

Soul Purpose

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PROLOGUE

Four billion years ago...

It all comes back to here. It's as good a place to start as any. Back here, things are different — not only a foreign country, but a foreign world. If you were here, there would be little from your world that would make sense. Of course, you wouldn't be here. Or rather, if you were, you would be too busy asphyxiating, boiling, getting zapped by lightning, fried by lava and generally having too much of a rotten time of it to sit down and take in the local scenery. Not that you'd enjoy it much if you did. What isn't red hot and melted is boiling hot and steaming. The ground is covered in black slag dissected by molten rivulets of the still-forming world. The air is filled with the crackle of lightning, and the mists and fogs of numerous unpleasant gases. Staring up into the primordial sky is like trying to watch an Andy Warhol film from the back row of a smoky auditorium. Barely visible through the gloom is the distant haze of a virgin sun, ancient beyond measure and yet long before its prime.

Still, this is your world. And this is where it begins.

When it starts, it starts with a simple chemical reaction — and to be honest, in all this chaos, chemical reactions are ten a penny. Acids forming proteins forming complex tertiary structures that become unstable and melt away, collapsing in upon themselves and dispersing, drifting away to do it all over again. This reaction, however, is different. Not in a flash-kerbamm-zooooom chemistry-set kind of way, but in a subtler, quieter and altogether more important way. Another protein is formed. It maintains its shape. It is not the first to do so, but there is something unique about it. This protein can make copies of itself. It can replicate and propagate and spread. It can recruit nearby unsuspecting proteins, rope them in, force them to conform. It knows nothing of its destiny, but its descendants will rule this world.

Proto-life has arrived on the young planet. And with it, something even more significant.

The first soul.

For Beattie

Chapter One

I

— *Ring Ring* —

At first, he didn't have a clue where he was, or what his name was. Slowly it dawned upon him that he was in a bed, and the noise was the telephone ringing. Everything else remained a mystery. Instinct sent his arm scrabbling towards the phone, and when his outstretched fingers felt it he picked it up, studying the receiver with a puzzled look, as if it were an iguana that had unexpectedly been handed to him for lunch. Then he remembered what to do. As he placed the phone to his ear and his mouth began to form the first tentative syllable of a sleepy 'Hello?', his memory decided that he was awake enough to release some relevant information to him. He wished it hadn't.

- He was twenty-seven years old.
- He was a vet.
- He hated his job.
- He was absolutely, completely bloody sick of being called out in the middle of the night.
- He was being called out in the middle of the night.

There had been no response from the phone in his hand. He examined it, cursed, turned it the right way around and said 'Hello' again, praying that if it was a call out, it would be a nice, warm one. Perhaps the euthanasia of an elderly cat with kidney failure, peacefully passing away in front of a log fire. Or an epileptic dog. Even a collapsed hamster would do. Anything where he didn't have to think. Anything that he could examine in the comfort of the surgery. Anything that wasn't a cow.

II

'Hello?'

'Is that the vet?'

'Erm... what?'

'I said, is that the vet? I'm phoning for the vet.'

'Erm... yeah. Yes, it's Alan here. Who is it I'm speaking to?'

'Hi, Alan. It's Mike White here, out at Quayle's farm. I've got a problem with a cow.'

'What kind of problem?'

'Bugged if I know, Alan. That's why I'm calling you. Could you get out right away?'

III

One of the few things Alan Reece had learned since he had started practising was that it was entirely possible to go out in the night, see and treat an animal, discuss the case with the client and only wake up on the drive home. It was then, of course, impossible to get back to sleep, leading to him being wide awake for the rest of the night and half-asleep the following day. He was, therefore, only mildly surprised to find himself pulling the terminally ill Astra his practice had supplied him with into the yard of Quayle's farm with no memory of the preceding fifteen minutes. He turned off the engine, which coughed and shuddered to a halt like a tuberculous sprinter after a hundred-metre dash, and stared miserably out of the windscreen at the dismal rain, which was blattering everything that could be blattered into a soggy pulp. The rain stared miserably back at him, and then got on with the job of covering everything in cold muddy water, and basically making everything in the county as thoroughly unpleasant as possible, a job at which it was astonishingly good.

With a sigh as deep as an ocean trench, Alan opened the door, trudged round to the boot and manoeuvred his feet into

his Wellies — managing, as he always did on nights like these, to get his socks soaked through before getting them in the boots, thus utterly defeating the point of putting them on. He was in the process of wrestling with his waterproof top, working out where his arms were and wishing he had washed the top at some point in the last month so that didn't smell quite so much of rotting lamb, when Mr White arrived. Alan squirmed his way into the top (inside out, as usual, ensuring he would never again be able to wear his shirt in polite company, or even impolite company, come to that) and blinked as the farmer flashed his torch into Alan's eyes. Alan tried to smile as the beam was lowered.

'Hello, Mr...'

Something in Mike White's face stopped Alan. His round cheeks were as white as his name and looked as if he'd just been diagnosed with the sort of thing that gets publishers of medical textbooks excited and reaching for their digital cameras.

'Through 'ere,' was all Mike said before turning to the barn.

Alan was normally worried when on call. He hated it. The stress of it was almost too much for him to bear. It was certainly too much for his digestive system to bear. You could always tell a weekend when Alan was on call, his ex-fiancée had told friends, because he got through at least two and sometimes three double-quilted toilet rolls. The expression on Mike White's face got Alan wondering whether this weekend was going to be a treble-roller. He followed Mike towards the barn, his Wellies squidging mournfully with every step.

IV

The barn was an old building, rickety and wind-blown and, at this time of year, ankle deep in cow shit. It had a thin scattering of straw on the ground as if in an attempt to disguise the dirt. It didn't work. The beam from the nervous farmer's torch

bounced around the room as if it would rather be at an all-night rave. The acrobatic lighting added to Alan's feeling of discomfort and displacement. It should have been a relief to be out of the driving rain but at this moment Alan would have gladly stood out in it naked until sunrise if it meant he could avoid seeing what had turned Mike White, who had calmly held pro-lapsed uterus up on his knees and sawn rotten heads off stinking lambs to get them out of the ewe, as pale as his cows' milk.

'What... er... what have you got for me, Mr White?' Alan asked nervously.

Mr White turned to Alan. He had been a farmer all his life. He had seen just about everything nature could throw at a person, most of it before he was twelve. The horrible pulsations and hideous smells of nature gone wrong held no fear for him. Alan wasn't at all sure that he wanted to know what it was that had shaken him, but thought he should at least have some warning about what he was approaching.

'It's the damnedest thing, Alan. Never seen anything like it in all me born days.'

'What is it, exactly?'

'I was 'opin you could tell me. Maiden heifer, just calved. See for yerself.'

Mike turned back again, and trudged forwards, his torchlight illuminating a cow-shaped form in the corner of the barn. Alan followed, squinting, trying to make it out. It was a Friesian-Holstein heifer, slightly on the thin side, and as Mike had pointed out, obviously just calved. She was standing and licking forlornly at a small pale object lying in the straw. Alan's mouth formed the 'W' of 'what' but whatever else he was planning to say was lost to posterity because at that moment Mike shone his torch directly onto the object. The word retreated from Alan's mouth and hid, quivering, down by his diaphragm.

The thing the cow was licking was a calf. Of sorts. Alan had seen foetal monsters before, strange furry blobs of flesh with the odd foot, tail or even head protruding. Accidents of nature, never meant to live. This was different. Externally, it

looked normal. Four legs, head, tail, everything seemed in place. At least, Alan thought so. It was hard to make out, because the torchlight shone right through the calf, illuminating the bloodstained straw beneath, which reflected the light right through the calf again as if it wasn't there. The calf was transparent.

Alan's brain didn't quite grasp the concept as it zapped through his neurones the first time, so he tried thinking it again, more clearly this time.

The calf was transparent.

He could see its ribs, its beating heart, its lungs, which were twitching and contracting as the neonate fought for breath. Alan watched in astonishment as the calf gave a feeble cough and a blob of pleural fluid travelled out of the lungs, up the trachea, and into the mouth, where the calf swallowed it.

The mother briefly glanced at the two intruders and then turned back to licking her miraculous calf.

V

Alan's heart skipped a beat. A moment later, it skipped another one. It was preparing to skip a third when it received an urgent communiqué from his brain, suggesting that if it did so, there would be trouble. Reluctantly, it started up again, but decided to make up for lost time by hammering away at double speed.

Alan took a cautious step towards the calf. Mike stayed where he was.

'What d'you reckon, then?' the farmer asked.

Alan couldn't tear his eyes away from the creature in front of him. He wondered if he was still asleep. Half of his brain was gibbering with sheer incomprehension. The other half was running through his notes, searching for the section headed 'photo-transparent idiopathies'. Either he had forgotten all about them, or no such section existed.

The heifer looked up at him again. Alan had never been

very good at reading bovine expressions, but as far as he recognised that a cow could look reproachful, this is what she did.

'Did she calve all right?' he asked automatically, buying time so that his brain could stop gibbering and start working.

'Reckon so,' said Mike. 'We didn't help her out or nothin', anyway.'

Alan was at a loss for what to do. Surely he should be gathering evidence, taking photos, something. This was obviously a whole new disease. He switched himself onto autopilot, clinical exam mode while he wondered what the bloody hell he was going to do.

The cow herself seemed fine. Normal heart rate, normal temperature. A little bruised, but nothing out of the ordinary. She had cleansed quickly. The shrivelled mess of placenta lay on the floor next to the calf. It was normal.

'Er... aren't you going to look at the calf?' Mike asked from his safe distance.

'Oh... erm... sure,' mumbled Alan. He moved back around to the front of the cow and looked down.

It didn't make any sense. How could it be alive? Weren't there... reactions and things that had to happen in the skin? Didn't it need to absorb light or something? Alan wasn't clear on the specifics. Biochemistry was not his favourite subject.

Slowly, he knelt down beside the creature. It turned its head to him, making a weak mewling sound. Alan could see its larynx vibrate as it did so. It was clearly dying. The calf's heart had slowed its beat since he had first looked at it, and the wretched thing was almost too weak to hold its head up.

Alan felt strangely reluctant to touch it. At the back of his mind a quiet but insistent voice suggested that it would be a really bad idea. The cow nuzzled her calf again. Slowly, trying to shake the feeling that this was all a dream, Alan reached his hand out to it.