



**THE  
HUMMINGBIRD  
KILLER**

**FINN LONGMAN**

SIMON & SCHUSTER



# 1

## **ŜANĜI (TO CHANGE)**

A shower will never be enough to wash away the blood, but Isabel Ryans has made a ritual of it anyway: after a death, the scalding rain, thundering on her skin.

There have been a lot of deaths – more than she cares to count, in the two years since she sought safety in the arms of Comma and surrendered her future to the guild in exchange for her life. The whole city of Espera owes its prosperity to Comma and Hummingbird, funded and protected by the weapons the two guilds develop and the agents they train, but Isabel owes a larger debt. Poisoned by her father, rotting from the inside out, she would have paid any price to survive, and she did. She still does.

And after every death, she seeks this imperfect cleansing,

losing herself beneath the stream of water as blood, sticky and invisible, stains her hands an ever-deeper red.

After the shower comes the silence, the suffocating quiet of the flat she shares with a large number of weapons and two years of solitude. This is neither ritual nor choice, but everyday life is a yawning void she doesn't know how to fill, the hours stretching interminably between assignments and sleep. Isabel does whatever jobs Comma give her: hits motivated by politics or petty spite, hard jobs and easy ones, a knife here and a bullet there. Her signature on a dotted line and the commission paid neatly into her bank account. And, always, she comes back to this: a lonely flat in a city ruled by killers, eyes she doesn't dare meet in the mirror, all sense of self lost behind the masks that used to be hard to don.

If this is safety, if this is what she fought for, then she was lied to, because it feels like a cage.

Isabel lives in a dull corner of Weaverthorpe, which offers few opportunities to escape the holding pattern she's trapped in. The Comma borough is inhabited primarily by adjacents, the guild's support staff: admin, medical, weapons manufacturing, and all the other cogs in the murderous machine. It takes a great many lives to sustain an organisation that deals death. If she wanted to, Isabel could take an adjacent role herself, something flexible enough not to interfere with her assignments, and then she'd have colleagues, and work that took her out of her flat for more than an hour at a time. But that would only tighten the stranglehold that Comma have on her life and her finances, and sometimes, late at night, she

can't help remembering the days when she would have killed to live any life but the one she's living now.

Still, she can't deny that she's good at what she does. Killing comes naturally, the weight of a knife familiar and comforting in the hand of a girl trained since childhood to be the guild's perfect weapon. The Moth – that's what they call her, the butterfly of night, and she's everything Comma wanted her to be. Never mind the scars that mark their failures and her own, her body a battleground and a memorial. None of it matters as long as she does what they ask, and she always does what they ask, because she owes them her life.

But she minds.

Her tattoos are a small act of reclamation, immortalising damage in ink and transforming her wounds into something less grotesque and more beautiful. The jagged memory of barbed wire across her back has been subsumed into wings, inked in blues and greens from her shoulder blades. A skull in the small of her back, all bright watercolour and harsh black edges, hides an old knife wound, and flowering vines trail their fronds around the surgery scars on her abdomen. Even her left hand is easier to look at with a rainbow of geometric lines across the damaged skin.

Only the butterfly burn in the centre of her chest has been left untouched.

On a day like today, when she's still damp from the shower and antsy from the assignment that preceded it, Isabel's empty flat crushes her mood like a vice. The silence allows her mind to wander, and being left alone with her thoughts is

the last thing she wants. Her mental stability is dependent on avoidance and denial, a precarious network of self-delusions that can't bear the weight of examination, and if she spends a moment too long thinking about any of it, it'll collapse.

So she pulls on a hoodie and drags a comb through her wet hair, dyed a variety of bright and unnatural shades. The shaved side has largely grown out now, helped along by her impulsive decision to hack the rest off to a jagged bob, but it still takes several minutes to braid the hair out of her face, subduing the wispy, uncooperative strands with half a dozen clips. She doesn't look in the mirror to see how good a job she's done, just tosses the comb onto the coffee table and stomps into the hall to retrieve her boots.

Then she catches a tram out to Luton, weaving through the familiar streets of the civilian borough she used to live in until she reaches a small shop squeezed between two larger, flashier stores. Sark Furniture. Isabel isn't looking to buy cabinets or shelves: she's here for the owner who gave his name to the business.

Mortimer Sark.

'Oh, no,' he says, when she walks in.

'Hello to you too,' says Isabel. 'You could at least pretend to be glad to see me.'

Her former Woodwork teacher smiles, leaning on the polished wooden counter. As always, his face is scruffy with stubble, his dark hair verging on overgrown. He's pushed the sleeves of his plaid shirt up to his elbows, exposing muscled forearms and a battered watch, and there's a sprinkling

of sawdust in his hair where he must have run his hands through it. ‘Obviously, I’m delighted,’ he says. ‘Now, what’s the crisis?’

‘Nothing,’ she says, puzzled.

‘Then it must be option two. You’re lonely and wondering how to deal with whatever passes for emotions in that stone heart of yours.’

Isabel’s confusion turns to exasperation. ‘Very funny.’

‘Well?’ says Mortimer, lifting the counter so that she can duck through and join him in the back room. This, like the main shop, is overcrowded. ‘What brings you here?’

‘Maybe I came to see how business is doing.’ She eyes the jam-packed furniture. ‘Booming, apparently. Have you given up selling and started a collection?’

He doesn’t rise to the bait. ‘It’s quiet, but it’s ticking over. Bookshelves don’t seem to be in high demand in Espera.’

‘Time to pivot to making coffins, clearly.’

The joke’s a little too true to be funny, and Mortimer doesn’t laugh. ‘Come on, Isabel,’ he says, filling the kettle in the corner. ‘I know there’s a reason you’re here.’

She sighs, passing him two mugs from the draining rack. ‘I need a hobby,’ she says. ‘Something to fill the time, some kind of . . . outlet. I’m bored, and restless, and . . .’

‘Lonely?’ he prompts, with half a smile.

‘Maybe,’ she admits reluctantly.

Mortimer adds soy milk to the tea, and they both avoid acknowledging that he only switched because Isabel is lactose intolerant and it makes things easier whenever she calls by,

just as they never talk about the carefully labelled gluten free biscuit tin he acquired right after Isabel found out her wheat allergy was permanent. If they talk about it, Isabel will have to face up to how much she owes Mortimer, and he'll have to reconcile his affection for a fucked-up contract killer with his abolitionist beliefs. So they don't.

'You need a day job,' he says at last, pushing a mug towards her. 'And not an adjacent role. Something normal.'

It's not that she hasn't considered it, but there's a flaw in his plan. 'How am I meant to find a civilian job in Weaverthorpe?'

Mortimer shrugs. 'Who says you have to stay in Weaverthorpe? You must be able to afford to live in Central Espera by now.'

He's right: Isabel's hits earn her enough to cover rent in the city centre, especially with her frugal lifestyle. But a girl of her age living alone in Central Espera would raise eyebrows, and then people might start wondering how, exactly, she makes her money . . .

'It would look suspicious,' she points out.

'Not if you had a flatmate.'

Isabel tries to imagine living with another person, and can't. The thought of somebody in her space fills her with panic, and the idea of hiding her identity and her assignments from them is exhausting.

But then she thinks again of her quiet flat, and how the empty hours echo as long days stretch out, interminable and bloodstained. Briefly, she contemplates spending the next five, ten, thirty years like that, silent and alone, and dread

seeps through her. Risky or not, anything has to be better than that.

‘Okay,’ she says at last, and sees momentary surprise on Mortimer’s face. ‘How do I find one?’

‘Finally,’ says Mortimer. ‘A question I’m actually qualified to answer.’

Over the next half-hour, he helps her create a profile on a flatmate-hunting website. The *hobbies* section proves challenging; Mortimer vetoes ‘throwing knives at inanimate objects’, but eventually lets Isabel include ‘working out’, since she does spend too many hours down at the training gym. Next is *personality*, which requires a number of white lies to cover up the fact that she’s an emotionally stunted disaster with a pile of unresolved trauma and extremely murderous coping mechanisms. Eventually, however, they have something they’re both happy with.

‘They’ll be queuing up to live with you,’ says Mortimer, unconvincingly.

‘Uh-huh,’ says Isabel. With some trepidation, she adds her real name to the profile: *Isabel Ryans*. She hesitates before using it, but it’s not like anybody is looking for her any more, is it? Her parents are dead, and Comma already know where she is: right under their thumb. If there are any rules against moving in with a civilian flatmate, she’s never heard them.

Then she clicks *post*, and she and Mortimer treat themselves to another biscuit as a reward for a job well done. By the time Isabel leaves, an hour later, she’s shaken off



some of the melancholy of the morning, and she feels almost cheerful as she boards the tram back towards Weaverthorpe.

Halfway home, her phone buzzes with a message, startling her.

Saw your advert looking for a flatmate. Mine just left abruptly and I need to find someone ASAP to cover the rent. If you're interested, here's my number.

Below that, there's a short personal profile:

Laura Clarke. She/her. 18. Waitress.

Isabel reads it three times, looking for clues in the sparse message that might indicate a trap, but nothing stands out to her. It goes against her deeply ingrained instincts – not to mention her training – to trust that Laura Clarke is who she says she is, but calling the number can't hurt, can it?

She wavers a moment longer, then makes the call.

'Hello?' The voice is cautious, maybe suspicious.

'Is that Laura speaking?' Isabel keeps her voice down, trying not to disturb her fellow passengers.

'Depends who's asking.'

'Isabel. I got your message.'

'Wow, that was quick.' Laura sounds relieved. 'Sorry, there's this total jerk who— never mind. Does this mean you're interested?'

‘I’d . . . like to know more,’ says Isabel uncertainly. ‘You said you’d lost your flatmate?’

‘Yeah, she promised me she’d stick around, right up until she got this girlfriend, and then she packed up and moved in with her, no warning, leaving me on the hook for the rent. My pay’s not terrible – I work at The Griffin’s Claw; do you know it? Fancy restaurant in Central Espera? But I can’t pay central rent on my own.’ Laura’s words fall out at high speed, piling on top of each other and leaving Isabel to sort them into the right order. It’s a little overwhelming, after two years of silence broken only by Mortimer’s fond sarcasm and Daragh’s gentle admonishments. Daragh has gone from being the doctor who saved Isabel’s life to another odd kind of friend, much like Mortimer: friendships formed in blood and the ash of the worst year of her life. But she’d forgotten what it’s like to talk to another teenager. ‘Anyway, the flat’s a two-bed,’ Laura continues. ‘Pretty good kitchen. No bath, which sucks, but the water pressure’s good in the shower. Want to come take a look?’

Isabel hesitates. This is progressing much faster than she’d anticipated – she needs to know way more about both the flat and Laura before she commits to anything. For a moment, she has the absurd desire to hang up and call Mortimer for advice.

Laura, apparently sensing her uncertainty, says, ‘You can totally back out once you’ve seen it. Or once you’ve met me, if it turns out you think I’m weird. I mean, hopefully you won’t, but I’m not asking you to commit to anything straight off.’

She definitely sounds like the eighteen-year-old she claims

to be: unfiltered and enthusiastic. That doesn't guarantee she's not guild, but she's younger than Isabel, and most people would barely have started training by then. Most people get a chance to grow up first.

She's overthinking it. Laura *just said* it's not a commitment. 'Okay,' Isabel replies.

'Great,' says Laura, sounding relieved. 'This afternoon work for you? Sorry, I know it's short notice, but my shifts—'

'That's fine. I'm not busy.' An understatement. 'Send me the address.'

'Will do. It's kind of hard to find, though, so maybe I should meet you. Do you know the tram stop near Fountain Square?'

'Yes.' Isabel took down a businessman a few months ago who tried to escape by jumping in the eponymous fountain. It didn't end well for him. 'Three o'clock?'

'Wow, you're efficient. All the monosyllables.' Laura laughs.

'Sorry,' says Isabel uncertainly.

'It's fine. I'm sure I can get more words out of you in person.' She laughs again. 'Three o'clock works for me, so I guess I'll see you then. Gives me time to clean the place up a bit.'

Isabel is torn between wanting to convey that Laura doesn't need to clean for her and being distinctly nervous about the concept of moving in with somebody *messy*, with all the unpredictability that mess adds to an environment. 'Okay,' she says at last.

Laura doesn't seem to notice her hesitation. 'Great! Later.' And before Isabel can muster a goodbye, Laura hangs up on

her, leaving her with her mouth half open and a vague feeling of having missed a step while walking upstairs.

Isabel shakes off the awkwardness of the call and disembarks from the tram, glancing at the time. Two hours left before she's due to meet Laura. Plenty of time to run some background checks – and ruminate on the fact that she has no idea how to make a good impression on a total stranger.

She sends Mortimer a quick text, asking for tips, and his reply comes through just as she unlocks the three locks of her current front door.

You'll be fine. Just try not to be yourself.