

THE FINAL RAVEN

Chapter One

Just as night followed day the ravens were always there, guarding the Tower of London. Sergeant Major Sam McKenna shivered and pulled his cloak tightly around his shoulders. The frost was already thick on the ground as the last visitors made their way past the Bloody Tower and Water Lane. The Christmas trees glittered. A flake or two of snow drifted down. Just one family remained on the edge of Tower Green. McKenna wandered over to them.

'Look, dad,' said the boy, who was no more than seven or eight. He was pointing at a few enormous black birds fluttering their wings and clacking their beaks. 'The ravens are coming closer.'

'It's because they're hungry,' McKenna said. The family turned to see who had spoken. The boy's eyes widened.

'Are you a real Beefeater?' he asked.

McKenna smiled.

'Our full title is Yeoman Warder of Her Majesty's Royal Palace and Fortress and a member of the Sovereign's Body Guard of the Yeoman Guard Extraordinary, but everybody calls us Beefeaters.'

He kneeled down next to the boy.

'An old legend says that if there are no ravens at the Tower, Britain will fall. They're here to look after us and so we look after them.' He held up a tablet. Seven green bars flickered across the screen. 'Each bird has a microchip implanted into it. We can keep track of their vital signs to make sure they're healthy. Amazing what you can do with technology, eh?'

The boy nodded.

'So, time to lead them in for their tea. I'm known as the Ravenmaster, although I reckon they're the ones in charge and I just do what they want me to. You can walk with them if you like.'

He glanced at the ravens, making sure they were playing the game. It wouldn't do for them all to hop off in the opposite direction.

'What's the matter with that one?' the boy asked.

McKenna hesitated. One of the ravens was staggering a little. Its wings were dragging in the frost. The bird's beak opened slightly. A single drop of blood fell from it. As the Ravenmaster and the family watched, the raven keeled over and lay on its side, gasping for air.

Fighting for life.