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Written by Louise Voss & Mark Edwards

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LOUISE VOSS AND
MARK EDWARDS

Catch Your Death

HARPER

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Prologue

Sixteen Years Ago

The world was on fire.

Or maybe she wasn't in the world any more. Maybe this was Hell. The heat, the taste of sulphur on her tongue, the sickness, the torment. Screams rang through the air, relentless, monotonous, a one-pitch yell of despair. She opened her eyes and saw a figure stooping over her; a hovering devil, with flaming red hair. She tried to shout but all that came out was a rasping noise, and the devil's face was close, the brimstone smell of its breath in her nostrils.

'Kate. Kate, get up. Come on.'

She stared, blinked. Slowly, a face came into focus. Not a devil, but Sarah, her red-headed room-mate.

Sarah pushed aside the thin sheet that covered Kate's body and took her by the hands, pulling her up. Kate's pyjamas were damp and cold, but her skin was desert-hot. Her fever was nearing 105 degrees. Sarah was in a similar state, but she'd been lying on top of her sheets, too ill to sleep.

Kate's bare feet touched the floor. It hurt. Everything hurt. Her body was a bruise, tender to the touch.

'Come on.'

Kate could still hear the screaming, and put her hands to her ears to block it out. She'd only ever felt this ill once before, as a child. She had the vaguest memory of a nurse with black skin and kind eyes sponging her down with cold, cold water which dripped down her narrow heaving chest, and soaked the waistband of her pyjama trousers. She'd cried, weakly, at the ordeal. Cried for her mother, even though her mother was already gone.

She wished the nurse was here now, to cool her with water, to put out the fire that raged across her skin.

Her eyes fixed on the curtains. At some time during the night, as she drifted in and out of feverish dreams, she had seen little men with malevolent eyes swinging on those curtains. Sarah opened the door and, holding each other up, they stepped into the corridor. Kate had a vague idea that she was supposed to be angry with Sarah but she couldn't remember why.

At the same time that Kate and Sarah left their room, another couple of young women emerged from the next room. Denise and Fiona, the Glaswegian girls they weren't allowed to be in contact with, but had communicated with, talking and giggling like boarding school girls through the walls, figuring out ingenious ways to pass notes out of the windows, attached to the end of a cane Sarah had found in the Centre's gardens.

'Is it real?' Fiona asked. Her voice was thick, her nose bunged up. Kate thought she was speaking a foreign language. Or maybe the language of Satan. What if these were all devils, taking her to be tortured, dragging her into Hell? She panicked and tried to pull away.

Denise caught her and she nearly fell, but the Scottish girl managed to stop her from crashing to the floor.

'It can't be a drill,' Fiona said, answering her own question.

'Let's just get out of here,' said Denise, leading the way.

She gripped Sarah by one hand and Kate, who kept pulling back, looking around her with wild eyes, by the other. Where was everyone else? Were they the last people left in the building?

'We're going to die,' Kate said. 'We're going to die.'

Denise shushed her. 'No. We're not. The exit's just around this corner. Come on, Kate. We're nearly there.'

They turned the corner and came face to face with a wall of thick smoke.

'Oh God!'

Kate emitted a small yelp of fear and struggled, but Denise held tight. 'Calm down.'

They were all sweating now, as the corridors filled with heat, and the smoke pricked their eyes, bringing forth the tears. Four young women in their pyjamas; holding on to one another, paralysed by the most primitive fear of all.

'We'll have to go back,' Denise said.

They turned round and ran – even the sickly Kate and Sarah, with Denise and Fiona holding their hands. They heard a crack and a crash in the distance and suddenly smoke was filling the whole corridor, rushing up behind them, chasing and overtaking them. It caught them and, like drowning swimmers, they panicked and gulped in lungfuls of the stuff, acrid and bitter and lethal. Coughs racked their bodies.

Sarah fell to her knees. Fiona stopped and tried to pull her back up. Denise let go of Kate so she could help, and as they struggled to get Sarah to her feet, Kate peered ahead. They were engulfed now, the smoke filling the whole

corridor, and her eyes streamed as she tried to make sense of what she could see.

There were figures coming at them through the smoke. The devils. Come to claim her. The screaming continued.

One of the devils grabbed hold of her. She tried to fight but the devil was too strong. It lifted her and carried her deeper into the smoke. She kicked weakly. Each of her friends had been taken hold of too. She decided not to fight any more. She just wished she'd had a chance to say goodbye to Stephen.

Stephen's face was the last thing she pictured as she slipped into the welcoming darkness.

When she came round she was lying on the grass outside. She lifted her head and saw that Sarah was lying nearby. Sarah lifted her arm and waved weakly. Kate tried to speak to her, but a moment later she passed out again.

The next time she awoke, she found herself in the eye of a storm of chaos. Doctors and researchers ran around with their white coats flapping. A man in a red uniform, a fireman, stood nearby, drinking from a white cup. She could hear the seesawing wail of a police siren mixed with the piercing, steady scream of an alarm.

She rolled onto her side and coughed hard, spitting out black phlegm.

'Kate!' Denise appeared. 'Are you alright?' Her blonde hair was grey with soot, her cheeks and forehead smeared with it.

Kate sat up. Her chest hurt. Her head hurt. But she was alive. 'What happened?'

'Don't you remember?'

She concentrated. 'I remember . . . devils. A scene from Hell. I thought I was dead.'

'I thought we were going to die too. The Centre was on fire. It looks like the whole building we were in has been burned out.'

For the first time, Kate looked properly at the scene before her. In the darkness, clouds of smoke still rose from the long thin building that she'd called home for the last week. Fire engines stood close by, the uniformed men lined up with hoses, sending ribbons of water into the fire to fight its rival element.

'We were lucky,' Denise said.

'Was anyone killed?'

'I don't know.'

'What about Fiona?'

'Fiona's just over there. I don't know where Sarah is though. They brought her out with us but I haven't seen her since.'

'She was here a minute ago. When I came round I saw her. She waved at me. Then I passed out again.'

'Maybe they've already taken her to hospital . . .' She trailed off. 'There were other girls in there, though. I haven't seen them bring anyone else out, but it's too chaotic to know what's going on.'

Kate pushed herself to her feet, her head spinning, her eyes blurring. She was so sick. What the hell had they given her yesterday? This was no common cold.

'I'm going to check on Fiona and see if I can find Sarah,' Denise said, touching Kate's hand then disappearing into the chaos.

As Kate tried to steady herself, to stop the world rotating around her, a man in a white jacket came up to her. Kate squinted at him. He was tall and thin; kind of creepy. He reached towards her, uninvited, and laid a hand on her brow, making her flinch away. She knew she had a reason

to be afraid of him, but in her delirium she couldn't remember what it was.

'Kate. You shouldn't still be out here . . . you're too unwell.'

She ignored him. 'Do you know Stephen? Stephen Wilson? Have you seen him?'

He shook his head. 'Come on – you really should rest. You've inhaled a lot of smoke. And you have a fever.' He looked around as if searching for someone to help. He muttered something under his breath. Something about somebody interfering?

She didn't hear any more because his words were drowned by her own coughing fit. Her throat felt like a raw wound.

The creepy man helped her sit down. He looked around again then said, 'Stay here, okay? Just stay here.'

Another coughing jag filled her eyes with tears, and when it passed, he'd gone.

She needed to find Stephen. He'd told her he was staying late tonight. She'd been planning to meet him. He said he might have something to tell her. She stood up again, concentrating all of her remaining energy into staying upright, and headed towards the building and the firefighters.

'Stephen,' she tried to call, but her voice was too weak. She was dizzy and nauseous. She wanted to lie down, to sleep. But she desperately needed to find him – just see him and make sure he was okay before she could rest. There was no reason, really, to think he could have come to harm. His office was in a separate wing of the Centre. But still, she wanted to be sure. She loved him.

In the distance, she could see figures close to the building, the darkness and smoke reducing them to silhouettes. Two firemen were carrying out a stretcher with a motionless

form on it; a form of approximately Stephen's height and build. One arm flopped over the edge of the stretcher and, as they grew closer, Kate saw the familiar bulk of the chunky wristwatch Stephen always wore. It was blackened, like the arm to which it was attached, but she was certain she recognised it.

It *was* Stephen. She tried to run, but her own legs were too weak, her lungs too clogged. Her bare feet slipped on the grass and she lurched forward. When she got to her feet, the scientist – the same man who'd touched her forehead – blocked her way.

'You have to rest,' he insisted.

'But Stephen,' she said, reaching out towards the building, and suddenly there was movement all around her, an ambulance speeding past, firefighters running towards the Centre, and the scientist grabbing her arm and producing a needle which he stuck into her. A quick jab, and an even shorter struggle before haziness enveloped her. Once again, she passed out.

The last thing she saw was the scientist frowning down at her, while behind him paramedics crouched on the grass beside Stephen, and one of them shook his head.

She never knew if she actually did scream, or had just imagined it.

1

Present Day

The woman lying on the bunk appeared to be dead, until she sneezed; the violent motion making her skinny body spasm. She opened bloodshot eyes and lifted an arm, trying to pull a tissue from the box on the bedside cabinet. But as she reached out, her body spasmed again and she knocked the box to the floor. Too weak to pick it up, she lay still, until a further series of sneezes rocked her body like gunshots.

There were two men watching the girl. One was in his early forties but appeared younger because of the lack of lines on his face. His skin was tanned from a recent holiday in Bangkok, and at first glance he was unusually handsome, like a model in a commercial for razors or fast cars. But anyone gazing at his face for more than a few seconds would notice something strange. He still looked like a model, but a model in a magazine or on a billboard, frozen in time, unanimated. Worst of all were his eyes, which were small and lifeless like a shark's. Secretly – because no-one dared criticise him to his face – he had been described as a robot.

His name was John Sampson.

The other man, whose name was Gaunt – nobody had ever heard him use his first name – was taller and paler, with skin that spoke of months and years spent in artificially-lit places like this. He was so thin he appeared to be wasting away. When he was locked in the laboratory, he often forgot to eat. Food wasn't important. Nor was sleep. There was too much to do; too many exciting things to be discovered and tested. Nodding towards the woman on the bunk, he said, 'She arrived last night. We picked her up at Heathrow and brought her straight here.'

Sampson said, 'What is she? Chinese? Thai?'

She reminded him of a girl he'd met in Bangkok. He wondered idly if that girl's family were still looking for her or if they'd given up by now. If they even cared.

'Vietnamese, actually. Her name's Lien. Twenty-three years old, resident of Hanoi. Doesn't speak a single word of English – oh, except "please". "Please, please, please." She said that quite a few times, before she lost the ability to speak. I wonder what promises they made to her at the other end? A new life in England: a good job, a flat, a washing machine and a colour TV . . .?'

Sampson peered at Lien through the one-way glass.

'What is it? Bird flu?' he asked.

Gaunt, who wore a doctor's white coat and spoke with an upper-middle-class English accent, took off his glasses and sucked on them. Finally, he said, 'No. This is something new.' He smiled. 'It's very impressive, actually. I have to hand it to our friends in Asia these days. Sars. Avian Flu. Both very impressive. But this one's even better.'

'It's fatal?'

The doctor laughed. 'Oh yes. Infinitely more so than Avian Flu.'

John Sampson looked at Lien again. She had tried, while

they were talking, to pick up the glass of water that sat beside the tissue box, but she had knocked that over too. Water dribbled down the side of the cabinet and pooled on the floor.

'I'd like to talk to her.'

'I'm afraid that's not possible. She's extremely contagious. She'd just have to breathe in your direction and you'd catch it.'

'Shame.' Sampson would have liked to find out how the girl was feeling.

'Want to see exactly how contagious this is?'

Gaunt gestured for Sampson to follow him. They walked a little way down the harsh, bright corridor, beneath fluorescent strip lights that flickered occasionally, and stopped in front of another small room with one-way glass. A second woman, this one Caucasian, with bleached hair and dirty roots, sat on the edge of the bed. She looked miserable and confused. Not as far gone as Lien, but she had a red nose, pink eyes, and she held a box of tissues in her lap.

Sampson waited for the doctor to explain.

'She's a prostitute. Serbian; she was brought here last night. She was clean – no viruses, no problems, remarkably healthy for a woman of her profession. How old do you think she is? About twenty six?'

Sampson nodded slowly. The girl was beautiful. He pictured himself holding her, sitting with her as she died. She would explain what her pain and suffering and fear felt like. He would stroke her dirty hair as she breathed her last breath.

Gaunt said, 'We put her in a room with Lien for twenty seconds. They didn't touch or even speak to one another. She started showing symptoms eight hours later. But she

herself isn't contagious yet. You can talk to her if you want.'

Sampson raised his eyebrows.

The doctor drummed his fingers on the glass and the girl looked up. A gold chain, bearing a locket, hung around her neck. Beneath the sickness, she looked angry and defiant. Her mouth moved but they couldn't hear what she was saying. Maybe she was pleading. Or spitting words of fury. Whatever, her words were as futile as her hopes.

'This is the most remarkable thing about this virus,' the doctor said, ignoring the girl. 'It has a safe period. For fifteen hours, the carrier isn't contagious, even though they start to exhibit symptoms. My Asian contact told me they wanted to develop a virus that would be safe to work with for short periods. With this strain, the carrier can be safely transported to a far off place, just like Lien here. Could be useful in war. Like a time bomb. And it suits our aims perfectly.'

Sampson nodded, not taking his eyes off the young prostitute. 'So the people who were on the plane with Lien will be fine.'

Gaunt continued talking. Something about how close they were to completing their plans. Sampson tuned him out and continued to watch the girl sniffling on the bunk. He was waiting for the doctor to shut up and open the door, so he could talk to her and find out the answers to his questions. After that, when she became contagious and he had to leave her, he would find out what job the doctor had planned for him.

Who would he want killed this time?

2

Present Day

England was just as she remembered it. Grey, oppressive skies, even in summer, people rushing from place to place, avoiding one another's eyes, locked into their own personal spaces. The music they used to isolate themselves came from an iPod these days rather than a Walkman, and the litter on the streets carried different brand names, but apart from that, it was like stepping into a time warp. Even the teenagers wore the same clothes she'd worn twenty years ago. Punk and goth were fashionable again. Bleak fashions for a bleak city.

It was so good to be back.

Kate Maddox felt an urgent tug at her arm and looked down into a pair of wide blue eyes – eyes like her own, Vernon had always said. 'His mother's eyes and his father's nose.' She hoped that was all Jack had inherited from his dad. Other attributes mother and son shared were dark brown hair; Kate's long and wavy, falling over her shoulders; and Jack's cropped close, but in exactly the same shade of chestnut; freckles across the bridge of the nose which were only really visible in summer, and an infectious, easy laugh.

Like Kate, Jack would probably be tall and slim when he grew up. She was secretly pleased that he would one day, hopefully, tower over the short-legged, bull-necked Vernon.

'Mum, Mum, look – there's that robot I was telling you about.'

Jack was pointing towards a shop window – Hamleys, she realised, the giant toy shop that she had once dragged her own parents around – and a white toy robot lumbering around in the window. She only had the vaguest recollection of Jack telling her about this robot, but it was clear that it had been occupying his thoughts recently. It was amazing how, in the midst of upheaval, he could still fixate on such things. Actually, it was reassuring. Although she hadn't yet explained to the six-year-old exactly how different things were going to be from now on. She'd been putting it off.

'Can we have a look? Please?'

'Okay.'

She allowed herself to be led over to the window where Jack pressed his palm against the glass and watched the white and silver robot as it performed a number of tricks. 'It's so cool,' he breathed.

'Hmm.'

He gazed up at her. 'I'd be really happy if I had one.'

She smiled at his disingenuous turn of phrase, then caught herself and frowned. 'I think it's probably too expensive.'

Jack squinted at the price tag. 'It's eighty pounds. How much is that in dollars?'

'Too much.'

She sensed him deflate and felt a blow of guilt, then annoyance at her own guilt. £80 *was* too much for a toy, although she and Vernon had both bought Jack a lot of expensive gifts recently. Guilt gifts. Competitive gifts. Most

of those toys were still in Boston, in Jack's cluttered bedroom with the Red Sox bedspread and posters covering every inch of the walls.

The robot's eyes flashed red and Jack squealed with laughter. 'Cool. I can't wait to tell Tyler about this.'

Tyler was Jack's best friend. Hearing his name brought back that feeling of guilt with a vengeance. Was she a bad mother? What would Jack say and do when she told him? She looked at the robot and at Jack's rapt expression as he watched it; and then she decided to infringe the first rule of parenthood: never back down once you've already said no.

'I guess you have been a good boy recently.'

Thirty minutes later they were in McDonald's in Leicester Square – another treat for Jack, who wasn't normally allowed to go into such unhealthy and additive-laden places. Every other kid in the place was gazing enviously at Jack's white robot.

Jack cradled it on his lap while he ate his veggie burger with one hand, Kate trying to be relaxed at the sight of the ketchup threatening to drip at any moment. The bloody robot was nearly as big as her son and now they were going to have to lug it round with them. What had she been thinking? She'd let her guilt get the better of her.

'I'm going to call him Billy,' Jack announced solemnly. 'Billy, this is my mum.'

The robot bleeped on cue.

'Pleased to meet you, Billy,' Kate said, forking a piece of tomato.

'Mum, where does the Queen live?'

'Nearby, in Buckingham Palace.'

'Billy and I would like to visit her.'

'I'm sure she'd be fascinated to meet Billy, but I don't think the Queen allows visitors.'

Jack thought about this. 'Is it because I'm American?'

'You're half British.'

'Which half?'

'The best half.'

'Daddy said that most British people are stuck up and have dirty teeth, like that man over there.'

The man Jack was referring to, who did indeed have teeth that looked like they'd fall out in shock if a toothbrush ever went near them, looked angrily over, and Kate shrunk down in her plastic seat.

'Jack, shush.' Most British people were stuck up? That was the most hypocritical thing Vernon had ever come out with – he was the bloody snob in the family. He was the one who refused to fly economy because of the *hoi polloi*. He was the one who didn't have a single acquaintance without an Ivy League education.

'Are my teeth American?'

'Yes.'

'What about Billy's?'

'I don't think he's got teeth. But if he did, they'd be made in China like the rest of him.'

'Mum, what do robots eat?'

She grabbed one of his french fries and held it up. 'Microchips?'

They both giggled, and the man with the mossy teeth gave them an equally dirty look.

'Come on, we ought to get going. I'm tired and I need a bath.'

'Are we going back to the hotel?'

'Yup.'

'Mum.'

'Yes?'

'I don't have to have a bath, do I?'

'It depends how good you are between now and bedtime.'

They left the restaurant and joined the throng outside. With Kate holding her son's hand, they edged their way through a crowd gathered around a juggler.

As they reached the kerb, she stuck her arm in the air as she spotted a taxi with its orange light on, but another man, a businessman with a phone stapled to his ear grabbed it first. The cab crawled away – traffic didn't speed in this part of London, where gridlock had become something else for tourists to write home about – and she cursed under her breath. She looked around for another cab.

And saw a ghost.