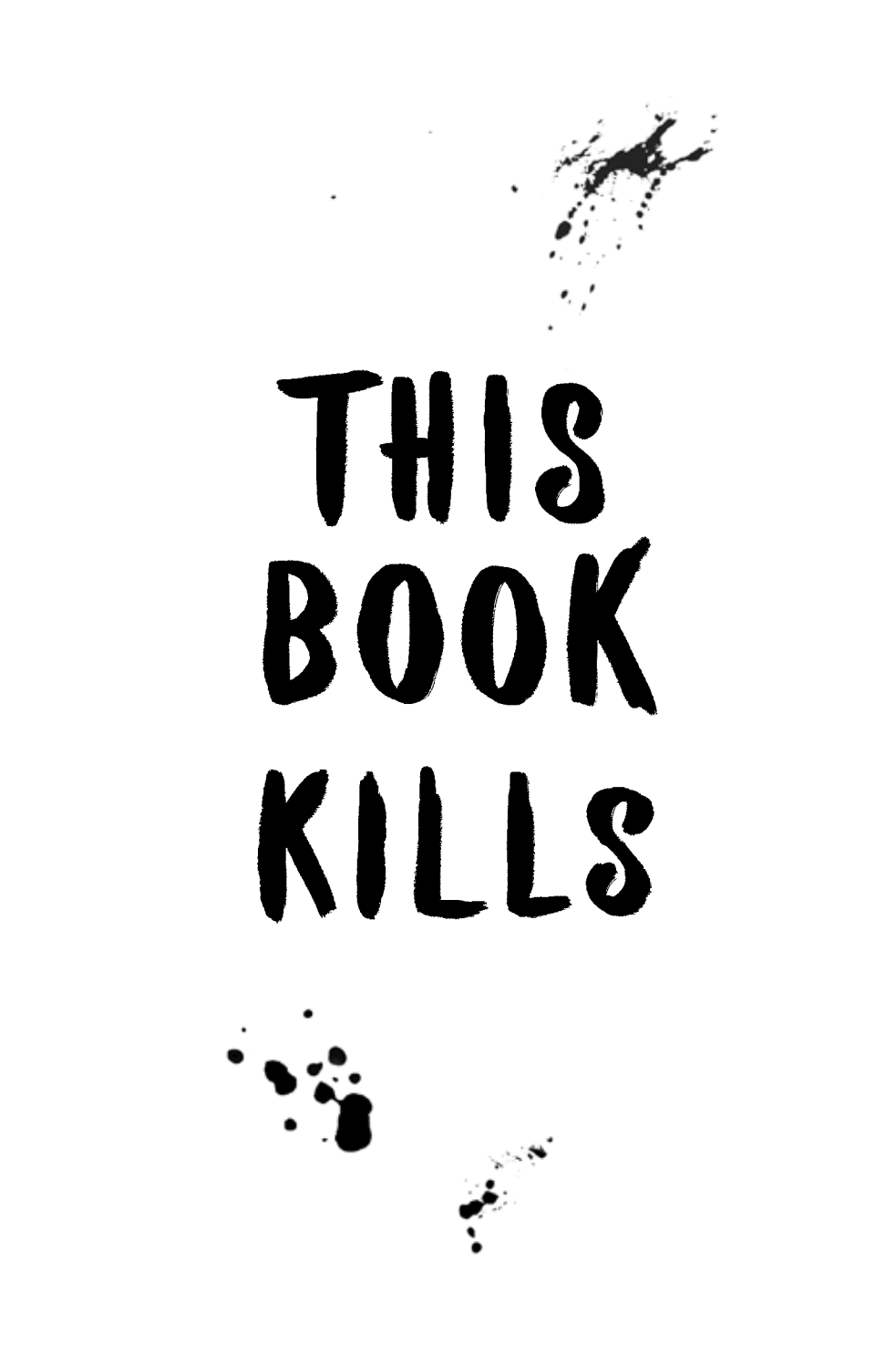

THIS
BOOK
KILLS

To Mum, for everything

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1

I'll make it clear from the start: I did not kill Hugh Henry Van Boren.

I didn't even help. Well, not intentionally.

Mum thinks I've got some latent trauma hanging around. She's not a psychologist or anything – she just watches loads of documentaries, and believes that makes her an expert on everything. Apparently, writing down what happened will help me *process*. I think that's a load of crap, but when I politely said that out loud, Mum got that steely look in her eye which said, *Better do what I say, Jess Choudhary, or I will beat you with this slipper*.

Mum's never actually beaten me. She just threatens The Slipper.

Anyway, I'm going to pour the truth into this notebook, even though I'd rather forget the entire thing.

Let's get cracking with my tale of misery and woe.

* * *

The week before Hugh was killed, I witnessed the first sign of trouble brewing.

I was sitting alone at the end of one of the long, polished wooden tables in the dining room. My best, and only, friend, Clementine-Tangerine Briggs, had decided to skip dinner so she could spend more time focusing on her new venture – a podcast detailing the sad plight of the Titicaca water frog. It was nicknamed the "scrotum frog" and was apparently very close to extinction (Clem was adamant that ugly creatures deserved to be saved too). And yes, Clementine-Tangerine is her real name – her parents said fruit was the biggest seller in their chain of organic superstores, and big sellers made them money, and Clem's parents love money.

I had a book propped up on the crystal jug of orange juice in front of me. I wasn't actually reading, but I'd brought it along so people would think I'd intentionally sat by myself, to be alone with my thoughts. Mysterious, too cool to have friends. I'm sure everyone was fooled.

There was a big, empty space around me at the table, as if I repelled people. Further down the bench, my roommate was gossiping loudly with her friends. Their shrill laughter grated on my ears, but I still wished I could slide down and join them.

I never would, though. I didn't fit in at Heybuckle School. No matter what I did, or how nice I was, everyone else would always see me as the poor kid, the charity case.

Every so often, I turned a page of my book, to make the whole act of *mysterious loner* look more believable.

When I was about halfway through my fish and chips, Millicent Cordelia Calthrope-Newton-Rose (also, unbelievably,

a real name) made her grand entrance, slamming open the wooden doors of the dining hall.

Millie sashayed down the empty space in the middle of the hall, her hips swaying like she was on a catwalk. Her blonde curls hung loose around her shoulders, and her deep blue eyes narrowed as she scanned the crowds. Her regulation grey skirt was hitched up around her waist to show off her long legs, and her tie dangled around her neck like a fashion accessory. She always wore her uniform like that – not even the teachers dared to tell her off.

"Where's Hugh?" she demanded.

Her voice carried across the room, but no one spoke up. I was at the other end, as far from her as I could possibly be. Still, I made myself smaller. Hugh rose from where he had been sitting, nestled comfortably amongst his squad of friends just metres away from Millie. Like her, he was incredibly good-looking, with curly blond hair and rosy cheeks. He rarely smiled, his face carved like a stone sculpture, and was over six foot, with broad shoulders from all the time he spent exercising. They could have ended up being a famous modelling couple, they were both so pretty. You know, if he hadn't cheated on her and then got killed.

"Here I am, babe," Hugh said, sticking his hands in his pockets. His tone was bored. "What's wrong?"

"What's – wrong?" Millie's voice was strangled. "You lying, two-faced piece of—"

"Oh. You found out." Hugh took his hands out of his pockets and smoothed down his red-and-gold Heybuckle tie. His expression was indifferent, almost resigned, like he'd been

expecting this day to come. "Maybe we shouldn't talk about this here—"

"You CHEATED on me," roared Millie. "You lying scum, you absolute piece of filth. FILTH." She got right up in his face, screaming the word again and again like a wind-up toy that had got stuck.

Hugh shrugged, looking unconcerned as the words slid off him. "I feel like we've become two different people," he said.

He was acting so reasonably, half the dining hall seemed to be nodding along with him, even though he was the cheater and Millie was in the right. Millie seemed to sense the mood shift in Hugh's favour, because she screamed, grabbed a pitcher of orange juice, and tossed the drink in his face. Some of the juice sploshed down onto his shirt.

"What the hell!" said Hugh, frantically rubbing his eyes. "Someone get me some water – she's got it in my eyes – they're burning—"

Hugh's friend, Eddy, reached for the jug of water in front of him, but Millie was quicker. She flung the water at Hugh.

"Do you all want to know who this *scum* cheated on me with?" She waved the empty jug above her head.

Hugh ineffectively dabbed at the yellow blotches on his formerly starch-white shirt with a wet tissue, his cheeks flushing red. "This is going to *stain*," he said. "Urgh, it's disgusting, I'm going to have to throw it away." He looked more upset about his shirt getting dirty than his girlfriend of three years ending their relationship.

The teachers at the head table were frozen, a few with their forks halfway to their mouths. The kitchen staff hung out of the

hatches, watching in astonishment. None of the adults would stop Millie before she spilled the truth. I knew what was coming, and I couldn't do anything about it.

Millie was looking around again, and I wished even more that I had friends to sit with. On my own I was vulnerable, like a weak gazelle about to be picked off by a cheetah. I tried to hunch over further, but Millie's gaze had fixed on me.

"You," she breathed, stomping towards me.

Everyone turned to look. My cheeks burned red. People started whispering, the dining hall filled with the noise of leaves swishing in a gentle breeze.

Crap.

I had never been more aware of my tongue. Was it always pressed to my teeth like that?

"Where is she?" Millie towered over me, her rose-scented perfume – definitely designer, most certainly eye-wateringly expensive – almost overwhelming. "Where's that boyfriend-stealing little trollop?"

My mind went blank, and my throat closed up. I couldn't speak, even if I wanted to.

Hugh looked up from his ruined shirt. "Leave Jade alone," he said with a sigh, as he dropped the mulch of wet tissue onto the table. "I'm the one you're angry at."

It would have been heroic if he wasn't still dripping in diluted orange juice. And, I wasn't about to correct him in front of everyone, but the boy had been in most of my classes since we were thirteen, and three years later still didn't know my name. It's not like *Jess* was that hard to remember.

Millie threw her head back and let out a guttural scream.

Her hair flew wildly about her face, while her eyes darted everywhere. "Scum!" she shrieked. "Scum!"

I wondered why she loved the word *scum* so much, and why she hadn't used a normal swear word yet, but it turned out she'd been building up to it, like a singer warming their vocals for the grand finale of a song. She started throwing every bad word in the book at Hugh, her voice getting plummier and plummier as he didn't react to any of the insults.

"You *humiliated* me—"

"You've humiliated yourself, babe," said Hugh in a gentle voice.

"Don't you dare call me *babe*. I will kill you," she screamed, her smeared mascara making her look like she had two black eyes. "I – will – kill – you."

And then she did.

No, I'm kidding, that's not what happened. Though this story would be a whole lot shorter and way less stressful for me if that's how it had all gone down.

Instead, the door to the dining room opened and my best friend Clem walked in.

Everyone looked at her, including Millie.

Who let out a yell so high I bet some dogs ten miles away pricked up their ears and barked.

Clem stopped, confused.

And Millie charged.