



## One Week Earlier

**T**here are some things in life and death that are certain. One of those things is that a man digging a hole in the dead of night is definitely up to no good.

A lamp swung in the branches of a hawthorn tree and the shadows of the headstones jumped around the overgrown graveyard. In the silence of the hour, each thrust of the shovel seemed loud enough to wake the dead that slept for eternity beneath the cold, hard earth.

There was the unmistakable sound of metal scraping against wood. The huge man digging the hole grunted, straightened his back and wiped a grimy hand across his sweaty, sloping brow. He looked up as another figure stepped from the shadows, carefully avoiding the patches of wet mud.

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This second man had done no digging. Even in the darkness that fact was clear as day. His sharply tailored suit was still in impeccable condition, unplucked by the prickles of the hawthorn trees and unsoiled by the fresh dirt that had been removed from the ground.

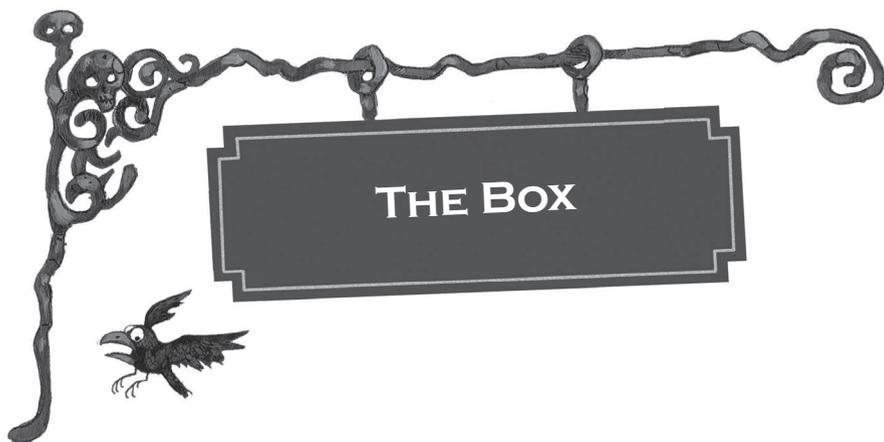
The suited man watched as the remains of a partly rotted coffin was manhandled from the grave. Now it sat beside the hole. He leaned forward as his brutish accomplice began to crowbar the lid open, the damp wood separating easily from the rusty nails. A satisfied smile flickered across the suited man's face at the acrid stench of embalming fluid released from within. He reached inside and lifted the corpse's hand to the lamplight.

He had found what he was looking for.

'It is you,' he whispered. 'After all this time. It is really you.'

He looked at the corpse's withered and lifeless face, then reached out to brush a strand of black hair from a cold, grey forehead.

'Your time has come at last!'

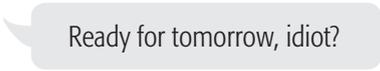


Jake Green was definitely alive. He was alive when he woke up, he was alive all day at school, and he was currently still alive as he trudged his way home through the little village of Elmbury. Being alive was something Jake took for granted. For as long as he could remember he had always been that way. Jake found being alive quite easy. All you needed to do was not die – and so far, for Jake, that had come naturally.

He turned to head up the dark alleyway that cut between the high flint wall and the back of a row of houses. Jake didn't normally come this way – like a lot of the living, he associated darkness with danger. But it was a shortcut, and the late-October sun was already low in the sky, and he was keen to get home.

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Jake's phone beeped. He unbuttoned the pocket of his coat and reached inside. It was a message from Sab, his best friend. If Jake was honest, the job of being his best friend wasn't a highly sought-after one, but they'd found a common interest in playing computer games and a common disinterest in studying. They had a mutual respect for each other, too. Sometimes that was all you needed. Jake opened the text.



Ready for tomorrow, idiot?

It was the sort of message that was typical of Sab. He was talking about their school trip: three days away from home. It sounded all right when you said it like that. But three days studying rock formations didn't sound quite as fun. Still, Jake was looking forward to the trip. It would be good to get away from what Sab called his 'Mum and Dad situation'. It was the only thing Sab didn't make jokes about. Sab knew what it was like. His parents had split up too. It wasn't a common interest as such. More of a shared affliction.

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Given how things were at home, Jake had jumped at the chance to get away for a while. His suitcase was packed and ready to go, waiting in the spare room at his dad's place. He typed his reply:

Yup.

Then as an afterthought he added:

Idiot.

It was the little details that made their friendship work.

The phone beeped again.

How's it going? Love you. Dad xx

Jake rolled his eyes. Dad signed all his messages like that. Like he was writing a postcard or something. As though he thought Jake wouldn't know who they were from.

To say Dad hadn't kept up with the forward progress of mobile technology was an

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understatement. He preferred old-fashioned things, like his campervan. In Jake's opinion, Dad buying the van was when things had started to go wrong. He typed a reply:

You'd know if you still lived with us.

Jake's thumb hovered over the send icon, but he knew he wouldn't tap it. He returned the phone to his pocket.

There was a quiet rustling sound in the bush. Jake paused as a cat emerged from the shadows.

'Hello, cat,' said Jake. He'd always wanted a pet, but Mum was too busy to look after one, and Dad . . . well, Dad *probably* wasn't responsible enough to have a pet. Jake squatted down and reached out to stroke the cat behind the ears, but it suddenly arched its back and hissed.

'It's OK, cat . . .' he moved his hand out of scratching range, then stopped. He looked at the cat. It wasn't hissing at him. It was hissing at something behind him.

A chill swept over Jake's body. He had a strange

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feeling that someone was there. Taking a deep breath, he slowly stood up and turned around.

The alleyway was empty.

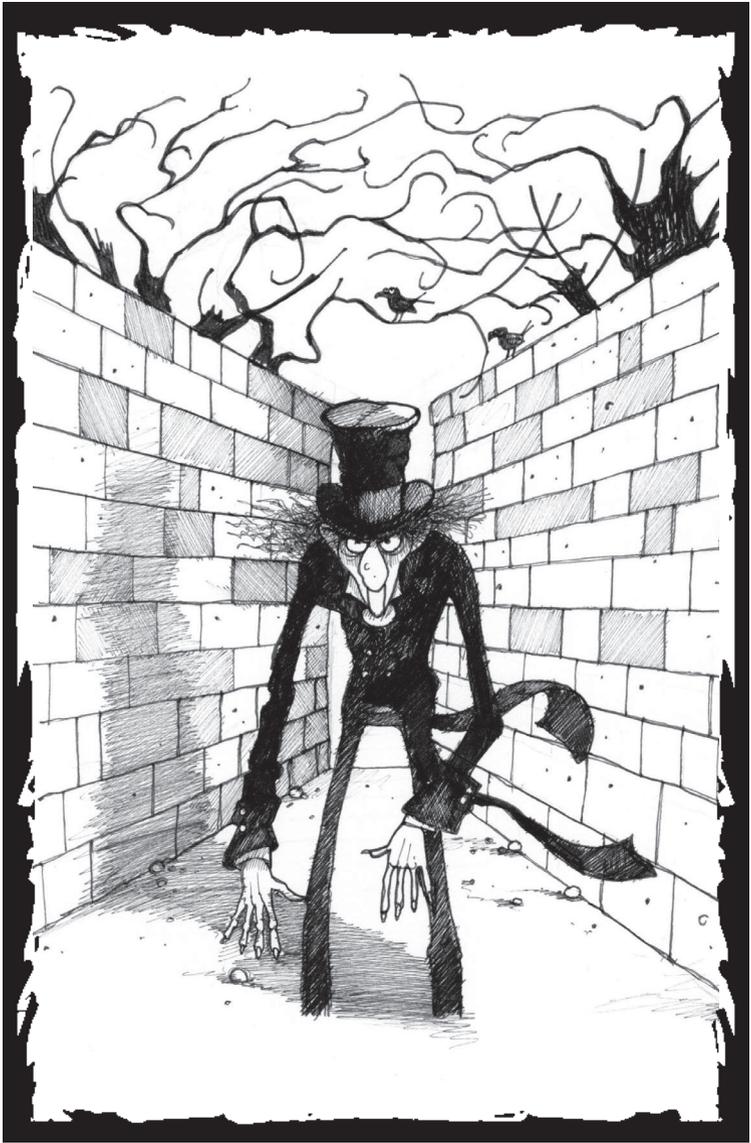
He breathed out heavily. 'Stupid cat,' he muttered, turning round to continue on his way. But the words caught in his throat, hindered by the fact that he could not close his mouth.

Where once the alleyway ahead was clear, now a man, tall, thin and stooping, stood within touching distance, blocking his path.

A top hat added to his already looming height and a tattered black coat flapped behind him in a sudden, cold breeze. To Jake he seemed the very picture of what an undertaker should look like, which was a) solemn, and b) wrinkly.

The man inspected Jake through small, baggy eyes perched closely together over a beak-like nose that, along with his flapping coat and long, thin legs, gave him the appearance of some kind of sinister wading bird.

The man took a pocket watch from his waistcoat and inspected it. He frowned and placed the timepiece back into his pocket.



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‘Good morning,’ he said in a deep voice.

Jake blinked. It was the afternoon – maybe even the evening – though he wasn’t too sure where one *officially* ended and the other began. He looked up at the darkening sky. Even if it was morning, it couldn’t by any stretch of the imagination be referred to as a *good* one. He didn’t know how to reply and he definitely didn’t want to start a conversation about the correct greeting to use when a person looms out of the shadows to surprise a child in a dark alleyway.

‘Er . . . yup. Good morning,’ he croaked, slowly edging backwards, tightening his frightened, sweaty grip on his phone.

The man removed his hat to reveal thinning grey hair and a wrinkled brow. He tucked the hat beneath a long arm. Some dirt fell from the brim.

‘You be a little early, but I appreciate punctuality. Pleased to be making your acquaintance,’ he said, not looking particularly pleased. ‘The name’s Stiffkey, but I’m sure you already know that.’ He peered at Jake through narrowing eyes. ‘I’ve a package for you.’

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The man reached into the dark folds of his coat and retrieved a clipboard and pen that he handed to Jake. Jake stared at a form on the clipboard, his brain refusing to read what his eyes could see.

‘You can just mark it with a cross,’ said the man, sternly, ‘if you ain’t been sufficiently schooled to read or write.’ He pointed a long grey finger to a space for a signature. ‘Although that would be highly irregular for someone of your position.’

Jake unhooked the pen. He was standing in a dark alley with the sort of man the phrase *I wouldn’t want to meet him in a dark alley* was invented for. It was probably best to skip to the end of the form as quickly as possible. He signed his name in an elaborate swirl of letters and loops that was illegible but looked cool. He’d been practising for when he eventually became famous for something. He blew on the ink and handed the clipboard back to Stiffkey.

Stiffkey looked at Jake over the top of the clipboard. ‘A mere child,’ he said, sighing. ‘No good will come of this . . .’ He shook his head slowly and replaced the clipboard in his coat. ‘But no good ever

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comes from the living meeting the dead.’

Jake might not have put much effort into staying alive so far, but right now he was conscious of definitely wanting to remain that way. He took a cautious step backwards, preparing to run.

Stiffkey stepped forward, stooping until his eyes were inches from Jake’s.

Once more he reached into the deep folds of his coat and pulled out a package – a small parcel wrapped in brown paper and tied neatly with twine. He pressed it into Jake’s hands. It was surprisingly heavy. Jake blinked and looked up at Stiffkey, unsure of what to do next.

Stiffkey’s mouth formed a tight smile, almost a grimace, and he breathed in deeply through his nose and then out again. ‘I know you will protect the box and carry out the Embassy’s orders. To be unburdened of the damned thing after all this time is a relief, I don’t mind admitting it. Good luck.’

He jammed the top hat back on his head and, starting from the hands and nose and working slowly inwards, faded into nothingness, until only a neat pile of freshly dug earth remained.

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Jake blinked again.

'Goodbye, Stiffkey,' he said quietly and shook his head in disbelief.

*I have just seen a ghost!*

