

CHAPTER 1

TUESDAY 2.16 A.M.

ST EDMUND'S HOSPITAL, LONDON

Adam McNeal's eyes shot open. Bloodshot and watery. Head pounding.

Like sharp needles, his screams stabbed the cushion of silence in this forgotten ward. But few people could hear him. It was a part of the hospital no one came to; that's why he'd been put there.

'They're coming!' he shouted, his body writhing around in the soggy bed.

No reply.

'Help me!'

His skin was postulated and weeping. Deep red and purple sores, like blackened bruises but yellow and pus-filled at the core, covered his pitiful body and clung like limpets to the embarrassing floral gown he'd been given, now stained and sodden.

The pillow beneath his sweaty hair was damp and as he sat bolt upright he left an imprint on it – the cradled shape of his poor, wretched head. He looked like a young child, caught up in some heat-oppressed night terror. He needed his mother to come and shake him out of it, tell him everything was OK, it was just a dream. Put a cold flannel on his neck, hold his hand and stroke his matted hair.

But Adam McNeal was forty-three.

And this was no nightmare. He was dying.

‘Yaaagh . . . Go on . . . get away, get away from me . . .’

Under the sheet his legs were kicking again and his arms were stabbing out at the terrifying images that flickered like projector slides across his mind’s eye. His flailing arms revealed painful black sores, growing like fungus beneath his armpits.

Sweat trickled down his forehead and seeped into the cracks and sores and scabs. His nose was darker than the rest of his face – blackened in parts, almost as if he’d bruised it. And beneath the sweaty hair at the base of his neck, there were more black spots forming.

‘The ghosts! Get ’em away!’ he screamed again. ‘No. No! Don’t take me. You can’t have me! You can’t have me, no! You can’t . . . you . . .’

There was a hand at his wrist.

Another at his shoulder. He was pinned down.

The needle pierced his skin and within a few moments the thrashing and screaming waned. A few more convulsions and then his body was at rest. The sedative had worked its magic. For now.

Emily placed the needle back in its case and stared at him. She could feel tears forming in the corners of her eyes. He must have been so handsome, before – beneath the dark scabs and the sweaty rashes. His strong jaw, his straight nose, and those symmetrical lips that moved almost imperceptibly as his breathing slowly steadied itself.

It was tragic to see something so poisonous and ugly eating its way out of something so beautiful. She stroked his left hand, placed across his large, muscular chest. The ring on his finger was now lodged fast. Blackened skin had swollen up around the shiny silver band, and the nails at his fingertips were flaking off, revealing dark sores beneath.

Where was this going to end? Emily knew the answer to that.

The doctors had written him off already.

Tests were still ongoing to identify his disease and how to treat it, if they could, but you only had to look at this man now to know that he was on a downward spiral.

And as a nurse it was her job to be right there, up close, watching the metamorphosis – a tall, handsome man slowly becoming a disease-ridden corpse. Prince into beast.

Emily picked up the needle case and the bottle of sedative solution and left the room forlornly.

The door closed behind her and there was a smash of glass. The bottle had dropped from her hand and shattered on the hard tiled floor. Its contents formed a syrupy puddle around her feet as she stood there.

Terrified.

Lighting in the corridor was dim at this time of night – just the emergency exits and the odd spotlight turned low – but it was enough for her to see the shape approaching. It seemed to glide eerily over the tiles instead of walking. It was wearing a long black overcoat, or was it a robe of some kind?

But it wasn't the dark robe that scared Emily. Or its apparent lack of arms and feet, engulfed in black cloth. It was its face that struck terror into her stomach and caused her body to shake uncontrollably.

Shrouded in a black hood was a pearly white mask, shaped like a skull, with concave cheekbones and large black holes for eyes.

But it was the nose that freaked Emily out and she started crying as the figure came closer. She'd never seen anything like it. In the centre of its skeletal face where the nose should be was an elongated beak, animal-like, about ten inches long, pointing in her direction, like a dagger.

CHAPTER 2

THREE DAYS EARLIER

CALDER'S JEWELLERY STORE, HATTON GARDEN, LONDON

Nicky Calder carefully placed the gleaming gold ring back into its snug position in the burgundy velvet display tray. The rows of jewellery inside the glass cabinets looked enticing. They had to. Tonight was opening night and he'd never get a captive audience like this again. They were coming to celebrate and drink champagne and be seen in this chic part of town. But Nicky knew different. They were coming to be fleeced. No one would be leaving without a stylish little paper bag with 'Calder's' emblazoned across it.

The door behind him clinked – that optimistic ring to say a customer had entered the lair. He turned and beamed at the guests wandering in. Outside he saw high-class taxis deposit upper-class guests wrapped in fur coats.

This was the night he'd been dreaming of for years. And it was finally happening. His new suit looked good, and the half hour he'd spent agonising over which shirt to wear had been worth it. The white, blousy top with oversized cuffs contrasted

well with the sharp lines of his slim-fit navy-blue jacket. Nicky had a flamboyant dress sense and so did many of his friends in the clubs and bars he frequented. He'd been known to wear the odd bit of eyeliner now and again, and his foundation and concealer were a godsend after those frequent late nights spent dancing and drinking. His blond hair was thinning if you looked closely, but he kept it short and applied enough wax to create a tufty, Tin-Tin flick above his forehead. He was the wrong side of forty, just, but he didn't look it – unless you saw him at seven in the morning, when he looked the wrong side of fifty. He loved champagne and cigarettes, that was his problem.

'Saluti! Benvenuti, my darlings!' he said warmly. *'Come in, come in. Champagne?'*

Some female guests giggled with undisguised excitement at Nicky's Italian accent, while their husbands rolled their eyes and clung tightly to their wallets in their pockets.

The shop was filling and Nicky was dancing across the room, air-kissing the cheeks of anyone he could find, while his assistants, Toni and Rachel, were offering fluted glasses of pink champagne from silver trays. They knew their brief – get as much of the stuff down the guests' necks as they could. Nicky didn't want to see anyone clutching an empty glass.

The small boutique in this famous jewellery quarter of London was awash with superlatives.

'Oh, it's divine, darling.'

'Simply stunning.'

'Look at this one, sweetie, it's a must.'

'Honey, just look at this. Don't you think it suits me? Oh, do say it does, darling.'

Nicky winked at Toni across the room and sneaked a quick smile. This was going to be a lucrative night.

CHAPTER 3

TUESDAY 4.00 A.M.

ST EDMUND'S HOSPITAL, LONDON

Dr Mike Withers rubbed his eyes wearily, got up from his desk and grabbed the clipboard. It was time to do the rounds. He loathed night shifts. By the time he'd finished and returned home, his wife would have got the kids up, fed them breakfast and bundled them off to school without even so much as a farewell hug for their daddy. And then there was the constant battle of trying to get some shut-eye while his wife tiptoed around downstairs trying to clear the chaos left behind by the children. There were no winners with a night shift.

He left his tiny room and began the long marathon of patient checks.

Twenty minutes later he was walking down the corridor into the quarantine ward, East Wing. This was an eerie place in the daylight and at night-time it assumed an even stranger atmosphere of neglect and hopelessness.

St Edmund's was one of those giant, red-brick Victorian hospitals. The solid block of building rose above the houses in this poorer district of London like a factory building. Its austere appearance lived up to expectations inside. Long, dimly lit corridors with Victorian tiles from floor to ceiling, like the kind

you see in old swimming pools. The wards were no better. Funding was tight, after all.

One day, Withers thought, he would make a name for himself and join all those better-paid doctors at the more prestigious hospitals across the city. Do some private practice work too. Triple his salary and then set himself up as a private consultant to the rich.

But for now, he had to contend with the night shift at St Edmund's - the only hospital brave enough to take him on after medical school.

He tapped the pass code into the metal keypad by the double doors and kicked the scuffed metal footplate. The door swung open with an ominous creak.

'Emily?'

Why wasn't she sitting at the reception desk, playing solitaire on the computer, like she usually did?

Maybe she was actually checking patients, like he always told her to do whenever he visited this forgotten wing.

But there was something strange in the atmosphere tonight. Chilling even.

He walked past the empty desk and on, deeper into the section. He passed Ward A and peered through the closed door. He could see two beds, each with sleeping bodies in them. He'd check on those in a minute. Better to find Emily first so as not to give her a fright. He'd done that a few times in the past and he knew how easily scared she was.

'Emily?' he said again, softly.

Nothing.

Another room on his left. No one there. Just empty beds. A lone fly buzzed around an emergency light.

He checked the third room and saw three beds, one of them empty, one emitting the guttural snores of a suffering patient and the other with an old man sitting bolt upright.

'Hello,' Withers whispered. 'Everything all right?'

No answer. He could just make out in the dim light a strange expression on the old man's face. He was wide-eyed but speechless.

Probably dreaming, thought the doctor. So many of the patients suffered nightmares – the frightening consequences of the high temperatures they were running. Better to leave him, especially if he's not making any noise.

He decided he'd talk to Emily and get her to check on him in a moment. Bringing someone out of a nightmare was always laborious and required the kind of bedside nursing skills he'd always lacked.

He turned the corner and headed for the last room in the section – home of the new patient whom everyone had been talking about. The man with the unknown disease. Unknown until the tests arrived, at least. They should've been here by now, he thought.

It was a long corridor, dimly lit. But Withers could see there was something on the floor up ahead.

He stopped.

'Emily?'

He ran the last few steps, his heart beating like a machine gun inside his chest.

She was a mess.

The dirty white floor tiles were stained with dark brown puddles of congealed blood that led ominously from her neck.

Emily's throat had been cut. Her head was twisted round and facing the opposite end of the corridor. He saw a terrified expression etched forever on her face. Her lifeless eyes were wide and her mouth was open and bloodied.

He'd seen some things in his short time as a doctor but nothing quite like this. He put a hand to his mouth as he felt the bile rising inside. He placed his other hand against the wall to stop himself from keeling over.

He regained his composure and – pointlessly, he knew –

stooped to place a finger at her neck to check for a pulse. Nothing. Her skin was cold.

‘Oh, God,’ he said.

A sudden chill began at the base of his spine and trickled up his back, bringing a shiver to his scalp.

If someone has done this to Emily – could they still be here?

He spun round, his breath quickening. His eyes were darting defensively in every direction. Up and down the empty corridor. He turned round again.

No one.

There was one room left. He knew whose that was and held his hand over his nose like a mask; last time he was in there the stench from the poor man’s skin was horrid.

He slowly pushed the door open. It was dark and cold. The freezing night air blew through him from the direction of the window. As he went to close it, his shoes crunched over broken glass and he saw jagged shards sticking out from the window frame like icicles. The window had been smashed. He peered through the gaping hole at the metal steps beyond – the rickety fire exit that led down to the shadowy car park below. His forehead felt icy cold.

He spun round to face the bed. The orange curtains that were pulled round it were flapping from the draught and they revealed brief glimpses of crumpled, sticky sheets.

‘Hello?’

Nothing.

‘Mr McNeal?’

Gingerly, he pulled the curtains apart and saw damp, sweaty sheets and patches of congealed, crusty blood.

But no patient.

Adam McNeal was gone.