

## An Empty Death

### Chapter 1

June 1944, Fitzrovia: The night was bright – a bombers’ moon – but the planes were far away. The other side of London, the man thought. He glanced round the rubble-strewn site. Five or six houses must have been knocked out, because all around him were crumbling interior walls with tattered wallpaper, torn-out fireplaces with weeds sprouting in hearths now forever cold, and window frames, some with the grey remnants of slashed curtains, the harshness of their destruction softened by the pale light. The edges of ill-secured tarpaulins flapped in the light breeze, and nettles pushed their way through mounds of plaster, glass and broken woodwork. The man could even make out the looming bulk of the Middlesex Hospital across the way.

It was time to die again. That was how he thought of it – dying and being re-born, at the same time. He always felt a sense of loss at such times, although he couldn’t have said what it was that he was losing. He’d been relieved – delighted – to walk away from his first life, to cease being the useless, despised failure who got everything wrong. The selves that came after, personas of his choosing, had been more successful, but it was never enough. This one would be different. He’d wanted to be a doctor ever since he was a child, and now he had a name – a life – ready and waiting for just this opportunity. This was simply the penultimate step in his plan. He hadn’t expected it to happen quite like this, but that did not matter.

He stared at the corpse at his feet. The blood on the face had congealed. The body had, simply and with silent finality, stopped working. He’d seen hundreds of cadavers since he’d started his job in the hospital mortuary, but as most of them had been dug up from the ruins and carted in, they hadn’t been fresh. Good job he’d made the most of the chance to study anatomy at first hand, even if a lot of the specimens were pretty mangled – crushed, or with missing limbs, or even, in some cases, decapitated. He’d pieced his knowledge of anatomy together with each human jigsaw, and, once acquired, such information was never wasted. He was already well prepared, but there was a great deal of work still to be done. He’d start tonight.

Best not hang about. If anyone saw him, his new life would be over before it had even begun, and this one, he knew, was going to be the best yet. ‘Goodbye,’ he murmured to the body. It was no longer a man in the sense of being a person, it was merely a vacuum, a space that he would fill. The original owner had no use for it, or – more importantly – for his job

anymore, so what he was about to do wasn't stealing, it was simply retrieving something that had been discarded. True, the discarding hadn't been voluntary, but it was too late to worry about that now. After all, he couldn't bring the bloke back to life, could he? Nevertheless... 'Thank you,' he muttered with a moment's awkward reverence. 'Much appreciated, old chap.'

Then he turned away, entirely indifferent to everything but the inward surge of excitement and certainty that told him he was, once more – as he had planned all along – the sole controller of his fate. Buoyed with a new sense of purpose, he walked, as quickly as he dared, across the rubble and down the moonlit street. In the distance – somewhere Northeast, he thought – bombs were falling.

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