

# THE MAN WHO KILLED DARREN SHAN



*Darren Shan had come for him...*

LOOKING BACK, HENRY PARKER could honestly say that he had never wanted to hurt anyone. Certainly, it had never occurred to him that he would one day plan and then execute the perfect murder of an internationally well-known children's author ... even if that was what actually happened. To begin with, all Henry wanted to do was write.

Even as a boy he had dreamed of being a writer. No, not just a writer, but an Author with a capital A – published, with a fan club, his book in every bookshop window, his photograph in the Sunday newspapers and a great pile of money in the bank. And what sort of writing would make his name and put that name on the front of a million books?

Henry loved horror. To him, the only good story was one that had people dying, knives cutting into flesh, brains exploding and blood dripping from every paragraph. In “Verbal Abuse”, written when he was just sixteen years old and still at school, a boy was actually crucified by his Latin teacher for talking in class, while in another work, “Tooth Decay”, a Birmingham dentist was torn to shreds by one of his patients who turned out to be a werewolf.

Having written these stories, Henry wasn’t sure who to show them to. His wealthy parents were abroad most of the time and didn’t seem to have a lot of interest in their only son. He didn’t really have any friends. In the end, he went to his English teacher and asked him to look at the neatly-bound manuscript he’d carried to school in his backpack. “I’d be very grateful if you would tell me what you think, sir,” he said. “Although, personally, I think they’re very good.”

The teacher, Mr Harris, accepted the task with pleasure. He was always glad when any of his young students showed initiative in this way. However, after reading the pages at home, he wasn’t quite so sure. “Your work does show promise, Henry,” he muttered. “But I have to say, I did find some of your writing a little ... over the top.”

“What do you mean, sir?” Henry asked.

“Well, do you really have to be quite so explicit? This paragraph here – where the dentist’s heart is pulled out and then minced – I read it after dinner and felt quite ill.”

“But it’s a werewolf!” Henry protested.

“Werewolves enjoy mincing human organs.”

“And in this other story ... the boy being nailed down in that way. Wouldn’t it have been better to leave a little to the imagination?”

“My readers may not have any imagination,” Henry replied.

“I’m sure that’s not true.” Mr Harris sighed. “Have you considered writing any other genre? Romance, for example. Or perhaps a spy story?”

“I prefer horror.”

“Well, I don’t want to discourage you. It’s very good to see you taking an interest in anything at all. But I don’t think you’re going to succeed unless you tone it down a little. Scaring people is one thing, but making them feel sick is quite another.”

That night, Henry began a new story in which a stupid English teacher called Mr Harris was captured by cannibals and eaten alive.

Two years went by. Inevitably, Henry wrote less as his A-levels took over his life. He did not get brilliant results, managing only two Cs and a D. His worst marks were for English Literature. In one paper he wrote five hundred words describing the murder of Duncan in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*; the woman who marked it actually resigned from the examinations board the very next day.

Henry didn’t go to university. By the time he left school, he felt he had learned more than enough and that three more years of education would only get in the way of his becoming a world-famous author. His parents owned a large house in Reading where he could live. He was fairly sure that his father would support him while he wrote his first full-length novel. He already had the beginnings of an idea. Fame and fortune were surely only just round the corner.

But then two things happened that changed everything. First of all his parents died in a bizarre accident. They had gone to

a circus outside Munich – Henry’s mother had always been fond of trapeze artists – and they’d been having a wonderful time until the turn had come for the human cannonball to perform. Something had gone wrong. Instead of being fired into the safety net, the human cannonball had been blasted, with some force, into the third row of the stalls, killing Mr and Mrs Parker instantly.

The second disaster was that Henry discovered that his parents had left him no money at all. In fact, it was even worse than that. In recent years, their business (in dental equipment) had taken a distinct downturn and their borrowing had got so out of hand that their home and all their possessions had to be sold off to pay their debts. And so, at just nineteen, Henry found himself broke and alone.

Somehow, he needed to earn a living. With such poor A-levels that wasn’t going to be easy, but a friend of his parents’ took pity on him and managed to get him a job as an estate agent. This involved showing people around properties in Battersea, south London – and he hated it. He sneered at the other estate agents and he was jealous of the young couples moving into houses and flats that he himself couldn’t possibly afford. He was now renting a single room that backed onto the main railway line from Victoria Station.

But he still had his dream. More than that, he had the use of a desk, paper and pens, and the office computer. And so, every evening when the agency closed, he would stay behind, tapping away into the small hours. He was writing his novel. Two thousand words a night, five nights a week – Henry figured it would be finished in less than three months.

In fact it took him eleven years.

Writing is a strange business. You write a sentence and then you read it and one word leaps out at you. Or should that be *jumps* out at you? Or *bothers* you? And then you go over

and over it, and by the evening you find you haven’t written two thousand words at all. You’ve only managed a couple of sentences, and even they don’t strike you as being quite right. So you start again and again, crossing out and crumpling the pages into balls, and no matter how hard you try you never quite reach the two words you’re most keen to write: THE END.

That was how it was for Henry. Eleven long years of showing people around properties, working through the night and sleeping right through the weekends certainly took their toll. By the time he was thirty, he had lost most of his hair and much of his eyesight. He wore thick glasses and sat with a stooped back. A poor diet and lack of exercise had both hollowed him and drained much of the colour from his skin. The honest truth was that if he had gone to a funeral, no one would have known whether he was the undertaker or the corpse.

But at last he finished the novel. And reading it through while chewing on a cheese rind – which was all he had been able to find in the fridge – he knew he had created a masterpiece. A horror novel for children, one hundred thousand words long and like nothing anyone had ever written before.

Curiously, it was the death of his parents that had inspired him. Although he had been shocked by their sudden end, and even more by the disappearance of their wealth, Henry had never really missed them. His father had always been bad-tempered and his mother too busy to look after him. But the way they had died had given him the idea of writing a story that would begin in a circus; not an ordinary circus, but a world inhabited by strange creatures ... freaks.

His novel was called *Ring of Evil* and told the story of a young boy who ran away from home and got a job in the circus, only to find himself surrounded by ghosts, werewolves,

witches and vampires. Henry described in loving detail how the vampires would chase members of the audience into the car park, tear their throats open and drink their blood. The hero's name was Justin and in chapter five he was turned into a vampire himself. He then spent chapters six, seven and eight killing people, gradually discovering that being a vampire was fun ... certainly more fun than being a schoolboy. Eventually, Justin teamed up with the ringmaster – who was called Mephisto and who turned out to be the son of Count Dracula himself – and the two of them set off on an adventure that brought them into contact with two vampire armies, fighting for control of the world.

The final chapter was set in New York City, and finished with the whole of Fifth Avenue turning into a river of blood. At least a thousand people were killed as the two vampire armies joined battle in the subway system. Mephisto himself was impaled on a metal spike (the description ran to three paragraphs) and Justin returned to England and took over the circus.

THE END.

Henry typed the words in bold and underlined them twice.

That evening he left the office at the same time as everyone else and bought himself a half-bottle of champagne which he sipped, on his own, in his room as the trains rumbled past outside. He had spent twenty pounds having the manuscript photocopied and bound, and he couldn't stop himself flicking through the pages, running his hands over the cover, reading his favourite paragraphs again and again. He had absolutely no doubt that *Ring of Evil* would be a huge, international success. He went to bed that night working on the speech that he would make when he won the Carnegie Medal, which was only awarded to the very greatest writers. The book was everything he had hoped it would be ... and more.

The next day he put the manuscript into an envelope and sent it to one of the most famous publishers in London. He had noticed their name on a number of bestsellers and guessed they must know a thing or two about children's fiction. Three days later, he received a polite note, thanking him for the manuscript and assuring him that the publisher would contact him shortly.

The next month was a nightmare. Henry was in such a state of nervous excitement that he couldn't eat or sleep. When he showed customers around flats, all he could think of was blood and vampires, book signings and VIP travel around the world. The next month was just as bad. By the third month he was beginning to wonder just how long the famous publisher needed to read one hundred thousand words.

And then the letter came.

*Dear Mr Barker...*

It was a bad start. They hadn't even got his name right.

*Thank you for sending us your novel, Ring of Evil. Although your work shows a great deal of imagination and energy, I regret to say that I do not think it is suitable for publication.*

*You say that this is a work for children but I would be very concerned, personally, by the levels of violence and bloodshed. I think you would find that most teachers and librarians would not want this on their shelves. At the same time, the book is clearly not adult enough – particularly with a hero who is only twelve.*

*I'm afraid, therefore, that I am returning the manuscript. I hope you won't be too discouraged and wish you luck elsewhere.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Hilary Spurling – Senior Editor*

Henry read the letter once. Then he read it again. He felt a rush of different emotions. The first was disbelief. *Ring of Evil* had been rejected! Disbelief was followed by dismay. All those hours of work, the weeks and the months – for nothing! Then came anger. Who was Hilary Spurling? What did she know? How could she be so shallow and arrogant, to dismiss his one-hundred-thousand-word manuscript with a letter that didn't even reach much more than dozen lines? Muttering a curse, Henry reached for a second envelope. There were plenty of publishers in London. A few weeks from now, Hilary Spurling would be weeping bitter tears. And she would be a senior editor no longer, fired from her job for missing the biggest bestseller of the decade when it had been sitting right there in her hands.

In the next twelve months, *Ring of Evil* was rejected by another eight London publishers as well as three literary agents. By now, Henry had left the estate agency. Everyone in the office knew that he'd been writing a novel and he couldn't bear to tell them that he hadn't managed to sell it. He got a job in a warehouse in Shoreditch, supplying chemicals to laboratories around London. There was no computer there for him to work on after hours. But nor did he want one. If his first book – his masterpiece – wasn't going to be published, why should he even think about writing a second?

And that might have been the end of it. Henry could have ended his days bitter and defeated, unhappy, unmarried and alone. Perhaps he'd have been found in the corner of his local pub, propping up the bar with one whisky too many, dreaming of what might have been. He could have worked at the warehouse until he retired and then, after a couple of years in a dreary old people's home, quietly died.

But everything changed one day when he

walked into a bookshop near Victoria Station. He hadn't even gone in to buy a book. He had just needed somewhere to shelter from a storm. But while he was inside, waiting for the rain to die down, his eye was caught by a pile of books on the front table. Puzzled, he picked one up. The book was called *Cirque du Freak* and it was written by someone called Darren Shan.

The back cover told him everything he needed to know. The hero was a boy called Darren Shan – it was strange that he had the same name as the author – who sneaked away from home to visit a travelling freak show. Henry flicked through the pages. The book struck him as very short. Every chapter was topped with a picture of a skull. Before he had even left the shop, he had got the general idea of the story. Darren Shan's best friend was bitten by a spider, and in order to save him Darren had to become a vampire and...

It was *his* story! There could be no doubt about it. Of course, not all the ideas were the same. But the circus, the freaks, the vampires, the child hero, even some of the names were too similar for it to be pure coincidence. For example, in Shan's book there was a character called Mr Crepsley – almost the same name as one of the clowns (Mr Crispy) in Henry's. Shan's best friend was called Steve. In *Ring of Evil* a character called Steve was murdered in chapter twenty-seven. Henry looked at the cover. As he gazed at the name of the publisher, a black fury rose up inside him. The same publisher had turned down *Ring of Evil*.

He bought the book and took it home, and that night he spent several hours reading *Cirque du Freak*, underlining passages in red and circling words. As the sun rose, he was one hundred per cent certain. The publisher had taken his manuscript and given it to another author. This author – Darren Shan – had copied the best bits and published the book as his own. He had stolen the result of eleven years' work!

And to make things worse, Shan was getting brilliant reviews. The next morning Henry rang in to say he would be late for work. He scuttled off to an internet café down the road and Googled everything he could about *Cirque du Freak*. The critics were unanimous. Here was a well-crafted and completely original story which would attract even the most unwilling readers. Another fourteen volumes planned, and publishers were snapping them up all around the world. A major Hollywood film was on the way. Overnight, Darren Shan had become a star.

Henry went straight back to his room, sat down and composed a letter, writing with a pen that kept leaking ink, in jagged handwriting that lay on the page like dead spiders.

"Dear Mr Shan," he began.

*I have just read your book, "Cirque du Freak" and have noticed many similarities to a book of mine, "Ring of Evil". My book is set in a circus, just like yours. My book has vampires in it, just like yours. My book also has a boy hero who is only two years younger than yours. And I could point to several phrases in your book that also appear in mine. For example, on page 33, you say, "It was Friday evening, the end of the school week..." Almost exactly the same words - though in a different order - appear on page 297 of my manuscript! Again, on page 124, you describe your teeth as "clattering". That description is obviously taken from page 311 of my book which describes window shutters in exactly the same way.*

*I could give you a hundred more examples.*

*I would like to know who it was at your publisher who showed you my manuscript and whose idea it was to steal it and make it your own. We will discuss how much money you should pay me later.*

*Yours sincerely,*

Henry Parker

It took three weeks for Henry to receive a reply, and when it came it wasn't from Darren Shan at all. It was from someone called Fenella Jones who worked at the publishing house. It read:

*Dear Mr Parker,*

*Thank you for your letter. I can assure you that Cirque du Freak is a completely original piece of work. Mr Shan wrote it without any discussion with us and we are very proud to have published it.*

*I am sorry if you feel that there are similarities to your own book.*

*With best wishes,*

Fenella Jones – Editorial Assistant

And that was it. No apology. No explanation. No promise of money. Just a few lines dismissing him as if he would simply crawl away and forget the whole thing.

Over the next six months, Henry wrote nine more letters, and when *The Vampire's Assistant*, the second book in the series, was published and was even more successful than the first, he wrote eleven more. He got no reply to any of them. It seemed that Darren Shan and his publishers had decided to pretend he didn't exist.

As The Saga of Darren Shan grew and became ever more popular, Henry bought all the books and went through each one, not

once but several times, making notes in a pile of exercise books that he kept by his bed. Of course, it was easy enough to convince himself that certain words and phrases had been copied from his novel, and even when the saga went off in a completely different direction from *Ring of Evil* he was able to persuade himself that Shan had changed his plans because he was afraid of being sued. Or maybe now he was stealing his ideas from somebody else.

At the same time, Henry began to collect as much information as he could about Darren Shan. He learned that the writer was surprisingly young and lived in Northern Ireland. He cut out pictures of him from newspapers. Shan was short and stocky, with closely cut hair and a face that was as round as a pumpkin. Henry thought he looked more like a footballer than a professional author. It seemed he had once worked as a teacher. He visited Shan's website and began to follow his progress through Britain and around the world. It soon became clear that there wasn't a country on the planet where the books weren't doing well. And all the time Henry could feel jealousy, like a cancer, creeping through him. *Cirque du Freak* was his book. It was his idea. He should have been the one enjoying the fame, the wealth, the jet-setting life.

Henry would never be able to remember the exact moment when he decided to murder Darren Shan. It wasn't an idea that simply arrived – a sudden inspiration. It was more like a growing awareness that murder was the only answer. He wanted to punish the successful writer. But more than that, he needed to get rid of him, to stop him existing. As far as Henry could see, it was the only way to allow his own life to continue. Without Shan, there would be no more books in the *Cirque du Freak* series. And then, just possibly, there might be room for *Ring of Evil*. But the truth was, Henry no longer cared whether his own novel was published or not. He had

fallen into a quicksand of hatred and despair. He wanted to lash out one last time before he was sucked under completely.

But how to do it?

Shan made occasional appearances in London where he would sign books for long queues of his devoted readers. It would be easy enough for Henry to join the line with some sharp implement concealed beneath his jacket. That would be appropriate. There was plenty of blood in Shan's books already. Henry would add a few pints more.

But despite everything, he didn't want to go to prison. It wouldn't be fair. After all, he was the victim here and he would only be giving Shan what he deserved. And he certainly didn't want to spend the rest of his life surrounded by common criminals. Henry thought about it and decided. He was an artist. He would use his talents to commit the perfect murder. And one day, maybe, he would write about it. Yes. He would have to change a few names and places, but killing Darren Shan might actually make a good subject for a book.

It wasn't going to be easy. Henry had to kill someone he had never met before – and probably never would meet. He had to do it from a distance. Yes. That was it. Almost at once an idea began to take shape in his mind.

Like many successful authors, Shan received fan letters and mentioned on his website that he tried to reply to as many as possible. Henry had already written to him once and had received a reply from some editorial assistant. But suppose he were to write again, pretending to be a twelve-year-old boy...? Shan would have to write back. And that would be it. It would be easy. Nobody would ever be able to pin anything on Henry.

The very next day, Henry stole a pair of rubber gloves from work – the sort used to protect workers' hands from dangerous chemicals. He would need them to make sure

he didn't leave any fingerprints. He bought a cheap pen and some writing paper – choosing a common brand. Then he sat down and composed his letter.

“Dear Mr Shan,” he began. He was careful to disguise his writing. He used large, looping letters to make it look as if the letter had been written by a young boy.

*I am a huge fan of your work. I think you are a great writer. I have read all your books but my favourite was Vampire Mountain which I thought was brilliant.*

He misspelled brilliant on purpose. He was meant to be a schoolboy.

*I would be very grateful if you could send me an autograph. I know you are busy so I am enclosing a stamped addressed envelope. Right now I am in hospital and the doctors are very worried about me. So your autograph means a lot to me. Please send it soon.*

Yours sincerely,

Steve Lyons

He signed the letter with a fake name – in fact it was based on the character Steve Leopard he had read about in Shan's book. He was particularly pleased with the lie about being in hospital. It made it doubly certain that he would get a response. But the most brilliant – or brilliant – part came next. With his work in the Shoreditch warehouse, Henry regularly came into contact with poisons and dangerous chemicals. It wasn't all that difficult to steal a small phial of liquid that was colourless, odourless and totally lethal. He mixed this with glue and then, using a paintbrush, applied it to the inside flap of an envelope which he addressed to

Steve Lyons at a false address in Brighton.

The trap was simple. Shan would read the letter asking for his autograph. He would sign his name on a card and slip it into the stamped addressed envelope. And when he licked the flap, he would seal his fate. Henry reckoned he would be dead before he reached the nearest post box, and with a bit of luck the police wouldn't even be able to work out how the poison had been administered.

Finally, just to be on the safe side, Henry took a train to Brighton and posted the deadly letter there. With no fingerprints, a false name and no misleading postcode on the stamp, he was confident that nobody would ever trace the letter back to him.

He sat back and waited. The next few days passed with a sense of continual excitement ... almost, in fact, like reading a good book. Every evening he hurried home to his single room to catch the seven o'clock news on his television, the picture flickering each time a train went past. He couldn't wait to hear it... “And after the break, the children's author who took a tumble. Darren Shan's painful end...”

But in fact it was the newspapers that gave him the story he most wanted to hear. It was as he was leaving the warehouse, on his way to Shoreditch station, that he saw the words in bold type, hanging on the side of the kiosk:

## **CHILDREN'S AUTHOR MURDERED**

Just three words – but the most brilliant phrase Henry had ever read. He fumbled in his pocket for cash and bought the paper and there it was, on the front page.

### ***POLICE SUSPECT “POISON-PEN LETTER”***

Darren Shan, the moderately popular children's author, died shortly after being admitted to hospital this morning. Shan, 32, had been answering his fan mail when he was suddenly taken ill. His assistant, Fenella Jones, called an ambulance but despite their best efforts, paramedics were unable to revive him.

Shan, whose Cirque du Freak series has topped bestseller lists all over the world, was in the middle of a second series known as The Demonata, and fans have already begun a candle-lit vigil outside his Dublin home. At first it was believed that he had succumbed to an attack of food poisoning, but police are now examining mail that he received in the morning post. Detective Superintendent John Dervish said, “It is possible that Mr Shan was the victim of a fan – or a madman pretending to be a fan. At the moment we are looking at every possibility.”

The story went on over the page and there was a picture of Shan signing books, surrounded by children. Henry read the report with a mixture of emotions. Of course, he was delighted that his plan had succeeded. But at the same time, he was a little nervous that the police had so quickly figured out the murder method – the poison-pen letter, as the newspaper had put it. In a way, he was glad – he wanted the world to know that the writer had been punished, not just struck down by a piece of bad chicken or fish. But if the police had found out this much, this quickly, might their investigation lead them to him? No. Neither the paper nor the envelope could be traced to him. The letter had been postmarked Brighton, which was miles

away. He had been careful to avoid leaving fingerprints. And even the poison that he had used was fairly common. Plenty of people could have got hold of it.

Henry watched the seven o'clock news with a growing sense of confidence. He watched the news again at ten o'clock, and at eleven o'clock, and each time the report was the same. The death of the young writer was a tragedy. The police were looking into it. But so far they had no clues, nothing to report.

Henry went to bed that night, fairly certain that he had got away with it. It didn't even occur to him that he had taken a human life, that he would have left behind a grieving family ... not to mention several thousand fans. As far as he was concerned, what he had done had been well executed. Nothing more, nothing less. It was as if the murder were a story that he had plotted, and it certainly had an utterly happy end.

It was the end of November and the weather had recently turned cold. There was only one radiator in Henry's room and although it was turned on full, it never seemed to give out much heat. The window frame was cracked, and some nights the wood rattled and cold breezes danced around the room. This was just such a night. More than that, a mist seemed to have risen around Victoria. There was a full moon but it seemed pale and yellow, unable to penetrate the cloud.

Henry tried to sleep but he couldn't. Though he pulled the duvet over his head, the chill still got in. He could feel it around his neck, creeping down his spine. His room was always a little damp and tonight he could almost see the moisture glistening on the walls. He was annoyed with himself. This was supposed to be his night of triumph. Maybe he should have gone out and bought himself a drink ... or several. He had committed a murder and got away with it! Surely that was something to celebrate.

“Henry...” The voice came as a whisper out of the darkness.

He had dreamed it, of course. It was a ghost voice, like something in a horror film, rising up from a swamp or out of a ruined castle. Only ... how could he have dreamed it when he wasn't yet asleep?

“Henry...” The whisper came again, louder this time and filled with venom.

Henry hunched himself up in bed, drawing his knees to his chest, looking around him. There was a strange, green glow outside his window. His room looked out onto a strip of wasteland with the railway just beyond. Normally, he could see walls covered with graffiti and topped with broken glass and barbed wire. But the mist had grown thicker. It had smothered the outside world. And as he watched, wide-eyed, he saw it trickling under his door, filling the very room where he lay.

“Who is it?” he whimpered. The door crashed open. It seemed to have torn itself out of the frame – for there was nobody on the other side. More mist rolled in, and Henry smelled something thick and horrible, like dead, decaying meat. At the same time he heard footsteps, echoing along the corridor. He wondered what had happened to his landlady. She had a room on the floor above and must surely have heard all this. He tried to call out her name but his throat had seized up. He was petrified. No words came.

A figure formed in the half-light, then stepped into the room.

Henry stared. He raised a hand, his fingers twisted as if broken, like an animal claw. He knew what he was seeing. He couldn't believe it. But he had to accept it.

Darren Shan had come for him.

The children's writer had been dead for at least twenty-four hours. His skin was a hideous shade of white – it was obvious that not a drop of blood was being pumped through his veins. His eyes were also white and lifeless, as

if covered in cataracts. At some point, blood must have gushed out of his mouth and over his chin for it was still there, dried now, a horrible, dark brown stain. His clothes were stiff with it. He was wearing a strange nightgown – but Henry recognized what it was. A shroud. He would have been wearing it in his coffin.

How could it be happening? Henry was trembling so hard he was making the bed shake. Tears of sheer terror were trickling down his face. At the same time, a terrible thought was working its way through his mind. Darren Shan was a horror writer. In *Cirque du Freak* he had even claimed to be a semi-vampire. Well, suppose it was true? Suppose he was, in some way, in touch with dark forces, with the ghosts and the monsters that inspired him? Shan was dead. Henry had seen it on the television and read it in the newspapers. And now he had come back from the grave, continuing his life's work even after that life had ended.

“You killed me,” the creature rasped, his voice rattling in his throat. And as he spoke, Henry saw that his tongue had gone green and there was some dark-coloured liquid dribbling over his lower lip.

“No!” Henry replied. He wiped away his tears, but more instantly followed. “How did you find me?” he whimpered. “How did you get here?”

“You wrote to me.” Darren Shan shuddered. “You made me reply. And when I licked the envelope ... the pain! It was you, Henry Parker.”

“Go away! Just go away!” Henry closed his eyes, hoping this was just some sort of hallucination. But when he opened them again, Shan was still there. “You stole my idea!” Henry screeched. He couldn't help himself. And at the same time, he had a sudden, crazy thought. This could hardly be better. He had spent months and months waiting to tell Darren Shan what he thought of him. Well,

now Shan had returned from the grave to hear it. What was he going to do about it? He was a phantom! If he wanted to contact the police, he'd have to do it with a Ouija board. “You stole *Ring of Evil* from me. I sent it to your publisher and they gave it to you. You took my story and my characters and you made millions of pounds and I got nothing. Well, now I've shown you. I came up with the perfect murder. Yours! And soon you'll be forgotten but I'll write another book and nothing will stop me...”

“You killed me!” Shan wailed.

“Yes, I did. It was so easy. A little potassium cyanide mixed with the glue on the envelope. And you were such an idiot, you fell for it. I'd love to have been there when you licked it. You thought you were writing to some sick kid who loved your books, but in fact it was me.”

Henry began to laugh.

He was still laughing when his bedroom lights flashed on and half a dozen policemen rushed in and dragged him out of bed. “Thank you very much, Mr Shan,” one of the policemen said.

“It was my pleasure,” Darren Shan replied.

It was only then that Henry saw what should have been obvious all along. He had been tricked. Darren Shan was very much alive. Somebody had given him some clever make-up, turning his skin white. There was red dye in his mouth and he was wearing contact lenses. The smoke and the sewage smell were being pumped into the room by a machine just outside the door. And Shan was holding a tape recorder. There was a microphone attached to his shroud. Everything that Henry had said had been recorded and would be used against him when he went on trial.

“No!” Henry howled as he was bundled out of the room and down the stairs. It wasn't fair! His plan had been perfect. What could possibly have gone wrong?

They answered that question when they

interviewed him at Paddington Green police station. He was interviewed by two grim-faced detectives. The man in charge was called Jack Grest. He was a big man, stuffed into an ill-fitting suit. “You might like to know,” he muttered, “that my son is a big fan of Darren Shan. He's got all his books. I don't know how I'd have been able to break it to the little lad if you'd murdered his hero.”

“I don't understand,” Henry stammered. He was crying again, still unable to accept what had happened. “How did you find me? What went wrong?”

“I'll answer that, you swine,” the other detective said. “Mr Shan had an assistant to help him with his fan mail. Her name was Fenella Jones and she was the one who licked the envelope you sent.”

Fenella Jones. Henry remembered her name from the newspaper report. And now he thought about it, she had been the woman who had written to him from Darren Shan's publisher. She had worked there as an editorial assistant. After that, she must have decided to work full-time for Darren Shan.

“She was the one you murdered,” Grest continued.

“But how did you know it was me?”

“We didn't. You covered your tracks well. But the thing is, publishers keep copies of all the crank letters they receive and they had your name on file. You had every reason to want to harm Mr Shan – even though he never copied a word of your ridiculous book. And when we found out you were working in a chemicals warehouse...”

“But you still didn't have any proof!”

“That's right. Which is why we planted the news story and asked Mr Shan to help us with that little charade. We knew you'd confess to everything if he walked into your room in the middle of the night dressed up like that. And it worked! You were a complete idiot to fall for it and now you're going to have plenty of

time to think about how stupid you've been."

He had been stupid. Henry realized that, sitting on his own in a maximum-security cell in the middle of the night. He had a bunk, a blanket and a toilet built into the wall. He was still wearing the dressing gown and pyjamas that he had been arrested in, although they had taken away the cords. He had been very, very stupid indeed.

How could he possibly have believed, even for one minute, that Darren Shan was a ghost? Henry was a writer! He knew, better than anyone, that ghosts didn't exist. They were made up by people like him, simply to scare the people who read the books. Horror stories were nothing more than that ... stories! He had been caught by surprise and had allowed his own imagination to get the better of him. An Irish writer made-up with white paint had outwitted him. He should never have allowed it to happen.

There were no such things as ghosts. Or vampires. Cirque du Freak, indeed! Cirque du Complete Nonsense.

It was very cold in the cell.

In fact, it seemed to have got colder and colder in the last few minutes. Henry looked at the door and saw, to his astonishment, that a thin white mist was seeping in underneath it, spreading across the floor. And that horrible smell was back. Rotting meat and damp, graveyard soil. It must be one of the policemen! They had turned on their wretched machine again to frighten him.

"Go away!" he shouted.

His breath frosted around his mouth.

And then something formed in front of him. It didn't walk in as Darren Shan had done. It seemed to piece itself out of the half-light, the molecules rushing together in the middle of the room. The figure solidified. It was a woman, hideous beyond belief, her face distorted by pain, her eyes bulging out of their sockets, her mouth twisted in a death's head

smile. She was short and muscular and her hands, stretching out in front of her, seemed too big for her arms.

This wasn't a trick. This was real. Henry knew. "Who are you?" he whimpered.

The woman reached out for him. Her fingers clamped down on his shoulders, holding him in place. "Who do you think I am?" she replied, and he smelled the poison on her breath. "I'm Fenella Jones."

Her teeth closed in on his throat.

