

# REAPER'S LEGACY



TIM LEBBON

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BOOK TWO



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Jacket design by Nicole Sommer-Lecht

Inquiries should be addressed to

Pyr

59 John Glenn Drive

Amherst, New York 14228-2119

VOICE: 716-691-0133

FAX: 716-691-0137

WWW.PYRSE.COM

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*For my own special children, Ellie and Dan*



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ROOKERY

Beside the tumbled wreck of the London Eye, on the banks of a River Thames clogged with refuse, the rubble of bombed buildings, and an occasional floating body, Lucy-Anne sees a woman waiting for her. The woman is dressed in normal clothing, yet possesses an ethereal quality that makes her shine. Her hair dances to an absent breeze. She moves across the pavement almost without walking, seemingly imitating one of the many mime artists who used to work this place, dressing up and painting themselves to lure coin from foreign visitors. Yet there is nothing at all fake about this woman. Against her stark reality, the backdrop of ruined London appears sketched onto the sky.

Lucy-Anne walks towards the woman, climbing over piles of twisted steel and shattered glass. She never looks away, in case the woman vanishes. *Stay there, I need to talk to you*, she thinks, because behind that idea is the certainty that this woman will tell her the truth.

And Lucy-Anne has lived in a world of lies for so long.

The woman turns to walk away, and Lucy-Anne calls after her. But though she opens her mouth she can issue no noise. Her cry is silent.

Walking along the riverbank, the woman turns and looks back. She is smiling. It's an expression that does not appear at home on her face. Even the intense flash that follows does nothing to illuminate its origins.

Lucy-Anne flinches, squeezing her eyes shut against the explosion. The ground thumps at her feet. Fallen steel groans, as if in sadness at the fresh destruction about to be wrought upon it. And way

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past the woman, north of London's heartland and past the false edifices of tower blocks and grand architecture, a ball of flame expands from the new wound in the land.

Firestorm scours along the river, turning water to steam, snatching old bridges from their mountings and ripping them to shreds, shattering any glass remaining in buildings and then scorching the buildings themselves.

The cloud of fire and smoke is expanding, being sucked upward into the horribly familiar mushroom cloud that Lucy-Anne had always believed was a fear from the past.

She reaches for the woman, who seems untouched by the firestorm, unconcerned at the dreadful explosion. But she is already turning away.

"No!" Lucy-Anne says, and this time her voice works. It is louder than the explosion, and for a moment she believes she can shout the detonation down. But London is falling, and burning, and being flattened to make way for whatever folly might come next.

The woman is walking away. Her clothes flap around her, unconcerned at the sun-hot flames melting the pavement at her feet and turning trees to instant charcoal. Each footstep is a *flutter . . . flutter . . . flutter . . . flutter . . .*

Lucy-Anne recognises the noise. She knows she should already be dead. The fallen ruin of the London Eye—ten thousand tons of steel and glass—is picked up and melted by the explosion, and the only sound of its demise is the symphony of countless wings.

Before the final blink of Lucy-Anne's dream, the woman glances back over her shoulder one more time. She looks like unfinished business.

The whisper of wings woke her, and Lucy-Anne tried to hear a message in the sound. But that was not her gift.

Rook was kneeling beside her. He looked concerned, and as she opened her eyes, the expression fell from his face, replaced with the customary casual smile. For a moment she thought she might have seen past his mask.

Rooks fluttered through the air behind him, and one large bird was perched on his shoulder, staring at her with dark, lifeless eyes.

"I'm fine," Lucy-Anne said, sitting up and looking around. Memory rushed in, drowning the dream and replacing it with a stranger reality. But just for a moment a dreg of the dream remained—the fire, the nuclear explosion, the strange woman's enigmatic smile—and she shivered. *Not everything I dream comes true*, she thought, but she could not be certain of that. Time had yet to tell.

Rook had brought her to St. Paul's Cathedral, and they had spent the night high in the dome, in a place called the Whispering Gallery. She wanted to ask why he had chosen somewhere so exposed and well-known, especially after the confrontation with the Choppers that had left so many dead. But then she had heard the effects the birds' fluttering wings had in the Gallery, and she knew. There was no silence here. Even with the birds roosting, the whole dome whispered to the sound of their wings. When he slept, Rook needed that.

"I don't like the silence," he told her, as if reading her thoughts.

"Why not?" Lucy-Anne asked. Rook's face dropped a little, and he turned away.

"It's dawn. Time to hunt."

"Hunt?"

"You chose to come with me, so you should see what it is I do."

"I came with you because you said you could help find my brother Andrew."

"I can," Rook said. "And I will. But come on." He led the way down out of the Whispering Gallery, and Lucy-Anne followed.

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She hoped the others were okay. She'd watched Jack, Sparky, and Jenna fleeing the street, leaving burning helicopters, blazing buildings, and bodies behind. Leaving also Jack's father, Reaper, the leader of the Superiors, and Miller, one of the senior Choppers. She'd felt sad watching them go because she and Jack had been close—still were, she hoped. And Sparky and Jenna were her friends. But something had changed in Lucy-Anne the moment they'd entered the Toxic City. Discovering that her parents were dead had cemented that change, and as she'd fled from the hotel where she had discovered that fact, the city had seemed to open up around her. Running, crying, she had felt part of the city, not apart from it.

"Your friends haven't been caught," Rook said. They were walking through St. Paul's itself now, the huge cathedral eerily quiet but for their footsteps and the flutter of rooks' wings.

"How do you know?"

Rook did not need to answer. Two birds left his shoulders, three more landed there, spreading their huge wings to balance and breaking the silence with their cries.

*He communes with the birds*, Lucy-Anne thought. The idea was crazy, yet she accepted it completely. There was so much crazy stuff going on, including within her.

Those dreams she'd had. Dogs attacking, and then the pack of dogs had assaulted them in the tunnels into London. Her family buried, and then she'd learned that her parents were dead, and likely buried in one of London's massive mass graves. And Rook and the birds. She had dreamt of them as well, and now here they were.

"We need to go north," she said as they emerged onto the cathedral's wide steps. *Your brother is alive north of here*, the man who'd confirmed that her parents were dead had told her. The street before them was silent and still. Nothing moved.

"And we will," Rook said. He was a small, slight boy, with a

dark mop of hair and almost-feminine features. But Lucy-Anne had seen him use his birds to kill.

“Andrew is all I have left,” she whispered.

“No he isn’t.” Rook shook his head, reaching out to touch her hand. Was that affection? Ownership? She didn’t know, and she flinched away. He’d said he could help her, but that didn’t mean she owed him anything. Not yet.

Rook laughed softly. “Come on. East of here, there are four of them. I’ll show you what I can do.”

“Four of what?” He started down the steps at a jog, without answering. “Rook? Show me what?” Still he didn’t answer.

At risk of losing him to the deserted, dead streets of London, Lucy-Anne followed.

There were four, as Rook had said. But one did not belong.

“What are they doing to him?”

Rook reached out quickly and pressed his hand across Lucy-Anne’s mouth, then came in close so he could whisper in her ear.

“Not a word.”

They were in the third floor of a once-exclusive apartment complex, looking out through net curtain at the wide street below. The trees and bushes down there, untrimmed and unchecked since Doomsday, had gone wild. Expensive cars sat on flat tyres along the centre of the street. And parked on the opposite side of the road, a dark blue Land Rover. She could just make out the driver sitting inside keeping the engine running, and outside stood two heavily-armed Choppers, and the man.

Rook’s retinue of birds remained out of view. Lucy-Anne saw a few pigeons and, high overhead, a family of buzzards circled.

She watched Rook watching them, and wondered what he was here to do. Was he a spy for Reaper, gathering as much information

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as he could about the Choppers and what they were doing? Or was this something else?

Shouting. She returned her attention to the street, just as one of the Choppers shoved the man forward. He was crying and shivering. He looked very thin. Lucy-Anne wanted to reach out to help him, but knew she could not.

Rook had slipped his hand beneath the net curtain and flipped a catch, and Lucy-Anne held her breath as he eased the window open.

"Get on with it!" she heard the Chopper shout. "It's your last chance, you stupid bastard. You know what you've got to do, so do it!"

The other Chopper said something Lucy-Anne didn't catch, but the loud one shouted him down.

"You saw what he did to me in the back of the Rover. Just look! Bit me!" He held out his gloved hand, displaying nothing. He nursed his rifle in his other hand, barrel never wavering far from the snivelling man.

The man faced away from the Choppers, and that's how Lucy-Anne knew he was not feigning the tears. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen anyone looking so wretched.

"Go on! Do it! *Do* it!"

The man squeezed his eyes closed and seemed to gather himself, and for a moment silence descended across the street. Lucy-Anne held her breath in anticipation of what she was about to see. *What can he do?* she thought. But nothing happened, and the man slumped down to his knees and started crying again.

"Right, well, another waste of bloody time," the Chopper said. "Got the camera ready?" His colleague chuckled and nodded as the soldier raised his rifle, sighting on the back of the man's head.

Rook glanced sidelong at Lucy-Anne, eyes glittering, as if testing her.

She screamed, "Leave him alone!"

Rook chuckled, then grabbed her arm and pulled her back from the window.

Machine-gun fire raked the building's façade, shattering windows, bullets ricocheting, the sound unbelievable where it was channeled back and forth between the high buildings. Lucy-Anne curled into a ball and watched bullets stitching the plaster ceiling above her.

Rook was crawling towards the back of the room, and as he knelt up he whistled, a high-pitched sound which seemed so unnatural coming from a human mouth. He seemed suddenly more alive than she had seen him before, and for a moment as he raised his arms she thought he might take flight, mimicking the birds he seemed so close to, and over which he exerted such control.

The gunfire halted.

"The man!" Lucy-Anne said, but Rook was only grinning. He whistled again, attracting another burst of gunfire. They were shooting blind. The Choppers had no idea who was watching them, or from where.

The light from outside suddenly faded, and even beneath the staccato gunfire she could hear the descent of birds.

Rook laughed out loud, revelling in what he was doing. "Come and see!" he said, grabbing Lucy-Anne's hand and pulling her to the window on her knees. Broken glass cut their legs, but neither of them took any notice. The scene outside was so amazing that it eased away the pain.

Rooks filled the street, shadowing her view of anything beyond the window, fragmenting it so that she only caught brief, fleeting glimpses of what was happening—the Choppers shooting, their hands waving, the guns dropped, arms flapping, bodies falling beneath the onslaught of birds. The Land Rover started reversing along the street, engine protesting, and then it impacted a BMW

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that had not moved in two years. Its windows starred, then broke. Its insides turned black, and then red.

"What about him?" she said, leaning left and right as she tried to spot the man the Choppers had brought here for whatever reason. "Where is he? Rook?" She glanced at Rook, then back down to the street.

"He needs to keep still," Rook said. He was concentrating. "Sometimes the birds . . ." He shrugged, unconcerned.

"You're as bad as Reaper," she said.

"I'm nothing like Reaper," Rook said. "I'm on my own. Come on. There'll be more arriving soon."

"But . . ." The noise outside was already decreasing, and the air seemed to be thinning and growing lighter as the rooks spiralled up and out of view over the rooftops. Left behind, evidence of the terrible deaths they had brought down with them, at the behest of the young man in whose hands she had placed herself. The two Choppers were tattered remnants of humanity. The Land Rover's engine had died, windscreen splashed red from the inside. And as she watched, the terrified Irregular slowly raised his head and looked around, struggled to his feet, and hobbled away down the street.

*We should help him*, she thought. He was trailing blood. Perhaps a Chopper had got a lucky shot off before the birds descended. But even as she had the thought, she realised that he would slow them down. He would be an encumbrance, and Rook was right—more Choppers would soon arrive.

"We've really gotta go," Rook said.

Lucy-Anne looked back at the slaughtered Choppers. One of them was scratching slowly at the rough road surface, but his eyes stared sightless into the gutter. Last breaths. "I'm staying here."

"Fair enough." He left the room, and the sudden stillness and silence were startling. Lucy-Anne held her breath.

It was thirty seconds before Rook reappeared, his smile tensed with frustration.

"I'll come if you tell me why you've got so much hate," she said. "You smile, but . . ."

"Yeah," Rook said, looking down at his feet. It was the first time he'd allowed her to see him sad. She supposed it was a start.

They were walking along a narrow pathway between high-walled gardens, pushing through rose and clematis bushes that had run rampant in the two years since Doomsday. It surprised Lucy-Anne just how much things had grown in such a short time, almost as if nature had been waiting for humanity to lose its grip and was reveling in newfound freedom.

Rook had not spoken for half an hour. The silence suited her, but it also made her memories of the deaths she had witnessed more vivid. There was such coldness in the boy that she could almost feel it emanating from him in waves. He made the hairs on her arms stand on end.

Each time she blinked she saw the dying Chopper scratching at the road, and wondered what last thought had been going through his or her mind.

Lucy-Anne maintained the silence, hoping that he would start telling her about himself without prompting. But every moment that passed increased the pressure of the quietness between them, until it became so great that she thought the air might break.

"Tell me why all the hate," she said at last.

Rook stopped and turned, pushing her back against a wall. For a moment she thought he was going to attack her, and she was aware of his birds shadowing the air around them, like black bags carried on the breeze. His eyes glimmered dark. His lips were pressed tight, pale. But then he sighed, relaxed his grip on her throat, and stepped back. His fingers lingered against her skin, a silent apology.

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"I hate them because they killed my brother." He was looking at her shoulder, unable to meet her eyes. "They dragged him away soon after Doomsday, cut him up . . ." He waved away whatever images the recollection invoked.

"Go on," Lucy-Anne said. Rook veered from anger to confusion, not used to exposing himself so much. But then he seemed to settle and started speaking.

"David. He was my twin but so much more . . . special. He could speak to the birds. All of them, from the smallest wren to the biggest buzzard. They'd drift down and perch so close to him that he could touch them. It was amazing, and he kept it from everyone but me."

"Why keep it from people?" she asked, confused. Wasn't everyone in London special nowadays?

"Because he was like that when we were little kids together, then older kids, then all through our teens. And it was only after Doomsday that it troubled him enough to get caught."

She frowned, confused.

"He was like you," Rook said. "Special all on his own, before all this."

"Like me?"

"I dreamed of you because you dreamed of me," Rook said softly, and it was the most emotion she'd heard him convey. He was opening himself to her, and at the same time his doubt about doing so was obvious. He'd been closed up tight for so long that this was hurting.

"I *did* dream of you," she whispered.

"And that's why I want to help you," Rook said. "Because you're like David. Pure. Don't you see? You weren't even here when it happened, and still you're *so special*. Not like me. Changed into this by Doomsday and all the shit that's come after." He turned suddenly and walked away. Overhead, rooks followed them, flitting from roof to roof, all of them totally silent.

Lucy-Anne ran after him. She could not shake from her mind's eye the image from her dream—that strange woman on the banks of the Thames, and the nuclear explosion that had seemed to pass her by.

“They’re just dreams! They can’t *all* come true.”

“I came true,” Rook said over his shoulder. He continued walking away, and Lucy-Anne could only follow.