



RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

THE BLACK TATTOO

by Sam Enthoven

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FRESH BLOOD

London. The West End. A little after four in the morning. At the base of the skyscraper known as Centre Point Tower, in the darkness at the end of a dank concrete walkway, something stirred. The shadows there began to ripple and coalesce. The dark became a manlike shape of pure liquid black. Then the demon emerged, taking its first leisurely step towards the woman who stood there watching it.

'Jessica,' it said.

Hearing that voice again, and the way the sound of it seemed to take shape inside her head like black flowers blossoming behind her eyelids, Jessica found that it was all she could do to stop her legs from trembling. She'd been so close! Another few minutes and she'd've made it! She gritted her teeth and told herself to concentrate. The demon took another step. It was clear of the shadows now, and the rainy orange streetlight glinted off its inky wet skin. Its face was a blank, but she could feel it looking at her.

'You should not have come back,' it said.

Slowly Jessica put down the plastic bag full of fourteen years' worth of carefully hoarded tobacco shreds and cigarette ends that she'd been collecting and saving for this moment. She unbuttoned her filthy overcoat.

'Really,' she replied. 'And what makes you say that?'

'You must have realized that I can't let you warn them,' the demon told her. 'You must have known that if I found you you'd be killed, and what knowledge you possess would die with you - but you still came. Why?'

'Confident,' said Jessica, 'aren't you?'

Her amber eyes glittered. Her hard brown hands lifted fractionally from her sides.

The demon looked at her.

'Very well,' it said. 'Since you insist . . .'

It took one more step -

- blurred into motion -

- and attacked.

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Jessica wasn't as young as she used to be. She'd been expecting the demon's charge, but her reactions had slowed over the years since they'd last fought. When she leapt, with superhuman speed, two metres straight up in the air, flinging herself in a twisting forward roll so tight it left her dizzy, she was, therefore, slightly too late. Her knackered old trainers clipped the demon's back as it flashed past beneath her. She was slightly off balance as her soles smacked back onto the concrete - and the first knife she threw as she landed went wide, spanging off the walkway's railing and spinning off into the night.

Smoothly her right hand whipped back and out again, but the demon had already recovered itself; it swatted her second knife out of the air with something very like contempt. Jessica held her breath as she reached for her third: the blade crossed the space in a flash of silver and struck the demon in the face, right between where its eyes would have been if it had been a person.

But it was not a person. Grimly she watched her knife vanish into the glossy darkness, leaving barely a ripple. The demon didn't even break stride. With the best speed she could muster, Jessica dived to one side. She just had time to notice that the demon had anticipated her . . .

. . . when she felt a blow that took her breath away.

The concrete wall at the end of the walkway was a clear six metres behind her; the blow flung her the distance in less than a second, and she smacked into the wall back first. Helpless with pain, she slid to the floor, waiting for the follow-up that would finish her.

But it didn't come.

When she looked up, the demon was watching her.

'Feeling your age, Jessica?' it enquired.

Jessica didn't answer. Her bones were aching, and she could taste blood in her mouth, warm and coppery. She gritted her teeth and got to her feet, keeping one hand behind her back. *Magic*, she was thinking. All right: she was going to have to use magic.

'I sympathize,' said the demon. 'Truly, I do. As you see' - it gestured at itself with one ink-black hand - 'I've taken what strength I can from my current host. But he, like you, is old now, and weak. He will not sustain me for much longer.'

Jessica said nothing. She was concentrating. Behind her, slowly, agonizingly, the air above her palm wobbled, bulged - then a light appeared. It was a tiny spark at first. The spark glistened and twinkled as she coaxed it into life, gradually becoming a little brighter, a little stronger with each passing moment. It was *herself* that Jessica was pouring into it - all her determination, her power and her hatred, condensed into a single, glittering point. The spark grew to a sphere, a whirling globe of orange-flecked and sizzling silvery blue, as the demon continued to speak.

'What I need,' it said, 'is a new vessel to work from - *fresh blood*,' it added, 'as it were. Someone vigorous yet . . . pliable. Someone spirited yet suggestible. In short, someone *young*. Why *did* you come back?' it asked again suddenly. 'Was it the girl?'

Still Jessica did not reply.

'Well,' said the demon, 'it doesn't matter.' It waved wearily at the hand Jessica still held behind

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her back.

'All right,' it said. 'Go on, then. Surprise me.'

Jessica bowed her head. She brought out her hand and what was inside it -

- and she smiled.

Already, a thin shell of softer blue was forming around the small globe of light that still danced and whirled over her hand. Another second and the shell seemed to harden, then *crush* inwards, turning the light of the globe to an angry red, then white.

Then, suddenly, the demon was screaming.

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