

# The Confessions of Jim Reaper

## DEAD IMPRESSIVE

### CHAPTER 1

You probably think that Halloween is big in our family. My Dad is ~~DEATH~~, after all. But Dad doesn't bring his work home, and actually he doesn't approve of Halloween. He thinks having fun and pretending to be dead is disrespectful to people who *are* dead. But he doesn't stop me doing it. I'm glad about that, because trick-or-treating is a big event on my calendar.

I always do it with my best friend Will. Every year. It's a tradition.

We spend a lot time planning it. We work out which doors we'll knock on and at what time, to maximize sweet-gathering. And, of course, we think a lot about what to wear.

If you're assuming I always have the most gruesome costume, you'd be wrong (I've inherited my Dad's fear of blood); and if you reckon that being the son of Death means nothing could surprise me, you'd be wrong again. I may have seen stuff that would freak you out, but Will – he surprises me every time. Last year he went as a killer cabbage (he used real cabbage). This year?...

"I'm going as road-kill."

"Road-kill?"

"Yeah - it's the dead animals you see at the sides of roads, Jim."

"I know what road-kill *is*, Will."

"Then why are you looking surprised?"

Will doesn't act or think in the same way you or I would. If you ask him a question there's no way you could guess his answer. Oh, apart from if you ask him what he likes to read at night,

because without fail he'll say *The Life Of Molluscs*.

But any other question - any question at all - and you'd have no chance. I turn it into a kind of game. **Will Bingo**. I ask him questions and give myself a point if I guess any of his answers right. And if I get them all right, then *BINGO!* So far, I've never actually got a Bingo. But it's hard when you get answers like this:

Me: "What's your favourite breakfast?"

Will: "Leftovers."

Me: "What are you doing after school?"

Will: "Probably engineering. Or I may go to Denmark and work with Lego."

Me: "What's the weather like today?"

Will: "Depending on how fast the cold front comes in from the East I think it will be - Isambard Kingdom Brunel! I knew there was someone I missed!"

???

Exactly. There's no way of knowing which direction Will's brain is moving in. So, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised at all at his choice of Halloween dress-up. It was never going to be a ghost or a wizard or a zombie.

"How are you going to dress as road-kill then, Will?"

"It's quite easy, really," Will said, seriously. "Road-kill is hard to identify. When we're zooming by on the motorway, I never know if we're driving past a fox, a badger or a *Gruffalo*." (He totally believes in the *Gruffalo*). "Dressing up as an unidentifiable dead animal should be straight-

forward. I just need some fur."

"You're not actually going to get a dead animal...?" I started, a little repulsed, remembering the real cabbage in the cabbage costume.

"Don't be stupid!" Will exclaimed. "Mum's got a fake-fur coat."

"But won't you just look like a boy wearing his mum's coat?" I asked gently.

"Not if I tear it up and cover it in red paint," Will said, rolling his eyes as if I was off the planet.

"I suppose not," I agreed. Some things just aren't worth arguing about. "And, er, what is Fiona doing for Halloween?" I asked, very casually and very carefully.

I asked very casually and carefully because I'm a bit in awe of Will's sister, Fiona. She's two years older than us and so cool I get brain-freeze just looking at her. She's a cross between teddy bear and Berserker Warrior. She loves animals, but she'd break your arm if you got on the wrong side of her. I've never got on any side of her, but that's because I'm too insignificant – she never even notices me.

"Why don't you ask her, yourself?" Will said.

"No, no, it's alright," I stammered.

But Will was already out the door, calling her name, leaving me prickly with nervousness.

It's crazy really - you start liking someone because they're cool or whatever, but when you get a chance to get their attention and feel the full-on magnitude of their awesomeness, you look away as if their eyes were burning laser beams and their breath was a bit pongy.

"Yeah? What?" Fiona stood in the doorway of Will's room, leaning against the frame.

She was all messy dark hair, green eyes and big eyebrows that she could move around a lot. My favourite eyebrow position is 'surprise'; it's where they raise high up her forehead and pull her big eyes wide open, and for a moment she doesn't look like she wants to hit someone.

But at this moment, they were bunched close together in a scowl above her nose, like a boxer mentally preparing for a fight, and she definitely looked like she wanted to hit someone. And she was looking at me.

"What?" I turned away quickly, in case her laser-beam eyes burned right through me.

"What do you mean - *what*?" she said with a particularly mean voice. "*I* just said *what*, but I had a reason to say *what*, because Will said you wanted to see me. So, what?"

"Oh, um, ah...."

"Does it look as if I've got all day to play *Guess What The Dweeb Wants*?"

"N-n-n-no," I stuttered. "It's just that Will and I were talking about Halloween."

"Oh, right," she said, suddenly sounding mildly interested. "What about it?"

"Well, I just asked Will what you were doing."

"What are *you* doing? I bet a hundred pounds you're putting a sheet over your head, flapping your arms and going 'woooo'."

"Will's dressing up as road-kill," I said, a little ashamed at using him to get the conversation away from me. But it worked.

"You're kidding me!" she exclaimed.

"Nope. Seriously," I grinned happily, feeling momentarily like we were on the same team.

"Will!" she called backwards, into the hallway.

Will arrived, holding a piece of toast. There was marmite on his face. At least, I hope it was marmite.

"Yup?"

"Your *little friend* says you're dressing up as road-kill for Halloween."

"Yup."

And there it was. No kid, big or small, wants to be called 'little'.

Okay, so I wasn't big. But I wasn't in nappies, either, and I was allowed to stay up after 9pm on weekends (sometimes), and although I hadn't done anything awesome I knew I had potential.

I certainly wasn't little.

And if I wasn't little, then I'd have to do something big.

I had to change her mind.

## CHAPTER 2

"Just popping out," Dad said. "Eat dinner without me."

There were two reasons Dad said that.

1: he didn't fancy Mum's 'all-together soup' (it was made with whatever was in the fridge, which could be absolutely anything).

2: he was doing a death.

I could tell that by the breezy 'nothing-to-worry-about' voice, and I'm sure I saw the Glove of Death sticking out of his pocket. I gulped. I was used to Dad doing deaths - he was doing them long before I was born - but it always left me feeling a bit weird, knowing someone was about to die.

DEATH is a huge operation. There are hundreds of employees at The Dead End Office and lots of paperwork.

Dad is in charge of Natural Deaths in South-West London. It's possibly the nicest job there is. Saying goodbye to very, very old people (you know, the ones that are so old they've started to look a bit like tortoises) is just up his street. There's no blood and no awkward conversation. Just a gentle touch with a soft white glove, and then gone. Easy and peaceful.

I should be okay with that, too. But I can't help thinking I'd prefer it if everyone stayed alive forever and ever.

"So, Jim," Mum said, after Dad had left. "How about a decomposing corpse?"

"What?" I said, startled.

"For your Halloween costume! A decomposing corpse. I could paint you green. No, wait! I could make a skin-rotting paste with some wheatgrass and dandelions. Then throw some rags over

you and - "

"Mum! You know Dad doesn't like that sort of thing."

"I know," she said in a hushed voice. "But he isn't here. It could be our secret. And I do like a bit of drama."

"I don't think so, Mum."

"Come on, it's easy. You just need to walk around with a limp, like this." Mum hobbled around the kitchen with her arms outstretched. "And moan a bit for effect."

"That's revolting," I said, heading out of the kitchen.

"Fair enough, love," Mum sighed. "How about one of my bran and cranberry muffins?"

"Revolting," I mumbled again, not making it clear if I was talking about decomposing corpses or Mum's muffins...

So, what was my Halloween outfit going to be?

I certainly couldn't go as a ghost. Not now Fiona had made fun of me. If I knew what *she* was going as, I could have done something similar, something she couldn't laugh at. Because it would mean we were on the same level of awesomeness.

Last year she died her hair pink and wore a leather wet-suit thing with knee-pads painted with flames. She looked wicked holding her skateboard, and so cool, but I didn't know what it had to do with Halloween and I made the mistake of asking.

"Skateboarder from Hell," she said matter-of-fact. "But I never expected you to get it. You've got no imagination."

A whole year had passed and it looked like she still thought I had no imagination. But I did. I imagined her all the time. Only in an admiring way, because she was the most popular of the non-girly girls in school and could do better jumps on her skateboard than Jeremy Flowers, who's a horrible kid who thinks he's best at everything.

Later that night I pulled out a new project book from my desk drawer. I had stacks of them, and my shelves were filled with finished books, crammed with random stuff - like observations about Dad's job, little thoughts that popped into my head, boredom doodles, poems and lists of my Top Five Favourites.

But this one had a definite purpose. I opened the cover and smoothed it down. Then I got my best biro - the one that didn't leak - and wrote, in big letters: IMPRESSING FIONA.

Do you think I'm being sappy? Kind of, but that's not the whole reason.

While I do feel kind of like *a bit different* when Fiona's around - sort of extra-interested - getting on her good side was also a career move. If I'd stayed quiet, I'd have been safe. But now I'd tried to make conversation I was in her 'firing range' and I could find myself in serious trouble. If she decided to tell anyone at school that I was a nerd-bum or a plonker, then nothing would save me. Everyone would laugh at me, and Jeremy Flowers would pin rude messages on my back. I'd be 'little Jim' until the day I left school. So yeah - impressing Fiona was more than a matter of personal interest. It was survival. I hope you believe me.

It took me hours to decorate the title - and it may have included a couple of small blotches that looked like love hearts, but that's only because the pen slipped, not for any other reason. But writing IMPRESSING FIONA was so much easier than actually doing it.

I made a start by writing down *No ghost fancy dress*. Well, I had to write *something* or it all looked a bit pathetic. I was hoping more things would come to mind, but they didn't.

I was stuck.

I was stuck because apart from the fact that she always kept her bedroom door closed and loved her skateboard more than her own brother, the only thing I knew for sure was Fiona **was dead** **difficult to impress**.

### CHAPTER 3

After school the next day Will came to my house, carrying his school rucksack and struggling with various large items wrapped in plastic bags. He was excited because he said he'd worked out a way of attaching a sheep's jawbone he'd found in the countryside to his mother's fake fur coat.

"If I do up these two buttons around the bone it holds it in place!"

"That's very good, Will," I said. It was disgusting.

"But that's not all," he grinned. "I found these in a skip round the back of that wedding dress shop on the High Street. Shut your eyes..."

Will rustled around for some time with a plastic bag while I sat in the dark, not bothering to guess what he'd produce.

"Ta-da! Open your eyes!"

I did, and laid out in front of me were various body parts.

"They're plastic," he reassured me. "Bits of mannequins. Look!"

Will picked up a whole arm and wobbled it. The wrist joint rattled.

"Er, great, Will. But what are you going to do with them?"

Will's jaw dropped open like dead fish.

"Jim, do I always have to spell everything out for you?"

"I think in this case you might have to," I said, patiently. "What do human body pieces have to do with road-kill?"

"Well, for your information, humans are animals, you know. Top of the food chain. But I'm not going as road-kill any more."

"Why?"

"Because mum came in as I was about to paint her fur coat red and went totally ballistic. I mean, can you believe that?!"

I thought that was quite a reasonable reaction, but I tutted in sympathy.

"So, what's the new plan then? Are you going as a grave digger?"

Will's face lit up. "That's not a bad idea, Jim," he said. "Maybe next year. But I've decided I'm going as a cannibal caveman."

"Cannibal. Caveman," I repeated slowly.

"Mum didn't say I couldn't use her coat. She just said I couldn't put red paint on it. So, I will wear it like a bear-skin - therefore making me a caveman - and I will carry human body parts in a big sack, suggesting I might be a cannibal."

"Greeeeaaaaat," I said, enthusiastically as I could. "Where does the jawbone come in, then? I thought that was for your road-kill costume."

"Oh, right, yeah. I still want to use that. Shame not to. I think it's the *piece de resistance*," Will said with an excellent French accent.

"Piece de resistance?"

"It's French. It means an outstanding highlight. I could adapt my costume to be a man-eating sheep devil. I'll go 'baaa' and I'll put mum's lipstick all over my face to look like blood."

"Nice," I agreed. "That's sorted, then."

"So what about you? You could go as a squid," he said, without waiting for my answer. "Or an octopus of death. Yeah, an octopus of death! That would be uber-cool."

Will has started saying uber instead of super. He pronounces it OOOBER.

"Will, I don't think -"

"You could pinch some of your dad's trousers to make arms, and stick on bottle-tops for suckers."

"I don't think my dad would let me do that."

"...and you could paint them orange. No, hold on, that won't work. You see, octopuses are colour-changing creatures. It wouldn't be realistic..."

"Will..."

"So maybe not an octopus. Maybe a killer snail!"

"Will!"

"You could slide over people and smother them with your slime."

"**WILL!**" I shouted.

"What?"

"I already know what I'm going as."

"Well why didn't you say so?" Will sighed. "What then?"

"A vampire," I said, proudly. "But after he's brushed his teeth, because I don't like blood."

"You're so predictable," Will sighed. "I bet one in four people will be vampires. My killer snail is a much better idea."

"Snacks, boys?"

Mum had suddenly appeared in the doorway carrying a tray with two plates and two cups.

"Yes please, Mrs Reaper," Will said. His cheeks went pink and I thought I saw his eyelids flutter. He clearly has a soft spot for Mum. He always sucks up to her.

"What is it?" I asked cautiously.

As you might have guessed from my reactions, you have to be cautious when you accept food and drink from Mum. If you've met her before you'll know exactly why. If you haven't, then let's just say she likes to include a big dollop of health-craze into her cooking, even if it means leaving out all the taste. She's always experimenting with different seeds and grains and husks and plant extracts. Dad and I are usually her guinea-pigs but we've learnt to stay away from the kitchen as much as possible when she's in it. Unsuspecting visitors usually get the full force of her enthusiasm.

"Flaxseed, spelt and raw cocoa cookies," she said. And then, when we didn't respond: "And carrot juice with extract of stinging nettle."

Will smiled, but I saw panic flash across his face. Mum put the tray on my desk.

"Now tell me honestly what you think, okay? Because personally I think I'm onto a winner here. Not only are these cookies absolutely delicious, they're extremely good for you!" Mum winked.

Will and I smiled with pretend joy at the news, and Mum seemed satisfied with that and closed the door gently behind her, humming a tune that had no tune.

"You don't have to eat it, Will," I said, kindly.

"But your mum made them especially. I'd feel bad," Will said, taking a bite of a flat brown disc.

"You'll feel bad soon enough," I muttered.

"Oh, *stinking sardines!* That is GROSS!" Will spluttered, spitting the biscuit into his hand and throwing it out of the window.

"Told you," I sighed.

"But I'm starving, and I don't dare touch that drink."

We both looked at the carrot juice with stinging nettle extract. It was muddy orange with green gelatinous chunks, which had sunk to the bottom.

"Tell you what, I'll go and raid Dad's secret stash of edible food. Stay here."

I made sure Mum wasn't around and went into the kitchen. After some quick rummaging I was rewarded with the discovery that Dad had smuggled in three packets of chocolate biscuits and hidden them behind the Bran Flakes in the breakfast cupboard.

Upstairs in my room, Will had made a discovery of his own.

## CHAPTER 4

"Why is my sister's name written in your project book?"

I could have made anything up and he'd have believed me, because he's very trusting. But there was always a risk with Will that he'd tell. He wouldn't mean to - it's just that the information piles up in his head and he sometimes needs to let it go. If he let the information about my project book fall out of his head in front of Fiona, I'd never be able to set foot in their house again. Or school. I needed to make up something good, so Will would have a reason to keep a secret.

"It's a - "

"*No ghost fancy dress...*" Will read.

"I thought we could scare you sister big time this Halloween," I said loudly, with a wicked grin, for effect.

I also grinned because I was very pleased with the cover-up story that had popped into my head. Adrenalin does that. It sometimes feeds me excellent thoughts.

"Why would we want to scare Fiona?"

"Well, she always reckons she has the best Halloween costume."

"Well, she does," Will said, nodding.

"And she's always teasing us, which is mean. Do you know what she said to me? She said she bet I'd go as something pathetic like a ghost, with a sheet on my head."

"It's a fair comment," Will said, shrugging. "You've done it before."

"Thanks, Will... And..." I thought hard. "She said she'd love to crush your snail shell collection."

"She did?"

No, she didn't. It was a lie. And I felt bad. But my survival was more important.

"She did. How mean is that!"

"Really mean, actually, because she knows they're my favourite thing."

"Precisely. She deserves to be punished. She deserves to be scare-i-fied."

"So how shall we scare-i-fy her, then?" said Will, with a bit more enthusiasm. "Shall we jump out at her and say 'boo!'?"

"Boo might be a bit predictable. Something a little more extreme, perhaps."

"Like what?"

"I don't know yet. We need to gather facts. Make it a project. That's why we've got a book."

"Oh, I see," Will said, nodding enthusiastically. "I get it."

"So let's start writing a list of things that Fiona likes and hates. Once we've done that, we'll be able to make a plan."

And I'd get to find out every aspect of his awesome big sister and I'd be able to impress her - or at least make her think I wasn't a plonker. Things were looking up.

"I reckon my costume will freak her out," Will added, after some thought. "Who wouldn't be scared of a road-killed sheep devil crossed with a cannibal caveman?"

"I thought you were just a man-eating sheep devil?"

"Nah. Someone else has probably thought of that, and how embarrassing would it be to bump into another man-eating sheep devil! So I'm going with all three to be safe."

"Excellent," I said. "Shall we concentrate on the list?"

We looked back at project book.

"Jim?"

"Yes, Will?"

"Why does it say *Impressing* Fiona?"

"Ah, well, that means making an impression - like scaring."

"Okay. And why are there love hearts above her name?"

*Oh no.... Come on, adrenalin. Kick in.*

"It's a cover-up, Will. It's a smoke-screen. It makes it look as if we're doing something nice

for her. If we want to spook her out big time, then we're going to have to be clever. Very clever. Because your sister's quite clever, isn't she?"

"Geddit!" Will said, tapping his nose. He then went on to pick it and I had to look away.

After two hours Will had done a lot of head-scratching and interrupted our project work several times to share information about molluscs, Lego-building and World War I. But in the end, we had down everything he knew about his sister.

The list wasn't great, but it was better than nothing. It looked like this:

***Favourite colours:*** Black, Red and Green

***Worst colours:*** Pink, Orange, Light Blue

***Favourite things:*** Guitar, skateboard

***Worst things:*** make-up, glitter, the word 'Princess'

***Favourite food:*** Spaghetti, Jaffa Cakes

***Worst food:*** Chips, Anchovies, Custard

***Favourite animals:*** Dogs, Lizards

***Worst animals:*** Gerbils, Hamsters, Hippos

***Favourite rock band:*** The Knuckle Crushers

***Worst rock band:*** The Tutu Girls

"So, what are we going to do?" Will said, as he gathered his mannequin pieces, his jawbone and his school bag. "Are we going to tie her up, cover her in make-up, and make her eat anchovies and custard with a hamster on her lap while listening to *The Tutu Girls*?"

"I don't think so, Will," I said, slowly.

"Good, because I like *The Tutu Girls*, and I don't think they'd appreciate being used as part of a Halloween prank. Is that what you were thinking, too, Jim?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking," I said, trying not to laugh. "Will, speaking of music - who are *The Knuckle Crushers*?"

"Oh, they were a rock band. Lived round here. They just shouted into microphones a lot. Their tour bus was involved in a terrible crash on the way to a concert ten years ago and they all died."

"What happened?"

"They loved to play jokes. One day they painted their tour bus-driver's sunglasses totally black. He drove straight off a cliff."

"That's awful. And a bit stupid, really," I added.

"Yeah. Uber-stupid. Fiona visits their monument all the time. I think she sits and tells them her problems. She loves them more than anything in the world, even living things. Even more than her skateboard."

"What problems?" I couldn't stop myself being interested.

"Dunno," Will said and shrugged. "Suppose I'd better go home and put my mind to thinking about our *project*." He twitched his index fingers on *project* to give it extra meaning.

"Yeah, okay," I said, slightly relieved.

"Oh," Will said, pausing in the doorway. "I nearly forgot. Did I tell you that the ramshorn snail is a term used to describe any snail with a flat spiral - or *planispiral* - shell?"

"Er, no. No you didn't, Will," I smiled, patiently. "Maybe you can tell more about that tomorrow."

"Okay."

## CHAPTER 5

"Urf... furf..."

It was dinner time and Dad's jaw was chewing overtime. He'd made the mistake of putting a forkful of food in his mouth mid-sentence, expecting to be able to eat it quickly and carry on talking. Although he'd begged Mum to make ordinary lasagna for dinner, she hadn't been able to resist adding an extra ingredient. When he finally swallowed a clump down he looked at her with alarm.

"It's bark from the pine tree, darling," she informed. "Full of antioxidants. The trick is to cut it very small."

Dad smiled weakly.

"So, what I was saying," he coughed, "is that I've been given a temporary promotion."

"Oh no," Mum said, touching the back of his hand lightly. "I'm so sorry."

For most people a job promotion is a good thing. It's when you get more responsibility and usually more money. But for Dad all the money in the world wouldn't make a promotion appealing. A promotion could mean working for Accidents or Murder or Misadventure (which is things like ruining a person's mountain climbing expedition with an avalanche), all of which involved blood, bones and sadness. Promotion was bad.

"It's not that bad, actually," Dad said, patting Mum's hand reassuringly. "I'll be 'overseeing' Deaths in South-West London, for a short while. It's a supervision role only. No direct contact with blood, thank goodness."

"How come?" I piped up.

"The Overseer is going on maternity leave."

"But it's a very senior position... With everything that's happened, how come they think

you're the right person to take over while she's away?"

Mum said that because a few things have gone wrong while Dad's been in charge of Natural Deaths in South-West London (and she doesn't know the half of it!). Let's just say there have been a few slip-ups. And let's just say I need to keep my mouth zipped shut about them, because they weren't all Dad's fault...

"Usually it would go to the Deputy Overseer, but it appears that his time's up quite soon, so they decided it would be silly to hand everything over if he's only going to go and die."

Mum gasped.

"Does he know he's going to die?" I asked. That's my **morbid curiosity**. It's hard for anyone not to be morbidly curious, but even harder for me.

"No, of course not. We're not given the dates of our own deaths. They've sent him on a cruise round the Bahamas. They'll make it quick and painless. He's well liked."

A quick and painless death in the Tropics... I can think of worse ways to go. But if our family is ever offered a holiday of a lifetime, I'll be worried.

"What will your duties be, darling?" Mum asked, brightly, tucking into her wooden lasagna.

"It'll be mainly a desk-job, giving the other Deaths their orders and sorting out mistakes. You wouldn't believe how many mistakes are made."

Dad slipped me a sideways smile. He and I had seen death mistakes made on our very own doorstep. I shouldn't have seen them - and Dad should have wiped my memory, like he has to do with ordinary members of the public who get caught up in death mistakes; but we'd had a real father-son experience, working side by side, and I'd promised never to betray his trust again. Interfering with Death was off the menu.

"A desk job? Lovely!" Mum exclaimed. "It'll be nice to have you at home for a while. I can cook breakfast, lunch and dinner for you. Look after you properly. Another slice of lasagna?"

I left Dad to struggle with that one and said I had some home work to do.

I stared at IMPRESSING FIONA for a long time. And it wasn't Mum's lasagna making my stomach churn...

Will's first idea was indeed a terrible idea. And if she found out – which she probably would because Will would tell her by mistake – it would end in her hating me even more. She'd corner me at school, pin me to the wall with her Viking-warrior arm-lock, and she'd say:

*"You're going to tie me up, cover me in make-up, force-feed me anchovies and custard? You're going to make me listen to The Tutu Girls? I don't think so, you despicable little worm. How do you fancy an arm wrestle? First arm to break loses."*

And I'm not even joking.

But wait! Will's idea wasn't altogether terrible. Not I could use his logic in reverse to boost my own secret plan – not the scaring plan, but the impressing plan. If he wanted to take everything she hated and throw it at her to freak her out, then to impress her I just needed to do the opposite... *Give her everything she loved.*

I checked the list.

I'd have to approach her when her eyebrows weren't mean, then casually offer her a Jaffa Cake and start up a conversation about dogs - which is easy, as Dad promised I could get a sausage dog - and then mention an important but little-known fact about *The Knuckle Crushers*. She could hardly think I was too insignificant to talk to then. I could say:

*'The Knuckle Crushers? Yeah, I've been a big fan for ages. I didn't know you like them too... Really? I've got every single one of their songs, you know...'*

What a great idea... She would turn to look at me with surprised eyebrows and big green eyes; then she'd sit next to me and listen while I talked about dog training and ate Jaffa Cakes and

considered the painful but funny last moments of *The Knuckle Crushers* and how they died doing what they loved. And she'd tell school bullies to leave me alone because I was a serious *Knuckle Crusher* fan.

What was it Will said?

*"She loves them more than anything in the world, even living things."*

I needed to find out more.

It was easy enough. They were online everywhere - there were blogs and fan sites galore. I started to collect facts:

1. *The Knuckle Crushers* was a three-man band who wrote songs with very peculiar subjects (not about love, nightclubs and beach holidays like most of bands you know);
2. They were once invited to be on the cover of *Rolling Stone* music magazine, but they painted the photographer's camera lens black for a joke, so the picture was never taken;
3. They had a holiday home in Cornwall, because their favourite thing was netting crabs at the harbour and eating fish and chips;
4. 1000 parents once demonstrated against them because young kids had started being rude after listening to their songs.
5. Their monument at St Agnes Church has to be cleaned of graffiti three times a year.

I scribbled and scribbled until my hand got sore. Then I looked at some pictures.

Their band photos always showed them standing in a stubby V formation with the lead singer Gray Minister sneering at the camera and holding his guitar like a cricket bat with Boot Mallory behind him to the right, mean-looking with his arms crossed over his chest, a drumstick in each hand; and to the left was Diddy Pain, who had a guitar on a strap over his shoulder, his thumbs

in his front jean pockets, pulling a pout like he was trying to stare at his top lip.

Gray, Boot and Diddy - they were just stage names. Their real names were Kev, Milo and Peter. Funny to think they were local boys. One even went to my school. Even funnier to think they were dead. Not funny, like ha-ha funny. Funny weird. If they were alive things would have been much easier, because:

1. I could have bought concert tickets for Fiona;
2. I could have got their autographs for her;
3. I could have written to them, asking them if they'd hang out with me, just for a bit, to make me look cool.

I'm sure if they would have agreed. After all, they did write a song called *I'll Try To Be Cool For You*. It was about having their bodies frozen for science, but I think the message was wider than that.

But they weren't alive. They were dead. And that was the problem.

## CHAPTER 6

At the school gates the next day I didn't mention our project and Will seemed to have forgotten about it anyhow. His mind firmly on our Halloween sweet haul, he had been focusing on working out the most efficient route around town for our trick-or-treat expedition. He brought out of his pocket a piece of crumpled A4 paper.

"It all about the ratio between Shopping street and Residential street," he explained, tapping his hand-drawn map with a grubby finger. "The time we spend in shopping areas is dead time because the shops will be closed and there will be no treats. Shopping bad, Residential good."

"I see," I said.

"If an average handful of sweets is 100 grams and an average residential street has eight Halloween-friendly houses, that's 800 grams per street. If we follow my map then we can expect to come home with nearly six kilograms of sweets."

I love Will. I really do. While lots of other kids at school are obsessed with mobile phones and gaming, Will's interests are more old-fashioned and alive and don't hurt your eyes. He likes building things, trapping creepy crawlies in specimen jars, and cycling fast by standing up and swinging the bike side to side when he pedals, sometimes shouting *whoo-hoo* at the same time. And he has a really healthy longing for sweets - especially those sour, sugar-coated ones.

"Let's see the map then," I said affectionately, taking the paper from his hands. It was very detailed, with pictures of significant buildings and road names, and even some speed limits. "Good work, Will. But what's this square area here? There's nothing written."

"Oh that," Will sighed. "It's no man's land - or no sweets land - and will take approximately three minutes of our trick-or-treating time to cross it. But we have to cross it if we're going to get

here," he said, pointing to the top of the page. "That's the Winkworth Estate. It's known to be extremely friendly to trick-or-treaters. We have no choice – we have to cross St Agnes graveyard. I've drawn the church, see?"

"Right..." I said.

*St Agnes? That name rang a bell.*

"Don't be too upset," Will said. "We'll make it up with the sweets from the Winkworth Estate, which is far more generous than the houses on this side. Besides, a graveyard will be suitably spooky. Maybe we could spook Fiona there - set a trap for her or something."

"I thought you'd forgotten about spooking Fiona," I said. "Don't tell me you have a plan?"

"No... I haven't, actually. I'm sorry, Jim. I meant to think about it more last night, like we said, but I got carried away with my Lego model of a space station. Not life size. Anyway, next thing I knew it was bedtime. I totally forgot about our evil plans till this morning, when Mum dropped the bombshell."

"What bombshell?"

Will looked embarrassed. "She said we're not allowed to go trick-or-treating on our own this year and Fiona's got to accompany us. And she's making me pay her a quarter of my sweet takings! That's even more reason why we should go the Winkworth Estate. I've got to get extra sweets to make up for it - and I know she'll go for my fizzies and sours. It's so annoying!"

"That is annoying," I said, absent-mindedly. I was still processing the name.

Oh yes. St Agnes graveyard - resting place of Kev, Milo and Peter of *The Knuckle Crushers*, buried all together in a grand monument tomb.

"Alright you little geeks?"

Fiona stood in front of us. Her hand was on her hips and her eyebrows were all mean.

"Alright, Fi - Fi - " I stuttered.

"Don't call me FiFi. I'm not a poodle," she sneered.

"I didn't mean to. I was, er, trying - "

"Whatever," she sighed. "What you got there?"

She snatched the map from my hands and turned it left, right and upside down in a big show of making it look like it was stupid. It was pretty obviously a map. She was definitely in a mean mood.

"It's a trick-or-treating map I made," said Will, oblivious to her horribleness.

She handed it back like it was a dirty tissue, but she was smiling. It was hard not to smile at some of the things Will did. For a moment she looked friendly.

"About that..." she began. "I have to miss some of Lisa's Halloween party to walk you two around town. Not only is that annoying, it's embarrassing. So don't think you're going to be trick-or-treating for more than an hour."

"We won't," Will said. "And I've got an excellent costume. You won't be embarrassed."

Will turned his attention back to his map, tracing the route with his finger.

"What about you?" she said to me, softly. But not softly. "Got your sheet ironed and ready? Don't forget to cut the eye holes..."

"I'm not going as a ghost," I protested, but she pulled out some earphones and pushed them into her ears. Then she began jerking her head to the music and punching the air with her fists. She was listening to *The Knuckle Crushers*. There was no other music you could dance to like that.

"Is that *The Knuckle Crushers*?" I said, loudly.

"What?"

"The Knuckle Crushers," I repeated. "I know them."

*What was I doing? I hadn't planned this - I wasn't ready! I wasn't confident enough to pull it off.*

Fiona took out her earplugs.

"You know them, do you?" she challenged.

"Kind of a big fan," I said. I tried a confident smile.

"Yeah, right. What's the drummer's name?"

"Er, Boot Mally-something - " I struggled.

"Boot Mallory," she said like a full stop. "See, you don't know them at all. You wouldn't know them if they came up and shook your hand."

Then she spun on her heels and walked away.

I didn't have a chance to tell her that they wrote a song about cryogenic freezing techniques and another about the joys of body-piercing. I didn't have the chance to tell her about some of the pranks I'd discovered they'd done. I had a small window of opportunity and I didn't speak up - instead I sounded like a gagged Smurf.

*You wouldn't know them if they came up and shook your hand.*

But then, in my misery, as I was considering throwing it all in, it came to me. It came like a gust of cold wind through the window of a hot stuffy classroom. A prank. A wonderful prank. Not one like snappy-chewing gum or cling-film over the toilet seat. A real prank. Better than anything *The Knuckle Crushers* could have done themselves. If I could make it happen, it would be a Halloween no one would forget.

## CHAPTER 7

I lay my costume out on the bed. I hadn't told Will yet, but I wasn't any old vampire now. I was Demon Magician. I had a top hat, a cape, a wand and a white rabbit toy I'd found in a charity shop (which I'd glued fake fangs to). But the white rabbit wasn't the trick, it was just decoration. What I'd really be pulling out of my hat would be much more impressive. It would be a show-stopper. It would stretch Fiona's eyebrows into complete surprise and her old impression of me would be a ghost of the past.

I had it all planned:

### **Phase One:**

Just as Fiona and Will enter the graveyard, the St Agnes clock strikes eight (eight o'clock isn't a dramatic time of night, but I had to be realistic). I rise from behind the monument where the bodies of Kev, Milo and Peter are kept, my arms outstretched, my wand pointy, my voice bold and true. And I say:

'Will and Fiona Maggot, welcome to my show. Look but don't speak. Be astounded but do not fear. For I am going to use all my powers to conjure the spirits of the dead and bring them before you. I - the Demon Magician - will show you something that will boggle your brain and make you question your sanity. But what you are about to see is real. What you are about to witness is truly IMPRESSIVE! Quick, the hour is upon us. It's time for a scram-sandwich.'

(That last bit is probably not very demonic, but it's my favourite expression).

### **Phase Two:**

Will and Fiona take a seat and look at me with awe and anticipation. I mutter a command

(not worked out yet) and the figures of Gray, Boot and Diddy rise to stand by my side. Fiona gasps.

Then I say:

'I bring you my friends *The Knuckle Crushers!*'

### **Phase Three:**

Fiona weeps and hugs her heroes and gets their autographs. And then she hugs me and says 'how can I ever repay you, Jim' (yes, she'll use my real name). Then I insist that she and Will leave the graveyard while I end the show (with a touch of the Glove of Death, I put them all back to sleep and return them to their monument).

And that was it. That was the plan. Unfeasible? Yes. Impossible? Of course not. My Dad is Death and newly promoted Overseer.

I knew from experience that bringing dead people back to life - or resurrecting them - was done by a special team employed by The Dead End Office. It involved secretive phone calls and a lot of paperwork, and it was way beyond what Dad could do when he was in charge of Natural Deaths. But his promotion put him charge of correcting death mistakes, so it was all brilliantly impossible. There was no reason why Kev, Milo and Pete couldn't reform as *The Knuckle Crushers* once again. Although there were complications.

How would I get them resurrected in the first place? Dad could do it but he'd never agree. I'd have to ask questions. And fast. Halloween was just hours away.

Dad hated it when I asked too many questions about his job. He told us everything he was happy to share, but if there were details he didn't want you to know about he'd make it very clear by saying:

"Dead? You will be...." or

"You'll find out, over your dead body..."

Or he'd just give The Cold Eye. It's a ghoulish face he pulls. Worse than any Halloween mask I've ever seen. I was going to have to tread very carefully, and I was going to have to forget the promise I made to never again meddle with Death and Dad's job. But one once last time wouldn't hurt, would it?

## CHAPTER 8

No moment is ever a good one to get on the wrong side of Dad. But this was a particularly bad one. He was pacing up and down the kitchen with a face like the Cold Eye, but more like the Cold Eye that has just been given the Cold Eye. He looked scared.

"What's up, Dad?"

He didn't answer, he just made grunting noises.

"I think he's a little bunged up - you know, constipated," Mum said. She mouthed the word 'constipated'.

"I am NOT constipated," Dad said loudly and then wailed a bit.

"Well, I think you are. You look bloated. I'll make you a concoction."

"You really don't have to - " Dad began.

"Absolutely no problem," Mum fluttered, already retrieving ingredients from the cupboards. I'm sure I saw a tin of Chick Peas emerge. Dad saw them too and sweat popped out on his forehead.

"What *is* the problem then, Dad?" I asked, eyes bulging. If he would only tell us, then it would save him from Mum's uncertain cure, which would certainly be foul-smelling and much worse than constipation.

"I can't tell you," Dad insisted. "I really *can't*."

"But Dad, you have to. You have to."

Mum was getting the blender out.

"You won't get it out of me, son," Dad warned. "It's a work thing. It's just that it's very HARD work."

"Definitely sounds like constipation to me," said Mum, who wasn't listening properly. "And it will all be over soon. Just after you've had one of my special drinks."

She poured the chick peas, along with frozen spinach, pineapple juice and something from a

silver packet into the blender. Dad's face went white.

"Dad, out here, quick!" I juttred my thumb towards the hallway, and we met outside the kitchen.

"Hey, where are you going!" Mum called over the grating sound of the blender.

"Back in a minute, darling!" Dad called back.

Dad ran his hands through his hair time and time again and then he stopped still and looked at me.

"Can I trust you, Jim. *Really* trust you?"

"Of course you can, Dad," I said. But my voice cracked slightly. I knew right then and there I was telling a bit of a porky-pie lie.

"Right. Well, I'll tell you what's on my mind. They do say a problem shared is a problem halved. And if I share it with your mother she'll make me meditate, and I don't have time for meditation."

A terrible noise like the crunching of sharp knives came from the kitchen, as the blender struggled with the ingredients.

"Quick, to the study!" Dad whispered.

We huddled into Dad's study and he shut the door behind him.

"Okay. It's the new job," he confided. "Turns out it's a bit trickier than I thought."

"Really? How?"

"So many rules and regulations to learn. I never realised being an Overseer meant you had to memorise protocol for every event and situation..." he sighed.

"What's protocol?"

"It's a strict way of going about things, written out like a law. The Dead End Office makes sure there's protocol for everything. It seems there are hundreds of protocols for every Death type. And for every Death problem."

"Oh."

"I just don't know what to do, Jim!" Dad pulled at his hair again. "Only today there was an issue with some extreme roller-skaters who were supposed to die in a multi-storey car park. Misadventure Death was meant to - *you know* (he did that horrible throat-cutting gesture) - but they got away with nothing more than cuts and bruises. When he called me for advice I didn't know what to tell him. It didn't look very professional. And this is a chance to prove myself, Jim. If I do well as an Overseer I may be offered a permanent Overseeing position. I'd never have to do a death with my own hands again. Wouldn't that be nice?"

"It would, Dad. So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I need to memorise everything as quickly as possible but it's doing my head in."

"Where is all the information?"

"In this."

Dad pulled a giant folder down from the top shelf of his towering bookcase. It had a leather cover and it was jammed full of papers.

"You could kill someone with that!" I laughed.

"It's not funny, Jim. And it might just be the death of *me*, as it happens."

"What's in there?"

"Every rule and protocol for every situation you could ever imagine. I don't know where to begin...there's just so much!"

My heart was beating so fast I had trouble catching my breath. This big book of the damned and doomed was exactly what I needed for my Halloween stunt. And if I could find the right bit - the bit about resurrection - then I wouldn't need to ask Dad any probing questions and I wouldn't get the Cold Eye. Then I had an idea...

"You should probably start with resurrections," I said, boldly, like I had nothing to hide.

"Because having to bring someone back to life is the worst thing that could happen. It means there's

been a really big mistake. Knowing what to do in a case of mistaken deading is probably the most important protocol to learn. If you can act fast and cool in the worst of situations, they'll know what an amazing Death employee you are. The rest is just keeping things ticking over."

"You're right, Jim!" Dad exclaimed, giving me a huge hug. "You're a genius!"

"Thanks, Dad," I grinned. "Why don't I test you?"

After dinner - lentil burgers and a hedgerow relish that Dad and I avoided like the plague - we returned to the study. Dad took a position in his armchair and I sat at his desk with the huge Tome of Death in front of me. I found the important chapter.

"Are you ready, Mr Reaper?" I said with pretend authority.

"I am."

"Then let's begin. What's the first thing you must do when alerted to a mistake?"

"Keep calm."

"Correct! In what situations will you need to send a clean-up team."

Dad thought for a while, and then counted on his fingers.

"When the Death is in shock; if the mistake is too big for one person to clean up quickly; when the mistake is made in a public place; when the mistake has been reported by the public to the police or the media."

"Correct! Well done, Dad! See, you know more than you think."

"Phew. Thanks Jim. Next?"

"Okay..." I coughed a little, and I hoped my nerves wouldn't show. "When a resurrection is required, what do you do?"

"I call the resurrection team and direct them to the body or bodies."

"What number do you call them on?"

"000 000 9696 248."

"Correct! That's 000 000 9696 248" I said, pressing the numbers deep into my brain. "And what details do you need to give the resurrection team about the bodies?"

Dad thought for a while, then lit up like a light-bulb.

"None! I'm the boss. I don't have to explain anything. They must resurrect on my order without asking any questions."

*Too good to be true!*

"How do they know they're talking to you, when you call?"

"I must give them my secret code."

"And, er, what is it?"

"Mr B - " he stopped. "Can't give you that information, son. It's more than my job's worth!"

*Oh, rats' bums!*

"In which case, Dad, I'm proud to tell you that you got ten out of ten on Emergency Protocol. The rest is a walk in the park. Shall I test you on Disciplining Deaths?"

Dad rubbed the top of my head.

"I think we'd done enough study for one night, Jim. Don't you?"

"Yeah. I reckon."

But it wasn't over for me. I had all the information I needed - all of it, apart from Dad's code word. Ugh! I was so close. Dad yawned, stretching his arms in the air.

"I'm going to watch *Mr Bean's Holiday* again if you fancy joining me," he said, sauntering out of study.

Bingo!

## CHAPTER 9

There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" Mum warbled. Then a second later, she called up in a dramatic spooky voice: "It's a gruesome flying carpet and a zombie punk to see you!"

"I'm not a flying carpet," I heard Will say, dejectedly. "I'm a road-killed sheep devil crossed with a cannibal caveman."

"Oh right. I thought, um..." Mum said, tailing off.

"And I'm not *in* fancy dress, actually," Fiona snapped.

"No! No! Of course you're not," Mum laughed awkwardly.

I cringed. Mum was so embarrassing.

"Could you tell Will to come up for a minute?" I shouted down the stairs.

After some clattering and panting, Will appeared in the doorway to my bedroom. He was so devoured by his mum's huge fur coat that just his head and feet poked out - along with various pieces of animal skeleton and mannequin. He looked at me in my ordinary clothes and his face twisted like he was about to cry.

"Why aren't you dressed up?"

"Change of plan, Will!" I said, excitedly.

"But I thought we were going trick-or-treating together..." He whined, tears brimming.

"We are. We *are*. Absolutely we are. But I've got other plans. Plans so amazing that this will be a Halloween we'll never ever forget."

"But what about trick-or-treating?" he sniffed.

"We can do that too, I promise. Lots of sweets."

"Oh, okay," Will said, sounding brighter. "What's the plan?"

"Remember we said we could spook Fiona in St Agnes graveyard? I've got something amazing up my sleeve. A Halloween show."

Will tried to look up my sleeves.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"You'll find out. But be in the graveyard at five to eight, okay? There'll be blankets for you to sit on. Just wait for me there. And don't be late. It's really important that you're not late. Five to eight. Not late. Say it."

"Five to eight. Not late."

"Got it?"

Will's eyes twinkled and he nodded.

"And it's really important you don't tell Fiona why we're meeting there. Even if she twists your arm or punches you in the back - do not tell. It will ruin everything. We're going scare-i-fy her big time."

"And do you promise we can get sweets afterwards?"

"Yes, Will. I promise."

All the sour sweets in the whole of the Winkworth Estate wouldn't beat this for a Halloween experience...

At half past seven I stood in Dad's study, heart thumping in my chest like a kettle drum. Beneath my cape and top hat, I was sweating.

*What if it all went wrong? What if Dad found out? He'd never trust me ever again!*

But I couldn't back out now. Not now I'd done hours of research about *The Knuckle Crushers* and promised Will I had something good planned. Not now I was so close to IMPRESSING FIONA...

I'd made myself a sandwich earlier, partly because I'd seen what Mum was making for

dinner but mainly so I wouldn't get held up at the dinner table when I had to put the final pieces of the plan in place. I crept past the kitchen, where Dad was safely trapped, trying to chew through pasta she'd made using brazil nuts. I guessed it would take him at least three minutes for every mouthful.

I picked up the phone.

I dialed 000 000 9696 248.

No time for second thoughts. It only rang once.

"Emergencies. Resurrection department. Code word, please," said a soft voice.

I coughed to make my voice more deep and gravelly.

"Mr Bean."

"What are your orders?"

"St Agnes graveyard," I said abruptly. "Kev Wilson, Milo Jones and Peter Cracknell."

There was a pause. I could tell the Emergencies secretary was curious as hell, but she wasn't allowed to ask questions.

"Um.. okay!" she said, brightly. "And you want that done now?"

"In fifteen minutes. At ten to eight."

"That's all logged. Thank you for your call."

"Er...yes. Thank you, too. For your help, and stuff."

I put the phone down quickly and wiped my sweaty hands on my trousers. Then I retrieved Dad's Glove of Death from its special protective glass box, slipped it into my pocket and tiptoed out of the study. I fetched two blankets from the airing cupboard and then paused in the hallway, waiting for the right moment... The last thing I needed was Mum making a fuss over my Demon Magician costume and finding the Glove of Death in my pocket. In the kitchen I heard Dad make pretend 'yum yum' noises and bang his knife and fork together on his plate. I shot out of the front door. I needed to get to the graveyard fast. It was time for a scam-sandwich.

As soon as those bodies were resurrected I needed to instruct them on where they had to hide and when they should appear. I'd decided my command was going to be *Rise Up and Rock On!* I thought that would appeal to Fiona. It sounded quite cool.

I ran like crazy with my cape flapping behind me all the way to St Agnes church. I was just in time to see the three shadowy Resurrectors at the monument of *The Knuckle Crushers* straighten and dust their hands. They disappeared fast as lightening on their superfast trainers, leaving me alone in the dark with three of the most awesome rockers (according to Fiona) that ever lived.

## CHAPTER 10

In the pitch black I walked towards the monument and I wished, a little too late, I'd bought a torch. I could hear the sounds of movement - a rustle in the leaves and a footstep on a gravestone somewhere. But there were no voices. Perhaps they were stunned silent at being brought back to life. It was probably they'd ever been so quiet. They were probably even a bit scared.

The idea of bodies risen from the dead should have scared me, too, and I'm not the bravest kid in town, but I felt a little glow of power. When they found out it was me who brought them back to life, *they'd* be in awe of *me*. They'd wrap their arms around me, call me *dude*, promise to dedicate their next song to me and treat me like one of the band. They would 'slip me some skin' (which is a special handshake I'd read about) and maybe even give me one of their t-shirts or jackets as a souvenir. Which I'd give to Fiona, of course. It just got better and better.

My grin and confidence grew bigger the closer I got. I was going to be treated like a God, and this was going to be the most amazing stunt ever pulled. And when Fiona arrived and saw them she would no doubt scream and *The Knuckle Crushers* would laugh their heads off. After all, it was the ultimate practical joke. A prank to top all other pranks. Even the one that killed them.

I spread out the blankets on the ground, ready for the audience, and softly approached the monument. I didn't want to alarm them.

"Ahem," I coughed gently to get their attention.

I heard a clatter.

"I'm Jim Reaper," I said more loudly.

Just at that moment, the trees overhead swayed in the breeze and allowed the moonlight to stream into the graveyard. It lit up the higgledy-piggledy headstones covered in ivy. It revealed the

silhouette of the creepy church against the sky. And it illuminated my rock band.

There they stood.

But they weren't in full rock band glory. There was no spiky hair and chunky tattoo-ed arms. There was no cool clothing. There was no attitude. And they wouldn't be slipping me skin. *Because there wasn't any skin!*

## They were skeletons!

White, clattering skeletons, with clacking jawbones and knocking knee-bones, spinning around in confusion in eye-less blindness, sending spindly arms swinging.

*How could I be so stupid!*

They weren't resurrected looking as they used to in the past; they were resurrected as they were now, as their bare-boned remains!

"Arghghghghg!" I cried, in a mix of frustration and utter panic.

The three skeletons didn't hear me (they had no ears) and began zig-zagging awkwardly across the graveyard, stumbling over the grassy mounds and smashing into headstones.

This had gone so horribly wrong and I wished right now Will and I were sauntering down the streets of the Winkworth Estate, collecting sweets... I wish I'd never been so crazy as to think this would work. But wishing wouldn't make the nightmare go away. My nightmare was *getting away* - way out of arm's reach - and I needed to make the skeletons dead (again) and fast.

But I had to catch them first.

The idea of grabbing a rib-cage, femur or tibia appealed to the science geek in me (Will would be able to label every bit of the skeleton, I bet), but only a small part of me was science geek. The rest of me was total scaredy-cat - so easily scared that I could never watch horror movies or sleep with the door shut; I even avoided zombie costumes in Halloween shops because the sight of blood (even pretend blood) made me feel sick. Bones were better than blood, but they were still bloomin' frightening.

"Come here!" I shouted in vain at the skeletons, which had now veered off in different directions, each one rattling like rolling dice. "Come back!"



The taller one, which must have been Gray Minister, a.k.a Kev Wilson, had flung himself against the stone wall corner at the edge of the graveyard and got himself stuck. With no brain he was unable to think his way out so kept walking at the wall, over and over again. I watched in horror as the bones started splintering and coming away from each other - the knee-bone was no longer connected to thigh bone, the thigh bone no longer connected to the hip bone... The skeleton fell into a clattering heap on the grass, and I took that moment to run towards it, pulling on the Glove of Death. Grimacing and feeling nauseous, I lay my gloved hand briefly on its skull and it stopped moving.

One down. But there was no time to lose.

I looked behind me. The other two skeletons were making their way towards the Winkworth estate through the opposite graveyard entrance. There were just a few feet between them and the public. All those parents and kids. What would happen if they were seen?

I grabbed a blanket and held it in front of me like a net. If I could kick one skeleton aside and then quickly bag the other one there was a chance no one would see them in the flesh. *In the bone*, more like.

But as I was gaining on the two marching skeletons, I heard Fiona and Will approaching from the entrance behind me. Their voices were muffled by damp and mist and a strange light flickered

around them. They were carrying torches.

"Jim said it's going to be really good. He wants to really scare you," Will was saying.

*I knew that boy couldn't keep a secret.*

"Yeah. Well, where is he then? The only thing I'm scared of is missing Lisa's party," I heard Fiona say, impatiently.

Then the torches landed on me.

"Hi Jim!" Will called.

Still holding the blanket in front of me I turned towards them. Fiona laughed, cruelly.

"Argh! It's a tartan ghost!" Will cried, happily. "Gotcha, Fiona!"

"Oh my god, I can't *believe* you're so lame. You're not only a ghost, you're a picnic rug ghost... and you're about as scary as a baby mouse."

I dropped the blanket.

"Oh no - wait, hang on," she laughed. "You're a circus Ring Master, too! That's doubly not scary."

"But that would be double-negative. If he's not NOT scary, you mean he *is* scary," Will said.

"Well done, Jim. You pulled it off!"

"Shut up, Will," Fiona groaned. Then she looked at me again. "And is that a cuddly rabbit tied to your waist?"

"It's a fanged rabbit actually, and I'm a Demon Magician, and I've got to go."

"Is that it?" she sighed heavily.

"Hang on, Will. What about trick-or-treating? You promised," Will called after me as I ran away from them, fast as I could in the other direction.

"Meet you there - at the Winkworth estate!" I shouted over my shoulder.

"You're rubbish!" Fiona shouted after me.

I dashed out of the graveyard and onto the road. The skeletons were half way across and

drivers were either swerving to avoid them or slowing down to look at what they thought were excellent fancy dress costumes. I had to get to them before they reached the other side, where people might stop and ask them questions, or poke them, or call the police or scream or be so scared they fainted and bumped their heads.

Cars beeped at me angrily as I ran across the road after them, clutching the blanket high above me. I brought it down over the skeleton nearest me - the small one, possibly Diddy Pain - and slipped my gloved hand underneath. The skeleton stopped moving. I gathered the corners of the blanket together to make a sack, catching his collapsing bones. I heaved the sack over my shoulder.

Two down, one to go!

"What you got in there, boy?" asked a parent, accompanying a group of young trick-or-treaters.

"Bag of bones!" I said in my most scary voice. And then I laughed, to show them that it was all part of my Halloween act. "I'm a Demon Magician," I explained.

"Oh right," said the parent. "Did you hear that, Lucy? A Demon Magician."

"He's got a wabbit!" said a very small witch by his side.

"So he has," the parent said. "Can Wicked Witch Lucy have a look at your rabbit?"

Out of the corner of my eye I saw the final member of *The Knuckle Crushers* stumbling towards the Winkworth estate. It was time for a scam-sandwich!

"Have the rabbit!" I said, and threw it into the arms of the little girl.

"It's got fangs!" she screeched. "Daddy, that man's rabbit bit me!"

"Sorry!" I shouted, and ran.

Ahead of me Boot Mallory was now in the middle of a crowd of kids parading up and down the Winkworth Estate. There were occasional screams and bursts of laughter and shouts of 'nice costume' and 'that's brilliant'. Somebody said 'is it held up with wires?'.  
I was so exhausted my own breath was burning my throat, but I couldn't stop. Especially

when I then heard someone say 'can I take a photo?'

Boot Mallory wasn't slowing for a photo or for anyone. He was barging through more groups of children, and their cloaks and gloves and little baskets of sweets were snagging on his pointy bones and being whisked away. The more clothes and goodies the skeleton gathered, the harder he was becoming to spot. He was growing a fancy-dress costume of his own and blending in with the with crowd!

I darted in and out of the people, tapping ghosts, ghouls, zombies and vampires (yeah, Will was right - it was about one in four, actually) to see if they were Boot. And then, finally, I grabbed a very bony shoulder. Its owner swayed under the weight of my hand and I saw the skeleton arm swing beneath its cape.

"Gotcha!" I said, slipping my gloved hand under his borrowed cloak, encircling his rib cage. The skeleton slumped in my arms, head on my shoulder.

It was hard to believe that this was the big butch drummer who played his drums so fast that sweat would flick from his hair and spray adoring fans close to the stage. Hard to believe that incredible personality was reduced to this skinny shell of a man in my arms. I took his fragile bony hand and gave it a little shake.

*You wouldn't know them if they came up and shook your hand.*

I was the first to get to know them in more than ten years.

"Jim! Jim!"

The wheezing pant was unmistakable.

"Er, hi Will."

*This was awkward.*

"You haven't been a very good friend today, you know," he pouted.

"I know," I said nervously, pulling the cloak up round Boot's thick skull.

"Who's that" Will said, peering at the skinny person on my arm.

"Ah... well...." I fumbled.

"You could have told me you were ditching to me go trick-or-treating with someone else, you know. That's so mean. I thought we were mates."

Will started to sob and wet patches were forming on his lipstick-covered sheep-devil face, making him look even more revolting. My stomach lurched.

Letting Will think Boot was another friend was the easiest way out of this mess. But I couldn't do that to Will. He was my best friend. And he was really upset. And I kind of pride myself on being a nice person.

"No, Will!" I said, softly. "You've got it wrong. This isn't a person. It's a real skeleton."

He looked up and blinked through sticky tears. "Is it?"

"Yeah."

"Where did you get it from? Was it from the skip behind that weird junk shop, because I once saw a stuffed bull's head in that skip. It's full of weird things."

"That's exactly where I found it, Will," I said, expelling a whoosh of relief. "I was really hoping to surprise you with it in the graveyard. It was part of my Halloween show, but I left it at home by mistake. That's why I ran off. I had to go and get it. Too late now, though. Sorry."

"Never mind, Jim. It would never have worked, anyway. My sister loves skeletons. She even painted one on the bottom of her skateboard. You really should have stuck to our project notes. After everything we talked about, you didn't use any of it!"

I definitely *had* used some of it, though I was now regretting it.

"And we didn't write anything in the book about Demon Ring Masters - " Will continued.

"Demon magician," I corrected.

"And I know for sure I said absolutely nothing about tartan. All in all, your show was a bit random. I don't want to be mean, but I really wish you'd never persuaded me to do the scare show. I wish we'd just stuck to my trick-or-treating map."

"I know. Me, too. But look, Will," I said, gently.

With my free, un-gloved and un-deadly hand, I pulled back the skeleton's cloak to reveal bags of sweets dangling from Boot's ribcage, like a gruesome Christmas tree. Bags and bags of sweets. More than we'd ever collected before. Will's face lit up like a child. He is a child, I guess. But he looked like a really little one.

"There you are, scumbags!"

It was Fiona. She looked at the skeleton like it was no more than a plastic science kit.

"Looks cheap and nasty. Did you get it from the Pound Shop?" she sneered. Then she saw the sweets Will was holding.

"We got an uber-haul this year," he said, proudly. "OOOBER!"

"Half of those are mine."

"Mum said a quarter."

"Half," she said, again. "Try and stop me."

She shoved her hands in the bags and pulled out fistfuls of sweets, which she stuffed in her pockets. Cool and awesome aside - Fiona could be stinkingly selfish.

"I'd better get you boys home," she said. "Promised Mum I'd have you back by eight thirty, and I'm so late for Lisa's party now."

"I'll walk home on my own," I said.

"Whatever," she said.

I left them at the side of the road arguing about sour sweets.

"And I suppose it's time to get *you* boys home," I whispered to Boot.

## CHAPTER 11

I collected all the bones - the ones in the corner of the graveyard belonging to Gray Minister, the ones in the bag belonging to Diddy Pain, and of poor Boot, the skeleton in my arms... To be honest, I'm not sure whose bones were whose when I'd finished gathering them, but they all got put back into the big monument. *The Knuckle Crushers* would still be all together, even if they weren't all together, if you know what I mean.

I couldn't get the stone lid back on, but I'd worry about that later. Now I had the emergency numbers I could do anything, although I'd think twice about doing something like this again. Raising the dead is hard work. And it's not easy running for miles in fancy dress, chasing rogue zombie skeletons with no eyes or ears. I was totally shattered. I barely had the energy to walk home. I needed sugar.

I opened up a big bag of Boot's stolen booty. It was stuffed with assorted sours, gummies, chocolate bars and wafers. I flopped to the ground and began to pick at them. That's when I spotted something shiny on the grass between my legs. A silver ring. I flipped it round in my fingers. It was inscribed: *I'll Try To Be Cool For You*

It must have fallen off the boney finger of Boot, Diddy or Minister!...

Suddenly, torchlight hit my face. I looked up, shielding my eyes.

"We thought Mum would kill us if we didn't make sure you got home safely too," Will said.  
"So we chased after you."

"Oh right, thanks," I said, heart pounding.

"That's *The Knuckle Crushers'* monument you're sitting next to," Fiona said. The torch light was still on me and I couldn't see her face in the dark.

"I know," I said, blinking in the light.

*Adrenalin rush!*

"I come here quite a lot. Told you I'm a fan," I added.

"Oh right. Are you really, then?" Fiona said, with a genuinely interested voice.

"But I thought..." Will started.

*Oops.*

"Yeah, Will. Stupid me, I thought you said *The Knuckle **Dusters*** - never heard of them. But *The Knuckle Crushers*? Of course. Who hasn't heard of them, right? Apart from really uncool people."

"Oh," Will said, acceptingly.

I raised my voice.

"Haven't I shown you this ring before, Will? I got it at an auction. I'm probably their biggest fan, actually."

Fiona sat herself down next me, and in the moonlight I saw her eyebrows were raised, and her eyes sparkling and soft and green.

"Let's have a look at it," she said, nicely.

I handed it to her. My fingers touched hers. She was wearing black nail-varnish.

"*I'll Try To Be Cool For You*," she read. "That's my favourite song."

"Mine, too," I said.

"What's it about, then?" she challenged me, but in a friendly way.

"Being frozen for science." She nodded and smiled. There was an easy silence. "Did you know that Diddy had a Border Collie and Boot had three Chihuahuas?" I said.

"No!" Fiona gasped. "Big Boot Mallory - three tiny *Chihuahuas*?"

"I know. Insane."

Will sniggered. And Fiona laughed. A little cackle - nothing like a Viking.

And then, as if by the work of some Demon Magician, I pulled out of my sweet bag a Jaffa Cake.

THE END