

Reaper

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Promotional sample

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by Jon Grahame

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An outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) has been reported in Guangdong Province, China. It was discovered by Canada's Global Public Health Intelligence Network (GPHIN), an electronic warning system that monitors and analyses internet media traffic, and is part of the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Global Outbreak and Alert Response Network (GOARN). The disease comes on top of the problems caused by the violent earthquake that devastated the region two months ago. Members of world wide aid agencies are still working in the area.

Guangdon Province previously suffered a SARS epidemic in 2002 although the Chinese Government did not inform WHO until four months later. It spread to 37 countries and there were 8,096 known infected cases and 774 fatalities. SARS is a viral disease that can initially be caught from palm civets, raccoon dogs, ferret badgers, domestic cats and bats. Initial symptoms are flu-like and may include lethargy, fever, coughs, sore throats and shortness of breath.

Chapter One

JIM REAPER started to plan murder as thousands began to die in a natural disaster that almost killed the world.

He had become a man of routine and habit. He still bought *The Independent*, as a sign of his social leanings and pretensions. He had bought the paper when Margaret was alive. *The Independent* for him, the *Mirror* for her. His and her papers, reflecting his and her intellects. Except that he had preferred to read the *Mirror* first, for the shorthand version of national and world events, and the sports pages.

On this day, he walked into the city, as he did every day, and bought the newspaper from the same shop in Reuben Street. He had a late breakfast at Wetherspoons. He always started with a couple of coffees and then, seeing as he was in a bar, it seemed only polite to have a couple of pints. Maybe three or four. No more. He wasn't an alcoholic

or dependent on the booze; he was dependent on the routine. On this grey day in the middle of February, he left to walk home, back through the city and into the suburbs. It was then he saw Frank Morris, large as life, coming out of a bar in New Street, a mobile phone to his ear, a girl on his arm, laughing and joking as if all was well with the world.

You only had to look at the morning headlines to see that all was not well with the world. The earthquake in China was proving more of a handful than expected. Thousands had been killed, infrastructure devastated and, on top of that, there had been an outbreak of a glorified flu virus. The world had started dying, although no one knew it, and all Reaper could think of was how to kill Frank Morris.

He followed him, almost without thinking, staying well back and hidden among the crowds. Morris and the girl went to the bus station and waited at the number 36 bay. Reaper kept his distance and watched from among the anonymity of ever changing crowds. A green double decker arrived and disgorged passengers. The driver left and the bus waited empty, doors closed, until a new driver climbed on board. Now the doors opened again and those waiting could board and pay their fares. Morris and the girl went upstairs. Reaper got on the bus and asked for a ticket to the terminus, took a seat on the lower deck, and continued to watch.

The girl was attractive in a common way. The boots she wore and the fake fur jacket were probably High Street

expensive. The skirt was short and her legs long; her make-up blatant and her hair bleached straw blonde. She laughed too loud. He could hear her now from downstairs; she was laughing as if to show off to the world that she was with a real catch. She couldn't be more than 18. She didn't know any better.

He held the newspaper at eye level in case Morris looked in his direction when they came downstairs to disembark but, when they did, in the middle of the anonymous Butterly Estate, the man was too intent on saying something suggestive to the girl, who obligingly laughed, and flashed a challenging glance down the bus, as if to relay the fact that they were now going off to do something scandalous and dirty that was far beyond the limits of her audience's boring lives. They got off as it started to rain. Two other people were also waiting to climb down, one an elderly woman who was taking her time. Reaper left his seat, helped her and got off himself.

The couple were running down the wet pavement, eager to be out of the rain, eager for scandalous behaviour. Reaper followed at a distance. They turned left and he ran to keep them in sight. They walked up the path of a semi-detached council house. The rain was getting heavier but he didn't feel the elements; he felt only the anger, deep and patient and uncompromising. He walked twenty yards down the street, until he could confirm the number on the gate, turned away and began to walk.

It was two hours before he realised he was approaching

his own house. Without realising, he had responded to a homing instinct like a pigeon. The day was already darkening and he was soaked and needed to pee. He let himself in, stripped naked, used the lavatory and took a hot shower. He lost track of time and became aware, some hours later, that he was laying on his bed in a dressing gown.

His mind had short-circuited with the knowledge that Frank Morris was out and he knew where he lived. A sudden thought muddled his half-formed intention. Did the girl live with him? Or was she only an afternoon's diversion? He calmed himself. A lot of planning was needed. He would discover the necessarily details, he would wait until the time was right, and then he would act and justice would finally be done. Because so far, justice had been only noticeable by its absence. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, and Reaper thought it was time the Lord had a little help.

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Reaper was forty five, five feet ten inches tall and average build. He stopped drinking and undertook a fitness programme of walking and jogging. He initiated a harsh regime of circuit training in his garage. After a month, he felt fitter than in a long time. He bought a nondescript second-hand van that wouldn't look out of place parked

near his target's house and kept intermittent surveillance on Morris. He treated the rear windows of the van with transparency paint so that he could see out but which rendered the interior dark. He sat on a mattress in the back and logged the man's movements, not all and every day, but enough to build up an accurate framework of when he was at home. He had been right. The girl did not live at the house. Morris took several girls there, most of them on the verge of legality, very few of them more than once.

Morris had spent three years inside and looked to be in the peak of condition. He walked as if he had lifted weights and his muscles bulged his clothes. His hair was cropped, his features had an arrogance that some women might find attractive. He was six feet tall and 32 years old. Reaper continued his own routine of exercise with a grim determination.

He no longer bought a newspaper and was unaware of the stories that reported the spread across the world of the pandemic that had been tagged Super-SARS. He watched only films or dramas on television. He recorded many and re-ran them. His choice was eclectic: *The Railway Children* for lost innocence, *Unforgiven* for revenge. Most were violent and he had a joke with himself that they were training films. He watched brain eating Zombies without flinching or laughing. He bought a punchbag that he hung from the ceiling of the garage and practised kicks and firmed up his fists upon it. The time was getting close. He felt he was approaching peak fitness and the moment of

justice. Then Morris disappeared.

Reaper parked the van to make sure his target was keeping to his schedule but he wasn't at the house. Had he stayed somewhere else overnight? He did not reappear the next day. Reaper spent longer in the van, using a bottle to piss in, but the man did not return that night or the next day.

Hunger and tiredness made him drive home and consider what might have happened and, after food and sleep, he returned to his vigil. Morris was still absent although the postman called. The thought that his mail was still being delivered gave him cause for optimism until he realised it could be junk mail or Morris had simply left without telling creditors. Why would he tell creditors? Who else would send him mail?

Driven to distraction by uncertainty, Reaper moved the van to a location well away from the house, then walked back and went down the garden path as if he had a right to be there. He pretended to knock at the door, in case a neighbour was watching, and peered through the front window into a room dominated by a large screen TV. Newspapers and magazines were on a coffee table, a scarf and a jacket were thrown over the back of an armchair. The house did not look abandoned. He went round the back and saw a piece of toast next to the sink alongside a mug of half drunk coffee. The clincher was a four-pack of Carlsberg Special on a cupboard. Morris would never have left those behind.

Even so, the following days were tense and his training suffered. When Morris returned after an absence of three weeks, he had a deep tan and a satisfied smile. Three weeks in the sun on no visible means of support. Reaper hadn't watched where Morris had gone during the days or nights; he had only wanted to know when he was at home. His hours of absence from the house had not fitted a normal work pattern, but then, Morris had never had normal work. Thieving, enforcing and drug dealing had been his trades, although the police had never been able to gather enough evidence to make a case.

Reaper stepped up his training regime and, towards the end of April, he was again ready, mentally and physically. Without turning mystic, he felt the karma of the moment ahead. It would happen Wednesday.

On Wednesday nights, Morris usually came home about 7 30 and stayed in alone. Usually it coincided with a football match on television. Everybody had routines. Reaper waited in the van and watched the house. A taxi stopped outside at 7 40 and Morris got out, walked down the path and went in through the front door. Reaper drove home, ate a steak, showered and prepared. He wore black to blend into the night. In a shoulder bag, he carried a meat cleaver, a hammer, a pair of plastic handcuffs and a replica Colt .45 that he had bought in a toy shop. At 10 o'clock, he drove the van back to the Butterly Estate and parked round the corner from the house.

There was an intermittent moon that played hide and

seek with the clouds. A spring night warm with the promise of a summer he planned to miss. He felt no excitement or fear or even anticipation as he left the van and walked down the street towards the semi-detached house: this was the final act. There was a light on in the front room. He went to the door and took the hammer from the bag. He knocked. Waited and knocked again. The light in the hall came on and he heard Morris speculating out loud to himself about who the hell was knocking at this time of night. The door opened and Reaper stepped forward and hit him with the hammer.

The speed of the attack made it successful. He connected with his head and Morris went down, still conscious but shocked and shouting. Reaper went inside and closed the door. He pushed the man onto his front and pulled one hand behind his back. As he tried to get the other, Morris realised what was happening and began to struggle. He was stronger than Reaper expected. The handcuffs wouldn't work. The plan to make him wait until dawn, tied to a chair, being told why and how he was going to be killed, was redundant. He pulled the meat cleaver from the bag, swung it high and brought it down into the back of the man's head. It split his skull like a melon and blood spurted into his face.

Morris stopped struggling. His legs twitched and he gurgled but he stopped struggling. Reaper sat with his back against the front door looking down the worn carpet of the hallway towards the kitchen. The door to the living room

was open and he could hear highlights from a football match on the television. He took a deep breath and smelt the blood, could almost taste the blood. He got up and left the cleaver where it was and wondered if it was too early to call the police. Maybe he would have a cup of tea first? He felt tired, drained. All that preparation, all that concentrated energy and now it was over in two blood splattered minutes.

Would Emily understand? Would Margaret? He suspected Emily would approve. This was for you, love. But his wife had been aggravatingly religious, particularly towards the end. She wouldn't approve. Not that he cared.

He went into the kitchen and switched on the light. Now he was here, he couldn't be bothered making tea. In the fridge were cans of Special Brew. He would never normally choose such a strong beer but there was no alternative. Besides, it was a special occasion, and he allowed the wisp of a gallows smile to cross his face. He took a can and popped the ring pull. A noise in the hall made him turn and, amazingly, Morris was trying to get to his feet. Reaper put the can down and opened kitchen drawers, found what he was looking for and picked a carving knife. He wrapped a tea towel round the handle to get a better grip, and stepped into the hall, measuring the distance. He judged his target was fairly close to death anyway, but he moved quickly and stuck the knife into his stomach with an upward thrust. He let go and stood back and watched Morris fall again, driving the knife further into

his body as he hit the floor. This time he wouldn't get up.

The blood on his hand bothered him. It was on his face as well. He ran a tap at the sink and washed it off as best he could, picked up the can of lager, stepped over the body and went into the front room. The match highlights were still on. Newcastle were winning two nil. He sat and watched until it finished and a news bulletin followed. It was about Super-SARS, the flu virus that was sweeping the nation. It had been dominating newspaper bill boards and TV headlines so much, even he had been unable to avoid a background knowledge, an awareness that it was happening. The TV reporter was speculating on rumours that the Government was planning quarantine areas.

Reaper was tired. Killing had taken more out of him than he had realised. Maybe it was time to call the police.

Morris didn't have a land line and Reaper didn't have a mobile. He used Morris's mobile, that was on the arm of the couch, where had apparently been sprawled. Reaper dialled 999 and told them his name and that he had killed a man. He told them the address and said he was armed and dangerous and would kill the first person who attempted to come through the front door.

He wanted them to bring guns. He wanted them to shoot him. Death by police. It had a certain satisfying symmetry.

The first car arrived within 10 minutes. By that time, he had opened the front window and had hung the body half

out of it so that the cleaver, still in place in the back of Morris's head, could be seen. That should give the police marksmen an incentive. The Armed Response Unit arrived 30 minutes later. By this time there were two police cars outside and a searchlight was aimed at the front of the house. Officers had tried to evacuate the homes on either side, although one family wouldn't go. He listened to them arguing: the son and daughter were in bed with flu and their mother wouldn't move them. He couldn't see much because of the light in his eyes but he waved the hammer and the replica Colt .45 to show his intent. No one fired. No one shot him. There was no release.

The light hurt his eyes and a disembodied voice that invited him to lay down his weapons and step outside annoyed him. He took another can of lager from the fridge - how many had he had? - and went upstairs to a back bedroom to rest in the dark. When dawn came, he would put on a show of provocation. He lay on a single bed that had no bedding, just a mattress. A second wave of exhaustion swept over him. He felt no emotion, no triumph, no regret. He had done what he had set out to do. What he had had to do. Vengeance is mine.

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The police found him asleep. He awoke as they put plastic cuffs on his wrists to hold his hands behind his back. They

were not rough and he suspected they knew who he was and the circumstances that had led him to dispense justice. He corrected them when they charged him with murder. 'It was an execution. He should have suffered more.'

'You're probably right, but whatever you call it, you killed him.'

He was taken to Police Headquarters, processed, declined a doctor, and put in a cell. It was strange returning to his place of work for the first time in three years. He had planned to be on a mortuary slab by now. Even though his plan had gone awry, the satisfaction of the kill had eased the perpetual pain inside. It was four o'clock in the morning and he expected the place to be busier, have more officers, more clients, more drunks, more noise.

The next morning, he was questioned by a detective sergeant and made a full confession. He spent another night in the cells and then made an appearance before a magistrate. He was remanded in custody for two weeks. The wheels of justice were operating on a skeleton staff. No one was available to transfer him to a proper jail and he remained in police cells. Charlie Benson was the custody sergeant, an officer he had known for years. He brought him meals from the staff canteen. He was sympathetic. They all knew the background.

'I'd have been tempted to do the same,' Benson confided.

A second bobby in the corridor outside coughed.

Benson called over his shoulder, 'Take your germs out of here. I don't want your flu.'

'It's not flu. I don't get flu. It's just a cold.'

'Everybody seems to be going down with this bloody flu,' Benson told Reaper, 'Even the villains, which is just as well. We're short staffed ourselves.'

Reaper was not interested in the outside world. He hadn't been for a long time. He did not want newspapers or news. The release of the kill was fading and he was sinking into despair because he was still alive.

During the first week of remand, he noticed the situation within the station get worse. Even fewer lags, fewer staff. In the second week, there was a 24 hour period when no one came to his cell. Then Benson opened the door. His eyes were red rimmed and he was breathing through his mouth. He held a handkerchief to his face. He dropped a couple of pre-packed sandwiches onto the bed.

'They're out of date, but it's the best I can do. It's crazy out there.' He coughed. 'Bloody SARS flu. I'd like to get me hands on the swine who started it. Look, Jim. Everything's falling apart. The courts have stopped operating. All custody remands have been extended. I'm not going to lock that door again. It could be there'll be no one around to open it. There's even been a riot up at the Infirmary demanding a vaccine. Bloody armed police, for chrissake, to disperse them. We're on our way to hell in a hand basket. God alone knows where it will end. I've opened all the

cells. Sent three on their way. I'm off home to bed. God knows. You hear stories ... you don't know what to believe. I'd stay here if I was you, Jim. Use the canteen. It'll stand you in good stead when things get back to normal that you didn't do a runner.' He coughed again, long and harsh. 'If things get back to normal.' He looked at his hand and his handkerchief and said, 'I won't shake hands. All the best, Jim.'

Reaper nodded.

Benson left and Reaper opened a packet and ate a cheese and tomato sandwich which he washed down with a glass of water. He sat on the bed, back against the wall, feet stretched out in front of him, and listened. Somewhere distant a door banged. Someone called out. Someone coughed in reply. Time didn't seem important. He lay down and slept. When he awoke he ate the other sandwich, ham and pickle. It was stale but it was food. He sat and waited. No one came. No more sounds except like the song. The sound of silence. He got up and stepped outside his cell. The corridor was lined with cells. All the doors were open.

He walked to the end of the corridor and the custody desk was unmanned. The three other doors that led out of the area all had coded key pads but they had been propped open. A noise on another level. A door? He went back to his cell and lay down.

Had he been mistaken? Perhaps he had really been shot and was now dead or dying in a hospital bed? Had the last

week been a bad dream, an illusion? Was death a deserted police station? He had thought death was nothingness, blackness, sinking into an endless sleep. How did this equate? Maybe drugs. Maybe he had been shot and was in hospital and had been pumped full of drugs. Like that TV series, Life On Mars. He tried to burst back into reality, to tell the doctors to turn off the life support system and let him go, but nothing happened. He fell asleep again, hoping that this time, he would wake up in the real world.

His eyes opened and he stared at the ceiling. A nondescript ceiling. An institutional ceiling. A ceiling that could easily be in a hospital. He looked round and saw he was still in the cell. He was hungry and felt dirty. When was the last time he had showered? He got up and went to the custody desk. Still silence. Three open doors of silence. He shouted. 'Anybody there?' but no one replied.

He went through a door that had been propped open with a waste bin, and walked along a carpeted corridor, past the interview room where he had made his confession, past small offices, through an open plan office that had been abandoned. The clock told him it was 11 50. He went round corners, along another corridor, and he was at the front desk, which was unmanned. Swing doors led to the outside. He stood near the glass and stared out onto the dual carriage ring road that ran past police headquarters. The sun was high. The body of a man in civilian clothes lay on the steps. There was no traffic.

He went back into the station, climbed stairs, and saw a

senior officer in an office, knocked and went inside. The man was dead, slumped over his desk. He carried on walking, exploring the station. He found three more bodies. What had happened?

Hunger drove him to the canteen. He cooked bacon, eggs, beans and toast and wondered how he could have an appetite? But he could and he did. It was as if whatever had happened was of no concern to him. He had stepped beyond society when he had killed Morris. He was alone and maybe there really was a God and His punishment was for Reaper to live in a land that had ceased to exist. Except for the bacon, eggs, beans and toast. Or maybe he was in intensive care in hospital and tripping on morphine.

Reaper went back to his cell and lay on the hard mattress. He dozed, woke and lay in a state of vegetation for a long time, trying not to think. He had wanted a conclusion when he had set out to kill Morris. He had expected by now to have been consigned to the nothingness of death. Instead, he didn't know whether he was alive or not. He had a drink of water, used the lavatory and used the custody section bathroom to have a shower and wash his underwear and socks. He went behind the custody desk and found the locker that contained prisoners' property. An envelope with his name on it was the only property there. He opened it, took a single photograph from his wallet, replaced everything else and put it back in the locker. He went back to his cell, switched off the interior light from the outside, and went to sleep.

When he next woke, he got up and had another shower. He was delaying decisions by mundane routine. He dressed and retraced his steps of the day before, or was it two days before? The lights in the station were permanently on but outside it was dark. He went to the canteen and cooked himself a bacon sandwich and drank tea. The bananas had gone rotten but the apples were edible. There was no rush. He drank more tea and wondered where he was; wondered if this was a different reality to the one in which he had killed Morris.

Had God banished him to an alternative universe? Probably not, because he didn't believe in God. He had lost that belief three years ago. The fact he didn't believe, of course, did not mean God didn't exist. Reaper could even see the humour in such a situation. Would he still deny His existence if he was ever called to account on Judgement Day? In the unlikely event of it happening, he would welcome such a confrontation. He would be able to ask where God had been when his family needed Him and to hell with salvation. He knew all about hell and nothing any God could do could compare.

He walked down to the front doors and went outside. The body of the man was still on the steps. Street lights were lit and he could see the roads outlined in orange dots as they climbed the hills opposite beyond the limits of the city. House lights showed sporadically and in the clear night air he could see smoke rising from a fire down the valley and could smell burning from a lot closer, probably a

building in the town. He sat on the steps, a few yards away from the body, and stared out at a night that was still and peaceful and listened to insect sounds and the rustle of leaves in the light breeze.

The possibility he didn't want to face pushed forward from the back of his mind. This time the flu or SARS pandemic had crippled the country, possibly decimated the population. Perhaps people had retreated to safe havens or been herded into medical compounds for treatment. What was that report he had half heard? Quarantine areas? Perhaps the city had been so badly affected it had been declared off limits. Perhaps armed police and soldiers still protected the hospitals and were keeping the infected at bay until the disease had run its course. How long would it be before they returned to the streets to clear the houses of the dead?

Part of his mind said this was the only logical explanation while another part refused to fully accept that England had fucked itself up quite so completely. What had happened? Hadn't the Government stockpiled enough Tamiflu or whatever they needed? Had there been selective prescriptions? Perhaps that's why the police station was empty. Most of the officers could have been given the necessary drugs and were now in those safe havens, waiting for the time to return.

The irony, of course, was that he had survived without so much as a sniffle. If he had waited two weeks, the flu would probably have taken care of Morris without him

having to dispense his own justice. Too late now and anyway, he was glad he had killed him, glad it was his hand to have dealt the blow and not some anonymous virus.

A crash of breaking glass from somewhere in the town was a shock. He twisted his head like a crow and tried to work out the location. Breaking glass meant people. There was a male shout and a female scream. Another male shout and the female screams continued. His blood ran cold, remembering. He sat and listened to the screams, interspersed by angry male shouts and guttural laughs. Eventually the screams died down to be replaced for a time by sobs and groans and finally silence. On a silent night when only the insects sang and no traffic disturbed the peace, sobs and groans carried a long way. Their echoes remained in his soul.

Still sleeping God?

God was dead, had never lived in the forms imagined by Buddhist and Jew, Muslim and Christian and all the others who had worshipped the sun and rocks and Mother Earth. God was an accident of cosmic energy who had grown into a dream and a hope by a mankind looking for a way out. Who, unsatisfied with a temporary burst of life, had gone looking for eternity. They prayed that when they died, they would sit at the right hand of God and live for ever in peace and harmony and love; states they had never been able to achieve in any real measure during their lifetimes. What a shock when they discovered the right hand of God was a black hole of dreamless sleep.

Reaper went back to his cell, lay on the hard mattress and tried to rationalise the situation. He decided that he did not know enough to make an informed assessment. Come the daylight, he would find out more. He slept fitfully, the screams of the woman replaying in his mind.

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