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Opening Extract from...

The Killing Files

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Chapter 1

Undisclosed confinement location—present day

The room is dark, damp. I cannot see properly. I have been caught, that much I know, but I am unsure by whom. The Project? MI5? Someone else? I don't know how I got here. I don't know how I am going to escape.

I lift my head but it feels heavy, a loaded sack filled with potatoes. I inch it back. My breathing is hot, the air a woollen blanket on my face, thick and scratchy, and, as my sight begins to adjust to the dark, slowly, like a curtain being lifted on a stage, I start to see small slivers of solid items. Where am I?

A room. I think that is what this is, but I am unsure. Then what? A cell? Prison confinement again? But I was found innocent. I am free, I tell myself. I am not guilty, have not killed anyone, yet even when I say the words to myself, for some reason, they don't seem right, instead feel out of place, a code reassembled in the middle.

One breath, two. My eyes begin to adjust to the gloom and my sight registers small globules of shapes. The corner of a wall, the shard of a window—snapshots only of a whole pic-

ture. There is a seat of some sort, a table perhaps, but beyond that, nothing. The air is too black for me to take an inventory, the atmosphere sticky tar turning all the soft daylight into hot, putrid night as adrenaline starts to spurt out into my blood creating short, sharp alerts. I am not safe here.

It is then I hear it: the rustle of movement.

'Who is there?' My voice clicks with a cotton bud dryness, and I wonder how long it is since I last drank water as my brain rapidly attempts to calculate timings and bearings and any scrap of geolocation memory it can cling on to.

'Who is there?' I repeat, yet there is no answer, only darkness. A worry rises inside me, but I press it back, not wanting to panic, not wanting to melt down here and now.

Focus. Breathing. I can hear someone breathing, there, on the whisper of the air. I inch my eyes left, sensing what exists but almost not wanting to acknowledge it. Have I put them there, whoever it is? Is that what this is—a hit? Did I try to kill them? I didn't murder the priest, but I doubted myself then, in court, at the trial. And then a horrific thought strikes. What if I have been on an operation for the Project and this is the result? A body on the floor beside me, injured by me and waiting to die. A killing I may later have no memory of.

My torso remains as rigid as possible, not daring to move. How did I get here? I think hard, connect my cognitive thoughts, but no matter how much I try, nothing shakes, as if my memory has been erased.

As if who I am doesn't really exist.

The person's breathing is shallow now, gravelled and raspy. I know what bleeding out sounds like—the sharp,

slicing quality of oxygen intake—but this is not it. And yet, there is an urgency to the breath, a desperation that I cannot place, but it makes no sense why. I am a doctor so should know the signs, but still I cannot place them. What is wrong with me?

I blink three times and try hard to concentrate, to return my brain to function mode, focusing again on the room for clues. The edges. They are shrouded in black, but the window above affords a slip of light that plops in a puddle to my left.

It is then I see it—an arm—and a gasp slips from my mouth.

I track the limb, milky-white skin on a long, limp wrist, different to my own arms, my muscled, tanned ones, with bitten nails and dirt in the creases. Even in this murky room, I can tell that this arm is clean, scrubbed.

I keep all my attention on the body part and attempt again asking who they are, instinctively counting the time as I wait. The numbers sooth me as seconds rack up in twos, the action slowing, at least for the moment, the anxiety that is building inside, but when I ask again who is there and no one answers, a moan slips from my lips. The urine-coloured light has all but disappeared, yet somehow I start to see something slithering into view. A long, T-shirted torso. An elegant, white neck. A skull.

A face.

A scream pierces the air and I am shocked to realise it is mine. I catch my breath, frantically slap my hands up and down, straining to thrash my body forward from the seat, but still my pulse flies. Because there is a face, a face staring back at me, a face I know. Shaven hair, sharp cheekbones, gapped teeth and pool-blue eyes, eyes that even in this tar-black air,

shine. My hearts races, my chest tightens. How can she be here? How have I let this happen? We are all in danger now, all of us.

'Doc.' The voice comes from the head on the floor.

I slam my eyes shut, not wanting to believe what is here, reciting an algorithm in a vain attempt to calm myself.

'Doc, it's okay.' The voice is a cotton sheet flapping in the breeze, a rustle of green grass. 'Doc, I'm okay.'

My eyes open. One millimetre then two, gradually allowing my sight to do the work my brain does not want to understand. My friend is here. My only friend in the world is lying crumpled on the floor beside me.

'Patricia?' I say, testing out the word. 'You are out of Goldmouth prison.'

'Yes, I got out on parole, remember? Two months after you.'

Confusion, worry. They spin round my head fast. 'You are here. Why are you here?'

'Because they have us,' she says, the Irish lilt to her voice still there as I remember, but scratched now, torn. 'The Project have caught up with us. You can't hide from them any more.'

The Project have found me—that's why I have woken up here in this room. They have entrapped us and there is only one way it will end: someone will die.

'We have to get out. Tell me your status—are you injured?'

I listen for her reply, but there is only silence.

'Patricia?' Yet there is no answer, no words back to me as I continue to repeat her name over and over again in the gloom. When I finally stop calling for her, I flop back, flooded with fear, fear of myself, of who I am. Because it's me—I have

done this. I have caused this to happen. I slam my head back and back again, crying out, yelling into the thick, black air. Why can't I recall how I got here? Why don't I recognise where I am? Why?

Why?

One solitary, fat tear slides down my cheek. 'Do not die.' The words slip out, silent, unbidden. 'Please, do not die.'

My eyes search for Patricia's body, for an arm or a head, anything that can reassure me she is okay, that my friend is okay.

'I am sorry,' I say. 'I am sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry.'

I stop, haul in oxygen, listen for signs of life, but in the ten long seconds that next pass, the only sound audible in the thick, foul air is the rasp of my own breath.

Salamancan Mountains, Spain.
34 hours and 59 minutes to confinement

The sun is blinding me. I kick off my running shoes, prop my hand on my forehead and, squinting towards the distance, listen to the morning as the mountains wake up. Clicking cicadas, dry summer grass rustling in the breeze, pregnant lemon and orange trees groaning under the weight of fat fruit spritzing citrus into the air, the distant bleat of a mountain goat—all the sounds that are now familiar to me, part of my daily routine. The security camera lights surrounding my hidden villa glow green, six lenses in total covering every angle of the property. The Salamancan earth is slowly rising.

I pick up my coffee cup, drain it then pad inside, counting my steps where the terracotta tiles are cold on my soles.

One, two, three, my feet move forward until twenty-four arrives and I halt at the sink, my eyes watching everything. I set down my cup, pick up a white cloth and dry last night's dishes: one plate, one knife and fork and one small wine glass. Opening a metal cupboard, I slot the crockery away, all of it easily fitting in, the only occupants in the large, spotless space.

I scan the rest of the kitchen, returning everything to its place. One pan, one white jug with a scratch seven millimetres long on the inside of the handle, one metal pot, small, for milk to warm at night when the sun rests and the night blanket covers the sky where the stars switch on and glow until morning. I count them all and document them in my head and, satisfied all is correct and present, I close all the cupboards and, stretching up my arms high into the air, recite the words I have spoken now every day since I came here to hide from the Project and MI5.

'I am Dr Maria Martinez. I am thirty-three years old.' My fingers ripple in the warm air, a gentle wisp of a breeze drifting in through the small open window, its wooden frame cracked yet solid. 'I am innocent of murder. I am free.'

I stretch my hands further into the void, my muscles elongating into the empty space around me as I go through my routine to remind myself who I am, because if I did not tell myself, I fear I would be lost entirely. My hands fan out and my muscles are taut and strong, and, when I twist towards the glass door of the oven, my reflection stares back, green contact lenses patched over brown eyes, black hair dyed platinum and sawn in clumps to my small skull, the flesh on my face and limbs deep and sun-brown, lines thick and

grooved and ingrained into my worn skin and elbows and ankles and knees.

'I am Dr Maria Martinez. I am thirty-three years old,' I repeat, inhaling, my back arching downwards and my arms reaching forwards so my palms flatten on the floor, the tiles cold on my skin, tiny sharp jolts reminding me I'm alive. 'I am innocent of murder. I am free.'

The yellow morning rays shine warm on my face. I close my eyes and I breathe it all in, moving, exhaling, saluting the sun, feeling my body work as one with my mind as I repeat my chant over and over, losing my thoughts to the repetitive medicine of it, allowing my brain to soften itself of the millions of cognitive connections automatically made every second of the day and night. I bend my knees now, toughened skin touching down on the terracotta as I crease my spine upwards towards the ceiling, eyes still closed as I battle in my head with the pictures that sway before it, pictures of the loud, excrement-filled prison I was kept in, of the court trial and the beatings and the discovery of the Project entire, the shredded sordid secrecy. I breathe, try to let the thoughts pass by me as my spinal cord folds inwards now, rippling the muscles of my torso up and down, feeling them creak and stretch after the running outside, shorts riding up and itching my skin, vest top stuck to me with sweat, and even though the irritation of it is sharp, I continue focusing, letting my brain be even a little bit at ease with who I am, all the while chanting, reminding, never ever forgetting, because without conscious thought, what would we be?

Ten minutes pass in the early morning sun of my movements across the tiles and in the empty air, and, when I am

ready and complete, I stand, exhale and open my eyes. The sun shines into them and I blink as my sight adjusts to the hazy film of the day that yawns out ahead of me, my mind registering with a glow of satisfaction that there are no people to attempt to converse with, no social games for me to decipher how to play. I turn to the sink. I extract one small glass from the cupboard to my left and, filling it with water, drain the contents, and mouth refreshed, rinse out the glass, and return it to its home.

When I am certain all is in its place, I wipe dry my palms on the back of my running shorts and pad towards the lounge, grateful for my daily routine, for each phase of it I have created. Every day since I left prison and came here to hide from the Project and MI5, after my morning run and yoga, I spend three hours tracking and documenting the latest news stories on the US National Security Agency prism scandal and any terrorist crimes or cyber security threats that I think the Project may be involved in.

I am just entering the lounge past the wooden crates on the floor when, today, it happens. I don't know if it's the thought of analysing the latest news on the NSA that has triggered it off or if it is because I slept badly last night, nightmares of prison waking me up in sweat-filled fits, but the memory arrives, fast and bright, not the hazy part of clouds that normally occurs when such recollections float to the surface, but this time quick, a taser prod, switching my mind from what is in front of me to what is inside, to a distant drug-hazed memory.

'No!' The sound of my solitary voice rings loud in the silence, sending the birds in the orange trees outside scattering in random directions.

I grip the kitchen sink. This process, this feeling, it is now familiar, so many times over the years has it passed, but still there is a fear as my brain is thrown into recalling something locked deep within my subconscious.

Something from my past.