

Chapter 1

November 1936 was a cold month, but it was not the chill winter air that made Ed Simkins shiver.

The soldier was standing outside the empty house when he returned. Simkins had been sleeping there for the past week. It didn't matter to him that the place was supposed to be haunted. Or that the windows were broken and the floors rotting away. It kept out the worst of the winter and gave him a roof over his head. And if there were lights and noises and things that went bump in the night, then the cheap gin kept them away.

But even through his tired, blurred eyes he could see the soldier's silhouette in the doorway. Standing, as if on guard, outside the house. *His* house. At least, it was his as much as it was anyone else's.

Simkins recognised the khaki uniform from his days in the trenches. Nearly twenty years ago . . . So much had changed since then. But even before he managed to focus on the soldier, he could tell there was something odd about it. Sentries never stood that still. Not once did the soldier look round, or try to stamp some life back

into his cold feet, or shift the weight of the pack he carried on his back.

In fact, now he came to look at it, the shape of the pack was somehow wrong, skewed. You needed the weight at the top, over your shoulders, not bulging lower down.

Most worrying, Simkins realised, was that while he himself was breathing out a misty fog of air, the soldier in the doorway was not. As if he was not breathing at all.

Simkins took a hesitant step towards the house, towards the figure. When there was still no movement, he crossed the road with more confidence. Of course, it was not real at all. It was a waxwork or a shop dummy. That was why it was so still, why the pack was wrong, why no breath came from the lifeless lips. He chuckled to himself, shaking his head at his own foolishness as he started up the short path to the door.

Then the soldier turned and looked at him. The pale glow from the nearest streetlight illuminated the soldier's head as it angled towards him. Simkins stopped halfway up the path, anchored to the spot with pure terror as he saw what was under the helmet. Where there should have been a face.

The creature that was dressed as a soldier stepped down on to the path. There was a warm mist now, but not from its mouth. It seemed to emerge from every joint, every opening in the stained uniform. The hissing that Simkins could hear reminded him of the hydraulics of a gun platform. Was it the sound of the thing moving or of the mist that wreathed it? Or was it Simkins's own ragged breath as he finally managed to focus his mind on what was happening?

He turned and ran for his life.

'That's quite a story, Mr Simkins,' the Invisible Detective said. His voice was rich and mellow. A pale hand appeared for the briefest moment from the other side of the armchair, as if to punctuate his words. 'What, may I ask, happened next?'

Brandon Lake, the Invisible Detective, was seated in the armchair and the chair was turned towards the wall. He never faced his audience. Nobody ever saw Brandon Lake. Nobody saw him arrive at the consulting sessions he held every Monday evening and nobody saw him leave. All that was ever visible was the hand and the vague shape of a figure in the chair in the dimly lit

upstairs room above a locksmith's on Cannon Street. That was why he was called the Invisible Detective.

The main window of the room was bowed and the curtain cut straight across, so that there was a small area before the window. In this space, Jonny Levin and Meg Wallace struggled to hear Simkins as he blurted out his story in fits and starts of breathless memory. The sound of the rain was louder here and Flinch had given up trying to catch the words. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor, fidgeting impatiently.

Flinch was a small girl with long blonde hair that was matted and dirty. She was perhaps twelve, perhaps older – she did not know. Flinch had lived on the streets for as long as anyone could remember. Now her home was an abandoned carpet warehouse on a corner of Cannon Street. Jonny and Meg were two of her best friends.

Jonny was a thin thirteen-year-old with short black hair. He was holding a fishing rod which he used to flick messages across to the armchair when necessary.

'Is he telling the truth?' Jonny asked Meg. If Simkins was lying, then the detective should know.

Meg shook her head, sending her long auburn curls into a frenzy of movement. 'He's not lying,' she murmured. 'But it doesn't follow that what he says actually happened.'

'What do you mean?'

'Can't you smell the drink?'

Simkins was standing close to the curtain, and now that Meg mentioned it, Jonny realised he could detect the stale, oddly dry smell of spirits.

'I ran,' Simkins was saying. 'Wouldn't you?' There was a rasp of drawn-in breath. 'Came after me it did. That thing. Arms out, fingers snapping. Like metal they were. Metal gloves or something. Coming for me, like metal claws reaching for my throat.'

Jonny could almost hear the man shudder.

'Not the only thing that's reached your throat, is it, Ed?' someone called out from the back of the room. There was an undercurrent of laughter at this.

'Good story, Ed,' someone else said, perhaps emboldened by the first person. 'One of your best.'

'Yeah,' the first voice called out again. 'You remember that time you was chased by a big blue

bear? Bet that had claws.’ There was louder laughter at this. Evidently many of them knew the story. But that did not deter the speaker from delivering his punch line. ‘Turned out to be Constable Wilkins after you for drunk and disorderly.’

‘God rest his poor soul,’ a third voice muttered.

‘I must admit . . .’ said the distinctive voice of Brandon Lake, causing everyone to quieten down again. ‘I must admit that there would seem to be a fairly straightforward solution to this particular case.’ He paused before adding, ‘Should we call it “a case of spirits”, perhaps?’

The whole room erupted at this. Jonny was aware of Simkins trying to make himself heard above the hubbub: ‘I know what I seen. Really I do.’ But the hilarity continued, punctuated by the sound of footsteps stamping towards the stairs at the back of the room. Simkins’s voice was fainter as he said, ‘I thought the Invisible Detective would help. No one else will, not the coppers, not no one. And that thing’s still after me.’

Nobody seemed willing to risk asking the Invisible Detective a serious question after Ed

Simkins's performance. People were still laughing and joking as they left.

When the room was empty, Meg and Jonny emerged from behind the curtains and Jonny went to count the money. Everyone who had a question for the detective was supposed to leave sixpence in a tin by the stairs. Meg stood watching him, her arms folded and her face set.

'He really did believe it,' she said. 'That's what drink does to a man.'

Flinch skipped happily across the room, delighted not to have to sit still any longer. She held her hands out to the Invisible Detective and he took them, allowing himself to be heaved out of the armchair.

'Thanks, Flinch.' The detective's voice was lighter, younger, as he threw off his oversized coat. But, then, the Invisible Detective was not Brandon Lake at all, there was no such person. It was Art Drake, fourteen years old and leader of the Cannoniers. The other Cannoniers – Jonny, Meg and Flinch – gathered round him.

'What about Sozzled Ed's story, then?' Art asked them. 'He should have been here last week and told it for Hallowe'en.'

There was much laughter at that. After all, they knew that even if Ed Simkins had actually seen something, it was not going to have been a ghost soldier with metal gloves.

It was Friday before Art thought about Ed Simkins's story again. He had given up waiting for his father to get home from work and was sitting in the kitchen, finishing his tea. Just as he rose to tidy things away, he heard the front door open.

'Sorry about that,' his dad said, coming in and immediately setting the kettle on the stove. 'I was just leaving the Yard when something came up.'

'Anything interesting?' Art asked.

His dad sighed. 'Interesting, but not pleasant. Local drunk found dead in the gutter.'

'That's not a detective matter, is it?'

'Not usually,' Detective Sergeant Peter Drake agreed. 'Sozzled Ed, that's what they called him locally.'

'Ed Simkins?'

'That's right.' His dad was surprised. 'You knew him?'

Art shrugged. 'Knew *of* him. Heard he told some pretty wild stories.'

'Not any more.' Peter Drake clicked his tongue. 'Murdered. Probably for the price of a drink, knowing the company he kept. Throat torn out, poor chap. Odd thing, though . . .' He paused as the kettle started to whistle. He lifted it off the heat, protecting his hand with a folded tea towel.

'What was odd?' Art asked. He had a cold, numb feeling in the pit of his stomach.

'I don't think you want to know.' His dad smiled. 'Especially after you've just eaten.'

'No, tell me.'

'The pathologist said it looked as if he'd been attacked by something with claws, except the marks were too regular. Machined. As if . . .'

'As if,' Art suggested, 'the claws were made of metal?'

And his dad nodded.



It was strange, Arthur Drake thought, how he no longer felt embarrassed about visiting his

grandfather in the home. The television was on, but only his dad was watching – football.

Arthur and Grandad sat on the other side of the small room, talking quietly. Grandad had a newspaper on his lap folded to the crossword. But neither of them were very interested in the clues.

Perhaps it was not so strange that they were now such friends, Arthur decided. After all, they had faced a monster together. But he still found it hard to think of his grandfather as young – as young as Arthur himself was now. Hard to think of him as Art, the Invisible Detective, all those years ago, back in the 1930s.

It was even more difficult because Arthur was himself – somehow – that Art as well. In his dreams, or when he stared deep into the strange oval stone he had found at Bessemer's Paranormal Puppet Show . . . No, he had to remind himself, it was Art – Grandad – who had found the stone. Arthur had been given it by the old man who owned the antiques shop on Cannon Street that he passed on the way to school.

He could remember that day as if it was yesterday. He could remember sheltering in the shop from the rain and the old man giving him the

stone. He had also given Arthur a handwritten notebook – handwritten, it seemed, in *his own* writing. It was the casebook of the Invisible Detective. He could remember how surprised he had been to see his own name signed in it and his own address. Now, of course, he knew it was Grandad's. But even so . . .

'I read about the Ghost Soldiers last night,' Arthur said quietly.

Grandad nodded. 'And do you remember any of it?' he asked with amusement.

Arthur grinned back. Grandad knew that often when he read the cases in the book he then forgot them. It was as if he was somehow not allowed to remember the events until the time was right. He could not recall the Shadow Beast until he and Grandad had faced their own monster. 'Yes, I remember,' he said. 'And I was wondering – what really happened to Algie?'

Grandad shrugged. 'I wish I knew for sure. I've often wondered that myself. I hope . . .' His cracked voice tailed off. He coughed a dry hoarse cough before going on. 'But it's no use hoping. Not now. Not after so long and after so many other things have happened. It can't make any difference, can it?'

'I suppose not.'

'Oh, will you look at that?' Arthur's father cried from across the room. He glanced round at them for support. 'Penalty at least.'

'At least,' Arthur agreed, without looking.

'Seemed fair enough to me,' Grandad said, his eyes widening slightly with amusement.

But Arthur's dad was already engrossed in the match again.

'Do you know anything about websites?' Arthur asked. 'The Internet and stuff?'

'Computers? Not much. What they are, a little of what they can do. The web's like an online library, isn't it?'

'Well ...'

'Why do you ask? Your father thinking of getting me a computer, is he?'

Arthur laughed. 'I don't know. Do you want one?'

Grandad shook his head. 'I don't think so. You tell me.'

'You might actually. There's this website – like a page you can look up. But it's called *The Invisible Detective*.'

'Is it now?' Grandad turned slightly, interested.

'There's a bit about the original Invisible

Detective. Well, you know – the *official* story if you like. But mainly you type in questions and they send you back answers by e-mail. It says there's some bank of computers doing it. Searching through the Internet for stuff that matches your question and sending it on to you.'

'Computerised librarian?'

'Sort of. Only . . . Only I get weird stuff sent to me,' Arthur confessed. 'This Invisible-Detective.com site sent me an e-mail saying, "Ask me about the Shadow Beast" once.'

Grandad frowned. 'Did it now?'

'So I thought, well, I thought maybe you were something to do with it. You or one of the other Cannoniers – Meg or Jonny or Flinch.'

Grandad shook his head. 'It's a funny thing, age, you know. Back then, when we dealt with the Shadow Beast, or the Ghost Soldiers, I was a bit older than Meg and Jonny, and much older than Flinch. But now . . . Well, time is a great leveller. Now we're as near as damn it the same age. I don't think any of us is up to organising a website these days, Arthur. It's enough of an effort just filling in the crossword.' He lifted his gnarled hand, the ballpoint pen held awkwardly between his arthritic fingers.

Arthur was not sure what to say to this. But he was saved comment as the referee blew the final whistle and Dad switched off the television in disgust.

'That lot couldn't beat your school team, Arthur.' He checked his watch. 'We must go.'

'Off to the fireworks tonight,' Arthur said.

'The big display at Sydenham,' Dad explained. 'Crystal Palace Park. You want to come? It shouldn't be that cold.'

Grandad smiled and shook his head. 'After my bedtime, I expect. Anyway,' he went on, looking meaningfully at Arthur, 'I've seen fireworks there before.'

