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The Killer on the Wall

Written by Emma Kavanagh

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THE KILLER ON THE WALL

Emma Kavanagh



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Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

– Nietzsche

Do not be dismayed to learn there is a bit of the devil in you. There is a bit of the devil in us all.

– Arthur Byron Cover

22 July 1996

It began with the bodies.

They had been seated, backs propped against the tumble-down stones of Hadrian's Wall, faces a bitter white. Their heads were tilted forwards, their jaws grazing their sternums. You might have thought that they were sleeping. But there was the colour of them, the rigid emptiness of them, the first shadowy scent of decomposition riding on the promising heat of the day to come.

Fifteen-year-old Isla Bell felt the ground sway beneath her, the village and the moors retreating far far away, so that it was just her and the dead. Her knees gave way. She sank down, her bare legs swallowed by wet grass. Her palms landed on an outcrop of rock, spikes of pain zinging through her hands, her stomach contracting and she folded over, a dry heave, a merciless heat running through her.

They had been murdered. Isla was only fifteen, knew little of death, and yet even she had no doubt. Three people did not wander from their homes in the early morning and line up alongside one another in order to die. Not unless they had no choice.

A necklace of bruises ringed Kitty Lane's neck. Her hands

had been folded into her lap, a knotted network of veins stark against the grey of them. She wore a fuchsia housecoat, bootie slippers lined with fur, her legs bare against the damp grass. Her head had begun to slip sideways, had drifted downwards so that her tightly permed curls rested gently against the cheek of the corpse beside her.

Ben Flowers. Hadn't he got married recently? Rhian, Rachel, something like that? There was a line of blood, dried along the side of his forehead. His arms too had been folded into his lap, but the left hung at an odd angle, as if he had been given an additional elbow, midway along the radius. His jaw too, that looked wrong, out of position somehow. And, if you looked very closely, you could see the dark red bruise of fingermarks on his neck.

And then there was Zach. Zach sat three seats across from her in English. Zach ate tuna sandwiches for lunch and hated spiders. Zach once broke his leg trying to prove to his brothers that he was big enough to jump from a second-storey window. Zach was quiet and kind and funny and, undeniably, dead.

She allowed her head to sink downwards, looking at the blades of grass, the ant that hurried up her bare knee, and told herself to breathe. It had been a run. That was all. A day like any other, in which her eyes flickered open as the clocks rolled on to 6 a.m., the sunlight breaking through the chink in the curtains and her body thrilling with the fizz of contained energy. Her mother said that she was like a springer spaniel, needed a couple of good runs a day to be bearable. She had let herself out of the house, the clock reading 6.09. Through the garden and out on to the moor, vast in its rolling bleakness. Had paused for a moment, the

cool air lapping at her skin. A kestrel cruised above the scrubby moorland, dipping low over the curve of the Whin Sill, following the arch of it as it clambered up into the amber dawn sky. Then she had pushed off, the sole of her foot shoving away the uneven ground below. She ran for the wall, the cold sharp in her chest, the barrenness pushing her to run faster, harder. A pull to the left, her trainers followed the arc up the Whin Sill, her calves straining against the incline, breath coming hard and fast as she reached the height of it, balancing on the narrow ledge that abutted the stones of Hadrian's Wall. And then, turning left, her feet working to remain where they were on the slender pathway, running into the sunrise, so that its fingertips of red reached out to her, tugging her onwards. The stones of the wall stretching out beside her like a column of marching ants.

She ran with a long, loping gait, fighting to keep her balance on the sloping land that seemed determined to tip her over. Perhaps that was why she ran it. Perhaps it was the bloody-mindedness of being where the land itself did not seem to want you. Or perhaps it was the wall. Because Hadrian's Wall was home to her. When she was a child and was asked where she lived, she would simply reply, I live on the wall. The wall was what protected her from the moor, from the wildness beyond. It was that line of organisation that cut across the moorland, suggesting that even this could be tamed by some stones and an abundance of will.

Then as her lungs were straining and her heart was hammering and the outskirts of the village had come into sight, she had descended from the peak, a headlong dash down a wild slope, turning away from the cresting sun and the early morning mist that sat low across the horizon. Into Briganton

itself, an oasis of civilisation in a desert of green. The stone-built houses huddled together, immensely proud of their age and their neatness, the gardens put together with an excess of care, flower beds lush and organised with a precision even the Romans would have been proud of. It had been still as she had run through the empty streets, a town frozen as it waited for the day to begin. She had run through the village, along the narrow pavements that graced just as narrow roads. Up past the primary school, past the tree that she had once got stuck in, up to the church, its heavy wood doors shut tight. Then at Bowman's Hill, the furthest reach of the village, once she had the Cheviot hills in sight, looping left, back down and around until she reached the wall again. Running, her footsteps loud in her head, thinking of little things, like exams and school and boys and the kind of things that you think of when you are fifteen and alone, and then, as the landscape shifted, and the moor flattened out beneath her, seeing something off in the distance that her mind simply could not explain.

Getting closer and closer and thinking that at any moment the scene would rearrange itself and then what was before her would make sense again. Because she was in Briganton and in Briganton there were no dangers and the world was small and orderly and safe. And so what she thought were dead bodies, well, that simply could not be.

Isla stared at the sharp-edged stone beneath her fingers. She didn't want to look any more. She didn't want to see.

But then it was unlikely that Kitty or Ben or Zach wanted to be here either, so she forced her gaze upwards, allowed it to rest on them. She needed to call for someone, needed to get help. Her father would be at home still, would not have left for his shift.

Isla pushed herself upright. Dad. He would know what to do, would be able to fix this, make it whole. But even as the thought formed she could feel the lie of it. Nothing would make this whole. In an instant the world about her had changed. Nothing would ever turn it back to how it used to be.

That was when she heard the sound, a low moaning like the wind that sometimes funnelled its way down through the Cheviots, and a feeling of electrification raced across her skin along with the knowledge that she was not alone.

Isla whipped around, expecting to see . . . what? A killer waiting behind her? But there was nothing, just the moor and the sleepy village. And then again that sound. She wanted to run, could feel her entire body sparking with it, the need to escape. But she stayed, turning around, her gaze running along the clambering, dipping Whin Sill, past the stones of the ancient wall, the bodies before it, tracking past them even as they tried to stay her attention.

Then a flash of something, an unexpected shadow falling in just the wrong place. The slightest suggestion of movement.

He lay perhaps a hundred metres away, face down in the grass. It looked as if he too had been positioned, but had slumped down, the weight of his body tugging him down to the welcoming earth. Isla's breath became short again, a new horror plucking her from what was already horrific enough. She moved slowly, cautiously towards the fourth dead.

The sound came again, and with the sound the slightest twitch of movement.

Isla ran then, throwing herself carelessly down into the grass besides the fourth victim. His eyes were closed, the hair on the back of his head densely matted with blood.

'Oh God,' she said 'It's okay, Ramsey. It's going to be okay.'

Friday, 21 October 2016

The Bogeyman – Isla

Monsters rarely look the way you expect. Isla watched Heath McGowan through the window. He lay prostrate, his head held in place with a cylindrical cage. He should have looked like the devil. And yet there he lay, all 5'9 of him, a thick frame supporting a square head, hair cut bluntly short, somehow smaller now than the last time she saw him. An ordinary man, a small pot of a belly beginning to form, nails bitten down to the quick. And yet it would be no lie to say that she had thought of him every night for twenty years, that every night as her hand grazed the lamp switch, she had paused to drink in the last of the light and had thought of the killer on the wall. She was a thirty-five-year-old woman and she was afraid of the dark. Heath McGowan was the reason.

'You okay in there, Heath?' She leaned closer to the microphone, depressing the speaker key, keeping her voice light, friendly even. 'We're going to get started in just a minute.'

She watched him on the monitor, his eyes darting upwards as they dissected her words. What was he looking for in there?

But Isla had done this kind of thing many times before and she knew full well what Heath McGowan was hoping to find in her.

Weakness.

'You take your time, Professor.' His voice was calm, almost relaxed, as if somehow he had made the coffin of the MRI scanner, the guards and the shackles that waited for him disappear, and he was lying on a beach.

Isla released the button and glanced across at the prison guard. Steve? Stan? Attractive in an over-muscled way, he stood flush with the window that separated the control room from the scanner – separated him from his prisoner – his gaze locked on the machine and what could be seen of Heath McGowan's body. It was a strange sensation. To know that the room had been swept, that anything that could, even in the wildest of imaginings, be transformed into a weapon had been removed, that there was a guard here, one outside the door, another outside the door beyond that, and yet still to feel that your safety relied on the good grace of a monster.

'There's coffee there.' Isla waved to the table beside her. 'And cake. You should make yourself at home. This will take a while.'

The guard nodded, risking the briefest of glances in her direction. 'I'm good. Thanks.'

'MRI is ready.' The radiographer was a small woman, neat and grey, unimpressed with the calibre of the patient. She drummed her fingernails on the desktop.

Isla depressed the button. 'Okay, Heath. We're starting the structural scan now. This will take a few minutes.'

'Yup.'

It was a special kind of madness this, lunacy in the

pursuit of science. To remove a man convicted of two or three or four or more murders from his prison cell, to place him into a transport, with guards who look at you like you have lost your mind. To bring him to a hospital, take him into a room in which you will have to remove his handcuffs, encourage him to lie down on a sliding table and be slotted into the clanging wildness of an MRI. All the while hoping against hope that whatever evil put him in prison can remain boxed away, at least for this little while.

And yet here they were.

'Lucky number 13.' Connor leaned against the back wall, cradling a chipped mug.

'Lucky number 13,' Isla agreed.

Thirteen serial killers. Thirteen times they had removed monsters from their cages, had peered into their brains, had felt their hot breath, their ice cold smiles, and, thirteen times, Isla had known that her survival depended on the good grace of the devil.

Isla watched Heath's feet, white trainers slack against the bed, and wondered what he was thinking. Of course, the real question was, did any of the previous twelve count? Really, if she was being honest with herself, hadn't it always been about this moment and this man?

She had run across the moor, on that July day twenty years ago, her heart beating hard, unsure whether she was running from or running to. Had flung herself through the back gate, past the goldfish pond, screaming for her father like she was the one being murdered. She didn't know how she made him understand, how she had put into words that which seemed so far beyond them, and yet somehow she did, and then she was running again, this time her father

alongside her, pulling ahead of her, seeming to lead instead of follow. She had thought that Ramsey would be dead, that he couldn't possibly have survived the hours, years that it had taken her to call for help. And yet, miraculously, he was not, remained clinging to life, still face down in the sodden grass. She had thrown herself down beside him, had clung to his hands, muttering comfort that she did not believe while her father stood and stared at the dead. Then a drowning cascade of sound, wailing sirens, blue lights thrown up against the stone walls of the nearby cottages, and people, everywhere, it seemed.

More childhoods than hers had ended that day. Because it seemed now that all of Briganton had been experiencing a prolonged infancy, that it had been cradled by Hadrian's Wall and the Cheviots and the ocean of moorland, that the world had been kept at bay for longer than should have been possible. And then, on that July day, all that had been kept back came crashing in, and the faces that had before been creased up only with petty concerns now wore the telltale signs of terror. It seemed clear that whoever had done this was one of them. No one could quite put their finger on why this must be so. Perhaps it was because that was the worst they could imagine, and the entire village had suddenly realised that they were not immune to the worst after all. There was no talking on street corners, no evenings in the local pub. The summer fete held three days after the deaths was attended by, at most, a dozen hardy individuals. Briganton had experienced real fear for the first time. Its response was to lock itself away. Isla's father had vanished, Detective Sergeant Eric Bell now needed far more elsewhere than he was in their little home. He became a ghost to them,

a poltergeist leaving traces of breadcrumbs on kitchen counters, creaking floorboards in the wee small hours as he returned for a few hours' sleep before beginning again.

Then three weeks later came the next one. The murder of nineteen-year-old Amelia West, a trainee nurse living two streets over from Isla's own home. And disbelief warped into blind panic. He, whoever he was, was not done. He was hunting.

Isla's parents had begun to talk about moving, about leaving the village that was in their blood, their bones. Her father, on the rare occasions she saw him, had grown older, more weighted down, whether by the deaths or by his inability to solve them.

Two weeks after that had come the murder of Leila Doyle. Twenty-five years old. She had vanished while putting her washing out.

Isla had stopped sleeping then, had moved into her sister Emilia's room, where she would lie, staring into the lamp that remained steadfastly on as the night rolled around into morning. Had waited each day, each night, for him to come for her.

And then, after six weeks of torment, there had come a day on which her father was gone, for a day, a night, another day. She had started to wonder if he too was dead, if her mother was simply afraid to tell them. Then, the phone ringing late in the evening, her mother's hand shaking as she picked it up, silence and then her face changing, transforming back to something that Isla had not seen in six long weeks. He got him. Your father got him. His name is Heath McGowan.

Heath McGowan had been arrested in a pub in Newcastle. He had gone there straight from the flat of his then

girlfriend, Lucy Tuckwell. Eighteen years old and six months pregnant with their first child. When police – or, more specifically, her father – had arrived at the flat, they had found Lucy dead on the floor, the final victim of the series.

'Maybe we'll get a nice fat tumour pressing on the amygdala,' Connor suggested. He sipped his coffee, watching the screen. 'Love me a nice fat tumour.'

Isla glanced back at him. Lanky and lean, hair cut short, but not short enough to prevent the ends of it flicking up into those inexorable curls. It was different for him, she reminded herself. Some days, she felt she had known Connor her entire life, like he was a brother to her. But then she remembered that he was not here back in the dark days, that he had not survived what they survived, and so would forever remain separate, only able to know them as one looking in through a window. They had worked together for six years, knew each other's rhythms and tastes. And yet, for Connor, what they did remained an adventure, a walk through a jungle on an organised tour, the simulation of danger where the real threats have been filtered out, packaged away. Perhaps, thought Isla, that was why he always seemed so much younger than her, even though they were the same age. Perhaps it was the excitement in him, the thrill of academic exploration. For him, the horrors that they heard were little more than a scary story shared around a campfire. For her, they were her life and her home.

She shrugged. 'You never know. Although, frankly, he's always been a prick.'

The sounds began, thunderous bangs as the hydrogen atoms are shifted, realigned, shifted again. A rising harmony of beeps, one picture, two, three, four, a thousand. Isla

leaned back in her chair, her eyes trained on the hands of the killer on the wall. They lay limp at his side. Large, the fingers shorter than you would think, stubby. The hands that wrapped themselves tight across the throats of Kitty Lane and Ben Flowers and Zach.

Isla had waited for this since she was fifteen years old.

They had said that she wouldn't get him, that Heath McGowan had built himself into a legend, that in twenty years he had not once spoken about the dead bodies he left seated against Hadrian's Wall. Many had tried. For ten years following McGowan's arrest, Stephen Doyle, the husband of Leila had written to him once a week, pleading for a meeting, begging to know what had become of his wife in those last precious hours of her life, just how her end had come. I just want to sit across from him, Stephen had said. I just want to look into the eyes of the man who took Leila, so I can try and understand. But Stephen, like the journalists, the police officers and the academics that followed him, had been met with a hefty wall of silence. McGowan, it seemed, would take his stories with him to the grave.

Isla, however, never afraid to tilt at a windmill, had written to him, pouring into the letter all of the charm and the persuasion that she could muster. Had reminded him of their childhood connection, tenuous at best. And had promised to provide him with answers, to delve into the glorious mystery that was the McGowan brain and to lay the results before him.

To the amazement of all but Isla, he had written back.

It had been a week ago that Isla Bell had first made the hour-long drive to Winterwell prison, a fortress that stood alone on the edge of Kielder forest, had watched as Heath

McGowan was led into the room, seated at the table before her, and had known that she had done what none had done before. She had got in.

'You look different.' Heath McGowan had studied her with that spotlight focus that would have told her, had she not already known, that she was in the company of a psychopath.

'I'm older,' Isla had replied, coolly.

'Yeah.' Heath had laughed, head dipping down, coquettish almost. 'Aren't we all? But you . . . age suits you. What are you? Thirty-four?'

'Thirty-five.' Isla had sat at the desk, had watched Heath opposite her. Had felt her heart thundering. Had told herself that this was simply number thirteen. That she had done this many times before. That this was no different. Of course, all of that was a lie, wasn't it? Because this time, with this man, it wasn't about the stories, about victims who were simply names in a crime story. This time it was about the person who had left three dead for her to find. Who had tried to murder Ramsey and had failed. It was a feeling of the wind blowing as you stand on a cliff edge.

'Of course. Four years younger than me. I remember you from school, you know.'

In her memory, Heath was a ghost in a ripped denim jacket, his lip curled into an ever present snarl. One of them and yet not one of them. His mother a drinker, his father in the wind, he had landed on his grandmother's doorstep, would stay a while, long enough to get himself a reputation as trouble, then would leave again each time his mother resolved to do better, to be stronger than her need for the

alcohol. Yet, weeks, or months, later he would always return, each time angrier.

'I'm surprised you were there often enough to remember me,' Isla said, wryly. They were old acquaintances chatting about days past. They were neighbours, sharing a history. They were a serial killer and the teenage girl who found his first victims.

Heath gave another laugh. 'Aye, well . . . had better things to be doing with my time. Your sister. Emily? Emilia? Now, she was always a looker. How is she?'

He was testing her, a great white nibbling around the edges of a cage to see if it really will protect the diver within. Isla looked at him, her gaze steady. Emilia had moved away from the village as soon as she was able to. She'd married her first boyfriend, had three little boys, a detached house on a modern estate in Newcastle and a rampant anxiety disorder – the last thanks to the man before her. Isla smiled. 'Emilia is fine. So, Heath, shall I tell you a little bit about our study? See if it's something you're interested in participating in?'

'Aye.' He had watched her, gaze hungry.

'I'm a professor of criminal psychology at the University of Northumberland. I specialise in brain function and its influences on criminal behaviour.' She slid into the speech like a comfortable pair of shoes. 'I've worked with a number of other people in the past on this. What I'd like to do with you is have a bit of a chat, talk about some of your experiences, childhood, things like that, get you to take part in a few tests, and then, in a couple of weeks, we'll arrange for you to go through a functional MRI, magnetic resonance imaging, which will allow us to see how your

brain is working, how it responds to stimulation, things like that.'

Heath had leaned forward, his forehead knitted in a frown of concentration. 'So . . . like, this functional . . . whatsit . . . does it, like, tell you why I do the stuff I do? I mean, will you be able to see if there's something wrong with my brain? If that's why?'

'It will certainly give us some indication, yes.'

Heath had sat up straighter then, and Isla had known. She had him.

A low buzz and Isla's head snapped around as she was pulled back to the present, the monster in the tube.

'Professor Bell?' The radiographer tapped some keys. 'Structural scan is complete.'

'Okay,' said Isla. 'Let's start with the moral decision making task.' She leaned forward, speaking into the microphone. 'Heath? We've completed the structural scan. Now we're entering into the functional phase of the MRI. Keep looking at the screen in front of you. I'm going to present you with a series of choices. Use the button box I gave you to select one. You happy?'

'As a clam, Prof.' His gaze on the monitor was flat, unmoving.

The guard snorted, rolling his eyes at Isla.

She pushed the microphone away, smiled. 'Could be worse. The last guy we had in here decided to mark his territory by pissing on the floor.'

'Charming.'

Connor pulled out a chair beside her, lowering himself into it, one hand carefully grasping a cupcake. 'Yeah, he was a beaut. Cupcake?'

Isla shook her head. ‘How the hell do you eat so much but stay so skinny?’

He grinned. ‘Good genes.’ He lowered his voice. ‘How’s Ramsey doing?’ Nodded towards the scanner. ‘He, ah, he got any issues with this?’

Why has McGowan agreed to do this? Ramsey had asked. Her husband had put the pan on the stove, harder than was strictly necessary, lit a blue flame beneath it, poured in a glug of oil.

Isla had kept her gaze averted, her full concentration directed to checking the tomatoes for inadequacies. Ramsey, he’s been in prison for twenty years. He’s probably bored. The chance to have a nice day trip, even if it’s just to an MRI scanner, probably seems like a pretty sweet deal. She had pushed closed the door to the fridge, expression effortfully light. Because it seemed somehow crucial that she kept it hidden, how much this mattered to her, how great her own need was to sit across from the killer on the wall.

Ramsey had nodded, the back of his blond head dipping up and down, just once. Had swept the onions into the pan. Were his hands shaking?

I just . . . I don’t trust that guy.

The rest was left unsaid. Because he tried to murder me. Because he murdered my brother, five others besides. Isla turned, watching her husband’s wide shoulders, the arch of his arms, quiet muscles beneath a plaid shirt. He still had nightmares that kept her awake into the small hours of the morning, her husband twisting and pulling at the sheets, his hands grasping at the pillow, at her, as in his dreams he attempted to save himself. To save his brother. And she would cradle him to her, mother to a small child.

It had become a rhythm in their marriage, calm waters shaken by something and by nothing, the swell of a wave, a crest, and then, from nowhere, calmness again. There would be long periods in which Ramsey slept peacefully, and then a change – restless nights leading into sallow mornings, quietness becoming a dense silence. His features gaining a sad slackness, a jumpiness, as if her husband had moved into a perpetual state of waiting, ready to leap at the closing of a door or the unexpected fall of a foot. The counsellor had said that it would be like this, that there would be periods of peace laid alongside periods of unrest. Post-traumatic stress disorder coupled with relapsing/remitting depression. A diagnosis that Isla could have made herself. This period, these last five years, this had been the most peace they had known. Isla had begun to wonder if the storm had finally passed. If life could in fact be different. Then those words – I'm going into the prison, I'm going to meet with Heath McGowan.

If he's agreed to be a part of the study, Ramsey said, stirring the onions, the oil spitting, sizzling, maybe it's because he knows who you are. You know what these guys are like, with their grandstanding. Wouldn't it just be the perfect twist of the knife to get to you? Your father's daughter. My wife?

Isla had dug the point of the knife into the tomato, its ripe to the point of bursting skin rupturing beneath the pressure, sliced with a fast sweep. Had tried very hard not to feel that flush of anger. That she was by definition to be explained only by her relationship to someone else. To the men in her life. That she had got to Heath, had squeezed her way inside, and that the success of that was only because of

her father – the man who arrested him – and her husband – the man he had attempted to kill.

She let her knife race through the tomatoes, her heart beating fast. The trouble was, she wasn't at all sure he wasn't right.

Isla had taken a deep breath, her tread careful. This was, after all, her husband's story more than it was hers. She could bow out. Get Connor to do it. He was more than capable. And yet . . . Isla thought of that moment, every single night, her hand on the light switch, the fear that raced from her abdomen up to her mouth at the thought of the darkness about to come. She was not good with fear. Ramsey had caught her once, had come home late on a night when darkness had plummeted early, brought about by wild weather, had found her walking the blackened house, bare feet, wearing nothing but a strappy vest and absurdly short shorts. Had looked at her like she was insane. And she had never said it, had never explained to him that she had been pushing herself to the point of her greatest terror. With the darkness and the vulnerability of near nakedness, it was like a private dare. I bet you can't . . . Isla had always been a sucker for dares.

Well, I'm sure it will be fine. All of the authorisation is in place, so I don't really have much choice in the matter now, Isla lied. Just . . . look, these guys, they want something to fill their days in there. A study like this, it gets them interested. And they get to brag. You know, tell someone how clever they were, how they almost got away with it. I'm sure McGowan has no clue who I am.

Now Isla sipped her coffee, black, the bitterness of it making her wince. 'Ramsey's fine. He gets that this is important. You finished up all the childhood stuff, right?'

They were two halves of a coin, she and Connor. Him: developmental and environmental influences. Her: cognition, genetic factors. Taken together, they could tell a story – how a serial killer became a serial killer. Because if you could tell that story, then maybe, just maybe, you could change it.

'Yeah, it's . . . not great. I mean, it's not as bad as some I've heard. Pavel Devreaux still gets to keep his worst-childhood-imaginable crown.'

Pavel Devreaux killed eleven men, mostly homeless, helpless, in and around Calais in the late 90s. He then ate their internal organs.

'Heath's mother was an alcoholic, father erratic, but around just long enough to sexually abuse Heath from the ages of four to seven. Pretty vile stuff. The mother alternated between affection and fury, and it looks like little Heath had no way of predicting which way she would go. The most consistent presence seems to have been the grandmother. From what he says she tried her best, but sounds like she was pretty overwhelmed by the whole thing. Heavily critical, not much in the way of affection. Would routinely tell him that he had been taken over by Satan.'

'Well, she was right about that much,' muttered the prison guard, keeping his stare on the unmoving feet of Heath McGowan.

Isla nodded, watching the screen where Heath's selections were flashing by. The test was coming to its conclusion. The attentional focusing one would begin shortly. She pulled a file closer, flipped the cover open. 'I finished going through the PCL-R.'

The Psychopathy Checklist – a measure of badness.

'And?'

She looks at him, her gaze flat. 'Thirty-seven.'

Thirty points would have indicated that he was a psychopath. Forty was the most extreme level of psychopath it was possible to measure.

Connor nodded. 'Well, that's pretty definitive.'

'Yes. Yes, it is.'

Of course, thought Isla, sometimes you just knew. Even without a test. There was a certain feeling that would occasionally come from sitting with a psychopath, that notion that your senses have been supplanted, that what you think now, what you feel, will come from him, this man in front of you, rather than from all that you know to be true. It was like being bewitched and horrified at the same time, the watching of yourself from a great distance as you are led willingly into danger. Isla often thought of psychopaths as the anglerfish of the human race.

'I liked Briganton,' Heath had said on that day, a week ago. He had leaned forward across the desk, his expression earnest, hands hooked together like a child at prayer. 'I mean, my nan, she was all right. Lived there all her life. 'Course, you say that name now and all anyone ever thinks of is . . . you know.'

You. The killer on the wall. There were coach tours now, organised excursions for the dark of mind, the opportunity for misery tourists to visit the famous murder sites in the north. Briganton was stop number three. Isla had stopped telling people where she was from, had grown weary of that look of almost-recollection, of the dawning realisation and, far too often, of excitement.

Then Heath had looked at her with the air of one who

has recalled something. 'How is your dad? I heard he became a superintendent. Superintendent Eric Bell. Has a nice ring to it. I always liked him. Gave me a hard time, when I was pissing around as a kid, but he was all right. 'Course, I went off him a bit when he arrested me.' Something glimmered in his eyes. Amusement? 'I heard that he became quite the celebrity. The great Eric Bell, the detective who brought down the killer on the wall. You know, he never even said thank you. I mean, that big old career of his, I did make it, after all.' He had studied her, critically. 'You look just like him, you know?'

Isla wondered faintly what it was that Heath was expecting? Did he expect her to cry? To rush from the room, a little girl pulled to pieces by the big bad wolf before her. Perhaps he had not yet understood just what he had done to her at the age of fifteen, how much he had changed her and just how many wolves she had tamed since then.

'Yes. Yes, I do.'

Fuck you.

Now the MRI thumped, beeped. Isla watched Heath's hands work the button box, the speed of them suggesting enjoyment.

'Professor? The structural scan has finished processing. It's ready to be viewed now if you want to see it?' The radiographer didn't look at Isla, her gaze locked on her screen in an expression of rapt boredom.

Isla pushed her chair back, and stood up. 'Please.'

She felt Connor behind her as the screen moved from black to grey and then an image filled the screen. She studied it and, despite herself, her heart sank.

'No gross abnormalities.'

Isla gazed at the brain of the killer on the wall, its swirls and ridges. There was no convenient tumour impacting on the amygdala that would explain the aggression, nothing that she could point to and say 'here, here is where the evil lies'. To all intents and purposes, they were looking at a perfectly normal brain. But then, wasn't that the thing with serial killers? Weren't they all, when you looked at them, perfectly normal? Right up until the monster in them was unleashed.