

TRAUMA
LAND

ALSO BY JOSH SILVER

HappyHead

Dead Happy

TRAUMA LAND

JOSH SILVER



This book contains material that some readers may find distressing, including discussions of anxiety, mental illness, medical procedures, knife violence, homophobia, bullying, kidnapping, torture, self-harm, cannibalism and pet death.

A Rock the Boat Book

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Dedicated to anyone who is not afraid of this world.

I hope this does something to change that.

MY OVERWHELMING EMPTINESS

‘Could you repeat that please, Elias? I’m not sure I heard you correctly.’

She heard me correctly. ‘I said, I think I’m a psychopath.’

I make the final word louder just so she’s perfectly clear.

‘OK, Elias. That’s an interesting choice of words.’ Melinda stares at me over the bridge of her glasses. ‘Why would you think that?’

‘I overheard someone at work say I look like the kind of person that would shoot up a school.’ Her face doesn’t move. She’s good at this. Very professional. ‘It got me thinking. What if I actually am that kind of person?’

I don’t want to scare her. I like my therapist. I do. But she asked for the truth and I made a promise I’d give it to her.

‘So, you think you’re a psychopath because someone else said so?’ She raises her eyebrows like I’m being childish. She always does that when she thinks I’m being ... well, childish.

‘Yes. Exactly.’

It’s OK, by the way. We understand one another. I hate her and she hates me, but we love each other really.

‘But you have empathy and compassion.’

If I do, I'm currently on the last dregs of it stuck here on this blue swivel chair. 'Sociopath, then. Isn't that the difference? The empathy part?'

'I'm pretty sure you're neither.'

That's promising. My therapist is *pretty* sure I'm neither a psychopath nor a sociopath. No one really knows the difference between a psychopath and a sociopath. Well, I do, but that's because I google these things. Anyway, I digress.

'You don't look convinced, Elias.'

'The guy at work seemed pretty convinced.'

She frowns her thinking frown. 'Is he the one who pushed your head in the toilet while you were cleaning it?'

'No. Different one.' Different one, Melinda. Stay sharp.

'OK, let's see. If you're worried –' I'm not worried – 'let's go through the psychopath checklist.' Oh, fun. 'Do you pretend to feel emotions?'

'No. I just don't have them.'

She raises her eyebrows again. 'Elias.'

'Yes, Melinda.'

'You do have them.'

Never. 'Sporadically.'

'I think you're referring to the overwhelming emptiness we've been working through.'

I didn't name it that, by the way. She did and now it's stuck. Me and my Overwhelming Emptiness meet with her every Thursday at 7 p.m. for fifty minutes, annoy the living shit out of her, then leave. 'Maybe.'

'We've spoken about this.' Melinda is right. We have spoken about this. We've spent forty-three hours speaking about it, to be precise. Every week for ten whole months.

But the Overwhelming Emptiness has gone nowhere and all I've managed to gain is a more profound knowledge of its existence. 'You are making progress. And it's completely normal for you to feel this way after what happened to you.'

'If you say so.'

'Are you cold and ruthless?'

Hmm. Is feeling *nothing* cold? I'll go with yes. I know that ruthless is going to happen at some point soon, too. You'll see.

'I live at home with my mum and dad. I love cats.' I'm a cat person. Don't fuck with cats. 'That doesn't really scream *I'm gonna slit your throat*, does it?'

'No.'

'Could all be a guise though, Melinda.'

'I highly doubt it. And not all psychopaths slit people's throats.'

'That's true.' Told you she was good.

'Are you intent on becoming successful at the expense of others?'

'I work in a café, cleaning the bogs because I failed all three of my A levels.' I put my thumb up. 'So, a firm no to that one.'

OK, fine. I passed one of them. But it was art, which isn't a *proper subject*.

'Next question, Elias. Are you dishonest?' I mean... 'I'll answer that. You're not. You are very honest. Bravely so.' I like that she thinks that. 'Do you try and copy emotions? Imitate them?'

'I...'

That's a weird one. Because since it happened – the reason I'm here – I can't remember how to feel emotions. Instinctively, anyway. I try to summon them, I do. I worry

the summoning part is the psychopathic part. Well, no, I don't *worry* because I can't. But I think about it often. Ponder, if you will. *Muse on it*. Sorry. Rambling. Shh, brain.

I should really tell her all this. That would be the honest thing to do. 'No, I don't.'

'And you're not outwardly charming.'

'Wow. OK.'

'You're *genuinely* charming.'

She then looks sad, like she really cares about me. I hate it when she does that. 'So no, Elias, you're not a psychopath or a sociopath.'

'I dream about murdering people.'

She pauses. 'Elias.'

'What?'

'I can't tell if you're joking again.'

Again? Oh, she thinks I was *joking* about the psychopath thing. It's probably better that way.

I am joking now, though. I just want to shit her up a bit. Shake up the session in the closing minutes. I can see by the clock on the wall there are only five minutes left, but the last five are always the worst so I'm hoping she'll just end it. Not all of time and humanity, just the session. (Although that would be interesting.) You get what I mean.

'We've spoken a lot about your dreams.'

Damn it. 'We have.'

'And there's no murder in them.'

'No. I was making a bad joke.'

'Right. Good one.' She puts *her* thumb up this time. 'OK, so can we be serious now?' Melinda closes her notebook, clicks her pen and places it neatly into the pocket of her blazer.

Oh, she's ready. She's ready to get serious.

'Potentially.'

'There's six minutes left.' Five. *Five* left. 'And I want to know how your symptoms have been this week.'

I exhale. 'It's been getting better. The nightmares aren't as bad. The pain is less frequent. The headaches aren't making me feel as sick as they used to. I've woken up feeling more positive and I'm screaming less.' I hope that didn't sound too robotic.

'The screaming at night, you mean?'

Yes, Melinda. 'Less dreaming, less screaming.'

'Well, that's great. Really great, Elias. And the emptiness?'

'It's less.'

'Great. Good. And what about the feeling you've described as *missing something*. You've often spoken about it as a sort of inexplicable *longing*?'

'Yeah.' That's the worst one. 'It's getting better now.'

'It will go fully with time.'

I nod to make her think I believe her.

'And your memory? Is it becoming clearer? Solidifying?'

I blink. 'Yes.'

'That's wonderful. Remember, everyone is safe and everyone is well.'

'They are.'

'Are you keeping up with your therapy exercises?'

'I am. They're helping.'

She wrinkles her nose like she's very pleased and very proud. 'Good. How's Lucas?'

My older brother. Home from uni for the Christmas break. 'He's good. Going to hang out with him tonight.'

‘To tell him how awful this has been?’

‘You read my mind.’

‘God, I would hate to do that.’ She grins. ‘Right, well. See you tomorrow, Elias.’ I scrunch up my face. *Tomorrow?* ‘It’s going to be a year since the date of the Incident.’

The Incident. She loves referring to it as that. Wait, *what?*

‘Yeah. I know.’ But I didn’t know. I’d actually forgotten. Or blocked it out, probably.

‘Good. So, as I told you, it’s a group session.’ Oh, holy hell. ‘With Mum and Dad.’

It makes me feel weird when she calls them that, like they’re her mum and dad too. ‘Can you call them something else?’

‘Right. Sorry. With Mr and Mrs Pew.’

‘OK, but no. That’s too formal. Like we’re going to have a business lunch about my trauma.’

She doesn’t smile this time. Probably because she knows that’s exactly what we’re going to be doing. ‘I’ll just call them—’

‘My parents. Yep. My parents will be there. Got it.’

‘It’s a home visit. So, if you’ll remind them, I’ll be at your house at ten a.m.?’

‘Does it have to be?’

‘At ten?’

‘A home visit.’ I glance at the clock. We’re now running over.

‘They’re taking the time off work and I know how busy they are.’

‘But I just feel like... I dunno. I can’t imagine you stood in my kitchen in your own clothes and stuff, talking to my mother about *The Great British Bake Off*—’

‘I always wear my own clothes, Elias.’

‘You’ll suddenly become normal and not the powerful mythic being that you are.’

‘I think there’s a compliment in there somewhere.’ She smiles. I’m good at making her do that. ‘It’ll be really useful. A pivotal moment in your recovery. We’ll show them the progress you’ve made.’

Not sure. Not sure, Melinda. ‘Cannot wait.’

‘I’ll drop you a text first thing, so you don’t forget.’

Yeah. My therapist texts me. She’s new wave and edgy like that. She’s *available to me at any point, night or day, while retaining appropriate boundaries*. And my parents pay shitloads of money for her. I wish I could say that I haven’t had to call her in the middle of the night. But I have. Many times.

I stand. ‘See ya, shrink.’ And then I leave.

So, another healthy, well-adjusted session with my therapist complete. Time to go home, sit through my family dinner, then escape to my room and rewatch *The Exorcist*. I’ve seen it over one hundred and forty times. That’s one hundred and forty times in the past ten months. This is one of the many things I’ll never tell Melinda. But it does help. I’ll explain later.

Before that, there’s something I must do. And Melinda *definitely* can’t know about this. Because I’m going to do something ruthless. Something morally and ethically wrong. Something *bad*.