

CHAPTER 1

MONDAY: 5.35 P.M.

CENTRAL LINE

In the darkness of the underground, among the bats and the spiders and the rats, another train thundered down a neighbouring tunnel.

People read their newspapers. Some tried the crossword. Two kids argued over who was having the last Haribo. A woman shuffled in her seat and dropped her folder of papers. They splayed out over the floor. Letters from clients. Telephone messages. Conference notes. Doodles on a pad. A day's work.

A speaker in the corner broke the silence. 'Ladies and gentlemen. The delay we're experiencing is due to a broken-down train up ahead at Holborn station. We apologise for any inconvenience caused.'

Passengers kept on reading. Delays like this were common on the Central Line.

The lights of the carriage flickered again. There was an electrical kind of buzz, more flickering, causing shadows to chase around the carriage, and then . . .

Darkness.

The woman on the floor kept scrabbling around, trying to collect up her work. Blindly her hands swept over the dirty floor,

fishing for bits of paper. She was grabbing anything now and stuffing it into her briefcase. She felt nervous; she hated being trapped in between stations. And now in darkness too.

‘It’s so annoying!’ someone said.

‘We’ll be off soon, don’t worry about it,’ said another.

Then silence.

Another announcement. ‘Ladies and gentlemen. I’m sorry to have to inform you that we’re experiencing an electrical fault. I’m sure we’ll be able to fix it and will be on our way again soon. In the meantime, let me—’

The speaker clicked, buzzed and then fell silent.

Nothing. No light. No sound. No help.

People started chatting to one another quietly, trying to ease the tension.

‘Always happens on the way home, doesn’t it? Never on the way to work!’

‘Typical!’

‘You’re right. We’ll be off soon, though.’

‘Yeah, don’t worry about it, luv.’

‘I never said I was worried. Just bored.’

Anonymous conversations in the dark.

One solitary emergency light above an exit door flickered on. Like a candle flame it brought a momentary comfort to the people around it.

One by one, other emergency lights blinked wearily into action, offering just enough brightness to read by. The conversations became unnecessary and passengers settled back into their private worlds of books and papers.

And then it happened.

One person saw it first.

She screamed – a piercing, chilling scream that ran right through everyone like a burst of cold air. People leapt up.

‘What?’

‘What’s wrong?’

Confusion began to sweep through the packed train.

‘What the hell was that for?’

‘THERE!’ she yelled. ‘Out there! At the window! Look!’

Everyone turned their heads in the direction she was pointing.

There was a face.

In the tunnel outside, appearing through the shadows.

A lank, pale face, its cheek pressed up against the glass. Distorted and dribbling. Rings of swirling gases circled its head.

Screams spread through the carriage.

The hideous face peeled itself off the window, leaving a foul trail of cloudy dribble on the glass, like green and yellow algae. The glowing plasma that encircled it intensified as it contorted and puckered up to break into a gruesome smile. The sickly grin exposed brown, rotting teeth. Its cracked and bloodied lips widened. And kept widening. Soon they revealed a gaping hole in the centre of the face, towards which the dark, lifeless eyes now seemed to sink downwards. Features blending like smoky images.

On and on the mouth widened, jaw dislocating, eye sockets sinking yet further down into the black. Then, when the mouth could extend no more, and the void seemed vast, it spewed out a rank mixture of maggots and cockroaches. They hurtled at the window, some sticking to the mucousy dribble, others rattling against the glass like hailstones and scurrying in every direction, intent on finding a way in.

The rattling rose to a deafening din and the window finally gave way. Lethal shards of jagged glass launched in every direction. Flesh was pierced. Blood was pouring. The plague of beetles and lava began to gnaw away at passengers’ faces. Like piranhas they worked, as their startled victims struggled frantically to brush them off, screaming and crying.

The thing at the window was now inside.

It scoured the seats. A mottled and congealed face. A mouth

now shrivelled, black and pursed. A body engulfed in a dark, swirling cloak that crawled with beetles. A dirty white shirt, open at the neck, revealing skin that peeled from the bone, like an old carcass for dogs. And a strange gaseous plasma that encircled it, merging the edges of its body with the rank air around it.

Suddenly, out of the black folds of dirty cloth, a grey, skeletal hand appeared. The fingers seemed dislocated and worn. Stippled bones, stripped of flesh. They clutched something tightly.

Polished wood. Metal fixings. Shiny barrel.

It couldn't be.

It was.

A seventeenth-century duelling pistol.

There was a deafening crack, which echoed around the carriage. The thunderous shot had been released in the direction of a businessman, cowering in the corner. He'd taken the bullet clean through the neck. His suited body slumped to the floor, spurting blood across the faces of the petrified onlookers. The ghostly apparition let forth a blood-curdling laugh of victory and reached down to the body. With a gruesome snap it broke the man's ring finger and pulled it clean from its socket. Right off. The ghost pocketed the bloodied finger, with its shiny gold wedding ring still attached. Turning to face the terrified passengers, now frozen with fear, it raised a hand and began lashing out.

There was an agonising shriek. The ghost had gouged out the eyes of a woman watching, mouth open, her body stiff with fear. She grabbed her face, collapsed to the floor and passed out. Fodder for the beetles.

Pandemonium broke loose. Deafening screams, frantic pushing and shoving. Panic blew through the train like icy wind in a tunnel.

'Get it OUT! Get it away from me!'

'Somebody! For God's sake.'

'Help me!'

Passengers clambered over one another, desperate to get to the doors. Some tried to prise them open with their fingers, their skin pressed white against hard metal rims – but they stayed shut. No way out. The ghost trudged on, deeper into the carriage of hell, firing off shots and spewing foul insects over everyone.

As it swept past, those who survived could see through their tears that it was, or had once been, a man, with a ring of rotting red flesh around his neck – a souvenir from the gallows, where the hangman’s noose had wrung him dead.

Desperation grew further as people tried to escape through through the broken window, or slammed their shoes frantically against other windows. In the rush of bodies, all anxious to get through the connecting doors into the next carriage, a woman fell to the floor and was trampled over. She pleaded for people to stop crushing her, but soon her voice fell silent. Her begging ceased. She lay squashed in the aisle, her neck broken.

Another loud crack from the pistol. The ghost forced its way through the mass of terrified passengers at the door and entered the next carriage along. More yells for mercy. He grabbed the first woman he found. He lifted her up and pressed her face close to his. She gagged on the smell of maggot-infested flesh. His stagnant breath gushed from the black hole in his face. She retched again. She stared into the black, eyeless sockets in front of her. Into nothingness.

He parted his lips, grinned, and through the sickly dribble, in a harsh, guttural voice, he whispered to her:

‘Good day, madam. Your money or your life.’