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Invisible Fiends: Mr Mumbles

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PROLOGUE

What had I expected to see? I wasn't sure. An empty street. One or two late-night wanderers, maybe.

But not this. Never this.

There were hundreds of them. *Thousands*. They scuttled and scurried through the darkness, swarming over the village like an infection; relentless and unstoppable.

I leaned closer to the window and looked down at the front of the hospital. One of the larger creatures was tearing through the fence, its claws slicing through the wrought-iron bars as if they were cardboard. My breath fogged the glass and the monster vanished behind a cloud of condensation. By the time the pane cleared the *thing* would be inside the hospital. It would be up the stairs in moments. Everyone in here was as good as dead.

The distant thunder of gunfire ricocheted from somewhere near the village centre. A scream followed – short and sharp, then suddenly silenced. There were no more gunshots after that, just the triumphant roar of something sickening and grotesque.

I heard Ameena take a step closer behind me. I didn't need to look at her reflection in the window to know how terrified she was. The crack in her voice said it all.

'It's the same everywhere,' she whispered.

I nodded, slowly. 'The town as well?'

She hesitated long enough for me to realise what she meant. I turned away from the devastation outside. 'Wait… You really mean *everywhere*, don't you?'

Her only reply was a single nod of her head.

'*Liar!*' I snapped. It couldn't be true. This couldn't be happening.

She stooped and picked up the TV remote from the day-room coffee table. It shook in her hand as she held it out to me.

'See for yourself.'

Hesitantly, I took the remote. 'What channel?'

She glanced at the ceiling, steadying her voice. 'Any of them.'

The old television set gave a faint *clunk* as I switched it on. In a few seconds, an all-too-familiar scene appeared.

Hundreds of the creatures. Cars and buildings ablaze. People screaming. People running. People *dying*.

Hell on Earth.

'That's New York,' she said.

Click. Another channel, but the footage was almost identical.

'London.'

Click.

'I'm… I'm not sure. Somewhere in Japan. Tokyo, maybe?'

It could have been Tokyo, but then again it could have been anywhere. I clicked through half a dozen more channels, but the images were always the same.

'It happened,' I gasped. 'It actually happened.'

I turned back to the window and gazed out. The clouds above the next town were tinged with orange and red. It was

already burning. They were destroying everything, just like *he'd* told me they would.

This was it.

The world was ending.

Armageddon.

And it was all my fault.

THIRTY-FOUR DAYS EARLIER…

Chapter One

Jungle Hell

If Nan had made the joke about the frosted glass once, she'd made it a hundred times. It wasn't even very funny the first time round.

'Look, Kyle,' she'd say between tracks of the cheesy Christmas hits CD she was inflicting on me, 'the glass in the windows is more frosted up than the frosted glass in the door!'

The first few times I laughed. The next few I smiled and nodded. By the seventh time I'd taken to ignoring her completely. It was the only way she was going to learn.

Don't get me wrong, it's not like I don't like my nan. She's actually pretty cool most of the time. For a seventy-four-year-old with two plastic hips, anyway. It's just

that her mind plays tricks on her sometimes.

Up until I was about six or seven, Nan used to stay here in the house with us. It was Nan, Mum and me, all living together and getting along fine.

Then one day Nan forgot her name. It just popped right out of her head one morning, and she had to ask Mum what it was. The whole thing seemed hilarious to me at the time, though Nan and Mum didn't see the funny side.

Everything was OK again for a while, then Nan started to get more and more confused. She'd wake up in the night and not know where she was. Some days she'd believe she was a little girl again, dodging the bombs in the Second World War.

One time she thought I'd vanished. For three whole days she couldn't see or hear me, even when I was standing right in front of her, waving my arms and shouting. It freaked Mum out. After that, the doctor said it was best if she didn't live with us any more.

The home Mum found for her seemed quite nice. Everyone there was friendly, and Nan seemed happy enough. She still

spends every Christmas Day with us, but I don't get to see her much apart from that. The doctor says she's getting more and more confused with every day that passes, so she's pretty much confined to the home all year round. She doesn't seem to mind.

Her 'confusion' was why she kept repeating the joke about the frosted glass over and over. Well, that and the fact she'd had four sherries in forty minutes.

When Nan wasn't making wisecracks about the temperature she was grinning like a maniac, and watching me play with the action figures she'd given me. Every year I try to explain that I haven't played with action figures since I was five. Every year she buys me more.

Last year it was Power Rangers. The year before that it was Spider-Man. The years before that? I can't remember. I had no idea who this year's merry band of misfits were, either. One looked like a cat dressed as a cowboy. If I kind of closed one eye and tilted my head to the side another one looked like a monkey in a dress. A bit.

I did my best to look excited for Nan's sake, and smacked

them against each other a few times as if they were fighting. Even now, with all the crazy stuff I've seen in the past few hours, I can't think of many reasons why a cowboy cat would be fighting a monkey in a dress. It seemed to make Nan happy, though, so I kept it up until she started snoring her head off in front of the fire.

With Nan asleep I was free to go and check out the smell that had been wafting in from the kitchen for the last twenty minutes. Mum was making Christmas lunch for the three of us, and I could hardly wait.

Usually Mum's cooking was something to be avoided. Feared, even. For a woman who could burn a boiled egg, though, she somehow always managed to make a mean turkey with all the trimmings come December 25th. It was her own kind of Christmas magic. Not as spectacular as flying around the world in one night, but impressive all the same. Such a gift, of course, didn't come without a price...

'*Kyle Alexander, touch those sausages and I'll break your fingers!*' Mum snapped. I hadn't even noticed the plate of half-sized bangers cooling on a wire rack next to the cooker

until then, but suddenly I wanted them more than anything else in the world. 'I mean it,' she scolded, stepping back to avoid the heat as she yanked open the oven door and slung in a tray of potatoes. 'I need them. If you're hungry have a mince pie.'

'I'm not hungry,' I shrugged, and I wasn't. I just wanted a little sausage. The look on Mum's face told me if I took one I'd be signing my death warrant, so I slowly stepped away, keeping my hands in clear view at all times. For 364 days of the year Mum is pretty easy-going, but mess with her when she's making Christmas dinner and you're opening the door to a world of pain.

She swept past me and tore open a drawer. I could hear her muttering to herself as she rummaged around, getting more and more annoyed as she realised that whatever she was looking for wasn't where she thought it was.

'Need a hand?' I asked. I didn't know the first thing about cooking, but thought I'd offer anyway.

'Have you seen the – *Aha*!' Like a tiger pouncing on its prey, Mum bounded across the kitchen and snatched up two

complicated-looking kitchen utensils. At least I guessed that was what they were. They might have been instruments of torture for all I knew. In the mood she was in she'd probably use them too.

I knew it wasn't the right time to ask the question. Sometimes it seems like it's never the right time to ask the question. I always ask it anyway. I can't help it. It just slips out.

'Any word from Dad?'

Mum sighed and slammed the utensils down on the kitchen counter. She hung her head, her back towards me, saying nothing. The only sounds were the howling of the wind outside and the frantic spluttering of Nan choking on her teeth in the living room.

'Not this again,' breathed Mum. Her voice wasn't angry like I'd expected it to be. It just sounded tired. She turned to face me and I could see that the lines of her face were drawn with sadness. 'No, Kyle,' she said, 'there's been no word from Dad. Just like there was no word from him last year, or any year before that.'

I don't know why I think about my dad so much, what with me never having met him. I can't help that either. I wonder every day what he's like. Do I look like him? Do we sound the same? I don't even know his name.

'Maybe he'll phone,' I said, thinking it out loud more than anything else. I jumped as a plate smashed on the kitchen floor.

'No, he won't phone!' Mum cried. That had done it, she was properly angry now. 'He'll never phone! He doesn't care about us! When are you going to accept that?'

I felt tears spring to my eyes, as much for Mum as for myself. Why did I always push her like this? I should have let it go then, but I couldn't.

'He does care,' I shouted, my voice sounding much bolder than I was feeling. 'He'll come back one day, you'll see.'

'Oh, and what then?' Mum demanded, throwing her hands up into the air. 'You'll go off with him and live happily ever after, will you?'

From the way she said it I knew Mum was only looking for reassurance. She just wanted to know that I loved her and

that I wouldn't choose someone over her who'd walked out before I was even born. I knew that was what she needed to hear, so I don't know why I said what I did.

'Maybe I will.'

She stared at me for a few long moments, her face a melting pot of betrayal and shock. I bit my lip, wishing I could take the words back. She took a steadying breath and patted down a crease on the front of her *World's Best Mum* apron.

'I think you should go to your room, Kyle,' she said. Her voice was flat and controlled. Suddenly the kitchen felt as frosty as the glass in the window frame.

'But what about dinner?' I protested. 'It's Christmas dinner!'

'Your room,' she repeated. 'Now.'

Usually I like lying on top of my bed. It's a comfy place to come and read, or just to think. I hoped I might get a games console for Christmas, so I could play it up in my room, but no such luck. I have a TV, but it's old and falling apart. On

the rare times it actually picks up a channel, the picture is usually too snowy to watch. Still, I have my books and comics, and can normally pass a few hours with those.

Apart from the dodgy TV and the lack of games consoles, the only real downside to my room is the view from my window. Mum has a great view from hers. Our terrace is right up on top of a hill, so from Mum's room you can look out over the whole village. OK, so the village itself doesn't look all that impressive, but on clear nights you can make out all the lights of the next town, twinkling away happily in the distance.

It's a four- or five-mile trek to town, but it's worth it. If you're looking for decent shops, or a cinema, or anything at all, you'll find it in town. Even my school is there, which means a twenty-minute bus journey there and back every day during term time.

Our village has nothing very exciting in it. We've got houses, a couple of churches and a tiny supermarket whose shelves are always half empty.

Oh, and there's a police station. A lot of the time it's

unmanned, but sometimes – maybe when they need a rest, or something – one of the officers from the town comes over there for the day. They usually spend the whole time sitting with their feet up because – to be honest – there's not a lot happens in our village.

Beyond the town lie the mountains. They look brilliant at this time of year – the snow is almost right down to the bottom – and if I get my binoculars out I can sometimes see some of the kids from school sledging on the lower slopes. It looks like fun. Maybe one day I'll ask them if I can come. Then again, they'll probably only say 'no', so maybe I won't bother.

So, yeah, anyway, it's a good view from Mum's room. Mine isn't so great. In fact it's fair to say that my view gives me the willies. You see, unluckily for me, my bedroom faces straight on to the creepy abandoned house next door. The Keller House.

When I was eight or nine I kept asking Mum why we couldn't just move into the house. It's much bigger than ours, with a massive garden. It also has a room built on to the side

with a private pool, but I hate water, so I wasn't too bothered about that. I just liked the idea of having a gigantic bedroom.

But that was before I heard the stories. Before I found out all about the Keller House. After that, I didn't want to go near the place. No one did.

So, as I was saying, I usually liked lazing on my bed, but lying there playing the conversation with Mum over and over in my head, it was the most uncomfortable place in the world.

I shouldn't have said the stuff I did, I knew that. The fact was, though, I *did* want to know about my dad. Mum never told me anything other than that he disappeared the day she told him she was pregnant with me.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he really didn't want anything to do with me. He'd made no effort to get in touch my whole life, after all. Still, something kept telling me I should keep asking, and it seemed as if I was powerless to fight the urge.

Up above me a shiny plastic Santa swung gently backwards and forwards on an invisible breeze. My eyes

tick-tocked left and right, following his jolly pendulum sway. On each upward swing the glow from my light glinted off his oval eyes, making them appear glistening and alive.

Then, without warning, the overhead light went dim. For a moment it flicked and flickered, sending distorted Santa shadows scurrying up the wall. The wind shook the window, rattling it in its wooden frame. The bedroom door creaked loudly as a draft slowly pushed it closed.

With a distant *fzzzt* the room was plunged into almost total blackness. The faint, grey December daylight that seeped into the room barely made a dent in the dark.

Suddenly, over the howling of the gales outside, I heard a sharp scraping sound. It was slow at first, almost methodical. Quickly, though, it picked up pace, until a frantic, desperate scratching ripped through the gloom.

There was a crazed urgency to the sound which froze me to my core. I lay still, unable to do anything but listen to the racket. It bounced off every wall, as if it were coming at me from every direction at once, making it almost impossible for me to pinpoint the source.

It took me several seconds, but eventually I realised where the horrible scratching was coming from: the ceiling above my bed. The blood in my veins ran as cold as ice.

There was something in the attic.

And it was trying to claw its way through.