

CONTAGION

THE TOXIC CITY TRILOGY

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COntaGION

TIM LEBBON

CONTAGION

TOXIC CITY
BOOK THREE



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This one's for Dan the Man.

CHAPTER ONE

sEvENTeen

Jack viewed the endless stars, the incredible depth of space, and the sense of eternity surrounding him, but he was not afraid. He belonged in this universe deep inside himself. With effort, he would flex it to his will.

He moved quickly, flitting from star to star and orbiting briefly as he considered the gifts they might bestow upon him. Some he recognised, because he had used them before. Others were mysterious, massive and cold, closed to him for now. He did not like such mystery, but now was not the time to probe them.

A few were ready to reveal themselves, and it was these he sought.

“Get a bloody move on!”

Jack blinked away the voice, frustrated. *Leave me alone!* He drifted through those interior constellations, closing on one blue star that seemed to pulse each time he blinked. The blueness belied its deep, hot heart, and he plummeted, delving inside and surrounding himself with its wonder.

“For shit’s sake, Jack!”

Sparky, shut up! he thought. He wanted to speak, but feared that might break his concentration. When he rose, he had to drag their salvation with him.

He felt a hand grasp his arm and pull him down, and as he struck the hard ground, gunshots echoed across the vastness of his perception.

Okay, now, here we go, I’m ready to—

In the distance, something red. It was unlike anything he had

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seen before. It seemed to swell, as if reacting to his noticing it. A deep, bloody red object, too large for a star, larger than many constellations, and seeing it brought him suddenly, terrifyingly close. The red thing was covered with swirling storms and tumultuous explosions, and more than anything it showed him the sheer scale of this inner world he had discovered.

No, not discovered. Been given. Because this had been thrust upon him, and any sense he had of control was surely balanced on a knife-edge.

“Jack, we’ve got about three seconds until—”

One . . .

Jack circled the red object, and it throbbed. Each pulse matched the beating of his heart.

Two . . .

He pulled away, rising up and out of himself. The red giant watched.

Three . . .

And as he emerged into the chaos of the toxic city of London once more, he realised something awful.

That red thing within him was alive.

Gunfire stitched the wall above their heads. Smashed brick rained down on them, some shattered shards kissing across Jack’s forearm. Blood weeped. It made him shiver.

Sparky was staring at him, depending on him. Behind him, Jenna was sheltering Rhali with her own body the girl still weak and confused from her terrible incarceration at Camp H.

They were trapped beneath an old brick railway arch, pinned down by three Choppers who had almost literally driven into them. As he and his friends had run for cover, Jack had barely had time to be glad that his

sister and mother were already out of London. And then the gunfire had begun. There was no demand that they surrender, no negotiation. These Choppers had been told to shoot on sight and were glad to do so.

With each fusillade of bullets they'd been forced deeper beneath the arch as the Choppers ventured closer, their angle of fire changing. Behind them, heavy steel gates and gratings cut off any hope of retreat. The space beneath the archway smelled of damp, piss, and hopelessness.

But Jack was far from helpless.

He stood, took in one deep breath, and shouted.

His voice bore weight and heat. He pushed the power that had changed his father into the monster called Reaper and the air before him blurred with the terrible energies unleashed. Combined with the heat of the new talent he had just touched, the destruction was awful. Loosened bricks were smashed from the high arch's outer curve, shattering in the air and peppering the buildings across the street with molten shrapnel. Windows burst inward, glass shards melted, doors smashed open, and several vehicles resting on flat tyres were flipped onto their sides and crushed against the buildings—a pub, a betting shop, several boarded-up homes. Window frames ignited. Car tyres flowed.

Jack knew there were three Choppers hiding behind these vehicles, but he felt very little remorse. Not then. That, and the guilt, would come later.

As his incredible shout faded, its echoes were replaced by the musical tinkle of falling glass and the patter of brick fragments. A Mercedes that had been crushed against the pub's front wall tilted, creaked, then fell back onto its tyres with a dull crash. Its heated metal ticked and groaned as it cooled. A shape slid down the wall behind it, leaving a dark smear against the brickwork. Night hid the full scene from Jack, and for that he was glad.

"Bloody hell," Sparky said.

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"Keep down," Jenna said. She shifted forward, signalling to Rhali that she should stay back as far as she could.

"Jenna, careful!" Jack said. She went to her knees to look out into the dark street. There was moonlight, and a starscape that made Jack feel uncomfortable. And he knew also that there were night scopes and heat detection equipment, and that any Choppers watching would not have been shocked into immobility at his display of power. His father's use of it had killed many of their comrades, after all.

"I think they're down," Jenna said.

Down. She could have said dead, Jack thought. Or crushed, or smeared across the road. But instead she tells me that they're down. He could have searched for a power and sensed outwards, perhaps, looking for signs of pain or indications of life. But right then he had no wish to revisit that constellation of potential still growing inside him. Not when that red thing was there as well.

"Then let's get the hell out of here," he said. "We need to hide low 'til daylight, plan what to do."

"Finding Lucy-Anne is what we do!" Sparky said.

"Yeah," Jack said. He looked at Rhali and smiled. She did not smile back. He wondered what damage she must have suffered, physically and mentally, at the hands of the Choppers and their sick leader Miller. Perhaps soon he would ask. "But first we've gotta find somewhere to rest. We can't run into another Chopper patrol, not now. They're out for revenge for what's happened to their mates, and . . ."

"And you're tired," Jenna finished for him.

"Yeah. Exhausted."

"Pussy," Sparky said.

Jack smacked him playfully across the shoulder and they hurried quickly along the street. He did not once look back. But that could not stop him from thinking of the people he had just killed.

During his brief time in London he had already witnessed so much violent death. One death was too many for someone of his age, but he had seen many more than that—Choppers killed by Reaper , and Fleeter, and other Superiors in their ongoing game of cat and mouse in the remains of London; Irregulars caught in the crossfire; and the shelved and jarred remnants in Camp H, grim evidence of Miller's inhuman vivisection of the Doomsday survivors.

But he had never killed. The very idea of it was sickening to him, and it was a line he had never dreamt of crossing. Now he had. Minutes before, three people with memories and loves, lives and ambitions, fears and desires, had been alive in this world, and now because of him they were no more. They had ceased to be, and the consequences of their deaths would ripple outward beyond London, touching wives and husbands, children and parents. Jack had become a harbinger of tears.

Perhaps I'm like him now, he thought, picturing the man who had been his father. And yet Reaper was a monster, acting only upon his own selfish needs. Killing was a pleasure to him, and Jack had witnessed him delighting in it more than once.

Jack was different. He was trying his very best to save London, and everyone left alive in that once-great place.

He had to insist upon that—he was *different*.

The deaths weighing heavily, he led his friends deeper into the doomed city.

Lucy-Anne knows that she is dreaming. But this time she is a passive observer, and whatever strange power drives her dreams is cruel. It keeps her prisoner, frozen into immobility, eyes open, able only to watch as Rook falls again and again, trying to grab her and scratching three trails across the back of her hand with his nails. They will scar if she lives long enough. Even without these nightmares, she will have a reminder.

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She struggles to cry out a warning to him. But each time she does so it's too late, and he is already down in the pit. She hears his screams of terror and then agony again and again. The dreams give her that. *I'm sorry*, she thinks, but by then Rook is already falling once more.

She tries to wake, but in this dream she cannot pinch herself. *Perhaps this is hell*, she thinks. Rook falls again.

Pain cuts in across the back of her hand, a cruel heat. Lucy-Anne gasps, and then—

—the gasp came again, echoing back at her from the small room where she had taken refuge. It was a lonely sound, yet it made her feel safe. She was alone here, as she had been when she'd crawled this way blood dribbling from the wound on her scalp, emptiness around her where Rook and his birds should have been. The scrapes across the back of her hand were already rough with dried blood.

Awake in the darkness, Lucy-Anne felt the warm comfort of fresh tears. She'd believed that she had saved Rook, dreaming away his fall into the pit and death at the jaws of the worm-thing. But fate had found him at last. Perhaps that was simply how it worked.

She sat with her back against the damp wall and looked around the dark room. Furniture hunkered, shadows frozen. Pictures on the walls reflected weak moonlight filtering through the net curtains. Close to the edge of Hampstead Heath, the house smelled like time stood still. She felt the same way floating in that strange time between sleep and wakefulness when dreams still intruded, and reality was reforming around her. The more of the real world that flooded in, the more wretched she felt, because it was not only Rook who was dead.

"Andrew, my sweet brother," she whispered, and then she heard a sound. She froze, holding her breath and her tears, head tilted. She started breathing out slowly, aiding her hearing, and then it came

again—something in the next room, brushing against a wall. She stood, pain pounding through her skull. If she had to run, the front door was out in the hallway opposite the room where the sound originated. She could turn the other way, maybe, run towards the rear of the house, but she had not checked back there when she'd crawled in. She'd barely looked anywhere.

She stood as motionless and silent as could be, and something dropped into the doorway.

A rook. She knew it instantly, because she had been so close to them over the past couple of days. Her fear evaporated. She held her breath and her heart hammered as she listened for footsteps behind the bird. *He'll saunter in now and smile at me, shrug when I ask what happened, and I'll dream us together forever.*

But there were no footsteps. And after looking at her for a few seconds the rook skipped out of sight. She darted after it, reaching the corridor just in time to see it hop into the other room, and reaching the doorway to that room in time to see it take flight through a broken window pane. By the time she stood at the window the bird was gone. The darkness had swallowed it, just as it had the creature's master.

Awake now, welcoming the pain from her bruised scalp and scratched hand, Lucy-Anne looked north towards the shadowy landscape of Hampstead Heath.

I'm told that there is a bomb, Nomad had told her and Rook. *A nuclear bomb.* She'd looked directly at Lucy-Anne as she spoke, because both of them had known that anyway. They had seen it in their dreams. *The people of the north—the ones you see as monsters—they know also. They have sensed it. And they're not as monstrous as they seem.* Lucy-Anne had been unable to talk, taken as she was with the memory of those terrible dreams—conflagration, destruction, the cloud that London would become. But Rook had asked her more. *I don't know*

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where or when, had been Nomad's response, and Rook had grown angry, even though he feared her. With one more glance at Lucy-Anne, the mysterious woman had left.

"All of this, gone," Lucy-Anne whispered. She expected no reply from the city, but in the distance a long, lonely cry rose up, part animal, part human. She had no wish to know what might make such a sound.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, shrugging off dreams and memories and those crippling visions that seemed to pin her to unreality. This was real. She was here, alone, with a message to tell, and with friends to find again. She'd abandoned Jack, Jenna and Sparky, and Jack's sweet sister Emily, when she had first discovered the truth about her dead parents. Plenty had changed since then—in her, and around her—but she found some shred of comfort in the realisation that some things never change.

Friendship, for instance.

She had been running south for her friends when she'd tripped and banged her head. Now, she took a few moments to root through the house she had sheltered in, searching for useful things. She found a leather jacket that had seen better days, two tins of food in the kitchen that might still be edible, and a carving knife that she slipped into her belt.

Out in the street she turned south and started to jog, and doing something positive made her feel safer.

Behind her, a shape parted from shadows and followed.

In the cool night, Nomad sat in the shattered thirteenth floor window of an office block, looking out across a city that should never be dark. Starlight silvered the buildings and roads, the tree canopies of parks, and the uneven contours of car parks filled with vehicles that would never move again. Night neutralised colour, and hers

was a grey London tonight. Out there she could still sense her boy Jack, struggling with the changes she had planted within him whilst attempting to save his family. She could sense Lucy-Anne, that girl who had been special even before Doomsday. And she wanted to protect them both.

That was why she was here. High, quiet, apart from the violence that sometimes ruled the streets down below, she breathed in the scents of her city. The pain still nestled in her chest, and she knew what that meant. Many across London suffered the same sickness. But pain was fleeting and temporary. Even though she bled from her nose when she reached outward, and her head throbbed blindingly when she listened, she could not let it matter.

Beyond the pain she heard time itself.

It grumbled in the settling of a thousand old brick foundations, and many more newer beds of concrete. It whispered in the imperceptible flow of old glass, gravity urging it slowly, so slowly down. It sang in the straining growth of countless trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses, and murmured stiffly in other plants' demise. Time's flow swept the city forward and drove the clogged Thames, corroding, worrying at bridge supports and the concrete banks built up to stop the flooding that would inevitably occur one day. Every breath was a moment further away from time's beginning, and every footfall was one step closer to the end. She flowed with it for a while, enjoying being in tune with not only nature itself, but the inscrutable time that moved it ever onward. The pains became dulled with time's promise that pain would always end. Then she focussed, listening and sensing for those ways in which humanity made itself aware.

In the distance, the *tick-tick* of a wrist watch on someone still living. Further afield, the heavier clicks of a wall clock passing each second. She heard and disregarded countless sounds, senses, feelings,

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passing them by in her search for the one that mattered. When she found it, its nature and purpose were obvious.

It counted backwards.

To the south, in a locked place so well shielded from outside that the air inside must smell of almost two years ago, the city's destruction sat in an object barely the size of a suitcase.

Seventeen hours, thirteen minutes, twenty-eight seconds . . .

The pains kicked in again, possessing her bones and blood and seeming to melt away her whole body as if caught in a terrible blast. She shivered, and groaned.

"Oh, no," Nomad muttered. More words stolen by the breeze. They added to the utterances of desperation and hopelessness made since Doomsday and still echoing from old brick and stone, and Nomad rested onto her back as she gratefully withdrew into herself again.

Seventeen hours . . .