The Shining Skull

Kate Ellis

Published by Piatkus Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter One

**TO BE HELD AT THE GEORGE INN, DUKESBRIDGE
ON THE 24TH DAY OF APRIL 1814**

**A MEETING AT WHICH WILL APPEAR
THE AMAZING DEVON MARVEL
WHO, BEING BUT 10 YEARS OLD, WILL ASTOUND
ALL PRESENT WITH HIS PRODIGIOUS
CALCULATIONS**

Admission 1d

Leah Wakefield was in full view now.

Watching from the shelter of the trees, the stalker shifted from foot to foot. The time had to be right. The conditions had to be perfect for the operation.

The little bitch was strutting down the green velvet lawn behind the house, making for the azure rectangle of the swimming pool wearing a bikini that left little to the imagination. There was a fixed scowl on her lightly tanned, baby pretty face and she kept throwing contemptuous glances at the older woman trotting beside her, trying to keep up.

The stalker recognised the woman, the small, plump blonde with too much make-up on her hatchet face and a skirt too brief for her years. Leah's pushy mother, Suzy Wakefield – a face that had graced every tabloid and celebrity magazine in recent months. And for once it looked as though the newshounds at the lower end of the market had struck a rare and rich vein of accuracy. The body language and the never-ending barrage of carping from the older

woman targeted at the half naked girl with the California tan and the gym-honed body said it all.

The rift between mother and daughter was deep. As deep as the cut the stalker would make in the victim's throat if the family didn't come up with the goods.

The girl was in the pool now, floating on her back, her bronzed limbs spread out like a sacrificial victim. She was vulnerable; oblivious to the outside world. And completely unaware of what lay ahead.

'There's been another taxi attack. That's the second in two weeks.'

Detective Constable Steve Carstairs looked up from the open copy of the *Daily Galaxy* he was reading underneath his desk and saw Detective Sergeant Rachel Tracey looking down at him.'

'Sorry, Sarge. What was that?'

Rachel pushed her blond hair back off her face, trying to conceal her impatience. 'Another woman's been abducted by a bogus taxi driver . . . same as before.'

Steve looked at her blankly.

'Forget it. Everyone else seems to be out so I thought you could come with me to interview the victim. But if you're busy . . . ' She said the words with heavy irony as she stared down at the newspaper. 'Anything interesting?'

Steve felt his cheeks reddening. 'Er . . . I was just reading about that singer Leah Wakefield. She's a right little slapper by the sound of it.'

Rachel unfroze for a second and allowed herself a grudging grin. She too had followed the musical career and personal life of the teenage singing sensation, Leah Wakefield, with some interest – along with a substantial proportion of the population. But she was hardly ready to admit this weakness to Steve.

'If I were you, Steve, I wouldn't believe everything you read in that paper of yours. They usually make it up as they go along.'

By the time Steve had opened his mouth to protest, Rachel was heading towards DI Peterson's office with the determination of a guided missile. Steve watched her retreating back and saw her hesitate for a second by the office door to smooth her hair. Any excuse, he thought, to talk to Peterson. Sometimes she made it so obvious.

As his office door opened, Wesley Peterson looked up. 'Anything new?'

'Another taxi abduction,' Rachel began as she made herself comfortable in the visitor's chair. 'Early morning this time, would you believe. Woman on her way to Neston Station to catch the London train. She rang for a cab and one turned up. Then after a while she noticed the driver wasn't taking the right route for Neston. She told him but he just carried on and parked the taxi in an isolated country lane somewhere – she wasn't sure where. Anyway, it was exactly the same MO as before. He took out a pair of scissors and cut off her hair.'

'The boss thinks he fancies himself as a hairdresser. Or he used to be a hairdresser and he got the sack.'

Rachel shook her head. 'I don't think even a defrocked hairdresser would make the sort of mess this bastard does. I've seen the other victims. He just hacks their hair off. No marks for artistic merit.' She looked up. 'The papers are starting to call him the Barber. Do you reckon it's sexual . . . a power thing?'

Wesley shrugged. 'I think it's a distinct possibility. But we won't know for sure until we catch him. Where did he drop off his latest victim?'

'Just like the others. He dropped her off at the station. He leaves them wherever they've asked to go.'

'Description?'

'Nondescript. Middle aged. Baseball cap pulled down over his face. Droopy moustache. Average build. Average height. Average everything.'

'Last time it was a clean-shaven man with long mousy hair.'

'Perhaps he's disguising himself . . . or it's a different man?'

Wesley looked up. 'Surely there can't be more than one of them. What about the taxi firm she booked?'

'Again the bona fide cab arrived to find the client already gone. Our friend's listening in to the taxi frequency for likely victims and getting in there first. All the victims swear that the car bore the name of the correct taxi company and a licence plate. It all looked kosher.'

'He's organised. I'm just worried that he's going to move on from chopping his victim's hair off to doing some real harm.'

Rachel looked at Wesley. 'I wondered if you'd like to come with me to see this latest victim.' She felt herself blushing. 'She might

have seen something the others didn't. I mean, as you said, he's got to be stopped before someone gets hurt.'

'Where does she live?'

'Stokeworthy. Next to the village school.' She hesitated, the mention of schools bringing something uncomfortable to mind. 'How's your wife by the way? Has term started yet?' She couldn't help asking the question, like picking at a scab.

'She went back last Tuesday.' Wesley smiled. 'And she's looking forward to half term already.' Pam Peterson taught in a primary school and Rachel had worked out long ago that Wesley's domestic life tended to follow a pattern – agreeable in the school holidays and strained in term time.

Wesley stood up and looked at his watch. 'The DCI's in a meeting with the Chief Super which means he'll be like a bear with piles when he gets back. I think we should make ourselves scarce, don't you?'

Rachel smiled. Wesley's assessment of DCI Gerry Heffernan's mood was probably all too accurate. She followed Wesley Peterson out of the office. It looked as if it was her lucky day.

The stalker watched Leah Wakefield disappear into the house. A big house. Neo-Georgian. Vulgar as its residents and built on the outskirts of Neston in the days before the South Hams became an area of outstanding natural beauty and the planning authorities became too fussy.

He felt he knew the house. The interior was familiar from a four page spread in a well known celebrity magazine. And then it had featured on the TV series *Star Homes*. Cameras had followed the scantily clad Leah around the house ... to the gold and cream lounge with the massive plasma TV occupying one wall like a cinema screen; to the sumptuous bedroom with its walk-in wardrobe and en suite with corner spa bath with solid gold taps; to the kitchen with its acres of polished wood and granite. The stalker had played the video through again and again until he knew the layout of the house and the contents of each opulent room off by heart.

He'd seized the opportunity to have a good look round when the house was empty during Leah's last nationwide tour and he'd paid particular attention to the security system, noting each PIR detector and every lock on the doors and windows. Emboldened, he had

called at the house pretending to sell alarm systems and struck lucky with Leah's cleaner. She was a garrulous woman who, in her pride at being connected with a celebrity, had talked far too much. When the stalker had feigned the excited interest of a genuine fan, Mrs Cleaner had played to the gallery, impressing him with her intimate knowledge of the Shining One, bathing in her reflected glory. As far as she was concerned it was only natural for someone to be awed and fascinated by someone who had appeared regularly on the TV and whose every action was reported in newspapers and magazines.

Leah and her mother had been staying in Devon for a week now and the stalker had watched her from his well-concealed hiding place in the woodland – in the wild area between her grounds and the adjoining farmland. There had been a close shave when a brace of paparazzi came stamping through the undergrowth in hope of capturing a shot of the star off her guard and doing something that might be worth a headline or two. But they had given up after a few hours. If they'd stuck it out, they would have got an eyeful.

The weather forecast for tomorrow was good. She would be in the pool again. Half naked and vulnerable.

If he was to take her, it would have to be soon. But the moment had to be right.

It was a strange symbol, one Dr Neil Watson of the County Archaeological Unit had never come across before. Seven boldly carved rays radiated from a seven-pointed star with a flower, possibly a rose, at its centre.

'It's on several graves . . . all dating from the early nineteenth century.' The Reverend John Ventnor, Rector of St Merion's church, Stoke Beeching, gave a nervous smile. 'I've no idea what it means. Do you . . . ?'

Neil shook his head. 'Contrary to rumour, archaeologists don't know everything. I've never seen anything like it before in my life.'

'There's been quite a bit of opposition, you know.' The Rector saw that Neil looked puzzled. 'To the church extension . . . the new parish room. A lot of people don't like the idea of disturbing the dead.'

Neil assumed what he considered to be a suitably solemn expression. 'No. I suppose some people are squeamish about . . . '

'They'll be disinterred respectfully, of course, and reburied in another part of the churchyard but . . . '

'Yeah.' Neil gave an impatient smile, trying to think of something intelligent to say. He just wanted to get on with the job. The authorities had insisted that the delicate work of disinterring the old graves and digging the foundations for the new parish room at the north-west end of the church should be supervised by an experienced archaeological team, due to the thirteenth-century church's historical significance. And now it looked as though part of his job would be to soothe the nerves of a jumpy clergyman.

The Reverend John Ventnor leaned towards him confidentially. 'To be honest, this has caused so much ill feeling in the parish that I almost wish Miss Worth hadn't specified that the money she left should be spent on building an extension to the church. Half the parish think it's the best thing since sermons were cut from three hours to the requisite fifteen minutes but the other half seem to imagine that we've hired Beelzebub himself as the architect. You just can't win, can you?'

Neil smiled, suddenly finding himself sympathetic to the man's predicament. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'It'll all be done as discreetly and quickly as possible. We're erecting screens today so nobody'll be able to see what's going on. I presume all the relevant families have been informed? It's not going to come as a nasty surprise to anyone that Great Uncle Albert's being shifted to another part of the churchyard?'

John Ventnor nodded earnestly. 'That's all been dealt with. Fifteen burials will be disturbed and only one family couldn't be traced . . . a burial dating back to 1791. Of course there's the Bentham family vault – the tomb you were looking at before with the odd symbol – but that's not a problem.' He leaned forward confidentially. 'Miss Worth was their only surviving relative.'

'And she suggested that her nearest and dearest be shifted to make way for the parish room.'

'Miss Worth was a very practical woman,' the Rector said with a twinkle in his eye. 'Sentimentality was hardly her forte. She lived till she was ninety, ran a smallholding single handed and rode to hounds until she was eighty-two. Salt of the earth.'

'A formidable lady.'

'You didn't argue with Miss Worth,' said the Rector with feeling. Neil suspected he'd had one or two altercations with the formidable lady in his time.

Neil looked around. The contractors were arriving to erect the screening, their thoughtlessly parked lorry blocking the main street through the village. Some of the archaeological team had already turned up in an old camper van and they'd started to unload equipment from the back. John Ventnor turned and gazed upon this scene of industry but showed no sign of moving and leaving Neil to his work.

Neil had never considered making conversation to be one of his strengths but, as he wasn't in a position to do much else just yet, he thought he'd give it a try. 'Do you know the new Vicar of Belsham?'

'Mark? Yes, of course.'

'I was at university with his wife's brother.'

The Rector's eyes lit up. 'Really? I've met Maritia a few times . . . lovely lady. She told me that her brother's a policeman in Tradmouth.'

'That's right. Wes studied archaeology with me at Exeter before he joined the force. He's a detective inspector now.'

'Did you go to the wedding?'

Neil nodded. Then he turned away. The mention of Maritia Peterson's wedding conjured uncomfortable memories.

His eyes focused once more on the strange carving that adorned the Bentham family tomb. The past, to Neil, was a safe and comfortable country . . . unlike the present. 'Odd symbol that. Wonder what it means.'

'I'll have a look through the church records if you like . . . see if there's any mention of it.'

'Thanks,' said Neil as the builders were making their way noisily up the church path carrying various unrecognisable pieces of equipment.

It was time to make a start.

The Barber's latest victim lived in the increasingly pricey village of Stokeworthy, in a cottage straight off a chocolate box. Pink cob and thatch, it stood next to a small village school which, unlike many such schools in the area, was still open for business, just. It seemed like every town dweller's dream of rural living And Sienna Calder had acquired that dream. But now, maybe, her idyll had turned into a nightmare.

Rachel Tracey lifted the heavy knocker, formed in the shape of

a Cornish pixie, and let it fall. As she waited for her knock to be answered she turned around and gave Wesley a shy smile which he returned automatically.

After half a minute the door opened, just a little at first as though the resident was a nervous old lady, terrified of bogus callers. After Rachel had done the introductions and poked her ID round the door for examination, the door was opened wider to admit them.

As they stepped straight into the low-beamed sitting room, Wesley caught his first glimpse of their hostess and what he saw shocked him. Sienna Calder had an attractive face, mature but, as yet, unmarked by the ravages of age. Wesley guessed she was in her thirties and the clothes she wore had a well-cut simplicity that marked them out as expensive. But the sleek image was marred by her hair, hacked inexpertly almost to the scalp like some Victorian workhouse child who'd been found to be crawling with lice. He averted his eyes, feeling that it would be rude to stare.

'How are you feeling?' Rachel asked sympathetically.

Sienna slumped into a brown leather armchair. 'It was a bit of a shock but at least he didn't . . . .I suppose it could have been worse. A lot worse.' She put her hand tentatively to her head. 'I expect it'll grow back.' The words were brave but Rachel could detect a tremble in her voice.

'Can you tell us exactly what happened?' Wesley said gently.

Sienna nodded and invited them to sit.

'My partner, Guy, works in London during the week. I work from home here for two days – I'm in IT – and I go up to London on Wednesdays and stay in the apartment with Guy. Then we both come down here on Fridays.'

'Rather a lot of toing and froing,' said Rachel with a hint of disapproval. Her family had farmed the Devon earth for generations and she felt the native's resentment of wealthy Londoners who bought up weekend places and priced local youngsters out of the housing market. But she tried to concentrate on the matter in hand. The woman had been attacked and her attacker had to be caught.

Either Sienna hadn't heard Rachel's remark or she'd chosen to ignore it. She carried on. 'I was catching the London train from Neston and I ordered a taxi from the firm I usually use. A cab turned up, no problem. Everything seemed normal then . . . '

'Go on,' said Wesley quietly.

‘He started driving towards Neston. Then he turned off down a little lane . . . very narrow. Only room for one car.’

‘That could describe most lanes round here,’ said Rachel sharply. ‘Did you notice any signposts or . . . ?’

‘No, I was sitting on the back seat reading some business papers so I wasn’t really concentrating. I assumed he was just taking a short cut.’

‘Then it became clear he wasn’t?’ said Wesley.

Sienna nodded. ‘It seemed to be taking rather a long time so I said something like, “I did say Neston railway station, didn’t I?” But he said nothing. He just kept on driving down these lanes. That’s when I started to get really worried. I kept asking him where he was going. I was going to tell him to stop the car then I thought better of it. We were in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Go on,’ Wesley prompted gently.

Sienna glanced at Rachel, as though for support, but Rachel avoided her eyes. It would be up to Wesley to do the tea and sympathy bit.

‘He stopped the car. Then he got out. I tried the back doors but the child locks were on. I was trapped. I really started to panic then, believe me.’ She looked Wesley in the eye. ‘Well, you can imagine what I thought. It’s amazing how everything you learn at self-defence classes goes out of the window when you’re faced with . . . ’

‘You thought he was going to rape you?’ Wesley was surprised at the lack of sympathy in Rachel’s voice.

‘Of course. I saw he had something in his hand. I thought it was a knife but now I know it was a pair of scissors. I remember crouching on the floor of the car thinking that if he couldn’t drag me out, he wouldn’t be able to . . . But he was stronger than me. I tried everything . . . biting . . . hitting out. But he dragged me out of the car onto the ground and pinned my arms behind me and bound them with tape – I think it was that brown tape you use on parcels. I was so terrified that I couldn’t even scream. Then I saw the flash of a blade and I thought, “this is it. He’s going to kill me.”’ She took a deep breath. Wesley could see her hands were shaking. ‘I closed my eyes and prayed. I’m not religious but I prayed.’

‘Go on,’ Wesley said quietly.

‘Then I just felt my hair being pulled and I heard . . . All I heard

was cutting. He was cutting my hair off. It seemed to go on for ever and . . . '

Rachel leaned forward. 'Did he say anything?'

'Not till it was over. He must have used the scissors to cut the tape round my wrists then he just told me to get back in the car. To tell you the truth, I was so relieved that he hadn't raped me and that I was still alive, I just did as he said.'

'Did you get the impression the motive was sexual?'

Sienna thought for a few moments. 'I honestly don't know. It might have been but he never tried to . . . ' The sentence trailed off.

'What happened next?'

'He drove fast and before I knew it we were on the outskirts of Neston. When we reached the station he got out and opened the door and I jumped out. Before I had a chance to think about alerting anyone, he sped off.' She gave Wesley a shy smile. 'But I did get the registration number.'

Wesley and Rachel looked at each other. The other victims had taken the number too but when it had been checked out, it had become clear that the attacker used a variety of false number plates along with his selection of false taxi stickers. But the car was the same each time; an old dark-blue saloon, possibly a Ford – common as seagulls on Tradmouth waterfront.

'What did he do with the hair,' Wesley asked suddenly, although he knew the answer already from interviewing the other victims.

Sienna frowned and put her hand to her head, as though trying to conceal her attacker's handiwork. 'It was strange,' she said slowly. 'He had a plastic bag . . . one of those self-sealing ones. He picked it up very carefully and put it in.' There was a long pause while she tried to find the right words to explain. 'It was as if it wasn't an attack on me personally. It was as if there was some purpose to it. Does that make sense?'

Wesley smiled, reluctant to say that it didn't make any sense to him. And, from the puzzled look on Rachel's face, it perplexed her too.

'You've already given a description to the officer who took your statement. Average height, average build, baseball hat, droopy moustache . . . '

She nodded.

'The other victims have given us different descriptions. It could be that he changes his appearance every time. Please think

carefully: is there anything else you can remember? His accent, for instance?'

Sienna shook her head. 'He didn't say much but I'm sure he wasn't local. I'd say he sounded northern.'

Wesley leaned forward. 'What sort of northern? Manchester? Liverpool? Yorkshire? Newcastle?'

'I'm not sure. I'm sorry. Just northern.'

'Well, that could be very helpful,' said Wesley with an optimism he didn't feel. 'Do you think you could find the place where he took you again?'

Sienna shook her shorn head vehemently. 'It could have been anywhere around here. All these narrow lanes look exactly the same, don't they?'

'You don't remember passing any houses or crossroads or farms?'

After more negative answers, Wesley and Rachel took their leave with a plea for Sienna to get in touch if she remembered anything more.

'What do you think?' Wesley asked as they climbed into the car.

'I haven't a clue,' Rachel replied.

'That makes two of us.'

Marcus returned his hired boat early that afternoon. The rain had held off, which was lucky, and as he sat on the quiet quayside watching the car ferry scuttle to and fro across the river in the fading light, he wondered whether he should summon the courage to go back there. It was late now and it would soon be dark. But there was no right time for something like this.

He wasn't sure whether it was fear of rejection that was holding him back, or the simple possibility that nobody would believe him in the first place. He had been out of their lives since 1976. How could he just turn up and say, 'Hi, I'm home?' Perhaps he should send a letter. Or make a phone call. But that would be just as bad as turning up in person. However the news was broken, it would come as a shock.

He had to face his return to life some time.

His guesthouse was up one of the steep streets that led away from the river front to the higher part of the town and the uphill walk made him breathless. He decided not to go in – the landlady was the nosey type. Instead he climbed into his battered red car

and backed it out of the front drive before heading for the main road out of Tradmouth.

Having studied the maps over and over again, he knew how to get to the house by road. He drove slowly down the narrow, unfamiliar lanes. Last time he had been down them, he had been far too young to drive and he barely recognised the cottages and farm gates that lined the route. The signposts to Derenham told him he was on the right road and as he pulled in to let a tractor squeeze by, he realised he was on the brow of the hill that overlooked the village. Soon he'd be heading down the steep streets past the church and down to the glittering ribbon of the River Trad. Then he'd branch off and head out of the village towards the house. He remembered it best from the river of course – the river had been part of his life all those years ago. But he thought he could find it from the road. He had to find it.

He drove through Derenham's barely remembered streets, taking two wrong turnings. He was reluctant to ask for directions, reluctant to involve strangers in this, the most momentous occasion of his adult life. He found himself wondering whether anybody in Derenham would recognise him. But then time changes everything and everyone.

It took him fifteen minutes to find the house. He recognised the gates at once. And the name. Mirabilis. Over the past few weeks he'd wondered whether they would have changed the name to something more sombre in view of what had happened there. But it seemed they had kept it. Perhaps they'd been waiting for a miracle. The one they were about to experience.

He parked the car by the gate. It seemed right to go the rest of the way on foot. To walk back into their lives as he'd walked out all those years ago.

It was dark now. Country dark without the jaundiced glow of street lighting. Instead the full moon and the pin-point stars cast a silvery pall over the countryside. His eyes adjusted to the dimness as he walked up the drive, his footsteps on the gravel crackling like gunfire in the silence.

The doorbell was new, he could tell. Plastic, not like the old brass bell push that had been there before. He placed his forefinger on it and heard a buzzing noise from somewhere within the house. Then footsteps. There was no turning back now.

The door opened and a man stood there in the hallway, holding

onto the latch. There was something familiar about his face and Marcus realised that he was looking at himself, only changed . . . different; younger; better groomed; taller; blue eyes rather than his own green. But the same shape of face; the same mouth. The two men stood, staring at each other for a while, weighing each other up, neither wanting to break the spell.

It was Marcus who spoke first. 'Does Mr Fallbrook still live here?'

The man in the hallway gave a brief nod, his eyes never leaving the newcomer's face. 'I'm Adrian Fallbrook.'

The newcomer looked confused. 'No I meant . . . Mr Fallbrook. Mr Jacob Fallbrook.'

'That's my father. Look, I'm afraid he . . . '

But Marcus wasn't listening. His eyes were shining as the words spilled out. 'You must be . . . ' He hesitated. 'My brother?'

Adrian Fallbrook looked confused. 'What are you talking about. I haven't got a brother.'

'You don't know who I am, do you? I'm Marcus. Marcus Fallbrook.'

Adrian Fallbrook's mouth fell open and he stared at the visitor with disbelief.

'I'm back.' He hesitated, nervous. 'I'm back from the dead. You going to ask me in or what?'