



Two murders. Twenty years.
Now the killer is back for more . . .

FOR
REASONS
UNKNOWN

A DCI Matilda Darke novel

MICHAEL WOOD

For Reasons Unknown

MICHAEL WOOD

K I L L E R
R E A D S

The logo for 'KILLER READS' features the words 'KILLER' and 'READS' stacked vertically in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Red lines connect the top of the 'K' to the top of the 'R' in 'READS', the top of the 'I' to the top of the 'E', the top of the 'L' to the top of the 'A', and the top of the second 'L' to the top of the 'D'. Small red dots are placed at each of these connection points.

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To Mum

Thank you. For everything, thank you.

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Prologue

It could have been any sitting room in any house throughout the country but it wasn't. It was a room in the middle of South Yorkshire Police HQ, designed to give a relaxed, homely atmosphere. From the outside, it looked friendly and inviting, but if walls could talk they would tell a different story. Here parentless children were comforted; victims of rape and sexual abuse were given tea and sympathy; and elderly victims of brutal crimes were consoled by fresh-faced WPCs with soothing tones and a never-ending supply of tissues.

Sitting on the floor was a blond, blue-eyed eleven-year-old boy dressed in a grey tracksuit that didn't belong to him. He was surrounded by blank sheets of paper and an array of wax crayons, coloured pencils, and felt-tip pens. Squatting next to him was a young PC, who, against orders from his superiors, had not changed out of uniform.

The door opened and in walked Dr Sally McCartney. Unlike the PC, she had softened her appearance. Gone were the severe ponytail and conservative jacket. She had removed her glasses and suffered the anxiety of touching her eyes to put in contact lenses. She shot the PC a look of indignation. He could have at least taken off his uniform jacket.

'Hello Jonathan,' she said. The young boy didn't look up from his drawings. 'My name is Sally. I've come to have a chat with you if that's all right?'

He continued to scribble on the paper. Sally McCartney knelt down to his level and looked over his shoulder. He had drawn a house and was colouring in a large tree next to it.

'Is this your house?'

Jonathan nodded.

'It's very nice. That's a lovely tree too. Do you climb it?' No reply. 'Which room is yours?'

He pointed to the top right window with the blue curtains, then went back to colouring in the tree.

'Is the room next to yours your brother's?'

He nodded again.

'Jonathan, we've been looking for your brother but we can't seem to find him. Do you know where he might be?'

Jonathan stopped drawing and looked up as if in thought. He looked across to Dr McCartney and fixed her with an expressionless stare, then returned his attention back to his drawing.

'Jonathan, we need to find your brother. It's very important. Do you know any of his friends?'

The door opened and Detective Sergeant Pat Campbell popped her head into the room. She looked haggard, having been on duty for more than twenty hours. She signalled for Dr McCartney to join her in the corridor.

'Why didn't that PC change out of his bloody uniform as I told him to?' she asked before the DS could speak.

'I don't know. He should have done.' The DS sighed and looked to the ceiling. 'Has the boy said anything?'

'Not yet.'

'It is paramount we find his brother.'

'I heard that his mother was still alive. How is she?'

‘I don’t know where you heard that from. Both parents were pronounced dead at the scene. They were hacked to death.’

‘Jesus. Well he doesn’t need to know any of that. Not now at any rate.’

‘We’ve managed to locate a relative in Newcastle. She’s coming straight down, but it’ll be a few hours before she gets here. Look, whatever happened in that house, he saw it, or at least heard it, and we need to know.’

‘I’m aware of that.’

Pat Campbell looked over the doctor’s shoulder, through the narrow glass window in the door, and into the room at the young boy drawing as if nothing extraordinary had happened. ‘How does he seem?’

‘He’s in a complete shutdown, which isn’t uncommon. When it comes to anything traumatic, sometimes our brain takes time to come to terms with it and until it does, it shuts down. It’s a self-preservation thing.’

‘So he’ll soon come out of...whatever this is, and be able to tell us what happened?’

‘In theory, yes.’

‘Why only in theory?’

‘Depending on what he saw his brain may not want him to remember.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Campbell said, leaning back against the wall for support. ‘What’s with the drawings?’

‘It’s a way of helping young children come to terms with what they’ve witnessed. Whatever they draw is usually an indication of what’s going on in their heads. Hopefully it will help to understand what went on in that house, and then we can take our therapy from there.’

‘And what’s he drawn so far?’

‘He’s drawn his house with a tree next to it.’

‘Does that tell you anything significant?’

‘Not yet,’ she half smiled. ‘It’s early days. He’s clearly looking at what happened from the outside. If his next drawing is also a house, I’ll ask him about the inside and see what he draws when I talk about the rooms in the house.’

Pat shook her head. ‘My God, the mind is a powerful thing isn’t it? I don’t envy your job.’

There was nothing the doctor could say to that. There were times she didn’t envy her job either. ‘Is there any chance of getting him in some of his own clothes? That sodding tracksuit stinks.’

‘I’ll get something brought over from the house.’

‘And how about a glass of milk and some chocolate?’

‘Whatever you want.’

‘Thank you.’

She turned and went back into the room. Jonathan had drawn two adults, a child, and was currently on a second child: his family. Dr McCartney bent down next to him and watched him draw in the details: the hair, the clothes, the eyes, the smiles. He then picked up a red felt-tip and with a forceful action that caused the doctor and PC to jump, he scribbled all over the picture. He didn’t stop until his mother, father, and brother were completely covered in blood.

Chapter 1

Twenty years later

Matilda Darke had been looking forward to this day for nine months. In that time she had been through a painful miasma of emotions; from a deep depression where she wanted to spend the rest of her life under the duvet, to mild hysteria where tears would flow like a swollen river for no apparent reason. Now, after a long course of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, weekly sessions with a psychologist, and popping antidepressants as if they were about to be rationed, she was back to her fighting best, she told herself.

It was the first Monday in December. She'd woken two hours before the alarm, to a freezing cold house. The central heating had failed to switch on, and, according to the digital thermometer on her windowsill, it was minus four degrees outside. It wasn't much warmer inside.

She showered longer than usual, until the blood in her veins thawed and was flowing around her body once more, then forced down a breakfast of black coffee and two slices of granary toast. Chewing was a chore. Part of her was excited to return to work, hold her head up high and show the world she was still a force to be reckoned with. Another part of her was crying inside and longing for the security of her duvet once again.

Her three-year-old Ford Focus stuttered in the cold but didn't take too long to warm up. It was as if it knew she wanted a smooth ride with no trouble on her first day back.

The twenty-minute journey went without a hitch, and she was soon turning into the familiar car park. It was as if she had never been away. She took a deep breath, allowed herself a little smile, and turned left to her usual parking space.

Matilda quickly slammed on the brakes and gripped the steering wheel tightly. Her heart beat rapidly in her chest and the prickly sensation of an oncoming panic attack rose up the back of her neck.

'Walpole, Compton, Pelham, Newcastle, Devonshire,' she whispered under her breath.

She looked ahead at the brand-new black Audi in her parking space. Who did it belong to? Had the owner not been informed of her return? She had a lump in her throat that was hard to swallow. Suddenly she didn't think coming back was such a good idea.

Fifteen minutes later, after finding an empty parking space at the back of the building, she was sitting on an uncomfortable chair, the padding in the seat dangling out, waiting to be called into her boss's office.

She looked around the small anteroom at the cheap framed prints on the walls. There was a tall vase of plastic flowers in the corner; each fake petal had a thick layer of dust, dulling the lively colours to a pathetic grey. There was a sharp smell of pine disinfectant in the air, which was itching at the back of her throat.

The light above the door turned from red to green.

'Shit,' she said to herself. 'Here we go.'

She stood up and straightened her new navy trouser suit. It was the first new item of clothing she had bought in over a year, and it had been an unwelcome surprise to find she'd gone up a dress size. She

ran her fingers through her dark blonde hair, which had been neatly trimmed only last week. Matilda was forty-one years old, and felt like she was about to enter the head teacher's office to be told off for cheating on her maths test.

Before pushing down the door handle she looked at her hands; they were shaking. This was not a good sign.

'Oh my goodness, look at you.' Every word was said as if a sentence of its own. It was highly unprofessional, but Assistant Chief Constable Valerie Masterson leapt up from behind her oversized desk and took Matilda in a tight embrace. 'Sit yourself down. I have a pot of coffee just made.'

They sat at opposite sides of the desk, which dwarfed the slight frame of the ACC. They examined each other in silence for a long minute.

To Matilda, Valerie looked much older than her fifty-three years. She was thinner than the last time they'd met, and she had more wrinkles, as if she had a slow puncture. Matilda briefly wondered if Valerie was thinking similar negative remarks about her; *Can she tell I've put on weight. Is my hair a mess? Have I aged much?*

'You're looking very well,' Valerie lied convincingly.

'Thank you. I feel well,' Matilda lied back.

Valerie Masterson, a caffeine addict, did not like the black goo that came out of the vending machines dotted around the police station, so had her own personal Gaggia in her office. She poured them both a medium-sized cup, white with one sugar for herself and, remembering, black for Matilda.

'So, your first day back. Are you ready for this?'

'I really am. I want to put this past year behind me and get back to normal as quickly as possible.'

'I'm sure you do. Unfortunately, I can't return you to active duty just yet.'

The painted-on smile suddenly fell from Matilda's face. 'Why not? We discussed on the phone last week...'

'What I mean is that I have to adhere to the conditions laid out in your psychiatric report.'

'My what?'

Valerie leaned forward and pulled a brown folder from deep within her in tray. She took out the five-page report and began skimming through it.

Matilda was itching to lean across the desk, snatch the report from her, and find out what the belittling therapist had been saying about her.

'Now there's no need to worry. I don't know any of the details of your sessions with Dr Warminster. Those, as you know, are private. However, Dr Warminster was asked to submit a report before you returned to work; giving her opinion on your readiness and the level of workload you would be able to cope with.'

'She's not happy with me returning to full-time duty?' Beneath the desk Matilda screwed her hands into tight fists, her fingernails digging hard into her palms. Her knuckles were white. The pain ran up her arms and she could almost feel the instant relief.

'Not at all. She has written a glowing report. She admires your courage and your recovery.' The ACC smiled.

Was that a genuine smile or was it forced? There was no wrinkling around the eyes to express a sincere smile, but then there wasn't much room on her face for more wrinkles. Matilda chastised herself for letting her mind wander. 'But...'

'She just doesn't think you should be running a major department straightaway. She recommends you be eased back into work slowly, and I tend to agree.'

'Is this a cosy way of telling me I'm being demoted?' Throughout her nine months away, one of the

main issues on Matilda's mind was being stripped of the Detective Chief Inspector title she had worked so hard to achieve.

'You are not being demoted Matilda. You are one of South Yorkshire's leading DCIs. You're well known for your work and dedication. But I can't have you handling a major investigation until all parties concerned know you are ready to do so.'

'All parties?'

'You, me, Dr Warminster, the Chief Constable. We are all behind you one hundred per cent.'

Newcastle, Bute, Grenville, Rockingham, Pitt the Elder, she said to herself. Why was the mention of her therapist's name causing her such anxiety? She managed to control her stress by reciting the names of British Prime Ministers; a technique suggested by Dr Warminster in the first place.

Matilda knew that the support of her superiors was a hollow promise. Yes, she had made a mistake. Yes, she had suffered for it. 'Look, there's no denying I've changed in the past year, but I am still a DCI. I'm still capable of doing my job. If I didn't believe that, I wouldn't be here now. I know I can do this.' She wondered who she was trying to convince.

Valerie reached into her top drawer and pulled out a thick file. The folder had seen better days and was covered in coffee-mug rings and splashes. 'Do you remember the Harkness killings?' she asked, interlocking her fingers and resting her hands on top of the file.

Matilda knew where this was going. 'You're giving me a cold case aren't you?'

'I just want you to look at it. A month, six weeks at the most.'

'Is there any new evidence?'

Valerie looked down at the file. 'Not as such.'

'What does that mean?' Matilda folded her arms. She could feel the prickling heat in the back of her neck.

'Do you know the case?'

'Everybody does. It's part of Sheffield folklore.'

'The house is being demolished tomorrow.'

'About time.'

'I had a reporter on the phone from *The Star* last week asking if the case was up for review.'

'I'm guessing that it is now.'

'Due to budget cuts we no longer have an active review board looking at resting cases. The house being demolished isn't only going to have local interest but national too. It was a big story. I don't want them thinking people can get away with murder in South Yorkshire.'

'So it's a PR exercise?'

'Matilda, I believe this case can be solved. It may have been a long time ago but the killer is within these files. I know it. If anyone can find the killer of Stefan and Miranda Harkness, it's you.'

Matilda knew she was being placated. With the botched Carl Meagan kidnapping still fresh in the minds of the Sheffield people it would not look good if a DCI with a heavy cloud over her head was leading a major investigation. If, on the other hand, she could solve a well-known cold case then there would be smiles all round. She reached forward for the file, but pulled her hand back quickly.

Grafton, North, Wentworth, Petty, North and Fox.

'I'll need a DC.'

'I'll assign one to you.'

'And an office to work in.'

'Not a problem.'

‘Where’s all the evidence?’

~~‘On its way from storage. You’ll have access to everything pertaining to the Harkness case and carte blanche on interviews.’~~

Matilda rolled her eyes. The files were on their way. The decision had already been made. She began to wonder if this was the beginning of the end for her. Did anyone want to work with her anymore? ‘What if I can’t solve it?’

‘I have faith in you.’

‘That’s not what I asked.’

‘Then it remains a cold case.’

‘Will I be able to return to the murder team when all this is over?’

‘That will be reviewed at the time.’

She could feel a tension headache coming on. The impulse to throw her ID on the table and resign was bubbling up inside her, almost at eruption level.

‘Are you still seeing Dr Warminster?’ Valerie asked when she saw the DCI chewing her bottom lip.

‘I have no choice in the matter. A bit like the situation here.’

‘Matilda, a great deal has changed in this past year. Work on this case, keep seeing Dr Warminster and everyone will be happy.’

‘Everyone except me.’

‘Did you honestly think you’d be able to return to front-line duty as if nothing had happened?’

‘Yes I did. A review panel cleared me of any wrongdoing. I should be able to pick up where I left off.’

‘And you will. This is the final hurdle. Look, South Yorkshire Police isn’t exactly going through the best of times at the moment; the Hillsborough Inquiry and the child abuse scandal in Rotherham are just two major headaches I have to contend with. I cannot be seen to have you return to front-line work as if nothing’s happened.’

Grudgingly, Matilda picked up the file. She feared that the second her fingers gripped the folder there would be no going back.

‘There’s one more stipulation...’ Valerie began.

Of course there is.

‘Dr Warminster has recommended reduced working hours.’

Matilda didn’t say anything. She was already being stripped of her powers, her role within the force taken away from her, segregated from her colleagues; anything else they added was out of her control and not worth fighting over. This was a battle she was not going to win.

‘You’re not to start work before 9 a.m. and you’re to be out of the station by 4 p.m. Is that understood?’

Matilda rose from her seat clutching the cold-case file firmly to her chest. ‘That’s fine,’ she said through gritted teeth. ‘I’ll be able to get home in time for my game shows.’

She turned on her heels and swiftly left the room. She wanted to slam the door, but would wait until she arrived home, and, at the top of her voice, would scream into a pillow from the pit of her lungs another stress-relieving exercise from the two-faced harpy Dr Warminster.

Chapter 2

The detached five-bedroom house in Whirlow sat in its own grounds. It was set back from a main road, and a boundary of neatly trimmed evergreens sheltered it from view. A gravel driveway forked off; one way leading to a double front door, the other to a detached garage, which sat proudly next to the house. Made of classic red brick in the Victorian era, it also included two impressive chimney stacks, and large windows.

A house and grounds of this age needed regular attention to remain looking grand. Unfortunately, nothing had been tended in over twenty years. The evergreens had been left to wild abandon, their branches drooped lifelessly, and the once brilliant green was now dull.

The garden was overgrown, the driveway almost hidden under weeds and brown leaves. The house itself was dead. Windows had been smashed and boarded up with cheap plywood. One chimney had collapsed, and the lead stolen from the roof, which had very few tiles remaining. The garage door was covered in graffiti.

A strong wooden fence surrounded the entire plot. Crudely attached stickers informed passers-by that the house was due for demolition. The once grand building was now an eyesore to everyone in the neighbourhood, and had a knock-on effect to selling prices of nearby properties.

Towards the back of the plot there was a gap between the last fence panel and the evergreens. It was a tight squeeze, but just manageable for someone thin enough to wriggle through without being seen from the main road.

Once through, the man dressed in black dusted himself off and stood up to look at the house. It was pathetic and sad to see such a wonderful building fall into a state of decay.

There wasn't much to see; the downstairs windows were all boarded up. The padlock on the sheet of plywood covering the back door was rusted and didn't take much striking from a rock to break it. He pushed open the door and entered.

The back door led straight into the kitchen, once the heart of the family home. It was dark and had the bitter smell of death. Cobwebs hung from the walls and light fittings, and a thick film of dust covered every surface. The kitchen had all the mod cons a wealthy family could wish for, though everything was now dated. The food processor was the size of a microwave oven. A yellowed salad spinner sat on the work surface next to the cooker. Did people still use salad spinners?

The man went through the kitchen into the large hallway. A sweeping staircase with ornate wood panelling led up to the first floor. The stairs looked warped. He wasn't sure if he should risk climbing them.

He went through to the living room and was surprised to find the furniture still there. He couldn't understand burglars not taking the relic kitchen implements, but he thought someone would have made use of the corner suite and even the bulky television set. He smiled at the memories the room brought back and sat down on the seat he had graced as a child. It was closest to the television so he could watch his favourite programmes without being disturbed by someone passing the screen and blocking his view.

The dining room was a sad sight. The unit that housed the best crockery had been pulled off the wall, all the plates smashed on the floor. He bent down and picked up a jagged piece. He wiped the

dust from it and smiled at the pink flowery pattern. His mum loved this dinner service. It was only be used on special occasions; Christmas, birthdays, and big family dinners. Probably kids had broken in and smashed it, not caring about the sentimental value.

From the hallway he looked up the stairs. He was tempted to ascend, despite how unstable the looked, but was frightened about what he would see. If the kitchen had been left in the state it was on the final night someone was living here, what would the bedrooms be like? Did the police clean up after a crime or would the walls be covered in dried blood, carpet matted with the leaked insides of its occupants, and bodily fluids allowed to dry and disintegrate into the very soul of the house?

The memory of what happened on the first floor angered him. It all came flooding back. He no longer wanted to go upstairs. He wanted to leave this place. He should never have come back.

He quickly left, slamming the back door behind him and securing the plywood back into position. Nobody would care that a padlock had been broken. He looked at his shaking hands, they were covered in dust. It was in his hair, up his nose, and in his mouth. He could taste the decay, the mould and the decomposition, not only of the building but of the people who had once lived inside.

Chapter 3

Everything had already been set out for Matilda; a room allocated and the dusty Harkness files brought out of storage.

The office was no bigger than one of the holding cells in the bowels of the police station. Behind the door was an old mop and metal bucket, long since abandoned. The room had a pungent smell of damp. The only window was covered with a yellowed venetian blind, each metal slat caked in years' worth of dust.

She went around the desk, briefly glancing down at the files, and pulled at the cord. It was brittle and snapped in her hands; the blind was staying shut. There would be no natural light in here. The only light came from the bare sixty watt bulb dangling from the ceiling. If there was ever a room to tip a depressive DCI over the edge, this was definitely it.

Matilda turned her back on the window and took in the room, which would be her place of work for the next four to six weeks.

'Welcome back Matilda,' she said to herself, 'we've really missed you.'

She looked at the faded labels on the folders neatly placed on what was her new desk; witness statements, forensic reports, crime-scene photos, police reports – it was all here: everything she needed to know about the Harkness case. She reached out for one, but her hand stopped short of picking it up. What was this mental block she had all of a sudden?

There was a box file on the corner of her desk. She leaned forward and quickly flung back the lid. It was practically empty apart from a thick paperback book. Frowning, she lifted it out and studied the cover. The pages had yellowed with age and it had obviously been well thumbed before being archived. The cover, although faded, was an image of a crime scene: the slumped body of a naked woman lying face down on a crumpled bed surrounded by splashes of blood. Matilda knew straight away what this was. *A Christmas Killing* by Charlie Johnson was the 'definitive true account of Britain's most brutal unsolved crime', according to the blurb.

She briefly remembered the book being released in the late 1990s but had never read it. She tried to avoid true-crime books wherever possible.

According to the first page, Charlie Johnson was one of Britain's leading crime writers, having worked on several national newspapers in a career spanning two decades. Apparently he had covered many of Britain's shocking crimes for national and international media. Matilda wondered if Charlie Johnson had actually written his biography himself. There was no author photograph, but she pictured him having small piggy eyes and a permanent smug smile that could only be removed by a sharp slap.

INTRODUCTION

The British police force is one of the finest, and most respected, in the world boasting an array of dedicated detectives who will stop at nothing until they find their culprit. Unfortunately, there are times when a case can go cold, the killer goes to ground, and justice for the victim is trapped in a state of limbo.

One crime which shook the nation in the 1990s was the case of the Harkness killings at Christmastime. A hard-working husband and wife were brutally slain while their youngest child was forced to look on in horror. What happened on that fateful night has never been fully revealed...until now. Featuring lengthy interviews with witnesses, family, friends, and neighbours, *A Christmas Killing* will throw a new light on the case and...

Matilda's reading was interrupted by her mobile phone ringing. She was thankful of the interruption. The introduction, written like he was a fly on the wall at the time of the killings, was vomit-inducing.

'Good morning DCI Darke. How does it feel to be back in the saddle?' The cheery caller was Adele Kean, the duty pathologist and Matilda's best friend.

Adele's breezy tone was infectious and Matilda found herself smiling for the first time. 'I'm not back in the saddle unfortunately. You could say I'm in the side car.'

'What are you talking about?'

Matilda leaned back carefully in her wooden chair, hoping it wasn't as brittle as the blinds. 'Apparently I'm not to be trusted. I have to prove myself again before I'm allowed to play with the big boys.'

'Oh Matilda. I'm so sorry. We did wonder whether this would happen didn't we? I suppose it's not as come as too great a shock.'

'No, I suppose not. I'm not even allowed to sit with the big boys. I've been given a grotty little office no bigger than a cupboard under the stairs.'

'Well if it's anything like the cupboard under my stairs the cat usually puts her finds there. Be on the lookout for dead sparrows.'

'Judging by the smell I think there may be a dead albatross in here somewhere.'

'Is everyone pleased to have you back?'

'I've not seen anyone. It's like they're keeping out of my way. I don't know what they think I'm going to do to them. I've had a meeting with the ACC. She's given me a project to keep me out of trouble.'

'What?'

'Apparently I have to pass a test before I can move on to the next level. I've been given a cold case to solve,' she said, lifting up the cover of the first file and taking a look at the top sheet.

'Well, you do enjoy a puzzle.'

'A puzzle I can solve. This isn't a cold case, it's frozen solid. It's its own little ice age.'

'What's the case?'

'The Harkness murders.'

'Bloody hell. Well, anything you want to run by me give me a holler. I don't mind playing Jessica Fletcher.'

'I'll remember that when I'm tearing my hair out. Did you know the house is being demolished tomorrow?'

'Is it? Well I'm not surprised. It's stood empty for years, even Dracula would apply for rehousing if he lived in there.'

Matilda laughed and felt herself relaxing.

'It's good to hear you laugh, Mat. Fancy meeting for lunch? Panini on me.'

'Yes OK. I'd like that. I'm not sure what time I'll be free though.'

'That's OK. I'm off today. Give me a call.'

Matilda promised that she would, said goodbye, and hung up. She realized she was still smiling and had an air of confidence about her. This always happened in Adele's company. Her positivity was as infectious as a baby's giggle. Adele should be bottled and issued on the NHS to people with depression.

A knock on the door brought Matilda back to reality. She looked around at the drab office and felt her stomach somersault. How was it possible her mood could leap up and down so rapidly? She made a mental note to bring her antidepressants tomorrow.

She called for her visitor to enter, but her mouth was dry. She cleared her throat a couple of times and tried again.

The door opened a small amount, the hinges creaking loudly. A head peered around the door. It was DS Sian Mills.

'Hello, I heard you were back,' her voice was soft, almost timid, as if talking to a patient who had just woken from major surgery.

Matilda was not sure she had the strength for this. All the old familiar faces she had seen, known and worked with would hunt her out one by one to have the same welcome-back conversation. Some would be genuine, Sian in particular, others would be more perverse. They would want to see the state she was in, and get the gory details of her absence. Matilda suddenly realized she was the human equivalent of a car crash.

She took a deep breath. 'Sian, good to see you. Come on in.'

'Welcome back Mats. You've been missed. You really have.'

'Thank you. I like your hair.'

'Thanks. I wasn't sure at first. I thought it made me look like a twelve-year-old boy. Stuart likes it though.' She ran her hand around the back of her neck. 'You're looking...well,' she said for want of a better word. She tried not to stare too much at the woman who was, in effect, still her boss. It was difficult, however, not to notice such a drastic change in her appearance.

'Thanks. I feel well.' Would the lies this morning never stop?

'I didn't realize you were coming back today. If I'd known I'd have made some muffins or got you a card.'

'That's really sweet but I don't want a fuss.'

'No. Of course not. You're right. Start as you mean to go on and all that,' she half laughed.

'Something like that.' She gave a weak smile and glanced at the Harkness files.

'You'll have to come up to the Murder Room, see us all, have a coffee.'

'I will. Maybe a bit later.' Another lie.

'How about lunch? We can catch up. Did I tell you Stuart's father died? He's only left us his boat. Can you believe that? What are we supposed to do with a boat in Sheffield?'

'Some other time perhaps. I've got plans this lunchtime.'

'Oh. OK. No problem. I understand. Well, let me know when.'

'Will do.'

'Well I'd better be going.' She made her way to the doorway. 'It really is great to have you back.'

Matilda offered a painful smile as a farewell. Any words would have choked her.

As soon as Sian left the room, closing the door behind her, Matilda felt her body begin to relax once more. She had been tense throughout the conversation. Why should she feel on edge around Sian? Sian had known her for years, worked with her on many investigations, cried and ranted at the state of the judicial system when a killer went free, and had a few too many Martinis together at Christmas parties. If she couldn't relax around a friend, how was she going to react around others she considered to be mere colleagues?

Pitt the Younger, Addington, Pitt the Younger, Grenville, Cavendish-Bentinck.

Maybe she had returned to work too early, but then how much longer could she keep putting it off? Surely nine months was more than enough.

She shook her head as if dispelling the dark thoughts, and busied herself with the evidence boxes scattered around the room. She lifted one up, expecting it to be heavy, but was surprised by how light it was, and placed it on her desk. She removed the lid tentatively and peered inside. There was one

one item in it: sealed in an evidence bag was the neatly folded white shirt belonging to a small boy. Standing out against the pure white cotton material, pools of dried blood covered the front.

Matilda reached in and lifted it out. She held it firmly in both hands. Searching back in her memory twenty years, she briefly remembered eleven-year-old Jonathan Harkness being found alone at the crime scene. How long had he been there? Had he been present in the room as his parents were butchered in front of him? If so, why hadn't the killer turned on him too? Respectfully, she gently placed the shirt back in the box and returned the lid.

Another knock at the door brought her back from her reverie. She sniffled and realized she was on the brink of tears, clearly from the effects of the bloodied shirt belonging to an innocent child mixed with her already fragile emotional state. Maybe she would feel better once she started on the case properly.

'Come in.'

This time the door breezed open and in bounded DC Rory Fleming like Tigger on Ecstasy.

'Rory, good to see you. What can I do for you?' She tried to sound jolly but it came out rather laboured.

'I've been assigned to you ma'am, for the Harkness case.'

'Oh right. Well come on in. Have a seat, if you can find room.'

He shut the door and sat on the hard wooden seat on the opposite side of the desk. They eyed each other up in painful silence.

'So, are you pleased to be back?'

'Right,' she began, slapping her hands on the desk, 'let's get things settled before we begin. Firstly, you don't need to treat me like I'm made of glass. I'm not going to break. Secondly, you don't have to be careful about what you say. There's bound to be some mention of missing children or kidnapping at some point, and while it will bring back memories, they're my memories and not yours, so don't worry. Thirdly, the length of time I was off was due to personal reasons, which have no effect on my work, so you don't need to know about them. Is that all right?'

Rory looked taken aback by the speech. He nodded as if summing it up. 'That's fine by me,' he gave a pained smile.

'Good. So, how are things with you?'

'No offence but that's a personal matter, which has no effect on my work, so you don't need to know about that.'

Matilda threw her head back and gave out a natural laugh straight from the pit of her stomach. Yes, she definitely had made the right decision to return to work.

Chapter 4

DC Rory Fleming was a good-looking young man in his late twenties. He had the clean-cut look of a fresh-faced Premiership footballer with brawn to match. He took care of his appearance; always wore well-fitted, clean suits, which hung on him like they did on the shop dummy, and seemed to have a new tie every day. Now, trapped in an office the size of a prison cell with a mountain of paperwork to wade through and with no natural ventilation, his skin was dry, his hair ruffled from the many times he had run his fingers through it in exasperation, and his once crisp white shirt creased, with the sleeves rolled up.

He had just finished reading a section of Charlie Johnson's 'definitive book' on the Harkness killings. Twenty years ago Fleming was still an infant, overly excited about the upcoming visit from Father Christmas, and stealing chocolates from the back of the Christmas tree.

DC Fleming was Sheffield born and bred. He knew of the Harkness case, having heard the story many times from various relatives, and colleagues on the job, but he wasn't familiar with the govt details. The killings were frenzied. From the crime-scene photographs, Stefan Harkness had been killed at his desk, where he was sitting. It appeared the killer had come from behind and caught him unawares. All it took was a single stab wound in the back of his neck to render him immobile. He had been unable to fend off his attacker, and died where he sat.

The killing of his wife, however, was one of unadulterated rage. The bed was covered in blood and the sheets disturbed. From the height and direction of the blood sprays she had been knifed in the chest and tried to flee her attacker. She stumbled onto the bed and managed to get to the other side before being struck again. Once on the floor the violent attack continued with the knife raining down on her back. The wounds were deep. Whoever committed this crime had plenty of power and weight to plunge the knife so deeply and be physically able to rip it out again.

'Where are you up to?' Matilda asked, interrupting his reading.

'The bit where Jonathan was found by a neighbour.'

'What do you think?'

'Of the book? It's a bit...'

'Shit?' Matilda completed the thought for him.

'I wasn't going to say that. It's a bit...I don't know...voyeuristic. It goes into a lot of detail. How did this Charlie Johnson get all this stuff?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

Extract from *A Christmas Killing* by Charlie Johnson

CHAPTER ONE: A DARK AND DEADLY NIGHT

Wednesday December 21, 1994

It had been dark for most of the day. A grey sky heavy with snow loomed over Sheffield and the temperature hadn't risen above zero all day. A biting wind from the north made it feel colder and whenever a gust blew it felt like needles against bare skin. Work had to be done, and school had to be attended, but when darkness fell the best place to be was indoors, wrapped up warm and in front of a roaring fire.

Wednesday night marked the first in a series of Christmas events at St Augustine's Church at Brocco Bank. The first night was a carol concert in which local school children would spend forty-five minutes delighting the congregation with their

unique rendition of popular Christmas songs. The Harkness family was not a religious one but Stefan and Miranda were well known within the community; Stefan, a Professor of Medical Oncology at the University of Sheffield and Miranda, a GP. Their attendance was expected. Stefan had recently acquired a grant to set up the Lung Cancer Clinical Trials Group. In the New Year he would begin creating synthetic cancerous cells to be injected into laboratory mice. It was a highly controversial study but the growth of the cells and their effect on the body in stimulated climates could yield a better understanding of lung cancer. If successful, further tests involving other cancers could be carried out. Miranda had recently been made a partner in the Whirlow Medical Centre. She was keen to work more in family planning and was in the early stages of setting up a clinic to provide confidential advice to sexually active teenagers. This project had received negative press and many locals saw it as glorifying teenage promiscuity. In January, Miranda, and the other partners at Whirlow, would send a letter to all patients and the neighbouring community to allay any doubts they may have in the programme. Making up the Harkness household were the two children, Matthew aged fifteen and eleven-year-old Jonathan. The brothers were chalk and cheese. They didn't get on and rarely spent time together. The parents were not worried. They assumed their age difference played a large part in why they didn't interact and allowed them both free rein to be their own person. Matthew, a typical surly teenager, was excused from attending the concert. Straight from school he went to best friend Philip Clayton's house, where he stayed for dinner and played in a bedroom on the family computer. He stayed later than usual and at nine o'clock used his friend's mountain bike to cycle the ten-minute journey home. Judith Clayton, Philip's mother, waved him off and watched as Matthew cycled down the road and turned left. Once he was out of sight she went back indoors.

The concert started at eight o'clock, and from seven, Miranda was busy getting dressed. In the main bedroom, a half-dressed Stefan was working on a speech he was to give at a departmental Christmas dinner he was attending on December 29th. His speech was to congratulate the team on obtaining the grant which would see them continue their work for the next two years. He wanted to show them how proud he was and he needed the right words. He had already spent several sleepless nights poring over his notepad yet he was still unhappy with the tone. The youngest son, Jonathan, had been left to his own devices and was getting changed in his bedroom. However, he still wasn't dressed with only fifteen minutes before they had to leave. His mother harshly chastised him to stop playing with his Lego and get dressed.

The Harkness family never made it to the carol concert. Their absence was noticed by many.

After the children had finished singing, a reading was given and the vicar spent ten minutes congratulating everyone involved for such a splendid evening. He then went on to read out the events due to take place over the next few days culminating in midnight Mass on Christmas Eve followed by a very special service on Christmas morning. In the hall at the back of the church, a buffet had been laid on by the Women's Guild. Once everyone had aired their views on the angelic singing and choice of carols, the conversation turned to the absence of Stefan and Miranda Harkness.

On her way home from the concert, family friend Aoife Quinn drove to the Harkness's house in Whirlow to see why they hadn't attended. When she arrived the house was in darkness apart from one room at the back of the house, Jonathan's bedroom. Ms Quinn knocked on the front door several times without any reply before going to the back of the house and knocking on the kitchen door. Again, she received no answer. She looked up at the window, seeing the light seeping through the gap in the curtains; she knew something was wrong. She tried the handle but the door was locked. She could not leave and go home without finding out what, if anything, had happened. Aoife crossed the road to neighbour Andrea Bickerstaff, and asked if she had a spare key. She did but they decided to phone the house first rather than just walk in. Andrea admitted she had not seen any member of the Harkness family leave the house since Miranda had come home earlier in the afternoon. She telephoned and waited as it rang continuously. The answering machine was not turned on; something Miranda always did when they left the house. It was obvious something was amiss. By now it was almost ten o'clock. Andrea Bickerstaff joined Aoife Quinn and together they went back across the road. Andrea only had a key to the back door. As she put the key in the lock she found there was an obstruction. She forced the key hard and a clang was heard on the other side. A key was already in the lock and Andrea had pushed it out. Andrea went in first and made her way through the ground floor of the house, first calling out for Miranda and then for Stefan. Aoife followed and stopped at the bottom of the stairs. Sitting on the top step was eleven-year-old Jonathan. He was pale and cold and in a state of undress. Aoife called Andrea over and they both looked up at the boy. He was unresponsive to their calls. Aoife walked up the stairs slowly and tried to get the boy's attention. She asked if he was all right and where his parents were, but he did not reply. Eventually, she was close enough to see the dried blood on his hands. Fearing the worst, she instructed Andrea to take Jonathan downstairs but not to touch anything or allow him to wash his hands. Tentatively, she placed a comforting arm around his bony shoulders and eased him up. She almost had to carry him down the stairs. Once they were out of sight, Aoife continued her climb. She had been in the house many times before and knew her way around. At the top of the stairs she turned left and entered the main bedroom where Stefan and Miranda slept. She was stopped in her tracks by the sight of horror which opened out before her. Stefan was slumped over his desk. He was dressed in a white shirt, black socks and black boxer shorts. His back was covered in blood. He had been stabbed once in the back of the neck. A pool of blood surrounded him on the floor. Aoife steadied herself by putting a hand on the door frame. After a moment to compose herself she walked further into the room. Her eyes were drawn to the high blood sprays on the wall and ceiling above the bed. As she made her way around the bed she saw Miranda on the floor. She was dressed in a conservative floor-length ivy-coloured dress. It was soaked in her blood and torn

where the knife had cut through to slash at her body. She had been stabbed eight times in the chest and fourteen times in the back. Aoife was brought back to reality from her state of shock by Andrea calling from the bottom of the stairs. She wanted to know what was happening. Aoife quickly ran out of the room and said they needed to call the police.

A murder investigation was launched and Jonathan was taken to hospital. He had no physical injuries but he was unresponsive. He did not react to any test by doctors and did not blink when a light was shone in his eyes. He was in a catatonic state. He was placed in a private room at Sheffield's Children's Hospital and guarded by a police officer who stayed with him all night. A missing person investigation was simultaneously launched to seek the whereabouts of fifteen-year-old Matthew Harkness. Neighbours saw him leave the house that morning to go to school but nobody remembered him coming home. In the days that followed, police investigated the lives of the Harkness family both personal and professional. Media interest was high and the story had the whole country gripped. Stefan's sister Clara came down from Newcastle to look after Jonathan, who, after three days, had not uttered a word. Matthew was still missing.

'I don't like this,' Rory said, putting the book down.

'What? Is it badly written?'

'Not just this book, the whole true crime thing. I find it gruesome. It's so detailed and graphic. And another thing, how did Charlie Johnson know all the little details, like Jonathan's mum shouting at him for playing Lego? Who told him that?'

'I thought the same thing. Maybe he's just using creative licence. Have you noticed what's missing out of all of these files?'

'No. What?'

'A statement from Jonathan.'

'Well, he went mute didn't he?'

'Yes, but for how long? Surely he started speaking again at some point. There's a psychiatric report on him suffering from shock but that's it. From the file's point of view his aunt took him back with her to Newcastle and that's it. I'm beginning to see why this case was never solved.'

Rory went back to reading the book, his lips moving slightly over each word. 'Do you have those photographs of Jonathan taken at the scene?'

Matilda had been reading the post-mortem reports. She lifted a folder and then another, eventually finding the pack of pictures he wanted.

Rory rifled through them. He was unfazed by the blood-stained bed, the saturated carpet, and blood-spattered ceiling. Towards the back of the pack he found the pictures of Jonathan he was looking for.

Jonathan had been dressed like his father: white shirt, underwear but no trousers. They were caught by their attacker unawares. The pictures of the eleven-year-old showed him with a blank expression on his face. His hands were red with drying blood.

'What do you make of this?' He held up one of the photographs and waited while Matilda marked her place in the report with a Post-it note. She took the picture from him and studied it carefully.

'What am I looking at?'

'His hands.'

'OK. Go on.'

'Why are his hands covered in blood?'

'Put yourself in his position, Rory; he's just found his parents dead, he's frightened. What does a small boy want when he's frightened? His mum. He'll have run over to her and tried to rouse her in some way. Of course his hands are going to be covered in their blood.'

'Yes, fair enough. It wasn't long after Stefan was killed before Miranda was killed. If Jonathan had gone into the bedroom then surely the killer was still in there too. Why didn't the killer murder Jonathan as well as his parents?'

Matilda frowned. 'Maybe the killer's gripe wasn't with Jonathan. Maybe it was all about the

parents.'

'But Jonathan must have seen the killer if he'd gone into the room.'

'Well, according to Jonathan's aunt, his mother came up the stairs and saw Jonathan on the landing with blood on him. He'd obviously gone into the bedroom and come back out again.' She thought for a moment and then continued. 'Remember back to when you were a kid and you wanted your parents' attention? You don't just walk into the room and wait until you're allowed to speak; you call for them. On your way to the room don't you?'

'I suppose.'

'So the killer heard him coming and hid in the en suite until he left. There's a big difference between killing an adult and killing a child. The majority of convicted killers are appalled by crimes against children.'

'Yes. That's true. I suppose that's why paedophiles are kept apart from everyone else in prison,' he said. 'Hang on a minute, Jonathan's aunt said his mother came up the stairs and found Jonathan with blood on him?'

'Yes. So?'

'Where did you get that from?'

Once again Matilda rifled through the mess of paperwork on her desk before she found the two-page document she was looking for. 'A statement by Clara Harkness given in May 1995.'

'That's what, six months after the killings? Jonathan was living in Newcastle by then. So he was obviously talking.'

'Obviously.'

'Yet there's still no statement from Jonathan Harkness. Why not?'

Matilda had to admit that she had no idea why Jonathan was never interviewed. On the other hand, maybe he had given a statement and it had somehow disappeared from the archive over the years. As she looked around the room at the opened boxes of evidence, the stacks of files and packs of photographs, she wondered if she had really been given all the information the ACC had promised. Already the case was throwing up more questions than answers. She was surprised to find DC Fleming so articulate. Where had this sudden intelligence come from?

Rory coughed. Matilda looked up and saw he was studying his watch. She turned back to her post-mortem report and was interrupted by a louder cough. Rory was still staring at his watch.

'Is something the matter?'

'Well, it's just that...' he seemed nervous and unable to make eye contact with his boss. 'The thing is...the time.'

Matilda looked at her own watch. It was just after 4.15. 'What about the...oh. You've been told about my curfew?'

'Yes, sorry.'

'Don't apologize; it's not your fault. Thank you for reminding me. I'd hate to get a detention on my first day back at school.'

They both laughed, but it wasn't genuine.

'Shall I continue reading up on the case?'

'No. Why should you have to stay behind and I go home? Have an early finish. Go home to the girlfriend of yours.'

'Oh. We're engaged now, actually,' he said, his cheeks reddening slightly in embarrassment.

'Really? Congratulations. When's the big day?'

'We've not decided yet. Amelia is aiming for promotion so wants to get that out of the way before'

having to plan a wedding.'

'What does she do?'

'She's a junior solicitor. She wants to specialize in criminal law.'

Matilda was tempted to say something about the potential for a conflict of interest in any of her cases going to court in the years to come, but the sweet smile that lit up his face was full of the innocence of youth. She didn't want to spoil it for him. She found herself relaxing in Rory's company. Before her nine month enforced sabbatical she saw Rory as just an annoyingly loud, over-eager D who would need a serious change of personality if he expected promotion. However, cooped up in the broom cupboard and working on a one-to-one basis she was seeing him in a different light. He was warm and approachable.

'So what have the others in the Murder Room been up to in my time away?' The question surprised even Matilda. She had never engaged in gossip before, and although the personal lives of her team were important for her to know in order to find out how they were going to approach particular cases she kept the majority at arm's length.

'Well Sian's been bitten by the *Great British Bake Off* bug. She's been trying out her skills on us by bringing in muffins and cakes. She's actually quite good. She's also just inherited a boat which she's been harping on about for months.'

'Yes, she mentioned that this morning. It was one of the first things she said.' Matilda smiled.

'We think Aaron may be going through a mid-life crisis. Ever since he turned thirty-four he's gotten all moody. I think there might be trouble at home. I know his wife wants a baby. I'm guessing he's not playing with a full load.'

'Blimey Rory, you're worse than a bunch of women at a school gate.' She didn't tell him to stop talking though.

'Oh, big news about Scott. You know we all thought he was gay? Well he went out with the blond one from the press office for a couple of weeks but it didn't last. Still, I won a fiver off Aaron so he wasn't complaining.'

'What's the new girl like? Faith is it?'

He rolled his eyes. 'She's a bit of an enigma. She seems to think she's been hand-picked to join the team, like she has something special to offer. She's not even trying to fit in with us and she got Sian back up straight away by helping herself to the chocolate drawer and replacing what she took with new bars and packets of seeds.'

'How's her work?'

'She's good at what she does; she's just not much of a team player.'

'Maybe she's nervous.' Matilda found herself sympathizing with a woman she didn't even know. She could certainly understand what it was like entering an already established team. Even though she'd been with the Murder Investigation Team from day one, she found herself feeling like an outsider again.

She didn't want to dwell on this for too long; her mood was beginning to sink again. 'Look, you go off. I'll tidy up in here. Tomorrow is the demolition of the Harkness house. We'll meet there at nine o'clock; watch the house being torn down, then plan what we're going to do next in the pub. OK?'

'Fine by me. I'll see you tomorrow.'

As soon as he had gone Matilda closed her eyes and took several deep breaths. The stale air in the room was not helping. She put the post-mortem report, a pack of crime-scene photographs, and witness statements in her bag. She may not be allowed to be in the station past four o'clock, but nobody had said anything about working from home.

Chapter 5

Jonathan Harkness was a timid, frail figure of a man. Standing at six foot tall and a little under to the stone, he looked almost emaciated. His icy blue eyes were sunken and his cheekbones prominent to the point of bursting out of his skin. His thin lips were red and dry. His skin was pale and lacked life as did his unruly dull hair, which wasn't styled, merely combed into a neat passable excuse.

He held himself rigid and constantly looked about him, as if frightened of the world he lived in. His body language was cold and unapproachable and his shoulders were permanently hunched. He never allowed himself to relax, not even for a second. He was constantly on his guard.

Jonathan hadn't been a confident child and preferred his own company to that of his contemporaries. Twenty years ago, when he was eleven years old, his entire world was torn apart with the brutal murder of his parents in cold blood. Everything that happened to him after that night, every decision he made, was born from the fragile mind of a young man who was still unable to break free of that night in December 1994 when he had stood in the doorway of his parents' bedroom and seen the nightmare unfold before him.

He was grateful for Aunt Clara, who took him away from Sheffield, but once the residents and local press in Newcastle realized who he was, the gossip began, the phone calls began, and they were a constant after his version of the events.

Eventually it died down and Jonathan could grow up in the shadows, just like he wanted. Now, with the stiff cream envelope in his post box and the logo of the company he knew all too well, his nightmare was about to return. He had been expecting this day to come and now that it had he was surprised by how sanguine he was about it all. It was only a letter after all. What damage could a letter do?



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London
EC1 2BF
December 3, 2014*

Dear Jonathan,

I hope this letter finds you in the best of health. As I am sure you are aware your childhood home is due to be demolished in the coming days. I have already had many journalists contact me asking if I will be willing to write a feature on the demolition and a review of the murder of your parents.

Coincidentally, next summer I will be releasing a new book titled 'Britain's Unsolved Murders' and will be revisiting some of the crimes I have covered in the past. Naturally I would like the Harkness killings to be at the heart of the book.

I have spent time looking online and chatting to journalists and I see you have never told your story. You must realize that yours is a story worth telling and the whole country would certainly still be interested in reading it.

For your own convenience I can be up in Sheffield in just a couple of hours and we can discuss your story and fees in person. Please contact me as soon as possible so we can get the ball rolling.

Kind regards,
Charlie Johnson

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