



DEAD MAN'S
HANDLE

TAMMOORE

Dead Man's Handle

TA Moore

Copyright © 2018 TA Moore

All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements

To the Five. And to C.S. Poe, who is a snitch!

Dead Man's Handle is a prequel novella for my short story 'Collared' in the *Devil Take Me* anthology.

Buy *Devil Take Me* at [Amazon](#) or [Dreamspinner](#).

CONTENTS

[Acknowledgements](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

1

By midnight all good-living and God-fearing men were tucked up in bed, locked away from the hot temptations that lived in the dark. Perhaps that was why Jackson Riggs came to hammer at Elijah's door. Elijah had only been in town for a few months, but the town gossips had already decided that he--a professional man who lived alone, not even a maid to set his breakfast for him, with no obvious vices--could be neither good nor god-fearing. Particularly since he showed no interest in changing the status quo of his household through employment, marriage, or debauchery.

"Dr Martin!" the porter yelled as he hammered at the door. "Doc Eli! Wake up. It's an emergency."

Elijah groaned, the sound sour with the taste of last night's whiskey, and lifted his head off the pillow. In his experience the only urgency in a coroner's life was the slow deadline of rot. Since Riggs seemed unlikely to stop his assault on the front door, however, Elijah dragged himself out of bed. The thin, sweaty sheets came with him and dragged over the floor.

"A minute!" he yelled, fairly confident his voice would carry through the drafty windows. "No need to break my door down!"

Elijah snatched a robe up from where it was hung carelessly over a chair and dragged it on over his shoulders. The remnants of his vanity pulled his

eyes to the mirror that stood in the corner of the room, fly-spotted glass framed in ornate, dark cherry wood.

He felt like one of the indigent drunks the Craven deputies would pull from the gutters and drag to his morgue for Monday morning, usually dead but sometimes just dead drunk. There was grit behind his eyes and his skin felt coarse and loose. In some ways the man in the mirror could still pass for handsome, or at least distinguished, with his grey-streaked hair and sharp, bony face.

Maybe the pale grey eyes were bleary and, from his side of it at least, his breath was foul. That could be put down to sleep though.

It was self-indulgent. James hadn't been Elijah's to mourn for years, that duty belonged to his well-bred young wife and their better-bred children. A dynasty of thoroughbreds, cold nosed and glossy coated. Elijah grimaced at his reflection as he belted the robe with impatient hands, couldn't he take even his own self-destruction seriously?

Riggs, who had emptied enough bottles out of the morgue's trash to know that there was a good chance Elijah had passed back out, started to batter the door again. This time Elijah was awake enough to register the wine-sick headache that vibrated between his ears.

"Enough, enough," Elijah groaned. He stamped down the stairs, wood cold against bare feet, and wrenched the door open. The cold whispered in around his ankles and walked damp fingers up toward his thighs. He knuckled at his sleep-sticky eyes and squinted at Riggs. The porter pre-dated Elijah at the morgue, a wiry, grey haired man of uncertain age. Tonight he looked old. "What is it?"

“The train crashed at midnight,” Riggs said. He grimaced and dragged his hand down his face as if whatever he’d seen had stuck to him like cobwebs. “The dead are everywhere.”

What train? What dead? Elijah could ask, but the haunted look in Rigg’s eyes made him hold his tongue. It must be bad if they’d sent to the coroner for help.

“I’ll get dressed,” he said. “Wait a moment.”

He slammed the door and took the stairs two at a time, the robe shed before he reached his bathroom. It was only as he wrestled his waistcoat on--had the town’s cheap laundry shrunk the fabric or the cheaper wine expanded his waist?--that something occurred to Elijah.

The poker game at the bar had gone on well past midnight. Elijah had hunched over a row of bad hands as the grandfather in the corner of the judge’s chambers chimed the hours, each sonorous bong bounced around his tender skull. It had been near dawn when he finally staggered home to an empty bed and bittersweet memories.

The town had been quiet. Silent. No screams, no panic, no alarms raised or eager ghouls on their way to the spectacle. There was no way the train had crashed at midnight. Elijah supposed, with a pinch of uncertainty, that it could have been a mistake.

That was strange. It would only get stranger.

2

Bodies *littered* the tracks.

Elijah walked among the dead, his head still fogged with drink and sleep, and tried to make sense of it. A handkerchief blew out of a bloody hand, the bones so twisted it looked like a claw, and blew toward Elijah. He jumped forward to step on it, as if a square of fabric pinned down to the rail could someone serve as the anchor for the eerie event of the night.

There was a monogram on the corner of the square of linen. Blood red thread worked in, out, and through the close-woven fabric. J.C.M in florid letters, embellished until they hardly looked part of something so workday as the alphabet.

He had mocked James for that.

James Calladay Madden. Who'd been dead a month, and had no plans to come to Craven before that. No reason to either, no matter what Elijah's heart would like to pretend.

"Dr Martin?" a soft, Scots burred voice interrupted. He turned to look at a short, dusty-haired man in a shabby grey uniform, engine oil smeared over his hands and up the side of his face. "Are you quite alright?"

"No," Elijah said, quite honestly. He waved a hand at the ragdoll bodies

that surrounded them. “Why are there so many dead?”

The pale man followed the sweep of his hand with bright, black eyes. “Well, there was an accident,” he said. “The train crashed, and where else would they put them?”

That wasn’t an answer. Elijah rubbed his hand over his face. He only realised he’d copied Riggs’s gesture from earlier as his thumb scraped over his jaw. It wasn’t a mask he needed to remove, he realised now, it was a veil of cobwebs. Something felt wrong, more than just the usual dyspepsia of booze.

“This isn’t right,” he said.

The grey man scratched his head. His hair stuck up between his fingers like a crest.

“No,” he agreed, with a sage nod. “You’re right, we should get them inside. Before someone sees too much for their peace. Some things, Doctor Martin, you’re best to look away from.”

He stalked off, balanced on the scraped rail in his narrow, polished black shoes. Other men in grey suits moved along the tracks, between the dead, and chatted companionably with the deputies and doctors who’d come down from the hospital.

They were just there to do the heavy lifting, though. It was Elijah who was in charge of the scene, for not a single passenger had survived the crash. Only the grey men in their cinder-coloured suits had gotten out of the overturned, crumpled train alive.

Elijah bent down and snatched the handkerchief from under his foot. He

balled it up in his hand, stiff from starch.

“What’s your name?” he called after the grey man on a sudden impulse.

The man turned around and looked back at Elijah. “Cook” he said, before he jumped the track and headed over to talk to Riggs.

He had a point, Elijah supposed as he carefully didn’t look at the contraband cloth in his hand. The dead didn’t belong out here. It would be best to get them inside, out of the sun, where he could look for a familiar, impossible face.

Best to look away, the soft, rough voice muttered around the edges of Elijah’s mind. He couldn’t do that though. It was his job to look at the dead.

3

It had been two days. The dead overflowed the morgue. Corpses lay top to tail in cold storage, under sheets in the hall as they waited a space. They made for restless company, never quite where you thought you’d left them or who you thought you’d left them with. Behind closed doors they sighed and settled, with a rustle of fabric and the wet crackle of broken rigor.

Their presence unnerved the nurses in the hospital above, agitated the patients, and stitched shadows into previously brightly lit corners. Cook and

his grey colleagues didn't help, always one of them there to watch when the breath rattled out and the cold settled in to a patient.

Instead of a solution, the mayor just moved the problem. Elijah was ousted from his small, chilly basement and, along with the dead, relocated to the dry dock of the town's winter-parched baths. Bodies wrapped in perfumed linens, black spores of fungus spouted in front of mouths and ears, were slotted together on the bottom of the pool. They sloped down from the shallows to the deep end, where the shadows were dark and deep and sometimes you'd catch a wet, cat quick blink of light. As if something had opened an eye and quickly closed it again.

Even cheap, sour whiskey, that great duller, did nothing to quiet the atavistic crawl of unease that dogged Elijah's steps.

A familiar cravat had joined the monogrammed handkerchief in the drawer of Elijah's desk, and he could smell James' favorite cologne in empty rooms and doorways. A hint of musk and roses, layered over rot, as if something he desperately didn't want to see had just been there.

"...my brother," the woman said. She was thin and high-colored, with red hair the same potently dyed shade as James' embroidered monogram. Her smile showed small, worn button teeth and her tongue was pale as she poked it into the cracked corners of her mouth. "I think he was on the train. A tall man, red-haired and well made. Twins, we were. Can I..."

Over the years Elijah had shepherded hundreds of relatives in for one last look at what was left of their daughter, brother, wife, uncle. Some of them grieved, some of them were greedy, a few squeezed out crocodile tears from relieved eyes. None of them had licked their lips and worried at raw hangnails with an addict's eagerness for the bottle. They didn't have the eager

gleam in their eyes that he'd caught in reflection when he reached for a bottle.

“There's no-one of that description,” he told the woman. It was and wasn't a lie. He'd seen no red-haired men in the bodies stacked in the pool, their sour blood and juices seeped down into the grout. At the same time he had the uneasy suspicion that if he turned and pulled a bleached stiff fold back from a corpse's face, the male version of the woman's face would grin up at him worn down teeth. “Get out.”

The woman raged and slandered, until the porters dragged her out by her elbows and tossed her into the street. Her parting shot was a gob of spit that stained the starched white cotton of Elijah's shirt grey as the woman's teeth.

There were others with plausible stories and no real documentation. At first they travelled in, train-smoke on their clothes and dust on their travel-best shoes, but now people Elijah recognised from town came to tap on the door with lies.

“My mother,” jilted Jessie Clemmons said with damp eyes and downturned mouth, as if he'd not seen her scold of a Mama take a strip off the baker down the road that morning. “She was out for a walk.”

“A friend,” Ned Yard, the thin lawyer who lived his life and ran his business out of a small office over Backlin's Butchers, claimed straight faced. “Dear to me.”

He'd been one of the last to get in. The expression on his face as he left--somewhere between horror and lust--still lurked at the edges of Elijah's mind.

“My sister. My family. My mistress.” That had been Riggs, the reliable

porter a grimed mess as he was dragged out of the pool of corpses he'd waded into. "I need to find him!"

They'd sent him home, fired him when he came back and threw a punch that broke another porter's jaw. At night he crept around the ground floor and tried the doors, hissed frantic promises through keyholes.

"You could have him back," he'd whispered, wet and eager. "This time he'd *have* to love you. We could make him."

Elijah hadn't called the other porters that time, or the local deputies like he'd threatened. Instead he just locked the main doors, barred and padlocked, and retreated to his makeshift office.

The seal on his whiskey had been broken, a shot poured and drunk. A greasy imprint of lips had been left on the rim of the glass, clotted with sticky flecks of skin. On the ledger next to the bottle words had been scratched into the thin paper in clumsy, jagged lines.

Help. love.

Elijah reached out with an unsteady hand and picked up the glass. A coin had been left in the bottom of it, heavy and silver. He would bet it was two-sided, James had prided himself that he'd never made a fair wager in his life. A smarter man than Elijah would have taken that as a warning.

"I wouldn't drink that if I was you," the Scottish voice advised from the door. "You might regret it."

Elijah turned around to look at Cook. The railway man had wiped the oil from his face and brushed his dusty hair fastidiously into shape, but he was still shades of grey and buff. He was designed by nature to be inconspicuous,

but the flicker of sly, dark humour in his eyes made him memorable.

That and the fact it seemed he knew what had happened.

“I wasn’t going to,” Elijah said. He put the glass down carefully, as if it was as fragile as he worried his sanity was. “What are they?”

“Dead. Corpses. Cadavers,” Cook rhymed off. “Stiffs. The late unlamented.”

Elijah had known that. He was, despite his best efforts over the years, good at his job. Death was familiar, even if this wasn’t quite the death Elijah knew.

“What were they before?” he asked.

Cook laughed slyly. “That’s the question.” He pushed himself off the door and prowled over into Elijah’s space. Too close, so close that Elijah could smell the dusty sweetness of his skin and hair. “I told you that you shouldn’t look. Who was he?”

“Dead.”

Cook laughed and pressed a soft, unexpected kiss to Elijah’s throat. His lips were dry and his breath warm as he exhaled. Shock pinned Elijah in place. He *should* pull away. He *should* mumble offense and confusion. Years of being quietly, bitterly alone told him that, but instead he curled his hand around the back of Cook’s neck. The close-cropped hair at the nape prickled Elijah’s fingers like pin feathers.

“To you,” Cook murmured. “What was he to you?”

“Everything,” Elijah admitted. Then he cracked a ragged laugh. “Or

that's what I thought. He died a month ago."

Cook nodded. His hair tickled against Elijah's jaw and it had been so long since anyone had touched Elijah. Despite Cook's warm lips, his hands were cool as he pushed Elijah's vest out of the way and pulled the tail of his shirt out of his trousers. "Times have changed. We have to change with it, but you know what it is like. No one in authority wants to change anything ever. It took us long enough to upgrade to trains."

"From a ferry?" Elijah asked, his throat dry and he coughed the word out. He'd had a good education, the classics had been whipped into him along with a passable hand at the piano and no regret for the father whose death he'd seen in the paper years ago.

Cook just laughed and pushed Elijah back against the desk. "Does it matter?" he asked. His

"Maybe," Elijah managed. Not for the first time he regretted the survival instinct that had undercut his self-destruction for years. "Will I end up on your train?"

"Not from this," Cook said, his dark eyes briefly very serious. Then he chuckled as he went down onto his knees, the kisses that skimmed Elijah's bare stomach butterflies of temptation. "Not at all, until we get it fixed."

Afterwards they lay on the floor of the office, legs tangled and sticky. Elijah felt heady with the stupidity of it all as he fumbled his cigarette case out of the pocket of his discarded vest. The door was open, but who was there to see anything but the dead.

The...damned, he supposed.

“Can you?” he asked as he held up a cigarette between his fingers.

Cook considered it, shrugged, and reached out to pluck the cigarette from Elijah. He put it between his lips and inhaled, the end of it somehow already lit. Then he passed it back to Elijah.

“Why?” Elijah asked as he breathed in the grey, harsh smoke. The taste of it reminded him of Cook’s mouth, the stony undertaste of his skin. “Why me.”

“Why not?” Cook countered. He rested his chin on Elijah’s shoulder and laughed at his grunt of frustration. “You were lonely and I have...been alone. Tonight, for a while, neither of us were.”

“Are you a demon.” Elijah exhaled and watched the smoke drift toward the ceiling.

“...depends who you ask,” Cook said after a pause. “I have no use for your soul if that’s what you mean. What does your ghost have on you? Love doesn’t hold the haunts, no matter what they say, that part goes...somewhere else. So what does your dead man have on you?”

Elijah leaned his head and closed his eyes. The secret was buried down inside him, in a pocket of moral pus and regret. What did that matter to,

depending on who you asked, a demon. “I lied for him,” he admitted. “His father was a coroner in New York and he took me under his wing. Somehow James knew that I...had never cared much for the company of women. He...I suppose you could say he seduced me, but I never needed much seduction.”

“Noted.”

“He told me he loved me, told me that I was his whole world. It sounded true, because he was mine, after all. Then he begged me to just...sign the death certificate, to not ask any questions. That it was for us, and his wife had been so ill after all.”

“Did you?”

“...yes,” Elijah admitted. It hadn’t been quite that simple. He’d stood over her poor, blue body and tried to see the cow that James had called her. Then James’ father had come in, grim and grey and built like he could heft hods instead of wield a scalpel, and asked if there was any reason to do an autopsy. It had felt like pressure, but that could just be an excuse. He said no, folded the sheet over her face, and signed it off as misadventure. “Maybe he didn’t kill her, maybe he did. I’ll never know.”

Cook wove his fingers through Elijah’ hair. “If it helps you decide,” he said. “The final station for my train is one no-one wants to reach.”

Elijah wasn’t sure that made it any better. He deserved to be alone, the punishment he’d lain over his own shoulders, but since he wasn’t... He turned his head and kiss Cook, the murmur of surprise tart as he swallowed it.

It would be a long night if he was left here alone with the dead.

5

Two days later the mayor had a strange gleam to his eyes and he refused to answer any of Elijah's questions about the the dead and what they were to do with them. The other porters had refused their shifts and it was left to Elijah to lock the doors at night.

He could pretend he minded, but he whiled the hours away with Cook's company. From what he'd been able to glean from the grey little...whatever he was...when they weren't tangled together, Cook was caught in the same limbo as Elijah until decisions were made wherever he took his orders from.

It was a morbid fantasy, whatever they had to pass the time while they minded the dead, but it was strangely sweet too. Or Elijah wanted it to be. He was, after all, a track record for self-delusion. Just now though, with Cook's face in his hands as they kissed, he didn't care to question it.

The hammer of a fist on padlocked doors jarred him from the moment. For a moment as he raised his head he wondered, as his mind pitched with disorientation, if he'd imagined it all. He almost expected Cook's cool, lean body to dissolve into stained linens and sticky shame, but instead a hard hand caught at his elbow.

"Wait," Cook said.

"I can't just ignore that," Elijah pointed out as he dragged his shirt closed over a kiss-damp chest. "People will complain."

Once people complained, then *this* would be gone.

He stuffed the tail of his shirt back into his trousers as he jogged down the tiled halls to the main door. It had gone quiet by the time he got there, but when he looked out there was someone laid out on the steps.

A woman, from the great spill of sandy-grey hair that had halfway escaped her braid. Old instincts made Elijah pull the key from his pocket and hastily fumble the door open. He hurried out, nearly tripped down the steps, and crouched next to the bony woman in a stained nightdress. She was dead, he knew that before he touched her shoulder. Her face, hidden by her hair from the door, was gone. He checked her pulse anyhow, as if he might have just made a mistake in the dark.

“She struggled this time,” a harsh voice said from behind the door. “I told her it was for the best, that it was a kindness really, but she didn’t believe me.”

Elijah froze. He had to look around, but he couldn’t make his neck move. Instead he stared at the poor ruin of the dead woman and felt his heart trip and speed as heavy footsteps scuffed closer.

“You never could look at me afterwards.” It wasn’t James’ voice, too old and too hard-used, but it tried to be. “Despite everything *you* didn’t do, you thought you were better than me. Do you know how pathetic you were? Mewling for just a little of affection, like a stray cat.”

The cruelty was right.

Elijah stared at the cheap, brass pin in the woman’s hair and wondered who’d loved her as...whoever it wasn’t drew closer. A rough hand clenched in his hair and yanked his head back. He stared up into a face that wasn’t

content with being James, but couldn't quite find its way back to Jackson Riggs either.

Riggs talked about his wife sometimes, as he wheeled bodies into the morgue or out of it. Elijah had never listened, but he remembered that. The face might still have shadows of Riggs, but whatever ran the show didn't.

“You killed her.”

To be honest, Elijah didn't know if he meant James' poor, unsuitable first wife or the faceless woman on the ground. It didn't matter, since he'd killed both of them.

“Did I?” James asked. He dragged Elijah to his feet by his hair and twisted his head painfully to the side. Elijah' scalp burned as his hair ripped at the roots. He whimpered before he could choke the noise back. “You could have helped me. I asked you, I begged you, but you just ignored me, Elijahy. So I had to be a bit more...direct.”

Elijah grabbed at the wrist and dug his fingers in. He couldn't get any purchase against the muscle gained through a lifetime of heavy labour. “The only reason I'd slow your drift to hell, is to spit in your handbasket.”

A smile that wanted to scream did horrible things to a man's face. James pulled Elijah closer and snarled through that terrible grimace. “I'm not asking now. You're going to help me,” James said. “This old, run-down corpse is no good to me, I don't want to be a porter and he won't stop screaming. But you...you always wanted me inside you didn't you, Elijah?”

“No.” Panic slurred in Elijah' throat as he tried to shove the bigger man away from him. He clawed at Rigg's face and dry skin ripped like paper under his fingers. The flesh underneath was dense and white, like a fungus

more than a man. “No!”

His protests did no good. James twisted his lips into a parody of pucker and sealed it over Elijah mouth. The scruff of short, salt and pepper scraped roughly and his tongue probed deep enough to make Elijah gag on the rancid taste of old beer and fresh rot.

It slid down his throat, slime and bilge water that dripped down into his gut. Elijah retched and tried to pull away. The sourness that was James filled him like an broken cistern, spilled over into his veins and seeped into his bones. He wanted to puke it up, but soon it felt like there was more of it than there was of him.

Then it spilled away.

Elijah’ knees gave under him and he fell over the dead woman’s body. She was still warm, only half-cooled. Elijah pushed himself off her and nearly slid down the bloody steps. A hard, cold hand at his collar stopped him from pitching down onto the cobblestones below.

“Are you?” Cook asked. His usual amused reserve had cracked and his dark eyes were intent on Elijah’ face.

Elijah spat and wiped his mouth on his sleeve frantically. He wanted to stick his fingers into his mouth, to scrape the taste of James off his tongue and from between his teeth. Somehow, though, he didn’t think he could reach deep enough to reach it.

“I’m still...I think...I’m still me,” Elijah said. He looked around for Riggs and found the man crumpled against the doors of the baths. For a second Riggs peered out from the mask of his face, his eyes raw and his mouth round for a scream, and then James dragged his contempt back down over it. He

scrambled to his feet and picked a broken piece of door casually out of his stomach. Blood spilled out with fatal enthusiasm, but it didn't seem to concern James. Elijah pulled at Cook's arm. "We need to go. He's--"

He stumbled over whatever it was. Cook curled his mouth in an odd, shy smile. "So am I," he reminded Elijah. "Do you have his token?"

Elijah drew a blank for a second and then remembered the locked drawer and the handful of eerie, impossible momentos. "In the office."

Cook nodded. "Get them for him," he said.

James grabbed a block of the stone from the wall and ripped it loose. He raised it over his head and peeled his lips back from bloody teeth.

"Not your place to intervene, ferryman," he hissed. "I'm not on your damn carriage. You've no authority over me!"

He threw the block overhead at them. Cook's fingers tightened on Elijah's wrist and he...wasn't where he had been a moment ago, and neither was Elijah. The stone crashed into the steps and shattered into gravel. Elijah shivered with a deep, terrible chill and brushed grey-green cobwebs from his arms with frantic fingers.

Wherever they had been for that breath of time between *there* and *here* hadn't stuck in his memory, other than the marrow-deep conviction he didn't want to go back.

"Go."

"Can he hurt you?" Elijah asked.

"Maybe," Cook said. He shrugged. "He's right. I'm only a demon

according to some and my authority ends at the train tracks. On the other hand he's a venal, faithless soul in an old man. So maybe."

Elijah hesitated. He wanted to offer himself up as a sacrifice, but the memory of that terrible, slimy evil as it filled his gullet made a coward out of him. James patted his belt and pulled out Riggs' short, viciously curved little knife. He licked it and it sliced through his tongue like butter, blood wet from his smile.

"The quicker you go, the less chance he has of luck going his way." Cook gave Elijah a shove. "Get me his tokens."

6

If he couldn't be brave, Elijah supposed, he could at least be quick. He darted back into the baths and ran down the long, dark corridors. On another day the chitters from the shadows and the things that swam through the corpse pool and pulled themselves up for a better look would give him the horrors. Right now they didn't seem to matter.

His taste in men was eternally doomed—a murderer and a sometime demon—but Cook mattered to him. That the dusty, unsentimentally sweet man...demon, spirit...would be harmed because of Elijah' old mistakes couldn't happen.

The office lay open. Something wet and small sat under the desk in a puddle of wet, salty water and waited for him to look. He'd seen it before, he suspected, cut the poor little waif open to prove her mam had brought her

dead to the water.

Pity tugged at him, but there was no time for that. Besides, Cook had said that anything good went somewhere else. Only the worst was left here. So maybe, the thought squirmed into his brain, James had cared for him once, had been at least a bit the man Elijah loved.

Except he recognised James. There wasn't much of the man he'd known that he hadn't seen out there, just freed from the fear of social opprobrium. He snatched up the coin and the handkerchief and left the little dead girl to her puddle as he ran through fear-thick shadows back to the front door.

James had a handful of soft grey hair, the ends bloody, gripped in his fingers and an eye plucked whole from his head like a pebble from the ground. The socket was dark and looked half-rotted already, as if there wasn't much left of Riggs after he'd made room for James. Opposite him Cook had a bloody temple and a bruise that ran from his cheekbone to his jaw. His left arm hung limp and awkward, at the wrong angle under his sleeve.

"I have them!" Elijah yelled as he staggered over the threshold.

His hand was so tightly clenched around the tokens that he could feel the milled edges of the coins against his skin. The handkerchief flapped from his hand as he raised it, the monogram suddenly more a dribble of blood than elegant stichery, and James roared as he saw it. He dropped his head and charged at Elijah, mouth gaped open and bloody as if he planned to swallow him whole.

Behind him Cook held up his good hand, fingers crooked, and waited. Elijah supposed if he died, at least he'd never know if he put his trust in the

wrong man again. He tossed the tokens over James head. The handkerchief caught the wind and fluttered away, caught on the rough edges of the broken wall, but the coin flashed silver in the moonlight as it flipped end over end into Cook's hand.

James ploughed into Elijah like a bull and they fell back into the morgue. The weight of the man on top of him as they hit the ground popped one of Elijah' ribs with a sharp flash of pain.

“All your—“ James slurred out angrily as he grabbed fistfuls of Elijah' hair and smacked his head into the ground. “Fault! You could have! Just helped!”

He stopped abruptly, mouth open as his tongue flapped horribly in search of words. Tears sprang to his one eye and dribbled, half salt and half blood, down his seamed cheek. It dripped on Elijah' face and stung like acid.

Cook crouched down next to them, the silver coin between his teeth. He smiled that sly grin of his, tossed it, and swallowed it. James rolled off Elijah and garbled out a scream as he writhed on the ground, smoke and stench leaked out of his pores and wriggled like worms.

“You had a place in this world,” the Cuckoo said as he wiped his lips with the handkerchief. The embroidery carved out a C now, black against the bleached ivory. “Now it's mine.”

James screamed, frustrated and unhappy as a child, and then he was gone. The shell of what was left behind sighed like a child, curled up around itself, and waited to die.

“So are you a demon now?” Elijah rasped out as he resisted the urge to squirm like a baked worm on hot concrete. His ribs screamed as he rolled

onto his side and propped himself up. He thought that was about as far as he could get with the heavy drumbeat of pain that swam through his head.

Cook caught his arm and helped him up. His body felt warmer than it had, or maybe that was Elijah.

“If you want,” Cook said as he kissed a trickle of blood from Elijah’s forehead. “I could be yours.”

No one ever came to claim the dead who had spilled out of the overturned carriage outside of Craven. They were buried behind the Baths, each grave marked with a stone. Twice a day Elijah walked the bounds of the makeshift graveyard to be sure that everyone had stayed where he put them.

Usually they did.

Riggs was blamed for the murder of his wife and for Elijah’s broken ribs and concussion. No one wanted to ask too many questions, in case somehow they got answers for how a man had rotted down to skin and bone by dawn or ripped apart a balcony.

No one ever asked why Elijah walked out to the train station every night at midnight either, or who the pale man was who walked back to his house with him. They didn’t need to. After all, any good, God-fearing man wouldn’t have been up that hour at all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



TA Moore is a Northern Irish writer of romantic suspense, urban fantasy, and contemporary romance novels. A childhood in a rural, seaside town fostered in her a suspicious nature, a love of mystery, and a streak of black humour a mile wide. As her grandmother always said, ‘she’d laugh at a bad thing that one’, mind you, that was the pot calling the kettle black. TA Moore studied History, Irish mythology, English at University, mostly because she has always loved a good story. She has worked as a journalist, a finance manager, and in the arts sectors before she finally gave in to a lifelong desire to write.

Coffee, Doc Marten boots, and good friends are the essential things in life. Spiders, mayo, and heels are to be avoided.

| [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Goodreads](#) |