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25 Years Later

Chapter 1
Horror Boy Harker

The teacher's voice droned on in the background . . .

Meanwhile, an army of vampires flocked down from the hills.

'*Feast, my brothers!*' the master vampire cried. '*Rip out every throat! Drain every artery! Tonight we shall bathe in blood!*'

Jake licked his thumb and index finger. Resting on his knee under the desk, the comic book crackled at his touch. He turned the page to find a scene of vampire frenzy—all flared nostrils, bloodshot eyes, and bared fangs. He yawned and flipped the page.

The title of the comic shrieked out at him: *TALES FROM THE CRYPT!* Jake's eyes widened. Amazing! Tucked inside this collection of old terror tales bought from a charity shop was the first horror comic he had ever read! The sight of that famous title, and the ghoulish image on

the cover, sent Jake's thoughts scurrying back six years. His ninth birthday. The day when his obsession with all things grisly had begun.

He remembered his dad pushing a big cardboard box across the kitchen table. With one eyebrow raised, Jake had flipped back the sides, plunged his hand into the box and brought out the first in a bundle of dusty old comics.

'I collected this lot when I was about your age,' his father had said, beaming. 'They used to scare me stupid! The comic you have there was one of my all-time favourites: *Tales From The Crypt!*'

Jake stared at the cover. It showed a picture of a terrified man locked in the embrace of a zombie.

'I treasured these comics, and now they're yours. Happy birthday, son!'

That night, hunkered down under the duvet, torch in one hand, horror comic in the other, Jake had begun his journey into the world of monsters. There were four fully-illustrated stories per issue. By the end of the first tale, he'd felt pretty scared. Two stories down and he was well and truly spooked. The third slice of gruesomeness, a story about a man changing slowly into a flesh-eating ghoul, had to be abandoned halfway through.

Weeks passed and the comics gathered dust on his bookshelf. Eventually, Jake plucked up the courage to take down Issue 2 of *Tales From The Crypt*. By the end of the month he had finished his dad's collection. By the end of the year, he was a certified horror nut.

With his dad's encouragement, Jake moved on from comics to books. He searched libraries for tales of haunted houses, blood-hungry beasts and creeping corpses. He loved zombies (*Ber-ains! Ber-ains! BER-AINS!*), werewolves (*vulnerable only to silver bullets*), vampires (*like Jake, allergic to garlic*), golems, ghosts, and gremlins. He read everything he could find and, at the age of fifteen, Jake considered himself something of an expert on monsters . . .

'HAR-KER!'

Mr Kilfoy's screech jolted Jake out of his memories.

'Sir?' he said, stuffing the horror comic into his bag.

'*Macbeth*, young man,' the English teacher sneered. 'I'm sorry to have woken you, but in the living world we were talking about one of Shakespeare's greatest plays.'

Kilfoy stalked down the room. He reached Jake's desk and slapped down a dog-eared copy of *Macbeth*.

'Witches.'

'Sorry, sir?'

Kilfoy picked up the play book and, with each word uttered, rapped Jake on the head with it.

'The—Three—Witches—in—*Macbeth*! What is the point in me giving extra classes to prepare you for A Level English if you just sit there like a brain-dead moron? Listen—to—the—text, numbskull!' Kilfoy cleared his throat. ' "*Fair is foul, and foul is . . .*" '

Jake snatched the book from Kilfoy's hand and shot to his feet. He was tall for his age, his legs lanky, his arms long and thin. Towering over the teacher, Jake felt the blood roar in his veins.

Kilfoy noticed the look in the boy's eyes and took a step back.

'"*Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air*,"' Jake quoted. 'Spoken by all three witches at the end of Act One, Scene One. The witches in *Macbeth* believe that they have power but, in the end, their magic is just an illusion. Was that the theme we were discussing?'

Kilfoy's mouth fell open.

Jake glanced around the room to see if his victory had been noticed. Anyone else in 5B could have expected a few sniggers and the odd thumbs up but, in his heart of hearts, Jake knew he would receive no such sign of approval. 'Weird' Jake Harker was regarded by his classmates with almost as much dislike as Killjoy Kilfoy himself. It was surprising, then, to see a face in the front row smiling back at him. Jake's heart snapped into a gallop—it was Rachel Saxby, hands down the prettiest girl in the year.

The end of day bell rang out. Chairs scraped back and mobile phones bleeped into life.

'Bell's for me, not for you,' Kilfoy barked.

Whatever he had seen in Jake's eyes—whatever had unnerved him in those deep brown pools—had vanished. Now Kilfoy's old authority returned to him.

'If you're taking part in the short story competition this term, leave your efforts on your desks. I guess we'll have the same old rubbish from you, Harker? Ghoulies in their graveyards, vampires in their vaults?'

Jake took a folder from his bag and handed it over.

Kilfoy slipped his spectacles onto his nose and flipped open the folder.

'*A Hungry Heart* by Jacob Josiah Harker. OK, let's have a quick look . . . Hmm. A pretty young schoolgirl falls in love with . . . Ah, of course, should've known it—a werewolf with a taste for human hearts!'

'It's not a werewolf,' Jake protested, 'it's a wendigo. There's a difference.'

'Oh really? And what, pray tell, *is* the difference?'

'Well, a wendigo's an animal spirit from Native American mythology while a werewolf is a creature that looks kinda like your mother. Only less hairy.'

'What did you say, young man?'

'Nothing, sir.' Jake picked up his backpack and headed for the door.

During his chat with Kilfoy, the class had emptied. With an eye out for Rachel Saxby, he squeezed his way through the crowds in the corridor. Calls and shrieks—the excitement of another school day done and dusted—accompanied Jake into the entrance hall, through the large double doors and out to the school gate. He saw no sign of Rachel.

The wind howled through the streets like a mischievous ghost, rattling letterboxes and throwing litter into gutters. Head down, Jake trudged away from Masterson High and towards the Hobarron Institute. It was a half-mile walk but on that day, with the wind cutting through him, it felt like a twenty-mile trek. He marched through the Tesco car park and into the New Town housing estate. Beyond the houses, out to the west, scarlet streamers blazed in the sky.

Jake emerged from a side street and onto a long stretch of tarmac. The road to the Hobarron Institute rolled out through acres of cornfields like a black line scored through yellow parchment. He had walked a few paces when a Vauxhall Corsa roared up beside him. The passenger window slid down to reveal Rachel Saxby.

Jake had known Rachel all his life. Their parents were colleagues at the Institute and they had seen each other at various Hobarron events over the years. He even had a vague memory of dancing with her at a Christmas party when they'd both been about five years old. Since then they had never really talked. Despite this, Jake saw Rachel often in his dreams

Now her sea-green eyes held him where he stood.

'Hey, Jake, need a lift?'

'Rachel. Hi. Um . . . I'm walking actually. I mean, obviously I'm walking—it's the one leg in front of the other motion that gives it away. Ha-ha.' *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* his brain screamed at him. 'But, yeah, I think I'm OK. OK walking, I mean.'

'Come on, Rach, why've we stopped to talk to this freak?'

It was the driver who spoke, one of Rachel's girlfriends from the year above. Like Jake, Rachel had few friends in their own year, although in her case it was a matter of choice. Trendy, hip, sophisticated Rachel was more at home with the in-crowd of Masterson High's Lower Sixth.

Ignoring her friend, Rachel asked, 'Are you going to the Institute? We could drop you off, no bother.'

'I don't think that'd go down too well with your mates,' Jake muttered.

'Oh, don't worry about them, they're cool. Us Institute kids should stick together, yeah?'

'I guess.'

'Jump in then.'

Jake glanced through the rear window. A girl sitting on the back seat narrowed her eyes and shook her head.

'I'm good thanks,' he sighed. 'Think I'll walk.'

'Come on, Jake, it's not like you need the exercise, there's nothing of you.'

Always conscious of his stick-thin body, Jake bristled.

'Look, to be honest, Rachel, I don't really understand this.'

'Understand what?'

'You being nice to me.' Blood rushed into his face and he heard his voice crack into an embarrassingly high pitch. 'This is, like, the first time you've *ever* spoken to me and . . . '

'Hey, I was only offering you a lift,' Rachel snapped. 'I wasn't asking you out on a freaking date! Listen, I just read one of your stories, right? One of those you posted online. The one about the guy haunted by his mother's ghost.'

'*Mother's Day*,' Jake said, surprised. 'I posted that anonymously.'

'I recognized your style.' A smile fluttered across her lips. (*Beautiful, cupid's bow lips, shining with pink gloss. Don't stare, you moron!*) 'Anyway, I think you're really good. I write a bit myself, poetry mainly. Maybe we could've talked. Wish I hadn't mentioned it now. See you around.'

The Corsa's back wheels kicked up a cloud of dust into Jake's eyes.

You bloody idiot! You had the perfect chance to talk to her—maybe even get her number—and you blew it! Jake scuffed his trainers against the tarmac. Perhaps it wasn't a total disaster. She liked his stories—that might be a way in. His parents must have the Saxbys' number in their phonebook. He'd get home, have a shower, relax a little, and then summon up the courage to call her. Play it cool . . .

'Heads up, gimp boy!'

Something sharp struck Jake on the back of the neck. His fingers went to the spot and found it soft and tacky with blood.

'Ow, baby's been hurt,' a familiar voice sniggered from behind.

Jake swore under his breath. Silas Jones, a boy made up mostly of muscles, tattoos, and broken teeth, loped along the road towards him. Jake hadn't seen Silas for a while—he had been expelled from school last year for beating up Mr Cable, the geography teacher. A single punch had broken Cable's jaw.

The street was otherwise empty and the windows of the houses facing it had their curtains drawn. Jake was all alone with the biggest mentalist this side of the Closedown Canal.

'What d'you want, Silas?'

'That's a funny tone to take with me, Jake,' Silas smirked, showing a mouthful of black fillings. 'Seeing as how I could beat the crap out of you right here and now. Unless you think you could take me on?'

Silas thrust his face to within inches of Jake's. It was a great, flat, ugly thing, peppered with yellow-headed

pimples. Jake could smell a tuna paste lunch on Silas's breath and tried not to gag.

'Anyway, what're you doing talking to Rachel Saxby? Don't tell me you think you stand a chance with *her*? You're outta your skull if you do. She'd never look at a scrawny scrap of nothing like you.'

Jake started to walk away. Silas trotted alongside, like some kind of psychotic pet dog.

'Where you off to?'

'Meeting my mum.'

'Oh, baby needs his mummy to walk him home. Still, I guess that's about right. It's not like you've got any friends to keep you company. What's it they call you at Masterson? Gimp-face? Ah no, I remember: Horror Boy Harker, the Creep Freak.'

Jake had a dozen witty comebacks. He swallowed each of them down. He bit back his anger too. There was no point starting a fight with this human demolition machine—not unless he wanted an ambulance crew to scrape him off the road.

'So where does Mummy work?'

'The Hobarron Institute.'

'*La-di-da*. You know, my dad says that only bad things have happened to this town since *they* came here. Everyone knows they're messing around with dangerous stuff—nuclear junk, gamma rays, chemical weapons. My dad says they'll probably blow us all up one day. 'S that what your mummy's gonna do, Harker? Blow this piece of crap town to Kingdom Come with her all stupid experiments?'

Rage burned in his stomach but Jake managed to stay silent.

'Yeah, bet that's what your silly cow of a mother is up to. They've probably got a bunker or something under that tower. They'll cause some massive explosion, kill everyone, and you guys'll be nice and safe in your bunker.'

Walk quicker. Don't listen.

'You'll be laughing at us then, won't you? You and your sick mother.'

Stay calm. He'll get bored soon. Go away.

'Answer me, Horror Boy. I said, is your silly cow mother gonna blow us all up?'

Jake stopped. His hands clenched into fists.

'Are you stupid or something?'

Silas's left eye twitched. 'What d'you say?'

'I said, are you *stupid*?' Now the anger spread out through Jake's entire body. It felt as if he was on fire. 'The Hobarron Institute is a charity. It's a scientific think tank. Do you understand these words, Silas? Are they too big for your dumbass brain to comprehend? Am I talking too quickly?'

'I—it's—my dad,' Silas floundered, 'he says you'll blow us all up and . . . '

'Well, if *your* dad said it then it must be true, Silas. After all, he obviously has first dibs on the family brain cell.'

Silas responded the only way he knew how. His tattooed fist slammed into Jake's stomach. Jake fell to his knees, eyes streaming, choking as he tried to breathe. Another blow, this time to the head, knocked him sideways. *Ceerr-ack*. His left cheekbone hit the kerb and pain splintered across his skull.

Through tears, he saw Silas's heavy Doc Marten as it flew towards him. The boot buried itself in his ribs. Pain again, this time reaching into every part of his body. Silas's rants sounded distant in Jake's ears.

'Take the piss out of me and my dad, you little git? When I've finished with you, you won't be laughing. I'm gonna pound you into the pavement. I'm gonna crack your stupid skull open.'

The sole of the Doc Marten pressed down against Jake's face.

'OK, after three I'm gonna slam my boot into your nose. It's breaky-breaky time.'

Pleas for the psycho to stop rose and stuck in Jake's throat. Whatever happened, he wasn't going to beg.

'Any last requests?'

'A change of footwear?' Jake said, grinning through the fear. 'Gotta tell you, Silas, no one wears Doc Martens these days.'

'Think you're funny, don't you, Harker? We'll let's see if you're still cracking jokes in a minute. Ready? One, two, thr—'

A smooth, silky voice cut Silas short.

'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Silas balled his fist—he wasn't afraid of adults.

He spun round to face the stranger. 'What the hell's it got to do with y—?' and his words dried up.

With one hand cradling his gut, Jake managed to stagger to his feet. He looked over to where Silas gawped at the newcomer.

The sun fell behind the houses. Streetlights blinked on, bathing the road in an orange glare. In this sickly half-light, the face of the Pale Man gleamed.

He was dressed in an old-fashioned style: shiny leather shoes with pointed tips, pinstriped trousers and waistcoat. A scarlet tie had been fastened to his shirt with a flashy diamond pin. His clothes were immaculate and tailored perfectly to fit his emaciated body. Jake had immediately thought of him as the 'Pale Man' because of the deathly shade of his skin. In fact, now that he looked closer, it seemed that the skin was almost translucent—that the brilliant white of the man's skull could be seen shining through.

'Who are you?' Silas said, his voice quivering.

Blue eyes shifted between the boys.

'I am a friend of young Master Harker.'

'I don't know you,' Jake said.

'Not yet,' the Pale Man agreed. 'And now, Master Silas, as there are grown-up things to discuss, I bid you goodnight.'

Silas's face flushed red. He looked as if he was about to attack the stranger.

The Pale Man shook his head and wagged his finger. 'Now, now, I wouldn't try anything if I were you. My friend Mr Pinch is waiting in the car. He is my—how shall I put it?—my guardian angel.'

He nodded towards a long black limousine parked a little way down the road. Its tinted windows reflected Silas, Jake, and the Pale Man, but kept the mysterious Mr Pinch hidden from view.

'Best you run off home, Silas, or my "angel" will come out to play.'

A silhouette moved against the glass of the windscreen. It was a small form, no larger than a cat. Its movements struck Jake as odd—smooth, stealthy, and then suddenly ragged and sharp, like a string puppet being jerked this way and that. What was it? he wondered.

Jake glanced to his right and saw that Silas was watching the shadow, too. All the ferocity had drained from him and he looked like a frightened little boy. Without a word, Silas turned and shuffled away down the street.

When he reached the end of the road, the Pale Man smirked and called after him. 'Now be a good boy, Silas, or one day I might come looking for you.'

Silas put his head down and walked on.

'That's better, isn't it?' the man said, and held out his hand to Jake. 'Very pleased to make your acquaintance, young Harker.'

Jake tightened his grip on the straps of his backpack. Sweat sprang out at the nape of his neck. There was something very wrong with this man, he could feel it.

'Come now, I am sure your parents have told you that it is impolite not to shake hands when a stranger introduces himself.'

'My parents told me not to talk to strangers.'

'Very sensible. Indeed, I should have expected nothing less from Adam and Claire Harker. But tell me, how are your parents?'

'Fine.'

'I am relieved to hear it. And they are both still happy in the employ of the Hobarron Institute? I wonder what fascinating projects they are working on these days . . . ' Eyes dazzling, he closed in on Jake. 'If you tell me, I could make it worth your while. Whatever your heart desires could be yours. Money, clothes, the latest gadgets. If there's some girl you like, I could arrange things so that she looks favourably upon you. Or that boy just now—would you like something *unpleasant* to happen to him?'

Jake took a step back. 'I have to go.'

'What a pity.' The Pale Man looked genuinely saddened. 'But perhaps you will do me *one* favour before we part—if you are now on your way to the Institute, I wonder if you would place this at the memorial?' He took a scarlet flower from his buttonhole and handed it to Jake. 'In memory of the tragedy. And now, as we have nothing left to say to one another, you had best go on your way, Master Harker.'

'How do you know my name?'

'Your father and I are old, old friends.'

The Pale Man smiled and fear wriggled in Jake's gut like a ball of worms.

'What . . . ' Jake's breath shortened. 'What's your name?'

Spots of rain started to run down the stranger's face and into the hollows of his eyes.

'Quilp,' he said. 'Mr Quilp, at your service. And I am sure we shall see each other again, young man. Very soon, in fact.'