

Prologue

The problem was, the boy had said that he had seen a ghost. Where do you go from there? That was the question that Ernie kept returning to as his life slowly ebbed away.

Perhaps if the boy hadn't told Ali about The Knock Knock Man, and had Ali not then told Ernie, then the face they had seen that night in the woods could have been put down to a vivid imagination. Maybe the whole sorry mess could have ended at the Deveraux estate with the zip of body bags.

Maybe.

But the boy, Jake, months dead himself now, had said what he had said, and then Ali and Ernie had seen what they had seen. There was no going back after that. That moment wasn't an ending to the awful events at Lord Deveau's estate; it was the start of a whole new story, and now that Ernie had the truth of that night, it seemed it was time for him to bow out, bent and broken on a dirty linoleum floor.

He barely gave his own demise any thought at all. His life hadn't flashed before his eyes as he fell, and even now, as he lay prone on the floor, it all felt slightly ridiculous to him. He could sense his right leg jutting out to the side at an impossible angle, as shattered as his back, but he couldn't turn his head to look. He was sure the wetness seeping from his left ear was blood, but he couldn't move a hand to wipe it away. The tip of the index finger on his right hand was motionless against the cracked screen of his mobile phone. He wondered if the call had connected before the phone broke. He wondered if Ali could hear him breathing his last.

His vision was blurring now, images seemed overlaid and distorted. The blackness of the building rising above him held back a myriad of shapes, but occasionally they drifted and bloomed out of the shadows, and if he looked long enough, hard enough, those shapes would be figures, and those figures would all become the same person.

He thought of two more things before he died.

He thought of his dear friend, Ali, and his guilt at not telling her the truth of that night when he had the chance. More than anything, he wished he had done that. Not to give her closure, at least not anymore, but to give her a warning. Then, before darkness drew down, and Ernie finally let go, another thought came to him as soft as a whisper. It was the same thought he'd had every day for the last fifteen months.

I don't believe in ghosts.

It seemed a little stupid now.