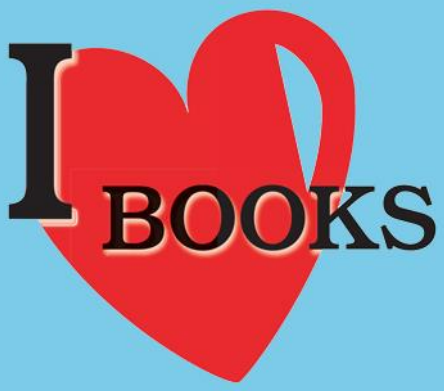


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Michelle Harrison

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Once Upon a Time . . .

ALICE SILVER HAD NEVER MET ANYONE WHO had killed before, but that changed on the day Dorothy Grimes walked past the window of Alice's favourite coffee shop.

Alice had been sitting at the smallest table, staring anxiously at her notebook. It was open on the table next to her coffee, which had gone cold, because she'd forgotten to drink it. She turned the notebook's pages, reading over her work.

Words swam before her eyes, the same words she had written weeks, months ago, and had read through many times since. She didn't even know if they made sense any more.

She was tired. Her head ached, her neck ached, even her eyes ached. Irritable, she flicked to the pages at the front. The writing here wasn't quite as dense: it was mainly lists and diagrams, and snippets she had stuck in, such as

photographs or pictures from magazines. One of these, a news article, had come loose over time and slipped out on to the table. Alice picked it up, scanning the headline she knew by heart.

YOUNG KILLER
LOCKED UP FOR LIFE

The cutting was over two years old now, but Alice still remembered all the details. They had shocked her deeply – and everyone else in the country. The thought that someone her age – just sixteen – could murder five people in such horrible ways was not something that could be forgotten easily. In fact, the killings were what made this case an oddity. Most murderers use the same method to kill each time. This one was different. There had been one strangulation, one bludgeoning, a stabbing, a drowning, and a house fire that had been set deliberately.

She turned the cutting over. On the back was part of another story about a teenage girl who had won a prize for keeping a diary for a year. Alice remembered how she had been holding the cutting to the light, allowing the words on the other side of the thin paper to show through. How words from the two different articles had combined to form 'kill ɣɹɐıb'.

Kill diary.

That was how she'd got the idea to combine both articles to make a truly memorable character for the story she was

working on: a killer who kept a written log of her murders, framing each one as a piece of fiction.

Alice shivered. Sometimes the best ideas came about by accident, and this was one of them. A few tweaks here and there, a new name, a few different murder methods. It was surprisingly easy to think it all up. Alice wondered, not for the first time, if she were a wicked person for imagining such terrible things, but she supposed that all storybook villains had to come from someone's imagination. After all, what was the point of a villain if they were not scary?

She put the cutting down and closed her eyes, massaging her temples. Words floated in the dark space behind her eyelids. Even when her eyes were shut, there was no escape. They surrounded her like a prison, but she knew the only way she would get free was with more words. The *right* ones. The trouble was she didn't know them. She'd written herself into a corner and she had no idea how to finish the story. And now she was starting to worry about what would happen if she didn't. Not just because all her hard work would be wasted, but what would happen to *her*.

Alice had spent the last few months telling herself that what had happened last time hadn't been real. That she'd imagined it, that it had been the lack of sleep, the stress. Whatever it was, it had started up again in the past few days. The shadows, like someone moving just at the edge of her vision. The footsteps behind her on an empty street. The whispering.

She was afraid.

She opened her eyes, letting out a slow breath. The coffee shop was within a bookshop, up on the first floor. She did most of her writing at home, but had thought that a change of scene might help the words to flow. It hadn't. If anything, being around so many other stories, all finished, was like a quiet form of torture. Instead of inspiring her, she imagined the other books were taunting her. She leaned closer to the window, looking out. A sharp winter draught crept in and prickled her face as she watched people moving about on the street below, unaware they were being observed.

And then it felt like all the hairs on her body were standing on end as she caught sight of a slight figure that was looking in the window of a shop opposite.

It can't be, it can't be, it can't be . . .

The words pounded in Alice's head, each one accompanied by a sickening thud of her racing heart. She stood up without even meaning to, knocking into the table. The untouched coffee slopped over the sides of the cup, speckling the notebook and the newspaper cutting. She pressed her hands to the glass, barely aware of the *drip*, *drip*, *drip* of liquid hitting the floor and splashing on to her boots.

She snatched her notebook up and lurched away from the window. The newspaper cutting floated to the floor, but she didn't register it or the strange looks she was getting from other customers.

'Not again,' she whispered, the words catching in her throat. 'Please, not again!' But she still had to know for sure. She stumbled out of the coffee shop and rushed for the

stairs, arriving outside the bookshop moments later. Her breath came in fast gasps, each one puffing in the frozen air.

The girl had gone. Alice turned this way and that, searching the street. Had she hallucinated the whole thing? Fallen asleep perhaps? She hadn't slept properly for a while now—

There. Alice just caught sight of the back of her, vanishing round a corner. She followed, a chill wind making her teeth chatter. Only then did she realise she'd left her coat behind, but if she went back now she'd lose her. She caught up and drew level, trying to get a proper look at the girl's face.

When she saw it, a small cry escaped her lips, but it was whipped away by the wind.

It *was* her.

She had changed her appearance since leaving the hospital. The dull brown hair that had hung in limp rats' tails was gone and so was the dowdy hospital gown that made her look young and helpless. To anyone else she would have been almost unrecognisable . . . but not to Alice. She stumbled, bumping into someone nearby, but was too full of shock and horror to react to the cross words that were spat at her. She had read about a person's blood running cold in many books, but now she actually felt it: the warmth draining from her toes and an icy chill working its way through her entire body like a wave.

What is she doing here? Alice thought. *Does she know? Is she looking for me already?*

And, almost as though Alice drew her like a magnet, the girl turned and stared at her. There was curiosity in her expression, but nothing to suggest she recognised Alice. Nothing to say she was aware of their connection although, as Alice stopped walking and became frozen to the spot, something stirred behind the girl's eyes. Malevolence and a different kind of awareness.

She can see I'm afraid of her, Alice thought. *And she likes it.*

Slowly, Dorothy Grimes strode up to her, a small smile curving her lips. It became wider as Alice backed away, not even realising she was doing so until she came up against a wall.

Dorothy finally stopped, too close to Alice. So close Alice could feel her breath on her face. The sensation of it turned her stomach.

'Have we met?' Dorothy asked. Her voice was soft, but there was nothing gentle about it. It was soft the same way a pillow could be as it smothered you.

'N-not . . . in person.' The words came out as little more than a croak.

'But you know who I am, don't you?'

'Yes,' Alice whispered. 'I know who you are.'

'And you know what I've done.'

A wave of dizziness threatened to overwhelm Alice then. She swayed lightly, managing to steady herself, trying to blink away the awful images that had come to mind. Images of Dorothy striking a match, of squeezing someone's throat,

and of scratching crusted blood that wasn't her own off her cheeks. Yes, Alice knew exactly what Dorothy was capable of.

'Did you read about me in the news?' Dorothy asked. She lowered her voice. 'All the naughty things I've done?'

Alice shook her head weakly. 'Not exactly.'

'Then how do you know me?' Dorothy asked.

'I know everything about you,' Alice whispered.

Dorothy rolled her eyes. 'Oh, not you as well. Do you know how many doctors I've had to listen to, spouting that sort of rubbish? We know all about you, Dorothy,' she mimicked. 'You must have experienced some kind of trauma, Dorothy. We want you to keep a dream diary, Dorothy, Dorothy, *Dorothy*.' She was getting worked up now, getting that glaze over her eyes. 'Repeating my name over and over to make me think they're my friends.'

'I know,' Alice said.

'Oh, you *know*, do you?' Dorothy said, her eyes gleaming.

'I told you. I know everything about you.' Alice sagged against the wall, her knees trembling. She wanted to run now, but felt like she was stuck in one of those dreams where, if she tried to, she'd be going in slow motion. 'How . . . how did you get here?'

Dorothy laughed. 'Well, if you don't know that, you don't know everything about me, do you?' she mocked. 'I followed someone. Someone who took something of mine and I want it back.'

'Ramblebrook,' Alice muttered.

The smile left Dorothy's face. 'How could you possibly know *that*?' She leaned further in to Alice's face. 'You'd better start talking.'

So, in a few brief words, Alice told her.

Afterwards, Dorothy stared at her for a few seconds before erupting into giggles.

'Oh, that's good,' she said finally, clapping her hands together. 'Bravo! Even I couldn't have come up with *that* and my plots are pretty . . . *twisted*, shall we say?' She shook her head, still chuckling. 'You actually believe that, don't you?'

'No . . . I *know* it.'

Dorothy gave a low whistle. 'And people say *I'm* dotty.' She looked impressed, envious even. 'Girl, you are *mad*. You are one *craaaaaazy* cuckoo!' She clucked sympathetically. 'I don't have to worry about you talking to anyone about me. You sound far too bonkers for anyone to believe you.'

She pushed her face even closer to Alice's and, with that, something inside Alice snapped like a spell being broken. She lashed out with her notebook, catching Dorothy on the side of the face.

'Get away from me – stay away! Just . . . *just go back to where you came from*!' Her voice erupted from her, shrill and desperate. She hit out again, missing this time, for Dorothy ducked out of the way, and the notebook flew out of Alice's fingers, landing with a whack on the pavement.

She threw herself towards it at the same time as a cackling Dorothy did. Panic gripped her as Dorothy

reached it first, her eyes fixed on the open pages. With a gasp, Alice wrenched it away.

Without another word, she ran, swerving to avoid tripping over a black cat before fleeing into a side street. Her breath came in ragged sobs that burned her throat, but she didn't stop. She felt as though Dorothy Grimes's eyes were still on her, but when she looked back she saw no one except a scattering of strangers staring at her.

Alice ran, and ran, and didn't stop until she reached her house, slamming the front door behind her and locking it. She caught sight of herself in the hallway mirror and stared. Her hair was a tangled mess, stuck to her cheeks with snot and tears. Her face was a deathly grey. But it was her eyes that were the worst. They were wild, haunted-looking. *Mad*-looking. And no wonder, with what she had just seen.

'It's not possible, it's *not* . . .' she wailed to the empty house. Her voice jarred in the silence, like a puzzle piece that wouldn't fit.

She sank to the floor and huddled with her back to the door. Dorothy Grimes was mad; Alice knew that better than anyone. But then what did that say about *her*?

Could Dorothy have been right?

Was Alice even crazier than she was?