

**Keith Stuart** is an author and journalist. His heartwarming debut novel, *A Boy Made of Blocks*, was a Richard & Judy Book Club pick and a major bestseller. His third novel, *The Frequency of Us*, was a BBC2 *Between the Covers* pick and Radio 4 *Book at Bedtime*. Keith has written for publications including *Empire*, *Red* and *Esquire*, and is the video games correspondent for the *Guardian*. He lives with his wife and two sons in Frome, Somerset.

 @keefstuart

 keef.stuart

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*Also by Keith Stuart*

A Boy Made of Blocks

Days of Wonder

The Frequency of Us

**LOVE  
IS A  
CURSE**

**KEITH STUART**



SPHERE

SPHERE

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For Michael and Eileen Vockins

One need not be a chamber to be haunted,  
One need not be a house;  
The brain has corridors surpassing  
Material place.

Far safer, of a midnight meeting  
External ghost,  
Than an interior confronting  
That whiter host.

Far safer through an Abbey gallop,  
The stones achase,  
Than, moonless, one's own self encounter  
In lonesome place.

EMILY DICKINSON,  
From 'One Need Not be a Chamber to be Haunted'

## Prologue

# Batheaston, 1892

She kissed her daughter and squeezed the tiny girl for as long as she dared, because this would be the last time. Once the precious cargo was lowered back into the cot, Camille turned away and left the room immediately. Her whole body shook in protest as she walked down the hall, but she fought to control it. This was necessary. It was the only way to ensure the safety of her child. The only way.

She put on the red dress she'd had made. It was an exact likeness, as far as she could remember, of the one she had seen that night.

Downstairs, the maid was in the kitchen peeling potatoes, humming to herself.

'I am just stepping out for a walk,' said Camille, her voice thick and wavering. 'I may take a stroll up to the manor. Please can you check on Daphne if I am not back within the hour?'

'Yes, ma'am.'

‘She’ll be hungry when she wakes up.’

‘Yes, ma’am.’

‘Good,’ said Camille, absently. ‘Good girl.’

She left the house, taking only a small bag, a lamp and a flask with her. It was early evening and the high street was quiet, the stores already closing in the dimming light. The track to St Cyprian’s Court would be muddy, but she was wearing her stout boots and it didn’t matter if the hem of her red dress got ruined – she wouldn’t wear it again. Crossing the street, she waved to a woman she vaguely recognised from church and started up the hill, the hedges bristling in the wind either side of the narrow road. The breeze stilled for a moment and, in the deadening quiet, Camille whispered to herself, ‘Be strong, be strong.’ This was, after all, the course of action she had planned for weeks. It would be the end of it all – the constant fear, the dread, that some harm would come to Daphne if she did not act to protect them both. The track turned sharply to the left, and when she rounded the corner, she saw a large black dog in the lane fifty yards ahead, its eyes almost luminous in the low light. It watched her for a few seconds then padded into the trees. Above her, branches groaned and rustled. Starlings whirled in the brooding sky.

After another turn in the track, the old church hove into view, its tower already black against the clouds. She would not go in there, she could not even bring herself to get close. And although that is where it all happened, it was not the source of the evil. Instead, she followed the track up to the mansion itself. It had been home to the Seymour family for hundreds of years, but now they were gone, and a beastly presence occupied that vast gothic building and all its grounds. Camille was here to exorcise it at last. She lit her lamp and stood watching for a moment. Then she retreated and waited . . .

Once the house was dark, it was not hard to find a quiet way in.



A servants' door at the side was often left unlocked, allowing the staff to leave and enter the building at all hours. There would be perhaps four or five staff in the main building; most resided in an annexe at the rear, but their accommodation was distant enough from her plans to allow their escape.

Inside now, Camille made her way quietly through the scullery and kitchen, into the servants' corridor running behind the main ground-floor rooms to the library, situated directly under the master bedroom. She took the flask out of her bag and opened it, the sharp smell of paraffin filling her nostrils. She splashed the contents onto the drapes and across the bookcases, she splashed it on the furniture and the Persian rug.

For a moment she paused, thinking of her blessed daughter who she would not see grow up, of her husband, who would struggle to understand her disappearance. But their safety was what motivated her. They would never be entirely free until this place was razed to the ground and, pray to God, taking the curse with it. She had tried to leave no record of the terrible event that tormented her, and surely her husband would never disclose it to their beloved girl. He would protect her.

Then she threw her lamp to the floor. The fire caught, a blueish flame following the paraffin trail up to the books where pages browned then ignited. The curtains were quickly ablaze, multi-coloured flames burst from a large painting hanging above the fireplace. The heat rose at a frightening pace. Calmly, she walked to an armchair and sat down amid the fiery ruin she had brought forth, satisfied that she would finally have her peace from the demon that had brought itself upon her.

They say the flames reached up to the clouds that night. The hellish orange glow was even visible from Bath. Black smoke

billowed out like spilled ink across the sky. Many local men ran up the track when the fire was spotted, but there was nothing to be done and no chance of getting a water pump up there. All the witnesses could do was watch open-mouthed as the inferno swallowed the building.

## Chapter One

# How It Began

I was fifteen when I found out that my family is cursed.

We were gathered at my aunt's ramshackle home, a converted medieval church hidden away in the woods outside Batheaston. It had once stood on the estate of a country house named St Cyprian's Court, but that burned down many years ago and the church was left semi-derelict until my aunt bought it. The stone walls were crumbling, and the ancient windows were so thick with muck, the few meagre shafts of light that made it through were weak and jaundiced. I sat on a threadbare sofa with my sister, Nikki, both of us silent and clenched. Several of my aunt's old London friends were gathered in a conspiratorial scrum in another corner, murmuring to each other amid the cloying smoke pouring from an incense burner precariously placed on a pile of glossy magazines. Along the north wall was a row of metal shelving units stuffed with books, records and weird prototype sculptures shaped

from doll parts and broken computers. At intermittent points there were large industrial radiators. And in the centre of the nave was my aunt herself, lying barely visible in a huge antique four-poster bed, its curtains drawn on three sides, with only the side facing us left open and lit by a single spot from above, like a ghoulish stage set. She was dying, and this gaudy, monstrous flourish was the way she wanted to say goodbye. My mother was at her bedside, inside the curtain, leaning in towards her sister, their voices indiscernible across the echoing chamber. The whole tableau had the look of some dark gothic painting – if only Auntie had been well enough to paint it.

Lorna had been famous once. She was one half of an artistic duo, alongside her ‘creative partner’ Reggie Macclesfield whom she had met at the Slade School of Art in the 1970s while sharing a studio with a bunch of other students making cutting-edge computer and video art. Lorna and Reggie specialised in weird animatronic sculptures of demons and witches made out of shop-window dummies and TV screens and wires and metal. They were fascinating and horrible. The art world adored them. Then something big happened and the duo broke up. Auntie never told me anything about it, but afterwards she fell into drugs and alcohol and disappeared for two years. When she resurfaced, the art world had moved on. The church was her home, but it was also supposed to be her studio. Her plan had been to make new art alone, but it never transpired, not even when the cancer brought her a ton of attention. A few months after their break-up, Reggie won the Turner Prize alone.

I was bored and didn’t know how to behave. Was I supposed to be crying? No one else was. So I sat picking my black nail varnish off, sighing to myself. I took my phone out of my pocket so that I could text my friend Jess and ask her to grab a book from the

library. Nikki tutted at me loudly. 'It's for school,' I mouthed, but she shook her head. 'Go outside if you have to,' she rasped. 'I'll get you when it's your turn to see her.' I rolled my eyes, got up and flounced outside.

It was a relief to be in the open air, breathing in the heavy scent of the earth and trees. This had always been a spooky place. Two sides of the building were surrounded by an overgrown graveyard, the weathered headstones half sinking into the weeds and slime. And then there were the woods, thick and dark, encroaching on the church's boundary wall as though determined to engulf it. I used to play out here, climbing the withered branches, making dens. It scared me a little, but I was also fascinated. I would circumnavigate the building over and over again, running my fingers along the cold stone, imagining who had touched it before. I felt that I knew every inch, every scar.

While I waited, I did another circle, following the greenish paving slabs around the exterior, avoiding the nettles. After I'd almost completed a circuit of the entire building, I batted some brambles out of my way and spotted something I didn't recognise. Low down on one of the slightly newer sections of the porch wall, which had clearly been part of repairs some time ago, there was a heart shape carved gracefully and deeply into the surface, and in its centre were the letters, 'R. W. & D. R. In love. 1915. For ever.' I was still examining the beautiful serif letters when I heard Nikki calling my name from the church entrance. The time had come for me to sit at Aunt Lorna's side and I wished it to be over already.

The thing is, I loved my aunt. I adored her. I was obsessed with her. She was so different from the rest of the family. Strange, scattered, angry and impetuous. You never quite knew what she was thinking. She was a punk and then a goth, she was obsessed with witchcraft and horror, but also robots, computers and sci-fi ...

I definitely took after her – the books I read were ghost stories, the first make-up I ever wore was her thick sludgy mascara and blood red lipstick; the bands I loved were Bauhaus, Joy Division and Siouxsie and the Banshees, drawn from her huge record collection. Lorna saw in me a kindred spirit, a fellow weirdo. Like her, I'd always had a dark imagination, my sketchbook filled with monstrous imaginings. I would stay with her for most of my school holidays, something my mum actively encouraged. I was not exactly an easy kid. I was volatile and obnoxious and I carried within me this subtle sense of dread that I couldn't explain. It lingered at the back of my mind, whispering of sadness to come. Mum couldn't handle it. As an architect specialising in very sensible austere office design, she struggled with my unpredictable behaviour and wild mood swings. I was never surprised when it was time to pack me off to the church in the woods. Lorna would often take me to London. We'd buy vintage dresses and army boots in Camden Market, we'd go to exhibitions, gigs and gallery openings. Sometimes Reggie was there. In the taxi afterwards, she'd cry and say she'd screwed everything up, and then we'd laugh about it, her heartache. I didn't understand, I just thrived on the drama. There was never any drama at home, not even when Mum divorced my dad. He just disappeared from our lives when I was seven, leaving almost no sense of himself behind, like a brief haunting.

A few years ago, Lorna started to get tired and breathless, and she lost so much weight. She looked ten years too old. Then she admitted she had lung cancer. Three months ago, she became too ill to move, but was enjoying the attention – so she had her huge industrial workbench taken from the nave and replaced with this lavish antique bed so that she could rest in grand comfort while receiving journalists and acolytes. Moths to a dying flame.

Yesterday, the call came in from her manager: she wanted to say goodbye to her friends and family. But I didn't want to say goodbye. I wasn't ready.

I followed my sister back inside, allowing my eyes to readjust to the darkness. As the heavy oak door closed behind us, I stood stupidly staring for a few seconds, watching my mum and her sister finishing their final chat. Just before they parted, my aunt reached for something – a small red satchel – and handed it to Mum; they gave each other a meaningful look. Then Mum walked away towards the rabble of artists, and my sister nudged me in the ribs.

'Go on,' she whispered.

I shuffled forward, slowly and self-consciously, across the stone floors with their etched memorials to long-dead people, towards the wraith-like figure at the heart of the room.

What greeted me was a scene of human ruin. Auntie Lorna, emaciated and pale, was almost lost beneath myriad blankets and quilts. She was half sat up, her greying hair matted, her old Cure T-shirt stained and baggy. The small chamber, enclosed within the thick curtains, had a horrible musty-sweet smell that I instinctively hated and feared. All around her lay books and newspapers; her bedside table was a bombed-out pharmacy of scattered pill bottles, used tissues and little plastic cups. There was an IV drip hanging beside her, the tube leading under the bedclothes.

'Auntie,' I said, and my voice broke into a squeak.

'Come in,' she said. 'Sit down next to me.'

I edged towards her, making my way through piles of clothes and photos and junk, then pulled myself up onto the bed, unable to look my aunt in the eyes, afraid of her and what was coming.

'Cammy,' she said. 'I see you are grieving me already.'

I looked down at my black T-shirt, black cardigan, black Docs. 'I like to be organised,' I said.

She tried to laugh, but it came out as a scary hissing, choking sound. 'You get me,' she said. 'That's why I saved you until last.'

I smiled and finally looked at her properly. Her eyes were liquidity, her mouth all drooping. I hated myself, but I overwhelmingly wanted to run out of there, run far away. This person wasn't my aunt. This wasn't my hero.

'I know,' she said softly. 'I've let myself go.'

She smiled again and I did too. She took a cigarette out of the packet by her bed and lit it. 'How are you? How's school?'

I shrugged. 'I've got some exams next week.'

'Have you revised?'

'Not really.'

'Good. Exams are a tool of the patriarchy.'

We were silent for a second.

'Are you happy?' she said.

'I don't know. I guess?'

'At your age, not knowing is good enough. It's something to build on.'

I knew I should say something to her, tell her that I loved her, but I didn't want to get it wrong. Nobody prepares you for moments like this.

'Auntie, I . . .'

She lifted her skeletal hand and placed it on my arm. There was no weight to it at all.

'Shh,' she said. 'I know. I know.'

For the first time I felt the sting of tears in my eyes.

'Do you have good friends?' she said.

I thought of Sarah, Jess and me messing about this morning, listening to music, laughing.

'Yeah, they're good.'

'You need three types of friends to make it through life: the fun



ones, the ones you can talk to, and the ones who can get you out of a mess. Ditch the rest. Ditch the ones who use you and give nothing back. Learn to spot them.'

'I will.'

'Be nice to your mum. She loves you. In her own way. Things haven't been easy for her.'

Her hand slipped away and her eyes closed. I leaned in.

'Auntie?'

She suddenly started, as though shaken awake, and looked back at me, her eyes focused and alert at last. 'One last thing,' she said. Her voice was so faint I had to get even closer. 'Did your mother tell you about the curse?'

I looked at her, confused. 'The ... the curse? You mean, like, periods?'

She smiled. 'No, an actual curse. A real curse.'

'I ... I don't think so.'

'I thought she wouldn't. Deborah has always shied away from the dark side of the street.'

She looked over at her library.

'Do you remember the books we used to read together when you were a child?'

'Yes. Those old ghost-story collections. I loved them.'

'Your mother hated that I read them to you. She said that they put scary thoughts into your head. Do you remember what you said to her when she told you that?'

'No.'

A shadow passed across the bed, and Auntie wheezed, watching it go. She flicked ash onto her blanket, then her eyes were back on me.

'You said, "But, Mummy, those thoughts were already there."'

I looked back towards my mother, who was now sitting on the sofa with Nikki. She was watching us.

‘Cammy, listen,’ said Lorna. ‘There is a curse on the women in this family, there has been for hundreds of years.’ She said it matter-of-factly, as though it was the most normal thing in the world, then she took a long drag on her cigarette. ‘You ought to know.’

This would have been a lot for most fifteen-year-olds to take in. They might have assumed she was delirious or joking. But not me. It wasn’t just the stories we’d read together. She’d always believed that the supernatural is just science we don’t yet understand; her mantra was that Arthur C. Clarke quote: *any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*. ‘Listen,’ she’d tell me. ‘If we are prepared to accept that subatomic particles can exist in two places at once, we should also accept that the dead are among us. And the dead *hate* us. We take from them everything they once had and we don’t look after it well enough.’ I believed in curses, I had read so much about witchcraft. But could *we* really be cursed? My thoughts swirled in the thick air. I looked out towards my mother, as though hoping for guidance from someone outside this weird little haunted grotto. My aunt chuckled again.

‘It’s all right, I don’t expect you to believe me,’ she said, her pathetic attempt at a laugh dissolving into another coughing fit. And she suddenly shifted to utter seriousness. ‘But you will.’

I swallowed deeply.

‘What . . . I mean, what sort of curse?’

She took a deep, laboured breath, then pointed at me.

‘Us Piper girls, we can’t . . .’ She stopped for a second, as though to compose herself. Her breath crackled in her chest like kindling on a fire. ‘We can’t have the things other people have. It always ends badly.’

‘What? What always ends badly?’

‘Relationships. Romance. Everyone gets hurt. Obliterated. When we fall in love, something terrible comes for us.’

She looked away, falling back into the pillow.

‘Auntie, I don’t know what you’re trying to tell me.’

She coughed again, lightly at first, but then horribly loud, over and over, her pale face reddening with the effort and pain.

‘You are capable of great things, Cammy. But you must be independent. Do you understand?’

I nodded.

‘The rest of the family, they all tried to pretend it wasn’t real. It got them nowhere. I succumbed to it too. But you, you must face it.’

‘I’ll try . . .’

‘There is a secret for you to uncover. There is proof. It all ties together.’

‘I don’t understand. What . . .’

Another coughing fit, a horrible wet, hacking sound. ‘Just go now, my darling. Go.’

I stood up, the combined weight and weightlessness of the moment bewildering me. All I knew for certain was that I wanted to do what she told me. I did very much want to get out and get away. But as I slid down from the bed, I heard her breathe in again.

‘Cammy, turn around, look at me for a second. Be what you want. Do what you want. But . . . just . . .’

She stopped and there was a silence so deep I dared not breathe through it.

‘Just don’t fall in love.’