

BEFORE HER EYES

BEFORE

SHE CAN'T SEE THE KILLER

HER

BUT THE KILLER CAN SEE HER...

EYES

JACK JORDAN



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*Dedicated to J,
for everything you have conquered*

PROLOGUE



The blood on his hands peeled off in flakes like ash from charred meat. He tasted her every time he licked his lips, and remembered the hot splatter of blood against his face as he dragged the knife across her throat.

The spade crunched into the earth. Drops of sweat mixed with the blood and ran down his face in rosy streaks.

The body lay at his feet, skin washed porcelain white under the moon. The fear she felt as the blade severed her neck was locked inside her eyes.

He stopped to catch his breath and looked down at her.

Even in death she was beautiful.

The adrenalin began to wane. Lactic acid burned in his arms and shoulders; his bones ground together at the joints and seized with every thrust of the spade. He wiped sweat from his forehead and waited for the guilt to come. Nothing.

The spade fell to the ground with a clatter. He took her by the ankles and noticed how cold they were, how the skin and muscles had begun to harden against her bones. He heaved her towards the grave, squinting against the sweat. The body landed with a thump. A bone cracked against a rock, the snap

of her neck maybe, or her skull splitting in two. He threw the knife in after her and eyed the moon reflected in the bloodied metal.

Light flooded the lawn with a flash. He shielded his eyes and felt sweat trickle to his elbow.

Mother stood at the window, her shadow stretched across the grass. He felt her take him in: skin and clothes spoiled with dirt and blood, strands of hair stuck to his face.

Mother knew what he had done, what he was capable of. Perhaps she had always known, known even before he did, and had been waiting for this very moment, sleeping lightly and ready to wake to watch her child bury another.

He had to finish before dawn. Dew was collecting on the grass and the eastern corner of the sky was diluting with the waking sun. The car would need to be scrubbed and bleached, his clothes burned.

He picked up the spade and shovelled the dirt on top of the body, listened to the stones clatter against her bones, ricochet off her eyes, her jaw, her ribs. He watched her face disappear beneath the dirt as it filled the dip of her eye sockets and her open mouth. When the earth was packed tight, he looked up again. The sky was emblazoned with oranges and reds where the sun had risen behind his back.

Mother closed the curtains. He went inside to wash the blood away.

PART I



ONE



Naomi Hannah stood at the edge of the cliff with the sea breeze pushing against her as though it was trying to keep her from jumping. All she had to do was lean into the wind and wait for it to drop.

Not knowing how far she had to fall should have made it easier. Being blind didn't usually come with advantages, but as she stood before death, she was indebted to the darkness.

She stood and listened to the waves crash against the cliff. The sound of them thundered in her ears like taunts. *Jump, you coward. Jump.*

Maybe the waves would be merciful, yank her downwards with the current and rake her over the rock bed until her neck snapped; quick and forgiving. But Naomi knew better than to expect mercy.

She curled her toes over the edge until earth crumbled between them. All it would take was a second of courage to tip forwards. Gravity would do the rest.

Someone would find her clothes and walking boots at the top of the cliff and know she had jumped. There would be no need to scour the beach for tatters of fabric tangled with the

seaweed. Someone would find the suicide note tucked in her pocket, the paper stained with dark splotches from stray tears, the words scrawled on the page like the writing of a child. No one would need to find the body she had left behind, dressed in nothing but underwear and bloated skin. The sea would take care of that.

Max ran around the green behind her chasing rabbits, his tail wagging and wet with dew.

He will go on helping people, she thought. He will forget me.

Just the night before, she had stood in the very same spot, wondering if it would be better to wait for the tide to go out so she could fall onto the beach and break her spine in one quick hit, or leap then and there for the waves to slam her against the cliff face and thrash the life from her bones. But she hadn't found the courage; she had stood there for hours picking at the skin around her nails until her fingers bled.

The smell of the sea brought with it memories of better times. A day at the beach with her adoptive mother and sister eating soggy sandwiches speckled with sand; playing on the beach with her niece and nephew with her then husband by her side, his voice filled with hope at the thought of children of their own, children she would never give him. She shook her head.

Don't think of them.

Her mother, the woman who had found her and raised her as her own, would never forgive her. The wail of the wind began to sound like distant screams. Maybe that was what her mother would sound like when she learned her daughter was dead. She clenched her eyes shut and covered her ears.

'Please stop,' she whispered.

Her ex-husband's voice seeped in, stalking the salty breeze, whispering the words she would never forget: *I'll never stop loving you.*

Two tears shot simultaneously down her cheeks.

'LIAR!'

She shouted the word to the wind until her throat burned.

Dane had been the start of it all. He had been the one to claw up that voice again, the voice that whispered of death and how easy it would be. She had existed for two long years, isolated, single and friendless, but loneliness had finally got the better of her. To successfully quieten the voice inside her head, she had to die.

Max's bark echoed over the barren clifftop. If she turned, he would run towards her and make her give up. She couldn't give in to the fear. Not again.

'Max, go away!'

She covered her face with her hands and felt the wind curl around her body like a cold embrace. Even the wind pitied her.

Max barked again, closer this time; she felt the heat of his breath on the backs of her legs.

'Stay away! Go!'

His high-pitched whine sliced through her chest. She landed on the ground with a dull thump, sending crumbs of dirt from the edge towards the sea.

Max nuzzled her hair with his wet nose and licked her tears.

She hadn't brought him with her last night for fear of not being able to go through with it with him so close, but then the guilt had eaten away at her when she thought of him locked up inside the house waiting to be found. What if no one realised

she was gone? What if he wasted away waiting for her to come home? She imagined her mother entering her house and being hit by the smell of him, decomposing in his bed.

The sun hid behind a cloud and left her to the mercy of the breeze drifting in from the sea. She stood up and began to dress.

‘Tomorrow,’ she whispered. ‘I’ll do it tomorrow.’

She forced her feet into her socks and walking boots. The laces fumbled between her deadened fingertips, numb to the bone.

The suicide note teetered on the edge of her jeans pocket and whipped up with the breeze, carried briefly about the green before it launched over the edge of the cliff and danced in the air, right before her eyes. All she saw was darkness.

‘Come on,’ she said, searching for Max’s service harness on the wet grass. ‘Let’s go home.’

She fitted Max’s harness and walked away from the cliff edge. Another failed attempt. She took a deep breath and held it in her lungs until her chest burned.

Tomorrow, she thought. I’ll do it tomorrow.

TWO



Naomi walked from the cliff to town, shivering against the wind as it drifted in from the sea and through the streets, the blood in the town's veins. She missed the serenity of the clifftop, with nothing but the sound of the waves crashing to shore and the squawk of gulls as they glided in the morning sun. In town, life crashed around her and invaded her every thought.

Balkerne Heights was an incestuous wasteland at the edge of the county, but to Naomi it was the edge of the world. The town had been picturesque once, with stone cottages lacing the lanes and colourful terraced houses framing the seafront, their bay windows reflecting the chopping waves and the sun as it set. Photographs of the cliffs had been slapped on postcards, and the yellow ribbon of beach had once been crowded with tourists. All it had taken was one crime to suck the life from every brick and cobble. The cliffs crumbled and the sea greyed. The townspeople locked their doors and scared the tourists away. The town didn't just lose its beauty; Hayley Miller, the teenager who had gone missing, was never seen again.

Naomi trudged on with clenched teeth to stop them chattering. She listened to the rush of cars splashing

through puddles, the mutter of voices blending into one incomprehensible hum. She never seemed to be a part of the life that vibrated around her. She was always on the outside listening in.

‘Naomi!’

She heard Wilson’s voice through the noise, mumbling around the cigarette between his lips. He would be waiting by his garden gate for the milkman like he did every Monday. They always talked on Mondays.

‘Good morning, Wilson,’ she said, forcing a smile.

‘You got a cold?’

Her voice was raspy from screaming into the wind. ‘A little,’ she lied.

‘Hot water and lemon, that’ll do the trick.’

‘Thanks, Wilson.’

She passed his garden gate and breathed in his ashy exhales. She could smell sleep on him: dried sweat, stale in the folds of his skin.

‘How’ve you been?’ he asked.

I want to die, Wilson.

‘I’m fine. How’re you doing?’

‘Grand, sunshine, grand. How’s the pup?’

‘Just fine. He’s going on seven.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ he said.

‘Time flies, doesn’t it?’ she called behind her, a false cheer in her voice. ‘See you soon.’

They had the same conversation each week. No one else seemed to notice that their lives rewound every Sunday night and replayed the next morning, recycling each smile, word and

breath. Naomi wanted to scream at them, wake them from the hold the town had over them. They were a town of nobodies.

She had battled against her suicidal thoughts for two years, but last night she had finally given in to the persistent whispers and trekked through the night with only her cane to guide her until she reached the cliffs. Just the act of accepting her fate had lifted a weight from her shoulders, and even though she hadn't gone through with it, knowing that she would succeed tomorrow made each breath a little easier.

She listened to footsteps pass by, the scratch of coats as they brushed against hers. Perhaps it wasn't as suffocating for the rest of them because they had opportunities that she would never have.

Naomi's life wasn't out of control; quite the opposite. Her mother and sister chose her clothes and submitted her online supermarket shop, ordering the same food each week. Her dog and cane took her everywhere she went, led her to her dead-end job in the café because no other employer would take her. She couldn't just jump behind the wheel of a car; if she wanted to go somewhere, she had to be driven. And how could she move on from Dane and meet someone new? For everyone else, it was as easy as catching someone's eye. All Naomi could do was wait for someone to breach the darkness, someone she couldn't even see coming. The only aspect of her life in her control was the decision to live or die.

Max's tail swished against her knees and Naomi knew that they were approaching the bus stop where Joanne waited for them each morning. She wouldn't be surprised if Joanne let several buses pass just so she could catch a glimpse of Max.

‘Here’s my beautiful chap,’ she said, her voice creeping through the noise.

Max’s tail beat faster against Naomi’s legs. He sat and fanned the ground, and waited for the treat Joanne always gave him.

The bus stop smelt of cigarette smoke and stale urine, but Naomi could still smell the peppermint on Joanne’s breath and the sweet lavender perfume dabbed behind her ears.

‘Hi, Joanne.’

‘How are you, darling?’

I tried to kill myself today.

‘I’m fine.’

‘How’s Max been?’

‘He’s great.’

‘I’m so pleased.’

Naomi could hear from Joanne’s voice that the old woman was stooping, her spine slowly curling in on itself like an insect shrivelling in the heat of the sun.

‘Can I give him a treat?’

‘Just one, he’s getting fat.’

Max sniffed around Joanne’s bag as she rummaged inside. Naomi’s shoulder brushed against the side of the bus shelter, and the memories flooded her mind like stagnant water.

She could still feel the softness of her biological mother’s fur coat caressing her cheek as she was carried through the night. Her mother’s heartbeat and the vibrations from her cries had sent Naomi to sleep in her arms, lost in the warmth of her. When she woke up, she was alone, huddled in the corner of the bus stop, wrapped in the coat, which smelt of stale cigarettes and cheap perfume. She called out for her mother and cried

until she wet herself. On bad nights, she could still feel the warmth of the urine soaking her thighs and hear her calls for the mother who never came back for her, even in her dreams.

‘Naomi?’

‘Sorry, what did you say?’

‘I asked if you were going to work today.’

Max finished crunching on the treat and licked the tarmac for stray crumbs.

‘No, no work today.’

‘How about tomorrow? I could drop by the café and say hello to Max.’

‘Yes, I’m working tomorrow.’ *But I’ll be dead by then.* ‘I’d best be off.’

‘Oh.’

‘We’ll see you again tomorrow.’

‘Yes, tomorrow.’

‘Come on, Max.’

Naomi had to stop herself from smiling at the thought of never having to walk down that street and talk to those people again.

Max stopped suddenly and sniffed the air.

‘Keep going, Max.’

He pulled at his harness, dragging Naomi behind him as he darted to the left. As she tightened her grip on the harness, she mentally retraced the steps she had taken thousands of times before. She could smell fresh pastry from the baker’s shop drifting across the street, and fresh coffee from the new café next door, but Max wasn’t led by greed. He wanted to go into St Peter’s Alley.

‘No, Max.’

A whine rumbled in his throat, strained from the harness.

‘Max, come on. We don’t go that way.’

The dog pulled until Naomi struggled to stand in place without moving with him. She heard his claws scratching against the pavement and imagined them filed down to nubs, dusty scratches left in the tarmac.

Passers-by moved around them freely. A man grunted as she blocked his path. The hard corner of a briefcase knocked into the back of her thigh.

‘Max, please,’ she whispered.

Max forced himself against the harness until his breaths escaped in desperate hisses. Her boots slid on the pavement. The harness began to slip from her grasp.

‘Max!’

He gave up with one final whine and shook his fur to rid the sound from his ears.

Don’t be angry with him, she told herself. It won’t matter tomorrow.

She thought of everyone watching her, a blind woman who couldn’t even control her own dog.

‘What’s up with you today, huh?’ she asked him as he carried on up the road with his tail between his legs.

Max was trained to ignore his instincts and lead her around safely. The change in him was worrying. Perhaps she couldn’t put all her trust in him. What if he did it again and ran off? What would happen to her then? But it wouldn’t matter for much longer. Tomorrow she would be dead.

THREE



Detective Sergeant Marcus Campbell had never been to a murder scene before, though he had seen his share of the dead. His first was a drunk driver slumped behind the wheel of a car, his neck snapped from the impact of the airbag. His last had been an elderly woman stiff on the floor days after falling, her hand frozen like a claw reaching for the phone to pull it from the side table and call for help, help that would never come. But although Marcus had seen plenty of bodies, he had never seen so much blood.

The woman was lying on the ground, tucked up against the brick wall of the alley with a deep gash in her neck, curved like a toothless smile. The strands of blonde hair stuck to her face were red with blood. Eyeing the white of the bone within the wound gave him the sudden urge to stroke the skin on his own neck to check it was still intact.

A school kid found her, he thought to himself. He won't sleep for months.

'What a waste,' Detective Inspector Lisa Elliott said, her eyes on the body by their feet. Her auburn hair glimmered in the setting sun. The lank black suit hung from her frame as

though it was still on the hanger. The only bit of colour on her was the gold ring wrapped around her wedding finger. If she behaved at home like she did at work, Marcus didn't envy Lisa's wife.

'We got a name?'

Forensic pathologist Dr Ali Ling looked up at them from the ground where she was crouched beside the body.

Marcus had only met Dr Ling once, when he had first joined the force in Balcerne Heights two months earlier. It was a quick exchange, sharing names as they shook hands, but there was something genuine about her that put him at ease; he could see it in her eyes, hear it in her voice.

Being in a small town with even smaller resources, Dr Ling and her team were also trained and employed as the crime scene evidence recovery unit. Men and women dressed in white suits filled the alley, snapping photos, bagging possible evidence with gloved hands and metallic tools. Someone was taking photographs of blood splattered up the bricks. They all looked the same, dressed in white from head to toe. The flash of the camera blotched Marcus's vision and followed his eyes.

'Driving licence says her name's Cassie Jennings, twenty-five years old.'

'Anything stolen?'

'Not that I can see. We found two phones and a purse filled with notes.'

'Two phones?' Lisa asked. 'Why would she need two?'

'One's a high-tech smartphone. The other is a cheap pay-as-you-go.'

‘You’ll need to check the call records from each phone,’ Lisa said to Marcus without looking at him. ‘I want to know why she has two.’

‘Could it be a work phone?’ Marcus asked.

‘Perhaps, but I want to know for sure.’ She looked down at Dr Ling. ‘Did she die from the neck wound?’

‘It appears so,’ Ling said, tucking an imaginary lock of hair behind her ear. Even though the white plastic suit hid her hair, it didn’t seem to break the habit. The mask over her nose and mouth muffled her words. ‘No signs of sexual activity at this stage, but I’ll confirm that after the post-mortem. I have yet to find any other wounds from the weapon that cut her throat, though again, we won’t know for sure until I flip her over.’

‘You’ll get your time with her,’ Lisa said. ‘Let us have a few minutes at the scene.’

Dr Ling stood up and removed the mask from her mouth, leaving it dangling around her neck. ‘I wasn’t suggesting we hurry.’

Marcus shook his head. *Let it go. She’s on one today.*

The setting sun reflected in the dead woman’s eyes as if they were burning inside her skull. St Peter’s Alley was getting colder by the minute.

Dr Ling cleared her throat. ‘There are no signs of skin deposits under her fingernails, but there’s bruising on her neck to suggest she was—’

‘Strangled?’ Lisa cut in.

‘No, but held with force. The splashes of blood on the wall –’ she moved up the alley and pointed to dark, crusting splatters against the bricks – ‘suggest she was first attacked here.’

‘So someone grabbed her and cut her throat, and she wound up over there.’

‘Probably trying to escape,’ Marcus said from behind them.

‘So the killer just let her get on with it?’ Lisa asked.

‘Watching her die might have been part of his motive,’ Dr Ling said. ‘All he had to do was step back and enjoy the show.’

‘He?’ Marcus asked. ‘How do we know it was a male killer?’

‘This scene doesn’t suggest a female,’ Lisa said.

Marcus looked at the puddles, the lifeless eyes in the young woman’s skull, the wasted life splattered up the walls.

Dr Ling watched him eyeing the crime scene for answers.

‘Female killers tend to choose people they know, and for a particular reason: rivalry, jealousy, obsession. Crimes between women tend to be ... messier. This is more of an execution.’

‘What Ali is trying to say,’ Lisa said, ‘is that if a woman did this, our victim would look like a dead pig used for target practice.’

Marcus looked down at the body apologetically.

‘Yes, it would most likely display multiple wounds, more rage.’ Ling made her way back up the alley. ‘What I did notice –’ she knelt beside the body – ‘was that the wound seems to have been made quickly but nervously. I wouldn’t be surprised if this was our murderer’s first kill, or his first kill in a while.’

‘But we don’t know if it’ll be his last,’ Lisa said. ‘Any initial signs of hairs or semen?’

‘We won’t know for sure until—’

‘The post-mortem, I know,’ Lisa cut in. ‘I asked for *initial* signs, Dr Ling.’

‘Semen?’ Marcus said. ‘I thought you said you hadn’t found anything to suggest sexual activity?’

‘Masturbation, Campbell,’ Lisa said coldly. ‘Just because he didn’t violate the victim doesn’t mean he didn’t stroke the pony while she died.’

Marcus blushed.

‘Nothing yet,’ Dr Ling said. ‘Either sex wasn’t the motive, or he is good at tidying up after himself. The downpour last night didn’t help. We’ll examine the body for any traces.’

‘Okay, call me when you’ve cut the cake,’ Lisa said and made to leave.

‘Do you ...’ Dr Ling paused, chose her words carefully. ‘Do you think this could be the same attacker as ...’

‘Not a chance. That was twenty years ago.’

Marcus looked between the two women, watched them speak without words.

‘All right,’ Ling said finally.

Lisa walked off with a confident stride. Marcus followed behind her, building up the courage to ask what she meant by cutting the cake, until it came to him: the post-mortem.

He looked back at the body and felt a pang of guilt for leaving her there. He wondered if it was possible to be lonely in death.

‘Well, that was useful,’ Lisa said wryly as Marcus shut the car door behind him.

Sitting next to her in the confines of the car made his skin itch. He wiped his palms on his trousers.

‘No evidence at all. That place could be a gold mine in the right hands.’

‘You don’t think Dr Ling is qualified?’

‘I don’t think she’s smart,’ Lisa replied as she turned the key in the ignition. ‘There’s a difference. She looks for the obvious, not the hidden clues.’

‘But what if there aren’t any? What if the murderer is good at cleaning up after himself, like she said?’

Lisa looked at him as though a child was buckling itself in beside her. ‘There are always clues, Campbell. You just have to find them.’

She pulled away from the scene, thrusting Marcus into the back of his seat.

‘What was Dr Ling talking about just now?’ he asked.

‘The past. It’s all they do in this bloody town.’

FOUR



The sounds of the sea called to her in soothing whispers. Her nightgown flittered in the wind and brushed against her thighs. The wind tickled the palms of her hands and laced between her fingers, like warm hands leading her towards the cliff edge. When it appeared beneath her toes, peace washed over her until she was completely submerged in it, in the totality of what it meant to step into the unknown. For the first time, she wasn't afraid to die.

She rested into the wind and breathed in the salt of the sea. The waves were lapping beneath her, beckoning her down. Her right foot crept out. The breeze sent a shiver up her calf. She let the wind tip her forward and smiled the whole way down.



Naomi woke screaming. It had all changed when she plunged into the sea. She had screamed for help beneath the waves and clasped her throat as the water forced itself inside her and choked the air from her lungs. As she sank, her ears popped with the pressure and the sea salt clawed at her eyes. She

inhaled until her lungs burst, just as her feet reached the sea floor and kicked up a flurry of wet sand.

She sat up in bed and felt cold sweat snake between her breasts. A part of her was still in the sea, screaming beneath the surface, and for a moment she mistook the sweat for seawater dripping down her body.

The house was quiet except for the sound of her neighbour, George, shuffling around on the other side of the wall. The chill in the room snuck into bed with her and cooled the damp sheets. She took her phone from the nightstand and asked for the time. It was late; she had crawled into bed the moment she got home from the cliff that morning, too exhausted to face the day, only to return there in her dreams.

She patted the other side of the bed and felt nothing but sheets. Two years had passed and she still struggled to call the bed her own. In the slumberous limbo between sleep and waking, she sometimes forgot that Dane was gone. She thought of him in his own bed, a bed he shared with someone else. Now it was Josie who felt the warmth of his skin at night, and listened to the softness of his breaths as she drifted off to sleep with his arms wrapped around her. That was enough to make Naomi hate her, the woman she had never met, whose only crime was loving the man Naomi herself had discarded, at the price of breaking her own heart.

She picked up his pillow and breathed in the scent. The aftershave he had worn since he received his first ever pay cheque evoked every memory they had shared, and the safety she felt when he was near. On bad nights, she spritzed the scent on the pillow; it was the only way she could sleep. She used to

spray it every night, but now she only had half a bottle left. The line had been discontinued; when the shop assistant had told her, she'd had to bite back tears.

She longed to move on, but couldn't seem to let him go. Leaving him behind would mean losing a part of herself. She hated who she had become without him, and dreaded to think what would happen to her if she severed herself from him completely.

Naomi crept out from under the sheets, wrapped herself in her dressing gown and made her way downstairs. Max rushed from his bed to greet her with his tail thrashing into the banister.

'Hello, Max.' She rubbed his head.

She grabbed an armful of logs from the stack, arranged them in the fireplace, and waited for the flames to take hold before heading for the kitchen. Max followed her every step of the way.

Once the fire began to eat away at the wood, she crept through the dark house and let Max out into the garden before feeding him quickly so she could return to the fire.

The doorbell chimed. Max gave a bark from his dinner bowl.

She was so used to being alone that she froze on the spot. The only visitors she had were her mother, her sister and Dane, none of whom she was expecting. The bell rang again. Naomi smoothed her hair and checked her breath in a cupped hand. She opened the door and closed her eyes as the night air hit them.

'Hi, are you all right? I heard a scream.'

George.

‘I’m fine, I ...’ She considered lying, but swallowed it down. ‘I had a nightmare. Sorry.’

‘That’s a relief. I was worried you were hurt or something.’ He shuffled on the spot. ‘How have you been? I haven’t seen you in a while.’

George was new to Balcerne Heights. He was in his mid-thirties, but had something about him that made him seem like an older, wiser man.

‘I’m fine,’ she lied. The tie on her dressing gown fell slack around her waist and the wind fluttered the hem of her nightgown. She crossed her legs and squeezed the silk of it between her thighs. ‘How are you settling in?’

‘Fine.’

‘That bad, huh?’

He gave a nervous laugh. ‘People here don’t half fight friendliness from strangers.’

‘It’ll get better. Give them time. We’re not used to new faces.’

‘I’m sure any other neighbour would’ve slammed the door in my face.’

‘Well, I’m blind. I didn’t have the opportunity to peek through the curtains.’

He laughed. ‘I’ll let you get back to your evening. Good to see you.’

‘You too.’

Naomi shut the door and turned on the answering machine as she headed for her armchair by the fire. She angled herself so her feet dangled before the flames.

‘You have two new messages.’

One of them would be from her mother. Rachel was her

mother whether they were blood relatives or not. She had been the one to find Naomi hidden in the corner of the bus stop, her small body hiding behind her jittering knees. With the fur coat and her eyes filled with terror, the little girl had reminded Rachel of a cornered feral animal. Despite that first impression, she'd taken her home and domesticated her until she learned to love again. Social services had called the adoption *a match*, because like Naomi, Rachel and her biological daughter Grace came from African descent. Years later, she still remembered the phrase with disdain; they had been seen as a match because of the colour of their skin, above their ability to love and nurture. She often thought how much better off society would be if everyone were blind and incapable of making judgements on a person's appearance.

'Hi, darling, it's Mum. We missed you at the party today.'

Naomi closed her eyes and sighed. The twins' fifth birthday party. She had forgot all about it. Their presents were waiting on the sideboard by the front door.

'Give me a call when you can so I know you're okay.' Her mother paused and took a small breath. 'I don't know if you've heard, but there was a murder in Balkerne Heights last night.'

Naomi sat up in the chair and tucked her feet beneath her. She thought of her immediately.

Hayley Miller.

'People are saying it was Cassie Jennings. Poor girl. She was on her way back from her niece's funeral, as if the family didn't have enough going on. Make sure you keep yourself safe. You're vulnerable, darling, so don't go out after dark. At least until the person responsible has been found. Give me a call

when you can, and don't worry about the party. Grace will get over it soon enough. Love you.'

Grace.

Naomi wondered how her sister had taken the news of the murder. It had been twenty years since her sister's best friend had gone missing. It was inevitable that those memories would be clawed up with Cassie's death. Grace and Hayley had been as close as siblings until the night before her disappearance. Something had happened between them. Naomi had found Grace at midnight, sobbing into her hands in the dark.

I can't tell, Grace had whispered when Naomi asked her what had happened. *She made me promise not to tell.*

Naomi had never told her mother about that night. Whatever her sister had done, she had to protect her – Rachel and Grace had taken her in when she needed them most. But whenever Naomi thought of her sister, she wondered about the secret she had harboured for twenty years.

She turned on the TV, pressed the numbers on the remote for the local news segment, and held her breath so she could hear every word. The news broadcaster introduced a tape of a police press conference, headed by the lead detective on the case.

'At three thirty this afternoon, the body of twenty-five-year-old Cassie Jennings was discovered in St Peter's Alley. At this stage we do not believe the murder was motivated by robbery. We ask that anyone who knew Cassie, or anyone who was in the area between eight and ten p.m. yesterday evening, come forward with any information they may have, however seemingly insignificant. Balkerne Heights is a small town that

doesn't hear news like this very often, so I ask you all to be vigilant while my team and I work day and night to bring justice for this horrendous crime. I understand this is unsettling, but I want to assure every resident in the community that we will find the person responsible for Cassie's death. In such a small town, there are few places to hide.'

'Oh my God.'

St Peter's Alley.

Max's claws tapped on the wooden floor as he entered the room.

'I'm sorry, Max.'

He crossed the room and rested his chin on the armrest. She stroked the soft fur on his head, thinking of what had happened just last night in her town, so close to where she slept.

That poor woman.

The broadcaster spoke again in her neutral tone. 'The murder isn't the first major crime the town has experienced, with the controversial case of eighteen-year-old Hayley Miller still unsolved twenty years on.'

Naomi turned off the television.

To think that just that morning she had passed Cassie's body, lying in the alley. Max had smelt death in the air. She thought back to the desperate hisses straining from his mouth, his claws raking against the path.

Thank goodness I wasn't the one to find her.

She noticed the shaking of her hand as she pressed the button on the machine to play the next voicemail message.

'Where were you today?' Grace asked. 'I know you're there. Pick up.' Heavy breaths crackled down the phone. 'You're their

auntie, Naomi. You need to be there. Everyone was asking where you were.’ She sighed again. Naomi could almost feel the heat coming off the phone. ‘I’m sick of covering for you every time you hide away in bed. You can screw Mum and me around all you want, but don’t hurt my kids. It’s not fair. I needed you today. Hayley would have been there for me. I should have known you wouldn’t turn up. I don’t know why I bother, Naomi. I really don’t.’

Naomi flinched as the message ended with a bang as her sister slammed down the phone.

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered.

Grace hadn’t said the words, but Naomi had felt them rippling beneath her message. She would rather Hayley was alive than Naomi.

Twenty years had passed, and still the town spoke of Hayley’s unsolved disappearance. Naomi struggled to pair the Hayley she had known with the Hayley who stoked the local whispers. They seemed like two different entities: one a sweet, vivacious teenage girl, the other a manipulative and promiscuous young woman who had slept with half the town.

She jolted in her seat as booming thuds thundered on the other side of the door. She hadn’t heard anyone at the door in days, and now she was about to receive her second visitor of the evening.

Max rushed to the door, barking as he went. Naomi headed after him and took him by the collar as she opened the door.

Cold wind whistled through the crack between the door and the frame.

‘Hello?’

Max pushed his head through the gap and barked hot breaths into the night.

Dead leaves rustled down the path. The air was moist with rain.

Max continued to bark. Someone was out there.

‘Hello? Is anyone there?’

She could hear someone breathing. Excited breaths consciously slowed, rattling through the stranger’s nostrils, vibrating with the beat of a heart.

‘Who’s there?’

Max’s bark echoed down the empty street, bouncing against every closed door, every curtained window. No one would see the stranger push their way inside. No one would know.

The wind rustled the trees lining the road and battered the leaves with rain until the quiet street turned into a rush of noise. The iron gate at the end of the garden path slammed and creaked, slammed and creaked.

‘Tell me who you are.’

Naomi stood in the doorway on shaking legs, listening to the rush of the rain and her own frantic breaths. Adrenalin leeches the moisture from her mouth until the insides of her cheeks stuck to her teeth.

Footsteps headed down the path. The gate squeaked on its hinges and slammed shut. The last thing she heard was the footsteps walking steadily back up the road until they were nothing more than a whisper, leaving her staring blindly into the night as rain collected on her cheeks like tears.