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The Blood Pit

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Extract

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PROLOGUE

The small figure lay on the sand gulping in salty, seaweed-scented air as the twisted face descended slowly, closer and closer.

The watchers had been egging on the tormentor, braying like donkeys. Relentless, mocking. But suddenly they fell silent and began to back away, as though an evil spell had been broken. Then, after a few frozen, expectant seconds, they fled the scene, leaving the victim alone with the powerful one, waiting for the cruel laugh and the final blow.

There was no pain when the blood started to drain away into the thirsty sand. And as the victim looked upwards, the stars and the towering cliff face silhouetted against the midnight sky began to blur and fade. The end was near. This was death.

Savouring the moment of supreme power, the bringer of death sat back and smiled. But when a sound cracked like a gunshot through the gloom, the tormentor fled into the shadow of the cliff and the victim was left alone, life blood gushing away like a stream, staining the sand a rusty red.

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER

Annette Marrick turned the car into the drive of Foxglove House, narrowly avoiding the couple who were walking past the gate – a man and a woman, not old, not young; out for a saunter in the late afternoon sun with their cheap supermarket clothes and plastic carrier bags. As Annette swung the steering wheel, they scurried out of her path and she smiled with satisfaction before continuing down the drive, bringing the car to a halt in front of the house with a crunch of gravel beneath her wheels.

Charlie's new Range Rover was there, parked thoughtlessly at an angle as usual, and as Annette opened the front door, she couldn't help feeling discontented and a little angry. But she often felt like that these days – especially when he was up to what she thought of as His Little Tricks.

She noticed that the lounge door was shut, which was unusual. Perhaps he was in there, she thought . . . entertaining. Tentatively, she turned the handle and listened for sounds of hurried, embarrassed dressing. But when she stepped into the room, all she could hear was the faint sound of birdsong from the garden trickling in through an open window.

Three months ago, she had had the lounge decorated to her own taste. Cream carpet; white leather sofa; white walls and ceiling; cream drapes at the French windows with the occasional splash of cool green to relieve the monotony.

And red. There were splashes on the walls and ceiling. Scarlet in places; rusty in others where it had begun to dry. The white sofa was now a deep, glistening scarlet and he lay slumped there, staring at her accusingly.

'Charlie,' she whispered, hurrying over to him and touching his arm with the tips of her fingers. When he didn't move she looked down and realised that she was standing in a pool

of blood, thick and sticky. She froze for a few moments, wondering what to do, before backing away, her eyes fixed on her husband's dead face.

She took off her stilettos at the door and tiptoed into the hall in her bare feet, her heart pounding. When she reached the huge mirror that hung by the staircase, she stared at her reflection in horror. Her white skirt was stained with Charlie's blood so she unzipped it frantically, only to find that the red had seeped through to her underskirt. She stepped out of that too and stood in her white lace knickers, staring at her half-naked image in the mirror, telling herself to stay calm. There was some way out of this.

Then she rushed to the kitchen and plunged the skirt and underskirt into the sink. She had to be clean. No blood must be found on her hands.

CHAPTER 1

Dear Dr Watson or may I call you Neil? Yes I'll call you Neil – it sounds more informal. Friendlier.

Did you know the monks of Veland Abbey were bled every couple of months and that they regarded it as a great treat – a holiday almost? It was their only chance to eat decent food in the warmth away from the daily grind of hard physical work and those interminable prayers.

I feel I know all about you, Neil, and I feel you'd understand. You see, I'm scared I might do something terrible. And I'm scared the bleeding won't stop like it did for those monks.

Neil Watson stared at the letter and frowned. It had been waiting for him in his letterbox at the entrance to the flats, between an electricity bill and an offer of a credit card at amazing rates from a company quite unaware of what archaeologists actually earned. As it had promised to be the most interesting item of correspondence, he'd opened it first. And now he turned it over, as though he expected to find some sort of clue on the back of the sheet of A4 paper. The letter had been printed on a computer. Times New Roman. And the envelope was the plain white self-seal type with a computer-printed address. All standard stuff. Apart from the content.

He realised his hand was shaking. He was an archaeologist; not the sort of person who received anonymous letters. And the thought that someone out there was watching him was unnerving. The writer knew what he did. And where he lived. He could be watching now . . . somewhere in the shadows. Waiting.

Neil put the letter down on the small dining table that doubled as his desk. Perhaps he should ignore it. There were a lot of peculiar people about and his recent appearance on local television had probably lured one of them out of whatever woodwork he or she had been lurking in. He'd raised his head above the parapet; maybe even become a bit of a local celebrity of the very minor kind. Neil had never considered himself the celebrity type but then someone – he couldn't remember who – had once observed that everyone has their fifteen minutes of fame. Although he had to admit that he hadn't particularly enjoyed his.

Fame, in Neil's case, had crept up unexpectedly when he'd agreed to take charge of the Archaeological Unit's first training excavation at Stow Barton – a puzzling collection of medieval ruins on land once owned by a Cistercian abbey two miles to the west. Members of the public could, for a price, take part in a dig, supervised and instructed by professional archaeologists. The powers-that-be had told him that it would spread the word to the masses. And it would raise some much needed funds into the bargain.

However, from the very beginning, Neil had had an uncomfortable feeling that the enterprise would end in disaster.

He re-read the letter again before screwing it up into a tight ball and aiming it at the waste-paper basket in the corner of his cluttered living room. It was rubbish. The work of a nutcase with nothing better to do.

But half an hour later he retrieved it and flattened it out.

He had an uneasy feeling he might need all the evidence he could get.

The hooded figures on the littered recreation ground that lay on the edge of Morbay's Winterham Estate had their own rituals, strict and unchanging. The circling on bicycles like some tribal round dance. Then the solemn drinking of the strong cider or lager – whatever they could get their hands on. Then, as darkness fell, the furtive communion with their shaman – Daz the dealer who hung round the estate in anticipation of their needs – their alternative emergency service. Then the escape to their tawdry ecstasy of enlightenment – the high point of their day. The thing they mugged, shoplifted and burgled for. The temporary oblivion they craved for want of anything better to do.

At six thirty, after a hard day avoiding the security guards who patrolled the shopping centre in Morbay, Carl Pinney felt thirsty. His mates decided to go to the chippy but Carl, knowing his mum had bought some diet coke from the supermarket the day before, broke away from the tribe, saying he'd see them later, and made for home. He fancied some coke before Chelsea, his stupid bitch of a sister, drank it all. And, besides, he had seen his favourite pizza being shoved in the freezer. And pizza, in Carl's opinion, trumped the Fat Friar's soggy chips any day.

The maisonette he called home was in sight. Built in the 1950s in the utilitarian council-house style, it had grubby net curtains at the windows and an old fridge – once the property of the neighbours – stood on the patch of scrub that his mum optimistically referred to as a lawn. Pathetic really, Carl thought. But his mum had always had big ideas . . . until Dad had walked out and the pills and booze got to her.

Carl was making for the front door when he saw something glinting on top of an open bin bag by the front gate.

The thing caught the light amongst the ready meal packaging, sparkling like a jewel in mud, and Carl leaned over the bag of rubbish to get a closer look.

The blade looked vicious. Thin and sharp and stained with something brown. The handle and the top of the blade looked brand new and as Carl reached down and picked it up he realised that the stain on the blade wasn't rust. It was something far more thrilling and his heart began to beat a little faster.

He stood gazing at it for a while before walking round to the back of the building, to the little flagged area Mum called the patio. The key to the tumbledown shed was in his pocket – he always kept it with him – and as he undid the padlock, the door opened with a creak. All his things were in here – the precious things he kept away from Chelsea and his mum. His private things. He opened the wooden box on the top shelf – the box his dad had given him when he was little – and placed the knife inside carefully before retracing his steps.

When he entered the house he found that Mum was out of it as usual, snoring gently on the settee, a half empty vodka bottle squatting on the coffee table, and Chelsea was nowhere to be seen. So he made himself a pizza before revisiting the shed.

One of the young constables in the patrol car who'd answered the initial 999 call had been sick in the rhododendron bushes lining the drive that lead to Foxglove House on the edge of the village of Rhode, halfway between Tradmouth and Bereton. Detective Chief Inspector Gerry Heffernan had taken pity on him and put him on the gate to keep away the press and the curious. The crime scene had already been preserved with blue and white tape, draped around the front door like welcoming bunting.

It was a pleasant evening, positively warm for early June

and Heffernan was sitting in front of the house on a wrought-iron garden bench, enjoying the late sun while he waited for the Forensic team to complete whatever mysterious rituals they performed on such occasions so that he could make his own examination of the scene. He was wearing a white crime-scene suit which strained around the belly because he'd already had a brief look inside the house. Death was never pretty but this one was enough to turn the strongest stomach.

He heard the growl of an approaching car engine and when the vehicle appeared round the bend in the drive, crunching the luxuriant gravel beneath its tyres, he stood up. Wesley. Just the man he needed.

'Your mobile was off,' Heffernan said accusingly as DI Wesley Peterson climbed out of the car. 'Where have you been?'

Wesley glanced down at his jeans and white T-shirt, not his usual working garb. 'I told you I was taking the afternoon off. It was Michael's school sports day then we all went for something to eat. Pam would have skinned me alive if I'd been called out. It was more than my life was worth to keep my mobile on.'

Heffernan knew that this was the time to bluster a little, to make Wesley feel guilty for his lack of dedication to duty. But somehow he couldn't manage it. He knew exactly how Wesley felt.

'So did he win, then, your lad?'

'Third in the egg and spoon race,' Wesley said with a shrug of the shoulders. 'He's more the cerebral type.'

Heffernan smiled. The kid was clearly a chip off the old block, he thought. But he said nothing.

Wesley looked across at the open front door. He could see figures in white overalls huddled in the hallway, deep in concentration. The police photographer and a couple of Forensic officers emerged from the front door, their faces

solemn and businesslike. There was none of the usual banter. Wesley knew that this was a bad sign. 'So what's the story here?' he asked.

Heffernan didn't answer. Instead he called over to the Forensic officers and asked if it was okay to go in. When they answered in the affirmative, Wesley donned a paper suit and plastic gloves and the two men began to make their way to the house.

'Nasty?' Wesley asked.

'You could say that.'

Wesley took a deep breath, preparing himself for the unpalatable. He came from a family of doctors but the genetic strong stomach had somehow passed him by.

Gerry Heffernan led the way into the hall and pointed to a half-open door to his left. 'In there.' The way Heffernan said the words made Wesley feel nervous. He hesitated before taking a bold step across the threshold.

The sight that greeted him made him freeze. There was blood everywhere, pooled on the floor and splashed up the walls, and three white-clad figures were crowded around something lying on the sofa. Wesley recognised one of the figures as the pathologist, Colin Bowman, intent on his work and deep in concentration. Wesley didn't greet him. He had caught the metallic stench of blood in his nostrils and his stomach was beginning to churn. He stepped out of the room quickly. He'd leave them to it for now.

Gerry Heffernan was waiting in the hall at the foot of the wide staircase, carpeted in cream to match the lounge. 'Not a pretty sight,' the DCI observed.

'Who was he? Or was it she?'

'It's a he. Wine merchant by the name of Charles Marrick.'

'Could it be suicide? Or an accident?'

Heffernan shook his head. 'No note and no sign of a weapon.'

'Who else lives here?'

'Only the wife. She found him. She's in the conservatory at the back of the house with Rachel.'

Wesley nodded. If anyone was going to get anything out of the grieving widow, it was DS Rachel Tracey. She had a talent for that sort of thing. A gift. And, to top all that, she had a good ear for a lie.

'How's the wife taking it?'

Heffernan thought for a second, searching for the appropriate words. 'I get the impression she's not exactly heartbroken.'

'Think it could be a domestic?'

'My first thought when I saw the body was that a woman couldn't have done it. But I have to admit that I've known some pretty scary women in my time.'

Wesley looked at him curiously, wondering if he was about to be the recipient of some interesting confidences.

But Heffernan didn't elaborate on his last statement. 'I suppose we'd better make Mr Marrick's acquaintance,' he said with a sigh.

Wesley nodded. It couldn't be put off any longer.

The two men entered the lounge gingerly, stepping over the Forensic team's metal plates, put down to preserve any evidence that might lie on the floor. Dr Colin Bowman was blocking their view of the thing on the sofa and when Heffernan greeted him, he looked round and smiled.

'Come in, come in,' he said like a genial host, beckoning to them to come closer. The lady of the house must have favoured cream and white, Wesley thought, and the overall effect was airy and light – or it would have been if it weren't for the dark stains on the walls and fabrics. At first he thought the deep-red sofa was a dramatic interior design statement. Until he saw the body of Charles Marrick.

Normally Gerry Heffernan would have indulged in a bit of idle chatter, small talk to relieve the tension, but today he stayed silent as Colin moved aside to give them a better view, like an artist showing off his handiwork.

The corpse of Charles Marrick lay slumped against the cushions, staring at the ceiling with sightless eyes. The expression on the dead man's pallid, almost white, face – a desperation, as though he was pleading for help which never came – made Wesley take a step back. Then his eyes were drawn to the neck. Blood must have gushed like a fountain from the pair of neat wounds, close together and perfectly aligned like a vampire's kiss. Most of the blood had been absorbed by the sodden sofa but some had splashed on to the surrounding walls and furnishings and trickled down on to the creamy carpet below.

'There are two neat stab wounds close together and both of them pierced the artery,' Colin pronounced with inappropriate cheerfulness. 'Either lucky or he or she knew what they were doing.'

'There's so much blood,' Wesley observed quietly. Then he felt a little silly at having stated the obvious.

Colin Bowman cleared his throat. 'Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?'

Heffernan looked up. 'You what?'

'Shakespeare . . . the Scottish Play.' He turned to the corpse. 'What I can't understand is why there are no defensive wounds. He was a youngish man and fairly fit, I should think. Why didn't he put up a fight? And why didn't he call for help? He probably didn't die instantly and there's a phone on the table by the window.'

'Unless he was restrained or knocked out somehow,' Wesley suggested. 'Any sign of a head wound?'

Colin Bowman shook his head. 'Nothing obvious. But something might come to light when I get him on the slab. And there's nothing to suggest he was tied up.' He glanced across at the windows. One of them was open and the white voile drape, spotted with dried blood, billowed gently in the breeze. 'Lovely evening,' he observed absentmindedly.

'Not for him,' Gerry Heffernan replied before marching out of the room.

The feeling of the knife in his hand gave Carl Pinney a sense of power. And the blood on the narrow blade meant that it had been used before – blooded like a warrior's sword. Proved. Carl hadn't washed the blood off – he hadn't fancied it, watching the water in the basin turn red as it floated off in russet clouds. Instead he had dropped it into a thin supermarket carrier bag. It'd be safe there.

Somehow he didn't feel like company so he hadn't gone to meet the others. But he needed something to blot out reality. He still had some of the stuff him and Nathan had nicked from the vet's surgery in Tradmouth left but he was keeping that for a rainy day. Besides, he fancied something stronger and that would cost money. He felt in each pocket but found nothing but the unfruitful scratch card he'd nicked from the newsagent's the previous day. Daz would have what he needed – but Daz didn't give credit so he had to get hold of cash and fast. He could always go back home to see if there was anything in his mum's purse – she'd be in no fit state to stop him. Or he could try his luck in Abbeyside. There were a lot of upmarket flats and houses in Abbeyside, some owned by well-off single people who'd soon be arriving home after an evening in the pub. Ripe pickings.

He pulled his hood up, concealing his acne pitted face, and slouched down the street. The no man's land between the Winterham Estate and Abbeyside was a small district of small terraced houses, some rundown, some newly gentrified by optimistic first-time buyers who'd convinced themselves, despite all evidence to the contrary, that the area was on the up and that the Winterham Estate was improving daily. There were shops and takeaways on the main road but these didn't welcome the likes of Carl. The shopkeepers kept wary vigilance and regularly called the police who responded

with half-hearted boredom. Their hands were tied unless a crime was actually committed. And hanging round in a threatening manner didn't constitute a crime. At least not yet.

But Carl had no intention of drawing attention to himself that evening. He had been to Abbeyside many times before: he had watched the new young residents talking on their mobile phones, carrying their laptops in black padded cases, their wallets and handbags stuffed with cash and credit cards. As far as Carl was concerned, they were easy prey. Asking for it.

He slipped into a narrow alley that ran between a dry cleaner's and a Chinese takeaway and stood quite still, waiting, like a hunter, for his quarry to come into view, striding confidently, unaware of any danger. He felt in the carrier bag and touched the cool metal of the knife handle. When it was over he'd go straight to Daz. His head was hurting and his mouth was dry. He needed something to blot out the world and he needed it soon.

Carl waited hours – or it might only have been five minutes; his sense of time had gone completely haywire – before he heard footsteps. One person walking quickly down the street towards his hiding place. Instinctively he crouched a little, making himself invisible, coiled and motionless, waiting to pounce. The knife was in his hand but he couldn't remember taking it from the carrier bag. The footsteps were louder now, getting nearer. Then a shadow crossed the alley's mouth, blocking out the evening light, and Carl's muscles stiffened. This was it. Prey. Time to move.

It happened quickly. Carl leaped out just as the figure had passed. Later he was unable to recall the exact words he used. Highwaymen of old used to say 'stand and deliver' but Carl's opening line was almost certainly smattered with four-letter words starting with F and lacked the elegance of a bygone age. He came up behind his mark and pressed the knife against the side of his throat, expecting the victim to freeze with

terror and hand over all his worldly goods meekly, without a word of protest.

His victim was a man, five ten and dark haired, wearing a soft black leather jacket that must have cost a fortune. He looked young and fit and, what was more important, he looked as if he had money. In a fair fight, he'd beat Carl no problem. But nobody argues with a blade: weapons are the great leveller . . . like death.

But things didn't quite go to plan. The victim swung round and pushed Carl to the ground, sending the knife clattering into the gutter. Then Carl was hauled upright. A pain shot through his body as his right arm was wrenched into an arm lock. He was forced to the ground again and he flinched as a punch landed on his face.

As he lay helpless and groaning, his captor made a phone call and a few minutes later a patrol car sped to the scene, blues and twos blaring. Carl's nose was still streaming with blood when he was pushed into the back seat.

The intended victim, who had introduced himself as Detective Constable Steve Carstairs when he made the arrest, grinned with satisfaction as he picked the knife out of the gutter. Then he climbed into the police car and sat beside Carl, leaning towards him so that Carl could smell his after-shave and the faint whiff of garlic on his breath.

'Not your lucky day, is it?' Carstairs said in a gloating whisper.

The only suitable response Carl could think of was to spit in his face.