EMBASSY OF THE DEAD

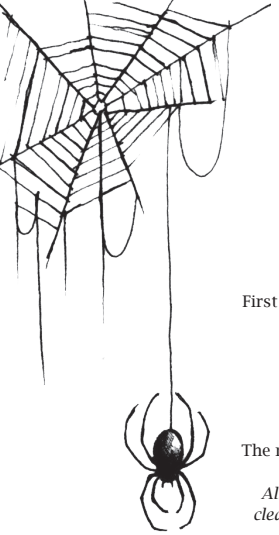
HANGMAN'S CROSSING

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With illustrations by
Chris Mould

Orion
Children's Books



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For Thomas



Grave Tidings

Shabwell, London: One Week Earlier

Ghosts don't feel the cold.

All the same, Amber Chase lifted the collar of her flying jacket to protect herself from the freezing night air. She'd been dead for ninety years, but old habits die hard.

Unusually for the city, the snow was beginning to settle. A light coating covered the dead-end street, a thin blanket of white concealing the grime beneath.

Amber kept to the shadows. With darkness came safety. Even though she was invisible to the vast majority of the living, it was best to take precautions.

Besides, *it wasn't the living she was afraid of.*

Something bad was crossing over. Something worse than she'd ever expected. She had a time, a

date, and now . . . a name. For the sake of the here-and-now and the happy-ever-Afterworld, it had to be stopped.

Grave tidings must be delivered.

Her handler would know what to do. He should be here by now.

Where was he?

Her eyes scanned the high brick walls of the alley. She was looking for the triple-crossed logo of the Embassy. A sign that would show he was here, somewhere, waiting in the shadows.

But she was at the dead end now and there was no symbol. She looked to the night sky, cursing her rashness – the trait that had got her killed in the first place.

Ninety years gone by and she could still smell her mistake: the acrid burning scent of her plane's over-heated engine. She could still hear the altimeter ticking down.

800 feet. 700 feet. 500 feet. 200 feet . . .

A countdown to the impact of the rocky desert that was hurtling towards her. A different pilot would have settled for breaking the world distance

record. But not her. She had to push the plane to its limits . . .

The only part of the plane they'd found was a small piece of metal bearing the words she'd carefully painted on the plane's fuselage: *Against all odds*.

She blinked away the memory of her death. Something had caught her eye.

Back down the alley a shadow peeled away from the wall. A creeping puddle of darkness that merged and grew upwards from the snow until it formed a jagged, faintly humanoid shape, faceless and grey, flickering into solidity as it paused to sniff the air.

Another shape peeled from the wall. Then one more. Now there were three creatures in total.

They must have known she was coming.

She had been betrayed.

But the safety of all the living and all the dead depended on her message getting through.

Three against one.

Her eyes narrowed and she reached into her flying jacket and took out a heavy wooden cosh. She had to escape. There was no other option.

Against all odds.



Staying Alive

Jake Green was still alive. At first it had been easy being alive, a simple case of *not* doing deadly things. Not crossing the road without looking. Not putting your finger in the toaster. Not choosing the mystery-meat lasagne in the school canteen. Then, for a few short days a couple of months ago, it had suddenly been a lot more difficult. He had accidentally discovered he could see ghosts and subsequently been sucked into the world of the Embassy of the Dead. From that point on, staying alive needed a more proactive approach, more drastic measures like stealing a campervan and going on the run with a spectral undertaker to try and prevent Fenris the fallen reaper rising from the grave to bring forth an Age of Evil. That kind of thing.

He didn't like to think about Fenris. With the help of a few new friends, he'd pretty much condemned Fenris's spirit to an eternity trapped in a severed finger. Jake hadn't had any choice – his life had been at stake and any sort of Age of Evil had seemed best avoided, if possible. So the world had been saved and Jake Green was still alive, but weirdly, as a side effect, the Embassy of the Dead had made him an Undoer – someone who helps ghosts resolve their unfinished business on the Earthly Plane so they can continue with their onward journey to the Afterworld. It wasn't a profession he'd ever considered before and so far, despite a mysterious postcard summoning him to the Embassy of the Dead, it wasn't one he planned on following. It seemed safer to just stay at home, play video games and push the postcard to the back of his mind.

Given Jake had recently saved the world, you would think, in the grand scheme of life and death, being late for Thursday morning registration wouldn't be that important. Sadly, though, this wasn't the case. Life on the Earthly Plane went on.

And that's why he was sitting at his mum's breakfast table, shovelling cornflakes into his mouth as fast as physically possible.

His best friend Sab, sitting opposite, was tilting his phone to control a game he was playing. He was less concerned with lateness.

Jake drank the last of the cereal milk straight from the bowl. A girl's voice sounded from behind him.

'I am appalled by your complete lack of table manners.'

There was a pause. Jake placed the bowl back on the table.

'Appalled but not *at all* surprised,' the voice added flatly.

If you were blessed with the ability to see ghosts and ignored her slight transparency, Cora could have passed for an everyday schoolkid – albeit one from an exceedingly posh school, with a hockey stick in one hand and a straw boater on her head. Cora was a ghost – one of those new friends who had helped Jake take down Fenris and stay alive. Jake had freed her from the all-girls' boarding

school she'd been forced to haunt since the 1990s. Now she lived in the spare bedroom of his mum's house. As a Possessor – a rare type of ghost – Cora was bound for ever to a small silver trophy from which she could venture no more than thirty or so metres. It meant she was never far away, demanding Jake take it everywhere with him, hidden in his rucksack. His only escape from her was to shut the lid. Then she was trapped inside. To be honest, he never did that. No matter how tempting it was. For one thing, he'd never hear the end of it when he opened it again. But anyway, he liked having her around, even if she was annoying. It got a bit lonely sometimes at home. He'd come to terms with the fact that his mum and dad weren't ever going to get back together. It wasn't the perfect situation, but then again it hadn't been perfect when they were together either.

Cora had promised she'd stay in her room this morning while Sab was here, but clearly she was already bored.

She leaned to one side and her hockey stick materialised from nowhere to support her weight.

'I don't know why your parents don't send you to boarding school. Then you would never be late. You might actually learn table manners too . . .'

Jake put down his bowl and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

'You've come to talk about the postcard again, haven't you?' he asked.

Sab looked up. 'Huh?'

'Nothing. I was just talking to myself.'

Sab went back to his game. 'Idiot,' he muttered.

It was a sign of affection.

Unlike Jake, Sab was completely insensitive to the presence of ghosts. He couldn't hear or see Cora. To be honest, when he was playing a game on his phone he was pretty much insensitive to the presence of the living too. Jake was quite surprised Sab had even heard him speak.

Jake stood up and walked to the hall to get his coat.

Cora was waiting for him.

'Too right I want to talk about the postcard. It's been almost a month since we were summoned back to the Embassy of the Dead . . . It might be

something important . . . It might be something *fun*.'

Jake pulled a face. *Something dangerous, more like.*

He was glad to have left the Embassy of the Dead behind him. Literally everything that had happened since he'd met Stiffkey had been dangerous. And although he missed the grouchy old ghost, he was happy he'd been able to Undo the troubled undertaker and let him pass on to the Afterworld at last. Since then he'd been enjoying getting back to his life of relative normality on the Earthly Plane. Well, as normal as it could ever be when you were being nagged by a ghostly schoolgirl every day.

'Oh please can we go . . .'

Jake looked up at her eager face in disbelief.

It was like she'd forgotten about Fenris. It was like she'd forgotten about Mawkins, the other reaper who, despite not being fallen and in fact being on their side in the end, had nearly sent them to the Eternal Void. And she'd definitely forgotten about the Ambassador of the Embassy of the Dead, who

had been very clear in stating that, although Jake was now officially an Undoer – a member of the living blessed with the ability to help trapped spirits pass on to the Afterworld – and there was nothing she could do to prevent that, nonetheless she did not like Jake and hoped not to see him again until he was dead.

Jake couldn't even think why the Embassy had asked them back.

It *couldn't* be a good thing. And, like most of his problems, Jake felt the best way to approach it was not to approach it. Instead he had decided to ignore it. Ignore the Embassy, ignore the postcard. Ignore it *all* for as long as possible.

His mind was made up.

No, he mouthed at Cora, looking down to fasten the zip on his coat. It was time to go to school. As far as he was concerned, *the matter was closed*.

If he'd looked up, he would've seen from the look in Cora's eyes that it clearly wasn't.

