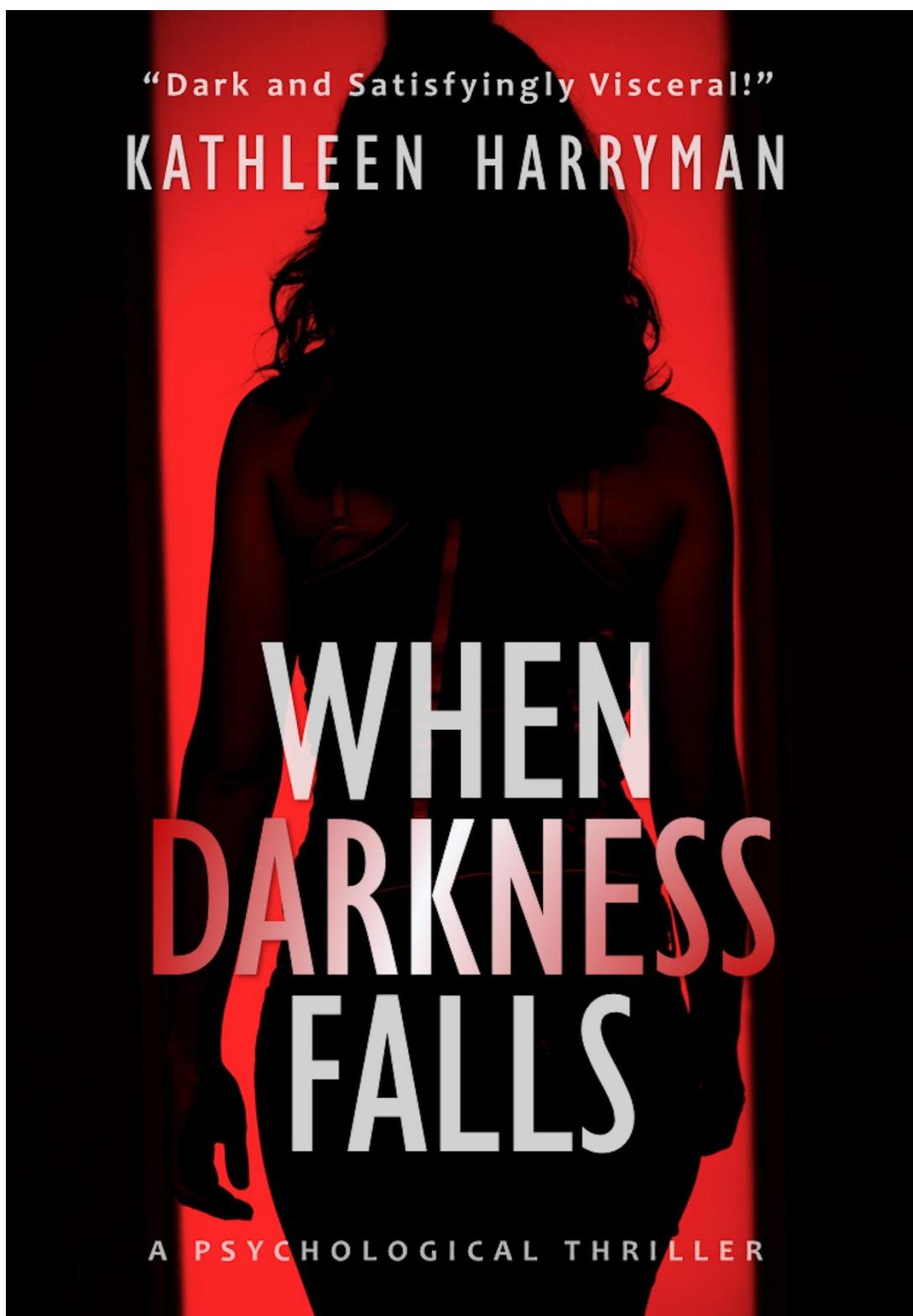


*Excerpt from When Darkness Falls*



# Chapter One

What's wrong with being a psychopath?

Wait... Stop and think about it. Psychologists give you this fancy title because they need to categorise you. It furnishes them with feelings of satisfaction. *Psychopath*. This new label maintains their superiority complex.

J.L. Korch (German psychiatrist) first uses the term *psychopastiche* in 1888. When the early 1900s arrive, literature is commonly using the term 'psychopath' to describe the disorder. In 1941, Hervey M. Cleckley develops a list of criteria, allowing the medical world to label you a psychopath, and why? To fulfil their need to place a tick in a box, that's why. With no feelings of remorse or shame, people view psychopaths as egotistical and manipulative, capable of lying to achieve their goals.

Put like that, it could be any one of us, right?

Some of you may disagree with me. Fine, then answer this...

Have you ever lied to get what you want? Manipulated people to make sure you get your own way? And, tell me, were you sorry? Did you feel any shame when you accomplished your goal? Bet you didn't.

So, why should I differ from you?

Psychopaths are dangerous. I can't argue with that. We are cruel. Violent. Guilt Free. And extremely charming, sucking you in to our fable. But don't we all have these tendencies, perhaps in a milder form? The alcoholic who blames the alcohol for the violence they unleash whilst under the influence. The drug addict who stops at nothing to get their next fix. Unlike them, I apportion blame to nothing, and no-one, for the way I am. I take full ownership of every action I undertake. And yes, I relish the violence and the manipulation it takes to get what I want. I enjoy being me.

According to scientists, my behaviour results from a lesion on the part of my brain responsible for fear and judgement, known as the amygdala. The amygdala is the centre for emotions – emotional behaviour and motivation. It is also accountable for detecting fear and preparing the body for emergency events – fight-or-flight. This explains to scientists (scientists, they need to rationalise everything!) why psychopaths don't experience the effects of fear – or softer emotions, like love. I can't help being the way I am. I really was born to kill.

When it comes down to it, we all have a predisposition towards psychopathic tendencies.

The chap strapped to the chair in his kitchen would disagree with me, because when he wakes up, I'm killing him. Nor will I feel a damn bit of remorse about it.

A few hours ago, I'd dropped him a sleeping pill. Waiting for him to wake up was boring. Wandering around his apartment, I found nothing to entertain me while I waited. On my hands are a pair of vinyl gloves. I'm conscious of trace evidence which will lead the police in my direction. Thanks to Dr. Edmond Locard, who once said, '*Every contact leaves a trace*,' for sparking my brain to ask, '*What if I manipulated trace evidence?*' If, at every crime scene, the perpetrator (me) leaves something behind and carries something away with them, can I not

choose what I leave behind and destroy what I take with me? Simple, yes? This also stops me from partaking in trophy collecting. That kind of thing leads to your arrest.

Besides, I can't really see myself collecting my victims' eyeballs, or cutting off their fingers or hair and storing them in a jar, only to get them out later to take a peek, to feel the rush once more. No, my trophies come from my memories of the kill. The fight my victims put up before I kill them. Their whimpers and cries for help. But most of all, it's the blood. I love watching the blood drip... drop... from their bodies.

I also feel that psychologists like to define serial killers by their trophies. It's as though trophy collecting and being a serial killer go together, like jam and tarts (see what I did there?). To these experts, a serial killer collects their victims' body parts like someone collects stamps. Me, I pride myself on being different. I'm not the next Edward Gein, taking my victims' skin to make a lampshade, or using breasts and skin to make a vest. The reason I kill is clear, I need nothing to remind me. I kill because of Tracy Bennett. Because I hate Tracy so much, I want to make her life an absolute misery. For her to feel her life is unbearable, so she'll disappear for good. Her demise will make me complete. I know this with absolute certainty. It occupies most of my time.

When I'm not killing people, that is.

So, what made me choose this chap snoring like a pig in front of me? It was Tracy's reaction to him. Her big intake of breath as his aftershave assaulted her nasal passage. Dilating eyes feasting on his well-sculptured body. His visual charms stimulating her senses.

"Oh, Patrick Barnes, how dead you're going to be..." My whisper falls to the ground on deaf ears.

Random murders make finding the perp hard for the police. And that's just what Patrick Barnes' death will be... random. Sitting on a bus next to Tracy Bennett will not lead the police to a pattern. The last man I killed was drinking coffee in a Starbucks, smiling at Tracy like a lovesick frog. Tracy's answering smile sealed his fate. Oh, what a mistake, buddy!

Tracy is your modern-day leper, the bringer of death (she should wear a warning bell). The unfortunate thing is, she has no idea the body count is increasing because of her. Yet...

But that's not Tracy's main problem. Tracy Bennett doesn't even know I exist. She doesn't *want* to know I exist. And while she's in denial, the deaths are increasing. Tracy is too wrapped up in her own world to notice me staring back at her. It wouldn't be so bad if she'd accomplished something in the last fifteen years since the 'incident.' Ok, being kidnapped, beaten, and raped at the tender age of eight by Uncle Kevin – not a blood relative but a so-called family friend (or he *was*, until the incident) – wasn't a good thing to happen to Tracy. Still, she has the capability of achieving more with her life. Tracy has a very high IQ. She doesn't like people to know how intelligent she is, so she hides it. Intelligence, to Tracy, makes her different, and different is bad. I don't agree. Different is *interesting*. Tracy's always so desperate to please, and fit in. Tracy is needy. Why she never thought to make Uncle Kevin pay for what he did to her leaves me confused. Uncle Kevin might be behind bars serving his sentence, but Tracy missed her opportunity to get even. She should have cut off Uncle Kevin's balls when she had the chance. That's what I would've done.

Peter Kürten, the Vampire of Düsseldorf, never wasted his life away like Tracy. Peter was the son of an abusive alcoholic who brutalised his wife and thirteen children. Being born into poverty and violence did not stop Peter from furnishing his own career in crime and murder. Thinking about it, Peter might not be the best example, but he is interesting. My favourite scary fact about Peter Kürten is his execution, carried out by the guillotine. Imagine walking up to

the guillotine, the prison psychiatrist at your side. Like Peter, you turn your head and ask, “When they sever my head from my body, will I still be able to hear the blood gushing from my neck?” Receiving confirmation that it’s possible from the psychiatrist, Peter replies, “It will be the pleasure to end all pleasures.” And they say *I’ve* got problems.

I’ve known Tracy Bennett for a long time – most of her life, in fact. I’ve watched Tracy grow from a gawky, uncomfortable eight-year-old into a beautiful woman. Her dark-chocolate wavy hair hangs down her back, like waves rippling across the ocean. Stormy blue-grey eyes stare from beneath long thick eyelashes. Her height is the only average thing about Tracy Bennett. Her body is muscular, without being unfeminine. She spends hours in the gym and pounding the pavement, keeping her fitness levels strong. She makes me keep myself in shape. I can’t go around killing people and not look after myself. I might be slender in stature, but I’m muscular. It helps with moving the bodies around and positioning them where I want them.

Patrick Barnes will soon understand what kind of girl he has picked up in The Parish up on North Street, York. So much for the good-time girl he’s expecting. I smile. Wait until he finds I’ve not only tied him to a chair, but he’s also naked. Patrick’s nakedness isn’t a sexual thing, though I’m betting he’ll be hoping it is. No, I like to see where I cut. To see the blood. When a knife goes through clothing, most of the damage remains hidden. Bloodstains on fabric don’t move me. Just where is the fun in that?

Another consideration is the depth of the cut. A knife can do a lot of damage and kill a person long before I want them to die. A situation like that isn’t good. I often wonder if anyone appreciates my skill. My victims never seem to. I’m not sure what the police think as they don’t release information about my killings to the press in any detail. All I have is a stupid serial-killer nickname: ‘Yorkshire Slasher’. Not very original and really, I don’t slash. I take great care *not* to slash! It’s taken me quite a few bodies to perfect my technique.

Patrick Barnes’ apartment sits along the river Ouse in the old Bonding Warehouse Building. Years ago, once retired from its original purpose as a warehouse and restored (in 1980) as a restaurant and bar, the Bonding Warehouse was the place to be. Nestled between Skeldergate Bridge and Terry Avenue, it lit up the river Ouse. By the end of 1990 it was standing empty and derelict. Now it’s a place of luxury apartments and offices. The developers created four prestigious living spaces in 2013. I’m a nosy girl and so I know Patrick paid over nine hundred thousand pounds for the privilege of living here. Patrick must earn a lot of money; makes me wonder what he does for (or should I say ‘did’, as I’m killing him) a job.

Traces of femininity litter the apartment. That’s the ex-wife. She appears to have a passion for country twee. It doesn’t suit the industrial building. A pine table and four carver chairs with plaid cushioning, the overhanging rack above the range – all very twee. It gives the place a cosy (claustrophobic) feel. The apartments listing says each unit offers over two thousand one hundred square feet. The walls are a mix of exposed brickwork and soft caramel paint. The curtains hanging at the windows have pale lilies on a sweeping blood-red background (I like the background colour). Narrow twisting wooden stairs lead to four bedrooms, bathroom, and toilet; the apex limits the floor space in two of the rooms, something the listing’s square footage doesn’t take into account.

I’ve surveyed, cogitated, and I’m still bored. Fred’s standing by the kitchen cabinets next to Patrick in the open-plan room, waiting for Patrick’s blood to hit him. In his size-twelve army boots and standing at six foot and a few inches, Fred is one of my trace-evidence markers. Depending how much air I blow into Fred, he is the broad, brooding type, or frail and thin. I love Fred because of his portability. Fred is all about blood spatter, or rather the void in the pattern. By planting Fred, I’m leading the police to think perpetrators, plural, not singular. I

hope they appreciate the lengths I go to, to give them something to work with.

A moan comes from Patrick. His thick black mop of hair moves as his head slowly comes up. He blinks as his brain takes in his new sitting position, and me, standing in his kitchen, knife in hand.

I'm ambidextrous, which is a handy skill to have when you are a killer. I always make sure I use my left hand for stabbing and my right for everything else. Most of us must have seen at least one episode of CSI, so we know the police take these things into account. My point of reference supporting this is the case of Joan Pearl Wolfe, murdered by her boyfriend, August Sangret. The locals, because they are a nice unoriginal bunch, referred to Joan as the 'Wigwam Girl' as she lived in two improvised wigwams on Hankley Common, Godalming, in Surrey. They discovered her brutalised body on the 7th October 1942; unoriginality prevailing, they entitled her death the Wigwam Murder. The murder of Wolfe made British history in the courts when they evidenced the victim's skull in the trial. Sangret had smashed Wolfe's skull into forty pieces with a heavy wooden stake, attacking her further with a knife (my weapon of choice). I hold no respect for someone who doesn't take the time to learn some finesse. A killing needs careful planning and execution. As an artist covers a canvas with paint, with careful thought and attention.

Dr. Keith Simpson reconstructed Wolfe's skull, finding three stab wounds to the front of her skull, along with other wounds in her palm and right forearm below the elbow. An aggressive and feral attack. Like I said – no finesse. I'm an expert with a knife, as Patrick Barnes will soon discover. Sadly, Dr. Simpson was lacking in my area of expertise, and his description of the knife Sangret used, well, it leaves me in a state of astonishment. After making everyone wait ages for his opinion, the good (or not so good) Doctor Simpson confirms the point of the weapon to have something of a 'parrot's beak'. What?! Seriously?! A parrot's beak?! I appreciate we are talking 1942, and resources weren't what they are today. No Google. Still... a parrot's beak? I feel annoyed at his lack of research. The curvature of a blade is as individual as a person. To find the correct knife, Dr. Simpson should have made some comparisons against blades known to be curved, such as the hawkbill blade, or clip point blade, or maybe the trailing point blade. All of which resemble a parrot's beak, to those less trained in such things. Dr. Simpson (bringing me back to my comment about using my left hand to kill) concluded that, as the stab wounds were close together, high on the left side of the skull, a right-handed person had made them. Now, you can understand what I mean about CSI taking such things into account. Technology advancements made since 1942 allow for cleaner, more reliable analysis. However, the basic principles remain. Angle, depth, position, it all stacks up against the average killer.

"What's going on?" Patrick's voice is sluggish from the drug I slipped him when we arrived at his apartment. At the time he'd been too busy trying to get my knickers off to notice. I'm betting he was wishing he'd paid more attention now.

"Well, Patrick, just so you know, I think you have a lovely... no... *great* body. I can tell, looking at your abs, you've been taking care of yourself. I know Tracy Bennett would have liked to see them." I give him an encouraging smile as Patrick checks out his abs. I'm not just saying it, he really has a wonderful set of abs. Perhaps he's a model? I can see him in a pair of Calvin Klein's.

"Who's Tracy Bennett?" Echoes of confusion hang heavy in his voice.

I allow a sigh of annoyance to register. "Tracy Bennett is the girl you sat next to on the bus. And when I say she liked what she saw, well, I mean it. It's too bad she'll never sample the goods, eh?" I wink at Patrick. Time's ticking, eating at his life. His brain is working so hard

at recalling Tracy, he hasn't noticed the silk ties securing his arms to the chair.

I might not like the ex's taste in country twee, but I'll admit the old carver chairs are handy, allowing me to tie Patrick's arms to each side of the chair, palms facing the ceiling. There is a lot of flesh for me to carve. Oh... the irony... '*Carving flesh*,' and Patrick sitting tied to a 'carver chair.' It makes my lips twitch. It's always the little things, isn't it?

"Great body or not, Patrick, you're going to die tonight." Patrick's looking frightened. "On the plus side, you'll die knowing you look gorgeous."

Patrick's tongue sneaks out, licking at his rapidly drying lips. I reckon he's trying to decide if shouting, '*You're a crazy bitch*,' will help his current situation, or maybe he's going to go for, '*I understand you routine... You're so funny... Had me going there... Phew*.' Either way, I was killing him.

Patrick's indecision makes me laugh. Bending over him, I give him a good eyeful of my voluptuous breasts (no, they aren't natural, they're the making of a push-up bra). Pulling in guys like Patrick is so easy. Tits on show, long legs poking out from a skirt my father would say I'd forgotten to wear. My long red hair, just like Patrick's ex-wife's, moving tantalisingly about my waist, is my crowning glory. If Tracy Bennett is beautiful, I'm exquisite, and unlike Tracy, I know what men like, even if they never get what they came for.

Tightening my grip on the Robert Welch Signature twenty-centimetre carving knife, I let Patrick's brain catch up with what's happening. I straighten, letting the long curving edge of the knife bounce off my left leg, holding Patrick's attention. Choices... choices... they're everywhere, and the Robert Welch, being the sharpest in the kitchen drawer, is my weapon of choice to kill the man sitting in front of me. With a slicing action the blade eats into the soft tissue on Patrick's right cheek. My pressure is light, the sharp cold blade not digging into the flesh too deep. With blood dripping down his cheek, flowing to his chin, and down his chest, Patrick is gorgeous to look upon. My breath catches in my throat; the blood's bringing me pinpricks of pleasure. I enjoy cutting the face; blood springs quickly to the open wound, making the cut look worse than it is. The forehead is the best spot to make the first cut. It's a winner for blood flow and reaction and causes no lasting damage. If scaring Patrick was my main aim, the forehead is where I'd start.

As Patrick's screams vibrate off the walls, my body shudders with pleasure.

"You crazy bitch!" Hysterically he thrashes against the silken ties holding him to the chair.

"Why, Patrick, what's wrong, baby, don't you want me anymore?" I pout.

Smiling nastily at him, I recall his pickup line: "The neighbours are out of town for the weekend, you can scream as loud as you want, baby!" Blimey... how egotistical and testosterone-macho-man of you, Patrick. Ironically, *I'm* the one making *him* scream. However, I find the neighbours being away interesting; I like to hear my victims scream in terror.

Whipping the knife through the air, it kisses his left cheek. Panic is mounting, Patrick's eyes are unfocused, darting around the room. Patrick knows his death is imminent. There's no shouting or fighting his way out of this. Hands shaking, breathing erratic, hyperventilating, Patrick is in the grip of a panic attack. This is it for Patrick Barnes. He's taking deep gulps of air. It's like he can't get enough oxygen into his lungs. His pecs are dancing madly at me. Up and down... up and down.

Hips swaying, I walk behind him, my shoes clicking on the wooden floor. Bending down, I place my lips an inch from his ear, and breathe in his fear. He shivers and beads of sweat appear on his skin.

“You smell of fear, Patrick.”

His answering whimper sounds like a puppy who’s had its toy taken from it. I smile and place the blunt edge of the knife against his Adam’s apple. His skin tenses under the cold steel, as he swallows down his saliva, but he doesn’t cry out. His body stiffens in horror.

Slowly, I walk back round to face Patrick, holding the knife against his neck. Straddling him, I slide the knife’s blade down his chest, over his left pec, angling it towards Patrick’s navel. I watch his rippling flesh in fascination as goose bumps form, and the blade eats into his skin, ripping it open. He’s no longer breathing, his breath’s frozen inside him, along with the rest of his body. His eyes stare out in front of him at some unknown object. I smile ever so sweetly as the knife travels back up his body on the right side, making its slow ascent from his navel to his collarbone. The blade caresses his body like a lover’s gentle hand. Blood seeps from the thin break in his skin. Broken out of his fear-induced stupor, Patrick screams, and tears fall from his eyes. His lips tremble and tiny bubbles form between his lips. Blood’s dripping... drip... drip... drop from his body. While he was asleep, I nailed his feet to the wooden floor. A knife-wielding woman can make the pain disappear. The wooden floor is a wonderful find. People seem to prefer tiles these days. I don’t enjoy strapping legs to chairs; they bounce too much during the struggle. Ten-inch nails through feet, biting into wood, stops a body moving.

Slowly, ever so slowly, as Patrick’s eyes meet mine, I move off him, standing back to admire my artwork. My critical eyes roam over every inch of his naked flesh. Hmm... where will I cut next? Like an artist moving paint across a canvas, I work the knife across Patrick’s body, dancing, swirling, twisting around him. My body moves and the knife pierces the flesh. Each stroke differs in length and depth, never too deep to cause serious harm, but enough to rip apart the skin, allowing the blood to flow. I stop in front of Patrick. His whole body is shaking, and his chin is resting on his chest as he prays for this to be over. The only patch of Patrick’s body that isn’t bleeding is where his flesh meets the chair. Bloods splatter covers the kitchen area and it is a beautiful creation of its own. I take a second to appreciate the deep arches in the blood patterns as they’ve hit the kitchen units and trailed over the floor.

Patrick is weeping uncontrollably. His emotional torment litters the room, releasing no empathy within me. I feel disappointment ignite when I look at the snivelling man. Patrick Barnes is such a big, muscular man. Yet here he is crying like a little baby. I lean over, my face close to his. His eyes widen in fear.

“Poor baby, almost over.” I tied Patrick’s arms with his palms facing up for a reason.

I do nothing without a reason.

I move, twisting the blade of the knife. It comes down hard on the exposed flesh of Patrick’s left arm, and then his right. The two main arteries on his arms are unprotected, the blood begging for release. I hear its whisper. It doesn’t bother me which of the arteries I hit, the ulnar or radial. Maybe I’ll drag the blade through them both. The blood’s flowing... death is coming for Patrick.

Patrick slumps in the chair, he’s no longer crying. The blood’s still flowing onto the floor, so his heart is still pumping... thump... thump... thump. I move to the wall, sliding down it until my bum hits the wooden floor. I lick my lips in pleasure... Oh, the pleasure... It rushes through me with every drip... drip... drip... of Patrick’s blood. My pleasure is immense, as the blood coats the floor in a beautiful red veil. It’s amazing how quickly blood leaves the body.

Patrick takes his last breath and I fix my gaze on the red puddle on the floor. I like this part best.

I like to watch the blood form as it stretches out its sticky fingers and life leaves the body. Every bloody puddle is different.

There are so many variables, I bet you didn't know that. It depends on the surface the blood drips onto, how I position the body, and the way the floor tilts slightly; so many things for me to think about. You can't possibly find the wonder in such things. Your emotions are telling you it's wrong. How can you take pleasure in death, like I do? You don't know what you're missing.

I feel myself coming down from the high I've been riding. Sighing, I push myself off the floor. Everything is over quickly... too quickly... I'm not ready to let go of the pleasure. I walk round the puddle, careful not to step in it.

"You're disappointing, Patrick, but your blood is still beautiful." I prefer it when my victims show more fight... more spirit.

I wash away Patrick's blood from my skin. I never remove my gloves. Fred still stands by the cabinets. A nice-sized puddle wraps round his size-twelve boots. Dear Fred... He's good at his job. I pull out his plug, squeezing out the air. Fred deflates, and I lift him out of his boots. He's slimy. Patrick's blood is making him a slippery little thing. Still, Fred serves his purpose well. I appraise the void he's left behind as I roll him up against my body. Plastic bag in hand, I place Fred inside, putting him in my open handbag.

There's a clean pair of gloves on the kitchen counter. I pull the old ones off and slip my hands inside them. Slipping out of my heels, I rummage in my handbag, pulling out several pairs of socks. Socks on, I slip my feet into Fred's boots. I've packed out the toes of the boots a little with wrist weights, to ensure the footprints I'm about to make remain even. The boots clang against the wooden floor as I walk from the cabinets to the front door. Securing the latch in place so I can get back inside, I stride down the hall to the external door. A trail of bloody boot-prints litter the clean surface of the floor, making me smile. I slip the boots off and walk back to Patrick's flat, swinging them at my side. The heavy plastic door to Patrick's flat swings open and I walk inside. The bloody body grabs my attention. My breath catches in my throat. He's gorgeous, and I stop to appraise my artwork. The thin lines of the knife, the blood that's spilled from his open skin; I notice each differing depth of the curved lines the blade has made. My brain releases feelings of happiness, sending butterflies to fan their wings in my tummy. WOW... I'm excellent with a knife. Turning, I pull out a plastic bag and put the boots inside. I place them in my handbag.

Manipulation of the evidence, it's what it's all about.

It gives the police something to work on, keeps them busy... busy... busy; always so busy... busy... looking in the wrong direction. Laughing, I drag my oversized handbag over and take off my socks, stuffing them inside my bag. It's a good job oversized bags are in fashion. Now... somewhere in here I've a spare set of clothes. I take a while to locate them as they have fallen to the bottom of the bag; everything gets lost in these things. Clean clothes on, I stuff my feet back in my heels. I grab my coat and throw my handbag over my shoulder. Replacing the vinyl gloves on my hands with a pair of black leather gloves, I'm ready for my final exit. My heels click on the hard surface of the floor, leaving broken bloody footprints as I walk next to Fred's, taking care that mine don't merge with his. After all the effort I've made, it would be a shame to spoil my work. The two sets of prints highlight two perps killed Patrick Barnes, that'll keep those pesky forensic folk busy.

I'm not worried about the evidence I'm leaving behind. The shoes on my feet are a size too big. The extra insoles in them prevent my feet sliding forward, evening out the pressure of

my feet and the footprints. I put as much effort into evidence manipulation as I do killing.

The calendar in the kitchen confirms the cleaner is in tomorrow. She's in for a heck of a day.

"Sweet dreams, Patrick." I smile at his decaying body.

Black fur brushes my leg as a cat walks in. That's the neighbour's cat Patrick's looking after while they're away. The poor bugger's not getting fed tonight. He is in for a fun night, however. By the time he finishes padding around this place, the little moggy will wreak havoc with the evidence.

"Enjoy," I call to him as I close the door.

By my calculations, when the forensic crew arrive the moggy will have smeared Patrick's blood across the apartment like a dot-to-dot puzzle. Little paw prints of destruction at work.

The wind grabs my hair as I walk down Skeldergate back towards The Parish. I place the black bobble hat from my coat pocket over my head to lessen the wind's grip on my hair. There's a bus stop outside the pub. Few people fill the street and the bus stop is empty. A digital screen at the stop informs me the bus is arriving in two minutes. Change rattles in my pocket. I never use a card to pay for my fare. It leaves a trail of evidence behind. A few drops of rain hit my face. As the rain increases the bus pulls up. I'm conscious only of the rain washing away my bloody footprints on the pavement as I hand over my money and take a seat. There are four other people on the bus. No one bothers to acknowledge my presence, their mobile phones keeping their attention on their tiny screens.

Mentally I make a list of jobs I need to do when I get home.

1. Clean my shoes and Fred's boots.
2. Throw my clothes in the washer.
3. Treat Fred to a good old let's-get-rid-of-the-evidence deep clean.
4. Throw my bag, gloves, and wig (did you think I was a natural redhead?) in the fire in the living room.
5. Shower and bed.

I yawn... I can't wait to go to bed and relive Patrick's death as I sleep.

## Chapter Two

Abigail Hill waddles between the cosmetic counters towards Tracy's makeup counter, mobile in hand. If Mrs. H sees the iPhone, she'll have a fit. Mrs. H is the cosmetic manager at Hopstocks Department Store. The name rolls off the tongue, doesn't it? I refer to it as Hopscotch's Department Store as the staff here all act like kids.

Hopscotch's sits on the corner of St Helens Square and Blake Street in the centre of York. The property is quirky, business expansion eating at its original features, hiding them with harsh lighting and false ceilings. But, behind the scenes, references to its past linger. The shop is made up of several dwellings. Walking along the corridors to the staff room or small staff kitchen, you can still get a sense of the individual buildings. The best place to get a flavour of this is on the first floor. Concealed behind a 'PRIVATE – STAFF ONLY' door, stairs lead you to the storeroom and lockers. Old banister rails take you up to the coat rack, then have you turning and walking back on yourself to get to the locker room. If you want to enter the storeroom from this door, you need to pass the lockers and then down a set of stairs to reach it. I love walking along these corridors. It's eerie and if I believed in ghosts, here is where I would likely find them. Because of the mashing together of buildings, Hopscotch's has five customer entrances, the largest of which leads customers directly into the cosmetics department where Tracy works. Compared to most of the counters Tracy's is small (small – insignificant – it suits Tracy). The major cosmetic houses like Estée Lauder, YSL, and Lancôme command the main selling space.

The grey suit Abigail's wearing does absolutely nothing for her figure. She's too wide across the hips to be wearing a pencil skirt, and the length is unflattering. It drops to her knees, emphasising her heavy-set legs. The jacket fits snuggly across her mid-section and has a box cut to it, making her look like she doesn't have a waist. The jacket blends into the skirt, skimming inches off her height. Since she's five-foot nothing, Abigail can't afford to look any shorter than she is.

Abigail is one of those people who is constantly dieting. She knows every diet that has ever graced our planet, and yet her round shape remains. Knowledge doesn't equal practise, in Abigail's case. Her blue eyes are wide with excitement, and her mouth curves up with a superior tilt to it. She's wearing her gossiping, '*ground-breaking news*' expression. Abigail is Hopscotch's chief gossip guru. And like most people who spread idle chitchat, the truth becomes lost within the embellishment of the tale. However, Abigail's stories are always entertaining.

There is nothing I can do but wait for Abigail to relay her message to Tracy, who's too engrossed in her morning cleaning ritual to observe the forthcoming tidal wave that is Abigail Hill. Tracy is such a goody-two-shoes. Another name for her is boring. Hidden away from prying eyes, I have an excellent view of the proceedings, without becoming embroiled.

"Did you see the news this morning?" Abigail enquires as she plonks her bum on the cream faux-leather chair by the counter. Her greasy hands smudge the clean streak-free glass.

Tracy sighs at Abigail's hands, but says nothing. Instead, Tracy's hands grip the duster and glass cleaner, ready for use.

Abigail doesn't bother waiting for Tracy to respond. "The Yorkshire Slasher's at it again! He's killed some guy in one of those posh apartments down by the River Ouse. You know... the old Bonding Warehouse place. You should see the headlines: 'Yorkshire Slasher strikes again...' Doesn't it sound exciting?"

I bristle at the word 'Slasher' – I do not slash!

Tracy looks at Abigail, shock falling across her perfectly made-up face. She smooths down her navy dress, which clings to her feminine curves and shows off her narrow waist. You either have a fantastic figure or you don't. Tracy does, Abigail doesn't.

"Wow! It hasn't been that long since they found that other guy. How many is it now?"

"Five, but I reckon there's been more, and the police don't want to tell us. You know, in case it puts the tourists off."

What the tourists and the police not releasing information has to do with anything, I'm not sure. But for once Abigail is right; I've killed loads more. Five is such a paltry number. Still, I'm of the belief that the police aren't holding back information regarding my victims' numbers. They haven't found all the bodies yet. I've hidden them well. The killing was sloppy. Practicing has its uses, but no artist wants remembering for their less-than-perfect work.

Tracy nervously pushes her high chocolate-brown ponytail behind her back. "I can't believe that this is happening, in York, too."

"Ha, you have got to be kidding me. You live in a very bloody city, Tracy. The Romans cut off people's heads and stuck them on spikes at the gates of the city, just to teach everyone a lesson. Reminding them what happens if they break the law. It was only a matter of time until we got our very own serial killer."

I have very little choice in the matter. York is where Tracy lives, and therefore my killings take place here. I admit to wondering what the profilers make of me. Did they have me logged as the abused kid who has suffered at the hands of their so-called parents; or the loner who doesn't have friends? Ha, what a load of bull. If anyone tried to abuse me, they'd soon find their life expectancy diminish to zero. As for friends, well, who needs them? Friends just tie you down.

"Really, Abigail!" Susie Johnson struts over, her high heels clicking on the floor tiles. She picks up a tube of mascara and starts applying it. "You wouldn't be saying that if the Yorkshire Slasher kidnapped you. 'Hey, it's only a matter of time before you killed me,'" Susie mimics, shaking out her waist-length blonde hair, which tumbles down her back.

Susie is like a Barbie Doll. Her boobs are too big for her tiny, tiny waist, and her body comprises more plastic than anything else. While her lean legs have mileage at thirty-four inches, there is no reason for them to be constantly on display. Today is no exception. Her skirt is bordering on becoming a belt.

I hope she is wearing clean knickers.

The only reason Susie gets away with looking like a tart is because the store manager – Mr. Humphreys – fancies his chances. If his eyes ever make it past Susie's legs, then they definitely never make it past her boobs. I'm convinced he would be incapable of picking her out of a mugshot line-up. Mr. Humphreys is a dinosaur; he should be extinct. Perhaps I should do him a favour... but I digress. Looking is the only thing he's probably capable of these days. Even if he took Viagra, he'd suffer a heart attack long before he got any satisfaction. Susie's comeback to the critics who dare to voice an opinion on her lack of skirt length is that she works in hosiery and is 'demo-ing' the product. As a comeback it's lame, like her.

The buttons on Susie's tight-fitting shirt are being put to the test; her boobs are on their way to becoming today's exhibit. I wonder if this is her second or third set of implants. If they get any bigger, she'll need a forklift to keep them in place, never mind a bra. I don't see the attraction, myself. However, being the killer that I am, I wonder how much silicon it would take before I saw any blood.

Abigail picks up her iPhone and starts flipping through the online images of the Yorkshire Slasher's crime scenes.

"Have you seen what's going on out there?" Her face loses some of its colour. "You know, you're right, Susie, it could have been me. I live close to the Bonding Warehouse."

I want to tell her she's safe, she's not even close to being on my list. Yet...

Susie sends Tracy a pained look, raising her eyes to the ceiling. "Abigail, you live on Butcher Terrace, that's like a million miles away from the Bonding Warehouse." Susie plucks Abigail's phone from her chubby fingers. On the screen is a picture of the Bonding Warehouse with police tape around it.

Short-stuff Abigail tries reaching for her phone. "If I lived a million miles away, I wouldn't be here. I'd be in Spain or New Zealand, or something. Anyway, you're only being bitchy because you live on the wrong side of the river."

"Fulford is not on the wrong side of the river." Susie makes a threatening gesture with Abigail's iPhone.

Abigail ignores the threat. "It is so. You're only jealous because I live closer."

Abigail uses the foot bar on the chair to provide her with additional height. The chair wobbles in response. In retaliation Susie raises the phone above her head. Precariously balanced as she is, Shorty doesn't stand a chance of getting the phone back.

Sensible Tracy reaches out, plucks the phone out of Susie's hand, and gives it back to a smug Abigail.

Susie sticks out her tongue at Tracy, who sighs in response.

"I think we're off track here. Someone died last night." You know what follows Sensible-Tracy? Boring.

Abigail's eyes light up. "I know. It's so exciting! Do you think the Yorkshire Slasher is a looker? Hey, if they catch him, I could become one of those prison brides. I saw a programme about it the other week."

Abigail isn't my type.

The police have released little information, which is probably why Abigail thinks I'm a chap. And the profilers are... shall I say... not helping and leave it at that.

I'll be honest; I find it irritating. Just because I'm female doesn't mean I'm not a killer. Fred is good, but he has his limitations. He's the right chap for Abigail though. Being a blow-up doll, Fred will never have to suffer through one of Abigail's conversations, which begins and ends with 'me... me... me.' And psychologists say psychopaths are egotistical and self-absorbed.

The alert tone rings on Abigail's phone. "Oh, they've named the dead guy. Wow, he's... was... gorgeous."

I can concur with that. I'd left him looking even more gorgeous when I'd finished cutting him up. There's something about a knife's work that leaves me breathless.

Tracy and Susie lean forward. “Gorgeous, Abigail?! Bloody hell, he’s a lot more than *gorgeous*.” Susie taps the screen, making Patrick Barnes’ picture bigger. “I’m betting there’s a six-pack hiding beneath that T-shirt.”

Abigail stares at the picture. “I think you’re right. What a waste.”

I disagree with that statement. Patrick Barnes’ death wasn’t a waste. I enjoyed every cut I’d made. Every trickle of blood that left his body. Patrick Barnes is famous, something he would never have achieved had I let him live.

“He’s married.” Tracy points at the picture of the woman at Patrick’s side...

That’s *ex-wife*, Tracy.

“It says *ex-wife*, they weren’t together anymore,” Abigail sighs. “He was available, and he never had the chance to meet me. Now that’s a waste.”

“They could have got back together, and now they won’t ever get the chance.”

Susie and Abigail look at Tracy.

“You’re such a romantic, Tracy. They’d never have got back together.”

“How can you be so sure about that, Susie? It says that they’d only just separated.” Tracy views the world through Disney-coated glasses. She never sees the bad things; even after Uncle Kevin, she trusts people too easily. She should have been born a dog.

Tracy Bennet makes my blood boil like no one I know. She needs me in her life to remind her how pathetic she is. She makes me mad... mad... mad. Using a knife on Tracy is too easy. No, I have plans for Tracy Bennett. Utter-destruction-of-the-person plans.

“Because he’d have met me and forgotten all about his ex,” Susie laughs.

“Why you? I’m more his type than you. Men like something to hold.”

“You’re fooling yourself, Abs, if you think he’d have picked you over me. You’d have given him a stoop. The guy looks to be about six foot to me.”

Six feet four inches and two hundred ninety pounds of pure muscle, actually. I would know, it had been me lugging him off the sofa and onto the chair in the kitchen. Nailing his feet to the floor had been pure frustrated pleasure. The unhelpful sack of human flesh hadn’t made moving him easy, and it had taken more of my time than planned. Given my temper simmers at the service, you can imagine how hammering nails into his flesh made me feel better.

“Who you are calling short?”

“Oh, not you, obviously!” Abigail’s hand shoots out, jabbing Susie in the ribs. And the three women laugh. The sound grates on me.

Makes me mad.

I hate to see Tracy happy.

*Patience... patience... patience*, I remind myself, taking a deep breath.

“Hey, where were you last night?” Karen Stillman comes stomping over.

Her obvious displeasure is clear not only in the way her thick rubber-soled shoes are beating on the tiles, but also in her chiselled features. For a girl she has a very masculine look about her. And how do you get rubber to make such an angry sound?

You either hate Karen or you tolerate her (I'm not saying love, because how can anyone love the thing at Tracy's counter?). There are no half measures with Karen Stillman. I hate Karen (no surprise), Tracy tolerates her. Figures. Tracy will take any stray in and call it a friend.

"I'm off," Susie mutters.

Susie likes Karen as much as I do.

Karen's in her late thirties and is renowned for her bad temper; with more mood swings than a two-year-old, she gives 'temperamental' a new meaning. Her shoes are solid flat loafers, with a thick rubber non-slip heel. And her skirt (unlike Susie's) falls loosely past her calves. The jumper she's wearing does little to present any curves to the world. No makeup covers her face and her frizzy ginger hair spills around her head like a set of angry snakes making a bid for escape.

Karen works in accounts and spends most of her time hiding there, which is probably just as well because she's not known for her sensitivity. However, Karen is a fantastic accountant. She's reliable, and predictable, and so long as you never touch the things littering her desk, you will keep all your fingers, and maybe your head attached to your neck.

Abigail's too busy fiddling with her phone to notice Susie's quick exit and Medusa's approach.

Tracy loses all her colour as the snakes hiss at her (that is, Karen's angry breathing).

"Well?" Karen rounds on Tracy. "Harkers... last night after work... remember. It's not like you can get lost, it's down the road from here." Karen waves her hand in the general direction of Harkers.

Tracy's mouth hangs open. "Well, I looked like a right prize-sized you-know-what sat there waiting for you."

"Don't worry, no one'll try chatting you up," Abigail said.

"I'm sorry, Karen, I must have forgotten." Tracy quickly covers Abigail's comment.

"Forgotten? Well, I guess that's ok, then. And there I'd been thinking you'd had some emergency. Knocked down by a car, got trapped under a bus or something. But nooooo... you forgot. What were you doing last night that was sooooo... engrossing you forgot about me?"

Frown lines appear across Tracy's forehead. "I don't remember."

I smile to myself. That's right, Tracy, you lost a lot of time last night, didn't you?

"Oh, well, that's just great. I thought we were friends. If I wanted a friend that only thinks of themselves, I'd have got a cat."

"Look, I'm sorry, Karen."

"Not good enough," Karen storms as her hands hit the glass counter.

A few people stop and stare. No one comes over. In a swirl of hissing snakes, Karen makes her way across the department floor to accounts.

"Well, that went well." Abigail smiles encouragingly.

"You think?"

"No, not really. Look, if you want to make it up to her, why don't you go to Betty's and get her a bun or something? I wouldn't mind a bun if you're going."

Betty's (Harrogate) Ltd first opened its doors on the 1st June 1936 at 11 a.m. Lord

Middleton graciously consented to open the establishment. Opening a new Betty's in York was the brainchild of Frederick Belmont. For those who don't know what Betty's is, it is a traditional tearoom, serving traditional meals influenced by Switzerland and Yorkshire. Betty's sells delicious cakes, confectionery, tea, coffee, and loads more over the counter, and in their tearooms. It's expensive. And Abigail has a taste for expensive.

"You think that'll help?"

"I wouldn't like to say. Karen's like a rabid dog when she's mad; hopefully the bun will help to calm her down. If not, I know eating a bun from Betty's will help me block out her screaming."

"Right, best get back to it." Abigail slides off the chair, trailing more fingerprints over the glass. "It's ok for you; you don't have to work with her."

"I'll get her something at dinnertime."

"Don't forget me."

"I won't."

Abigail nods, taking in Tracy's pinched expression. "I don't know why you want to be friends with her."

"I feel sorry for her. She's always on her own."

"There's a reason for that." Abigail sends Tracy a meaningful look as she sits back down. So much for *getting back to it*.

"People shouldn't be on their own."

"Tracy, she's a person, not a dog. Dogs don't like to be on their own. People often do."

"You don't."

Abigail grins. "I can't help it if I'm a people person. Someone needs to spread a little cheer around the place."

Mrs. H rounds the corner. Her bleached-blond hair sticks up like spikes on a hedgehog. The hairstyle suits her prickly nature. Hidden away as I am, I shake my head at her as she approaches Tracy and Abigail. She's like a tiger sensing her prey. Like a tiger, Mrs. H is as cute and cuddly as a bear woken too early from hibernation.

In her late fifties, Mrs. Hamilton (Mrs. H) has a tendency to forget what's appropriate for someone of her age to wear. She's like Madonna without the cash. Today she's wearing a black leather skirt six inches above her knees, and black-patterned tights with roses on them (at least I think they're roses). Her bright-red shirt is virtually transparent, and while her bra is pretty, people don't need to see it. She has thrown her black suit jacket over her arm, despite the temperature outside being below three degrees. Clasped in her right hand is a black briefcase. She thinks she's a lawyer, rather than the cosmetics manager at Hopscotch's Department Store. Her long red acrylic nails are as practical as a family of four having a two-seater sports car.

In a waft of perfume, Mrs. H stops at Tracy's counter. "Abigail Hill, if I'm not mistaken accounts is on the second floor."

Abigail jumps, sliding back off the chair her bum has only just hit. She quickly sneaks her iPhone into her jacket pocket.

"I was just going," she mutters, smearing more fingerprints over Tracy's counter.

Tracy's looking worried.

“See you at break time, Tracy.”

As Abigail makes for the escalator (she’s never used the stairs in the three years she’s been working here), Mrs. H rounds on Tracy. While her nails remain sheathed, her claws are out.

“Tracy, I can’t say I’m impressed.” No change there. “Your figures are down, and your counter is a mess. This is not a good start to the day.”

For dramatic effect, Mrs. H moves her black jacket to look at her watch. There’s a clock on the wall above Tracy’s head. “I’ll be back in five minutes, please make sure your counter is spotless and then we will look at how you will make your weekly target; your shortfall so far is four hundred. And considering it’s Saturday tomorrow, you’re going to have to do something spectacular to make up the loss.”

Tracy withdraws into herself. She has a tendency to do this when she becomes agitated.

Mrs. H struts over to her office, her six-inch red heels tip-tapping on the tiles. As I watch her, an idea forms. Why I believe I’ve found my next creation. I’m not keen on the word ‘victim,’ as it downgrades my artwork. I create spectacular pieces of art. It’s a shame no one else agrees.

Remember when Lady Gaga wore a dress made from raw beef at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards? What a fine creation that was. I am sure if I possessed cannibal tendencies, I would have followed her anywhere, with my pots of salt and pepper. Her intentions may have been to urge the US military not to discriminate against gays and lesbians, but the stir it created outweighed any political message. My artwork has never... ever... outweighed the message I sent. I am a bloodthirsty killer. My message is clear.

Mrs. H has it in for Tracy. I don’t know why, and I don’t care.

Tracy is mine, and I’m not about to let the fifty-year-old sink her manicured claws into her. No one picks on Tracy but me, and especially not Mrs. H.

I need some new art material and Mrs. H is it. I’m betting she’ll be a screamer, which needs taking into account. Hmm... My mind spins as ideas form.

One thing is for sure, for any murder to be successful there’s an awful lot of planning and surveillance to do. I’m not the sloppy kind.

Not with my artwork... I can almost hear the blood dripping from her body.

## Chapter Three

I am sitting in a rusty, battered black Ford Fiesta, looking out the driver's side window. I keep the car for two reasons: one – it still works and doesn't cost me much to run, and two – I can't afford to replace it. The paintwork's a mix of rust and metallic black. Coffee stains litter the back seat. Unless I'm killing, I'm not tidy. When I kill, I'm meticulous in every way.

Parked outside Mrs. H's house between a dark-blue SUV and a white hire van, I have an excellent view without drawing attention. I've been here for thirty minutes and have just finished the dregs of my coffee. The dashboard clock says it's five thirty. I'm not expecting Mrs. H back for another ten or fifteen minutes. Over the past four weeks I've collected a lot of information on Mrs. H. Her routine, and that of her husband's and cleaner's. You can't expect Mrs. H to clean her own house with those nails. I have also found some rather interesting surprises, which I will make sure benefit me.

I look at myself in the mirror. Today I'm blonde. The cold ash tones suit me; they add an extra steel to my eyes, which are violet today. Wigs and contacts, it really is amazing how they change a person's look.

Thick black leggings and a fine-knit black jumper help me blend into the shadows. My black coat is slung across the neighbouring seat at the front. On the back seat is my oversized black bag, all packed and ready for the kill. A happy thrill shoots through my blood. I am not about to stop the smile spreading across my lips as sweet anticipation calls. It is such a lovely emotion.

Mr. H isn't expecting his wife back for another couple of hours. Unlike me, Mr. H doesn't know his wife left work early, feigning a headache. He is in for a shock when she's finished at the supermarket. Not long to wait before the fun starts. I slide down in my seat, putting the lid on the thermal mug.

Sometimes I'm quite the oracle. I see things my victims miss and can predict their futures far better than any horoscope or pack of tarot cards. Their routines. The little things they never see coming. It surprises me how much people miss, too busy living their daily lives to notice the important stuff. Take Mrs. H; she has no idea what she is about to walk into. Me, I have known for some time. Knowledge truly is power. I don't like surprises. They're bad news. A killer's enemy. So, it pays to be observant.

A brand-new blue Nissan Micra rolls down the road. It turns into the Hs' drive. The low autumnal sun hits the immaculate flashy paintwork. I predict a lot of damage will soon occur to the sparkly new car once the wife (Mrs. H) comes home.

Mr. H, the dirty bastard, is entertaining his bit on the side, in the family home – really! (The silly man should connect with his brain before letting his hormones take control.) His trash is no better. The dumb bitch has parked her car on the drive, nose first, eliminating a fast exit strategy. People never prepare themselves for the unexpected.

Being the thoughtful person I am, I borrowed the spade from the neighbours' front yard. It is

now resting against the Hs' house, ready for Mrs. H. The spade's going to inflict a lot of damage on the car, and the bit-on-the-side, if Mrs. H has the opportunity. Foresight is one of my specialities. People never think things through properly; not me. I always take time to ensure I take everything into account. And I mean *everything*.

The sidepiece of trash is in her early thirties. That alone will be enough to send Mrs. H over the edge. She's already had two facelifts. Age obsession is a curse. It eats away at your insides until obsessing about getting old is all you can do and living life to the fullest takes second position. The 'age curse' grips its icy fingers around everyone at some point. As a nation we are fixated about our ages. The young want to be older and the old want to be younger. Weird. Me, I am perfectly happy being me, no matter my age. So long as I'm killing, I am perfectly happy.

Mrs. H thinks she dresses like a lamb when really, she is more mutton – well past her prime, and at the age for slaughter. Not only does she look ridiculous, she gives women in their fifties a bad reputation. Look at Helen Mirren. Now *that's* class, make no mistake. Mrs. H should copy her rather than Madonna. At least Madonna looks after herself – unlike Mrs. H, who thinks you spell gym G-I-N. Well, it's all too late now. I am killing her tonight.

Long lean legs clad in thigh-high spiked boots poke from the open car door. Trash steps out and the wind catches her calf-length black coat, whipping it open. Sexy lacy red underwear, suspenders, and fishnet stockings are on display for all to see. It also confirms that underwear alone is not substantial clothing for the autumnal weather. She grips her coat together, goose bumps covering her skin. Her caramel hair flies about her shoulders in clouds of soft playful curls, and her super-long lashes bat together against the wind. Red lips tilt in a sultry pout. The front door opens, and Trash spreads her coat wide. It is a good job Mr. H wears glasses. They stop his eyes from popping out and falling onto the floor. Licking his lips hungrily, he pulls Trash to him, slamming the door shut. Judging by the noises emanating from behind the plastic door, they haven't made it upstairs.

Really, people are beyond my understanding. You can find excitement and pleasure in lots of ways. Why risk losing everything just because you can't keep the two separate? A hotel bill is cheaper than a divorce. Mrs. H will take her husband for everything he has, including his Mercedes-AMG GT Coupe in canary yellow – or whatever posh name Mercedes calls yellow – and his pension. Plastic surgery isn't cheap, as the Hs know.

From my wing mirror I see Mrs. H's flashy red BMW John Cooper Works Convertible Mini approach. I sit straighter in the car seat, waiting for the fallout and entertainment to begin.

This should be good.

The opportunity Mr. H and Trash has presented me was too much to pass up. It would be rude of me to walk away. So, I watch and wait. This hiccup in Mr. H's life is working better than my original plan, so I am happy for it to play out.

I pat Mrs. H's mobile, sitting on my coat. I had taken it from her office this morning. She's not popular and has no messages, nor has she noticed its disappearance. Sometimes things are too easy.

The front door opens and Mrs. H walks into the house. The screaming starts long before the door closes. Seconds later, the front door opens, and Trash runs out, with Mrs. H snapping at her like a rabid Rottweiler. Her high-pitched screams of outrage make her words incoherent. A waste. If you have something to say, ensure your audience hears each spoken word. And Mrs. H is

gathering quite an audience.

The neighbours stare, open-mouthed, as curtains twitch, and their sticky beaks poke out from behind the fabric. Mr. H's affair will soon become forgotten, overridden by Mrs. H's murder. Murder is far more interesting than sex and betrayal.

Mr. H falls out the front door after his wife, stumbling over his half-mast trousers. He loses his footing and hits the concrete path – *whack!* Silky red boxers are slightly askew and pull at his legs. My laugh fills the car, the scene reminding me of an old slapstick movie.

In the space it is taking Mr. H to peel himself off the path, Mrs. H is whipping off her six-inch stilettos and scraping the metal heel against the Micra's beautiful blue paintwork. To make it worse, Trash drops her car keys and is grovelling on the floor, her coat billowing around her, and she is showing off her arse as her thong sinks deeper into her round, pert bottom. Given everything happening here, nobody will remember the beaten-up black Ford Fiesta, that is for sure. Mrs. H takes advantage of the time Trash is taking to retrieve her car keys, and her greedy hands grab the shovel. Now, whose wickedly cunning idea was that...? Ah, yes, that would be me! The crunching of metal dances in the wind as the shovel connects with the bonnet of the car. Glass cracks and metal buckles under Mrs. H's anger. The paintwork is taking a beating, and the once-sparkly new car looks ready for the scrap heap.

A shoe can only do so much damage, but a shovel... Now a *shovel* does a hell of a lot of damage, especially when the person wielding it has a lot of aggression to blow off. See, I can do 'thoughtful.'

In the ten minutes since Mrs. H discovered her husband's infidelity, Trash has the car off the drive and down the street at a speed above the twenty-miles-an-hour speed limit. The Micra bounces over speed-humps and the sound of the exhaust hitting tarmac replaces the screeching of metal. It's a shame there isn't a police speed van in the vicinity. Well, I can't plan and implement everything. Sometimes a girl has to rely on the police to police. Oh wait, they are all looking for me. HA!

Mr. H pulls up his pants as his wife walks over to him. A look of confusion lights his face. He's lucky his wife has thrown the shovel at the disappearing Micra.

"You stupid bastard!" Hands outstretched, Mrs. H shoves her husband out of her way.

Tears fall down my face and my sides hurt from laughing as he loses his balance and his trousers fall to his ankles. The Hs' house sits on a slight hill, and Mr. H, unable to stop the momentum of his falling body, rolls down the hill, hitting the lamppost. *Thump!* That has to hurt. With unsteady legs, Mr. H stands up. He takes a step and his feet catch on the fabric of his trousers, and down he goes again.

The front door opens, and Mrs. H throws an armful of clothes at him before slamming the door. I hear locks slide into place. There is no getting back in tonight. Mr. H sits on the ground, his clothes littering the pavement in front on him. His hand runs over his face and bewilderment replaces confusion. How did it all go wrong? Fortunately for Mr. H, I was around and there would be no need to pay out for a divorce lawyer. He would get to keep the car, house, and his pension. Unbeknown to Mr. H, he would soon owe me, and one day, I'll be around to collect on the unspoken debt.

It is extraordinary how murder benefits people. You hear so much from relatives about how

their lives will never be the same. The pain that stabs at their hearts at each waking moment and haunts their sleep. How they miss their loved ones. Their angry grieving shouts echo round them, wanting, *needing* to cast out their blame, as they whisper about unfairness. Mr. H won't be missing his wife or looking for someone to ask why; in fact, he's got a lot to gain from his wife's demise. Hmm... will the police see Mrs. H's murder as a copycat endeavour? Unfaithful husband kills wife and covers it up, making her death look like the Yorkshire Slasher's next victim! It has merit. But no one... and I mean *no one* can copy my killings. I am far too good at what I do for someone else to kill like me. While the police will never see the beauty in the blood, I have my followers... those who wish they were me, but no one can be me.

Followers are people incapable of thinking for themselves, that's why they choose people like me to lead them. I am not disrespecting my followers. It is nice to know someone appreciates my artwork. I am born to lead, and others born to follow. It is just the way it is. I enjoy having followers. My work's too good to go unnoticed.

Mr. H fumbles with his car keys in his back pocket. Shoulders slumped and trousers secured in place, he collects his clothes and walks to his car. A broken man, or just shaken at being found out? The curtain twitchers leave their windows in search of better entertainment.

The slamming of Mr. H's car door signals the end. The engine roars to life, and the car begins its slow journey off the drive. Things have played out well for me. I sit in the car for two hours, waiting for the perfect moment to approach Mrs. H. I don't mind waiting, it adds to the excitement. The clock on the dash counts the passing time. Mrs. H will be onto her second bottle of wine by now. Well on her way to becoming paralytic. That is how I want her – unable to react quickly, her brain too groggy to work out what is happening to her until it's too late.

The sky outside has darkened and the clock on the dashboard trips to eight. I grab my coat. It's time.

Slipping Mrs. H's mobile into the right pocket of my coat, I fasten the buttons, grab my bag off the back seat. Given the contents, my bag is heavy and isn't easy to pull through the gap between the front seats. Three-door cars are impractical for all kinds of reasons.

Mrs. H opens the door at my tentative knock. I don't want to appear eager. Mascara runs down her face, and she looks haggard. No wonder Mr. H went surfing. She takes a while to recognise me, but once my face comes into focus, she all but glares.

"What do you want?"

It is as well I'm not expecting polite chit chat.

I remove her mobile phone from my coat pocket. "You left this, and I thought you might need it."

Wiggling her phone in front of her face, I watch her eyes spin. Oh, yes, she is very drunk. Hands reaching out, Mrs. H tries to grab her phone. Her greedy hands come away empty, while I try not to laugh.

"You don't look so good, has something happened?" I find caring difficult, but I think I have pulled it off, as Mrs. H becomes a blubbering mess.

Oh, good.

I snake my arm around her shoulders. "Come on, let's go inside, you don't want the

neighbours seeing you like this.”

The neighbours have seen the best bit, no need for the outtakes. Mrs. H doesn’t resist as I usher her inside. Open plan seems to be the way to go these days. The hall blends into the living area and kitchen. Glossy white units and cupboards line the far wall; a centre island runs the full length of the kitchen area. Uncluttered black granite worktops give the area a barren feel. My nose wrinkles in distaste at the cold-white sparkly floor tiles.

I hate tiles.

As drunk as Mrs. H is, I know she will be a kicker.

A large cream leather corner sofa dominates the two far walls, defining the sitting area. Guiding Mrs. H to the sofa, I push her down onto the leather and pass her a glass of red wine. It sloshes over the rim, dripping onto her red leather pants and the sofa. A dark stain spreads out across both surfaces. Lips smacking together, she slurps at the wine, muttering something about not being able to trust men. I tune her out, aware that listening to her whining will set my nerves on edge.

I hate talkers.

Life is shitty. That’s the way it is. Whining accomplishes nothing. Get even. Take what you want. It is a better solution, if you ask me. Mrs. H is too busy crying over her husband’s infidelity to question why I am wandering round her kitchen, opening drawers. By the time I am dragging the chair out from underneath the dining table, Mrs. H is slurring her words into her wineglass. Since I am busy with prep work, I have limited my responses to *hmms...* and *ahhs*. Mrs. H is too busy pondering life to notice that my timing’s been off.

I set the chair in front of the sofa, dumping my bag onto its shiny black plastic seat. Fred grabs Mrs. H’s attention as I pull him out of the bag and begin blowing him up. She stops rambling, her wineglass midway to her lips, and stares at Fred.

“Who’s he?”

I look at Fred. No point in scaring her before I get her tied to the chair.

“This is Fred. You could say that he’s my silent partner.” A smile spreads across my lips... Ha... ha... ha... Oh, that’s tickled me.

I am still laughing at my joke as I take my coat off and walk over to the staircase and hang it off the bannister post. I don’t want to get it covered in blood. My leather gloves still cover my hands.

“Why do you have a blow-up doll?” Red wine falls onto her white blouse as she points her glass in Fred’s direction.

“You’re spilling your wine.” Mrs. H looks down at her blouse. I take the wineglass and place it on the floor near the sofa.

“Come on, we’d better get you out of that before it stains.” It is a reasonable request and Mrs. H obliges without question. That only leaves the bra. “Better take the bra off, no point in staining it.”

She blinks at me but leans forward so I can unhook the clips. That is the best thing about alcohol, it makes a person more pliable, stops them asking too many questions, or even thinking.

Mrs. H is a pathetic drunk. Her anger has dissipated, and sadness and despair are setting in fast. She confirms my thoughts by falling back against the sofa, crying. Advantage provides many opportunities, and I pull off her trousers and knickers. I hate leather trousers; they stick to the skin, and I have quite a sweat going on when the buggers finally come off.

“What are you doing?”

What did it look like I was doing?

“I want you naked.” Before she responds, I take hold of her arms and pull her off the sofa, kicking my bag off the chair and settling her onto it. She sways unsteadily, and I press her back hard against the chair to stop her from falling to the floor. Fingers reaching inside my bag, I pluck out a bundle of zip ties. The thin plastic eats at her wrists as I tie them behind her back, palms showing.

Mrs. H kicks out. “What-you-doing?” Her words are one big slur.

Ignoring her, I grab her left leg, zip tying it against the cold silver metal leg of the chair. As I go to grab her right leg, she kicks out, hitting my shoulder. Grabbing the offending leg, I tie it to the waiting metal leg, extra tight. The thin plastic sinks into her skin, biting at her flesh. Though the zip ties have securely fastened Mrs. H to the chair, it wobbles as she thrashes, her body fighting against her bindings. You can see why I like wooden floors so much – apart from sinking the nail into the flesh and watching the blood pour free. When I nail a person’s foot to the floor, it doesn’t matter how much thrashing they do; there is no wobbling. Chairs don’t bounce forward or topple from side to side. They stay put.

“What are you doing? Get off me! I want you to leave. I want to be on my own.” She *has* to be a talker.

At least fear is making her words come out more clearly.

I sigh, leaning forward. Her eyes swim in front of my face as she tries to focus. “You’re sobering up. Not good.” Damn!

Mrs. H thrashes her body against the plastic chair and starts screaming. Really... she’s giving me a headache! I slap her across her left cheek. Her head snaps to the side. Stunned, she slumps in the chair. Good.

Fred lays across the sofa after floating there when I dragged Mrs. H to the chair. He needs weighing down to hold him in place. Boots... where are they? I dig inside my bag... ah... here they are. Holding Fred’s right arm, I position him to Mrs. H’s left, near the sofa, placing his feet into the weighted boots. Fred sways but stays put. Standing back, I appraise his positioning, deciding to move him closer to Mrs. H. It is important I get a nice void in the blood splatter along the edge of the sofa.

I like to imagine the forensic team going over the scene, making comments as they dust for fingerprints. Looking at the blood and the story it tells them as it sailed across the air, marking walls and the ceiling, etcetera. They are such busy bees in my head, commenting over the lack of DNA and fingerprints. Questioning how the perp gained entry. Their hypothetical questions permeate the air as my imagination whirs away.

The fibres from the wig I am wearing will never send the police looking in my direction, though I like the thought of them scuttling off to identify the manufacturer of the wig and the

retailer they have sold it to. Narrowing down their search area. That is the thing about trace evidence. Even the ordinary and insignificant can bite a killer.

Mrs. H's incoherent blubbering makes my ears scream for earplugs. Striding back into the kitchen, I grab a knife from the wooden block which is the only item to clutter the glittery black surface. Metal grates as I slide it free. The base acts as a sharpening block and the carving knife comes out with an ultra-sharp blade. A smile covers my lips and I think I am drooling as I look at the beautiful object in my hand. There is something about the cold beauty of a knife that makes my blood sing with pleasure and longing. Just one quick slice and the blade cuts through flesh, killing or releasing a nice flow of blood, aiming to terrorise you into submission.

It all depends on me, and what I want.

I rest the knife on the tip of my finger; it balances wonderfully considering it is a plain, ordinary kitchen knife. But then the Hs have never settled for cheap. The expensive cars they drive, and the high-quality handmade kitchen, are clear signs they like their comforts, which only a great deal of money can buy. Mr. H must earn a packet; I know Mrs. H's wage is dismal. I flip the knife. The light plays over the sharp blade. I am finding the play of the light hypnotic, and I continue to twist it one way then the other. When I come out of my trance Mrs. H is dribbling snot down her face. What a horrible creature she is. Gentle fingers rest underneath her chin and I lift her head.

"I'm not really a patient person. You can understand, I'm sure, the way you've been going at Tracy. I wonder what she did to you; too young, maybe, or too pretty?" I smile at the snivelling woman. It isn't a nice smile.

"Well, you don't have to worry; when I've finished with you, you will look far prettier than Tracy Bennett."

Mrs. H sees the knife; her body freezes in fear as her jaw drops open and she screams. I am conscious that she hasn't been listening to me. Her lungs rapidly fill with oxygen as she lets out another long agonising scream. I slice the knife across her collarbone. The light pressure of the blade smoothly parts the skin and blood trickles onto her chest. Mrs. H promptly throws up and slumps unconscious. Nice.

My nose wrinkles and I breathe through my mouth. Irritation replaces my pleasure as the vomit sticks to her body, covering the blood. My cheeks puff out as my teeth grind together and I breathe like an angry bull. The woman is incapable of doing anything right.

This won't do... It won't do at all. Any pleasure I felt from seeing the blood leaves my system, disappearing with the blood. Anger boils through my veins, and I rock my head back, screaming my frustration, my fists clenching at my sides. My screams are feral. Control... control... My cheeks puff out... *Control*... I continue whispering. I wasn't about to let this piece of shit spoil my artwork. I have to come back down, to concentrate. A few deep breaths and my vision's clearing from the red haze that it has been swimming in. My cooling temper allows me to seek a solution to my current problem.

On the sideboard in the far corner of the room, a large crystal vase sits, filled with tropical flowers. As this is the Hs' residence, the humble rose is too ordinary; therefore, the vase's occupants are exotic and tropical. There are nutans, with their thick rubber beads conning round the flower head, in shades of burnt orange and red; green anthuriums, thick petal-shaped leaves with a white core; and Strelitzia birds of paradise standing tall with their green stems and orange-and-purple spiky flowers. Not being a cultured girl, I don't appreciate the cost of these flowers.

Besides, what is the point of flowers? Flowers last, what, a week? Then what? You bin them and buy yourself more. Dead money if you ask me.

Throwing the expensive flowers on the sideboard, I remove the vase, emptying the contents over Mrs. H. The water hits her square in the chest, washing away some vomit. There are still a few lingering pieces. I fill the vase and pour the water over her head. It gushes over her body, and she sputters as the ice-cold water hits. Oh, good, she's awake. No pleasure found in the unconscious.

Her eyes snap open. Fear shadows her face as she looks at me. Her nightmare hasn't gone away.

"Help! Help! Help!" she screams at full volume.

I roll my eyes. "Oh, please, like someone will come and rescue a pathetic person like you. You threw the only person who could have saved you out the door... remember?"

The look on her face says she is recalling Mr. H's infidelity.

Raising my left arm, I sweep the blade across Mrs. H's forehead. Blood streams down her face and her screams turn to sobs.

Such a small cut. So much blood!

My heartbeat quickens in pleasure.

"Just in case you've not worked it out, you're going to die tonight."

There is no reaction to my words.

"Not so much fun, is it, when someone picks on you? Think how Tracy feels. Not that I care about Tracy, but she is *mine*. Mine to destroy, and you were interfering in my business. You can understand how irritating that kind of interference can be, I'm sure."

I dance around Mrs. H's body, my knife lightly pressing against her skin, laying open the epidermis and dermis layers; releasing blood, but never going too deep. My feet spin on the tiles, my left arm swings. The wig flows around my shoulders. I am a dancer, an artist, always creating, always poised, and always, *always* in full control.

Mrs. H's blubbing stops, her brain reaching the point where it can no longer cope with what is happening, and so shuts down, protecting the person inside. Her heart beats out a rapid pulse, fear... fear... flight... the erratic rhythm causing the blood to leak faster from her body. The mind and the body are made to protect, to endure, each reacting to the basic need for survival.

Lightly, I trail the knife down her forearms to her wrists, leaving a small trail of blood behind; not enough to open the arteries pulsing beneath her skin, just enough to release blood. Mrs. H whimpers, tears rolling down her face, merging as one with the blood. Her face echoes her terror... I change my mind. No, this is too personal for such a kill. The black leather of my gloves grab hold of the short length of Mrs. H's hair. Tipping her head back, I expose her neck. I like to vary my kills. It gives the CSI unit another angle to consider. Did I share the killing with my partner? Like I'd ever let anyone share and take the credit for my creations.

Same is boring. Unlike others before me, a copycat can't copy me, because sometimes I open up my creations' wrists, other times I might slit their throats, or take out their hearts. My different styles of killing keep things fresh, keep it beautiful. The only thing that remains the same is the

blood that trickles drip... drop... drip... drop... from the body.

In one quick movement I slide the sharp blade across her neck. I feel the knife tug at the skin, ripping at it. The sound of flesh tearing lingers in the air. The wound is deep and blood flies, hitting Fred, covering the sofa, walls, units, floor, and ceiling. Pleasure flows like Mrs. H's blood through my body, cascading over me and capturing my heart within its net of emotions.

My legs shake as wave after wave of pleasure grips me. Still, Mrs. H isn't dead... yet. Not quite. Her body shivers and rocks. Life still flows... Fresh blood pours from her neck. She gurgles... I move from behind her to sit on the floor in front of her, making sure I am not so close as to disturb the puddle of blood forming across the tiles. The heart will give out soon and the blood will stop its journey, life gone.

Time slows down as I stare at the blood, Mrs. H, and the splatter.

Far too soon Mrs. H is dead, and the blood ceases its descent to the floor. Why does it never last?

Sighing, I push myself off the floor, leaving the knife resting on the tiles. No point in taking it with me, I would only have to get rid of it. When I first started killing, I hid the knives from the police. The game became boring fast, so I stopped. There are only so many places to hide a knife.

Dear Fred... He is saturated in Mrs. H's blood. Mrs. H is one of my finest creations. I congratulate myself on doing a stunning job. Fine bloody lines cover her face, and her breasts hang at odd angles from her body. This has allowed the blood to flow in different directions. Cuts smatter her arms, legs, and feet, made by the glittering silver blade of the knife. Mrs. H is more gorgeous now than any of her facelifts have made her.

It's clean-up time.

There's also the matter of tampering with the evidence, getting ready for someone to find the body. The cleaner isn't due for three days, and who knows when Mr. H will slither his way back here.

The patio doors have become mirrors as darkness has fallen. There are no stars to light up the dense blackness. Even the moon is in hiding... Hang on. I look back at the patio doors... Hmm... I slide the doors open. The gentle wind carries the noise of cats fighting. The dog next door barks. I remember Mrs. H complaining about her neighbours' new puppy, who prefers her garden to her neighbours'. Walking back into the kitchen, I open the fridge, surveying its contents. It is crammed with all sorts of interesting food. At the back of the fridge is leftover cooked chicken. I know a puppy who will love this. Like breadcrumbs, I scatter the chicken over the concrete slabs of the patio, uncovering the puppy-sized hole in the fence. Chicken litters the tiles inside the house and Mrs. H.

On thundering paws and licking jaws, the puppy enters the house. He is so intent on eating the chicken he pays me no attention. I tickle him behind his ears and tell him he is a good boy, so he knows he's welcome. His big paws slip in the puddle of blood, and he is looking less blonde and more blood red. I think the colour suits him better. It matches his cherry-brown eyes.

My work here is complete. Well, it will be once I have cleaned myself up, changed my clothes, washed Fred, and placed his footprints over the house.

Half an hour later I am in the car. Soft light basks Mrs. H's house; the warmth of the light

belies the terrible secrets inside.

Impatience nips at my skin. I am looking forward to the big reveal. To find out what the police will release in their next press conference, and how the media will react. I'm betting the husband will be the one to find Mrs. H as he slinks back home, his well-rehearsed apology on his lips. He will soon realise the favour I've done him – once he's over his wife's death.

I have eliminated a problem for him.

On second thought, it could be the puppy's owners. They are in for a shock when their little bundle of fur and joy comes home.

I pull the car away from the curb, heading home, singing full volume to Queen's 'Don't Stop Me Now.'

*"I'm having such a good time..."*

Ha... ha... ha...