

CHAPTER ONE

Murder at the Windmills

JohnGarland – The Million Men

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Part One:

When you're lying on your back by the side of the road on a cold November night and the mud is creeping up through your jeans and shirt, that's when it hits you, *Revelation*.

If it didn't you'd be dead and not from hypothermia. I'll explain in a bit. Listen to the rain on the hard metalled road, the swish of the traffic whirring past – an ironic part of you says: *They'd see you if you hadn't lowered the suspension on the campervan to look cooler so it hides you completely* and you wish that smug little voice would shut the fuck up. But it doesn't. *...and there's no petrol left in the tank, and there's no money in your wallet and you're going very blue, did you know?* And that's when revelation hits you like a blow between the eyes;

The voices aren't in your head, you aren't going mad.

I reached up and grabbed it roughly around the neck. 'Shut the fuck up,' I heard myself say, 'Just shut up!' I made myself look at it, a dull broken doll with the head of a pumpkin for chrissakes...

'Finished gawping 'ave you?' it growled. *'You've got about five minutes before they get here – so we'd better run.'* It was a line I would hear again.

The voice isn't in your head, which is a relief but instead it's this little shit, this horror, and you can hear the smugness in its voice. You're not, but if you were, this is what the end of sanity would feel like, you're sure.

I dropped it, as if it had burned me.

'Who is this 'we' and what are you talking about 'the rest of them?'

 I said

'You've killed one – they won't stand for that you know,' the voice said in a level tone.

You know that feeling when memory creeps in through the layers of hangover – when the dull and limp shapes of what you did the night before get crisper and leaner? 'Oh shit!' I stood up and stared at the body of the police officer I had

killed. Now it was all coming back to me, like a badly digested meal.

Run Henry, run. The little bastard at my feet said.

Part Two

So I ran. I abandoned my beautiful red splitty campervan on an unmade road in the middle of nowhere and ran for my life.

I expected the little voice to say - you can't escape the police, they'll get you, arrest you and you'll do life, double life for killing some of theirs. Instead I just heard the patter stump of feet on the mud behind.

The memory of what had happened came back all too clear, 'Oh shit.' I had been driving my Van through the roads and lanes above and below the chalk hills of Sussex that they call The Downs. The Van was my excuse to be out driving. I had come for an interview the day before, and I was trying to convince myself I didn't care. The waiting, I thought, was killing me. How wrong I was. I had stayed at a local campsite, and was driving back to it for the night. Driving gives you this wonderful illusion of control, because you are in control of the vehicle, it feels like you are in control of your life. That was when the car hit me, shunted me right into a ditch. I had heard a sickening squeal, which I thought was the bodywork, and winced at the thousands it would cost to repair. I'd only just finished restoring it. I hauled myself out of my seat ready to kill the driver of the other car or give him a piece of my mind. Then I saw it was a police car. The Sussex constabulary are a wonderful body of men and women, don't get me wrong, but they've never been the sharpest pins in the packet and I knew they were sticklers for detail. So when the officer lurched out of the car I couldn't believe my ears.

'Move along, just move along.' His voice was old Sussex, with a hint of East End and he sounded drunk.

'No you have to be kidding,' I said in disbelief. 'My insurers will need a crime number.' I tried to make a joke of it, 'you don't know any police officers do you?' The burly man with a whitened face just stared at me blankly. 'Move along,' he said – though it sounded like 'Meerve ulleng.'

'Just get in your car, and go away.' I hesitated at that. Since when was a campervan a car? And how was I going to haul my van out of the ditch.

There was something very wrong here. The officer looked like he was drunk or on drugs. There were livid blotches like pinchmarks on his face and lower lips and suddenly I felt unsure. What was happening? The air around us had turned cold and it started to spit with rain. I tried one last time – 'please just let me...'

And that's when he hit me.

Part Three

I shouldn't have hit him back, I shouldn't have knocked him over. There had been a sickening crunch as he fell and when I looked more closely I saw a dark liquid seeping from his beneath his head onto the unmade road. In the clinical, cold moonlight it gleamed dully, and his body went limp.

And now here I am running through open fields and Downlands around Clayton in Sussex – a man on the run. I found an allotment, broke the padlock on a shed as quietly as I could and tried not to be sick. I hadn't run so much since I was twelve and had competed for the county.

As I'd run through the brambles and over the ploughed fields – twisting my ankle in the process- I thought I'd imagined the voice. The whole evening seemed like one bad dream, so when the creature sat down beside me and spoke, I jumped two inches off the lumpy potato sack I'd sat on – 'Jesus!'

'It wasn't a policeman,' a little voice said.

The voice stopped and I couldn't help myself I turned to look at it. It was dressed in blackened and oil stained jeans and it wore a strange baggy shirt and a kind of leather jacket. It looked like a mini biker – if you didn't look at the head, believe me I tried not to... It had a dark green squash for a head, not a pumpkin, a strange dark green squash the size of a softball and pointed on top. It wasn't cute – it had no eyes or cheeky grin cut out of it like a pumpkin or Jack O'Lantern. It was a weird half-breed – a thing I could never have imagined in my darkest dreams. When the creature spoke again its voice was deeper more gravely in tone, as if he had a forty a day habit.

'It's my fault about your campervan – it's my fault about the one that tried to kill you. It wasn't you they wanted...' It paused, 'it was me.'

I stared at it blinking hard - Through the shed's broken window a slant of moonlight caught the side of my face but lit him up like he was caught in a spotlight. The dark shadows were crisp around the edges of his blank face.

'They only rammed your campervan because I was hiding in the engine.' The creature said. I thought about that, the engine on a VW camper is at the back, it certainly explained how he'd got so greasy and why the van had been overheating. 'They tried to kill you to get to me Henry.'

Part Four

If you think about things too much, nothing makes sense. You get moments where everything seems arbitrary and all that you've done, surreal and unnecessary. So here I was stuck in a mouldering allotment shed that smelt of rotting vegetables. At least I hoped it was the shed and not the strange creature that sat beside me. The smell certainly had that organic quality to it.

'What time is it?' the voice said. I was probably wrong but it sounded male.

'About four-thirty in the morning.'

The creature nodded.

'We'll be safe in about an hour – they don't like the sun.'

I stared at him, trying to understand. I shook my head trying to guess what he was telling me.

'The police? The police don't like the sun?' I blinked, it was like he was using a different language. There was a rattling noise like a seed rattling in a pod and I realised later that it was his equivalent of 'tut!'

Suddenly the creature's strange head twisted rapidly around. About half a second later I heard it, a squeaking noise. It wasn't a mouse and the door wasn't moving. With horror I realised that it was the battered allotment gate. The feeling in the pit of my stomach wasn't rational and my palms were getting very hot and sweaty. Something was coming.

Peering over the edge of an old wheelbarrow I saw a dark figure striding through the bean canes and clattering through birdscarer CDs. Even though it was still dark their shiny edges caught the light and flashed. It was the Police Officer. I shook my head, he was dead, I had been sure of it.

The policeman turned his head back and forth slowly, an arc light sweeping the allotment, then he would stagger forwards and swing his head back and forth and side to side. It was peculiar to watch, mesmerizing almost as he came closer and closer to the shed. Suddenly the Police Officer who was supposed to be dead jerked his head to the ground and stopped. Even though the creature beside me was hidden behind a wooden wall, I knew that was what the police man was looking at.

'Run,' I whispered to him, 'run.' The pumpkin creature jumped to the bottom of the plastic wheelbarrow and hauled himself up to stare out of the window at the dark sentinel, whose head had lifted to track him.

'Too late, too late,' he muttered to himself. He twisted to face me, suddenly decisive, 'Run Henry, run!' he shouted. 'It'll kill you too. If they are out this late to risk the Dawn, then they'll risk the host body and don't care about discovery.'

With that bizarre announcement he leapt to the ground, smoothly rolled to the door and kicked at it. Though the creature was only seven inches high, still the door burst open with incredible force. The policeman gave a terrible broken roar and began to lurch toward us. Suddenly the little creature running ahead of me through the cabbages and brassicas seemed much more human than whatever this abomination in blue was.

We ran. Whatever was chasing us, it wasn't a policeman, I didn't even think it was human.

All I remember is stopping, even now I don't know what caught me, was it the police man or was it my own clumsiness? Worse still did I want to be caught?

'Run,' the little voice beside me urged again, 'run.' But I couldn't. My left leg had caught against a cold frame and my heart seemed frozen. My head felt numb and it was if the whole world had disappeared behind a thick sheet of glass.

The policeman smiled a rictus smile, lips bared.

'You are a resource' a voice from deep within seemed to groan. The voice resonated from behind those pale lips.

'A thing to be used and employed,' the head jerked up and the lifeless eyes seemed to catch mine, 'both of you.'

At the back of his throat something glittered, something gleamed but I didn't look, I wouldn't look at it. All I could do was move back, one foot, and then the other. The sky was brightening, dawn was almost upon us and I think that the policeman sensed it too. His body jerking, twisted towards the east to look for the sun. Then it turned back and stared at me.

'Henry Johnson,' the policeman cried. 'You are mine.'

My body was a locked box, my fingers were all that I could call mine. There was a sudden pain in my neck as if someone had tightened the cord tied there. I could move my eyes and my fingers but that was about all. What was going on? As the light of dawn bloomed I thought I could make out the policeman's features. His broad nose, his round flabby ears and his dark coal eyes that stared like fish on ice at me. His beard seemed wrong somehow. I couldn't, didn't remember seeing him with one before when he had rammed into the back of my splitty campervan.

Slowly it dawned on me, it became horribly clear that it wasn't his beard. Something was crawling out of his mouth. A dark shape that obscured his mouth grew, unfolded, unfurled until it was the size of my hand. It was a man swathed in a long coat ornately folded like the wings of a bat.

Part Six

I think I screamed, that at least was still left to me. The thing shivered and its tiny head turned to me as it pawed its way down the zips and flaps of the policeman's uniform.

'It's a Homunculus,' said the voice by my ankle in a matter of fact voice. Something inside me broke then, I don't know why and I began to laugh even as it carried on talking. 'It exists only to possess, they are all the same. Their tradition of magic is dying so they leech off everyone else.'

This is all so wrong, I thought. This can't be happening, and if it is? How long do I have left? The little life left in my fingers and my mouth fled at the sight of that face. I can see it in my memory clearly now. The pale sticky skin, the mean little mouth looked as if it had been mummified or packed in salt, and the eyes. The dark glinting eyes that roved over my body like a man admiring a Ferrari – and that's when I understood what it wanted. I wasn't a human, not to it. I was a vehicle a resource to be ridden and driven 'til my flesh ached, grew pale and my heart gave out. I was the creature, a creature to be used abused and then abandoned – just like the police officer.

My eyeballs were locked now and it had slipped out of sight. I could no longer see my doom approaching, I could only hear the scuffling and then – a feeling that I will never forget, its hot bony hand grabbed my ankle and it began to climb up my leg.

'No,' I managed, 'not like this.' It was a stupid thing to think, but nevertheless that was what I thought.

Was I about to die, or would I be an observer as this thing became my puppeteer? The man with the wooden cross who pulled my strings.

I would never know.

Part Six

There is an agonizing pain in my leg and I know I've been stabbed. It felt this way when my clumsy brother threw a dart and stuck it in my leg. The pain is excruciating, as if whatever it is has been dipped in acid, salt or fresh Jalapenos. I scream and in that moment whatever hold-fear the puppeteer put on me is broken. The pain is replaced by blind unreasoning anger. I kick at the stabbing pain in my leg and then slapped my hand over my chest where the homunculus was crawling up to reach my mouth and crawl inside. My lips still feels numb where it had yanked trying to pull itself inside.

We are still in the allotment and I shake the creature hard trying to break its neck like a rat, not wanting to look at it, but I can still feel it wriggling, writhing in my grasp so I dropped to my knees and slammed it with my fist into the glass cold frame. The pain is awful. The glass lacerated and tears into my arm but the writhing stops. Still embedded in my calf is a metal spike – distantly I notice the ornately wrought handle on the end – but I realise I don't care. Finally it stops moving, but still I don't look.

Sunlight breaks finally over the allotment and the pieces of broken glass catch the orange red glow. There beneath my fingers is the creature. It is dead, but I don't let it go. Instead I turn to look at the larger creature, the one with the head of a green and orange squash who plunged the spike into me and saved my life. The Pumpkin man does not look at me, he only pulls out his spike. The pain is brief and not unpleasant. 'There will be others,' he says calmly to me. 'Come.'

'My name is Jacq,' the creature said solemnly before walking up the Sussex Downs. In the light of the dawn were the half-seen forms of two giants, arms raised high. It is a trick of the light, and as the light changes I see two windmills one black, one white sitting astride the pale pagan downs. When Jacq gets to the wooden gate he stops and begins to speak again.

'These hills resisted the Christian tide like a breakwater, the coming of the priests left them speechless. The stories and mythologies may have been bullied from the minds and hearts of the people, but their souls remember. The Call is strong – There is a deep magic, a dark and earthy call at work here.' Then he clammers the gate and jumps down.

I know I could follow him up the hill, but somehow I dare not.

Not today at any rate.

end