The Ghosteleers

PHILIP BEICKEN

Hashtag PRESS

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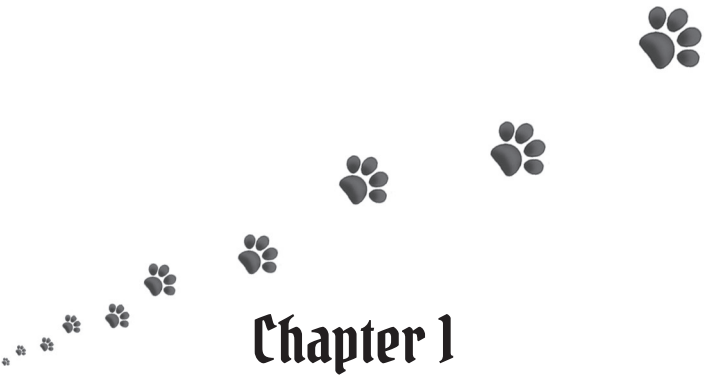
To Tracy, Sophia & Finley
(and of course my cat, Morph)
for being my inspiration

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Chapter 1

The Surprise

The explosion literally lifted the roof off the peaceful suburban house. In the garden, Richie the gnome tumbled into the murky pond and Miss Owen's underwear caught fire on the washing line next door. Thick smoke billowed into the grey sky, as Norman's simple furnishings transformed into a charcoaled mess.

Earlier that day, Norman had sniffed the air suspiciously. A distinct smell of gas lingered ominously in the room, but he couldn't figure out where it was coming from. He looked down at his seven-year-old, black Devonshire Rex cat, Morph, as if expecting him to provide the answer.

Morph interrupted licking his black wiry coat and stared at Norman with his large, dark brown eyes. He returned Norman's gaze with a 'give me some chicken or I will start to eat your leg' stare.

Morph had had a busy day trying to get some sleep as

Norman performed his yearly spring clean on his small, badly laid out terrace house.

"I just don't understand where that smell is coming from," Norman muttered, ruffling his brown coloured hair, that always resembled a mop regardless of how it was combed.

He peered around the back of the antiquated freestanding gas cooker. It was still far from gleaming, but at least the eight chips, four peas, one chicken nugget and the single black sock that had somehow escaped from the washing machine, had been cleared away.

He could hear a faint hissing noise, which he didn't remember being there when he had moved the cooker earlier that day. It sounded very much like a deflating balloon that stubbornly refused to give up its last breath.

Morph stuck out his short-haired paw and started to jab Norman's leg like a prize fighter.

Hello? Hungry cat still here! About to starve unless you feed me this instant!

Frustrated at being interrupted, Norman turned his attention to Morph, picked up the empty red chicken bowl and glanced across at his gleaming silver biscuit bowl that had laid untouched for the last three days.

"If you're that hungry, why don't you eat your biscuits?"

A look of distain crossed Morph's round face. *Chicken, now!*

Norman had rescued Morph at six months old and he understood very well the levels of vengeance that Morph could inflict upon him if he didn't get his delicately sliced chicken breast pieces on time. This would consist of being

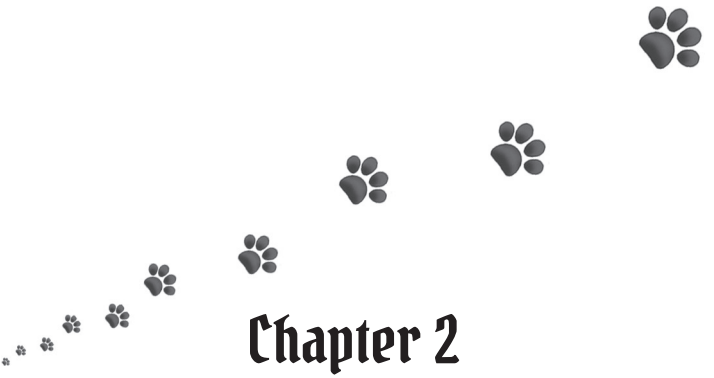
sick on all the fluffy pillows in the house, escaping from the downstairs lounge to sit on Norman's head in the early hours of the morning, or tripping him up at every opportunity (which had once resulted in Norman landing in the goldfish tank and getting Bert stuck up his nose).

Norman caught his reflection in the mirror next to the fridge, or 'chicken world' as it was often called. He raised his arms and flexed his biceps with all of his strength. Nothing. Not even a slight bump creased his worn-out but incredibly comfy navy checked pyjamas. He didn't mind. He liked the fact that he was considered average in height and weight. It was just a shame he was below average in school and hadn't managed to rid himself of the startled gormless look he'd inherited from his father.

To alleviate the gloom in the kitchen, Norman stretched out his index finger to the brushed chrome dimmer switch and pressed it firmly. An instant later, there followed a loud crack and a whoosh that engulfed the whole room.

In a split second, the blast propelled a shocked looking Morph in the direction of Norman and planted his soft underbelly squarely on his face.

The last memory Norman had of his twenty-three years as a human, was his cat glued to his own surprised face, whilst being hurtled across his clean house in a massive, expanding ball of explosive fire.



Chapter 2

The Awakening

Norman blinked slowly and opened his heavy eyes. He found himself lying on top of a spongy, thin, single bed staring at an unfamiliar ceiling, with no features other than a bare light hanging limply.

The bed covers were pale green and felt so crisp that Norman was scared he might break them. Sluggishly, he raised his body on to his elbows and looked around the room.

The cream-coloured walls were unremarkable and plain with no pictures or windows. Situated to his left stood a cheap, wooden, bedside table, where his favourite retro Casio watch had been neatly positioned. Norman noticed the digits were not moving, as if time itself had frozen.

A single occupied chair was positioned in the far corner of the small room, away from the rest of the furniture.

Beaming at Norman, sat a short, ball-shaped man whose

hair seemed to have slipped from the top of his head and appeared to be trying to escape from his nose and ears.

"Ah, welcome, my dear friend. I'm so glad you're able to join us," he said jovially.

He raised himself from the chair with no little degree of effort and stood with a cheerful expression plastered on his chubby, endearing face. In his hand lay a well-worn pamphlet that he kept turning over nervously, as if it intended to bite him at any minute.

"I expect you have one or two questions, but perhaps, maybe, you would permit me to explain a few details?" he suggested. "I think this may help set the scene."

The balding man quickly stepped in Norman's direction and stretched his clammy hand out to place the pamphlet on the bedside table, next to the watch. Then, he hurriedly retreated to the safety of his chair.

Norman sat upright, leaning against the bare wooden headrest and carefully picked up the booklet from the bedside table. In big, bold, dark letters across the front page were the words,

YOU'RE DEAD. GET OVER IT

He stared in disbelief at the words, reading them over and over again, not quite able to comprehend their meaning. He assumed it was a joke and he was really in a private hospital somewhere exotic, about to be surprised by a nurse in a gleaming white uniform.

He opened the booklet to pages two and three, but they

were blank. Nothing appeared but white, empty space. Pages four, five, six. . . in fact, all the remaining pages, were completely bare.

Norman snapped his head up and looked questioningly at the anxious man facing him, who simply shrugged apologetically and held out his hands.

"It used to be filled with lots of useful information, but we found that after new residents read the front page, they didn't really take any notice of the rest, so I had the words removed. It saves ink, which is one of my better cost-cutting ideas," he exclaimed proudly.

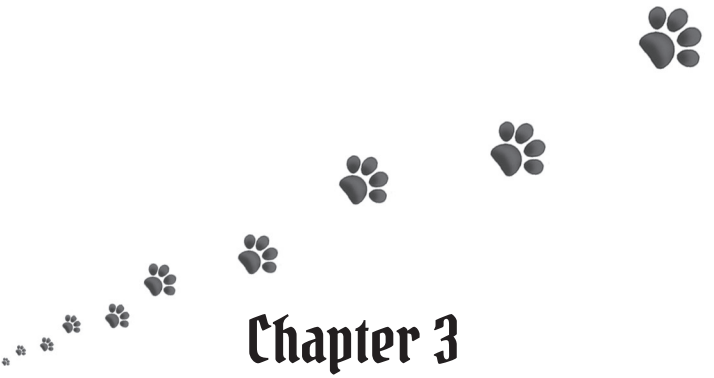
Norman felt movement at the foot of his bed. Snuggled up, with his paw over his nose, lay Morph. Lazily, he uncurled himself, stood and stretched his back to that almost impossible angle that cats somehow manage and sat looking around the room.

Whilst Norman and the round-faced man returned his gaze, to the absolute amazement of Norman, Morph spoke. It was a clear, educated voice that exuded authority, even though it only consisted of a single word.

"Chicken."

Morph appeared just as surprised as Norman with his outburst, but it was followed with an expression of smugness.

"This is most irregular," the man cried. "Somehow, when you died, you and your cat were fused together. Normally, it is just a select few who are lucky enough to make it to our centre, but in your case—" he looked at Norman. "It appears you have a companion."



Chapter 3

The Classroom

Shortly after their awakening, introductions were made and Norman discovered the genial man was named Abathar.

"My official title is The Weigher of Souls."

Norman pulled a face.

"Yes, I know it is rather dramatic, so instead I go by The Purveyor of Opportunistic Power. . . or Sir Poop for short."

Norman and Morph followed Sir Poop out of the bedroom and down a very long, brightly-lit corridor with a solid-looking red door at the end. The silence in the corridor was almost deafening and even Morph's fur bristled at the eeriness of the situation they found themselves in.

Suspended on one of the walls were small portraits of important-looking people—Elizabeth Fry, Sir Isaac Newton, Queen Elizabeth I, Leonardo Da Vinci, Sir Tim Berners-Lee, Professor Brian Cox and many more outstanding figures of humanity, going back many centuries.

Norman paused briefly at each picture and read the nameplate with interest, trying to recall their achievements from BBC documentaries that his parents made him watch when he was younger.

Sir Poop stopped outside a light blue door half-way down the corridor. Fixed above the entrance was a small plastic plaque that read, 'Training Room 834.'

Next to the door dangled a picture of Albert Einstein, posing with his trademark pipe and wild grey hair. Inscribed below the picture were the words, 'Albert. Saved by Lord Bruce III.'

Sir Poop opened the door, flipped on the light switch and a few seconds later strobe lights flickered into life, revealing a square room with a large, well-worn desk and a clean white board at the front. Facing the board and the desk were four tables set out in the classic 1940s classroom style.

Sir Poop invited Norman and Morph to take a seat and strode purposely to the front of the class.

"Right. Let's get started," Sir Poop said, pausing for dramatic effect, whilst Norman took his seat. Morph sprang lightly from the floor up to the seat next to him.

"As I'm sure you are aware by now, you are both dead."

Not the most uplifting start to a class, Norman thought, but he forced himself to remain silent.

"However," Sir Poop continued with gusto. "You have been specially selected to become a Ghosteleer, which is one of the highest honours one can achieve after death. A Ghosteleer's mission is to protect human beings who are destined to become great inventors or make discoveries that

will improve the living world. The pictures you saw hanging in the corridor outside are examples of some of our finest work. If it were not for our brave Ghosteleers, humans would never have progressed and would most likely be extinct now, like the dinosaurs, who unfortunately did not employ our protection services.

"After five years' service as a Ghosteleer, you will painlessly dissolve and head into the light to a beautiful paradise where you can remain in peace for the rest of existence."

Norman, unable to restrain himself any longer, excitedly put up his hand.

"Excuse me Sir Poop, but do you mean Heaven?"

"Actually, it's more like Brighton. May I carry on?"

Without waiting for an answer, Sir Poop continued his lecture with such enthusiasm Norman thought he might burst like an over-inflated balloon.

"Only a very small number of individuals are lucky enough to be chosen as a Ghosteleer and receive the special powers that go with the job. When you die, we take different aspects of your body, mind and soul and increase their ability. Your brain, for example, is sharpened like a razor so it can react to and overcome any tricky situation it faces."

Norman, whose attention had now piqued, sat up straight in his uncomfortable chair.

"I've become more intelligent," he mused with a satisfied look.

He tried to think of something smart that he would have found impossible before he died. He decided on naming all the planets in the solar system.

"Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn. . ." he paused, concentrating on what could be next.

Meanwhile, Sir Poop—now in full swing—exuberantly listed all the parts of Norman and Morph that had been honed like a finely tuned instrument.

"Your legs will never tire; your minds will be able to lift heavy objects and your hair will never go grey. However, the part of you that is the most significant and I'm most proud of is—"

"Uranus!" Morph erupted. "For goodness sake Norman, it's Uranus!"

Stunned silence descended in the room.

"I can hear every word you say in your mind and it's making the fur on the back of my neck stand on end. It's like an infestation of mice that I can't pounce upon. I'm a cat. I used to sleep and eat chicken! It's true, I occasionally pooed in the front garden and blamed it on Socksy next door; but that was my life and I loved it. Now, I must live the next five years with your thoughts in my mind, and the worst thing is you didn't feed me before you selfishly blew us up, so I'll always be hungry! AAARGH!"

Morph hissed, twitched his long whiskers and skulked off, with his tail between his legs, to sit at the back of the classroom.

"Well," continued Sir Poop. "I was going to say your ears."

Several minutes later the tension in the room had eased a little and Sir Poop went on to explain that Ghosteleers don't sleep, eat anything (including chicken), or go to the toilet. Ever.

Norman could hear a continuous 'thump' at the back of the classroom as Morph banged his head against the desk, presumably in despair that his purpose as a cat had evaporated.