

THE DARK ENTRY: PROLOGUE

The teeth of the JCB bit deep into the earth, gouging out a large hole, the arm swinging free and descending again. A screech of metal on metal pierced the air. As the arm juddered, the operator swore loudly, then turned off the ignition. He scowled fiercely, lit a cigarette, then heaved himself out of the cab and peered down into the hole.

“What the hell was that?”

In the cathedral close, an eerie silence descended like fingers of cold mist, spreading along the length of the close, winding and prodding their way out of the nooks and crannies of the offices and houses, enshrouding pedestrians with a dank odour, like a heavy cold weight in the still, summer air.

The frozen stillness was broken by a low, sustained rumble as if the very earth was groaning and heaving in protest. Like an angry beast, it began slowly, then, gathering speed, began to rock the foundations of the surrounding buildings. From the epicentre, it roared out beyond the Cathedral Close, out to the River, beyond into the city.

At the Ferry, the water began to ripple and churn, rocking the barges and boats, scattering the swans in a macabre flight of fear. A boy, fishing by the river, leapt to his feet in alarm, his stool rocking, his rod dislodged by the deep tremor. Further along the river, behind the magistrate’s court, a hunched youth who had been sitting quietly on a bench, sprang to his feet in sudden fear as the trees shook and quivered around him, and the earth moved.

The tremor hit the cathedral like a great train, bursting through, rattling windows, shaking joists, scattering hymn books and papers wildly. Terrified choristers gasped in fear and clung to each other as the ancient stones shook to their foundations. Candles guttered and toppled from their sconces and the nave was plunged into stygian gloom as the lights failed.

A party of sixth formers, some lounging on the grass, others cavorting around the labyrinth, fell silent as the tremor hit them and the sky above darkened. Some shrieked, others ran into the cloisters towards the Dark Entry but one girl stood silent at the edge of the grass, sensing the deep reverberations from beneath her.

She clasped her forehead, feeling a sharp, searing pain, then fell backwards in a faint, lying awkwardly on the grass, her ashen face framed by deep red curls.

The JCB operator steadied himself and stared in disbelief. The barriers had collapsed and the JCB was leaning at an acute angle above the hole.

“God help us if there’s another of those,” he shouted at his workmate. Hands clenched, he stepped carefully over the debris and stood at the mouth of the hole. He certainly wasn’t going in there for a while. Crouching at the edge, he peered down and saw part of a lead slab protruding from the clay.

As he stared down, he became aware of a dank, decaying odour emerging from the hole. The nauseating smell clung to him like a piece of musty muslin. He shook himself vigorously, then, lurching backwards, turned and retched.