

## CHAPTER ONE

Three authoritative knocks at the front door shattered the fragile morning peace. As Tom turned to the sound, the butter knife in his hand clipped the coffee cup, sending it spinning off the counter. Hot coffee poured over Tom's trousers before more liquid and shards of china exploded across the kitchen floor.

'Shit!' said Tom.

Three more knocks, sounding decidedly officious. Making no attempt to mask the irritation in his voice, he shouted, 'All right, all right, I'm coming!' as he stomped along the hall, wiping a sticky hand down a coffee-soaked trouser leg.

Opening the front door revealed a young female police officer, her expression concerned. Standing behind and slightly to one side of the officer, head drooped, shoulders sagging and eyes downcast, was Samantha, Tom's nearly-fourteen-year-old daughter.

From what little he could see of it, the skin around Samantha's eyes looked reddened. The rest of her face was puffy and covered in black streaks and smudges. The thought flashed through Tom's mind that he'd never seen Samantha wearing mascara before. Whatever else, a lot of crying had obviously been going on.

In a quick-thinking response to the irate expression on Tom's face, the officer began, 'Apologies for disturbing you this early, sir,' before continuing swiftly with, 'but are you Mr Thomas Duxworthy?' Her mouth was busy giving him a reassuring smile while the rest of her expression spoke of

sympathy. She'd already spotted the soaked trouser leg.

'Yes. Why? What's happened?' Tom replied.

'Daddy!' Samantha cried out, knocking the police officer aside in her haste to rush forward. Throwing her arms up around Tom's neck, Samantha burrowed her face into his chest. He automatically returned his child's cuddle.

Stooping to kiss the crown of her head, he noticed that she had recently dyed her hair. Naturally mousy, it was now an absolute and unconvincing jet-black. It didn't appear to suit her, but then who was Tom to judge.

Samantha was trying to speak but couldn't get the words out. Sobs racked her body and stole her breath as tears soaked cheap mascara indelibly into Tom's previously immaculate shirt. Looking back at the officer, he asked again, 'What's happened?'

'As you are probably aware,' the officer replied, 'Samantha has run away from home on several occasions recently. This isn't the first time we've enjoyed each other's company, is it Samantha?' Samantha was too busy crying to respond, so the officer continued, 'Samantha is now refusing to return to her mother and stepfather.' She paused before delivering the punchline. 'I've been given to understand that you, Mr Duxworthy, are what's commonly known as "Plan B".'

Samantha locked herself in the spare bedroom soon after, from where the sound of crying continued unabated. Looking down dejectedly at the mess of spilt coffee and broken china spread across the kitchen floor, Tom shook his head in dismay. The trousers would need dry cleaning. The suit was still new, in cornflower blue to match his eyes.

Glancing at his watch, he noted that he should have left the

house twenty minutes earlier. He'd aimed to be reaching the motorway by now. Besides showing early symptoms of panic, Tom was also angry with himself. As he had been discovering all too often recently, these things just happen—and more so with each passing day, apparently.

There'd been a ridiculous amount of this sort of random chaos going on, stretching back for months now. Whatever Tom tried to do, whichever way he turned, things just went wrong, fell to pieces, disappeared, melted, got lost in the post or eaten by a dog he didn't own. He'd seriously considered the notion that he might be losing his mind, slowly breaking under the strain. There had certainly been enough of it around lately; he was undeniably showing a few early signs of wear and tear, already a shiny grey hair or two vying for attention. But no, he wasn't going mad; life was just constantly taking the piss.

None of all that, Tom knew, excused him from having told the officer that he couldn't possibly take Samantha just now because he had an extremely important meeting to attend in London at one o'clock. The young lady hadn't been at all impressed, and neither had Samantha. Tom realised his crushing mistake the moment he spoke. He'd capitulated instantly and tried to take the words back. The officer had eventually allowed herself to be mollified, leaving soon after. Samantha was a different story.

'Nobody loves me.'

'Nobody understands.'

'I wish I'd never been born.'

'I didn't ask to be, you know.'

'I. Hate. You. All.'

'JUST LEAVE ME ALONE!'

Tom had no idea what Samantha's current problem with her mother was, but he was close enough to his daughter to

recognise teenage angst when he saw it. The black hair and copious mascara were enough to tell him that the conflict probably had something to do with Samantha's desire to acquire a pair of black Doc Martins for her upcoming fourteenth birthday. Or maybe a stud in each nostril joined by a little silver chain. Or even, perish the thought, a Rammstein logo tattooed across her forehead. Come to that, it might just be the dyed hair that had started the issue; Stephanie wasn't the kind of mother who would stand by watching as her only child went over to the dark side, not without putting up a protracted and ultimately futile fight. There was irony there, thought Tom. Stephanie's new man, Richard, an ex-business partner and once long-standing friend of Tom's, had been a goth too back in the day.

If Samantha had a genuine problem though, like being bullied at school, or suffering depression, or some other harrowing life event, he felt sure she would have said something to him by now. She always did. It was a part of their unbreakable bond.

Calling Samantha's school, Tom explained that Samantha had been up all night with a sore stomach and wouldn't be coming in today. A rather condescending voice at the other end informed him that Samantha's mother had already called in about Samantha's terrible headache.

Deciding it probably best just to leave his daughter alone for a while, Tom cleaned up the mess in the kitchen before heading upstairs to find his only other suit, a threadbare and nondescript little number in grey. All was now silent as Tom passed the door to the spare bedroom. He decided that this was probably a positive sign. Samantha appeared to be calming down.

Fifteen minutes later, he was back outside the same door.

Everything remained quiet. He'd changed his clothes, tamped down his unruly hair, regained his composure and was almost breathing normally. Today was incredibly important. Who wouldn't be nervous? He needed this contract. He really needed the money. And then also, if he was totally honest about it, he desperately needed a victory, some sort of win—for something, anything, just for once, to go right.

Tapping at the door, he asked, 'Samantha, are you okay?'

'No.'

'Samantha, I—'

'Leave me alone.'

'Samantha, please, listen to me. I'm sorry for what I said downstairs; you know I didn't mean it. I'm also sorry that you're having problems with Mum again. Of course, you're more than welcome to stay for as long as you like. Look, you've already moved in.' Tom paused for breath. 'I've really got to go now, Hun. There's a pizza in the freezer. You know what to do with it; read the instructions. I won't be home late, and we can talk then.' Before turning from the door, he added, 'I love you, Samantha. You know I do. I'll see you later.'

Samantha's predictable response was yet more screaming silence.

Tom glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time as he made his way down the hall towards the front door. Okay, he thought, I'm running nearly half an hour behind schedule. Par for the course and pretty much to be expected these days.

Collecting his laptop from where he'd deliberately left it, propped against the wall close to the front door so that he wouldn't forget it, Tom headed out. The entire pitch was on the laptop. He'd left it behind while otherwise distracted on two earlier, highly embarrassing occasions. It wasn't going to happen again.

Tom's pride and joy, his classic Beetle, was thankfully still waiting for him, parked on the short drive outside his small, rented, privet-enclosed, two-bedroom semi. The sight of the car's lovingly polished paintwork, glinting invitingly despite the overcast sky, relaxed him a little. The way things had been going lately, it wouldn't have surprised him in the least to find that the car had been stolen during the night. Or been crushed by a falling tree. It didn't matter that there weren't any trees within range; he was sure they'd happily walk to get there.

Savouring the car's scent of old oil and vinyl with petrol top notes, Tom carefully placed his laptop safely in the passenger-side footwell. Having laid his jacket neatly across the back seat where it wouldn't get creased, he held his breath while turning the ignition key. The engine responded instantly, jumping into life before settling down to a nice, throaty purr.

Slipping the gears into reverse, he took the handbrake off and, twisting hard in his seat, navigated the car slowly backward onto the road. He was especially careful now, recognising a situation just begging for an oncoming idiot not paying due care and doubtless uninsured. The Volkswagen was the only thing of value he still owned after the ridiculously expensive and acrimonious divorce.

The road was thankfully clear of oncoming vehicles, so Tom tried to finish the manoeuvre briskly. He was on the point of braking to change into first when a loud pop issued from the back end of his beloved car. Tom not only heard the whoosh of escaping air but also felt the sudden subsidence of the rear offside tyre.

'Shit!' said Tom.

Having driven the crippled Beetle gently back up the driveway, he stopped for a moment to think. Knowing he

would get filthy changing the wheel while doubtless ruining his suit in the process, he immediately discarded that idea. Retrieving his jacket and shouldering the laptop before locking the car, Tom fished for his phone. A quick scan of the departure times of trains to Paddington confirmed that he'd just missed the only one that would get him into London in time to get across town. So then, taxi it is. Not a problem. Really, not a problem at all.

He didn't dare go back into the house. Samantha would more than likely come out of hiding to find a new way of delaying him. Pacing up and down, constantly checking his watch, he waited on the pavement instead. The cab took forever, if forever lasted less than ten minutes. Deftly avoiding a shattered beer bottle in the gutter, the taxi pulled to a gentle halt.

Thoroughly stressed and not in the least in the mood for idle banter, Tom resolved to spend the time constructively doing deep breathing exercises and thinking about the meeting. Having carefully folded his jacket across the seat beside him, he opened the laptop and started checking the details of the presentation for the ten thousandth time that week. Deep breath in and hold, and deep breath out...

A little over ninety minutes and a painful chunk of money later, Tom finally found himself deposited outside the plush offices of Ronson and Gimble. Noticing a small coffee shop on the far side of the busy road, and with over twenty minutes to spare, he decided it was time to relax. He'd made it and was ready to do his thing.

Sitting at the counter by the window a few minutes later, stirring circles into the froth of his café latte while watching the world hurry by, Tom tried to get himself in the mood. He needed to enjoy the moment. Confidence was vital to the

success of the meeting.

Gallons of midnight oil had gone into this gig. The pitch was as sound as it could be, the complete rebranding of Ronson and Gimble Limited, purveyors of quality tools for the discerning gardener. Tom was proud of the results he had to show for his efforts: from letterhead to logo, from style guide to website, and all comfortably within budget. What could possibly go wrong, really? Apart from everything.

He had few worries as far as the meeting was concerned. Tom had met his prospective client, George Ronson, on several earlier occasions. The two men had always hit it off. George was getting on in years, true enough, but he wasn't as slow as he looked. The old boy knew his trade inside out and knew how he wanted it sold. Tom was sure that George was ready to give him the contract and certain that the presentation proved that he was more than capable of delivering.

Bouncing echoes off nearby buildings, the wail of an approaching siren intruded on Tom's thoughts as it grew shrill above the background drone of cars, buses and motorbikes. He watched with a growing sense of apprehension as an ambulance, blue lights in a fit of flashing, drew to a sudden stop outside the offices of Ronson and Gimble. Within seconds, a couple of paramedics exited the rear of the vehicle before running purposefully into the building. One of them was lugging a large green holdall slung over a determined shoulder.

Coffee forgotten, complimentary biscuit still in its cellophane wrapper, Tom picked up his laptop. Goose bumps crawled across his flesh as he headed for the door. He knew instinctively, without the slightest hesitation, precisely who those paramedics were now attending. The malicious force had caught up with him again, despite all his best efforts.



## CHAPTER TWO

Twenty minutes later found Tom standing by the roadside, feeling helpless and strangely guilty as they'd stretchered poor George into the ambulance. The old man was conscious, but his half-closed eyes weren't focused. He didn't recognise or acknowledge Tom as they carried him off. Obscured beneath the distorting transparent plastic of an oxygen mask, his face looked grey and pale.

Tom couldn't avoid the crazy thoughts running rampant through his head. Had he somehow placed that poor man directly in destiny's line of fire? Had his thwarting of the Fates, by taking a cab instead of just giving up, forced them to go after George instead? Was that how it worked? Was this all somehow Tom's fault? It certainly felt like it.

After the ambulance sped George away to an uncertain future, Tom went in to speak briefly with the receptionist. Explaining who he was he said that, just as a friendly gesture, he would like to send a card and maybe some flowers to George at the hospital. The receptionist, understandably shaken, took Tom's details and promised to get in touch once they knew more. She tried to smile professionally when he thanked her, but he could see that she was deeply upset.

Following his phone's directions to the nearest underground station, Tom tried to convince himself that he was more concerned about George's current welfare than his own sad, crumbling life. That might as well be put on hold for the foreseeable future. The gloomy thought darkened his

mood still further. With a sharp pang of instant remorse, Tom realised he should be counting his blessings. He still had his health, which was more than could be said for George, a daughter he loved tremendously, a roof over his head and all the other essentials.

After a numb tube ride across town, Tom spent more money he couldn't afford sitting at a nameless crowded bar, waiting for his train home. He didn't usually drink spirits, or anything at all until recently, but now felt the need for something with clout.

The first double bourbon hit the spot nicely, so it seemed a reasonable proposition to follow it up briskly with a second. With five minutes to spare before boarding his train, he managed to squeeze in a quick and irresponsible third. With minimal resistance to hard liquor, and not having eaten all day, the alcohol went straight to his head. The platform wobbled erratically with every careful step. What the hell, he thought, who cares.

The train was quiet, with only a few early commuters escaping before the main rush. Finding a window seat with a table, he squeezed himself in. Having laid his neatly folded jacket over the laptop on the empty seat beside him, he settled down with elbows on table and weary head propped on clenched fists.

The three double bourbons encouraged Tom's thoughts to wander aimlessly as he gazed unseeing through the dirty carriage window. He hardly noticed the man taking the seat opposite him until the aroma of hot bacon wafted across the table demanding the attention of Tom's empty stomach. So much for the celebratory lunch with client, he thought, watching as the pinstripe-suited commuter unloaded all the paraphernalia he was awkwardly carrying, one item at a time,

carefully onto the table. First came the offending bacon baguette in a brown paper bag, then a large takeaway coffee followed by a folded broadsheet newspaper. The commuter carefully stowed his battered briefcase in the overhead rack before making himself comfortable. His precise actions spoke of a practised routine.

The baguette smelt lovely. Tom regretted not having had the same idea, rather than going with the booze. Turning to stare out the window again, he tried to ignore the sound of eating as the train pulled smoothly from the station.

As they so often had in recent months, Tom's thoughts drifted to the endless string of disastrous events that he was slowly becoming convinced were deliberately destroying his life. Whatever he did, no matter how hard he tried, everything he touched ended up exploding into a thousand tiny pieces. Everyone has their little ups and downs; sure, that's the way it goes. But the last six months had been nothing if not a complete catalogue of catastrophes.

It wasn't just the important things like the back-stabbing business partner or the unfaithful wife; it was all the never-ending small stuff too. The traffic lights all turning red when he's already late. The broken ATMs when the trader only takes cash. The diarrhetic seagull and the freshly polished car. The shopping bag splitting when his arms were already overloaded. The virus that locks his computer just as the external hard drive with all his backups decides to irretrievably fail. The bank card missing from his wallet after he's scanned all the items at the self-serve checkout with the long, impatient queue. And yes, the coffee cups hitting the deck, the cheap mascara, the tyre punctures, and last, though by no means least, poor George Ronson, timed to destructive

perfection. Yeah, right. Stuff like that doesn't just constantly happen to people—that amount of bullshit takes planning.

This was the point in Tom's thinking where he usually began questioning his own sanity. The fact that he could quite easily envisage a third party going about their damnable business clearly spoke of paranoid delusions. He tried clearing his thoughts, turning his attention to the accelerating scenery. Consisting mainly of high brick embankments, however, it offered little to distract him.

Taking a break from his baguette, the businessman laid it reverently back down on its paper bag before carefully removing the lid from the steaming coffee. Another tempting aroma. Glancing enviously across the table, Tom noticed the bacon was lying mouth-wateringly nestled between thick slices of tomato and crinkly lettuce.

Then, at the outer edge of his vision, a vague simmering in the light hanging over the aisle beside him caught his attention. Turning his head slightly towards whatever it was, the light folded around itself, finding form. Tom's hackles rose in confused alarm as he realised what he was seeing.

Standing right beside his seat, materialising out of thin air, was a man no more than a metre tall. Even though Tom could now clearly see the diminutive figure, the apparition remained impossibly transparent, glowing opalescent. Dressed in the style of a scruffy Dickensian rogue, complete with a heavy overcoat with oversized lapels, a cloth scarf and a lopsided top hat, the ghostly figure radiated mischief.

Other than blinking rapidly in a futile attempt to clear his vision, Tom froze while he thought about his next move. The little man wasn't paying attention to Tom directly and hadn't yet noticed that he was being watched. Following his intent gaze, Tom realised that the ethereal figure was staring at the

exposed pocket on his jacket, lying on the seat beside him.

Moving with the practised stealth of a professional thief, the little man stepped in closer, reaching out a hand wearing a tatty, fingerless woollen glove. Tom remained inert, watching as the hand dipped deftly into his jacket pocket before reappearing again almost instantly, now clutching Tom's train ticket between two lean, gnarled fingers.

The spell holding him immobile broke with the realisation that the half-pint spook was robbing him. Finally reacting, he swiftly caught the little man by a surprisingly solid forearm while shouting, 'What the bloody hell do you think you're doing!'

Startled, the apparition looked directly into Tom's eyes, shock registering in the wrinkled face. The expression then briefly changed to one of sudden understanding. When he came to recollect the event later, he was sure that the little man had smiled briefly as he faded away, taking Tom's train ticket with him. Tom's hand, previously clutching a firm arm, was now holding absolutely nothing at all.

'Hey! Come back here, you little thief,' he yelled in panicked confusion.

In attempting to leap to his feet, Tom's legs banged with force against edge of the table, sending the coffee cup flying towards the bacon baguette, the newspaper and the suddenly alarmed pinstripe suit sitting opposite. At that moment a woman's voice further down the carriage called out loudly, 'Have your tickets ready, please.'

Tom was in a state somewhat akin to shock by the time he opened his front door. He had by now firmly convinced himself that he had deservedly suffered the effects of too much alcohol on an empty stomach. Rather than condemning

supernatural forces for the nightmare on the train, Tom accepted that he had nobody to blame but himself. That had certainly been the conclusion of the pinstripe-suited commuter and the lady ticket inspector. They had both been in favour of kicking him off two stops before home, preferably while the train was still in motion.

Fortunately for Tom, events had brought enough clarity of mind speedily back to his addled brain for him to manage, with many apologies, to convince both parties of his sobriety and harmless intent.

To the businessman, he explained that he'd had a very nasty dream, having briefly dozed off after a particularly gruelling day, and that he was most terribly sorry about the coffee, the baguette, the suit and everything else. Yes, he'd willingly agreed, recalling his own recent flying coffee experience, he could imagine it had burnt quite a bit. And again, he was very, very sorry.

Tom then produced the credit card receipt he still had in his wallet for the lady ticket inspector, proving the purchase of the missing ticket. Yes, he'd said, he realised that a receipt wasn't a ticket, and he would definitely take more care in future, and again he was sorry, so very, very sorry.

Collecting his laptop and jacket from the seat, Tom had moved to a different carriage for the rest of the trip and hadn't had to face either of them again.

Samantha was sitting on a stool in the kitchen when Tom walked in, engrossed in her phone. She didn't look up or acknowledge her father's presence as he entered the room. Tom knew this was Samantha's way of telling him something. What that something was, however, he didn't have the foggiest idea. Whatever it was, he decided, it couldn't be any worse than anything he had just experienced. Stifling a sigh,

he broke the silence. ‘Aren’t you going to ask me how my meeting went?’

Samantha looked up reluctantly from her electronic other life and replied grudgingly, ‘How did your meeting go, Dad?’

Tom gave his daughter the best smile he could manage under the circumstances. ‘Don’t ask,’ he said. ‘Fancy Chinese?’

Supper arrived soon after, delivered by a young lad riding a highly suspect moped. Whatever Samantha’s gripe had been, it quickly dropped into the number two slot behind the Chinese takeaway currently surging into the lead.

‘This stuff is full of monosodium glutamate, Dad,’ Samantha said, pushing noodles dejectedly around her plate. ‘Don’t you ever cook your own food?’

‘Only when I’ve got the time,’ Tom answered through a soggy mouthful. It all tasted fine to him. He loved MSG and had become accustomed to takeaways. The local area catered well to those who liked their food delivered ready to eat. Tom had all their numbers on his phone—whatever, whenever. Convenient, yes, but he had to admit, expensive.

‘Mum only ever cooks fresh food these days,’ Samantha replied. ‘She’s becoming really strict about healthy eating, because Richard says it’s important.’

‘Well, I’ll cook tomorrow, if you like, just to prove I can,’ Tom said, finding himself unexpectedly on the defensive. ‘What do you fancy? I can do a more than reasonable spaghetti, and I’ve been reliably informed that my chilli is surprisingly good.’

Samantha wrinkled her nose, shaking her head in disgust. ‘You never know what they put in mince these days, Dad. Probably more horse than beef. Anyway,’ she added, ‘we

should all be aiming to reduce our meat consumption because of the hidden global costs. The world can't afford meat every day. That's what Mum says Richard says.' Samantha paused, considering the matter before continuing. 'Still, if you serve it with plenty of green salad, with beetroot and avocado and stuff, that should be healthy enough. I don't want to put on weight while I'm living here. Oh, and don't make the chilli too hot.'

It was Tom's turn to shake his head. He had always been quietly proud of his spag bog and chilli. They were the only two dishes he could confidently cook. He could see that his problems were all still far from over.

After supper, while Samantha took a shower, Tom called Stephanie. Richard answered her phone. Tom felt the steam rapidly building pressure as Richard faked the usual meaningless pleasantries as Stephanie dried her hands. The conversation with her was, as always, stilted and direct.

Yes, she'd said, he could drive over in the morning with Samantha to collect clothes and other essentials. Nine o'clock would be fine. Tom then replied to Stephanie's only question. Yes, he'd said, Samantha's settling in great. End of communication. Next time he'd just text.

Samantha shouted down from the top of the stairs as Tom concluded the call. 'Dad, I can't find the conditioner. And where do you keep your clean towels?' Tom gave a slight groan before replying. Neither answer was going to please his daughter.

They sat silently in front of the TV a little later. As always, there was nothing worth watching. That didn't matter; Samantha was lost in her phone, and Tom had sunk into zombie mode. He tried broaching the subject of Samantha's troubles with her mother, but Samantha obviously didn't want



to discuss it. That was fine as far as Tom was concerned. They could talk when she was ready. He was happy having her stay over despite the added hassle. It felt like they were almost a family again. Tom had discovered that he didn't handle the whole living-alone thing as well as he'd once thought he might.

Samantha announced that she was off to bed. Saying goodnight, she headed upstairs, leaving her exhausted father to his own devices. He decided to follow her lead ten minutes later, but not before making himself his customary hot chocolate. It helped him sleep after a difficult day.

Standing with his back to the kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil, Tom was lost in thought when a surprised voice began talking behind him.

'What are you doing here, Ron?' asked the voice.

Blood turning to ice, Tom listened without moving.

'I've come to arrange for the morning,' someone apparently called Ron replied. 'You know, block the kitchen sink, rig the kettle to blow and curdle the milk. Anyway, same question back, what are you doing here?'

'There's been a change of plan...' the first voice began.

Finding the strength to confront the intruders, Tom turned.

There were two of them this time, the same as before, small, transparent and oddly dressed. The one talking soon stopped when he noticed Tom's attention. Their eyes locked. Tom noted that the little character didn't look surprised this time. The other chap hadn't noticed. He didn't look too pleased.

'What do you mean, change of plan? Nobody's said nothin' to me.' Briefly fumbling in an overcoat pocket, the apparition produced a dog-eared sheet of paper. 'Look, it plainly says 'ere that I've got to—' At that moment the little

man realised that his partner was staring across the kitchen at Tom. Glancing in the same direction, he did a quick double take as he realised that Tom was gawking straight back at him. 'Oh,' he said. 'I see we've got a slight problem here.'

The other apparition patted the one called Ron firmly on his shoulder, saying, 'Don't worry, it's all in hand. Let's get back, and I'll explain everything.'

Both characters gave Tom one last lingering look before dissolving into thin air. Tom stood immobile for a full ten seconds before the sound of the boiling kettle switching itself off made him jump. 'I'm not going mad,' he told himself without conviction. 'I'm not.'

Realising that he was no longer under the influence of too much alcohol forced Tom to accept the only possible explanation. However unlikely, however absurd and utterly ridiculous, he now knew for an absolute certainty that whatever he had just witnessed was, somehow, real. It was either that or he was totally insane.

Forgetting the hot chocolate, Tom took himself upstairs. He went through his usual routine of washing his face and brushing his teeth in a trance before heading into his bedroom to undress.

This time he wasn't altogether shocked to discover another of the little critters sitting quietly on the end of his unmade bed, its arms neatly folded across its miniature chest. This one, Tom noticed, looked to be on the wrong side of fifty and wore an old, peaked leather cap. A paisley neck scarf was tied loosely around its neck and tucked into the top of a plain waistcoat, worn under an open frock coat. Its little lace-up ankle-length boots, industrial-looking and doubtless hobnailed, only reached halfway to the floor and hung shy of the trousers above. The creature, man, ghost, whatever, smiled

at Tom as he stood in open-mouthed silence. It was a kind smile, not at all intimidating.

‘Good evening, Mr Thomas Duxworthy,’ the apparition said pleasantly. ‘I trust you can see me clearly enough. Allow me to introduce myself. My name’s Jack.’

## CHAPTER THREE

Tom experienced several emotions in the first seconds of confronting a spectral man in miniature sitting on the end of his bed. Had he been paying attention, he would have been surprised to discover that fear was not among them. The little man’s whole demeanour spoke of affability. But even without fear, Tom’s mind was a confused whirlwind that left him speechless and again immobile.

‘I suppose this must be a rather trying experience for you,’ said the little man. ‘To be expected, really, what with one thing and another. Got to be a bit of a shock.’

Tom still couldn’t find any words or even the ability to rally coherent thoughts. Jack continued by way of breaking the threat of silence. ‘Well, this is a historic event and no mistake. First contact. Mr Thomas Duxworthy meets Meddler Jack in the master bedroom of Number forty-seven, Sycamore Avenue.’

Climbing down from the bed, Jack walked smartly across the bedroom and stopped, his small hand outstretched upward directly in front of Tom. ‘I’m delighted to make your acquaintance, Thomas,’ he said, a broad smile lighting his face. ‘Mind if I call you Tom? I know that’s generally what

you prefer.'

Forced to bend slightly at the waist to reach, Tom gingerly and wordlessly accepted the proffered hand. He absently noted that it was warm, solid, and of firm grip as he gave it a brief and formal shake. A part of him also registered that, as the seconds passed, Jack, or whoever, or whatever he was, was becoming less transparent.

'There's got to be one or two questions running through your noggin right now,' Jack said, returning to his perch on Tom's bed. 'Why don't we make ourselves comfortable while we have a good old-fashioned natter,' he said, patting the rumpled duvet beside him. 'Sort a few things out, so to speak.'

The bed offering the only place in the room to sit, Tom moved as if in a trance as he sat beside, but not too close to, the slowly solidifying spectre. He finally found words. 'What and who are you?'

'Ah yes, what and who indeed,' Jack replied. 'Cut to the chase, as they say. I like that in a person. Directness of thought; that's what it shows.' Jack gave Tom another smile before continuing. 'It'd probably be best for me to do most of the talking for a start. You can then ask any questions you've still got once I've explained a few things. How does that sound?'

Tom nodded in the affirmative. His mouth was too dry, his mind too numb for words. He realised his whole body was shaking. Only slightly, but to the core. Probably some sort of mild shock reaction, he decided.

After a brief pause and a deep breath, Jack began. 'Right then, first off. Please accept my heartfelt apologies for turning up out of the blue without so much as a by your leave. Most rude and irregular of me, I must admit. But I had to move fast in case we lost you again. We've never tried communicating

with humans before, so it's all a bit suck it and see. There's one or two didn't even think it was possible, but we had to give it a go.' Jack looked up at the bewildered expression on Tom's face. 'I can see I'm not making much sense at the moment, but hear me out if you would be so kind and maybe the fog will begin to lift.' Jack scratched his chin, ordering his thoughts before continuing. 'Maybe I should start by telling you something about myself and how I fit into the great scheme of things. That might help.' Jack threw Tom a quick smile again.

'Just like everybody else back home, I work for the greater good and sole benefit of my eternal and all-powerful master, Lord Sod, as we all calls him. Though I must say, he prefers, indeed insists upon, being referred to as "Your Lordship" when addressed directly. I'm what's known as a meddler. That's my job, see. I meddle in your realm's affairs for Lord Sod. I take it you have heard of Sod's Law.'

'Sod's Law? You've got to be joking!' Tom couldn't believe what his ears were hearing, just as he was still struggling to accept what his eyes were apparently seeing.

'Do I look like I'm having a laugh?' Jack replied.

Tom had to concede that the little man appeared deadly serious as he returned Tom's stare. 'You mean like Murphy's Law?' he asked.

'Oh, no, that's not the same thing at all.' Jack looked suddenly offended. 'That's an idea from the Americas, that is. Murphy's Law lacks intent—no malice aforethought, see. And don't even mention Finagle's Law. Sod's Law, though, that's the real deal.' Jack appeared to puff himself up just ever so slightly with a touch of pride as he spoke.

'Anyway,' he continued after a brief pause, 'it's usually, though not always, a meddler's job to cross over into your

realm to ensure that if something can go wrong, it most certainly will. It especially pleases His Lordship if it can be arranged to do so either at the worst possible moment or to the worst possible degree.’ Jack gave Tom another of his little smiles at this point. ‘Sounds simple when you say it like that, but you’d be surprised at the amount of planning involved. Logistics, I believe you people call it these days. His Lordship has the means to track the whereabouts of just about every human on Earth. You wouldn’t credit it as possible.’

Glancing up at Tom to make sure he was still following, Jack continued apace. ‘People in your realm, other than your good self as of this very evening, of course, they can’t see or hear us meddlers. They’re not remotely aware of our realm’s existence. As far as they’re concerned, we simply don’t exist. That’s in part because whatever the human mind isn’t tuned to accept, it simply blanks out, see, like the blinkers you put on a carhorse to keep it from getting distracted. I’m given to understand that’s how you people evolved. There’s more to it than that, but it’s hard to explain, and you’ve got the basic idea.’

Tom had no idea at all, let alone basic. He was no longer paying much attention to Jack, who had by now solidified completely, and was instead pondering the nature of hallucinations in respect to an overstressed state of mind.

Oblivious to Tom’s now unfocused gaze, Jack continued. ‘Anyway, it makes life easy for us meddlers going about our business, just so long as we keep a low profile and don’t make ourselves too obvious.’ Jack stopped for breath while giving Tom another quick sidelong glance. ‘Which brings me to what we’ve been up to with you, see. We’ve deliberately made ourselves undeniably and irrefutably obvious, just to you.’ Jack paused again, allowing his words to settle.

Tom returned the little man's steady gaze but said nothing, thoughts of hallucinations suddenly forgotten. Somehow, Jack's words were starting to make some sort of crazy sense. The little man had Tom's full attention as he resumed, 'What with all our constant meddling in your life, your poor befuddled brain eventually said to itself, "Hang about a minute, something fishy is going on here," and it shifted its position just ever so slightly, so it could peek a bit beyond its blinkers. As soon as you started to believe, Tom, to really believe, that's when you began to see. I also happen to think that three double bourbons having a party in your internals helped, as it turned out, but that's beside the point. We've been after getting your blinkers off for quite a while. I didn't think you'd make it, to tell the truth, and time's now fast running out.'

Tom felt quick, hot anger suddenly rising. 'You inflicted a possibly fatal heart attack or stroke or whatever on George Ronson just to get my attention?'

'No, no, no,' Jack replied quickly. 'We certainly burst your car tyre, and irrefutably messed things up between your daughter and her mother, just for the fun of it. The coffee cup this morning—that was us, obviously. And loads more besides, as you have clearly noticed these last few months. Full responsibility and not a word of denial. But not that poor man's nasty turn. No, that was just honest-to-goodness bad luck, I do most solemnly swear.'

Tom had no way of knowing whether Jack was telling the truth about George but decided to accept what he was saying, at least for the time being. Now raised, however, Tom's anger realised that it had a lot more questions. 'Why do you do all this, what did you call it, meddling? What's the purpose?'

'Well, under normal circumstances, because Lord Sod

demands it, that's why. Because that's how I put a roof over my head and food in my stomach. Because that's what I have to do.' Jack's staccato answers came thick and fast without making much sense. 'We don't have the little luxury of options like you people over here. It's all, "Do as you're told or suffer the dire consequences".'

Anger subsiding beneath confusion, Tom decided it would probably be for the best if he let Jack continue uninterrupted.

'This isn't easy, you know, explaining who I am, what I do and why,' Jack went on, 'but bear with me a stretch longer and, with a bit of luck and a following wind, it'll all become a bit clearer, if never truly crystal.' Tom shrugged his shoulders and gave Jack a small nod. What else could he do?

'Let's maybe try starting at the beginning,' said Jack. 'Back in the year eighteen fifty-two, by your realm's calendar, my realm came into mysterious and sudden existence. Which, it must be said, was something of a shock to everybody in it at the time.'

'What?' said Tom, his forehead suddenly ridged in frowning furrows.

'The First Generation; that's what we call them now.' Jack continued after a brief pause, 'My great-grandparents, eight or so generations back down the line, they didn't have mums and dads of their own, see. The way they told it, they just appeared one fine day, already grown into their early middle age, the pair of them; their trades somehow learnt as if by instinct. They had a small hovel in the Warrens to call home and a brace of nippers snapping at their heels. The first male ancestor in my line was a foundry worker. His good lady was a seamstress. It was the same for everybody.'

'But how can any of that happen?' Tom was trying his best to keep up.



‘Short answer,’ Jack replied, ‘Nobody knows, all except His Lordship that is, who was doubtless somehow behind it all.’

‘How so?’ asked Tom.

‘Because he has been around, unchanged by the years, since the dawning of that very first day,’

‘Are you saying he’s immortal?’

‘Well, I’d say it certainly looks that way.’ Jack agreed before adding, ‘Also, he’s like you and all the others in your realm, human-sized, twice as tall as anybody else where I come from. He’s educated well above the norm, even for your modern world, and he’s obviously a man of exceedingly high breeding, of which there are no others at all back home. Oh, there’s plenty enough who try to act the part. None who are naturally born to it though, not when you stand them beside Lord Sod.’ Jack considered his next words carefully. ‘There’s something else you should know about His Lordship while we’re on the subject of similarities.’

‘What’s that, then?’ Tom asked, warned by Jack’s guarded expression that he might not like what he was about to hear.

‘You, Tom, with perhaps a few minor changes to the way you style your hair, are the absolute spitting image of Lord Sod.’

Surprise aside, Tom wasn’t sure what to make of that. Just add it to the ever-growing list of things I don’t understand, he thought. He was still in no way reconciled to the fact that he was sitting on his bed conversing with a miniature man. A man wearing Victorian attire who had materialised out of thin air only a few minutes earlier. After a second or two of silence between them, Jack asked, ‘Might I be so bold as to trouble you for a glass of water? I haven’t talked this much since I don’t know when.’

Following Jack downstairs to the kitchen moments later, Tom paused to listen at the door of the spare bedroom as they passed. All remained quiet. Samantha was doubtless fast asleep after her long and trying day.

Selecting the smallest glass in the spartan cupboard, Tom poured water from a flask he kept in the fridge. Jack needed both hands, as would a child, to hold the drink, which he placed on the breakfast bar before climbing up onto one of the stools and making himself comfortable. Tom then waited as Jack drained the glass in one long gulp, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand and gave Tom another of his smiles.

‘Okay,’ Tom said, feeling the need to somehow take control of events, ‘given that I haven’t gone crazy, am not hallucinating and that you actually do exist, which I have to say I still seriously doubt, why are you here and what do you want from me?’

‘Well now, good questions, straight to the point again,’ Jack replied. ‘But before I go into the whys and wherefores, maybe there’s something you ought to see. I think it’ll help put your mind at ease, so to speak, as regards to whether or not I’m as real as I say I am.’ So saying, Jack climbed down from the breakfast stool and moved to the middle of the kitchen, beckoning Tom to stand beside him.

‘Now then, I’m going to have to ask you to trust me on what’s about to happen,’ said Jack, reaching out his hand. ‘What I want you to do is just take my hand for a moment and close your eyes.’

Tom gave the little man a doubtful look, to which Jack replied with a gentle smile, saying, ‘Don’t look so worried, Tom. I don’t bite, and this won’t hurt one tiny bit. On that you have my word.’

Gingerly taking the little man’s hand, Tom closed his eyes

as asked. Even before opening them again just seconds later, he knew that something profound had taken place. At once, the air felt cooler and slightly damp and carried with it strange echoing noises and the sharp tang of bare metal and hot oil. As Tom's eyes found new focus, his entire world turned upside down.

He was now standing in a vast and mostly dark building. Gas lamps lit the scene here and there. Warm puddles of light cast long, dark shadows across an interior that was all iron walkways and monstrous, slowly moving machinery. Tom's feet sensed vibration, a long, deep rumbling that suggested a sleeping dragon snoring heavily somewhere beneath the flagstones now under his feet. At his side and still holding his hand, Jack peered up into the half-light with that same good-natured smile, saying, 'Welcome to Sod's realm, Tom.'