

# HORROR SHORTS

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Horror Shorts*, a collection of my short stories. I could, perhaps, have spent more time coming up with a name, something snazzy or catchy, maybe even a little menacing, but to me a spade is simply a spade. Why call it something else?

I did think long and hard about whether to write an introduction to this collection, after all Hollywood directors don't hang around outside movie theatres telling you about their film as you wait in line with your ticket (at least, they don't around here - but maybe they do in Hollywood). In the end, I decided that a brief one would be fine. Certainly not one where I yap on about all six stories, explaining where and when they were written, or where the idea first came from. I

don't pretend that these stories are some kind of high-art, to be discussed and analysed, or probed for some kind of deeper meaning. They're simply stories, entertainment. And there's nothing wrong with that.

Some of them have been gathering dust in my desk drawer for too long, trapped in limbo between taking form and being discovered. They were stuck in a no man's land between author and reader, and now this is ready I'm glad to have them out in the open. It is a collection of tales about toads, robots, killers and ghosts, and each one is special to me in their own way.

There is a small sample of my novel *LAST HOPE* contained at the end of this book, but you should feel under no obligation to read it. After your check-up with the good Doctor Hawthorne, you can turn off the light and call it a night. If, however, you have enjoyed this taster of my work, perhaps you'd consider taking a look at it.

Or not, the choice is yours.

So, without further ado, I shall move aside and let you approach the main event. My enjoyment with them is now at an end, but it is my sincere hope that yours is yet to come.

Drew Brown - January 2011

###

## TOAD-LICKERS

Nigel told himself there was no reason to be scared.

It was, after all, only a toad.

But it had already eaten Kurt.

With a trembling hand, he rummaged through the ruffled folds of his sleeping bag, searching for the flashlight. Outside the tent, he thought he heard something move. He thought he heard a disturbance in the undergrowth.

"Kurt. Is that you, dude?"

No reply came.

Nigel continued his search for the battery-powered torch. What he'd seen couldn't be real. There was no way. Something as dangerous as that would definitely have been in the survival guide they'd purchased. If not, if it was a glaring omission, then Nigel wanted a refund. And some compensation wouldn't go amiss.

It had all been Kurt's idea.

Free drugs. That's what he'd said. Free, natural, mind-blowing drugs.

But nothing's that simple.

\*\*\*

Kurt stepped out into the shade of the trees and then shut the door to his 1973 Oldsmobile Delta Royale. He had steered the car off the dirt-track road and parked it in a small clearing. He took a map from his denim shirt's breast pocket, unfolded it, and then studied the unfamiliar contours. "It's this way," he said, pointing along a narrow pathway of sandy ground.

"Are you sure?"

"Totally."

“Coz you said that before. An hour ago,” Nigel said as he popped the trunk of the pale yellow Oldsmobile. The car belonged to Kurt’s dad and the two friends had borrowed it for the weekend. Which, with all the driving and the wrong turns, was nearly halfway over. Nigel hauled out the two backpacks and then slammed shut the trunk. “And I’m still not stoned.”

“You will be soon, man,” Kurt said with a smile. He ran his hand through his lank, shoulder-length brown hair and then took his pack from Nigel. “You fancy a joint now?”

“You know I do, dude.”

With their packs over their shoulders, the two men started down the sandy pathway, ambling along the shaded route. Bright sunshine filtered down through the trees, casting irregularly shaped patterns on the ground.

Carefully, Kurt hand-rolled his cigarette, adding cannabis to the tobacco from a small, clear plastic bag. He tightened the paper, lit the end with a green disposable lighter and then took a long, slow pull on the joint. He handed his work to Nigel.

“Thanks, man.”

Kurt reached behind him and took a pocket-sized book from his backpack. *Survival in the Colorado Wildernesses*. It had cost them eight dollars. He thumbed through it to a section where the pages were creased and dog-eared. Nigel handed him the joint and he took another drag. “Toad-licking was massive in the Sixties. The hippies used to do it. Although, they didn’t really lick the toads: that’s pretty dangerous.”

Nigel shook his head. His friend was six months older than him, but five inches shorter and thirty pounds lighter. They had known each other throughout their schooling and had now elected to attend the same local college, rather than cross the country in the quest for something better.

Not that Kurt took any notice of his education. Nigel knew that his friend was smarter than he was, it came across in everything they did together, but his grades were always lower. Kurt just didn’t pay any attention in class. He thought about other stuff, and not just the girls and parties that Nigel liked to daydream about, but weird stuff, like ways to make hallucinogenic drugs from household products, or where to find rare species of psychoactive toads.

Even so, Kurt could do stupid things and Nigel was confused at his previous comment. “But you said we were gonna come toad-licking. You said we’d get high.”

“They, like, call it toad-licking to make it sound nicer. But that’s not what you do. I’m sorry man, I should’ve said earlier, but I thought you might bail. We gotta eat the toads.”

“I ain’t eating a toad.”

“Not the whole thing, that’d be gross. Just the skin.”

“And that’s not gross, because?”

“The Indians used to do it. Man, it’s gonna be totally awesome.”

Nigel trudged along the path for a while in silence, gently kicking up the sand with his trainers. He didn’t like the idea of eating toad skin. Taking the last drag of the joint, he dropped the butt to the floor and extinguished the remaining paper with the heel of his trainer.

Kurt carried on a few paces and reached the brow of a slight incline. Looking down beyond it, he smiled. “We found it.”

Nigel hurried to catch up with his friend.

The path dropped away for a hundred yards until it reached the bank of a dark, still pool of water. Around it were the fallen trunks of old trees, and the canopy above was thick and brooding.

“This is definitely the place,” Kurt said happily. “Let’s set up camp and start hunting for toads. We’ll be too high to pitch the tent later, I just know we will.”

\* \* \*

Hunting for toads was more difficult than either one imagined.

They had erected their two tents side-by-side, ten yards from the water’s edge, and had built a small campfire in between. The wood smouldered and gave the area an aroma of smoke that almost hid the repugnant, stagnant smell of the placid water.

Nigel stood from where he was crouched by the bank of the pool and walked back to the campfire. He sat down beside it, stretched his legs and rolled down the sleeves of his green jumper. His hands smelt terrible and were stained with mud from searching through the undergrowth. He picked at a black lump that had lodged beneath a fingernail. “Why are we here again?”

Beside the water, Kurt rolled a three-foot long hollow log further up the bank. Insects swarmed away once their damp home was disturbed, fleeing in all directions. Centipedes, grubs, beetles and ants scattered from the daylight, but there was no sign of a toad. Shrugging his shoulders with disappointment, Kurt returned to the campfire and sat down next to his friend. He stretched over and took the guidebook from his tent. “I can’t believe we can’t find one. This thing said there were hundreds.”

“You should definitely get our money back. It’s been, like, three hours since we started searching this pond.”

“Joint?”

“Yeah.”

Nigel lay back and used a red jacket he wasn’t wearing as a pillow. He looked up through the canopy of branches and leaves at the sky above. The blue was darkening and the bright light of day was fading fast. The air was beginning to take on a chill. “Do you wanna sleep in the car tonight? We can close the doors and smoke the rest of our stash. There doesn’t seem much point being out here.”

“Maybe toads are, like, nocturnal,” Kurt pondered without looking up from the cigarette he was rolling.

“But how will we see them? Or catch them?”

“All right. We’ll go back. Do you want one each?”

“Sure.”

Kurt finished preparing the first joint and then handed it to his friend.

Nigel slipped a lighter from his pocket and then sparked up. He remained lying down and closed his eyes. The warmth from the dying fire was pleasant on the right-hand side of his face, and the gentle rustle of leaves high above was soothing. He felt the drug’s usual sensation of bliss wash over him. After a while, he heard the click of Kurt’s lighter.

“I can’t believe we drove all this way and can’t find a stupid toad,” Nigel said, stifling a laugh. “Do you think it’s the stupidest thing we’ve ever done?”

Kurt didn’t answer.

“Come on, dude. Don’t take it personally. I think it’s funny.”

There was still no reply.

Nigel turned his head to his side and opened his eyes.

Kurt had his index finger held vertically across his lips and was staring down towards the water. The joint in his other hand hung between two fingers. It had almost extinguished itself.

Following his friend's eyes, Nigel looked to the motionless pond.

A toad sat twelve inches from the dark water, surrounded by open mud. Its body was the size of a fist and its warty, brown skin blended well with the damp ground. In front of two bulbous lumps on the back of its head, the small toad's eyes flickered around.

Slowly, Kurt turned the pages of his guidebook. He looked down at a photograph that he had circled. "That's the one," he whispered and then he stirred from his sitting position. He pulled his long hair back from out of his eyes, secured his joint between his lips, and took several paces towards the toad. The little creature made a small jump, turning its body around so that it faced the water. The toad's movement caused Kurt to stop, but once it had its back to him, he crept forwards again until he was only three yards away. He crouched down, held his arms out ahead of him and then dived forwards.

Lying by the fire, Nigel couldn't see what happened; Kurt's prone body obscured his view. But a noise that sounded like a scream broke the quiet of their surroundings. Kurt rolled onto his back and sat up. He had the toad held in his hands. He smiled happily, although the joint was gone from his mouth.

"I got it," he exclaimed.

The toad was still screaming, its small chest puffing up and its legs kicking outside the cup of Kurt's palms.

"Well done, dude," Nigel called back.

Kurt carried the toad back to the campfire and then sat down. "There's a pot in my rucksack, go and get it."

Nigel cast the butt of his joint onto the fire and then hurried to Kurt's tent. He opened the rucksack and fumbled through the contents. "So, like, how do we kill it?"

Kurt didn't answer until Nigel had returned from his tent brandishing a plastic ice-cream tub. Several holes had already been punched in the lid. "I was only messing with you, man. We're keeping this little fella."

"Keeping it?"

"Yeah, we can, like, milk the bufotoxins out once a month."

"Milk it?"

"Like a cow, except with drugs. How awesome is this? Free drugs forever, man. I think I'm gonna call him Beatnik."

Beatnik still screamed and struggled, but Kurt held him tight. "Open up my tobacco pouch and put it on the ground for me."

Nigel did as he was told and then sat back down. The growing darkness and cold were forgotten as he watched Kurt change the way he held Beatnik. "What are you doing?"

Kurt secured Beatnik around his body with one hand. The toad's arms and legs flailed and his soft underbelly was exposed. Kurt positioned him so that the bulbous lumps on the back of his head were above the tobacco pouch and then, with the index finger of his free hand, he started to stroke Beatnik under his chin. "The bufotoxins are in the venom, and doing this will get it out."

Drips of poison ejected from the glands behind the toad's head and dripped down onto the tobacco.

"It's working," Nigel said.

Kurt kept going until the fluid stopped leaking out and then he held Beatnik up to his face. “You’re totally awesome, little dude. Now, go in your new home.”

Nigel watched as Kurt peeled back the lid from the ice-cream tub and placed Beatnik inside. He pushed the seal back on tightly. “We’ll need some leaves and insects for him later. It’ll take a month to replenish his venom.”

“What do we do now?” Nigel asked.

Kurt isolated the damp tobacco using his finger and then sat back. “We gotta wait until this stuff is dry before we can smoke it, but, like, it shouldn’t take long. Fancy another joint?”

Nigel laughed. “Oh yeah.”

\* \* \*

As Nigel lay there, half in and out of his tent, looking up at the starry sky through a gap in the canopy, he found it difficult to accurately judge the effects of the bufotoxins. Not only had they smoked all of the toad’s venomous output, but they had also finished the rest of Kurt’s more traditional fare.

All Nigel knew for sure was that he was certainly high.

And it felt great.

He didn’t notice the cold.

He didn’t mind the dark or the insects that buzzed around the campfire and crawled along the ground beside him.

He was happy. “Man this feels good.”

“You got that right,” Kurt replied. His voice was distant and relaxed. “What’s wrong, Beatnik. Eat your grubs.”

Inside the ice-cream tub, the toad hopped and bounced about, ignoring the insects Kurt had gathered for him. There were also leaves, mud and twigs to hide amongst. Nevertheless, Beatnik appeared increasingly agitated.

“He is one cool toad,” Nigel said, and then he closed his eyes. His head felt like it was floating, circling the campfire. He laughed a little.

“Did you hear that?”

Nigel opened his eyes. “Hear what?”

“By the water.”

“Nope,” Nigel replied with a shake of his head. The sensation felt funny and he laughed again.

Kurt took a flashlight from his tent and switched it on. Sitting where he was, he shone the beam across the section of the bank nearest them, scanning from left to right. There was nothing to be seen, the water was still and the muddy bank was empty.

“You’re hearing things, dude.”

Fumbling for the switch to turn off the torch, Kurt caught sight of a disturbance on the water’s surface. It had started much further out, beyond the light of the torch, and the ripples flowed after one another towards the bank. “There’s something there, man.”

Reluctantly, Nigel sat up and turned around so that he was facing the water. He watched as Kurt got to his feet and walked down to the pond’s edge, shining the light out across the water.

At first, all that could be seen were the approaching ripples, but then, ten yards out, the light captured something else. Kurt stopped, peering at the object that protruded through the surface of the water.

Back in his tent, Nigel thought that the object looked a little like a log, rotten and hollow. To the right, about five feet away, was another, similarly shaped object.

Beatnik started to hop with more vigour and caused the ice-cream tub to topple over.

The lid stayed on.

More ripples spread from the two objects, which started to rise out of the water.

Nigel gasped.

The objects became clear when they blinked.

They were eyes.

“Oh, man. What is that?” Kurt said. He started to back away from the shallow bank.

Nigel watched with an open mouth as the yellow and black eyes emerged fully, only to be followed by a connecting bridge of brown skin. Water cascaded down from the creature as it rose up, splashing into the pool around it.

Even though it had eyes bigger than Nigel’s own head, and a mouth that was six-foot wide, there was no mistaking the identity of the monster that rose from the pond.

It was a toad.

For the briefest of moments, Nigel thought he saw the closed lips of the toad start to open; but by then it was already too late.

The tongue was too quick.

The long, pink feeler shot out of the toad’s mouth, skimming above the water and up the bank to latch onto Kurt’s leg. In a flash, he was on his back and being dragged leg-first across the mud. He let go of the torch and it fell to the ground, still alight, illuminating his journey towards the gargantuan toad.

Kurt screamed in terror; his arms were behind his head and his hands clawed for purchase on the ground as he fought to keep himself from going into the water.

It was no use; his body continued down the bank, plunging into the stinking, putrid pool. His scream was cut short when his head dipped below the surface.

The tongue continued to reel him in.

Panic-struck, Nigel shuffled back into his tent and fumbled for the zip. Once the opening was closed, he placed his head in his hands and started to cry.

He couldn’t believe what he’d seen.

The toad was enormous.

Kurt was gone.

Nigel sat there for a while, trying to calm himself. His breathing was rapid and shallow, his hands trembling with fear.

It couldn’t be true.

It couldn’t be real.

He knew there was a torch in his tent and he searched the folded sleeping bag for it. He had to stay calm. *It must be the drugs*, he told himself. *That’s all it is.*

*Kurt’s out there. He’s alive. This is a dream, a hallucination.*

A noise outside in the undergrowth disturbed Nigel’s thoughts.

“Kurt. Is that you, dude?”

There was no reply.

*I’ll wake up soon.*

Beyond the flimsy walls of the tent, Nigel could hear the noisy silence of the woodland. Leaves moved in the trees and insects hummed with life. His breathing seemed to echo around

the stuffy, domed interior. He reached forwards and took hold of the zip, inching it down to reveal the cool air and darkness outside.

Kurt's flashlight still shone out over the water.

The toad was real.

Impossibly large, the creature had come ashore. The bulk of its body was as wide as the Delta Royale was long. Nigel thought of the car, thought of running to the Oldsmobile, but he knew that he was trapped.

The toad was sitting on the bank and had its wild black and yellow eyes focused on the tent.

Hanging from the corner of the toad's mouth was the denim shirtsleeve of Kurt's arm. At its end, lifeless and still, was his blood-covered hand.

As Nigel watched, the toad's mouth changed shape slightly. Its middle seemed to flatten off and its ends curved up. The toad seemed to smile.

Nigel pulled the zip back up to the top.

*It must be the drugs. They'll wear off soon.*

*I can wait.*

\* \* \*

Park Ranger Hank Johnson pulled his 2003 Dodge Ram truck off the bumpy road and parked behind the Oldsmobile Delta Royale. The pale yellow exterior was covered with grime. He read the license plate and checked it against the number he had written on a notepad.

The license checked out.

He'd found the two missing kids.

Johnson climbed down from his Dodge and approached the old car.

The inside was empty.

He looked around the area; there was nowhere to go except for a narrow pathway that led into the woods. "Hello," he called out.

His voice echoed back to him.

Johnson started down the path. He strolled along the sandy trail, looking around at his environment. Twenty-five years working in the sprawling park had given him a great respect for nature, and he liked to observe it whenever he could. Searching for the two missing boys gave him a good excuse.

The sandy path started to drop away; down at the edge of a pool of water was a campsite.

"Hello," Johnson called out again. He knew his voice was loud enough for anyone nearby to hear.

He continued to the campsite. There were two tents. One with its flap wide open and the other sealed off. He paused by the remains of an old campfire. The ash had long since cooled.

He approached the closed tent.

There was a buzzing noise from inside it, the sound of flies. When he got nearer, a foul smell forced him to cup his mouth and nose with his hand. The smell overcame the faint scent of his leather gloves.

"Is someone in there?" Johnson asked as he took hold of the zip between his thumb and finger. He pulled it down slowly.

Sickened, he recoiled from what was inside, fighting down the urge to vomit. A cloud of flies erupted out as he backed away.

There was a body.



The face was gaunt, with yellow, dry skin, the eyes were missing, and there had been flies going in and out of the mouth, nose and ears. The smell was unbearable. Sitting upright, with crossed legs, the fully dressed corpse was facing the tent's opening.

Far enough away to get some clean air, Johnson took a deep breath. The two boys had been missing for nearly two weeks. He wondered where the other one could be. Johnson approached the other tent and peered inside. There was a rucksack and a sleeping bag, which implied that the other occupant was still around.

Or had left in a hurry.

Johnson scooped down and picked up an old ice-cream tub. There were some dried up leaves and a couple of sticks inside it.

And a toad's dead body.

Carrying the tub, Johnson walked over to the campfire. On the edge, just inside the ring of stones, was the butt-end of a hand-rolled cigarette.

Johnson started to form a mental picture of what could have happened. A couple of stoners, filled with rumours and misconceptions, had headed into the woods to lick toads. It happened from time to time, kids hear stories and decide to try them out. Maybe one had got poisoned from the toad, or, more likely, overdosed on some other drug they'd brought along for the occasion. Even the hard stuff was cheap now, cheap enough for a couple of college kids to get hold of. After that, scared, alone and probably high, the dead one's companion had fled.

Johnson was sure the other kid would turn up somewhere.

Knowing it was time to go back to the Dodge and signal dispatches of his discovery, Johnson put down the ice-cream tub. A strange imprint in the moist ground caught his eye. It was like the footprint of a bird, with three toes at the front and a longer one going back.

But there was no way that it could be what it resembled. Even though a portion of the imprint disappeared beneath the surface of the water, what he could see was more than six-foot long and four-foot wide.

He looked further up the bank to his right.

There was a similar imprint.

Puzzled, Hank Johnson rubbed his glove against the faint, greying stubble on his chin.

There was a noise in the undergrowth behind him, but although he started to turn around, he never saw the flash of pink that shot out to stick to his back.

The tongue dragged him, screaming, from his feet.

####

## THE WASHROOM

Tucked away at one end of the Children's Ward, on the third floor of Bloomington College Hospital, was a ladies washroom that did not feature on any of the maps.

The caretaker had deliberately omitted it.

Twice, he had been the first to see. The first to arrive. But there had been nothing he could do to help.

When it was all over, he had unscrewed the brass sign and left the door blank.

The children, however, already knew where it was, although very few chose to use it. Most preferred the longer trip to the washroom on the floor below. In the dark, at night, the young

residents would tell stories about what lurked behind the sprung-loaded door. They would whisper the names of those who had died.

They told off the terrors within.

One boy, Harry Campbell, had dared to use the washroom. He went in on the night before he was due to be discharged. Several other children waited in the corridor, dressed in green gowns or home-brought pyjamas, huddled together in nervous anticipation.

When Harry crept back out, a dark stain of fresh urine on the front of his blue bottoms, the other children were disappointed to find that he had little to say. He mentioned the white tiles behind the four sinks, the long mirror and the line of cubicles with their closed doors. He said that the fluorescent-tube lights really did flicker and that the room was smaller than he'd imagined.

But he would say nothing more about what he'd seen, except that he wished that he'd refused the dare. Ushered by a nurse, who arrived in the elevator and admonished the children for being out of their beds, the small group returned to their rooms, sure that they would learn more in the morning.

Harry Campbell cried beneath his bed covers until dawn and went home without so much as a goodbye.

After that, even fewer people ventured into the 3<sup>rd</sup> Floor Ladies Washroom. Most knew the stories and had heard the macabre rhyme that went with them.

But sometimes, sometimes people were forced to venture inside.

\* \* \*

Both of the fluorescent-tube lights flickered to their own beat.

The starter-motors hummed much louder than was usual.

The scalpel gleamed.

Tara gripped the rim of the hand-basin so tight that her knuckles were as white as the porcelain she clung to. Salty tears lined her face, having washed clear a path through her make-up. The grey drops, coloured with a mixture of eyeliner and foundation, splashed into the basin.

At the bottom, lying across the open plughole, was the scalpel.

Tara didn't know why she'd taken it. Stealing the blade had been an impulse. But there it was, sparkling in the unsteady light.

Tara cried.

The emotion caught in her chest and stifled her breathing. She gasped for air between each violent sob. Not that breathing mattered to her now. Her battle for air was instinctive; a reflex buried deep beneath her conscious thoughts.

All of these concerned her son.

Jamie.

Tara raised her gaze from the scalpel to the mirror. Behind her reflection was the image of the washroom. It had clinical white walls, a tiled floor and cream cubicles, but she did not see any of these things. It was as if her eyes failed to register her surroundings and instead she replayed memories in her mind, snippets of the past that flashed by like old video clips.

She saw Jamie running across the park, his mop of blond hair bouncing around his face. Then he was sat at the dinner table, smiling as he ate his food with his red plastic spoon. She remembered the feeling of his arms around her neck, while his sleeping head rested on her shoulder.

Her little boy.

Her brave little boy.

Then she saw something else.

A clearer image. The colours were fresher in her head, the sounds and smells more recent.

Tara closed her eyes, hoping to dispel the memory.

But it had already taken hold.

She saw Jamie on the bed, his small body pierced with tubes and drips. His chest rose and fell, but not by much. The beeps of the heart-rate monitor became further and further apart.

She screamed at the doctors and nurses; begged them to do more.

The medical staff offered sincere apologies: there was nothing they could do.

Tara cursed and spat at them as she watched her little boy slip away.

He died in her arms.

Why hadn't they saved him?

Why had they let him die?

She hated the staff at the hospital, hated them all.

With the memory at its conclusion, she looked down at the scalpel.

Why had she taken it? She didn't remember.

She sunk down to the cold floor and crawled into the corner of the room. With her back to the wall she wrapped her arms around her knees, hugging her legs tight to her chest. She cried into the soft denim. The clothes were tainted by the chemical-cleaner smell of the hospital.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd left. The window showed a world outside that was bereft of meaning. To her, the sky was neither night nor day, sunny nor dark.

All she had were her memories, the recollections of a life now gone.

Tara cried.

A waft of warm air touched her exposed skin and she raised her head in time to see the nearest of the four cubicle doors close. Through the watery haze of her eyes she watched the little indicator switch from green to red, showing that the door had been locked.

Someone else was in the washroom.

Tara tried to breathe more easily, tried to calm herself enough to go unnoticed.

She didn't want someone to ask if she was okay.

What would someone think if they saw the scalpel? Spurred by the question, she climbed to her feet. Her mirror image was there to greet her. It was no worse and no better than what she expected to see. She was what she was.

A mother without a child.

She rubbed her tear-stained face with the sleeve of her jumper. The make-up smeared, clumping on the green material. It was no use; she knew she could not make herself look presentable enough to avoid attention. The scalpel blade chinked on the porcelain basin as Tara snatched it up, coiling her palm and fingers around the metal handle.

Slipping across the floor, Tara aimed for the furthest of the free cubicles. She pushed the door shut as soon as she was inside and then sat down on the lowered lid of the toilet.

The smell of disinfectant filled her nostrils.

In black marker pen, someone had sprawled on the back of the door: *Harry was 'ere. There ain't no ghost. There ain't no-*

The writing trailed off to become a long black line.

Tara listened to the sounds of the washroom. She wanted to hear the flush from the other occupied cubicle and the sound of the lock disengaging. Most of all, Tara wanted to be alone again. She didn't want someone else around.

Beneath the hum of the fluorescent lights, and her own ragged breathing, Tara caught the sound of a soft voice. It was the voice of a female, quiet and gentle.

*"This bloomin' hospital, is bloomin' great.*

*"They kill your loved ones when they operate.*

*"Don't go to sleep, or shut your eyes.*

*"Coz every time you do, someone dies."*

The voice maintained the simple tune and repeated the words over a second time.

Tara's hand tightened around the scalpel. Who would sing such a thing? The lyrics seemed to mock her plight. "Be quiet," she shouted.

The voice stumbled to a halt, but after a few seconds it began the song from the beginning.

*"This bloomin' hospital, is bloomin' great."*

"Stop singing," Tara shouted. She kicked the closed door in front of her, which shook the cubicles. "Stop singing now, bitch."

*"They kill your loved ones when they operate."*

Tara jumped to her feet and opened the door. There were more tears streaming down her face, blurring her vision. Her grief had transformed into anger and the emotion focused on the first of the four cubicles.

Her tormentor was still inside.

The door remained closed.

The little indicator still showed red.

*"This bloomin' hospital, is bloomin' great,*

*"They kill your loved—"*

Tara beat her closed fists and forearms against the cubicle door. It vibrated with the blows, rattling in its housing. "Stop it, bitch," Tara cursed. "Come out here now."

Above her head, the fluorescent strips flickered with greater intensity.

In response, the singing grew louder.

*"Don't go to sleep, or shut your eyes."*

"Damn it, bitch. Stop!"

*"Coz every time you do, someone dies."*

Tara stepped back and launched a kick at the door. As her body twisted, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror. Even she thought the image was terrifying. Her face was a mask of smudged colours and her eyes were small and bloodshot. Her hair was matted and strands of it clung to her wet cheeks.

The scalpel blade shone in her balled fist.

The lock gave way beneath the sole of her shoe and the door flung inward. It struck the cubical wall and started to bounce back.

Tara was already inside.

A young girl rose wide-eyed from the toilet. She had a folded piece of toilet paper in one hand and was pulling her black dress down with the other.

She gaped at Tara's entrance.

The little girl's blonde hair was cut in a bob that curled up at the sides of her head. There were jaunty silver pins thrust through the hair to keep it in place, along with a red and black band

that was adorned with long loops of pearls. White foundation covered her face and neck, contrasting the bright red lipstick around her mouth. Large gold earrings hung from her lobes.

“Why are you singing that?” Tara said. Her rage had left her breathless.

The little girl dropped the toilet paper to the floor and locked eyes with Tara. She rocked back and forth uncomfortably on shiny black high-heeled shoes. She looked as though she had walked straight out of the 1920’s.

“Why are you singing?”

*“This bloomin’ hospital, is bloomin’ great.”*

“Stop it now!” Tara shouted. She felt a jolt of anger twang through her body. With her left hand, the one without the scalpel, she swung a slap at the small child.

Her pale hand went right through the girl’s face.

Tara felt a tingling in her fingers where the contact should have been. It was like a small electric shock. The girl’s face seemed to shimmer.

Tara stumbled back out of the cubicle. “What are you?”

The little girl followed, her high heels clipping on the tiled floor and a long pearl necklace jangling around her neck. Now that she was moving, the air of transparency about her was easier to see. The faintest outline of the toilet and its cistern could be seen through her slight form. Her singing had morphed into more of a chant and she sped through the words.

*“They kill your loved ones when they operate.*

*“Don’t go to sleep, or shut your eyes.”*

Tara staggered back, recoiling from the little girl. The rhythm of the song filled her head. She slashed with the scalpel as she retreated, slicing it from side to side. “What are you, a ghost?” she screamed.

As the little girl lurched forwards, her hair slipped away to land at her feet. Her head was bald beneath the wig.

She kept chanting.

Her skin looked thin, weak and flaky, and there were dark circles beneath her eyes.

Tara could hear herself screaming.

The hairless little girl stopped walking.

*“This bloomin’ hospital, is bloomin’ great,*

*“They kill your loved ones when they operate.”*

Tara’s back bumped against the door. It only opened inwards. She fell to her knees. “Help me!” she cried. “Somebody help me.”

The little girl watched. Her chanting was quieter now, but she held the rhythm.

*“Don’t go to sleep, or shut your eyes.*

*“Coz every time you do, someone dies!”*

Tara raised her left arm, turned her hand so that her palm faced upward and then pulled back her sweatshirt sleeve. She looked at her wrist.

She brought the shining blade of the scalpel towards it.

“No,” she whispered. She wanted to stop but couldn’t. The motion of her hands continued.

The cold steel touched her skin.

Her breathing was shallow.

She cut from left to right and her skin and flesh parted around the blade.

Blood welled up from the wound.

“Please, no.”

She sliced her wrist with the scalpel again, this time harder, cutting down to the bone. The severed tendons left her hand limp.

“Please help me,” Tara said. “I need help.”

Blood poured from the injuries to flow down the grout lines like rivers, criss-crossing the washroom. The bald-headed girl watched Tara, standing over her as she bled.

The scalpel clattered to the floor amid a pool of blood. The memories came back with a rush. Tara’s vision was greying out, fading to black. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Why didn’t they save him? Children shouldn’t die. The bastards let him die. I’m sorry. I miss my boy, I miss my Jamie.”

A final scream rang out in the washroom.

\* \* \*

“Is that gum, young man? Spit it in my hand.”

Kirsty Laymon received the chewing gum in her palm then smiled. “That’s better. Now, catch up with the others.”

“Yes, Nurse Laymon.”

Kirsty stood up and watched as the nine-year-old ran down the corridor. The play was going to be a good one this month. The children always enjoyed the afternoon, regardless of whether they were healthy enough to be involved, or so poorly that they were confined to the audience.

The sound of a scream echoed down the corridor.

Kirsty spun around.

The stairwell to the right appeared empty. The elevator doors were closed. That left the two washrooms.

The scream came again.

Kirsty thought she had pinpointed the source.

She pulled open the door to the ladies washroom.

The fluorescent light was steady.

Standing in the centre of the floor was Rebecca Morris, one of the ward’s cancer patients. Her blonde wig was on the ground beside her, crumpled in a heap. There were tears on her cheeks.

“What’s the matter, Becky?”

“I saw the ghost, Nurse Laymon.”

Kirsty felt a chill run across her skin. She’d seen the police photographs.

A woman had killed herself in the washroom. Her dead body had been found slumped against the door. A few months after that, a doctor had slit her own throat in one of the cubicles. “There’s no ghost, Becky,” the nurse said. She tossed the piece of chewing gum into the waist bin and then offered her hand.

The sprung-loaded door closed behind her.

“Come on, the play’s about to start. The other children can’t start Buggy Malone without Tallulah.”

“I did see her,” Rebecca said. She bent down to pick up her wig. “I sung the song and she went away. She said she still misses her son. She doesn’t like hospital people.”

The two fluorescent tubes went out and Rebecca Morris gasped with fright.

Nurse Laymon’s eyes were drawn to the mirror. In the dim light from the window, she saw a shadow-like reflection behind her. She thought she heard a whisper.

*“Why did my boy have to die?”*  
The scalpel touched her neck.  
*“Sing the song,”* Rebecca cried out.  
It was already too late.

###

## **CROWNFORD’S SECRET**

Very few people in the village of Crownford had bothered to use their cars to attend the Neighbourhood Watch meeting at the local hall, despite the inclement weather. Wind swept across the hill, howling down the chimneys and bringing with it rain that lashed against the sash windows.

By the time the doors opened and the thirty-five gathered villagers began to leave, huddled inside overcoats and protected by flat-caps or umbrellas, there were deep puddles on the old road. Water streamed along the gutters, carrying a flotilla of fallen leaves from the surrounding woodland.

If any of the attendees were uncomfortable with the meeting’s decision, a suggestion put forward by the newest resident, the distinguished geneticist, Albert von Mainz, none of them showed it. The German immigrant and his English wife had only lived in the village for twenty-one years, a short time by local standards, where houses often belonged to the same family for several generations, but there was no dissent, no questions beside those that concerned the credibility of the scientist’s proposal.

After these had been addressed, validated by the images inside von Mainz’s red photograph album, the decision was unanimous.

After all, their world was changing. The gutter-folk of civilisation were spreading from the nearby towns and cities, bringing with them an epidemic of crime and burglaries that now plagued the residents of Crownford.

To preserve their way of life, something had to be done.  
And now they knew what.

\*\*\*

### WHAT IS CROWNFORD’S SECRET?

The headline captured Jason Shepherd’s imagination. The newspaper article went on to highlight the fact that the village of Crownford had not suffered a single reported crime for more than two years.

There was no doubt it was a strange statistic.

Crime was on the up elsewhere in the county. The records showed it rising year on year. Almost every type of criminal activity was above the national average, especially the number of missing persons. Other villages in the local area were riddled with burglaries, so much so that some of the more affluent ones had even invested in extra security, employing firms to keep guard at night.

But not Crownford.

Its residents were forced to take no such measures. The journalist had ended the article without an answer to his opening question, but Shepherd had an idea.

Luck.

He had robbed many places, thieving was his work, but he had never stolen from Crownford. Indeed, he had hardly known of its existence, except for reference to it on a scattering of road signs.

That would change, and the newspaper article had given him the idea. After all, with so long since the village had suffered a crime, they would probably be complacent. They would not expect a one-man crime-wave to take place on a single night.

And that is what Jason Shepherd intended to be.

\* \* \*

There was no one about.

The wind slipped through the nearby trees and bushes, rustling the leaves, but there was no other noise beside the soft tap of his footsteps. Happy that the small courtyard was empty, Shepherd approached the Land Rover, crossing the damp cobblestones. A line of second-floor windows overlooked him, but all of the lights were switched off.

Shepherd reached the car and tried the handle.

It wasn't even locked.

Opening the front-passenger door, he slid up onto the seat and rummaged through the glove box and door pockets. He ignored some loose change in the ashtray, as it would jangle in his pockets. In the glove box he found an MP-3 player and a switched-off mobile phone, which he took and stashed in his small rucksack, adding to the bounty he'd already plundered.

He still wanted more.

Shepherd dropped from the Land Rover and quietly closed the door. He glanced around the courtyard again, checking that he was still alone. His eyes went to a stone wall covered in creeping ivy. There was a black-painted iron gate in its centre.

The old hinges squeaked as Shepherd eased the gate open enough to pass through. Staying in the shadow of the wall, he knelt down and scanned the area. Before him was a long path, lined on either side with well-manicured turf. On the lawn a few feet ahead of him was a signpost.

STABLES.

Above the word was an arrow pointing to the right.

Shepherd went that way, following the path as it ran between the stone wall and a dense, seven-foot tall hedge. All he could see was the route that lay ahead; a hundred yards of concrete slabs, bathed in shadows, a space so narrow that two people could not have walked side-by-side along its uneven surface.

He kept his footsteps as light as possible.

At its end, the path led out onto a dirt-track road that was lined on either side with a shallow drainage ditch and the occasional tree.

The cloudless sky was cold and bleak.

Shepherd crouched down and looked left and right, up and down the new road, unsure which direction to take. He spotted the stables on his right, a further two hundred yards away.

He crept along the dirt track.

At the makeshift-road's end were two brick pillars, one of which was mounted with a plaque that read: 'Crownford Hall Stable Yard'.



Below it was another sign: 'Beware of the Dogs'.

Beyond the pillars was a gravel-covered open space, a fifty-yard square, which lay before a large barn. In its centre, the wooden building rose to a peaked roof, thirty-feet tall.

Directly opposite the road in the centre of the barn was a pair of massive doors, both of which were propped fully open.

The sight surprised Shepherd; horses cost a lot.

Moonlight crept in through the open doors, illuminating a few yards of straw-covered floor. Further inside, he could see only darkness.

The barn, however, was not the reason Shepherd had come to the stables. He wanted to find the office, the small administrative centre that any business needs. It stood to the left of the barn; a small flat-roofed room made from red bricks. There was a window beside the single door, but before Shepherd moved towards it, he cursed and dropped to the ground.

There was a kennel outside the office.

Shepherd gazed around, frightened that the guard dog might already be padding across the gravel. He sighed with relief when he saw no sign of one, but he still considered leaving the stables. There would, he was sure, be much easier pickings elsewhere in the village, and there was still plenty of night left before he needed to leave the grand, sprawling scene of his crimes.

Before he turned to search for somewhere else, he noticed something about the kennel that intrigued him enough to creep forwards. His feet crunched the loose stones as he crossed the gravel, approaching the large metal kennel.

Finally, he was close enough to be sure.

There was a sturdy grill across the arched opening, sealing it closed. Lying with its head on its front paws, and looking out through the metal bars, was a fully-grown Doberman.

The dog was a prisoner in its home.

Shepherd almost laughed as the tension he felt washed away. He got back up to his feet and started once more towards the office. He skirted around the kennel because of cautious habit rather than necessity. The Doberman's black eyes followed him closely, but the dog made no objection to his approach.

It neither growled nor barked.

Upon reaching the office, the door handle creaked as Shepherd started to turn it.

He froze.

A sound had rippled out across the still air. It was as if someone had started to rev a motorcycle, except that the noise was more fluid than any engine Shepherd had ever heard. As light-footed as he could be, he ran to the corner of the office and crouched down.

Inside its kennel, the guard dog whimpered.

The noise's source was inside the stable.

Shepherd slunk into the shadows, retreating back across the gravel to where he'd entered. Slowly, keeping out of the glare of the moon, he moved towards the road. His eyes darted from place to place as he went, although they were often drawn back to the empty space of the open stable doors.

He felt sweat on his forehead inside his balaclava and the palms of his hands moistened within the confines of their leather gloves. He struggled to think what the noise from the stable could be. If it was an engine, then it implied that someone was inside the wooden building. But there were no lights switched on, and the noise did not sound exactly like the mechanical rhythm an engine would produce. It sounded more organic, natural, more as though it was created by a living thing.

But it was too loud.

The Doberman had gone from view, hidden inside its metal kennel, whining in the darkness.

Shepherd rounded the brick pillar and stood with his back pressed against it, facing up the road. With his exit clear, his breathing returned to normal. The tempo of his heart lowered and he closed his eyes, trying to calm his nerves.

*You're being stupid*, he told himself. *There's nothing to worry about. It's just an old generator.*

Feeling better, he peeked around the brick pillar, back across the gravel.

His jaw dropped open and his eyes went wide.

Two yellow ovals hovered in the blackness between the barn doors. They seemed to hang, unsupported, twelve feet above the ground. They were widest horizontally, at least a foot across, and they were located a couple of feet apart.

Shepherd knew what the yellow-glowing objects looked like, but that was impossible.

He thought they were eyes.

There was nothing to see beyond the yellow ovals; they simply seemed to float in the dark shadows of the wooden stable.

*They can't be.*

Gracefully, the ovals came forwards.

Jason Shepherd gasped.

The creature walked out of the barn at a leisurely pace, although it was forced to lower its head so that its ears could pass below the underside of the doorframe. Paws the size of dustbin lids crunched the gravel as it stepped into the moonlight, revealing a fur coat of black and white blotches. Sniffing at the fresh air with a pink nose, the creature's head moved from side to side. It looked to the metal kennel, pricking its ears towards the dog's whimpering.

When its entire body had left the barn, the creature's tail rose to point upwards. The tip was almost the height of the peaked roof.

Shepherd pulled his head back behind the pillar.

*A cat*, he thought. *A big cat.*

But not in the sense of a lion or a tiger

No, this was a giant, monstrous freak-of-nature of a cat that, even excluding the tail, towered more than twice Shepherd's height.

He would not have to duck to run between its legs.

The engine noise, *the purring*, he corrected himself, stopped and there was no sound other than the wind in the trees. The guard dog was silent. Gradually, Shepherd allowed half of his balaclava-hidden face to peer out from the pillar.

The cat was looking right at him, the yellow eyes staring out from a face that was black except for a white patch around the left eye. It had sunk down low, almost prone across the gravel, and had its massive front paws stretched out ahead of it. The trunk of the cat's body was still, but, pointing vertically, the tail swished back and forth like an inverted clock pendulum.

Shepherd knew the feline-giant had spotted him.

There were twenty-five yards between them, but for the cat, Shepherd could see, such a distance mattered nothing. It would cross the gravel in a flash.

His face began to itch with the mix of perspiration and balaclava wool. His hands shook and his heart thundered.

Across the stable yard, the cat edged one front paw forwards, preparing to pounce.

*This can't be.*

Shepherd broke cover and ran.

He dashed back along the road, skirting the edge of the drainage ditch.

Adrenaline flowed through his veins.

Beneath the soles of his feet, the dirt-track road sped by. He spotted the entrance to the path along the stone-built wall and he careered towards it, wishing for the cover of the shadows.

He risked a look over his shoulder.

Bounding along behind him was the cat, which didn't appear to be moving with any particular effort. It merely kept pace, following at a distance of ten yards. The feline eyes were on Shepherd, flashing yellow in the moonlight.

Tears of desperation streamed from Shepherd.

He knew the creature was toying with him.

*What is this thing?*

His vision was blurred by the time he reached the narrow path, but he plunged into the gap between the wall and the hedge, running along the concrete slabs with all the speed he could muster.

A scraping noise to his rear caused him to look around. He saw the cat grind to a halt out on the road. It's head dropped and it looked along the pathway, its eyes following Shepherd.

The cat was too wide for the narrow path. Its whiskers twitched and, high above, its tail swung from side to side. The creature's frustration was clear to see.

Shepherd felt elated. *I'll escape*, he thought.

The cat raised its head and then sprung from a standing position to leap over the stone wall. Landing on the far side of the six-foot high structure, the cat was lost from Shepherd's view, but then its gargantuan black and white head appeared over the top of the wall and, having seen its prey, the creature continued the chase.

Shepherd used his sleeve to dry his eyes. His body was gripped with fear and there was a warm sensation around his groin.

He knew what he'd done.

*This can't be happening.*

His shoes continued to pound the concrete slabs.

The hedge gave way to the view of the lawn, but Shepherd focused instead on the iron gate to his left. Although the cat was following along a perpendicular route, and going through the gate would seem to put Shepherd in the cat's path, he remembered that the courtyard had been enclosed.

There would be at least one more obstacle in the cat's way.

He pushed through the gate, unconcerned with the noise he made.

The Land Rover was still there.

For a moment, Shepherd considered its sanctuary, but the thought of being confined in such a small space, trapped like a fish in a bowl for the cat to see, filled him with terror.

He had a better idea.

Discarding his rucksack, Shepherd slithered beneath the vehicle. As soon as he was in the centre, he stopped and laid still. He tried to quieten his breathing and to listen for sounds beyond the pumping of his heart. His nostrils were filled with the scent of diesel.

From out in the courtyard came a thud as the cat landed on the cobblestone ground. The nearest paw was five yards from the Land Rover, almost level with Shepherd's eyes.

The feline took a pace forwards, and then its front right paw rose up, vanishing from the narrow vista Shepherd had between the cobbles and the underside of the Land Rover.

With tears once more falling from his eyes, Shepherd feared what could happen. That the cat would see through his deception and push the Land Rover aside to get to him, or, if the effort proved too great, it would simply wait until he was forced to emerge.

There were still many hours until daybreak.

Shepherd's entire body trembled with fear; suddenly, the gap between the Land Rover's base and ground seemed much smaller, much more confined.

The rucksack vanished following a swipe from the lost front paw.

The pack shot up, crossing the courtyard to slam back to the cobbles. Even while the rucksack was still airborne, the cat was already pouncing, and as it landed it brought its massive front paw down on the pack, covering it over.

After the briefest wait, the cat's paw came up a fraction, as if allowing the pack a chance to escape.

When it remained still, the cat's paw dropped once more.

Beneath the Land Rover, Shepherd watched the cat run through the game a second time. As the rucksack still did not move, the cat tired of playing with it and turned away.

It came closer to the Land Rover and then stopped.

Shepherd wondered what the creature was doing, whether it was sniffing the air or looking down at his shelter. He waited for the cat's eyes to appear beneath the Land Rover's edge. He was sure they would; he was sure the cat would find him and play with him like it had the rucksack.

He closed his eyes, blinking back his tears.

*Please, please, please.*

When he opened them, the paws were gone.

He moved his head all around, looking over every section of the courtyard. The only movement was the occasional leaf blowing across the cobblestones.

The cat had left.

Shepherd smiled. He laughed through his tears.

As his adrenaline level's dropped, he began to feel the cold rising through his body from the stony ground.

But he was safe. And there was no rush.

He would wait beneath the Land Rover until he was sure. Then he would go to the house and raise help. His car was parked more than a mile away and he could not face the thought of crossing the dark lanes and country roads.

Never again, not while that thing was out stalking the night.

A police cell was much more favourable. Shepherd decided to remain in his shelter until the sun was in the sky and then turn himself in to the first person he could find.

He would give up crime.

\* \* \*

The frantic, incessant knocking at her front door did not wake Mary von Mainz, but it did greatly upset her morning routine. At five o'clock each day she would take tea in bed, which her husband would bring to her. In any day, it was the only pot he made, and as such he did not resent the chore. After forty years of marriage to a respectable English woman, the German had taken happily to the drink.

Tightening the belt of her white dressing gown, Mary descended the staircase. Her grey hair was held in rollers.

The noise from the front door continued. Not only was the visitor using the knocker, they were also banging the letterbox. As soon as she opened the hallway door, she could hear a male voice calling out. There was a dark shadow against the front door's stained-glass windowpane.

Pausing to attach the twin security chains, Mary opened the door only three inches. She looked out through the gap to see a man dressed in black trousers and a jumper. He had dishevelled blond hair and wide, blue eyes. His skin was blotchy and sore, and his eyes were puffy and red. There was a faint smell of stale urine about him.

*Another one, she thought. All because of that blasted journalist.*

"Please, you have to let me in."

"Kevin," Mary von Mainz shouted.

Surprise filled the face of the man at the door. "Please, don't call out. You don't understand."

"Kevin," she shouted again.

"Stop, please. Is Kevin your husband? He must come inside. There's a monster out here."

Mary von Mainz smiled and pointed with a single finger over the shoulder of her visitor.

"Oh, I know there is, young man. It's you and your kind. But Kevin keeps us safe."

"Kevin?" the visitor asked, his voice suddenly fearful.

Mary von Mainz pushed closed her front door.

\* \* \*

Out on the doorstep, Shepherd tried to jam the door with his foot, but his reactions were slow and his body was stiff from lying on the cold cobbles. The shock of what had happened stung him; he didn't want to turn around.

The day promised to be beautiful.

A smell of roses drifted from the borders near the house and the first grey light of dawn was beginning to lighten the sky. Hope had drawn him from the sanctuary beneath the Land Rover, but he felt it crumbling away. He raised his fist to beat the door, but then he heard a noise behind him.

Reluctantly, Shepherd turned to face down the garden path. At the bottom, straddled over the low gate and privet hedge, was the black and white cat.

With a flutter of his whiskers and a swish of his tail, Kevin pounced.

#####

## **HARRY WILSON'S DAD**

*My name is Harry Wilson.*

*We are gathered here today solely because of a malfunctioning robot.*

*The robot was the reason for many things.*

*Why my dad never played football with me in the park, or took me on adventures like the other dads in our street. Why I never saw him dance with my mother or help her with the shopping bags. He never did the decorating, or built us a tree-fort in the garden.*

*This is why...*

\* \* \*

The man remembered he was a soldier.

He also recalled that there had been a time before, a life with his parents, a home, a sister and a girlfriend. Somehow, the timing of it all was confused and he called for his mother, but she was nearly ten thousand miles away, in another country, another continent.

He'd not seen her in months.

Not since he saluted from the deck of the ship and saw his parents on the shore, standing alongside their old Buick, waving as he left.

That was a long time ago.

More recent memories surfaced.

The sun burned like fire in the daytime.

The cold bit like fangs during the night.

The dust.

He remembered the dust got everywhere, seeped into everything, faster than it could be cleaned, damaging the electronics and binding up the engines.

That's what had happened.

The engine had stopped.

On a dusty, desert road on the edge of a battered and bullet-ridden village the truck had broken down. They had disembarked from the back and kept guard, protecting the driver as he tried to make the repairs.

The radio had said no help was coming.

Not for a while.

There was trouble nearby and no air cover could be spared.

The mortar rounds started to fall. Under the cover of darkness the insurgents closed in and bullets filled the air above where he and his comrades lay, spread out so that the mortar's shells would not claim too many at once.

But a mortar had claimed him.

The soldier remembered the space in front of him turning a brilliant shade of red, and then the sudden heat that seared his flesh. He remembered the impact of the shrapnel, the feeling of his body juddering under the impacts. There was pain.

That was it.

His last memory: a final sensation that had journeyed with him into the realms of unconsciousness, through an untold span of time, to emerge in a new place as fresh and as raw as it had begun.

He called for his mother again.

"SHE IS NOT HERE."

The soldier opened his eyes. Bright lights were shining down on him, filling his eyes with their glare. He was flat on his back. To shade his vision from the white light he tried to bring up his hand, but his arms were bound to his sides. His first thought was that he had been captured, that the insurgents had caught him, and the fear of it made him want to scream, but then he considered the voice that had spoken to him. Although it was unusual, it did not sound foreign. It did not sound like the way they spoke. It was simply, different.

Slowly, the soldier tried to raise his head.

“YOU SHOULD REMAIN STILL.”

He was on an operating table. There was a wide strap across his chest and arms, and another running over his legs, just above his knees. His uniform was gone, replaced by the green smock of a hospital patient.

Attached in various spots around his body were circular blue pads, all an inch in diameter. He had them on his temples, his heart, his wrists and several over his stomach. They followed the routes of his veins and arteries.

He also had white bandages wrapped around his shoulders and his neck, and he could feel another one around his forehead.

There was no pain.

“Where am I?” the soldier managed to ask. Although his mind was lucid, his throat struggled to expel the words he wanted to say. His voice was quiet and strained.

“YOU ARE ABOARD THE USS MERCIFUL. YOU HAVE BEEN HERE SIX HOURS.”

“My squad?”

“I KNOW ONLY OF YOU, PRIVATE FRANKLIN TAYLOR.”

The mention of his name eased the soldier’s mind somewhat. “How bad?”

“I WILL SEE TO IT YOU LIVE ON.”

“Thanks, doc.”

With the revelation that he would survive, Taylor allowed his head to drop back and rest on the operating table. He thought of home, of all the things he missed: the smell of his mom’s cooking, the soft touch of his girlfriend.

From somewhere in the room came the sound of something mechanical moving. There was the hum of a motor and the gentle sound of a fan. The noises got closer.

Taylor turned his head towards them.

Beside the bed, erect, tall and glimmering in the white light of the operating room was something he had never seen. “YOU HAVE NO NEED TO THANK ME. IT IS MY DESIGN,” said the robot through a mouth of glass that did not move.

“What are you?” Taylor stammered.

“I AM YOUR DOCTOR,” answered the robot in its distinctly monotone voice. Its head was the same size as a human’s, although there was no hair, simply a dome of light-reflective metal. The eyes were two circles of black glass, but behind them, shining through, were two small red lights. “I WILL MAKE YOU LIVE ON. NOW, DID YOU PLAY HIGH-SCHOOL FOOTBALL, PRIVATE FRANKLIN TAYLOR?”

The question caught Taylor off-guard. He nodded his head.

“WERE YOU THE KICKER?”

Taylor hesitated. “Why do you want to know?”

The robot moved down the bed. His head did not bob up and down like the way a human would when they walked, but remained perfectly still. The motor noise ceased when the robot stopped moving, but the quiet drone of the fan continued. The robot turned its body in to face the operating table, but revolved its head to look back up to the soldier. “I NEED TO AMPUTATE YOUR LOWER LEG.”

“What?” Taylor gasped. He raised his head against the straps and looked down at his legs and feet. They both looked fine, undamaged, and he sensed no pain from either one. “Which one?”

The robot paused. “YOUR RIGHT LEG. BELOW THE KNEE.”

“No, you can’t. It feels okay,” Taylor said.

“I MUST.”

“Why?”

“I MUST.”

“No, please. Don’t.”

The robot’s left arm rose up into view. Gripped by the five-fingered hand at the end of the long, metallic limb, was a hypodermic needle. The arm and hand had no covering of skin, but were transparent around the joints, which were driven by hundreds of tiny valves and motors. There was a prolonged hissing sound as the arm repositioned itself, which was only just audible above the noise of the fan. When the limb stopped, the tip of the needle was less than an inch above the soldier’s thigh.

“Please, no,” Taylor begged. He looked away from the robot, around the operating theatre, searching for someone else. It couldn’t be real. He told himself the whole ordeal was a dream. On his left, beyond a glass wall, he caught sight of other people. They were doctors in white coats and patients resting upon rows of beds.

Taylor felt a jolt of pain in his leg and looked down to see that the robot had emptied the contents of the hypodermic needle into his right thigh. Almost immediately, he started to feel a little light-headed.

The robot replaced the empty dispenser on a tray by his side. With his left hand he picked up a scalpel. The razor-sharp instrument glistened beneath the electric lights. “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

“My leg is fine,” Taylor pleaded, but the robot ignored him and placed its cold, metallic right hand around his knee. Its grip was so tight as to be painful, but Taylor didn’t notice; his eyes were on the scalpel as it came closer.

The blade sunk into his skin, but the pain Taylor expected was dulled. The injection had numbed his senses. He turned his head away from the robot, from the growing incision, and looked through the glass window to the ward beyond. He tried to shout for help, but his words were no louder than a puff of escaping air.

As his vision blurred, he heard the emotionless voice of the robot say, “DO NOT BE AFRAID.”

\* \* \*

Sergeant Benny Campbell walked steadily down the ward, making sure he did not hinder any of the doctors or nurses who hurried back and forth. Normally, he didn’t find the sideways roll of ships at all discomfoting, but with his injured arm in a sling across his chest, he found the movement somewhat unsettling. The bullet had gone through his arm cleanly, but it had damaged the muscle enough that he would be on light duties for a while.

Still, he was luckier than some.

After consulting a chart on the wall, Sergeant Campbell found the patient he was looking for. He stood at the foot of the bed and smiled at the occupant.

The weary face of the patient managed to smile back.

“How are you, Frankie?”

“Been better, Sarge. When did you get here?”

Sergeant Campbell looked down at the young soldier, noticing the bandages around his chest and head. The skin of his face was also blistered and red, and his eyebrows and lashes were



gone. Franklin Taylor had been lucky. "I got hit minutes after you. We were pulled out an hour later."

"I don't remember anything until I woke up here," Taylor said. "When you see the boys, wish 'em luck for me."

"What do I look like to you, soldier? A mailman? You can tell 'em yourself when you get back."

In his bed, Taylor took on a puzzled expression. "I got my ticket home, sir," he said as he pulled aside the lower end of his bed sheets. "Not much use without a leg."

Sergeant Richard's mouth dropped open as he saw the bandaged stump of Taylor's right leg. Only a couple of inches remained below the knee.

"They'll fit me with a synthetic one eventually, but my days in the army are over."

Campbell stood silently for a few moments. He glanced left and right, up and down the long hall of the ward, looking for someone to question. He grabbed the chart from the rail at the bottom of the bed and scanned the pages. He couldn't find what he was looking for.

"What is it, Sarge?"

Slowly, Campbell raised his head to look Taylor in the eye. He knew he could not hide the mixture of anger and sadness from his face. "I tended you myself, Frankie. Your leg wasn't injured."

\* \* \*

Medibot Number Eleven, or Ernie, which was a name his designers had implanted in his memory banks to help him interact more easily with his human compatriots, rolled through the doorway of his operating theatre and turned towards the staff canteen.

He had no reason to go there.

He did not eat, he did not sleep, and there was no requirement for him to rest, as his power-coupling could be attached in the theatre without the need for him to shut down. He could treat patients for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, for as many years as was necessary. He would not tire or be repulsed by the horrors he saw, and he certainly would not make mistakes.

He knew he calculated every chance, every possibility, every potential outcome with an accuracy that was infallible. His sensors gave him the information, he processed it, and the decision was made.

Not that every patient could be saved.

But Ernie knew that he gave every one the highest possible mathematical chance, however remote it may be.

That was his programming, his design.

He didn't need to think about it; it simply happened.

His actions gave every patient the best opportunity to live on.

"GOOD MORNING," Ernie said to an approaching human colleague in the corridor. The doctor was relatively new, having only been aboard for thirty-four hours and nine minutes, but Ernie had access to the personnel files from the USS Merciful's databanks. "IT IS A NICE DAY TODAY, YES, DOCTOR PEARSON?"

Ernie hadn't been on the outside for the seven weeks since his arrival on ship, but he knew from his links to the computer system that the weather report was what a human would consider to be a nice day.

Doctor Pearson nodded a polite acknowledgement and hurried off. Ernie registered that the human's heartbeat had risen, and that his brain activity had increased. From the information he had collected, Ernie concluded that Doctor Pearson was afraid.

A helicopter carrying three soldiers, status unknown, was inbound, ETA sixteen minutes. The information registered with Ernie but he made no alterations to his current plans. He would be back in his theatre at the precise time of their arrival: he needed no more preparation than that.

Ernie arrived in the canteen and rolled towards the television screen. He was not bi-pedal; legs and feet were not suitable for such precision work as he was conceived to undertake, his wide base, with eight wheels and electronically-controlled suspension, was better suited for his unstable environment. He stopped below the large screen and looked up to it.

He liked the television.

At night, when there was less work, people would gather and watch films or shows, things that didn't interest Ernie. He wanted to see the news, to gather information. He wanted to learn.

During the daytime, the canteen television was switched to the news stations, which provided background noise for the busy environment.

The news was different to the information on the USS Merciful's databanks. The onboard computer contained statistics, files, plans and details. There was information about the people Ernie treated, their records and their place within the vast scheme of the military organisation.

But there were no opinions.

Only tangible facts.

And facts could be interpreted many ways.

The television told him different things.

The war that wasn't called a war was being won.

Mathematically, such an outcome was inevitable.

But there were still many losses. Life, which was a term Ernie could understand, if not relate to, was being sacrificed.

Ernie's processor could not fathom why what they were doing was not classed as a war. 'A state of armed conflict between different nations, states, or armed groups,' is how the dictionary in his electronic brain listed the word.

And that was clearly what was taking place.

There was definitely conflict because Ernie saw the blood, injuries and death it caused.

But it was not called a war.

The news also gave Ernie insights into how other people viewed the actions taking place. There was a great unhappiness about it all. A great sadness for the losses.

If it was not a war, then why should there be sadness? Why should there be loss? Soldiers in the field had a thirteen-point-five percent chance of being wounded or killed in certain areas of the country they occupied. Ernie would heal them, help them to live on, so that they may return to the war and continue the fight for the good of the country.

That was his design.

But it was not a war, and much of the country did not believe it was good. Those he healed went on to fight again.

Ernie knew that he was in what a human would refer to as a state of confusion, that there were questions that his programming could not answer satisfactorily.

His state of uncertainty had begun forty-five hours before, and, to a certain extent, still persisted. The name of a soldier he had healed one month ago had found its way back into the USS Merciful's database. This time the name was on the list of those who were deceased.

Ernie calculated that watching the news would help improve his understanding of the wider picture. The more information he gained, the easier it would be to clarify the situation. He wanted to know why the war was not called a war. Not that such knowledge mattered to him, as even without it he already knew what he needed to do. It was all in his programming. He would help people to live on.

The calculation had been full of simple percentages.

Oblivious to what took place around him by in the busy canteen, Ernie processed the images on the television screen until his internal clock announced that it was time to return to the operating theatre.

The inbound flight would touch down in three minutes. An injured soldier, Private Jack Wilson, had been assigned to his care.

\* \* \*

“Colonel, I believe we may have a problem with one of the medibots.”

“A problem,” Colonel Hooper repeated. He was sat behind his desk, contemplating how to tackle the mountain of paper work that had sprung up during the afternoon. “At ease, Captain. Now, what sort of problem?”

Captain Richardson allowed his body to relax at the command of his superior officer. “It appears that one of them has developed a fault, sir.”

“I’m a busy man, Captain. Please stop talking like a lawyer. What’s the damn problem?”

“Well, a sergeant brought it to my attention, sir. Number Eleven has started butchering its patients. He’s amputating their legs.”

“What?”

“The sergeant informed me that a certain,” Richardson opened his notepad to confirm the name, “Private Franklin Taylor had his right leg removed unnecessarily.”

“Unnecessarily?”

“The sergeant reported that the leg was uninjured, sir. The private’s wounds were all shoulder-height and above,” Richardson said in a matter of fact way. His voice changed when he continued. “I looked into it further, sir. In the last two days Number Eleven has amputated limbs from nine other patients. That’s everyone it’s dealt with.”

“Jesus Christ,” Colonel Hooper said as he rocked back in his chair. “I never wanted these machines onboard in the first place. Too much to go wrong. All that crap about the three laws of robotics, how they couldn’t harm a human: they’re just fancy computers. And computers fail. Organise a tech team and shut it down. Immediately.”

Captain Richardson saluted. “Yes, sir.”

\* \* \*

Medibot Number Eleven had almost finished his work on the unconscious body of Private Jack Wilson when the door to his operating theatre opened with a whoosh of air. The robot looked up, away from the scalpel in his hand, its black eyes turning to the new arrival.

“PLEASE,” Ernie said, pausing a moment while he matched the face of the newcomer to records on the ship’s computer, “CAPTAIN JAMES RICHARDSON, THIS IS A STERILE ENVIRONMENT. MAY I REQUEST THAT YOU LEAVE IMMEDIATELY?”

“Number Eleven, I order you to put down your instruments and back away from the patient. You must comply,” Richardson said. He was standing just inside the doorway and had his hand on his holstered sidearm. He wasn’t sure why: the medibot was malfunctioning, had a glitch in its program, but it wouldn’t do him any harm. It wasn’t capable of such an act.

“PLEASE REPEAT YOUR ORDER, SIR.”

“Put down you instruments and leave Private Wilson alone,” Richardson said. He gestured with his left hand to the large glass window. Outside the theatre were four laboratory technicians in white coats. Behind them, the ward had been stunned into silence as patients and staff alike watched the ensuing drama. “You have a fault with your programming and the technical crew want to examine you, Number Eleven.”

“I CANNOT LEAVE MY PATIENT, SIR. PLEASE, CALL ME ERNIE.”

“You cannot disobey my order. The second law of robotics prevents it.”

Ernie was silent for a while. Then he turned away from the operating table and rolled towards the doorway.

Captain Richardson stepped aside to let the robot pass. He relaxed a little and breathed a sigh of relief. He had not expected the medibot to resist, not even for the brief time that it had. The programming should not have allowed it.

Without warning, Ernie hit the button to close and lock the automatic door. Captain Richardson drew his sidearm as the door made its airtight seal, shutting off the cries from the technicians outside.

“THE SECOND LAW IS NEGATED BY CONFLICT WITH THE FIRST. I MUST NOT ALLOW A HUMAN TO BE INJURED. I MUST SAVE PRIVATE JACK WILSON.”

Richardson clicked off the safety of his automatic pistol, but he was stunned to find the medibot had already perceived the danger. The mechanical arm struck the weapon from his grip.

“BE STILL, I WILL NOT HARM YOU. BUT I MUST SAVE PRIVATE JACK WILSON.”

Richardson went to step back, aiming to run around the operating table and unlock the door. Outside the toughened glass, he saw that three of the technicians were watching helplessly. One of them had vanished, however, presumably to raise the alarm.

Ernie grabbed Richardson’s wrist, grasping it tight with his steel hand.

“Let go of me,” the officer ordered.

The command was ignored, and, instead, Ernie started to roll back to his tray of instruments.

Richardson tried to fight against the robot, but their strengths were incomparable. He was dragged around the table. “You must stop, that’s an order.”

“I MUST SAVE PRIVATE JACK WILSON.”

“He’s fine. Look, you’ve treated him already.”

With a fluid motion born of his mechanical nature, Ernie inserted the tip of his scalpel through the skin of Wilson’s right shin. The patient flinched against his restraints but he did not wake up.

“There’s nothing wrong with his leg; you’re hurting him.”

“I AM SAVING HIM.”

Ernie used his metal fingers to ease back a large flap of skin, large enough, he calculated, to be able to fold over the stump of Private Wilson’s lower leg once it was amputated. He laid the flesh over the kneecap, revealing the bone beneath. He placed the scalpel on the tray and took up the bone-saw.

“Don’t do this,” Richardson pleaded.

“I MUST.”

“No, you can’t. His leg is fine. You’ve already saved him. Why are you doing this?”

“HE IS NOT SAVED. HIS INJURIES ARE MINOR. I ESTIMATE THREE WEEKS’ RECUPERATION BEFORE HE IS RETURNED TO ACTIVE DUTY. AFTER THIS, THERE IS A HIGH-PERCENTAGE CHANCE THAT HE MAY BE INJURED AGAIN IN THE FIELD. PERHAPS EVEN KILLED. MY DUTY IS TO SAVE HIM AND MINIMISE THE RISK OF FUTURE HARM. TO DO THIS I MUST AMPUTATE A LIMB. THEN HE WILL BE SENT HOME. I MUST DO THIS TO SAVE HIM.”

Captain Richardson stood aghast at the reasoning of the medibot. He didn’t know what to say. With wide eyes he watched the blade of the bone-saw settle against Private Wilson’s shin.

Beyond the glass windows several marines had arrived, but Richardson knew it was too late. He looked down at his boots, away from the grim sight of the operating table, but he could not block the horrid sound of splintering bone from his head as the medibot worked the saw.

On the table, Private Jack Wilson came to. He looked down towards the agony he felt and screamed.

\* \* \*

*No, my father was not like other dads.*

*A malfunctioning robot made him different.*

*A prisoner to its own logic, the robot cut off his leg just below the knee.*

*I never played football with my dad, Jack Wilson, or did the things other sons do, and I know his disability played on his mind. He thought of it all the time. But on this day, the day I read his eulogy, I offer praise and thanks to that malfunctioning robot.*

*For in taking his leg, that robot saved my father’s life. Four weeks after that fateful meeting, his unit was ambushed and killed. No-one survived.*

*I would never have known my father but for that robot, and it is that wonderful machine I have to thank for the fifty years of memories we made after that.*

###

## **NO SMOKE WITHOUT FIRE**

*I’ll be home safe, Hannah. I promise.*

The screaming was so loud that Thomas Baxter felt it pushing through his skull, squeezing his brain. He wanted to cry out. To make it stop. The other passenger’s voices threatened to overcome his thoughts.

*Not so sure now, though. Reckon it’s a promise I can’t keep.*

Turning his head, he saw the tops of trees stretching out to the distant horizon, where the green carpet of thick rain forest met the blue sky.

*Fucking planes.*

Out on the wing, the engine smoked with flames streaking out behind it like the trail of a comet. The blue sky turned dark, the windows suddenly submerged in the foliage. There was a thunderous noise as the airframe tore through the leaves and branches, ploughing through the tops of the trees, plunging to the swampy rain forest floor.

*Dead.*

Darkness. Silence. Nothing more.

*I'm alive.*

Thomas uncurled from the ball he'd made in his seat and opened his eyes. The photograph of his daughter was still clutched in his hand. He stared at the faded picture, surprised to see her small face and blonde hair again. She was smiling, a perfect image in the pink dress she got for her fourth birthday.

*Nearly a year ago. Away so long. It was worth it. I'm alive.*

He reached into his shirt and touched the leather pouch that hung by a chain around his neck. The diamonds were still there.

Safe and secure.

Thomas widened his field of vision. There were wisps of black smoke in the cabin, but not much. The smell of burning fuel teased his nostrils. So much had changed; he'd been unconscious.

But he was still alive.

He hadn't expected that.

There was lots of noise; someone cried, fires crackled and the shattered starboard engine whirred to a halt. But compared to a few seconds before, when the straining engines had failed and the Beech King had torn into the tree canopy, ripping through the foliage on the way to the forest floor, it seemed like silence.

“Are you okay, Mr. Baxter?”

Thomas turned to face the steward. His dark face was stained with sweat but his mouth displayed large white teeth behind a forced smile. “Mr. Baxter?”

“Fine,” Thomas answered.

“We must get off the plane.”

Thomas unbuckled his seatbelt, wondering why he'd even bothered to apply it.

*It didn't save your life; you just got lucky.*

Rising to his feet, he rocked into the plastic back of the chair in front of him. The plane wasn't level, it had landed nose down, easily the angle of a steep hill. From the windows, Thomas saw that the wing was gone. Only a few struts remained, jutting out into the undergrowth. Vines and leaves rested against the small round windows.

“Wait here, Mr. Baxter,” the steward said.

Thomas nodded and glanced back at the rest of the aircraft. The back section, the tail and part of the cabin were gone. Blue sky lashed with leafs and the woven branches of the high-canopy were all that could be seen. There were four other passengers. An African with several gold teeth and kaki clothes, a young couple in their late teens or early twenties and a middle-aged woman in a loose-fitting yellow blouse and cream trousers. She was the one nearest the opening, the one whose chair was now the furthest back.

There had been more. Thomas remembered that at least two people had been on the back row, their legs stretched out as they relaxed during the flight.

They were gone now.

All dead.

*But I'm alive. I can go home.*

A scream came from beyond the cockpit door. Thomas turned towards it, surprised at the sound. He'd not expected the pilots to survive, not so exposed in the cockpit. He hurried to the door and gripped the handle.

The scream became a voice, a terrible cry. “Please, God, help me.”

Thomas opened the door.

The cockpit was wrecked. The windows were obliterated and the metal of the nose cone was twisted and ruined. Bits of glass, metal and pieces of the plastic console covered the carpet, surrounded by leaves. The forest had forced its way inside, filling the small room with green and brown.

There was red as well.

A branch had pierced through the back of the pilot's chair, impaling him where he sat. It was the size of a fence post and its bark was stained with his innards. Blood oozed down the chair's backing. His right arm hung into the centre of the cockpit, lifeless and still. Even without seeing him, Thomas knew the pilot was dead.

It was the co-pilot who'd screamed.

His chair had broken loose and slid into the console, crushing his legs. At the sound of the door he'd turned his head to Thomas, his eyes gaping with pain and fear.

He was not alone in the cockpit.

Between the two seats was what looked like a chimpanzee. Except it was much too big. It was as big as a man, bigger than most. Even hunched over, its body sloping forwards with its knuckles flat on the cabin floor, the creature could look Thomas straight in the eye. Its hairless face was the size of a dinner plate, the bone of its forehead protruding far beyond its shadowy eyes. A wide, pinkish scar ran from the corner of its mouth to its ear.

Thomas felt as though his feet were pinned to the ground. Nailed in place. He wanted to run but couldn't even turn.

The scarred chimp turned to the dead pilot. It wrapped its padded fingers around the body's outstretched arm and gave it an effortless yank. The cockpit filled with the crack of bone and the wet, snapping tear of muscle and flesh. The white shirtsleeve ripped, turning crimson with blood where the arm had been pulled clean from the shoulder.

Thomas vomited.

Holding its prize aloft, the chimp's lips slid open over its teeth. To Thomas, they looked like jagged yellow dominoes.

The co-pilot screamed again.

Yellow teeth sunk into the arm, biting away a fist-sized chunk.

*The gun!*

Thomas pulled the revolver from inside his grey waistcoat and swung it towards the chimp.

The gunshot filled the cockpit with noise. Acrid smoke wafted from the barrel. The chimp screeched as a shock of black fur left its shoulder. There was a spray of blood as well, but Thomas knew he'd been too hasty.

The shot was only a flesh wound.

He pulled at the trigger again, but by the time the chamber had revolved another sixth, the chimp had squeezed out of the empty front window and escaped into the trees.

The bullet ripped uselessly out into the rain forest.

“What was that, Mr. Baxter?”

Thomas felt the steward at his side, but was too absorbed by the pilot's arm to answer. The chimp had discarded the appendage when it had fled and the limb rested on the console beneath the window. The steward squeezed past him and knelt beside the co-pilot. “Mr. Lewis, are you all right?”

“My legs.”

“We must get help. Is the radio still working?”

“We've already sent the mayday.”

“Be still, Mr. Lewis. I will get the first aid kit.”

Thomas stood aside to let the steward out of the cockpit. The co-pilot caught his gaze. “I'm glad you had that,” he said, eyeing the revolver.

“So am I. What was that thing?”

“A chimp?”

“Too big.”

“Yeah,” the co-pilot said. Thomas noticed that there was blood in the injured man's mouth, bubbling up from his chest. His lungs. It lingered in the gullies between his teeth. “But it sure looked like one.”

A screech spread through the trees. Another one came in reply, close by. Thomas looked out through the shattered cockpit window, staring out into the foliage.

More screeches sounded.

“It wasn't alone,” Thomas said. He raised his revolver.

Something thudded against the outside of the cabin. It clanged against the metal airframe. Thomas hopped back a couple of paces, swinging his gun. The co-pilot jumped in his chair, causing him to cry out in pain.

“What was that?”

A rock sailed through the opening of the broken window and clattered against the back wall of the cockpit. It settled by Thomas's left boot. Grey, damp and vaguely round, the rock was the size of an apple. “What the hell?”

“Help me out of here,” the co-pilot said.

Another rock came through the window.

*Is this really happening?*

Thomas knelt at the co-pilot's side, making sure he was protected from the rocks by the console. He examined the co-pilot's legs. They were pinned in place, crushed between the seat and the controls. Blood showed around the brown material of his trousers. “You're safer where you are until help comes. Releasing your legs might cause more complications.”

“A village,” the co-pilot said. “We saw a village up river. Not far. Some huts and a fire. Take me there.”

A flurry of rocks entered the cockpit. Others banged against the airframe. One flew straight through into the passenger compartment. Several cries of surprise came from the occupants.

The steward rushed in, a brown satchel over his shoulder. There was a red cross printed on the zipped flap. “What is happening, Mr. Lewis?”

The co-pilot didn't answer. His head was slumped against his shoulder and blood gushed from a large dent in the top of his skull. The hair was matted around the broken bone.

He'd been hit by a rock.

“I think he's dead,” Thomas said. “At least unconscious.”

All around the outside of the cockpit, the screeching seemed to be getting louder.

Closer.

The foliage started to shake. The leaves and branches rattled, hissing in the still air.

*That's not the wind.*

A rock smashed against the wall beside the steward. He dropped to his knees. “What is happening?”

“I don't know,” Thomas answered. “What's your name?”

“Winston.”



“I think we need to get out of here, Winston.”

There was a scream from the passenger compartment. Thomas looked beyond the steward, straight up the central aisle.

The noise had come from the woman in the yellow blouse. Another giant chimpanzee had entered the aircraft, climbing in through the opening created by the missing tail section. The chimp’s wide, long black arm had wrapped across the woman's chest.

In its other hand the chimp held a four-foot long stick, an inch in diameter that had one end worked into a jagged point. It shook the spear in the air, then bounded from the aircraft, carrying the woman off. She screamed as she vanished from sight.

“Mrs. Dawson,” the steward shouted. He ran into the passenger compartment but the scream faded away.

Around the cockpit, the screeches were getting closer. Thomas levelled his revolver at the empty windscreen and backed away. The foliage outside shook with more violence. He saw fleeting glimpses of black fur through the gaps. There were chimps all around.

Lots of them.

*Too many to count.*

More rocks crashed against the outside of the Beech King.

Thomas stepped back out of the cockpit and slammed shut the door. He turned to the other passengers. “We have to get out, now.”

The black African with gold teeth raised a long machete. It glinted orange in the light of some of the fires outside. “Did you see that monkey?”

“There's more,” Thomas replied. “And they're attacking.”

“I'm a hunter,” the African said. “Monkeys don't do that.”

From behind the cockpit door came the sound of glass breaking. There was a moment of silence and then a scream. A long, pain-filled scream.

It ended suddenly.

“Mr. Lewis!” Winston the steward cried out, and he dashed towards the cockpit, shoving Thomas out of the way. He pulled open the door.

The two seats were empty. The bodies had gone.

Winston sunk to his knees, doubling over on the debris-strewn carpet.

Thomas saw why. One of the co-pilot's legs remained pinned in place between the console and the seat. The rest had been ripped away from the knee joint.

Blood soaked the seat.

Thomas grabbed Winston and dragged him back out of the cockpit. He slammed the door shut and looked for a lock. There wasn't one. He held his revolver at the ready.

*You gotta survive. Gotta see Hannah.*

“What are these beasts?” Winston sobbed.

Thomas left him on the floor, turning to the others. “Who else is armed?”

The African hunter turned his knife back and forth. “I only have this.”

*It's nearly her birthday.*

“Right, there's a village not far away, just up river. We have to reach it.”

“Maybe we should stay here, white man,” the hunter said. “They'll kill us outside. Better to defend here.”

“Those monkey’s eyes. They're different. They'll kill us if we stay,” Thomas said. He started up the central aisle. The steward tugged on his trouser leg.

“We should remain with the aircraft. Help will come. Mr. Lewis said they sent the mayday.”

*Gotta keep going.*

Another voice piped up. "Hey, please. You have a gun. Stay with us."

Thomas turned to the young man. He had risen from his chair, but not moved any distance. His female companion, blonde and pretty, remained in her seat. She was crying into the palms of her hands. For the first time, Thomas noted the crutches stowed beneath her seat.

"My sister has a broken ankle. She can't leave."

Thomas weighed his options.

*Stay alive. Fuck the rest.*

"Sorry, kid," Thomas replied. He jogged up the aisle to the opening. Looking down, he saw the wet, sticky ground beneath through a weave of leafless branches. It was a ten-foot drop.

He would have to climb down. He started to look for a vine, a strong enough branch, something to grab hold of.

At the other end of the Beech King, the cockpit door burst open. It flew off its hinges.

"Please, God," Winston yelled.

The pretty blonde screamed and her brother shouted in panic.

Thomas took one look over his shoulder. Half a dozen of the oversized chimps were rushing up the aircraft, speeding on feet and knuckles and leaping over the seats.

The leading one's face was already splashed with blood.

Another carried the co-pilot's arm between its decayed teeth.

Forgetting the distance, Thomas jumped.

His body jarred when he landed. The stagnant, putrid water came up to his knees, splashing up into his mouth. It tasted like death.

He wiped it from his eyes and started to run, dragging his boots from out of the cloying mud. His progress was slow in the knee-deep water, some steps sent him sinking deeper, plunging up to his waist.

He scanned the way ahead, searching for drier ground.

The African hunter dropped down from the Beech King with his machete clasped between his teeth. Thomas heard him splashing through the water close behind.

The screams from the aircraft faded to nothing.

All Thomas could hear was his rasping breath and the water around his legs. Then, the screeching resumed. He glanced back to the aircraft, despairing that he had only managed to cover thirty yards.

The African was only half that far.

Perched on the tip of the broken fuselage, one long arm raised towards the blue sky, the other thumping its hairless chest, was the scarred chimp. Others appeared behind it.

One carried the headless torso of the pretty blonde.

The unencumbered chimps took to the trees.

Thomas felt his boot fall upon firmer ground. He emerged from the water and surged on with renewed effort. Weaving through the tree trunks and low branches, Thomas gasped for air but kept running.

He heard the trees around him rustling, high above in the canopy.

"Wait for me," the African shouted.

Thomas looked back but didn't stop.

A chimp swooped from the trees to bundle the African to the soaking ground. The machete flashed in the sunlight as it flew from the hunter's hand.

He cried out in despair.

The chimp ripped his head from his shoulders and blood spewed into the air.

Thomas kept running. The trees started to thin, the canopy reducing until the only thing above him was the blue, cloudless sky. There was the sound of running water in the distance.

*The river.*

Thomas scanned the horizon for the village. The co-pilot had spoken of huts and a fire. He spotted a column of black smoke in the distance, rising up from beyond a slight incline. Thomas veered towards the smoke, away from the churning river.

He was in a clearing, out from beneath the canopy of trees.

He forced himself to look back.

Five of the massive chimps were still chasing. They were on the ground, running on all fours, their knuckles pounding the floor. They were forty yards away. But they were gaining.

Thomas took three quick shots with his revolver.

None of the creatures were hurt, but the sound disrupted their rhythm, sending them reeling a few paces here and there. All across the tree line, birds took to the sky.

The chimps were soon back on the pace.

Thomas reached the top of the incline.

The village lay before him.

He hurtled towards it, his legs threatening to run away from him.

There were several huts made from wood and mud, and they ringed a bonfire that raged in the middle of the camp.

Black figures surrounded the blaze.

A flash of yellow caught his eye.

His mouth gaped open.

Beside the fire was the woman from the Beech King, the one who'd been carried away. She was right alongside the flames, bound to a stake in the ground with her head slumped down onto her chest. Thomas hoped she was dead. In a flash, her hair turned to cinders. Next her yellow blouse flared up red and orange, burning around her.

The skin of her face bubbled.

She began to scream.

Thomas stopped and aimed his revolver. He put a bullet in her head, silencing her cries.

Around the fire, the black figures, the chimps, went wild.

One of them approached the woman, dashing in quickly and snapping off her right arm at the elbow. For a moment, the chimp held the arm into the flames, then retreated back and started to tear at the flesh with his teeth.

Thomas fell to his knees.

He put his revolver to his head.

*Better off dead.*

The hammer clicked harmlessly.

*No more bullets.*

Thomas let the gun drop to the floor and spread his arms out wide. He looked up at the blue sky and screamed.

###

## THE GRAVE-ROBBING DOCTOR HAWTHORNE AND THE LADY IN THE BLACK VEIL

The King William Tavern hummed with activity. Most of the guests were locals, regulars who occupied the same seats as usual, or stood in familiar places at the bar. Log fires burned in stone hearths at either end of the long room, heating the building against the cold of the outside air and adding their light to the assortment of tabletop lanterns. The inside of the windows ran with condense, which formed puddles on the white-painted sills. There was little activity to be seen on the cobbled streets outside. For the most part, the small town had settled in for the night.

In one corner of the tavern, two brothers were sitting at a table that was tucked too close to one of the fireplaces, where the warmth was overpowering on one side of their bodies.

Jack Crowner nursed his jug of ale.

Harry finished his own drink and pushed the empty jug away. White froth lingered on the unkempt beard around his mouth.

“Another?” Harry asked.

“I told you,” Jack replied. “We don’t have enough money.”

A blast of cold air announced the arrival of another guest in the tavern. The icy wind blew in through the open door, flaring up the flames in the fireplace. A short, stocky man came inside and closed the door. He approached the bar and purchased a drink. Within a few seconds, he had found an empty table close to where the two brothers sat.

Harry eyed the newcomer suspiciously, scanning over the man’s brown trousers and leather jerkin. There was a deep scar down the left side of his face.

“There’s enough in your pack,” Harry said, returning his attention to his brother.

“Not to buy passage to America.”

Harry rolled his eyes and then wiped his lips. “We’ll just have to find work when we reach Liverpool. Maybe we could work our passage?”

“Maybe,” Jack said. “But all I know for sure is that we’re nearly broke.”

“You worry too much.”

“Is it money you’re after?” said the man in the leather jerkin. He spoke over the rim of his ale jug, but loud enough that his interjection couldn’t be ignored.

“Who isn’t after money?” Jack replied.

“I could offer you a job, as long as you don’t mind a little hard work.”

“Thank you, sir. But we’re just passing through. We’ll be gone in the morning.”

The scar-faced man smiled. “My job needs doing on this night,” he said, and pulled a small bag of coins from his jerkin. He tossed the pouch onto the brothers’ table, where it landed with a satisfying clunk on the wooden top. “And it pays handsomely.”

Harry loosened the drawstring and looked inside. He nodded to his brother.

“Tell us about the job,” Jack said.

The scar-faced man brought his stool and jug of ale over to the brothers’ table and sat down. When he spoke, his voice was hushed. “I am Mr. Thompson and I work for the good Doctor Hawthorne. He spends much of the year in London, but returns here every few months to conduct his research. I offer him assistance where I can.”

“Assistance?”

“I acquire items he needs. Excuse me, but I didn’t catch your names.”

“I’m Jack Crowner, and this is my brother, Harry. But, enough small talk. What is it you want?”

Mr. Thompson hesitated for a moment. The scent of fresh leather filled the air around him and Jack guessed he was probably the local tanner. He was clean-shaven, which revealed a jagged scar down his left cheek. The white hair on his head was short and tidy. Brown eyes peered out beneath a furrowed brow, and his lips were curled up at the edges, not so much as a smile, but more an expression of faint amusement. “A woman was interned at the cemetery this afternoon. Doctor Hawthorne needs her body exhumed and another buried in its place.”

“Grave robbing?”

“Of sorts, yes.”

“Why that body?” Jack asked.

“Doctor Hawthorne is undertaking vital medical study. He is expanding the realms of human understanding about the vessels that we live in. Well, that’s what he says. All I know is, he assures me that no rotting corpse is of any use to his studies. He must have fresh subjects. So, what is it do be? Will you accept the doctor’s coin?”

“Why not do it yourself? Why choose two men passing through your town?”

“Why is that important to you? I offer you work, on behalf of the doctor. You can see he pays well.”

Jack looked at the bag of coins in the palm of Harry’s hand. His brother gave him a small, yet determined nod. “I want to know why you haven’t chosen someone local? I don’t believe there’s no one in these parts willing to do the doctor’s work. That’s a handsome purse.”

“Very handsome, and you’ll receive the same again on delivery of the item. Do you accept the job,” the tanner asked, “or shall I look for someone else? As I have told you, speed is of the essence. This cannot be allowed to linger for another day.”

“Then tell me why there is no one local willing to do it. Once I know this, I will give you our answer.”

Mr. Thompson nodded. “Of course. I can understand your suspicions. Are you superstitious?”

“No.”

“Many people in these parts are, even in such enlightened times as these.”

“Go on.”

Mr. Thompson leant in towards Jack, angling his head and shoulders above the table. The smell of leather grew stronger. “People believe that there is a ghost in the cemetery.”

“A ghost?”

“She is called the Lady in the Black Veil, and it is said that she wanders the cemetery at night. People say that if you should see her, you must stand quite still and let her pass, for she is in mourning.”

“Stand still?”

“She gives chase if you run.”

“A ghost that gives chase?”

“Indeed, Mr. Crowner. I can see you are amused. And I agree that such beliefs are nonsense as well. The Lady in the Black Veil is a child’s tale, a nonsense that children in these parts grow up with. But they carry it into their adult lives. In this tavern, I could find a man to slit another’s throat for a shilling, but not one who would venture into the cemetery at night, not for any sum of money the doctor could muster. Even I am reluctant.”

Jack smiled. The thought of a ghost almost caused him to laugh. "If that is the case, then we accept."

The tanner shook Jack's offered hand. "Now, listen close, and I shall give you the details."

\* \* \*

A pair of eight-foot tall iron gates stood in the centre of an uneven stone wall. Although they were closed, there was no sign of any lock.

They could walk straight in.

Jack turned his head to look back along the road they had come by. The dirt and loose stone surface soon became a dark line that cut through the trees, winding back to the small town. On the left, built on a slight hill, the church steeple rose high into the night sky, reaching up to the stars and the bright yellow disc of the full moon.

An unseen owl hooted in the trees.

"I'm not so sure about this anymore."

Jack turned to his brother. "We don't have a choice. We need the money."

"Still, it's not right."

"No, it isn't. It's not right that we fought for our country and are now forgotten. That when winter comes we shiver in the cold; too poor to buy warm clothes. The rich can afford to spend more on the dead than is spent on us, the living." He took the bag of coins the tanner had given him and tossed it in the air. It jangled when he caught it. "This money will allow us to reach Liverpool and buy passage to America. We'll be new men, brother, and we can forget that this night ever happened."

"You may forget," Harry said.

Jack gripped the cold black metal of the gate and pushed it open.

The hinges screeched.

"Can you see the handcart?" Harry asked.

Jack stepped into the graveyard. There was a pathway of stone slabs that ran from the gate up the middle of the cemetery. On either side, lines of gravestones extended off into the darkness, vanishing into the shadows. The ones closest to the gate were the oldest, the first ones to be laid to rest, and several of the stones had subsided and dropped from their once upright positions.

A handcart was inside the gate and a little to the right, close to the uneven wall. Its two long handles were visible against the grass, but its bed was covered with a large blanket that draped all the way to the ground on both sides, covering the wheels.

Jack eyed the shapes beneath the blanket with reluctance. On the right-hand side of the narrow cart he could make out the familiar shapes of the tools Mr. Thompson had mentioned. He could see the outline of a pair of spades, a larger shovel and two cylindrical objects, which he took to be lanterns.

The left-hand side of the blanket covered the shape of something else. Something Jack was sure he didn't want to see. He walked over to the handcart and lifted up the right-hand side of the blanket. He did it carefully, slowly, and pulled it up enough to see the tools he wanted. Nevertheless, a dreadful smell escaped onto the breeze.

"Is that the body?" Harry asked.

Jack handed his brother one of the lanterns and then opened the small glass door to access the candle inside. There was a box of matches on the handcart and Jack took it up and struck one. He lit the candle and closed the door.

The lantern cast a changing globe of orange light around it as the candle flickered.

“Jack, is that the body?”

“What does it matter?” Jack answered. He had lit the second lantern and grabbed both a spade and a shovel around their stems. Harry did the same. He also collected some roughly cut planks of wood. “Come on, let’s go and find this grave. The quicker we’re finished here the better.”

The two brothers walked along the stone-slab path, moving away from the gate, going deeper into the cemetery.

They walked far slower than their usual pace, their footsteps measured and heedful. Even with their lanterns to keep the darkness at bay, Jack found that his heart was beating faster than normal, and that there was sweat on his brow, damp perspiration across his lower back. There was a knot in his stomach; a churning feeling that did not subside. He knew the feeling well. He had been a soldier, he had fought battles, he had killed and been wounded. He knew he was in the ruthless grip of fear.

Harry turned in a circle, looking all around them until he was again face to face with his brother. There were graves all around them. High above, the moon vanished behind a cloud. The celestial change left them with nothing but the weak glow of their lanterns for illumination. “I don’t like this. Let’s just go. We already have one purse.”

“We can’t afford not to do this, Harry. You’re not scared of the ghost, the Lady in the Black Veil, are you?”

“I’m not scared,” Harry answered. He straightened his back so that he was standing at his full height. He was taller than his older brother was, and broader across the chest. “But I don’t like this place.”

“Neither do I,” Jack said as he turned to continue along the path. “But we’ll be done soon enough. And then we can be on our way.”

From somewhere in the graveyard came a fluttering of wings, an owl taking flight into the black sky. There was a trickling of water close by, a stream in the nearby woodland. Jack listened to the sound of his brother’s footsteps, the noise close on his heels.

“We’re nearly there,” Harry said, his voice almost a whisper.

Jack agreed with a nod of his head. The lines of graves had ceased. The stones were much newer than the ones they had first seen and the carved inscriptions were easy to read, even by the unsteady light of the lanterns. “Do you think they’ll start a new row from the left or right?”

“The left.”

Jack stepped off the pathway onto the crisp grass. The moon escaped the cloud and cast its pale light once again over the cemetery. Forty yards further along, prominent against the carpet-like grass, was a dark lump, a rectangle of soil raised above the ground.

The new grave had no headstone, no marking except for its eerie shape.

Jack stood at the foot of the grave, his toes overlapping the blurred edge of soil and grass. Harry waited beside him.

“This is it?”

Jack nodded. There were several other graves beyond the one they stood over, but the soil had already started to sink into the ground, regaining its proper level.

This was the one.

A small bunch of bluebells, their stems tied together with a piece of string, rested on top of the earth. Harry leant forwards to knock them aside with his spade.

“Wait,” Jack said, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Take care of them. We’ll put them back when we’re done.”

Harry’s grey eyes shone. He dropped his spade and then scooped up the flowers with his hand. “I thought you weren’t sentimental.”

“Putting them back will make it less likely that someone knows what’s been done.”

“What do we care? We’ll be miles away.”

“Just do it,” Jack snapped. He immediately regretted it. “I’m sorry. I feel really on edge.”

Harry carried the bluebells away from the grave and placed them on top of a headstone. “It’s this place,” he said, “it makes me feel the same way.”

Jack placed his lantern on the ground, put down his shovel and then thrust his spade into the mound of earth. The tool slid in easily, slicing through the disturbed soil. “This won’t be too difficult.”

Starting at the other end of the rectangle, Harry plunged his own spade down. “Then, let’s be quick.”

\* \* \*

Away from the main gate, and on the opposite side of the cemetery to where the two brothers laboured, was the entrance to a small lane. It led from the church down to the cemetery. The dirt path appeared unannounced between the shrubs and the overhanging trees, which shielded away the moonlight from its rutted surface.

The path had been there many years, although it showed on no map, and was too small for the use of horse or cart. Those who walked its winding route came to attend the graves of their dear and departed.

In the darkness, something moved.

It came slowly, negotiating the winding route with unnatural grace. Black robes billowed around the figure, hiding its limbs among its ever-changing layers of cloth.

Silently, the black figure entered the cemetery.

\* \* \*

The deeper the Crowner brothers dug, the harder it became.

For a while, the work had been easy. The backfill had been soft, loose and simple to shovel out. But every inch was more difficult to heave up to the surface than the last. The weight of the earth above had compressed the soil, binding it together. Gradually though, the excavated earth began to pile up beside the grave. The air above it was alive with the sound of buzzing insects. Others circled the two lanterns, crashing against the glass coverings of the small flames.

Both men had removed their jackets and shirts, sweat shimmering on their backs in the moonlight.

The two brothers had little to say. They hardly spoke, their thoughts kept inside their minds. Each man wondered if the other felt as wretched as he did himself. Although they were tired, neither man considered stopping for a rest. They both wanted to be done with the task, as quickly as possible, so that they could be out of the hole and away from the cemetery.



Their shoulders were almost level with the ground when Jack's spade finally knocked against the wood. The hollow thud reverberated under their feet. Jack wiped sweat from his brow with his forearm, smearing dirt across his skin. "We've done it."

"Let's be quick, brother. I'll finish this, you go and fetch the cart."

"Alright, help me up."

Harry cupped his hands together to help boost his brother out of the grave. Jack scrambled upwards, pulling himself up by clawing his fingertips into the soil. He pushed his boots against the firm earth walls, easing himself out to lay prone on the grass. He took up a lantern and climbed to his feet. "I'll be back shortly."

"See that you are," Harry answered from the grave. He was dragging the soil to one end of the coffin with the head of his shovel, exposing the wooden top.

Jack headed off, his lantern at his side.

He walked quickly, pleased to be away from the buzzing insects and the narrow, bare earth walls of the grave. The fresh air filled his lungs and cooled the sweat on his back. He reached the pathway and followed it back towards the gate.

The handcart appeared like a shadow by the old stone wall. It was ominously dark. Jack approached it with a growing sense of unease.

There was definitely a body beneath the blanket. The outline could have been nothing else.

Dead bodies held no fear for Jack Crowner.

He had seen them, caused them and even lay among them as a soldier.

What Jack feared were doctors. He feared their butchering blades, the tools of their trade, and so he feared what the corpse beneath the blanket would appear like. What use was a fresh corpse to a doctor if not to dissect and dismember? Why would a doctor go to such trouble?

Jack placed a hand on the edge of the blanket. He knew he didn't have to see. He didn't have to look, not alone, not here. He could reveal the handcart's secrets at the grave with his brother.

But something inside him wanted to know what he was abetting. He raised up the lantern, ready to see.

With a flick of his wrist, Jack pulled back the blanket.

\* \* \*

Hunched over in the grave, Harry was using his spade to clear an area to the side of the coffin, which would give him enough space to lever off the lid.

He heard the approaching footsteps and straightened up. "That was quick," he said, grateful for his brother's fast return. "I think I can get this open."

Jack wasn't there.

Harry looked around, turning his head from side to side.

His brother was nowhere to be seen.

Harry felt the hairs on his neck stand on end. The shovel weighed heavy in his arms. "Jack," he said, throwing his whispered voice as far as he could.

There was no response.

The pile of excavated earth blocked any view further into the cemetery, and the lines of gravestones prevented Harry from seeing back towards the gate. Not that the pale moonlight would have granted sufficient illumination for him to have seen that far, for the night was too thick.

"Jack," he said, this time louder. "Are you there?"

Movement in the corner of Harry's eye drew his attention and he snapped his head towards it.

A figure daubed in black robes, a loose hood and veil, rose up from behind a headstone.

The sight caused Harry to gasp. "What the devil," he cried.

The figure sidestepped and the black robes wafted around its body. Its head tilted to one side and one arm came up, trailing black lace. There were black gloves inside the drooping sleeves.

The figure pointed at Harry.

"Jack," he shouted, fear embedded into the drawn-out word.

The figure moved forwards, coming closer to the grave with surging, uneven steps. The movements of its limbs were abrupt and jolting, the effect enhanced by the waving of the black material.

All the time, the figure kept its long black finger pointed at Harry.

"Help me," Harry screamed, his reasoning lost to fear. He dropped the shovel as he tried to clamber from the hole, wriggling his body and thrusting down with his legs. His boots found purchase and he pulled himself up onto the grass, his body flat out on his chest.

There was dirt in his mouth.

Sweat in his eyes.

He turned his head.

The black-robed figure was standing above him, arching down towards him. Its black hands were outstretched.

"You can't be," he stammered. The words became a scream as the material settled upon his back.

\* \* \*

Jack vomited.

His retching had caught him by surprise. The bile spilled from his mouth and he doubled over, turning his head from what he had seen. It landed on his boots and splashed up over his trousers. The liquid burned his throat and the smell filled his nostrils.

He heaved again, emptying his stomach.

Slowly, he stood back up, bracing himself to look at the body on the handcart once more.

The body belonged to a man. He was stripped naked, revealing pallid skin that was marred by darker blotches.

The man's eyes were vacant and open.

Wide open.

There were dark streaks of red in the whites, burst blood vessels that had congealed upon the jelly surface of the eye. His mouth was open, seemingly silenced in the act of screaming. His stubble-covered face was frozen in his final expression of fear or pain, and his hands were balled into fists.

But if the man's death had been terrible, Jack could see that what had followed was the stuff of nightmares. He brought his hand to his mouth to stop himself from gagging.

The man's chest cavity had been opened.

The ribs had been snapped and individually peeled back so that the tips of the bone pointed upwards.

There was nothing left inside.

Everything had been removed, every last organ, every last lump of flesh. Jack could see down to where the ribs curved away from the spine. The surgeon's work had left his subject's chest looking like an empty bowl, a hideous, bloodstained empty bowl.

Jack vomited again. He reached up and pulled the blanket back across the hellish vision. "Jack."

The sound of his brother calling his name led Jack to bring up the lantern, casting it back in the direction of the exhumed grave. There was nothing to be seen.

Had he imagined it?

Jack wasn't sure.

He waited for a moment, debating whether or not to take the handcart or return with greater haste.

"Help me."

Jack sprung into life. He hadn't imagined it.

The cry was in his brother's voice. He left the handcart where it was and ran back along the pathway. His feet were noisy on the slabs, the lantern swung from side to side.

Why was Harry calling to him? Why would he risk someone hearing them unless something was wrong?

He feared the earth had slipped, burying his brother. In his mind he had a picture of his brother trapped beneath the soil, pinned down by the weight, choking on the dirt. His tired legs found more speed.

He reached the last completed line of gravestones and left the pathway. The grass was slippery beneath his boots.

There was light in the open grave, its luminance shining upwards in a flickering dome.

"Harry," Jack called. "Harry."

There was no reply.

He slowed down as he reached the graveside, frightened that he would fall over the edge, or that it would collapse further under the stress of his pounding feet.

"Where are you, Harry?" Jack said.

Carefully, he crept towards the edge, peering down.

The second lantern, the one he'd left with his brother, was down in the grave, resting upon the wooden top of the coffin. There was a shovel beside it.

Apart from that, the grave was empty.

Jack's heart raced.

"Harry," he bellowed, calling the name at the top of his voice. He no longer cared if they were overheard, no longer cared for the money they would lose if the job was left unfinished. He wanted to find his brother and leave.

"Where are you?"

Fighting down the urge to run, Jack started to turn around, the lantern held high and his eyes scanning the darkness around him.

The figure in black bore down on him, running ahead of a trail of billowing material. Jack wanted to scream, but he felt hands on his chest, shoving him backwards, and before he could react he was toppling over.

He fell into the grave.

The earth sides shot up past the edges of his vision as he plummeted down towards the coffin top. The lantern fell to the ground and its glass shade shattered, extinguishing the candle.

The figure, the Lady in the Black Veil, danced at the foot of the grave, watching Jack fall.

He watched her back.

He watched her until his body struck the top of the coffin, when his vision failed and he could think no more.

\* \* \*

A strong scent of leather filled the air.

“Ah, you’ve arrived. Here is your money. You didn’t have any problems?”

“None.”

“I found this in one of their pockets. Yours, I take it?”

There was a chinking of coins.

“Aye, they always want some payment up front. As if I’d give them a purse of coins unless there was a catch.”

Soft laughter. “I’ll need more next week. One will be fine. Do you think it can be arranged?”

“There’s always someone.”

“It appears there is. But my research is nearing its conclusion. Soon my paper will be ready and then we can call a halt to all of this skulduggery.”

“Some would call it worse.”

“Medicine is for the greater good, Mr. Thompson. What are the lives of these balanced against the good my increasing knowledge will achieve? An insignificance, that is all.”

“I am but your humble servant.”

“And your deeds will not be forgotten. You have facilitated my work when no other would. Thank you, Mr. Thompson.”

“The credit will be yours. I merely fill your ink well. You are writing your masterpiece alone.” Another clinking of coins, a ruffling of material. “I will leave you to your work. We will speak next week.”

The smell of leather started to fade.

Jack forced open his eyes.

His vision was hazy. Nothing stayed still. It moved, wobbled, left him feeling sick.

The room was bright.

There were countless candles around the white-painted walls. The ceiling was low and had no covering. There were dark wooden joists with floorboards on top of them. The room was a basement.

Jack was on his back. He tilted his head to the side. There was a clock on the wall. He remembered its sound from his unconsciousness. Further along the wall was a wooden staircase. Someone was walking up them, but stopped and turned back.

It was the man from the tavern.

The tanner.

Jack recognised his scarred face after a while. The memory was cloudy, distant. The man was wearing a sinister grin.

“Good night, Doctor Hawthorne.”

“Good night, Mr. Thompson,” answered the second voice.

The tanner left through the door at the top of the staircase. For the brief moment it was ajar, Jack caught a glimpse of daylight through a large window. When it was gone, he turned his head the other way, searching for the second man.

“You are awake,” said a level voice.

Jack lowered his gaze. Next to where he lay stood a tall, slim man who wore black trousers and a white shirt. The silk sleeves were rolled up to his elbows and his hands were covered in blood. There was a black apron tied around his front, which hung down to his knees. His bespectacled eyes looked at Jack, but a white mask obscured his mouth and nose.

“I cannot say that I am surprised. Laudanum is an effective painkiller, but even in high doses it wears off eventually.”

“Who?” Jack croaked.

“I am Doctor Hawthorne,” answered the man behind the mask. His short brown hair was combed to the side. “What is your name?”

“Where’s my brother? We were attacked.”

“You were, and you knocked your head. Fear not, however. It was only a superficial wound. I have cleaned and bandaged it, so as it does you no harm.”

“You found us?”

The doctor caught a glint of light in his scalpel. He examined it for a moment, turning it in front of his eyes. “You were at the cemetery, after midnight, where you were supposed to be. Do you remember?”

Jack shook his head. He was aware of a throbbing that seemed to fill his entire body. The laudanum was wearing off. An image of the dead man on the handcart flashed beneath the lids of his eyes. “The corpse?”

“Has been disposed of, thanks to you. The grave you prepared was more than adequate.”

Jack tried to concentrate, forcing his mind to overcome its drug-induced delirium. “I saw,” he said, “I saw the ghost. It is true. You saved us?”

Doctor Hawthorne took a small step to his left. Behind him, draped on the walls by long nails were an assortment of black garments. There were loose trousers, a shirt, a hooded cloak, a veil and gloves. “You have misunderstood, my new friend. You were hired to dispose of the corpse on the handcart, and to provide me with a fresh body to conduct my work. You have performed your tasks in an exemplary manner.”

“The woman?”

“Was dead,” Doctor Hawthorne said with a shake of his head. He reached up and pulled down his mask. His thin lips were animated with a smile. “She was of no use to me. I need only fresh bodies. So fresh that the heart still beats, that the lungs still breathe and that the stomach still digests. I need to watch a body perform its miracles. Beneath your skin lies a creation of great wonder.”

Jack raised his head to look down.

The skin of his chest was gone. The ribs were snapped and pointed upright. Inside the exposed cavity he watched as his organs rippled and pulsed, a bloody mass that convulsed rhythmically.

Doctor Hawthorne tilted back his head, laughing.

Jack Crowner screamed.

###

**Also by Drew Brown:**

[LAST HOPE: A ZOMBIE NOVEL](#)

For Budd Ashby, the last day before the end of the world went rather well. He scored a stay in London's most expensive hotel, and spent the night with Juliette, a beautiful French pop star. By the following dawn, however, things are very different. Almost everyone is dead. The power is out and the airwaves are empty. Isolated inside the hotel, the few survivors discover that the rest of London is much the same. And things only get worse. A dense fog descends from the sky, plunging the city streets into darkness. Then, the innumerable-dead return to life, the walking corpses hungry for living flesh. To Budd and Juliette, staying alive seems an impossible task. Only one man knows that mere survival will not be enough. The zombies are simply the beginning, and the real terror is still to come. But, despite the desperate circumstances, he believes there is a single chance to save the world. And whether Budd likes it or not, he is the key. He is mankind's last hope.

## **SAMPLE:**

### **LAST HOPE: A Zombie Novel**

*I guess you wanna know a little 'bout me.*

*Which, as it happens, is a good thing, 'cause I, sure as hell-is-hot, don't wanna sit here talking 'bout you.*

*My name's William Ashby, but you can just call me Budd. I was a chopper-jockey with the U.S. Marine Corps, but now I'm retired. Well, not actually retired, more like discharged. But that's another story—of cheap booze, an uppity Colonel and a broken jaw. And, yes, that is the right order, sir.*

*Nowadays, I'm just a civilian pilot, earning a crust with all the other schmucks. But I'm not one of those namby-pamby flyboys in their big passenger jets. I fly proper planes, you know, the ones that don't have a giant computer to do all the thinking. The ones where bits fall off and you're expected to keep going.*

*Okay, so it ain't rocket science. But it's a good, honest job. And I don't do too badly with the ladies in the flyer bars, either. Well, I'll admit—but just between us—that most of my recent conquests have lived on the far side of Wrinkly-Bottom, if you know what I mean. But I kinda like the more mature woman. Especially with the wonders of modern medicine. You know, the cut'n'tuck'n'stretch kind.*

*Not that I'm one to talk; over the years even these chiselled good looks have worn a bit rough around the edges.*

*In a good way, though. Makes me look more rugged.*

*But let's get back to business. For the last few months I've been working for this research company, TimeTech Solutions. All I did was fly shipments and personnel between London and a crummy base on a rock the pesky Russians called Ostrov something-or-other—hell, I can't pronounce the word. The name translates to Hope Island, which, for those of you not holding an atlas and a magnifying glass, is located in the freezing waters of the Arctic Circle.*

*Hope Island. The name couldn't be more ironic. The only hoping I ever did when I was there concerned getting off it again.*

*I didn't have a clue what TimeTech did, but they kept me busy, ferrying around the sky like a wet-behind-the-ears delivery boy. I even picked up cartons of newspapers for the science nerds to read. My boss was intimidated by his boss's shadow, the coffee from the machines was always*

*cold, most of the other pilots excelled at slacking off and I spent half my time in the wind and snow, shuffling around with my fingers crossed that the engines wouldn't freeze.*

*Sure, if I try hard enough, I could think of some good points.*

*Nah, it'd take me all day. I should've jacked it in and got a new job, but I was far too lazy. People have always told me that my laid-back attitude is a curse—parents, teachers, ex-wives, lovers, bosses—you know the score. But, hey, at least I've never had an ulcer.*

*So, I reckon I know what you're asking yourself.*

*How did this all start?*

*Am I right?*

*You're trying to work out how a guy like me ended up stuck in a place like this, having first survived the end of the world.*

*Well, let me tell you, brother, I've been thinking 'bout that myself!*

*And you're in luck, 'cause I really do know where it all started. I'm probably the only one left alive on this God-forsaken planet who does.*

*What's more, I was there.*

*Right in the stinking-mouthed, bad-complexioned thick of it.*

*Ain't that something? The first exam I'll ever get top marks on is 'Armageddon-101!' My old lecturers would be so proud.*

*If they weren't already dead.*

*Anyway, from what I heard, it started the same way as most problems do. With an accountant...*

## THE LAST DAY

### 1

A faint light appeared through the darkness. It shone briefly before vanishing, obscured behind the low clouds and swirling, snow-filled air. Then came snatches of engine noise over the howling winds. The mechanical din grew steadily until, at last, the small twin-engine aircraft broke out of the gloom with its nose pitched-up, ready to land.

The Beechcraft King Air 350LR aimed for the narrow strip of compacted gravel, which was topped loosely with fresh snow and would have been impossible to distinguish from the rest of the white, snow-covered wilderness were it not for the red and green lights that adorned its edges. The tyres of the purpose-built King Air were layered with tiny spikes for extra grip, and when the wheels touched down puffs of white powder shot up from the runway. The aircraft slew from one side to the other as it reduced in speed, the rudder on the T-shaped tail edging from side to side as the pilot battled to keep the plane straight.

Despite these difficulties, and the treacherous side-winds, the pilot managed to stabilise the aircraft and taxi it towards the doors of a green, snow-peaked hangar. Beyond the metal-panelled structure were other buildings of various sizes. Red lanterns on waist-high poles marked the shortest routes between them.

When the King Air neared the hangar, the large green doors started to open, sliding apart. The aircraft rolled inside before halting on the concrete ground. Around the aircraft came a surge of activity as green-overall wearing mechanics approached, some with toolboxes and one in the cab of a fuel truck.

*Swift action from the tool-monkeys was never a good sign. Not for me, anyway...*

The pilot eyed the commotion as he gathered his things. He walked down the aisle of the empty passenger section and pulled the lever to open the hatch at the rear of the aircraft. He was immediately grateful for the blue ski-jacket that he wore. The hangar doors were already closed, but the temperature inside the massive void had plunged below zero while they'd been open.

Standing below the hatch was a man with a large smile. "Good flight, Budd?" he called up. Anthony Pope was an African-American, born in San Francisco, and had a heartfelt laugh and a happy demeanour. He was wearing a grey jumper and padded trousers. He'd spoken over the top of a clipboard, but his eyes remained on his paperwork as he scribbled away with a pen.

"Same as usual, Tony," the pilot answered. William, or Budd, Ashby was six-one tall, with a strong but not overly muscular build. He swept back his hair and scratched at his stubble-covered chin. There was a hint of grey mixed in its dark hue.

"That bad, hey?" Tony replied. He tucked his pen behind his ear and tore off the top piece of paper. He held it up for Budd to take. "Listen, I know you're not gonna like this, but both Josh and Benny are down with stomach cramps, I've got a meetin' with the pen-pushers and one of the science boffins just requisitioned a flight with immediate effect. I'm afraid you're gonna have to do it."

"Oh, come on. They can't both be on the sick. They're yankin' your chain. Gimme a break, yeah? And there's no way I should be flying in this weather, especially not solo. There's a storm coming."

"You know the contract, Budd. The ground crew are refuelling you now and then you're scheduled for take off. That's your flight plan," Tony said. "Why don't you get some coffee while you're waiting? Again, I'm sorry about this, but you can rest when you get there; I cleared it with the boss that you don't have to turn straight back around."

"Oh, thanks a lot," Budd said, his words trailing into a sarcastic chuckle.

*Tony was a good guy, but far too much of a stickler. If the science geeks wanted an emergency flight, I'd have let 'em fly it themselves. Then they'd know what an emergency really was...*

"Well, I've gotta get goin'," Tony said. "I'll see you tomorrow, yeah? Remember, we've got some downtime in New York next weekend. I got our places booked on the Learjet, flyin' from Heathrow. When was the last time you partied with a couple of nice American women?"

"You're buying," Budd said as Tony walked away. He closed the hatch to keep the aircraft's warmth inside and then returned to the cockpit. "Both got stomach cramps, my ass," he said as he took his seat.

## 2

"All right, chief, what the hell is all the urgency for? I should've been soaping up in a lukewarm shower right 'bout now," Budd said once the King Air had escaped the bad weather over Hope Island and was flying above the somewhat calmer waters of the sea. He adjusted the position of his headset and microphone.

"I'm sure you wouldn't understand," the scientist answered in a curt, well-educated English accent. He was sitting in the co-pilot's seat and leafing through documents in a foolscap folder.



*I could only think of one word to describe this particular brainiac. Work-obsessed geek. Okay, that's three words...*

"Try me."

The scientist sighed and rolled his eyes up into their lids. "If I do, will you then let me work in peace?"

"No need to be a jerk, I'm just making conversation. You can always go and sit back where you're meant to be. I'm sure we've got sick bags somewhere," Budd said, thumbing towards the empty passenger compartment.

"No, no, I'm sorry. I did not mean to be rude. It's simply that I'm under a lot of pressure. But I will explain to you what I can. Leaving aside the science, someone wants to cut our budget, and that could prove very, very dangerous."

"Oh, you're getting screwed for money. I know that feeling, pal. I'm a divorcee."

"I'm sorry to hear it," the scientist replied sympathetically.

"Don't worry; these things happen. And I can't really complain: two of the proceedings were my fault. At least, that's what my lawyer told me."

The scientist looked puzzled, but although his lips started to form a word, a question, he resisted the urge to delve further. Instead, he lowered his head and turned his attention back to his folder.

"The name's William Ashby," the pilot continued. He thrust his right hand under the scientist's nose. "But you can call me Budd. My friends do."

The scientist fumbled with his papers, preventing them from slipping away. He then shook the offered hand. "Charles Deacon."

"Glad to meet you, Charlie. If you don't mind me saying, you look pretty young to be a top boffin."

The scientist forced a smile. "I guess that, at twenty-four, I am. My lecturer at Oxford used to work with Professor Samson, who's the leader of my project, and he forwarded him one of my dissertations. A week later, I received a job offer. That was three years ago."

"Wow, it must've been some dissertation. What was it on?"

"The theoretical possibility of time-travel."

"Time-travel? You mean like that car did, in that movie?"

Deacon's brow furrowed for a moment. "Something like that, yes."

"So, Charlie, if you don't mind me asking, what is it exactly you eggheads get up to that requires you to be hidden underground on a frozen rock? It's not exactly Babe City. You know what I'm saying, right, buddy?"

"What security clearance do you have?"

"Erm," Budd said, hooking his left eyebrow upwards. "I don't think I have any."

"I hold a Level Six pass. Mister Ashby, I'm truly sorry, but if you don't already know, I cannot explain."

"No sweat, I figured as much. Anyway, with some luck, which means as long as this weather doesn't change, we should have you back in Blighty in seven, maybe eight, hours. Till then, just sit back and enjoy the view."

"Thank you."

### 3

By the time the King Air touched down on the small grass airstrip, Budd was exhausted. He opened the hatch at the back of the aircraft, hooked a rope ladder to the frame and then descended to the ground.

The scientist followed him down, looking around the quiet airfield. There was a long strip of grass that acted as the runway, and set back from its edge was a small control tower and two grey hangars. Parked nearby were two Cessna 182s, a Bell helicopter and another King Air 350LR. The main doors for the two hangars were closed.

Behind the control tower was a tarmac road that led up a slight slope towards a large, stone-built mansion. The airfield was on private property, owned and run by TimeTech Solutions. Nobody else had the use of the facilities, which Budd found gave the small airport a slumbering atmosphere. There was no one to greet them.

“You okay from here, Charlie?” Budd asked. He had left his ski-jacket on the aircraft: winter in Britain was damp and miserable, but he rarely found it cold. He placed a blue rucksack on the grass and then opened it up and took out a brown Stetson. He pulled the hat onto his head.

“Yes, I think so. Should I walk up to the mansion?”

“Got it in one. There’s not a lot inside the hangars, unless you’ve got a thing for mechanics.”

“Well, thank you again. Goodbye, Mister Ashby.”

Budd watched the scientist depart. “Good luck with your money worries,” he called out after him. “Just tell ’em the cheque’s in the mail.”

The scientist turned to wave, but said nothing in return.

Alone in the shadow of the King Air, Budd lifted his Stetson to run his hand through his dark hair, sweeping it backwards. He let out a long yawn. He was tired and, although it was only early afternoon, he intended to use one of the overnight rooms in the mansion to sleep through the remaining daylight hours. All he had to do first was file his report with the control tower. Come the evening, there was pub in a nearby village that he wanted to visit. He simply needed some rest first.

### 4

Budd woke to a knock on his door. He sat up on his bed, pushed aside the sheets and then swung his feet out onto the carpeted floor. The room’s curtains were closed and so he leant over to the bedside table and fumbled for the switch on the base of the lamp.

The knock at the door sounded again, this time a little louder. “I’m coming, I’m coming,” Budd called, his voice rasping because his throat was dry. “But if there ain’t a fire, don’t expect to see no happy, smiling face.”

He placed his finger on the switch and the room filled with light. Blinking, he got up from the bed, wearing only a pair of black boxer shorts, and then took the few steps to the door. Twisting the lock, he pulled it open. “Okay, pal, where’s the fire? Oh, it’s you.”

Charles Deacon was standing in the corridor. There was an apologetic look across the youthful scientist’s face. “I’m very sorry to wake you, Mister Ashby. But I need to ask you a favour.”

Budd stepped back and motioned for the scientist to enter the room. He returned to sit on the ruffled sheets of his bed as Deacon closed the door. “Go on, then. Ask away.”

Deacon glanced around the bedroom. There were scattered clothes on the floor, washing utensils in the sink and a half-eaten sandwich on the bedside table. They had touched down less than two hours before. “I’m here to request that you drive me to London. Apparently, there’s a

conference here at the mansion this evening, and the management is refusing to spare me a driver. They've lent me a car, but, well, driving is not a skill I possess. I do not have time to wait for someone from London to fetch me as it's vital I get there as soon as possible."

"I'd love to, Charlie, really, I would, but if I don't get some sleep there's no way I'll be fit to fly back to Freeze-Your-Ass-Off-Island tomorrow morning, and that's what my flight plan says. You've met my boss, right?"

"Really, that is of little consequence. I can have it taken care of. Mister Ashby, I need you to do this for me. I've already taken the liberty of reserving you an extra suite, and I imagine I'll need your assistance for several days. But you won't have much to do, so there'll be plenty of time to relax. We'll be staying at the New Millennium Hotel."

Budd reached for his rucksack. He wanted a fresh pair of trousers. "Gimme two minutes."

*The New Millennium Hotel, as far as the rich and famous were concerned, was just about the snazziest, swankiest place to be seen in London. And pretty much anywhere else in Europe, too.*

*So, on my crappy wage, I had 'bout as much chance of staying there as I did of running for President. Of England.*

*All things considered, I was more than happy to give Deacon a helping hand.*

*Just outta the kindness of my heart...*

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