache.'

'Take some aspirin. You good to come to the boardroom in ten minutes?'

'Of course,' said Dave.

'Great. Is there anything else you need?'

'I don't think so.' West was halfway out the door when Dave thought of a question.

'Just one more thing, Conrad, if that's OK?'

'Sure. Shoot.'

'What do I actually do?'

The UberSystems International boardroom had been designed with understated good taste and an overstated budget. If Dave had known how much the leather chair he sat in cost, he would probably have stopped picking at the stitching. He was surrounded by middle management; cheap suits and expensive ties. The room hummed with fear and buzz words.

This was where he spent the rest of the day, in meeting after meeting. At one point he was pretty sure he was having a meeting about a meeting he was going to have later in the day. Dave reckoned that he could recreate his work day by slamming his head in a door while someone poured cold coffee over him and repeatedly shouted, 'Synergies!'.

At five thirty, Dave escaped back to his office. The mythical computer engineer was staring at Dave's computer with a look of disappointment.

'Dude, you don't need an engineer. You need a priest. What did you do?' he said.

'Tried to change my password. I'm not very good with technology.' Dave pressed buttons on his phone in a futile attempt to retrieve his messages. Melanie looked around the open doorway.

'Well, don't you look the very model of a young professional,' she said playfully.

'I like to make an effort every now and again.' Dave continued to punch the phone's screen.

'What is that?' Melanie asked.

'It's a company smartphone.'

'What do you need one of those for?'

'It means I can be contacted any time, day or night,' he said with an air of self-importance.

'That doesn't sound very smart to me. We're going to the pub. You coming?'

Dave sighed. 'I can't. I've spent so long in meetings about the work I have to do that I haven't had time to actually do the work.'

'Fair enough. You still got time in your diary to fit me in tomorrow?'

'Of course.'

'Don't work too hard.'

'I won't.'

A large green plastic bag labelled 'PATIENT PROPERTY' was waiting for Dave when he returned home late in the evening. He had the flat to himself. Every Thursday night, Gary attended his conspiracy theorist support group, though he insisted on calling it a Truther Symposium. He had taken Dave along to a meeting once. Fourteen passive-aggressive men drinking real ale and all insisting they sat with their backs against the wall opposite the window.

He tipped the contents of the bag onto the living room floor. The clothes he had died in; smashed devil horns, torn tee shirt and jeans. Then a moment of clarity. He remembered everything. That night. The accident. The

pub.

Dave picked up the crumpled trousers and turned them over. Nervously, he put a hand in the back pocket. He pulled out a creased business card. Ran his fingers over the raised text. 1 Crow Road.

He would definitely be phoning in sick tomorrow.

Dave slept fitfully that night. Whether awake or dreaming, the same thought occupied him like the last chorus of a song he had caught on the radio. He told himself that he didn't believe in any of this. His near-death experience had been his body's biochemical reaction. It was caused by a combination of oxygen deprivation and hormones overloading his system. Then he saw the business card perched against his bedside lamp. He felt like he had as a child when he'd worry about the monsters hiding in his wardrobe. The world now seemed even bigger and even more frightening.

Dave had been staring at the ceiling for thirty-four minutes when his alarm went off. He had been counting down the minutes; a tally drawn on the wall of his mind. Mechanically, he climbed out of bed, showered and made a phone call to the office. He explained about the physiotherapy session he had forgotten about. He was very sorry and would be contactable on the phone. Human Resources understood, wished him good luck for it, hoped he had a good weekend and would see him on Monday.

Dave had been surprised to discover there was only



one Crow Road in the whole of London. It had taken several strolls up and down the length of the main street until he found the entrance where he was sure there had once been a coffee shop.

Crow Road, NW1, was a cobblestoned cul-de-sac lined with office buildings whose brickwork had been smoothed and softened by decades of wind and rain. This unassuming passageway didn't look like a location where worlds collided. Dave pulled his winter coat close, wrapping himself against a chill that was not meteorological.

Dave walked down the alleyway until he reached the last door. He went to press the buzzer, but hesitated as he considered the ridiculousness of the situation. He had been brought here by a supernatural business card. It must be a practical joke. Gary had heard him talking in his sleep the other night, had printed a card out and had hidden it for Dave to find. But such an operation would require a sense of purpose and effort that Gary did not normally possess.

The intercom crackled to life.

'Dave Marwood?' asked the woman on the other end. Flustered, Dave pressed the button.

'Erm... Yes.'

'We've been expecting you.'

The door unlocked with an electronic buzz.

*Maybe they have cheesecake,* Dave thought hopefully. He pushed the door open and stepped through to the other

side.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The office was cramped and uncomfortable. Desks and filing cabinets were jammed next to each other like a giant game of analogue Tetris. Sometimes, Anne would look longingly across the rooftops towards the gleaming air-conditioned towers of the City, but only sometimes. This was a vocation. A calling. Like a teacher, surgeon or those people that sell cupcakes on the Internet. She moved with a crisp efficiency. A quick check that the coffee was warm, a hand combed through her hair. She was ready. It was time.

The stairs creaked beneath Dave's feet like old men's bones. The air smelled of accountancy and failed start-ups. He arrived at a door and knocked three times.

'Come in!' Anne called.

Dave stepped into the small office. The watery winter sunlight splashed over the furniture, bathing Anne in its glow. Dave guessed that she was in her early thirties and overly attached to her cat.

'I'm Anne. Can I get you a drink?'

'Hello, I'm Dave. But you already know that. I'll have

a coffee, please. Black.'

Anne poured him a cup from the pot and passed it over. Dave sipped the finest coffee he had ever tasted. He drifted away with thoughts of home and comfort. This was coffee beyond the skills of mortals.

'You found us, then?' Anne smiled.

'Yes. What have I found, exactly?'

'Perhaps we should go and see the boss?'

'Perhaps we should.'

Anne walked over to another door and rapped her knuckles on the frosted glass. She let herself in and Dave followed.

Death sat in a forest of Post-it notes and files. His feet were up on the keyboard of an untouched computer. A sign that read 'You don't have to be dead to work here but it helps' was stuck to the side of the monitor. Death was shouting into a telephone.

'I just want to know my bank balance... My mother's maiden name? I was born of chaos and pandemonium... What do you mean that's not what you've got on the computer? Right, mate. You're on my list.' Death slammed the phone down and took a long swig from a takeaway coffee cup. It was then that he noticed Anne and Dave.

'Oh, hello. You made it in the end.'

'I had a dream about you...'

'Let me stop you right there, Dave. The only way you could make this conversation any less interesting is if you

were dreaming about showing me your holiday photographs.'

Anne stepped forward. 'I think somebody is having a bad day.'

Death sighed and picked up a newspaper from the desk. He threw it towards Dave.

'Humanity. I love you all, but you've really got to stop being wankers to each other. When will you learn? Whatever your gender, race, religion or sexual orientation, you're all as insignificant as each other. Lots of you are going to be very embarrassed when you find out there's no supreme being, no divine plan and we're all just making it up as we go along.'

Dave felt he should make an effort to defend his species.

'But people need something to cling to. Some order. Some reason.'

'Yes, everything happens for a reason,' Death said, 'but sometimes the reason is that life is cold, random and awful. Like telephone banking. I need a biscuit.'

'I'll warn you now,' said Anne, 'we're out of chocolate HobNobs.'

Death was enraged. 'What? The chocolate HobNob is humanity's crowning achievement.'

'I can go and get some if you want?' said Anne.

'No. Screw this. I can manipulate time and space. If anyone needs me, I'll be at Friday. Dave, Anne will give you the tour. I don't know what I'd do without her.'

Death disappeared, slipping through a gap in the fabric of reality.

'I'm sorry about that,' said Anne, 'He can get a bit grumpy.'

'What is this? I'm still in a coma in hospital, right?'

'You know those moments when you've seen someone nobody else can?'

'Hallucinations?'

'Death's mistakes,' she said.

Anne took the opportunity to get on with some filing while she waited for Dave to arrive at a conclusion. It was as though he was trying to work out the sixth character of an Internet password without using his fingers.

'Ghosts?' Dave finally asked. Anne nodded her head. His eyes widened as he looked her up and down. He reached out and prodded her with his finger. Anne looked cross.

'Please don't do that. A while back, it all got a bit too much for him. Some slipped through the net. He was all, 'Keith Richards is still alive? Bloody hell. Who did I collect in 1971, then?'. I was brought in to help with the paperwork.'

'Are you telling me ghosts are administrative errors?'

'In a manner of speaking.'

'And I'm here because...?'

'We're hiring.'

The conversation seemed to clog up Dave's brain. The words jammed themselves between the neurons and

coated the synapses.

'I've already got a job. Thanks for the coffee, but I'm going to have to go now.'

Dave opened another door, but a wave of chattering and shrieking knocked him back. The noise and smell almost overwhelmed him. He staggered back and slammed the door shut.

Dave gasped. 'What was that?'

'That's the room of infinite monkeys working at infinite typewriters. They were left here by the last tenant.'

'What do they do?'

Anne picked up a bound stack of paper. 'Just a screenplay for an Adam Sandler movie so far. It's not much, but it's a start.'

Death. Monkeys. Drinkable coffee in an office. Dave realised that these were all figments of a deranged imagination. The only rational explanation for all of this was that he was heading for a spectacular breakdown. He had to get out. He looked around for another door and made his way towards it.

'But you've not even seen the Deathmobile,' said Anne in an attempt to make him stay. Dave stopped. He turned around.

'The Deathmobile?'

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Anne opened the garage door. It rattled up into the roof to reveal a black Morris Minor. Anne gave the car's bonnet a quick polish.

'That's it, is it?' Dave asked, unable to disguise the disappointment in his voice.

'Get in,' she said, 'There's something I want to show you.'

They travelled in silence away from the choking streets at the heart of the city. Soon, the buildings began to shorten and spread out as if the world had relaxed and opened its belt a few notches.

After half an hour, they pulled into a car park and Anne killed the engine. Dave could see a forest steadily darken as the late afternoon light grew fainter.

'Come on,' said Anne as she stepped out of the car. Every nerve in Dave's body sang out a warning, yet still he followed. They headed deeper into the woods, the branches above their heads growing ever thicker. Anne moved with a practised grace, while Dave tripped over exposed roots and snapped twigs underfoot.



'In 1828, a young man and woman fell in love,' Anne whispered. 'He told to her to wait for him for a year, while he went off to find his fortune so that they could marry. She retreated to a cabin in these woods. A year came and went. When he didn't return, she threw herself into the lake just over there.'

'Wow,' said Dave, rather loudly.

'Ssh!'

They stepped into a clearing, the forest circling them like an attentive audience. A beautiful young woman in a white dress floated serenely between the trees. An other-worldly light illuminated her path. Dave swore it came from within her. She entered the clearing and he could see clearly that she was, in fact, hovering. There was only mist where her feet should have been. Even with his limited knowledge of anatomy, Dave realised that wasn't quite right. He started to back away, but Anne gently placed a hand on his arm.

'It's alright to be freaked out the first time.' She stepped towards the spirit.

'Rebecca?' she asked gently. The creature that was once Rebecca turned its head towards them. Dave held his breath for fear that it might shatter the moment into a thousand pieces. Then his mobile phone began to ring. He took it out of his pocket and looked at the number. It was Melanie. Anne and the ghost of Rebecca looked over at him.

'Sorry. I need to get this,' he said sheepishly. He

answered the call. 'Hello? Fine. You...? Oh. No. I just had a hospital appointment... That's tonight? Of course it is... No. Tonight's fine. Look, I'm in the middle of something. Sorry. See you later. Bye.' Dave hung up. 'Got a date tonight.'

Anne and the ghost of Rebecca looked less impressed than Dave had hoped and turned their attention back to each other.

'Are you friends of Jerome?' Rebecca asked.

'Yes. We'd like you to come with us,' Anne replied softly.

'I cannot. I must wait here for my love. He will return for me. He promised.'

'I know. He did return. The day after you took your life. You see, 1828 was a leap year. You forgot.'

This information hung in the air for a moment before Dave burst into laughter.

'What? That is the stupidest thing I've ever heard!' he said between snorts. Anne looked angry. Rebecca reacted to Dave's outburst by retreating into the forest.

'Don't go,' Anne said. 'We can take you to Jerome. You just need to take my hand.' She took a careful step towards Rebecca, her hand outstretched. Rebecca floated towards Anne, her fingers reaching for the warm touch of the living. An intense blinding light flashed when their fingertips met and Rebecca was gone.

From the passenger seat of the car, Dave stared at the

darkness stretching out before him. He munched thoughtfully on a chocolate HobNob.

If Dave had learned anything from listening to Gary's convoluted analysis of everything from 9/11 to the moon landings, it was that the simplest explanation was usually the correct one. If he wasn't schizophrenic, and the CAT scans in hospital had shown nothing to suggest this, and he wasn't a vegetable in an intensive care unit, then this was the only remaining answer. Terrorists crashed the planes. People walked on the moon. He could see ghosts.

'This is what we do,' said Anne. 'We find the lost. We rescue those who were left behind. We bring comfort to those who are afraid.'

'You've been practising that, haven't you?' Dave asked between biscuit bites.

'A bit. Yes. Since you crossed over, you too are a link between this world and the next. You could only see them before. Now you can help them cross over. They were read-only, but now it's all rewritable. Sort of.'

'Why doesn't he sort it out?'

'I don't know. Pride?'

'So how did you cross over?' Dave made speech marks with his fingers and immediately regretted it. Partly because he thought it made him look foolish, but mainly because he dropped crumbs over the car's pristine interior.

'I don't know you well enough to talk about it.'

'Oh. Embarrassing, was it?'

It started to rain on the drive home. Dave watched the water on the passenger window. The streaks split, merged and ran down in paths that shimmered in the light of the approaching city. A thought had been playing hide-and-seek with Dave since they had left the forest.

'When I was a kid, there was this girl. Emily. We played together. Then we moved house. The last time I saw her, she was staring down from my old bedroom window as we drove off. I'd never seen anyone look so sad. Do you think she's still there?'

Anne just continued to stare at the road ahead.

Anne and Dave arrived back at Crow Road and parked the car in the garage. They ran to the shelter of the building, splashing in puddles pooled in the pockmarked road. As they climbed the stairs, they could hear music playing loudly. They entered the office and it was coming from behind Death's door. Dave realised that it was Blue Oyster Cult's '(Don't) Fear The Reaper'.

Anne knocked on the frosted glass and then marched in uninvited. Death was dancing to the music, his scythe a replacement for a guitar. Anne turned the music off and it was replaced with an awkward silence.

'Before you say anything, I've had a very hard day. Have you got a song named after you? No, I didn't bloody think so,' Death said indignantly. Anne placed the half-eaten packet of biscuits on the desk. 'Oh, bloody hell,' he shouted. 'Who's been eating these?'

'Yeah. That'll be me,' said Dave. 'Can I ask you something? Jesus rising from the dead. Was that one of your mistakes? I ask because I'm concerned that wars have been fought and millions of lives lost over what was essentially a cock up.'

'You take one day off for the Easter bank holiday and you never hear the end of it. And how do you guys commemorate the resurrection? By spending Bank Holiday Monday walking around DIY stores wishing you were dead too. Anyway, what are you still doing here? Haven't you got a date?'

'How did you...?'

'Do you really need to finish that question?' said Death.

Dave looked at his watch. 'Oh no. I'm going to be late.'

'Go. I'll see you soon.'

'You do know that saying stuff like that doesn't get any less creepy?' said Anne.

'Thanks for the biscuits,' Dave shouted as he sprinted out through the door.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It looked like rain, but it fell like stones. It stung Dave's skin as he made his way across the city as fast as he could. He found Melanie sat in a corner of the bar. Illuminated by the candlelight in her white dress, Dave was reminded of souls glowing in a dark forest. As he shivered and dripped water onto the stone floor, Dave truly felt that he was punching above his weight. He was soon warmed, though, by the wine, the fire and the company. So what if she was out of his league? Weirder things had happened to him that day.

'How did it go at the hospital?' Melanie asked as she poured the last drops from their third bottle of wine into her glass.

'What?' said Dave, confused. 'Oh. Yes. I don't think there's any permanent damage.'

Melanie pointed to her hairline. 'You wanna feel something permanent? Just put your hand there.' Dave leant across the table and, gently brushing away her hair, felt Melanie's forehead. 'You feel that little lump? St Paddy's Day. Dublin.'

Dave slumped back into his seat and thought for a moment.

'I got that beat,' he said as he rolled up the sleeve of his shirt, grabbed Melanie's hand and placed it on his arm. She rubbed his skin. 'Moron let his dog loose at a beach party,' he said. 'Bit right through my jacket. The dog. Not the moron.' Under the table, Melanie threw her leg over Dave's. She hitched her dress up slightly to reveal a dark scar against her smooth, pale thigh.

'Thresher,' she said proudly.

'Thresher?'

'It was an off-licence. New Year's Eve in Glasgow. A guy fell through the window. Shard of glass caught me.' Dave put his leg over Melanie's and rolled his trouser leg up. He rubbed a patch of rough skin on his calf.

'Glastonbury last year.'

'You were there?'

'No, I fell off the ladder trying to adjust the satellite dish so I could watch it on the telly.'

'You wanna drink?' asked Melanie. 'Drink to your leg?'

'I'll drink to your leg.' He looked at the empty wine glass in front of him. 'Shall we get another bottle?'

Dave swung his arm to attract the attention of a passing waiter, but knocked Melanie's full glass over. Time seemed to slow as he watched the dark liquid splash all over the table and onto Melanie's pale dress. She leapt up as if an electric charge had been put through her chair.

Panicked, Dave attempted to dab the growing dark stain with a napkin.

'What are you doing?' she yelled. 'Oh God. I'm going to have to get this in to soak. It'll be ruined.' Melanie grabbed her coat and wrapped it around herself.

'I'm so sorry!'

'It's okay. Accidents happen. Thanks for the drink. I'll see you at work on Monday,' Melanie said, already heading for the door. She walked out of the bar without looking back.

Dave decided to have that bottle of wine. Time flew by as he sat there alone and before he knew it, the bar was closing. He just wanted the night to end. Everybody thinks that they are the star of the story of life, but Dave knew that he was just a bit part; a minor character, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in the drama that was humanity. He had realised that throughout the day. Life wasn't a romantic comedy. Nobody learns a lesson. Life wasn't an adventure. Few have the chance to get the girl and kill the baddie.

He knew tomorrow morning would hurt, and not just from the hangover. He had to win Melanie over. He pulled his phone from his pocket. With his head and fingers like marshmallows, he punched at the keyboard. Drunken logic told him he should tell Melanie everything. No secrets. She would respect him. He wrote about ghosts and Death and biscuits.



Send.

He stumbled through the streets, battling the tide of Christmas party goers; wave after wave of drunk executives crashing against him. His stomach rumbled and he realised that he had not eaten since those stolen biscuits. He wanted to get some takeaway and a taxi back to his bed. The alcohol would keep the dreams at bay. A quick inspection of the contents of his wallet soon stopped those thoughts, until he walked past a pizza parlour. He had a brainwave. Actually, in his current state, he considered it a brain tsunami. The greatest idea ever. He double backed, entered the shop and slapped his money down on the counter.

'I'd like to order a pizza for delivery, please,' he slurred to the bored-looking shop assistant.

Dave woke slowly. His head throbbed painfully in time with his heartbeat. His skin was cold and clammy, his mouth dry. Maybe this wasn't a hangover. Maybe he was patient zero in the Zombie Apocalypse. That would be the only way he could explain how bad he felt. He was glad that he had made it to his bed, even if he had only been able to remove one shoe. He turned over and found a half-eaten pizza spread across the duvet, greasy meat leaving a dark smear across the fabric. He didn't remember buying that. Some memories, though, bubbled to the surface like farts in a bath.

He felt under his bed until his fingers wrapped around

his mobile phone. One new message.

LEAVE ME ALONE.

Dave dropped the phone back onto the carpet. The wine and pizza in his belly had been replaced with a mixture of lead and crushing embarrassment. The realisation of what he had done made him close his eyes and offer the traditional prayer of the drunk and remorseful: 'I am never drinking again.'

Then, after a moment of sombre reflection, he groaned, 'You idiot.'

'Don't be so hard on yourself.'

Dave jumped when he saw Death sitting at the end of the bed, a cup of coffee in his hand.

'Oh no. Am I dead again? I feel like it.'

'No. Social call. Is that cold pizza?' Death asked, helping himself to a slice before Dave could answer him. 'You like that girl, Melanie, don't you? Personally, I believe that love is merely a chemical imbalance that makes you forget your credit card limit.'

Death offered the cup to Dave. 'Strong coffee is the answer.'

'Is it strong enough to punch a hole through time to before I started drinking?'

'Funny you should say that. Would you like another go at last night? Best out of two? I can arrange that. I once had a chat with Einstein. Apparently the theory of relativity is nothing to do with time running slower the closer you get to your relatives.'

'And you'd do that for me?' Dave asked with suspicion.

'Of course. You'd just have to come to work for me in return. I like your style. Getting a lift with the pizza delivery guy? Inspired.'

Dave had no idea what Death was talking about. 'My mother warned me never to make deals with anthropomorphic personifications.'

'Sounds like she was a smart woman.'

Maybe it was the hangover or the desperation, but Dave told himself that everybody deserved a second chance. He just never thought that it could be so literal.

'Okay,' Dave said. 'This isn't going to screw up the space-time continuum or anything?'

'Nobody will realise I've done anything. I just need you to sign this.'

Death produced a thick contract and a silver pen from the folds of his dark cloak. Dave skimmed through the pages.

'Death accepts no responsibility or liability for any loss, injury, embarrassing family encounters or changes to documented historical fact. This liability includes, but is not limited to, becoming your own father and/or mother, the rise of Hitler or the inexplicable success of Coldplay.'

'It's pretty standard temporal law,' Death explained as he inspected his fingernails. Dave shrugged and signed his name at the bottom of the last page. If at first you don't succeed, torch the place and claim on the insurance.

'So, what happens now?' he asked as he passed the pen and contract back to Death.

'I think the question should be "what happens then?"' said Death.

'You wanna drink?' asked Melanie. 'Drink to your leg?'

'I'll drink to your leg.' He looked at the empty wine glass in front of him. 'Shall we get another bottle?'

Dave swung his arm to attract the attention of a passing waiter, but knocked Melanie's full glass over. Before it could complete its trajectory, time juddered to a halt. Panic was frozen on Dave's face as the room was caught in a moment of existence.

Death strolled over to the table and picked up the wine glass that was balanced at an impossible angle. He drank the contents and placed it back into its halted free fall. He then moved Dave's arm, like he was playing with an oversized action figure, so that his hand was beneath the glass. Death stepped back like a sculptor admiring a newly completed work of art, and vanished.

Time lurched back into motion. In an instant, Dave caught the now empty wine glass before it bounced off of the table.

'Wasn't that full? Where did it go?' He put the glass down and scanned the floor.

'That's two times you've saved the day now,' said Melanie.

'I suppose.'

'Why did you do that?'

'Well, wine stains are a nightmare to remove.'

'I'm not talking about tonight.'

Dave knew that this was his chance. His heart seemed to fill his whole chest and his tongue became as dry and heavy as desert stone. 'Because it's a better world with you in it.'

They looked at each other and it was as if time had halted once again.

Dave and Melanie decided to have that bottle of wine. The time flew by as they sat there together and, before they knew it, the bar was closing. Neither of them wanted the night to end, so they decided that it didn't have to.

As they walked along the bank of the Thames, they were the stars of their own romantic comedy. The heroes of their own private adventure. The rain made London sparkle in the flat orange glare of the street lights and the city belonged only to them. Melanie slid her arm through Dave's. Her fingers searched for his and entwined with them. Dave realised what those skinny boys with acoustic guitars had been singing about on soundtracks all these years.

They found a twenty-four hour café and talked about their lives before that night, as if everything had merely been a prologue to that moment. Melanie played with a silver cross; a christening present, while she talked about

her family. It caught the light and sparkled just like her eyes. Her parents were still together. She was the eldest of three girls who had spent their lives playfully bullying the only man in the house. As an orphaned only child, Dave didn't feel jealous of this, instead he was happy that her family brought her such joy.

They talked about their ambitions and dreams and neither one laughed at the other. Even the silences were comfortable when the conversation ran dry. Dave revealed secrets he had never told anyone, such as how he felt it was him against the world, and she returned his trust by telling him hers. He had briefly considered telling her the biggest secret of all, but decided that admitting you could talk to ghosts was probably a third or fourth date confession.

Soon tiredness took hold and, hiding yawns from each other, they headed to the nearest underground station to catch the first train of the morning. Unsure of what to say, or how to say it, Melanie leaned forward and kissed Dave. She tasted of coffee, mints and hope. Pressing her body next to his, she felt real and warm and alive.

'Call me,' she whispered before heading into the station. Dave watched her until she turned around, smiled, and went past the ticket barriers.

He decided to walk the quiet streets for a while. That's what the leading man would do in the movies. He splashed in the puddles and wondered if he would ever stop smiling. He didn't have to wonder for much longer.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

'Nice weather for ducks,' said a voice behind Dave. He turned around to see Death standing before him on the pavement. 'I could never figure out what you meat puppets meant by that. For a time I assumed that ducks were very romantic creatures and enjoyed walking in the rain thinking about other ducks they had loved.'

'What are you doing here?'

'I'm guessing it all went well with Melanie? There's no need to thank me.'

'Thank you for what?'

Death pulled the contract from his cloak. He looked at the last page, but Dave's signature was no longer there.

'Oh bloody hell. Stupid linear time. Can't causality take one for the team just once? Change of plan. Can I show you something?'

'If it's quick.'

Death grabbed Dave by the wrist. It felt as if he was a cocktail being poured from one place to another. Suddenly, they were standing in a dark bedroom. An old man was perched at the end of the bed while his body lay

beneath the covers. Dave had never seen a dead body, other than his own, and he was surprised by how little it disturbed him.

'Hello, Michael,' said Death.

'I wondered when you'd get here,' said the old man with a sigh.

'Sorry I'm a bit late. Traffic's a nightmare.' The old man smiled, then pointed a finger at Dave.

'Who's he?'

'Work experience,' said Death.

Michael turned his attention back to the dark figure. 'You know you're a lot shorter in person?' he said.

'So I've been told.' Death glanced at Dave.

'What's it like, then? Eternity?'

Death thought for a moment before answering.

'Long,' he said, 'I've been watching a lot of Scooby Doo recently. Have you got any biscuits?'

'In the kitchen,' said Michael. 'The cupboard by the window.'

Death turned to Dave. 'Make yourself useful.'

Dave went downstairs. The walls of the hallway were lined with framed photos that told the story of a long life lived. Michael as a small boy, carried in his father's arms. Michael as a young man, surrounded by friends. A woman joined him in the pictures. They grew older together. Children and grandchildren appeared alongside them. Then, the woman was gone. Michael as an old man; an image of the person Dave had just left in the bedroom.



As he rummaged through the kitchen cupboards, Dave looked at the meals for one and the soups and realised that Michael had lived and died alone. At that very moment, he couldn't think of anything sadder.

When Dave returned to the bedroom with the packet of biscuits, Death had settled into a chair with his feet up on the bed.

'I just can't see where they got the money from,' Death said as he helped himself from the packet. 'Ooh. Garibaldi. Lovely.'

'Example?' said Michael.

'In one episode, Scooby and the gang were investigating a haunted hotel. It turned out that the janitor, it's always the janitor--'

'Or the theme park owner,' said Michael.

'--or, indeed, the theme park owner. Anyway, the janitor was pretending that the hotel was haunted to drive down its value so he could buy the place cheap. But the holographic and laser equipment he used must have cost thousands; hundreds of thousands, even. He would've got the place at a rock bottom price. But he would've owed a huge whack on the military hardware. It was a completely false economy.'

'If it wasn't for those meddling kids,' said Dave.

'And they always find a rational explanation for the supposedly supernatural events, but nobody ever mentions the talking dog. "Hmmm. Egyptian exhibition possibly haunted by a mummy? Let's investigate!" You're

having a conversation about this with a Great Dane and he is actively disagreeing with you! Deal with the issue at hand!

'Do you think we could get on with this?' Michael asked. Dave felt that he was intruding on a very private moment and quietly slipped out of the room.

'Yes. Of course. Sorry. Take my hand.'

Dave returned to find Death turning the pages of a half-read murder mystery novel that had been left on the bedside table. He flicked to the last page.

'I should've told him how it ended. There's nothing worse than not knowing.' Dave pulled the duvet up to Michael's chin, as though he were simply in the deepest of sleeps.

'I phoned for an ambulance,' Dave said, 'I didn't know how long he'd be here otherwise.'

'Thank you. I guess there's nothing more for us to do,' said Death, as he put the book down. He grabbed Dave's wrist. Once again, he was sucked up and spat across the country.

When Dave dared open his eyes, he saw that they were standing outside his flat. The rain had finally stopped and fingers of sunlight crawled over the dark glossy roofs.

'I'm not bad, or evil, Dave. I'm here because you all need me. Are you defined by your job? No.' Death sighed. He seemed tired. 'But there are probably things you need to do. I'll see you around.'

'Maybe.'

'Oh, you will. Eventually,' Death said as he disappeared into the ether.

Eventually. Dave understood. The soul was just too strong, too full of life, to be stopped. It had a momentum of its own and all Death could do was deflect its path of travel. Sometimes you needed a companion for a journey. Nobody should be alone.

His exhaustion forgotten, Dave knew what he had to do. He quickly showered, changed his clothes and quietly closed the flat's door behind him so as to not wake Gary, who had fallen asleep on the couch again. Dave made his way through the waking city until he arrived at Marylebone station.

'Where are you going?' asked the bored woman in the ticket office.

'Stratford. Warwickshire. I'm going home.'

'You can't go home.'

'Well, that's your point of view.'

'No, I mean there's a signal failure just outside the station. You'll need to take the Bakerloo to Oxford Circus, then take the Victoria to Euston. Take a train from there to Birmingham New Street, walk over to Birmingham Moor Street and then get a service to Stratford.'

'Oh, right. Thanks. I'll do that then.'

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dave made his way to Euston station, where he found buying a train ticket was an altogether less philosophical experience. He bought a cappuccino with so much chocolate topping it was technically a coffee Revel and boarded his train. He finally succumbed to his tiredness and fell asleep before the train had even left London. He dreamt that he had died but nobody had noticed. Everybody he knew continued with their lives, oblivious to his absence. Terrified and alone, he called and screamed at them as if behind a glass wall, but nobody responded. When he woke with a cry, he had arrived at his destination.

Dave left the station and, as Meadow Close was only a few minutes' walk away, he thought the crisp winter air would clear his head of the cotton-wool helmet that sleep had bestowed upon him. He was struck by the odd juxtaposition of the familiar and the new. There was the newsagent he had bought sweets from. A block of flats that had once been a pub.

The pub. The Green Dragon. Where his parents had

first met. He remembered now. He had come here, the urn tucked away in a bag, and got heroically drunk. Then, he had wandered into the garden and had spread their ashes in the bushes and the flowerbed. The beginning and end of their life together.

Dave crossed the road and tried to look over the garden wall, but it had been rebuilt and raised since the last time that he'd been drinking here. He peered through a gap in the woodwork. Though it was now a private garden, the borders looked the same. Dave smiled to himself.

'See you later, mum. Goodbye, dad.'

Soon, he was walking past the bright Christmas decorations and tidy lawns of Meadow Close. The suburban perfection made the shock of seeing his childhood home even more intense. A bleakness infected the abandoned Number Fourteen. The overgrown front garden and boarded windows made it look like a decayed tooth in an otherwise shining and healthy mouth. Dave wondered what could have happened in the two decades since his family had left the street. He knew where he could potentially find answers. He walked to the house next door and rang the bell. An old lady answered. Stooped over a walking stick, she warily looked Dave up and down.

'Mrs Van Dresch?' Dave asked.

'I'm not buying anything,' said Mrs Van Dresch in an indeterminate accent, and began to close the door.

'I'm Dave Marwood. Bob and Susan Marwood's boy? Do you remember?'

Mrs Van Dresch peered over her glasses and smiled. 'No! Little Dabbie Marwood?' A nickname he had not heard spoken in almost twenty years. 'Come in! The kettle has just boiled. How long has it been?' Dave stepped into the hallway and was shepherded into the kitchen.

'About eighteen years, I think.'

'Look at you. So big now! Why do you come here?'

'I'm just visiting an old friend.'

'And parents? Bob and Susan? How are they?'

'They're both dead. I'm sorry.'

'Oh, Dave, I'm so--'

'Don't be. I think they're in a good place now. I'm not sure if it's better than here, but I think they're alright.' The kitchen was silent as Mrs Van Dresch performed the solemn ritual of the making of the tea until Dave asked, 'What happened next door?'

Mrs Van Dresch put a cup of tea in front of Dave and let out a sigh.

'Very bad things. Strange things. Everybody frightened. Nobody want to live there. Very sad. It has good parking and south-facing garden.'

Dave finished his stewed tea and ate a slice of inappropriately named sponge cake. He and Mrs Van Dresch made small talk, but he couldn't make her elaborate on what had happened next door. He said

goodbye, promised to stay in touch, and when she had shut the door behind him, walked into the front garden of Number Fourteen.

Dave tried to look into the house but the boards over the windows were too tightly rammed together to offer any view. Hoping he would have more luck at the rear, he climbed over shopping trolleys and broken pieces of furniture in the side alley.

The back garden was in a worse state than the front, but the kitchen door had been exposed by somebody in the past. One of the small panes of glass had been smashed and the door opened easily when Dave tugged at the handle.

Daylight splashed over the grey, stale sideboards and cupboards. The house seemed to shift, as if it knew it had been invaded. Dave could have sworn the cup on the table in front of him moved an inch or two. Nerves made the tea and cake bubble in his belly, but he forced himself to take a step forward.

The cup flew from the table. Dave ducked and it sailed over his shoulder and shattered against the wall behind him. He choked on the dust and waited for both the grime and his heart rate to settle.

'Haunted house. No meddling kids. A janitor could make a healthy profit with a place like this,' Dave muttered to himself. He trod carefully through the hallway to the foot of the stairs. Dave had just mounted the first step when he 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 an invisible energy sucker-punched him off his feet. 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 couldn't tell if the voice belonged to him. He stood up, dusted himself down and renegotiated the stairs. Dave climbed and turned the tight corner when he reached the top.

'GO AWAY' had been scratched thickly and deeply into the wall. He ran his fingers across the rough relief of the letters. Layers of paint and wallpaper peeked through at the edges like rock strata. He walked across the landing to his old bedroom door. The paint was peeling and it hung off its hinges. With some effort, Dave pushed it open, the bottom scraping and catching on the bare floorboards.

There stood a little girl, no older than eight years old. She wore the same summer dress and sad expression Dave had last seen all those years ago.

'Hello Emily,' he said.

Her eyes narrowed. 'Go away!'

'It's me. Dave. We used to play hide-and-seek together. You always won. Remember?'



'You can't be. You're a grown up.'

Dave smiled sadly. 'That's what happens.'

'Not to me. You left. That made me cross.' Emily's lower lip jutted out.

'Is this what this has all been about? You've been sulking?'

Emily shrugged and stared at the floor. Dave could feel a smile beginning to curl at the edges of his mouth. All the terror and fear these walls had witnessed had been caused by a hissy fit.

'I'm sorry. I didn't want to leave.' It was all he could think of to say and he didn't know what to do next. He remembered what Anne had done in the forest, and took a step forward. Emily turned away from him. He decided a different approach would be needed.

'Do you want to play a game?' he asked. Emily spun round.

'Like what?'

'Whatever you want.'

They spent the day playing hide-and-seek (Emily's suggestion), Princes and Princesses (Emily's suggestion) and Killer Zombie Kung Fu Cyborgs (Dave's suggestion). They laughed and teased each other. As the evening drew in, they sat on the bedroom floor.

'I spy with my little eye something beginning with "D",' said Dave.

'Door?' asked Emily. Dave looked over his shoulder.

'Yeah, that'll do.' He winked at her.

'This has been the best day.'

'It has been, hasn't it?'

'Dave?'

'Yes, Emily?'

'I'm cold.'

'I know.' Dave held his hand out towards her. Emily smiled, though her eyes were heavy and wet with tears. She placed her hand in his and it was as if he was holding a breeze. They were surrounded by light and then, for a fraction of a moment, they *were* the light, until the darkness enveloped them and Emily was gone.

Dave stepped out into the chill of the evening air and quietly closed the door behind him. From the pavement, he looked back at Number Fourteen, Meadow Close. It was now just another neglected house; a spooky story, an urban myth. Dave made a promise to himself that he would never again forget Emily.

Once back in London, Dave transferred to the underground. It was the Saturday night lull, a time during which people were neither going out nor staggering back home, so he had the train carriage to himself.

The exhaustion seeped into him and spread through his bones. He wondered what touching a ghost's soul did to the living. His head fell forward and his heavy eyelids closed. Blissful silence. All of a sudden, he felt as if he was falling and jerked back upright, the back of his head

banging against the carriage window. A man in a tweed suit and fedora now sat opposite him. He doffed his hat to Dave. 'It's you!'

'How nice to see you. Even better to be seen,' the man said. 'Fred Drayton.'

'Dave Marwood. I'd shake your hand, but it would get all pan-dimensional and stuff.'

'I see,' said Fred, who obviously didn't. 'You look tired.'

'It's been a busy day.' Dave sighed.

'Have you always been able to do this?'

'Apparently so.'

'It must be very unnerving.'

'I'm starting to get the hang of it. How long have you been down here?'

'Since August 12<sup>th</sup> 1957. They call it the Glorious Twelfth. Not so glorious for me, it turns out.'

'How did you... well... y'know?'

'It is not considered polite to ask a gentleman the cause of his demise,' Fred replied haughtily.

'I'm sorry.' Dave hadn't realised that there was a whole new etiquette he would have to learn. He felt that it would be good manners to offer his services. 'It must be very lonely down here. I can help you... well... cross over to the other side, if you'd like.'

'I get by. There are a few of us down here. Our paths cross from time to time. It's very kind of you to offer, but I'm just not ready to leave all this behind. I know this

sounds foolish. I watch everyone making their journeys each day and it almost feels like I'm still alive. Almost.'

It did not sound at all foolish to Dave. The train began to slow down and he wobbled to his feet.

'This is my stop,' he said apologetically.

'Of course. I'm sorry to have gone on.'

'Not at all. I'll see you around? I'm always up for a chat and if you ever get bored of this...'

'Thank you, Mr Marwood. That would be lovely.'

Dave stepped out onto the platform and the doors closed with a hiss. The train pulled off and he waved it on its way. Fred Drayton disappeared into the darkness of the tunnel, continuing his journey with no destination.

Dave walked back home and went straight to bed. Almost as soon as he sank under the covers, he fell asleep. This time, though, he slept like he had never been afraid.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Conrad West burst through the door of the UberSystems International boardroom like a small, yet well-dressed, explosion. He slipped off his jacket and slid into the chair at the head of the table in one silky movement.

'I'm here to kick ass and chew bubble gum. And I'm all outta bubble gum. Wait. There's some in my back pocket. Sorry.' Nervous laughter rippled through the executives in the room. 'Where was I? Oh yeah. Monday morning. Let's grab the week by the throat,' he said as he clapped and rubbed his hands together.

'Or smother it with a pillow,' Dave said with a yawn. He tried to stop himself sliding down the smooth leather chair.

'What was that, Marwood?' West asked.

'Nothing, sir. Just very excited.'

Dave returned to his thoughts, tuning out the white noise of corporate-speak. He had not spoken to Melanie since Saturday. After he'd returned home that night, he had fallen asleep, missed Sunday entirely and hadn't

surfaced until this morning. He'd hoped to speak to her when he got into work, but he'd been dragged into this meeting and had only managed to wave to her across the office. Was this playing it cool? Too cool? Not cool enough? Should he wait longer? Being a grown up was rubbish, Dave decided.

'I've looked at the figures. Right now, the market's colder than a witch's tit,' West told the room. 'We've been looking at new investment models. People already regard us as monsters that feed on faded dreams and broken promises made to small children. Let's not piss about. The Heart of Darkness Fund. Tobacco companies, arms manufacturers, petrochemical giants.'

Brochures were passed around. Though the figures and formulas contained within them were incomprehensible to Dave, others gave low whistles and murmurs of approval.

'As society crumbles, markets crash and governments fall, the returns could be phenomenal,' said West. The enthusiasm in the room made Dave feel uncomfortable. He raised his hand to speak.

'Yes, Dave?'

'I'm sorry, Mr West, but is this ethical?' There was a moment's pause before the room erupted in laughter. The suit next to him tapped him on the shoulder.

'You're new here, aren't you?'

'I love this guy! Listen, Dave, UberSystems International takes its employees' concerns very seriously

and I'm sure we can allay them. Now if there are no more questions, then we'll move on. Bowen will talk to us about the company's new vision statement.'

Bowen had entered the room unnoticed, like a ninja accountant. He took his place in the seat at West's right hand side. Meticulous in his movements, he removed a single piece of paper from a folder and placed it on the table.

'The board have been working with one of the country's top consultants for several months in order to rewrite our corporate narrative. Here's what they have agreed upon.' Bowen cleared his throat and read from the paper.

'UberSystem International's vision is to always be true to our vision.'

'Punchy, don't ya think?' West grinned.

Dave looked around at the people applauding with fervour in their eyes; wanting to be led, no matter where. He raised his hand again to disapproving glares.

'And how much did that cost?' Dave asked.

'I don't have the exact figure to hand,' said Bowen, 'but around two hundred thousand pounds.'

This time Dave saw his whole future flash before his eyes. A near-life experience.

'Life's too short for this,' he said, shaking his head. Silence. Dave made up his mind. He stood up, smoothed out his suit, and walked right out.

Dave returned to his office and began filling his pockets with his Star Wars action figures. West didn't knock on the door; he strode in as if he owned the place. Which he did. That was fair enough, Dave thought.

'Dave!' West smiled benignly. 'UberSystems International is like a big family. We laugh with each other, we fight with each other. Sometimes we hit one member over the head with a shovel and bury them under the patio for the insurance. But we don't stay mad at each other.'

Dave let out a long sigh; one that had been growing since he had first walked through the doors of the building.

'I'm sorry.'

'Hey, it's alright. Nobody died.'

'We're all dead, Conrad. Everybody in this office is dead and we're all just killing time until somebody comes along and puts us in the ground.'

The office was bursting with the kind of silence that follows a detonation. Dave could tell by the look on West's face that nobody had dared talk to him like that for a long time, if ever. A crowd had gathered outside what Dave now assumed was no longer his office. Melanie fought her way to the front with a concerned look on her face.

'Is everything alright, Dave?' she asked.

West snarled. 'You walk out of that door, Marwood, and it will be the biggest mistake of your life. I guarantee



it.'

Accepting the challenge, Dave walked up to Melanie. He looked into her eyes and it felt, once again, as if she was the one and only thing keeping his heart going.

'Did you know, the only reason I came into this place every day was to see you?'

The kiss that followed was the most real and true thing Dave had ever experienced.

'Is that a Stormtrooper in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?' Melanie asked slyly when their lips finally parted. She smiled.

'Han Solo, actually,' Dave croaked.

On this occasion, it only took Dave two attempts to find Crow Road. The weathered and faded brick buildings were a welcome contrast to the sharp edges and hard lines of the office he had just left for the last time. He was about to ring the bell of Number One, Crow Road when the electronic buzz of the lock revealed that he was already expected.

Anne was waiting at the top of the stairs. She didn't say anything and simply led him inside. Death was leaning against the door to his office.

'Glad to have you on board, Dave. The pay's terrible and the hours are awful, but I'll offer you this one bit of career advice. There's no 'I' in team. But there is 'tea'. So put the kettle on,' he said before disappearing into his office.

'Just so you know, that was your orientation,' said Anne.

'Thanks. Is Emily...?'

Anne nodded. 'Yes. You did well. Little girl ghosts are the scariest.'

Dave smiled. The weight of two worlds, the living and the dead, lifted from his shoulders.

'I can't hear anything boiling!' Death shouted from the other side of his door. Anne dropped a heavy stack of folders into Dave's arms.

'These need to be done by the end of the week.'

# **Paper Cuts**

## **Chapter One**

## 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.'

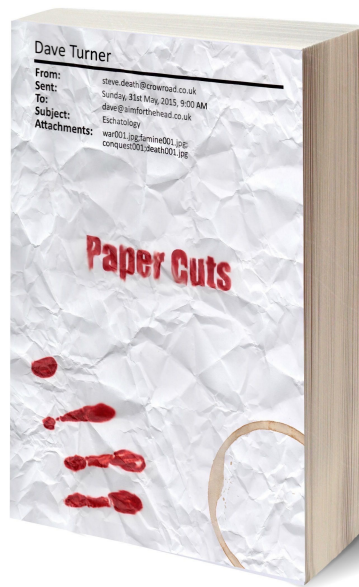
Death merely shrugged and waved his empty glass. It was time for another round.

'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.'

# Keep Reading 'Paper Cuts'!



Getting the work/life balance correct is tricky when you're employed by Death.

Dave Marwood is starting to realise that relationships are a lot easier when they don't involve the undead. Caught between the demands of the afterlife and spending time with his new girlfriend, he tries to find the answers to some difficult questions.

Where are the other Horsemen of the Apocalypse? What terrible secret lies at the heart of UberSystems International? Is cake the solution to world peace?

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## 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'. After selling various screenplays which you will note you have not seen as films at your local multiplex, he created Aim For The Head books to publish his work. He lives in the south of England with his wife, three children and a vague sense of ennui.

You can find him making poor quality jokes at these locations.

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