

The
Kult

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CHAPTER 1

People are predictable. That's what makes them easy to kill.

At least that's what the Oracle hoped. He had studied and plotted Jane Numan's routine over several weeks. Watched without her seeing, making note of every nuance, every step of her schedule until he had a complete diary of her movements, probably knowing more about her than she did about herself.

He crouched in the recessed doorway of the kebab shop opposite where she lived and gripped the handle of the knife in the sheath inside his jacket. His weapon of choice, he hoped the mere sight of the blade would instil terror in his prey, making it more personal, and putting him close enough that he could smell his quarry and see the fear in her eyes.

He looked at his watch; 6:29 a.m. and counting.

Any second now...

Like clockwork, the front door of what to anyone else would be a nondescript house opened and Jane walked out. The Oracle sank back into the shadows as he stared at the facial disfigurement that made it appear half her face was melting. Although only 23 years of age, she probably hadn't had the easiest of lives, which made her all the more desirable as a

victim as the more public sympathy his kill received, the more publicity he would generate, and as people were fond of saying, there's no such thing as bad publicity, especially not for what he had planned.

The Oracle watched her check that the door was locked, pushing once, twice, then a third time, as she always did when she left the house. His pulse increased, a volcano waiting to erupt within his chest. He rubbed the sweat coated fingers of his free hand down his trousers. Everything was going according to schedule.

He knew that if he had broken into her flat to stage the attack, there was the potential to leave too much evidence that might be used to track him down, and he couldn't have that. His motto was 'leave no trace,' which is why he planned to snatch her off the street.

Like many neighbourhoods clinging to the hub of British cities, the area Jane lived in was rundown, with discarded trash bags spewing their contents across the pavement—fodder for the rats and feral cats that prowled the streets once the sun went down. McDonald's packaging and the remains of half eaten kebabs discarded by late night drunks littered the gutters, and the tang of rotten produce and sour piss permeated the air. Dirt and grime coated the walls of the buildings, many of which were boarded up and covered with graffiti, the culprits marking their territory like dogs.

No one took much notice of him in areas like these, and the distinct lack of community spirit associated with the modern generation meant that people ignored most of what they saw, just trying to make it through each day as best they could.

The Oracle watched the girl walk across Hope Street, dressed for the heat of another day in a yellow t-shirt and a black knee length skirt. She clutched a brown shoulder bag to her side, and kept her head bowed, eyes focused on her white Nike trainers.

It would take Jane ten minutes to reach the main road. There she would wait for the number seven bus, which arrived at 6:45. Today, she was blissfully unaware her journey would terminate early. As usual, she would take the shortcut down an alley between two buildings, which saved her five minutes of extra walking. It was a simple routine to follow. Too simple, and his reconnaissance had revealed that the dingy alleyway between the buildings was the perfect spot to stage the abduction—it wasn't overlooked by any windows, there was only ambient light so much of it was in darkness, and the towering buildings would muffle her screams.

The Oracle followed Jane at a discreet distance of about forty feet, which he gauged to be far enough back so as not to appear threatening if she should discern his presence. He had parked his car near to the shortcut—not too close that she would notice the vehicle, because anything out of the ordinary might make her change something about her routine, but close enough that he wouldn't have to carry her too far.

She reached the corner of the road and turned left. When she disappeared out of sight, the Oracle hurried to close the gap. His body throbbed with anticipation, all of his senses highly aware of everything around him. It had been a while since he felt like this, and truth be told, he had missed the feeling.

Pursuing someone always gave him a buzz. The thrill of the chase. But it didn't come close to the euphoria he felt during the actual act of killing. That was something else. The biggest thrill ride in the world. Thinking about it made him smile; his balls tightened and goose bumps mottled his arms. Although the circumstances surrounding his choice of target were completely different now to those he had killed before, it didn't lessen the feeling—it actually enhanced it.

Jane walked with her arms folded across her ample chest, a subconscious form of protection and the barrier of the weak.

Not that it would help her today.

Her footsteps echoed along the road, the Oracle's almost silent as he followed in her wake, well versed in covert manoeuvres as he matched her step for step, becoming as one with his victim. The anticipation was almost too much to bear and he took deep breaths to control the beat of his heart. His fingers tingled and he licked his dry lips.

As soon as she turned into the alley between houses, he would strike.

With mere seconds to go, he withdrew a pair of disposable latex gloves and tugged them onto his hands, then pulled the chloroform soaked cloth from a bag in his pocket, the sodden material feeling cold and spongy through the gloves.

Jane turned the corner to take the short cut.

The Oracle followed, cloth held tightly in his fist, senses attuned to the task at hand. Jane was about eight feet ahead, her footfalls echoing between the walls. The aroma of Chinese food filled the air, a pile of discarded boxes piled up outside the back door to the restaurant. Stalactites of grease hung from an extractor fan on the wall.

It was time to make his move.

The Oracle readied himself to strike, one hand on the cloth, the other about to withdraw the knife when a young lad with a pockmarked face walked into the alley from the opposite end, a Staffordshire bull terrier tugging at the leash in his hand. The Oracle clenched his teeth, released the knife, rammed the cloth back into his pocket and watched as Jane exited the short cut.

The dog strained at the leash as it approached the Oracle, its small, muscular body set to pounce, teeth bared as it looked up at him. The owner struggled to pull it away, using both hands to yank at the lead.

"He's not usually like this," the lad said.

The Oracle guessed that the dog could sense the bloodlust

on his mind. He could easily take them both out, but they weren't his target. If he killed randomly, then he'd be just a savage, and they weren't part of his plan so he kept his gloved hands out of sight in his pockets so as not to arouse suspicion.

He wasn't happy about it, but he had considered this scenario, like he considered everything.

There would be another opportunity to grab Jane Numan.

People are predictable.

That's what makes them easy to kill.

CHAPTER 2

The kitchen of the Hungry Hippo burger bar felt hotter than a heat wave in hell. The air conditioning had broken sometime during the morning, and the repairman was still trying to fix it, banging away like a manic woodpecker.

Jane wiped her brow on the sleeve of her uniform. When she looked up and peered through the cloud of steam originating from the deep fat fryers, she saw three lines of customers queuing in the restaurant. She hadn't stopped for the last four hours—her feet ached, and their presence meant she wasn't likely to get a break anytime soon.

She noticed her reflection in the chrome extractor cover above the grill and hurriedly looked away. It didn't matter. The image never changed. Her left eye sat lower down her cheek than the one on the right, and her mouth curved in a permanent sneer. A port wine stain made the disfigurement appear worse; made it look as though that side of her face had been pressed against the griddle.

Most of the time she didn't think about her appearance, but people had a cruel habit of making her remember that she didn't look normal.

The repairman banged away on the air conditioning pipes, and combined with the heat, the noise gave her an almighty headache—he may as well have been hammering at her skull. Sweat rolled down her back, making her feel uncomfortable, and even though she'd used copious amounts of deodorant before coming to work, its effect had dissipated, and she was conscious of her natural body odour filtering through.

“Two more cheese burgers and fries,” Wendle shouted. He leaned through the hazy cloud above the fryers to make sure she heard him above the banging.

She threw two more patties on the griddle, and Wendle withdrew his head and turned away as the meat hissed and spat out steam. The patties were almost the same colour as her cheek, and she often wondered if that was why Wendle never ate at work, the revulsion often evident on his face.

“Three mega burgers,” Wendle shouted. “And easy with the mayo.”

Jane walked to the freezer and removed a thick wedge of burgers, a log of meat and derivatives. She basked in the chill that seeped out of the freezer and curled around her ankles. It was typical they were busy today. Two of the kitchen hands had called in sick—probably because most of the staff had been out the night before to celebrate Julian's birthday, an event to which she hadn't been invited, and they were now probably nursing hangovers—and Samantha and Justin were on their break. With a sigh, she closed the freezer door, checked the latch, and returned to the grill.

It was going to be a long day.

Jane finished her shift at the burger bar feeling much happier than when she started. Her headache had abated after the repairman fixed the air conditioning, so as she often did after work, she walked to the library where she liked to lose herself in books.

When she eventually left the library to catch her bus home, the setting sun cast an orange band across the horizon and wispy clouds scudded across the azure sky. A couple of teenagers on skateboards sped around the paved area outside the library, the wheels on their boards making a clacking sound as they went across the gaps between the paving stones. Across the road, a crowd of people stood outside a public house, basking in the last of the sunlight.

Jane crossed her arms, bowed her head and hurried past them.

Punctual as ever, the bus rolled down the road and stopped at the shelter, engine grumbling like a hungry tiger. Jane hopped aboard and flashed her return ticket before making her way to the top deck where she sat at the front so she could watch the streets. If she couldn't see out of the front, she got travel sick, especially on buses.

It was almost nine o'clock by the time she alighted.

A buzzing, flickering lamp painted the deserted street ahead, the ramshackle buildings having fallen into disrepair. Shops once thrived in the area, filled with the hopes and dreams of the proprietors. Now only boarded up shells remained: a restaurant flambéed by arsonists; a pub that served only rats and vermin; the walls of an off-licence that listed like a drunk.

During daylight the street looked depressing, and at night it assumed a sinister countenance. Dark doorways harboured children of the night, the prostitutes and drug sellers who profited from the squalor, those for whom the night was a cornucopia of chance. Now and again, a car crawled along the road, occasionally stopping to allow a girl to approach and tout for business. If a transaction was agreed, the girl was spirited away, if not, she skulked back to her spot to await the next customer. The area was the dark underbelly of the city, forgotten, abandoned, and left to fend for itself.

Jane hated living here, but her minimum wage job wouldn't allow her to move anywhere else. She shivered, wishing she'd worn a jacket.

She didn't like wandering the streets in the dark, but given a choice of sitting alone in her small flat or losing herself in a few books, she chose the latter and decided that the late walk home was worth it. If she was honest with herself, she didn't like her own company too much.

Up ahead, a group of teenagers huddled in a doorway. She counted seven of them, dressed in jeans, trainers and hooded tops. A few were smoking, the curling smoke issuing from their mouths like evil incarnations. A nearby streetlight cast enough radiance to allow her to see they all had a peculiar purple tint around their mouths the same colour as her disfigurement, due in their case to the bag of glue they passed around like a peace pipe.

Nervous, she folded her arms across her chest and quickly crossed to the other side of the road, trying to blend into the shadows like a chameleon.

"Hey, sexy mama," one of them said.

Jane increased her pace, heart pounding.

"Let's see what you got for me, baby," another called out.

Panicked, Jane's head spun as though she had been sniffing glue herself. Shadows danced on her periphery as she blinked rapidly.

"What's the rush?" a third drawled out, smacking his lips together.

She heard footsteps in pursuit. A hoot of laughter echoed along the street.

A hand grabbed her shoulder, and Jane flinched; her heart momentarily stopped. She turned to see a hooded teenage boy; watched his expression turn from a sneer to a look of shock as he stared at her face. His dark eyes went wide and he pulled the hood back from his head as if to get a better look.

“Fuck me,” he said, his breath sweet with the smell of adhesive that stuck to Jane’s throat. “It’s a monster.”

“Please,” Jane said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Just let me go.”

The rest of the gang gathered around, closing in like inquisitive hyenas, their clothes stained with strands of glue-like snot and eyes glassy.

Jane tried to swallow, willed her heart to cease its frenetic beat.

“What’s going on here?” a voice boomed.

Jane gasped as a stocky figure materialised from the shadows, his shoulders hunched against the night.

“Leave the girl alone,” the shadowed figure ordered, waving one arm. “Go on, bugger off!”

She clutched at the stranger’s intervention like the condemned to straws.

The teenage boy leaned towards her ear, so close she felt his hot breath roll across her skin. “Look out, look out, there’s a monster about,” he whispered, then pulled his hood back up and dispersed into the night with the rest of his pack.

A howl emanated from somewhere in the dark, a mocking sound followed by a peal of laughter.

“Are you all right?” the man asked stepping closer, his face masked by shadows.

“Yes, thank you.” She turned aside to try to hide her disfigurement.

“Don’t you know it’s dangerous to walk around here at night?”

“Yes, sorry.” She didn’t know why she felt the need to apologise.

“There are all sorts of dangerous people out here.”

Jane nodded and folded her arms over her chest, tilting her chin down. “Thanks. I’ll try to be more careful next time.” She frowned at the sudden scent of a strange, pungent aroma.

The man shook his head. “I’m sorry, but there won’t be a next time.”

Jane wasn’t sure she’d heard right. She frowned and lifted her head to look at the man when she noticed him withdraw white-gloved hands from his jacket pockets. Her frown turned into a look of fright, and her heart missed a beat, but before she could react, the man lunged towards her, fingers curled like claws, the cloying smell growing stronger as he approached.

Jane’s jaw dropped and she stumbled backwards, almost losing her footing. The man’s fingers latched onto her arm, but she twisted around before he secured his grip, his hand falling away from her. She shrieked as she turned and started to run.

What the bloody hell is going on?

Her footfalls echoed along the dark street, the shadowed man’s in unison as he gave chase.

“Help!” she screamed. “Please, someone help me!”

She wanted to shout again, but not knowing if anyone would hear, she conserved her strength—didn’t know when she might need it. She didn’t know the man, hadn’t even seen his face very clearly, so why the hell was he chasing her?

She remembered what the teenage boy had whispered in her ear: *Look out, look out, there’s a monster about.* When he’d said it, she thought he was referring to her own disfigurement, another cruel taunt. Now she wasn’t so sure. She surveyed the shadows as she ran, alert for movement, praying to see someone—anyone—even the teenage boy and his pack.

Although she ran as fast as she could, the man kept pace. His footfalls mirrored hers, an echo that drummed to the same beat.

Unused to physical exercise, her thighs burned from the inside, and her ankles felt ready to snap. Small ghosts of breath erupted from her mouth and her lungs laboured as she fought to suck in air, her throat felt like a parched tunnel that blazed with each inhalation.

Something rustled in the shadows of a shop doorway, startling her even more. She considered shouting again, but if it was the gang they were high on glue, and they might be more trouble than she was already in. She fled past the source of the noise.

The few streetlights that worked stood far apart, gaping oceans of darkness between them. Buildings lined the street, a demolition alley of decay and neglect. Illuminated by one of the streetlights, a large hoarding on a dilapidated hairdresser advertised new albums by the bands *Spineshank* and *Fear Factory*. The final name seemed appropriate for her predicament.

The ache in her legs grew more pronounced, spreading up her torso to produce a stitch in her side that made her wince. The skirt she wore now seemed wholly inappropriate. It tugged at her knees as she ran, a shackle of cotton and lace and her shoulder bag felt like a noose around her neck as it trailed behind her.

In an attempt to lose the man, she feigned heading straight on, then at the last minute, she dodged around a corner into an alley, the severe change of direction shooting sharp pains through her knee.

But it worked, and she heard the man's footsteps go out of sync as he ran past the alley, and it gained her a few vital seconds as he had to stop and turn to follow her.

She felt a glimmer of hope, only to have it extinguished when she saw she had entered a dead end street. A brick wall loomed in front of her, too high to climb, too encompassing to circumvent. It stretched between crumbling buildings, a net of brick.

She slowed her speed, her legs grateful for the slight change of pace, and looked around, eyes wide and chest heaving. A few wooden pallets lined the wall, and she noticed a couple of empty beer cans littering the dirty pavement, but

that was all. Alarmed to see no way out, her breath hitched in her throat.

Jane looked back and saw the man enter the alley. He withdrew a long knife, and the scream she had so far managed to suppress burst out.

CHAPTER 3

The Oracle looked down at Jane's naked body without blinking.

The light from the two lamps set on the stone floor beside her didn't illuminate much of the cavernous room, just highlighting a couple of the metal columns that extended into the darkness above, but they were sufficient to allow him to see.

With the help of the chloroform he had used to knock her out, Jane had remained unconscious throughout the car ride to his lair. While she had a nice body, he didn't take advantage when he undressed her, and one look at her marred face quelled any desire he might have had.

After a while, she started to stir; opened her eyes, her expression fearful as she tried to take stock of where she was. She struggled to move on the cold stone floor, hampered by the plastic ties that bound her feet and wrists. As though realising she was naked, she scrunched herself up a little to hide her body. Goose bumps erupted along her flesh.

"Where am I?" she asked, her voice choked by tears.

The Oracle didn't reply. He continued to stare at her, channelling his emotions into a single ball of anger.

“Please,” she whispered. “Please don’t hurt me.”

He didn’t respond, although it seemed something deep down inside heard her pleas and he blinked and licked his lips, pausing for the briefest of moments. Then he picked up the welding torch connected to the two compressed gas cylinders. One tank contained oxygen, the other acetylene. He turned the valve on the acetylene, struck a lighter, and ignited the gas which popped as it lit. Then he turned another valve to introduce oxygen, adjusting the mixture with the controls on the torch head until the flame burned vivid blue. Even holding it at arms length, the Oracle could feel the intense heat.

Jane screamed—a deep, throat searing sound that reverberated around the large room as he approached her, but he knew no one would hear her cries, not out here.

With one foot on her stomach to stop her moving, he touched the flame to her arm. The flesh bubbled and swelled, then blackened and crackled like plastic as the extreme heat burned through skin, muscle and then bone. Smoke rose from where her flesh burned, carrying with it the aroma of overcooked meat. Blood bubbled around the wound, but none flowed out, the flame’s heat congealing it on contact.

The Oracle ignored her screams, focusing his anger as he worked. Anger was the fuel that powered him. Pure, unadulterated anger.