



GABRIEL'S CLOCK

HILTON PASHLEY

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Andersen Press

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For the real Angela and Jonathan



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Author's Note

1

Jonathan

IN THE BLINK of an eye Jonathan's life changed for ever. Not moments before he'd been sitting in the cottage kitchen eating his dinner; now he was hurtling down the cellar steps as three black shapes burst through the lounge window.

Jonathan's mother screamed and pulled him across the cluttered cellar while his father slammed the door shut behind them. With a shaking hand he turned a rusty iron key in the lock and backed away, his face pale.

'What's happening?' cried Jonathan. 'Who is that? Why are they breaking into our house?'

His father looked at him and shook his head wordlessly. For the first time in his life Jonathan realised what true fear looked like - stark, naked, gut-churning fear. He watched in terror as the cellar door rattled on its hinges. The room shook with the force of the blows, dust sifting from the ceiling like icing sugar.

'They've found us!' said his father.

'Who've found us?' Jonathan cried. 'I don't understand!'

His mother held him tightly, kissing the crown of his head, squeezing her eyes shut to keep tears from falling into his hair. 'I'm sorry, Jonathan,' she whispered to him. 'I'm so sorry; we tried so hard to protect you!'

With an awful crack, a huge fist punched its way through the door, splintering the ancient wood like kindling. The fist withdrew and, through the gap, a face peered in at the huddled family. The face had no visible features, just a smooth expanse of skin between hairline and shirt collar.

Jonathan screamed and pointed as the face smiled – if the sudden appearance of a crimson slit filled with jagged teeth could be called a smile.

‘It’s Crow,’ gasped Jonathan’s father. He turned to his wife and whispered in her ear. ‘You know where to take our boy. Use the old coal chute in the corner; it’s the only way out. I’ll hold them off for as long as I can.’ He kissed her cheek and hugged his son. ‘Be brave,’ he said, looking straight into Jonathan’s extraordinarily blue eyes. ‘Now go!’

‘We’re not just leaving you, Dad.’

‘I said, go!’ Jonathan’s father roared.

An awful, gurgling laugh erupted from outside the room. With one last massive blow, the door was torn from its hinges and reduced to matchwood. Into the room stepped three humanoid figures, each wearing shiny black shoes, an immaculately tailored pinstripe suit and a bowler hat.

The first, Crow, was a hulking brute; his ape-like arms dangled so low his knuckles almost brushed the floor. Another was short and thin, with long dark hair falling to her waist. The last figure stood between the other two; tall and menacing, he spread his arms wide to reveal over-long fingers tipped with cruel talons. None of the three had anything resembling a face – just those terrible smiles.

Jonathan’s mother grabbed his hand and half dragged him to an open bunker in the far corner of the cellar. Behind them, slick with black dust, a disused coal chute led up to an old wooden hatch. Beyond it lay the last rays of sunset, and escape.

The tallest figure stepped forward, his attention fixed on Jonathan. ‘*Boy!*’ he hissed, triumph dripping from the word like rancid fat.

Jonathan froze, his mind shrieking at him that this wasn’t happening. This sort of thing only happened in nightmares. It wasn’t *real*.

From the corner of the cellar, he watched as his father grabbed a short length of scaffolding pole that lay propped

against the cellar wall. Jonathan fully expected him to launch himself at the monsters that had invaded their home. Instead, and with extraordinary strength, his father swung at the huge brick pillar in the middle of the cellar floor, tearing through it like paper.

'Missed me,' said the tall monster.

Jonathan's father smiled grimly and shook his head, then Jonathan felt himself pulled off his feet and onto a pile of cobwebbed coal as the old cottage let out a groan of pain. He stared as the ceiling, and a great deal of the cottage collapsed into the cellar. It was as if a giant hand made of masonry and wood just slammed down onto his father and the three monsters, wiping them from view.

Dust and sound exploded all around him, and Jonathan fought his mother as she tried to pull him away.

'*Dad!*' he screamed. '*Dad!*'

Suddenly his fear left him and it was replaced by something else entirely, an emotion with which he was completely unfamiliar: cold fury. Jonathan gasped as the muscles in his shoulders and back began to shriek in pain. It was like something that was buried under his skin was trying to tear itself free.

'Jonathan!' his mother shrieked as she dragged him bodily up the filthy coal chute. 'We have to go; the whole cottage is about to—'

With a crack like a pistol shot, a wooden beam sheared from the wall above and swung down, striking Jonathan behind his right ear. He slumped in his mother's arms, his vision narrowed to a small, dim tunnel. A wet sensation ran down his neck, and he absently raised shaking fingers to the back of his head. He felt bone move, and a flare of agony lit up the inside of his skull like a firework.

His limbs virtually useless, Jonathan dimly felt himself dragged upwards and out into the fresh air, away from the choking brick dust and the noise of his collapsing home. He lay on damp grass, staring at the huge orange ball of the

setting sun, looking at the patterns it made as it lanced through the clouds. He reached out to touch it, but his arms wouldn't move.

There was the noise of a car engine being started and Jonathan was half carried, half dragged towards it. The world tilted as he was gently laid on something soft, his legs drawn up to his chest. He thought he could hear something. It sounded like his mother weeping uncontrollably, and he moved his lips to tell her not to be sad, but no sound came out, just a small bubble of blood.

He rocked gently on the car seat as his mother drove away from the cottage as fast as she could, not daring to look back in case she saw a faceless figure in a suit and bowler hat running down the road behind her.

'Where ... we ... going?' Jonathan managed to mumble.

'I'm taking you home, darling,' said his mother, her voice thick with an emotion he didn't recognise. 'I'm taking you home. Just hold on, please just hold on.'

'S'OK ... Mum. I'll ... hold ... on.'

A choked sob was his only reply. Jonathan watched the flickering light of sunset through the car windows above him. He watched as it dimmed, then failed completely, leaving him in darkness. The roar of the engine and the hum of the tyres on the road cradled him as he tried not to fall asleep. He didn't know why, but he feared that if he fell asleep now he might not wake up.

After what seemed like an age, the sound of tarmac was replaced by the soft crunch of leaves and small branches. The car drew to a gentle halt, and Jonathan felt himself lifted from the back seat, his mother's arm supporting him with extraordinary strength. The warm air of a summer night brushed his face as he stumbled along, his feet stubbornly refusing to put themselves one in front of the other. The throbbing at the back of his head was rapidly becoming his entire world.

Leaves and wood gave way to grass, and Jonathan felt something tingling at the edge of his consciousness; something that dulled the ache in his skull. It was like someone was holding a cold flannel to his forehead while whispering words of comfort in his ear. He smiled to himself, and gave in to the need to drift away.

Jonathan's mother sensed the change in her son and, with the last of her strength, she dragged his leaden body the few remaining steps to her destination - a little cottage tucked away in a graveyard behind a church. Sinking to her knees with Jonathan in her lap, she pounded her fist against the door.

'Please,' she sobbed under her breath. 'Please, Gabriel.'

There came a muffled thumping from inside the cottage. 'All right, I'm coming,' said a sleep-sodden voice.

The door was yanked open and an old man in bare feet and a linen nightshirt peered out. He stared open-mouthed when he saw who was sprawled on his doorstep. Jonathan's mother looked up at him, the imperial purple of her almond-shaped eyes almost black in the half-light while her tattered robes revealed a tracery of crimson scales that patterned her neck from behind her pointed ears right down to her shoulders. Delicate horns grew from her forehead and curved over her skull, almost meeting the bat-like wings that lay limp across her back.

'Savantha?' gasped Gabriel. 'Jonathan?' The old angel sagged against the doorframe and shut his eyes. 'Belial came for you, didn't he? I told you to stay here with me, where you'd be safe.' He shook his head in despair.

'Please help me,' begged Savantha, holding out a hand. 'I'm so tired. I can't maintain Jonathan's disguise as well as my own.'

Gabriel embraced them. 'Come inside,' he said. 'Before anyone sees you.' Leaning down, he half carried his visitors into the cottage.

‘He’s badly hurt,’ said Savantha, tears running down her face as she laid Jonathan on the sofa. ‘Darriel destroyed the cottage to bury the Corvidae and a beam hit Jonathan’s head. I don’t know how to stop the bleeding ...’

Gabriel kneeled beside them and gently slipped his hand beneath Jonathan’s blood-matted hair. He briefly closed his eyes in concentration; his will focused on the boy’s injuries.

‘His skull’s fractured and he’s lost a lot of blood.’

Savantha let out a small cry.

‘I can fix it,’ said Gabriel, squeezing her hand in reassurance. He paused, shut his eyes again and took a deep breath. The air around Jonathan’s head shimmered and brightened, filled with ever-shifting mathematical symbols. A smell of apples and beeswax filled the room, and Savantha watched in awe as her father-in-law performed a miracle as simply as if he were drawing the curtains.

Jonathan let out a sigh and his breathing became regular and deep. Colour returned to his cheeks and Savantha shook with a mixture of relief and exhaustion.

‘Thank you, Gabriel,’ she whispered.

Gabriel nodded, his lips set in a thin line. ‘Where is Darriel, Savantha? Where is my son?’

‘We’d run to the cellar,’ she said. ‘Darriel knocked out the floor supports and dropped the cottage on Rook, Raven and Crow so we could escape.’ She began to cry again. ‘He was buried with them. I don’t know what’s happened to him. Maybe he managed to get away and he’s following us?’

‘Maybe,’ said Gabriel. ‘But the demons of the Corvidae are strong, Savantha – that’s why Belial uses them. Darriel is a match for one of them, but all three at once?’ The angel shook his head. ‘This is exactly why I wanted you to live here in Hobbes End with me, not try to face the world alone.’

‘But Darriel—’

‘My son is as stubborn as his father,’ said Gabriel. ‘And proud too, which is a common fault with us angels.’

'I've got to go and see if Darriel's still alive!'

'I know,' said Gabriel. 'But you're exhausted; you need to catch your breath first. I'll get you something to drink.'

Savantha nodded, and Gabriel swiftly returned with a steaming mug of tea. As he handed it to her his face turned ashen and he let out a wracking cough.

'What's wrong?' asked Savantha.

'You know what's wrong,' said Gabriel, perching on the arm of the sofa. 'I don't have much power left. Every time I use some I'm left weaker than before. That's the price I pay for losing my wings.'

'I'm sorry,' said Savantha.

'Don't be,' replied Gabriel. 'It was my choice to give them away to create this village, to give my beloved Hobbes End a soul. I wouldn't take my power back even if I could - it would be murder. Anyway, what kind of grandfather would I be if I didn't help my grandson when he needed me?'

'You're an angel,' smiled Savantha.

'Ha-de-ha.' Gabriel smiled back then; looking down at Jonathan with a mixture of wonder and sadness, he reached out and brushed a stray lock of hair from his grandson's face. 'The power inside him is very strong now. I can feel it; all that potential just waiting for him to learn how to access it. It was obvious when he was born and now it's shining out like a beacon. It's no wonder Belial managed to find you.'

Savantha put her head in her hands. 'We stayed in one place too long. We hadn't seen any sign of Belial and the Corvidae for such a long time. We thought we were safe ...'

Gabriel sighed. 'Jonathan will never be safe, Savantha. Not until he's old enough and strong enough to face an archdemon by himself. Until then Belial will keep trying to catch him. Jonathan's the only half-angel, half-demon child in existence, and for some reason he's been blessed with more raw power than I believed possible. I see him as someone both Heaven and Hell could rally behind; but Belial, he just sees him as a potential weapon - a means to

carry on a grudge that should have been forgotten centuries ago.' Gabriel angrily thumped his fist against the sofa.

Savantha reached out and squeezed the old angel's hand. 'Will you look after Jonathan for me while I go and find my husband? Will you keep my boy safe?'

'You don't have to ask,' said Gabriel. 'Although I think it's best if his true appearance stays hidden for the moment. I'd trust the inhabitants of this village with my life, but there's no point broadcasting Jonathan's presence. I take it my grandson still knows nothing of what he is?'

Savantha shook her head. 'We've kept everything hidden from him, tried to let him lead a normal life.' She smiled ruefully. 'He thinks his parents are called Daniel and Sarah, and that his dad works in some top-secret government department. Imagine if he suddenly looked in the mirror one morning and saw *this*.'

She moved her hand slowly over Jonathan's face, the air shimmering as she did so. His features remained the same but with two startling additions: a pair of vestigial horns protruded from his temples, and a tracery of crimson scales similar to his mother's peeped out from the neck of his sweatshirt.

With another wave of Savantha's hand, Jonathan's horns and crimson scales disappeared. 'The masking should hold until he learns how to do it himself,' she said. 'Let's maintain the lie as long as we can, keep him safe.'

'He doesn't know who I am, does he?' said Gabriel.

Savantha shook her head sadly.

'Well, it's probably for the best,' said Gabriel. 'If we're going to hide Jonathan from Belial and the Corvidae, then we need to keep him away from me for his own safety. The best person to look after him is Ignatius. He'd love to have a child running around the vicarage again.'

Savantha took her sleeping son's hand. 'And while you look after Jonathan, I can find Darriel.'

'What if you can't?' asked Gabriel.

'Then I'm going to petition Lucifer for help. It's time he stopped sitting on the fence and did something about rogue archdemons.'

Gabriel raised his eyebrows in surprise. 'That's brave.'

Savantha snorted. 'Lucifer doesn't scare me. If Heaven won't do anything about Belial, then maybe Hell should.'

'I can't argue with that,' said Gabriel. 'But, please, be as quick as you can. Jonathan will be out cold for a few days, but when he wakes up in a strange place, without you or his father, surrounded by people he's never met, he's going to be scared and will ask a lot of awkward questions.'

'I know,' said Savantha. 'I don't want to be away from him a moment longer than I have to. But until I get back, you'll need to ...'

'Lie to him?'

She nodded.

'So be it,' said Gabriel.

Savantha turned to look at Jonathan. 'I can't even say goodbye.'

Gabriel shook his head. 'We'll keep Jonathan safe. Now go and bring my son back to me.'

Her face wretched, Savantha bent over Jonathan, kissed him gently on the cheek and whispered farewell.

2

I'm too old for this

GABRIEL SAT AND looked at Jonathan as he slept on the sofa. Savantha had gone, her distress at leaving her son matched only by her desire to find her husband.

'You'll be safe here in Hobbes End, Jonathan,' said Gabriel. 'I won't let Belial hurt you.'

He sighed and got to his feet. Grabbing an overcoat from a hook by the door and slipping on a pair of shoes, he quietly left his cottage, locking the door behind him. He made his way through the churchyard and along the road to the vicarage. He smiled when he saw a light on in one of the ground-floor rooms. 'Oh, Ignatius. Burning the midnight oil again, are we?'

The vicarage was surrounded by a high stone wall, with a pair of huge, wrought-iron gates leading onto a gravel drive. They were always open, and on each of the gateposts sat a granite gargoyle. Their eyes were closed and they were snoring. Not wanting to explain why he was creeping into the vicarage in the middle of the night, Gabriel tried to tiptoe past, but was foiled by the crunch of his shoes on gravel.

'Who goes there?' the gargoyles said in unison.

'Montgomery, Stubbs,' said Gabriel, 'I need to see Ignatius; sorry to wake you up when you're on guard duty.'

'That's OK, Gabriel,' chorused the gargoyles. 'Why are you wearing your nightshirt under your coat?'

The angel grinned. 'Look, we've had a new arrival in the village. I can't explain yet, but I need both of you to keep

quiet about anything you see tonight. Will you do that for me?’

‘You can trust us,’ they said. ‘Cross our hearts and hope to die.’

‘Hopefully it won’t come to that, but I suggest you pretend to be fast asleep until the sun comes up, OK?’

The gargoyles nodded, shut their eyes and began snoring again, very unconvincingly. Shaking his head, Gabriel continued up the drive until he reached the front door. Rather than use the brass bell-pull he gave a gentle knock. There was a pause, footsteps, and the door opened to reveal a massive shape that almost blotted out the light from the hallway.

‘Gabriel?’ boomed a deep, baritone voice.

‘Good evening, Grimm. My apologies for the lateness of my visit, but I need to see Ignatius.’

‘That sounds serious – you’d better come in.’

Gabriel stepped into the vicarage and followed Grimm down the hall to the kitchen.

‘Take a seat and I’ll put the kettle on. Ignatius will be through in a bit, he’s just writing in his journal.’

Gabriel smiled and nodded, watching Grimm as he went about one of his favourite activities, making tea. Halcyon Grimm was possibly the biggest human being Gabriel had ever known. He was less a man and more a piece of artillery. With his bald head, caterpillar eyebrows and badly broken nose, Grimm wouldn’t have looked out of place as a circus strongman. Luckily for everyone he came into contact with, though, his quick smile and gentleness soon put people at ease.

‘Hello, Gabriel. To what do we owe such an unexpected visit?’ The angel turned to see Ignatius Crumb, vicar of Hobbes End, standing in the kitchen doorway with an unlit pipe tucked into the corner of his mouth – he had given up smoking years earlier, but still liked the feel of his old pipe in his mouth.

‘We have a problem,’ said Gabriel. ‘I need you both to come with me to my cottage.’

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Ignatius.

Gabriel opened his mouth to speak when the flap in the back door banged open and a large black cat with white front paws and a dead bird in his mouth jumped into the room. The cat looked up, realised that all three men were looking at him and froze. His jaw opened with theatrical slowness and the soggy-feathered corpse fell to the floor. The silence was deafening.

‘What?’ said the cat. ‘Why is everyone staring at me? Stop it, you’re freaking me out!’

‘You’re not going to leave that there are you, Elgar?’ asked Grimm.

‘Well, I was intending to nibble on it later, but now I’ve lost my appetite.’

‘Then clear it away,’ growled Grimm.

‘Fine,’ huffed the cat, picking up the bird with his teeth and dropping it in the bin. He jumped onto the kitchen table and started washing his ears. ‘Nice jim-jams, Gabriel. What brings *you* out for a midnight stroll?’

The angel put his head in his hands. ‘I am too old for this,’ he sighed.

Ten minutes later, Ignatius and Grimm were standing in Gabriel’s cottage, staring at the wounded boy lying on the sofa.

‘Who is he?’ asked Ignatius.

‘He’s my grandson,’ said Gabriel.

Ignatius’ pipe fell out of his mouth and landed on the carpet. ‘I didn’t know you had a grandson!’

‘It’s complicated,’ said Gabriel. ‘This is Jonathan, and he’s in a great deal of trouble.’

‘What kind of trouble?’ asked Grimm.

‘The kind that involves being hunted by an archdemon. And tonight Belial found him. I’ve been dreading this ever since Jonathan was born.’

'Belial!' gasped Ignatius. 'What on earth would he want with your grandson?'

Gabriel sighed. 'I know Jonathan looks like an ordinary boy, but he isn't. His father is my son, Darriel ... but his mother, Savantha, is a demon from the area of Hell controlled by Belial.'

'You mean ...?' stuttered Ignatius.

Gabriel nodded. 'Yes. My grandson is the only half-angel, half-demon child in all of creation.'

'But I thought that was impossible?' said Grimm.

'It is,' said Gabriel. 'Or rather it was supposed to be. Apparently creation has other ideas. Perhaps times are changing for Heaven and Hell as we know it?'

Ignatius picked up his pipe and ran his fingers through his hair. 'Well, I didn't see that coming. Why didn't you tell us about this before?'

'I'm sorry,' said Gabriel. 'I didn't want to burden you. Not that I had much say in the matter since my son is even more stubborn than I am. I wanted Jonathan and his parents to stay here in Hobbes End where they would be safe, but Darriel wanted to do it all himself, try and let Jonathan have a "normal" life - as if that was ever going to happen.' He shook his head sadly. 'As soon as word of Jonathan's existence started to spread, it was only a matter of time before one of the three archdemons - Belial, Baal or Lilith - would disobey Lucifer and make a grab for power.'

'But what does Belial want with Jonathan?' asked Ignatius.

'Jonathan is special,' said Gabriel. 'I can sense it in him and so can Belial. By mixing the bloodlines of the demonic and the divine, Jonathan has the potential to become something quite extraordinary. Greater than me or my siblings, greater even than Lucifer himself. Belial will want to twist him, control him, use him. Turn my grandson into a weapon. I will not let that happen.'

'I see,' nodded Ignatius, his face grave.

‘And not only do we have Belial to contend with, he’s brought his bogeymen with him too. He’s unleashed the Corvidae.’

‘I thought they were just a myth?’ said Grimm. He turned to Ignatius. ‘I remember your dad telling us scary stories about them when we were kids.’

‘Oh, they’re real,’ said Ignatius. ‘They’ve been popping up for the best part of a century, and wherever they go they leave nothing but destruction in their wake. They currently have a liking for wearing human skin, pinstripe suits and bowler hats in order to hide their true forms.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ said Grimm. ‘I may have to hit them with my cricket bat.’

‘Hopefully you won’t get the chance,’ said Gabriel. ‘As you know, Hobbes End will not allow anything evil to cross its borders and live. I designed it that way. Jonathan will be safe – as long as he doesn’t leave here.’

‘So how did he end up on your sofa with a nasty head wound?’ asked Grimm, kneeling to examine the boy’s injuries.

‘The Corvidae finally caught up with him,’ sighed Gabriel. ‘Ever since he was born, Jonathan’s parents have been running, moving from place to place, never settling anywhere. They wanted to be a normal family so badly that this time they stayed in one place just that little bit too long. Darriel held off the Corvidae long enough for Savantha to escape and bring Jonathan here, but as you can see Jonathan got hurt in the process.’

‘Well, you did a good job stopping the bleeding,’ said Grimm, gently probing Jonathan’s scalp. ‘And his skull feels intact, but there’s still lots of swelling. He’ll need a week or so of bed rest before he’s fit enough to be up and about.’

‘Anyone would think you knew something about cuts and bruises,’ smiled Ignatius, teasing his friend a little.

‘Halcyon Nathaniel Oberon Grimm, M.D., if you please,’ said Grimm. ‘I think a medical degree and years of