

DEAD MAN WALKING



**SIMON R.
GREEN**





CALL ME ISHMAEL. *Ishmael Jones.*

I am the monster who hunts monsters. The man in the shadows that even the shadows are afraid of. The secret agent whose life is the greatest secret of all. And some of the cases I work on are trickier than others.

Even secret agents feel the need to raise their heads above the parapet sometimes. And so we emerge from the shadows just long enough to sniff the air, take a meeting, drop off information; or put the hard word on someone who's been showing too much interest in something they shouldn't. London has always been the favoured meeting place for spies of all kinds. Ever since Christopher Marlowe (who knew Faust personally) took his orders from Dr. Dee (who spoke with angels on a regular basis) as part of Queen Elizabeth I's intelligence network, London has been both a sanctuary and a feeding ground for all those people who aren't supposed to exist. Drifting quietly down streets with no name, we slip discreetly into crowded bars or private back rooms, to discuss the matters and make the deals that shape the fate of nations. We come and we go, and you never see us; because you don't need to know the kind of things we have to do, so you can sleep easily in your beds.

There is a world beneath the world; a hidden place of secrets and lies, deception and double-dealing, masquerade and murder. Where people you've never heard of work for departments that don't officially exist, doing things that no one will ever admit to. It can be a fascinating life if you don't weaken, but it's not for the faint of heart.

❖ ONE ❖

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

It was a surprisingly sunny day in mid-Autumn when I first heard that the prodigal son wanted to come in from the cold. I was sitting in a pizza parlour on Oxford Street, happily working my way through a deep-dish meat-feast that was supposed to serve two, while waiting for my contact to show up. All around me, the tables were crowded, the noise levels were satisfyingly high and, because it was after all the middle of London, I could make out half a dozen different languages adding to the protective babble. When the world thinks you don't exist, and you want to keep it that way, you learn to be very careful about where you show your face. Fast-food outlets are always a good place to hide in plain sight. Where people are always coming and going, and any number of conversations can take place without fear of being overheard. And as long as you don't tip too little or too big, even the waiter won't remember you.

I'd chosen a table at the rear, with my back to the wall, so I could be sure of getting a good look at everyone else. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance and a healthy dose of paranoia. My chair was set far enough back from the table

that I could be sure of getting to my feet in a hurry without my legs getting trapped; and I'd already worked out six different ways to quietly disappear, should it prove necessary. One of the disadvantages of living in my world is that you can never relax when you're out in public. You always have to be prepared for enemy action.

The Colonel slipped in off the street with an easy grace and stood for a moment just inside the doors, so he could look the place over. Like a predator checking out the possibilities at a new watering hole. This haughty-looking individual was a new Colonel, the old one having been murdered last year. I caught his killer and avenged his death, but that didn't bring him back. The Colonel is the middleman, the go-between, the overseer and case officer for all his very special agents. I have no idea what his real name might be; but then he doesn't know mine.

If the Colonel is a mystery, the Organization we both work for is a myth, an urban legend of the hidden world; the people who move behind the scenery, making the decisions that really matter. I have no idea who or what they might be, but as long as they preserve my anonymity and provide me with work worth doing, I'm happy enough to go along.

The new Colonel was a tall and elegant presence in his mid-thirties, dressed in the finest three-piece business suit Savile Row had to offer. Which should have made him stand out in such an everyday setting; but he was wrapped in so much unselfconscious authority no one wanted to look at him for fear of attracting his attention. In his own way, he was as invisible as I was. Almost certainly ex-military, given his bearing, and handsome enough in a supercilious sort of way. He looked the pizza parlour over as though he'd never set foot in such an establishment before and now, having done so, was convinced he'd been right all along.

His stern gaze finally picked me out of the crowd, and he strode through the packed tables with a magnificent disdain for one and all. A waiter tried to distract him with a brandished menu, so he could direct the Colonel to a table in his area; only to wither and fall back under the Colonel's icy stare. The great man finally slammed to a halt in front of me, and I made a point of ignoring him as I concentrated on my pizza.

"Next time," said the Colonel, in his best clipped and businesslike tones, "I will choose the setting for our meeting."

"No you won't," I said, looking up to fix him with my best cold stare. "You can call me any time and I'll answer, because that's the deal I made when I joined the Organization. But I decide when and where I appear in public. I wouldn't feel safe in any place you'd feel comfortable."

The Colonel indulged himself with another small sigh. "Did you lecture my predecessor like this?"

"I didn't need to," I said. "We respected each other. Tell me, why are you always the Colonel? Did I join the army and nobody told me?"

"I really couldn't say."

"And people wonder why I have trust issues. Would you care to order something? So you won't look entirely out of place?"

"I think not," said the Colonel. "I shall be dining at my club later."

"You won't get food like this there."

"Exactly. Now let me explain why you're here."

"Does it have something to do with Mummy and Daddy and a very special hug?"

"I understand the old Colonel was prepared to indulge your general impertinence and lack of respect," he said

heavily. "I, on the other hand, am famous for my complete lack of a sense of humour when it comes to such things."

I smiled at him, not entirely unkindly. "Unclench, Colonel. You'll last longer. Trust me, I've been doing this a lot longer than you."

"Since 1963, to be exact," said the Colonel. "You don't look your age, Mr. Jones."

"You don't know my age," I said.

"I've read your file," said the Colonel. "It didn't take me long, because there isn't much in it. No personal details, no background, no photos . . . Just a list of the cases you've worked on, and their outcome. Who are you, Ishmael Jones?"

"Wrong question," I said.

"What is the right question?"

"You see," I said. "You knew it all along."

He studied me for a long moment, as though he believed he could see right through my defences if he just tried hard enough.

"All our agents are assured their anonymity, but you take your privacy to extremes. How are we to protect you from your enemies, if we don't know who and what we're protecting?"

"No questions," I said. "That was the deal I made when I joined."

He sighed, just a little dramatically. "In an organization that exists to deal with mysteries, you seem determined to be the biggest mystery of them all."

"Is someone planning to deal with me?" I said.

"Not while you can still be useful. But if you continue to insist on keeping things from us . . ."

"I'm not the only one," I said. "Unless you're suddenly prepared to tell me your real name?"

“After you, Mr. Jones.”

I didn’t quite laugh in his face. “I don’t even know who it really is I’m working for.”

“Which is as it should be.”

“Do you know?”

“I doubt it,” said the Colonel.

“What do you want with me?” I said. “What could be so important that I had to drop everything just to sit down with you? What could be so secret you couldn’t even bring yourself to hint at it over the phone? A phone, I might remind you, that was given to me by the Organization. Along with a firm assurance that God herself would have a hard time listening in.”

“Frank Parker wants to come home,” said the Colonel.

And that stopped me dead in my tracks. I knew that name. Everyone in our line of business did. Parker used to be one of the Organization’s most respected field agents. I never met the man; but it’s inevitable that people like us will hang out with people like us. And over a drink or three, it’s inevitable that we will end up exchanging gossip and trying to outdo each other with strange tales and weird adventures. Because only we can talk openly about the kind of things we do.

Frank Parker spent more than twenty years operating in the wilder areas of the hidden world. Taking down people, and things that only pretended to be people, to protect Humanity and keep the world safe. As a reward, he was given all the most important and dangerous cases. Because Parker was the Organization’s blue-eyed boy; their foremost troubleshooter, destined for great things. Back in the day, you could frighten a whole room full of really bad people just by dropping his name.

And then he went rogue. Just dropped out of sight one

day; and the next thing anyone knew, he was working for everyone except the Organization. Doing bad things for bad people, for really good money.

I sat back in my chair, ignoring my meal. I wasn't hungry anymore.

"So Frank Parker has reappeared," I said. "What do you want me to do? Organize a whip-round for his coming-home party?"

"Hardly," said the Colonel.

"Did he ever betray any of his fellow agents?" I said.

"No," said the Colonel. "He never did . . . Even though the pressure on him to do so must have been immense."

"So he didn't leave because he was mad at the Organization," I said. "He just wanted out. Interesting . . ."

"Irrelevant," said the Colonel.

"Not from where I'm sitting," I said.

"After several years of working for the opposition, Parker disappeared again," said the Colonel. "No one could find him, even though some very highly motivated people spent a lot of time looking. Most of us thought he was dead and that we could all relax at last. But just twelve hours ago Parker reached out to us."

I didn't ask how. The Colonel wouldn't tell me.

"Did he say where he'd been, all these years he's been missing?"

"No. Just that he wanted to come home, as soon as possible."

"Does the Organization want him back?"

"He says he's ready to dish the dirt on everyone he ever worked for. Tell us everything he ever did for them. In return for having all his sins forgiven, and a new identity to retire behind."

"And you couldn't afford to miss out on a deal like that," I said.

"A chance to bury so many of our worst enemies, and put

right some of the damage he did when he left? Oh yes, Mr. Jones, we want to know everything Frank Parker knows.”

“Even if it does sound a little too good to be true?” I said carefully.

“Exactly,” said the Colonel. “Always look a gift horse in the mouth, because it might have a small army tucked away inside it. Parker is currently installed at Ringstone Lodge.”

I didn’t let anything show in my face. I’d heard of the Lodge, and not in a good way. An isolated and extremely secure interrogation centre; for defecting agents, suspected traitors, and anyone who knew things the Organization wanted to know. Ringstone Lodge, where the truth will out. One way or another.

“I love a good gossip as much as any other agent,” I said. “But I have to ask, why are you telling me this, Colonel?”

“Because we need to be sure whether the man we have really is Frank Parker,” said the Colonel. “Extensive and repeated plastic surgeries have made him unrecognizable. And since we have no physical records on file, it’s hard to be sure just who it is we’ve got. And we need to be certain before we can trust any of the information he gives us.”

“What has this got to do with me?” I said. “I never even met the man.”

“We’re limiting the number of people with direct access,” said the Colonel. “Because Parker, if he really is Parker, claims to have solid information about bad apples within the Organization. Not just from his time; but right now.”

I looked at him for a long moment. “And you think that’s possible?”

“People above me do. We need a field agent to join the interrogation team at Ringstone Lodge. Because only another agent would have the necessary experience to ask the right questions and evaluate the answers.”

“You need to know whether he’s a ringer.”

“Exactly. So, off you go to Ringstone Lodge. Two very experienced interrogators are already in place; they’ll do all the heavy lifting. Technically you’ll be in charge, but don’t push it.”

“Have there been any attempts to get to Parker since his return?” I said. “To silence him, before he can name names?”

“Not so far. But if there are traitors within the Organization, we can’t be sure how long his location will remain secret. The Lodge has first-rate security protections in place, but . . .”

“Yes,” I said. “But . . . How long can you give me before I have to make a decision?”

“Forty-eight hours. After that, word will get out and the opposition will start taking steps to limit the damage his information could do.”

“So,” I said. “No pressure, then.” I sat up straight in my chair as a thought struck me. “I take it I do have the Organization’s assurance that no one at the Lodge will start asking me awkward questions?”

The Colonel smiled briefly. “I can understand how someone with your privacy issues, and such an inflated sense of your own importance, might well be reluctant to see the inside of Ringstone Lodge. But don’t flatter yourself, Mr. Jones, we’re really not that interested in your no doubt murky background. Unless, of course, there’s something you’re not telling us . . .”

“More than you could possibly imagine,” I said.

“Only guilty people need to keep their lives secret,” said the Colonel.

“And that attitude is exactly why I take such pains to guard my privacy,” I said. “I serve the Organization and in return they hide me from the world. That is the beginning and end

of our relationship. The moment you do anything to threaten that, I am out the door and in the wind. And you can explain to your lords and masters how you lost them one of their best field agents.”

“You really think you can just disappear these days?” said the Colonel. “Constant surveillance has made it a much smaller world. You have no idea how much effort goes into hiding you and your fellow agents.”

“Parker managed,” I said.

I looked expectantly at the Colonel. Normally, this would be when he handed over the briefing file for the mission. He looked steadily back at me.

“There is no file on this case,” the Colonel said carefully. “And there isn’t going to be one. No official record, nothing in writing, no paper trail. Because if there are traitors operating inside the Organization, they can’t be allowed to know that Frank Parker is threatening to reveal their identities. There is no mission. I am not here talking to you. The only people who know about Frank Parker are those who’ve had direct contact with him, who are currently enjoying a nice holiday somewhere very secure in complete isolation; and those at the very top who give me my orders. And that’s the way it’s going to stay.”

“So the left hand doesn’t know who the right hand’s interrogating?” I said.

“Officially,” said the Colonel, “no one knows Parker is being held at Ringstone Lodge. There are no records of his arrival in this country, and everyone at the Lodge has been brought in specially from outside the Organization just for this particular operation. All the security, interrogation and support staff have been sequestered from the Ministry of Defence. They don’t know what we want their people for, and they know better than to ask.

“All of these individuals have worked with us before and have proper Organization clearance. They’ll tell you everything you need to know, once you get to the Lodge. But let me be very clear: you are not to contact me until you have made a decision as to whether or not this potential gold mine really is Frank Parker. And whether the information he is offering is worth anything. I will take it from there. Parker will then be sent on somewhere else, the Lodge people will be dismissed, and you will be free to return to wherever you consider home.”

“Fair enough,” I said. I looked at him thoughtfully. “You’ve made it clear you don’t approve of me, or my methods. So why haven’t you argued for one of your other agents to work this mission?”

“You were selected at the very highest level,” said the Colonel. “Because you are our most secretive agent, who has always maintained the greatest distance between yourself and the rest of the Organization. You are therefore the least likely to be involved with any of our possible traitors.”

“And, of course, if anything should go wrong I will be the easiest to blame and throw to the wolves. Because absolutely no one is in my corner.”

“I knew you’d understand,” said the Colonel.

“Is that it?” I said.

“One last matter,” said the Colonel. “We understand you prefer to work with a partner these days. Penny Belcourt.”

“Yes,” I said. “The one person I can trust to watch my back and not stick a knife in it.”

“You are expected to ensure her silence on all relevant matters,” said the Colonel. “Or we will.”

He rose to his feet. He took his time doing so, to make it clear leaving was entirely his idea. “You have your assignment. I don’t expect to hear from you again until

you've decided about Parker. Now I really must be on my way. Civilized food and a decent wine list await." He paused, to give me one last significant look. "I will find out the truth about you, Ishmael Jones."

"If you do, let me know," I said. "I've been wondering for years."

He turned his back on me and strode out, waitresses scattering before him like startled birds. I felt under pressure to prove myself to this new Colonel; even though, with my experience and proven success rate, I shouldn't have needed to. But like everyone else in this world, the Organization runs on "What have you done for us recently?"

And I still couldn't shake off the uneasy feeling that this might all be some kind of trap designed to lure me inside Ringstone Lodge and then lock the door behind me.

Penny came bustling over from the next table and dropped into the chair the Colonel had just vacated. She grinned cheerfully at me and I smiled back at her. A striking presence in her mid-twenties, Penny Belcourt had a pretty face with a strong bone structure and a mass of dark hair piled up on top of her head. Along with flashing eyes, dramatic make-up, a pleasantly trim figure, and enough nervous energy to run a funfair for a month. She nodded dismissively after the departing Colonel.

"Told you he'd never know I was here. He was so busy being important I could have danced the Time Warp on top of the table and he wouldn't have noticed. Are you going to eat all of that?"

She tore a slice off my pizza with one hand and crammed as much as she could into her mouth, rolling her eyes and making exaggerated noises of contentment.

"I wish you wouldn't do that," I said. "If you want something, just order from the menu. I'm good for it."

"I only wanted a taste," said Penny, indistinctly. "It's a big pizza. You can spare some."

"That's not the point," I said.

"It's good to share," Penny said firmly. "Also, very human. You should have learned that by now."

"I have been living among you since 1963," I said.

"Among isn't the same as being," she said crushingly. "You're still an outsider in many ways. That's why you need me."

"That's not the only reason I need you," I said.

She smiled. "You are a sweetie."

Penny had been my unofficial partner since I saved her life from the unnatural thing that killed the rest of her family at Belcourt Manor. She'd inherited a small fortune, which meant she was free to help me out as and when. We loved each other, as much as two people can when one of them isn't entirely human. Penny helped to keep me grounded and provided the human touch I still sometimes lack. I've been a part of human society for over fifty years, but I often think I'm no nearer understanding people. Penny assures me there are a lot of people who also feel the same way.

"Is this going to be a real case, at last?" said Penny.

"They're all real cases," I said. "Information gathering may not be sexy, but it's not always about monsters."

"But the monsters are real, in your world."

"Yes," I said. "They are."

"Where are you staying now?" she asked artlessly.

"Just another small hotel," I said. "You wouldn't recognize the name if I told you."

"I want to be with you."

"I am with you as much as I dare. I have to keep moving; because I can't afford to be noticed, to make ripples on the surface of the world. There's a reason why I've survived all these years in this very suspicious world."

“I thought the Organization protected you!”

“They clean up after me, on the few occasions when I do get noticed. But I haven’t stayed hidden this long by relying on the kindness of strange organizations.”

“I want to spend more time with you,” said Penny. “Just the two of us. All this dodging around makes me feel I’m just visiting your world.”

“I spend as much time with you as I can,” I said. “Any more could endanger you, as well as me.”

We held hands across the table, reaching out to each other across a divide greater than she could understand. Then Penny shrugged and changed the subject. She’s always been good at that when she realizes she’s losing an argument.

“This hidden world of yours is absolutely fascinating! I’ve been doing all kinds of research and have dug up some amazing stories.”

“You can’t trust everything you read on the Internet,” I said. “A lot of it is put there by groups like the Organization, as disinformation. To steer people away from the really nasty stuff. For their own protection.”

“So how much of it is true?” said Penny.

“Everything you wish wasn’t.”

“When are we going to get a proper case?” said Penny. “I want to fight monsters and save the world. I can do it, I’m spy girl!”

“You could say this case has a monster in it,” I said. “Frank Parker has more blood on his hands than any one man should have to account for.”

Penny frowned. “I thought you said you never met him?”

“I know about him. Secret agents gossip like schoolgirls. Just because they know they shouldn’t. Parker made his reputation by being able to break into anywhere, steal anything, and be gone before anyone even knew he was

there. He also killed a lot of people who needed killing, to make the world a better place. But after he left the Organization he killed a great many more, just because someone put a price on their head. Of course, how much of this is reputation and how much is true is hard to tell. In our game, everybody lies.”

“How good was Parker when it came to the monsters?” said Penny.

“He killed his fair share,” I said.

“Why did Parker quit?” Penny asked. “What could make him walk away from a job he was so good at? Did something happen? Something must have happened.”

“Presumably,” I said. “But no one knows what. The only weird thing about Parker, that made him stand out from all the other agents, was that he was supposed to be unkillable. There are all kinds of stories about him surviving being shot at close range or thrown from a great height. He’s walked away from plane crashes, explosions and impossible odds.”

“Could he be . . . different, like you?” said Penny.

“Not as far as I know,” I said. “But if he was as good at hiding his true nature as I am and something happened to threaten that . . . No wonder he just abandoned his old life and ran. And only worked for money after that, to make sure no one would ever get close again.”

“There must be someone in the Organization he worked with who could identify him!”

“Field agents mostly work alone,” I said. “It’s safer that way. Our only contact with the Organization is through the Colonel. And the Colonel who gave Parker his orders has been dead for some time now.”

“Is it really going to be that difficult to decide whether or not it’s actually him?”

“Parker’s changed his face so many times, he could be anyone.”

“You never changed your face,” said Penny.

“I really should,” I said. “But my face is one of the few things I have left from the old days.”

“Have you ever met anyone higher up than the Colonel?” asked Penny, wriggling excitedly on her seat as a thought struck her.

“No,” I said. “And I don’t want to. The last thing I need is the people in charge taking a special interest in me.”

“Then how can you be sure there actually is an Organization?” Penny said triumphantly. “I mean, what if it’s all just one big bluff?”

“I really don’t care,” I said. “They’re powerful enough to hide me from the world’s curious gaze. Nothing else matters.”

Penny sat back in her chair and studied me for a long moment. “You really don’t want to go to this Ringstone Lodge, do you? Is it really that bad a place?”

“It could be very bad for me.”

“But you’re still going.”

“Of course. It’s the job. And because if this is the real Frank Parker, I want to know why he quit. What he found out about the Organization . . . Perhaps when he tells me why he had to leave in such a hurry, I’ll want to run too.”

“You are a very suspicious person, Ishmael.”

I looked at the remains of my pizza and pushed it away. I had no appetite left.

“I don’t think you should go with me, Penny. This could turn out to be a very unpleasant case.”

She gave me a hard look. “All the more reason to have someone there you know you can trust.”

“I did manage to survive without you for a great many years.”

“There’s more to life than surviving,” said Penny. And she smiled dazzlingly at me, until I smiled back. “How long before we have to set off for the Lodge? Is there time for dessert?”

“There’s always time for dessert,” I said.

Penny clapped her hands together delightedly. “You do know what to say to a girl!” She picked up the menu and studied it carefully. Before asking, quite casually, “Is there anything unusual about Ringstone Lodge?”

“It has a reputation for being haunted.”

She stared at me over the top of the menu, her eyes big. “Really?”

“So they say. The Lodge encourages such stories to help keep people away.”

“Do you think we’ll get to see any spooks and spectres?”

“I doubt it. I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Penny slammed the menu down on the table and stared at me accusingly. “You? Of all people?”

“I may walk through the hidden world on a regular basis, but what I find there is still real,” I said. “And solid enough for me to lay my hands on, when necessary. Just because some weird things are real, that doesn’t mean all of them are.”