

CHAPTER 1

THURSDAY 9 JUNE: 11.57 P.M.

BOOTHAM, YORK

The man stared at the ceiling and allowed his eyes to trace the familiar route map of cracks that wove through the tobacco stains and patches of mould above him.

A clock on the far side of his apartment ticked its way through another monotonous minute, just as it did every time he lay down to wait for the spirit.

How many times had he done this? How much of his life had he spent lying waiting, watching the spiders crawl. Is that what they do? Crawl? he asked himself.

Or is crawling what four-legged creatures do?

Do they creep instead?

'Jesus, who cares!' he said aloud.

The stillness was disturbed before the tick-tocking resumed.

The man focused on his own breathing. He could always tell when he'd had a coffee too late in the day. He could feel the rapid rhythm bouncing in his ears and his breathing was unusually fast for someone lying down doing nothing.

Always *nothing*. Just waiting. He glanced over at the wardrobe, the rug and the floorboards beneath, where the old petrol can lay

hidden. Was he about to use it again? Was carnage on its way? He prayed not.

At times like these he was no longer a conscious, thinking person. A receptacle, that's all. An empty vessel waiting to be topped up again with the regular dose of . . . of what?

What *was* it? And where did it come from?

The spirit had been reaching to him since he could first remember – since he was a boy – clouding his decisions, shaping his ambitions. Owning him.

He closed his eyes and relived the moment again – that first time he'd ever heard the voice. It was so clear. Even now, twenty-five years later – twenty-five years of sharing his life with this uninvited guest – the hairs on the back of his neck prickled at the thought of it. That first, terrifying moment when the voice had penetrated through his little skull and on into the private recesses of his head. He didn't know why or how or where it had come from; he only knew he wanted it to stop.

But it didn't. And it kept coming back, kept influencing him. Sometimes it seemed like he had no free will – like his life was already mapped out for him.

As a kid, his parents had told him he was 'dreaming again'. He'd thought at the time that perhaps they were right, because the voice only came at night, and had always been silenced by the morning.

But now, as a man, living in a bachelor flat, his parents dead and his girlfriend gone, there was no one to tell him it was a dream any more. No one to stroke his blond hair and place a cold flannel across his brow.

He shrugged away the self-pity and tried to empty his mind of thoughts, ready for his guest.

He waited silently, the clock ticking like footsteps.

And slowly the voice came.

'Tonight is our time, little one,' it whispered, still using the same name from way back. It had always done that. 'Tonight.

You'll silence him for ever and our quest will begin in earnest.'

'How, master?' said the man.

No reply.

'How shall I silence him? *Tell me!*'

'Ashes to ashes . . .' came the reply.

The man heaved a sigh. He knew what that meant. Just like before. Just like every time. The spirit's obsession had never abated.

Burn him to death.

The smell of petrol always lingered in the man's nostrils for days afterwards. And he could smell it on his fingertips, especially when eating.

He'd hoped it would be different tonight. He'd clung to the faint possibility that the victim could be dispatched differently this time. Not burning again.

At least it was only the smell of petrol that lingered. The man had usually disappeared well before the stench of burning flesh could ever reach him.

That pleasure was for the firemen. The poor souls whose job it was to go in and remove the blackened bodies.

No, the smell of charred skin would be too much for the man. Besides, if he'd hung around long enough to smell them burning, chances were he'd have been caught.

But he had often wondered. As a kid, he'd once thrown a frog on a barbecue and pressed it down with a fork until it gave its last croak. He remembered the smell vividly.

Was that what chargrilled people smelled like? Dead frog?

'Hurry, little one.' The spirit's voice shook the man from his pondering. 'The night is on us and the flames of hell are rising. We must dispatch him tonight.'

Whether it was the frog or the whisky or the fact that he hadn't slept properly for three days the man wasn't sure, but he just couldn't face it this time. The thought of slipping out into the dark, for another kill? Not tonight.

‘Why, master?’ he whispered into the empty room. ‘Why tonight? I don’t understand why I have to . . .’

He trailed off. The pain was coming. He should have known it would. Whenever he’d shown disobedience in the past, he’d felt the same sensation – a sharp, agonising jab, like a dagger piercing into his flesh. But he never knew where it would enter his weak body. The spirit liked to surprise.

A blood-red stain seeped slowly on to the cream duvet just beneath his right thigh. He was leaking again. Just like before. And as the blood ran from his veins, so his courage ran with it.

Why he’d been the one chosen all those years ago he didn’t know. What he’d done in a past life to deserve it he could only imagine. All he knew now was that he belonged to the spirit, and he had the scars to prove it. His body was peppered with lesions from past moments of defiance. Would he never learn?

He grabbed his leg and pressed hard to stop the flow.

‘I’m sorry, master!’ he pleaded. ‘Leave me! I’ll do it. I will, I’ll—’

‘Rest, little one. Calm your head. I know you, better than you know yourself. I’ve watched you grow. And tonight is another step on our journey together – a journey that will end in triumph. You know it. And we shall reward you. Fear not. You are part of a much greater plan – so great it lies beyond your comprehension. But you will share in its glory.’

The man had heard the same speech many times before. But the crimson stains were spreading and his leg was paralysed with pain.

‘I’ll go now, master,’ he said weakly. ‘Please. Let me prepare.’

‘Then our quest continues, little one. I shall return on the morrow, to hear the good news.’

He was alone again. The searing pain in his leg slowly eased.

He rose gently and limped to his chest of drawers. He fished around inside for the screwdriver.

Then he moved to the wardrobe. He put his shoulder to it,

pushed sideways, and the old beer-stained rug beneath it ruckled, revealing dark, dusty floorboards. He jabbed the screwdriver down between two boards and one came loose. He lifted it up.

There was the old can inside the felt bag. And the familiar smell. God knows he'd tried to wipe away the residue. He was fastidious in his cleaning every time, but there was always a trace, and it was enough to release the petrol vapours as soon as the floorboard was lifted.

He *had* to be more careful this time. Wipe the can clean.

Wipe it. Wipe it hard.

He shuffled to the kitchenette, precious can in hand, refusing to turn and face the bloodstained bed - evidence of another battle of wills lost. He'd deal with that when he returned. God knows he'd got used to washing away his own blood.

Reaching to the back of the cutlery drawer, he found the matches.

Moments later, hood up, the man left the building and entered the dimly lit street.