

"A *Neverwhere* for the next generation."

— C.E. Murphy

SIXTY-ONE NAILS



MIKE SHEVDON



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Early praise for Sixty-One Nails

“Sixty-One Nails is a Neverwhere for the next generation. The pacing is spot-on, the characters engaging, and the world fits together beautifully to create a London that ought to be. I stayed up too late finishing it.”

– C.E. Murphy

an excerpt from
SIXTY-ONE NAILS
Mike Shevdon

To be published November 2009
(UK/Australia) and Spring 2010 (North
America) by Angry Robot, in mass-market
paperback, eBook and downloadable
audio formats.

ISBN: 978 0 00 733399 8

Angry Robot is a division of
HarperCollins*Publishers*
77-85 Fulham Palace Road,
London W6 8JB UK
angryrobotbooks.com

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buy Mike's book.

ONE

I was staring into space when it happened, so I didn't really see. I could feel the wind as the tube train buffeted towards the platform and hear the grinding and squealing as the driver applied the brakes. I was part of the crowd waiting for the train. There was no sign that the guy beside me was in any distress. He just stood there with everyone else, until the train was yards away. Then he stepped forwards, leaned over the edge and toppled onto the tracks.

I reached out my hand, pure reaction I suppose, in a futile attempt to pull him back. He fell away from my empty hand.

The electrical flash filled my eyes with vivid green spots and the screech from the train intensified until I was deaf as well as blind. The train juddered past me, finally stuttering to a halt fifteen or twenty yards down the track.

There was no chance he had survived.

I stood on the platform, numb, while people pushed past me. Some were trying to get a look at what had happened, some trying to push past to the exit. No one asked me what I had seen. No one asked why I hadn't stopped him. I didn't even know what he looked like.

"We are sorry to announce that there will be no further trains on the District or Circle lines until further notice. This is due to..."

There was a significant pause while the announcement system sorted through its list of possible reasons and selected one.

"...a person on the line. London Underground apologises for any inconvenience this may cause to your journey."

I looked at the small group of ghouls crowded around the front of the train. Were they trying to see or were they just making sure it wasn't anyone they knew?

Personally, I could sympathise with someone who had reached a point in their life where they just wanted to flash out of existence with no chance of reprieve. It had a brutal simplicity to it, though you had to feel sorry for the crews that cleaned up afterwards. The Underground staff had arrived and were pushing people away. Nothing to be done. Nothing to see here. They helped the driver from the cab. His face was white and he couldn't stop his hands shaking.

I shook myself to clear my head and then turned away, walking back up the stairs from the platform and used my card to exit the barrier. The ticket hall looked out over the Embankment and I could see a sharp shower had blown in, soaking cars and commuters alike. With the rain, the cabs would all be taken and the buses full. If I didn't want to get drenched then the best bet would be to use the covered walkway to Charing Cross Station, get the Northern Line up to Tottenham Court Road and then take the Central Line into the City. I would have to be incredibly lucky to make it to the office in time for my morning meeting.

Running up the steps across from the station entrance, I wheezed towards Charing Cross. I wasn't fit enough for this. I'd only just caught my breath by the time I reached

the entrance to the main concourse. I strolled through the swirls and eddies of the commuter crowds, heading for the entrance to the underground. As I reached it I saw the sign hastily chalked onto the board next to the stairs leading down. It said Tottenham Court Road Station was closed due to a suspect package left on the platform. I swore and kissed goodbye to my morning meeting.

Flicking open my phone, I hit the first speed-dial. My day was going to be spent playing catch-up and there was no way I was going to be able to leave early to collect my daughter from my ex-wife that evening. It was unusual for me to have Alex from Thursday, but she had Friday off school for a teacher training day. Katherine had arranged for me to have our daughter so she could go away with some friends for a long weekend. At least that had been the plan.

The phone rang and rang. I was about to disconnect when she finally picked up.

"Hello?"

"Katherine? It's Niall."

"Sorry, I was in the garden getting the washing in. It was such a nice day and then the rain came down. Now it's all wet again." She sounded breathless and annoyed.

"I'm ringing about tonight."

"Alex has her bag packed and ready and is looking forward to the long weekend with you. What's all that noise?" The station announcements boomed around me so I had to wait for a lull to speak.

"I'm sorry, Kath, but I haven't even made it to the office yet. Some guy committed suicide on the tube line and I'm going to be really late. I'll have to work tonight. Can I fetch her in the morning?"

"Don't do this to me Niall. You promised."

"A guy *died*, Katherine. I was right there."

"So take some time off."

"I have taken time off. I have all day Friday. I just can't be there this evening to collect—"

"You're doing this deliberately, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You're just doing this to spoil my weekend. You can't bear me having any time to myself."

"Now you're over-reacting."

"I am not over-reacting!" her voice rose in pitch, "You promised weeks, no, months ago, to keep this weekend free and to collect Alex after she got home from school so I could have a weekend away."

"I know, but it's not my fault. The trains are really—"

"It never is your fault, Niall, that's your problem."

"That's not fair. Look, I've got to go, otherwise I'm never going to get there."

"That's right, run away. Leave me holding the baby. Again."

"Katherine, I haven't got time for this discussion now, okay?"

"Just ring me when you're leaving the office. It doesn't matter what time. Alex can stay up late. It's not like she's got school tomorrow, is it?"

"Okay, I'll ring you. I promise."

Today was going to be a long day. I closed my phone and took the steps downward two at a time and trotted along the passages into the underground station and looked at the tube map. If I took the Northern Line to Leicester Square then I could probably get a train from there that would get me into the City. By then the rain might have stopped and I might get into work in time to salvage something from my morning.

I waved my card over the ticket barrier and it flipped open. Taking the down escalator, I pushed my way past the column of people standing to one side. Hearing the announcer on the platform ahead telling everyone to

mind the closing doors, I dodged past people into the tunnels at the bottom and raced for the platform. I pushed my pace harder and made it just as the closing alarm started. Ramming myself through the gap between the closing doors, I forced them to re-open and then slam closed again under the resentful gaze of my fellow passengers.

My breath wheezed in my chest. Indigestion grumbled in my stomach, the result of coffee, no food and being wedged into an airless carriage. We rumbled down the tunnel for the two minutes journey to Leicester Square. As soon as the doors opened, I joined the mass of people trudging down the platform into the echoing passage to the Piccadilly Line.

The commuters around me kept the same steady pace, unconscious of my need to hurry. Their footfalls resounded against the tiled walls like the march of a ragged army, their steps coming into time and then falling out again. My attempts to squeeze past were met with glares of disapproval and a wall of cold shoulders until I resigned myself to yet further delay. I could hear the train arriving on the platform ahead and feel the warm rush of displaced air as it clattered onto the platform. I heard the announcement as the carriages halted, the words booming along the corridor. The press of people ahead bunched and slowed as they approached the platform entry, bringing us all to a shuffling halt.

That was when the indigestion came back. It twisted into a stomach cramp and I bent forward involuntarily, earning a push backwards from the dark-suited man in front of me. Tingling started in my fingers and I lifted my hands to look at my mottled palms, slick with sudden sweat.

The crowd shuffled forward, penning me in. My head felt light and a sudden nausea had me swallowing hard.

The tingling numbness crept up my arms and tightness banded round my chest leaving me panting for air. My jaw ached and my mouth went dry. The numbness spread to my tongue so it felt fat and useless in my mouth.

A gap opened up ahead and the crowd surged forward, spilling down the steps onto the platform. The stairs wrong-footed me and I grabbed out sideways to steady myself, only to feel the shoulders to either side shrug me away. Unbalanced by the sudden space ahead of me I tumbled down the steps, rolling into the ankles of people in front of me. Cursed for my clumsiness, I sprawled at the bottom of the steps as people stepped over me.

I finally realised what was happening; I was having a heart attack.

I tried to reach up and catch hold of one of the coats floating past my fumbling fingers. I could hear acerbic comments made over me about drugs and drunkenness. I wanted to tell them I was sick, that I needed an ambulance, but my tongue wouldn't form the words. It flopped uselessly in my mouth, producing only incoherent groans. Why didn't one of them stop? Couldn't they see?

Fear clamped around my frantic heart as I realised I was going to die before anyone called for help. A wave of pain crushed the breath from me. Panic seized me, churning my stomach. My vision blurred with unshed tears. I couldn't get enough air.

If you're ever going to have a heart attack, don't do it on the Underground. Pick a back street, you'll get more help from passers-by. As they walked on past, the darkness swallowed me and the world fell away.

My final thought was for my fellow commuters.
Bastards.

I heaved air into my lungs and threw my head back, arching my spine. My throat burned and my eyes shot open. Watery colours in London Underground livery swam before me as I tried to focus and failed. I held that breath and then let it out in a wretched coughing gasp, collapsing back in a series of choking sobs.

Shivers wracked me. Cold and fear coursed through me. My heart hammered in my ears, its beat loud and irregular. Cramps knotted in my stomach, leaving me breathless with pain. Somewhere in the back of my head part of me was evaluating this calmly, telling me just breathe, idiot, while that same quiet voice informed me that I should be dead so no matter how painful, this had to be an improvement.

I would have been thrashing on the floor, but for the person knelt sideways behind me, leaning over and pressing their warm hand against the cold bare skin of my chest, holding me tight against the side of their thighs. I ceased struggling and worked on breathing.

The face above me came into limpid focus. An old lady with pale skin sprinkled with faded freckles was addressing a blue-jacketed attendant from the Underground.

"I know," she said, "But I can hardly move him in this condition, can I? Just give him a moment."

The public address system drowned out his reply with an announcement: "*Due to intermittent power problems on the platforms, this station is closing. Please make your way calmly to the nearest exit. There is no cause for alarm.*"

Another cramp twisted in my stomach and I curled around it, gasping as the light dimmed around me. I screwed my eyes shut and ground my teeth while she spoke calmly over me.

"I am a doctor, and I know perfectly well what I am doing. I'm quite capable of dealing with a minor emergency like this one."

I tried to tell her I was having a heart attack and needed the ambulance but this was interpreted only as further groaning.

"It's on its way, madam," he replied.

"Tell them to cancel it. He has no need of an ambulance. By the time they get here it'll be too late."

He held her stare for a moment and then turned away to issue instructions into his hand-held radio. I finally managed to get enough oxygen inside me to be able to say something.

"I think I need an ambulance," I croaked.

I lay on my side in the recovery position, her open hand resting on bare skin beneath my shirt. She leaned across, bowing her head over me, giving us a moment of relative privacy.

"Tell me truly. Are you from the other lands, yes or no?" Her words were quiet but insistent.

"Other lands?" I coughed.

"Yes or no?"

Her question pressed on me in a way I didn't understand. I felt the answer worming its way up out of my gut until I blurted it out. "I live in London. I was born in Kent." It was a relief to tell her.

"Very well."

She sat upright and the light faded. For one terrible moment I thought I was having another heart attack. Then I realised that the fluorescent tubes along the platform had dimmed and were pulsing with greenish light as they flickered uncertainly. A murmur rose among the people waiting to exit the platform and the attendant looked around. He began talking rapidly into his radio, only to find that it too had failed. He tapped it against his palm, pressing the talk button.

There was a distilled moment, crisp in every detail. The floor underneath me was suddenly chill in contrast to the

spreading warmth in my chest and I noticed tiny droplets of condensation forming on the hard tiles. A breeze whipped down the tunnel, plucking an abandoned newspaper from a seat, strewing broadsheets down the platform. The gust pulled at coats and hair as people turned their backs. I assumed a train would follow it and hurtle onto the platform, but the breeze died suddenly, leaving sheets of newspaper floating gently down onto the tracks as the lights flickered back to brightness.

The heavy pressure subsided and she took her hand away and moved so I rolled gently onto my back.

“An ambulance?” I suggested, looking up at her.

“Nonsense, young man, you feel better as every moment passes.”

I was about to protest about the chest pains, the cramps and the tingling, when I realised that I felt okay. The numbness had gone, there was no frantic heartbeat, no tightness in my chest and no indigestion. Could I have imagined it all? Could it be a hallucination brought on by stress and low blood sugar?

While my mind fought to rationalise the situation, the lady fastened my shirt buttons. I lay there stupidly while she carried out this act of decorous sensibility until she stood in one easy movement and offered me her hand. I sat up gingerly, expecting any moment for the clamping chest pains to reassert themselves, finding instead only how cold I had become on the floor.

Two men ran down the platform towards us. From their uniforms I would guess the attempts to cancel the ambulance had been unsuccessful.

“That’s all right, madam, we’ll take over now.”

For an odd moment I thought I heard the old lady swear under her breath, but then she turned to face them, all smiles and praise for the speed at which they had arrived. One of the men knelt down beside me.

"How are you feeling, sir? Any dizziness, nausea?"

"No, no. Nothing now."

"Any chest pains, sir? Any tightness of breath or pain in the arms?" He held a stethoscope against my chest and listened to my heart. "Are you on any medication? Any pills?"

"No, no. I'm not taking anything."

"Any history of heart disease, diabetes, strokes, epilepsy?"

"No, nothing like that."

"Has this ever happened to you before, sir?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm fine now."

The platform attendant filled in the gaps. "We saw the gentleman collapse on the monitors in the control room and I was asked to assist. By the time I reached him the lady doctor had turned up."

I looked around for her, wanting to thank her and explain, but she'd gone. Where did she go?

"She was here a minute ago."

His colleague looked up and down the empty platform. "No one here now."

The man beside me looked down, assessing me.

"You feel okay?"

"Yes, the lady helped me."

"We'd best get you to hospital just in case, sir. You're going to need a check up. Nothing to worry about but better safe than sorry, eh?"

"I'll be late for work."

"Better late than never, as they say. Can you walk?"

"I think so."

"It's probably easier to walk you up if you feel okay. Any sign of dizziness or nausea, though, and we'll bring the trolley down for you. Mark, keep the oxygen handy. What's your name, mate?" He helped me to my feet and then to a nearby seat.

"It's Niall."

"Excellent, Niall. I'm Joseph and this is Mark. Just sit there a moment and get your breath back."

"I told you, I'm fine."

"No sense in overdoing it, is there? Take your time."

Mark draped a blanket around my shoulders while I sat there feeling like a fraud and the crew chatted with the platform attendant. I was just thinking that now I really had got an excuse for turning up late for work and that Katherine was probably going to think this was just another way of spoiling her weekend, when I heard a train coming down the tracks.

As the noise grew, my eye caught the movement of one of the tiny grey underground mice that dwell in the cracks under the platform. It scurried quickly under the rail and bolted for cover as the train rattled onto the platform. As it crossed the open space between the rails, a long grey arm shot out from under the platform and snatched the mouse and vanished. The train rushed past, then slowed along the platform in a squeal of brakes. Passengers looked out from behind the glass as it slowed to walking pace, their expressions turning from hopeful to disappointed as the train accelerated again off into the tunnel without stopping.

"Did anyone else see that?" I asked.

"See what?" said Joseph.

I looked at where the mouse had been. "There was a mouse, under the train. And then..."

"Don't worry about them, sir. They live here all the time. They only come out when it's quiet."

I thought about trying to explain about the grey arm, then thought better of it. Maybe I really did need a check-up. "Can we go up now? I think I'm ready."

They helped me up and walked me to the escalators at the gentlest of paces, accompanied by the attendant. The

escalator was still working, and carried us up to the ticket hall where we were escorted through the side gate and around to the street exit. Up the stairs at street level the mesh gates had been pulled closed, but were pulled back to allow us out into the listless crowd waiting for the station to re-open. Mark cleared the way while they helped me to the waiting ambulance.

Inside the ambulance was white and sterile. They insisted that I lay down and was strapped in before driving off. Joseph stayed in the back while Mark went back to the driver's seat and used the radio to inform his controller that they were en-route with a conscious patient. Joseph belted himself in and then we were away, siren blaring as the ambulance forced its way into the traffic. We accelerated in a short burst and then braked hard as the traffic failed to clear out of the way. The siren wailed at the jammed cars.

Without warning, another stomach cramp twisted violently into my gut, I gasped and squeezed my eyes shut against the pain, pulling against the restraints and grinding my teeth. Then, just as suddenly as it had arrived, it passed. I opened my eyes and the lady was standing over me. She was undoing the belts.

"What are you doing?" I asked her.

"I am trying to get you out of these wretched straps."

"Stop that. I'm supposed to be going to hospital." There was a sound like a low groan coming from the ambulance.

"You're not going anywhere. The ambulance is dead, can you not hear it?"

I propped myself up on an elbow as she loosened the webbing. Joseph was slumped against the seat belt, Mark had collapsed over the steering wheel and the ambulance siren was making a sound like a stranded white whale.

"How did you get in here?"

"I followed you. I didn't have to walk very far with you in here. As soon as you had a spasm all the power died and the ambulance stopped. That noise is the siren using up what little power remains. I would turn it off, but I don't know how."

"You're crazy. What have you done to Joseph?"

"He'll be well enough." She grabbed hold of my lapels and hauled me up to a sitting position with surprising strength. "Look, I don't have much time. I need to you to come with me now, away from here and away from the hospital. I don't want anyone looking too closely at you." She flung open the rear door of the of the ambulance and gestured for me to exit. The sound of car horns blared through the opening from the blocked traffic.

"You're crazy! What are you talking about? I'm not leaving. I'm sick."

"You're fine, you have my word. What are you called?"

"My name is—"

"I didn't ask you what your name is, I asked you what you were called."

"It's the same thing." I told her.

"No," she said, "it really isn't. I shall call you Rabbit."

"I don't care what you call me. I'm going to the hospital."

She shook her head. "No," she said quietly, "you're not."

She grasped my hand in hers. There was a sense of vertigo and a momentary blinding headache.

When I opened my eyes the ambulance had gone. It was almost dark, the threat of dawn glimmering through the overcast clouds. I looked around, but found only rolling grassland fading away into the darkness. I wiped my long hair back where it clung to my face in the damp air. Fine rain drifted around me.

Twisting around, I half expected to see the ambulance behind me, finding only empty grassland and patches of boggy turf in near blackness. Apart from the wind, there was no sound at all. The breeze was fickle and gusty, tugging at my buckskin jerkin and linen shirt.

I couldn't see more than twenty feet in the dim light. I stuck my hands out around me, trying to break what must be an illusion. The cold breeze twisted through my fingers. Water started seeping into my boots from the soggy turf.

Where had the lady gone? Where was I?

A sound came. It drifted down the wind, too low for a wolf, too long for a bear. All the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. It howled, long and low and the primitive part of my brain that knew about caves and monsters kicked my feet into motion.

I found myself stumbling through the darkness away from that sound. My instinct said, hide, make yourself small. I looked around as I stumbled forward but there was no cover, just stringy tufts of grass and rolling hummocks. I started running and the howl came again, rolling down the wind after me. Tripping on a tussock of grass, I went down on my knees. Panic brought me up again, my fingers scrabbling in the wiry turf to get up and away. My heart started pounding in my ears as I accelerated away, the long howl louder now as it gained on me. I sprinted, every ounce of energy focused on getting away. Then the headache came again and blinded me.

I crashed into something and went sprawling on the concrete. I was surrounded again by the smell of wet pavement and the distant urban drone of diesel engines and motorbikes. My breath came in harsh barks while my heart drummed a staccato rhythm in my chest. I lay on my back, only thankful that the ground under me was

hard and the sound of the hunt had gone. I had beaten it.

A shadow crossed my face and I opened my eyes. It was her.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "it took me a moment to catch up with you."

"What in hell did you do?"

"I used what I called you to create a certain type of reality for you."

"You mean it was real?"

"As real as you made it."

"What would have happened if it'd caught me?"

"The same thing that usually happens when wolves run down a rabbit."

"There was only one." I told her.

"You only heard one."

"And it was too big to be a wolf."

"Suddenly you're an expert on how big a wolf can get. Tell me Rabbit, where did you come by such wisdom?"

I squinted up at her and then lay on my back, still breathing hard, trying to gather my wits.

"Ah, more cautious now," she said. "Maybe there is some wisdom here after all."

I looked up at her. The harmless old lady look was beginning to wear thin.

"What are you, some kind of witch?"

Her eyes hardened and her expression soured. She reached back down to me. I scabbled backwards to the wall away from her, avoiding her questing touch.

"That word," she followed me until my back was against the bricks, "is not a kindly word where I come from."

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean anything by it."

She withdrew her hand. "And I'll thank you not to use it again."

"Fine, whatever you say." She relaxed again, allowing me to look around. "Where are we?"

"Away from the ambulance and the hospital. In an alley. You collided with a dustbin and ended there. It was just as well you came back to yourself or you might have been trapped."

"I was fine until you interfered," I told her. "I was going to the hospital."

Another bout of pain erupted in my abdomen. I curled around it, immobilised by its intensity. It faded gradually. "Oh, God. I'm having another attack. Can't you see?"

"I told you, you are not going to die of a heart attack. Here, let me help you up." She offered her hand.

I looked at it, mistrustfully.

"Have it your own way," she said, withdrawing the hand.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Blackbird."

"Blackbird? What kind of a name is that?"

"It's as good a name as any I have ever had and it will serve me nicely, thank you."

Her tone was acid, but I didn't care. "What do you want from me?"

"From you? You're not in a position to offer me anything, just now."

"Then why did you follow me? What are you after?"

"When I revived you earlier, I acquired a degree of responsibility for what happens to you."

"I was fine. The ambulance men said I was okay, I just needed a check up."

Another of the stomach cramps twisted inside me and I bent over, momentarily breathless.

She was unconcerned. "Just try and breathe. The aftershocks will diminish shortly."

"Is it my heart?"

"Gracious me, no. Your heart is as strong as an ox and will stay that way for many years to come, should you live that long."

"I thought I had a heart attack."

"You don't remember?"

"Remember what?"

"You were on the platform of the Underground. Your heart failed."

"You died."

I searched my memory. Those last seconds were curiously blurred, as if my brain didn't want to register what really happened. "I can't have died. I'm here."

"I brought you back. I healed your failing heart and summoned you back into your body to keep something else from entering and using your corpse. If you were not dead then that other thing could not enter and I would not have to deal with it."

"What kind of other thing?"

"The sort of thing you don't want roaming around in someone else's skin."

"You're talking about possession."

"I am talking about reanimation, but yes, in this case they are essentially the same thing. Unfortunately you were already dead and it gained a foothold. I had to heal your heart and summon you back into your body. For a moment I was not quite sure which one of you I had rescued."

"That's what you were asking me, in the tube station – are you from the other lands?"

"Had it succeeded I would have killed it quickly while it was still weak from the crossing."

"But it was me."

"It was you. By the time I reached you, though, it had gained a sense of you. It will know you. It will have some of your knowledge, some of your memories."

"What will it do with them?"

"It will use them to find you."

"And then what?"

She looked at me. "It will kill you."

"I don't understand. Why would anyone want to kill me?"

"Because you are not entirely human."

"Are you mad? Of course I'm human. What else would I be?" The old woman seemed rational, but then started talking nonsense. Was she serious? She looked serious.

"Here," she said. "Let me help you up. I promise I'll not harm you." She offered her hand again.

I waved her hand away and pushed myself to my feet. I felt light-headed. Perhaps it was being alive when I ought to be dead.

"You have something on your trousers. It looks like it came from the bin with which you collided."

The sight of my trousers brought me immediately back to earth. "Oh no. This suit was just cleaned. Look at it, it's ruined." There were patches of damp and the dark stain of something putrid was smeared into the knees.

"It is the least of your worries, believe me. If you let me buy you a coffee, I will try and explain."

She walked to the end of the passage where it met the street and waited for me while I tried to remove the worst of the stain with some half-used kitchen towel protruding from a lacerated bin-bag. I wiped the slime from my hands with the remaining piece.

She turned down the street and walked away and I ran to catch up with her. I fell into step as she walked along. Mercifully, the rain had stopped, leaving the streets shiny in the autumn sun.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked her.

"I do not like loose ends," she answered. "They cause difficulty. Are you married?"

"I was. I got divorced last year." It was an old wound, but nearly dying made it freshly painful.

"No children." She made it sound like a statement.

"I have a daughter."

She stopped and stared up at me. "A child?"

"Yes. She's nearly fourteen. I'm picking her up from my ex-wife's tonight. We're going to spend the weekend together."

"A daughter? Well, well." She turned and continued walking, momentarily lost in thought. I followed, crossing Long Acre and heading down St Martin's Lane towards Trafalgar Square.

"What did you mean when you said I wasn't entirely human?" I asked her.

"Somewhere in your family tree there is one who is not human, but something else."

"What kind of something else?"

"A creature of power. A member of the Feyre, a race far older than humanity."

"I don't... The... Is this some kind of wind-up?"

"You tell me. Did you have a heart attack? Were you cold and dead? Are you a corpse on its way to the mortuary or walking along beside me?"

A faint smile touched her lips. Was she mocking me?

"I think... I think I would know if I wasn't... human."

"Without fey blood in your veins, the creature would not have been able to enter your body when you died. It was using your dormant power to bridge the gap between this world and the one it comes from. When I revived you I called to your power, the core of magic within you, and used it to mend your failing heart and bring you back."

We strolled past people on the pavement while she talked in level tones about magic and creatures. Nobody paid us the slightest attention. It was unreal.

"How did you... I mean, what...?" This made no sense. "This is... Why should I believe you, or any of this?"

"There was a creature waiting for someone like you, in another place nearby but entirely separate. It was waiting to cross over into our world. It was already in the process of taking your body when I found you. By bringing you back, I prevented it from completing the crossing, but it will have gained a sense of you. It will know you and will be able to predict where you will go and what you will do. Now it knows you, it will come for you, sooner or later."

"What does it want from me?"

"I told you, it wants you dead."

"Why? What did I do?"

"It wants you dead because of what you are, not what you have done. It knows what you are, as I do."

"So we're back to that. You think I'm not human."

"The only reason you are not lying dead on the floor in the Underground Station right now is because you have an ancestor who was fey. It is the reason you are alive. When I intervened I took a degree of responsibility for you and for what happens next. If you were to just wander off then things might become... difficult."

"What do you mean by difficult?"

"The magic I woke in you was dormant, but having woken it, it will not sleep again. It is alive in you now and will stay with you until you die, which unfortunately may be quite soon."

"I don't understand. First you tell me I'm healthy and then you tell me I'm going to die. You're not making sense. Which is it?"

"It's both. You're alive because one of your ancestors was not human, that much is certain. The creature that was trying to take your body will know you and will try to find you, that is also certain. It will not be able to cross

the gap between our worlds again for some while. It will need a little time to recover and then it must wait for an opportunity to slip across, but when it does it will come for you and for your daughter."

"My daughter? What has she got to do with this?"

"Rabbit, if you have a fey ancestor then your daughter does too, of course. You don't need to be a geneticist to work that out. It will want her dead as much as it does you. That is why you must stay away from her, at least for a while. Don't go near her and don't discuss her with anyone, no matter how harmless they appear. You do not want to lead it to your family."

It was bizarre, as if somewhere, at some point in my morning, I had taken a wrong turn. I found myself sifting back through her words looking for the loose strand that would unravel this elaborate tale. Is that how she got her kicks, conning middle-aged men into believing the unbelievable?

"What does it look like?" I asked her.

"A better question would be who does it look like? The Untainted don't enter our world directly unless they have to. Instead, it will find a host, another body with enough of a thread of magic in it to sustain the crossing. It could be anyone: young, old, fat, thin – anyone." She gestured at the people around us as we crossed the street at the bottom of St Martin's Lane.

"So how am I supposed to know which one is trying to kill me?"

"So you believe me now?"

"Let's say I'm humouring you."

She sighed. "Their perception of our world is governed by their own time, so they will appear a little uncoordinated, as if they were drunk. or hung over. You will have to be watching carefully to notice the difference, though." She led the way to a coffee and sandwich shop.

I followed her inside and she ordered for both of us, two strong coffees, mine with sugar and hers without.

I rested my hand on her arm. "How did you know I took sugar?"

"I didn't, but it is good for shock and dying counts, do you not think?" She glanced up at me and then took a small purple purse from her bag and paid the girl, all in coins.

The coffee shop was crowded and noisy with nowhere to sit, so we took the coffees outside where the staff were wiping down the chairs and tables. The lady held the door open while I carried the tray. She led the way to the table furthest away from the few other people where the broad pavement sloped down to the dominating presence of the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields. I put the tray on the table and she handed me my coffee as we sat down opposite one another.

I took the opportunity to look at her more closely. She was around retirement age, one of those silver-haired ladies that have worked and now have the resources to lunch in the city whenever they please. Ladies like her were common around the National Gallery and Covent Garden and I would not have picked her out as anything unusual.

She wore a wool coat with a tweedy texture to it which looked well worn, but not worn out. At her neck was a paisley patterned silk scarf that was wrapped inside her coat. Her hands clasped the cardboard cup. They had the soft texture of liver spots and freckles that you associate with older ladies with fair skin. Her eyes were clear and blue-grey and her hair was grey in a short but elegantly soft style. She watched me, removing the lid from her coffee and holding the cup underneath her chin, allowing the steam to rise around her face.

"If you knew somehow that you only had a single day left to live," she asked me, "what would you do with that day?"

"A single day?"

"One only," she nodded.

"I'd spend it with my daughter doing all the things you should do with your children before you die: wild rides on the fairground, eat too much ice cream, paddle on the sea-shore..."

"What if you could not be with your daughter? What then?"

"I don't know. Maybe just carry on and have a normal day."

"Just carry on? Is there no one else you would spend your last day with?"

"You needn't look like that. I have responsibilities. My job is important, and not just to me. My team rely on me. That's why I have to go to work."

"You are failing to understand me. If you go back to your job then your life expectancy can be measured in hours. More importantly, what are you going to do there?"

"What I always do: manage my team, work on my projects—"

She burst out laughing. "Oh Rabbit, you are precious."

"What's wrong with that? It's my life!"

"It was your life." She considered me for moment. "I need to show you something, but I need to use the facilities first." She pushed her chair back and stood. "I will be back in a few moments."

"Will I be safe here, all by myself?" I was suddenly conscious of how exposed I was, sat at the edge of the open square.

"That depends. If this is a trick of some kind then you'll be as safe as ever you were. If this is real then no, you're never going to be safe again. Get used to it."

