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Opening extract from

The Time of The Reaper

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PROLOGUE

Six Years Ago

The day his father died began like any other.

Travis was sitting in front of the Cartoon Network, munching his way through a bowl of cornflakes. His mum was calling from the kitchen for him to hurry up or he'd be late for school (she made the same dire prediction every morning but he was always on time). His dad was pacing the hall as if he was already on his beat. Everything was normal, safe, comforting, the way it always had been, the way it always would be, Travis assumed. He was ten years old.

'Bye, love.' His dad's voice.

'Bye.' Mum's.

The wet smack of their kiss. Then the hand, strong and protective, ruffling his shock of brown hair.

'Dad!' Travis complained with a grin, gazed up at his father.

'You be a good boy at school today.'

'I will.'

'That's if he ever *gets* to school,' his mother groaned in the background. 'Look at the *time*.'

'Catch loads of crooks,' Travis said.

And his father smiled. 'I'll see you tonight,' he said.

Men. They're not only on TV, are they? Some of them are real. Some of them have got guns. Why do you have to go after them?'

'Because I'm a policeman.'

'Why are you a policeman?'

His father's expression, usually so gentle around him, had grown graver, more serious. 'I'm a policeman *because* of the Bad Men, Travis. You're right. There are criminals out there, too many of them, people who break the law, greedy, violent people who don't care what they do or who they hurt. Dangerous people. Which is why those of us who believe in rules, in justice, in right and wrong, why we have to fight for our beliefs. Because the simple truth is this, Travis: unless good men are prepared to stand up for what's right, evil men will have their way.'

Travis recalled those words while Uncle Phil and some other police officers bore his father's coffin down the aisle of the church. Grandma was gripping Travis's hand so tightly as they followed behind, was guiding him every step of the way as if he was suddenly blind and in need of the assistance. Grandad was supporting Mum. Her feet dragged and trailed along the stone-flagged floor like they'd forgotten how to walk. Travis couldn't bear to look at his mother that day. It hurt too much, almost stopped him breathing. It was like watching someone drowning, but you couldn't help them because you were drowning too.

Funeral. That was the *real* F word.

He didn't sing any of the hymns or recite the prayers, even though he knew most of them. There was no voice in him. But he could hear.

'. . . a terrible thing, tragic . . .'

'. . . that poor little lad. Losing your father when you've

grown up is traumatic enough, but how old is he? Ten? Eleven? And what *happened*. I can't imagine how he must be feeling . . .'

'. . . brave of him to come – but then, his father was brave. *Too* brave . . .'

Travis's father was talking to him, too. Inside his head. 'Unless good men are prepared to stand up for what's right,' he was saying, 'evil men will have their way.'

I know, but I won't let them, Travis vowed silently. *I want to be like you, Dad. I'll do what's right. I'll make my stand. I promise.*

Later, the smoke from the crematorium chimney darkening the sky – like a premonition of the horrors to come.

But none of that had happened yet. It was morning once more: Travis was chomping cereal as usual and from the kitchen Mum was warning him about the time as usual and Dad was pacing the hall, alive again. Travis could hear him. If he got up, popped his head around the door, he'd see him.

The boy's heart surged. He was dreaming, he knew, but what if that didn't matter? The dream had whisked him back in time to that fateful, terrible, grievous day, like a character in a science fiction film, and to a point in that day before his father had left the house, before he'd . . . The dream had granted him a second chance. He could save his father. He could keep him alive. *Alive*. He could change reality.

He wouldn't let Dad down.

'Dad!' And he was on his feet and milk from his bowl was splashing on the carpet like drops of white blood but he didn't care and he was darting into the hall and his dad was at the door. About to open the door. 'Wait!'

His father paused. 'Travis?' He turned to face his son. 'What's the matter?'

Something. Something was the matter. Dad was wearing his uniform now but previously Travis was pretty sure he hadn't been. He seemed to remember that Dad used to change into his uniform at the station, travelling to and from work in his own clothes. Or maybe he'd got that wrong.

And he looked pale, his father. Maybe just a little pale.

'Don't go, Dad.'

'What are you talking about, Travis? I have to go or I'll be late.'

'Call in sick. Stay at home today. Don't go into work. Please.'

'I don't understand.'

'Something . . . something bad is going to happen to you today if you leave, Dad. I know it is. I've seen it. Stay with Mum and me.' Travis threw his arms around his father's neck, pressed himself against his father's body.

The cold took his breath away.

'Dad?' Instinctively, Travis recoiled. He hated himself for it.

Pale. Definitely pale. Like frost. Like ice. Lines scored across the man's brow like furrows in snow.

'Dad?' And what was this on Travis's neatly pressed white school shirt, this dark, damp stain? He smeared his fingers with the substance and rendered them deep red. Blood, of course. But how could it be blood? Travis wasn't bleeding.

The same could not be said of his father. How come he hadn't noticed earlier the evidence of Dad's punctured chest, spreading incriminatingly across the front of his uniform, soaking the cloth? Travis stared aghast. His father frowned as he looked down too, as if he himself had only now noticed his wounds. The wounds that had killed him.

Travis was too late.

Because the door was open already. It had opened of its own accord. And beyond the house lay darkness, not day, and the hallway seemed longer than it should, elongating itself to separate son from father, the living from the dead. And Travis's heart ached. He could change nothing. His dream was mocking him.

'Oh, God, Dad. Please don't go. Please don't leave us. Please. Stay.'

But his father was shaking his head, resignedly, mournfully, and the weariness of the departed was in his voice. 'I *have* to go, Travis. I know you want me to stay but I can't. I don't belong here with you any more.' A bleak wind blew across the night-world beyond the door. 'Goodbye, son. You have to go on without me.'

'I can't. I can't.' Clutching for his father again but not reaching him, unable to touch him.

'You must. For your mother. For yourself.' The man was disappearing through the doorway. The wind was snatching at him, gusting him away. 'Travis, I was your father and I loved you. Remember that.'

'Dad, I don't want you to go . . .'

But the dream wasn't listening to him. It was over. It was morning – for real.

Travis lay still and gazed into the empty whiteness of his bedroom ceiling. He didn't need to feel his pyjama jacket to know that he'd find no trace of blood there. Nightmares tended to leave little by way of tangible legacy. Yet the vision had driven home a difficult lesson, finally and irrefutably. His father was gone for ever.

Once something was lost, it could never be regained.

Six Days Ago

Captain Gavin Hooper hated the desert. He glowered down at its arid, rocky expanses through the helicopter window and he knew: the desert was his enemy.

Hooper felt more than qualified to comment on the topic of enemies. During his career as a member of Her Majesty's Armed Forces he'd faced – and defeated – many of them. Some had taken the form of men rushing at him with a curse on their lips and a gun in their hands – they'd been the easy ones to dispatch, even when, from time to time, the men had turned out to be little more than boys or, once, a young woman. Others had come composed of steel and wire and dynamite, and had lurked in parked cars on dusty roadsides, and they'd been more difficult to defend against. Hooper's own lacerated body and footless left leg testified to that. The most lethal, most dangerous enemies, the soldier's experience had taught him, were those that stayed hidden, secret, biding their time, those you couldn't see until it was too late. Or, he'd begun to think since his latest posting, those that were all around you, seemingly innocent, apparently harmless, but which sucked you in and wore you down, which killed you slowly by sapping your will to live. The desert, Hooper mused grimly. The desert was like that. The desert was his enemy.

'Sir.' The pilot alongside him, still young enough for serious acne. 'Sandstorm's picking up behind us.'

'How far to the base?'

'Twenty klicks, sir.'

Hooper nodded approvingly. 'We'll be on the ground before it closes in, son. Any contact from the base yet?'

'Still nothing, sir.' With a note of tension in his voice.

'Keep trying. You're doing a good job,' the captain added reassuringly.

The young pilot flushed at the compliment. *Too* young, Hooper considered. Like a lot of the lads he'd fought alongside in Iraq, like those he'd seen die. Not that politicians back home ever seemed to lose sleep over the average age of those they packed off to risk their lives in their foreign wars. Hooper remembered the two who'd been killed in the same incident that had lost him part of a limb, the boy who'd lingered screaming for a mother he'd never see again. *Politicians.* Should be put up against a wall.

Iraq had finished him as a front-line soldier, too. A man with a prosthetic foot was not to be subjected to combat. So he'd been transferred out here, made military liaison officer to one of the few Arab states in the Gulf still on friendly terms with the United Kingdom. Friendly enough to welcome her military assistance and technology, at any rate. Friendly enough in exchange to permit the establishment of the occasional scientific installation in the middle of nowhere, such as the one Hooper and his little squadron of three troop-carrying helicopters were approaching now.

Of course, that raised the question, *why* should the British government choose to exile groups of its scientists out in the trackless wastes of the desert rather than employ them more cosily in some state-of-the-art laboratory complex in the shires? What were they doing here? Apparently that was classified, even to somebody permanently maimed in the service of his country. But whatever the work entailed, Hooper doubted it was legal. 'Legal' tended not to require solitude and secrecy. New weapons technology, he suspected – that was what the boffins were developing in the desert: new ways

to kill young soldiers more ruthlessly, more efficiently. Ways that a soldier wouldn't see until it was too late.

Scientists. Should be put up against a wall.

'Sir!' The pilot's tone brightened. He was pointing ahead with something like relief.

The camp.

'Take her down, son,' said Hooper.

Though quite frankly, bottom line, he didn't really care *what* a bunch of geeky guys in white coats and spectacles got up to on their mysterious bases so long as it didn't impinge on his own existence, and until three hours ago it hadn't. But three hours ago was when all communications between the base and the outside world had come to a summary and inexplicable stop. None of the installation's personnel had been contactable since. Hooper and his men had been assigned to find out why.

Odd that this should happen now, though. Only yesterday a new contingent of scientists had been flown out to supplement their colleagues already resident here. At least, that was the official line. Hooper had glimpsed the team waiting for their ride, however, and he doubted any one of them had ever so much as slipped on a lab coat. Dark glasses. Darker suits. There was more of MI6 than Ph.D. about these latest recruits. Which matched up with a rumour he'd heard from a mate in air-traffic control that some kind of object had been tracked falling to earth in the base's vicinity. A fragment of a decaying satellite that had failed to burn up in the atmosphere, most likely, and, given that the newcomers had obviously arrived to check it out, not British in origin. Maybe the government was worried that others besides itself were taking an interest in the work being done in this godforsaken place.

Hooper was frowning as the chopper descended into the camp's compound. From this perspective, everything appeared normal, peaceful. The ranks of prefabricated huts and larger buildings, all single-storey, stood silently and respectfully like troops awaiting inspection: nothing out of order there. The camp's trucks and jeeps were also lined up in a neat row, its own helicopter in mint condition on its launch pad. The perimeter fence – rather a superfluous security measure, one might think, given the location's remoteness – remained serenely unbreached. Of human beings, however, there was no trace. The entire scene was as still as a photograph, and maybe that was what bothered Captain Gavin Hooper. There was no life in a photograph. As for the base . . . Just because you couldn't see an enemy, that didn't mean he wasn't there. Hooper felt his muscles tensing.

The pilot's landing was exemplary, even as the first winds of the imminent storm whipped across the open desert. Hooper patted the boy's shoulder and told him to stay where he was.

'Sir? With respect, sir, it wouldn't be a good idea to take off into this storm.'

'Hopefully we won't have to,' said Hooper. 'Now radio HQ and inform them that we've reached the base.'

The three choppers disgorged their occupants, six soldiers from each, all of them armed with automatic weapons.

'What do you make of this, sir?' said Corporal Kent, joining his superior officer. 'A bit *Marie Celeste*, if you ask me.'

'You think there's nobody here?'

'I think if anybody *was* here, sir, they'd have heard us coming in and somebody would have come out to investigate.'

'Looks like somebody has, corporal,' said Hooper, pointing.

A dog, a mongrel, suddenly ventured into view around the

corner of one of the nearest huts. Its tail and ears were drooping and it was whining.

'Here, boy, here,' coaxed Kent, but the dog only cowered away from him. When the corporal took a cautious step forward it fled.

'Hm. You obviously have a way with animals, Kent,' observed Hooper.

'Something's frightened it,' the corporal said. 'I wonder what.'

Hooper squinted up at the sky. It was the colour of jaundice. Dust and sand were beginning to lash at the soldiers in the compound, which perhaps explained why the men were instinctively clustering together. Whatever they might or might not discover in the base over the next few minutes, it occurred to Hooper, they were stranded with it.

'All right, let's do our job.' His voice, hardened by years of soldiering, cracked like a gunshot. 'Buddy teams.' He reeled off names. 'Start at this end of the camp.' More names. 'Start from the far end. Search each building in turn. Be thorough and be careful. Corporal Kent and I will meet you in the middle.'

'Where are we going?' Kent asked.

The mongrel had appeared again. Now it barked, apparently torn between fear and a need to make some kind of urgent canine communication with the new arrivals. 'We're going wherever the dog leads us,' said Hooper.

The soldiers penetrated deeper into the base, gradually losing sight of each other among the silent buildings. Men slipped inside one hut or another and did not reappear. Hooper watched them vanish. Perhaps they'd never truly existed in the first place.

'*Sir.*' Kent had been focusing on the dog. The animal had

insinuated itself through the narrow gap of a partly open door and into one of the larger constructions, perhaps a lab. Corporal and captain followed its lead.

'Hello?' Hooper shouted on the threshold. 'Anyone there? Dr Lansburg? Professor Fielding?'

If they *were* there, then they weren't answering. And it wasn't a lab into which the two men stole with all the wariness of seasoned burglars. It was a recreation room. There was a bar and a canteen, pinball and one-armed bandits, pool and table tennis. Nobody was playing just now, but they had been. The soldiers could tell because one guy was still at the pinball machine, only he wasn't likely to rack up much of a score slumped across it like that; and they could tell because a man and a woman were still holding table-tennis bats, though they wouldn't be very effective wielded from recumbent positions on the floor. The half-dozen other occupants of the rec room had obviously come here just to take it easy, which must have been why they were sat in two groups at the long tables in the centre of the room. Maybe it was also why they seemed to have fallen asleep, lolling back in their chairs or resting their tired heads on the table.

Only they weren't actually asleep.

Hooper stiffened, his eyes burning with alertness. There was another presence here as well, belonging to an entity as yet unseen. The most ruthless and implacable enemy of all.

'Dead,' Kent gasped. 'They're all dead.'

No mark of violence. No sign of struggle. No visible wounds. It was as if the base's staff had simply and collectively decided to die and had carried out the operation with the minimum of fuss.

'What the hell happened here?'

Hooper shook his head. No visible wounds? Not in the sense of gaping holes and dripping blood, but even from the doorway there seemed to be a redness about the deceased scientists' faces, as if they'd been boiled. Hooper glanced down. Their hands, too, where he could see them. The dog was licking at one that dangled listlessly from the arm of a bearded man whose head was thrown back with his mouth wide open as if expecting a dental examination in the very near future.

From outside, Hooper could hear the squalling of the sandstorm. The dog turned to look at him and barked.

Hooper advanced towards the corpses.

'Sir, do you think we ought to . . . ?' Kent held back.

'We don't have a choice, corporal.'

Hooper neared the body of the man who'd presumably been the dog's owner. At closer quarters, the scientist's heightened colouring made a grim kind of sense. Hooper felt his gorge rise. The man's skin was ravaged with a profusion of crimson circles, as if a lunatic had carved rings into the flesh with a knife. Or it was like he'd been tangled and suffocated in a scarlet net and its meshing had cut into him savagely.

It was disease. Infection had killed him.

Hooper moved on to the next body, despite the whimpers of the dog. Sightless, staring eyes, white in a mask of red. He didn't feel the need to check further. They'd all have perished the same way, that much was obvious.

'Sir . . .'

He ignored Kent. It must have come quickly for them, death. At once. In a moment. As they played and laughed and talked and drank coffee. Death had joined them and made himself at home.

'Sir . . .'

But how? Stealthily. In deadly and innumerable armies of bacteria. Invading through the nostrils, through the pores, conquering from the very air its victims breathed, murdering from the inside out. Some kind of fearsome viral agent, perhaps? A biological weapon? One that affected human beings only? The dog's continued survival proved that. Maybe new strains of disease were what the scientists had been working on out here, far from innocent population centres. Maybe there'd been an accident. Maybe the poison had been released into the base like cyanide capsules spilled.

Maybe it was still active.

'*Sir* . . .'

'Kent, call the men. We've got to evacuate im—'

And it was as if Corporal Kent had contracted a bad case of sunburn from somewhere. He was swaying unsteadily on his feet. 'I don't feel so . . .' He dropped his gun. He tried to reach down for it, but as he stooped he crumpled forward onto the floor and neither spoke nor moved again.

'Kent!' Hooper stretched out his hand towards his fallen comrade. It was blotched with the faintest of scarlet circles. 'My God . . .'

The enemy was close now, just as it had been months ago on the roadside in Iraq. But Captain Gavin Hooper had cheated death then and he'd cheat death now. Discretion had always been the better part of valour.

Striding towards the door he snapped into his radio, 'Rogers, Smith, Barnard – can you hear me?' It seemed not. 'Can anyone hear me?' Only the dog, yelping from behind him as though begging him to stay. 'If anyone can hear me, get back to the choppers now. We're pulling out.'

If the sandstorm would let them. It smashed into Hooper like

a boxer as he burst out into the compound, buffeting, staggering him. He raised his hand to protect his eyes. The red rings were bolder now, more deeply ingrained, as though they'd taken root.

Death was in him. He could feel it, corrupting his cells, attacking his organs. He could feel contagion brimming in him. But he could fight it. He could hold it back. The will was stronger than the flesh. He'd always believed that. Hooper waded through a blizzard of sand as through deep and drowning waters. No sign of any of the others. They must be dead, all dead. Like Kent. He was the last. But he would live. The huts were fading shapes around him. Ahead, like charcoal smudges, the choppers. That young pilot waiting. He'd fly him, Hooper, back to HQ. The doctors would save him, cure him. He'd stay alive if he had to cut off his own arm. But if his commanding officers *knew* that treacherous biological experimentation was going on here, why hadn't they properly equipped Hooper and his men with gas masks? Didn't they care?

Commanding officers. Should be put up against a wall. They were as bad as the politicians, as bad as the scientists. Up against a wall. All of them. Every damn one. The whole damn world.

Hooper's skin was burning. He felt like he was on fire. But he was almost there. Groping through the whirlwind of sand and grit. The chopper. The pilot where he'd left him, at the controls. Kid deserved a medal.

He heaved open the door. 'Quick, get us airborne.'

Unlikely. Dead men don't fly helicopters.

Captain Gavin Hooper cried out then. He tottered backwards and the gale of the storm spun him round as if he was nothing, as if he was dust, and he cried out in rage and frustration and despair.

But not for long.

ONE

At just after eight on what he later considered to be the last night of the old world, Travis Naughton stood on the doorstep at the Lanes' house and rang the bell.

His finger had scarcely applied its pressure before the door swung excitedly open. Light and music and chattering voices spilled out in an animated jumble. 'Travis!' Jessica had been poised to greet her guests, of course. She'd probably been hovering by the door all day in case someone arrived early. 'You're *late*.' Initial delight tempered with feigned reproof.

'Yeah, I know. Sorry about that. Thought I'd better start looking at those past papers old Thompson gave us. Went on the internet and kind of lost track of time.'

'No,' huffed Jessica, folding her arms. 'I don't want excuses, especially not if they involve school or work. Two words absolutely banned on my birthday. The invitation did clearly state seven-thirty, Travis.'

'How about I compensate you for those tragically missing thirty-five minutes?' Travis offered up his card and present like one of the three kings at Jesus's crib. 'Happy birthday, Jess.'

'For me?' She grabbed them with a gasp of exaggerated pleasure.

Travis hoped she wasn't going to be disappointed. He'd only been able to afford chocolates. 'So am I forgiven? Can I come in?'

'Yes, you are and yes, you can,' said Jessica, beaming. 'On one condition.'

'Does it involve self-humiliation?'

'That depends whether your definition of humiliation includes kissing girls on their birthday.'

'You know, I *think* we're all right.'

They held each other. They kissed. Travis was reminded of all those other birthday kisses he and Jessica had shared over the years. The embarrassed pecks on the cheek at four and five, both participants close to tears. The first brushing of the lips at eleven and twelve, mouths resolutely closed as if to protect against germs. The parting of the lips at thirteen; a meeting of tongues at fourteen. At fifteen, the issue complicated by dates and pressure and then the break-up. At sixteen, tonight, an almost innocent gladness at being together, at being friends with the stirring mysteries of life still ahead of them.

'What's that old song?' Travis said. '"Happy Birthday, Sweet Sixteen"? It's a milestone year, Jess.'

'If you say so.' Jessica turned and finally closed the door behind Travis. He thought that her head seemed to bow a little but he might have been wrong. When she looked at him again, she was still smiling exuberantly. 'What do you think of my dress? Do you like it? It's new.'

Of course it was new. Jessica *always* had a new dress for her birthday party. Each year, though, there seemed to be less of it. This one was traffic-light red and left all four limbs rather bare – shoulders, too. Jessica's shoes, lipstick and nail varnish

matched it, the colour fetchingly complementing her sweep of strawberry-blonde hair.

'Do I like it? Yes,' Travis conceded. 'It's very nice.' And Jessica Lane was very gorgeous, he realised, as her green eyes sparkled at his appreciation. 'Wouldn't wear it myself, though. Don't have the legs for it.'

'Oh, *Trav*.' She hugged him again.

Maybe it had been a mistake to agree to the split. Maybe he should have tried harder.

'So what's the scene?' Though it wouldn't be fair to complicate things for Jessica tonight.

'Music in the family room. Chill-out area in the lounge. Nibbles in the dining room . . .'

'Could be nibbles in the lounge as well if people get lucky,' Travis noted, a remark which his hostess chose to ignore.

'Drinks in the kitchen.'

'Including your dad's famous non-alcoholic punch?' Travis grinned.

'Absolutely.' This time Jessica grinned back. 'It's still with us, same as ever, even if Dad – and Mum – aren't. Not until eleven, anyway.'

'Parents have done a runner, huh? Excellent. While the adults are away . . .'

'So whether it *stays* non-alcoholic between now and then . . .'

'Might have to taste it and see. You coming, birthday girl?'

'In a minute. I'm just . . .' Jessica gestured towards the door. 'In case there's anyone else still on their way.'

'Might be. I thought I saw a *Hello!* photographer along the road asking for directions to the party of the year. I nearly told him . . .'

'Really?' The blonde girl blushed at Travis's good-humoured laughter. But she could get her own back. 'Mel's here,' she said with sly simplicity. 'You'd better just hope she's not in one of the rooms with the lights switched off or you'll never find her.'

She certainly wasn't in the kitchen. Trevor Dicketts and Steve Pearce were there, carrying on the same interminable discussion about football which had seemed to occupy them since the age of ten. And Cheryl Stone was there, too, pouring herself some punch. And Simon Satchwell. *Simon Satchwell?* Not exactly a name that featured high on most people's guest list – though Travis remembered that Jessica's parents knew Simon's grandparents somehow. The birthday girl herself probably hadn't invited him. Cheryl Stone for one evidently would have preferred it if *nobody* had. In heroically volunteering to help her with the punch, the bespectacled Simon had only succeeded in splashing the front of her dress with the liquid. Producing a handkerchief and dabbing at the subsequent wet patch, he was merely exacerbating his original offence.

'Simon, what do you think you're *doing*? Hands. *Off*.'

'Sorry, Cheryl, I just . . . sorry.' Wiping his nose with the handkerchief. 'Sorry.'

Travis's sentiments precisely, though in a slightly different context. He felt sorry *for* Simon Satchwell. He wasn't exactly Brad Pitt Junior himself, never had been. His undistinguished brown mop of hair was as unruly as ever and his features, while pretty much the right size and in pretty much the right places, hardly qualified as 'Hunk of the Month' material. He'd been told before that his blue eyes were kind of piercing, but they didn't smoulder: they were unlikely ever to gaze out

at adoring female fans from the pages of a teenage magazine. Still, Travis conducted himself with confidence, earned respect from boys and dates with girls. In all his life, to Travis's knowledge, Simon Satchwell had experienced neither.

It wasn't just the body, the angular awkwardness, the boniness, the colourless hair, the vapid expression, the glasses – though that was a lot. Appearance only ever set up certain expectations, like the opening chapters of novels. It was down to the individual to prove first impressions right or wrong, and in Simon's case, sadly for him, it was always the former. Had he been American, he'd have numbered among the nerds, the kind of guy whose photo you'd see in newspapers and on TV after he'd shot twenty of his classmates during a high-school rampage. Travis refused to apply the word nerd to him: Simon Satchwell was simply one of life's losers. And Travis recalled what his peers seemed to have forgotten, that Simon had lost a lot, more even than *he* had, and at a younger age, too – ample reason by itself why he didn't deserve the thinly disguised contempt of people like Cheryl Stone.

Who was scowling at him now. 'Simon, will you just get out of the way? Don't you think you've done enough damage already?'

'Sorry, Cheryl, but I was . . . I was just wondering . . . there's music playing in the other room and I was wondering if you wanted to . . .'

'No. I don't want to. Ever.' At which point, the girl noticed Travis. She cried out his name as if calling for help, lunged for him as for a lifeline. 'Travis, how *are* you? It's so good to *see* you.'

'Cheryl.'

'Dance with me. Dance with me.' Virtually dragging him away. 'In the family room. In the hall. Outside, if you like. *Anywhere but here.*'

'Actually, I was planning on getting a drink.'

'Have mine. Take mine. Come on, let's go.'

Cheryl Stone didn't glance back but Travis did. Simon hadn't moved. He was staring at the floor.

By the time they'd reached the family room – lights off, sound system in fine voice – Cheryl's ardour had cooled considerably. Thirty seconds. That was good for her.

She was grateful, though. 'Thanks for saving my life, Trav. That Simon Satchwell . . .'

'What? You think he might have been aiming to drown you in the punch bowl or something?'

'Why not?' Cheryl thrust her chest forward, jabbing at the fading stains. 'He made a start.'

'You were maybe a little unfair on him,' Travis suggested. 'Simon's not so bad, is he?'

'Not so bad?' Cheryl snorted derisively. 'Wait till he asks *you* out. "Not so bad" – way I hear it, he's running out of girls to pester so it could be soon. Let me tell you, the world'll have to end before I spend time with Simon Satchwell.'

'Well, I think you've stated your position clearly enough, Miss Stone,' said Travis. He'd never much liked Cheryl Stone. 'I guess I was glad to be of assistance.' Backing away from her.

'Don't you want to dance, Trav? Now that we're here, I mean.'

No. I don't want to. Ever.

'Maybe later,' he said. 'I'm looking for Mel, really.'

'Last I saw her, she was in the lounge.' Travis thanked Cheryl for the lead. 'No,' she stressed. 'Thank *you.*'

And Jessica had had a point about needing the lights on to see Mel. In the crowded lounge, at the other end of a sofa to Alison Grant and Dale Wright who were engaging in mouth-to-mouth as if practising for a life-saving class, Melanie Patrick sat like an ink stain, with her legs curled up beneath her. Black boots. Black tights. Black skirt – long. Black shapeless sweater kind of thing several sizes too big for her but which successfully swathed and hid her entire upper body – possibly her intention. Where any part of her could be glimpsed, a tide of dyed black hair, black nails, black lipstick, black mascara, black pretty much everything except her skin, which was quite the opposite in complexion. Funnily enough, though, the sight of Melanie Patrick always seemed to bring colour to Travis's life.

'Hey, Mel,' he grinned. 'So it's past chucking-out time at the morgue, huh?'

The goth girl smiled sarcastically. 'Beginning to think you weren't coming. Beginning to think it might turn out to be a good night after all.'

'Sorry to disappoint you.' Travis tried to slot himself onto the sofa between Mel and the lip-locked lovers. 'Evening, Dale, Alison. Any chance of you shifting up a little bit?'

'Mm *mm* mm mm *mm*' from the couple, which evidently constituted an affirmative since the sound was accompanied by a movement towards their end of the seat.

'Any chance of you guys getting a *room*?' Mel added disgustedly.

'What? There are men in long raincoats who'd pay good money to watch that,' said Travis.

'Yeah.' And, somewhere concealed by her voluminous sweater, Mel might have shuddered. 'Men have got a lot to answer for.'

'Present company included?'

'Present company honourably excepted.' Mel breathed in as if in slight but sudden pain. 'I'm glad you're here, Trav.'

'We aim to please. Actually, I wasn't sure you'd be on your own tonight, or even here at all.'

'Let Jessica down? Why would I want to do that?'

'I heard Kev Meade was going to ask you out.'

'Who told you that?'

'As in Kev "Gandalf" Meade,' Travis teased.

'It's not funny. Who told you? Don't laugh like it's funny, Travis. He *did* ask me out.'

'Excellent. Where to? A wizards' conference? A special screening of all three director's cut versions of *Lord of the Rings*? You'll have a magic time.'

'Travis . . .' Mel warned.

'You said yes, of course.'

'I said *no*, of course. What do you take me for?'

'Actually, Mel,' Travis reflected a little more thoughtfully, 'someone who it seems to me has loads in common with Kev Meade. You like the same things. You like the same look. He's a good bloke, really. I'd have said yes if I were you. If you were lucky he might have let you hold his wand.'

Mel curled her upper lip derisively. 'Just as well you're not me, then, isn't it? Though if you find Gandalf *that* attractive I happen to know he's free tomorrow night.'

'So poor old Kev joins the list, does he?'

'What list?'

'The list of guys who've asked you out only to have their best efforts thrown back in their faces. Where Mel Patrick walks, she walks alone – is that it?'