

FRANCES MACKINTOSH

COMING FOR YOU

PROLOGUE

I'm dying.

This dusty stone tomb is completely dark and there are no shadows. Or maybe it's my eyes. They are so dry and itchy. I can no longer open them as my eyelids have stuck together. I've not drunk or eaten since being here.

Eleven days ago, the stone ground on which I lie felt so cold. So hard. Now I barely notice it. My body is shutting down. Fluid seeps from me. My underwear is wet. The only item of clothing my abductor has left me with.

Retribution.

I'm slowly choking on the thick substance in the back of my throat and my lungs are breaking down. I try to take a weak breath through cracked, painful lips. I'm drifting into my final sleep and my breathing is hindered. Very soon, death will take me.

Left deliberately to slowly die of unmitigated hunger.

I want my mother.

CHAPTER 1

2004

I hear a gasp.

I pause for a split second before realising it has come from me.

I must get to work. I don't want to be late. I hate being late, it's rude. But I stop, without warning, and I can sense the frustration of others around me.

He's there again.

People are continuing to pass me by, maybe on their way to work or shopping. I don't care at this moment. He is staring intently at me from the other side of the road. His body is motionless, his stance confident.

This has been going on for about four months now. I don't know who he is. I can see him across the narrow road and he's always dressed the same, the man in the grey trench coat and trilby.

At first, I thought it was a coincidence. I seemed to keep bumping into him regularly. He has never approached or even tried to speak to me. He just stares, always watching. My mum always says there's no such thing as a coincidence.

I lower my head, denying myself the pleasure of the morning sun on my face. Hurrying towards the office, ignoring him, I wish I hadn't seen him. I can feel him watching me. I like to feel in control but this is making me anxious. An emotion I'm not familiar with.

Glancing at my watch, I quicken my pace. I'm five minutes away from my destination. It's 7.50 am and I start work at 8 am. I always wear heels. They look great but they slow me down. For the last five months, I've been getting the metro into the city centre, then it's twelve minutes to walk to work. It saves on driving in rush hour and expensive parking. I feel that the man watching me knows my weekly routine.

I can see the office block in front of me. It's a huge building with a glass front and a small café on the ground floor, used mainly for catchups with colleagues. The sun is reflecting off one of the huge windows. I love this time of year, late summer, with warm mornings and hours of daylight. The double doors open automatically and I take the stairs to the third floor where I work for an accountancy firm. P.E. Evans Accountancy, named after my boss. We are a small team of twenty-two and we all get on well. Unlike my last job, working with people who were over-promoted and without a clue. It's so true that you join an organisation but leave a manager. I work in finance as I prefer numbers to people.

I hurry along the white painted corridor. No pictures. It's very clinical. I stop when I reach the familiar solid wooden door with my name and job title on the small plaque, 'Faith Taylor – Personal Assistant.' I key in the door code C2468 which is easy to remember. My south-facing office is warm, so I slip off my navy jacket while stretching up to open a window. Throwing my Radley handbag under the desk with my other arm, I reach over to press the 'on' button and fire up the laptop. My desk is clear apart from the laptop,

notebook and teacup. I hate clutter and I keep my private life very private. No naff family photos smile from my workspace.

I hear the adjoining door open and I know who it is without looking up. My boss is a man of routine. He wanders into my office with a small pile of papers in his hand. As a company, we are yet to go paperless.

“Good morning, Mr Evans.”

“Morning, Faith. Can you deal with these, please?”

He hands me the papers. Some are letters and some are invoices. Not all our clients like to use email which frustrates me as it takes so much longer.

I smile at the middle-aged traditional man, now standing in my office space. Peter Evans is a good man and boss. I’ve been his secretary for three years. He’s mild-mannered, a workaholic, and treats his team with respect. He always gets me a case of red for Christmas and discreetly overlooks the odd hangover I bring into the office after a night out with the girls or some guy I’ve been seeing that month. We have mutual respect. He’s a traditionalist who dislikes me calling him by his first name. I’ve had other PA jobs in finance, for larger organisations, where it was common for the boss to sleep with one of the secretaries. Sex in the office before home time was a regular occurrence. Mr Evans is a loyal family man. I can’t imagine him getting crumbs on his desk, never mind having reckless sex on it. I honestly don’t think he would want to crease his suit.

As he turns to head back into his office, I turn my attention to the chrome kettle in the corner and flick the switch. It is one of my first jobs of the day; Mr Evan’s white coffee, no sugar. My gaze wanders back to the window, watching the bright morning. Summer is nearly over and we are a few days away from September. The office overlooks the beginning of the city centre and, beyond that, a run-down housing estate.

He’s there. The man with the grey trench coat.

Icy goosebumps stand to attention on my body and the back of my neck has gone cold as I involuntarily shiver. He’s just standing there. On a public pavement, staring up at my office window. Is he looking at me? I might be paranoid, but my heart rate has increased and my hands feel clammy.

The figure in the grey trench coat continues to invade my life and, at night, my sleep. I’ve started to wake at night in fear. Sometimes my eyes snap open and I find myself upright, with no memory of when I sat up. My heart pounds, my mind is confused and the dreams are so vivid.

Always the same recurring dream. He’s chasing me and there’s no escape. I try to run but my legs won’t work, or I dream I’m in a dark room and the lights won’t work, and he’s coming towards me in the grey trench coat, with his trilby hat pulled low on his face. I can’t stop him. I’m in darkness. I’m trapped and each dream ends the same. He grabs my shoulders, we are face to face and I can’t move.

I hate those dreams.

My mind has started to play tricks at night. I know I'm safe in the home I share with my parents, as I drift off to sleep in my room. But then I see him, near my bed. My hand frantically searches for the bedside lamp to cast his shadow and the terror away.

Knowing I'm safe in my office, I can't help staring back at him. He's motionless and just looking straight at me. He looks middle-aged, maybe older, lightly-built if not a little too skinny; it's hard to tell with the trench coat. His thinning grey hair is nearly shoulder-length and he has an unkempt look about him. My thoughts are racing. Do I know him? I don't think so. Is he undercover or an investigator? No, he stands out too much.

The kettle clicks off, drawing me sharply back to normality. Avoiding the hot steam, I make my flat white coffee.

Time passes quickly, it's been the usual busy day. Eight hours in front of the laptop, combined with the constant stream of incoming phone calls. I felt on edge most of the morning. Now I finally feel relief. Total relief. The man in the grey trench coat has disappeared and I can't see him anywhere out of the window. Sometimes I wonder if I should mention him to Mr Evans or even my parents, but I'm not one to worry people. I like to keep a low profile. I've never told a soul of my fear of the Grey Trench Coat Man.

Very soon I will deeply regret that decision. Later today, my life will change forever.

The best part of my day was another quick lunch with Aidan Handford, the new Debt Recovery Manager. The business does a lot of bookkeeping but not everyone wants to pay their bill. At thirty-five years old, he's seven years older than me. He's your stereotypical tall, dark and handsome guy. Rumour has it that he's a player and I plan to find out. The physical attraction between us was instant when we first met three months ago, but neither of us have mentioned it. Instead, we flirt and make small talk. He's Mr Evan's deputy, so seeing him regularly is easy and part of my job.

I don't know if he's married. I don't care. I have no plans to marry him. Just borrow him. He doesn't wear a wedding ring but that doesn't mean anything. He never talks about his private life and doesn't do social media. I've checked.

As time was tight and we both had a load of work to do, we went to the small café near the office block. He looked very attractive in his blue suit and what I could only describe as a blush shirt; a pale pink. He wore brown shoes, thankfully with socks. I know the trend today is for men not to wear socks but it looks like they've left the house in a hurry.

The Pure Apple Café only has five tables as most of its trade is takeout. It only does a vegan menu. I like a plant-based diet at times but I love a bacon sandwich more. Aidan, on the other hand, is vegan and hasn't eaten meat for ten years. Since I wanted to see more of him, I ordered a roasted butternut squash and black bean salad for lunch washed down with a cup of green tea known as Matcha. The salad and Matcha were both very good.

"Would you like to go for dinner on Saturday night?"

Aidan was looking directly at me for a reaction. I felt a surge of excitement and casually replied, "Okay, sure."

"Good, I'll pick you up at 7.30 pm then. Can you text me your address?"

Nodding and trying to play it cool, I casually responded, keeping the excitement out of my voice, “Looking forward to it. Shall we head back?”

Suppressing emotion usually comes easy to me and it comes in handy when you’ve just been asked out by someone you like. Together we left the café and walked briskly back, in contented silence.

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My mind wanders as I think about what to wear for our first date tomorrow, and he is probably thinking about which restaurant will impress me the most. I hope there is chicken on the menu.

It’s now five o’clock. Home time and that great feeling of no work for two days. I never tire of that feeling. Freedom and lie-ins for two whole days. I log off, knowing the start of my weekend is only minutes away.

I collect my things, close the window, and pop my head through the adjoining door. Mr Evans glances up from his desk.

“Have a good weekend. Doing anything special?”

He’s smiling at me.

“No, nothing planned apart from a meal.”

I keep the excitement out of my voice.

“See you Monday then.”

“Yes, here’s the mail for your signature.”

I hand him a blue cardboard file.

At that moment, I did not know I would never return.

CHAPTER 2

Outside the comfort and safety of the office block, I look around intensively. There is no sign of him. No sign of the Grey Trench Coat Man. Yet again, I experience relief sweep through me as I head determinedly towards the metro station, my thoughts drifting to Aidan. It is still very warm; I'm not sure how much is to do with the time of year, August, or global warming. Either way, it lifts my mood. I feel content and happy.

At twenty-eight years of age, I've never had a serious relationship. I like my freedom. Most of my relationships have lasted six months or less, and my parents joke if I'll ever leave home. I'm not planning on it. I save most of my wages each month and I don't have to cook, do laundry or clean. My mum, Martha, is fifty-eight years young and still attractive but plump; not that I'd ever say that to her. She's also easy-going and very talkative, takes pride in her family and runs a loving home. Her husband, James, my father, is quiet, reserved and likes to keep an eye on the finances, unlike Mum who likes to spend. At sixty-two, Mum is never going to change Father's ways. I was three months old when they adopted me and took me into their very warm hearts and home. They are the only parents I have ever known.

My birth mother didn't know who my birth father was, and she died about ten years ago in one of Her Majesty's prisons. I think it may have been HMP Durham. No one speaks about her. I never knew her and never want to. She was incarcerated for stabbing her then-boyfriend and, as he lay dying, she poured a bottle of bleach over his head to finish him off. It wasn't her first offence.

I feel the darkness within me that must have run through her veins too, to kill and destroy the guy so easily. So far, I have suppressed it. It's my dark secret. My birth mother died in prison from a drug overdose. I was eighteen years old when my mother told me, but I felt no emotion. She was a stranger to me.

I picture what it must feel like to kill someone. To be responsible for taking their life. If I took someone's life, would I feel guilty or powerful? I read that psychopaths don't feel guilt or empathy and they usually dislike or torture animals. Whilst I fantasise about murder, according to the experts I'm no psychopath. I love animals and I even have a cat. She's jet-black and called Snowy. I also have a sense of humour. I love my cat and I'd never harm her.

I continue towards the metro station, thinking about what to wear for the date. Should I go for a sexy look? Or a classy one? I could combine the two. I'm picturing a pair of jeans, a black off-the-shoulder top and sandals, with my blonde hair tousled.

Someone has grabbed my arm.

Shocked, I stop. My brain tries to process what has just happened. An elderly lady with thin, pale twisted fingers is gripping my arm and gasping for breath.

"Help me," she said, her voice no more than a whisper.

Still feeling stunned, I lean in to hear her as I ask, "What's wrong?"

She smells of mould and dampness. It's unpleasant and my nose twitches, trying to block the smell of stale body odour combined with pee. She points with her free arm to her chest and her breathing is heavy and slow.

"Chest pains. My heart isn't what it used to be."

The woman doesn't look well. Stick-thin, she looks in her late seventies, is shabby in appearance and her thin arthritic fingers are still clutching my arm. Her white hair is short and very fine and, although you can see her scalp in places, there's a natural wave to it. The shock is starting to leave me. I need to focus. She's old and I've got a metro to catch but there's no one else in sight. Damn it!

"I'll call you an ambulance," I say, as I start to rummage in my large navy Radley bag in search of my mobile phone; remembering that I still need to text Aidan my address.

"No, no need. Would you see me home? I live just five minutes from here and I've got medication there. I'm not dying in a bleeding hospital. Rather go in my own bed."

She is pointing in the direction of the run-down housing estate. I've seen it before from my office window. Many of the properties are empty and boarded-up. It would cost less to demolish the estate than to return the properties to a habitable state.

My heart sinks. I'm going to miss the 5.20 pm metro but thankfully they run every eleven minutes.

Still wheezing, the old woman points towards Bowman Street, the street I had just passed when my thoughts were filled with sunshine and Aidan Handford. My instincts are screaming at me. I feel on edge as if something isn't right. I'm looking at her. She needs help and there's no one else around. I must help her, yet I feel anxious and irritated by the delay. She still smells funny, slightly musty. Up close she looks about ten years younger, she could be early sixties. It's hard to tell.

I take the shopping bag hanging from her arm. It's very light but smells the same as its owner. I'm going to need a shower when I finally get home.

With a sigh, I turn back the way I came and slowly we make our way along the street. The old woman is clinging to me as if her remaining time depends on it. I don't know her name. I stop myself from asking as I just want to see her home and catch the metro. I hope I don't smell like her.

We continue to walk in silence. I still feel on edge and frustrated that I'll be getting home late. My tea will be ready. My mum is a great cook. I wish I was at home.

The street is deserted. Most people, unless they live here, avoid this area. It has a feeling of hopelessness about it. We turn left down another street. It certainly isn't the best area in town. The North of England is often depicted in the media as a dump. It doesn't help that, when covering local stories, journalists often choose people who can't string a sentence together. This part of town lives up to its reputation of deprivation. Until the suits in local government decide what to do with it, some houses stand abandoned. I thought there was a housing crisis. There must be about sixteen houses in this street all boarded-up, apart from three. I presume they are privately owned but I doubt the owners

would ever be able to sell them. This is a different world from where my parents live; detached houses with gardens and a feeling of success. Neighbours out on Sundays, either washing their already-clean cars or doing their immaculate gardens.

“That’s it there.”

She’s pointing to one of the three houses. It looks how she smells. Decaying. The garden is wild and overgrown.

Yellowed net curtains hang in the downstairs windows and one window upstairs is boarded-up. I have replaced annoyance with pity. I feel sorry for this old woman and how she seems forgotten by society and is immersed in a life of poverty. I smile at her and decide I’m going to give her the £20 note I have in my purse. Hopefully, she’ll be able to get some food and shower gel.

Removing a key from her coat pocket, I help her into the house; the now-familiar smell of dampness continues to invade my nostrils. She moves around me to close the front door and locks it. Maybe her age makes her safety-conscious. My heart is racing and my head is telling me to run. Now. Get out. My instincts are never wrong.

“I have to get home. Are you okay if I leave you now?” I ask, helping her into the front room and a chair. “Do you feel any better? Where’s your medication?”

She’s looking straight at me and there’s a coldness in her eyes I haven’t noticed before. She looks a lot better, a lot younger even, now that she is seated in her own home. She’s smiling at me but it’s an icy smile. I want to get out. I don’t know why. She’s old. I’m fit and work out regularly. I can easily overpower her.

“I must be going now. Is there anyone you want me to call?”

Her eyes are set on me. Small, uncaring eyes. Eyes that say something is about to happen. Goosebumps cover my arms and the back of my neck.

“Stay for a cup of tea,” she says as she begins to rise from her grubby chair. “To thank you. You are the only visitor we’ve had in a year.”

“Who’s we?” I ask.

She ignores my question and steadily makes her way into what I presume is the kitchen. I don’t know what to do. I want to run. She looks harmless and I feel sorry for her. No one should be living here. I watch as she heads to the kitchen. Her face is savaged by old age and poor living, some of her teeth are missing and a blue polyester dress hangs from her skeletal frame. She looks malnourished. I’ll take note of her address and ring Social Services on Monday.

As I wait for her to make the tea I don’t want, I take in my surroundings. The front room is dark, partly because of the grime on the windows blocking out the light of the watery sun. The furniture looks to be from the 1970s. Cobwebs hang from the ceiling, yellowed newspapers are scattered in piles and there’s mail lying on a small table, unopened. I resist the urge to scratch. This room is a breeding ground for fleas, insects and vermin. The smell

of urine is overwhelming. Years of filth, grime and neglect surround me, yet she seems to not notice.

She's back, with two cracked mugs of tea. At one time, they were plain white. I take a sip. It's very hot but I'm eager to finish it so I can leave. It tastes slightly odd. The milk is probably on the turn.

She's seated again, opposite me, observing me. I feel I'm about to be condemned.

"What's your name?"

"It's Faith."

She laughs. I like my name. I don't know why she finds it amusing.

"Oh, the irony," she says, still laughing.

My mood has changed from pity to annoyance and I find her rude and ungrateful. I should have ignored her when she asked for my help. Kept on walking and left her for someone else to help.

"Are you feeling any better?" I ask, out of politeness as I ignore her last remark. My instinct still urges me to get out of her house. Now.

"Better. I'm excited and relieved it's over."

She's laughing again. She's getting on my nerves and I'm puzzled by her response. Before I can question what she means, I hear the front door open and slam shut.

"Is that you, Son?"

She is now beaming. No longer the sick, vulnerable person.

I will not be going home or out to dinner with Aidan tomorrow night. Fear has paralysed me and I can't move. The man in the grey trench coat enters the room with a chilling sneer on his face.

"You have done well, Mother," he says as he moves towards me.

CHAPTER 3

The wind was angry, the sky slate-grey. It was typical for a Monday morning; awful weather for August. The ladies held on to their black hats, the gentlemen pulled the collars of their black overcoats high. The rain teemed down but no one standing at the freshly-dug graveside in St Paul's Cemetery seemed to notice. United in grief, they shared feelings of despair and misery at the loss of such a young life.

Her end had been long and painful, and she had suffered greatly. This fact was etched on the congregation's minds as they stood around the open grave with a pool of water starting to settle at the bottom. Her coffin, carrying one red rose, waited to be lowered into the damp earth. Aunt Dorothy dabbed at her eyes, thinking how wet and cold her niece was going to be, buried on such a dismal day. Not that it mattered as her soul was free and had gone on to better things.

Aidan Handford felt torn. He hadn't known the deceased very well, but well enough. His gaze remained downwards as he stared at his highly-polished black shoes.

People always stare down at their shoes at funerals. Better than staring at faces of grief.

The Reverend Simon Graham was addressing the congregation but Aunt Dorothy, a widow, was not listening. Her thoughts were cast back to her deceased niece's childhood.

She had such a happy childhood.

Dorothy had raised her niece single-handedly. She could still picture her in her school uniform on her first day at Infants, then Juniors, followed by Senior School.

How time flies.

She could remember the tantrums because she would never let her stay out after 10 pm, even when she had reached sixteen. Then there was her first boyfriend, Peter, who now stood at the graveside, his face expressionless.

Aunt Dorothy was a proud, plump, smart lady, although you could not consider her working life to be a career. She had worked hard and supported herself and her niece adequately. Always cooking for her from scratch. 'Eating clean' they call it today. Normal life and not being lazy was how Aunt Dorothy saw it. Her niece had loved her pies, casseroles and cakes. Everything was homemade as she didn't like the idea of eating processed food or 'muck'.

The house was always warm, clean and tidy. The door was always open to those who needed a shoulder to cry on. The opposite of Aunt Dorothy's childhood, or Dot to her friends. She kept her memories tightly locked in her mind until she moved in with her grandparents. Her birth parents had no time for their three children as they were too wrapped up in each other. Dot was the friend everyone wanted and needed, everyone who met her, liked her. Apart from her older sister, Elizabeth. They had not spoken in years and Elizabeth accused Dorothy of abandoning her. She had wanted to live with their grandparents too but they had found young Elizabeth unsociable and withdrawn.

Elizabeth had nothing to do with her family. Today was no exception, she hadn't made an appearance.

Dot's thoughts ended abruptly because of the commotion around her. The deceased's birth mother had turned up. Natalie Winter, Dot's younger sister. It had been decades since any of the family had seen Natalie or Elizabeth. The sight was pitiful. Natalie was lying on top of the white coffin, clinging to it, awash with drink, guilt and grief.

Natalie looked older than her early-fifties. Her appearance didn't fit with the smartly-dressed, sombre crowd. She was in black leggings, worn boots and an off-white parka. Her hair was wet from the heavy rain and her face showed the story of a hard wasted life.

"Why?" she sobbed.

Dot stood motionless, taking in the nauseating scene before her. Surely it should be her who was overcome with grief? A middle-aged man from the congregation stepped forward, followed by another mourner. After a short scuffle involving Natalie trying to kick both of them, they removed the deceased's birth mother from the white coffin. She was ushered quickly towards a member of the cemetery staff who must have come from the small church nearby. The single red rose from Aunt Dorothy lay crushed on the earth.

The Reverend Graham quickly wrapped up the short service. The congregation stood in silence as the coffin was lowered into the ground. A small white cross marked the spot until her headstone would be ready. It read 'Abbey Jessica Winter 10 November 1974 - 06 August 2004.' She was only twenty-nine. Aidan Handford's second cousin.

Abbey had been one of those people who would light up a room and whose beauty matched her personality. Dot had taught her to treat others as she expected to be treated herself, to have goals in life and follow her heart. She would be greatly missed. She had been the love of Dot's life, who thanked the Lord that she was with Abbey in her final hours before she faded away. The cancer had finally taken her.

Thirty minutes later, the soaked congregation had gathered at Dot's house for sherry and a buffet. All homemade and all Abbey's favourite things. The atmosphere had lightened a little, probably thanks to the sherry, and most of the guests were reminiscing about Abbey. Dot wished they would all hurry up and leave so that she could get on with the washing up and get the house back to the way Abbey liked it. Spick and span.

At 3 pm the guests finally started to leave. Aidan offered to stay and help clear up, but she was having none of it. Instead, he hugged her at the doorway and briskly strode to his car. The day had turned chilly but at least the rain had stopped.

Once inside the car, away from the hustle and bustle, his thoughts returned to Faith. He wondered why she hadn't been in touch to arrange their night out. He envisaged her blonde hair, slim figure and long legs and heaved a long sigh of regret.

I'll ask her out again next week. Offer to cook her supper. Women often like that sort of thing.

Faith wouldn't be there for supper. She was living a nightmare.

CHAPTER 4

I'm in shock. My brain is struggling to comprehend what is happening. I am unable to move. My body has frozen. I can see my fingers tight around the mug of tea, and my knuckles are white. I can taste something strange in my throat, it's fear. Moving only my eyes, I'm looking directly at the old woman. Her face holds a gleeful look. You could describe it as a smirk.

My brain seems to have engaged. I know I'm in danger. Real danger. The man who has followed me is only feet away and I'm trapped. My instincts are screaming out to run but I can't move. My body has shut down and I can't get out of the chair.

"She's very pretty, William," says the old woman, with a grin. "She'll make a perfect mother for your first child."

"Perfect, isn't she? And she's finally here. In our home, after all this time. Now she's part of our family," chuckles William.

They are both laughing as if this is a normal situation. Stalking and entrapment. I find my voice.

"You're sick. Both of you. Insane."

I'm terrified and enraged. Fear that paralysed me seconds ago has switched to burning anger. I will survive this. They don't know the darkness I secretly carry within. The fantasies I have had to control. A slight flicker of excitement flashes through me. I might get to try some of them out. This is the perfect situation. Self-defence. I'm leaving.

I push myself out of the chair, throwing the cup and some of the tea violently towards the old woman, aiming for her smug face. I don't know if it has hit her. My eyes close and I have an overpowering need to vomit. I feel faint and my sight is going. I'm losing consciousness. I can only see darkness.

I collapse over the chair and my face takes the impact of the fall. I should have known better. The old cow has drugged the tea.

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My face hurts. I can feel my heart palpitating. I'm conscious but I don't want to open my eyes as I'm afraid of what they'll see. I remember vaguely what happened. I remember that I was going to faint. I've no idea how long I've been unconscious. I brace myself and slowly open my eyes.

Nothing is familiar. I'm in new surroundings.

Time has yellowed the ceiling and there's a naked light bulb above my head. I'm confused. My brain doesn't recognise what my eyes see. I push myself up into a sitting position. The smell of dampness is invading my nostrils.

I'm in a room, on a bed. The wallpaper has a large floral pattern, hideous orange and brown. It's hanging off in strips where the wall is too damp to hold it up. To my left, there's

a battered dark wooden bedside cabinet with nothing on top of it. No alarm clock, book or bedside lamp.

The bed I'm sitting on stinks of pee. There's one blanket that is threadbare, as is the folded purple bedspread at the bottom of the bed. There are black circles, in various sizes over it, which look like mould.

I've just had a sickening thought. I hope this isn't his room. The Grey Trench Coat Man, or William, as his mother called him. I need to get out. I am so thirsty and my mouth is so dry. I stumble off the bed. My head is throbbing as I have an almighty headache. Looking down, I experience some relief. I'm fully-dressed and they haven't tied my hands.

I feel strangely calm and sleepy as if this isn't happening to me. Walking towards the only small window in the room, I can't see the view outside. A film of grime and dirt, built up over the years, obscures it. As for the bars, they are solid. Something tells me I am not the first person to end up here. They've done this before.

Why me? I push the thought quickly from my head and try the door. As expected, it's locked but there is no keyhole so it must be bolted from the outside. I wander around my new surroundings; they are so dirty and neglected. I can't think straight. My legs are heavy and walking is such an effort. Tiredness is taking over. I can't fight it, it's so strong. I need to lie down. The bed stinks but it's better than the floor. I know I'm drifting back again into a drugged sleep.

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I don't know how long I've slept or how long I've been here. Have I woken up? Am I dreaming or is the sensation I'm experiencing real? I feel disorientated. Is someone brushing my hair?

"Hello, Dear. Sleep well?"

The Grey Trench Coat Man is here. He's in my space, smiling at me. My vision feels weird. Slightly out of focus.

I spring upright, still on the bed. Or I try to. My reflexes are slow.

"What! What are you doing?"

I'm so confused. I push his scrawny hand away. How has this happened to me? What day is it? And my parents? Oh God, what are they doing now? Do they realise I'm missing?

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The smile fell from thirty-four-year-old William Channing's emaciated face. He looked much older than his years. His long wispy hair, which his mother cuts, didn't help. He was confused.

Mother said she would love me. Why, then, is she mad at me? Doesn't she know all I want to do is take care of her? I came into her room to check on her and noticed that her hair needed brushing.

Getting up from the bed, he left the room, slamming the door behind him.

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I need to focus. I need to get out of this creepy house. I look around the small, damp room for my bag. Damn it. It must still be downstairs, along with my mobile phone.

The door opens. He's here again. This time, with a bucket.

"Go away. Leave me alone!"

"Your supper is ready. You have to get washed."

He is softly spoken with a northern intonation and there's an expectant look in his green eyes.

I'm struggling for words as none of this seems real. I am just about to object when he thrusts a soapy sponge in my face. He's rough and is washing my face like a child who has devoured ice cream.

"There, you're all nice and clean."

He smiles, happy with his work.

I feel physically sick as he tries to dry my face with a towel. It stinks. I slap his arm away. It smells the same as this room. Rotten. I'm staring at him in disbelief as I can't believe what has just happened. Being washed as if I'm a toddler. Except there were no loving gentle movements in his hands. They were rough and frenzied as if the experience had excited him.

I watch him leave the room but he's back after only a few seconds, carrying a round tray. Something on it smells faintly familiar. Nausea washes over me again. I don't want to eat. I want water.

"Here you go. Supper. You like fish, don't you? I've seen you buy it in the supermarket."

I have nothing to say. I'm taking in his thin frame and the bony hands clasped around the tray. He must have been following me around without me knowing. I can't remember the last time I bought fish. My mind can't focus. I rarely go food shopping. There's no need as my tea is usually ready when I get in. My mum takes care of it.

I need to win William round. It has worked for me so far in my life. Adapting my behaviour to fit in.

"Thank you."

I take the tray slowly from him. I'm not hungry but I remember reading a story about a soldier who had been captured and survived in the Middle East. His training had kicked in and he played a subservient role, so as not to antagonise his capturer. Here it goes. Submission time.

“What do you want with me, and when do you think I can go home?”

I stare straight into his aroused eyes as I ask the questions. I’m searching his face for the answers I need.

He looks baffled.

“But you are home. I’m going to look after you, feed you, clothe you and wash you. You are meant to be with me. I’ve been watching you for a long time. You’ve been watching me from your office window. You’re so different to the rest.”

I don’t reply. I don’t know anything about stalkers. Do they often kill their victims? He doesn’t look strong enough to kill me.

He’s leaving the room again. This time I hear a bolt being locked from the other side. I’ve no idea how long I’ve been here. I hope my parents have called the police and they track my mobile phone.

My stomach growls with hunger so I decide to take a chance and taste the fish. I’m surprised as it tastes fine. There’s a slight flavour of milk and butter, three boiled potatoes and a small serving of carrots on the chipped plate. I’m so thirsty that I can hardly swallow. There’s no water on the tray but there’s a mug of tea. The mug looks familiar. Surely they haven’t drugged this one? I’m wary. It smells fine. Taking a small sip, it tastes slightly bitter and it’s hot. Thirst takes over and I gulp it down, burning my tongue.

I wish I hadn’t given in to the thirst. Given in to his plan. With time, comes the familiar sensation of losing consciousness. My senses fail and I know darkness is about to follow. My body twitches from the effects I will later find out are Ketamine and Amtyl. Sleeping pills.

*

I wake to what I presume is the next day as daylight fills the room, which makes it look even more run-down than I remember. Do people really live in so much filth? I feel strangely chilled out. I know I was dreaming but I can’t remember clearly what it was about. I just remember the feeling of helplessness. My heart is racing and I want a bath. My body feels detached as if I’m not in control of its movements. I huddle the worn blanket around me. I no longer notice the smell of dampness and urine. I have become habituated.

I only have my underwear on! Where’s my dress? What has he done to me? There are no memories. I can’t remember taking it off. I can’t remember him taking it off either. Panic rises within me but I don’t have the strength to move. I’m so tired. I feel helpless. I don’t do helpless. I have a darkness within me. I am no victim.

“WILLIAM, WILLIAM!”

Anger erupts inside me. I’ve had enough. Having no control over the situation has suddenly fired my ugly temper. An uncontrollable rage. I want to kill him. I want to feel the pleasure of watching him die. My body feels strange. I feel disconnected from it as I find myself at the door, pounding it with clenched fists.

“LET ME OUT, NOW, WILLIAM. I’LL KILL YOU AND YOUR BITCH OF A MOTHER.”

I’ve lost control as adrenaline surges through me. The door opens abruptly. I don’t attack as this isn’t what I was expecting. What I see is sickening.

“What’s all the noise for, you naughty girl?”

I recognise the voice but his appearance has changed.

I find my legs carrying me backwards to the safety of the pee-stained bed. William is wearing my blue polka-dot dress but it’s open at the back. A blonde wig, in an identical style to my natural long hair. His face is masked in badly-applied makeup. Even his lipstick is the shade I usually wear. He has a familiar smell about him. I remember that Red Petal scent. He’s wearing my favourite perfume.

I can’t step back any further as my legs are up against the bed. Blind fury has turned to confusion and panic. I don’t know what this means.

“Why are you afraid? Why are you afraid of yourself?”

Before I can respond, William continues.

“You see, Faith. I love you. I am you. I want to be you. I want us to be one person.”

Slowly lifting my arms to waist height, I take the breakfast tray which he’s carrying. We are staring at each other. He’s about four inches taller than my 5ft 7in frame and his skinny legs are sticking out from under my dress. Without thinking, I hurl the tray and its contents with all my strength. It strikes him hard against his left shoulder and hot tea burns his left arm. For a second, he doesn’t move as the toast and an empty cup lie at his feet. He doesn’t seem to notice the pain. He is confused by my anger. His left hand smacks my right cheek. I feel little pain but the impact knocks me onto the bed. I freeze as I watch him, fearful of what will happen next.

It isn’t what I expect. I expect him to attack me. Instead, he slowly turns away from me and heads out of the room, pausing momentarily to turn his head and look at me, with his lips partly open as if to speak. Whatever he was about to say he keeps to himself and a smile crosses his thin lips.

*

You are not going anywhere. Not until you give me a child. There have been seventeen others before you and none of them left here alive.