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Opening extract from

Monster

Written by

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Published by

Mira Ink an imprint of Harlequin (UK)

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Published in Great Britain 2015
by MIRA Ink, an imprint of Harlequin (UK) Limited,
Eton House, 18-24 Paradise Road,
Richmond, Surrey, TW9 1SR

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ISBN 978-1-848-45389-0

47-0915

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Printed and bound in Great Britain
by CPI Antony Rowe, Chippenham, Wiltshire

1
I, Monster

That last week at school before the Christmas holidays, death was in everything.

In Geography, the sea was eating away the coasts. In English, Juliet was stabbing herself with Romeo's dagger. Even the school gerbil, Rafferty, was found stiff in his water bowl on Tuesday lunchtime. The skies above us bore a foreboding grey gloom, telling us snow was on its way to suffocate the land. In the dorms, everyone was packing up their trunks for the coming break and preparing to say goodbye to the year.

And in our last floodlit netball practice that Friday evening, I saw the monster.

The thing generations of Bathory girls had nightmares about. The Beast of Bathory.

I watched it in the fading light through the wire mesh

of our netball court fencing. A black mass, stalking quietly across the playing fields, its two yellow eyes turning to stare at me every so often as it walked, unchecked. Unafraid.

Pheeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! went the whistle.

'Nash, pass! Pass! I'm free! I'm free!'

I was watching it as much as it was watching me.

Pheeeeee! 'Natasha, are you playing netball today? Or are *we* playing netball and *you* playing Musical Statues?'

I tried to get my head back in the game. 'Sorry, Mrs Scott.'

'Rebound, pink team,' she called, marching back up the court, whistle ready in her mouth. I sneaked a look behind me to the playing fields, but there was no sign of it. It must have dashed into the hedge. I put my trainer to the yellow line and clutched the ball firmly, looking for a free pink-bib to throw to.

'Aaaaaaand… *pheee*!'

'Nash! Nash! Overhead! Here! Here!' Maggie Zappa was calling for it. Wing Attack, socks at half-mast, hair a mass of black curls. School rebel. I wasn't throwing to her.

'Nash! Here!' Clarice Hoon, Goal Attack, too much make-up, bedmate of half the Lower Sixth St Anthony's boys. We had a history. I wasn't throwing to her.

Dianna Pfaff, my opposition Centre, was using everything she had. She wasn't as fast as me, but she was tall, with a ballerina's balance, and had several times marked me out of the game. Her thick blonde curls bounced and flew as she darted left to right in front of me, shadowing my every movement with her hands. I had to throw.

I saw Regan. Wing Defence, black plaits hanging down and thick, clear-framed glasses. Way back on the line. She had arrived in the Lower Fifth with a subtle smell of wrong-

ness about her and the appearance of a spinster in her late fifties. She wasn't even calling for it. I threw to her.

It bounced high off the ground in front of her, and she fumbled it offside.

Pheeeeeeee! 'Foul ball. Advantage blue team.'

Regan bit her lip. Clarice rolled her eyes.

Maggie Zappa puffed and blew her fringe curls up from her face. 'Da fuq didn't you throw it to me? I was free. I had acres!'

'Margaret Zappa!' yelled Mrs Scott.

'But I was free!' She turned back to me, slapping her hands to her sides. 'What did you throw to her for? You might as well have thrown it over the fence.'

The blues scored a goal before Mrs Scott had finished dressing down Maggie for a string of ensuing bad language. We all went back to the centre. Dianna Pfaff had the ball.

Pheeeeeeeee!

'Dianna, here! Here!'

I marked Dianna's movements like a shadow. She couldn't pass, couldn't get to anyone. Frustration screamed from her.

Pheeeeeeee! 'Possession. Advantage pinks.' Mrs Scott's fat thighs smacked together as she marched over to us and pointed to the spot, handing me the ball. I spotted a free pink and lobbed it across the court.

'Aw, hospital pass!' cried Mrs Scott, as the ball bounced away from Jenny. 'Rebound! Advantage pinks. Rebound. Advantage blues. Come on, you're not nailed to the ground, reach for the ball! Jump for it!' Goal Attack to Goal Shooter. Score. *Pheeeeeee!* 'Pinks lead two to one.'

Dianna threw me a look as the ball was lobbed back in my direction.

Pheeeeeee!

'Nash, pass! Over here, over here! I'm free!'

'Nash, for God's sake!'

'Natasha! What are you…'

It had stopped there, just in front of the hedge, a black shape moving in the falling darkness across the playing fields. The huge black shape. It was waiting for me to go over to it. I went across the gravel, across the grass of the playing fields to the swings.

'Natasha, come back here! What on earth…'

I had to see it more clearly. I had to know if it was there for sure, the thing I'd been seeing for weeks now, darting across fields, hiding around corners, vanishing behind trees. The killer of dozens of sheep and chickens. And possibly humans.

But, in a second, it had gone, vanished into the hedge with barely the rustle of a leaf.

Someone was behind me, walking quickly to catch up. I turned. Regan Matsumoto.

'That was it, wasn't it?' she said breathlessly. 'You saw it, didn't you, Nash?'

I didn't answer. Our PE teacher was marching up the grass behind us, face as red as her Aertex shirt. I was going to be punished. The only punishment Mrs Scott ever doled out: the thing no one wanted to do.

'Just what the hell…'

'I'll collect the balls, Mrs Scott.' I walked past her back towards the court.

There were many bad things about Bathory School for Girls—the rules, the staff, the food, the beds, the homesickness and the spooky legends including the Beast of Bathory—but some things about it were truly wonderful.

For a start, there was the amount of time we were expected to be outside. We were always playing sports —netball, hockey, tennis in the summer, swimming when it was hot enough in the outdoor pool.

Then there were the Hidey Holes, secret doorways and passages all over the main house, which had been there since Elizabethan times. Apparently their original purpose was to conceal Catholic priests who'd visited South Devon and taken refuge there—according to legend, one priest had hidden in a Hidey Hole for so long that he suffocated and died. Bathory girls had found four main Hidey Holes—two linking the Fiction and Reference Libraries, one in the Laundry room behind the towel rails and one in the wall behind the stage at the back of the gym—but there were more. The house itself was this huge, imposing grey building, surveying the remote South Devon moors like some buxom grey nursemaid with shining black eyes. It had a long flat roof and large turrets at either end. One turret was The Observatory where we had telescopes for stargazing, and in the other was the Weather Station where we took readings for science.

We had Hogwartsy-style Houses—Plantagenet, Tudor, Hanover and Windsor—and there was an unwritten rule that girls seemed to get picked for them according to their status, which was kind of like Hogwarts too. All the bad girls went in Plantagenet, all the ones good at sport went into Hanover, all the brainy ones went to Tudor and all the, well, the ones who weren't really good at anything went in Windsor.

Another wonderful thing about Bathory was its setting. It was literally in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by fields and woods and acres of land in which to get lost. We

were miles away from any form of civilisation, but we were quite self-sufficient. We had tennis courts, netball courts, playing fields, hockey pitches and formal and kitchen gardens where the cooks grew herbs and vegetables. Behind the house was a huge wooded valley with two large ponds and five beautiful follies in the upper sections of the woods. These were called The Birdcage, The Temple, The Wendy House, The Tree House and The Chapel. If you stood at the bottom of the valley by Edward's Pond and looked up, you could see all of them, dotted around at regular intervals, like ornaments on a giant cake.

Back in the mists of time, before it became a school in the 1930s, Bathory House was the private home of the Duke and Duchess of Bathory and their twins, Edward and Grace, who were incredibly spoilt. When the little boy had asked for a pond to keep some fish, the little girl asked for a lake. Then the boy had asked for a tree house in the woods, but the girl had asked for a life-size version of her dolls' house, and so on and so forth. So basically, The Follies were monuments to the tantrums of two greedy little brats.

The wonderful really did outweigh the not-so-wonderful at Bathory and I loved it there. Especially at Christmas. The week before Christmas hols was usually the most magical time—full of parties, log fires, tobogganing down the hillsides in the snow, making sugarplums and traditional decorations for the end of term concert. It normally left me with the feeling of complete and utter happiness. Of safety. Of certainty that this was perfection.

But this Christmas, everything was different. There was no squidgy feeling. There was no safety. For me, Christmas was cancelled.

And Dianna Pfaff was making the most of my misery.

She sidled up to me as I was collecting up the balls after netball practice that evening.

'Your head's not really in it at the moment, is it?'

'Oh, it's okay, you don't have to help. Mrs Scott asked me to…'

'I want to help,' she said, and set the bibs down on the ground to help me pick up balls. 'I heard about your brother…'

'What about my brother?'

'About him being missing. Everyone knows.'

'He's not missing. He just hasn't been in touch with my parents for a few days. They're a bit worried. He'll be okay. How does everyone know?'

'Penny Marriott heard it from Kezzie Wood who got it from a Pup with chickenpox who was waiting outside Mrs Saul-Hudson's office when you went in this morning.'

'So the whole school knows?'

Dianna's lips thinned. 'What's the latest?'

She said it like you'd ask for a weather update. 'He went on some whale-watching expedition at a national park on the northern coast of Colombia. He was supposed to ring home two days ago but he didn't. Probably just out of range.'

Dianna nodded. 'Do you think you'll be staying here for Christmas then? If your parents have to fly out to Cambodia?'

The thought was acid in my mouth. 'It's Colombia. And no, it won't come to that. He'll be fine, I'm sure.'

But still Dianna looked twitchy. 'Mum said there's a chance I might be staying. Hope not though. Christmas here would be a nightmare. She's still in Spain. New boyfriend. Such a leech… Anyway, if you want a hand with any of Mrs Saul-Hudson's stuff…'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, I don't know, just, like, the diary or making her tea or organising anything, you know, just give me a shout. I'm here if you want the help.'

She'd been like this for months, ever since she found out I was the frontrunner for Head Girl. The final week she had really ramped up the helpful bit.

'I know you want Head Girl as well, Dianna.'

'No, no, it's not that at all,' she said with a nervous laugh, eyebrows up in her hairline, trying to come across completely blasé. She bounced a white netball between her fingers. 'But you're under a lot of stress at the moment, getting everything ready for end of term and the Christmas fair and the concert and what with your brother…'

'My brother will be fine,' I said, measuring every word so it didn't come out as loudly as I wanted it to. So many other words teetered on my tongue, from 'I can manage perfectly well without your help, you endless parasitic worm' to 'Get lost and die a slow lingering death in a ditch.' But none of those things were ever going to come out of my mouth. In the end I simply said, 'Thanks.'

In the changing rooms, the school Matron and Maggie Zappa were arguing like two alley cats over a fishbone.

'I didn't take it, all right? Stupid old fart. Why do you always assume it's me?'

'Because it usually is!' screeched Matron, hands on hips, her tight blue uniform dotted with melting ice flecks. She'd apparently been head first in the chest freezer, looking for some lost meat.

'I haven't touched your stupid turkeys. Get your hands off me!'

Eventually, Mrs Scott and Matron grabbed Maggie's arms

and led her bodily up the corridor towards the Head's office, a string of expletives dancing along the air behind her.

'Margaret, the more you struggle the harder you're going to make this for yourself.'

'I didn't take them! Am I speaking another language? Have I woken up Chinese like that woman in the science video? I'm not responsible for your stupid turkey theft, *capiche*?'

'You're a liar,' said Matron, teeth gritted, a huge bunch of keys jangling violently against her hip and strands of her black hair coming loose from her tight bun. 'This has got your name written all over it, Maggie.'

'Where? Where's my name? Where? Tell me. Where's the proof? I haven't done anything. Nash, tell them I didn't take them!'

I said nothing as they came past me, just did that very British thing of averting my eyes, cleaning a smudge on a nearby doorframe. I made my way into the changing rooms and got washed and dressed for Prep.

I couldn't associate with Maggie Zappa this week. Not this week of all weeks. I'd already blotted my clean copybook in netball by going into some kind of trance and walking off court. I couldn't defend Public School Enemy Number 1 as well. Maggie had earned over twenty Blue Tickets for Plantagenet House this month alone. This week was just too important to even be seen talking to her. That badge was too important.

All I'd wanted since I'd arrived at Bathory aged eleven was the Head Girl badge. The previous Head Girl had left the school suddenly at the start of the autumn term and ever since then Mrs Saul-Hudson had been vetting potential prefects. I was the front-runner, there was no doubt. I'd

made sure of it. I only had one more week to wait for the announcement and then all my deportment badges, my 349 Gold Tickets, my academic awards, my staying up late to help the Headmistress with the diary, all my sycophancy would be rewarded. Just one more week.

After changing, I did my hair in the sink mirrors and found myself standing next to Clarice Hoon. 'They found your brother yet?' she said, applying a thick layer of concealer to her under-eyes.

A dark cloud descended across my vision. I covered my accelerating heartbeat and shortness of breath by combing down my honey bob until my hair looked like the two sides of a golden apple. 'Sorry?'

'He's quite fit, isn't he?' she continued, turning to look at me. She had so much mascara on she could barely lift her eyelids.

Don't give her the oxygen of attention, came the voice in my head. *She wants you to respond.* I checked the pleats of my raspberry tunic and plucked a lint ball from my navy cardigan, ensuring my netball, hockey, tennis and athletics badges were all equidistant down the side of the V; my prefect's badge in alignment with the base of my tie. One space remained on the V—the one right on my heart. Head Girl.

Clarice didn't like my lack of reaction. 'What will you do if he's dead?'

'Clarice Hoon, you're on your way to Prep, not the Oscars.' Mrs Scott had returned from helping Matron, complete with reddened cheeks, blown pupils and a torn shell-suit sleeve. 'Enough with the make-up.'

Clarice waited for Mrs Scott to move away before she leaned in to me. I felt her hot breath on my ear. 'I think he is dead.' She slung her kitbag over one shoulder, smiled at

our teacher, and slunk out of the room like a pedigree Persian who'd won Best in Show.

I had tried to keep the thought from my mind for the past two days but hearing it from someone else—hearing it from *her*—was too much to bear. I thought the room was empty when I collapsed against the cold porcelain basin, my forehead in my hands, my sobs echoing around the white walls. But, moments later, she appeared, standing over me.

Regan Matsumoto helped me to my feet.

2
The Devil Inside

Sebastian, my good-looking big brother with the shaggy blond hair. At twenty-two, he was six years older than me and he was good at it too. He'd taught me how to ride a bike, defend myself, drive a car and tie my shoelaces. Seb had tried to make me unafraid of life. Now, the only thing that made me afraid was not knowing where he was. If he was still alive.

Was. *Is*, I meant to say. He *is* still alive. His heart *is* still beating. I couldn't begin to think of him in the past tense.

Saturday came, Saturday went. Sunday came with a screaming headache, and went with more crying, this time into the Che Guevara T-shirt that I'd nicked from his room at Exeat.

Sunday lunchtime, Mum called—still no word.

I found myself volunteering to do things away from everyone so I wouldn't have to look at the pitying faces, deal with the questions, talk to anyone about anything. I offered to clean the storage sheds in the Pig Yard at the back of the tennis courts, pull up weeds in the formal gardens, salt the drive, walk to Bathory village for provisions, just so I could sob without some infuriating arm coming round my shoulder. I wanted to work and walk until I was too tired to think. But it was impossible not to think.

I had looked up Colombia in the Reference Library. It had over 1.14 million square miles of land. Two thousand miles of coastline. Rainforests. Deserts. I found encyclopedia entries about tribal tales: mythical beasts that ate backpackers whole. Drug cartels who hacked off human heads with swords. Tourists going missing and never being found. Paranoia set in like bacteria and mutated over everything. I clung on to the one thing I knew—that I didn't know anything.

I'm all right. Stop worrying. Worrying gets you nowhere. I heard him in my mind. I wanted to believe it.

I was in the field at the top of the drive, walking the school Newfoundland, Brody, when I saw it again. And again, all was silent. The birds had stopped.

The monster.

It was three fields away, a large black shape stalking through the long grass. Definitely too big to be a farm cat. I waited. In a couple of blinks, it had disappeared into a thicket of trees.

No one alive had seen this thing for decades. There had been sightings, scratch marks on tree trunks. Blood on the odd rocky outcrop on the moor. The odd fruit-loop venturing onto the moors, trying to track it, to no avail. I had seen it twice inside of a week. Why me?

Each night since my netball meltdown, I dreamed about my brother. I'd call for him and hear nothing but growls in the distance. A burning shack in a thick forest. Running up an endless staircase, feeling my skin burn as I screamed for him. A jungle of trees. An endless landscape of greenery and strange noises and dark places. In one dream, I parted some leaves and saw the monster, the huge black Beast, its head bent over Seb's body. It looked up at me, orange eyes gleaming, my brother's beating heart clamped between its jaws.

Regan Matsumoto wasn't helping. She kept appearing silently in doorways, right in front of me. Never saying anything, just looking at me with black eyes like a ghost. One night I swore I saw her on the landing by the toilet. But the next moment she was gone.

Dianna Pfaff was shadowing everything I did like a very persistent blonde stain—offering to wake up the Pups for me, insisting on monitoring Prep with me, catching the post before I could get there, giving teachers messages I was supposed to give them. All to 'give me a break'. All in the name of 'help'. I didn't need her help. I especially didn't need the kind of help she wanted to give me. I could have screamed the roof tiles down. But I simply said, 'Thanks,' every time. Because Head Girl doesn't scream the roof tiles down. Or rather, *wannabe* Head Girl doesn't. The rumours from the village weren't helping either. More and more began to swirl around: Mr Pellett had been attacked on his own doorstep in the middle of the night. There was blood spray on his hallway ceiling. A large shape had been seen stalking across his garden. Mrs Saul-Hudson told me to 'play down the rumours' and 'say it was a burglary that had gone wrong'. I wanted to say no, say, *You don't know that for sure and*

neither do the police. It could be the monster. But I did the same as I always did. I said, Yes Mrs Saul-Hudson.'

The more I tried to clear my mind, the more it would fog till it felt like Head Girl was a rope dangling off a cliff face and I was barely clinging on. But cling on I did. I bottled and I clung. Everything I wanted to say, I kept to myself. Everything I wanted to answer her back about—the comments about my 'scrawny wrists' as I wrote in the diary, my 'distinctly miserable face of late' that might put off prospective parents at the Christmas Fayre—I held back. I swallowed it all down with a glass of tepid tap water and left it at that.

By Monday morning, Seb had been missing for exactly five days and I was losing it rapidly. I felt like a fish on the end of an unending reel.

French:

'Natasha, *est ce qu'il ya une piscine proche s'il vous plait*?'

Something about swimming pools. 'Er, *non*.'

'*Non*?'

'*Non*, Madame.'

'*Ah oui. Maintenant, nous sommes aimerons aller au la plage*.'

Plage was beach. I think. Or plague. '*Oui, la plage*.'

'*Pouvez-vous me donner des directives à la plage, s'il vous plait*?'

Something about medicines to take when you had the plague? Or was she asking for cafés near the beach? My mind was a blank page. I had nothing. '*Uh, non*?'

'*Non*?'

'*Oui. Er, non*.'

Le grand sigh.

Maths:

'With that in mind, Natasha, what is the value of n?'

'The value of n?'

'Yes, on the board. See where it says n? What is the value of n, if we know that x = 40 and y is 203?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't know?'

'No. What was y again?'

English Lit :

'So, studying these passages in *Jane Eyre* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, how do we begin to compare and contrast some of the ways in which Victorian novelists use landscape to lend resonance to their work? Natasha?'

'What?'

'Didn't you hear what I just said?'

'Uh, no, sorry, miss.'

Big sigh. 'The landscape in these two books. How does it lend resonance?'

'I have no idea.' Sniggers from the back.

It's not like you, Natasha. It's not like you. It's not like you, not like you, not like you.

The only light that shone onto that day was when I saw the little white Bathory Basics van coming up the drive just before sunset. It pulled up on the gravel driveway just to the left of the front entrance, near the side door to the kitchens. I passed Mrs Saul-Hudson in the front porch.

'It's all right, ma'am. It's just Bathory Basics with the turkeys for Christmas lunch.'

'Oh wonderful, Natasha. I'll leave you to deal with it. I've got the police on their way. Do you know where Dianna is?'

I stopped in my tracks. 'The police? Is everything all right, ma'am?'

'Yes yes yes,' she said, all flustered and hair-flicky, looking all about her for something. 'They come every year around this time. Just checking on who is staying over Christmas. Making sure we've done our safety checks, that's all. All quite routine. Have you seen my handbag? Oh I must have left it upstairs.'

'Do you need me to talk to the police with you, ma'am?'

'No, I need Dianna. You've got enough to deal with.'

'Is it about the man in the village who was killed, ma'am?'

'Yes,' she said and minced off upstairs without another word.

Bloody Dianna, I thought. Bloody bloody bloody Dianna. Why was *she* the one to help her talk to the police about it? What about me?

I tried to shake the image of the blonde assassin from my mind as I stepped out onto the front mosaic to greet Charlie Gossard from the shop and try to be happy. I'd had a substantial crush on Charlie for a while now. His dad ran Bathory Basics and he worked there, serving customers and 'out the back' though I never really knew what went on 'out the back'. It had started with the odd flirty comment about what I was buying whenever I walked there on a Saturday morning for provisions, then it progressed to long looks across the freezer in the summer. Now, we were into conversations and every now and again he'd give me some sell-by pies or sweets if there were any due for chucking out. I hadn't told him about Seb being missing or anything serious like that—our conversations mostly ran to school or what Xbox game he'd recently bought and what his top score was.

He caught sight of me as he got out the driver's door. 'Hi, Nash.'

'Hi, Charlie,' I said.

'How are you?'

'Yeah, fine thanks.'

He was big into gaming, and even though I wasn't at all, I enjoyed listening to him talk. He could have been reciting the phone book and I'd listen to him. Charlie had short blond hair, blue eyes and always wore tight t-shirts, even in winter, which you could see his nipples through. Maggie said he was a *'un renard chaud'*, which meant a hot fox, but I just thought he was lovely. There was always a long white apron tied around his waist, usually smeared with grubby fingermarks.

'Do you need any help?'

'Yeah, if you don't mind. Thanks.'

His smile cut a diamond into the early evening light and he went to the back doors of the refrigerated van to unlock them, then reached in to get one of three humungous turkeys out for me to carry.

'She's a heavy one, mind. You got it?'

'Yeah,' I said, straining to hold it in both hands and making my way towards the kitchen door. He grasped the other two, one in each hand.

'Dad said make sure your cook knows they're premium birds. KellyBronze. Free range, the lot.'

'Oh, great,' I said, struggling a little with the weight of mine as he edged past me and opened the side door to allow me inside. Cook was delighted and, as she and Charlie settled the invoice, I hung around, even though I knew I had no business being there. I was just waiting. For anything. For some little shred of Charlie that I could think about for the rest of the day. Something to send me to sleep smiling tonight instead of crying.

When the invoice was settled and he and Cook had talked

about cooking times and types of stuffing and 'succulence', he walked back out with me to the annoyingly nearby van.

'So,' he said. 'I guess you go home for the holidays tomorrow then?'

'Yeah. I guess so.'

'Not looking forward to it?'

I shrugged. 'It'll be nice to see my parents. Yeah. Yeah, it'll be nice. Presents and Midnight Mass and everything.'

'Oh we went one year. Pretty boring really.'

'It's tradition though, isn't it? My mum and dad enjoy it.'

'Yeah, it is. Gotta keep the old folks happy.'

'Yeah.'

We both laughed, a nervous sort of laugh that went on as long as it could because it was obvious neither of us knew what to say next. We'd run out of conversation so quickly, I hadn't seen it coming. I had nothing in reserve to impress him with. I did a bit of subtle eye-batting and leaning in the hope of… What was I hoping for? For him to take me in his arms and ravish me right there in the school driveway? I didn't know. I just knew I needed something from him. Something more.

'What are you getting for Christmas then?' I asked, hopelessly. Desperately.

He laughed. 'Probably some Boxing Day overtime and a thick ear.' He smiled, wringing his hands like they were cold. I did the same, mirroring his movements.

'Are yours freezing too?' he asked, reaching for them and taking them in his. They were warmer than mine, but at that moment I didn't care if he'd been lying about having cold hands just so he could hold mine. I didn't want him to let go. 'Yeah, they are.' That tiny moment, with him hold-

ing my hands in his, made the day seem finally worth getting up for.

'I'm all right now,' I said, regrettably pulling them away and looking down to hide the flames in my cheeks.

'Listen, you better get in and warm up before they fall off. I've got another twelve of these to deliver before the end of the day. Have a great Christmas all right? And I'll see you next term.'

'Yeah,' I said, as I watched him make his way back to the van. 'Charlie?' I called, when he was almost in.

'Yeah?' He looked back.

'You have a great Christmas too.' And we both smiled at each other. For now, that would have to be enough.

Monday night after Prep and monitoring the Pups' bedtime, I bathed and wrapped myself in my school-approved navy dressing gown and raspberry slippers with the school crest on and went down to Mrs Saul-Hudson's office for our usual routine of cocoa and diary. She was sitting at her desk when I knocked and went in, closing the door behind me.

'Oh Natasha, is it that time already?' she said, already in her pyjamas and dressing gown herself and looking more flustered than normal. 'Sorry, I've got *such* a lot to do before tomorrow.'

'Good evening, ma'am.' I placed her cocoa mug down in front of her, my tap water down in front of me, and opened the diary to tomorrow's page so she could see it. 'It's all done for you to check.'

'Wonderful. Before we got through tomorrow's notes, have a seat. I wanted to talk to you about something.'

'Yes, ma'am?'

She took a sip of her cocoa and I took a sip of my water.

Then she settled down the mug. 'Lovely. Just right as usual. Right, last day of term tomorrow, we've got lots of visitors coming. Who is supervising Pups all day?'

I opened my notebook and clicked on my pen. 'The usual staff, ma'am, plus I've allocated three prefects from Tudor, Hanover and Windsor House to the three groups as well. No lessons means lots of extra hands on deck, which is great.'

'Excellent. And how about the Tenderfoots?'

I checked my notes. 'Two prefects, three members of staff and two TAs. That should be quite enough, ma'am. A lot of the Tenderfoots have gone home early.'

'Good, and the Christmas Fayre?'

'Stallholders will be arriving from ten a.m. and the Years Nine and Ten have been briefed by their form tutors about helping set up stalls and—'

'What about the play?'

'Years Nine and Ten will be setting out the chairs once they've helped with the stalls.'

Mrs Saul-Hudson smiled and sat back in her large leather chair, like a queen testing out a new throne. 'Where would I be without you, Natasha?'

I smiled and blushed at the same time, taking a large sip of my water.

'So how are you bearing up? It must be very hard on you and your parents with Sebastian still not found.'

She'd sucker-punched me, bringing Seb into the conversation so quickly, but in a way I was glad she'd found time to care.

'I'm trying not to think about it really, ma'am,' I said. 'Not much I can do by worrying.'

'That's the stuff,' she said proudly. 'Keep busy, that's always the best way. No sense in worrying. Worrying, I

always say, does not empty tomorrow of its troubles, just empties today of its strength. You bear that in mind, won't you?'

'I will, ma'am,' I said, once I'd figured it out.

'And you're doing a marvellous job here so it would be a shame if… well, if things started to slip.'

I didn't know what she meant by that at that exact moment, but I didn't have time to figure it out because the next demand came swiftly round the next corner.

'Oh, and in the morning I want you to arrange some signage to go up once the choral procession through the woods is over. I've asked Mr Munday to… well, we've taken steps anyway, just in case anything grisly is about. I'm sure there isn't but, well, best to be safe.'

'Yes, ma'am. Just regulation "Keep Out" signs, was it?'

'Yes. Nobody will be going up there over Christmas anyway, but we need signs keeping anyone out of the woods and away from the ponds in case they freeze over.'

I made a note in my book. 'Yes, ma'am. Is this what the police suggested we do?'

'Hmm?' she said, looking up from her papers in alarm as if I'd just asked her what method she suggested I hang myself with.

'Your meeting with the police this afternoon? They were here to talk about the man in the village and the… beast?'

'Oh that!' she said, almost shrieking with laughter. 'Oh that, yes. Yes, the police did say we needed to take extra precautions.'

'And… Dianna was a good help with the police?'

'Yes, wonderful. Actually, you really have both been a constant support this year. And without any detriment to

your grades. I don't know how you and Dianna do it, I really don't.'

I poured a mental pail of cold water over the flames that had just ignited in my mind. Dianna? A constant support? A constant thorn in my side, rather. A constant interloper on *my* duties, definitely. 'Well, I can't speak for Dianna but I enjoy it, ma'am. I like helping out.'

'Well, you've both been a marvel. How is the play coming along?'

'Oh we're almost there, ma'am. If you'd like to come and watch the dress rehearsal, we'll be starting just after Prayers tomorrow morning.'

'Lovely, yes, I might do that. And talking of Prayers…'

Here it comes, I thought. *This is it. This was the moment I've been waiting for.* My heart began to pump like a clubhouse classic.

'Would you be an absolute dear and set out the hymn books first thing tomorrow, please? I meant to ask Clarice Hoon but I never got round to it. Oh and breakfast tomorrow—'

'I can monitor it,' I said quickly, so as to squeeze the information, the golden information out of her just that bit quicker. 'Sorry, ma'am, was there something else you wanted to say about Prayers?'

'Uh, yes, erm, I've forgotten what it was now,' she chuckled. 'I'm sure it'll come to me. I must just tidy up these last few things and show my face at the staff Christmas party. I promised I'd do a little speech and announce Employee of the Year. Any idea where that gold picture frame I got from the mother-in-law last Christmas is?'

'Yes, it's on your tallboy in your apartments, ma'am.'

‘Oh good, I’ll wrap that up quickly and give that as a prize. Was there anything else?’

‘Er, no, ma’am.’

She got up from her desk chair as I got up from mine, and went over to her corner armoire and took down a coat hanger from which hung her Christmas end-of-term red trouser suit. ‘Be a dear and go up and hang this in my bedroom would you?’

I looked at her. I waited for her to look at me. Any sign, any inkling, any vestige of good news, vanished from her face.

‘That’ll be all for tonight, thank you, Natasha,’ she said finally, with a knotted brow, clicking off her desk lamp and leaving me in darkness.

3
Insidious

I spent a fitful night, worrying about Seb and angsting over Head Girl. Obsessing over why my dad hadn't called me with news. Fixating over why Mrs Saul-Hudson hadn't mentioned some shred of hope that badge was mine in our meeting. If I got that badge I would be able to cope better with Seb's disappearance, I knew I would. I'd be able to focus myself on my duties and I would stop worrying so much. If I didn't get it, what then? What the hell would I do? Who the hell was I at this school if I wasn't Head Girl? Just some wannabe?

That Tuesday morning, the last day of term, I had a phone call.

I was waiting to be connected to my dad on the public phone outside the school office. There was a shiny prospec-

tus on the shelf and I was absentmindedly peeling through it while I waited. It stated that Bathory School 'prides itself on its record of pastoral care'. I looked through the pages of all the girls, six-year-old Pups, wide-eyed Tenderfoots, spotty Pre-Pubes, proud prefects and perfect head girls of years gone by, action shots of athletics and gymnastics, wondrous gazes down microscopes, contented smiles while reading books on beanbags, playing cellos in the Music room, waving through coach windows on the way to Switzerland, Venice or Amsterdam. I'd done all of that. I'd had all these experiences. My parents were paying £9,000 a term for all this and it wasn't as though they were rich, not like a lot of the other girls. My mum and dad ran a bakery, that was all. They weren't loaded by any stretch of the imagination. But they'd sent Seb to a private school, so they sent me too. I knew it was a struggle. I knew I had to do my best.

'Nash, hi, it's your dad.'

I closed the prospectus. 'Hi, Dad.'

'Nashy, it's good to hear your voice, darling.'

I wanted to cry. I'd forgotten how much I'd missed his voice. 'Is everything okay? You don't usually phone this earl—'

'I know, darling.' He'd called me 'darling' twice. This really wasn't good.

'What's wrong?'

'Uh, it's Seb.'

That was all he'd needed to say. The bottom dropped out of my world. I reached behind me and felt for the corridor wall so I could lean against it.

'Nash? Nash darling, are you there?'

'Yeah.' I didn't dare say anything. I didn't want the silence on the line to be filled with words I'd always dreaded

I'd hear. Words from my nightmares. But I had to ask. 'What's happened?'

'Well, there's still nothing. They think he's gone off the map a bit.'

I sank back in the big leather swivel chair and it turned me towards the wide bay window. He hadn't said dead. He still wasn't past tense. There was still hope.

'Oh,' I said.

I could hear Dad scratching his stubbly chin, another bad sign. He hadn't shaved. By the way he was talking so quietly and slowly, it sounded like he hadn't slept either. He always talked like that when he'd done a night shift. 'They've made contact with three of the lads on his expedition. Apparently, three of them went off to spot a pod of manatee while the others returned to camp. Seb's group didn't come back. I'm sure all will be well. You know Bash. If he fell into a pit of snakes he'd come up wearing snakeskin boots.'

This was Dad trying to make me feel better. It didn't help. All it did was make me think my big brother had fallen into a pit of snakes.

'He's more than likely just gone somewhere remote where there aren't any phones and he can't get in touch.

'We're catching a flight out there this lunchtime. Managed to get a couple of cancellations. So, I'm afraid, you'll have to stay there, baby, at least for now.'

'What?' I said. 'Can't I come?'

'We can't come and get you, darling, we'll have to leave for the airport in a couple of hours.'

'But I could get a train or something.'

'It'll take too long. We've got to get our flight. Look, you stay there, where you're safe. Where we know where you are. We spoke to your Headmistress and she said Matron's

going to be staying over Christmas as well so you won't be on your own.'

'So, the Saul-Hudsons aren't staying?' I said. 'First I've heard.' They never went away for Christmas, always New Year skiing, but never Christmas. They always stayed here in case any girls were going home later.

'Yeah, she said they're leaving tonight to go skiing or something in Scotland. There's a few other girls staying as well as you she said. Okay? Nash? They said Matron's very happy to stay instead of them.'

'Okay, Dad,' I said. Cowards, was all I could think. And then my mind went to all the Christmas presents I'd wrapped and put under the loose floorboard in my room. I couldn't wait to give Dad his. It was this board game he used to play as a kid and thought they'd stopped making. I got it on eBay months ago when I was home for the summer. When Seb was there. We'd had a barbecue for his birthday. We were always together for birthdays and Christmases. Always. Always.

'What about Christmas?' A single tear fell into the phone mouthpiece. I rubbed my cheek.

'We'll have our Christmas when we get back. All four of us. Okay? Try not to worry too much, Nashy. They'll find him by then, I know they will.'

I swallowed down a lump of emotion and built a dam for any more tears. There was nothing to cry about yet, I kept telling myself. When I got off the phone, the pain in my throat was worse, but I wouldn't cry.

'There's nothing to cry about, stop it. Stop it,' I said aloud.

Often, at times where I didn't know what to do, I'd hear Seb's voice in my head. He was always full of advice. He always said the right thing.

Suck it up, Nash. I'm fine. Just fancied being on my own for a bit, that's all. Typical Mum and Dad to panic and get the Embassy involved. I can look after myself.

I could hear it. But I didn't believe it.

I was in the Chapel, already dressed in my Bob Cratchit outfit for the dress rehearsal straight after morning Prayers. Even though I'd spent a fairly sleepless night, I'd been tasked with setting out the hymn books and assembling the right hymn numbers on the board above the lectern so I focused on the task at hand. I was a mere minutes from the official announcement of Head Girl and I had to put everything else out of my mind.

The Chapel was set apart from the main school, at the start of the wooded valley known as the Landscape Gardens. It was the first building you saw at the bottom of the path. Warm, wooden, bedecked in burgundy and navy curtains, carpets and prayer cushions, it was where we worshipped, where we heard any big announcements and where girls ran if they needed help from a higher source.

'Hi, Nash.'

Clarice Hoon and a couple of her hangers-on, Allie Powell and Lauren Entwistle, sauntered in and took early places right on the back bench. I heard the creaking of their pews, whispering and a few giggles.

I carried on putting up the numbers on the hymn board. Two five six. One one nine. Twenty-three. *Don't get angry unless you have to*, came his voice in my mind. *They're not worth your anger or your tears.* 'Any news about your brother yet?' Clarice called out. I looked over to them. They had their feet up on the pew in front. 'Bet you're worried about him, aren't you?'

I went over to the organ and got the music sheets ready for Mr Rose.

'He's really hot,' said Lauren.

'I saw him at Sports Day last year. He came with your parents, didn't he?' Allie this time—like Clarice was working them both like a ventriloquist's act. More giggles. More whispers. 'Has he got a girlfriend?'

There was a cloth underneath the eagle lectern. I bunched it up and wiped over the top and around the eagle's bald head, trying hard to zone them out. *They're idiots. They couldn't find their own backsides with both hands. Don't even listen. Block it out.*

'Why are you ignoring us, Nash?'

She'd been like this ever since fourth form. Last summer I'd reported her for pushing a Pup down the main staircase. There were many things I hadn't reported her for, as well.

'Just trying to get this place ready,' I muttered, keeping my head down as I finished polishing the lectern. Now I had done everything I had to do. The hymn books were laid out. The lectern and music were ready. I had to go back down the aisle, past them, to get out of the Chapel and rejoin my class.

I knew one of them would move the moment I was level with them. She blocked my way with her whole body. *Don't vent it. Keep it in check. Stay strong.*

'Let me past, please, Clarice.'

Her face was thick with foundation and blusher. Her breath smelled of sour milk. 'Why won't you talk to us? Are you too good for us or something?'

Acid began filling my chest. 'I have nothing to say to you.' Lava bubbled up in the middle of my chest. *Think of Head Girl. Set the example.*

'Nothing to say? Not like you, is it? You had plenty to

say to Saul-Hudson when you reported me.' She whipped her hair flirtatiously over one shoulder. 'You never report Maggie and she's done a lot worse than I have.'

Avoid eye contact. 'You had your revenge,' I said, remembering the start of term. She'd put tacks in my outdoor shoes. She never admitted it, but I knew it was her.

'Why don't you ever report Maggie Zappa? Are you and her lesbi-friends now?'

'I report people who do bad things, Clarice. Maggie doesn't endanger life. Maggie doesn't abuse children.' I still didn't look at her.

She stepped back from me. 'Abuse children?' She looked back at the other two, who were laughing. 'Who have I abused?'

'I'm not going into it now.' I tried barging through her, but she held me in place.

'Whoa there, you can't just say that and then walk off. That's libellous.'

She'd learnt that word in English last week. We all had. 'Actually it's slander, but it happens to be the truth. Now let me past, please.'

'No, you're accusing me of something, so accuse me. Tell me what I've done.'

'Get off me.'

'No. Finish what you were saying. I abuse children or something.'

'You really want me to say it now?' I glanced back at Allie and Lauren. They were transfixed, like they were watching some award-winning movie moment.

'Say it,' she snarled.

I looked just past her, still not focusing on her eyes. 'I didn't tell Saul-Hudson about the five different St Antho-

ny's boys I've seen you sneaking up the back stairs in the past year.'

She went crimson.

'I didn't tell her that you cheated in the Maths test or spat in the school governors' tea. But yes, I did report that you pushed a new Pup down the stairs. And that I've watched you drag a compass across a Tenderfoot's knee in Prep to see how long it would take for her to scream. I report people who do that kind of thing. Not because I'm a lesbian, but because *you're* a psycho. Do you want me to go on?'

I pushed towards the Chapel door. Allie and Lauren looked like two frightened lambs, lined up for the garrotting machine. I was on my way, my foot over the step, almost back out into the crisp, cold morning, when I heard her say it.

'I hope your brother died slowly. In pain.'

Was, she said. Past tense. Died. Deceased. No longer with me.

Kill her.

No more cooling voice of advice. I flew back into that Chapel like a wind and grabbed her by both shoulders, slamming my forehead against hers with an eye-watering *CLUNK*.

The rest I don't remember.

And before I knew it, I was running.