

world's end

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world's end

book one of
the age of misrule

MARK CHADBOURN



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For Elizabeth, Betsy, and Joe

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prologue

And now the world turns slowly from the light. Not with the cymbal clash of guns and tanks, but with the gently plucked harp of shifting moods and oddly lengthening shadows, the soft tread of a subtle invasion, not here, then here, and none the wiser. Each morning the sun still rises on supermarket worlds of plastic and glass, on industrial estates where slow trucks lumber in belches of diesel, on cities lulled by the whirring of disk drives breaking existence down into digitised order. People still move through their lives with the arrogance of rulers who know their realms will never fall. Several weeks into the new Dark Age, life goes on as it always has, oblivious to the passing of the Age of Reason, of Socratic thought and Apollonian logic.

No one had noticed. But they would. And soon.

chapter one
**misty morning,
albert bridge**

It was just before dawn, when the darkness was most oppressive. London was blanketed by an icy, impenetrable, February mist that rolled off the Thames, distorting the gurgle and lap of the water and the first tentative calls of the birds in the trees along the embankment as they sensed the impending sunrise. The hour and atmosphere were unfriendly, but Church was oblivious to both as he wandered, directionless, lost to thoughts that had turned from discomfort to an obsession, and had soured him in the process. If anyone had been there to see his passing, they might have thought him a ghost: tall and slim, with too-pale skin emphasised by the blackness of his hair and a dark expression which added to the air of disquieting sadness which surrounded him. The night-time walks had become increasingly regular over the past two years. During the routines of the day he could lose himself, but when evening fell the memories returned in force, too realistic by far, forcing him out on to the streets in the futile hope he could walk them off, leave them behind. It was as futile as any childhood wish; when he returned home he could never escape her things or her empty space. The conundrum was almost more than he could bear: to recover meant he would have to forget her, but the mystery and confusion made it impossible to forget; it seemed he was condemned to live in that dank, misty world of not-knowing. And until he did know he felt he would not be whole again.

But that night the routine had been different. It wasn't just the memories that had driven him out, but a dream that God had decided His work, the world, had gone irrevocably wrong and He had decided to wipe it away and start again. Inexplicably, it had disturbed Church immeasurably.

There was a clatter of dustbins nearby, some dog scavenging for food. But just to be sure, he paused, tense and alert, until a russet shape padded soundlessly out of the fog. The fox stopped in its tracks when it saw him, eyed him warily for a second, until it seemed to recognise some similar trait, and then continued across the road until it was lost again. Church felt a *frisson* of some barely remembered emotion that he gradually recognised as a sense of wonder.

Something wild and untamed in a place shackled by concrete and tarmac, pollution and regulations. Yet after the initial excitement it served only to emphasise the bleak view of the world he had established since Marianne. Perhaps his dream had been right. He had never really been enticed by the modern world. Perhaps that was why he was so drawn to archaeology as a child. But now everything seemed so much worse. If there *was* a God, what would he want with a world where such a vital force as a sense of wonder was so hard to come by? Although most people seemed to hark back to some golden age where things were *felt* so much more vibrantly, it seemed to Church, with his new eyes, that they didn't even seem to have the passion to hate the world they lived in; they were simply bowed by the boredom of it: a place of routine and rules, where daily toil was the most important thing and the only rewards that really counted were the ones that came in currency. There wasn't anything to get excited about any more; nothing to believe in. You couldn't even count on God. Churches of all denominations seemed to be in decline, desperately stripping out the supernatural wonder for some modernist sense of *community* that made them seem like dull Oxfam working parties. But he had no time for God anyway. And that brought him in an ironic full circle: God was preparing to wipe the world clean and God didn't exist.

He snorted a bitter laugh. Away in the mist he could hear the fox's eerie barking howl and for a hopeful second he considered pursuing it to a better place. But he knew in his heart he wasn't nimble enough; his legs felt leaden and there seemed to be an unbearable weight crushing down on his shoulders.

And then all the thoughts of God got him thinking about himself and his miserable life, as if there were any other subject. Was he a good person? Optimistic? Passionate? He had been once, he was sure of it, but that was before Marianne had turned everything on its head. How could one event sour a life so completely?

It wasn't the damp that drew his shiver, but he pulled his overcoat tighter nonetheless. Sometimes he wondered what the future held for him. Two years ago there had been so much hope stitched into the direction he had planned for his life: more articles for the learned magazines, a book, something witty and incisive about the human condition, which also instigated a quiet revolution in archaeological thinking, building on the promise he had shown at Oxford when he had become the first member of his family to attain a degree. At twenty-six, he had known everything about himself. Now, at twenty-eight, he knew nothing. He was flailing around, lost in a strange world where nothing made sense. Any insight he thought he might have had into the human condition had been expunged, and poking about in long-dead things suddenly hadn't seemed

as attractive as it had when he'd been the leading light of his archaeology course. It sounded pathetic to consider it in such bald terms, and that made it even more painful. He had never been pathetic. He had been strong, funny, smart, confident. But never pathetic. He had potential, ambitions, dreams, things that he thought were such a vital part of him he would never be able to lose them, yet there he was without any sign of them at all. Where had they all gone?

The only work of which he had felt capable was hack journalism, turning technical manuals into plain English and writing PR copy, bill-paying rather than future-building. And all because of Marianne. Sometimes he wished he could channel his feelings into bitterness, maybe even hate, anything that would allow him to move on, but he just wasn't capable of it. She'd dragged him out of life and left him on a mountaintop, and he felt he would never be able to climb down again.

With a relief that was almost childlike in its intensity, his thoughts were disturbed by a splashing of water which jarred against the sinuous sounds of the river. At first Church thought it might have been a gull at the river's edge, another sign of raw nature intruding on his life, but the intermittent noise suggested something larger. Leaning on the cold, wet wall, he waited patiently for the folds of mist to part as the splashing ebbed and flowed.

For several minutes he couldn't see anything, but as he was about to leave, the mist unfurled in a manner that reminded him of a theatre curtain rolling back. Framed in the white clouds at the river's edge was a hunched black shape, like an enormous crow. As it dipped into the eddies, then rose shakily, Church glimpsed a white, bony hand. An old woman, in a long, black dress and a black shawl, was washing something he couldn't see; it made him think of pictures of peasants in the Middle East doing their laundry in muddy rivers. The strangeness of a woman in the freezing water before dawn didn't strike him at first, which was odd in itself, but the more he watched, the more he started to feel disturbed by the way she dipped and washed, dipped and washed. Finally the jangling in his mind began to turn to panic and he started to pull away from the sight. At that moment the woman stopped her washing and turned, as if she had suddenly sensed his presence. Church glimpsed a terrible face, white and gaunt, and black, piercing eyes, but it was what she held that filled his thoughts as he ran away along the footpath towards Albert Bridge. For the briefest instant it appeared to be a human head, dripping blood from the severed neck into the cold Thames. And it had his face.

Ruth Gallagher had a song in her head that she couldn't quite place; something by The Pogues, she thought. Then she considered the holiday she hoped to take

in the South of France that summer, before admiring the pearly luminescence of the mist as it rolled across the surface of the Thames. And when she opened her ears again Clive was still whining irritably.

“And another thing, why do you always have to act so superior?”

Clive gesticulated like he was berating a small child. He didn't even look at her; he had been lost in his rant for so long that she was no longer needed in the conversation.

“I don't act superior, I am.” It was the wrong thing to say, but Ruth couldn't resist it. She had to stifle a smile when a sound like a boiler venting steam erupted from his throat. It didn't help that at nearly six foot, she towered above him. Such nastiness wasn't normally in her nature, but he had treated her so badly throughout the evening she felt justified, while still acknowledging the whiff of childishness in her response.

When they had met at the Law Society dinner six weeks earlier, she went into the relationship with the same hope and optimism as always; it wasn't her fault that it hadn't worked out. In fact, after so many previous failed relationships, she had tried especially hard, but Clive was like so many other men she had met in recent times: self-obsessed, nervous of her intellect and wit while professing the opposite, quickly becoming insecure when they realised she wasn't so desperate to hold on to them that she'd kowtow to their every whim and turn a blind eye to their many insufferable qualities. It didn't take her long to see that Clive equated long, dark, curly hair and refined, attractive features with some pre-war view of femininity which he could easily control.

That sort of attitude could have made her blood boil, but the simple truth was she had realised that night that she felt so far removed from him it was hardly worth losing sleep over.

But Clive was just symptomatic of a wider malaise. Nothing in her life seemed fixed down, as she had expected it would be by the time she approached thirty; the job, her great ambition since her father had instilled it in her at thirteen, left her feeling empty and weary, but it was too late to go back and start over; she was ambivalent about London; the best word she could find for her friends and social life was *pleasant*. It was as if she was holding her breath, waiting for something to happen.

She hummed The Pogues' song in her head, trying to recall the chorus, then turned her attention once more to the marvellous way the mist smothered the echoes of their footsteps. Not far to go until she was home, she thought with relief.

“And another thing—”

“If you say that one more time, Clive,” Ruth interjected calmly, “I'll be forced to perform an emergency tracheotomy on you with my fountain pen.”

Clive threw his arms in the air. "That's it! I've had enough! You can make your way home alone."

He spun on his heels and Ruth watched him march off into the fog with his head thrust down like some spurned, spoiled child. "The perfect gentleman," she muttered ironically.

As his footsteps faded away, Ruth became acutely aware of the stifling silence. She wished she'd left the club earlier, or at least countermanded Clive's order for the cab to pull over so they could have a "quiet chat" as they walked the last few hundred yards to her flat. London wasn't a safe place for a woman alone. Her heels click-clacked on the slick pavement as she speeded up a little. The rhythm was soothing in the unnerving quiet, but as she approached Albert Bridge other sounds broke through: scuffles, gasps, the smack of flesh on flesh.

Ruth paused. Her every instinct told her to hurry home, but if someone was in trouble she knew her conscience wouldn't allow her to ignore it. She was spurred into life by a brief cry, quickly strangled, that seemed to come from the river's edge in the lonely darkness beneath the bridge. Two itinerants fighting over the remnants of a cheap bottle of wine, she supposed, but she had seen too many police reports to know the other possibilities were both many and disturbing. She located the steps to the river and moved cautiously down until the mist had swallowed up the street lights behind her.

When he heard the same struggle, Church's heart rate had just about returned to normal, but his nerves still jangled alarmingly. The image of the woman's terrible face wouldn't go, but he had almost managed to convince himself he had been mistaken in his view of what she was holding. Just a bundle of dirty clothes, a trick of the light and the fog. That was all.

He had been approaching Albert Bridge from the opposite direction to Ruth when the scuffling sounds provided a welcome distraction. Negotiating the treacherously slick steps down to the river, he found himself on a rough stone path that ran next to the slim, muddy beach at the water's edge, where an oppressive smell of rotting vegetation filled the dank air. A slight change in the quality of light signalled that somewhere above the mist, dawn was finally beginning to break, but the gloom beneath the bridge was impenetrable.

With only the soothing lapping of the Thames around him, he wondered if he had misheard the source of the fight. He paused, listening intently, and then a muffled cry broke and was instantly stifled. Cautiously he advanced towards the dark.

Keeping close to the wall so he wouldn't be seen, odd sounds gradually emerged: heavy boots on stones, a grunt, a choke. Finally, at the edge of the darkness, his eyes adjusted enough to see what lay beneath the bridge.

A giant of a man with his back to Church grasped a smaller man by the lapels. The victim looked mousily weak, with tiny, wire-framed spectacles on a grey face, his frame slight beneath a dark suit. There was a briefcase lying on the ground nearby.

The taller man, who must have been at least seven and a half feet tall, turned suddenly, although Church was sure he hadn't made a sound. The giant had a bald head and long, animalistic features contorted by a snarl of rage. In the shadows, his pale, hooded eyes seemed to glow with a cold, grey fire. Church shivered unconsciously at the aura of menace that washed off him in a black wave.

"Put him down."

Church started at the female voice. A woman with long dark hair and a beautiful, pale face was standing on the other side of the bridge, framed against the background of milky mist.

The tall man's breath erupted in a plume of white as it hit the cold; there was a sound like a horse snorting. He looked slowly from Church to the woman and back, effortlessly holding his victim like a rag doll, his gaze heavy and hateful. Church felt his heart begin to pound again; something in the scene was frightening beyond reason.

"If you don't put him down, I'm going for the police," the woman continued in a calm, firm voice.

For a moment Church thought the victim was dead, but then his head lolled and he muttered something deliriously. There was contempt in the attacker's face as he glanced once more at Church and the woman, and then he hauled the smaller man off the ground with unnatural ease. Transferring his left hand to his victim's chin, he braced himself, ready to snap the neck.

"Don't!" Church yelled, moving forward.

In that instant, for no reason he could pinpoint, Church felt fear explode in every fibre of his being. The giant glared at him and Church had the disorienting sensation that the mugger's face was shifting like oil poured on water. He flashed back to the old woman at the water and what she was holding, and then his thoughts devolved into an incomprehensible jumble. His brain desperately tried to comprehend the retinal image of the giant's face becoming something else, and for a moment he almost grasped it, but the merest touch of the sight was like staring into the heart of the sun. His mind flared white, then shut down in shock, and he slumped to the ground unconscious.

Dawn had finally come when Church woke to the sensation of hands pulling him into a sitting position. There was a spinning moment of horror when he thought he was still staring at the changing face, and then he became dimly

aware of the dampness of his clothes from the wet ground and a flurry of movement and sound around him. He grappled for some kind of understanding, but there was a yawning hole in his memory from the moment of his collapse, as raw as if he had been slashed with a razor.

“Are you okay?” A paramedic crouched in front of him, shining a light into his eyes. When the flare cleared, Church saw uniformed police and what were obviously plain-clothes detectives hovering near the river’s edge.

Church remembered the mugger and his victim and suddenly lurched forward. The paramedic held him back with a steady hand. “Did you see what happened?” he asked.

Church struggled for the words. “Some kind of fight. Then . . .” He glanced around him curiously. “I suppose I fainted. Pathetic, isn’t it?”

The paramedic nodded. “She said the same thing.”

Nearby was the woman Church had seen earlier. A blanket was draped around her shoulders; a medic checked her over while a detective tried to make sense of her replies. As Church watched, she looked up at him. In the second when their eyes met, Church had a sudden sensation of connection that went beyond the shared experience: a recognition of a similar soul. It was so intimate that it made him uncomfortable, and he looked away.

“Do you feel up to a few questions, sir?” The detective offered a hand and Church allowed himself to be hauled to his feet. The CID man seemed unnaturally calm for the activity going on around them, but there was an intensity in his eyes that was disturbing. As they headed towards the water’s edge, Church saw the body in the glare of a camera flash; the neck had been broken.

“How long was I out?” Church asked.

The detective shrugged. “Can’t have been long. Some postman on his bike heard the commotion and we had a car here within five minutes of his call. What did you see?”

Church described hearing the noise of the fight and then seeing the tall man mugging his victim. The detective eyed him askance, a hint of suspicion in his face. “And then he attacked you?”

Church shook his head. “I don’t think so.”

“So what happened to you and the young lady?”

There was an insectile skittering deep in his head as he fought to recall what he had seen; he was almost relieved when the memory refused to surface. “I was tired, the ground looked so comforting . . .” The detective gave him the cold eye. “How should I know?” Church looked round for a way to change the subject. “Where’s his briefcase?”

“We didn’t find one.” The detective scribbled a line in his notebook and

seemed brighter, as if the disappearance of the briefcase explained everything; a simple mugging after all.

Church spent the next hour at the station, growing increasingly disturbed as he futilely struggled to express his fears in some form the police could understand. In reception, he bumped into his fellow witness, whose expression suggested she had had a similar experience.

"Look, can we go and grab a coffee? I need to talk about this," she said without any preamble. She ran her fingers through her hair, then lightened. "Sorry. Ruth Gallagher." She stuck out a hand.

Church took it; her grip was strong and confident. "Jack Churchill. Church. They weren't having any of it, were they?"

Ruth sighed wearily. "No surprise there. I'm a solicitor, in court every day. I found out pretty early on that once the police have discovered the most simplistic idea out there, they're like a dog with a bone. If they want to file this under M for Mugging, by God they're going to, and nothing I'm going to say will change their minds."

"A mugging. Right. And JFK got roughed up that day in Dallas." Church watched her features intently, trying to discern her true thoughts.

She looked away uncomfortably, disorientation and worry reflected in her face.

There was an intensity about her that Church found impossible to resist. They went to a little place on St. John's Hill at Clapham Junction, filled with hissing steam from the cappuccino machine, the sizzle of frying food and the hubbub of local workers taking an early breakfast. They sat opposite each other at a table in the window and within seconds all the noise had faded into the background.

Sipping her coffee hesitantly, Ruth began. "What did we see?"

Church chewed on his lip, trying to find the words that would tie down the errant memory. "It seemed to me that his face began to change."

"Impossible, of course," Ruth said unconvincingly. "So there has to be a rational explanation."

"For a changing face?"

"A mask?"

"Did it look like a mask to you?" He tapped his spoon in his saucer. The merest attempt at recollection made him uncomfortable. "This is what I saw: a man, much bigger than average, picked up someone with a strength he shouldn't have had, even at that size. Then he turned to us and his features started to flow away like they were melting. And what lay beneath—" He swallowed. "—I have no idea."

"And then we both went out at exactly the same time."

"Because of what we saw next."

Ruth gave an uncomfortable smile. "I'm not the kind of person who has hallucinations in a moment of tension."

Church glanced out of the window, as if an answer would somehow present itself to him, but all he could see was a tramp on the opposite side of the road watching them intently. There was something about the unflinching stare that disturbed him. He turned back to his coffee and when he looked again the tramp was gone.

"This whole business is making me paranoid," he said. "Maybe we should leave it at that. We're not going to discover what happened. Just put it down to one of those inexplicable things that happen in life."

"How can you say that?" Ruth exclaimed. "This was real! We were right at the heart of it. We can't just dismiss it." She leaned forward with such passion Church thought she was going to grab his jacket. "You must have some intellectual curiosity."

"I find it difficult to get curious about anything these days." There was a hint of surgical dissection in the way she eyed him; he almost felt his ego unpeeling.

"At least give me your number in case one of us remembers any more details," she said. It was too firm to be a request. Church scribbled the digits on a paper serviette and then took Ruth's business card for her practice in Lincoln's Inn Fields with her home number on the back.

As he rose, she said, in a quiet voice that demanded reassurance, "Were you frightened?"

He smiled falsely, said nothing.

The days passed bleakly. Winter receded a little more, but there was still an uncomfortable chill in the air that even the suffocating central heating of Church's flat seemed unable to dispel. Once spring was just around the corner, he always used to feel an urge to get his hands dirty in some dig or other, grubbing around for flaking bits of pottery or corroded nails which used to instil in some people a depression for the fleeting nature of life, but always filled him with a profound sense of the strength of humanity. At that moment, as he dredged deeply for any remaining vestige of enthusiasm to help him complete a manual for spreadsheet software, the feeling seemed further away than ever. It was compounded by a terrible uneasiness brought on by what he now called *that night*; whatever secret his mind held pressed at the back of his head like a tumour, sometimes feeling so malign it unleashed a black depression of such strength he found himself considering suicide, a feeling he had never countenanced before, even in the worst days after Marianne had left.

Dale, one of his few friends from before (he always saw his life as two distinct units, Before Marianne and After Marianne), was so shocked by his latest state of mind he almost attempted to press-gang Church into getting some kind of medical help. After a wearying struggle, Church had convinced him it was simply a passing phase, while secretly knowing neither Prozac nor EST could put him back on the road to well-being. The only option was to lance the boil, unleash the memory, and how could he do that when it was so unbearable in the first place?

"You've got to start getting out, you know." Dale, always the most irresponsible of his friends, suddenly sounded like some geriatric relative. Church, seeing how he was infecting others, winced with guilt.

"It's not as simple as that."

"I know it's not as simple as that. I'm not stupid," Dale bristled. He swigged from his beer bottle, then suddenly flicked it in a loop in the air and caught it without spilling a drop. "Hey! That was good, wasn't it?"

"Marvellous."

"Okay. This weekend. We get a bootful of cans and take off for Brighton. Drink them all under the pier, a few burgers, a mountain of candy floss, then off to the pleasure beach and see who's first to vomit on the rides. You know it has to be done."

Church smiled wanly; two years ago he would never have guessed Dale would have been the one to stick around. "It's a good idea, but I've got too much work on. Financial planning software, for my sins. It's got to be in by Monday."

Dale said, resignedly, "You remember the time you cancelled your holiday in Cyprus and bundled us all into the car for a week in Devon to cheer up Louise after her dad died? That was spontaneous fun."

Church shrugged. "Cyprus would have been too hot that time of year, anyway."

"You don't fool me. You'd been planning for that holiday for months. Years probably, knowing you. And you gave it up in an instant."

"I'm so selfless," Church said sarcastically. He caught Dale examining him as if searching for the person he remembered. "Of course, I've still got the photo of you at that gig we drove up to in Oxford."

Dale blanched. "Not the one where I lost my trousers when I was stage-diving?"

"Boxers too. Jesus, that was a horrible sight."

"I was expecting you to catch me, not take photos!" Dale said indignantly. "If I ever find out who pulled my keks down—"

"Serves you right for stage-diving. The rest of us were respectfully enjoying the music," Church mocked.

“Yeah, you were a real muso, weren’t you? You were like the bleedin’ HMV computer. Name a CD and you’d list every track on it. And you could play the guitar *and* the drums. Bloody show-off.”

“You know you needed me. I provided the intellectual conversation while the rest of you were drinking your own weight in alcohol.”

Dale chuckled at the memories. “We had some laughs too, right? You, me, Pete, Kate, Louise, Billy . . .”

And Marianne.

“That was a long time ago,” Church said.

Dale visibly winced at his *faux pas*. “Listen to me. I sound like some old git reminiscing about the war.” His voice trailed off, and he looked Church in the eye a little uncomfortably. “We can’t keep talking around it, you know.”

“I’m okay,” Church protested. Here it was, as he feared, coming up on him from his blindside. “I’m not some sap mooning around who can’t accept his girlfriend’s gone. It’s been two years!”

“Bollocks. We both know it’s not about the fact she’s not here. It’s the *way* it happened. And what you saw. That would be enough to screw anybody up.”

“Are you saying I’m screwed up?”

“Are you telling me you’re not?” Dale dropped his bottle and the contents flooded out. “Shit. Now look what you’ve made me do.”

“Forget it.”

Dale scrubbed the beer into the carpet with his boot. “You shouldn’t tear yourself apart. It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

“You think she’d have gone like that for no reason? Of course it was my fault.”

“Listen, you’re a good bloke. I’ll never repeat this in company, but you’re probably the most decent bloke I’ve ever met.” He paused thoughtfully. “I know about your doctorate, you know.”

“What are you talking about?” Church looked away.

“Billy’s a screw-up—he always was. But you gave him that money you’d been working round the clock for a year to save so you could go back and get that qualification you’d been dreaming about ever since you were a kid. Don’t deny it, Church—he told me, even though you tried to keep it a secret. I know your family never had much and you had to get a job to send some cash back to them. And then you saved Billy from all that disgrace and now look at him—the fattest of fat-cat accountants in the West End. Thanks to you. And all it cost you was your life’s dream—to be a doctor of digging-up-crap. Not much to anybody else, but I know how much it meant to you. So don’t go beating yourself up thinking you’re some little shit because of Marianne.”

Church shook his head dismissively. Dale didn't understand—how could he?

"I'm only saying these things because I'm a mate." Dale was on a roll now; Church recognised the gleam in his eye. "I remember what you used to be like. You used to enjoy yourself, all the time, even when the rest of us were miserable and it was pissing down with rain and some club wouldn't let us in because Billy was dressed like a stiff again. When Louise and Pete had one of their irritating arguments, you'd always find something positive to get them back together. You used to read more books and see more films and hear more music than anybody I knew. And now—"

"I don't."

"Exactly. Now you don't do anything. You've lost all focus. What's done is done. You've got to start living again."

Church made some conciliatory sounds, but it didn't convince Dale; he'd heard it all before. In the end he departed in irritation, but Church knew he'd be back to try again. He was good like that. But Dale couldn't be expected to understand the depth of the problem, how many futile hours had been spent looking at it from every angle; if there was an easy solution he would have found it long ago. The worst thing was he felt so bad about how he'd made Dale feel over the months, he couldn't bring himself to talk about the experience under Albert Bridge.

For the rest of the evening he kept flashing back to the moment before he fainted that night, interspersed with too many memories of Marianne: on the banks of Loch Ness, at her birthday in Covent Garden, the Sunday morning she brought him a champagne breakfast in bed for no reason apart from the fact that she loved him. Finally sleep crept up on him.

"Ruth. My office. Now!"

Ruth dropped the pile of files at Milton's barked order and then cursed under her breath as she scrambled to collect them. What was wrong with her? She wasn't the nervous type, but since that morning by the river she had been permanently on edge, jumping at shadows, snapping at colleagues. Her work had always been the calm centre of her life where she could do no wrong, but now it seemed dangerously askew.

Dumping the files on her desk, she marched into Milton's glass-walled office, sensing the atmosphere before she had crossed the threshold. The senior partner glowered behind his desk.

"Close the door," he growled, his repressed anger bringing out his Highland brogue. That was always a bad sign. Ruth waited for the fireworks.

"What's wrong with you, Ruth?" he asked. "Is it drugs? Drink?"

"I don't know what you mean, Ben."

He tapped a letter that was placed precisely in the centre of his blotter. "Sir Anthony is absolutely livid. He says you hung up on him yesterday."

"It was an accident," she lied. She'd always been able to cope with the peer's toffee-nosed pomposity and condescension, but, for some reason, yesterday she'd had enough. She knew at the time she should have called him back, but she couldn't bear to listen to any more of his bluster.

"He's our top client, for God's sake! Do you know how much money he brings into this firm? And he was *your* client because you were the best and you could be trusted."

Ruth didn't like the sound of the past tense. "It won't happen again, Ben."

"It's not the only thing, Ruth. Not by a long shot." He angrily flicked open a thin file. "During the last two weeks you've overcharged three clients, undercharged two. Your brief to the barrister in the Mendeka case was so incompetent it's possibly actionable. You were so late in court on Friday the case had to be rescheduled. Two weeks for at least three sackable offences. Jesus Christ, what kind of a firm do you think this is?" Her ears burned. "To be honest, I don't want to know what's wrong," he continued. "I just want it sorted out. Anybody else would have been out on their ear by now, but your past record has been exemplary, Ruth. I hope you've not simply become aware of that and you're resting on your laurels."

"No, Ben—"

"—Because even our best man can't go about pissing off the clients who make this a premier league firm thanks to their patronage and their money. At your best you're still an asset to us. I want you to find out where that best has gone."

"Ben?"

"You've got some time off, unpaid of course. The next time you're here I want it to be the old Ruth."

He lowered his attention to the paper on the desk in a manner that was both irritating and insulting. Ruth had never liked him, but at that moment she wanted to grab him by the lapels and punch him in the face. The only thing that stopped her was that every word had been true.

In the toilet, she blinked away tears of frustration and rage and kicked the cubicle door so hard it almost burst off its hinges; her hatred for the job made her feel even worse. It had never been what she wanted to do, but her father had been so keen she hadn't been able to refuse him. But that wasn't the real cause of her sudden bout of incompetence; it was the scurrying, black lizard-thing that had taken up residence in her head.

For the first time she had an inkling how the victims of abuse suffered in later life from the hideous repressed memories that manipulated their subconscious. Whatever had truly happened that early morning beneath Albert Bridge

had turned her into a different person: depressive, anxious, underconfident, hesitant, pathetic.

She put her hands over her eyes and tried to hold the emotions back.

Church was spending too long surfing the web and he knew his phone bill would be horrendous, but there was something almost soothing in the crashing waves of information. It was zen mediation for the new age; every time he felt an independent thought enter his head he would click on the hotlink and jump to a new site with new images and words to hypnotise him. He had been around a score of different subjects—cult TV, music, new science, even delving into some of the archaeology sites, but somehow he had found himself at www.forteanimes.com—and everything had gone horribly wrong.

He knew vaguely of the magazine the website represented. The journal of strange phenomena, *Fortean Times* it called itself, an erudite publication which examined every odd happening, from crop circles and UFOs to contemporary folklore, bizarre deaths to crazy coincidences, with a ready wit and a sharp intellect. He always flicked through copies in Smiths, but he'd never gone so far as buying one.

On the lead page was a brief story:

In the last few weeks the world has gone totally weird! As you know, we continually compile all reports of strange phenomena from around the globe for an annual index to show if the world is getting weirder. Since Christmas the number of reports has increased twentyfold. Postings on the Fortean newsgroup {alt.misc.fortean} indicate an astonishing increase in all categories, from electronic voice phenomena and hauntings via amazing cryptozoological sightings to UFOs and accounts of more big cats in the wilderness. What's going on!?!

Church went through the report twice, feeling increasingly unnerved for reasons he couldn't explain. Briefly he considered how he should have read it—as cranky but fun—but it sparked disturbing connections in his mind. He clicked on the hotlink to Usenet. When alt.misc.fortean appeared, he scrolled slowly through the postings. In Nottingham, a sound engineer for Central TV had recorded strange giggling voices when his microphone should have been picking up white noise from a radio. A rain of fish had fallen on Struy in the Scottish Highlands. Mysterious lights had been seen moving slowly far beneath the surface of Ennerdale Water in the Lake District. A postmistress from Norwich wrote passionately about a conversation with her dead father late one evening. Unconnected incidents, but as he worked his way down the never-

ending list of messages he was staggered by the breathtaking diversity of unbelievable things happening around the country, to people from all walks of life, in all areas. The accounts were heartfelt, which made them even more disturbing. It put his own odd experience into some kind of context.

One posting leapt out at him from LauraDuS@legion.com. It said simply:

All this is linked. And I have proof.
Email me if you want to know more.

He vacillated for a moment or two, then rattled off a quick reply requesting more information.

Further down the list there was a message from one of the *Fortean Times* editors, Bob Rickard, talking in general terms about the magazine's philosophy. With a certain apprehension, Church typed out the details of his experience at Albert Bridge and sent it off for Rickard's views. Then he returned to the list and immersed himself in the tidal wave of weirdness.

With bleary eyes and a dry mouth, he eventually came offline at 1 a.m. feeling an odd mixture of excitement, agitation, concern, and curiosity that left his head spinning. It was a pleasure to feel anything after two years of hermetically sealed life.

Away from the computer, he became aware once again of the hidden memory's horrible presence at the back of his head; his mood dampened instantly and he knew there would be no relief for him until that desperate event was put into some kind of perspective. He was so lost in his introspection that at first he didn't notice the figure outside as he began to draw the curtains. But a passing car disturbed him and within seconds he had grown rigid and cold. From his first-floor vantage point, the figure was half-hidden by the overhanging branches of the tree across the road, but the subtle way the body was held was as unmistakable to him as his own reflection.

And a second later he was running through the flat and down the stairs, feeling the first tremors of shock ripple through his body, wincing as the cold night air froze the sweat that seemed to be seeping from every pore. Desperation and disbelief propelled him out into the road, but the figure was gone, and although he went a hundred yards in both directions, there was no sign of the person who had been watching his window. Finally he sagged to his knees at the front gate and held his head, wondering if he had gone insane, feeling his thoughts stumble out of control. There were tears where he thought he had exhausted the well. It had been Marianne, as surely as the sun came up at dawn.

And Marianne had been dead for two years.