

An extract from *The Midnight Charter*

Chapter one – The Staircase

Being dead was colder than Mark had expected.

When his mother had told them all tales of the afterlife, she had drawn him close into her woollen skirts and painted a picture of another city, one where it was always summer. A world where the river glowed clean and bright, a land where all debts were forgotten. Mark had trusted every word, until he awoke in a stone cell, shivering and wrapped in a shroud.

His mother had been the first to go. At least she would have found out before him how wrong she had been. She had turned as grey as the stone. He had held her hand right up until the end. Then the Reaper had come. It had looked like a man in a black coat until he had glimpsed its face – smooth and white, without mouth or nose, but with two huge black eyes. Mark had shrunk into a corner as it passed by. The other children had said to touch it was to turn to dust.

It came three times. The first time for his mother, then for his brother and sister. On each occasion he heard his father mumbling something, and the low answering tones of the Reaper, just out of earshot. Only once had his father's words become loud enough to make out. He was shouting something about the water, that there was no other water to drink. The Reaper had left with a slower step that time, as if it knew it would be back.

After that came the tiredness, the lightness. Mark had watched the backs of his own hands turn grey. He knew it would be soon. Then there were only feelings. The sense of a burning mouth, and of noise. Of being half pushed, half lifted past whirling shapes and sounds. Of a final, blissful coolness filling him.

When he awoke, he was cold. It was obvious he was dead. Everything felt different. The grey was gone from his skin, the noise from the air. In life, the stench of the river had mingled with the tang of fish, clinging to his hair and clothes. The afterlife smelled of dust, with a whiff of vinegar. For a while he shut his eyes, drawing the sheets round him to ward off the draught that crept about his feet, but it was no good. He peered around the room. It was not large. The walls and floor were of grey stone. He could make out a fireplace where a few embers still glowed. And beside it, a door.

Mark waited, though for what he was not sure. An angel? Had he been good enough for that? He'd always helped his father to gut the fish. And he'd cared for his brother and sister as the plague claimed them. Was that enough? Stiffly, he slid his feet over the edge of the bed and got up. He shuffled towards the door. It was old, the wood warping around the hinges. It did not look like an angel's door. With a shaking hand, he pushed it open.

An ancient stone staircase spiralled up before him.

In the back of his mind, something stirred. Something his mother had said about the legend of the man who was not good enough to get into heaven, who had climbed there himself. In the distance, up the stairs, he thought he saw a glimmer of light.

He raised a bare foot and placed it on the first step.

The staircase was uneven; the stone crumbled away in some places. When he looked down, he could see that it carried on, past the room he had come from, and disappeared into murky depths. After that, he tried not to look down again.

He passed doors. Thick doors of dark wood. No light came from behind them. What if they were where the damned went? Those who left their work unfinished, their debts unpaid. Mark had seen them dragged screaming out of their homes by the receivers, the men in blue. They were never seen again.

He carried on, twisting higher and higher. The staircase seemed to grow steeper. His legs were weaker than in life, and he leaned against one wall. His fingers felt something

carved into the stone. It was too dark to see what was there, so he traced it with his fingertips. Six shapes in a circle. Pointed shapes. Stars. Should he know what that meant? He tried to remember more of his mother's stories, but thinking about her was painful.

Then, below him, he heard the squeak of hinges.

He began to move faster. He scrambled up, pushing himself with hands and feet, his heart pounding. Behind him he heard another step, slow and firm. Nothing good would be coming from those musty depths, and he was so close to the light.

And then he saw it.

Above him one of the old doors stood open. Light streamed through from beyond – pink, orange and gold. Mark pressed forward, clambering higher still. As he moved, he glanced back. The Reaper was on the stairs behind him, his black shape blending into the deeper shadows. He willed himself upwards. *Just a little further, just a few more steps. No Reaper could ascend into heaven.* He reached the door, gasping, pulling himself round the frame, throwing himself into the room.

His eyes hurt from the brightness; he had to screw them up. Beyond the door was a landscape of pure white. And ahead of him, bathed in streaming light, stood a figure, a girl, staring into the heart of the burning radiance. She turned; Mark dropped to his knees, fixing his gaze on the floor. Mother had said to look upon a dweller in heaven was to feel your soul burn away. His eyes were already on fire.

From behind, he heard the approaching step of the Reaper. He flattened himself on the ground. The angel would save him.

'Sir . . . who is this?'

The voice wasn't that of an angel. It was wary, guarded and unmistakably young. It reminded Mark of his sister.

'His name is Mark.' Another voice, male, older and soft.

Mark felt his breath catch. The Reaper was behind him now; he heard the rustle of its coat as it bent over him.

'He belongs to me now.'

'Is he ill?'

'Not any longer. Isolation from further infection was the only way to achieve a full recovery. Certainly seems more lively now, although I don't see the reason for all this panic.'

Confused, Mark opened his eyes a crack, turning his head slightly. The angel stood before the Reaper – he tall, in black robes and with a ghastly, pale face; she in white, apart from the darkness of her face, hair and hands. He tried to raise himself, but the angel turned her head his way. He looked at her imploringly.

'If you will permit me, sir,' the angel said, her deep brown, almost black, eyes curiously meeting Mark's gaze. Then she reached up and deftly removed the Reaper's face.

For a moment, Mark felt dizzy, his head spun.

And then he came back to life.

The tower room grew darker as the setting sun, which had been streaming through the narrow window, sank beneath the ledge. The room, Mark now saw, was full of furniture covered in white dustsheets. The angel's robes no longer burned with light. In fact, they were not much better than his own clothes – only a rough, cotton working dress and a cream-coloured apron. As she bent over him, a few strands of thick, black hair fell forward over her face, slipping loose from the white ribbon she had used to tie it back. And in her hands the dark-skinned girl now held a white, strangely shaped mask, together with a pair of thick, dark pieces of glass which Mark would soon learn were called goggles.

As for the Reaper, his true face was human. A young man, his short, straggly brown hair beginning to recede, a thin moustache perched upon his lip.

Mark sat up.

‘Am I alive?’ he said, his voice rattling painfully in his dry throat.

The girl nodded. ‘Thanks to Dr Theophilus,’ she said.

She stared at Mark, her dark eyes taking him in. Then she turned to the man.

‘Sir, the Count’s note said that he wanted to see you at the fifth hour. I have taken him his meal.’

The doctor nervously ran a finger over his moustache.

‘Don’t suppose you could tell what kind of mood he was in, Lily?’

The girl, Lily, frowned. ‘I would be . . . tactful, sir.’

She glanced down at Mark, who was still sitting between them, and said, ‘Are you hungry?’

It took Mark a few seconds to realize that she was talking to him. Then, at once, he found that he was ravenous. He nodded furiously. Lily smiled.

‘Can he have food now?’ she asked the doctor, who pursed his lips.

‘I believe so,’ he answered cautiously. ‘Yes . . . some food first, and then show him round. Grandfather and I have important business to discuss.’

Lily responded with a brisk bob of the head and turned back to Mark. She held out a hand.

‘First part of the tour – the kitchen is this way.’

Mark put his own hand in hers. It seemed paler than normal against her dark fingers, but maybe it was because the usual grime had been washed away. Shakily, he rose to his feet. He was taller than her. She let go and gestured down the stairwell. From up here, it looked less supernatural.

‘Five doors down,’ she said. ‘Go in and wait for me. If you touch the pots you’ll be sorry. I just need a moment with the doctor.’

Mark nodded again, trying to think of what to say even as he stepped back on to the stairs and began to descend. He was still puzzling it out when he reached the fifth door and turned the handle. Then all thoughts of words were driven from his mind by the overpowering smell flooding through the open doorway. The smell of food simmering in pots over a smoky fire. All at once, it was like being back by the river, before the grey plague had come, where in the evening the different scents of a hundred broths and stews would lead him through the alleys and home to huddle round the bowl with his brother and sister and pick clean the remains of his father’s last catch of the day. He was about to rush in, to pull the lid off the nearest one, when he heard a sound above him. Lily and the doctor were talking. He hovered by the door, curiosity fighting with hunger. Then, silently, he moved back up the stairs, straining his ears.

‘. . . not to let the old man know,’ the doctor was saying. ‘Not just yet. He doesn’t think we can keep another servant. I’ve tried to explain that I cannot manage without assistance but . . . you know him.’

‘Very well, sir. I take it Mark will be helping you.’

‘As soon as he is well enough, Lily. He’s my first full recovery,’ the doctor said with a touch of pride in his voice. ‘I’d better be careful.’

Mark smiled. He didn’t know what was happening, but whoever these people were, they were going to keep him.

‘And . . .’ Lily’s voice drifted down, ‘does he know yet that his father sold him?’

There was a pause.

‘I thought you might break that particular piece of news, Lily,’ the doctor sighed, ‘as one who knows what it’s like to adjust . . .’

‘As you wish, sir.’

Numbly, imperceptibly, Mark’s appetite died.