

## Prologue

I killed a demon. I don't know if it was really, technically a demon – I'm not exactly a religious person – but I do know that Mr Crowley, my neighbour across the street, was some kind of monster, with fangs and claws and the whole bit. He could change back and forth, and he murdered a lot of people, and if he'd known that I knew who he was, he would have murdered me too. So for lack of a better word I called him a demon, and because there was no one else who could do it, I killed him. I think it was the right thing to do. At least the killing stopped.

Well, it stopped for a while.

You see, I'm a monster too – not a supernatural demon, just a messed-up kid. I've spent my whole life trying to keep my dark side locked away where it couldn't hurt anybody, but then that demon showed up, and letting my dark side loose was the only way to stop it. And now I don't know how to lock it back up.

I call my dark side 'Mr Monster' – the side that dreams about bloody knives, and imagines what you'd look like with your head on a stick. I don't have multiple personalities and I don't hear voices or anything, I just . . . it's hard to explain.

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I think about a lot of terrible things, and I want to *do* a lot of terrible things, and it's just easier to come to terms with that side of me by pretending it's someone else; it's not John who wants to cut his mother into tiny pieces, it's Mr Monster. See? I feel better already.

But here's the problem: Mr Monster is hungry.

Serial killers often talk about a need – some driving urge that they can control at first, but which builds and builds until it's impossible to stop, and then they lash out and kill again. I never understood what they were talking about before, but now I think I do. Now I can feel it, deep in my bones, as insistent and inevitable as the biological urge to eat or hunt or mate.

I've killed once, and it's only a matter of time before I kill again.

# Chapter 1

It was 1 a.m., and I was staring at a cat.

It was probably a white cat, but here in the dark I couldn't tell for sure; what little moonlight filtered through the broken windows turned the room into an older version of itself, a scene from a black and white movie. The cement-block walls were grey, the dented barrels and stacks of wooden planks were grey, the piles of half-used paint cans were grey – and there in the centre, refusing to move, was a grey cat.

I played with the plastic jug in my hands, turning it back and forth, listening to the gasoline as it sloshed around inside. I had a book of matches in my pocket, and a pile of oily rags at my feet. There was enough old wood and chemicals in here to fuel a spectacular fire, and I desperately wanted to light it, but I didn't want to hurt that cat. I didn't even dare scare it away, for fear that I might lose control.

So I stared at it, waiting. As soon as it left, this place was *gone*.

It was late April, and spring was finally winning its battle to transform a dull, frozen Clayton County into a cheerful, green one. A big part of this, of course, was the fact that the Clayton Killer had finally left us alone. His vicious

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killing spree had lasted almost five months, but he'd stopped very suddenly, and no one had heard from him since January. The town had huddled in fear for another two months, barring its doors and windows every night, and waking up each morning hardly daring to turn on the TV and see another shredded corpse on the morning news. But nothing had come, and slowly we'd started to believe that it was over for real this time, and there wouldn't be any more bodies. The sun came up, the snow melted away, and people started smiling again. We'd weathered the storm. Clayton had been tentatively happy for almost a month now.'

I was the one person, in fact, who hadn't been worried at all. I'd known for certain that the Clayton Killer was gone for good, way back in January. After all, I'm the one who killed him.

The cat moved, turning its attention from me to drop its head and lick its paw. I held completely still, hoping it would ignore me or forget me and go outside to hunt or something. Cats were supposed to be nocturnal hunters, and this one had to eat sometime. I pulled my watch from my pocket – a cheap plastic wristwatch that I'd torn the straps off – and checked the time again. Five past one. This was going nowhere.

The warehouse had been built as a supply dump for a construction company many, many years ago, back when the big woodmill in town was new and people still thought Clayton County might turn into something. It never did, and while the woodmill still struggled along, the construction company had cut its losses and gone home. In the years since, I wasn't the only one who'd made use of this long-

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abandoned building – the walls were covered with graffiti, and the ground inside and out was littered with beer cans and empty wrappers. I'd even found a mattress behind some wooden pallets, presumably some vagrant's temporary home. I wondered if the Clayton Killer had got him, too, before I stopped him; either way, the mattress was musty from disuse, and I figured nobody had been out here all winter. When I finally got a chance, that mattress was slated to be the core of my carefully crafted fire.

Tonight, though, there was nothing I could do. I followed rules, and those rules were very strict, and the very first one said *Do not hurt animals*. That made this the fourth time the cat had stopped me from burning down the warehouse. I suppose I should have been grateful . . . but I really needed to burn something. One of these days I'd take that cat and— No. I wouldn't hurt the cat. I'd never hurt anyone again.

*Breathe deep.*

I set down the gas jug; I didn't have time to wait for the cat, but I could burn something smaller. I grabbed a wooden pallet and dragged it outside, then went back in for the gas. The cat was still there, now sitting in a ragged square of moonlight, watching me.

'One of these days . . .' I said, then turned and walked back out. I drizzled a little gas on the pallet, just enough to make it easy, then placed the jug by my bike, far away from where the fire would be. Safety first. The stars were out, and the trees in the forest loomed close, but the warehouse was in a clearing of gravel and dead grass. Somewhere through the trees the interstate rumbled by, filled with late-night semis and the occasional drowsy car.

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I knelt down by the wooden pallet, smelling the tang of gas in the air, and pulled out my matches. I didn't bother to break up the planks or build a proper fire, I just struck the match and dropped it on the gas, watching it flare up bright and yellow. The flames licked up the gas and then, slowly, started in on the wood itself. I watched it closely, hearing the little snaps and pops as the fire found pockets of sap. When it had a firm grip on the board, I took the pallet by a safe corner and turned it on its end, letting the fire climb up, and then flopped it down on the other side so the flames could spread to the rest of the boards. It moved like a living thing, probing the wood with a thin yellow finger, tasting it, then reaching out greedily and lapping it up.

The fire caught well, better than I had expected. It seemed a shame to waste it on just one pallet.

I pulled another pallet from out of the warehouse and dropped it on top of the fire. The blaze was big enough now that it roared and crackled, jumping on to the new wood with obvious delight. I smiled at it, like the proud owner of a precocious dog. Fire was my pet, my companion, and the only release I had left; when Mr Monster clamoured for me to break my rules and hurt someone, I could always appease it with a good fire. I watched the blaze tear into the second pallet, hearing the dull roar as it sucked in oxygen, and sighed with pleasure. It wanted more wood, so I went inside for another two pallets. Just a little more wouldn't hurt.

'Please don't hurt me.'

I loved it when she said that. Somehow, for some reason,

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I always expected her to say, 'Are you going to hurt me?' but she was too smart for that. She was tied to the wall in my basement, and I was holding a knife – of course I was going to hurt her. Brooke didn't ask stupid questions, which is one of the reasons I liked her so much.

'Please, John, I'm begging you – please don't hurt me.'

I could listen to that for hours. I liked it because it got right to the point: I had all the power in the situation, and she knew it. She knew that no matter what she wanted, I was the only one who could give it to her. Alone in this room, with this knife in my hand, I was her entire world – her hopes and her fears together, her everything at once.

I moved the knife almost imperceptibly, and felt a rush of adrenaline as her eyes twitched to follow it: first left, then right; now up, now down. It was an intimate dance, our minds and bodies in perfect sync.

I had felt this before, holding a knife to my mom in our kitchen, but even then I'd known that Brooke was the only one who really mattered. Brooke was the one I wanted to connect with.

I raised the knife and stepped forward. Like a partner in a dance, Brooke moved in unison, pressing back against the wall, eyes growing wider, breath growing quicker. *A perfect connection.*

*Perfect.*

Everything was exactly as I'd imagined it a thousand times. It was a fantasy come real, a scenario of such utter completeness that I felt it begin to gather me up and sweep me away. Her wide eyes focusing completely on me. Her pale skin trembling as I reached towards her. I felt emotions

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surging, roiling inside me, spilling out and blistering my skin.

*This is wrong. This is exactly what I've always wanted, and exactly what I've always wanted to avoid. Right and wrong at the same time.*

*I can't tell my dreams from my nightmares.*

There was only one way it could end; only one way it ever ended. I shoved the knife into Brooke's chest, she screamed, and I woke up.

'Wake up,' said Mom again, turning on my light. I rolled over and groaned. I hated waking up, but I hated sleeping even more – too much time alone with my subconscious. I grimaced and forced myself to sit up. *I made it through another one. Only twenty hours before I have to do it again.*

'Big day today,' said Mom, pulling open the blinds in my window. 'After school, you've got another appointment with Clark Forman. Come on, get up.'

I squinted at her, bleary-eyed. 'Forman again?'

'I told you about this last week,' she said. 'It's probably another deposition.'

'Whatever.' I climbed out of bed and headed for the shower, but Mom blocked my path.

'Wait,' she said sternly. 'What do we say?'

I sighed and repeated with her our ritual morning phrase: 'Today I will think good thoughts and smile at everyone I see.' She beamed and patted me on the shoulder. Sometimes I wished I just had an alarm clock.

'Corn flakes or Cheerios this morning?'

'I can pour my own cereal,' I said, and pushed past her to the bathroom.

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My mom and I lived above the mortuary in a quiet little neighbourhood on the outskirts of Clayton. Technically we were across the municipal line, which put us in the county rather than the town, but the whole place was so small that nobody really noticed or cared where any of the lines were.

We lived in Clayton, and thanks to the mortuary we were one of the only families that didn't have at least one person working in the woodmill. You might think that a small town like this wouldn't have enough dead people to keep a mortuary in business, and you'd be right – we were on the ropes most of last year, struggling to pay the bills. My dad paid child support, or more correctly the government garnished his wages to pay it, but it still wasn't enough. Then last fall, the Clayton Killer had shown up and given us plenty of business. Most of me thought it was sad that so many people had to die to keep our business solvent, but Mr Monster loved every minute of it.

Naturally, Mom didn't know about Mr Monster, but she did know that I had been diagnosed with Conduct Disorder – which is mostly just a polite way of saying that I'm sociopathic. The official term is Antisocial Personality Disorder, but they're only allowed to call it that when you're eighteen or older. I was still a month shy of sixteen, so Conduct Disorder it was.

I locked myself in the bathroom and stared in the mirror. It was encrusted with little notes and Post-its Mom left to remind us of important things – not daily things like appointments, but longterm 'words to live by'. I could sometimes hear her recite them to herself as she got ready

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in the morning: things like 'Today will be the best day of my life,' and other crap like that. The largest was a note she had written specifically for me, compiling a list of rules written on lined, pink notepaper and taped to the corner of the mirror. These were the same rules I'd created years ago to keep Mr Monster locked up, and I'd followed them just fine on my own until last year, when I'd had to let him out. Now Mom had taken it upon herself to enforce them. I read the list while I brushed my teeth:

*Rules*

*I will not hurt animals.*

*I will not burn things.*

*When I think bad thoughts about someone, I will push the thoughts away and say something nice about that person.*

*I will not call people 'it'.*

*If I start to follow someone, I will ignore them as much as possible for a full week.*

*I will not threaten people, even implicitly.*

*If people threaten me, I will leave the situation.*

Obviously, the one about burning things had already been tossed out. Mr Monster was so insistent, and my mom's

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supervision so restrictive, that something had to give, and that was it. Lighting fires – small, contained fires that wouldn't hurt anyone – was like a release valve that let out all the pressure building up in my life. It was a rule I *had* to break, in order to have any hope of following the others. I didn't tell Mom what I was doing, of course; I just left it on the list and ignored it.

Honestly, I appreciated Mom's help, but . . . it was getting very hard to live with. I spat out the toothpaste, rinsed my mouth, and went to get dressed.

I ate breakfast in the living room, watching the morning news while Mom hovered in the hall behind me as far as her hair-curling iron could reach. 'Anything interesting going on at school today?' she asked.

'No,' I said. There was nothing interesting on the news, either – no new deaths in town, at least, which was usually all I cared about. 'Do you really think Forman wants to see me for another deposition?'

Mom paused for a moment, silent behind me, and I knew what she was thinking: there were things we still hadn't told the police about what happened that night. When a serial killer comes after you, that's one thing, but when that serial killer turns out to be a demon, and melts away into ash and black sludge right before your eyes, how are you supposed to explain that without getting thrown into an asylum?

'I expect they just want to make sure they have it all written down right,' she said finally. 'We've told them everything there is to tell.'

'Everything except the demon who tried to—'

'We are not going to talk about that,' said Mom sternly.

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‘But we can’t just pretend—’

‘We are *not* going to talk about it,’ Mom repeated. She hated talking about the demon, and almost never acknowledged it out loud. I was desperate to discuss it with someone, but the only person I could share it with refused even to think about it.

‘I’ve already told him everything else twenty-seven times,’ I said, flipping to another new channel. ‘He’s either suspicious or he’s an idiot.’ The new channel was as dull as the last one.

Mom thought for a moment. ‘Are you thinking bad thoughts about him?’

‘Oh, come on, Mom.’

‘This is important!’

‘I can do this myself, you know,’ I said, putting down the remote. ‘I’ve been doing this on my own for a very long time. I don’t need you reminding me constantly about every little thing.’

‘Are you thinking bad thoughts about me now?’

‘I’m starting to, yes.’

‘And?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘You look very nice today,’ I said.

‘You haven’t even seen me since you turned on the TV.’

‘I don’t have to say sincere things, just nice things.’

‘Sincerity will help, though.’

‘You know what will help,’ I said, standing up and taking my empty bowl into the kitchen, ‘is for you to stop bugging me all the time. Half the bad things I think about are caused by you breathing down my neck every second of the day.’

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'Better me than somebody else,' she called from the hallway, unfazed. 'I know you love me too much to do anything drastic.'

'I'm a sociopath, Mom, I don't love anybody. By definition.'

'Is that an implicit threat?'

'Oh, for the—! No, it was not a threat, Okay, I'm leaving.'

'And?'

I stepped back into the hallway, staring at her in frustration. We recited it again: 'Today I will think good thoughts and smile at everyone I see.' I picked up my backpack, opened the door, then turned around and looked at her one last time.

'You do look very nice today,' I said.

'What was that for?'

'You don't want to know.'

## Chapter 2

I left my mom and walked downstairs to the side door, where our upstairs home met the ground-floor mortuary. There was a small space there between the doors and the stairs, and I paused there for a moment to take a deep breath. I told myself, as I did every morning, that Mom was only trying to help – that she recognised my problems and wanted to help me beat them in the only way she knew how.

I used to think that telling her my rules would help me follow them – that it would somehow make me more accountable to them – but her level of control was too overbearing, and now I couldn't see any way out of it. It was driving me crazy.

Literally.

The rules I followed were designed to protect people – to stop me from doing anything wrong and to keep me out of situations where I might hurt somebody. You see, the potential was definitely there.

I was seven years old when I first discovered my life's greatest passion: serial killers. I didn't like what they did, obviously – I knew that it was wrong – but I was fascinated by it, and by how they did it, and why. What intrigued me

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the most was not how different they were, but how similar – to each other, *and to me*. As I read more and learned more I started to check off all the warning signs in my head: chronic bedwetting; pyromania; animal cruelty; high IQ with low grades; lonely childhood with few or no friends; strained parental relationship and dysfunctional home-life. These and dozens more are predictors for serial-killer behaviour, and I had every single one of them. It's a pretty big shock to realise that the only people you can identify with are psychopathic killers.

The thing about predictors is, they're never set in stone: most serial killers show these signs as children, but most of the children who show these signs will never become serial killers. It's a step-by-step process to move from one to the other, graduating from one bad decision to another, doing just a little more and going just a little further until finally you're caught with a basement full of corpses and a shrine made of skulls in the den. When my dad left, and I was so mad I wanted to kill everyone I knew, I decided that it was time to do something about myself. So I made rules to help me stay as normal and happy and non-violent as I could.

A lot of the rules wrote themselves: *Don't hurt animals. Don't hurt people. Don't threaten animals or people. Don't hit or kick anything.* As I got older and understood myself better, I started making my rules more specific, and attaching self-punishments where necessary: *If I want to hurt someone, I have to compliment them. If I start to fixate on a specific person, I have to ignore them for a week.* Rules like that help me drive out dangerous thoughts and avoid dangerous situations.

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Once I hit adolescence, my whole world changed and my rules had to change to keep up: the girls in school grew hips and breasts, and all of a sudden my nightmares were full of young, screaming women instead of old, screaming men. I instated a new rule, *Don't look at breasts* – but in general I find that it's easiest just not to look at girls at all.

Which brings us to Brooke.

Brooke Watson was the most beautiful girl in school, and she was my age, and she lived two houses down from me, and I could pick out her scent in a massive crowd. She had long blond hair and braces, and a smile so bright it made me wonder why other girls bothered smiling at all. I knew her class schedule, her birthday, her gmail password, and her social security number – none of which I had any business knowing. I had anti-stalking rules that should have prevented me from knowing any of that, or even from thinking about her at all, but Brooke was a special case.

The thing was, my rules were designed to keep Mr Monster in, but they had the brutally efficient side-effect of keeping everyone else out. A guy who forces himself to ignore people anytime he starts to get to know them is not a guy who's going to make a lot of friends. I used to be okay with this, content to ignore the world and stay far away from any temptation, but Mom had other ideas, and now that she was taking an active hand in my sociopathy she was forcing me into situations I wasn't sure how to handle. She insisted that the only way to learn social skills was to practise them, and she knew that I liked Brooke, so she pushed us together every chance she got. Her latest ploy, now that I had my learner's permit, was to loan me

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a car and tell Brooke's parents that I could drive their daughter to school every morning. Brooke's parents thought it was a great idea, partly because the nearest bus stop was about eight blocks away, but mostly because they didn't know how many times a week I had dreams about embalming their daughter.

I pulled out my keys and went outside, walking to the car. Mom had bought the cheapest possible car she could find for me to use – a 1971 Chevy Impala, baby blue, with no AC and a radio with no FM. It was built like a tank and handled like a cruiseliner, and I figured you could melt it down and make at least three Honda Civics, but I wasn't complaining. It was good just to have a car.

Brooke came out of her house before I could even get the car in gear. I always wanted to drive to her house and pick her up – it seemed more polite that way – but every morning she heard me start the engine and met me halfway.

'Good morning, John,' she said, climbing in the passenger side. I didn't look at her.

'Good morning, Brooke,' I said. 'Ready to go?'

'All set.'

I pulled away from the kerb and got up to speed, carefully keeping my eyes on the road. I didn't look at her until the end of the block, stopping at the corner and catching a quick glance as I checked for traffic. She was wearing a red shirt, and the top layer of her hair was tied up in a pony tail. I stopped myself from looking at her clothes any closer, but from the flash of skin on her legs I knew she was wearing shorts. It was pretty warm this time of year, so she'd be fine by lunchtime, but it was just chilly enough this early in the

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morning that I reached out and flipped on the heater before continuing down the street.

‘Are you ready for Social Studies today?’ she asked. It was the only class we shared, so it was a frequent topic of conversation.

‘I think so,’ I said. ‘I didn’t want to read the chapter on peer pressure, but some friends convinced me to.’

I heard her chuckle at that, but I didn’t look to see her smile. Brooke was the big anomaly in my life – the twisted knot that messed up all of my rules and disordered all of my plans. Any other girl, of course, I wouldn’t even talk to, and if I ever had a dream about any other girl I wouldn’t allow myself to think about her for a week. That was the safe way – that was the way I’d lived for years.

Because of our situation, though, I had to stretch my rules to accommodate my enforced proximity to Brooke. I’d made a long list of exceptions to cover the area between ‘ignoring her completely’ and ‘abducting her at knifepoint’. I couldn’t ignore her, but I couldn’t just stare at her either, so I’d developed a set of acceptable options.

I could say her name once, in the morning, when she got in the car. I could talk to her while driving, but I had to keep my eyes on the road. At school I could look at her three times during class, and talk to her once during lunch, but that was it. Between classes I had to avoid her, going out of my way to do so, if necessary. I could not follow her, even if we were going to the same place, and I could not, under any circumstances, think about her during the day. If I started to, I made myself recite number sequences in my head to drown out the thoughts: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34.

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Perhaps most important of all, I could not touch her or anything that belonged to her, for any reason.

Before I'd made that last rule I'd actually stolen something of hers, just to have it – a hair clip that managed to end up on the floor of the car one day. I kept it for a week, like a good luck charm, but it made the *don't think about her* rule almost impossible to follow, so I'd put it back on the floor and pointed it out to her the next morning, as if I'd just found it. Now I shied away from everything, to the point that I didn't even touch the passenger door – 'her' door – unless I absolutely had to.

'Do you ever think he might come back?' asked Brooke suddenly, interrupting my thoughts.

'Who?'

'The killer,' she said. Her voice was distant and thoughtful. 'We act like he's gone, just because he hasn't attacked anybody in months, but they still haven't found him. He's still out there somewhere, and he's still . . . evil.'

Brooke usually avoided talking about the killer; she hated even thinking about the subject. Something must have been bothering her if she was talking about it now.

'He might still be out there,' I said. 'Some serial killers can wait years between attacks, like BTK, but they're usually a different kind of killer. Our killer was . . .' I almost looked at her, stopped myself, and glared at the road. I had to be very careful not to freak her out; people usually got really creeped out when they realised how much I knew about serial killers. Even Agent Forman had been surprised in our early interviews. He was a criminal profiler, and yet I'd read an essay on Edward Kemper that he'd never even heard of.

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'I don't know,' I shrugged. 'It's hard to think about.'

'It is hard,' Brooke agreed. 'I don't like to think of it either, but with Mrs Crowley right there, it's kind of hard to forget. She must be so lonely.' I checked my blind spot just in time to see Brooke look over at me. 'Do you ever have nightmares about it?'

'Not really,' I said, but it wasn't true. I had nightmares about it almost every night – it was the main reason I hated sleeping. One minute I'd be nodding off, fighting to fill my mind with happy thoughts, and the next I'd be back inside the Crowleys' house, beating Mrs Crowley with a clock. I had nightmares about finding Dr Neblin, my therapist, dead in the Crowleys' driveway. And I had nightmares about Mr Crowley – the Clayton Killer himself – impossibly transformed into a demon, slashing and killing a long parade of victims before finally coming after Mom and me. I'd killed him then, but that only made the nightmares worse: most of them were about how much I had enjoyed killing, and how much I wanted to do it again. That was a lot more frightening.

'I can't imagine what it must have been like for you to find that guy,' said Brooke. 'I don't think I could have done what you did.'

'What I did?' Did she know that I killed the demon? How?

'Trying to save Neblin,' Brooke went on. 'I would have just run.'

'Oh yeah.' Of course: she wasn't thinking about killing, she was thinking about saving. Brooke always saw the positive side of everything. I'm not sure I had a positive side, but at least around her I could pretend.

'Don't think too much of it,' I said, pulling into the

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school parking lot. 'I'm sure you'd have done the same, and probably made a better job of it. You have to remember, I didn't even save him.'

'But you tried.'

'I'm sure he appreciates the effort,' I said, and made for the one parking spot that still had enough room for my massive car. It was kind of funny, actually. This thing probably outweighed 99 per cent of the vehicles here, even though half the kids drove trucks. 'Well, here we are.'

Brooke opened the door and stepped out. 'Thanks for the ride,' she said. 'I'll see you in Social Studies.'

I permitted myself one long look as she walked away, jogging to join a friend on her way to the building. She was gorgeous.

And she was so much better off without me in her life.

'Shut up,' said Max, walking up next to me and dropping his backpack on the ground. Max Bowen was the closest thing I had to a friend, though it was more a matter of convenience than actual friendship. Serial killers tended to be withdrawn from the world as children, with few if any friends, so I'd told myself that a best friend, even a fake one, would help keep me normal. Max was the perfect candidate – he had no friends of his own, and he was just self-absorbed enough to not care about my various eccentricities. He was, on the other hand, very annoying – as with his new habit of starting every conversation with 'shut up'.

'You are just a delight to be with these days, you know that?' I said.

'This from the walking dead boy,' said Max. 'We all know

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you're a Goth waiting to happen, so why don't you just wear black and get it over with?"

'My mom buys my clothes.'

'Yeah, so does mine,' he said, forgetting the string of insults and squatting down to open his backpack. 'Pretty soon I'm going to fit into my dad's clothes though, and then I'm going to look awesome. I can wear his combat fatigues and everything.' Max worshipped his dad, even more so now that he was dead. The Clayton Killer had ripped him in half just after Christmas, and everyone in town had been extra nice to Max ever since, but I figured he was better off this way. His father was a jerk.

'Check this out,' he said, standing up and opening a thick cardboard folder. Inside were several comic books, carefully sealed in plastic, and he gingerly took one out and handed it to me. 'This is a limited edition,' he said. 'Convention-only *Green Lantern*, issue number zero – it's even got a foil stamp in the corner. It's numbered.'

'Why do you bring these to school?' I asked, but I knew the answer. Bragging about his expensive comics was the whole reason Max brought them. They weren't any good to him if they stayed at home in a locked drawer where no one could see how cool he was for owning them.

'What this?' asked Rob Anders, stopping next to us. I sighed. *Here we go again*. This happened almost every day: Rob would mock Max, I'd mock Rob, he'd threaten me, and we'd go to class. Sometimes I wondered if I bugged him on purpose just to feel the thrill of danger again – to feel just a taste of the driving terror I'd felt over the winter. But Rob was not a killer, and he was definitely not a demon – his

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threats were thin and hollow. He was sixteen years old, for crying out loud. What was *he* going to do?

'Good morning, Rob,' I said. 'It's always great to see you.'

Mr Monster desperately wanted to stab him.

'I wasn't talking to you, freak,' said Rob. 'I was talking to your boyfriend.'

'It's a comic book worth more than anything you own,' said Max, taking it back protectively. Max always knew exactly what not to say.

'Let me see,' said Rob, and shot out his hand to grab the comic book. Max was at least smart enough not to fight over it, and let go immediately.

'Hold it carefully,' said Max. 'Don't crease it.'

'The *Green Lantern*,' said Rob, holding it up in front of him. His voice was different now – more deliberate than normal, and a little more dramatic. I'd learned through experience that a voice like that meant the speaker was mocking something. 'Is this who you dream about at night, Max? The big, dreamy *Green Lantern* swooping down into your bedroom?'

'Is homosexuality really all you talk about?' I asked. I knew I shouldn't antagonise him, but Rob never did anything to me, just to Max. I think he was still scared of me after the Halloween incident.

'I only talk about gays around gaywads like you,' he said, flexing the comic and its cardboard support.

'Please don't bend it,' said Max.

'Or what?' asked Rob with a smile. 'Your Commando Dad's gonna beat me up?'

'Wow,' I said. 'Did you actually just make fun of his dead father?'

DAN WELLS

'Shut up,' said Rob.

'So you're tough because somebody else killed his dad,' I said. 'That is a gutsy claim, Rob.'

'And you're a fag,' he said, slapping the comic into my chest.

'You do realise that highly vocal homophobes are far more likely to be gay?'

Rob sneered. 'And you realise that you're asking me, in very plain terms, to beat your face in – right here? You're handing me a signed request form.'

Jus then, Chad Walker, one of Rob's friends, walked up behind him.

'It's the freaks,' said Chad. 'How are you today, freaks?'

'I'm wonderful, Chad,' I said, not taking my eyes off of Rob. 'Nice shirt, by the way.'

Rob stared back at me a moment, then dropped the comic book into my hands. 'Take a good look, Chad,' he said. 'Living proof of how messed-up fatherless children can get. Two dysfunctional families in action.'

'Having a father has obviously done wonders for you,' I said.

Something finally snapped in Rob's mind, and he shoved me in the chest. 'You want to talk about dysfunctional, freak? You want to talk about cutting people open? They bring you into the police station almost once a week, John. When are they finally gonna arrest you for the psycho you are?' He was shouting now, and other kids stopped to watch.

This was new – I'd never pushed him this far before.

'You're very observant,' I said, struggling to find some kind of compliment. I couldn't think of anything else to say, but

## MR MONSTER

Mr Monster was whispering something in my ear and it slipped out before I could stop it. 'But think about it this way, Rob. You're either wrong, in which case all these people staring at you think you're an idiot, or you're right, in which case you're physically threatening a dangerous killer. It doesn't seem very smart either way.'

'Are you threatening me, freak?'

'Listen, Rob,' I said. 'You're not scary. I've been scared before – really, legitimately scared – and you're just nowhere in the same league. Why do we have to go through this every day?'

'You're scared of getting caught,' Rob sneered.

'We've got to get to class,' said Chad, pulling Rob away. His eyes said that he was worried – that Rob had gone too far, or that I had. Rob took a step back, flipped me off, then walked towards the school with Chad. I handed Max his comic book, and he studied it carefully for damage.

'One of these days he's going to hurt one,' said Max, 'and then I'm going to sue him for damages. My dad said these things are worth, like, hundreds of dollars.'

'One of these days you're going to leave your hundred-dollar comic books at home where he can't hurt them,' I said, angry at him for attracting Rob's attention. I shouldn't break any of my rules – not even the simple ones like this. A year ago, I would never have provoked Rob like that. Mr Monster was getting too strong.

Max slipped his comic back into his folder, and then into his bag.

'See you at lunch,' I said.

'Shut up,' said Max.