

THREE
CHAPTER
PREVIEW

The Floors



Lucian Poll

Prepare to enter a
new dimension of horror

The Floors



Lucian Poll

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This is for anyone with a story to tell.

Write it down and believe.

CRUX CANNIBAL STRIKES AGAIN!

Body parts thrown onto sidewalk in broad daylight

by William D. Summerville, Chief Crime Editor

**SEATTLE MAIL
EXCLUSIVE!**

The hunt for the Crux Cannibal intensified dramatically yesterday afternoon when several gruesome body parts rained onto shocked bystanders.

The incident occurred at approximately 2:20pm outside the Crux Capital building in the Central Financial District, an area of Seattle already nervous of the killer's next move and his apparent motives.

Bones

Witnesses spoke of a hail of long, bloody bones, mostly picked clean, hitting the sidewalk. An elderly man, believed to have been struck by one of the bones, was treated at the scene by paramedics.

Our reporter received unconfirmed reports that the remains were mostly scorched and bore knife marks. Bones that were mysteriously cast onto the same spot two months ago were later confirmed to be human.

No body

Police were quickly called to the scene and stormed the Crux Capital building in an attempt to capture the killer. Using sniffer dogs they worked through each floor but could find no trace of the Crux Cannibal, nor an apparent victim.

The audacity of the killer's latest move has rocked confidence in the Seattle Police Department, and has seen pressure mount on Mayor Dagliani to step up patrols in the Downtown area.

From the front page of The Seattle Mail, Tuesday, 3rd June 1986

The gun turrets in the ceiling juddered into life and trained their red laser sights onto Clive's bony chest. He stopped dead in the T-junction. The soles of his trainers squeaked in protest against the polished metal floor. He squinted and tried to focus.

A striped line of yellow and black ringed the interior of the corridor, unmistakable in the subtle lighting. Beyond the line was clearly a no-go. A short distance ahead was a steel door and, beside it, a single window.

It was the closest thing to an exit he could remember since becoming trapped in this place.

Trapped.

He chewed over the word. It was odd how a lean spell had altered his perspective. For a long time he'd considered himself the King of the Castle. The one chosen to enjoy the shortest odds in this survival of the luckiest. But time always got its man. Over a long enough period everything resolved to nothing. Those favourable odds, it seemed, were salted.

He saw the tall backrest of a black leather chair through the window, tucked neatly beneath whatever table or console lay on the other side. Perhaps someone was there.

'Hello?'

His voice echoed around the corridor.

The lasers continued to pinpoint his heart. He placed a hand in the way and watched as the turrets retargeted a point lower down, perilously close to his testicles. However cloudy his mind had

become, at least he still had the sense to know the guns meant business.

‘Hello?’

Still nothing.

There were large foreign characters stencilled in red on the walls of the no-go area. Some numerals too. He guessed the backwards Rs made the text Russian.

What was Russian for “hello” again?

‘Allo?’

Again, no response.

Fuck it.

He took a few steps toward the line. The turrets smoothly tracked his approach, their barrels spinning faster the closer he came. The corridor filled with a whirring sound, increasing in pitch. The turrets were readying for the kill.

It didn’t matter. Better he died on his own terms than to be hunted down like an animal. With no means to defend himself he was a sitting duck. No way would he let his scrawny arse form some bastard’s next meal.

He crossed the yellow and black line and kept his eyes on the steel door, only metres ahead. Perhaps if he could get to it and bang his fists against the window then someone...

The sound of gunfire filled the wide corridor. The first bullet caught him in the ribcage. A small explosion made mincemeat of his insides and blinded him with agony. A second bullet shredded his heart.

In that instant a terrible memory flooded his dying mind. He had been bludgeoned by something heavy and red. He felt his knife hand being hacked away. He saw a swarm of flies close in on him and then all was darkness.

The guns spun down. Smoke slid out from their barrels and up into the polished metal ceiling. A couple of spent shells ricocheted around the corridor. Unexploded, they eventually rolled along the floor to a stop.

The man had vanished.

• PART ONE •

THE KILLING FLOORS

Flies lay claim to office block

**"We keep killing them but
they keep coming back!"**

by Rachael Moyne
Environment Correspondent

Businesses occupying the upper floors of one of Reading's premier office buildings, Berkshire Tower, were once again forced to call in pest controllers to deal with another invasion of bluebottles.

Employees of Infoclamp, a computer security firm, were forced to evacuate the fourteenth floor and take another afternoon's leave. Dave Bryte, co-owner, said of the latest disruption, "It's frustrating. Our projects require a lot of on-site work. These disruptions are eating into already-tight deadlines from our big clients."

The flies have repeatedly infiltrated the twelfth and fourteenth floors over the last six weeks. Their repeated appearance has been a source of embarrassment for the building's owners, British Property Securities PLC, who are keen to avoid an imminent investigation from the environmental agency.

Excerpt from The Reading Evening Herald
Thursday, 19th July 2012

CHAPTER ONE

Clive's house reeked of petrol. The fumes poisoned his tear ducts and made his eyes sting. If only he'd had the foresight to bring some goggles.

He adjusted the swimmer's nose-clip for comfort. One breath of the toxic soup surrounding him and he would surely collapse and die. He checked the gauge on his tank. So long as he didn't panic he had around ten minutes' air remaining. He glanced at his wristwatch and saw it was more like five. Enough time to get what he needed, but little more.

He took in a cold squirt of air and listened to the hiss of his breather.

The oven before him hissed in return, its door wide open, its four hobs urgently belching gas into the kitchen. Someone would come later to disconnect the mains. Another to take away the keys.

Let them try.

His lips curled up around the breather.

A trio of opened jerry cans, filled with petrol, stood in the middle of the kitchen. He had purchased them from a local army surplus store over a number of weeks. The guy never once questioned why anyone would need close to a hundred jerry cans. Neither did his rival.

Another couple of cans littered the hallway alongside the kitchen. The dark blue carpet upon which they stood squelched beneath his Doc Martens as he took to the stairs.

The middle floor sported a box room, a bedroom and a lounge. The top floor had a bathroom, another bedroom and a master bedroom with en-suite. The house was the same as the one next door, and the house next door to that. All three were his, each laced with petrol, each filled with gas.

All of the doors were propped open to let the fumes gather and mingle. As he walked by each room he checked on the jerry cans inside.

A mountain of paper dominated the centre of the lounge. Flecks of red from countless reminders, final demands and other threatening letters lent the pile a sickly chickenpox veneer. Every sheet told its own chapter of his dismal life.

Remortgaging his house to buy three properties off-plan at the height of the housing market had proved to be the biggest fucking mistake he ever made. It seemed a no-brainer at the time, but when he held the keys in his hands he quickly realised he'd bought three houses scarcely larger than rabbit hutches, at vastly inflated prices. "Bijou" was how one estate agent had later described them, as if tiny rooms were somehow a fucking selling point. The builder went bust, the mortgages bit and his savings were quickly wiped out subsidising rents from tenants who seldom stayed put. No-one in their right mind would buy them at the prices he demanded - prices he could ill afford to drop. All available credit cards were quickly maxed, leaving his credit score low enough to be counted on fingers and thumbs. It had been several months since he had a paying tenant in any of the houses.

The last thing he needed was to lose his job.

Not that any of that shit matters any more.

He walked into the lounge. A further four cans of petrol surrounded the pile of paper as if they were worshipping a God. He stepped around them to a large cork pin-board covered with prints of various sizes. The board rested against a scuffed stud wall.

His shrine.

Pictures of the same young woman were pinned to the cork, each taken during the last three years. In most of them the woman had no idea she was being photographed. In all the others she looked furious. Each image had their background meticulously cut away, leaving only her.

Dawn McKenzie.

He knelt by the board. He opened the door to a nearby display case and took a stiletto from the bottom shelf. He ran the fingers of his left hand gently down the collection of photographs.

His was a shrine built initially on lust, a testament of his waking obsession. There were early, now yellowing shots from Dawn's first days at Hardingham Frank, when she sported unnaturally black hair as straight as an arrow and long enough to brush her shoulders. It was a vampy look that she couldn't quite pull off, but it had caught Clive's eye. In a handful of other photographs she had auburn hair, equally unnatural and cut into a disastrous blunt bob. (The photos had been spared the shredder solely because her nipples could be seen poking through her blouse.) But Dawn's current style was little short of knockout. An earthy-brown cross between a pixie cut and a punk-rock bob with dark blonde highlights. Combine that with her mischievous face, her slim, almost boyish build, her amazing tits and her pale skinny legs - well, that made her too damned fuckable. Dangerously so when he factored in Mike, her gorilla of a boyfriend.

Then she cost him his job.

Dawn Lying-Bitch McKenzie.

It took a few short minutes for him to be escorted from the building, but in that time he had figured out a plan. At long last he had found a use for the three shitheaps that were bleeding him dry.

When embarking on a campaign of revenge it often paid to keep any incriminating stuff out of sight. Stuff such as the million and one reminders and final demands. Stuff such as the couple dozen DVDs of violent pornography. Stuff such as his display case and, of course, his shrine of hate.

Each and every photograph on the pin-board saw Dawn's eyes filled in with black ink. For some photos he had pushed map pins into the black holes, making them look like bizarre antennae. In her angrier photos he had pushed brass drawing pins into her eyes. He did the same for a picture where he had caught her by surprise, giving her an eerily comical expression.

The one picture that started all of this, however, the one where she had genuinely come onto him, the photo that still got him hard most mornings in the shower, the one where her eyelids were lowered and her lips pursed almost into a kiss - the one taken from across the office floor. That photograph received the full force of the stiletto blade, right in the middle of her conniving bitch forehead. In

her mouth he stuck a large, deep-red coloured drawing pin, making her look like a murdered sex doll.

By the end of the day, it would be the best she could hope for.

He lifted the corkboard onto the heap of papers, pushing down until he heard the DVD cases at its core slipping against one other. He opened the door to the tall display case once more. He took a second to admire the collection he was about to leave behind. In the midsection there stood a beautiful black crossbow, clad in carbon-fibre and accompanied by sleeves of incredibly sharp bolts. There lay on the shelf above a selection of repainted replica handguns and lovingly-restored antique revolvers. On the shelf below lay another stiletto knife, a couple of ornate daggers and a machete supposedly used to murder three women in Suffolk.

The top shelf, however, was reserved for Clive's pride and joy: a pair of parangs - heavy hunting knives with staggeringly sharp blades, eighteen inches long. Chopping, cutting, skinning, they could do the lot.

He glanced at his wristwatch. It was a shade after nine a.m. The lambs would be gathering at Hardingham Frank for another day of fucking people over. His house would have gone up by now, it was scheduled to detonate on the dot of nine. In three minutes this house and its neighbours would follow suit.

You're cutting it fine.

He removed the parangs from the display case and slid them into the sheaths that hung from his belt. Their sturdy plastic handles rattled against his holstered handguns.

Two guns. Two blades. Showtime.

With both hands clamped on the handles of his parangs, Clive barrelled down the stairs and hurdled over the jerry cans. The front door lay ahead and beside it, hanging from a hook, his long black overcoat. Though London was baking in the midst of an Indian summer there was something to be said for the coat's large, useful pockets. He pulled it on and savoured the feel of the cool fabric.

He slipped a hand around one of the guns, unable to resist. He pulled it from the holster, just an inch, enough to feel its pleasing weight. He imagined the looks of his former colleagues immediately before plugging them with hot lead: the way Stevens, the insufferable shit from marketing, would beg for his life, hiding behind his secretary all the while; or how the tireless bell-end Cocaine Dale would laugh his arse off, initially thinking it all a prank; and Barnes,

his boss. Sorry, ex-boss. Soon to be ex-living. Clive let the gun slide back in the holster, happy in the knowledge he was about to put that supercilious bastard into the ground.

The first decent day of 2013 came to Clive's mind. What should have been a glorious sunny morning enjoyed by all had somehow descended into accusations of a drink problem, gross misconduct and lewd behaviour from his supposed colleagues and superiors.

By sundown he was as drunk as he was sacked, pissing away what little money he had on him.

And all because of you, Dawn.

He stroked the handle of a parang. He took a long squirt of air.

Oh, you lying little bitch, I'm saving the best for you.

His holdall sat open on the other side of the front door. He glanced over its contents. A pair of submachine guns lay amid a motley collection of ammunition clips. They looked tiny for the money they cost. The last of his money.

Best that he made every bullet count. It was time to move, time to show everyone they couldn't fuck with Clive Brown and expect to get away with it. Nobody would be spared. Security? Fuck 'em. Let them try to stop him.

Oh, please let Mike try.

He reached for the handle of the front door and almost shat himself when the lid of the letterbox rattled open.

'Mr Brown? Bloody Nora!'

The lid slammed shut again. Whoever it was, the man outside was the last thing Clive needed. It felt for a second like someone had replaced his spine with an icy live cable. A fresh layer of sweat oozed from his pores.

He focused on the agenda for the day and cleared all doubt from his mind. He took one last lungful of air, threw the breathing apparatus onto the floor and opened the door.

A man in his mid-thirties stood outside, his fist raised and ready to knock. In his other hand he held a leather-bound folio of papers. The bank's embossed logo gleamed in one of the corners. Clive shoved him to one side and strode along the garden path.

'Mr Brown?' said the man, catching him up. 'Mr Brown, what are you doing?'

'Fuck you.'

‘Why have you left the gas on, Mr Brown? That is very irresponsible. We’re only doing our job. Now we’re going to have to call the fire brigade *and the police* to sort this out.’

Clive dug a large bunch of keys from his overcoat, turned and threw them against the partially open front door. They landed onto the welcome mat with a dull, chinking thud.

‘For goodness sake, Mr Brown,’ said the man. He dashed back to retrieve the keys.

Clive picked up the pace and hurried towards his car, parked thirty yards ahead. He had no idea whether it was far enough. The contents of his holdall and holsters rattled and clanged much more loudly than he’d hoped. He looked around for witnesses.

Don't pussy out on me now. We're doing this.

Once inside the car he placed the holdall in the passenger seat and looked in the rear view mirror. Bloodshot eyes blinked back at him. They were the last pair of eyes many would see today. That cold icy stare locking on. A look so utterly devoid of mercy.

In the mirror he noticed the man from the bank scampering towards him. The man’s expression was of impotent anger.

He was of no concern. Clive turned the key in the ignition and watched as his three shitheaps went up in quick succession.

BANG! BA-BANG!

The flashpoint momentarily blinded him. The windows of each house blew out in a fiery roar. The shockwaves of the explosion rocked the car and kicked in the rear windscreen, scattering glass everywhere. Clive ducked in his seat and checked his cracked wing mirror. His vision cleared quickly. He watched his front doors cartwheel into the cul-de-sac. One of them struck the shredded man from the bank before he could fully settle on the tarmac.

The way the man’s head snapped backwards suggested he wouldn’t be getting up again.

The explosions continued as each cluster of jerry cans detonated, punching large holes through the walls of each house. Chunks of masonry thudded against the roof of the car and shattered on the road. A few DVD cases clattered into the gutter. Scorched papers fluttered down and settled on the pavement. Thick black smoke poured into the deep blue sky and all around rang with the sound of a hundred and one alarms going off at once.

Clive pulled away and drove to work.

CHAPTER TWO

Dawn replaced the receiver and shuddered.

‘Babes.’

She spat the word under her breath and rolled her eyes. Had there ever been a more loathsome term of endearment outside of “bitch”? She fancied not.

She loved Mike to bits, but once he got among his colleagues in security her fiancée would always act like The Big Man. The knowledge that it *was* an act never failed to grate on her. Yes, his machismo had once been a big draw, but only within the context of a throwaway fuck. She hadn’t expected to go and fall in love with the big-hearted lunk hiding beneath all those muscles.

‘Babes.’ She sighed.

For all her good work over the years the guy still had a few too many rough edges. He needed a little extra *conditioning*. And so “babes” became the next thing for her to stamp out before the wedding.

‘What was that, sweetheart?’

She knew who had spoken before the man had a chance to open his mouth. It was Joe, one of the admin clerks from the main office behind her desk. She knew almost everyone at Hardingham Frank by their footsteps. It helped her identify those more forgiving of Spider Solitaire.

Joe sidled around the front of her tall desk. He leaned forward slightly, crossing his forearms against the edge and letting the desk

take his weight. He had an expectant look on his pale, slightly-sagging face. A strand of black hair came loose from his side parting.

‘No,’ said Dawn. ‘Not you.’

‘Not yet?’ Joe wiggled his eyebrows up and down in a poor impersonation of Groucho Marx. His dark brown eyes were alive with good humour and crusty bits of sleep.

‘Not ever, Joe. Sorry.’

Joe clutched his heart and moaned with expertly overworked melodrama. He spun on his toes and pushed his bottom lip outwards in a show of mock hurt. Once, over Friday drinks, he’d referred to it as his “pet lip”, which baffled precisely everybody at the table. Whatever his lip was called it didn’t make the guy look any more appealing.

‘Oh, light of my life, whatever happened to us?’

‘Gee, I don’t know, Joe,’ said Dawn, playing along. ‘Perhaps you knew one joke too many about dead babies.’

‘That *still*? Come on, it was one joke!’

‘Still one too many, Joe.’

His shoulders slumped and Dawn felt a small pang of guilt. Perhaps it was too low a blow to deal him so early in the day. He’d been rat-arsed when he told the joke, and only blurted it out to compete with the other, more puerile, guys of the firm.

What’s grosser than gross? Finding twelve dead babies in a bin.

What’s grosser than that? Finding a dead baby in twelve bins.

That bloody machismo thing again.

Dawn watched as Joe straightened up. Despite the jocular front he put up for everybody, there was something not quite right about him, dead baby jokes notwithstanding. His face would sometimes slip when he thought nobody was looking, revealing a sadness in his eyes.

And when someone loses a bit of weight, wouldn’t you expect them to look a little *healthier*?

Either way the guy badly needed a girlfriend. Someone to smarten him up a little and make him realise he needn’t try so hard to be liked.

‘So what happened here?’ said Joe, pointing to Dawn’s desk. A flat nineteen-inch computer monitor stood at an awkward angle, powered off, with a single kettle lead plugged into the back. Strips of tape held a sheet of clear plastic over the screen.

‘My monitor died. Gil brought this one up for me but it needed a different cable.’

Joe examined the rear panel of the monitor.

‘Yeah, the DVI’s in the detail,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘Hashtag geek-humour,’ he said. ‘DVI cables. You’d think they’d make them all the same, wouldn’t you, but nope!’

‘Joe, go and have sex with someone,’ said Dawn. ‘Please!’

‘Well, there’s a Friday night ahead of us, Dawn. Anything can happen,’ he said. ‘Right. I’m off for a slash and a fag. I’ll be back in ten.’

‘Thanks for the image.’

Joe walked away across the polished concrete floor, unconsciously patting his pockets. Dawn let her eyes drift down the back of his cheap grey suit jacket. For all she saw Joe as a colleague, she had to admit the guy had a nice arse.

Mike had muscles to spare. They were honed, rock-hard and such she could spend hours running her fingers over, but the fact remained her fiancée had an arse you could iron a shirt on. His arse was proof of one of life’s truisms. A universal constant that decreed a girl can never quite have it all.

The heavy door to the gents toilets slammed shut. Its echoes rang along the wide elevator lobby and towards Dawn’s desk, carrying with it an unexpected chill that caused her skin to prickle. She could sense no breeze, just a momentary coldness. She rubbed her arms and glanced around the corridor. The chill could have come from anywhere, not that she was surprised.

She had long considered the fourteenth floor of 3 Donnington Place to be a sterile affair, epitomised by the lobby she attended day in, day out. It was a charmless place of grey-veined, marble-clad walls and overly-polished concrete floors. There was a huge plate glass window at the opposite end that offered the obligatory dramatic view of London’s docklands to the few who could be bothered to walk over to it. Closest to Dawn, around twenty yards ahead, there stood a pair of opposing brass elevator doors that the cleaning staff would buff each week, only for them to attract an inexplicable number of fingerprints come Friday. Beyond the elevators there stood opposing stairwell doors for use in an emergency, or by those with a penchant for hundreds of stairs. A pair of doors further along the right led to

separate ladies and gents toilets. A single door opposite those offered a combined kitchen and recreation area.

The whole ensemble was so very Modern London, utterly Big Business and Somewhat Soulless.

The thumping echoes eased, leaving in their wake the tail-end of a strange whisper that slithered along the corridor towards Dawn's desk.

...hbhawnwnnnnnneeeee...

A breathy sound. Almost musical. Taunting her. A call she had not heard for years.

'No way.'

Her eyes darted to each of the doorways in turn, looking for movement - the lift and sigh of a stairwell door, perhaps - but finding none.

There! A small dark shape quickly moved away from the bottom right corner of the large window ahead.

'What the hell?'

The inside of her mouth turned to sandpaper and her heart thumped. She kept her eyes trained on the window while her brain took a few flying guesses.

Something that dropped from above? Or a bird? A pigeon?

She found herself unable to blink.

Would a pigeon bother coming this high up? Where would it land? There are no sills outside.

She froze. The window had her - or more accurately the thing outside the window. She ran the image once more through her mind. It had looked for all the world like a grey distended hand.

Stop looking, damn it!

A faint sound of disorder distracted her. She couldn't tell in which stairwell it came from, but it broke the spell she was under. She took her seat, caught her breath and wished Gil would hurry the hell up.

The familiar hum and buzz of Hardingham Frank's open-plan office helped calm her nerves. The *blip-blip-blips* of desk phones commingled with a gentle undercurrent of Friday morning chitchat, creating a pleasant noise that reassured her she was not alone. Working eight hours a day with one's back to it all made it easy to forget at times. She turned in her chair and examined the imposing partition that hid the rest of the office from view. Around eight feet up from the cold concrete floor "Hardingham Frank" had been set

into the plasterboard using thin, silver lettering, alongside it an achingly-corporate and utterly nonsensical logo.

The firm specialised in claiming compensation for mis-sold payment protection insurance. Prior to that, compensation for industrial accidents. As a result Hardingham Frank had garnered an ill reputation among the other tenants of the building. “Another day of raping the poor?” was a common greeting.

The taunts made Mike furious, doubly so when he witnessed them first-hand. The sex they brought out of him, however, was fantastic. Dawn explained afterwards, bathed in sweat, flopped over his broad chest like a smoking-hot ragdoll, that loosening the teeth of a few shithead office workers simply wasn't worth it, or at least not for deputy-heads of security.

The noise in the stairwell rose again, still faint, yet louder than before and more sustained. Some banging too. She wondered what on earth was going on. It sounded like a fight had broken out.

‘Good morning, Dawn,’ said Mr Wilkes. He walked out from a small office to the left of Dawn's desk carrying a sheaf of large designs. He was a slim, white-haired gentleman who stood over six feet tall and looked good in a waistcoat. Not for the first time that week Dawn found herself wishing he was her dad.

Better him than the one I wound up with.

‘It's a lovely day out there,’ Mr Wilkes continued.

‘All the worse for being stuck in here,’ she said, shrugging.

In a floor largely dominated by Hardingham Frank, Wilkes Kneale Sanderson was a relatively small firm of four architects - with the fourth guy presumably a latecomer to the party. Occasionally they would leave open the blinds to their office, offering a peek of their latest project. The small white buildings of the scale models fascinated her, helped in no small part by the dull nature of her job.

An old bugbear briefly surfaced. She got a two-one at university for this? To become an insipid, grinning gatekeeper to a den of sharks?

Two more years, she promised herself. Just another two years and she'd be out of there.

You said that three years ago.

‘Are you working on anything interesting?’ she said as Mr Wilkes walked away.

The phone on her desk *blipped* and flashed into life, cutting short the architect's reply. She picked up the receiver as she watched

Wilkes walk further down the corridor. Surely he wasn't going to take those designs into the toilet with him?

'Hardingham Frank?'

'Dawn!'

It was Barbara from the front desk of the ground floor.

'Dawn, oh, Jesus, Dawn!'

Barbara's voice trembled wildly as she spoke. In the background Dawn heard an almighty commotion. Shouting. Screaming. Crashes and bangs. They all coalesced into an incomprehensible noise above which Dawn struggled to hear what Barbara said next.

'Barbara, what's wrong? What's going on down there?'

'Oh, God, Dawn, it's *Clive!*'

'Clive?'

The man's name turned Dawn's backbone to ice. She could feel her skin contract as claws of the deepest cold dug into her flesh.

'For God's sake, Dawn, run! Get everyone out and *RUN!*' screamed Barbara. 'He shot Mike and he's-'

The elevator doors pinged open and a roar of gunfire drowned out the last of Barbara's words. Deafening peals of fire alarms burst from everywhere and echoed endlessly around the unforgiving interior of the corridor. Dawn dropped the receiver from nerveless fingers, and watched as Mr Wilkes' body was thrown against the opposite elevator by the force of the bullets. The polished brass doors offered little resistance as his twitching, bleeding body slid down to the floor. A second salvo rendered the man still, leaving a dark red pool to grow beneath him.

The body of a second man was thrown from the elevator. It slapped down hard against the polished floor and slid to a halt, leaving a short, bloody snail trail on the concrete. The man had a frozen, open-mouthed look of terror, the horror of his impending death tattooed into every muscle of his face. Then Dawn saw the awful wound. His throat hadn't been so much cut as his neck sliced through to the bone. His short-sleeved shirt bore more red than white. His arms were heavily streaked with blood. In his hands he held a cable. It was Gil.

The alarms yielded briefly for an automated announcement.

'This is a fire drill. Please evacuate the building via the stairwells and fire escapes. I repeat: this is a test.'

The awful racket resumed.

Dawn ducked behind her desk, keeping out of sight as best she could. The blinds of the architect's office twitched. Over the incredible sound of the alarms she heard someone nearby shouting to her. Cocaine Dale was in the open doorway to Hardingham Frank's office area. He had a bug-eyed look that suggested he could die of fright any moment as he held out a hand.

'Dawn! Come on, Dawn!' he yelled. His eyes were even wider than usual.

'Dale, it's Clive!' she cried. She reached for him and made a move to stand.

'Clive?' said Dale. 'Shit! Come on, we're using our fire escape.'

She shot a glance back to the blinds of the small office. They no longer moved. The other three architects were obviously still inside. For a horrible moment she found herself caught in two minds: to get the remaining guys out of there, or to leave them to their fate.

'This is a fire drill. Please evacuate the building via the stairwells and fire escapes. I repeat: this is a test.'

'Dawn! Move! NOW!'

Too late. In her peripheral vision she witnessed a dark shape emerge from the open jaws of the elevator. A cloaked figure. No, a man in a long black overcoat, a man with both arms outstretched, a man holding twin submachine guns and taking aim. She dived to the floor and heard Clive open fire. She rolled under her desk and saw Cocaine Dale fall through the wide doorway as if he'd been clotheslined. He landed heavily on the floor, unmoving. Splashes of his blood ran down the gleaming white jambs.

The partition exploded in a shower of splinters. She heard terrible screams from the other side as some of the bullets hit home. Clive hollered something in return but she couldn't make out the words above all the noise.

Her fight-or-flight response kicked in. Her ribcage shook against the ferocious pounding of her heart. Time seemed to slow. She heard the sound of each individual bullet fired, barely masked by the drawn-out dirge of the fire alarms. Splinters of wood rained on her ankles with all the grace and urgency of fat snowflakes.

He's come for you, Dawn.

This much was obvious. She recalled the time he waited for her at the supermarket car park. It had been only weeks since she'd had him fired. The vile promise of revenge he'd made formed a deep-seated memory as impossible to erase as her knowledge of how to

walk. He'd taken out his smartphone and snapped pictures of her fear, calling her a slag, a slut, a whore all the while.

The guy was a headcase for sure, but she never expected the creepy fucker to shoot up the place! She thought about Derrick Bird and Thomas Hamilton and Michael Ryan and the many lives they took before taking their own. She thought about Columbine and Aurora and Sandy Hook and knew she and everyone in the office behind her were as good as dead.

What the fuck are you still lying here for? Run!

The sound of gunfire abruptly ceded to the harsh alarm bells, teasing her with opportunity, but by then it was too late. A shadow spilled over the concrete floor by Dawn's desk. She saw a pair of Doctor Marten boots and looked up into the barrel of a submachine gun.

'This is a fire drill. Please evacuate the building via the stairwells and fire escapes. I repeat: this is a test.'

'In there, *now!*' said Clive. He pointed in the direction of Hardingham Frank's office, but Dawn could look no further than the smouldering firearm in front of her. He jabbed his finger once more. 'MOVE!'

Fight-or-flight be damned. There was no way she could match the speed or force of a bullet. She was a goner, no question. Even if she survived long enough for the police to arrive, the horrible acts Clive had promised to wreak upon her half-naked, ripped body would destroy her from the inside forever more.

She dared to look beyond the gun and saw a pair of grubby jeans heavily stained and streaked with fresh blood. Her chaotic mind swam.

Red wetness dripped from Clive's jeans. Crimson spots developed on the polished floor. Inside the madman's overcoat she caught sight of a long, brown leather sheath and a grey plastic grip jutting from it. Its twin dribbled yet more blood into the lining. Gil's blood. Under Clive's gun arm she caught sight of a holdall, its bottom wet through with gore. She gulped down a rising swell of puke.

'NOW!' screamed Clive. He jabbed the scorching-hot barrel into Dawn's forehead, making her scream.

But still she did not stand. Instead she thought about Mike, her gentle giant with no arse, who called her "Babes", who she was going to marry next month; now the man gunned down by the insane son

of a bitch that stood over her. Her muscles twitched as she felt her anger build. Why not be angry? It often came so easy to her. Better to go down fighting than crying on the floor.

She met Clive's eyes with a fuck-you look. Everything about the sociopathic piece of shit made her want to rip out his lungs and push them down his throat. The way he denied his male-pattern baldness was laughable. His bad teeth undermined every insincere smile he worked across his face. Then there was the deathly alcohol breath he tried, badly, to mask with knock-off aftershave from the market. (Perhaps he drank the stuff.) Despite these, and many, many other failings, this loathsome fucktard somehow thought he was God's gift to women.

She tried to stare Clive down but found his eyes strangely different, empty-looking, as if he was running on autopilot. The moment did not last. The man's face twisted up into a ball of fury. Even with the fire alarm echoing around the lobby she heard every syllable of his screamed order.

I SAID GET IN THERE, YOU FUCKING BITCH!

He threw one of the submachine guns onto Dawn's desk and grabbed her by the throat. His nails dug into her neck as he drew her up from the floor with near inhuman strength. Before she could respond he threw her into the main office where she landed on Cocaine Dale's body.

Dale's face had been annihilated by Clive's bullets. Entry holes peppered the right side of his face. They had shattered his cheekbone, punctured an eyeball and left a chunky mess around his head like some kind of gory aura. Two wounds punctured his neck like a vampire bite. The arterial spray from them had formed a wet stain on the carpet.

Dawn felt a chill down her spine that worked its way along every nerve ending. The deafening bells hurt her ear drums and her head spun more and more. She coughed hoarsely and felt herself gag. The blood, the death, the madman and what he would do to her - the whole ordeal became too much to bear. With a sudden deep wet belch she vomited onto Dale's ruined face. The smell of his blood mingled horribly with that of her insides and she retched again.

She felt a Doctor Marten boot dig into her side, kicking her from Dale's corpse and onto her back. She gasped for air, gulped it down, trying desperately to equalise her stomach. She shuffled away from

the body as best she could but saw two more colleagues hunched over their desks nearby, their flat-screen monitors streaked red.

She looked to the fire escape on the other side of the office and moaned in despair. Thirty or so of her colleagues clawed at each other to get through the door. She saw Barnes, her boss, peel away from the crowd and raise his arms. She couldn't hear a word he said. The man patted his hands down, imploring Clive to drop his weapons.

Clive stepped forward and raised his gun. Dawn saw the bulging, bloody holdall hanging from his shoulder and felt fearful she was staring at a bomb. Then Clive pulled the trigger. He had aimed away from Barnes and into the mass of people trying to escape. They fell one by one, peeling away like bleeding dead petals.

'This is a fire drill. Please evacuate the building via the stairwells and fire escapes. I repeat: this is a test.'

Barnes stormed towards Clive. He screamed obscenities. He had a look of desperate fury on his face.

Clive looked at his machine gun with disgust and threw it to one side. He reached into his coat and pulled out the biggest handgun Dawn had ever seen. The long, brushed metal barrel and black handle looked familiar from the movies, a Desert Eagle perhaps. Whatever it was, the gun made an immense noise and turned Barnes' neck into hamburger meat.

The operations manager spun to the floor in a hideous pirouette, spraying jets of slick red gloop onto the desks and chairs around him. He crashed to the floor and grasped at his neck, trying desperately to contain the wound. The look of outright terror in his eyes soon faded.

Clive fired again and again into the crowd, felling ex-colleagues with neither prejudice nor a second thought. Within a minute nobody stood near the fire escape, and he turned his attention towards Dawn.

She watched the sick bastard leer over her prone body and realised her skirt had ridden up. She tugged down on the hem, but Clive kicked away her hand. He knelt beside her and slid a hand over her thigh, finding the edge of her stocking.

A fresh wave of revulsion swept over her as she caught him looking between her legs.

How she wanted to kick out at that moment; to smash her heel into that sweaty unshaven face and watch Clive's teeth fly. She

moved around to find leverage but felt a sudden force press her head to the floor, a clammy palm planted over her mouth.

Fuck! He's too strong!

She gnashed her teeth against his hand but found no purchase. She dug her nails into the flesh of his wrist. He eventually released her. She made a grab for his sheathed knife.

Something hard smashed into her jaw and knocked her for six. Her vision blurred and doubled. Her brain swirled around in her skull. Her stomach heaved once more. The shock of being pistol-whipped dulled most of the pain but she knew she was in trouble.

Clive holstered his gun and forced her head into the carpet once more. She could smell his disgusting breath and the slimy skin of his cheek against hers. She felt a finger snag against her underwear.

'I think it's high time you lost these, don't you?' he said. He tickled her ear lobe with the tip of his tongue and then laughed.

She grunted and clenched her teeth, the pain in her jaw beginning to take hold. She spotted a mop of black hair over the Clive's shoulder, then the edge of a flat-screen computer monitor.

Joe!

Clive pushed himself back onto his knees, sat up and caught the full force of the monitor as it was smashed into the side of his head. His eyes instantly rolled up in their sockets and he crumpled sideways onto the floor.

Joe threw the monitor hard into Clive's midriff and thrust out a hand to Dawn.

'RUN!'

CHAPTER THREE

Joe hauled Dawn up from the floor and drew her arm over his shoulder. She was still groggy, not quite steady on her feet. Her weight surprised him, a stupid thought to pop into his head at a time like this. He helped her towards the fire escape.

The bodies of fallen colleagues surrounded the partly open door ahead of them. Glistening splashes of red trickled down the paintwork of the walls and coalesced into a wet stain on the carpet. Three survivors struggled to contain their injuries. They inched away from the dead as if fearing their fate was contagious.

One of the survivors, a work experience girl barely into her teens, had managed to prop herself against a desk. She looked to Joe for help, her eyes slick with tears. Her bottom lip quivered. She coughed up a gob of blood into her hand and began to cry.

Barnes lay on the floor between them. He still clutched at his shredded neck. The dramatic stains on the floor made it look as if he had strangled himself with rusty nails. Nearby there rested a small machine gun, discarded on the floor amid a mass of small bullet casings.

Behind them lay Cocaine Dale, with a face of blood and vomit, and a heavily dazed Clive who began to stir.

Clive's hand flopped onto the butt of his holstered pistol.

Shit! Where did that come from? How many guns has he brought here?

'Come on,' said Joe. He shook a little life back into Dawn. 'We need to move.'

‘Not the fire escape.’ She sounded half-asleep. Joe had to listen hard to her words over the clamour of the bells. ‘Use the lift.’

‘The elevators are out of action. The fire alarm disabled them.’

‘This is a fire drill. Please evacuate the building via the stairwells and fire escapes. I repeat: this is a test.’

Clive groaned before the bells cut in again.

‘The stairs then,’ said Dawn. Her eyes cleared. Her lips pursed into a thin line, as if she was holding something back. Tears. Anger. He wasn’t sure. ‘Please, Joe, he’s shot Mike. I need to see if he is okay.’

It wasn’t the worst idea in the world. The fire escape would leave them horribly exposed if Clive chased after them, and there wasn’t a chance in hell Joe was going to reach over and grab the holstered gun. Not while the psycho was stirring on the floor. No way. The stairs were an easy win.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘But we need to leg it, yeah? Two stairs at a time. Slide down the banister if needs be.’

Dawn nodded and he felt some strength returning to her. He turned them both to face the lobby, then glanced over his shoulder. The sobbing work experience girl wiped her shaking hands onto her heavily-stained clothes. Her hands still came away red. The blood that poured unbidden from her mouth terrified her. He saw her cough again, heard her wail over the alarms. Tears welled in his eyes as he mouthed the word “sorry”. He looked away, his face hot with shame.

They staggered through the doorway into the lobby and passed by Dawn’s desk. She picked up the submachine gun that lay there and waved it under Joe’s nose.

‘You didn’t think to shoot him?’ she said.

‘I tried, but it’s empty.’

He watched Dawn’s face darken. He felt her anger build quickly and possess her. She struggled free of his embrace and threw the firearm down the large corridor. It skittered across the polished concrete, clattered into the body of Mr Wilkes and spun into a corner. She leaned heavily against the edge of her desk, breathing hard.

‘Are you okay?’ said Joe.

Dawn pushed herself away and ran towards the stairwell door without answering him. They ran past the bodies of Gil and Mr Wilkes and slid to a halt by the large black stairwell door.

Three gunshots rang out in quick succession, audible over the bells. Then a fourth shot, and a fifth.

Joe turned to look, expecting to see Clive - but no-one was visible. His heart sank.

That poor girl. Everyone. Dead. This can't be happening.

A shadow moved in the doorway to the main office. Clive's stocky frame shoulder-charged the jamb. He still looked out of it, but was clearly coming round fast. He raised his gun.

Dawn grabbed Joe's arm and dragged him through the open stairwell door. He cried out as the wooden frame near his head burst into splinters. The heavy, black door closed behind them.

The alarm bells rang with intense urgency in the confines of the stairwell, loud enough to hurt his ears. Something immediately struck him about the stairs, something not quite right, something he couldn't put his finger on. There was no time to dwell on it.

Dawn glanced back at him from the landing, and continued down the next flight.

Joe reached out and grabbed her arm before she could go any further. He leaned in close to her ear and shouted over the noise.

'Wait! I've got an idea.'

Dawn didn't look keen. She edged to the next flight of stairs.

Joe pulled her back and pushed open the black door on the landing. The gloom beyond looked like a maintenance floor. He held the door open and pointed inside.

'Let's cut through to the stairwell opposite. We'll throw him off the scent.'

Dawn remained unsure, but then the air pressure in the stairwell dipped, as if a door elsewhere had been opened. Dawn felt it too. Her eyes widened and she mouthed a single word.

'Clive!'

Joe waved Dawn through the door and swung in behind her. He pushed hard against the door but it refused to be hurried.

'Come on!' He pushed again and again to no avail.

Clive would almost certainly see the door close. So be it. They had to run like hell. He abandoned the door and started after Dawn.

She had stopped in front of a bare breezeblock wall. She had her arms raised in a gesture that said "What the hell?" Spinning on her heels, she looked to Joe with frustrated confusion. She pointed to the wall and yelled something he could not hear.

Joe cupped an ear with his hand and then the alarm bells suddenly cut out.

'I said where the hell is the other door?'

Her piercing cry echoed against the unpainted bricks and dusty concrete all around them. The deafening racket of bells and alarms had been replaced with the hissing and huffing of pipes and generators, as if the stairwell door had been heavily soundproofed.

Joe's eyes adjusted to the darkness of the maintenance floor. Pockets of sickly yellow light dotted the solid breezeblock walls of a wide corridor to the right. He pointed to a T-junction at the end and started running.

'Hurry! Up here. The stairs must be around the corner.'

They stopped at the wall and found two plastic plates screwed into the brickwork. They each gave directions: "Biuro / Office" to the left; "Kombinat / Works" to the right. Both corridors, left and right, stretched into dimly lit passages seemingly without end.

"Office", said Joe, tapping one of the plates. *'Yeah, that sounds about right. The other stairs must be that way.'*

They sped along the corridor, solid walls of breezeblock on both sides. Joe's mind worked on what the hell to do next while his subconscious dealt with a flood of nagging thoughts.

What was it about that stairwell that seemed so odd?

That door took far too long to close. Surely Clive would have seen it?

We'd have heard the fire alarms again if he'd followed us.

Wouldn't we?

Hang on. Why are the bells not ringing on this floor?

He spotted a corner ahead that bore right, taking them deeper into the maintenance floor. Dawn slowed to a halt and he followed suit.

'Something's wrong here,' said Dawn, gasping for breath. She looked around, trying to find her bearings.

Joe had a reasonable idea where they stood in relation to the stairwell door but had to concede the layout of the floor was confusing. It brought forth another wave of nagging questions.

Where on earth are the stairs here?

Have they been closed off from this floor for some reason?

Why would anyone close off a perfectly good stairwell?

And how come nobody's ever mentioned it before?

Yeah, fat boy, like you've ever taken the stairs in this place.

'No wait,' he said, pointing. *'Look, there's a door up ahead.'*

A scuffed grey door was set into the wall on the left, a sorry specimen. The paint had worn away around the angle of the door handle, and peeled and blistered around the kickboard. Joe tried the door. It opened outwards revealing a storage cupboard filled with mops and buckets, shelves of cleaning fluids and polish and dusters, a pair of stepladders and a large floor polisher in the centre.

‘Okay,’ he said, closing the door. ‘Not a stairwell, then.’

The corner led to a shorter corridor that ended in a mostly black rectangle. Dawn stood facing the darkness ahead, not saying a word.

The buzz of generators and the clanking of pipes rolled out from the darkness, a now familiar sound in the maintenance floor. The music, however, was something new.

‘Is that what I think it is?’ he asked.

‘Chopin,’ said Dawn. She glanced over her shoulder, showing off her bruise.

Joe’s mouth waggled open but no words came out.

‘Don’t look at me like that, Joe,’ said Dawn. She scowled. ‘It’s not like I know the name of it or anything.’

She faced the darkness again, still rooted to the dirty concrete floor.

‘Any torches in there?’ she finally said.

‘What, in the cupboard? None that I could see.’

‘Shit.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t like the dark.’ She turned and met Joe’s eyes to reinforce her point. ‘I *really*, really don’t.’

‘Let’s go,’ said Joe, nudging her forwards. ‘The dark can’t hurt us as much as Clive can.’

‘Yeah, but what if he’s there waiting for us?’

‘I didn’t hear him come in, did you?’

‘No, but-’

‘*Avanti*, Dawn. Mush! We need to get out of here. Your eyes will just have to get used to it.’

Dawn nodded with little enthusiasm. She edged along the remainder of the corridor, never once threatening to hurry the hell up.

Joe mulled over the strangeness of the situation. The fact the alarms weren’t ringing still bugged him. Had someone simply switched them off at the exact moment the door closed behind him? Too much of a coincidence. Then there was the elusive second

stairwell. Could there really be only one on the maintenance floor? It made the layout of the whole floor plain odd. Nothing seemed to match the floor above it. No wonder the climate control in the building had a mind of its own.

Then it struck him what was so unusual about the stairwell.

‘Dawn?’

‘Sssh!’ She flapped a hand, agitated.

‘Dawn,’ Joe whispered. ‘Where *was* everybody?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘On the stairs just then. Where were they all? The fire alarms were going off and the elevators were out of action. Those stairs should have been mobbed.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Dawn, seeming to tire of the questions. She stopped at the lip of the corridor and looked around.

‘Oh,’ she said.

‘What?’

‘I guess this is what they meant by “Office”.’

Joe craned his head over Dawn’s shoulder to get a better look. The corridor opened out onto a large open space framed by breezeblock walls and two rows of portakabins, angled in a slack L-shape with three cabins in each row. Some of the cabins were lit from the inside, casting a little light onto the floor. Between and beyond the rows of portakabins there lay only darkness and noise. Grubby papers, old and crumpled, littered the open area. Gaudy crisp packets too. So much for the floor being occupied by cleaners.

Three of the cabins stood dark: one in the row directly ahead of Joe and Dawn, and two in the row along the right. The twinkling of a piano continued to play, a little louder now, most likely from one of the dark cabins on the right. The one with the open door.

Joe stepped into the open space and approached one of the portakabins. He peered in through the lit window and found a dismal beat-up swivel-chair behind an equally beat-up desk. Behind those hung a lop-sided noticeboard that sported an oily Pirelli calendar and assorted scribbled notes. A rickety shelf struggled under the weight of assorted bizarre-looking tools and contraptions. Among them there stood a large, yellow, high-power torch.

He opened the door and hopped into the portakabin. He soon returned with the wide-beam torch and a clipboard. He angled the torch over it and looked to Dawn.

‘Mind your eyes,’ he said, and switched it on. ‘Look at these papers.’

‘So? They’re written in... what? Polish?’

‘Looks like it. Don’t you think it’s a little presumptuous to assume every cleaner here is going to be Polish?’

‘I don’t care, Joe,’ said Dawn. She sighed and hid her eyes. ‘I need to find Mike. Please, let’s get out of here.’

‘Sorry.’

He felt his face flush again with a slight tinge of anger. It wasn’t as if he had any reason to hang around. The queasiness squirming inside of him was the result of more than just shock and nerves. He’d forgotten to take his shot of insulin for the morning, like an idiot, and not for the first time. There was no way he’d ever get used to this new lifestyle so suddenly thrust upon him.

He flicked off the flashlight and handed it to Dawn, then threw the clipboard back into the portakabin.

‘Let me grab a torch as well and then we’ll look for an exit.’

‘Okay, but hurry. It won’t take Clive long to work out where we are.’

Joe peered through the window of the other lit portakabin but found nothing of use. He tried the handle of the next door along but found it locked. The same result beckoned when he tried two of the other cabins to the right. That left just the one with the open door, pitch black, a radio inside playing Chopin. Joe stepped inside.

The smell of the place aggravated his nose. Disgusting and decayed, it reminded him of rubbish trucks passing by. Something hard knocked against his shin causing him to yelp. Through the smudged window he saw Dawn jump in surprise.

‘Sorry!’ he said. ‘I’m okay. I didn’t mean to scare you. Ah, here it is.’

He flicked on the light and Dawn screamed. He screamed too, for the interior walls were awash with dark red blood. The floor of the cabin was a burgundy mess. On the window he saw the smudge had in fact been a gory handprint. It slid down the glass and onto a marked and heavily-stained desk.

But there was no body he could see. Just a lot of scattered papers and blood and an upended chair against which he had knocked his shin. He looked out of the window and saw Dawn turn to run.

‘Dawn, wait!’

‘Shit, Joe, run! The blood... *He’s here!*’

Joe gave chase. He ran from the portakabin and slipped to his knees, the soles of his shoes momentarily robbed of grip. He quickly got back to his feet and hared after Dawn. He saw the faint outline of her white blouse in the darkness ahead, framed on both sides by walls of pipes.

'Wait for me!' he hissed loudly, hoping Clive couldn't hear. It didn't seem to matter, given the clattering noise of Dawn's heels.

He wondered how long Clive had been hiding in the maintenance floor. Surely he'd come from here. The blood in the cabin looked old, a lot older than the bloodshed he'd seen above. Had the sick bastard been building up to this day for some time – had he made a huge mistake, dragging Dawn into Clive's lair?

Dawn slowed as she approached a thick length of silvery air conditioning duct. She looked left and right, unsure of which way to turn. She powered on the torch and pointed the beam to the left. Joe caught up and peered around the corner. In the distance he saw the outline of a black rectangle. Door-shaped.

'You beauty!' he said and gently shook Dawn by the shoulder.

She ran ahead and he heard her sobbing as she neared the door. He couldn't decide whether it was through fear, happiness, relief or whatever. She switched off the torch. She grabbed for the large metal handle and pulled.

Nothing.

She pushed.

Nothing again.

She dropped the torch and pulled at the handle once more, this time with both hands. She squealed with the exertion.

Still nothing.

A horrible sinking feeling infested Joe's stomach as he neared the door. He placed a hand on Dawn's back, hoping to calm her but she peeled away in a fit of angry tears. Putting his other hand on the door to catch his breath, he was surprised at how cold it felt for something made of wood.

Dawn slammed her hands against the door, livid. She kicked it, hard, again and again. Breathing deeply, she fought to regain her composure and picked up the torch, her hands shaking.

Joe saw something on the door despite the poor yellow light, a small hole underneath the large handle. He ducked down to take a better look.

‘Ah, see, it’s locked. Probably to keep us lot out of the maintenance floor. We just need to find another door. We know at least one of the them is unlocked.’

Dawn reached down and slipped off her shoes. She glanced to Joe, who looked at her as if she was going mad.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Let’s sneak back to that other door and get out of here. Mike will probably be on the way to the hospital, anyway.’

Joe hoped that was possible. He kept shtum, feeling it better to leave her with some hope.

‘You too,’ she said, gesturing to Joe’s feet.

‘What?’

Relatively speaking, the return journey to the first stairwell door was reasonably straightforward, save for the cold concrete floor numbing Joe’s feet and sending chills up his bones. Despite his discomfort he held his tongue, knowing Dawn would call him an utter blouse. They soon rediscovered the plastic wall plates of the T-junction and ran down the corridor towards the door and freedom.

But the door would no longer open.

Dawn exploded. She dropped the torch, took a shoe in each hand and smashed them against the door. Her anger quickly led to tears and she crumpled to her knees by the door.

The sinking feeling in the pit of Joe’s stomach deepened further still. The other door being locked, that was understandable, but who the hell had locked them in here?

Clive? Could he have had a key? Have we just closed the cage door behind us?

He recalled the state of the portakabin and felt the sweat on his back cool. Maybe Clive had been waiting here for them all along.

‘Shit! Come on, Dawn,’ he said. ‘We need to keep moving. We need to find another door.’

Dawn threw her hands into the air. ‘We found the bastard door and now it’s locked!’

‘Get *up!*’ he hissed. ‘Seriously, I’ve an awful feeling Clive’s locked us in here with him.’

That did the trick. Dawn gathered her shoes and sprang to her feet. Joe fetched the torch but found its glass broken.

They returned to the T-junction, turning right this time to reach the works area. They made slow cautious progress through a humming maze of pipes. Ducts hissed. Generators buzzed.

Machinery whirred. The acrid smell of burnt oil stung their nostrils. The chill of the concrete floor further numbed their feet yet they still refused to pull on their shoes.

Every one of Joe's senses worked overtime. He tried to fathom whether they were alone on the floor and, if not, where Clive could be hiding.

He heard rapid breathing behind him, panicky. He held out his free hand to Dawn without thinking. To his surprise she accepted it without hesitation. He would have taken some pleasure in that were it not for the pain of her fingernails slicing into his skin.

They eventually met with a thick pillar of breezeblock in the middle of the vast maintenance floor. Dripping pipes, thick and thin, ran the length of its sides like railings. Walking the perimeter revealed it to be a wide elevator shaft fronted by a pair of sliding metal doors.

'Oh, great,' said Joe, tapping the door, finding it surprisingly cold to the touch. 'Just to rub salt in the wounds.'

Dawn pressed the call button on the side regardless. She looked to Joe, astonished, when the elevator whirred into life.

"'They disabled the elevators,'" he said.'

'But they did!' said Joe. 'You heard the announcements yourself. This must be a service elevator, or one not connected to the main lifts.'

The elevator's arrival created rather more noise than was comfortable. The whirring and clanking of engines cut through every other sound around. Joe looked nervously for moving shapes in the darkness between the pipes as his mind again worked overtime.

So who did Clive kill in the portakabin? Was it Clive that did the killing?

Someone, or something, had certainly been slaughtered back there. The inside of the cabin had resembled an abattoir. The lack of a body still gnawed at him. Moving it must have left one hell of a blood trail. His eyes gravitated towards the dirty concrete floor and the dark stains.

'Dawn...'

'Ssssh!'

'The floor, Dawn,' he said. 'Can you feel it?'

'I can't feel a thing.'

She looked down and nearly cut through Joe's hand with her fingernails.

'Fucking hell!'

The floor rumbled and shook without warning, knocking Joe off balance. He saw dread in Dawn's face. There was a loud crack immediately followed by an unnerving crunching sound - concrete rubbing on concrete - over by the portakabins, like an earthquake had suddenly hit the building. Pipes rattled and banged against their supports and a huge hissing noise announced itself nearby. Clouds of vapour rolled out across the floor, impossible to see through. A collection of pipes visibly shook behind them. They looked the next to go.

'What the hell was that?' he said.

'Clive... he had a holdall on him,' said Dawn, releasing Joe's hand. 'I thought... Oh God, it looked like a bomb!'

'Shit!'

The elevator slowed to a halt. The building groaned and vibrated around them.

Joe pulled at the large twin doors and parted them, spilling light onto the concrete and revealing the massive streaks of blood upon which they were standing. He dragged the inner cage door aside. Dawn leapt into the elevator car, leaving small bloody footprints on the otherwise clean metal floor. Joe hopped in and dragged the cage door back in place. He listened to the clattering and hissing and grinding outside, squinting into the impenetrable darkness beyond.

'Joe?'

'Come on, Dawn, get us out of here!' he said without looking back.

'Joel!'

He turned. Dawn was pointing to the elevator controls. The bottommost button had a symbol of two opposing triangles, to signify the opening of doors.

Each and every button above it bore the number 13.

A loud bang elsewhere shook the elevator from side to side.

Dawn turned to face Joe. 'Okay, what the fuck is going on?'



#fearthefloors

HOW WOULD YOU
ESCAPE A MAZE OF
THIRTEENTH
FLOORS?

AVAILABLE
FRIDAY 13th
SEPTEMBER 2013

EBOOK
*
PAPERBACK

lucianpoll.com

