

Cursed Under London
Gabby Hutchinson Crouch

CHAPTER ONE – The Unundead

It begins where it should have ended, in an alleyway at the rough end of Upper Blackfriars. It was night, not that there was much distinction between night and day beneath the tight-packed buildings that loomed over the cobbles in this part of Upper London. Be it sunshine or moonlight, whatever natural light dared to peek through the glorious English clouds or the smoke of the city tended not to venture all the way down to an alley like this. Tiny candle flames in windows overlooking the alley faintly illuminated the scene below in timid orange flickers, as if they were afraid of what they might see down there.

And, well they might be. There in the gloom lay something that was very nearly, but not quite, a corpse. For now, it was still technically a man, but it was a mess of a man. The cobbles around him were slick with dark red. The man slumped in the blood and the filth, and waited for the inevitable.

After a while, there came a soft, heavy sound. Padded paws on stone, the faint click of claws, the dragging of a long, thick tail of scales along the muddy alleyway. It stopped close to the man. The creature sat next to him and waited.

'Don't mind me,' said the creature in a husky, friendly voice after a while. 'I'm not going to start until... you know. I would never. Just, I smelled the blood, and wanted to get here first and call Baggsie.'

The man managed to turn his head a little and opened an eye, to squint at the creature. She was small, for a dragon. Either a lone juvenile or a runt who had somehow managed to scrap it out and survive to early adulthood. Whichever it was, this dragon clearly needed a decent meal, and as soon as he was dead, his fresh carcass would provide one. His death would help her survive. That was something, he supposed. And, he did appreciate her not starting to eat him until he was dead. He knew that the law expressly prohibited killing, or eating living humans on the Uppeside, but he also knew that times were hard, criminality was rife and that a crafty dragon could drag him down below to Deep London where it was legal to kill him. One could even argue that laws agreed with the Tudor throne to protect the people of Upper England shouldn't apply to him, because he was foreign.

'Besides,' continued the dragon, 'thought it might be nice for you to have a bit of company at this difficult time.'

The man huffed a painful sigh. He really had been hoping to die alone. It was what he deserved. Oh well. Maybe there were some other upsides. He spat out a glob of blood and gritted out a question.

'Did you see a cat?'

'A cat?' asked the dragon.

'With an injured tail,' added the man.

'Um,' replied the dragon, 'hang on...' she sniffed the air, then snuffled over to a barred basement window a few yards along the alleyway. 'There's one in this basement,' she announced. 'Don't know how she's injured, but I smell cat blood.'

'She going to be OK?'

The dragon gave another sniff. 'She isn't losing enough blood for it to kill her, and she's safe and warm down there.' The dragon came ambling back to the almost-corpse. 'Unlike someone I could mention. Why'd you ask about her?'

The man didn't answer.

'Don't tell me that's how you ended up getting all beaten and stabbed?' asked the dragon, 'stepping in to help a little street cat?'

Still, the man didn't answer.

'That's adorable,' added the dragon, 'I mean, as far as fatal beatings can be adorable.'

The man groaned a groan that he hoped conveyed an emphatic 'just let me die in peace'.

The dragon sat down again, and they both waited – the dragon exhibiting rather more anxiety than the dying man. The dragon kept looking around, nervously. Clearly, the rules of Bagsie didn't count for much in a city full of crime and hungry dragons, vampires, zombies and so on. The man had no doubt that this dragon was starving and that she stood no chance of winning a fight if any bigger creatures came to steal her meal before he was dead.

He tried dying faster, for her. It didn't work.

'Is there anything else I can do for you?' asked the dragon. 'Any last words you want me to pass on to a loved one?'

The man snorted, derisively. The dragon shifted anxiously again.

'Would you mind if maybe I took you down to the Deepside?' she asked after a while. 'The tube's not far at all, and once we're in Deep London, I can make it instant and painless for you... oh, hang on, actually...'

The darkness was closing in, now. Not the darkness of the alley; a different darkness. A more final darkness. A darkness that silenced sound, and made pain dwindle to nothing. He couldn't even smell the stench of the alleyway anymore. Here it came. No more running, no more guilt, just the peace of death. And, perhaps, at the other end of the peace, someone would be waiting for him. He was coming! He embraced the absolute darkness.

And then, in the darkness, a spark. A spark! Oh no! It hurt. His heart... his lungs... they were working again. Heaving, pumping, painfully. Stop it, you horrible organs, just let me die, he wanted to cry. The darkness fell away from him, insubstantial as a shadow. The alley was still there. The dragon was still there, her mouth open, glistening fangs inches from his face, her expression frozen with guilty embarrassment. She pulled her head back.

'I am so sorry, I could have sworn you were... you know.'

The pain was searing. He could hear the blood in his ears, and it all hurt so much. 'What happened?'

'I don't know! I swear, your heart stopped, all of you stopped. And then you just... restarted.' She anxiously looked around herself again. 'I should go.'

'No... wait.'

'No. I shouldn't be here. You're not dying, you're not dying at all! You used to smell of death, but now you smell all weird. This is wrong, this is bad.'

The dragon started hurrying away, waddling along the narrow alley as fast as her little reptile legs could take her. The man tried to get up, tried to follow her. Everything hurt so horribly. He just about managed to push himself painfully onto all fours before the dragon disappeared into the gloom, in the direction of Blackfriars tube.

Great. Now he was alive and in horrible pain and stuck in an alley. He didn't feel like he was dying, anymore. It was nothing as peaceful as that. This felt worse. And, not dying meant that he now had to deal with the problem of how he was supposed to get all the way to Upper Southwark. South of the river, in this state, at this time of night. He managed to get some purchase on the wall of one of the nearby buildings, pushed himself onto his wobbly legs and began to make slow, aching progress along the alleyway, dragging himself along from beam to beam like a nervous first-time ice skater. This was going to take forever.

He persisted, step by shuffling, painful step. Left foot. Right foot.

But then, he thought to himself as he made his slow southbound trek, hadn't his whole life been a slow, painful journey, step by terrible step? He'd really thought the journey had come to an end, tonight. He should have died. It didn't make sense. This was yet another problem for him, right when he'd hoped his problems may have finally been over.

Typical, thought Fang.

Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot.

Fang was already five thousand miles away from the only place he'd ever called home – give or take a few hundred miles or so, honestly he'd stopped counting somewhere in the Ottoman Empire. What was another mile or two, on bloodied, bruised and shaking legs?

Left foot. Right foot. Left foot. Right foot. Left.

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'Well, then.' Lady Alice Feignshaugh paused, cleared her throat and started again. 'Monsieur Quitbeef. Yes. Well, then.'

Lazare de Quitte-Beuf smiled winningly at his employer and tried to pretend that he couldn't read from her tone that she wasn't going to be his employer for very much longer, at all.

Lady Alice clapped her hands together with a pretence of pleased satisfaction. 'I must commend you, Monsieur, on your tutelage. After a mere nine months, I must say that Cuthbert's command of the French language has come on in leaps and indeed bounds. He speaks it as if a native of your land, I have no doubt!'

Cuthbert Feignshaugh could not speak French as well as any Frenchman, and it didn't take a Parisian to know that. Cuthbert could speak French as well as a bored child with a thick English accent, and even then was only able to tell you whether the boulangerie was on the left or the right, and that on Tuesdays he enjoyed riding horses with his cousins.

'And Cecily plays the flute like an absolute cherub following your months of instruction,' continued Lady Alice, with a cheer as thin and as hard as varnish.

Lazare had never seen cherubim, nor heard whether they were known to be proficient flautists. There was, he supposed, a chance that cherubim were only capable of squeaking out a tune that occasionally veered into something like Greensleeves, the way Cecily Feignshaugh was after nine difficult, patience-straining, if reasonably paid months.

'So, I do believe your mission has been a complete success,' concluded Alice. 'Bravo, Monsieur.'

She smiled at him, expectantly. Lazare smiled back, mentally unpicking what she'd said to locate the meaning she'd buried deep amongst layers of flattering lies.

'Are you,' he hazarded, his smile never dropping, 'firing me, Madame?'

Lady Alice beamed at him. 'Goodness, no! We're setting you free! To pursue other avenues! You have your acting career to concentrate on after all, you don't want to waste any more of your time after achieving what you temporarily joined our household to do.'

Lazare continued to smile politely. 'Is this because I'm French?'

'Monsieur, you're so delightfully amusing, why, we *hired* you because you're French!'

He nodded, aware that his smile was losing its lustre. 'Is it because of the wings?'

And there was the glint in her eye. 'Noooo,' she cooed, 'goodness, no. We Upper English do not discriminate against our friends from the other side. Why, you saw for yourself, Mr Peaks was taken good care of, even though he was a zombie.'

Lazare didn't reply. Mr Peaks had been kept as a footman in Lady Alice's employment for a mere six weeks after being turned into a zombie. Lazare had had his little misfortune only a month ago.

'I'm sure that, as with Mr Peaks when he felt it was time for him to move on, you'll find London to be simply packed with fresh opportunities for a talented young vampire such as yourself.'

'I'm not a vampire, Madame,' Lazare replied, ensuring she could see his normal human teeth through his renewed smile.

'Or whatever it is that you actually are,' continued Lady Alice, smoothly, and Lazare had no answer to that. He knew that the one thing he very definitely was, was fired.

Lazare wasn't a vampire. That much, he knew. To become a vampire, one must be turned by another vampire. It hadn't been a vampire attack that had started Lazare's recent troubles, but humdrum, run of the mill human muggers, with boring old cudgels and knives. Vampire attacks were actually very rare in Upper London, in spite of all the lurid rumours and whispers about their kind, and it was even rarer for a vampire to revive a dying human by

turning them without their consent. No, none of this was a vampire's doing. In fact, the only vampires that ever bothered Lazare even now were...

'Sir? Good Sir? Excuse me?'

Lazare sighed inwardly, and painted his smile on for the approaching vampire.

'I couldn't help but notice that you appear to be afflicted, Sir.'

The vampire seemed to be a boy of around ten or eleven, although his eyes, like the eyes of any vampire, were old and tired. Like Lazare, the boy had a large pair of leathery wings, the same shade as the skin of his face. There was something familiar about him that at first Lazare couldn't quite place.

'Wulfric, Sir,' continued the child, holding out a hand for Lazare to shake.

Lazare accepted, politely. 'Lazare de Quitte-Beuf, at your service. Um... have we met?'

'Possibly?' Wulfric shadowed Lazare's own expression as they tried to place one another. 'Do you frequent the Moon and Werewolf? Upper Deptford?'

'Guilty as charged.' He clicked his fingers. 'You're a pot boy there.'

Wulfric looked offended. 'I'm the owner.'

'Of course you are, Monsieur,' replied Lazare, hurriedly. 'Forgive a poor mummer's foolishness.'

'You're that French fellow who drinks with the actors,' said Wulfric. It was the vampire's turn to look apologetic. 'Your affliction must be very new, in that case. I truly hope your vampirism isn't down to any of my clientele, I've been very firm with undead customers that they are not to-'

'They did not,' said Lazare, cutting the boy off, 'as I am not "afflicted" as you think.' He flashed another wide, deliberately toothsome grin.

Wulfric noticed the teeth, and Lazare watched the by-now familiar expressions of surprise, confusion and disappointment flit over the vampire's face.

'Oh,' said Wulfric.

'*Oui*,' replied Lazare, smoothly.

'So, you're... you're not actually...'

'I am not. Same old human teeth, same old human appetites, I was able to go outside that one afternoon last week when it was sunny.'

Wulfric sighed. 'That's a pity, Monsieur.'

'I know.'

'I was hoping to invite you to join our support network.'

Lazare nodded. He'd had this conversation before and yes, he agreed, it truly was a pity. One vampire had managed to get a good five minutes into trying to sell the support network to him before noticing that he wasn't actually a vampire. It sounded marvellous.

'We have lawyers and everything,' continued Wulfric, 'we could have helped you get a base in Deep London, keep your connections Uppertime, or help with any discrimination cases, in terms of employment, or lodgings...'

Wulfric gave a meaningful little glance to Lazare's bags of belongings.

'I am indeed between jobs and lodgings right now,' Lazare admitted, 'at least nobody chases one with flaming torches in these enlightened days.'

Instead, thought Lazare, in the forward-thinking and ever-so-civilised Upper London of 1599, they waited a few weeks so that it didn't look like they were sacking you because of the wings, and then turned you out of a live-in tutoring position so that you were immediately without income or board and under threat of being arrested for vagrancy. In many ways, that was worse than a lit torch – it was insincere and cowardly. You weren't allowed to fight back. You just had to say 'thank you Madame' for the insipid letter of reference and politely be on your way.

Wulfric's smooth little face creased with a bewildered frown, and the vampire's top lip curled up slightly as he gave Lazare a good sniff. 'So... what *are* you? Where do you belong? Are you undead, at least?'

'I don't know,' replied Lazare, truthfully. He didn't *feel* undead, but how else could he possibly describe the sudden change that had happened to him a month ago? He had almost died... no, that wasn't quite it. For the briefest moment, it had felt as if he *had* died. And then, there had been a sort of spark in the darkness, and a searing pain, and then he simply hadn't been dead anymore. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't entirely alive, either. He definitely wasn't human anymore – the massive wings he'd woken up with made that pretty clear – but in the past month he'd discovered he wasn't a vampire, a ghoul, a zombie or any of the known magical demographics of Deep London either. As for the question of where he belonged, he definitely didn't know the answer to that either, but certainly hoped it wasn't 'in the gutter'.

'Before you ask,' added Lazare, anticipating what usually came next whenever a vampire respectfully approached him, 'I don't want you to take me Deepside and finish me off or fully turn me, either. I just feel like that would make things more complicated.'

'No.' Wulfric stopped sniffing and stood back again, with a troubled expression. 'I don't think I could, even if you did want that. You smell... off.'

As an enthusiastic consumer of the finest perfumes available on a tutor's wage, Lazare couldn't help but feel a little affronted at that. "'Off'..?'

'Off,' repeated Wulfric, still frowning. 'I'm so sorry, Monsieur. I don't think I can help you, at all.'

Lazare tried another smile, even though his heart really wasn't in it. 'That's all right.'

'And I certainly can't try turning you or drinking you, because you really do smell...'

'Off,' replied Lazare with forced cheer. 'Yes. I get it.'

'I should get back to it,' continued the vampire, turning back the way he'd come, 'there was a dead fox in the gutter over there that should make a decent meal for a couple of... oh, for pity's sake!'

Lazare gazed over the little vampire's head to see what had annoyed him so much. There was indeed some of a dead fox lying in the gutter, although the back half of it was a cleanly picked skeleton by now. A stumpy, brick-brown runt of a dragon was making fast work of scavenging the carcass.

'I was going to have that,' cried Wulfric. 'I called Baggsie!'

The dragon looked cowed. 'You were chatting, I didn't think you'd mind. D'you want me to save you a leg?'

'No! I wanted...!' Wulfric sighed. 'Fine, I'll have a leg. And the heart, unless you've snaffled that, too.'

The dragon backed away from the fox corpse, before sniffing the air and staring at Lazare.

'*Bonjour*,' said Lazare, politely.

'We don't have to share with him,' Wulfric told the dragon, reaching into the cadaver's chest cavity. 'He's not one of us.' The little vampire pulled the heart out easily and tucked into it as if it were an apple.

The dragon approached Lazare with a combination of trepidation and wonder, still sniffing. 'I recognise that stink.'

'I don't stink...!' Lazare complained. He was wearing his second best pomander, for crying out loud.

'I can smell it even under all that lavender you're wearing.' The dragon sat down in front of him, the fox corpse seemingly forgotten. 'God's Scales,' she exclaimed, 'it happened again. I found another one!'

'Lavender is very in fashion right now,' argued Lazare, before breaking off suddenly. 'Wait... what do you mean, "another one"?''

'Another one,' repeated the little dragon, brightly, like that was enough of an explanation.

'Another... not-quite-a-vampire?' asked Lazare.

The dragon turned tail and started waddling off. 'I'll show you him. C'mon.'