

Jinx

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CHAPTER 1

It is the perfect evening to summon a demon. Dry, warm, and dark. While the clouds overcrowd the sky, the horizon swallows up the last bit of sun, turning the day into dusk. The air hangs heavy and grey, casting an eerie atmosphere over the moors.

Mist rises from the mossy ground and a strong breeze whirls around the trees, through the leaves and branches, and into Jason's ear canal. Every breath he takes fills his lungs with the earthy fragrance of damp bark and soggy grass, leaving a lingering sensation in his throat despite being accustomed to the earthy taste of the countryside air.

Amidst the trees in a wood a few miles away from his house, Jason stands confidently, his attention focused on the camera he meticulously arranged. Using a GoPro, he's able to document the entire experience from a first-person perspective. It's shockproof, waterproof, records in 4k, and fits in his pocket. The perfect solution for any YouTuber who films on the go.

A telescopic tripod holds the camera with a ring-light illuminating the back like a halo, while a red light in the corner of the GoPro flashes denoting that Jason has already started recording.

With a swift motion, he runs his fingers through his quiff and the strands of his hair effortlessly fall into place. He then tugs at his Ralph Lauren bomber jacket, smoothing out any visible creases. Jason opted for the green bomber jacket over the blue one, as he believed it would better showcase his brown eyes on camera.

Out of the thigh pockets of his cargo pants, Jason produces a gadget and, with a flick of a switch, the small black box springs to life, illuminating with alternating red and green flashes. With a nod towards the camera, signalling he's about to begin, the sudden noise of a twig snapping quickly diverts his attention. The colour drains from his face, leaving him paler than before, and his eyes widen with fear as he casts a frightened glance towards the camera.

"No sooner as I turn up here at Crawshaw Wood, we get some paranormal activity," he says in a half whisper, dramatic as ever.

With the black box in hand, he raises it towards the camera, revealing the frantic flashing of red and green lights.

"The EMF detector is going fucking mental! That means there is a spirit nearby. We are literally in the middle of nowhere, so there will be no electromagnetic interference. This shit is from some pure paranormal presence."

The sudden crack of a branch hitting a tree trunk startles Jason, causing him to jump and spin around in a full circle, desperately trying to locate where the sound came from.

"Did you hear that? It sounded like someone treading on a stick. There's no one here though, apart from me. I'm here, alone, at three in the morning. I can only assume that I am encountering a spirit. The spirit of a monk that famously haunts these woods."

He vigorously whips at the back of his neck and leaps forward.

"Fuck me! Something touched the back of my neck. It felt like an icy hand wrapping its fingers around my neck, grabbing at it."

Jason scrambles at his other thigh pocket and pulls out another gadget.

“Something is nearby. I can sense it. It feels like something from the spirit world, watching me, stalking me, hunting me. I will attempt to communicate with it. Now, beware, folks, this is not for amateurs. You can unleash true evil into the world if you are not careful.”

With a press of a button, he activates the new gadget.

“This is my EVP recorder. It picks up the sound of the dead.”

As he takes a deep breath, the taste of moist bark fills his senses once again.

“If there are any spirits here, please make your presence known...”

He holds the EVP recorder above his head and a branch directly above the camera shakes furiously.

“Shit! The trees are shaking to fuck! Listen to that rustling. This spirit is pissed! Let me see if I can capture this.”

He grabs the tripod and leans it back, allowing the camera to point up to the shaking branch.

“This is fucking terrifying! Let’s see if it wants to speak to me.”

He angles the camera back to its original position and takes a step back into the frame.

“If there are any spirits here, please speak to me.”

He closes his eyes while he waits for an answer. There’s another crack of wood.

“Hello, spirit? Are you there?”

As he concentrates intently, he tightens the grip of his eyelids, straining to pick up any discernible sound amidst the piercing whistle of the wind.

“I hear whispering, but I can’t make out what the spirit is saying. I’ll give it another go. Spirit, what do you want?”

The recorder crackles as he waits for a reply.

“Hurt people?” says Jason, in a shocked voice. “You want to hurt people?”

The crackling continues.

“Oh, my God! That was a clear yes. This spirit wants to hurt people. I don’t feel safe. I might need to cut this video short, guys, and get out of here to safety. But let’s see where it goes first. Spirit, what do you want from me?”

As he patiently waits, he can’t help but bite his lip in anticipation. His eyes shift about in their sockets as he goes to bite a fingernail.

“My soul? That sounded like my soul. Fuck! Okay, I’m not safe. I need to end the recording right away and get the fuck outta here!”

He swivels his neck to check his surroundings as he addresses the camera.

“Remember, if you like this video, smash that like button and leave a comment. Also, press that subscribe button so you never miss a future video. Right. I gotta get outta here, ghost hunter fans, because my life is in danger. Catch ya later.”

With his arm outstretched, he presses the stop button on the top of the GoPro.

“What time is it?” he asks.

Layla glances down at her wrist and checks the time on her watch.

“It’s only half nine,” she casually remarks while stepping out from behind the camera.

Layla has long legs and voluminous hair, both traits inherited from her Jamaican father. Thankfully, her mother is accountable for all her other aspects.

When she has her hair in a full afro and wears heels, she appears taller than Jason. Without them, she stands at a height of five feet ten, three inches shorter than him.

"Are you staying over tonight?" asks Jason with a glimmer of anticipation in his eyes, hoping for a chance to be intimate. He unscrews the camera from the tripod while she considers it.

“Best not,” she says. “I’m on earlies this week. Need to be up at stupid o’clock.”

Jason doesn't show his disappointment by holding in a sigh.

"Just quit. Come work for me. I'll look after you," he jokes, half serious.

Layla laughs at the idea.

"It sounds good, but this won't last forever. Plus, I love my job."

Once he's carefully folded the tripod, he stows it away in his backpack, making sure it's secure. The camera and ring-light join it, ready for their next venture.

"What do you mean, 'this won't last forever?'" he says, appearing to be wounded by her comment as he slings his backpack onto his shoulder.

"You can't be *YouTube* famous forever. And the comments prove people know you're a fraud."

Jason clutches his chest, pretending to feel his heart being ripped apart. "Ouch! A fraud? How dare you!"

"Jason, it's not three AM. You're not here on your own. The ghost of a monk was not snapping and shaking branches, and that MPV thing..."

"EVP," Jason corrects.

"Whatever it's called."

"EVP. An MPV is a big car."

“I was close enough. That EVP recorder wasn’t picking up shit, but after a dodgy bit of editing, the video will show you having a full-blown conversion with Father McMonkerton.”

As they walk out of the woods, Jason can't help but snort in amusement at her comment. They walk a short distance and reach Jason's white BMW M3, which is parked in a layby on the A57.

“You gonna come round tomorrow, then? After work? You can help me come up with some new ideas for videos. Stop me from becoming a has-been so soon.”

He offers her a warm smile, his eyes filled with an earnest plea.

“Oh, can I now?” she laughs.

“I’ll make it worth your while.”

He pulls her close, wrapping his arm around her, and gives her a one-arm hug. As he leans in, he plants a gentle kiss on her temple.

“Oh, really?” she says.

“Yeah. I’ll buy us take-away and do it to you twice,” he says, grinning like a mischievous schoolboy.

Layla arches her eyebrow. “Take-away, huh? Wow! How can I refuse?”

Jason chuckles and tosses his backpack into the trunk before they both climb into his car. As he drives her home, he keeps one hand on the wheel and the other on her lap. He always says to her that

the advantage of driving an automatic is that he has a spare hand to touch her up with while he drives.

It takes half an hour to drive her home. It is a one bedroomed flat in the small town of Willowbrook, on the edge of the Peak District. Among the residents on her block, she is the youngest. The flats are occupied by elderly folk who have lived in the same town since birth, and they are not very welcoming. They never say 'morning' to her, they never accept a parcel on her behalf if she's out, and they never put out her bins if she's away. Jason blames it on racism. 'Old people round here are not fond of black people. They've probably never interacted with anyone that's not white before. It's a very white town,' he said to her when she once complained about them to him.

Pulling up outside her block, he finds a parking spot and plants a gentle kiss on her soft lips, that he playfully refers to as her 'blow-job lips'. He teases her about her them, suggesting they are ideal for both kissing and performing oral sex. At first, she didn't interpret it as a compliment, but now, after dating for over a year, she laughs when he says it. Not because she now finds it funny. She doesn't laugh that hard. It's more of a polite chuckle. She informed him that her 'blow-job lips' were inherited from her dad, meaning kissing her was like kissing him. Jason reacted with disgust and requested that she never mentioned it again.

Following their ten-minute goodbye, Jason screeches off and heads home. A ten-minute drive from Layla's, Jason lives in a modernised farmhouse in Hazelridge, the adjacent village. The building was old, damaged, and beaten up when he moved in a year ago. Now, it has white walls, a black roof, and a lot of oversized glass windows. The idea came to him from one of those houses people can apparently win with Omaze. He saw their advert offering the chance to win a £3 million house in Cornwall, plus a

brand-new Mini Cooper, and when he saw the house that was being offered as a prize, he knew that was the house he wanted to live in or one that looked similar. He didn't want to spend that kind of money, though. That was why he went for something rundown. A restoration project, he could turn into something that looked similar.

Jason has never been extravagant with his spending, both before and after he gained wealth. He bought the house and the BMW and that was it. He'd love a Ferrari or a Lambo, but knowing that his *YouTube* popularity is temporary, he wisely spends on what he needs and saves the rest for the future.

Jason drops his backpack onto his glass dining room table by the side of his laptop. That is where his laptop lives, always plugged in and always on the dining room table. He could use a spare room. In fact, there are many spare rooms in the house that Jason can utilise as a study or an office. One space is an office. However, he works at the dining room table because of its ample lighting. Bright spotlights illuminate the dining room, which is complemented by white walls and a white-tiled floor. It is also conveniently near the refrigerator for easy access to essential snacks during editing breaks, which are often.

Jason lifts the lid of his laptop and presses the power button. As it boots up, he grabs a glass of water. Once he returns to the laptop, it's ready for him. It doesn't take long to boot up because of the big RAM, high processing speeds, and SSD hard drive. He doesn't know what any of this means. It was what the man at PC World told him, and Jason just took his word for it.

He took Layla with him to buy it. The PC World was in a retail park in town and had a Pizza Hut opposite. Jason didn't want to come across as someone who didn't know a thing about computers

in front of Layla or the sales assistant, so he confidently agreed with everything the sales guy said and bought the one he recommended.

Afterwards, he treated Layla to a Pizza Hut. It was a weekend, so the 'All You Can Eat' buffet wasn't on, leaving them to order a pizza each. The service was slow and their waitress was a middle-aged woman who had a giant mole on her neck that resembled one of the meatballs that was a topping on Jason's meat feast pizza. He struggled to not feel queasy while munching down on his pizza, when Layla pointed out that if the waitress's mole fell off onto his pizza, he wouldn't notice because it would fit right in with his toppings.

He ate what he could and asked for the bill. That took a while, too. When they got back to his car, it had a parking ticket stuck to his windscreen. What Jason didn't realise was that there was a ninety-minute limit at that retail park, which was 'fucking daft!' he said. To this day, he holds Pizza Hut responsible for the ticket because of their slow service and has avoided going there ever since.

When it comes to computers, the most technical word Jason knows is 'mouse', and because of his inability to use his laptop's mouse pad, he has one plugged in. He struggles to use his finger to move the little on-screen arrow because the pad isn't big enough, and he runs out of space before the arrow reaches the edge of the screen.

To locate the cursor on the screen, he wiggles the mouse and then doubles-click on the MIC icon to bring up the recording software. Then he clicks the red circle and starts recording. Reflecting on his conversation with the EVP recorder in the woods, he pictures the ethereal voice of his imaginary spirit

echoing through the trees, and whispers into the laptop's microphone.

“Huurt people...I want to hurt people... Yessssss... Soulssss... I want your soullll... I'm going to kill you.”

Clicking the red circle again, he ends the recording. The only thing left for him to do is to perform some video and audio editing, incorporating the whispers of the spirit into his video, and then record a closing summary.

After removing his GoPro from his backpack, he secures it onto a smaller tripod equipped with a built-in ring light, and positions it on his dining room table. He takes a moment to adjust himself, straightening his posture and running his fingers through his quiff. He clears his throat, readying himself for his summary, and with a press of a button, the GoPro's red-light blinks, signalling that it's recoding.

“So, hey guys. I made it home, safe and sound. It's about four in the morning and I'm just about to go through the footage I captured today. Sorry for this video being shorter than normal. It's just, I know that when you encounter an evil spirit, you stop immediately and get outta there!”

With the top of his fist, he massages his heart.

“It felt like my chest was getting tighter, like the spirit was trying to suck my soul right outta me. And when I walked back to the car, it felt like I was being followed. It's a place I need to go back to and investigate further...”

Just as he's about to finish his sentence, he diverts his attention away from the camera, his eyes focusing on a point far off in the distance.

"...but with back-up next time and hopefully, we will get more activity next time."

As he locks eyes back on the camera, a slight smile plays on his lips.

"So, for now, I'm signing off. I'll get this video uploaded and you lot remember to smash that like button and subscribe to my channel. Also, check out my new merch now available on my website. The link will appear below. We have fresh shirts on sale now! So, check 'em out. Okay, time for me to go. Goodnight and peace out."

Bringing his recording session to an end, Jason turns off the camera before closing his laptop. To ease his dry throat, he picks up his water, takes a sip, and takes it with him as he makes his way into the living room.

The living room displays a sophisticated monochrome aesthetic. Immaculate white walls tower over a luxurious deep pile carpet. Its pristine, snow-like surface is velvety to walk on. The sleek black leather sofa anchors the room, offering a striking contrast to the other furnishings. The glossy surface shimmers, reflecting the soft light and adding an elegant touch. In the corner, a solitary bookcase stands, casting a long shadow against the wall.

With care, he places his water on the coffee table, crafted from elegant black glass, then sinks into the plushness of his black leather sofa. The leather is cold, but that's good. On warm nights

like this, he likes to cool down by peeling off his cargo pants and feeling the cold leather on his thighs.

He rummages under the cushion beside the sofa arm, his fingers brushing against crumbs, until he finally finds the TV remote. With a click, he switches on his 60-inch Samsung telly, the bright screen illuminating the room. He settles in, ready to enjoy some Family Guy on Disney Plus until sleep overtakes him.

He'll watch with only half of his attention. To wind down, he enjoys rewatching something familiar on TV. Knowing the episode and the jokes, it allows him to plan his next move and seamlessly appreciate the show. It doesn't matter if he misses any of the gags. He knows them all.

With the other half of his attention, he can focus on the video's final editing. He considers how to present it and what effects to incorporate. With great anticipation, he eagerly awaits the morning when he will unveil it to the world. That feeling is something that never fades. A sense of excitement builds up inside him when he knows that a video is almost ready for uploading, but not so much that it keeps him up. His eyes always shut within a short time, and tonight is no exception.

CHAPTER 2

As Jason's stomach rumbles loudly, he can practically taste the delicious takeaway he's been daydreaming about. The anticipation has been building all day, and he knows exactly what he's going to order. The full works. Prawn toast, duck spring rolls, prawn crackers, and chicken chow mein. Without a doubt Layla will go for the deep-fried chili beef. All he wants is for her to show up so he can go get it. She shouldn't be much longer; her shift finished a couple of hours ago. The journey to Jason's house would only take thirty minutes if she didn't go home first to change, but it's obvious that she has.

For about the hundredth time this hour, Jason brings up the time on his gold iPhone that he regrets upgrading to. When the network provider contacted him to offer a new phone, they discussed the available colours of the latest model, and Jason, being Jason, chose the gold option. However, it doesn't look gold. The moment he laid eyes on it, he couldn't help but think, 'that's peach,' when he unboxed it. Now he's embarrassed to get it out in public, as he doesn't want to be seen with such a girly phone.

Once he's glanced at the time, he opens YouTube to check the current statistics of his video. 30k views and 1.4k likes in its first 12 hours.

Not good enough.

Jason obsesses over the viewing and like figures as soon as a video goes up. He has to keep himself entertained to get his mind off it or he will gawp at his phone or laptop for the whole day, week, or month, watching the counter go up.

Jason uploaded the video from last night early this morning and then went to the gym. He has to look good for the camera. The local gym is not that local to him. It's ten miles from his house. However, he can get there in under fifteen minutes. He only needs to break a couple of traffic laws to do so.

They have a spin class in the morning, which Jason is a regular. While he focuses more on weights to sculpt his legs and arms like a Greek adonis statue, he still incorporates cardio into his workout routine. Spin class is his sole form of cardiovascular exercise. Though, he's more there for the view rather than the exercise. He likes to choose one bike at the back of the class because out of the twenty members, only two are male, including himself. The other eighteen members are enthusiastic women that sport tight, colourful spandex that accentuates the curves of their undulating buttocks. As he watches the hypnotic jiggling, all thoughts of his viewing figures slip away from his mind.

After spin class, light weights are next. Arms and legs are always on the agenda because in Jason's world, every day is leg day. He never neglects his legs because he values being in proportion and having flamingo legs are his nightmare, so he gives them plenty of attention, not pushing himself too hard; just enough to stay toned. The ideal for him is a flat stomach, a singular chin, and abs that ripple, not bulge. And that will suit him fine because his primary goal is to de-stress and get out of the house. It's not to sculpt rock-hard pecks, that's just a bonus. It is to avoid rotting on the sofa and obsessing over viewing figures.

The doorbell chimes. *Finally*, he thinks as he rises to his feet and speed-walks to the front door, expecting to be greeted by Layla's warm smile. He pulls on the silver doorhandle, only to be met with an empty space. He steps outside and looks left and then right. It's the usual view. The BMW is to the right of him, then to the left, a

few conifers. Jason ducks down to see if there are any feet under the bottom branches. There aren't any. Everything looks normal. The sun is halfway through its descent; the fields are a rich green, and crows are sitting on the telegraph pole.

"Layla?" Jason calls out, straining his ears for any sign of life, but there is nothing but silence. No heavy breathing. No laughing. Not even a whisper. As he steps back inside his house, frantic banging against the back window reverberates through the house. He sprints down the hallway, through the dining room, sidestepping the table, into the kitchen, then into the back porch.

Panting, he scrambles with the Yale lock, trying to catch a big breath. He knows it's Layla messing with him. Probably Layla. Definitely Layla. And what if it's not? He doesn't have a plan; he's just acting on pure adrenaline. Acting without thinking. That's going to get him into trouble one of these days. *Not today*, he thinks. He's confident he can handle himself with whatever it is out there. Whoever it is out there.

Jason thrusts the back door open, revealing his back garden and only his back garden. Again, everything looks normal. The garden is the size of a couple of tennis courts. The flat green grass is looking immaculate, though he isn't noticing that right now. There is nothing in the garden apart from a couple more conifers, the towering beech tree at the bottom of the garden, and the high, solid fence that runs around the edge. The gate that leads to a path down the side of the house is closed.

He shouts for Layla and again, there's no reply. He shuts the back door and lets the Yale lock click shut. Uncertainty floods his thoughts as the sound of the 'click' echoes in his head. Did he shut the front door? Jason runs back to find out.

He didn't. He slips his house key out of his pocket and locks it. *Better late than never*, he thinks, not truly believing this. Anyone could have come in while he was investigating the back door.

Jason grabs his iPhone and checks for messages. He doesn't see if there are any or not. Before he can check which notifications are on display, the sound of a creaking floorboard murmurs out from directly above him.

That's definitely Layla, he thinks, trying his best to convince himself it's her and not some psycho, or a robber, or a vengeful ex.

He snaps out of his momentary panic and re-focuses on his iPhone. Unlocking it, he urgently navigates to the recent calls and searches for Layla's number. She appears as 'Babe', right at the top of the list. His finger prods her name on the screen, then he holds the phone beside him, not bringing it to his ear, in order to listen for Layla's phone ringing nearby. It doesn't, and Layla answers.

"Hi, yeah! I'm nearly ready. Just give me twenty minutes," she says.

"What? You're not here?"

"Not yet. An old lady vomited on me, so I had to get washed and changed."

A hush falls over him.

"Hello?" says Layla.

"Don't leave just yet. Give me five minutes. I'll call you back."

“Is everything okay?”

Just as he is about to answer her, he hears the ceiling creak again. He hangs up on Layla and instinctively turns his head towards the sound. Where he’s standing, underneath his bedroom, he can pinpoint the exact location from where the creaking has emerged. It’s from the floorboard one metre into his bedroom. He knows this because he stands on it every morning. It’s an unmistakable sound.

Now he knows it’s not Layla. A wave of nausea claws at the bowls of his stomach and acid burns at the back of his throat. He swallows it.

His heart pounds in his chest as he tiptoes to the top of the stairs, legs trembling.

Who the fuck can this be?

He makes it to right outside his bedroom door. It’s closed. It’s never closed. Someone’s fucking about with him. He stands outside his room, unsure what his next move is. Should he try the quiet approach? Like a ninja or a silent assassin? He could push the door open slowly and sneak up on the intruder. Or should he burst in with a war cry and his arms flailing, catching whoever’s in there by surprise? All he can hear is the blood rushing around in his head. Nerves take over. His heart thumps against his ribcage, like it’s trying to punch itself free, and his hands are so clammy, he has to wipe them on the front of his shirt.

Jason decides on a plan. Realising he’s more than likely bigger than whoever’s in there, he’s no longer worried. Okay, maybe a little worried.

Gently wrapping his fingers around the door handle, he turns it enough to open the door a little, and pushes it twelve inches. He peeks through the gap and sees the room is empty. The part he can see is, anyway. Whoever's in there may be on the floor behind his bed. He pushes open the door a little further, just enough to fit through. He's hesitant at first, but after a deep quiet breath, he takes a long stride into his room, skipping the creaky floorboard, and goes to the hidden side of the bed where there's a two-foot gap between the bed and wall. It's big enough to hide a human.

With each cautious step, he can feel the tension building in the air. He creeps closer to the hiding spot, but before he can investigate further, a figure jumps out from behind the curtain.

“GIVE ME YOUR SOUL!”

Like a kicked cat, Jason leaps into the air and twists his body round.

“FUCK!” he screams. “You absolute twat!”

"What?" exclaims Layla, struggling to maintain her composure.

“What you playing at?” he says as he puts a hand on his chest to check on his heart.

“I thought you wanted help with some new content?” she says through a smirk. “Wasn’t you filming it?”

“Filming it? Course I fuckin’ wasn’t.”

His heart is beating faster, desperate to escape his body. He holds it in with a hand on his chest.

“And here I was thinking you’re a professional investigator of the paranormal.”

Shaking his head, Jason walks out of his bedroom, feeling his heart slowly calm down. Layla follows him out of the bedroom and downstairs.

"I don't think my dumbass girlfriend sneaking into my house and jumping out on me qualifies as paranormal."

They reach the bottom step and he can still hear her giggle behind him.

“It sounds like an idea for a new channel, though,” she says.

“I can’t see it taking off.”

“You’re just saying that because you don’t want me to have a more successful channel than you. Plus, you won’t want people to see how scared you get when shit gets real.”

She laughs as he rolls his eyes at her.

“Scared? I wasn’t scared. I came upstairs to see what was making the floorboards creak because I wasn’t scared.”

“You nearly wet your pants.”

“Shut up, you clown.”

Both laughing, they sit down on the sofa in the living room. The leather is cold on Layla’s bare calves. She lifts her legs and swivels on her bum so her back is resting on the sofa arm and her

legs are resting on Jason's lap. He strokes them, gliding his fingers up and down her smooth flesh.

"Have you seen the video from last night? I'm just gonna check the viewing figures," says Jason.

He leans to one side as he takes his phone out of his pocket.

"It was at fifteen thousand views when I watched it on my lunch-break," says Layla.

He gives his phone a few swipes and taps.

"Thirty-one thousand now," he says with a tone of disappointment.

"That's good. It's only been on half a day."

"I think I deserve more for the number of subscribers I have. But they're not increasing. I need some new ideas," he says with a tone of concern. It wasn't too long ago he was getting six-figure views by the end of the first day.

"And that's why I'm here, plus the promise of a takeaway."

She grins at him.

"And the promise of doing it twice?" Jason reminds her, grinning back at her while sliding his hand high up her thigh.

"I'm unsure we'll manage it once, after all the takeaway I'm gonna eat," she says as she puts her hand on top of his, holding it in place.

“I’m sure we can power through it. If pigs can get it on after stuffing their face, I’m sure we can. Though, I suppose a pig has a bigger advantage to doing it twice since they have two dicks.”

“What?” questions Layla, frowning at him.

“Pigs. They have two dicks.”

The frown remains on her face while she searches the memory banks of her mind.

“Nah. They can’t have.”

She thinks for a couple more seconds, working out which stick he has the wrong end of.

“Sharks!” she blurts out. “You’re thinking of sharks. They have two dicks.”

“Oh. I thought it was pigs.”

His eyes roll to the back of his head. Layla knows he’s trying to work something out.

“What’s special about a pig's dick?” he asks.

“Err. It’s shaped like a corkscrew.”

“What? No way.” Jason’s face looks so excited by this news.

“It’s just in case it wants to open a bottle of wine first before it woos the girl pig,” says Layla.

“Now that’s one hell of a party trick. ‘Just going to open this bottle of wine with my dick’,” jokes Jason as he pretends to spin a bottle open with his crotch. “When the pig gets on top for some loving, does it start spinning to get its dick in?”

“No, but it helps,” laughs Layla.

“How do you know so much about dicks?”

“Well, I’m obviously an expert.”

“I thought as much. Anyway, I’m starving. Are we having Chinese?”

“You know me so well.”

“I’ll go collect it. It’s quicker. You coming?”

She stretches her arms and legs like a dog waking up from a long nap.

“Nah,” she replies. “I’ll wait here. I’m too comfy now,” and she lifts her legs to let Jason out.

CHAPTER 3

Growing up, it was just Jason and his mum. His dad left when he was young, before any chance of a sibling, so Jason has no brothers or sisters that he knows of. The thought has entered his mind and more than likely he will have a half-sibling somewhere in the world, which seems crazy to him. It's possible for him to pass by a random girl in the street who could be his blood relative without realising it. He could pass his dad and not know it, though.

Jason hardly remembers him; he can barely picture the man. He only has one memory, and it's more of an image, a still photo in his mind. It's of a man stood in the kitchen holding a mug of coffee. When he visualises his dad, he sees a slim, dark-haired man with greyish skin, but he's unsure if his skin was grey or if the memory of him is fading. He's in a small yellow kitchen with brown cupboards and drawers and surface tops, and Jason is in a high chair, or is he? He's unsure if he remembers actually being in the high chair or if his memory is getting mixed up with old photos he has seen of himself.

There're no photos of his dad. His mum said she only ever took photos of Jason. It was different in them days. Unlike today, they didn't have the luxury of a camera in their pocket, so they couldn't snap thousands of photos of everything they saw. You had to go to the pharmacy and buy a disposable camera that took 27 photos, then go back to the pharmacy to have the photos printed. They couldn't afford a digital camera. They were expensive back then, especially on a single mum salary, so Jason's mum didn't take many photos. The only times that were different were on Christmas and Jason's birthday. On those occasions, Jason's mum

would buy a disposable camera to capture those important moments of Jason opening his couple of presents.

Most of the photographs became blurred because of Jason's constant movement as he eagerly tore the wrapping paper off the gifts. She kept them all in many albums, to preserve the memories. The photographs captured Jason's happy childhood.

Jason left school at sixteen with an A in Art and a C in English. The rest were D's and E's. His disinterest in all the other lessons was so profound that he couldn't find any reason to care, so he didn't give them much attention. Maths, Geography, History. None of them resonated with him. There was no interest, so every fact and piece of knowledge taught to him drifted by. When was he ever going to use quadratic equations and Pythagoras's theorem? And why would he need to know what happened to Henry VIII's wives?

He frustrated teachers. His report cards always read 'has potential, just needs to exert himself'. When it came to lessons that didn't engage him, he was unwilling to exert himself. The teachers liked him as a person. He was sociable and funny and chatty, maybe a little too chatty, getting into trouble in almost every lesson for talking, and sometimes for not doing his homework.

Education was not a priority for Jason. In his youth, he valued socialising with friends and making money. He was quite the entrepreneur in school, designing and creating fake IDs and using them to buy cigarettes, buying packs of twenty for a fiver, then selling off single cigarettes for a quid to the smokers that couldn't get served. He never smoked himself because his mum did. She smoked like a chimney. Her teeth and fingers took on a yellowish tone, her hair developed a dry, straw-like texture, and her skin displayed signs of wrinkling and a leathery appearance. She stunk

of smoke and coughed up black shit every time she had to climb the stairs. Jason didn't want to end up like that and it put him off smoking for life.

As soon as Jason's exams were complete, he left school. At sixteen, he got himself a job as a postman. It suited him perfectly. Finishing no later than half two in the afternoon, and if he finished his round any earlier, he could go home early, while still getting paid a full day. He also got daily exercise, power walking over six miles a day with a sack full of letters hanging off each shoulder while flexing his rock-hard calves in his khaki shorts in rain, sun, and snow. Whatever the weather, he wore shorts.

He had Sundays and Mondays off and could work overtime whenever he wanted because of the amount of sickness and absence. There was always a round that needed filling, and Jason was always happy to oblige because the Post Office's money was better off in his pocket than anybody else's. He was the richest sixteen-year-old in town, even after most of his pay packet going to his mum. He gave her 75% of it without fail. Jason was the man of the house, after all. He felt it was his duty to take care of everything. He was generous with his board, that his mum never asked for but never declined. It was Jason who decided to pay for his keep. If he never gave it to her, he would have eaten them out of house and home. His food bill alone was more than she could afford. Following the creation of an additional mealtime between supper and bedtime, Jason was eating six meals per day.

She never turned Jason's money down because she needed it more than he did. She had a growing kid and a smoking addiction to feed, as well as bills to pay. He needed just enough to afford his driving lessons for when he turned seventeen, and a Saturday night drinking session with the lads, also for when he turned seventeen.

Thanks to his fake ID, he could buy a box of eighteen Budweiser to share between him and his two mates, to enjoy on a park bench. With any money left over, he saved up and bought a PC with a webcam.

During his Mondays off, when most people were occupied with work or school, he dedicated his time to producing YouTube content. In those early days, his videos would only garner around a hundred views, barely making a ripple in the vast sea of content. Filming from his mum's house, he shared his views in the videos, giving viewers a glimpse of his everyday surroundings while hanging out in his bedroom.

He created an eclectic array of videos covering various topics while he found his voice. Among the videos were discussions on Oscar predictions, album reviews, iPhone tutorials, and various conspiracy theories. These theories delved into topics such as Area 51 and the mysterious disappearance of Malaysian flight MH370, using Google Earth to search for potential evidence of a crash site. In a single video, he showcased the art of making the perfect pancake, leaving his mum with cleaning up the messy kitchen. He would exhibit his creative abilities by drawing and presenting them in his other videos. Among his various artistic interests, he found immense joy in drawing Superheroes, with Wolverine and Venom holding a special place as his most beloved characters.

Seeking a change from the low number of views on his videos, he ventured into the world of gaming, immersing himself in popular games like Grand Theft Auto, Fifa, or Call of Duty.

It wasn't until a few years later, after receiving a comment on one of his gaming videos, that the idea of filming himself chasing ghosts came to him. In the video, he was killing Nazi zombies in Call of Duty, and in the corner of his video; he had picture-in-

picture that showed himself gaming in his bedroom. He was wearing a black v-neck t-shirt and white Turtle Beach headphones that covered his ears and flattened his quiff. Positioned behind him was a bookshelf housing a collection of comics and Beano annuals, while a framed Queen poster graced the wall to the side of the bookshelf. It was a picture of a red 'Q', embellished with two regal golden lions on either side and a golden phoenix above. Suddenly, amidst the intensity of the game, the sound of glass shattering filled the room as the poster dropped off the wall behind him. Jason jumped, swore, and spun around in his gaming chair. It was only a loose nail that gave way to the vibrations from him getting over-animated. He often jumped and banged while playing video games.

He included the incident captured in the video and uploaded it. Someone called SIMOT89 wrote the comment, 'Your house is haunted and the ghost don't like Queen.'

Jason found it funny and thought little of it. But later, he saw the video had 20k views. No video had previously surpassed two-hundred. An epiphany struck him upon seeing the viewing figures. Instead of clarifying the reason behind the picture falling off the wall, he confidently declared that his house was haunted, stating that such events were a common phenomenon. That's when he started filming his 'haunted house'. His views and subscribers increased and when he hit a thousand, Jason monetised his videos and started making some cash that he kept from the taxman. But only until the money got a more serious, which it did just at the right time. His mum had to stop working because of her health. Her heavy smoking of over thirty years finally took its toll. The doctors diagnosed her with lung cancer and gave her three months to live.

Jason took a break from filming, and life in general, to take care of her. At work, he stopped doing overtime and other people's shifts. This meant he was home by 1 pm every day. He also stopped going out on Saturdays to get pissed. As she remained in bed towards the end of her life, he took on the responsibilities of cooking and cleaning. Then when it got too hard for Jason, she moved to the in-patient centre at St Luke's hospice, where she died, holding Jason's hand.

One of the social care workers called him and requested his presence while he was in the middle of his shift. Dropping off his undelivered letters with a colleague, he drove the post van to the hospice to be with her. Her delicate frame made her seem tiny as she lay in bed. With closed eyes, she felt his presence as he softly whispered to her, holding her hand and caressing her face until her breathing ceased. If the social worker had allowed it, he would have stayed there indefinitely.

They laid her to rest through the process of cremation. It was the first funeral Jason ever attended. He had stayed with a neighbour when his grandparents died. He had the responsibility of arranging this one.

On the rural outskirts, the crematorium was situated amidst the serene countryside. The interior was principally green, with a green carpet and a lighter green on the walls. It smelled like it was full of the pine tree air freshers found hanging around rearview mirrors in cars.

Her coffin rested on a table at the front of rows and rows of gold chairs with green cushions. Take That's 'Rule the World' played in the background. Jason's mum chose the song. He would have preferred a Queen song, but the lyrics to 'Rule the World' fitted better than any Queen song he could think of. With the red curtains

drawing to a close and the coffin slowly vanishing from sight, Jason's sobs intensified, filling the room with his grief. His breath failed him as he bid farewell to his mum. He was now on his own. No dad, no brothers, and no sisters. His aunts, uncles, and cousins that turned up and offered their condolences disappeared until the next death.

Jason inherited the house, living alone in the two-bedroomed end terrace, finding comfort in the solitude, surrounded by her belongings. He kept everything the same. The brown furniture that smelled of smoke. His double bed he had slept in since his teen years. The big box telly that weighed a tonne. And his mum's bedroom, forever untouched and off-limits.

CHAPTER 4

Jason parks his high-end Beamer on the asphalt drive, the sound of the engine fading into the serene surroundings. The aroma of Chinese food drifts out of the two plastic carrier bags that are sitting on the passenger seat and hang in the air. Jason leans over and unlocks the glove compartment to retrieve a bottle of Honey Suckle Fabreze. With a couple of squeezes, a gentle mist fills the air and overpowers the lingering smell.

After grabbing the take-away and exiting the car, he firmly shuts the car door using the sole of his plimsol and sees the front door to his house is open. He pauses to wonder if he left it that way or if Layla heard the car and opened it for him.

“Layla, I’m back,” he calls as he steps inside, closing the door behind him and locking it. She doesn’t call back to him.

“Layla?” he calls again, throwing his keys into a flowery bowl that lives on a mahogany side table next to the front door. He kicks off his shoes and watches them roll underneath the side table. Layla’s black Converse high tops remain untouched in the same spot where she had left them before he went to get Chinese food. He’s well aware of her intentions and she won’t scare him again tonight, if that’s what she’s thinking.

He carries the Chinese to the dining room, peering into the living room on the way past to see if she’s about. It’s empty, just as he expected. After setting the bags of food on the dining room table, he quietly retreats from the room. He’d love it if he jump-scared her. That would teach her to mess with him. With a gentle motion, he silently glides up the staircase on his tiptoes. The carpet muffles

his steps to the top, where he sees that his bedroom door is open. As he pokes his head in, he immediately notices the curtains, partially closed, casting a dim shadow over the room. With one long stride, he misses the creaky floorboard, then takes another four to reach the window. He whips the curtains open, and all he sees is his own reflection staring back at him through the window facing the front of the house.

Shit...behind the bed, he thinks to himself as he spins round and races towards the gap between the wall and the far side of the bed. Nothing's there either apart from a pair of dirty grey socks looking like two dead fish on the floor. They must have been there a while because he's not worn socks since spring. He bends down for them, scoops up the socks in one hand, and straightens back up.

“GIVE ME YOUR SOUL!”

Layla grabs him by his hips and rags his body back and forth.

“FUCKIN’ HELL!” yells Jason as he stumbles into the wall.
“What’s wrong with you?”

Layla laughs in her usual high-pitched scream that, according to Jason, sounds like a helicopter on helium. As he turns to face her, he notices she is holding her phone up in front of her, capturing the moment.

“Are you recording this?”

Her grin widens as the glow from her phone's screen illuminates her face.

“Yes, it’s for my new YouTube channel,” she replies.

“You don’t have a YouTube channel.”

As she peeks over the top of her phone, a mischievous glint twinkles in her eyes as she glances at him.

“I do now, I have my first video. Gonna call it, boyfriend jump scares.”

“I think I’m going to have to ban you from my house.”

She stops the recording and lowers her hand.

“What?”

“Yep. You’re barred. Please leave and never return.” As he speaks, a fleeting glint appears in his eyes and a subtle smirk plays on his lips. He gently nudges her forward, his hand resting on the small of her back, guiding her towards the door.

“Can I eat my Chinese first?”

Pretending to think about it, he pauses, his eyes tracing the swirls on his ceiling while he absentmindedly taps his chin.

“Okay,” he says.

“Nice.”

*

It was as if Layla hadn’t eaten in a week, the way she devoured her crispy shredded beef in chili sauce. She consumed her meal so

thoroughly that not a single speck of food remains. The plate is perfectly clean, as if she licked it completely.

Jason's meal remnants are in disarray on the table, a telltale sign of his distracted eating habits. He focused his mind on his phone, delving into analysing his viewing figures and engrossing himself in videos of other ghost hunters, hoping it would spark his creativity and provide him with fresh inspiration. It didn't.

He gives up his phone and gathers the bean sprouts from the table, returning them to his plate. Taking the Happy Garden bag, he scrapes in the leftovers and tosses in the cartons while Layla sinks into her chair, stretches her limbs, lets out a tired yawn, and soothingly rubs her stomach to find comfort. While she typically maintains a healthy diet and watches her portion sizes, there's a certain satisfaction in having a full stomach of Chinese cuisine. As she lets her eyes close, a sense of peacefulness washes over her, leaving her feeling content.

"Okay. Get out," says Jason.

Layla sits up like a meerkat on alert.

"Eh?"

"You're done with your food, so you can go and never return. You are hereby banished, and your presence is no longer welcome here."

He gestures towards the door.

“Hold on,” she says as her eyes gleam at him, trying to think of a compromise. “How about if I come up with some ideas for your channel? Can I stay?”

“Hmmm.” With a thoughtful expression, he strokes his chin, pretending to contemplate Layla's proposition. “They need to be original ideas.”

Jason has found himself increasingly uninterested in exploring supposedly haunted locations, such as pubs, houses, and forests, during the eerie hours of the night. Even his viewers have seemed to have lost enthusiasm, judging by the declining view counts and lacklustre comments on his videos. His videos suffer from a lack of variety, as they all follow the same formula. Same shit, different location. He needs something fresh. Something different. Something original, and if not original, exciting.

“How about an unboxing?” suggests Layla.

“An unboxing?” he repeats, rolling his eyes, unable to hide his disappointment at her suggestion.

“Yeah. But with something EVIL!” She says ‘evil’ in a deep, booming voice. “Say that you’ve been browsing the dark internet...”

“You mean the dark web?” he interrupts.

“Yes. That as well. And say you’ve bought a cursed item. Unbox it in the middle of the night. Give it a scary back story. Have your electromagnetic gizmo go mental over it, rig up books to fall off shelves, and lights to flicker. Bring a spirit into your home. Make it into a haunted house. Pretend you live with a ghost.”

The expression of disappointment on Jason's face dissipates as he absorbs her words.

“You might be on to something here. My first videos were of me living in my mum’s haunted house, and that’s how it all kicked off. I could re-visit it.”

“You could unbox a cursed item that has the soul of a serial killer attached to it and you accidentally release it. Shit happens, and you become concerned for your safety.”

“I have literal goosebumps.” He lifts a bare arm and shows the hairs standing up. “You are no longer banished from this house.”

“Yay me!”

“It’s genius. I could give regular updates from the comfort of my home.”

Jason carefully maps out every step of the plan in his head. He just needs a cursed object from somewhere, possibly from Amazon or eBay. Or an antique shop. There were plenty nearby. Just one advantage of living in the countryside. If Jason ever needed some old-looking antique-type junk, he didn’t have to travel far to get it.

The urge to grab his phone and browse for ideas is strong, but he's mindful that ignoring Layla for the rest of the evening wouldn't be the best approach. He's convinced that he can patiently wait until the morning.

“I’m on earlies again tomorrow so you can get up with me and start having a look at what you need first thing in the morning.”

It was like she read his mind.

“Or you can call in sick and spend the day with me?” he says.

“Ha! Or I can go to work and do the job I’m paid to do.”

“You’re such a goody two shoes,” he teases.

“I just don’t want to lose my job. I like my job.”

This isn’t entirely accurate because she has to endure a multitude of unpleasant situations that are both mentally and physically exhausting, and the meagre pay hardly compensates for it. That’s why she’s studying to become a paediatrician.

“Fine,” he says. “We best have an early night then. I’ll wash up tomorrow.”

Jason piles up the plates and slides them into the sink before switching off all the lights. By the time he catches up, Layla is already halfway up the stairs. He rhythmically pats her buttocks like bongos while they climb the remaining steps.

Layla slips into a silky red chemise, feeling the smooth fabric against her skin. The hem stops high on her thigh, showing off her long legs, though Jason doesn’t have time to admire them. She has already closed the curtains, switched off the light, and thrown the duvet over her. Jason rolls into bed next to her, runs the tips of his fingers up her stomach, and cups a breast. The size of it exceeds what his hand can handle. With a gentle touch, he slides his hand down the front of her top, softly squeezing her supple flesh and simultaneously stroking her breast with his thumb, creating a circular motion around her nipple until it stiffens. As his hand

glides back out of her top, it gently caresses her skin before ascending to find her face, where he tenderly turns her head towards him for a passionate kiss. Their tongues meet each other. Both are soft as they dance together.

“Do you want to do it?” he whispers.

Layla nods her head. With a gentle roll, he finds himself on top of her, his knees gently parting her legs. As they kiss, he seeks the sensation of her tongue with his slightly open mouth, while his hand gently caresses her breast. She becomes aware of his arousal as he pokes between her legs and braces herself.

“Be gentle,” she whispers in his ear.

He thrusts his hips forward, his movements filled with a mix of desire and frustration as he struggles to enter her. Layla winces in discomfort, and Jason's face scrunches up in response. He lets go of her breast and uses his hand to feel how wet she is. She isn't, so Jason puts a couple of fingers in his mouth and coats them with saliva by dribbling onto them, then strokes her between her thighs with his spit-covered fingers to lube her up.

Now wet enough, Jason thrusts his pelvis, and this time enters her. She grimaces, but it's too dark for Jason to notice.

“Slowly,” she says. Jason does as he's ordered and leisurely gyrates his hips.

Layla's hands tremble as she claws at the bedsheet, her fingers tightly gripping the bedding she has clasped in her fists. She screws her eyes tight shut and counts down from a hundred, trying to empty her mind as she says every number in her head on every scant breath. When she reaches twenty-eight, she notices a shift in

the energy around her as Jason speeds up. As a result of the increasing frustration in his balls, he has instinctively increased the speed of his thrusts.

“Stop,” she says.

“I’m nearly there,” he says, still thrusting.

“No. Stop!”

She raises her voice and pushes at his chest with both hands, forcing him off of her. He pulls out and shoves himself up onto his knees while she brings her thighs together and shuts up shop and apologises to Jason.

“It’s okay,” he says, hiding his frustration. “We’ll do it your way until you’re ready.”

“Thank you.” She sits up. “I’m okay with other stuff.” She isn’t. Not fully, but it’s easier. She doesn’t want him to become sexually frustrated and end up looking for a release elsewhere. She wants him to be happy, but she wants to be happy too.

Her fingernails lightly graze his sculpted thigh, and she realises he’s still aroused. She finishes him off with her hand, not her mouth, not wanting to use her blowjob lips.

He collapses by her side, satisfied, and closes his eyes. It takes mere moments for Jason to slip into a deep slumber. He snores as he spoons Layla with a hand on her breast like a comforter. Layla takes a few more minutes to fall asleep, as she overthinks as usual, and eventually drifts off.

CHAPTER 5

“I’ve got to go.”

Layla bends down and plants a gentle kiss on Jason’s forehead, causing him to stir. Straining to open his eyes, he offers her a smile when he sees her standing over him, dressed in her regal blue nurse’s uniform.

"Wait," he says, his arms reaching out for a hug.

She bends down once more, and he pulls her close, wrapping his arm around her neck, to kiss her on the lips. Before letting her go, he takes a deep breath, savouring her scent. The air around her carries the subtle, sweet notes of coconut.

“Have a good day,” she says and lets herself out.

Jason reflects on the previous night with gratitude. He is relieved to be free from the discomfort of blue balls, a stark contrast to other mornings after Layla has stayed over. If he has gone through a night of being aroused with no relief, he’ll wake up with a persistent, dull pain that radiates from his testicles to his stomach, and spend the morning walking in a hunched manner, resembling an elderly person with a hernia, until he has relieved himself of his sexual tension.

Without taking time for breakfast, Jason quickly showers and, after glancing out of the window, dresses in a pair of navy-blue chino shorts and a plain white t-shirt. It’s all blue skies and sunshine outside.

It's a twenty-minute drive to the posh, old village that's full of antique shops and elderly people who have all retired rich. Jason finds pleasure in exploring old villages where the elderly live, knowing that he can wander unnoticed. Old people aren't part of his demographic, especially old people that live in the sticks. It is likely that most of them are unaware of the internet, let alone YouTube. His presence wouldn't go unnoticed in the city, especially when he went out with his mates. They would boldly announce his arrival, hoping to blag a few free drinks and impress any potential gold-diggers. Their plan never succeeded because the small number of people that recognised him did not treat him like a beloved celebrity. They heckled him with "Oh, Ghostboy!" and "Who ya gonna call?". Someone once asked him if he had ever fucked a ghost.

Occasionally, drunk girls ask him for selfies, but mostly, the attention he receives from strangers who recognise him is negative. He takes it in his stride, though. He knows it all comes from jealousy. People hate the success of others, especially success from something anyone can do. He knows it's what people say. 'Well, I can do that.' But it's him that's doing it. It's his videos people watch. He knows he has plenty of fans out there that like his videos, and while they continue to watch him, the money will keep rolling in.

The shopping trip is a bust. The antique shops have nothing suitable. He's not exactly sure what he's looking for, but he'll know it when he sees it. Among the assortment of clocks, water paintings, jugs, and plates, there was nothing that gave him an eerie or cursed feeling.

One shop had for sale a Ouija board. The dog-eared packaging had a faded picture of a couple of hands resting on a planchette. Inside was the wooden board with black letters and numbers, but

the planchette was missing. Jason considered buying it, even though he has already done a seance video with a Ouija board. It was the thought of how it went last time that put him off buying it, not the fact it had missing a piece.

The biggest mistake was asking his mates, Fat Fingers and Jaap to help. The filming of the video took place in his old bedroom at his mum's house. He turned off the lights and shut the curtains, making it as dark as possible. A table lamp with a bendy neck was the only light, pointing to the board placed on the carpet, making it pitch black behind the three of them. They all sat on the floor, surrounding the board.

The introduction went fine. The camera only showed the board and their hands while Jason talked through the dangers of using a Ouija board. He went on about a woman that haunted his house and he wanted to make contact with her, see if there was anything he could do to help her.

"Is anybody there?" he chanted. "Is anybody there?"

Straight away, Fat Fingers and Japp snorted while trying to keep in a laugh. Jason shushed them and started again.

"Is anybody there?"

The planchette moved to YES.

"We have made contact," said Jason. "Spirit. What is your name?"

The planchette moved again. This time staggered around the board. Jason expected it to glide smoothly, but pushing a

planchette around the board while other hands on it is more difficult than it looks. He spelled out CHARLOT, giving up on the final T and E.

“Charlotte, how did you die?”

B-Y-H-O-R-E-S

“By whores?” Fat Fingers screamed, bursting in a fit of giggles with Jaap. “She was killed by whores.”

“No, no. I think she meant by horse. She probably can’t spell very well,” said Jason.

“I think it’s you that can’t spell well, Jason,” said Jaap.

Fat Fingers and Jaap roared with laughter again.

“Did you mean by horse?” said Jason.

The planchette moved towards YES, then suddenly shot to NO.

“See Jason, she meant by whores,” said Fat Fingers, the darkness hiding his grin at what he had just done.

Jason continued, confident he could edit the footage.

“What is your connection to here?”

L-I-V-E-D-H-E-R-E

“Lived here?” said Jason.

“Does that mean you live in a brothel, Jason?” said Fat Fingers.

“No,” said Jason sharply. From his tone, it was obvious he was increasingly getting more annoyed. “She’s not a whore, and whores did not kill her. Just calm down, please.”

For a moment, they remained motionless, with only the sound of air passing through Fat Fingers and Jaap's noses as they suppressed their laughter.

“Right. What else can I ask them?” wondered Jason.

“Oh, I have a question,” said Jaap. “What colour are your panties?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake Jaap,” said Jason as he takes his hands off the planchette.

R-E-D

“Red! The dirty bitch,” said Jaap, howling to himself.

“Will you give Jaap a blow job?” said Fat Fingers.

The planchette moved to YES.

“There you go, Jaap. You’re first ever blowy,” said Fat Fingers.

Jason stood up and turned off his camera.

“No. I’ve had a blow job before,” said Jaap.

“Oh yeah? From who?”

“Your mom.”

The two of them howled as they carried on asking the Ouija board about its sexual experiences, then moving the planchette to answer their questions. Jason sat on his bed and watched. A smile did eventually break out when he realised what he was witnessing. His two best friends talking dirty to a made up ghost. Needless to say, the video never got uploaded to Jason’s channel.

He needs something that looks spooky, something that could posses a soul. He wonders if there are any taxidermists nearby by. There’s no signal on his phone, so he can’t check right now. And what would Layla think about having a dead animal in the house?

Regretfully, he wishes he had attended the morning spin class at his gym. It feels like a wasted morning. In order to lift his spirits, he treats himself to lunch at the KFC drive-thru. However, after indulging in two take-aways two days in a row, he feels guilty. To ease his guilt, he hits the gym in the afternoon. Once there, he channels his frustration and guilt into an intense session on the rowing machine.

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A numbing sensation spreads from Jason’s toes to his thighs as his leg goes dead. Through gritted teeth, he powers through the pain and continues to scroll through the TikTok while he sits on the loo. He has liked countless videos featuring bikini-clad women shaking their goods while blaming the KFC hot wings he had for lunch for being sitting there this long. Last night’s Chinese won’t have helped either.

As he turns his phone off to wipe, the sudden clunk of his front door shutting startles him.

“Layla? Is that you?” he yells.

He pauses, straining his ears to catch any sounds in the distance. There’s no reply, but what did he expect? His chunky metal wristwatch says it’s too early for Layla, though it can’t be anyone else. The sound of feet pounds up the stairs. There’s no mistaking the noise. It’s clear that whoever it is, they’re not making any effort to hide their presence in the house. Therefore, it can only be Layla.

Jason wipes as quickly as he can before flinging up his shorts. There’s no way she’s going to get him this time. Racing out of the bathroom, he almost loses his balance on the slippery black linoleum before hurrying after the sound of footfalls into the bedroom. As he steps on the creaky floorboard, something different abruptly diverts his attention, something that catches his eye. In his peripheral vision, he glimpses a mysterious figure sitting on the edge of his bed. A doll sitting motionless. Its gaze fixed intently on some unseen horizon. Crafted from porcelain, its skin bore the translucent glow of moonlit ivory. Adorned in an off-white wedding dress, the lace frills whisper tales of a ceremony that never was. Its expression, etched with the silent sorrow of a jilted bride, spoke volumes of a love lost or perhaps never found. Stray tufts of blonde hair, rebellious and untamed, crowned its head in haphazard abandon. Though no larger than a newborn, the doll’s features were hauntingly mature—faded red lips and cheeks faintly flushed with a rosy hue, as if it were blushing at its own timeless predicament.

With a mixture of excitement and hesitation, Jason moves closer to the doll and extends his arm to grab hold of it.

“GIVE ME YOUR SOUL!”

Layla bursts out from behind the curtain, causing Jason to shoot up into the air.

“I shit you not. I’m gonna start locking my front door,” he says, annoyed at himself for letting her scare him again.

“You like the doll?”

Without hesitation, he forgives her completely. “Yeah, I love it. Where did you get it?”

“It’s called Anne. I remember my nan having this freaky doll when I was young. I hated it. My mum must have ended up with it because I found it in one of her closets and now, you can have it.”

“It’s perfect. It looks possessed.”

He admires it while he rotates it in his hands, inspecting its face and clothes.

“That’s because it is,” she says.

Pausing his examination of the doll, Jason lifts his gaze to meet hers. “Shut up, you pillock.”

She snatches the doll from Jason’s clutches and inspects it herself, turning it over in her hands.

“My nan told me that the doll moved on its own. A thud would wake her up at night and she would find it on the floor. It had

jumped from the shelf by itself. One morning, my nan found the doll sitting at the foot of the bed, staring at her.”

“She really told you this? I think she was lying, or you are,” he says with a raised eyebrow.

“Excuse me, my nan would never lie. She also blamed the doll for the death of her sister.”

“Oh yeah, how?” he asks, crossing his arms in front of him as he humours her.

“She confessed just before her death. I didn’t even know she was a twin. It must have been tearing her apart, keeping this inside of her. She says that she heard a thud in the middle of the night but on this one occasion, she ignored it and tried to get back to sleep. She must have eventually nodded back off because she doesn’t exactly remember what happened next. All she knew was that Anne climbed onto the bed and strangled her twin sister, Mavis. My great-grandparents rushed into the room after being rudely woken by the commotion, but it was too late. Mavis was already dead. My great-grandparents hid the truth. They believed my nan had murdered her and concealed the crime to save her from jail. They resented her for what they presumed she did. Stripping her of everything except her clothes, they cast her away to an orphanage, clutching onto her only companion, the doll. My nan blames the demon inside of it. It’s possessed, and it killed her twin sister. She didn’t dare tell anyone because who would believe her? She didn’t want to end up in a lunatic asylum.”

Jason looks at her gobsmacked for a couple of seconds. Unfazed, she maintains unwavering eye contact with him, mirroring his intensity.

“You do talk some crap,” he says, breaking into laughter.

“I had you for a minute, though.”

He smiles at her. “It was a good story. I’ll give you that.”

“I think one of my nan’s neighbours gave it to her when my mum fell pregnant. My mum must have ended up with it when nan died. She probably didn’t even know she had it, but now it can live with you.”

She tosses the doll to Jason, and he catches it.

“That’s fine by me. It’s going to be the star of my channel for the next few days. First, I have an idea for a new video. We can record it before we get into the possessed doll. I’ll set up my laptop and you can make me a coffee. You know how I like it, babe. The same as how I like my women.”

“Black?”

“No. Sat on my face.”

“You say some stupid things.”

CHAPTER 6

During her childhood, Layla would often spend most of her weekends at her nan's house. It was a nice little two-bedroom semi that her nan and grandad bought sixty years ago for a couple of grand. Layla's mum grew up there and now lived around the corner from it. Like most houses occupied by old people, the house had a distinct smell of pot-pourri and body odour. Nan didn't believe in deodorants; good old-fashioned soap and water were fine. She was wrong. They weren't fine because they didn't cover up the smell of her body odour. In fact, the sweaty smell used to make Layla gip, especially when she caught a whiff while trying to eat her Frosties for breakfast.

Sometimes Layla's nan smelled of wild garlic, but when Layla went to university, she learned that the earthy, woody smell wasn't wild garlic after all. Her flat mates, who smoked weed, emitted the same odour. Her nan was already cool in her eyes, but learning that her nan liked to get high made her even cooler.

Layla has no memories of her grandad. She never had the chance to meet him, as Testicular Cancer took his life before she was born. Once Layla's nan became a widow, she never had another man in her life and lived the rest of her days alone. She had her daughter only living around the corner, but it seemed her daughter needed her more than she needed her daughter. Being a strong-minded, independent woman, she thrived on the freedom of being on her own.

She was a small and wrinkly woman, and even though she looked bony, she was surprisingly fit, staying in shape by lifting cans of beans, as if they were some kind of fitness equipment,

curling them up and down until her arms burned. Furthermore, she would regularly walk to the shop and back, an arduous task as the shop was located one mile uphill.

Her nan had always been an enormous ball of positive energy and had an attitude ahead of her time. If she were alive now, people would consider her a woke, liberal, hippie lefty. Someone's sexuality or race was irrelevant to her, not caring about whether someone was gay or black. The law that criminalised homosexuality was abhorrent to her when it was in force. She viewed everyone as equal, as human, regardless of their colour, religion, or sexuality, and partook in marches and protests for animal and human rights. She enjoyed festivals and getting high.

In 1968, she attended the first festival on the Isle of Wight, seeing the likes of Bob Dylan and The Who. The main purpose of her trip to the festival was mainly to admire Joe Cocker on stage. His gravelly voice had a profound effect on her, making her weak in the cervix. She'd fantasise that he'd see her in the crowd, call her out, whisk her away from her husband, and take her on tour. It never happened, but it was a pleasant dream to have.

Layla's mum inherited her nan's views and beliefs and fell in love with Kevin, a tall Jamaican man. Layla's nan had no qualms about their interracial relationship, unlike her neighbours. She lost friends allowing that kind of thing. They ignored her in the street and posted notes through her letter box, telling her it was an abomination. Her neighbours really lost their shit when her daughter fell pregnant out of wedlock. However, Layla's nan was tough and didn't give a fuck about what people thought. People are people, no matter what they look like, just as long as they are kind to others. That's what she judged people on. To Jason, she sounded like one cool mother fucker and Layla would agree that she was.

Every Saturday, Layla's parents looked forward to their cherished date night, shipping Layla and her brother off to their nan's house. Kael was seven years older than Layla and acted differently depending on who was around. Shy and silent in public and a menace when out of sight of others. He was boisterous and terrorised Layla, bullying her with his imposing stature. He was as black as his dad and just as tall, reaching six feet by the time he turned 14. Layla's mixed-race heritage was evident in her light skin, resembling a milky coffee. Kael was dark-skinned and lanky, with long limbs and a thin frame. He suffered from bullying at school, where the other kids mocked him for his appearance, saying he resembled the starving African from South Park and giving him the same nickname, Starvin' Marvin. He never retaliated, bottling up his anger and letting it build inside before unleashing it on Layla.

Kael longed for friendship and desired to play and be accepted by others. Only, he was completely clueless about how to approach it. When he tried to make friends, he would stutter, and then panic when the words got stuck in his throat, which only invited more ridicule. He returned home furious, concealing his feelings from his dad, not wanting to appear weak in front of him.

The play fighting was something that Layla despised. Kael had the weight, reach, and weight advantage on her. She was only a small thing compared to him. He'd pin her down and make her hit herself. Layla only wanted to be left at peace to play with dolls, but that never lasted long. Kael would intervene and turn the event into a Royal Rumble, ending with Kael as the winner and Layla, Barbie, and Ken as the losers.

Staying over at her nan's was something Layla didn't like. She loved her nan and everything was fine when she was around. But at bedtime, they would send her and Kael to the spare room. This

was where the scary-ass doll lived, Anne the jilted bride. It had more hair back then and a little more colour in its cheeks. Its expression was the same. She didn't know why it had to live in the spare room. Her nan told her to stop being silly. It's only a doll and it couldn't hurt her. Layla thought differently. This was because Kalel had seen a film called Child's Play about a doll that goes on a murder spree, and even though it terrified him, it gave him a lot of pleasure telling Layla about it, telling her that dolls like Anne can come to life and murder people. He loved scaring the shit out of her and making her cry.

Layla and Kalel slept head to toe at their nan's house. Kalel would make up a bedtime story about a killer doll and terrify her before sleeping. Trembling for an hour or two, she would hide by pulling the duvet over her head. Somehow, this made her feel more protected from any doll with murder on its mind. Eventually, Layla would fall asleep, and upon waking, she would find the doll sitting on the pillow next to her. It was the first thing she'd see when she opened her eyes and she'd scream. Kalel would swear blind that it wasn't him, only because he didn't want to get into trouble. Layla knew it was him because he was the one who enjoyed frightening her with killer dolls.

CHAPTER 7

The coffee machine might make nice coffee, but the sound of it grinding beans is grating on Jason. The noise is completely unnecessary, with its whirring and crunching. It vibrates throughout Jason's skull. And it's no quicker than a kettle. Jason makes a mental note to buy some instant.

The dining room fills with the smell of fresh coffee as Layla sets down a cup on a coaster next to Jason's laptop. It's a normal white coffee mug with 'who you going to call?' printed on the side in a tall black font. Jason had them made especially for his channel from a seller on Amazon. It became a catchphrase of his on his earlier videos until the comments started mocking him for blatantly ripping off *Ghostbusters*.

Jason positions his GoPro on the tripod, directing it towards his well-defined face. As he feels the stubble on his chin, the reminder to shave pops into his mind. In his opinion, having a clean-shaven face gives him a more youthful and healthy appearance on video, so he strives to maintain a smooth, baby-like complexion. There's nothing he can do about it now, so he flicks on his ring light and gets ready.

Layla disappears into the living room, and Jason runs his fingers through his quiff. He shuffles his buttocks into the cushioned chair, trying to find the grooves his cheeks have set. After getting himself comfy, he taps a couple of keys on the laptop and presses the record button on the top of the GoPro. As the red-light blinks, Jason confidently puts on his fake showbiz smile, proudly displaying his 'Turkey-teeth'.

He had taken Layla on holiday there for a week. She couldn't get more time off work with that kind of late notice, plus she didn't want to miss much of her university course.

Layla fell in love with Istanbul, with its stunning architecture and vibrant colours. The weather was perfect, with a gentle breeze and warm sunshine. And the food was a mouthwatering fusion of flavours and spices, leaving a lingering and irresistible taste. Plus, Jason's dental work went off without a hitch, leaving him with a bright, perfectly shaped smile. Every chance he got, he couldn't help but flash a smile to himself and admire his new teeth in the mirror.

Jason couldn't persuade Layla to get some work done herself. Not even a bit of Botox in her forehead to help with the frown lines she's always displaying. She took offence to his suggestion and frowned at him. 'See!' he said, pointing at her head. She slapped his finger away.

Jason coughs to clear his throat and starts speaking.

"Hey, guys. Welcome back. And to the new viewers, welcome to my channel. Tonight, I'm going to do something a little different. Instead of talking to evil spirits, I'm going onto the dark web to see what other kind of evil exists online."

He educates his viewers on the web's different layers: the worldwide web, the deep web, and the dark web, describing what each layer holds and how to reach them. The monologue drags on too long and boredom sets in as he continues to drone on. Jason redirects the conversation, realising that he is not creating suspense and is explaining things in a condescending and monotone manner.

“Here you can buy guns and drugs and counterfeit money. You can even put hits on people. Now I’ve entered a private chat with someone very dangerous. Let me share the screen.”

He types away at the keyboard and the words ‘I’m interested’ appear on the screen.

Janson talks to camera again. “On the dark web, you need to make purchases using cryptocurrency for anonymity. Don’t use your credit cards, whatever you do. I won’t be making any purchases from this guy. You’ll see why in a second.”

The laptop pings as a reply flashes up.

‘Do you have a preference?’

Jason asks if they can elaborate and a new message comes through.

‘Gender? Hair colour? Skin colour?’

“This situation is making me feel uneasy.”

He types ‘what’s the price?’ and the laptop pings.

‘I have a nine-year-old Chinese girl ready for \$50,000. If you want blonde and boy, then \$250,000 but longer wait.’

Jason looks up at the camera with an intense gaze.

“Longer wait? I guess they snatch a child once they receive the orders. I feel sick.”

He types into the laptop to ask about delivery and waits for the response.

‘I get passports and paperwork ready and you collect from Russia. Easier to travel with a child of the same colour. Customs and air stewards are becoming more vigilant.’

Jason shakes his head.

“Russia, it always is.”

‘What do you have already?’ Jason types in.

‘2 girls, Chinese sisters 7 and 9.’

“I can’t do this much longer. I wish I could save them both before some paedo buys them.”

His eyes coat over with tears, looking like they’re about to break into a stream.

‘How much for both?’ Jason types.

‘\$110,000.’

“I’m shutting this down,” he says to the camera. As he brings his laptop session to an end, a solitary tear trails down his cheek, his jaw tightens with determination, and a visible frown materialises on his face as he gazes directly into the lens.

“I couldn’t carry on. I wish I could have saved them both, but I can’t trace where this guy is.”

He takes a breather and looks around the room, thinking about what to say next. It doesn't take that long. He's been doing this for years and ad-libbing comes naturally to him.

"I feel so useless."

With tear-filled eyes on the verge of breaking further, he stares into the camera, displaying his deep mahogany-coloured eyes.

"The dark web is full of evil. I've done this to show you what's on there so you don't have to. I wouldn't want any of you to get into any kind of trouble. If you want to see more dark web content, then leave a comment and smash that like button, and I'll create more videos showcasing what else you can purchase. Maybe I could place a hit on myself? Anyway, thanks for watching, and peace out."

Jason gives a more sombre grin as he stops his GoPro and Layla comes through from the living room with a laptop in her clutches, dropping it on the table a little too heavily. Jason looks at her with a pleased-with-himself smile that quickly fades from his face.

"What's up, babe?"

"That upset me. I wish I could save them," she says.

"It's not real, babe. It was you from the other room."

Layla tuts and rolls her eyes.

"You don't get it. They are real. There're children that this is happening to. Getting sold off or rented out. And there's nothing

we can do about it. I'm never going to let my kids out of my sight."

Jason's laughter comes too easily, causing her to shoot him a questioning look, wondering why he isn't taking her seriously.

"Come here, babe."

He pats his lap invitingly and opens his arms wide. She sits on his knee and lets him cuddle her.

"I'm going to edit and upload the video tomorrow. Let's go to bed," he says.

"Yeah, I am tired. I'll probably fall straight to sleep."

Jason sighs to himself, making sure Layla doesn't catch on. Her meaning is clear to him. It means absolutely no action of any kind tonight. He hides his upset from her, not wanting to be accused of sulking, and he doesn't want her to feel guilty. Jason knows what she's been through and he agreed to take it slow. It just frustrates him sometimes.

"On second thoughts. I will edit it tonight. The quicker I get it uploaded, the quicker I'm making money from it."

He places his hands on her hips and gently guides her off his knee.

"Okay. I'm up early, so I'm going to go up. You don't mind, do you?"

Without giving her a second glance, he opens his laptop and tells her it's fine.

"OK then. Night," she says.

The sound of her footsteps gradually diminishes as she leaves the dining room and eventually fade into silence as she arrives at the bedroom.

A shadow falls upon Jason's face, causing the light in his eyes to dim, as if the sun within him has been obscured by a cloud. There's a palpable shift in his demeanour, a retreat into himself as if to hide from the accusing glare of his own conscience. Guilt wraps its icy fingers around his heart and the question of whether he had acted selfishly lingers in his mind, refusing to be ignored. It was childish when he pushed her away dismissively. She's going to think he's sulking, and rightfully so, considering his behaviour. He couldn't help it. All he wants is a normal relationship with her, one where they have normal sex, and maybe some adventurous sex. Even after being together for over a year, he was still having to pull out. Perhaps that is normal? It's what they do in the pornos he's watched. He's not asked other people what they do.

And it's not like he's not getting any at all. He always gets a happy ending. She doesn't tell him to stop and that it's tough shit. She finishes the job.

It's not the sex he's upset about, he realises. It's the fact she doesn't want sex with him all the time. Because that's what he wants. He wants to have sex with her every night she stays over, and every morning they wake up together. Maybe that's an unreasonable request to make of her, since what she has endured has created difficulties for her. He should show more understanding. He cannot imagine what it's like for her. Now, he

feels like scum. He needs to make it up with her. The editing can wait until morning. Layla will be at work, so he has all day to sort his video out. With a click of the mouse, he shuts down his laptop, then switches off the lights as he heads upstairs to bed.

Darkness shrouds his bedroom, making it difficult to see anything. As his eyes adjust, he can make out the soft contours of Layla's figure in bed. Shedding his clothes, he joins Layla in bed, pressing himself against her back, and enveloping her in his embrace. He kisses the back of her neck, feeling the warmth of her skin on his lips, then waits for sleep to take over.

CHAPTER 8

Queen is Jason's all-time favourite band. The first time he heard them was when he was ten and his mother had treated herself to the film *Highlander* on DVD that she found in the bargain bin at the petrol station opposite her work for £1.99. It was a film she loved, co-starring Sean Connery, who she had a crush on, even though he was old enough to be her dad. Maybe even old enough to be her grandad. It was more his James Bond years that she was interested in.

She would sit down with Jason with a big bowl of popcorn and watch a movie. It was their usual Sunday thing. A film and popcorn. And it was practically every Sunday, the same routine. She would take him to play football for his local team, bring him home for a bath, cook him a Sunday dinner, then sit down for a movie in the evening.

They took turns in deciding which film to choose. However, she always chose a film that Jason would enjoy, not wanting to risk their Sunday tradition of film and popcorn ending. Apart from this one time. This particular Sunday, she wanted to share her favourite film with him and opted for *Highlander*.

Old films never captivated Jason because of their lacklustre special effects and outdated nature. However, there was a certain allure to *Highlander* that intrigued him. It was the soundtrack. Jason fell in love with it. The songs were mesmerising and Freddie Mercury's iconic voice was captivating. He couldn't get enough. He wanted to listen to more of their music. Obsession took hold of him after that Sunday evening of watching *Highlander* with his mum. The moment he had enough pocket money, he wasted no

time in buying a *Queen* album, and it made sense for his very first to be *It's a Kind of Magic*, the soundtrack to the movie.

It was a cause of ridicule amongst his friends though because they mostly listened to Kanye and Usher and Eminem, while he nodded along to some really old band that their grandparents probably listened to. But Jason didn't give a shit, he had no interest in others' opinions. He remained a loyal fan, constantly adding their albums to his collection and relishing every chance to listen to their music. And as fate would have it, it was his love of *Queen* that brought him and Layla together.

Jason, Jaap, and Fat Fingers got tickets to go see *Queen* in Manchester. Jaap and Fat Fingers being his mates from school. Their real names were Charles and Steve, but no one had called them by their real names since school. They weren't fans of *Queen*, but Jason was paying and they did like some of their songs, just not as much as Jason did.

The night crackled with energy as Jason listened to the live music being performed by half of the original members of *Queen*. An overwhelming inebriation seized control of his body, drowning him in euphoria and engulfing him in ecstasy. While the lead singer may not have had the same vocal prowess as Freddy Mercury, he still delivered an incredible performance that sent tiny prickles down Jason's spine.

He lost Jaap and Fat Fingers in the crowd very early on, but didn't notice because he was lost in the music, relishing the sound that echoed around the stadium and moshing along with a thousand other sweaty bodies. As each legendary song played, the crowd could feel the pulsating beats vibrating in their chests.

As the show neared its end, Jason anxiously scanned the crowd, hoping to catch sight of his mates because Fat Fingers was his ride home. He couldn't see either of them. However, he noticed Layla standing behind him. Their gazes connected, and she flashed a smile. Her eyes sparkled, her smile was enticing, and a glow radiated from her cheeks. Probably from being hot and flustered from the concert, but it suited her. Jason had to give a double take. Was she smiling at him? Did she recognise him? Did he recognise her? The confused look on his face made his smile appear forced, as if he was acknowledging a colleague from work whom he didn't want to engage with. But she was someone he wanted to talk to. It was the screaming in his ears; the sweat dripping down his face, and his shirt sticking to his back that put him off, plus the fact he was eager to find his ride home. Anxiety won, and he didn't approach her. Instead, he disappeared into the crowd in his search of his mates, and he regretted it.

It was on the drive home when he remembered how he had recognised her. They attended the same school, but their paths never crossed because of their age difference, with her being a couple of years younger. He recalls glimpses of her, though they never talked. She was tall with an air of quiet intelligence and often seen with a small group of friends that weren't part of the popular crowd. Their appearance was more studious, with colourful thick-rimmed glasses, hair in neat plaits, and teenage acne covered in concealer. With her flawless caramel skin and delicate features, she appeared to be out of place among her friends, towering over them and standing out from the crowd. She looked like she should have been hanging out with the popular girls, but possibly being held back by a shyness.

She had little memory of him at school, as he blended in with the other white boys with brown quiffs. It was a more recent recollection she had of him. Layla recognised him as the postman in her town. On her days off, she often saw him strolling the streets

in his vibrant red top, paired with brown shorts and a mailbag slung over his shoulder.

A few weeks after the concert, he encountered Layla once more while he was out drinking at The Wagon. It was the first Saturday of summer. Twilight hung in the air, casting a dusky glow over everything. The air was thick with humidity, making it uncomfortably sticky, but the cold beers helped take the edge off. Layla was in her signature denim shorts, drinking vodka and orange with plenty of ice. She was easily noticeable among the crowd as the sole black individual within a sea of white faces and being significantly taller than her friends. Standing amidst a spirited crowd, she listened on to the animated conversations and infectious laughter as she sipped her drink, close to the back privet hedge that bordered the beer garden.

As their eyes met for the second time, a familiar spark of recognition passed between them. She smiled, and he waved. Grateful for a second chance and determined not to waste it, he went over to chat with her.

At school, he had never gazed at her like this before. He was more interested in playing footy on break than chasing girls. In that moment, he found himself unable to divert his eyes, utterly mesmerised by her presence. When it came to his preference, Jason could never decide between being a legs guy or a breast guy. With Layla, he didn't have to decide because she possessed the best of both worlds. She looked exotic, maybe even forbidden. Her face was gentle, and her eyes shimmered with a bronze glow. Her smile radiated a warmth that pulled Jason towards her like a gentle current.

“Hey, I saw you at *Queen*. I thought I knew you when I saw you. We went to the same school,” he said with his showbiz smile on show.

“Oh, right,” she said with a subtle smile, nodding as she discreetly assessed him, slightly holding back, wary of his intentions. She folded her arms over her orange vest top.

“They were good, weren't they?” he said.

“Oh, yeah. It was unreal,” she said, her crossed arms frozen in place.

They then spent the next half an hour passionately discussing their favourite songs, albums, and memorable moments from the concert, while also praising Rami Malek's outstanding performance as Freddie Mercury in the film. After they exhausted every bit of *Queen*, she eventually thawed and became more relaxed, unfolding her arms and allowing them to move freely, becoming more animated as she spoke.

He discovered she worked as a nurse at the nearby hospital, attended Loughborough University in Leicester, was currently pursuing a medical degree in Sheffield, lived alone, and was an only child. As Jason spent more time with her, his desire for her grew stronger. A bit of that was because of the drink, but a large part of it was simply because he was in awe of her. He was in awe of her strong values, ambitious nature, independent spirit, and sense of humour.

“We're off into town later. City Hall has a seventies disco night. Wanna come with us?” he asked with pleading eyes, not wanting the night to end.

“If my mates are up for it,” she said. There was no chance she’d go without her friends, even if the night was going great with him. She knew more than most that there’s two sides to every person and she didn’t want to find herself alone in a difficult situation.

But her friends were up for it and they danced and laughed and drank some more and they kissed. As the night drew to a close, he asked if she would like to stay over at his house. She gently declined and elaborated on her stance, expressing that she wasn’t the casual type and didn’t engage in one-night stands. He understood and admired her for that, agreeing that he, too, was not looking for a fleeting encounter. He hoped to forge a lasting connection with her, where they could spend nights engrossed in meaningful conversations and shared moments of laughter.

“Can I have your number so we can go out again?” he asked.

She agreed to a date and typed her number into his phone before they went home separately.

The date went great, with laughter filling the air and sparks flying between them. They went for a drink at a cosy pub near Layla, where they continued their conversation, their hands intertwined, and their lips met once more. Jason was smitten, and so was Layla. This time, instead of inviting her back to his place, he walked her back home, making sure she arrived safely before saying goodnight.

For their second date, they opted for an evening of late-night bowling after enjoying a meal at Nandos. The thought occurred to Jason that if she was bad at bowling, he could hold her by the hips, press his chest to her back, and let his warm breath fall onto the back of her neck while he helped her bowl. It turned out she was

pretty good and didn't need any tips. Jason had to step up his game so as not to be beaten by a girl.

When Layla agreed to a third date, Jason assumed she was finally going to stay over. It was inevitable, being the third date, because that's the rule. The cinema was his choice for the date, and he suggested grabbing a few drinks afterwards to help her relax and let go of her inhibitions.

Seeking intimacy, he chose the cinema for its private setting, knowing he could sit in the dimly lit theatre with his hand gently resting on her thigh. The cinema also offered the possibility of some back row kissing, with no pressure of conversation. Though he wasn't worried about that; he was a pro at filling in the silences.

They went to see a film about *Elvis*. Since the movie had been out for a couple of weeks, he expected the cinema to be empty and perfect for some intimate moments. Once again, she wore her denim shorts, accentuating her long, slender legs. Feeling the silkiness of their texture, Jason couldn't help but feel a slight tingle of arousal. That was a sure sign he was getting lucky. It was in the bar afterwards when Layla told him, "I want to take things slowly," deflating his rising desires.

It wasn't until they had gone on a few more dates that Layla felt comfortable enough to open up to Jason about why she wanted to take their relationship at a slower pace. For now, if he wanted to date her, he would have to accept the absence of any explanation.

CHAPTER 9

Jason sprawls on his settee, propping up his feet and holding a half-eaten Mars bar in one hand, as he mindlessly stares at his mobile, constantly refreshing the view counts and comments on his latest video. In the background is an episode from season 4 of *The Simpsons*, streaming on the TV. He's seen every episode thousands of times, so he knows what's happening without looking or listening. He's not missing anything new.

Layla should be there by now. On her university days, she gets to his earlier than when she's working. He considers the possibility that she might be there already, lurking in the shadows, plotting to frighten him again. Although, it'll be more difficult for her today, because he's locked the front door.

Upon hearing the doorbell, Jason immediately abandons the comfort of the couch and hurries to the front door. He unlocks it and opens it, revealing Layla on the other side.

"You actually locked the front door?" she says with her hands on her hips and etched deep lines furrowing into her forehead.

"Of course. Can't be too careful. Don't know what type of perverts are lurking around." He grins at her, his eyes crinkling with joy.

"You're a spoilsport!"

With a self-amused laugh, Jason shifts to the side, giving her room to stomp inside with an audible huff. He locks up and

follows her into the living room, where she flops onto the settee, sprawling across all three seats. Jason gently raises her legs, settles himself beside her, and rests her feet on his lap.

“I watched your video on my lunch today. Very emotional,” she says.

“Did you see the views?” Jason says excitedly.

“Yeah. A hundred thousand.”

“Two hundred thousand, now,” he corrects. “People are interested in the dark web. There’re comments wanting me to chat with more people. Like a hit man. Some request that I take up the offer of putting a hit on myself. Imagine the views on that?”

“You gonna go down that avenue? You could foil an intruder’s attempt?”

“Possibly, but I’m working on other ideas first.” He nods to the doll sitting on his bookcase. “I want to keep doing paranormal videos, so I did a time-lapse video today. Filmed the doll for eight hours. Now I need to watch it sped up to see if there’s any movement.”

Wrinkles appear on the forehead as she’s about to speak. “It’s not going to. Dolls don’t move on their own unless there’s a minor earthquake or a strong draught that could cause a slight twitch, but you couldn’t pass that off as a possessed doll.”

“It would just be nice to have a genuine paranormal video,” he says with his usual idealistic faith.

“Bit of a long shot, but okay,” she says with shrug and her usual pragmatism.

Jason plays the video on his laptop and casually places it on Layla's chest. The warmth of the device heats her upper body.

“I just need a wiz. Watch it for me.”

He exits the living room, leaving Layla to get on with it. The video is in black and white and slightly grainy. Layla believes that the grainy visuals enhance the overall atmosphere as she watches the screen. For the initial minute, nothing noteworthy occurs, and Layla expresses her boredom with a yawn. She checks her watch, then looks back at the screen. The doll is still sitting on the shelf, not moving. The shot is a close-up of the doll looking slightly off-camera.

Wasn't it looking directly at the camera before?

She pulls the laptop closer to her face and sees the doll turning away from the camera. Its body's rotating, slow but noticeable. She shakes her head to herself, disappointed that Jason genuinely thought this would fool her. Layla understands dolls do not become possessed. This one belonged to her nan, and she's been around it her entire life. Is she meant to believe that now it's in Jason's possession, it is now possessed by a demon? *Give me a break*, she thinks.

“Jason! It's moving. I think the doll is really possessed,” she yells in a mocking ‘princess in distress’ voice. There's no reply from him. Probably too busy scrolling through TikTok while sat on the loo, or refreshing his YouTube video.

She looks up at the actual doll that's on the shelf next to the door and she's sure that was sitting straightforward, too. It's facing her now. She swivels her legs onto the floor and puts down the laptop near her feet as she stands up to walk over to the shelf to check if the doll has moved. It was more to the right of the shelf, and now it's closer to the centre. She stops about a yard away from the doll and stares at it for three or four seconds. The doll flies off the shelf and Layla flinches, flapping her arms like she's trying to swat a couple of wasps. The doll chucks itself towards the door and lands on the floor.

"Holy fuck!" she screams.

Jason jumps out from behind the door, startling Layla with his loud yell.

"Give me your soul!"

She staggers backward and trembles slightly.

"Ohh fuck, you bell end," she spits. Jason laughs uncontrollably, needing to brace himself by placing his hands on his knees to prevent himself from falling to the ground.

"You have far too much time on your hands," she says, pushing him away with her right hand as she goes back to the sofa, kicking the doll with her foot on the way. She now sees the fine fishing line wrapped around it.

"God, your face. I thought you were going to cry. Thought you found this kind of stuff funny."

"I'll show you funny, just you wait. Is that all you've done today?" In a display of irritation, she crosses her arms and huffs.

"No, I've been planning the next video. I'm going to say I bought a possessed doll from the dark web."

She unfolds her arms, trying to regain composure after the shock.

"Because it's that easy to buy a possessed doll?"

"You can buy anything from the dark web," he says a matter-of-factly.

"And how did it become possessed?"

"Well," he says, "I'll say they found it in twenty-fourteen when they excavated a Nazi extermination camp. I'll say the seller is a collector of old dolls and bought it, but it kept ending up in his daughter's bedroom. It would mysteriously appear on her bed and no one knew how it got there, so they believed it was possessed."

"So, he sold it on the dark web?"

"Yeah, he didn't want to sell it on eBay because he didn't want to ruin his one hundred per cent satisfaction score. You didn't think about that, did you?"

Pleased with himself, he looks at her with a satisfied expression.

"You got me there. Then what's next?"

“I do the usual tests. Run the EMF detector over it, have it go off, confirm it’s possessed, keep a video diary explaining it moves and show the footage of it doing exactly that.”

She nods along with him, unable to find fault in his plan, then looks down at the doll and shudders from the sight of its unsettling facial expression.

“You keeping the doll down here tonight? I’m not sleeping over with the doll in the same room.”

“Don’t be daft. It’s not real,” he says, laughing at her.

“I know, but you’ll do something daft in the middle of the night like move it, so I wake up right next to it.”

Feigning emotional distress, he dramatically inhales with a sharp intake of breath. “The idea never entered my head. But yeah, we’ll leave it down here.”

“Okay, just make sure you do. I gave you that doll so you can make your little videos, not to terrorise me. I don’t particularly want to have anything to do with this doll, so never seeing it again would be great, thanks.”

“Noted,” he says, returning the doll to its place on the shelf.

CHAPTER 10

“This way,” says the little Thai woman. She’s middle-aged and like all the other Thai women working here, wearing a traditional Thai outfit, wrapped in red silk that’s detailed with exquisite embroidery and intricate gold patterns. Jason and Layla follow her as she shows them to their table.

“I just need to pop to the ladies’,” says Layla before she sits down. Jason takes his seat while Layla disappears to straighten up.

She pushes through the door to the ladies’ and checks herself out in the mirror above the sink. She wants to make sure her breasts are even and none of her hair is out of place.

There’s only her in there. A second person would be a tight squeeze. There’s only one sink, one mirror, one hand dryer and two cubicles. In contrast to the rest of the restaurant, the decor in the ladies’ room is completely different. Cream tones dominate the room, while the eating area showcases lively and vibrant colours.

In order to get a better view of her dress in the mirror, she takes a few steps back, almost stepping into the cubicle behind her, and then rises onto her tiptoes. Her little black dress hugs her figure.

The country roads near Jason’s aren’t the best, so the taxi ride was bumpy, and she’s worried the drive left her boobs wonky and her ass out. When she looks back over her shoulder, she sees her bum has remained covered. She still pulls down on the hemline anyway, making sure. Then she spins back round to straighten her breasts. They look even already, so she doesn’t mess with them for long. Next, she pulls her mobile out of her black handbag. There

are no notifications and it's on silent. She can't remember putting it on silent, but she must have done it at some point. Possibly in the taxi.

After zipping it back up in her handbag, she heads back to their table, her hips swaying as she confidently strides in her black high heels. Ordinarily, she'd choose her Converse over her heels, every day of the week apart from one exception, date night. If she's going somewhere fancy, she will slip her feet into heels, no matter how uncomfortable they are.

Jason doesn't see her saunter back. He's too busy checking his viewing figures on his phone.

She sits opposite him and looks around the place. Jason has chosen this location for their date night more frequently than any other place, and this has been the case for three consecutive weeks. Despite that, she really enjoys the food, and it is the nearest restaurant to Jason's house.

The walls of the room bore the gentle colours of a pastel sunrise—soft oranges blending seamlessly into deep yellows. Their warmth envelope the space, casting a soothing glow upon the patriots. In one corner, a gold-painted statue of Phra Phrom stands sentinel. Fans, like vibrant petals, adorn the walls. Each one a canvas of colour and pattern, whispering stories of distant lands. Some portray intricate artwork of birds, their wings frozen mid-flight, as if forever suspended between earth and sky.

Layla has her eye on the fan with the peacock. She tells herself she'll whip it off the wall the first opportunity she gets. They have not sat at the table beneath the fan as yet, so the opportunity to snatch it off the wall has not come.

She already knows exactly what they will be ordering. Set meal C and set meal E. Both are an extensive selection of Thai food that arrives all at once and placed on a spinning round table top, enabling them to try everything. They've already tried all the set meals, from A to H, and these two are their favourites.

"Would you like to order some drinks?"

Jason jumps as a young Thai woman comes up behind him with quiet efficiency. It wasn't intentional; it happened by accident. She's very slight and wearing plimsols so didn't make a sound, and he's lost in his phone.

"A lager, please," says Jason.

"And for you?" she says while looking at Layla. With her hair slicked back into a tight ponytail, the waitress' unadorned features become more noticeable: a dainty nose, angular cheekbones, and a slender smile. Her natural beauty shines through, with no need for makeup, and her smooth skin has a gentle radiance.

"I'll have a vodka orange, please," says Layla.

The waitress, with a slight bow, shuffles off to attend to her other tables.

"How's your last video doing?" she asks.

Without looking up, Jason swipes and prods his screen.

"Alright..." He thinks for a couple of seconds. "I might have not thought this through. It's not very original."

“What isn’t?”

“Possessed dolls. It’s been happening in movies since the eighties. There’re books about it, and there’re already loads of videos on YouTube.”

“Well, let’s not worry about it tonight. Let’s enjoy ourselves and come up with ideas tomorrow.” She leans forward and places her hand on his forearm.

Jason looks up at her and gives her an apologetic smile. “Sorry, Babe. The views need to get sorted as soon as possible. This is my livelihood. I need to get them back on track.”

She sits back in her chair and puts her hand back on her lap.

“There’s nothing you can do about it right now though,” she says.

“You can help me come up with some ideas. I’m not able to concentrate on anything else until I sort this out.”

“It’s tough. People have already done everything before. Seances, possessions, haunted houses, haunted pubs, demons. How about real people? They’re much scarier. You’ve already touched on children being sold on the internet. How many views did that get?”

Jason prods at his phone again.

“Over half a million, that one.”

“See. You said that people are on the dark web. What else can you find on there?”

“Hitmen, weapons, drugs, women.”

The waitress comes over with their drinks and places them down in front of them. A vodka orange in a tall glass with ice for Layla and a large bottle of Singha lager for Jason.

“Are you ready to order?” the waitress asks.

“Yes, we’ll have set meals C and E please,” says Layla with a warm smile. Jason continues to stare at his phone.

“Very good,” says the waitress as she picks up the menus and takes their order into the kitchen. These are their favourite set meals because set meal C comes with the most king prawn dishes, and set meal E is the only set meal that comes with the deep-fried fish in spicy breadcrumbs and Thai curry, a favourite for both of them.

“I’m a supernatural channel. I want to keep it that way.”

“Buy a ghost.”

He glares over the top of his phone at her.

“Buy a ghost?” he repeats in a dead tone that matches his dead expression. Layla’s body trembles as she desperately tries to suppress her laughter.

“Or a demon. One that wreaks havoc around the house. I don’t know,” she says.

“That’s what I was going to do,” he snaps. “With the doll and no one was interested. I mean... the doll came to life and moved by itself. What the fuck do these people want?”

“I don’t know Jason. I’m sure something will come up.”

“Well, it needs to hurry.”

He shifts his attention back to his phone, his eyes fixated on the screen as he scrolls through his previous videos, analysing the number of views on each one. Every single one of them. Layla finishes her drink in three large swigs, then signals the waitress for another by shaking her empty glass above her head. As of now, Jason has not taken a sip of his drink. He’s too busy with his head down, scrolling through his channel, desperate for ideas, and searching his popular videos for answers. This behaviour lasted the entire night, and to the annoyance of Jason and Layla, the answer did not come.

CHAPTER 11

The first time Jason realised he could make substantial money from YouTube had nothing to do with his views or subscriber numbers. It was when a company messaged him asking if he could wear one of their T-shirts in one of his videos. They offered him a grand to wear the shirt and mention the company in the video and he agreed, no questions asked. He didn't care what the company did or where these shirts came from, they could have come from a factory in India full of children for all he gave a shit about, just as long as they paid him and they did.

After that first video, that was it, the floodgates opened. Companies wanted to sponsor his videos, they wanted to send him free clothes, male grooming gadgets, and geeky shit, along with a good fee, just as long as he mentioned them and their product or game or app or service or brand. They just required a product placement or a positive mention and money rolled in. At the peak of his success, he was making £5,000 per video from YouTube and AdSense, along with an additional £5,000 from video sponsorships, all on three videos a week.

Then there were the haunted pubs willing to pay him to do videos on location. It increased his income further, and because he managed it himself, there were no management fees or agent fees to pay out. The only financial outgoing he had was for a PO box he had set up. He didn't want to use his home address, but still wanted his fans to be able to reach out and send him gifts without knowing his personal whereabouts.

They sent some peculiar stuff. A taxidermist sent a stuffed bat. One fan sent him a tooth that belonged to their granddad. Someone

sent him a voodoo doll of himself demanding him to torture it. There were letters from fans telling him about their supernatural experiences and questioning if he'd go round. Jason never accepted; he didn't want to go into strangers' homes. He had no know idea what kind of weirdos were writing to him. The invites he accepted were the free nights at hotels, but they were a no-brainer. Free piss-ups for him and his crew, usually Jaap and Fat Fingers. One holding the camera and one holding the mic boom that wasn't plugged in.

It was good publicity for the establishments and he only charged £500 plus travel, expenses, drinks, and accommodation. The hotels ended up spending over £1000, but the exposure to over half a million people made it worth the cost. Additionally, having a supernatural 'expert' confirm it as haunted added to its allure. And Jason, conveniently, always had a paranormal experience, which drew people to these places, apart from Ye Olde Ship on the west coast of Scotland.

Fat Fingers did the four-hour drive in his Vauxhall Corsa while Jason and Jaap played on their phones. Jason rode shotgun just in case a track needed skipping on which ever *Now Dance* album was in the CD Player.

They arrived at the hotel earlier than they typically preferred to. Fat Fingers reverse parked in the hotel's empty car park and they all staggered out of the car. An icy Scottish wind slapped them across their faces as they walked to the back of the car. It was a frosty autumn day with the sun hiding behind light grey clouds. The whole scenery looked void of colour with everything appearing paler than normal, as if someone had applied a vintage filter. The hotel had a classic, antiquated appearance, resembling a traditional Tudor-style structure with its white walls and vertical black wooden planks leading up to a pointed, brownish roof.

A short ginger man with a long bushy beard greeted them. He looked like he suffered from high blood pressure. The sight of his matted red cheeks gave the impression that someone had struck him on both sides of his face, as though someone had delivered a left-right combination.

“You must be the ghost people,” he said as he came out to them.

He didn’t have a warm demeanour. There was no welcoming smile. He stood with his hands placed firmly on his hips, maintaining a slight distance that prevented any possibility of a handshake.

“Come on in. I’ve stuck you all in a family room.”

He turned his back on them and walked back inside before Jason and his crew had dragged their luggage out of the boot. They got their bags out and hurried inside to find the man standing at the foot of the staircase. A smoky residue of fires long extinguished lingered in the air. The lobby had a wooden floor and wooden walls that were a chaotic display of vintage artifacts, featuring a lacrosse stick, weathered fishing rods, a banjo, a handcrafted wooden trout, and a train station clock frozen in time at noon.

When Jason is hungry, his ability to concentrate and make decisions becomes severely impaired. Until he’s eaten, he can’t focus or find the energy for anything else, so they had an early dinner before filming. The hotel’s dining room was dead. Empty tables sat ready and waiting for guests. Once again, the floors and walls were made of wood, with an even greater assortment of clutter decorating the walls - a dart board, a bugle, a military sword, and various other miscellaneous items. It looked like a bric-à-brac shop had thrown up all over the walls.

Everyone ordered a pint of Tennents to go with their meals, except for Fat Fingers who opted for a whiskey chaser, so the bartender served his Tennents alongside a scotch. Fat Fingers would frequently complain during these outings that he doesn't get to drink as much as the others because he always has to be the designated driver. However, Jason and Jaap always reminded him he can't handle his alcohol well, so it's better for him to drive. He's an embarrassment during night outs, stumbling and slurring his words as the night progresses, and frequently discovered hunched over in one of the men's restroom stalls, his back pressed against the door, and his legs entangled around the toilet bowl. It's a grim thought to consider the amount of urine he has sprawled in. Jason and Jaap would both have to support him as he fell out of nightclubs in search of a taxi, apologising to every bunch of girls they walked past as Fat Fingers straight out asked if they wanted to fuck. The answer was always no.

After devouring three Angus Burgers and downing four rounds of drinks, Jason was eager to film, wanting to finish before Fat Fingers became too intoxicated to stand.

They gathered their equipment. Jaap tightly gripped the camera while Fat Fingers held the boom, raising it high and twirling it through the air as he swayed back and forth.

"Here, ghosties," he called out, like he was retrieving a dog.

With a disapproving tut and an eye roll, Jason expressed his annoyance at Fat Fingers. Jaap couldn't help but smirk as he turned on the camera and gave Jason a nod to signal that he had started recording.

"Hi, I'm here at..." Jason began saying when Fat Fingers howled.

“What you doing?” asked Jason.

“Some sound effects,” said Fat Fingers.

“There’s no need. I can sort that out. You don’t even need to hold the boom. Just take a seat.”

“Gotchya.”

The boom slipped from Fat Fingers’ grasp, causing the metal handle to bounce and emit a sharp clinking noise on the wooden floor.

“We could fuck around with the shit on the walls,” said Fat Fingers as he was being drawn towards the hotel’s décor. “The ghost could play the bugle.”

Fat Fingers hooked his banana-like hands under one table and dragged it closer to the wall.

“For fuck’s sake, Steve!” yelled Jason. He only called him by his real name when he was really fucked off with him. Fat Fingers ignored him. When he had an idea, he acted on it and there was no stopping him. Fat Fingers stepped on the back of his trainers and slid his feet out, revealing black socks that were slightly worn on the heel, and had the tip of his big toe on his right foot protruding out.

“Don’t,” Jason pleaded. Again, his words fell on deaf ears.

Fat Fingers continued to mount the table and precariously stood up like a toddler getting to its feet for the first time, his arms outstretched for balance while he wobbled and straightened his

knees. The table gently rocked as he reached out to the wall where the bugle was on display. Several nails that jutted out of the wall supported the bugle, so it was easy for Fat Fingers to lift it off the wall. With a proud smile, he hoisted it above his head, making sure everyone could see that he had succeeded.

“Right. Get down,” said Jason. “Carefully.”

Fat Fingers couldn’t wait. “Hold on,” he said and put the bugle to his lips and blew. The only noise that came out was Fat Fingers spitting.

“I’ve got this. Wait.” He blew again and more spitting sounds came out. Jason massaged his temples with the thumb and forefinger on his left hand. This was his livelihood. He hated that his friends failed to understand this. It wasn’t serious for them. They saw this as a bit of a laugh. It didn’t matter because Jason didn’t believe in ghosts. To them, it was a con. A way of tricking people out of free drinks. A swindle. A hustle. A ruse. Not Jason’s livelihood.

Jason only took his eyes off Fat Fingers for a second and closed them as he wished him back home, when the sound of a train wreck smashing through the dining room brought him back to reality. Beside the table he was on a second earlier, Fat Fingers laid, sprawled out on his back amongst a pile of cutlery. The bugle was bent and dented, and still in his grasp. He put it to his lips and spat through it again. “I can’t get it to work.”

Neither Jason nor Jaap helped him up. Jason was fuming. All he could do was breathe slowly so as not to lose his shit. Jaap was upset too, but only because he didn’t get any of it on camera. He wished he had captured it all so he could have constantly shown it

to Fat Fingers at any opportunity to remind him he cannot take his alcohol. All he recorded was Jason's reaction to it.

The hotel owner burst through the doors.

"What's all the noise?"

He looked at Fat Finger on the ground, turning crimson as he continued to blow into the bugle. Then he glanced at the wall, where there was no longer a bugle. He turned his head slowly to stare at Jason with a look that said, what the fuck is going on? Which he knew the answer to, so didn't ask.

"Get out!" he yelled. "I knew you'd be a bunch of piss-takers."

"But..."

"No buts!" he continued to yell. "I am not paying you. You need to pay for the drinks and meal and the damage."

"We'll pay for the food, but there's no damage," said Jason.

"I think the bugle's broken," said Fat Fingers as he tried to blow it again.

"No damage?" The hotel owner stormed over to Fat Fingers and picked up the table. He ran his fingers around the edge, feeling for missing chunks. Satisfied there was no damage to the table, he snatched the bugle out of Fat Fingers' claws and thrust it towards Jason.

"This is bent! These cost twenty-five quid!"

“Okay, I’ll pay, but let us finish up. I can sort this,” Jason pleaded.

“No. I want you out.”

“We’re miles from home. Let us keep the room. I’ll pay for the room.”

“Pack up and get out!” The man’s face grew redder with each word he yelled. Jason gave up arguing and agreed to go.

They loaded the car and left but didn’t go far, since Jason had to drive having drunk four pints of Tennents. He hoped the Angus burgers had soaked up enough of the alcohol. Only after driving a couple of miles, he pulled over at the first lay-by he came across and parked up for the night.

Trees rustled and cars hummed in the distance throughout the entire time. Jason had a terrible night, as he could hardly sleep because of the cramped leg space and the uncomfortable upright position that felt awkward.

In the morning, his head throbbed from the lack of sleep as he peered into the mirror, his eyes stinging and bloodshot. He vowed to never again bring his friends with him.

CHAPTER 12

Jason steps onto his asphalt driveway with one foot. The back of his flip-flop on his other foot catches on the bottom of the car seat and he stumbles out of his car. By performing a quick skip, he maintains his balance and avoids falling on his face.

It's a blistering evening with an intense sky so dazzling it causes Jason's eyes to water as he squints. Wednesday is the only day of the week that the post office stays open until late, so it is a little less busy than normal. So Jason likes to collect his post on a Wednesday. He cannot bear the queuing time and the sound of senior citizens complaining about immigrants. He likes to be in and out.

Jason lifts a plastic tub of letters and parcels from off the back seat of his Beamer and admires the swelling of his biceps while holding the box while he makes the journey to the dining room. They're tanned and defined and the strain makes his veins bulge. He drops the box on the table and removes his vest, throwing it straight into the washing machine. It's too warm for tops.

His iPhone buzzes, blaring *We Will Rock You*. It rests atop the stack of letters, perched there because his shorts' pockets are too shallow to hold it securely. The phone has a habit of slipping out, crashing to the floor. Until now, luck has shielded the screen from damage, but it's only a matter of time before his fortune runs out. Perhaps it's about time he learns his lesson. He reaches for it and looks at the display. It says 'Babe'. Jason slumps into one of his chairs and presses answer.

"Hey, how's it going?" says Layla.

Jason puts his phone on speaker and slides it onto the table.

“Just got back from the post office. About to go through all my letters.” He rifles through some of them with his thumb.

“Ooh, fan mail? Lots of people asking for your autograph and naked pictures?”

“Just a load of housewives sending me their knickers,” he jokes.

“If they’re clean, save them. I could do with some new underwear.”

“I’ll sniff them to check.”

He’s sure he heard her eyes roll. He opens the first letter.

“Hey, I have a letter here from a hotel in Tennessee saying it’s haunted by Elvis.”

“Cool. Any hotels in the Maldives wanting us to stay for three weeks while we investigate?”

“I’ll check.” He rips open another envelope.

“Communicating with celebrity ghosts, though. If that’s a line you want to go down, then there’s no one bigger than Elvis,” says Layla.

“Jason Spieren, celebrity ghost chaser! I can see it now. Lennon... Churchill... Jesus!”

“I stand corrected. Jesus is the biggest.”

Jason organises the letters and arranges them into piles, depending on the contents.

“So, where you off to with work tonight?” asks Jason.

“Eating at Cibo’s, then a few bars after, maybe a club.”

Cibo’s is an intimate Italian restaurant in the city centre. Layla adores Italian cuisine, but Jason refuses to take her to an Italian restaurant. He insists he can whip up equally delectable Italian dishes at home, rendering restaurant visits unnecessary. Unlike Thai or Indian food, where restaurant flavours surpass homemade versions, spaghetti bolognese or lasagne taste identical, whether prepared by a chef or cooked in the comfort of their kitchen using a jar of Dolmio sauce.

“Is your boyfriend going?”

“Stuart? of course. As soon as he heard I was going, he confirmed.”

Jason laughs a breathy laugh to himself that sounds forced. It's not jealousy he's feeling, it's more a gradual decline in patience towards him, always hanging around and paying too much attention to Layla and no one else. It's annoying.

“He’s so boring,” he says.

“Ahh, he’s lovely, Stuart.”

“He’s weird. What’s wrong with him?”

“He’s just a little awkward. I think he just needs a nice girlfriend.”

“Why does he laugh after every sentence? Every single one, literally. Like, stop fucking laughing, you boring, awkward wanker.” The thought of Stuart winds him up. Layla can tell by the tone of his voice, not just the words he’s using.

“You sound jealous to me,” says Layla.

“I just don’t know why he’s always sniffing around you all the time. He knows you have a boyfriend.”

“He’s harmless. Anyway, I gotta finish making myself look pretty. I’m not at work tomorrow, so I’ll come round about lunchtime.”

They end the call. Layla finishes applying her makeup, and Jason continues going through his letters. He leaves the parcels until last, that’s his favourite part. He’s hoping for a new pair of trainers from a new sponsor.

The piles of letters stack up. There're piles for UK invites, non-UK invites, fan mail, and hate mail. It’s surprising how many people take time out of their day to write to him to call him a fake or tell him to die or that he’s a cunt. This pile goes straight into the bin. In the early days, he read all these letters, and they got to him. It depressed him and angered him. It’d play on his mind. The words circled his head throughout the day while he came up with replies and imagined saying them back to the haters. He’d also imagine tracking some of these people down and kicking the shit out of them. It’s something he has never got used to. It would still affect him like this if he read them. Now he simply avoids them. Sadly, it's the downside to being famous. Even if it's only semi-

famous, there are individuals who enjoy expressing their animosity, but he understands it stems from envy.

Layla likes the invite pile. Especially the non-UK invites. Jason never takes up on these offers, but there was no harm in looking. Despite Jason's lack of research, he strongly believes that there are intricate legal issues related to taxes and immigration that prevent him from filming his videos in other countries. Layla volunteered to investigate, but he turned down the offer, saying that it's just a massive ball-ache. Plus, travelling abroad carries the potential danger of being stuck in a shithole with questionable individuals.

Jason handles his own fan mail. He makes sure he replies to every single one that left their home address or email. There's never too many for him to handle. Sadly, there are never any letters from lonely housewives, sending their knickers or asking for nudes, which he can't get his head around. He's a good-looking lad. Surely, there's someone in the world who has dirty thoughts about him and wants to tell him. He obviously wouldn't follow up on any of these letters because he loves Layla, but it's always nice to feel wanted.

Sometimes, Jason gets mail from a man called Ron, claiming to be his dad. He got his first letter about six months ago and had a couple more since. The first one was about Jason's mum. The man stated that she had never let him see Jason, and that he wanted to be in Jason's life and even tried, but the effort was ineffective. This is not what happened, according to Jason's mum. She told Jason that he had left when he was young and then never heard from him again. He just disappeared from existence with a load of their money, never to be seen, or heard of, again. In the other letters, he talks about how proud he is of him and wants him in his life, and that it's not too late.

His dad was called Ron, so Jason never questioned the authenticity of the letters, but he assumes he's only interested in getting in touch now because of his success. Ron has obviously seen that he's a successful YouTuber, and he wants to get in on the action. The letters have an address and phone number on them that Jason ignores, and he dumps them in the bin. If this man wanted to have Jason in his life, he would have said a lot sooner. It's all about the money. It always is. The letters have always been his secret, one that he has no plans of ever sharing with Layla. He simply wants to forget all about them and he's doing a good job of doing so.

Jason's ears perk up as he thinks he hears a faint tapping sound coming from the front door. As he reads one of his fan letters, he pauses and questions if he heard something. If it was a knock at the door, why didn't they use the doorbell? He taps on the side of his trousers to feel for the lump of his keys in his pocket as he heads to the front door. Before he unlocks it, he peers through the frosted window at the side of the door. If someone is there, he'll be able to see a blurry silhouette, and it looks like no-one is.

Jason has seen enough horror movies to know he shouldn't go outside to investigate any strange noises, but that doesn't stop him because they are only movies. He unlocks the door and opens it to the smell of pig shit. The wrench fills his nostrils. It's one negative of living in the countryside. When the farmers are spreading muck, it sours the air, and it seems like the farmers are constantly spreading as much as they can at the moment.

There's no one in sight. Jason isn't sure if he imagined the tapping or not. He slips on a pair of plimsols and steps outside. There's no sign of life apart from the midges hovering around in the early dusk. He turns left, walks along the front of his house to the side path, and pokes his head around the corner. The gate is

closed. He shrugs off the tapping as his imagination because it could have been anything. He doesn't know what. Just anything. Water pipes clicking. A tap dripping. Birds pecking. Branches falling. Serial killers tapping. Jason speed walks back to the front door on high alert, listening for the slightest noise, and scanning for any kind of movement. Suddenly, he comes to a halt when he notices the unexpected sight of a parcel lying on the floor by the front door. It's around the same size as the box his Xbox came in, but he knows this was no Xbox. It's a standard brown cardboard box, taped up with brown tape. How did he miss it? It's by the side of the door, on the floor to the right. He supposes that at the angle from the front door looking out, he could've easily missed it. It must have been there when he came out and he must have missed it. If someone put it there while he was down the side of the house, he's sure he would have heard a van coming up his drive, and he would have seen it leave. He wasn't that slow. No, it couldn't have been dropped off now. It must have been delivered while he was on the phone to Layla, and he imagined the tapping. However, tapping noises on the door does have Layla's name written all over it. Jason takes his phone out and presses her name on the contact list. She answers on the third ring.

"Hiya, you alright?"

Jason presses the phone hard to his ear and listens for background noise. There is none.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just found a parcel outside my front door. Just checking you've nothing to do with it."

"Me? No. Whose name is on it?"

Jason pokes the box with his foot, spinning it round.

“Mine and my address. Not my PO box address, which is a little concerning.”

“Shit. What is it?”

“I don’t know. Hey! I could do an unboxing video.” His voice rises with giddiness.

“Or you could throw it away. You know what they say? Curiosity killed the cat.”

“That’s okay. I hate cats.”

Since she knows he won't listen to him, she decides not to pursue the matter.

“Okay... I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow... unless you die of anthrax poisoning.”

“Anthrax poisoning takes ten days to kill you, so the joke’s on you. You’ll still be seeing me tomorrow.”

He hangs up, picks up the cardboard box with ease, and carries it inside.

CHAPTER 13

Layla always thought she wanted to be a nurse. After graduating, her ambitions and payslip convinced her otherwise. Now she is studying to become a paediatrician while still working as a nurse. She's about to finish the first year of her three-year paediatrics course. Once a month, she has a night out on the town with her classmates. They're all part-timers and are all nurses in the city hospital. Layla's an outsider, being the only one on the course that's working in a hospital in the neighbouring town.

Stuart is the only boy in the class of ten students and he loves it, though a little intimidated by it. But that's Stuart. His entire personality contradicts itself. He's not confident, but an extrovert. He has poor social skills, but he's social. Eye contact makes him uncomfortable, but he stares. He's camp, but straight, and he's taken quite the shining for Layla. When she appears before him, his eyes light up. He plots to get the seat next to her in class, attempts to make her laugh, and bombards her with questions. Layla's convinced he's harmless, like a lost puppy, and immediately friend-zoned him by talking about how great Jason is whenever she could. She never compliments him and evades any physical contact. There's no comforting hands on shoulders or friendly hugs. She wants to avoid leading him on and giving him the wrong impression or getting him over-excited. It only goes as far as politely laughing at his jokes and answering his questions. She doesn't want to hurt his feelings unnecessarily.

In Cibo's, Stuart manages to bag the seat next to Layla. His skinny bean pole of a body doesn't take up much room. He's a couple of inches shorter than Layla and that's without her Afro. His loud shirt has the tones of one of those magic eyes from the

90s. He jokes he can see a dolphin when he stares at it long enough, before humming out a laugh. He has repeated that joke to everyone, which was inevitable because every time he has gone out in that shirt, he's said it.

When the waiter comes round, Layla chooses the linguine ragu to accompany the bottle of red wine that was waiting for them on the table.

"Hey, that's what I fancied as well. We're like two peas in the pod." Another hummed chuckle as he orders linguine ragu too.

"Would you ever eat dog?" he asks. His words rush out at the usual fast pace he speaks.

"You're assuming that I haven't," says Layla with a smirk. Stuart's eyes fidget for a couple of seconds while he processes her reply and realises that she's joking.

"Ha, you're so funny, Layla." He laughs again.

Cibo's is an intimate restaurant. It's possible to zone in on any of the other patriots and listen in on their conversation. Layla's table takes up half of the room. The other five tables are couples on dates. Layla doesn't know why her classmates picked this place for a group outing. It's too romantic for a huge piss-up and girly banter. It makes her feel awkward and self-conscious, sitting amongst a sizeable group while surrounded by couples on dates.

Not all the waiters at Cibo's are sleazy Italians acting like they are Tony Soprano's number two. A couple of blonde English girls work there as part-time waitresses while they study at the university, most likely Media Studies or Business Management. However, it is one of the Italians that is waiting on Layla's table

tonight. With a group of nine, possibly single, young women and an obvious homosexual, there was no chance he was going to let one of the girls serve at this table. It's a once-in-a-blue-moon occurrence when a table full of ladies comes along, and now it's here, the waiter's going to seize it.

When Layla talks to Stuart, she concentrates hard on keeping eye contact. She doesn't want her eyes to become distracted and wander to the mole with the wiry black hair growing out of it, on the side of his right cheek. Layla questions if he doesn't see it when he's shaving in the mirror. He must be aware of it. Layla would be so embarrassed if he caught her staring at it.

It's no better looking into his eyes. They hold a peculiar intensity and are larger than average, like a tarsier's eyes. His eyebrows are untamed and seem to defy grooming. Especially in the middle of them, where they threaten a mono brow, a feeble attempt at unity that remains noticeable but not quite successful. Then there are his lips, fat and full, just like Layla's, apart from that his look overused. Dry, cracked, and scabby. They look sore.

He's certainly not a looker. That much was fair to say. Yet, he's persistent—a trier in a world that often favours aesthetics. It never got him down, not visibly at least. The outside world saw resilience, a stoic facade. But behind those enormous eyes, beyond the chapped lips, lies a quiet determination—a fire that burns, unyielding, even when the mirror reflects imperfections. He remains confident that there's someone out there for him, only it's obvious he's desperate. The desperation oozes out of him like sweat and it puts people off. Oblivious to it, he persists on his quest for love because of what his mum used to say to him. She used to tell him that 'every pan has a lid', and in his eyes, Layla is his lid.

The prospect of the club afterward fills Layla with anticipation, as she imagines herself dancing carefree, fully immersed in the music, and blissfully oblivious to Stuart's irksome questions. Her patience is wearing thin, though nobody would know by looking at her. She's hiding it well. Inside, she can detect something simmering. The inside of her skull is getting warm and her legs are twitching. She's already answered if she is a dog or a cat person, what her favourite fruit and veg are, her favourite holiday destination, what would she do if she found a dead body, her favourite smell, what colour a mirror is, if she believes in aliens, and how sad would she be if bananas became extinct. The interrogation has got her riled. She wishes she was a smoker so she could take a break, though he would probably follow her outside to keep her company. The next best thing is a trip to the ladies' with one of the girls.

She usually has more patience than this, but something feels different. He's acting different. He usually only keeps to one or two drinks. Tonight, he has already polished off a full bottle of wine plus a couple of Peronis. He is louder and closer than normal, and on some kind of mission. By the looks of it, he is also planning to let loose and have a carefree night. Layla assures herself the club will be better. The music will drown him out and she can lose him in the crowd. She heads back to the table and sees Stuart waiting for her. He's not chatting with any of the other girls, he's twiddling with his napkin. She drops into her chair with a huff.

"I'm stuffed, I could go for a nap right about now," she says, not directed to Stuart in particular.

"Well, it's tough. We have a club to go to. Hey, don't you go out around Chesterfield sometimes?"

He's speaking quieter than usual, like a normal person's noise level. Layla didn't realise he could control the volume level of his voice.

"Yeah, sometimes," she says.

"Me and my mates have always fancied a night around Chesterfield. How about next time you go, you let me know so we can go out around Chessy together?"

Layla's eavesdropping on the couple at the next table, listening to the lad complaining about his date always being on her period.

"I thought it was only once a month. It's like every weekend."

"Layla?" he says, startling her.

"Er, yeah? Oh, yeah. Of course."

She nods. Her friends and his friends out together? No harm in agreeing to it. She'll just never tell him when she's going out.

Stuart goes quiet. It seems like he's exhausted all his energy or maybe ran out of questions. He has asked all the possible questions in the world.

The group split the bill, handing the sleazy Italian waiter crisp bills before leaving. Layla thinks of Jason as she exits into the street. Has he contracted anthrax poisoning? She looks at her mobile and there are no messages or notifications for a new uploaded video on YouTube.

The group wanders down Division Street. It's full of students walking, chatting, buzzing, unaware of where life is leading them, all enjoying the moment, visiting bar after bar before heading to a nightclub. The yellow street lights glow, though not as bright as the moon. It looks lonely, as not a single star shines in the sky. Stuart jog-walks to catch up with Layla to walk side by side with her.

"I can't believe you said yes," he says.

Layla doesn't reply. She hasn't the faintest idea what he is on about. He continues.

"I was so nervous about asking you out. I wasn't going to, then I did it and then you said yes and I was like, I can't believe it. I'm so glad I asked you out. I can't wait."

Layla's dumbfounded. She cannot formulate a single word. Her lips fall to sleep in an oval contour and her bronze irises flicker as she thinks back. She wasn't fully listening to him, as her focus was on the sex problems of the next table. He didn't ask her out on a date, did he? His words go through her head again. Is he deluded? Did she hear him wrong?

"When are you going to tell Jason?"

He goes to slip his hand into hers and she snatches it away. Her lips wake up.

"I didn't realise you were asking me out. If I knew what you were asking, I would have said no."

Stuart's smile disappears. His face contorts into something that resembles a blobfish, full of sadness and mucus. He looks like he is going to cry and audibly sniffs.

"What? Why?"

"I have a boyfriend, Stuart."

"But if you weren't with him..."

"No, Stuart. We are just friends."

He attempts to hold her hand again, and she pushes his hand away.

"Get off me," she yells.

He extends his arms, attempting to hug her, and tries to grasp her shoulders in order to close the distance between them. His lips are puckered as he forces himself upon her. She turns her head away and tries to take a step back so as not to get his scabby lips on hers.

"Fucking get off me!" she growls through clenched teeth and palm-strikes him in his heart. With a pathetic squeal, he relinquishes his hold on her and clutches his chest. In a state of disarray, he stumbles backwards, tripping over his own feet, and ultimately lands on his back. The commotion catches everyone's attention, causing them to turn and look, while Stuart, lying on the floor, looks up at Layla through tear-filled eyes. She doesn't look sorry. Her nostrils flare. Her gritted teeth are on show. One girl from the group runs over and puts an arm around her shoulders.

“Are you okay, Layla?”

She shrugs the arm off.

“Yeah, I’m okay, thanks.”

Stuart stands up, sheepish and embarrassed, avoiding eye contact as he turns red.

“I got to go,” he says, before running away down a side street towards the taxi rank. Layla’s hands are visibly shaking from the shock and anger. She bites down on her lip and convinces herself that all she needs is a tequila and she’ll be fine again, because all things considered, she’s overcome worse.

CHAPTER 14

Whatever the box is hiding, it's light and small enough to slide around inside. Jason can't wait to peek inside. He doesn't set up his camera to film it; he goes straight to a drawer in his kitchen and grabs the bread knife with the sharp, jagged teeth. Delicately, like a surgeon performing brain surgery, he slices open the top of the box and folds back the flaps. Inside is another box, half the size of the box it's in. With caution, he lifts it out delicately, as if it's a bomb that'll explode with any sudden movement.

The box appears to be wooden, resembling something made in design technology at school. Two small gold hinges attach the lid to the box, which is sealed shut with melted red candle wax. The lid depicts the word 'jinx', etched into it with jagged, knife-like strokes, reminiscent of the vandalised desks schoolchildren used to carve their names into.

Jason tilts the box and feels a weight inside shift. He shakes it and hears a soft knock of whatever's inside it hit the side. It crosses his mind that it could be another doll and wonders if a fan saw his doll video and sent him another one? He returns the wooden box to the cardboard one and reseals it using brown tape.

Now he sets up the camera, fixing it to a taller tripod with a big ring light before sitting it on the living room floor and pointing the camera at the love chair in front of the bookcase for a more interesting backdrop. He presses record and sits in the leather one-seater with the box on his lap.

"Hey guys, this is a little impromptu video I'm recording for you right now. Something really unexpected happened, literally five

minutes ago.” He slaps the top of the cardboard box like a used car salesman. “I found this on my doorstep. I didn’t see who left it. As you can see, it’s a blank box, so a courier has not delivered it.”

He keeps the label pointed away from the camera so they can’t see that UPS delivered it.

“I don’t know what it is, but it’s very concerning that they have not used my PO box address. However, it could just be my neighbour leaving me some cakes or something, though they’ve never done that before, so why would they do it now?”

He holds up his bread knife to the camera.

“Let’s get it open.”

He slices through the newly stuck brown tape and folds back the flaps. He exaggerates a frown as he looks inside. “What’s that?” he says, badly acting surprised. “It’s a wooden box, possibly made from acacia.”

He doesn’t know what wood it is. He doesn’t really know what Acacia is, only that it’s a type of wood on *Minecraft*.

“It’s sealed with wax and I see that someone has etched the word ‘jinx’ into the top.”

He holds the box to his ear and shakes it.

“There’s something inside. Something soft that fills most of the box. My guess is it’s another doll.”

He flicks his head back, guiding the viewers' attention to the doll sitting on the bookcase behind him.

“Let’s test it before opening it.”

He pulls out his EMF detector.

“Nothing will probably happen, as it’s just a box.”

He knows nothing will happen because he doesn’t have his mobile nearby to fake the result like on all the previous occasions. By palming the mobile and putting it close to the detector, it causes the lights to flash.

He runs the EMF detector around the sealed wooden box and the lights flash. Jason halts and stares at the lights while he tries to work out what’s happening. He pats down on his two pockets to see if his mobile is in there. It isn’t. He’s left it in the dining room. He looks around, searching for something that could be affecting the EMF detector. There’s nothing obvious to sight.

“Okay, err. I have a reading... It must be a mistake. Maybe the batteries are going?”

He scowls at his EMF detector as he drops it to the floor.

“Maybe there’s something inside the box, like a transmitter or something. Let’s try the EVP reader.”

He pulls it out from the side of the chair and switches it on. Immediately, it emits a piercing screech. Jason winces and instinctively clutches his ears before fumbling with the reader, desperately trying to switch it off. The ceiling light flickers as he

turns off the reader and brings the screeching to a halt. He throws the reader down onto the floor.

“Fucking hell. It’s never done that before. Jesus! What the hell happened there?”

He briefly stops to catch his breath, his hand resting on the box as he looks into the lens, unsure about what to say. Normally, he has a clear idea of what he will say because he typically has a good sense of what will occur, since it’s all planned, but today is different. None of it is going to plan.

He needs to know what’s inside the box. That’s where the answers lie. Picking up the bread knife, he uses it to saw away the wax that’s sealing the lid shut and frantically pushes off the remaining wax with his fingers and thumbs.

With a careful, steady motion, he lifts the lid up, exposing the contents of the box. And there, on the bare wood of the inside of the box, is a noose made from a dirty, dry rope that is long and thick. Jason holds it up and looks through the hoop of the noose and into the camera.

“What kind of sick joke is this? Is this meant to be some kind of death threat? Is someone trying to tell me to go kill myself?”

He spins the noose around in between his fingers and then stops the camera so he can inspect the noose. He touches it and he sniffs it. It’s just an old rope, rough on his fingers. He pulls on the end of the rope to tighten the loop, then he pulls the loop to loosen it again. He re-examines the wooden box. It’s just a box, the lid scarred with the word jinx. There doesn’t seem to be anything special about it. It’s an empty wooden box. He then checks the cardboard box it came in. It’s also empty. There’s no letter, no

explanation, and no return address. Maybe he could call UPS to see if they know where it came from. He has questions like, who the hell has sent it? And why? Is it a death threat? Or a joke? Or is it a genuine gift from a fan? The thing he does know is that it's disturbing.

He places the noose back in the wooden box and shuts it away under its lid. He looks at the word 'jinx' again, this time feeling the carving with his fingertips. Sitting in silence, he tries to unscramble the thoughts rushing through his brain. The same unanswered questions swirl around like there's a merry-go-round in his head.

With the unfinished video hanging over his head, he reluctantly calls it a night and heads up to bed. He needs to leave this one for tonight. Unsure how to finish the video, he needs a night to think about his conclusion, what he's going to say, and how he's going to play it out.

He has a quick tidy up and completes his usual bedtime routine before rolling under his covers, then throwing them back because it's too hot to be under blankets. He lays still, on his back, with his eyes closed until he falls asleep. There's too much going on in his head, too many questions he needs answers to, like what the actual fuck? Who sent this box? Why did the EMF detector light up? And why did the EVP screech like that? There'll be a simple explanation. There always is. It's just that the simple explanation is usually him.

He finally passes out, and after having a dreamless night, wakes up the next morning on the edge of his mattress. He rolls over and opens his eyes.

"What the..."

His face tightens and his eyes narrow as he stares at the side of the bed where Layla is usually found. And because of his tiredness, his confusion is even more pronounced. He cannot work out what is going on, but even though he is clueless about what has happened, he believes it will be good content for his channel.

He leaps out of bed, sprints down for his GoPro, and returns in a matter of seconds. After pressing the record button, he talks to the camera.

“Hey guys...”

CHAPTER 15

Layla picks up her mobile to check the time. It's past 11 AM. Craving a caffeine boost, she longs for a cup of coffee and a couple of paracetamol to relieve her discomfort. Her head is banging and she can't remember why. She must have partied hard because she can't remember a lot of last night. With half-shut eyes, she staggers towards the kitchen, wincing at the intense light that claws at her retinas. Her brain throbs on every step she takes as it bashes against the inside of her skull.

She starts the tap running while she looks for a clean glass, then pops two pills into her palm and shoves them into her mouth. The water is still at room temperature, even after running it, as is always the case in the summer. She tilts her head back and takes a big gulp of water to wash down the pills in her throat. Next, she boils the kettle and opts for a cup of tea. The idea of having coffee while dealing with a headache doesn't appeal to her. While waiting for the kettle to boil, she checks her phone. There's a notification for a recently uploaded YouTube video. She taps the notification, bringing up Jason's latest video, and watches it while making a cuppa.

"Oh yeah, the parcel." She recalls making a joke about him getting anthrax in the mail. While the video continues to play, she chucks a tea bag into her coffee mug, the one that says 'I am a nurse. To save time, let's assume I'm never wrong' in black bold lettering. She received it as a gift from her secret Santa at work during the Christmas season.

It's a wooden box covered in red candle wax with 'jinx' etched on the lid. She didn't see that coming.

The video shows the lights on the EMF detector flashing in Jason's hand, then the EVP recorder screeching while the lights flicker.

As she pours the boiled water onto the tea bag, she understands his point about his videos. He does need new ideas. They're predictable. The EMF detector always flashes and the EVP recorder always picks something up, though the screeching is new and a good touch. It made her jump. Plus the lights flickering is something he hasn't done before. It is one of the most interesting videos he's done for a while, full of suspense and mystery.

What's in the box? she wonders.

She gets the milk out of the fridge but doesn't pour it into her tea just yet. Jason has the bread knife and is sawing away at the wax. She wants to see what's in the box before she pours.

It's a noose. She would never have guessed that.

The video abruptly transitions to a closeup of Jason's face, capturing every emotion in his dimly lit bedroom. She can't tell if he's worried, scared, or excited.

"I've just woken up. I went to bed after revealing the noose, deciding to sleep on it before doing any more recordings of what I received. But then, something weird has occurred. I don't know what it means or how it happened..."

He pans out so his bed behind him comes into view. There's a dining room chair laid on the bed.

“That chair is from downstairs and I'm unsure of how it ended up there. When I woke up, it was poking into my back. I assure you guys, I did not just plant the chair and started recording. That chair has somehow made it into my bedroom in the middle of the night.”

Layla takes a sip of her tea, unsure what to make of the new video.

“I'm going to do more investigating into what has happened here and why, so remember to subscribe so you don't miss a video. Also, please check out this video's sponsor. The link is in the description. Later.”

The screen fades to black as the video ends and the buzzer on her intercom goes off. It's like a drill to Layla's brain. Whoever's pressing it is not taking their finger off, and Layla knows exactly who it is. It's Jason acting like an impatient child who cannot wait to discuss his latest video. Downing the remaining gulps of tea, she buzzes Jason in and unlocks the front door so he can come straight in. He bursts through the door. “Have you seen it?”

She winces at the volume of his voice. Her head is still somewhat fragile as the effects of the paracetamol haven't taken effect yet.

“Yeah, just finished watching now.”

“Amazing, isn't it?” he says enthusiastically.

“Yeah, it's intriguing. Not your scariest. The chair thing was a little confusing. The MVP screeching was a good touch. And the light flicker.”

“EVP,” he corrects. “But yeah. It was all real. I didn’t mess with the EMF detector or the EVP reorder. It actually screeched like that and then this morning when I woke up, a dining room chair was on my bed next to me. I didn’t put it there.”

“When you woke up this morning, the chair was already on your bed?”

There’s a sceptical look on her face as she looks at him. She knows every single one of his videos is fake. She sees him do it.

“Pull the other one, Jason. I know what you’re trying to do.”

“I’m not trying to do anything,” he says with a hint of frustration breaking through in his voice.

“That all really happened?” She smirks while shaking her head at him. “Yeah, whatever.”

“Have you seen the views? Through the roof. There’re loads of comments with their theories. A lot of calling bullshit, but I don’t know, there’s a lot of interest.”

“The noose is a little disturbing, especially as it got sent to you personally and not your PO box. Who knows where you live?”

“I imagine my address can be found on the internet.”

“Maybe you should go to the police.”

He frowns at her.

“Why? It’s just a piece of rope. I’m not exactly going to use it on anyone.”

“I’m not convinced that it isn’t sinister.”

He shakes his head, dismissing her concerns.

“I need to do some research on this jinx box. Find out what it means.”

“Okay, but first, what we doing for breakfast? I need a McDonalds. It’s the best thing for a hangover,” says Layla.

Jason knows this is a good plan. He can google some stuff while sitting at the drive-thru and do some research while eating his food.

“Come on then. I’ll treat you,” he says.

CHAPTER 16

Layla never met Jason's mum. She passed away a year before they started dating. Jason was still living in his mum's house after inheriting it. He had bought the farmhouse before they began dating, but it was inhabitable.

It was a farmhouse Jason knew well. One Sunday a month, Jason's mum would drive them there when Jason was in his pre-teen years to visit the old man that lived there. Jason only knew him as Farmer Salt. It was only to buy a dozen eggs off of him, but it would become a social visit and they would stay for an hour for tea and cakes. He was a widower with no kids; he did, however, have three dogs. An old Collie and two Jack Russells. One old and one young. While Jason's mum gossiped with the farmer, Jason would play with the dogs. He would throw a tennis ball on the massive lawn for the Collie to fetch. The Collie would obediently bring the ball back and drop it. If it was raining, then Jason would sit inside with his mum. He would sit in the old dusty green chair with dark varnished wooden arms and stroke the young Jack Russell that would sit on his lap. Sometimes, Farmer Salt would get his shotgun and let Jason handle it while sat in the chair. Jason was unsure why, probably because Farmer Salt thought he would relish holding a real gun, as most children love Nerf guns.

When Farmer Salt passed, the farmhouse went up for sale at a decent price, only because it needed a lot of work. The restoration project on the farmhouse was bigger than what Jason expected. He had watched TV programs that made it look easy. He quit his job at Royal Mail giving him free time to spend work on it, then realised he had no clue to what he was doing. Nor did his mates, Fat Fingers and Jaap. He ended up paying a couple of builders to

bring his grand design to reality and, with his free time, he became a full-time YouTuber. It made sense; he was already making decent money out of it. Going full-time allowed him to not only make significant money out of it, but also provided the added bonus of never having to worry about getting up early.

The entire work/life/friends/girlfriend balance worked for a while. He made at least three new videos a week, saw the lads on Saturdays, and saw Layla a couple of nights a week. As the relationship got more serious with Layla, Saturdays with the boys became scarcer as he began bringing Layla along. This led to Jason being mocked for having to bring his girlfriend to nights out. He didn't have to; Layla wasn't like that. She wasn't the type to get the face on if he went out without her. He just wanted to spend more time with her, but still spend Saturday night with the lads. He was the only one who brought his girlfriend, mainly because he was the only one with a girlfriend.

Fat fingers and Jaap were both single. Layla felt sorry for them. The first time she met them was at the pub and she asked them about their nicknames. 'It's what everyone's ever called me,' Fat Fingers explained. He got the nickname because simply, he has fat fingers. Noticeably fatter than the normal person, they look like a bunch of bananas.

Jaap told her he got the nickname because he used to have a stammer at school, so he got called Stam for short, which changed to Jaap Stam, after the dutch footballer.

"That's quite offensive," said Layla. He looked embarrassed by this and didn't defend it. It wasn't him who chose the nickname. No one chooses their own nickname apart from losers, and it's something that has stuck with him. No one's ever questioned it before.

After the hotel debacle and Fat Fingers' drunken antics, Saturdays became another date night. No lads invited, just the two of them out for drinks, sometimes a meal, then back to his for some taking-it-slow. For the first six months, she would only allow him to do above-the-waist stuff. When he tried to use his fingers between her legs, she would take his hand and put it on one of her breasts. She understood his frustrations and would relieve him mostly by hand, occasionally with her mouth. After the first few months of hand-jobs and blow-jobs, Layla felt she had to explain why sex had been off the table and why taking it slow was important. After explaining, he stopped trying it on and was content with hugs and kisses.

Their relationship grew. He respected her, and she felt it, and that was when she said she wanted sex. The first time didn't last long. Not because of Jason getting over excited too quickly. It hurt Layla too much. She stopped it before the third thrust and began hyperventilating. In an effort to assist her during her panic attack, he got off her, sat her up, and soothingly rubbed her back. He didn't know if he was helping or not. Probably not, but he continued because he wanted to show her he was there for her. He wasn't entirely sure how to act because he had never been with a rape victim before.

CHAPTER 17

Jason slowly oscillates his hips while on top of Layla, edging toward climax. This is the closest he has been to coming inside her. He doesn't speed up because he doesn't want to spook her. She stops him anyway. It's like she's read his mind or could sense he was close. The veins in his arms were close to popping and probably gave the game away.

She puts her hands on his elbows and pulls him up her body so he's straddling her midriff. He touches her breasts with one hand and finishes himself off with the other. He knows the procedure. She closes her eyes so she can't see him beat his meat while she waits to feel the warmth of his happy ending on her chest. He rolls off of her and pulls a clean towel from the radiator next to his bed, and passes it over to her. She cleans herself up and gives him the towel back, where he drops it off the side of the bed to be cleaned up later. The lights flicker.

"It did that last night," says Jason.

"Ooh, the spirit of Anne is in your electrics," jokes Layla.

Jason turns to look at her, his expression unimpressed by her mocking.

"Or it could be some loose wiring in your lights," she says.

"It happened downstairs as soon as I opened the jinx box."

“Yeah, but that was just a coincidence. Lights flickering happens all the times. I’m sure I’ve noticed it happen on plenty occasions, before yesterday.”

“It feels too much of a coincidence. It happened while the EVP recorder was screeching. Then there’s the chair ending up stairs.”

“Shut up. That was you,” she snaps at him.

“I swear it wasn’t,” he says defensively. “I woke up with it there, laid beside me.”

Layla is about to lose her shit. Why won’t he tell her the truth? She has seen most of his videos. In fact, she has been on location while filming a lot of his videos. She knows precisely how he captures paranormal activity, down to the smallest detail. She thinks back to the time he was filming in an isolated pub in a village pub an hour away and a glass shattered behind as he was calling out to the spirit world. It was Layla. She had prearranged to throw the glass from behind the camera, to give the impression an angry spirit had smashed it.

“Why are you trying to scare me? Neither of us believes in this kind of shit. In the hundreds of videos you’ve made, not a single one is genuine. It’s always you moving shit and making noises. If it’s not you, what’s your explanation?”

“There is no explanation. That chair somehow made it upstairs. It has to be something with that jinx box. I can feel it. I can’t explain how or why, but I know I didn’t move it.” He’s becoming flustered.

It is very convincing. So much so, Layla is questioning if he is telling the truth, or is it the same as all his other videos? Fake. If so, why isn't he letting Layla in on the game like he usually does?

"What do your viewers say?" says Layla.

"Mostly that it's bullshit, and I moved it. Some others have their theories. My favourite theory is that a spirit possesses the jinx box, and they committed suicide by hanging themselves using the noose and jumping off a chair. That's why the chair was brought upstairs, to be used again."

Layla 'umms' for a second. "Yeah, I suppose it fits. You could say that you shouldn't have opened the box. You were meant to protect it and now you've opened it, you've released an evil spirit that used to be a serial killer and he hanged himself when he got caught. Now that the spirit is free, it's trying to kill you by hanging."

"Wow. I have literal goosebumps. I suppose it doesn't have to be a serial killer. It could be a rapist or a child rapist. Make it a little darker?"

"No, I'd keep it as a serial killer. It's less of a taboo, talking about a killer. They seem to be idolised. You've seen all the documentaries. There's a lot of sexual assault victims out there and if they see it, they'll feel you're trying to cash in on their tragedy."

"Oh yeah, sorry." He squeezes her. "Do we know any killers that hanged themselves?" he asks.

"I know the last person to be hanged by execution in Britain was a woman. She was a model in the fifties and she killed her

husband. He used to beat her, but the law was different back then, so she was found guilty of murder and they hanged her for it.”

He looks at her in awe. This is one reason he fell in love with her. She always amazes him with her random knowledge.

“Look at you with your trivia,” he says.

“I’m not just a pretty face.”

“I know. You’ve got a cracking pair of tits, too.” He turns and kisses her on her forehead.

“Thanks.” She shuffles into his body, becoming the little spoon, and Jason wraps an arm around her. They lie there for a while, fully absorbed in the tranquil hum of the earth. Jason falls to sleep first while cupping one of her breasts. Layla lies awake for a little longer.

CHAPTER 18

There was a time when Layla's father hit her mother in her presence. According to her mum, it was the only time. It was when she kicked him out. Even though Layla was nine, she understood why he got kicked out, but never understood that smack around her mum's face. It echoed around the kitchen, creating a lasting resonance that remains ingrained in her memory. Layla can still close her eyes and hear it, as clear as the sounds she heard this morning. She'll never forget the sound it made, or the red hand mark that formed on her mum's cheek. It cracked in the air, like someone snapping a dog's leg in two. It was a nauseating sound that still leaves her sick to the stomach.

Her dad left with Kalel. She always felt Kalel was her dad's favourite because he got away with murder. He was a lot stricter with her than he was with his son. She believed her dad treated her differently because she was a girl. As she got older, she wasn't so sure.

She often questioned if it was because she wasn't as black as Kalel. Layla is obviously of mixed race, whereas Kalel was as black as his dad. She sometimes concluded that it was because Kalel was his firstborn and maybe she was an accident, or maybe it's all three reasons. She's a second-born, pale, female accident.

Their dad would spend weekends with Kalel. He played for two cricket clubs. One in a Saturday league and one in a Sunday league. And that consumed most of their dad's free time. He wanted Kalel to make friends. Away from Layla, Kalel was quiet and awkward, not wanting to speak to the other players. He would turn up, play his game, and leave. That was probably why cricket

suited him. He didn't have to be social. He could stand in the middle of the field away from everyone, and when he was waiting to bat, he would sit with his dad, never leaving his side.

If Kalel would have ever wanted to go to a party or sleepover, Layla was pretty certain their dad would have let him go and would have even driven him there if he had asked. They never allowed her. It was always a straight no for no reason, and if she went to a friend's house, her mum had to pick her up before it was dark. Layla felt like this was unfair. She was possibly in denial about the seven-year difference between her and her brother. Still, she couldn't help but notice the difference in treatment.

There was one particular night when Kalel snuck out, strolled back in after midnight, and vomited on his bed. He had been drinking, which was something he had never done before. The stench of rum and stale beer filled the air. Their dad didn't get angry. He sat up all night with Kalel to make sure he didn't choke. It was a side to her dad that Layla had only seen and never experienced up to that point.

When Layla was nine, she ran away from home. It wasn't really running away. It was more like sneaking out to a friend's house and not telling anyone and planning to live there forever. She hid in her friend's bedroom and made it past her curfew. Not that long past, though. They found her quick enough. All it took was a phone call from her mum to her friend's mum, asking if she had seen her.

'Oh yes, she's upstairs.' The snitch!

Layla's mum collected her in the Ford Fiesta and Layla sobbed all the way home. When she got there, her dad, who was waiting in the kitchen, erupted.

“You stupid girl! What the fuck did you think you are doing? You are grounded!”

Layla couldn't take it anymore. She blurted out the secret that haunted her. The secret that he was aware of, but not her mum. It was an impulsive act, not a deliberate one. She was in anguish. She felt the agony inside her and let it out, believing that speaking up would end the pain.

All hell broke loose. Layla looked up at her parents. She stood still and silent as they screamed. Her mum showed him the door, screaming to go and never come back, and he slapped her before leaving with Kalel and becoming only a memory, never making contact again.

CHAPTER 19

Layla wakes up with her back to Jason. His hand is still on her breast while he spoons her and pokes her in her left buttock with his morning wood. Sat on her pillow, three inches from her face, is Anne the doll in her wedding dress. Her face is the colour of milk and her jaw gives the expression of a jilted bride at the altar. Layla's reflexes kick in and she right hooks Anne in her stupid face. She then jumps up and smacks Jason.

"You twat!"

Jason awakes with a start.

"What... what's up?"

"The doll, you prick."

"What?"

Jason's still trying to come around, his brain like a jigsaw puzzle, slowly coming together.

"Moving it so it was right in my face when I woke," she snarled in an accusatory tone.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Jason doesn't even know what day it is. The mental cogs are turning sluggishly.

"Shut up. You know full well what I'm on about. It didn't move on its own."

Jason swivels his legs out of bed, forces himself up, and walks around the bed. He picks up the doll and turns it round in his hands, inspecting it.

“How did this get up here?”

Layla doesn't reply. She allows the charade to continue. He looks at her, confused, or possibly tired. Maybe both.

“I honestly don't know how she got up here.”

“Just like the chair?” she asks with a tone of accusation.

“Yeah, just like the chair,” he snaps as he wraps his Jedi dressing gown around him.

He heads downstairs for breakfast with Anne in his hand. Layla catches up to him as he returns Anne to the bookcase and looks to see if anything else has moved. Nothing jumps out.

“I'm going to set up a camera to see how things keep ending up in my bedroom.”

Layla doesn't entertain him with a reply.

“Aren't you a little intrigued? Ever since I received that box, things have started to move.”

“Yes, what a coincidence. Paranormal activity is happening now and never before,” she says sarcastically.

“I'm going to prove it to you.”

He flips open his laptop on the dining room table, brings up Amazon, and searches for CCTV.

“You are seriously going to set up a camera in your bedroom?”

“Of course. We need to get to the bottom of this.”

“I’m not staying over while you’re filming. It’s perverse.”

“Fine. I’ve primed the camera. It’ll be here tomorrow and I’ll have it set up before bed.”

“I don’t think I’m going to stay over tonight either.”

“What? Why? You scared?”

“No. I know it’s you, but my brother used to move that doll at night to freak me out and it’s made all those feelings come back.”

“Brother? I thought you said you had no siblings?”

Layla never mentioned her brother to Jason. She’s not seen him or had any contact with him since her dad took him that night. It’s the first time she’s mentioned him in a long time or admitted that she has a brother. She’s lived the years since he left an only child because in her head she has no brother. He would terrorise her and whenever they’d sleep over at their Nan’s house, she’d wake up with that doll in her face, and this happening again has brought all those suppressed memories back. Not only at their nan’s house did she face harassment, and the scary-ass doll wasn’t always the culprit. There was a morning at home when her mother was working nights. She woke up screaming from a pain coming from inside her body. Like a pain trying to force its way out through her

flesh. Kalel was next to her with his free hand over her mouth, shushing her. She could feel his fingers pushing inside of her. It stung between her legs. Tears rolled down the side of her face and into her ears as he pushed his fingers as far as they could go. Paralysed with fear, she starred at the ceiling, unable to scream or wiggle away or bite down on his hand. She wasn't sure what was going on and didn't know what he was doing or why, but she knew it wasn't right because it fucking hurt. She could feel him inside her, fearing she was getting torn to shreds from the inside out, like in some sadistic horror film that she couldn't switch off. Their dad opened the bedroom door to tell her to get up, as it was time for school. As he opened the door, Kalel jumped and spun onto his back and starred bashfully at their dad.

“What’s going on?” he said.

Kalel stuttered. “L.L.L...Layla had a nightmare.”

Their dad saw Layla's tears. Her eyelashes were sodden and stuck together above her red-blooded eyes.

“Get up. It's time for school.”

Kalel rolled out of bed and skulked out of Layla's bedroom, not making eye contact as he passed their dad, who filled the doorway. Layla remained frozen.

“Come on, Layla.”

He pulled the sheets back and saw blood smeared on her shorts, a patch on her crotch, and some on her thigh. There was a streak of blood on her bedsheet where Kalel had wiped his fingers clean.

Their dad walked over to his daughter and knelt beside her, putting his huge hands over hers.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “Kalel’s just...” He didn’t know how to finish that sentence. “No need to tell your mum. Kalel won’t hurt you again. I’ll sort everything out. I love you.”

Like a possum waiting for danger to leave, she continued to lie perfectly still while he hugged her.

“A shower will help. Come on.”

He guided her through to the bathroom and gently placed her under the shower as he ran hot water over her.

Layla didn’t see Kalel much for a few weeks because their dad sent him to stay with their nan. He was there for a couple of weeks. Layla’s mum believed he was going there to help look after her. It was their dad’s idea, saying it’d be good for him, and Layla’s mum loved the idea.

She can remember when Kalel came back home. He looked hurt and in pain, limping around and holding his ribs. Apparently, he had fallen downstairs, but Layla believes it was from their dad giving him a thrashing. He continued to leave Layla alone when he came back.

After a couple of months of freedom, Layla woke up with him in her bed, but this time, he had straddled her and held her hands down on either side of her. He moved them both to above her head and pinned them there with one hand. The other hand went under the sheets and dragged her shorts down just enough. With his knees, he spread her legs and used his spare hand to help aim as he forced himself inside her. Once in, he moved his hand over her

mouth and pushed up on her jaw with his thumb to trap her mouth shut.

This was a lot more painful than his fingers. He pushed his hips hard into hers a few times before moaning through gritted teeth and squeezing her hands tight and pushing down on her mouth as a warmth spread inside her; it felt like she had pissed herself as something dripped out of her from between her legs, but this felt more shameful.

Kalel collapsed, his full weight on top of Layla, his head face down on her pillow next to her head and his hand still over her mouth. He whispered in her ear.

“I’m sorry. Please don’t tell anyone. I won’t do it again. Look, I’ll help clean you up.” He took off his shirt and used it as a cloth to wipe up as much as he could between her legs. She laid stiff and motionless, staring at the luminous stars stuck on her ceiling that had lost their night time glow a few months back.

Kalel pulled her shorts back up for her before leaving her bedroom with his shirt scrunched up in his hand. It was then when Layla cried, praying her mum would walk in. She didn’t. It was her dad again.

“Oh, sweetheart. I’m sorry. Come on. Let’s clean you up. Please don’t tell your mum. It will only upset her and you don’t want to upset your mum, do you? I’ll sort it. Kalel’s just going through a phase. I promise I’ll sort it.”

He took her by the hand to the bathroom and bathed her.

Until the day she ran away, which was a week later, she kept it to herself. When they forced her back home, she couldn’t keep her

emotions hidden any longer. That's when she told her mom, in front of her dad, in the kitchen. All of it. What happened and that her dad knew about it. After that, she never saw or heard from them again. The threat of the police from Layla's mum made sure of that.

Layla explains to Jason how her brother terrorised her at her nan's house, sometimes moving the doll to spook her. She does not tell him that Kalel is her rapist. He knows her dad had left when she was nine and now he knows she has a brother that he took with him, but he doesn't know why. He always assumed that her dad was a cheat.

She has not consciously thought about what happened for a while. It's always in the back of her mind what happened, especially when she has sex with Jason, but this is in the most detail that she has thought about it. The pain, the fear, his body on hers. She decides she needs a few nights at home while Jason films his nightly 'paranormal activities'.

CHAPTER 20

Amazon comes the next morning. The navy-blue van with the smile on the side parks outside the front door. Jason is like a crackhead waiting for their dealer. He's been back and forth, between sofa and window, about six times in the last ten minutes, urging the courier to appear. As soon as he sees the van, Jason opens the front door before the courier has even put the handbrake on. He stands in the doorway, jumping from foot to foot, partly from the excitement, mainly because he needs to pee. The courier acknowledges Jason with a nod as he steps out of the van, leaving the key in the ignition and the engine on. The driver's door is open as the courier walks around to the back of the van. Jason supposes he could just jump in the van and drive off, take all the parcels with him, then realises that the courier knows where he lives, so hijacking his van would be futile.

It's a big box that the courier brings out from the back of his van, bigger than Jason was expecting. The courier looks miserable as he hands it over. It's also lighter than Jason expected. He thanks the courier and runs inside with it. The excitement is too much. Before reaching the dining room, Jason tears off the flaps, opens the box, and finds a small box and a load of screwed-up brown paper filling up the space. *Why does Amazon do that?* he thinks to himself.

Jason unpacks the CCTV from the small box and connects it to the charger. He picked a wireless one, not wanting to deal with any wiring, fearing he would electrocute himself to death. Jason can envision himself touching a live wire, shooting up in the air two metres, then landing on the floor as a smoking corpse, just like in the cartoons he watches.

The app is easy to set up on his phone and allows him to view the footage that's saved to the cloud. The footage also saves to a memory card in the back of the camera.

After fully charging his new gadget, he positions it above his bedroom window, directing it towards the bed and ensuring that the door into his bedroom is also visible in the shot.

Too excited to sleep, he lies there for a while as he tries to work out how the chair and doll had moved from downstairs to his bedroom. His only conclusion was a ghost. An actual fucking ghost. Could he be the first person ever to get an actual ghost on camera? A genuine video that is not faked like every other paranormal video in the world, including all of his.

Nah. It can't be a ghost. There has to be a rational explanation, he thinks as he tries to figure it out, but he doesn't. Everything turns black as he's beaten by sleep.

CHAPTER 21

Jason awakes from a dreamless night. It feels like it was a quick nap. One minute, thinking about life, the universe and everything, then suddenly, he faded into darkness for what feels like a few seconds.

His watch sits on the bedside drawers, lightly ticking. He sits up in bed before thinking about yawning or stretching. It feels like there isn't enough time to come round first because he's got stuff to do.

It must be early. Jason notes the grogginess of his brain from a lack of sleep, then he reaches for his watch and sees it's 7.12am. It surprises him. Even though he's had a full night's sleep, he doesn't feel refreshed. Is he hungover? He feels groggy, like he has a hangover, but he didn't drink. *Maybe it's a summer cold*, he thinks, and shakes it off.

A red light glares at him from the corner of his room, where the CCTV records his every move. Jason scans the room for anything out of place, like a giant spot-the-difference puzzle. Nothing.

His phone is next to his watch. He reaches over and grabs it while rubbing his eyes and massaging his temples. He wishes he had drunk last night. It seems unfair to have the symptoms of a hangover without the fun of drinking. The Woodford Reserve whiskey he bought for himself is still in the kitchen, untouched. He could have had that.

Nausea accompanies his throbbing in his head and the glow from his iPhone's lit screen hurts his eyes. Through squinted eyes, he

scrolls to the CCTV app to watch the recordings from last night. His actions are slow because of a fog that's taken over his mind. It reminds him of the days when he used to start work at 6 AM, after going to bed past midnight, struggling to function and perform simple tasks. Unable to think straight, he would put teaspoons in the bin and milk in the cupboard after making a morning coffee and not realise he was doing it. Jason can not cope with sleep deprivation.

He gets a waft of his morning breath from breathing out of his mouth. It's warm and sour. He has unpleasant morning breath most mornings but never usually experiences it himself. When he awakes with Layla by his side, he goes to the bathroom and uses mouthwash before she can experience it. As she's not there, it doesn't matter to him and so, he stays in bed and starts the footage.

He watches himself walking from the camera to his bed. The picture is in black and white and a little snowy. Despite being recorded in pitch-black, the picture is surprisingly clear. Jason's impressed with the quality, and so he should be, considering the price he paid.

He thumbs at the tracker and pushes the video along towards the middle of the night. There's still nothing, so he shifts a little more. The screen freezes and buffers and plays from a point where his bed is empty. He pauses it and rocks into the pillows to get comfy. After pushing the tracker back, he re-appears back on the screen as a lump under the duvet, and his head on the pillow. He moves the video forward a couple of minutes and the lump disappears again.

Did he go for a pee in the middle of the night? He doesn't remember. He moves the tracker back a little, and the video plays. It shows him sitting up on the side of the bed like a statue, eyes open, looking forward, unfocused. He can see that his chest is

pulsating from breathing hard. Prodding the screen with his index finger, the footage skips back to where he's laying down. He plays the video from there and stares at his phone.

It has been over a minute, and he still hasn't blinked. He doesn't want to miss a single frame. It feels like he's having an out-of-body experience. He cannot comprehend what's happening in the footage.

There's movement. In the video, he flings the duvet back and sits up. His eyes look empty and his skin is paler than normal. He swivels his body, puts his feet on the floor, and sits on the side of his bed.

"What am I doing?" Jason wonders. He continues watching himself, sitting still on the edge of the bed. It's minutes before the next bit of action. He stands like a robot being activated, maintaining a straight posture, and continuing to stare forward. He doesn't go anywhere. There's no other movement. Nothing is happening apart from him standing. Has he blinked yet? Neither Jason has. After a couple more minutes, he moves. He strides forward with long funeral march strides with a hint of swaying drunkenness, before stopping in front of the door, staring ahead at nothing in particular again. Jason can't see the eyes now, only the back of himself. Another minute later, he opens the door and shuffles out.

Jason looks up from his phone and looks at the door. It's closed. He goes back to his video. Nothing's happening. It is now a video of an empty room with an empty bed and an open door. Jason skips the video to find out when he returns to bed. It's an hour later at around 3:20 am. The footage shows him walking into the room, shutting the door behind him, lying down in bed, and putting the duvet over himself. Jason skips the video to see if anything else

happens the rest of the night, but there's nothing until he gets to where he wakes up and reaches for his phone. Now, he's watching himself, watching himself.

He tries to work all this out. A little slow, as it's too early for him, so he thinks aloud.

"What am I doing? Am I sleepwalking?" he says to himself. "Where? How?"

Thoughts rush through his mind as he puts the pieces together. Did he move the chair and the doll? He must have. Of course, there are no ghosts. It's him; he just didn't know it was him. The next question is, where did he go last night for an hour? He rings Layla from his bed and it goes to voicemail. She'll be at work.

"I'm sleepwalking... Call me," he says after the beep.

He rolls out of bed and slips on his Jedi Knight bathrobe and a pair of grey slippers. A shower or breakfast is not an option this morning because he has far too much to do, so he pees, washes his hands and heads downstairs to fire up his laptop and down a quick coffee. Now he's ready to create a video. He downloads the footage and cuts it down to only show the parts where he's walking out of his bedroom, then back in, with the time running in the bottom right corner. Once he's happy with the footage, he steers the mic and camera to his face and presses the record button.

"I have an exciting update for you..."

His hands are more animated than usual, the bags under his eyes are noticeable, and his quiff is flat. He doesn't care what he looks like, it's far too exciting to care about superficial things like what he looks like. He wants this video uploaded as soon as possible. It

may not be a paranormal video, but it's interesting. Where the hell did he go last night and what did he do?

“As you can see in the footage, the time is around ten past two in the morning. I sit up and go for a wander. I actually sleepwalked. When strange things started happening in the house, I put up this camera in my bedroom to see what the hell was going on and there it is, folks. Mystery solved. I'm sleepwalking. I must have brought the chair upstairs.”

He looks off into the distance for a second or two.

“But where did I go last night? I'm going to have to buy more cameras.”

He ends the video with his usual spiel and uploads it. The question hangs around in his mind. Where did he go? He walks around his house. The living room. The kitchen. The dining room. Nothing seems out of place. Anne the doll is on the bookcase in the living room, the jinx box is on the floor next to the wall in the dining room, chairs, cups, cutlery, shoes, pictures, framed photos. Everything is where it should be. It's a mystery. Jason opens the Amazon app on his iPhone and primes more cameras to come the next day. He downs a second coffee of the morning and opts for a shower.

Last night plays through his mind as he walks upstairs, unable to shake it off for a second. He turns on the shower and waits for the water to get hot, shedding his slippers and bathrobe. It doesn't take long for the shower to reach the perfect 39 degrees Celsius. Jason steps into the shower and lets the water bounce off his chest and run down his body and thighs, down his shins, and onto his feet where the water disperses down the plughole. He reaches for the soap and rolls it between his hands to the lather it up, then puts it

back. With his soapy hands, he bends down and scrubs himself clean from bottom to top. Brown water flows down the plughole. From underneath his feet, more brown water spreads out and dirties the shower floor. Dirty brown water and small blades of grass spiral around the white flooring of the shower before disappearing down the plughole. It reminds him of the showers he took after football matches. After a game of Sunday League, he would leave the shower filthy from scrubbing the mud from his knees. His mum would ask if he just rolled around in mud rather than played football because he would leave the shower in such a filthy state.

Jason lifts his foot to look at the sole and it's black. It's mucky like he's been walking around outside in bare feet.

"I went outside!" It's an epiphany moment. He cleans his feet and rubs the rest of his body with his soapy hands while the shower water washes away the suds. It's a rush job, only half-heartedly washing his face, armpits and genitals. He stops the water, jumps out of the shower, and snatches a towel off the radiator when his phone rings. It's Layla.

"I was outside! I sleepwalked outside! Look. I'll call you back."

Too excited to say bye, Jason hangs up and hurries to get dried and dressed to investigate his garden. He flings the towel over the radiator, after scarcely rubbing it over his body, and runs butt-naked to his room to rummage through his underwear drawer. As he tries to dress himself, his clothes roll up and twist from the resistance of his damp skin. He gets them over his wet body by tugging and pulling at them with force, then he runs a hand through his wet hair before rushing downstairs.

CHAPTER 22

“I’m not staying over while you’re sleepwalking, or recording in the bedroom,” says Layla, still in her nurse’s uniform. She came straight round as soon as her shift finished, intrigued by Jason’s latest video.

Jason tuts. “I won’t try it on while I’m recording, and if I sleepwalk, you can just wake me up.”

“No, it’s not a myth that you shouldn’t wake up a sleepwalker. It causes disorientation.”

“Is that it? It sounds safer than letting me wander outside.”

“Did you really go outside?”

“I must have. My feet were black. I found nothing, though. I looked out front and back and nothing has moved.”

“Weird.” Layla catches the jinx box in the corner of her eye. “Talking of weird. Found anything out about that thing?”

She nods towards the box.

“No. Gone through my comments on my video. There was nothing useful. Just the same old bollocks. People saying it’s fake, or I sent it to myself.”

“It’s just bizarre that it’s turned up with no explanation.”

“Probably just from a fan. They send me some weird shit. I think this one found my address on the internet, and sent me a noose in a box, thinking I’d like the surrounding mystery and include it in one of my videos.”

“And that’s it?”

Jason nods while Layla looks over to a cardboard box next to the back door.

“Is that the box it came in?”

Jason turns to look and says yes. Layla stands and goes to inspect.

A bold Arial font is used to print the delivery address on a white sticky label that is stuck to the side of the box. There’s no return address just in case it was undelivered. She looks inside and it’s empty. She runs her fingers under the flaps of the bottom of the box and pulls out a folded piece of paper.

“Er, Jason?”

She unfolds the paper delicately in fear it will shatter if she handles it too roughly, and reads the handwritten note in her head before announcing to Jason what it says. Goosebumps bubble up her arm and tug on the hairs on the back of her neck.

“Do not open or you will die!” she says.

She looks up into Jason’s icy stare. He storms over and snatches the note from Layla’s fingers.

“You need to call the police,” says Layla. “That’s a death threat.”

CHAPTER 23

Thomas steps onto the number 62, says his stop to the bus driver, and taps his phone on the card reader. The machine beeps when the transaction eventually authorises, telling Thomas he can take a seat. The bus is almost three-quarters full, like most evenings. He looks for a seat that is not next to a stranger. It's not that he dislikes people, it's a more self-conscious reason. If he has to sit on an aisle seat, one buttock hangs off the cushioned seating, which is uncomfortable, especially when enduring it for half an hour. The other option is to shuffle up, however, that results in one of his thick thighs resting on the person next to him. Again, another uncomfortable half an hour, but for him and another passenger.

His wide build is not bus-friendly. He knows the answer is to learn to drive or to get a job working from home. He hates his job anyway. The number of idiots he has to deal with. The amount of over-privileged boomers that call him to complain about the most ridiculous things. Working in a call centre is not for everyone, and it's not for him. Even after ten years of being there, he knows it's not for him. Quitting is not an option because he needs the money, and he doesn't have any other options because of his lack of skills. He's not fit enough or strong enough for manual labour work, but he has some ideas to get out of this depressing job. Maybe they are pipe dreams, but he's working on it. He's selling Harry Potter wands on eBay. It's not enough for him to quit. Still, it's a step. Jeffrey Bezos started somewhere.

Thomas flops onto the garishly patterned bus seat and slides up to the window, half of his bum cheek overflowing on to the aisle seat next to him. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and unravels

his wired headphones before poking them into his ears. There's a notification of a new video from his favourite YouTuber and he wonders if it has anything to do with the box he sent to them.

Thomas is a loyal fan and has watched most of Jason's videos. He's one of his early subscribers and followed Jason's channel when it went paranormal. Thomas enjoys the thrill of the jump scares and admires Jason's natural style on camera. He often feels worried and scared for Jason, especially when he encounters an evil presence, which happens a lot.

Thomas shook with excitement when he saw Jason unboxing his gift in the last video. He loved the lights flickering and the gadgets going off. Though, the ending was an anti-climax. What was with the chair in the bed? And why didn't he mention the note? Maybe he's building into something. He's done that before, like the time he received a voodoo doll. Jason made several videos of himself stabbing, burning and cutting the doll until revealing that he didn't know that it was a voodoo doll of one of his fans and it turned out that his actions accidentally put the fan in hospital. Thomas presses play and watches Jason's latest video.

When the video ends, he closes down YouTube and feels a surge of disappointment. Jason has ignored the box completely and doesn't even acknowledge its existence. Thomas wonders if he has wasted his time and money on sending it. He returns his phone to his pocket and gazes out of the window. The video was about Jason sleepwalking and it looks like there's more to come. Thomas wants his box to be the focus of Jason's videos. He gets his phone back out, opens Gmail, and taps on the option to create a new account. He has a new plan to go with his new email address.

CHAPTER 24

Jason persuades Layla to stay over. He had to convince her to keep the camera on in the bedroom, but persuaded her it would be beneficial for her to stay over because of his nighttime escapades and the possibility of needing medical help. Also, the video footage may need to be used as evidence if someone, or something, does come into the room to kill him.

Jason didn't call the police over the note. "That's not a death threat," he said. "It's like I said, it's from a fan trying to create a bit of mystery, wanting to send something scary for one of my videos. That is all. There's nothing to worry about."

She agrees to stay over but only in the spare room, with the door locked. He reluctantly agrees and sleeps on his own. He sleeps right through the night until the birds are chirping in the morning. It's Layla entering the bedroom that wakes him up. She's already showered and dressed for work. She looks up at the camera and sees there is no red light.

"Why didn't you record last night?" she asks.

Jason sits up and looks at the camera through his sticky, tired eyes and notices the lack of red light.

"Oh, what?"

He throws his duvet back and swings his feet round off the bed and onto the floor.

“Your feet are black,” Layla points out. Jason lifts his foot and, once again, dirt covers the soles of his feet.

“What’s happening?” he says as he picks up his phone. Layla sits beside him and looks over his shoulder, also wanting to see the footage of last night.

“Really could have done with all those cameras last night. There coming today,” he says as he brings up the CCTV app on his iPhone. He fast-forwards the video to find where he sits up. It’s at around half two. Jason gets a sense of *déjà vu* as he watches himself sitting on the edge of the bed, staring forward at nothing. He sits still for a couple of minutes before he turns his head to face the camera. It looks more like he’s looking past the camera rather than looking at it. After a few more seconds, he puts a finger to his lips and shushes the camera, like he wants it to keep a secret. Then he shuffles over to the camera and climbs up, resulting in an extreme close-up of his face filling the screen, before it turns blank. Jason shivers like he has an ice cube sliding down his spine.

“I turned it off,” says Jason.

“And then what?” wonders Layla.

Jason doesn’t know the answer. The only thing he does know is that whatever he did, it was outside. He bounds downstairs with Layla hot on his heels and heads to the door, but doesn’t make it. He stops while passing through the dining room. In his peripheral vision, he sees the jinx box is on the table. Jason spins to look at it. The lid is up and the inside is empty. Layla stares at the box too, both of them with their mouths open, and no words coming out. Jason snaps out of the trance and rushes again to the back door. He

whips the door open and instantly sees the noose. It's hanging from a branch of the beech tree at the back of his garden.

"How the fuck did it get up there?" says Jason.

"You put it there, I assume."

"Okay, let me rephrase that. How the fuck did I get up there and tie the noose to the branch?"

Layla shrugs. She has some theories but doesn't mention them. She's still in two minds, unsure if he's faking it all or if he's genuinely sleepwalking.

"I need those fucking cameras to come," Jason concludes.

CHAPTER 25

While Layla is at work, Jason records an update for his YouTube channel, uses a ladder to untie the noose, puts it back in the jinx box, uploads his video, and answers the door to the Amazon guy, who hands over a box. It's his extra CCTV to go around the house. Jason gets on it straight away, drilling the cameras one by one, and setting them up all over. The landing, the spare bedroom, the hallway, the living room, the kitchen, the dining room, the back porch and the back garden.

Afterwards, he walks around his house checking each one, admiring the job he's done. He's only screwed them into a corner of each room, but he is still proud of his workmanship. They're all pointing in the right direction, which is a good sign.

Jason sits back at his laptop to check his views and comments. His views are counting up nicely. His midnight antics are getting his views back up and stirring an interest. Even though he hasn't a fucking clue what's happening to him, as long as it increases his popularity, he's sure he can live with sleepwalking a bit.

Since he hasn't checked his emails in a while, he opens Outlook and expects to have several to delete. His inbox is full of the usual shit. Russian girls, Nigerian princes, and penis enlargers. Within the list, one stands out to Jason. The subject says 'Jinx Box' and it's from a Thomas Anderson. Jason slides the mouse and clicks when the cursor hovers over the email subject. It opens the email.

The first thing Jason looks at is the sender's email address. It's a jumble of random numbers and letters, followed by gmail.com. Someone recently created it for anonymity. Jason doubts that

Thomas Anderson is a real name. Still, he reads the email with interest.

“Why did you open the Jinx box? The letter told you not to. You were meant to keep it safe. It was a present because I am a real big fan. You’re probably going to die now.”

Jason swallows so hard that his Adam’s apple nearly doesn’t come back up. He suddenly notices how dry the inside of his mouth is. His tongue feels extremely dry, as if it’s undergoing desertification. Jason clicks reply and types.

‘Who is this? What do you want?’

He presses send and five seconds later, a ‘failed sent’ message appears in his inbox. Jason slams shut his laptop with a shaking hand. He knew it wouldn’t be a proper email address, just a temporary one. He needs a drink. It doesn’t need to be alcoholic, just wet enough to wash away the dryness from the back of his throat.

In a daze, he walks over to the sink and runs the water until it’s cool. There’s no glass within arm’s reach, so he bends over the sink and kisses the falling water, slurping at it like a virgin’s first kiss. After quenching his thirst, he straightens up and dries his mouth on the back of his hand as he shuts off the tap. He sits back at the table, unable to think straight as his brain shuts down while a million thoughts swarm through his mind. Eventually, disbelief creeps in and grows, causing doubt to take him by the scruff of his neck and talk him out of believing the email’s claims. It’s all a load of bollocks. He knows that more than most. How many haunted pubs, houses, and locations has he been to? Not once has he experienced any kind of paranormal activity first-hand. He has faked all the videos in the name of entertainment and money. Yep,

it's all a load of bollocks. He won't die. Well, not in the immediate future.

Taking deep breaths, a sense of calm washes over him, reassuring himself. But just in case something is off, he opens his laptop back up and types 'Google' into Bing and searches for 'Jinx Box'.

CHAPTER 26

Layla turns up at Jason's house in her uniform, coming straight from work once again. She can't help but notice the cameras as she walks through the house. They're in every room.

"Sheesh. Big brother is watching," she says.

Jason skips down the hall to greet her with a grin.

"Looking at the comments on my latest vid, people can't wait. My views are going through the roof. And my subscribers are at a record high. There's a lot of interest."

"Is that all you care about? You're apparently having a severe case of sleepwalking and somehow hung a noose up on a big tree in the middle of the night. You need to see someone if this is really happening. A doctor... for some pills to knock you out, or a psychiatrist to get whatever it is off your chest that is causing this."

"Maybe I need a voodoo doctor. People believe the jinx box has something to do with this."

"Don't talk shit. There's no such thing as curses or possessions. You don't need an exorcist."

"I've been doing some research."

"Where?"

“On Reddit.”

“Oh, fucking great,” she says while rolling her eyes.

“Yeah. There’re comments on there from people who know people who got one of these boxes.”

“People they know? Like their cousin’s boyfriend’s sister’s school friend? And what? They started sleepwalking?”

“No, they killed themselves.”

“Oh yeah, because that’s fucking better than sleepwalking.”

“Someone wrote that his friend received a box coated in wax with jinx scratched into the top and when he opened it, there was a knife inside. A few nights later, he stabbed himself with that knife.”

“Are you just trying to scare me because it’s working so you can stop now? Is it all crap, Jason?”

“No. Really. This is happening to me. I am sleepwalking. There was a woman who said her husband bought one of these boxes from eBay and inside he found a noose. A few nights later, she woke up to find him hanging. He’d used the noose to kill himself.”

“So, you’re saying you’re going to kill yourself? Fine, if that’s the case, there’s a simple solution.”

Layla storms into the kitchen and opens the drawer full of cutlery to pullout the long bread knife with jagged teeth. She wields the

knife as she walks to the jinx box and kicks the lid up to reveal the noose. She picks it up and wrestles with the knot, unravelling it back into a single long piece of rope before she hacks and saws at it with the knife, shredding it into smaller pieces. Jason just watches her do it. He doesn't intervene. He knows not to approach an angry woman with a knife.

"There. You can't hang yourself now."

"No, I suppose I can't."

She puts the pieces of rope into a 30p plastic shopping bag and ties it up before throwing it into the bin.

"The curse is now lifted. You don't need to put your cameras on tonight. There will be nothing to see."

She saunters over to him and sits on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck.

"And we can sleep in the same bed tonight."

"An early night?"

"Yes," she says as she kisses him on the end of his nose.

CHAPTER 27

Jason is lying with his back to Layla, already asleep. He is making noises that sound somewhere between heavy breathing and snoring. Before nodding off, that was the closest she'd been to letting him come inside her. She still couldn't quite bring herself to letting him, but she's getting closer to it. She had all the intentions of going all the way tonight. Then a panic attack crept up as Jason edged to climax. She hid it, and unless Jason was pretending to be unaware, she hid her panic attack well, coping until the very last few seconds when she had to pull him up onto his knees and manoeuvre him up to her chest. It was too late. Most of his semen sprayed onto her stomach before he could straddle her chest.

After cleaning up with the baby wipes that Jason now keeps beside the bed, she went to the bathroom to pee. By the time she got back, Jason had turned over and fallen asleep, or possibly pretending to be asleep with the face on for being pushed off of her when he was so close. She's just not ready, though. She wants to explain to him fully, so he can understand. He knows that someone raped her, but not by her brother when she was nine. How would he react to that? If they were in love and ready to spend the rest of their lives together, he would understand, right? He would be patient and loyal.

She will explain tomorrow. The truth. The whole truth. And if he can't accept it, then it means their relationship was never meant to be.

She drifts off. Then, in what feels like a blink, she awakes. It's black and too dark for eyes to adjust. All she can see is the red light from the camera on the wall. The camera? She extends her

hand out to shake Jason by the shoulder and catches nothing but air. She pats down the bed with her hand and can only feel the bare bedsheets. There is no Jason next to her.

“Jason?” she whispers loudly and from the end of the bed, he jumps on her. His knees landing on either side of her thighs and his palms smash into her shoulders, throwing her backwards. Her neck whips back and her head crashes into the pillow. Jason’s hands move from her shoulders to around her neck in one swift movement and he squeezes, pushing down on her throat. She grabs his arms and pulls at them, but they don’t shift. He’s too strong. She goes to scream and can’t. Unable to draw breath to fill up her lungs, snot and tears stream down her face. She grabs and scratches at his face, digging her nails into his forehead and cheeks. She can’t see if she has drawn blood. If she has, it doesn’t mean a thing, because Jason still has his hands around her throat. He lifts his head and sits up more to move out of the reach of Layla’s fingernails. The movement gives Layla a brief gap to move within. She kicks up her right leg as hard as she can and connects right between his legs. Jason rolls off into the foetal position and holds his balls while he swears.

“Oh fuck. My balls.”

She doesn’t say anything. She can’t say anything. Hastily, she collects her clothes and races out of the door.

“Layla!” Jason shouts.

She hears him and ignores him.

“Come back,” he cries.

She reaches the front door and rushes to get dressed before leaving, listening out for him. She hears the creak of his footsteps on the floorboards as he hops across the landing. The light at the top of the stairs comes on and Jason comes into view.

“Stay there,” she says.

“What’s up? What’s going on?”

She slips her feet into her shoes as Jason limps down one step. The pain has spread from his balls to his bladder.

“Don’t come anywhere near me!” she screams.

She opens the door and runs out into the middle of the night.

“Layla,” he shouts, then hobbles back to his bedroom to get his mobile. He tries calling her, only it goes to voicemail.

“Layla, please come back.”

He puts the phone down and notices the red light on the camera.

CHAPTER 28

Jason sits at his laptop, watching the footage over and over. It doesn't seem real, like it was just a dream, like it never happened. The severity of the video is not hitting home. To him, it's like every other video he's in. Fake.

His face stings to fuck. He touches the claw marks, running his fingertips over the scabby ridges on his face. They're real. The scratches are deep and they'll be there for a while. Thank God he hardly ever leaves the house anymore, and it's noticeable on his body. Love handles are forming from his lack of gym going.

He edits the video, cutting the length down, and starting the footage at the point where he sneaks out of bed. The video shows him creeping to the bottom of the bed, where he stands for several minutes before leaping on top of Layla. He has pixelated Layla's face and his hands while they are around her neck, not wanting YouTube to remove the video. He wants people to see what's happening, convincing himself that documenting every event is crucial, and that this evidence will prove the reality of his situation. It's proof to all his viewers that he's not a fraud and what's happening is real.

He places the GoPro on the tripod and adjusts it to capture his face, marked by scars. His hair is flat. Running his fingers through it does nothing as it settles back on his head, limp and lifeless. He clears his throat and presses 'record'.

"Hi, this video contains violent content and I need to alert you to this potentially sensitive material. However, I think it is important to show you this footage. As you can see from my face, I have

unknowingly been in an altercation. I will show you what happened right now and speak about it afterward.” He stops recording to take a sip of water and close his eyes while he takes three slow deep breaths and thinks about what he’s going to say next.

“As you saw in the footage, I attacked my girlfriend in my sleep. My sleepwalking has taken a very dark twist. I was unaware of this happening and did not wake until I got a kick between my legs. Who knows what would have happened if she did not get that kick in? I dread to think. The question is, why am I sleepwalking? And it’s not normal sleepwalking. This is something else. I think something or someone has possessed me. Possibly by a demon, and it takes over my body when I am asleep and not in control of myself. And I think it is this.” He bends down to pick up the jinx box and drops it in front of the camera. “Ever since I opened this, a curse has befallen me. I need to find out who sent me this and where it came from. Please get in contact. Look at my face. This is real. I need help. Please.”

He presses ‘stop’ just as his eyes well up. Tears cascade down his cheeks as his bottom lip quivers. He snorts as he tries to catch his breath. His vision darkens and his head spins. He has to push his chair back to give him enough room to lean forward and force his head as close to between his knees as his back allows.

After a few seconds, the light comes back to his vision as he calms down. His tears slow and so does his breathing. Not his heart, though. That’s beating harder and faster than ever. He can feel the pulse in his wrists pushing against the inside of his skin. It’s a sensation he’s never experienced. Maybe his body is trying to tell him something. He disregards it and completes the editing of his video before uploading it to his channel.

CHAPTER 29

Layla stares at the faces she can make out. A witch, with a pointy chin and matching nose. A fisherman, with a broad chin and a bucket hat. Abraham Lincoln, with the sideburns and square hat. The pattern on the ceiling repeats itself. Witch, fisherman, Abraham Lincoln, witch, fisherman, Abraham Lincoln. It's all she wants to think about while she lies in her bed.

It hurts to swallow; she hasn't looked in a mirror yet so she doesn't know how visible the bruises on her neck are. Currently, she's in denial about it, concentrating on the ceiling, making out the shapes and faces. At some point, she's going to have to make a move.

There's no way she can make her shift in the hospital, so she needs to call in and let them know she won't be coming in. She opts to put it off a few more minutes. The thought of making the phone call to work makes her a little sick. What is she going to say to them? Not the truth. She's too embarrassed about what happened.

She rolls over and reaches for her phone. Notifications flood the screen. She has no intention of checking them now, or ever. She could just clear all and shut out the world. Her only reason to grab her phone is to call work, not to deal with messages and voicemails. Ignoring everything on her phone, she scrolls through her contacts until she gets to 'work'. She wants to get it over with, like ripping off a band-aid, then she can pull the duvet over her head and retreat to her cocoon. The phone answers in two rings.

"Hello, Falow Hospital," says a woman with a tired voice.

“Hi, It’s Layla Luk. I’m calling because I won’t be in today. I’m not well,”

Layla answers the HR lady’s questions, blaming her absence on a migraine, and hangs up the phone.

That was easy enough, she thinks. The lady only asked who her supervisor was, her start time, and if she thought she’d be back tomorrow. Layla said she didn’t know, and the lady told her to call back again tomorrow if she’s not.

Layla slams her mobile back on the bedside drawer, yanks the duvet over her head, and closes her eyes to make it as dark as possible, but she can still see. She can see Jason’s eyes boring into hers while he puts all his weight onto her throat. It stops her from breathing and it doesn’t start back up. She kicks off the duvet and sits up to suck in some cool air. It rattles around in her throat as she catches her breath back. She blows out her cheeks in relief when the breathing starts again. It’s going to be a long day and being exhausted doesn’t help. She’s not been back to sleep since it happened and she can’t close her eyes to rest because when she does, she sees Jason lunging for her.

Brushing her teeth was another of Layla’s remedies for a hangover. It helped her get rid of the furry tongue and the sour breath that made her stomach churn and her head pound. A McDonald’s and a nanna nap were her other remedies. Even though she wasn’t hungover, she felt it. She had the grogginess, the headache, and the tiredness. One of her hangover remedies crosses her mind as a possible solution.

She rolls out of bed and zombie-walks to the bathroom, then pulls her pyjama bottoms down and sits on the loo to pee. She’s been putting it off, but now she’s there, she might as well go. As

soon as she starts peeing, the buzzer for her apartment reverberates through the intercom. It makes her jump. She's not expecting anyone. It must be the postie at this time, or Jason, and she doesn't want to see Jason, so she doesn't rush her pee. She lets them buzz again and whoever it is; they give up quickly enough.

There was no chance of her answering it. She shouldn't be in anyway. At this time, she has usually left for work by now. And Layla's not expecting any post, so if it wasn't Jason, she assumes that if it was the postman; he only wanted to leave a neighbour's parcel with her. Her neighbours don't accept her mail for her when she's at work, so she's not doing it for them.

The intercom doesn't buzz again. Layla finishes her pee and brushes her teeth. The sensation of a fresh and minty mouth helps her a little.

She examines her neck in the mirror, bending over the sink to take a closer inspection under the bright bathroom light. There're dark fingerprints around her neck. The bruises aren't obvious; she thinks she'll get away with it, especially if she applies a concealer, or puts foundation on and spreads it down her neck. No one's going to get up that close in a light this bright.

She continues taking little steps to get through the day. Next, she runs the shower until it's hot, and like most women, Layla likes the shower magma hot. She steps out of her pyjamas and kicks them to the corner of the bathroom floor. They're a thin cotton, in light blue, dotted with pink daisies, and white buttons run down the front. Even though they're thin, they're too warm for a summer night's sleep, but it's all she could find when she got in, and she didn't want to lie in bed naked. It leaves her feeling vulnerable when she's alone and then there's always the possibility of a night-

time emergency in which she has to escape quickly. She never once thought there'd actually be a middle-of-the-night emergency.

She steps under the falling water and lets it run down her face. Large droplets plunge onto the acrylic flooring, and the sound drowns out everything Layla could hear. The sound of the birds and the cars passing by, it all disappears behind the sound of water crashing around her. It stops her from being able to hear the dinks coming from the little stones being thrown against her front window.

She washes herself, oblivious to the outside world. The dinks stop as she turns off the tap and grabs a towel to wrap around her chest. It's long, fluffy, and creamy-coloured. It lives on the radiator, so in the winter, it's toasty warm. As it's summer, she doesn't have the heating on, so it's at a normal temperature. A smaller towel is used to wrap around her hair.

She sits on the bed and lets herself dry naturally, not bothering to rub herself with a towel. She will blow-dry her hair, though. It's too thick to leave or dry with a towel.

In the corner of her bedroom, a chair holds a pile of worn clothes, with a pair of black sweatpants catching her eye. She picks them up and chooses a white vest top from her wardrobe. After draping her towels over the radiator in the bathroom, she gets dressed. She doesn't know what to do today. All she knows is that she didn't want to wallow around in her pyjamas, and that she needs a coffee.

While the kettle boils, she opens the fridge for the milk. It's four days past its use-by date. She takes off the lid and swirls the milk around before putting her nose in there. The sour smell makes her wince. She pours the contents down the sink and tosses the plastic

bottle into the recycling bin. Unable to make a coffee now, she shudders at the thought of black coffee's bitter taste, which she finds truly evil.

She slips into her Converse trainers, grabs the keys from the hook at the side of the door, and leaves her apartment to head downstairs towards the front door. First, deciding to check her letterbox while she's passing. She stabs her key into the slit and turns. The box opens to reveal no post. Only a folded-up piece of paper. It seems like a ripped-out page from an A5 notebook. Layla looks around to see if anyone is watching her. There's no one around, so she hesitantly takes the note out of the box and unfolds it. Written on it is 'Fucking whore' in blue ink. She looks around again to double-check that no one is around and goes to the door to press her face against the frosted pane of glass. She can't make out any figures, so she can't be sure it's safe to go outside, and heads back up to her apartment to look out of the windows. There's still no sign of life.

Who's left this? she thinks, looking at the note again to see if she recognises the handwriting. It could be anyone's. It's all straight lines and capitals. She doesn't want to text Jason to ask if it was him, but that's the only person she can think of. He wouldn't, though, would he? She paces up and down, clutching the note. Was the buzzing something to do with this? Was it Jason? Did he think she was ignoring him and left the note? Why didn't he come upstairs and knock on the door? He got through the front door somehow because all the letter boxes for all the apartments are in the building's foyer.

A sense of dread sits in her stomach. She doesn't want to be on her own. She pictures bad things happening if she stays, so she messages her mum and tells her she's going to stay over.

‘Great,’ her mum replies.

Just in case someone is waiting around the corner, she calls her local taxi firm and asks them to pick her up from the front door. They’ll send John. They always do. Layla has known him for years. It’s why she has no issues calling a taxi when she’s on her own. He’s never ripped her off, he’s never said anything sexual or racist, and he’s never done anything to make her feel uncomfortable. John is a local, middle-aged, family man that lives with his wife and has two grown-up daughters who have flown the nest. It’s probably because he is a dad of daughters in a household of women that he is trustworthy. John honks the horn of his Prius and Layla runs out of the front door, jumping into the passenger seat.

“You could’ve walked to your mother’s,” he says to her. “It’s only around the corner.”

“I know,” she says. “I just...”

She doesn’t finish the sentence. She shrugs instead, and he knows what that means. It means ‘mind your own business.’

CHAPTER 30

Layla walks through the front door without knocking. Her mum never locks it, apart from at night or when she's out.

"I'm here," she bellows.

"Alright, sweetheart. You want a cuppa?" her mum calls back.

"Coffee, please."

Her body's still craving for that morning caffeine hit. If she had gone to work, she'd be on her third cup by now. "I'm just going to put my bag in the room."

She goes upstairs and walks past her old bedroom and Kael's and goes into the spare room. It used to be a study. Since it never gets used anymore, Layla's mum spent a few weekends decorating it and turning it into a guest room. B&Q had a deal on large tubs of brilliant white paint, so the walls are as white as Jason's teeth. It's only a small room, so the bed is a single. It's pushed against the wall with a small set of black drawers next to it that doubles up as a bedside table, topped with an office lamp with a bendy neck on top.

Layla throws her bag on the bed and goes to find her mum. She's in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil. Layla pulls up a stool and sits at the table, watching her mum with her back to her, scooping coffee into one cup and chucking a tea bag in the other.

“Everything alright? Not at work today?” she asks as she pours the boiled water into the two mugs.

“I didn’t feel well enough to go in,” says Layla.

Her mum adds milk to both drinks and uses the same teaspoon to stir the hot beverages. Layla knows she won’t be able to detect the tea’s taste in her coffee, yet the thought of her mum tainting her drink with a small amount of tea frustrates her.

“Oh? You and Jason okay?”

Layla’s eyes fidget as she thinks about her answer. Her mum puts the milk back in the fridge and fetches the mugs over to the table.

“Layla! Your neck! What in Christ happened?” she shrieks in one of those high-pitched motherly panic shrieks, and slams the mugs down on the table, causing splashes to land on the tabletop. Layla flinches as her mum pinches her chin between her thumb and forefinger and delicately lifts her head up and into the light. She caresses the bruises on her neck with her fingers.

“Who did this?”

Layla looks into her mum’s eyes and doesn’t answer her. She can’t. The word is stuck in her throat. Saying it will make it real and making it real means she needs to deal with it. It means she will cry; it means she will have to leave Jason; it means weeks of being asked what happened by work friends, and asking if she’s okay. Her mum answers for her.

“Jason?”

Layla looks away from her mum, ashamed. The floodgates open. No turning back now. Layla nods.

She sits on the stool next to her daughter and spins it around, forcing Layla to face her. “Oh, Layla. Why would he do this?” She holds her hands and rests them on her knees, her hands on top.

“I don’t know. It was in the middle of the night. Out of nowhere. He says he didn’t mean to.”

“Oh, they all say that. Was he getting frustrated with waiting?”

“No, Mum. He has no explanation. He claims he was sleepwalking and was asleep when he strangled me. He jumped on me in my sleep and tried to choke me.”

“What? Sleepwalking?” Her eyes lose focus and her expression stiffens, like she’s glitching from a poor Wi-Fi signal.

“I don’t know if to believe him or not. I don’t know if it was a stunt for his channel.”

Layla’s mum doesn’t reply. She continues to glitch. Layla can see her lips moving, silently talking to herself. Layla knew this meant she was in deep thought.

“Mum?” she says, snapping her mum out of her trance.

“Sorry. It’s just...”

“What?” says Layla.

“My mum. I think she sleepwalked.”

“Nan?” She tries to think back to those times she used to sleep over at weekends. No experience of this comes to mind.

“Yeah. I never saw it. It was when Kalel...” She stops. She realises this is the first time they’ve spoken about Kalel in years. “When Kalel stayed over when...well, when I thought it was to help my mum. He went to the loo in the middle of the night and he said that my mum was waiting for him at the top of the stairs and pushed him. He fell all the way down. Although he didn’t break anything, he was in a lot of pain for a couple of weeks. Mum said she couldn’t remember doing it. The noise woke her, and she found herself at the top of the stairs and didn’t know how she got there. He was lying there at the bottom of the stairs. He also said that she used to come into your room at night and move a doll so it was on the pillow in the morning. My Mum denied it. We didn’t believe him because why would she do that? Our only conclusion was that she sleepwalked.”

“No, Kalel used to move it...I think,” she says, unsure. She can’t remember seeing Kalel moving it. She just assumed. He was the one who made up stories about it. He was the one who loved to scare her and make her cry. “So, Jason could have done this to me in his sleep?”

She thinks about the possibility. Her nan and Jason. Sleepwalking. Hurting people. It is possible.

“You think Jason is telling the truth?” she asks her mum.

“Even if he didn’t mean to hurt you, he still did. It still happened. And if it happened once, it can happen again.”

“That’s not what I asked,” says Layla.

“Yeah. I suppose it’s a possibility. If it happened to my mum, it could happen to Jason.”

They linger in quietude as they sip their drinks. Layla removes her mobile from out of her pocket and lets her fingers stroke the numbers of her pin. She swipes down on the screen and taps on the “New Video” notification waiting for her and watches YouTube load up Jason’s new video. After a few seconds, it plays.

“What the ffff...!” yells Layla.

CHAPTER 31

Jason checks the views on his latest video. It's already in the millions. To prevent it from being taken down and continue being monetised, he has had to censor a lot of it. People can get the gist of what's happening, and he finishes with a close-up of his face so everyone can see his deep scratches.

He's not seen so many dislikes on one of his videos before, but he ignores that. A view is a view, doesn't matter if it's from a fan or a hater, just as long as they are watching him and he's getting his message across. Though he's unsure exactly what message he's trying to portray. 'Hey, look at me? Shit's happening. This could happen to you?'

A text comes through on his phone. It's from Layla.

'I can't believe you've uploaded that, you piece of shit. Take the video down now.'

He knew it was coming, and for what it's worth, he did contemplate not uploading it. Not for long though, but he did contemplate it. He messages her back.

'People need to see what's happening to me. Sorry.'

A message instantly comes through.

'But it's bullshit. You're a fake. Take it down.'

'Come round tonight and we'll talk.'

‘I’m not going anywhere near you. You tried to kill me.’

I didn't, he thinks, but he doesn't type that. He re-watches the video, and it still doesn't feel real. It's like it never happened. He doesn't remember any of it, apart from the kick in the balls, and Layla storming out.

He plays the unedited version on his phone and zooms in on her. There's a desperate panic on her face. Her eyes are devoid of life as their colour fades to a ghostly white. Her mouth hangs open in a frozen, wide, gaping position. Snot bubbles burst and saliva slides down her chin.

As he watches, a lead weight materialises inside his skull and pushes against his brain, causing his head to feel weighed down as he becomes engulfed with guilt. He looks at the comments on his video and none are positive.

Wife beater.

Scum.

Sicko.

Fucking cunt.

Bile rises in his chest like a wave and burns the inside of his throat. He forces himself to swallow it back down before it leaves his mouth. To enhance his thinking power, he closes his eyes to shut out distractions. What's his next move? He knows what he should do, but will he regret it? He convinces himself it's important for people to see this video, to understand what is

happening. It's real. Yes, he knows what he should do. He should get help. Medical help.

He calls the doctors, and a merciless receptionist with a detached tone tells him, 'I'm sorry, there're no appointments. Try again tomorrow, at half eight. You may get an appointment then.'

He slams the phone down. "Fucking NHS!"

Then he looks down at the floor and sees the jinx box.

"This is your fault!" he shouts as he gets up and stomps on it.

The lid splinters and collapses in. His foot lifts and thunders down again on the word jinx, splitting the lid into several more pieces. Chunks of wood scatter about the floor. Even though it's made a mess, the momentary burst of violence has done the job of getting his emotions under control. He picks up the remains of the box and the bits of wood, and takes them outside to throw it all into a metal bin-sized incinerator. It's rusted from being outside all winter and looks like one side of it is ready to collapse in on itself. It still works perfectly fine for now, but after a few more fires, it will disintegrate.

He pours in some lighter fluid and throws in a match. A powerful whiff of paraffin fills his nostrils and then quickly dissipates as the fire grows and engulfs the box. Flames poke out of the holes in the incinerator's side as he watches the smoke follow the wind through the air. He looks for demons and ghouls escaping the box within the smoke, but he can't see any. It looks like normal smoke. Thick and grey as it floats up and follows the wind.

Actually, this is the-person-who-sent-it's fault.

A headache is materialising under the surface of his forehead, a stress headache. It's prickling exactly where his frown lines are. He closes his eyes and tries meditating while trying to form a plan. How can he track down the sender? There was no return label on the box. The only thing he has is the email. He heads back inside and pours himself a pint of water and pops a couple of paracetamol.

On his iPhone, he brings up his emails and scrolls to the one from Thomas Anderson to read it again. There's nothing new from the first time he read it and no clues to who sent it. It's useless. He clicks on the Google Chrome icon and types in 'Jinx Box'. He's already done some research, but he's all out of ideas and he might have missed something. Probably missed something. He only went to the Reddit post.

He scrolls down and scans the results of his search. There's a board game, a character called Jinx from a video game, the Reddit posts he has read, and an item on eBay. He clicks on the eBay link.

'Supernatural Jinx Box. Cursed object inside. Beware. Do not open. £40.00, 10 in stock!'

Below is a picture of the wooden box with the word 'jinx' etched into the lid and red candle wax sealing it shut. It's exactly how his was. Jason clicks on the seller and looks at their profile. The name is neo2199 and they have a score of 694 with 100% satisfaction. He scrolls down to look at the estimated delivery. 2-3 days from Bootle, Merseyside. "Fucking scouser!" he mutters to himself. There's no seller address, only a link to contact them. What does he ask them? 'Hey, did you send me a box and put a curse on me?' Maybe not.

Jason wants to know if they have sold any recently and to whom? He clicks on the reviews. There's been no feedback for at least a month. The last two feedbacks are from spring, both for Harry Potter wands. It doesn't look like he's sold one unless they've sold with no feedback received. He thinks about the name. Neo2199. He thinks about the email. Thomas Anderson. It clicks in his mind as he sees the connection. They're both *Matrix* related. The two names Keanu Reeves go by in the film are Neo and Thomas Anderson. Is this the person who sent it? He opens up his contacts and searches for Fat Fingers. Once he finds his name, he taps the call button.

"Hi, Steve. Sorry I've not been in touch. I need a massive favour."

"You always do," says Fat Fingers.

"I know. I'm sorry. I'm desperate."

Fat Fingers hears the desperation in his voice. He's not heard him sound like that for a long time. Not since he lost his mum. Sympathy overcomes Fat Fingers, and he feels guilty for saying that Jason always needs a favour.

"What can I do?"

"I need you to buy an item off eBay. The seller knows me and my address. I'm trying to find out where they live so I can pay them a visit."

"Pay them a visit? Hold on. I don't want to be a part of this if you're talking about some kind of mafia hit."

“No, not that kind of visit. Something’s happening to me and I need to ask them some questions. Please order the item. I’ll send you the link. I’ll sort you out with the money. Once you have the item, message them and tell them you want to return it. Once you get the return address, we’ll visit them.”

“*We’ll* visit them?” Fat Fingers asks, double checking if he means the royal ‘we’.

“Please. I’m desperate.”

“You’ve said that already.”

“But, I am, Steve.”

CHAPTER 32

It's already been a couple of days and he still hasn't heard from Fat Fingers. He knows it's too soon, so he won't chase his friend. He's doing him a massive favour and pestering wouldn't be fair.

He's sprawled out on his sofa, watching nothing because the TV is off. On the black screen, he can see the reflection of himself laid down. He's in the same pair of blue chequered boxers and plain black vest top that he's been wearing for the past three days. The TV remote and his mobile are both out of reach on the glass coffee table. He doesn't have the energy to reach over to grab them. In the same way, he doesn't have the energy to shower, shave, and change. He's in desperate need of all three, but opts to lie in silence and prepare. Prepare for...he doesn't know exactly. He doesn't know what's ahead. What's he going to say to this person who sent the jinx box? What are they going to do? Does he need to take protection? Like a knife or a baseball bat? If he has some kind of curse, then what? Does he need a priest? Where does he find one of them? He is unsure. All he is sure about is that he will get his answers and they lie with the person who sent the box. He can sense it. All the problems started when he received that mystery box. Since opening it, all the shit happened. It's like he's released a demon into his life, one that takes over him at night. He realises it sounds stupid. Unbelievable, in fact, but he has no other explanation.

And once he sorts it out, he can get back with Layla. She'll understand it wasn't him and that he would do nothing to hurt her, and never did. Because it wasn't him, it was whatever it is that's inside of him, controlling him. It might have been his hands

around her neck, but it wasn't him controlling them. He never would because he loves Layla and will do anything to get her back.

CHAPTER 33

The buzzing of Jason's iPhone vibrates throughout the glass table in the living room. His phone dances for a couple of seconds before Jason sits up and looks at the display. It says Fat Fingers. He accepts the call and puts the phone to his ear.

"I have the address," says Fat Fingers' voice through the speaker. Jason can tell he's excited because he said it in a loud and cheery voice. He's thrilled with himself. Jason gave him a challenge, and he completed it. He feels like a private detective. Even though the plan was Jason's idea, it was Fat Fingers that tracked the guy down.

"Nice one. Come and get me. We could be there by lunch."

"Now?"

"Yeah, come on. I'll buy us a McDonald's breakfast on the way there and whatever lunch on the way back. And I'll fill your car up with petrol."

The phone line falls silent. Jason takes the phone away from his ear to look at the display. The call remains connected. The silence is Fat Fingers contemplating his answer.

"Come on, Steve. Like old the days."

"Go on then, I want a Toby Carvery on the way back. King-sized, with all four meats."

This brings a smile to Jason's face. A sense of nostalgia flutters inside of him and, for a second, he feels not sad.

"Sounds good to me."

*

Jason only needs to put a smudge of wax in his quiff and squirt a bit of Paco Rabanne into his face, and then he's ready. It takes Fat Fingers 20 minutes to get to the farmhouse. He parks his Corsa outside the front door and honks his horn. Jason runs out in his grey sweatpants, white V-neck t-shirt, and white Adidas Sobakov trainers with the three red stripes down the side that were given to him by an independent shoe store called Northern Kix, that sponsored one of his videos. It was a new high street store, opened up by a young lad, and Jason agreed to mention them at a tenth of his normal rate to help them out, just as long as he got a couple of pairs of trainers out of it.

He shuts the front door, locks it, and pulls on the handle to make sure it's secure. Once he's happy that it is, he turns to the car and lets out an exasperated 'oof' when he sees the side of Fat Fingers' car. He delicately opens the passenger side door and slips into the seat next to Fat Fingers.

"What happened to the car?" he asks.

Jason could not help but immediately notice the passenger side door bearing many dents and scratches. It looked a right royal mess.

"I hit a skip."

“A fucking skip? Didn’t you see it or something?” He sniggers as he asks the question.

“I had to drive on the other side of the road to get past it and a car came round the corner towards me, so I instinctively swerved and scraped the side of my car along the skip that was inconveniently there.”

“Man! We’ve all been there.” He clicks the seat belt into place and Fat Fingers sets off driving.

Jason wriggles his feet to create some space amongst the empty packets of Doritos, Galaxy wrappers, and empty bottles of Diet Coke. It makes him think about snow angels, but instead of using his body in a patch of snow, it’s his feet in a pile of rubbish. To his surprise, the car doesn’t smell too bad. It has a sweet candy smell to it. He can’t work out why until Fat Fingers puffs on a strawberry cheesecake flavoured vape and blows thick smoke out, filling the car and worryingly obscuring his view through the windshield for a couple of seconds.

“You could have had a tidy-up,” says Jason, wafting the sweet-smelling smoke from out of his face.

Fat Fingers shrugs. Jason should just be happy he has a lift to Bootle.

“How’s work? Jaap alright?”

“Oh, same old, same old. Jaap’s alright. He’s still at it. Working today, in fact. He’s started seeing some girl from Tinder.”

“Wow. How’s that going?”

“He seems happy. I only see him at work now.”

“What’s she like?”

“Meh.”

Fat Fingers is doing a steady 50mph. The first third of the journey is crossing the moors, full of sheep, hills, cyclists, and lorries. Saturday mornings are always quieter on the roads, there are more cyclists than cars in the countryside and Fat Fingers overtakes them all without a second thought.

“I’m thinking of coming back,” says Jason.

Fat Fingers takes his eyes off the road to look at Jason, his jaw hanging open.

“What? Back to being a postman?”

“Yeah? The three of us, together again.”

Fat Fingers has thousands of questions to ask about this and only manages one.

“Why?”

“I think I need to go back to the simple life. It was stress free. I got fresh air and exercise and early finishes.”

“And no money.”

“Money’s not everything.”

Fat Fingers snorts. "It's only ever people with money that say that."

Jason ignores his comment. He knows what he means. Money's not all it's cracked up to be.

"Has all this got something to do with the guy we're visiting?"

Jason's unsure how to put this to him. Fat Fingers will probably think that he's a wacko. It is so farfetched. After quick consideration, Jason opts for the truth. If he can't be honest with his friend, regardless of how unbelievable the truth may seem, are they truly friends?

"It's related. Have you seen any of my videos lately?"

"Not for a while. Why?"

"Out of the blue, I got one of those jinx boxes. I opened it and it had a noose inside."

"What? You didn't order it?"

"No, I think this guy sent it to me and I don't know why."

"And inside was a noose, like, to hang yourself with."

"Yeah. So I put it in a corner and left it. I had other videos to make. However, weird shit started happening at night?"

"Weird shit? Like what?"

“I woke up and there was a chair from downstairs on my bed next to me. A scary-ass doll moved another night, and Layla woke up with it next to her head. Another morning, I went outside and the noose from the box was hanging from the tree in my back garden.”

An icy shiver runs up Fat Fingers’ arms, causing his arm hairs to stand.

“Fuck off! You’re full of shit.”

“No, honest. Well, anyway. I set up a camera to film what was happening. And I’m sleepwalking. It was me.”

“Sleepwalking? Man! So, no ghost? I was gonna say.”

“Yeah, but this all started happening after I opened the jinx box. And it gets worse.”

“What?” He looks over at Jason, taking his eyes off the road again.

“I strangled Layla. I didn’t know I was doing it. She kicked me in the bollocks to get away. I don’t know what would have happened if she hadn’t.”

“Fuck! How is she?”

“Pissed. I haven’t seen her since. She ran out, fearing for her life. So, I want to know what exactly did this guy send me? Is it a curse? Am I possessed by a demon that takes over my body at night?”

“Have you spoken to a professional, like a doctor? Strangling people in your sleep is a pretty serious condition.”

“No. I just want answers first. I want to know who sent this and why.”

“Fine, but whatever happens here, on Monday, you’re calling the docs.”

Jason agrees. He knows his friend is right. Secretly, he’s hoping the answers he gets today are everything he needs to cure him and then he won’t need to visit the docs. But there is a lingering doubt in the back of his mind and he’ll not get any of the answers he desperately seeks. He’ll know soon enough, though. He looks at the Sat Nav and sees the estimated arrival time is just under two hours.

CHAPTER 34

They turn off Stanley Road onto Trufford Street, a long straight street encroached with terraced houses, each one painted in butterscotch, plum, terracotta, or a blueish-dark grey. Cars line both sides of the road, making it difficult to park. Fat Fingers slows down to running speed as he drives to the first available space and reverses parks his Corsa on the first attempt, only scraping his back tyre along the curb for a second, in between an Astra and a Volkswagen Polo.

“What number?” asks Jason as soon as they both leave the car.

Fat Fingers removes a folded piece of paper from the back pocket of his jeans and unravels it.

“Sixty-two.”

They look at the number on the house they’ve parked outside and calculate which way they have to walk. There’s no sign of life on the street, only cars with hardly any space between them. All the houses are the same apart from the colours. It’s house after house with no space between them. It’s a claustrophobic street.

They cross the road to the even side of house numbers and walk up, mentally counting the numbers that each door displays.

“What you gonna say?” asks Fat Fingers.

“I don’t know yet.”

“What if he’s a big fucker?”

“I’ll say that you’re here to shag his wife.”

They stroll up to number 62. It’s a terracotta house with a dark brown painted wooden door. It has a golden door knocker in the middle of it and a doorbell on the left side of the door frame. Jason doesn’t think about it, he doesn’t allow a second thought to bring doubt to his mind. He uses the doorbell and follows it up with a couple of bangs on the door, wanting the resident to know that he means business. After about thirty seconds, the door opens.

“Oh, my God! It’s you,” says a fat ginger man that’s opening the door, in a high-pitched, whiny voice and scouse accent. Fat Fingers winces. He hates the accent. It’s like running nails down a chalkboard to him.

“Come in, come in,” says the fat ginger man as he stands to the side to allow them to pass through into his house. The man looks like he smells of B.O. Jason eyes him up. He’s overweight, half a foot smaller than Jason, and in his mid-thirties. He’s wearing boot-cut jeans and a red ‘Flash’ t-shirt that clashes with his freckled face. Jason and Fat Fingers step directly into the living room where a woman in her sixties is sitting in a green love chair with her bare feet curled up underneath her, watching celebrity chef Rick Stein on the telly cook some Asian food. She’s in blue jeggings and a woolly pink jumper with a white Westie in a Scottish hat on the front.

“Hey, look Ma. It’s him who I watch on YouTube.”

The woman looks over and smiles politely before her eyes return to her program.

“Follow me, lad. We’ll go to my room.”

They walk through the door at the opposite side of the room and take an immediate left turn up the stairs. Jason and Fat Fingers grab the banister on the way up. The stairs are steeper than normal stairs and they fear that they’ll trip and roll to their deaths. They don’t and make a right turn at the top. The bedroom is dark and stuffy. The man opens the curtains and cracks a window. A gentle breeze brushes Jason’s face. It’s a pleasant sensation as it breaks through the musky, warm air.

“Please sit.” The fat ginger man says as he points at his bed.

The man sits down on his gaming chair and swivels around to face Jason and Fat Fingers. Jason sits down on the bed and looks around the bedroom. There are movie posters on his wall. Posters of IT and The Exorcist. His bookshelves are full of figurines. Jason recognises Freddy Kruger, Pinhead, and one of Keanu Reeves in a long black leather coat dodging bullets. There are more horror-looking figurines, but Jason doesn’t recognise who they are. The man’s PC setup looks expensive. Three wide monitors span across the desk. Underneath is a see-through base unit that flashes a spectrum of colours.

“So...what are you doing here? How did you find me?”

“First, I take it you are the person who sent me the jinx box?” asks Jason.

“Yeah, that was me. I thought you’d like it. I love your videos. How did you find me?”

“On eBay. I got Steve to buy from you, then ask for the return address.”

“Ah. Very clever, lad. So, why are you here?”

“I’m guessing you’ve seen my videos so you can see what your box is doing to me. This is because of you.”

“Hold up a minute. What’s because of me? The sleepwalking? Strangling your girlfriend?”

Jason winces at the reminder of what he did. Hearing the words of what he did out loud makes him a little sick.

“That’s no real though,” the man continues. “I know that ghosts and demons and the paranormal activity aren’t real, lad. I’m not a weirdo. I watch your videos because they’re entertaining, and quite scary. What is this? Do you have a hidden camera or summit?”

The man stands up and starts looking around his room. His paranoia has him believing people have been in his room and set up some hidden cameras while he was out.

Jason stands up, practically toe to toe with the man.

“No, I just want to know what you’ve done to me and how I stop it. Since getting the box, I’ve been sleepwalking and my antics, while sleepwalking, have been getting more sinister. I nearly killed my girlfriend.”

“Woah, that’s not on me, lad I thought it was all pretend.”

He holds up his hands in a surrendering motion.

“Let’s start with where you got the box from,” says Fat Fingers.

“I made it.”

Jason looks at Fat Fingers to see what his reaction is. Fat Fingers raises his eyebrows and looks back at Jason.

“Yeah. I make them. I buy cheap boxes from Etsy, paint them an old wood colour, scratch ‘jinx’ in the lid, put a noose or a voodoo doll in them, then I seal it shut by melting wax over the seal. I sell them on eBay and the dark web. I’ve only sold one on eBay and that was Steve, who’s returning it. They sell better on the dark web. Especially when you mysteriously received one.”

“Hold on. I don’t understand.”

“It’s an idea to make money. Selling cursed boxes that make the person who opens it die. I sent you one to get the publicity.”

“But I read on Reddit about people killing themselves after getting these boxes. You even emailed me to say I was going to die after opening it.”

“Again, all the Reddit posts are all me. I have several accounts. I logged on as different users and wrote different stories about them. And the email? Well, that was to get more coverage, get you to do another video about the box.”

Jason looks down at his trainers and the black carpet that feels like a sponge underneath his soles.

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what to say. If whatever’s happening to you is real, it has nothing to do with the box. It sounds to me like you have a severe case of sleepwalking, you hear about it happening. It’s a coincidence, that’s all.”

Jason looks over at Fat Fingers to read his reaction once again. Fat Fingers gets to his feet.

“Thanks for inviting us in to your home. Sorry to have bothered you. We have to get going, beat the traffic,” says Fat Fingers.

“Are you sure? I can get my ma to make us all some hot dogs?” The man gives them both a big, inviting smile.

“No, thank you. We want to beat the traffic.”

“Good idea. Everton are at home today. The street’s a fucking nightmare at the weekend, lad. Anyway, it’s lovely to meet you, like I said. I’m a fan. Love your videos.” He holds out a hand and Jason shakes it.

“One more thing. How did you get my home address?” asks Jason.

“The internet. I did some digging and found your name and address on the director’s page of a company directory. I sent it direct to you instead of your PO Box because I knew there’d be a better chance that you’d mention it in one of your vids.”

“Ah. Gotchya.”

They say their goodbyes once again and leave the house. Jason is silent. His energy drains, and too many thoughts rush through his mind, making it impossible for him to think clearly.

He flops into the passenger seat of Fat Fingers’ Corsa and puts on his belt. Fat Fingers types ‘Toby Carvey’ into the maps app on his phone, clicks on the pub in Warrington, and presses ‘Start’. He

sticks his phone on to a magnetic phone holder that's wedged into an air vent and follows the directions the phone is showing.

"I'm fucking starving," says Fat Fingers.

Jason grunts back. It's not clear if he's agreeing or clearing his throat.

"Look, man. You need to see a doctor. It means you can get help."

"It means it was all me. It was my fault. I cannot blame it on anything else."

"That's a good thing. It means we can do something about it. If it was a curse, you'd be dead soon. But it's not. It's all a coincidence. It's probably caused by stress. I saw a man on *This Morning* once who went on the show to talk about his sleepwalking problems. One night, he dreamt he was Batman, and he jumped out of an upstairs' window. Imagine if you did that next. Call the docs on Monday. Get help. Get it sorted."

He's right, thinks Jason. He needs medical help. Not a priest. Not an exorcism. Not a way to break a curse. A doctor. A psychologist. A shrink. Anyone that can stop him from sleepwalking.

CHAPTER 35

Layla walks home from her mum's. Blue skies surround the sun, the elderly are out, walking to and from the local supermarket, and the tweets of birds chime from the trees that line the streets. She has ran out of clean underwear and used this as an excuse to return home. She can only cope with being in her mum's presence and sharing a roof with her for three days, max. After that, Layla's patience wanes quicker and causes her to snap more often. It's the little things she does that annoy her greatly by day three. Like the way she bites the nail varnish off her fingers, the sound of the click, click, click of her teeth against her nails is enough to make Layla want to plunge a knife deep into her own ear.

As she walks up the concrete stairs to the front door, Layla pulls the key out of her handbag. As she slides her key into the hole, movement in the lobby catches her eye. Instead of turning the key, she presses her face against the frosted glass. She can make out the shape of a human dressed in black, but cannot see clearly enough to identify them. It looks like they are getting the post; they are standing at the post boxes with an arm stretched out, possibly posting something and not collecting. It dawns on her that this could be the person responsible for leaving the letter in her mailbox. A weight drops in her gut as she recalls the last time she checked the post. Her neck stiffens and her shoulders wilt. That awful fucking note. By being with her mum for the last couple of days and seeing Jason's video, her mind had strayed away from the hate mail and she worried about other things instead.

Layla waits for them to finish with whatever they are doing. She doesn't want to be seen by them, just in case. The human figure gets bigger as they walk towards the door. Layla whips her key

from the hole and dashes down the side of the building where a wall chase protrudes. She slips behind it, holds her breath, and sucks in her stomach. The door clicks shut, then one of the buzzes gets pressed. Layla listens out, wanting to know if she recognises a voice. Either the person pressing the buzzer or the person who answers through the speaker. There's another buzz and still no answer. The person gives up and walks down the path, away from the building and down the road. Layla peaks around the corner and checks out the figure from behind. They are walking away like a man. Swift and straight-legged. Layla sees that her assumption of them being dressed in all black, as she saw them through the frosted glass, is incorrect. They're wearing dark blue jeans that look too big. The back of them are sagging around the ass. The hoodie is black, though, and they have their hood up. She can't judge their height but can see they're skinny. Layla waits to see where they go when they reach the bottom of the street. She's intrigued by this person. There are no other young folk in the building, so she knows they don't live there. If they were a courier, surely, they'd have a van, or a car parked right outside the building. There was nothing in their hands, so she doesn't think they're a thief. It must be the culprit.

Layla steps back onto the street and watches them from behind a lamppost. It's not wide enough to fully cover her, but it'll do. The person doesn't reach the bottom of the street; they open the driver's door of a silver car parked halfway down and get in. It's about forty metres away, so Layla doesn't have a clear sight on them. When the car drives away, Layla thinks it's strange that they didn't park right outside the building unless they didn't want their car to be seen. Who does she know with a silver car? She can't think of anyone.

She walks back up the path and attempts to open the door again. There are no human-shaped figures through the frosted glass this time, so she turns the key and pushes the door open into the lobby.

Reluctantly, she slowly opens her box, frightened that something is going to jump out and get her. Inside, she sees a couple of envelopes that contain the usual junk from insurance and finance companies; she leaves them in the box and notices what's underneath them. Her heart sinks as she sees two folded pieces of paper. Without hesitation, she opens them up and reads what they say.

One says 'Bitch' and the other says 'Whore'. She screws them up with tense fists. Veins pop up her arms and into her neck as her face turns burgundy as an angry heat encompasses her head.

'The fucking audacity!'

She wants to chase them down, grab them by the neck, dig her nails into their skin, and scream in their face. Instead, she storms up the stairs to her floor and rams her key into the lock. Lucky not to snap it. Then she barges through the door, slamming it behind her.

Her hands remain tightly clenched, oblivious to the fact that her nails are digging into the skin of her palms. She slams her foot down on the pedal of her bin and empties her fists.

The living room is humid. She has to open a window to let a cool breeze cut through the sweaty air. Her living room has an east-facing window and a south-facing window, so on cloudless summer days, she gets the sun for the whole day, causing her living room to feel like a sauna.

Being this angry is not helping with the heat. She's hot and flustered and the window being open has not helped either. There is no cool breeze, so apart from letting out a bit of stuffiness and stale air, it remains warm.

She changes into a pair of yellow cotton shorts and a plain white vest top and takes a bottle of water from the fridge, only to roll over her forehead and cheeks, then down her neck. It helps until she stops and then she's hot again.

After unscrewing the lid, she positions the lip of the bottle to her mouth and gulps half of it in one go. She wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and takes the bottle to the settee with her. There's a soft two-seater in the middle of the room. It's red and small. To fit two, both people need to see thigh to thigh. She never has visitors, so it's big enough for just her. Her neighbours never pop around, mainly because they are old and possibly racist, and she never invites friends over, or Jason, or her mother. She goes to theirs.

She puts her legs over the arm and kicks back while she drinks her water, finishing the rest of the bottle. She drops the empty bottle to the floor, pulls her phone from out of her pocket and scrolls through TikTok for much longer than planned. It gets her mind off everything. For the time she's looking at her phone, she's not thinking about Jason or YouTube or the hate mail. Every so often, her brain tries to bring one of them up, but a swipe up to the next video keeps her mind occupied.

She doesn't realise how much time has passed until her belly rumbles. She's been putting off eating because she doesn't have the energy or motivation to make something. Now it's suppertime, there's no chance she's making a proper meal. What she wants is to go to bed. She knows that won't work because she can't go to bed on an empty stomach, so she musters up enough energy to waddle over to the kitchen and chuck a couple of slices of bread into her red toaster that matches her red kettle. It's too late for coffee, so she chooses to microwave some milk for a hot chocolate.

She might sleep better tonight, being in her own bed. The lumpy bed at her mum's house was uncomfortable. Also, with everything that's on her mind, she did a lot of lying awake, staring into the darkness, while her mind chugged away.

Now, she's exhausted, she's hoping to avoid a sleepless night. Her eyelids are heavy and she can't stop yawning. It will surprise her if she has to stare into the void again tonight. She's expecting to fall asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow, being too physically and emotionally drained to worry and overthink. And she's right, she's asleep within minutes of getting in her comfy double bed.

*

She wakes with a start, unsure if from a noise or a dream, but she can't remember dreaming. All she can remember is closing her eyes and then blackness. There were no dreams that she can recall. All she knows is that something made her jump. Possibly the wind or a car door shutting. She's pretty sure she forgot to close the window so she'll be able to hear all the noises from outside, like people going to work, birds singing, milkmen dropping off milk. It could be anyone or anything, like a stray cat or a neighbour's dog. It could be the people above having sex, though they are in their seventies, so Layla hopes not. She quickly gets rid of that thought.

She can hear creaking coming from the living room. It could be the branches moving in the wind, right outside the window. She holds her breath to hear more clearly. There's no whistling of the wind, only silence, mixed with the sound of the blood rushing around her skull, like a low hum.

Layla rolls back the sheets to free her long legs and gently positions her bare feet on the floor. The carpet softens the sound.

The room has an amber glow from the streetlights outside. She never sleeps with the curtains closed; she questions how people can sleep in total darkness. What do they do if they wake up in the middle of the night and can't see a thing? How do they go to the toilet? How do they know they are not alone? She likes the moonlight and the streetlights to shine through, so she can see exactly what's going on in her room, which is always nothing, and where she's going, which is usually the loo.

Her toes barely tickle the carpet as she sails over to the door. Has she breathed out yet? She does so now, just in case she had forgotten. It's a slow breath through her mouth. It's quieter that way. There is some kind of tapping coming from the living room. It sounds like taps on glass. The sound is irregular. There's no pattern to it. Layla pulls on the handle and swings the door towards her, opening up a living room of shadows.

There's a head protruding from the window, wriggling away, slithering forward, forcing its shoulders through. Layla instantly spots this and charges, while she screams an ear-piercing battle cry. It's not clear if she's screaming 'Get the fuck...' or 'What the fuck.' It doesn't matter, just as long as whoever this head belongs to knows that they're fucked. Her fists fly out in front of her, ready for confrontation.

"No, no, Layla! Stop! It's me," says the head.

Layla stops seconds before she's just about to slam into someone's skull.

"Jason?" she says.

"Yeah, it's me."

“What the fuck you doing?”

“I just needed to see you.”

“What the fuck, Jason?”

“Please, can you let me in? It’s quite high.”

Layla holds open the window as Jason slides into her living room on his belly. He gets to his feet and brushes himself down.

“You fucking scared me.”

“I’m sorry. I just needed to see you.”

“So, you climbed through my fucking window?”

“I didn’t think you’d answer my call, or let me in if I buzzed. When I saw the window open, I thought...”

“You thought you’d break into my fucking house in the middle of the night?”

Jason has never heard her swear so much. He looks at his shoes and runs his fingers through his hair. “It’s only half-eleven.”

She rolls her eyes at him, and her face turns burgundy again.

“Jason, you fucking strangled me and put it on YouTube.”

“I’m sorry. I thought people needed to see it. To see what is happening to me.”

“You had no right. Fucking hell, Jason. Pretty sure you needed my consent.”

“I blurred you out so no one will recognise you.”

“All my friends will. They know who my boyfriend is.”

“Oh, yeah,” he says, realising.

Layla can feel her veins popping up her arms again as she curls her hands into fists. She’s doing her best to restrain herself from throwing a punch at him.

“I thought something supernatural was happening to me. Since I got the jinx box, I have done some crazy shit in my sleep. It feels like I’m cursed or possessed.

“Jason, there’s no such thing.”

“I know. I tracked down the person who sent me the box and paid them a visit. Turns out, it’s just a box. Quite a nice guy, actually. For a scouser.”

“How?”

“Fat Finger’s got his address and drove us. Doesn’t matter, really. What matters is that I know it’s not supernatural. I’m not cursed or possessed. I have some kind of sleeping disorder. I’m going to seek medical help and get it sorted.”

Layla softens her voice. “That’s good.”

“So, you forgive me.”

“Give me time, Jason. Sort yourself out first. I need a bit of space. On top of... this.” She swirls her arms around like she’s stirring a pot. “I’ve been getting some not very nice notes left in my postbox.”

“What? By your neighbours? Are they racist?”

“No. I don’t know who they’re from. Notes saying I’m a bitch and a whore.”

“What the fuck? Who would do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll fucking kill them.”

“Probably best to let the police know to sort it out.”

“The police? They won’t fucking do anything. No point going to them. I’ll sort it out. I tracked down the guy who sent me that box.”

“Don’t get involved, Jason. I need you to go now.”

“Okay. But call me if you need me.”

She ignores the offer and guides him out.

“You can leave by the front door. No need to be climbing through windows.”

“Okay, but please, once you’re ready to talk, call me.”

Once he's left, Layla slaps the latch on her door and walks around each window, giving each one a little shove to check it's securely shut. She flops onto her bed and gazes at the back of her eyelids for several hours. The tiredness that she felt earlier has faded away. It looks like it's going to be another long night of overthinking.

CHAPTER 36

Jason confides in Dr Quereshi about his sleepwalking. She shines a light into his pupils, wraps a cuff around his arm, and places a stethoscope on his chest. As she monitors his vitals, she inquires if he has ever struggled with insomnia. He shakes his head and says that he drifts off as soon as he hits the pillow. She asks if he has suffered from any stress or anxiety prior to his sleepwalking. Again, he shakes his head. He mentions how he worried about his viewing figures on his YouTube videos, but it never kept him up at night. She asks if he's on any medication or takes narcotics. He says no.

“Some kind of stress you have been suffering from probably caused this. Possibly sub-consciously. I suggest some gentle physical activity, such as a stroll in the evening. Not too late, though. Maybe an hour after eating your evening meal. Look to eliminate any stresses out of your life. And finally, keep a regular sleep schedule.” She hands him a leaflet on mindfulness. “This might help too,” she says.

“Might help? I need something guaranteed to work. When I sleepwalk, I go outside and climb trees. I nearly killed my girlfriend by strangling her.”

Dr Quereshi's face looks horrified, like he's said something offensive.

“That is severe,” she says. She takes her prescription pad and squiggles something illegible down. “Take one a day, before going to bed.”

He thanks her out of politeness and leaves the examination room, taking his prescription to the pharmacy to collect his new meds. The pharmacist hands over a little orange bottle full of white pills. Jason reads the label on the bottle. She's prescribed him something called benzodiazepines.

After a couple of days of taking the pills, Jason has not sleepwalked, as far as he can tell. He takes one pill before bed and what feels like five minutes later, he's opening his eyes to blue morning skies and chirping birds. The first thing he does is review the CCTV footage, and it shows him staying put, literally looking dead to the word. No tossing, no turning. He wakes up in the same position he fell asleep in.

Since he spoke to Dr Quereshi, he's been thinking a lot about what she said about eliminating any stresses out of his life. To make this work, he needs to be rid of his biggest stress. He sits at the dining room table with a pint of water and pushes open his laptop. The screen glows. He grabs the mouse and navigates around YouTube. It takes him a while to work out where to go. YouTube hasn't made it easy, and Jason's never had to delete anything before, so he has no experience in doing this. Eventually, he finds where to delete his account, removing all his videos. Hundreds of videos spanning years. He inflates his cheeks and huffs out a mouthful of air as he clicks delete. 'Are you sure?' it asks. 'Yes,' he clicks, and it's gone. His life's work erased.

Tears stream down his face, but not for the reasons one might expect. He doesn't mourn the loss of his videos or the evaporation of his earnings. It's the realisation that he nearly killed Layla and uploaded a video for the views.

What was I thinking?

He texts Layla, 'I'm sorry. I've deleted everything. Seen the doc. On meds for my sleepwalking. I will do anything to sort this.' He doesn't expect a reply. She'll be in the middle of a shift, if she's gone to work, that is. He can hardly blame her if she's having time off.

His phone buzzes and the display lights up. It's a message from Layla. She must have taken the day off because she's not allowed her phone on her while she's working. 'Please give me more time,' the message says. He puts his phone back in his pocket and continues to give her time.

CHAPTER 37

"Out of milk again," Layla sighs to herself, giving the bottle a swirl and shutting the fridge. It's not surprising, as she's been mainly living on cereal since she's been back home. She pours the remaining dregs of milk into her coffee and stirs it, whisking the spoon quicker than normal, half expecting the quicker stirring action to turn her coffee into the correct shade of brown. It doesn't work. The coffee is too strong for her. She needs more milk, so she pours the coffee down the sink, sticks her white pumps on and heads out.

Before reaching the bottom of the stairs, she pops her head around the corner to check out the lobby to confirm she's on her own. And she is. There are no neighbours, no couriers, no stalkers, and no killers. But there could be people right outside the building. So she trots to the front door and presses her face against the frosted glass. It's not clear. She can make out some shapes, but it's mainly white light from the skies, a blur of green from a conifer, and a fuzzy block of blue from a car parked outside.

She doesn't detect any movement and tells herself it's safe for her to go outside. Not just safe from stalkers, but also safe from being seen by any of her neighbours. She detests bumping into them. They don't make small talk with her; they blank her. It's just so rude, it upsets her every time.

Are people who leave offensive notes stalkers? Or is there more to it? Layla is unsure, but she tells herself that it doesn't matter what the terminology is for people like that because, ultimately, she feels like someone is stalking her. Like someone is watching and following her. It causes a knot of anxiety in her stomach every

time she thinks about leaving the house. She knows she has to keep her wits about her, to be constantly glancing over her shoulder, and listening out for footsteps and snapping twigs.

Her face remains pressed against the frosted glass because her feet are glued to the spot, but she knows she can't stay cooped up in her apartment any longer. Her mind is suffering from the isolation and the fresh air will do her good. She also needs milk, and to get these things, she must face the fear that overwhelms her whenever she thinks about leaving. She refuses to be a prisoner. The shops are only down the road, and it's broad daylight. What's the worst that can happen? No one's going to attack her in the middle of the day. Even if the street isn't too busy today, they'll be a witness somewhere. The street is full of curtain twitchers with nothing better to do. At least one person would witness an attack. Though, they probably wouldn't do anything, just witness it. She can only hope that this is a big enough deterrent for her stalker to not attack her; the possibility that some boomer would call emergency services.

She speed walks down the road to the end of the street before making a right to the corner shop. It's expensive in the shop, she tries her best to avoid going to it. A two-pint bottle of milk is 30p more than the big supermarkets. It sells out-of-date beer at a reduced price, and the entire shop smells peculiar. And it's not a subtle smell. It stinks. Layla has always assumed it's the smell of the man behind the counter. The old man that runs the shop has worked there since she can remember. He has grey hair and a grey beard, thick and wiry, and he works there seven days a week. In the days when she used to pop in for stickers or comics on her way home from school, if the change was ever 1p, he'd never give her the penny. He would give her a chewy sweet. Sometimes a Black Jack, sometimes a Fruit Salad. This always surprised Layla because she thought he was a grumpy old man and grumpy old men don't give sweets out to kids. Then she realised he's not been

kind. He's actually a miser. A grumpy old tight-fisted miser, keeping all the pennies to himself. It's difficult to quantify how much the guy has actually made by giving out 1p chews instead of pennies for change, but he hasn't retired yet, so maybe not much.

Layla pays for an overpriced bottle of semi-skinned and leaves the shop. The brass bell dongs as she opens the door and steps out into the warm sun that feels like a hug to the face. It's a pleasant feeling. There's a cool breeze so the hot summer day is not unbearable. She pushes down the sunglasses from the top of her head to the bridge of her nose and walks up the hill towards the sun. She still has to squint, even though she has her sunglasses on.

It's such a bright day, she almost walks straight past the silver car parked on the side of the road. It wasn't there on the way down to the shop. The car says Kia on the front of it. It's parked in the same place the silver car the man in the black hoody got into. Layla's sure it's the same one. She knows it was quite a distance from her last time, so she can't be one hundred percent sure, but she has a feeling. It's too much of a coincidence. Even though silver cars are common, parking at that part of her road is not.

Seeing the driver's seat empty, she seizes the chance to glance through the window. It's incredibly tidy. A lot tidier than Jason's car. It's tidy, like her mum's car. There are no plastic bags or take-away boxes on the floor. No chocolate wrappers or crisp packets. There's a red Jelly Belly air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.

To inspect it further, she walks around the back of the car. It says Rio next to the left brake lights and above it on the glass is a bumper sticker that says 'Horn, if you're feeling honkey'. A light bulb switches on in her mind. She's identified the owner.

As she looks up the road, she lifts her sunglasses and blocks the glare with her hand, squinting to get a clearer view, but it doesn't improve her vision. Even with her hand blocking the sun, it's still too bright for her. She can make out someone walking, but she can't tell if they are walking towards her or away, then they turn right, roughly about where she lives.

Shit, she thinks. She pauses a couple of seconds before deciding to stay next to the car. She rests her back against the shaded side of one tree that grows by the side of the street and waits for them.

Every so often, she peeks around the trunk of the tree to see if they are walking back down. After five minutes, they reappear and start walking back down. Layla stops peeking and hides back behind the trunk of the tree. She doesn't want to be seen just yet; she wants to jump out when they are only a couple of meters away and confront them.

It only takes a minute before Layla can hear trainers scraping against the pavement. That's her cue. She steps out from behind the tree, right into the pathway of the person, and looks into their eyes.

"Hello Stuart," she says in a stern tone. He jumps a step backwards and flinches, turning his face away and shutting his eyes for protection. His arms flail wildly for a moment, desperately searching for balance.

"Layla," he says. "What are you doing here?"

"You should direct that question at yourself."

"I...er...I'm just visiting someone, that's all."

He looks around to see if there are any witnesses.

“Who?” she says.

“Er...no one you know,” he says. “Look, sorry. I got to go.”

She puts a hand on his arm and grips on. Not too tight, just enough to let him know to not fuck her about.

“I know it’s you?”

“Y...Y...You know what’s me?” he asks, sounding confused.

“The notes. I know it was you. I saw you,” she says.

“What notes? When?”

He checks again for witnesses. *Why is this road so quiet?*

“You know what notes. You were here a few days ago. I saw you in the lobby. Your dirty little hands messing with the post boxes.”

He looks down at the ground as he strokes the back of his head for comfort. Layla can't help but notice the rosy blush that spreads across his cheeks.

"Listen, all right. I admit it. I came here to find you. But I'm clueless about any notes. I swear."

“I saw you. If you weren’t leaving a note, what were you doing?”

“I’ve been trying to catch you, to apologise for my actions when we went out. I had a bit too much to drink, and I wanted to say sorry. My behaviour was unacceptable. I wrote an apology and was going to leave you a letter. I changed my mind and decided I had to do it in person. So, I tried buzzing you. You didn’t answer.”

“Bullshit! Why are you parked here? It’s because you don’t want to be seen. That’s why you have your hood up. So, you can be a sneaky fucker.”

She points her finger right into his face while her cheeks turn a dark shade of burgundy.

“No. That’s not it. I just didn’t want Jason to see me. I came a couple of days earlier and he was around and I thought you two must have had a fight because you wouldn’t let him in. He started throwing pebbles at your window.”

She takes a step forward and pokes a fingernail into his bony chest, visibly shaking with anger.

“Now I know you’re lying. Jason never comes here. And I would have heard stones being thrown at my window. There’s only you I have fallen out with, and there’s only you that is pathetic enough to leave me notes, calling me a bitch and a whore. You’re so fucking pathetic, Stuart. I never want to see you again. Just fuck off out of my life!”

Each word she spits out gets louder and louder until she’s practically screaming in his face. He can feel her breath and a few sprays of her spit as she loses it. As his face becomes redder, it’s clear he’s about to break down in tears once more. He sniffs and wipes his eyes and nose with the back of his hand, turns to his car, and gets in. It takes a while for him to drive off. Layla’s unsure

what's taking him so long, but she stands her ground and waits for him to leave.

Finally, he drives away and turns right at the end of the road, disappearing from her sight. She stays rooted to the spot while she continues to shake. Holding her hand out in front of her, she watches it vibrate.

As she blinks, tears push past the layer of water that covers her eyes and trace a path down her cheeks. She takes slow, deep breaths as she wipes her eyes. When she feels composed enough, she walks up the hill with her bottle of milk still in hand.

She thought the walk and fresh air would do her good, and she decides it did. She caught the person leaving her notes. She caught him red-handed. It could have only been him. He's the only one she pissed off. The only person who could have used those words. The only person who has those feelings for her.

She wonders what note he has left her this time as she walks through the front door and unlocks her post box. She pulls on the little door and reveals nothing. It's empty. She didn't expect that. She believed he had written her yet another message. Possibly calling her a cunt or something.

Well, that's good, she thinks. And it is. It's good that he didn't leave another nasty little note. It's good that she's found out who's been leaving her notes, and it's good that they've stopped. Everything is good, except she can't quite figure out why she's feeling disappointed about not getting another message from him.

She locks her postbox and goes up to her flat to have that cup of coffee she's been wanting.

CHAPTER 38

As another day draws to a close, the silence from Layla becomes an ever-present weight on his thoughts. He can't wait any longer and now that he's cured, it's the right time for him to message her.

'I hope you're ok. Since the meds, I've not sleepwalked. I miss you.'

He watches the two ticks turn blue, then her profile go offline. She's left him on read and it sends a surge of discomfort through his gut, as if a giant hand is tightening around his intestines. He bites hard on his bottom lip to distract his brain from the pain of rejection, while a wave of hopelessness washes over him.

He feels worthless and confused, unsure of his next steps, as if he has arrived at a junction with no signposts. It's difficult because it's not only his love life he needs to sort out. It's his whole life, especially now he has zero money coming in since deleting his YouTube channel.

Jason slumps onto the sofa and his body slaps against the cool leather. He selects a random episode of Rick & Morty on Netflix and contemplates his life. Without a mortgage, his expenses are relatively low, but he still has to pay the usual bills. He could use his savings, he has enough to retire with now, but it's too soon for him. He's still only young, and he wants to feel like he's doing something with his life, or like his life is worth something. Like it's worth living. What he needs is a reason to get up in the morning.

There's always going back to being a postman, like he mentioned to Fat Fingers. He's been contemplating it for a while now. It makes sense. The hours suit him and it would help him stay fit. It is noticeable that he has been neglecting the gym. He rubs the bump forming that is his belly.

There's a knock on the door. He hopes it's Layla. It can't be anyone else. He has no parcels due, though that means nothing. It's possible that someone sent another 'present' directly to his home address.

He opens the door. And it is Layla, looking sheepish, like she's regretting her decision to come over.

"Layla?" he blurts out, visibly thrilled to have opened the door to her. He's missed her incredibly and doesn't care that he's showing it. He steps to the side and gestures for her to enter. As she crosses the threshold, she remains silent. She knows what she wants to say. It's just that she's not saying it just yet. She's unsure she can now that she's there.

Jason picks up the remote and switches off Rick and Morty. Out of all the childish programs Jason watches, Rick & Morty is the only one Layla laughs at. All the rest are stupid and unfunny. She appreciates the humour of Rick & Morty, but Jason doesn't think she'll appreciate it right now.

She joins him on the sofa and looks around the living room. It somehow looks different, even though nothing has changed. Everything's in the same place as it was the last time she was there. It somehow all looks bigger to her.

"I'm glad you came," says Jason.

“I nearly didn’t,” she replies.

“I’m doing everything I can to fix this. I’ve deleted my channel. I don’t care about that. It was destroying me. Controlling me. I’m on medication now and I’ve stopped sleepwalking.”

“I didn’t know if it was real or not. I know how you operate. Then you go and upload the one of you strangling me.”

“It was real. I wouldn’t purposely hurt you. I want things to go back to the way they were. I’m going to go back to being a postman.”

She nods along to his words, to the beat of his voice, to acknowledge that she is listening. Even though she isn’t. Not fully. She wants to change the subject and find out if what Stuart told her was true. She didn’t believe Stuart, but she wants to make sure the feeling in her gut is right.

“Did you come round to mine last week? Throw stones at my window?”

“No, I climbed through the window.”

“No, before that. Someone saw you come round and throw pebbles at my window.”

“Oh, yeah. I wanted to see you. You didn’t answer your buzzer. Who saw me?”

Layla ignores the questions and looks deep into his eyes, hoping to see the truth.

“Did you write me the notes?”

Jason stands up in defence. “What? Of course not. Who’s saying that I did?”

“Stuart. I saw him in the street...”

“And he happened to be around when you received the notes and said that I left them? The sneaky little cunt. What a snake. It was Stuart who left them then? What a prick.”

“It’s okay. I told him exactly what I thought of him.”

Jason takes a deep breath and sits back down. He can smell her perfume. It’s his favourite smell. Sweet and floral. Subtle. Now it’s his turn to stare into the depths of her eyes. He finds himself lost in their amber allure, as rich and inviting as two spoons of golden syrup. Each blink stirs the sweetness that pools within them.

“Look, I need to tell you something first. And then...” She doesn’t know how to finish the sentence, so she skips that bit. “I was raped.”

“Layla. I know th...”

She interrupts.

“It was my brother.”

Jason’s eyes fidget in their sockets as he comprehends the words he’s just heard. Layla continues.

“When I was nine. Twice, he assaulted me. My dad walked in the first time and did nothing about it. The second time...” She tries to swallow the lump that has materialised in her throat but it’s not going anywhere, so she continues, skipping the details too difficult to relive. “I ran away from home. It was one of those pathetic half-attempts. I hid out at a friend’s house. When it got past curfew, my mum found me. That’s when it all came out. When I got home and saw my dad, he looked so angry with me and I blurted it all out. I couldn’t hold it in. I wasn’t planning on it. I couldn’t face him. My mum kicked them both out. I woke up with him inside me. Now I’m waking up with your hands around my neck.”

Jason’s face takes on a greyish tint as he tries not to think about the bile rising from his stomach. A layer of water coats his eyes before breaking into tears that trickle down his cheek. He pushes the sickly feeling to the back of his mind.

“I’m sorry, Layla. I love you.”

He grabs her hand, and she lets him. She looks at it, her hand in his, focusing only on the gentle pressure of his grip, unable to look him in the eye. They stay like that for several minutes, not talking, not moving. Only breathing, slow and deep. Jason doesn’t dare move. He thinks any sudden movement might scare her off and she’ll fly away like a startled bird. As time passes, the night takes over.

“You want to stay over? I’ll take the spare room,” he whispers to her.

She looks at his face for a couple of seconds.

“I don’t know.” She sees his heart break through his shattered eyes and it changes her mind. “Okay, but you stay in the spare room. We need to take it slow if I’m going to trust you again.”

“Only if you’re sure?” He strokes the top of her hand with his thumb. It’s soft and smooth. It reminds him of the satin underwear she sometimes wears.

“I’m sure,” she says.

“Do you want something to eat?” he asks.

“Yes. I’m starving.”

“We’ll eat in here. Stay there.”

Jason leaves the living room for a couple of minutes as Layla remains on the sofa, questioning her life's decisions. She can hear plates clinking and other noises coming from the kitchen while Jason is rustling something up. She closes her eyes and puts her head back, letting it sink into the soft leather cushion, but not for long. Her eyes re-open as Jason returns with a baguette under his arm and two stacked plates, the top one carrying a selection of cheeses, meats, and pâté, along with a couple of knives and a pair of scissors.

“Not had this for a while,” she says. Bread and cheeses were weekly in the early stages of dating. As he got busier with his videos, the dating part of the relationship slowly faded away.

He separates the plates and lays them down on the coffee table before letting the baguette drop from his armpit. He organises the

Blue Stilton, Roule and Wensleydale with cranberries, then opens the packets of Chorizo, Salami, and finally, the pâté.

“Help yourself,” he says as he falls back down beside her. He slides the baguette out of its plastic sleeve and picks up the scissors, snipping the air in front of Layla’s face before using them to cut the baguette into slices in the shape of round discs.

“Scissors? Really?” she says.

“Yeah, it’s just easier. The bread knife makes a mess. Crumbs get everywhere. Plus, I saw the scissors first, so...”

Jason picks up the Roule and spreads a lump onto a piece of baguette. Layla chooses the pâté first, as it’s her favourite bit. She bites into her bread and chews. It’s a taste that reminds her of happiness and the butterflies she used to get.

She looks over at the bookcase to Anne; the doll sitting on the top shelf, and swallows her bread and pâté as goosebumps run up her arm. She shivers from a cold draught only she can feel on the back of her neck.

“My mum said my nan used to sleepwalk.”

Jason stops chewing on his bread and looks at her. After three or four seconds, he chews as quickly as he can and swallows his food.

“What?”

“Yeah. I told my mum what happened.”

Jason interrupts. "You told her?"

"Of course." She looks at him like it's a stupid question. Jason realises he has no right to question her. What he did was despicable, even if by accident. She needed to talk to someone about what he did.

"Sorry, yeah. Go on."

"She used to move the doll in the middle of the night. I used to think it was Kalel. He told my mum that she used to come into our room in the middle of the night and put it on my pillow."

Jason says nothing to this. He just stares at her while he works out what it means.

"And that's not it. Kalel had to stay there on his own once and my nan pushed him down the stairs in the middle of the night. He must have been going to the loo or something. She couldn't remember doing it. She told my mum she woke up at the top of the stairs and was looking at Kalel, sparked out at the bottom of the stairs."

Jason leaps to his feet, holding his plate in his hands.

"What the fuck?" He puts his plate down. "When did you find this out?"

"The day after..."

Jason looks confused. "The day after what?"

"That day after I left here."

The fog clears. “Oh,” he says and glances over to Anne. “It’s the doll,” he says.

“The doll?”

“Yes, of course. You must have thought about it, too? The doll has cursed me. This all started when you brought that thing into my house.” He points at Anne with an accusatory finger. Anne does not respond. It remains in the same position with the same expression as always.

“Curses and possessions aren’t real. I’m just saying that attacking people in your sleep can happen.”

“How do you know that sleepwalking isn’t what happens when you’re possessed? They get up in the middle of the night, not knowing what they’re doing, not in control of themselves. That’s what happened to me. How can you be so sure that me and your nan weren’t possessed?” He stops to take a breath and look at her in the face. “I would never hurt you on purpose. I didn’t know what I was doing. And I think it’s the doll. Hold on. Was Kalel sleepwalking when...” He stops before he finishes the question, but not in time. She knows what he’s asking.

“No. Why would Kalel be sleepwalking? This has nothing to do with the doll.”

Jason walks over to the bookcase in the corner of his living room and lifts the doll off the shelf with one hand. He holds it to his face and rotates it. He’s unsure what he’s looking for, maybe a sign of life.

“The video when I opened the box. The EMF detector went off, then the EVP screeched and the lights flickered. I filmed it here. The doll was behind me. It wasn’t the box. It was the doll!”

“Jason, have you heard yourself? It is not possessed. You are not possessed. You even said, since you’ve started taking these pills, you have not sleepwalked. That proves it’s a medical condition.”

“It does have something to do with this fucking doll?” and he smashes its porcelain face into the side of the bookcase. The side of the doll’s head crumbles in and a chunk of porcelain flips onto the floor. Jason is ready to smash the remaining part of its head against the bookshelf again, but sees the red of his blood seeping out of the palm of his hand and he stops himself. Layla gets up from the sofa and runs over to him. She takes the doll from him and puts it back on the shelf, missing half her head, then she picks up the chunk of porcelain and drops it into the hole in her head before taking hold of his hand and squeezing it tight to stop the bleeding.

She can see the desperation in his eyes. He’s looking for a reason for it happening, someone or something else to blame, other than himself. He cannot accept what he did because he cannot remember doing it. It’s something he would never dream of doing, but yet, he did it.

“I don’t think possessions are real. It’s not cursed. You’re not cursed. You started sleepwalking because of some other reason. It’s quite normal. And some people hurt themselves, and some people hurt others. You’ve seen a doctor, and they prescribed you some medication. All you have to do is continue to take it. It has nothing to do with the doll. Do you hear how stupid it sounds? Curses and demons are not real. It’s just a coincidence, you and my nan hurting people in their sleep. It happens. I know it’s rare,

but it can happen.” She takes his cheek softly in her left hand and turns his head round to look at her.

A weight lifts from Jason’s shoulders that he didn’t know he was carrying, like a flat earther accepting that the world is round, or a Christian realising out there is no god. He’s accepting the fact that there is nothing supernatural in this world, only coincidences. It’s what he’s always known deep down, that there’s always an explanation. That’s why all his videos were faked. And the ones that weren’t had an explanation. He was sleepwalking because it’s something that can happen. It needs no other explanation than that.

He lets Layla take him back to the sofa, and they embrace in silence. The bleeding from his hand stops. It’s not a deep cut, it didn’t even need a plaster. The squeezing from Layla’s hand is all that it needed.

After a while, Layla nods and jerks her head awake, causing Jason to jump. He looks at her. She doesn’t look comfy, all contorted on the sofa, wrapped around his limbs and body.

“You need to go to bed,” he says to her.

He leads her to the bottom of the stairs and guides her up, letting her go first, then follows her into his bedroom. Half asleep, she looks around like it’s the first time she’s been in there.

The bed remains unmade, the white duvet is gathering at the foot of the bed, there’s a half-full pint glass of water on the bedside table, the black curtains are open, and the camera points at the bed. There’s no red light, which gives her some comfort, but she still shudders at the thought of it recoding her being strangled.

“If you need anything, just holler,” he says. They hug one last time, Jason only wrapping one arm around her. He squeezes her tight with his bulky arm and inhales the tender scent of jasmine coming from her hair. It makes him happy and gives him hope.

“Goodnight.” He kisses her forehead and leaves her to it, shutting the door on the way out.

Layla strips to her underwear. She didn’t bring any PJs with her because this wasn’t the plan. Even though she doesn’t know what the plan was, she’s sure this isn’t it. She folds her clothes neatly and lays them on the floor next to the bed, then she rolls the duvet out and wafts it open and onto the bed. After turning the light off, she takes three strides toward the bed until her knees touch the mattress, then slides her legs under the duvet and down the bed. She closes her eyes as her head touches the pillow and questions her life choices. *Am I doing the right thing?*

In the spare room, Jason struggles to sleep. His mind is asking too many questions. He has a sense of anxiety deep in stomach, punching and kicking from the inside, fighting to get out, screaming at him, screaming that this isn’t right. He swallows his feelings, shutting them down, and silencing them by thinking of Layla. About the two of them, together, forever. The smell of her hair. Her soft skin. The Queen concert where he saw her, then the pub a week or two later. Those long legs. Her kind smile. Their first date. Her sense of humour. Happy thoughts, happy thoughts...

CHAPTER 39

Layla's eyes flash like lightning. The floorboard creaking has woken her, but it's too dark to make anything out. She squints into the darkness. The only thing that catches her eye is a little red dot of light in the top right-hand corner of the room. Her eyes slowly adjust to the dimness of the room and silhouettes form and come into focus, one being the shadow of Jason, standing at the end of the bed. A severe case of déjà vu emerges from the back of her eyes. Her brain itches at the story unfolding that she knows all too well. She traces the outline of Jason. His tall frame and wide body looking like a shadow melding with the night. He lifts one of his sculptured arms above his head. She can make out the clenched fist and the thing he is holding. It's the bread knife, the long one with the jagged teeth and purple handle.

"Jason!" she screams.

He lunges at her.

"Nooo! Jason!"

Ignoring her screams or unable to hear her, he collapses on top of her, their bodies crashing together. Layla catches his wrist with both her hands, one behind the other, and stops him from plunging the knife into her face. Jason pushes down with more weight, forcing the knife closer to her right eye, neither of them knowing just how close the knife is to permanently blinding her.

Her arms weaken and tremble uncontrollably as they verge on collapsing. She swings a leg and strikes him with her shin, catching him between the legs. It's a weak blow, as she's lacking

leverage, but it's enough. Hard enough to make him roll over and curl up in pain. While he's writhing around, Layla swivels out of bed and bounds towards safety. She grabs the door handle to turn it, then forgets what to do next. She stands there, holding onto the handle. Not turning it. Not pulling it. Not trying to escape.

The jolt of an electric shock shoots into her spine, but all she can focus on is the overwhelming sound of blood rushing in her ears. It sounds like the sea is inside a shell, and the waves are crashing against the inside of her skull, or is it the sound of white noise coming from an untuned radio being slowly turned down? The sound disperses as heat spreads down her back. It's a heat that feels wet, like candle wax being poured onto her back. It's a sensation she's never felt before.

Her legs tremble and give way, and she sprawls onto the floor, landing on her side, her head up, looking at Jason standing over her. What looks like black tar leaks out from underneath her and coats the surrounding floor. She opens her mouth to scream but only blows out air instead. She swallows hard, her saliva tasting metallic, and slows her breathing, not knowing if it's a conscious decision or instinct. A darkness creeps into her vision from above and below until she can no longer feel the warmth of the blood pouring down her back. Her bones turn into icicles as she shivers on the floor, sleepy and cold. She always thought being tired and cold was the worst combination. Like those late nights, coming home from a long shift, exhausted, and sitting in her cold flat, tired and shaking from not having the heating on. All she could do was get wrapped up and sleep through it, and that's what she wants to do now. She wants to sleep through the cold and wake up when it's warm. She closes her eyes and slows her breathing even more, so much so it's difficult to tell if she still is.

The sound of Jason screaming her name does not stir her. His bare feet slip in her blood as he steps towards her body. He cups the back of her head and pulls her face to his so she can look into his eyes. Her eyes open, but she's doesn't look at him. She looks off to the side, expressionless, like someone that has given up. He grabs her shoulder with his other hand and shakes her.

“Layla!”

She doesn't wake up. Her body is limp and heavy and her skin is cold, like a slab of meat from the butcher's. Jason wrenches and spits bile onto the floor. Some of it dribbles down his chin. He rags the door open, sliding Layla's body out of the way, and runs out of the room, leaving bloody footprints on the landing's cream carpet behind him. While covering his mouth with his hand, he sprints to the bathroom and wrenches at the same time. He lifts the toilet seat and vomits into the lavatory bowl. It's clear and chunk-less and it splashes back up into his face. It's warm. He feels it spray onto his lips and chin as snot runs over his mouth, making him vomit again.

Once he stops, he puts his head in the sink and runs the cold water to splash his face until he doesn't think he's going to be sick again. Then he turns off the tap and sits down on the bathroom floor, tucking in his legs and cradling his knees as he rocks his body, attempting to clear his mind.

Call the police? Hide the body? Kill himself? Go on the run? He wishes his mum was here to sort it out for him, even though she would call the police. That would be her way of sorting it. She would do the right thing. He knows this; he knows that this is what he needs to do. He needs to call the police and explain everything. If he tells the truth, it will all be fine. It's not his fault. It was an accident. He just needs to get up off the bathroom floor and call the police.

But despite knowing it's the right thing to do, he can't help but sit on the bathroom floor and hug his knees. He thinks of Layla's body lying in her blood in his bedroom. The agony of it all makes him want to tear his face off. He screams as he pulls on a fist full of his hair as tears pour out of his eyes. The scream works. He pushes himself up onto his feet and storms to the spare bedroom, barging the door open and picking up his mobile. He paces the landing, striding over the bloody footprints, and dials the police.

He tells them everything and they say that they're on their way. An over-powerful feeling of regret hits him as soon as he's ended the call. Maybe he shouldn't be doing the right thing. He's a murderer. They won't understand and he'll go to jail. He'll have to take a shit in front of his cellmate every day and probably have the fuck kicked out of him at every opportunity. Prisoners don't like the guys that assault women. He can't go to jail. What kind of life is that?

A different plan forms, and he returns to the spare room. It's more of a last resort than a plan. What are his options other than spending the rest of his life behind bars while he gets attacked and fucked?

He turns the light on and the image of Layla's slumped body, bleeding out around her, flashes before his eyes. He chokes on the air as he hyperventilates and his eyesight darkens as shadows creep into his peripheral vision. In his head, he is spinning and has to put his hands on his knees and his head between his shins so not to black out. Then he takes deep breaths until the fainting feeling passes. When it does, a stabbing pain in the middle of his chest starts. He thinks like he's having a heart attack, though he doesn't feel the need to grab his left arm like in the movies. The pain is in the dead centre of his chest. It doesn't immobilise him; it's just

fucking painful. Maybe it's a panic attack and not a heart attack, he thinks, though a heart-attack would be perfect just now.

He searches for his pills, shifting the lamp and glass of water. They're not next to his bed or on the floor. *Shit*. He didn't take them last night. He forgot because of the change to his routine, with Layla turning up and him sleeping in the other room. They'll still be in his bedroom, in the drawer next to his bed, and if he wants to end it, he's going to have to go back into the room with Layla's body. The chest pains flair up again. He needs to get in and finish all the remaining pills before the police get there.

"Oh, God!"

He cries again, with big sobs as he convinces himself he can do this, telling himself he must do this. He closes his eyes as he enters his bedroom and takes three strides towards his bed. His ankle brushes against one of Layla's cold feet. A metallic smell strikes him and gets caught in his throat as he wrenches and swallows the bile back down.

He fumbles around in the drawer and feels his pills in their plastic orange bottle with his fingertips. After palming the bottle, he takes three large strides back out of the room, this time stumbling over one of Layla's long legs. A substantial weight lifts from his soul as he escapes to the landing, and a sense of freedom emerges as he walks calmly downstairs to his kitchen.

He remembers his attempt at installing the kitchen as he looks around. *They did a good job*, he thinks as he reflects and thinks about his goodbye to his farmhouse, to his life, to his troubles. The thought of soon being with his mum comforts him.

Using a glass from the cupboard, he fills it with cold water from the tap and opens the bottle of pills, pouring all twenty-one tablets onto the kitchen side. He fiddles with them and slides them into a pile. It'll soon be all over. After swallowing all the pills, he'll be fast asleep, forever in a peaceful slumber that never ends. He nearly smiles at that thought before realising there really isn't anything to smile about. He has totally fucked up.

There's a bang on the door and a voice calls through the letterbox.

"Mr Spieren? This is Detective Inspector Perkins. Please, can you open up?"

"Oh, shit!" says Jason, and he scoops up all the pills into a shaky hand and chucks them into his mouth. There are too many to handle in his throat. He pours water into his mouth and tries to swallow. Several go down, and several get stuck. He coughs to clear his airways and spits a few out onto the floors. Using his tongue, he flicks the remaining pills and positions them to the centre of his mouth before chugging more water. Again, he chokes. A couple more go down but more end up on the floor than in his stomach.

It's difficult for him to ignore the banging at the front door. Every thud vibrates through his wisdom teeth. He hasn't got long to get the rest of the pills inside of him because the coppers will be inside soon. He rounds up the loose pills with his hand and downs them with his water, swallowing hard. Every pill scratches at his oesophagus on the way to his stomach.

A drowsiness has hit him already as he edges towards his never-ending sleep. His head is swirling, which is not an experience he's had for a while. It's swirling like it used to when he was seventeen

and drank too much at the pub. Jason had a low tolerance for alcohol back then, and he would get hammered on four or five drinks. He named the dizzy sensation 'helicopters'. When he closed his eyes, it was like he was trying to sleep in a boat on rough waters while his bed span. He couldn't sleep when he had 'helicopters' and vomiting was the only thing that helped. After being sick, his 'helicopters' would settle and the room would stop spinning. Now, he is experiencing the same sensation, but this time he knows he must resist the urge to vomit to allow the drugs to work.

He lies down on the kitchen floor ready, not wanting to smash his head on the floor or a kitchen cupboard when he collapses. He knows it's a silly reason to lie down because he'll be unconscious, but just in case he can still feel pain, he gets himself comfy and closes his eyes, ready to see his mum.

CHAPTER 40

A police officer hands Detective Inspector Perkins and Detective Sergeant Crawford a USB stick with the footage. Perkins plugs it into the Smart TV that hangs on the wall of his office and uses the remote to switch the source. The AVI file plays and Jason's bedroom appears on the screen.

Tall and commanding, Perkins stands out in any room. Through a disciplined regime of morning runs, he maintains a slim, athletic build. Despite being 52 years old, he can easily pass for a man in his late thirties / early forties, thanks to his dedication to fitness and a healthy lifestyle. His thick brown hair is always neatly styled, a contrast to the dishevelled appearance of some of his peers. It's a testament to his attention to detail, both in his personal grooming and his work. Not a strand is out of place, even after a long day of fieldwork or hours spent poring over case files.

"It should be pretty clear cut. He stabs the girl, then he goes downstairs and ODs on some sleeping pills," says Perkins.

"Apparently, he was a sleepwalker. The data report shows his doctor prescribed the pills that he took after he strangled the girl in his sleep. He recorded that too, but uploaded that video onto his YouTube channel," explains Crawford, whose presence defies his below-average height, filling every room with an intensity that demands attention. His muscular shoulders stretch the seams of his tailored shirt, and his shaved head gleams under the lights. The stubble on his jawline hints at a constant battle between conformity and rebellion, and adds an edge to his otherwise approachable demeanour. But it's his fat nose, a battle-scarred ridge from a past altercation, that tells the actual story.

“And now he’s stabbed her,” Perkins points out.

They look at the TV. The video is in black and white because of the night vision and Jason is standing at the end of the bed with the knife in his hand.

“Is this the very beginning of the video?” asks Crawford. “No footage showing him turning the camera on? No footage of him entering the room?”

“No. This is the full video from his CCTV from the beginning.”

They witness Jason lunge at Layla, then see Layla kick him off.

She attempts to escape, only to be foiled by the knife that plunges into her back before she can open the door. She slumps onto the floor.

“It seems like the actions of someone not knowing what they’re doing,” says Crawford as he sees Jason come around and act surprised when he sees Layla’s limp body on the floor.

“Hmm,” half agrees Perkins.

He fast-forwards the video to the part where Jason re-enters the room and searches for his pills in a bedside drawer before he disappears downstairs and attempts to kill himself.

“He wakes up and sees the body of his girlfriend on the floor. Concludes he’s stabbed her to death in his sleep and can’t live with himself. I agree it’s rare, hurting people while sleepwalking, nevertheless, it happens,” says Crawford.

“But that’s for the courts to decide. Plus, there is some other evidence that forensics have found in her house. Two scrunched-up pieces of paper with the words Bitch and Whore written on them. We checked for fingerprints. There were two sets of fingerprints. Layla’s and Jason’s. It looks like he was leaving her nasty letters while they were on a break.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” says Crawford, scrunching up his brow.

“There is a theory that he was writing them to spook her, thinking she’ll call him and ask if she could stay over at his. But she stayed with her mum instead. She thought it was this other guy. Turns out, it wasn’t.”

“And he stabbed her because of it? Does that prove there’s a motive?” Perkins questions. Crawford shrugs as they turn back to look at the video and see Layla, lying still, in a pool of her own blood.

“Okay, that’s enough,” says Perkins. He turns the TV off and puts the remote down. “Let’s see DCI Roberts and let her know our conclusion.”

Crawford nods and follows Perkins out of the office.

They tell her their thoughts on the matter. It’s Perkins that speaks mainly, talking facts but Crawford finishes, expressing a feeling he has on the death.

DCI Roberts stands up from her chair and walks around her desk towards Crawford. Standing at a compact 5’2", she defies expectations with her stocky frame. Her shoulders are broad, a testament to the many years of catching criminals. She has a

wrinkly face that bears the map of her career, with fine lines around her eyes and mouth, each telling a story of her time in the force. Her medium-length blonde bob frames her face. It's practical and no-nonsense, just like her.

"Oh, pish!" she says. "You cannot stand there and tell me he didn't attempt to murder his girlfriend. It is literally there in black and white. He recorded himself stabbing her and then pretended to be shocked. He's a YouTuber. His videos were getting out of hand and this time he went too far and he will not be getting away with it. I want him remanded in custody and the courts can decide, and I can assure you they will find him guilty," she says with her arms crossed and her face scowling, making it look more wrinkly than normal.

"Why did he try to kill himself after if it was for a video? He wouldn't be able to upload it if..."

DCI Roberts cuts off Crawford before he can finish.

"Tried to kill himself? As the paramedics were banging the door down, he swallowed a couple of sleeping pills, or anti-depressants. Whatever they were. Not really an attempt to kill himself. How's the girl doing?"

"Stable. She's answered our questions and we've managed to get a statement," says Perkins.

"Well, that's a bit of good news. When Mr Spieren's discharged from hospital, I want him instantly remanded, capisce?"

Crawford and Perkins both nod.

CHAPTER 41

A green and white striped wristband marks Jason as a prisoner. Printed on it is his name, number, and a grim snapshot of his face. He twists it around, preferring the barcode to his own image. The wristband is the only splash of colour on his grey, prison-issued tracksuit.

The lady who issued his wristband ran through a few health questions, took his personal details, and asked if he had any special requirements. Jason responded with a shake of the head at most of the questions. Then the lady asked him if he needed to make a phone call so he could inform someone of his whereabouts. Again, he shook his head, opting to remain silent. Not out of defiance, but because he was too full of self-pity to talk.

After the lady finished with him, she directed him to another staff member who explained the rules and routines of the prison. The man was a proper fat fucker with a ginger moustache that made him look like a nonce. Jason stared through the guy as he continued his silence. He could not make sense of what the fat bloke was saying. It was as if Jason had forgotten English, the man's voice getting lost in the cacophony of thoughts and voices in his head. The words sounded like gibberish. He couldn't stop dwelling on the past events that led him here and questioning the duration of his remand. *A trial shouldn't take that long*, he reckoned.

The fat bloke thrusts a clear bag of toiletries, bedding, and a couple more tracksuits at him, rolled, not folded, and nods at a guard behind Jason, who encroaches on him. Jason stands and follows the guard to his cell, who raises an arm to usher Jason in.

He shuffles in and stops at the other side of the metal door to take in his new home for the next few days, weeks, months, or his entire life.

The cell is one room. There's a bunk bed on the left, a toilet on the right, and a sink in the middle. It smells of disinfectant and body odour. There's already someone on the top bunk. Another fat fuck, with black hair, dark brown skin and a cleanly shaven face. He's reading a tattered copy of *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison.

Jason stares at the toilet and imagines wiping his ass while his fat cellmate watches. He didn't deserve this. *Whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?*

A metal clang echoes behind Jason. It makes him jump, and he spins around while in mid-air to see the door closing off his freedom, and possibly his air supply. He pulls on the collar of his tracksuit top to help fight off his claustrophobia. The fat bloke looks over his book and eyes up Jason.

"Four weeks and two days and I'm still not used to those doors closing. I'm Ike."

Jason turns to face the man.

"Jason," he replies.

"What you in here for?"

Jason becomes mute, his eyes fidget, his brow glosses with sweat, and he feels a stabbing pain in his chest.

“I see. Just don’t let anyone else learn you’re a paedo, they’ll find a way to get you. The prison guards like to turn a blind eye to guys like you.”

“Paedo?” More stabbing pains shoot into Jason’s chest. He massages where his heart is with the heel of his right hand. “I’m not a paedo, I stabbed...someone. By accident.”

“Alright,” says Ike. “And I accidentally transferred half a million quid from my works bank to mine. Do you play chess?” He sits up, eager and optimistic, hoping he might have a playmate.

His bedsheet rustles as he fidgets underneath it as he searches for something. He pulls out a box; on it, a picture of a father and son playing chess, with the word “CHESS” in white bold letters printed over their faces.

“No,” says Jason.

“Oh,” says Ike as he slides the box back under his bedsheet and goes back to reading his book.

Jason places his toiletries on the sink ledge and arranges his spare tracksuits in a drawer next to the bed. He rolls out the bedding on the bottom bunk and taps the metal legs to test the strength of the bed. The bed seems sturdy enough. Ike’s been using it for over four weeks, and the legs don’t seem to have bent or buckled under his weight.

He lies down on the mattress; it feels nothing like a bed mattress. It reminds him of a thin gym mat from P.E. at primary school.

“One good thing about here is the food,” Ike shouts down. “They feed you well. I suppose it’s to stop people from getting hangry. Most of the inmates want to sleep when their bellies are full. I bet it stops a load of fighting.”

Jason doesn’t reply. He doesn’t want to come across as rude, but he doesn’t know what to say. He’s never been in this situation before. Stick a camera in his face and tell him it’s going on YouTube and he’ll talk for hours, but without the audience, what’s the point?

...

...

To survive.

“What’s your favourite meal, Ike?” he asks.

“Cottage pie.”

Jason can feel the bunk rock as Ike sits up.

“That’s my favourite,” Jason lies. “I bet it’s not as nice as the one my mum made, though.”

“You’ll be surprised.”

“Thirty days done then? How many more?”

“Ah, wondering how long you’re going to be in here for? Another week before my court case, I’m pleading guilty, though.

My solicitor reckons I shouldn't get more than two years, as I'm not a danger to people. I just got greedy."

Five weeks, Jason thinks, and his won't be as straightforward. Semi famous YouTuber stabs his girlfriend, leaves her for dead, and films it all.

"How did you transfer half a million to yourself?"

"Oh, it was over the course of several months. Maybe a year. I raised fake invoices and then paid them, paying the money into my account. I was skint and had no option. This government has fucking raped me. Corrupt, greedy, useless cunts. Could no longer afford to eat with all the prices going up. Was going to lose the house because the mortgage became too expensive. I thought I'd borrow a bit from work and no one would notice. And they didn't. Every month, I put in a new invoice or two. Maybe it was more like two hundred thousand. An auditor spotted it. Fucking nosey cunts." Ike takes a couple of deep breaths to calm himself down, and stop himself from having a heart attack. "So, what about you? Who'dya stab?"

"My girlfriend. I was sleepwalking."

"You're the YouTuber? Fuck off! I can't believe it. You're on the news." The bunk bed shakes like there's an earthquake as Ike gets himself comfortable. "Sleepwalking? Is that your solicitor's idea?"

"No!"

"They have the stabbing on video, don't they? Man! I can't believe I'm sharing a cell with the YouTuber killer."

“I didn’t kill her,” Jason corrects.

“Tried to, though. Yep, I’d be careful out there. Two things they hate in here, not including paedos. Celebrities and wife beaters.”

Jason swallows the words down into his gut and whispers “Oh, fuck,” to himself.

CHAPTER 42

The moonlight and prison floodlights glow through the window, dimly illuminating the cell floor. There are no curtains to block the lights from entering the cell.

Jason is dozing but can't quite get over that last hurdle to deep sleep. His neighbour is too busy using a chainsaw. He can hear him sawing down trees in the back of his mind. The sawing gets louder until Jason jumps awake and remembers he's in prison. It's not his neighbour using a chainsaw. It's Ike, snoring.

"Fuck sake," he whispers to himself. He prods the underneath of Ike's bunk to stir him, but since the bunk is a steel sheet, the prod is utterly useless. The bed did not move in the slightest. The prod was too feeble, so he knocks on the bottom of the top bunk instead and the snoring stops. Jason lies perfectly still, waiting for Ike to ask what's up. Nothing happens, so Jason rolls over and closes his eyes for his second attempt at sleeping.

Clouds coat the moon and darken the cell as the bunk bed rocks. Jason's eyelids flicker as he throws the sheets back and puts his feet on the floor. He climbs out of the bottom bunk, waking Ike. The sliver of light from the outside floodlights illuminates Jason's shadowy figure. Ike spies on him through one half-opened eye as Jason steps onto the bare stone floor and stands there with his arms to his side and his feet half a yard apart.

"What the fuck you doing?" Ike says. Nothing. "Jason?" he calls out.

He still doesn't move, so Ike sits up and calls out again, a little louder. "Jason?"

This time, Jason launches head-first into the corner of the bunk bed's metal frame. Ike hears the low thud of his skull against the metal.

"What the fuck?" screams Ike.

Jason headbutts the bed again, splitting his head open, causing blood to spill down into his eyes and down his cheeks. He then runs to the wall and smashes his face into it. Ike hears the crack of bones in Jason's nose.

"STOP!" yells Ike, but Jason's not listening. He runs to the sink and smashes his head into the metal rim, again and again and again. His skull caving in more and more on every impact with the sink. Ike jumps out of bed and rushes to him. "HELP, SOMEBODY, HELP!" he screams as he grabs Jason by his shoulder and pulls him back. Jason slips from his grip and carries on, shattering his face. His cheekbones collapse and one of his eyes slips out of its socket while the other bulges. It doesn't slow him down. He continues to smash his face in at full force and completely obliterates his eyeballs into non-existence, squishing them on impact.

His face contorts in a horrifying manner, as his features are now a chaotic jumble. His jaw unhinges and blood gushes from the mangled mess that was once his face while his skin flaps around.

Ike pulls him back again. This time, Jason spins into Ike's arms, and Ike holds him to his chest, restricting Jason from any movement. He stops him from head-butting anything else and Jason's legs buckle beneath him. Ike can feel the dead weight of

Jason. He can tell Jason's legs are no longer supporting him, so lays him down on the floor. The remains of Jason's head flop to the side and his arms drop to the cold, hard floor. His body wilts just like a flower with no light and water, when the final petal drops off.

Ike stands, not letting go of Jason. He stands there, holding onto Jason's hand, waiting for something to happen. Ike shakes his head to refocus his eyes and lets go of Jason to run to the door and slam his fists against the metal as he yells for help. He's relentless, smashing his fists repeatedly against the metal while screaming for a guard.

"It's Jason. I think he's dead."

The guards run to the door and look through the bars. They see Jason's limp body in a pool of blood.

"Back up!" shouts one guard, and Ike takes a step back.

"Put your hands on your head!" shouts the other guard.

"I didn't do anything," says Ike.

He still puts his hands on his head and takes another step back. The first guard opens the cell door and rushes in to look down at Jason's face. It's a fucking mess. It's caved in and covered in blood. Dark blood. Close to black with chunks of white bits that also scatter the cell floor. It's hard to tell if it's bits of skull or parts of his brain.

The first guard wrenches and has to look away. He bends in half and holds his stomach as he vomits. The second guard looks away in time so doesn't see the mess.

"He did this himself," explains Ike.

"Fuck off, he did," yells the second guard. "You have his blood on you."

Ike looks down and sees Jason's blood splattered on his top.

"No, no, no, no, no. He got up and started smashing his face against the bunk bed, the walls, and the corner of the sink. I was trying to stop him. Please believe me. He was sleepwalking!"

"No one can do that to themselves," says the first guard before wrenching again.

"No. I'm not a killer. I committed fraud. I'm not a killer. Please," Ike begs. The guards ignore him and call for backup.

CHAPTER 43

Fan slathers strawberry jam on a couple of slices of dark toast and sets a cup of black coffee on a tray, along with a handful of letters that arrived that morning. She lifts the tray and carries it upstairs, barefoot. Her husband had given her some white fluffy slippers for her birthday; she feigned delight and thanked him, but she never wears footwear inside. In the winter, she dons a pair of thick woolly socks, but in the summer, she walks barefoot around their house.

The bedroom door is already open. She walks in and sees her husband, asleep. He's wrapped in the black silk bedcover, baring a golden dragon, snaking its way to the foot end of the bed.

"It's time to get up. You're already late," she says.

Ron slowly stirs, emitting a low groan as he struggles to pry open his heavy eyelids. It usually doesn't take long for him to come round. Once his eyes are open, he's ready to go. He sits up, stretches and piles pillows behind his back to support him.

Ron is turning fifty-one this year. He has a full head of thick black curls and a hairy chest. He would have hair on his back and shoulders too, but Fan shaves them for him.

She places the tray on his lap. It has a cushion on the bottom to keep it steady and a pencil sketch of a highland cow in the snow on the top. The first thing Ron does is sip his coffee because Fan always fills the mug too high, and he doesn't want to spill any on his silk sheets or his bare chest. Then he bites into his toast while opening his post.

Fan perches on the edge of the bed and twists her neck to look at him.

“I’m going to the shops today. Do we need anything?” she asks.

“Not for me, Love,” he says, not looking up from his post.

“Which suit are you wearing today?” She gets up and opens up Ron’s wardrobe.

“Grey.”

Fan rifles through his suit jackets and picks out a hanger with a soft, light grey suit jacket and matching trousers on it, then hangs it on the wardrobe door. Then she chooses a sky-blue shirt to match the azure summer dress that she is wearing, and a tie with varying shades of blue.

“Holy fuck,” says Ron.

Fan swivels to him and waits for him to explain his outburst. Even though Ron is sitting up in bed, they are almost eye to eye. Fan is a petite woman, barely five feet tall. Ron dwarfs her by a foot when he stands. With minimal muscle and even less fat, she has a lean physique. She turned forty-five last month, but looks younger because her skin is flawless. Also, Ron paid to have her eyelids done to erase the crow’s feet, so that has knocked a few more years off her. Her eyelids are the only work she has had done. The rest of her is untouched. She could easily pass for thirty, and if she wasn’t Asian, she could be mistaken for Ron’s daughter.

Ron looks like he’s been in his fifties for a while. He attributes this to his restlessness during the night. It can take him all night to

fall asleep, and by the time he does, it's morning. Luckily, he is the boss, so no one can question him if he ever oversleeps.

Ron owns a car lot called Master Motors. It's his venture, so he can do as he pleases. He has a reliable deputy who can handle matters when he's absent, so the place practically runs itself these days, meaning Ron can take a day off whenever he wants and spend it with Fan or the golf course.

Fan doesn't work. It was a promise he made when he met her. If she left Thailand, she wouldn't have to work. Twenty-five years later, he has been true to his word; she has never had a job.

"It's from The Treasury Solicitors," he says, not looking up.

His eyeballs go from side to side while Fan continues to wait for an explanation.

"Due to the rules of intestacy, I have inherited the entire estate of Jason Spieren, being his only next of kin."

"Who's Jason Spieren?" she asks while she wrinkles her brow.

He looks up from his letter and looks into Fan's caramel-coloured eyes. "My son."

Fan slumps on the edge of the bed. He should have warned her she might want to sit down before unleashing that news.

"I didn't know you had a son," she says.

"Nor did I," he lies. He has written several letters to him in the last year or two, never getting a reply. He has also been searching

for Jason on the internet, ever since he and Fan found out that they could not have children. Fan felt sorry for Ron because she knew he desired a son, a mini version of himself, to inherit the business. She wasn't too upset for herself because she never felt the urge to be a mother. Every time she pictured her future, it never featured children.

When Ron located Jason, he sent him letters to his PO Box, asking to see him. Jason never replied. He threw away the letters and pretended that his dad didn't exist, just like Ron had done when Jason was a toddler. And now they have lost the chance to reconcile their relationship forever.

"Spieren?" Fan says.

"Yes. His mum's surname. She was called Maggie. She told me she was going for an abortion. Must have changed her mind."

Ron rubs the stubble on his chin as he reminisces. Jason was two when Ron left Maggie. He withdrew half the savings from the bank account and moved to Thailand. Soon after, he met Fan. working as a waitress in a bar in Bangkok.

"How do they know you are the father?" she wonders.

"She must have put my name on the birth certificate. All I have to do is take some ID and sign some papers, and everything is ours."

As easy as that, he thinks. He calls the number on the letter and sets it all up.

CHAPTER 44

“I’ve brought you another one of those solid gel air fragrances. This one’s lavender. This should block out that bleach smell.”

Layla’s mum drops the old air freshener into the bin and puts the new one on the bedside cabinet. Layla is sitting up in bed, with thin white pillows behind her back and white stale sheets covering her legs, watching daytime telly. She’s getting fed up with menopausal women losing their grip on the times and becoming more and more out of touch with the world each day, but there’s nothing else to do.

“What did you have for lunch today?” her mum asks.

“Just a chicken sandwich,” says Layla.

The door to her room opens and in walks the nurse that has been looking after her this week, and a short blond woman in a police uniform.

“Hi Layla,” says the short woman. “I’m DCI Roberts.”

Layla looks to her mum with worry and her mum looks right back at her, also with concern. The nurse closes the door behind her as she leaves.

“What’s this all about? My daughter has already spoken to the police,” says Layla’s mum.

DCI Roberts walks over to the bed, wanting to get closer to Layla, thinking it will help her come across as compassionate.

“I’m reaching out with some difficult news about your case. First, I want to offer my sincere condolences for what you’ve been through. We understand this is a very challenging time.”

Layla’s mum sits down in the plastic chair by Layla and grabs her hand, squeezing it tight. Layla doesn’t know what to say, so DCI Roberts continues.

“In regards to the investigation, I regret to inform you that due to the unexpected passing of the suspect, we are unable to continue the case.”

“Unexpected passing?” says Layla.

“Yes. Jason was killed by his cellmate while on reprimand and since prosecution is no longer possible, the case will be officially closed. We understand this might not be the outcome you hoped for, but I want to assure you the investigation was thorough. We can provide you with more details about the case closure if you’d like. Additionally, I’d like to let you know about victim support services available that can help you through this difficult time. There may also be a right to request a review of the case closure, and I can provide more information on that process if you’re interested.”

Layla doesn’t cry because she doesn’t know how to feel about the news. Should she be sad? She’s unsure. Someone killed the man she was falling in love with. The first person she allowed herself to be intimate with. However, it is also the man that has put in her hospital, and it wasn’t the first time he had been violent towards her, even if it was unintentional due sleepwalking. Her

nan had done the same once, pushing her brother down the stairs. Her family forgave her.

“What happens to Jason?” asks Layla.

“That’s down to the next of kin. You don’t have to worry about that,” says DCI Roberts.

“He doesn’t have a next of kin.”

"They have located his father, and he is handling the situation."

“Oh,” says Layla, the only word she could think to say, still numb.

“If there’s no other questions, I will leave you alone.”

She politely bows her head to them both and exits the room, leaving Layla to stare at the door while her mum silently grips her hand, waiting for the inevitable tears to come.

CHAPTER 45

The inside of the crematorium still bears the festive colours of green, gold and red, reminiscent of Christmas. Though only the few individuals who attended both Jason's and his mum's funeral will know this. There are a lot of empty seats. People are scattered randomly like strangers at an AA meeting, pretending not to know each other, possibly ashamed that they've turned up. Not even a quarter of the people that went to his mum's funeral are here to say goodbye to him. Perhaps feeling too ashamed to attend. However, it's more than likely that the relatives who have showed up only want to know if they will inherit anything from him. They won't because Jason didn't have a will, meaning Ron gets everything. And the first thing Ron spends his money on is this send off for his boy. The boy he hasn't seen for over twenty years.

Ron and Fan sit in the front row, directly in front of the coffin. The only other person sitting in the front row is Fat Fingers, though he introduced himself to Jason's dad as Steve. Jaap has not bothered.

Fan places a hand on Ron's lap as they listen to the officiant speak about Jason. They don't know if what the person is saying about Jason is true or not, as neither of them ever met him. They don't know which football team he supported. They don't know if he even liked football. They don't know which music he listened to, what TV shows he watched, what his favourite colour was. The officiant asked which song Jason would have wanted playing at his funeral and Ron didn't have a clue. It will only be right because Fat Fingers has given the officiant a CD he brought with him to guarantee the right song is played when the curtains close around the coffin.

To Fat Fingers, the sound coming out of the officiant is a white noise, buzzing in his ears. He's not listening, he's reminiscing. The days at school, how the three of them used to make each other laugh. They practically spent every day together at school. Then at work with Royal Mail, then onto helping Jason with his videos, and often not helping Jason with his videos. Suddenly, he snaps out of his deep thoughts and resumes listening, wishing Jaap was here with him. He suspects his new girlfriend stopped him coming. She didn't even know him, so she had no right to.

"...Jason's life may serve as a cautionary tale, a reminder of the devastating consequences of violence. Perhaps his story will inspire introspection, a call to understand the root causes that lead young people down dark paths," says the officiant.

Jason's life was more than just a cautionary tale, thinks Fat Fingers as the officiant continues. He can feel himself becoming upset. His cheeks burn as his eyes fill.

"As we say goodbye, let us not just mourn his passing, but also celebrate the light he brought to the world through his talent. May his story spark honest conversations and a renewed commitment to fostering a more just and compassionate world. Jason, may you find peace on your journey."

While the officiant steps aside, the curtains slowly close around the coffin, and Queen's *Who wants to live forever* echoes around the room, through old tinny speakers.

Fat Fingers is the only person who cries. Ron doesn't. He didn't know him well enough and since he didn't get to know him; he knows he has no right to mourn him. Before he could get to know him, he walked out. Ron tells himself he tried his best, but it's not true. He didn't try his best. He wrote him a few letters. If he really

wanted to make amends, he could have easily found his address on the internet and gone to visit him. Instead, he wrote to his PO box.

There must be something he can do to make it up to him, even after death. That's when Ron has the idea of sending Layla a share of Jason's money. Hopefully, that will help somehow. After the sale of Jason's assets, Ron estimates he will still have plenty to retire on. The money he will send will help Layla get back on track because it's a substantial amount. He doesn't even have to consult Fan. He knows she will agree with him. So, as soon as he gets to the house, he will make the arrangements and send Layla the life-changing amount of money.

CHAPTER 46

As Ron pulls up beside the building, he whistles in awe to show his appreciation for Jason's farmhouse. He puts the handbrake on and gets out of his car.

“He did alright for himself, didn’t he?” says Ron.

Fan nods as she walks to the back of Ron’s black Lexus and opens the boot. She lifts out two red suitcases and drops them onto their wheels. After extending the handles, she rolls them to the front door where Ron is already unlocking it with a key that someone gave him. He whistles again when he sees the length of the hallway.

“Shove the cases, at the bottom of the stairs, Love, and I’ll take them up.”

She leaves the cases at the bottom step and walks back to the car to fetch a bag of groceries. Knowing the first thing Ron will want is a cup of coffee, she heads to the kitchen with the bag, walking past the stairs where Ron is carrying both cases, one in each hand, already halfway to the top. He bangs and scrapes the walls with the cases with every step he goes up, trying not to let on that he’s struggling by keeping his wheezing and swearing to a minimum.

In the kitchen, Fan unpacks the groceries and finds places for them. Coffee for Ron for the morning. Tea, milk, and sweeteners for her, and a bottle of bourbon for Ron because he can’t resist a nightcap. According to him, drinking helps him sleep, so he splurged on a pricier-than-normal bottle, opting for Jack Daniel's

Single Barrel Select instead of the regular Jack Daniel's Old No.7, to celebrate his inheritance. Fan doesn't drink, so she'll celebrate with a cup of tea.

As soon as she's organised the kitchen, she puts the kettle on and opens the cupboards in search of a mug. The one she picks is white with 'Who You Going To Call?' printed on it in black writing. She drops a scoop of coffee in and fills it with hot water. Then she puts the kettle back and leaves the cup on the side to cool slightly so it's just the right temperature when Ron comes back down.

She looks around and sees that everything looks clean and new. The drawers are full of cutlery and the cupboards have plates and bowls and mugs and glasses stacked up inside. It leaves her feeling uneasy. All this is someone's stuff, and not just any someone, a dead someone. And it creeps her out, the thought of it being handled and used by a dead person. She shivers. It doesn't feel right.

In the hallway, she crosses Ron as she goes to sort out upstairs.

"I've left the cases outside the bedroom we're staying in," he tells her in passing.

She makes her way to the top of the stairs and sees the cases outside the spare bedroom. All the doors are open apart from one and that's Jason's bedroom. She ignores that room, averting her eyes as she passes, not wanting to think about what happened in there. Instead, she pokes her head into all the other rooms, inspecting the bathroom, the study, then the spare bedroom where they'll be spending the night.

She wheels in the cases and flips them onto their back with no intention of emptying them; she's perfectly fine with leaving their

contents in them and only taking out what they need when necessary. And what she wants right now is the bedding. In the first case she checks, neatly folded, is the black silk bed sheet on top of all the other items. She removes it from the suitcase, wafts it open and lets it float down onto the bed, square on. It doesn't take her long to tuck the end and sides under the mattress and stroke out all the creases. Then she completes the bed-making by plumping up two pillows and placing them at the top of the bed. Now that's done, she's ready for a cup of tea.

She re-boils the kettle and puts a tea bag and two sweeteners into another mug. One with Istanbul written above a picture of the city's skyline. She stirs in her milk and finds Ron in the living room. He's on the soft black leather sofa, forming a new groove with his ass. He has his feet up on the glass coffee table while he nurses a coffee in his thick hands and watches his favourite quiz.

Fan joins him on the sofa and sinks into the leather. She listens to Ron trying to answer the questions. He gets about a third of them correct, however; the questions do have a multiple choice of three answers.

As Fan sips her tea, she looks around the room, admiring the telly. She can't believe the size of it. She thought the one at home was big enough. This one looks like a cinema screen compared to theirs. And the sound, it's behind her as well as in front of her. She has to turn around to check the sound behind her is actually from the telly.

When she looks over at the bookcase, a queasiness runs through her that sticks in her throat as she spots a pale doll in a bride's dress, with half a head, that would have been gazing directly at her if the top half of its face was still intact. She locks eyes on its faded lips. It feels like the doll is staring her down, even without

its eyes, and it wins. She has to turn away and look at Ron, who is still struggling with the questions.

“That doll is very freaky,” she says as she nods in its direction. “I don’t like it.”

“It’s just a doll, Fan,” says Ron, not even looking up from his quiz.

“Its head is smashed in.”

Ron finally tears his gaze away from the television screen and shifts his attention to the doll, then to Fan.

“It’s broke, that’s all,” he says, his eyes flickering between her and the TV screen.

“I suppose so,” she reluctantly agrees. “I still don’t like it.”

“Well, we’ll just get rid of it. I’ll hire a skip and we’ll get rid of all the things we don’t want,” he says, desperate to get back to his quiz, hoping he’ll hear no more of it and have no more interruptions.

He allows his thoughts to return to the quiz on the telly and he resumes guessing at the answers as Fan has one last look at the doll. Knowing that it won’t be in the house for long doesn’t help her with the unsettling feeling she has.

“I’ll just get rid of it now,” she says, and she gets up and takes the doll to the pedal bin in the kitchen. It gives her small joy to slam her foot on the bin’s pedal and drop the doll in the bin, on top of the tea bag she threw away earlier. She heads back to the living

room and falls back onto the sofa next to Ron, where she watches TV with him for a couple more hours.

A darkness seeps into the living room where Fan can't keep her eyes open much longer. Her head is getting too heavy to hold up on its own accord. This is when she knows it is her bedtime. Ron likes to stay up and watch late-night telly, so she knows he won't be going up to bed for another couple of hours. She's always asleep by the time he goes up.

"I'm going up," she tells him.

Ron picks up the remote and turns the telly off. He didn't realise how loud the TV was until now. The silence seems extra quiet. A lot quieter than the normal quiet he's used to. Without the telly on, the countryside in the dead of night becomes void of sound. There's no sign of life outside of the living room. There are no birds singing or dogs barking or cars driving up and down. And tonight, there's no wind brushing up against the windows.

"I'll come up too," says Ron, to Fan's surprise. "It's been a tiring week."

He gets up and walks out of the living room, leaving Fan to flick the lights off before following Ron upstairs to the spare bedroom. They change, get into bed and lie there.

Ron falls to sleep before Fan. Looks like he wasn't lying about how tired he was. Fan thought he was coming up for a different type of early night, one that still resulted in him falling asleep before her, but one that left her to contend with a wet patch.

While facing away from her, he breathes heavily with breaths that are deep and weighty, on the cusp of snoring. She stares into

the black, trying her best to ignore him and thinking about the house and Jason. Thinking about what she read about him on the internet. What she found from searching his name on Google and how he attacked his girlfriend twice, then someone violently killing him in prison. Probably for being a woman beater. *They don't like that in prison*, she thinks as she drifts away.

*

The warm touch of sunlight on Fan's face rouses her from slumber, her eyes remaining shut. She knows it's morning by the faint glow that penetrates her closed eyelids. An alarm never wakes her up. She believes in waking up naturally and because her body clock is so in-tune, she never over sleeps. The curtains remain open while she sleeps, allowing natural daylight to wake her. If an alarm abruptly wakes her up from a dream or deep slumber, she spends the entire day physically drained and mentally scattered, resulting in her to become irritable.

She's not ready to make Ron's coffee just yet, so she turns to spoon Ron, only to be stopped by something. An unexpected object behind her. It clashes with her head as she rolls over. She opens her eyes to see what it is.

"Ron!" she squeals as she jolts up. "Ron!"

With a groan, he rolls over and struggles to open his eyelids. The thought of opening his eyes is met with resistance, as he knows the light will only intensify a headache that is materialising at the front of his head. He consumed only a moderate amount of whiskey last night. On most nights, he indulges in two, occasionally three. And large ones at that. Last night, he left it at one. So why does he feel groggy? He wonders if he's actually battling a hangover, or if his headache is from a lack of sleep?

“What is it?” he says with a croaky voice.

“Why is that doll up here?”

CHAPTER 47

3 years later

“We’re going for a meal, then a few drinks to celebrate.”

“Okay, do you want me to come back and collect you tonight?”

“No. I’ll be okay.”

“Are you sure? It’s no trouble.”

“It’s okay, Mum. We’re all going to crash at Serena’s house. I’ll be home in the morning.”

Her mum smiles and hugs her. “I’m so proud of you, Layla.”

Layla shuts her eyes and allows her mother to give her a gentle squeeze. Closing her eyelids prevents the release of tears. She is certain that her mom will be openly crying. Her mum won’t care, she will let the joy of today overwhelm her.

The pride inside Layla is immense. She is bursting at the seams with it. There was a point in her life when she thought she wouldn’t get here, but she’s done it. She’s finally graduated. She looks around at her friends and peers and their families and lecturers. Everyone is smiling and hugging and laughing and crying. She lets herself smile for the first time in a while.

A small group of her friends from her class walk over, all of them matching in black graduation gowns and mortarboards, and smile at Layla and her mum.

“Thanks, Mum. I got to go. I’ll see you tomorrow,” says Layla.

“Okay. Call me and I’ll pick you up.”

“Okay, Mum. I’ll call you in the morning. See ya later.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow. Love you, Doctor Luk.”

“Yeah, I love you too, Mum,” she says, and she spins herself around and pushes the wheels of her wheelchair towards her friends.

Q&A with the Author

When did you start writing?

It was through the first covid lockdown. I've always wanted to be creative but never had the time because of work and raising children, But I had a few ideas floating around in my head, I loved reading and I really wanted my children to love reading. I used to read to them but we it became hard to pick books they wanted me to read to them, so I started writing stories to suit them. Books that they would be excited to read because they knew it would be about something they'd like and filled with their kind of sense of humour.

What is your writing process?

It's a lot of mental preparation to start off with. When an idea for a plot forms, I think about it daily for months, expanding on the idea, what could happen and why and to whom. Once I have enough, I attempt to write something down. I try to start it in the middle of the story, somewhere exciting, where the action is. There I can work backwards, as well as move the story forwards. What I find important is to sit down and write, even if you don't know where the story is going, or if you're out of ideas, because something always comes to mind when you sit down to write.

When and where did the idea for Jinx come from?

An idea came to me about 15 years ago. I wanted to come up with a really scary horror. One that was realistic, that could happen in real life. Like Jaws. That could happen and it made many people terrified to go into the sea. So I thought about what scared me and it was poltergeists, but knowing that they aren't real, and I don't find them scary anymore, I had to come up with a scary explanation that shows how things moving in the night can happen to people in real life. After I came up with an explanation, the story was built from there.

Do you have a favourite scene in Jinx?

My favourite scene is when Jason and Layla are talking about a pig's penis. The reason I like this scene is because it shows what stage of their relationship they are at. They talk about stupid things and have a laugh about it, not judging each other. And it's obvious that Layla is more intelligent than Jason and he doesn't care. It doesn't bother him one bit. He's not insecure about it. He loves that Layla is intelligent.

The story includes dark themes and a very graphic sexual assault. How did you tackle this?

It was a really tough decision. I was in two minds for months and months over it. And even afterwards I'm unsure. In the end, I didn't want to skate over it or leave it up to the reader's imagination. The reason I wrote it in the way I did was for two reasons. Firstly, I didn't want there to be any doubt about what

happened. I wanted the reader to know for sure exactly what happened. There should be no dispute over it, and writing it so graphically removes any doubt from their mind.

Secondly, I wanted the reader to feel uncomfortable when reading it. Not for shock value. This is a horrible and disturbing thing and I wanted the reader to feel that. I want them to know and feel just how awful this kind of experience is, and I think this does that.

Who are some of your favourite writers?

Stephen King got me into reading horror. My first read of his was *Pet Semetary*. I instantly fell in love with his storytelling. I also like Grady Hendrix, another horror writer, who likes to add a bit of humour into his stories. I am also very fond of Fredrik Backman. He has a very comical and philosophical view on life and the world, and he has that wonderful Swedish off the wall humour. I highly recommend reading his books.

When you're not writing, what do you like to do in your spare time?

Reading. I make sure I read every day. Even if it's only for half an hour. The rest of my time is filled up with looking after my family and fussing the dog.

What's next for you?

Another book. I have two or three ideas swirling around. I've had an idea in my head for the last 10 years that I want to write. It's a psychological thriller. My son wants me to complete the trilogy of Sea The Day, I've written a couple of books about a pirate that goes on adventures and he wants the third one written, so I'll do that next for him, then start on the thriller.