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Written by Andrew Hammond

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CRYPT:
The Gallows Curse

ANDREW HAMMOND

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Ghosts are the stuff of fiction, right? Wrong.

The government just doesn't want you to know about them . . .

In 2007, American billionaire and IT guru Jason Goode bought himself an English castle; it's what every rich man needs. He commissioned a new sky scraper too, to be built right in the heart of London. A futuristic cone-shaped building with thirty-eight floors and a revolving penthouse, it would be the new headquarters for his global enterprise, Goode Technology PLC.

He and his wife Tara were looking forward to their first Christmas at the castle with Jamie, their thirteen-year-old son, home from boarding school. It all seemed so perfect.

Six weeks later Goode returned home one night to find a horror scene: the castle lit up with blue flashing lights, police everywhere.

His wife was dead. His staff were out for the night; his son was the only suspect.

Jamie was taken into custody and eventually found guilty of killing his mother. They said he'd pushed her from the battlements during a heated argument. He was sent away to a young offenders' institution.

But throughout the trial, his claims about what really happened never changed:

'The ghosts did it, Dad.'

His father had to believe him. From that day on, Jason Goode

vowed to prove the existence of ghosts and clear his son's name.

They said Goode was mad – driven to obsession by the grief of losing his family. Plans for the new London headquarters were put on hold. He lost interest in work. People said he'd given up on life.

But one man stood by him – lifelong friend and eminent scientist Professor Giles Bonati. Friends since their student days at Cambridge, Bonati knew Goode hadn't lost his mind. They began researching the science of disembodied spirits.

Not only did they prove scientifically how ghosts can access our world, they uncovered a startling truth too: that some teenagers have stronger connections to ghosts than any other age group. They have high extrasensory perception (ESP), which means they can see ghosts where others can't.

So was Jamie telling the truth after all?

Goode and Bonati set up the Paranormal Investigation Team (PIT), based in the cellars of Goode's private castle. It was a small experimental project at first, but it grew. Requests came in for its teenage agents to visit hauntings across the region.

But fear of the paranormal was building thanks to the PIT. Hoax calls were coming in whenever people heard a creak in the attic. Amateur ghost hunters began to follow the teenagers and interfere with their work. Suddenly everyone was talking about ghosts.

To prevent the situation from escalating out of control, Goode was ordered to disband the PIT and stop frightening people. Reporters tried to expose the team as a fraud. People could rest easy in their beds – there was no such thing as ghosts. Goode had to face the awful truth that his son was a liar – and a murderer. The alternative was too frightening for the public to accept.

So that's what they were told.

But in private, things were quite different. Goode had been approached by MI5.

The British security services had been secretly investigating paranormal incidents for years. When crimes are reported without any rational human explanation, MI5 must explore all other possibilities, including the paranormal. But funding was tight and results were limited.

Maybe teenagers were the answer.

So they proposed a deal. Goode could continue his paranormal investigations, but to prevent more hoax calls and widespread panic, he had to do so under the cover and protection of MI5.

They suggested the perfect venue for this joint operation – Goode's London headquarters. The skyscraper was not yet finished. There was still time. A subterranean suite of hi-tech laboratories could be built in the foundations. A new, covert organisation could be established – bigger and better than before, a joint enterprise between Goode Technology and the British security services.

But before Jason Goode agreed to the plan, he made a special request of his own. He would finish the building, convert the underground car park into a suite of laboratories and living accommodation, allow MI5 to control operations, help them recruit the best teenage investigators they could find and finance any future plans they had for the organisation – all in return for one thing.

He wanted his son back.

After weeks of intense secret negotiations, the security services finally managed to broker the deal: provided he was monitored closely by the Covert Policing Command at Scotland Yard, and, for his own protection, was given a new identity, Jamie could be released. For now.

The deal was sealed. The Goode Tower was finished – a landmark piece of modern architecture, soaring above the Thames. And buried discreetly beneath its thirty-eight floors was the Covert Response Youth Paranormal Team.

The CRYPT.

Jamie Goode was released from custody and is now the CRYPT's most respected agent.

And his new identity?

Meet Jud Lester, paranormal investigator.

Chapter 1

MONDAY: 5.35 P.M.
CENTRAL LINE

In the darkness of the underground, among the bats and the spiders and the rats, another train thundered down a neighbouring tunnel.

People read their newspapers. Some tried the crossword. Two kids argued over who was having the last Haribo. A woman shuffled in her seat and dropped her folder of papers. They splayed out over the floor. Letters from clients. Telephone messages. Conference notes. Doodles on a pad. A day's work.

A speaker in the corner broke the silence. 'Ladies and gentlemen. The delay we're experiencing is due to a broken-down train up ahead at Holborn station. We apologise for any inconvenience caused.'

Passengers kept on reading. Delays like this were common on the Central Line.

The lights of the carriage flickered again. There was an electrical kind of buzz, more flickering, causing shadows to chase around the carriage, and then . . .

Darkness.

The woman on the floor kept scrabbling around, trying to collect up her work. Blindly her hands swept over the dirty floor,

fishing for bits of paper. She was grabbing anything now and stuffing it into her briefcase. She felt nervous; she hated being trapped in between stations. And now in darkness too.

'It's so annoying!' someone said.

'We'll be off soon, don't worry about it,' said another.

Then silence.

Another announcement. 'Ladies and gentlemen. I'm sorry to have to inform you that we're experiencing an electrical fault. I'm sure we'll be able to fix it and will be on our way again soon. In the meantime, let me—'

The speaker clicked, buzzed and then fell silent.

Nothing. No light. No sound. No help.

People started chatting to one another quietly, trying to ease the tension.

'Always happens on the way home, doesn't it? Never on the way to work!'

'Typical!'

'You're right. We'll be off soon, though.'

'Yeah, don't worry about it, luv.'

'I never said I was worried. Just bored.'

Anonymous conversations in the dark.

One solitary emergency light above an exit door flickered on. Like a candle flame it brought a momentary comfort to the people around it.

One by one, other emergency lights blinked wearily into action, offering just enough brightness to read by. The conversations became unnecessary and passengers settled back into their private worlds of books and papers.

And then it happened.

One person saw it first.

She screamed – a piercing, chilling scream that ran right through everyone like a burst of cold air. People leapt up.

'What?'

'What's wrong?'

Confusion began to sweep through the packed train.

'What the hell was that for?'

'THERE!' she yelled. 'Out there! At the window! Look!'

Everyone turned their heads in the direction she was pointing.

There was a face.

In the tunnel outside, appearing through the shadows.

A lank, pale face, its cheek pressed up against the glass. Distorted and dribbling. Rings of swirling gases circled its head.

Screams spread through the carriage.

The hideous face peeled itself off the window, leaving a foul trail of cloudy dribble on the glass, like green and yellow algae. The glowing plasma that encircled it intensified as it contorted and puckered up to break into a gruesome smile. The sickly grin exposed brown, rotting teeth. Its cracked and bloodied lips widened. And kept widening. Soon they revealed a gaping hole in the centre of the face, towards which the dark, lifeless eyes now seemed to sink downwards. Features blending like smoky images.

On and on the mouth widened, jaw dislocating, eye sockets sinking yet further down into the black. Then, when the mouth could extend no more, and the void seemed vast, it spewed out a rank mixture of maggots and cockroaches. They hurtled at the window, some sticking to the mucousy dribble, others rattling against the glass like hailstones and scurrying in every direction, intent on finding a way in.

The rattling rose to a deafening din and the window finally gave way. Lethal shards of jagged glass launched in every direction. Flesh was pierced. Blood was pouring. The plague of beetles and lava began to gnaw away at passengers' faces. Like piranhas they worked, as their startled victims struggled frantically to brush them off, screaming and crying.

The thing at the window was now inside.

It scoured the seats. A mottled and congealed face. A mouth

now shrivelled, black and pursed. A body engulfed in a dark, swirling cloak that crawled with beetles. A dirty white shirt, open at the neck, revealing skin that peeled from the bone, like an old carcass for dogs. And a strange gaseous plasma that encircled it, merging the edges of its body with the rank air around it.

Suddenly, out of the black folds of dirty cloth, a grey, skeletal hand appeared. The fingers seemed dislocated and worn. Stippled bones, stripped of flesh. They clutched something tightly.

Polished wood. Metal fixings. Shiny barrel.

It couldn't be.

It was.

A seventeenth-century duelling pistol.

There was a deafening crack, which echoed around the carriage. The thunderous shot had been released in the direction of a businessman, cowering in the corner. He'd taken the bullet clean through the neck. His suited body slumped to the floor, spurting blood across the faces of the petrified onlookers. The ghostly apparition let forth a blood-curdling laugh of victory and reached down to the body. With a gruesome snap it broke the man's ring finger and pulled it clean from its socket. Right off. The ghost pocketed the bloodied finger, with its shiny gold wedding ring still attached. Turning to face the terrified passengers, now frozen with fear, it raised a hand and began lashing out.

There was an agonising shriek. The ghost had gouged out the eyes of a woman watching, mouth open, her body stiff with fear. She grabbed her face, collapsed to the floor and passed out. Fodder for the beetles.

Pandemonium broke loose. Deafening screams, frantic pushing and shoving. Panic blew through the train like icy wind in a tunnel.

'Get it OUT! Get it away from me!'

'Somebody! For God's sake.'

'Help me!'

Passengers clambered over one another, desperate to get to the doors. Some tried to prise them open with their fingers, their skin pressed white against hard metal rims – but they stayed shut. No way out. The ghost trudged on, deeper into the carriage of hell, firing off shots and spewing foul insects over everyone.

As it swept past, those who survived could see through their tears that it was, or had once been, a man, with a ring of rotting red flesh around his neck – a souvenir from the gallows, where the hangman's noose had wrung him dead.

Desperation grew further as people clambered over one another, eager to escape through the broken window, or slamming their shoes frantically against other windows. In the rush of bodies, all anxious to get through the connecting doors into the next carriage, a woman fell to the floor and was trampled over. She pleaded for people to stop crushing her, but soon her voice fell silent. Her begging ceased. She lay squashed in the aisle, her neck broken.

Another loud crack from the pistol. The ghost forced its way through the mass of terrified passengers at the door and entered the next carriage along. More yells for mercy. He grabbed the first woman he found. He lifted her up and pressed her face close to his. She gagged on the smell of maggot-infested flesh. His stagnant breath gushed from the black hole in his face. She retched again. She stared into the black, eyeless sockets in front of her. Into nothingness.

He parted his lips, grinned, and through the sickly dribble, in a harsh, guttural voice, he whispered to her:

'Good day, madam. Your money or your life.'

Chapter 2

MONDAY: 5.53 P.M.
BATTERSEA HELIPORT

The rotary blades had already begun spinning and Jud's black, tousled hair rasped across his face. Dressed in the usual black leathers – ready for his bikeride across the city – he would be hot and sweaty in the helicopter, but at least it was only a short flight to London, and after spending a miserable summer break at home in Buckinghamshire, he just wanted to get up into the air and away.

Things were so different without Mum.

And after all they'd been through, he couldn't wait to get back.

The helicopter rose steadily and soon the castle grounds were shrinking beneath him.

He'd been living in England since he could remember. Home was once New York, but his father's work had always taken him around the world. His wife, too. Jud had been something of a surprise; his parents had not scheduled a child into their busy lifestyles, and so as soon as he'd been old enough, he was sent from America to a boarding school in England, and a more settled way of life. Jason, his father, had been schooled in England as a boy and he'd always said it had made a man of him. Besides,

it was convenient – with Jud out of the way, his parents could continue their globetrotting.

But some years later, prompted by frequent trips to the UK on business, his father had decided they should spend more time together as a family, just the three of them. 'Time to get to know you again,' he'd once said to Jud. So he'd bought the castle estate in the Chiltern Hills. The plan was to spend school holidays together in England, instead of Jud having to travel back and forth to New York every time term finished. His parents would move to England. Even collect him from school, like the other parents did. It had all seemed so idyllic.

But that was nearly three years ago.

How times change.

And it was hard to separate his feelings for his mother from the nightmare that ensued after she died. Like an open sore, the memory still pained him.

And no one, not even Jud himself, could ever have imagined the cruel circumstances that were to follow her death.

Everything had changed unrecognisably. Jamie Goode was gone – even his name had changed – but slowly, secretly, a new life was emerging for Jud. And as the London skyline gradually hovered into view, he felt a new surge of energy and a sense of freedom.

His father had been right. Things *would* get better, in time.

Soon the black Squirrel HT1 was slowly descending like a demonic dragonfly on to the new heliport at Battersea Park. It had been open for just a few weeks, and the wealthy neighbours in their penthouse flats gazed out of their windows and cursed yet another intrusion into their luxury lives. The great tower blocks of shiny steel and tinted glass rose up either side of the Thames like some futuristic city, the chimneys of the old power station at Battersea the only reminder of a grimier industrial age, when local residents worked hard for their money.

Jud gazed out across the skyline. Where and what would his

next assignment be? His last investigation – a fatal haunting in Shoreditch – had been closed weeks ago, and he knew he'd be due another case soon. Somewhere down there, down among the clockwork commuters, with their everyday deadlines and ordinary lives, something extraordinary was bound to happen again sooner or later. The call would come in from MI5. And when it did, it would be Jud Lester's turn to be dispatched.

His Honda Fireblade waited expectantly for him at the side of the landing pad. He'd had the motorbike from the beginning and it had now become almost a part of him. He knew its potential and was brave enough to reach it. Together they were unstoppable.

The Squirrel landed gently and the blades soon stopped. Jud thanked Gary, his usual pilot and now firm friend, and leapt out on to the rainy ground.

'Good to see you again, sir,' said the man in the hi-vis coat outside. 'Pleasant trip?'

'A blast,' said Jud, sarcastically.

'Your motorcycle is ready and waiting, sir. And here is your helmet. See you next time.'

With a passing nod, Jud threw his rucksack on to his shoulders, squeezed his head into the dark helmet and straddled the bike. Next minute he was gone. Black bike, black leathers, black helmet – he looked like a passing shadow as he wove in and out of the London traffic, bound for the CRYPT. The headquarters of Goode Technology PLC were a fifteen-minute ride away and Professor Bonati didn't like to be kept waiting.

Jud quickly shifted through the gears and opened up the throttle. The Fireblade let rip. He was back in the saddle at last.