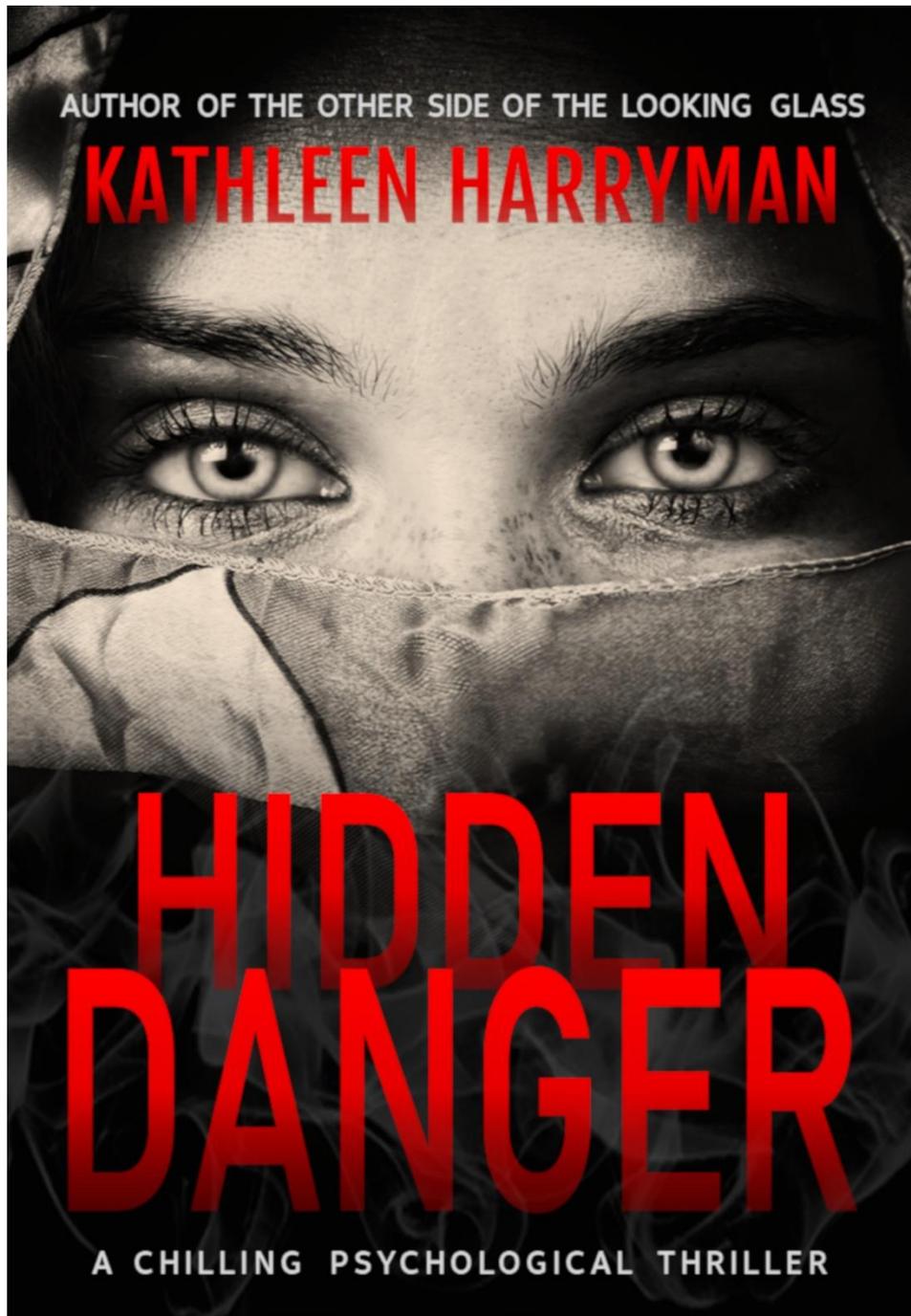


Excerpt from Hidden Danger



AUTHOR OF THE OTHER SIDE OF THE LOOKING GLASS

KATHLEEN HARRYMAN

**HIDDEN
DANGER**

A CHILLING PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

PROLOGUE

I find it strange how we view our young as a species. Faces full of innocence, we miss the inner person hiding inside. It's why we react with astonishment, revulsion, and fear when faced with their evil deeds. Our shock resonates like a siren echoing across the silence of our souls. The burden of our social expectations becomes damaged. Psychologists take advantage of this, programming us to think it's not the child's fault. That external factors are to blame, contributing to their behaviour. It is a peculiar analysis; one I've exploited many times. Youth, for now, is on my side. It's like a ticking bomb. *Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.* One day, I'll be old, and people will no longer blame external factors for the evil I have done.

My name is Rita Jackson. I am sixteen years old and a serial killer.

I've been killing since I was eight. Are you shocked by that? Perhaps you're wondering how an eight-year-old child could commit such terrible acts. It's that programming I mentioned earlier... it has you questioning my deeds. You seek justification for my actions. Instead, you need to consider the possibility that the young can be evil. Or we will continue to shock and frighten you with our repugnant deeds. Child killers are few, yet we touch you deep in your core. The crimes of the young will destroy and rip your delusions apart. To you, our actions are unquantifiable. You seek answers where none exist.

Society dictates that our young be carbon copies of ourselves. Such rationale makes it impossible to understand the hideous action of the child killer. It clouds your judgement and prevents you from seeing the monster. It is why I continue to take advantage of my youth.

Many have fallen prey to my young looks and tender age. Your lack of understanding allows me to keep killing. All you see is a child, and never the monstrous creature that hides within.

Never forget, I am evil.

A beast lives inside me.

When the Beast woke, I realised my true destiny. I recognised it as being a part of me. It was me. I don't suffer from schizophrenia, though I appreciate the links psychologists will make. I don't have psychotic episodes. I'm more than capable of distinguishing my own thoughts and ideas. I don't hear voices whispering inside my head, other than the Beast's, which is acceptable to me.

However, should the police catch me, I will ensure that the psychologist has knowledge of the Beast. I may find it necessary to put on a display to persuade them of my non-existent condition and convince them of a mental illness I don't suffer from. If it stops the legal system from throwing me in prison, I'll use it. Insanity is always a good plea.

The Beast is the creature that lives inside me for the kill. It hungers and ravishes at the tender flesh within my body. I do not look to it for ideas, I'm conscious of what I do and the monstrous perceptions my actions have on others. The Beast is an aspect of me I acknowledge and embrace,

as someone would embrace their selfish nature. My mind is clear. I understand that what I do is unacceptable to society.

A person has many sides... personality traits. The Beast is one of mine.

For you, killing someone is too repulsive to contemplate. Such notions cloud your cognitive processing and invades your cerebral thoughts. Your reasoning is limited, rendering you incapable of moving away from the fear that pounds at your heart when faced with the likes of me.

You want to live.

I want to kill you.

It's a game that's centuries old. The predator has always hunted the weak. Society hasn't moved forward, it's an illusion. In reality, all society has accomplished is to build a concrete fortress to hide within. You've made the game more interesting and very entertaining. The evolution of our species only brought more players to the contest. Humans aren't only studying animals, but themselves. Isn't that what psychologists are doing? Studying our species for answers to theories that are unsolvable. The solutions they're providing aren't answers. They're meant to comfort, not enlighten. People hate to face the truth, assembling invisible shields wrapped in lies, to keep out reality. Someone like me comes along and we put a dent in the shield. Your anxieties become an epidemic. So, the psychologist pours on an elixir of calming words, convincing you my upbringing is to blame. Did someone subject me to torturous and cruel acts at a young and impressionable age? Your young are safe. Children like me are exceptions caused by actions unforeseen, which broke down the mental receptors prohibiting normal behaviour.

But let me correct you... I was evil from conception. I know your social wiring requires you to dispute that sentence. Are we not defined by our environment? Our family? Our experiences? I would disagree. My mum is a very nice woman who's loving and kind. She's never hit me or locked me away in a cupboard and has always placed my welfare above her own. She did make me wear dresses and put ribbons in my hair, but that's not a contributory factor in the making of a killer. It was just irritating. I hate dresses, ribbons and looking cute. My brother Jack is ten years older than me. You could say I was a mistake, but you'd be wrong. I'm mum's miracle baby. My parents adopted Jack when he was eight after the doctors told her she couldn't have kids. Turns out, the doctors were wrong.

So here I am, the miracle child, with morals laced in evil and loving it.

You might be thinking that I've missed someone. What about Daddy? Let me tell you, I'm my father's salvation. Without me, he's nothing. He knows I'm evil, but he doesn't know how monstrous I am. At the moment, I need him to clean up my kills and dispose of the bodies. Like most dependencies, it won't last forever. He hasn't worked this out yet, but he will... the day I kill him.

That's how it happens every time. None of my victims saw death coming until it was too late for them. Daddy, of all people, should understand this. I'm outgrowing him. His usefulness is diminishing as old age creeps in. Death is catching up with him, licking at his heels.

But, like my victims, he's blinded by his perceptions of me. He'll never comprehend my true capabilities or the evil person I am. Daddy wants to be the killer, but his weak mind prevents him from committing murder. He has to satisfy his urges by witnessing my kills. I don't just destroy one life when I kill someone... I crush the life of my victim's families as I suck the life out of their

loved one. Until Daddy found his little girl killing animals, he'd kept his obsession with death hidden behind TV programs like Born to Kill and True Crime. Now, he has a front-row seat to every one of my kills. And I get to remind him just how much he needs me.

Trust me when I say psychologists are brainwashing you. They want you to trust in their theories. That they can save someone as wicked as me. Well, you can't save people like me. We are what we are, and no amount of brain fixing can rescue us from ourselves. Are we not all unique? Our tolerance thresholds differ, and my tolerance to cause harm and kill clashes with yours. That doesn't mean I'm crazy, so stop looking for excuses and quit labelling me. A psychologist categorising my behavioural traits will not keep you safe. The labels change nothing. Serial killers keep on killing. People keep on dying. And more labels and categories are created to justify their presence. A behavioural category will not stop people from committing heinous crimes. It's there to make psychologists feel that they're necessary, as more of them are created to respond to the ever-increasing need.

But they're playing with your mind. These are just illusions to protect your mental well-being. In truth, they are conditioning you like lab mice.

There is a psychotherapeutic method known as Flooding, designed to enable the sufferer to overcome phobias. They force a person to face their worst fear. Such techniques are unethical nowadays, as it causes intense distress. Systematic Desensitisation (SD) has replaced Flooding as it's seen as being calmer and more appropriate. SD exposes participants to their fear gradually. I think of my killing spree as Flooding. I'm a rip-the-band-aid-off kind of person, instantly releasing my victims of their fears and anxieties.

There's an expectation within humanity that domesticated animals will evolve beyond their basic instinct. You cannot change an animal or refine its temperament and alter its genetic requirement to hunt by labelling it a pet. You cannot remove nature from the beast no matter its environment.

While I recognise that our behavioural development is part environment (nurture) and part innate (our nature), the percentage split isn't even. Nature has more influence. If you're looking for proof, look no further than the domestic cat that keeps bringing the dead mice home; or drags the bird through the cat flap with its insides hanging out. That's evidence that we retain our nature even in the most domesticated environment. Trust me, no amount of petting and loving will make the creature forget the impulses it was born with.

Humans are still animals, and our animal instincts remain, albeit hidden most of the time. Psychologists presume that study and research can explain human nature... but they can't.

As the world advances and psychologists and law enforcement learn more about the behavioural traits of the killer, the more the killer learns to adapt and hide. The hope you seek doesn't exist. All psychologists are doing is opening a mental pathway to lessen your fear. They want you to buy into their fairy-tale. Therapy cannot suppress a killer's nature. It's just a band-aid. The inner person remains.

So, while you're living with the fantasy they fed you, I'll keep killing. Hope is merely a stupid word to keep you from facing the truth. Let me tell you... there is no hope. Not when I'm around. Are you shaking your head? I'm trying not to smile. It's a malevolent smile which you'd do well to heed. Take the warning, or death might claim you.

I'm a fair person. You're surprised I say that, aren't you? You're lucky because none of my other victims received a warning. Let's see if you'll take the warning or continue believing that someone as young as me cannot be a born killer. That with therapy, a psychologist can save me. If I were you, I'd stop listening to the psychologists and question your social expectations. Start viewing people like me as a threat, because one day, we just might meet.

1

Rita Jackson

She threw back her head and laughed. Her long blonde hair spilling down her back. Her blue eyes sparkled with excitement as she pouted her plump, cerise, glossy lips. The skirt she wore skimmed the tops of her toned thighs. Long, bare, tanned legs bewitched the male customers in the coffee shop. Her heeled sandals rang out a soft beat upon the wooden floor as she walked, flexing the muscles in her legs. Friends flanked her. Their eyes cast downward as they looked at the iPhone resting in her palm.

I nodded in the woman's direction, tapping my pink Converse shoe on the metal table leg. "She's next." I sipped on my full-fat latte. For the first time today, I smiled.

The early afternoon sun beat down, slipping beneath the dark red canvas awning of the coffee shop. The canopy offered little protection from the sun's heat. Unprotected skin sizzled and burned as UV rays bit unto uncovered flesh like fire ants. As I'm a redhead, I used nothing less than a 50 SPF. I never tanned, just burned.

Positioned in the shade, I enjoyed the sun's heat. I sat back against the woven cane chair, relaxed and unnoticed. No one looked in my direction. Uninterested in the young girl enjoying a day out with her dad in Whitby. With my abundance of freckles and my long auburn pigtails, innocence radiated from me. The sightseers walking along Baxtergate would never suspect I was a serial killer. When selecting my victims, Costa Coffee was my favourite place. They littered our streets like flies, offering protection from the weather, no matter the season. Costa Coffee was a place people would never associate with a serial killer. That was the problem with society... it never stopped to consider that a serial killer might do '*normal*' things. A serial killer would need to appear '*normal*' to conceal their true nature... which was what I was exactly doing. While I didn't agree with the term '*normal*', I accepted it because of the convenience it afforded me.

Whitby was the next desirable place on my serial killing list. With its links to the supernatural, it possessed a dark history. Bram Stoker's visit to Whitby in 1890 provided him with an atmospherical location for his gothic novel, *Dracula*. The fictional killer brought hordes of tourists and their money to its beaches. It was time for Whitby to embrace a new killer... the Gas Man. Once the town was linked to a serial killer as renowned as the Gas Man, its popularity would grow by significant proportions.

It was Goth Weekend. This event was first established in 1994 by Jo Hampshire and claimed to be one of the premier Goth events in the world. Twice a year, around April and October, Goths flocked to the coastal town of Whitby. However, some costumes on display leaned more towards bondage and S&M. I watched a man walk past with a metal cage around his lower jaw, wearing the tightest black leather trousers I'd ever seen someone squeeze themselves into. A set of handcuffs dangled from his belt hook. My suspicions were confirmed. He didn't understand what an actual 'Goth' was. His dress was as factious as vampires.

I hated him on sight. Research was essential, no matter how trivial the subject appeared. I couldn't respect anyone who neglected such fundamental details. He'd chosen his costume with his limited assumption of what a Goth would wear. The name Goth stemmed from the Germanic Tribes; Visigoths, who lived between the Danube and Dniester rivers, and the Ostrogoths, who lived in what we know now as Ukraine. The Romans found them barbaric and uncultured and harassed them for centuries. Later came the black clothing and dramatic makeup.

I'd toyed with the fantasy of a serial killer weekend. Imagine everyone dressing up as their favourite serial killer — like the Gas Man. My lips curled in distaste. Fantasy dissolving, as the man walked past. No doubt, everyone would walk around wearing a gas mask. Pleased with their faux authenticity of the serial killer. Given the pressure the police were under to catch the Gas Man, I'm sure they'd appreciate it if I went around wearing a gas mask. I'd be easier to identify and catch. Alas, it was a whimsical notion.

There I sat... the Gas Man. My fingers twisting around my auburn pigtail. Harmless to the onlooker. Unnoticed and preoccupied with selecting my next kill. People were so busy that their lives blinded them. They remained confident in their preconceived ideas of a killer, never seeing what was in front of their faces. I realised that it's difficult to look at me and see a killer. At sixteen, I looked young for my age — more around the age of twelve. Zillions of freckles lined my cheeks and nose. I had soft, baby-faced features in which sat liquid brown, trusting eyes. The average sixteen-year-old would hate the fact that they looked more like twelve than sixteen. They would apply makeup in thick layers to disguise their very youthful appearance.

Me? I loved it.

The media gave birth to my serial killer name — Gas Man. Their assumptions towards my gender were provided to them by professional profilers. Their hypothesis corrupted by memories of the Yorkshire Ripper, who had terrorised the citizens of Yorkshire back in the 1970s. Peter Sutcliffe killed thirteen women and attempted to kill seven more before the police stopped him in 1981. West Yorkshire Police received much criticism in their handling of the case. The police had brought Peter Sutcliffe in for questioning on two separate occasions. At the start of Sutcliffe's reign of terror, his victims had been prostitutes, taken while they walked the streets of the well-known red-light districts of Yorkshire. The police and press presented a united front in the embryonic stages of Sutcliffe's killing rampage. They accepted the murders because of the victim's profession. Categorized as an occupational hazard, the police response had been routine. The critique would influence their handling of such cases, even today. Mistakes like that didn't just vanish. Their stain remained.

While the Gas Girl would have been a more appropriate title, it would be inconceivable to the police and their profilers. Girls don't kill.

Besides, Gas Girl didn't induce the same intimidating fear as Gas Man. Perhaps it's the word 'man' which made it sound more threatening. How they reached this conclusion was easy to understand, even without the haunting presence of Peter Sutcliffe. The body count was increasing at a worrying rate. It wasn't logical for a girl of my age to be the killer. My victims came from the various towns and cities which made up Yorkshire. The geographic size of Yorkshire is 11,903 km². About 4,596 miles. A lot of ground for a 'girl' killer to cover, with no means of transport other than a push-bike which sat in the garage covered in cobwebs, and local transportation like buses, taxi cabs, and trains. It conjured up a comical vision of a girl sitting in a taxi and screaming, "Catch that man. I want to kill him!"

Despite there being a serial killer operating in the area, Yorkshire was a beautiful county. You should experience its Roman and Viking heritage, Norman castles, medieval abbeys, and its two national parks — the Peak District and Yorkshire Dales. Its cities included York, Leeds, Sheffield, and Huddersfield, etcetera. Have a look around but choose a day when I'm not around looking for my next victim. You might not get the chance to brag about how beautiful Yorkshire was. You could be famous suddenly as one of the Gas Man's victims. Your picture could adorn TV screens and social media. You might be thinking... *not under those circumstances*. Well, as they say, you can't have everything.

I looked across at Daddy as his eyes devoured the newspaper clasped between his chubby hands. Prior to the birth of the Gas Man, he'd never picked up a newspaper. Never mind contemplated reading one. The Gas Man was front page news, and he'd developed an intense thirst to lap up everything the paparazzi wrote about the serial killer. Caught within their web of lies and make-believe, Daddy hungered for more. Like a spider ready for the fly, the media spun its well-crafted silken web. Daddy drank it up, the thirst never wavering. I'd laugh at his newfound obsession if I considered him funny, but his delusional reasoning made me irritable. He was a rash I wish I could scratch away. Watching me kill did not make him the killer. He was getting too cocky, taking my killings and turning them into his glory. Cocky spelt sloppy. Too many killers found themselves in prison because they saw themselves as invincible.

I was having a lot of fun playing with the police and their profilers. Random... it was key to staying under their radar, allowing me to keep on killing. If I wasn't careful, Daddy would bring my killing rampage to a premature end.

My eyes swung toward the woman still tittering over her iPhone, her friend's laughter encouraging her to continue.

The rustling of paper drew my attention to the fat man next to me. Like a chauffeur, Daddy drove me around Yorkshire as I selected my victims. It wasn't a difficult job, and it suited him. In his warped mind, he had become the Gas Man. An illogical and egotistical, distorted image. I was the killer, not him. He might be fatter and older than me, and at a hundred and ninety centimetres presented a more imposing figure, but still, he didn't have what it took to kill. I was the lure, Daddy the restrainer. My tolerance was fast diminishing and useful or not, I found myself exasperated at how often I needed to remind him of his status. Perhaps, I had been too subtle. I smirked inward. My brother Jack would laugh at the idea of me being subtle. My directness at home was legendary.

Long before our law enforcement admitted they were dealing with a serial killer, social media had picked up on the increasing body count. It showed the power social media had on our everyday lives. People tweeted 'Gas Man - a serial killer at large.' Facebook users published 'Gas Man

strikes again - are we safe?' The paparazzi were quick to add their own pressure onto our police. Photographs of gas masks peppered newspapers and mobile screens.

My healthy fixation for oxygen led them to my serial killer name. The body's requirement for oxygen fascinated me and I liked to suffocate my victims, slowly, watching them as they struggled to come to terms with death. Some cried and begged, while others became angry. Once their body stopped twitching and death claimed them, I carved the image of a gas mask into their right cheek. Some would consider my serial killer name a lazy attempt by the paparazzi at finding a more unique and threatening nickname. Me? I wasn't bothered at all. As long as people kept fearing me, and I could keep on killing, I had no complaints. I had enough to contend with, with the sluggish slob sitting next to me.

Daddy looked over the newspaper, his eyes following the incline of my head to the girl and her seemingly identical friends. Cloning has been around since 1952 when scientists successfully cloned a tadpole. In 1992, scientists at the Roslin Institute near Edinburgh revealed a cloned sheep known as Dolly. By 2005, scientists had cloned their first human embryo. While there are those that object to human cloning, the women here weren't among them. They looked alike and acted alike, losing their individual identities and turning into clones of each other.

"She seems popular."

I rolled my eyes at his comment. He wasn't a risk-taker, nor was he imaginative. That's what he needed me for, amongst other things. "It'll make it more interesting," I coaxed.

He continued to stare at the clones for a prolonged second. I picked up the empty coffee mug and tapped my fingers against it. As my stubby nails sent out a soft ringing noise, I watched Daddy's eyes lower back to the newspaper. I allowed him time to ponder my suggestions. The art of manipulation was to allow for gentle processing. Rush them and people will never do what you want. Manipulation is a time-consuming and taxing process.

It was her popularity that attracted me. I hated her on sight. Flanked by her friends, laughing and gaining attention by the second, she made popular look easy. She was the image I worked hard to project to the world. To gain people's trust, I became the very thing I despised. I wasn't interested in people, other than killing them. I disliked having to converse with them, pretending their silly problems interested me. Loners made society uneasy, viewing them as recluses or mavericks. To look and act like everyone else are traits that made someone popular.

Popularity has its problems, though. Without individual personalities, they were boring. Yes, they were pretty with their long hair in varying shades and beautiful made-up faces. Their skin almost orange from too much spray tan and their super skinny bodies encased in super tight trousers and skimpy tops. Their oversized handbags hooked over one arm, with the ever-present mobile phone grasped in the other hand. Boring.

It wasn't suitable for a killer (*if they wanted to keep killing*), to present the world with their lack of emotional connection. The world demanded '*normal*' whatever that meant. Therefore, I was forced to conceal my true nature. Not having the same emotional constraints induced fear in people. Like the women in the coffee shop, I pretended to be a clone, adhering to society's demands.

I'd read an interview with psychologist James Garbarino which grabbed my attention. He was an advocate for giving teenage killers a second chance. A load of dribble based on unfounded theories that didn't consider the true workings of a killer's mind. That was my opinion, as imperfect

and judgemental it might be. As a teenage killer, I had more experience in this matter than Garbarino. His hypothesis outlined that underneath the layers of violent and sociopathic tendencies, there was a person who needed *'help.'* Quite a laughable conjecture to one such as me. I view psychologists as egotistical. Their notion that they could save a killer meant that killers were mindless creatures that could be controlled, manipulated and reprogrammed.

That's where they got it all wrong. Killing was an instinct. How could they overwrite the brain's natural impulses based on the creature's nature? An alligator will eat you if presented with the opportunity. The basic need for food overrode the conscious brain. An alligator would look at humans the same way we view chocolate — as a yummy snack. Garbarino might want to *'help'* someone like me, but he couldn't save me. I had a deep loathing towards professionals like James Garbarino.

Psychologists operated under the illusion that they understood a killer's viewpoint, but a psychopath's brain functions are different. Without the predisposition to kill, one can't truly comprehend why killers like me kill and enjoy it. Garbarino spoke of moral dilemmas. Those morals are theirs, not mine. I have none. When I kill, I am made whole. How could the likes of Garbarino internalise that?

Psychologists are singular in their analysis of us. They'd like us to conform with the labels they assigned to us. Their encroachment upon my mental wellness was unwarranted. I had no self-righteous need to inflict my view upon the clone girls in the coffee shop. I might not like them, but I had no need for their brain's cognitive reasoning to echo my own. Years spent observing behaviours did not enable a person to fathom the inner working mind of another. A killer was an artful schemer. Even when captured, their answers and actions depended on their level of boredom and self-interest. Imprisonment of the body did not prevent the mind from seeking chaos. The game between psychologists and law enforcement did not affect them. A killer would still play with your mind, if you let it.

I ground my teeth as Daddy shuffled the newspaper. The act reminded me of his presence. I despised the fact that I needed him. My small body forced me to accept his help and it infuriated me. At eight, when I'd first killed, I'd been unaware of my limitations. As I grew older and wiser, I found I could no longer ignore my body's shortcomings. They screamed at me daily. Daddy's existence was a constant reminder of my body's frailty, like the itching of an insect bite that was hard to ignore.

Perhaps I should swat him away, stop him from biting at my nerves. I smiled, appreciating the image of his head squashed at an odd angle beneath a giant swatter. Daddy's attitude towards me was changing. The delusional fool was under the misplaced notion that he could control me. I couldn't allow this new-found attitude of Daddy's from developing any further. The necessity of finding a replacement had become more urgent.

I eliminated my problems in a simplistic and enjoyable fashion; I killed them. Him being my father changed nothing. I felt nothing for him but irritation. An emotion I would be better without. His arrogance would be his destruction. He was getting older and slower. Daddy didn't notice his body ageing, but I did. It was slowing down, his muscles complaining at night, and his increasing body mass created its own health problems. His beer consumption was another issue he refused to recognise. His liver, I was sure, worked overtime to cope.

I breathed deep, filling my lungs with warm air. The Beast woke; its paws stretching, claws raking at my tender skin. In silence, I nodded at the Beast. We needed a plan... one that would lead to Daddy's beautiful and untimely death. Our heads inclined as one as we considered our options. Together, we drew up a mental list of activities Daddy performed for the Gas Man. For me.

1. Chauffer.
2. Cleaner.
3. Muscle.

The Beast and I appraised the list. It was short, making Daddy easy to replace. When I killed, Daddy watched with eyes glistening with unsuppressed pleasure, as the light died from my victim's eyes. Life was fragile. It hung on by a delicate thread. That fact remained unappreciated until someone like me came along and extinguished it. Daddy also excelled in his role as the Gas Man's cleaner, with his big bottles of bleach and long, black rubber gloves. His driving skill was suspect, though. We trundled along at a steady slow rate.

My gaze lingered on him as he continued to read the newspaper article. Beneath the layer of fat was muscle, though too much exertion led to profuse amounts of sweat, and yet he still believed he could control me. My eyes stared at his face where a smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He'd forgotten he was a nothing. A nobody. It took a special person to take a life and to feel no regret or remorse.

My killer-self awoke when I was eight, triggered by the cat next door. I observed in deep fascination as it stalked, toyed, and killed its prey. When the killing blow came and the mouse lay still, the cat walked away. Its fascination dying at the same point the mouse took its last breath. At that moment, I felt the Beast stir inside me. This strange, almost alien being whispered in my head, calling to the dormant killer within. I now understood why I could never give mum the emotional warmth she craved from me. Like the cat, I was a predator, and I will seize the advantage and kill. Freedom opened its door and I liked what I saw. The Beast raked claws against my flesh as it stretched out its paw. Its head raising with interest. I wanted to kill and taste the moment death came.

The next day, I sorted out the cat.

My Beast encouraged me to mimic its actions.

To stalk it.

Play with it.

Kill it.

And leave its lifeless body to rot.

Instantaneous gratification flooded my body. I understood the cat's need to kill. To be the hunter. My Beast smiled inside me, satisfied for a while.

Being only eight, I hadn't learned, nor had thought about, covering my tracks. The only thing I cared about was my next kill. When Daddy found me covered in cat blood, he smiled. Revulsion

never fell across his face. Instead, I became the solution. No longer would he have to satisfy his urges by watching televised re-enactments staged by TV producers. Naivety was not my blessing, however. At only eight, I was incapable of understanding Daddy's weakness. Unconcerned, I welcomed the opportunity to learn how to become a better killer. Under Daddy's careful instruction, I moved from the common pet to people. My youthful innocence evaporated. But Daddy stagnated as I grew. It wasn't long before I came to understand how much he needed me. The older I became, the more Daddy's usefulness waned. He was the cage that my killer-self paced within in. While he lived, he would forever try to control me and suffocate me. I would never reach my potential.

I cocked my head, flipping my pigtail over my shoulder. My brown eyes lingered on the group of girls. "You know, we could make this a mass kill. That would be something new."

In slow motion, Daddy lowered the newspaper. He looked back at the girls, his hazel eyes sparkling with interest. He was so easy to manipulate. His tongue snaked out, wetting his lips. I watched his Adam's Apple as it bobbed. Like a fish on a hook, I'd caught him. The Beast raised its head and together we surveyed our prey. My palms became sweaty. My pink t-shirt sticking to my skin. I uncrossed my legs, re-crossed them, lifting my mug off my skinny jeans. My eyes never left the Clones.

"I suppose we could do that."

I smiled. *Yes, I suppose we could.*

It was time for the Gas Man to evolve, and Herman Webster Mudgett was my chosen source of inspiration. Born in the 1800s, Mudgett was a serial killer well beyond his time. Mudgett reinvented himself when he started working at a pharmacy in Edgewood, Chicago. Now known as Dr. Henry Howard Holmes, he embraced this new chapter in his life and started seducing women out of their money. H. H. Holmes had been an intelligent and respectable man on the outside... a killer and con man on the inside. His three-story house trapped his victims within its soundproofed rooms. It was a house of deception, with secret passages, trapdoors, and body-sized chutes that led the dead to two furnaces. Holmes used gas to asphyxiate them. You could never escape the body's need for oxygen. The connection I felt with Holmes was more than just one killer appraising the other. We both had an insatiable appetite for starving our victims of oxygen. However, the most attractive fact about Holmes was the status he carried as America's first serial killer. Holmes was an original. Rumoured to have killed twenty-seven people. Even today, no one knew the exact number of his victims. He professed to the murder of several people found to be alive. With only ashes to identify the body count, there was no way of confirming the full total. Holmes also confused authorities with his confessions. Even when captured, Holmes didn't finish playing his games. An intelligent mind required stimulation, and Holmes found his new stimuli in playing with law enforcement. I wanted to be like Herman Webster Mudgett, also known as Dr. Henry Howard Holmes, but better.

Off the A64 eastbound sat an old derelict farmhouse which I'd passed many times while travelling in Daddy's van. From my limited vantage point, the roofs looked shabby. Windows were missing, boarded-up, or broken. The owner had left it to rot. That didn't matter, I'd offer it a new life. Give the farmhouse purpose and make it beautiful again. Holmes had converted his three-story home into a killer's paradise. I would have Daddy convert the farmhouse as well. I didn't expect to find

electricity or gas to feed the property. But even if the utility feeds were live, I wouldn't use them. I needed the farmhouse to remain off the grid, to keep its unassuming, dilapidated identity.

Technology in the 1800s wasn't what it is today. A killer needed to be smart. When Daddy caught me killing, he'd seen an opportunity and invested in it. I'd watched enough programmes like CSI and True Crime to understand how significant traceability and evidence were to the police. They played a key factor in capturing the killer. Growth in profiling enabled the police to get a clearer picture of the perpetrator. They were no longer looking for a monster, but a person where the monster lived.

Howard Teten and Patrick Mullany were the earliest credited with using behavioural analyses for problematic cases. Teten developed a hypothesis using evidence found at the crime scene to determine the perpetrator. I found Teten's theory fascinating. I wondered what he'd say about Daddy's habit of pouring copious amounts of bleach over my victim's lifeless bodies. Once treated with bleach, Daddy wrapped the corpse in an unused plastic sheet. He would then dump the body on the roadside, miles away from the actual murder scene. It must be difficult to form a correct analysis when the crime scene itself wasn't available. The police never made public if they'd found one of my crime scenes, and I never went back to find out. Killers who revisited their crime scene got caught.

I never crossed the arms of my victims. I left their faces on display, uncovered. I wasn't sorry for the life I took and didn't want to present the illusion that I was. The urge to play with the profilers was strong. To mislead them and cover the faces of the dead as I stared down at them. Like the cat played with the mouse. Playing with the local law enforcement and their advisors was tempting, but the kill took precedent. Too many killers became absorbed with the mind games and they lost. The only thing I left the profilers was my signature — a gas mask carved into the right cheek of my victims. They might think that the bleached bodies were part of a cleansing ritual or showed an obsessive tendency. I looked at Daddy. He was a neurotic chap, with his compelling need for cleansing the bodies and removing the evidence. The kill was the important part, not the game. Daddy's need to dip the corpse in the corrosive substance would become redundant at the farmhouse. Like Myra Hindley and Ian Brady who buried their victims on Saddleworth Moor, the farmhouse sat within several acres of land. Enough space to bury the bodies. Daddy would realise only one of us was in charge then... and that's me. He could try and take credit for my kills. The world was full of spineless, unimaginative people like him. But I won't let that happen.

I took a deep calming breath. My anger dispersed as air expelled.

I thought about an article I'd read on former FBI Agent John Douglas. Douglas was very influential in the science behind criminal investigation and criminal profiling. The studying and comprehension of profiling are important for someone like me. If I understood how profiling was being used to catch the perpetrator, I could use it against the profiler. God bless a profiler's need to write books, appear on TV shows and the internet. Human nature hasn't evolved. We still carry the basic need to be applauded for our work. Told '*well done*' and patted on the head, like a dog longing to hear it's a '*good dog.*' It hinders the fight against crime. Too many people like to boast about how they'd caught the killer or prevented a crime. They put their work into books, did TV interviews and such. Douglas believed that to understand the artist, you looked at the artwork. I must admit that I viewed my kills as beautiful pieces of art. Douglas also reasoned that to understand the criminal, one must study the crime. It was no longer enough for killers like me to kill. We had to be smart.

The Gas Man was a complex killer. It seemed the police and their advisors could not comprehend that the killer was a girl of sixteen years/ Or perhaps they looked at the artistry of the kill and concluded the perpetrator was male, with a job that led him to encounter a wide selection of people. A job which required him to travel. Perhaps their theories made them think that the Gas Man's occupation was that of a long-distance lorry driver. It would make sense.

It wasn't easy for the profiler to see me. No one wanted to believe in the possibility of an eight-year-old girl evolving into the Gas Man. Eight is such a tender, impressionable, innocent age. The police and their profilers would never catch me. Until they saw the evil in their young, their reasonings would always have its limitations. And because of that, killers like me will continue to kill... unnoticed.

Society will never change or adapt its point of view of people like me. Like a myth or fairy tale, preconceived ideas are hard to let go. People wanted to believe in the innocence and the beautiful purity of their young.

Technology worked for the police and the killer, like a game of spider and fly. I would never become a fly, that title would belong to Daddy, but he's too stupid to realise it. I've spent hours researching to ensure I remained under the police radar. Being careful prevented correlations from forming. My enjoyment came from mixing things up, like a bag of sweets.

The police had yet to locate all my victims. I made sure Daddy placed some in deep graves rather than leaving them all by the roadside. I enjoyed keeping pieces of the jigsaw puzzle hidden.

Once, I overheard a chap say serial killers were stupid. Yet most serial killers managed to murder several people before being caught. Not so stupid, if you asked me. The chap's dead now, so are his opinions, buried in one of those deep graves of Daddy's. Perhaps now, he had a better understanding of a serial killer's mind. If he'd been clever, he'd never have allowed me to kill him.

The metal legs of the chair scraped across the concrete as I stood up. "Fancy another?"

"Don't mind if I do."

The mugs clanged as I picked them up. I sauntered over to the barista, past the group of Clones. I smiled as I walked past them.

My smile said, "Which one of you am I going to kill first?"

The Clones ignored me, like so many stupid people before them.

This would be fun.

2

Jack Jackson

I rubbed the sweat from my palms down the leg of my jeans as I watched Daisy Jones walk down the aisle. It was only our wedding rehearsal and yet my nerves were already spiking. My mouth felt dry, my throat parched. Daisy smiled, flashing her perfect white teeth at me. My heart rate amplified, its loud, insistent beat drumming in my ears. Her faded blue boyfriend jeans swung around her slim legs. The large yolk neck of her t-shirt slid off her shoulder at one corner, revealing the white strap of her bra. She shook out her long blonde hair as her blue eyes locked onto mine. My tongue snaked out, licking at my dry lips. I'd always considered Daisy out of my league; she was gorgeous, intelligent, kind-hearted and sexy. Yet, there I was preparing to make her my wife.

A stupid grin played across my face, as my eyes slid to my kid sister, Nutmeg, as she trailed behind Daisy in her role as a bridesmaid. She rolled her eyes at me and I shrugged in response. Rita might have outgrown her pet name, but I still called her by it. Rita sounded so old for a sixteen-year-old. Nutmeg was friendlier, softer.

Terrance and Ruth Jackson had adopted me at eight-years-old. My biological mother had been a druggie who overdosed six months after they'd taken me into foster care. My birth father, I was led to understand, was in prison for stabbing his mate over a bottle of whisky. Somewhere, I had three older sisters; if they were still alive. I hadn't thought of finding them and ask them to shine a light on my past. They were twelve and ten years older than me, and at the time I was adopted, well established in prostitution. They were my past. One I had no desire to connect with.

I spent the first eight years of my life in an unpredictable and volatile environment. It made me overprotective towards my little sister. Not that my adopted parents were anything like my biological ones. However, I couldn't ignore my instinct to protect Nutmeg. The term '*Joe Average*' would be a fitting way to describe Terrance and Ruth Jackson. Dad worked for a small building firm which was expanding its business across Yorkshire. That meant he spent a lot of time away from home working on the bigger jobs. Mum worked part time at the local supermarket. Rita came along four years after my official adoption at nine years old. Being adopted didn't mean I loved my sister any less than a biological brother would, or that I saw Nutmeg as anything but my sister. DNA was not always an important ingredient for family. Nutmeg didn't need my protection. She was more than capable of taking care of herself. Sometimes she scared me. She possessed a dark coldness when her temper soared. Over the years, I'd seen her learn to control her anger. However,

there was still odd times when her control slipped, and the cold white heat of her anger radiated from her. Other than slamming doors and throwing things, she'd never given me cause to think she'd act on her temper.

A shiver ran down my spine at the memory, causing the skin on my arms to tighten as the hairs stood to attention. Still, I was her brother... her big brother, and I couldn't help but feel like her protector.

Nutmeg's multi-coloured dyed hair caught the sunlight spilling through the series of stained-glass windows. The windows ran the length of the church walls, coming to a stop before the altar. Shades of red, purple, yellow and blue highlights glistened from her head like a kaleidoscopic crown. She resembled a crazy rainbow, which suited her wacky personality. Dad's reaction to Nutmeg's choice of hair colours had surprised me. He wasn't a man to overreact, however, as soon as he saw Nutmeg, his temper rocketed. The newspaper fell to the floor as he leapt out of his chair. The article he'd been reading on the Gas Man's latest kill forgotten.

"What the hell have you done?"

"Amazing, isn't it?" She smiled. I watched as she spun round and round, the multi-coloured strands flying around her.

"You look ridiculous. Like a bloody rainbow!" Dad had looked at Nutmeg in disbelief. "This changes everything!" His voice shook in anger. "What the bloody-hell were you thinking?" His anger amplified, and he became more agitated. "You'll ruin everything! Everything I've worked hard for... gone." His hands spread out in front of him, swiping at the air. "You know that don't you?" Nutmeg's eyebrow shot up. Dad ignored the silent question.

His eyes never left Nutmeg's hair as he spoke to me. "Jack, text your mother. Tell her to get some hair colour!"

"What colour?"

His hazel eyes swung in my direction. Sparks of green and blue fury locked onto my own. I wished I'd never asked.

"Ginger! What other bloody colour were you thinking!" Dad's attention spun back to Nutmeg. "When your mother gets home, you change back!"

Nutmeg's deep brown eyes stared at him, unblinking. A chill ran down my spine. "Make me." Her voice held a quiet coldness to it. Far more threatening, unlike Dad's shouting.

Dad looked like he would combust on the spot at Nutmeg's defiance. A deep shade of red began to creep up his neck and cheeks. "I'll make you all right!"

"No, you won't." Her crazy hair tumbled forward, catching the sun. Her eyes blazed and sparkled as though there was someone, or something else living inside her.

Dad moved to grab her arm. On instinct, I moved forward, although he'd never hit us before. But kids have a way of making the gentlest of people lose their temper beyond reason and control.

"Touch me and you'll lose me," her voice cut through the room like a steel knife.

Dad and I froze. Me waiting to see what he'd do next, and Dad contemplating Nutmeg's words. His eyes locked on hers. A slow smile spread across her lips as Dad moved away.

"That's what I thought." She sounded triumphant.

Dad turned, the momentum of his footsteps carrying him out of the room. The door banged and rattled against its frame as he left.

Nutmeg turned to me. “Well? Isn’t it gorgeous? No one will forget me now.” She twirled, her hair flying around her. I just stood there transfixed, unsure about what had just happened.

Nutmeg was a plain girl. Apart from her freckles and brown, deep set eyes, there wasn’t much to remember. I guess if you’ve seen one girl with freckles, you’ve seen them all. Now, with her multicoloured hair, she was hard to forget. As far as stupid actions went, ‘*hair-gate*,’ as I referred to the incident, paled into insignificance. Lord knows what dad would have done if Nutmeg came home and proclaimed herself pregnant. I still didn’t understand Dad’s reaction to Nutmeg’s hair colour. There was no logic to it. I was missing something... I just didn’t know what.

Nutmeg stuck out her tongue at me, snapping my thoughts back to the present. My lips twitched, and my nerves melted away. Dad slapped me on the back as Daisy stood next to me. I took Daisy’s hand as instructed by the vicar. Nutmeg shuffled behind us. The loose-fitting, colourful shirt I’d dared her to buy swaying around her denim shorts. I never thought she’d wear it. Now, with so much colour going on, I wished I’d kept my mouth shut.

“Nice of you to dress for the occasion,” I said in a low voice as the vicar began talking.

Nutmeg looked down at her shorts and garish patterned shirt. “You’re welcome. What about the shoes?”

My eyes slid to the Doc Martens with their thick, black rubber sole. “Nice touch, but aren’t they a bit too girly? Metallic pink! Really?”

“The lady in the shop called the Doc Martens’ colour, *Pink Pony Gold-mix*. Not metallic pink.”

I took another peak at the shoes. “I bet they did. Pink Pony Gold-mix sounds more expensive than metallic pink.”

Nutmeg rolled her brown eyes at me. Daisy squeezed my arm. I looked at the vicar who was gazing at me with an expectant expression on his face. Oops.

* * *

I looked up at the blue sky hoping the good weather would continue until after the wedding. It was important that nothing spoiled our wedding day.

“You’re such a dork! Fancy fluffing your lines like that. You’d better not do it on the big day.” Nutmeg laughed at me as we stepped out of the church into the sunshine.

“All right, that’s enough cheek from you or you’ll be walking home.” I tried to sound stern. The smug smile on her face said I’d failed.

“No, I won’t, because we both know you’d never leave me here to walk the seven miles home on my own. There’s a serial killer on the loose. Remember?” She lifted her arms. “And before you say anything, no purse. See? So I can’t get the bus. HA!”

Smart arse.

“I could always lend you a few quid for the bus.”

“You? Part with money? That’s a new one.”

“It’d be worth it.”

“Come on then, part with the dosh.” She held her hand out, calling my bluff.

“Just get in the car.”

“*HA!* Told you.” She spun around. The sun caught her hair as she made her way over to my car.

Daisy laughed at me. “She’s a smart kid, your sister.”

“Hmm, maybe too smart.” I threw my arm over Daisy’s shoulders as we followed Nutmeg to the car. “Sorry, Debbie and Sandra couldn’t make the rehearsal.” Daisy had been so disappointed that her friends didn’t make it. She’d wanted all her bridesmaids at the rehearsal, not just Nutmeg.

Daisy wrapped her left arm around my waist. “Their bosses are total arses. At least they can come to my final fitting, I guess.”

I nodded. “Work’s pretty crap for a lot of us at the moment. Two more were made redundant last Friday. It’s ridiculous! We’re stretched as it is, with the increase in production and less of us to manage the orders. I’m not sure how we will cope with it all.”

I worked for a small bakery in Leeds, which supplied several supermarkets with quiches and pork pies. I met Daisy when she came to audit us. It had turned out to be the best day of my life.

“You’re not moaning about work again, are you?” Nutmeg leaned against my silver Volkswagen Polo 1.9 TDI 100 Sports car.

I frowned at her. “Don’t you go scratching the paintwork! I haven’t finished paying for it yet.”

“I’m not scratching it. Geez, it’s only a car.”

Daisy laughed. “You have a lot to learn, Rita, about boys and their cars.”

Nutmeg sent Daisy a sharp look. Sometimes, I got the impression that she didn’t like Daisy. Perhaps, I was being hypersensitive. Nutmeg often had a strange expression on her face when she looked at people. Her head was a scary place. Pop bands or boys didn’t fill her head like your average teenager.

I clicked on the car’s key fob. The indicators flashed. “It’s open, you can climb in.” I called out, hoping to get her off the paintwork before she scratched it.

Nutmeg smiled, draping her body across the car and lifting her Doc Martens against the door. “Hey, I could be the next VW Model! What do you think?”

“I think if you don’t get off the car, you’ll be walking home. And I don’t care how far it is or who’s lurking around.”

Nutmeg tossed her multi-coloured hair over her shoulder. “You’re no fun.”

“Oh, I can be a lot of fun. It’s not my fault you’re not funny.”

Daisy nodded her head. “I’ll second that. Jack is a fun guy.”

Nutmeg shot Daisy another cold stare as she moved away from the paintwork and opened the back-passenger door.

I sighed in relief. My relief was to be short-lived. “Hey watch the fabric! I can see boot marks from here!”

Nutmeg threw her hands in the air. “Get off the paintwork! Don’t mark the fabric! Geez, Jack, you’re getting more like mum by the second. And no, that’s not a compliment. Don’t do this. Don’t do that. Geez, give me a break from your constant nagging, why don’t you?”

I looked at Nutmeg and shook my head. “Mum’s not that bad, and I’m not nagging. Wait until you get your first car, you’ll be the same.”

“Yeah right! Like I could afford a car. I can’t even afford lessons. Dad says he’ll teach me when I’m old enough, but I don’t see it happening.”

Daisy opened the front passenger door and slid into the seat next to me. I watched the top as it lifted away from her chest, offering me a little more flesh. She caught me looking and winked. I smiled back at her.

“You going to drive or sit there with that daft look on your face?” Nutmeg huffed.

Daisy laughed.

I loved the sound.

I placed the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life. I looked in the rear-view mirror at Nutmeg. “Geez, don’t nag, will you?” I watched her eyes as they lifted to the ceiling at my impression of her, which I thought was fantastic. “What?” I raised my hands.

“You’re not funny. You know that, don’t you?” She stuck her knee into the back of my seat, making me laugh as I drove out the church’s car park.

“I thought it was funny. I am a funny guy.”

“Yeah, ‘course you are. If I was one of the infected in *The Living Dead*, I’d find you funny too. In the real world, you’re not funny at all.”

Daisy laughed next to me. I couldn’t stop myself from joining her.

3

Rita Jackson

I sat in Daddy's white, unbranded Transit van as it rattled and shuddered at the roundabout onto Spen Common Lane. Anticipation bled through my veins as I waited for Crossroads Farm to come into view. We'd passed several warning signs telling us to --- '*KEEP OUT. PRIVATE PROPERTY.*' Signs, they're silly things. They didn't do much. People were left to ignore or adhere to them at their convenience. No one was around to notice us and therefore our actions held no consequences. The dilapidated buildings on my left and the nettles sprouting up within the long grass implied no one had visited in a while. Crossroads Farm was becoming a crumbling ruin, destined to become a playground for the depraved. I'd been fortuitous to find such a perfect and silent partner to share my killing with.

After I finished my killing spree, my victims would never leave Crossland Farm. Even after their bodies decayed within their new graves, and then found and taken by the police and given back to their families, their spirits would forever roam the place of their death.

Once the news spread wide, the obsessed would come here. Serial killer junkies would gather alongside ghost hunters. The future of the farm would look bright again, even if its walls echoed with evil presence. Paranormal shows aimed at frightening the watcher would come to try and speak with the dead that would haunt and lay claim to the farm. I doubted the authenticity of those ghostly shows. If ghosts could talk, would they not choose someone better to converse with than Zak Bagans from Ghost Adventures?

The van shuddered to a stop outside the old farmhouse. Ivy covered the brickwork and windows. Traffic whizzed past in a faded blur of colour, between the line of trees which screened the farmhouse from the A64. Despite the speed limit being set at 70 mph, few drivers stuck within its parameters. An extra 5/10 mph was ok. It was within a 'law-abiding citizen's acceptable tolerance of illegal acts. Until the police caught them. Excuses would follow, turning to anger and claims of unfairness. Modern society was a selfish place with a singular perspective. Crime paid and lack of money no longer meant you couldn't afford what you wanted. Criminals stole it from the workers and achievers. Our prisons are full, but prison officers no longer treated them like criminals. Prisoners were people with human rights. I loved this modernistic world. It was bountiful towards people like me. We took without thought... killed without mercy. Yet society

continued to treat us like human beings, even long after the prison door slammed behind us and the guard turned the key.

I took a breath, satisfaction washing over me. An answering smile tugged at my lips. People... their busy lives absorbed their awareness to notice what was happening around them. No one got involved in 'matters that didn't concern them.' The police no longer had the resources. Budget cuts, an upward trend in crime, and reduction in their numbers were to blame. Young people knew their rights, using it against the authorities to their advantage — like a blackmailer extorting their victims. Section 46 of the Children Act allowed police officers to remove a child from a parent without an order for up to seventy-two hours. The professionals called it 'under police protection.' There was no Act protecting the adult from the child. Why? Because no one considered a child capable of administering high levels of violence against adults.

Power over grown-ups... it was heady stuff when adults made all the decisions. I'd seen a ten-year-old boy get cocky, mouthing off at a policeman while walking down Coney Street in York City Centre. The boy showed no fear towards the law enforcement officer as he reminded the policeman of his limits. "You can't do anything!" He'd been right. The law was on his side. The government's main concern was saving money. Our interest limited to mobile phones and Wi-Fi connections. Everywhere you go, on restaurants and bars, people huddled together, eyes down, looking at their phones. Conversation, unless via text or social media, was a dying art. We can't get enough of those handheld devices. But, don't worry, psychologists have completed their studies and evaluations. The statistics are in, and the data confirmed. Technology wasn't to blame for the increase in anti-social behaviour and the decrease in social skills.

Not that I'm complaining. While people had their eyes fixed on their phone screens, I was busy killing them.

I opened the van door to the sound of revving car engines and hooting horns. It was like a symphony of lost civilisation. Anger and discord floated through the air. If Chopin and Beethoven were alive, they couldn't have written a more promising musical score. The sound filled my very essence, heating my blood, carrying me away, nourishing my dreams.

A smile still upon my lips, I turned and walked through the stone arch. Nestled between the main farmhouse and the five terraced cottages, the archway bonded the buildings together. A single rose bush hugged the side of the farmhouse, one white rose standing in full bloom against the dirt-stained brickwork. Despite, the lack of attention, the rose bush fought against the weeds that threatened to strangle it and end its suffering. I was hoping my victims would be capable of exhibiting such strength.

I grabbed hold of the metal gate and the thick, iron chain and lock clanged and rattled. An inadequate deterrent to keep us out. As I climbed over the gate, the rusty metal lock swung against the iron links, deficient in its job to keep trespassers out. Anticipation, like a heated poker fresh from the fire, throbbled heat, igniting my skin. My trainers stamped down the weeds as I moved onto the stone path of the courtyard. It didn't matter how perfect I thought this place was, what mattered was that Daddy saw the same potential I did. My aspirations haunted me, laughing at my weaknesses. Without Daddy, the silent whisper of potential the farm exuded would remain nothing but childish fantasy. I required his skills as a builder and his sly acquisition of building supplies to bring sustenance to my dream. The dependence he held over me made me hate him. It gnawed at my insides, taunting me as it echoed out my feebleness. My body, gender, and age were my personal prison.

Metal grated on metal. I turned and watched Daddy clamber over the gate. His feet hit the ground, and he stopped to look at the farmhouse. The building loomed down on him, stamping its dominance upon the pathetic man. I felt my hate bubble as his eyes closed into thin slits, blocking out the heated glare of the sun. Lines deepened at the corner of his eyes, his clothing whipping against his skin as the wind howled around him. My hair danced over my face causing Daddy to disappear momentarily. I grabbed at the coloured lengths, forcing them down the back of my hoodie. With no properties to shield it, the farmhouse was susceptible to the weather's mercy.

The remoteness of Crossroads Farm meant that a passer-by would never hear the terror-filled screams of my victims. The farmhouse was a solitary presence kindling my interest. Its cry for attention turning into an irresistible song of death.

I refused the lure to anger as Daddy raised his eyebrows and shook his head. A deep intake of breath followed. He exhaled in one big sigh. Unlike me, he wasn't a visionary. His dreams were stale, his fantasies stilted. Impatience beat at my head. Eagerness chomped at my tolerances. I wanted to start my experiment into human behaviour now. Human beings were interesting creatures. I longed for the 'good old days' documented in past psychological research. Health and safety took the fun out of experiments now. I took a deep breath, the intoxicating scent of the farm infecting me and refocusing my mind. It zinged and vibrated, filling my head with countless possibilities. Crossroads Farm oozed perfection. Beneath my skin, the Beast stirred, lifting its head and surveying the building before us.

Perfection... it purred in happiness. Yes, I agreed in silence.

The five terraced cottages flanked the main farmhouse, forming the courtyard where I stood. Situated close to Bramham Crossroads, where the A64 and A1(M) crossed — eleven miles from Leeds and fifteen from York. The A1(M) was only a minute away, making any destination within Yorkshire easily accessible. Its Georgian heritage was recognisable within the 18th century architecture. Despite its neglected state, the building stood tall and proud, an enormous square box commanding regal acknowledgement. Large slash windows looked onto the eastbound carriageway of the A64 to York. It was constructed using traditional stone on which sat a slate roof. Ivy coated the stone brickwork and several windows. It ate at the fabrication of the building. Mortar had crumbled, replaced with the adhesive vines of the ivy. I hated ivy.

The farmhouse was five hundred thousand square feet of yumminess. Identical materials were used to build the adjoining cottages. Cottages one to three were composed of three bedrooms. Four and five had two. All set within one hundred and twenty acres. A hundred and eight acres of which was arable.

Not that it mattered. Still, the obsolete online brochure had felt the need to mention it, so I thought I would pass the information on.

Dirt crunched underfoot. "The place is in a poor state." Daddy's voice bounced off my nerve endings.

His dismissive words rattled round my head. The frown lines on his forehead deepened. His lack of imagination frustrated me. He'd not taken the time to appreciate the property's flawless beauty. The Beast prowled with impatience. I closed my eyes, quieting it.

Shhh... stay calm. He has work to do before he dies.

“That’s why it’s the perfect place. Its remoteness will allow me to kill without the threat of discovery. Besides, you’re always telling me what a good builder you are. Now you get the chance to show me.”

The semi-derelict state of the farmhouse didn’t matter. The building’s purpose was to house the generator. Daddy needed to concentrate on the building works required on the cottages. This was the place where my victims would stay, held captive and tormented until their death. I left Daddy staring at the farmhouse. If he was as good as he boasted, the place would sparkle with the evil I would inflict on my victims.

As I approached cottage one, I pulled out the leather gloves from the pocket of my pink hoodie. My hair flew around me once more, as the wind tugged it free. I ignored the flying strands and kept walking towards the flaky white painted door, with its discoloured letterbox and rotten bottom panel. The door was unlocked and swung open with a reluctant squeal. Was the farm considered too far away for squatters? Ignorance, not an acceptable excuse for incompetence. Several silly warning signs weren’t a reliable way to keep people out. The person who owned this incredible property didn’t care about it.

I patted the wall. *“Never mind, I’m here, I’ll take care of you.”* I whispered. *“For now.”*

Dampness hung in the air and cobwebs tangled with my hair. I took a bobble from the back pocket of my skinny jeans and tied it into a topknot. I’d put on a pair of old trainers this morning, rather than my Converse. Aware of vital clues dirt can provide the police. I found it fascinating how something so trivial could lead the police to a location and provide them with significant clues to break a case and catch a killer. Minerals in the soil found only in certain areas of the U.K. Microscopic particles that lay hidden from the naked eye, picked up under the magnifying glass of the microscope. Life wasn’t easy for serial killers.

A large window sat at the far wall of the small room. Dirt and ivy stained the glass, reducing the natural light, but enough light filtered in for me to appreciate the room’s set up, and to gather ideas. Unlike Daddy, I didn’t lack vision or imagination. My pulse sped up as my plans filled my head. H. H. Holmes would nod in approval, I was sure.

To the right sat a large unit, the doors beneath hung off their hinges. Dirt coated the stainless-steel sink embedded within the counter tops. I walked over and tried the cold tap, a high-pitched squeal filling the tiny room as I turned the handle. But the tap remained dry, with no water pouring from the faucet. Another job to add to Daddy’s list. He was the builder, not me, and it was up to him to get water into the place, without altering the waterboard of our presence.

The door to the main living area rested open, and I stood in the threshold for a moment as I surveyed the space. There was a large bay window to my left. Years of driving rain and strong winds had rotted the wooden frame. I walked over to the window and looked outside into the courtyard. Daddy walked past, unaware of my presence at the window. I watched him write something on his pad. Was he compiling a list of building supplies? His belly was getting larger and his hair thinner and greyer. The wrinkles at the corners of his hazel eyes were deepening. Lines furrowed his forehead like a newly ploughed field. The beard he sported resembled an unkept bush. It made him look old, not wiser. Tools of his trade filled the soft, leather tool belt wrapped around his hips. His dark blue cotton trousers were stained from years of work. Holes littered his brown safety boots, revealing metal toecaps. He’d zipped the black fleece up to his chin, making his chubby face appear fatter. The wind rustled around him, trying to grab at the fabric of his

clothes. I shrugged off the anger that burned beneath the surface of my skin whenever I looked at Daddy and turned my attention back to the room.

My heart hammered against my chest as the room's significance hit me. The overwhelming urge to hug the walls and dance around the place made me twitch. A dizzy happiness coated my flesh, singing through my veins. I'd only seen the farm from the A64 as Daddy whizzed past in his van, and from the obsolete online brochure. The location, the building, the isolation, so ideal it made me nervous and scared. If the fat man decided it wasn't worth investing his time on, all my ideas and possibilities would crumble to dust. He was my weakness, holding me back. Weaknesses made you vulnerable.

The Beast raised its head, licking its lips. Like a net falling over me, the need to kill caught hold. I paced round the room, unconscious of the primal noises escaping my lips. My head tipped back, and I howled at the ceiling. Puffs of breath filled the air around me as I began to rein in the Beast. The madness left me, and my eyes began to refocus, sweeping the room.

The high ceiling made the room appear larger than it was. Its size wasn't an issue, in fact it would make things more interesting. Opposite the window, a door stood closed. I walked over and pressed down on the handle. The door remained unyielding. A grunt fell from my lips as I pressed all my weight against the door, using every ounce of strength my feeble body contained, I pushed at the door. Finally, with a loud groan it moved, opening up into a tiny square-shaped hall. To my right, stairs led to the upper floor. Opposite the living room door, a narrow bathroom sat. The old wooden door resting in exhausted silence. A dirty olive bath sat against the far wall, with a matching olive toilet and pedestal sink. Yellow patterned tiles circled the bath and sink in rows of four high. With no window present, dark shadows lurked in the far corners, where the light spilling from the living room didn't reach.

My lips curled in pleasure as I turned and moved towards the stairs. No window meant no escape. Dust stuck to my clothes and the odd spider tickled my skin as I swept through the cobwebs. I didn't run around the place screaming. The spiders that lived here couldn't hurt me and I didn't see the point in fearing something so tiny it became insignificant.

Some steps were missing part of the wooden panelling. I eyed the steps in suspicion, wondering if they would hold my weight. On a deep exhalation, I placed my right foot on the first step and gave it my full weight. The wood creaked but didn't buckle or snap. I smiled. With care, I placed my weight onto the next step. My right fingers grazed the once white painted bannister as I moved forward. My fingers pulled on the bannister rail. It didn't move or squeak. If a step gave, I could use the railing to stop myself falling. Fingers gripping tighter to the rail, I began to move up the stairs. I tested each step as I went, avoiding the holes left by the missing strips of wood. As I reached the top, I turned to look down at the hall. The simple pleasure of reaching the top without the steps breaking forced a laugh of satisfaction to bubble from my lips.

A faint beam of light spilled from the far bedroom where the door stood open, providing the landing with its only source of illumination. Shadows engulfed me as I walked away from the light, towards the bedroom. Daylight poured onto the landing as I opened the door. Decades of dirt and ivy stained the glass. Dark patches of black mould grew near the window, eating at the faded pink wallpaper. A grey plastic light switch gave the false hope of electricity. Not a huge space, ample for five to six victims packed like sardines in a can. Victim welfare wasn't on my agenda. With everyone piled on top of each other, the potential for hostile behaviour increased. That would make for an interesting situation. Fear increased tempers and anger.

A smile played across my lips as I walked out to inspect the other rooms. All three rooms were similar in size and layout, and in the same dismal state of repair. Only the colour of the wallpaper changed from pink to blue to yellow. The amount of building work Daddy needed to carry out increased. If these rooms were to become the perfect prison, each needed soundproofing and the windows boarding over. The soundproofing was an important element in my design, as the occupants needed to believe they were alone in the house. Otherwise, they might hatch an escape plan, using their numbers to overpower Daddy. My chance to kill them lost. I shook my head at the notion, my eyes catching the pendant light. Would the electric work once Daddy brought the generator? I wanted to inject fear into my victims. To keep them in a heightened emotional state. Stop their brains from functioning, stripped of rational processing. The light would work on a timer, with one hour's illumination twice a day. Perhaps the light would measure the passing time.

With H. H. Holmes three-story house fresh in my mind, I swung the backpack off my shoulders. Heedless of the amount of dust lining the wooden floorboards, I sat down, my mind no longer present. The walls and ceiling fell away, fading from sight as my brain reached forward, breathing life into my dreams. Images floated before my eyes as I pulled out my sketch pad and pencils from inside the backpack. Driven by perfection, I began to draw my plans, so that Daddy would understand the task ahead of him without a doubt. Once he'd seen and digested my sketches, I'd burn the pad. Sloppy wasn't me, and I couldn't trust Daddy. My mind transformed the living room into a killing zone. Tall glass cylinders sat side by side, a lone chair sitting in front of the tubes waiting for the show to begin. People screaming, crying, pleading, dying. Intoxicating visions flashed before me. The Beast woke from its slumber and together we watched our dreams develop, change, and come to life. As the drawing took shape, a mutual understanding fell upon us — there was no future here for Daddy. Daddy was my patsy. He might veer on the side of obsessive, but he wasn't above the common element that governed us all. Human beings were born to make mistakes. It was written into our biological makeup. We're not computers. We couldn't analyse all the data in one collective moment with clear, emotionless undertaking. A lot of decisions humans acted on reflected on their emotional state. Even psychopaths had emotions. They might not be warm and fuzzy, but their brain still worked on emotions. A killer killed not because they were emotionless... they killed out of emotional enjoyment, seeking the thrill experienced when they take another's life. The power and dominance a killer gained over their victims tasted different each time they kill, and it made the killing addictive.

I wasn't going down with Daddy. I was young, and cute, with freckles lining my nose. Nothing more than a kid. The killer in me hidden from the prying eyes of the police. History could teach us many lessons. I used history to dissect past killers' methods. Perhaps, if the police used this resource, they would look at me in a different light.

For instance, Mary Bell, who on the 25th of May 1968, a day before her eleventh birthday, strangled and killed a four-year-old boy. Mary Bell had left a note admitting to the murder, which the police assumed was a prank. Disbelief, perhaps, that someone so young could commit such an atrocity. On the 31st of July 1968, Mary had enlisted a friend, Norma Joyce Bell (not related), to help her kill a three-year-old boy. Mary had returned to the crime scene to carve an 'M' into the boy's stomach with a pair of scissors. The police should have paid more attention to her note. Had they done that, the three-year-old boy would be alive today.

The past remained ignored and the death toll kept increasing.

In 1983, Cindy Lee Collier, aged fifteen, and Shirley Katherine Wolf, aged fourteen, brutally stabbed an elderly woman to death, for 'kicks.' Youth didn't signify innocence. My multi-coloured hair radiated youth. I was proclaimed innocent and immature because of my projected age. Visual representation of my age would be twelve, not sixteen. I'm one year older than Cindy Lee Collier when she killed that old lady. But her record would still not make you view me as a killer. My little button nose, round cheeks and freckles would confuse your brain and that is why the Cindy Lee Colliers of this world could kill with freedom.

For the record, I hated freckles.

There was money in death. Whether for the profilers or murderers, there was money in criminal acts. From publicity comes fame. When People Magazine published an article of the murdered old woman, they gave Cindy Lee Collier and Shirley Wolf what they wanted. Credit for their crime — Fame. Add social media into the mix and a killer could touch more people, receiving more glory and notoriety for their killings. They could even develop a god-like status, worshipped by their own kind. I found it all incredible and fascinating.

In 2018, Aaron Campbell, a sixteen-year-old boy living on the scenic and idyllic Isle of Bute in Scotland, murdered six-year-old Alesha MacPhail. I disagreed with children killing children. This was not my inner morals working, but a simple belief that children deserved the right to live. At least until they reach eighteen or above.

I found it difficult to understand 'average' people's behaviour. Conventional people had developed a thirst for the truth. But the minds of 'ordinary' people were easy to influence. They were also narrow-minded. While I possessed my own opinions, I still took time to understand my victims. I never underestimated them. In fact, 'normal' people were a constant surprise, clinging to their beliefs like a sloth hung from a tree. To end someone's life took planning and clear reasoning. The more I learned about my intended victim, the more there was to consider. The most important lessons and the hardest to control was my victim's unconscious thought, which made up ninety-five percent of the brain's processing. That's a lot of brain activity occurring without our awareness.

People will forever hold a fascinated obsession for those who are 'different.' The groupies and fans would award us a 'god-like status.' It was an unfortunate and somewhat irritating occurrence, when it happened. There'd been a time when I'd questioned my intentions. Youth was an impressionable period in everyone's life, and so I opened the door to query. Was my victim's death a cry for attention? Did I need to see my face splashed across the front page of the newspapers? Or the internet? Had I downgraded my desire to kill with the basic human compulsion of seeking glory? The Beast woke, raking a claw against my inner flesh. "No," it had echoed. My need to kill wasn't a secondary emotion. I did not dream of some stupid person to write about me. I killed out of need. Hunger. I'd been killing from a young age. My need to kill was a compulsion, formed by the unconscious. Similar to breathing, it was impossible to ignore. Glory was for the weak of mind. I didn't require applause for my victim's lifeless bodies. I just required to kill.

The clunk of Daddy's boots sounded on the stairs. He'd finished his inspections and was now seeking to offload his findings. I stared down at the sketchpad. My designs shone back at me, stealing my breath. The more I stared, the bigger my smile became. *Fantastic* wasn't a big enough 'wow' word to describe them. The dark carbon lines on white paper portrayed my plans in miniscule detail. I looked up, not seeing the room where I sat, but a room filled with five crying girls - Clones. Their fear so tangible the taste of it sat on my tongue. I saw their tears as they

huddled together in the far corner. Did they know they would never escape? That they would die? Would they fight or accept their destiny? So many variables.

I stood and walked to the large window. There were five cottages. Five potential places to store and play with my victims. The farmhouse might have started life as a coach inn, but it would end its life as a killer's paradise. Five cottages meant Daddy needed to source more victims, a lot more. A gurgle rumbled in my throat. I forced it down. I'd be giddy enough when I started killing.

There would be no quick death for my victims. I craved to experience their emotions... their fear and lost hope resonating deep into my core. Victims were toys to play with until my interest waned. Once I'd finished playing my games, just before death took them, perhaps they would pray for me to kill them. To put an end to their tortured existence. I tilted my head in reflection... like a god? Maybe. Killing was more than the kill. It was the power over the victim.

"Rita!" Daddy's raspy voice echoed from the stairs.

I turned from the window. As the stairs creaked, I moved to the middle of the room, hugging my sketchpad to my chest like a treasured possession. Daddy's footsteps hesitated as he reached the landing. Would he make the right choice? He turned left. *Silly man*. His footsteps faded as he moved down the landing. My heart gave an extra beat in anticipation. Would my victims' hearts beat with apprehension, dread pumping round their bodies until panic rendered them incapable of movement? Huddled together in the darkness, they would wait for the door to open, as minutes ticked into hours and days. The question over the balance of life and death would rattle round their heads. Will today be the day they die? Or, will this be the day that opportunity presented them with an escape?

A new idea took shape and evolved. What would it be like to escape your prison of death? To feel freedom trickle down your spine in a rush of adrenaline.

Heart pounding.

THUD!

THUD!

THUD!

Sweat dripping from your brow.

You hear a sound...

Quick, hide!

No, it was nothing.

Quick... Quick... Quick...

A fence comes into view as the traffic noise hits you. Car horns and the revving of engines spelling out your freedom.

Palms are sweaty. Your grip on the metal fence slick.

You don't give in.

You remember that this could be your only chance to gain freedom.

Car headlights shine through the line of trees as it turns at the roundabout.

You can see your freedom.

Your heart beats for it.

A smile forms. You never thought you would smile again.

Your leg swings over the fence and you land on the other side of the promised land of freedom.

This is it....

FREEDOM!

SAFETY!

Then you're grabbed from behind. Pulled back over the fence. Your sweaty palms offer no grip as you try to hold on to the metal.

You crumble to your knees, tears stinging the back of your eyes. Your cheeks become wet.

No... you don't want to die.

Freedom... so close you could sense it within the beat of your heart. Now, there was nothing. Hope, that fickle emotion, had deserted you. Time to prepare to die. Your heart squeeze within your chest. Your breath comes out in gulps. The tears won't stop. Your hands shake as you cry out for help.

NOTHING...

No one comes to your rescue. The traffic noise drowning out your voice.

Your breathing unsteady as you're dragged back into the house. Your brain goes numb, unable to accept what's happening.

You close your eyes.

Everything goes dark.

“What are you doing, Rita? Why didn't you answer?”

The images disappeared as Daddy entered the room.

“I was thinking.”

Daddy moved further inside and I tilted my head, appraising him. He might not admit it, but I knew this place had him. Excitement rolled off him as he stood in the doorway.

“Well, what do you think? Perfect, isn't it?”

“It'll do.”

My eyes swung to the ceiling. I took a breath, calming the Beast.

“I've been doing some sketches.” Daddy stretched out his left hand.

I looked at him, still hugging my pad.

“We need more people.” He raised an eyebrow at me. I answered this silent question with a smile as I handed over my pad. His eyes lingered on my drawings. I remained quiet as the muscle in his jaw began to twitch.

One by one his eyebrows met his hairline. “These are ambitious plans.”

“The property lends itself to them. You need to concentrate on what matters. People dying as you sit in the best seat at the farm.”

Beads of sweat appeared across his forehead. Oh yes, he was seeing them. Tiny little lights of life dimming. Daddy looked past me, his eyes travelling around the room. Like me, he wasn't only seeing this room, but every room within each cottage.

“I suppose it does.”

“The main farmhouse will be the information centre. You can put cameras in each of the main living rooms in each cottage to track and record selected kills. You'd be able to watch them die over... and over... again.” I let my words linger. “The recordings can be your trophies. It'd be nice for you to have something as a keepsake.” Daddy's eyes lit up. His facial expression didn't alter, but his eyes conveyed all the emotion he wouldn't allow himself to show.

I've heard it said the eyes are the windows to the soul. I didn't believe that. Eyes are the windows to hidden emotions. They sparkle with excitement, and dim with sadness and pain. You could learn a lot about a person from the light in their eyes.

I stared at Daddy as his excitement built. “You can only record the kills I tell you to. And I want the cameras at certain angles to allow for blind spots.” Daddy nodded at me. He'd agree to anything right now. In his mind, he was creating his very own, very personal True Crime Movie.

“Here hold this. I need to measure up. We'll need more building materials than I first expected.” I reached for my pad as Daddy got out his measuring tape and a small notebook.

“You've got loads of things stored in the garage at home. I've seen it all.” Daddy had been over ordering supplies for years, charging the customer for them and storing them away. It was time we started using them.

He looked at me. “They're for the extension. Your mother's been waiting for a larger kitchen for fifteen years.”

I shrugged. “So, she can wait for another fifteen. This is more important.” The kitchen we had was adequate. All she did was cook in it.

Doubt fell across his face. “Can we pull this off? What about the bodies? How will we dispose of them? We can't go around leaving them all by the roadside.”

Did he think I was stupid? Perhaps he was testing me, trying to act all big and clever, convincing himself that I needed him more than I did. In his primitive mind, was he trying to say, “You're nothing without me?” Anger began to vibrate inside me. I was better than him. This farmhouse was my chance to get rid of him for good. I spread my arms out. “We have a hundred and twenty acres of land at our disposal. I'm sure we can find somewhere to bury them.”

Daddy nodded. “I'll look at the electrics, and there's an issue with the water supply.”

I wasn't listening. He'd make this work. I knew he would. He enjoyed watching me kill as much as I enjoyed killing.

I began to make a mental list of the people I wanted to kill first. There was that boy littered with tattoos. He'd been so cocky and clever with me whilst I'd sat in the beer garden waiting for Daddy to price up a job. He should have lived each day being pleasant and nice to everyone he

met. I wouldn't have felt the overwhelming need to kill him if he had. I sighed in pleasure as Daddy began measuring for building materials. I turned my attention back to my list of victims.

1. Clones: Stacey Simpson, Diane Cane, Jenny Stroud, Katy Pearson, Helen Davies and Becky Thompson
2. Tattoo Boy

4

Jack Jackson

I woke to find Nutmeg looming over my bed. The sun bounced off her white t-shirt as it shone through the open curtains. Her red skinny jeans glared at me, hurting my eyes. My heart began to pound, eyes widening. *What the hell was she doing here?* Panicked, I looked round the room. Against the far wall was a poster of Mt. Everest with its white snowy top. A CD player sat on the unit to my right, a stack of CD's piled next to it. The walls were blue, the carpet beige. My heart rate slowed. I was in my old bedroom. Drawing a hand over my face and through my short brown hair, I breathed deep as pain stabbed at my head.

"About time you woke up." Nutmeg held a glass of water in her right hand. I knew it wasn't for me to drink. A smile fell across her lips. I'd seen that smile a hundred times. It spelled trouble.

"Mum, he's awake!"

I cringed at her raised voice. "Do you have to?" I wrapped the pillow around my head.

"Have to what!?"

As ear protection went, my pillow wasn't adequate.

The slow thud of footsteps drifted from the stairs. I watched Nutmeg as she turned towards the sound. "He'll need some paracetamol with his coffee!" The footsteps hesitated, before fading away.

"Geez, Nutmeg, pipe it down. Will you?"

She smiled that awful smile again. I groaned.

"I'd make his coffee a lot stronger too!"

If she continued to shout, she'd burst my eardrums and I'd end up deaf. The banging in my head amplified. Perhaps being deaf wouldn't be that bad.

"Go away." I ground out through teeth that had locked together and refused to separate.

"What? And miss out on all the fun? You've got to be kidding me." Her left hand moved to her hip as she cocked her head at me. Her rainbow hair swinging behind her back. "I've not enjoyed myself this much since you moved out."

Last night was coming back to me. I lifted the duvet and threw it over my head, cursing my foolishness. Daisy had invited her friends around for a pre-wedding get together. I'd opted to stay at mum and dads. It seemed better than waking to a house full of hungover women. My hangover began administrating its punishment, setting every nerve ending pulsating in pain. I'd have taken a room full of hungover women at that moment. They'd be quieter and more sympathetic.

"You getting up?"

Nutmeg raised her voice to set a new world record in decibels.

"You going to leave?"

"I could give you some encouragement."

I looked at the water as she tilted the glass in my direction. She'd do it too.

All I wanted was to fall back into the blissful sleep of unawareness. That dark and beautiful place where sleep took me, as my body worked through the alcohol I'd introduced it to the previous night.

"A-hmm." I lowered the quilt, my eyes peeking over the top. Nutmeg still stood there. "OK, OK, I'm getting up." I grumbled. "Put the damn glass down."

I removed the duvet from my face and peeked at the door. With luck, I'd get Nutmeg to leave on the pretence of getting up, lock the bedroom door and go back to sleep. I should have locked the door! Damn! Nutmeg stared at me. Fear ran down my spine.

"I removed the lock while you were out drinking with dad." She tapped her temple, lips curling upwards. "Careful, I can read minds."

"Bloody hell." I glared at the door. My sister spent too much time with dad. She planned and executed everything to the smallest detail. Her pranks weren't funny, and her jokes one-sided. I've yet to crack a smile since I opened my eyes.

"What's the hurry? Someone die or something?"

Nutmeg's eyes widened. "It's like three in the afternoon. No one's rushing anyone."

She took a breath and stared down at me with those liquid brown eyes of hers, trying to make me feel guilty. I hated it when she did that.

"I'm fed up, waiting for you to get your lazy arse out of bed. Mum's not going to make tea until you're functioning, and I'm starving. Plus, just in case you've forgotten, I'm leaving for Australia with Claire Reynolds in a few weeks. And you said you'd spend some time with me before I went." Her mouth turned down at the corners. The light in her eyes dimmed. "You never have time for me."

I decided not to take the guilt trip. "You're always hungry."

"Yeah, well, I've been up for hours. I'm allowed to be hungry. And since you didn't ask, I'll be away for the whole of the summer holidays." She was laying the guilt on thick. I needed to stop looking into those sad puppy eyes of hers. I screwed my eyes closed.

"By the time I get back it'll be your wedding and you'll be off on your honeymoon. Don't you want to spend any time with me?"

Damn it! Guilt clawed at my insides. I tried not to succumb to my emotions. *Stay strong*, my inner voice demanded. “What time did you get up?” She wasn’t one to wake up with the lark.

“Eleven. And before you say anything, technically, that was hours ago. So, don’t try it on. Besides, I’ve been patient. Now I want you up. The school holidays last for six weeks. That’s six weeks, in case you didn’t hear me.”

Bloody hell! Why didn’t I have one of those sisters that didn’t want to spend time with her big brother? Put like that...

I opened my eyes. She was staring at me.

“We’re going for a walk while mum cooks tea. She’s doing a roast, so it’ll take some time. We’ll get to spend lots of time together, breathing in the fresh air.” She took a deep breath, her nostrils flaring.

Colour drained from my face. The skin along my jawline tightened. My left eye began to twitch. “You’re kidding?”

“About which bit?” Nutmeg tilted her multi-coloured head to the side. My stomach somersaulted. I would have argued that you couldn’t get seasick lying in bed on mainland. As my eyes followed her flicking hair, my stomach told me I was wrong.

“OK! OK! I give in! You win!” I threw the duvet back. Exhaustion and pain made my movements sluggish as I sat up. The legs of my cotton pyjamas had ridden up, the fabric tight under my knees. I ignored the further tightening as I drew my legs up to my elbows. My head came to meet my hand. I sighed, my eyes closing.

“You heard what I said, didn’t you? I’m going to Australia soon, and you promised to spend some time with me before I went. You need to get your bum in gear and out of bed *pronto*. I’ll start adding additional miles if you don’t.”

I wanted to strangle her. If only she’d come a little closer. I didn’t know where Nutmeg got her love for the outdoors from, but I wish she would stick it where the sun didn’t shine and leave me to my hangover.

“Why?” I closed my eyes, wishing the pounding in my head would go away and take Nutmeg with it.

“Because, now, I’m mad at you. You promised. You’re getting married soon, and you’ll be spending even less time here than you do already. I want to have my sister/brother bonding session.”

I sent her a miserable look. “You need to find yourself someone else to torment.”

She looked shocked. “You’re kidding, right? I’ve perfected the art with you over the last sixteen years.” Sisters. Were they all like this, or was I the lucky one?

Footsteps sounded on the stairs again. Nutmeg smiled. Pain clouded my head even before she opened her mouth.

“He’s sort of up! Should I use the water anyway?”

A chuckle sounded from the landing. Dad appeared in the doorway, mug and paracetamol in hand. The coffee and paracetamol I could cope with... Dad and Nutmeg together not so much. My body shook in pain. His smile widened as he looked at me. Resentment settled in the pit of my

stomach. We'd gone out drinking together, so why was I the only one suffering? I swear the man was more fish than human. He wasn't the least bit hungover.

A black t-shirt clung to his expanding belly. His blue, washed-out jeans fitted a little snugger than they used to. His hazel eyes weren't bloodshot, and his skin looked like its normal, tanned self. He shot me a knowing wink. At least someone found the amount of pain I was in funny.

"How come you..." I waved my hand at him, my words trailing off.

Dad smiled. "Coz, I'm not a lightweight."

I stood up and took the coffee and pills. "Give me twenty minutes and I'll be downstairs." I handed the empty mug back to dad.

Nutmeg walked over to stand next to dad. "We make quiet a team, don't we?" Her right elbow rested on his shoulder as she looked at me. "I told mum not to fuss, that we'd get you up." Two jokers in the family, that's all I needed.

"Come on, give me some room. If you want me up and functioning, I'll need some time in the bathroom."

Dad and Nutmeg moved aside. "Ten minutes." Nutmeg warned.

My body caved in on itself. My head throbbed, letting me know ten minutes wouldn't be long enough.

"Yeah, ten minutes, I know."

Dad placed a hand on my shoulder, patting it as I walked past them. "It's your mother we're thinking of. She's in overdrive, having her boy back home for the day."

"Sure, course it is," I grumbled.

Nutmeg turned to dad. "I bet he thinks we get some perverse pleasure out of tormenting him."

Shock clouded dad's face. "No!"

Nutmeg nodded. "I'm afraid so."

I looked at them both. "You two are just too much."

Nutmeg laughed, looking at her watch. "Time is ticking bro."

I stumbled into the bathroom. My head vibrated in pain with every step. I'd have slammed the bathroom door behind me, but I couldn't take the noise. Instead, I took a lot of satisfaction in sliding the bolt in place. I sat down on the toilet lid and placed my chin in my hands. There was a tentative knock. I cringed.

"You OK, Jack love?" Mum's voice sounded from behind the door. "Do you want me to make you some breakfast? I can rummage up some scrambled eggs to line your tummy."

My stomach heaved.

I walked over to the mirror, and saw my eyes were red. My mouth felt dry and I looked awful. "I'll be downstairs in a while. I'll have another coffee for now."

Her displeasure vibrated through the door. She didn't like it when I skipped breakfast.

Nutmeg was a carbon copy of mum, but that was where the likeness ended. Mum's greatest strength was her kindness, which she smothered her children with. It would have been nice if Nutmeg had inherited mum's kinder qualities.

I pushed myself up from the toilet seat, aware I wasn't accomplishing anything, and time was ticking. The sun glared through the window over the white pedestal sink. The cheery yellow towel on the rail next to it laughed at me. I reached across and pulled down the blind, dimming the light. Shadows fell over the small room. The towel lost some of its cheerfulness which made me feel better. To my right was the bath. A waterfall showerhead poked out from the white-tiled wall. The yellow shower curtain hung open. I grabbed a clean towel from the airing cupboard that housed the hot water-tank and placed it on the toilet seat near the bath. Turning on the water, I set the shower temperature to cold, aware I needed to shock my body back to life. Pulling down my pyjama bottoms, I stepped into the bath. The cold water ate at my flesh with hungry teeth. My skin tightened and my stomach lurched. Water streamed down my face and body as I stood under the faucet. I breathed deep, dragging my hands through my hair. With a sigh, I grabbed the shower gel and washed myself down. The needles in my head continued to execute their punishment, jabbing at my skull and making nerve endings throb. I looked round the landing exiting the bathroom. My body sighed in relief to find Nutmeg gone.

"You're late! Come on! Get a move on! You're adding years to my age with the time it's taking you!" There was a pause. "You ready? I'm getting impatient here." Nutmeg called from downstairs.

I closed my eyes. She was like a praying mantis. I couldn't wait for her to have her first hangover. Payback would be sweet. Nutmeg would find out the hard way how bad hangovers reacted to loud uninviting noises.

"Just about," I muttered as I walked into my old bedroom.

My jeans and t-shirt from last night sat on the end of the bed, laundered and pressed, ready to wear. Mum was a gem. I smiled, asking myself why Nutmeg couldn't have been more like her. Clothed in dark blue jeans and a red t-shirt. My hair still damp from the shower, I made my way downstairs, ready to start the day. Not that I was ready for Nutmeg. She'd challenge anyone, with or without a hangover.

My thoughts lingered on Daisy. I was so jealous of her. I bet they were all still tucked in bed, sleeping off their hangovers. Perhaps, I should have suggested Nutmeg stay over at mine. A wicked smile lit my face.

"Finally!" Nutmeg complained as I met her at the foot of the stairs.

I shrugged, smiling at her. "Come on, admit it, I'm worth waiting for."

"In your dreams." She rolled her eyes at me.

I laughed, slinging my arm over her shoulders. "Come on. This walk will either kill me or cure me."

Nutmeg sent me a funny look. "I'm sure you'll be fine. Besides, I've got plans for you."

I stood staring at her back as she walked to the door, my mouth hanging open. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She turned and smiled. "You'll see."