



# KILL ME NOW

**HELEN PRICE**

Chicken  
House

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*For Imogen.*

*Who read and loved it first.*

# CHAPTER 1

**S**o much for praying Sixth Form would be different. I cradle my nose. Blood trickles through my fingers. White-hot pain burns behind my eyes.

‘Man, that felt good.’ Riley shakes his hand out and sneers down at me slumped at his feet. ‘How was it for you, Reaper?’

The crowd chuckles.

Five years of that nickname and still, they laugh.

He spins a full three-sixty, flashing the number on the back of his trackie top. That’s their cue, and they chant, ‘Riley North, blessed by Heaven. Our lucky charm, number seven.’

Yeah. It’s a thing.

The gold number looks regal against our purple sports kit, and he wears it like the king he thinks he is.

‘Go to Hell!’ I sniff back tears and my throat fills with blood. ‘I hope you burn.’

The corridor gasps. Phones still out and filming. Wishing

others harm constitutes a grave violation of the command to love thy neighbour. Obvs punching my lights out is OK.

‘Hey!’ Betty Okoye, prefect and hall monitor, pushes her way to the front. ‘What’s going— Oh, my goodness, Guy!’ She drops to the floor beside me. ‘Are you OK?’

‘I’m fine.’ *I’m so not, but . . .*

She gets to her feet and glares at Riley. ‘What’s this about?’

‘Secrets,’ I answer for him.

‘Shut it, Mortimer!’ he snarls. But it is. His way of ensuring I keep my mouth shut. But I’ve done that for five long years now and I’m sick of this shit. Keeping secrets comes at a price.

‘Well,’ Betty says, hands on hips, ‘it’s not a sin to keep a secret but it is to hide a sin, so—’

‘Ugh! Don’t start.’ Mungo Burns, aka Bunsen, groans out loud. ‘It’s our first day back.’

Sniggers ripple through the crowd.

Betty reaches for the tiny cross at her neck. ‘No. Wrath is a mortal sin and you should—’

‘Hey, B. Chill!’ Chelsey Moore drapes an arm around her friend’s shoulders. ‘It’s all good!’

‘No, it’s not!’ Betty shrugs her off. ‘God sees everything. We must atone for our sins or . . .’ Her bottom lip quivers.

‘Or what?’ Riley smirks.

Betty’s eyes flash with something that looks like fear. ‘Or the wages of sin is death.’

‘Ugh!’ Bunsen groans again, only louder. ‘It’s way too early

for this.'

'You don't understand,' Betty wails. 'I'm trying to help you.' She swings around to the crowd. 'All of you.' And, with a loud and sudden sob, runs off towards the principal's office.

Riley snorts. 'What's got into her?'

'Nun fever most like,' Chelsey says. 'She spent the entire summer with the Sisters of Grace.'

'Why?'

'Dunno, babe.' Chelsey cosies into him, holding her phone up high, so her followers can share the moment. PDAs are banned at school, but hey, what the school doesn't see . . . 'But you saw her, right? Girl's lost a ton of weight. Guess nuns don't—'

'Principal's coming!' someone hisses from the back.

Phones disappear, everyone moves, and the corridor clears in seconds. Leaving Riley alone with me. I prod my face gingerly and glare up at him. He's seriously hulked out over the summer break. He must have hit the gym every day.

With everyone now gone, I get my first real glimpse of our new Sixth Form block. Modern. Bright. Way different from the rest of school. No creepy statues or religious artefacts here. Well, except for the obligatory cross on the wall. No escaping that.

Principal Mayfield swishes around the corner, accompanied by Father Michael. 'Mr North, how lovely to— Oh!' Her greying eyebrows twitch at the sight of me on the floor.

‘Whatever’s happened here?’

Riley adopts his all-star, winning smile. ‘He fell, Miss. Cracked his face open on the lockers. I was just on my way to get the nurse.’

His eyes dare me to say different. And I would, except we both know who they’ll believe.

Father Michael crouches down to take a look at me. ‘Hmm. Your nose may be broken. I suggest you go to the medical centre, and we call your parents.’ His face softens. ‘Would you like a friend to wait with you?’

*A friend?* I almost laugh. I wish.

I shake my head, and Riley suppresses his smirk. But then his attention shifts to the cute girl with a blue nose stud and razor-sharp bob who’s just stepped out from behind the principal.

‘Ah, yes.’ Mayfield smiles. ‘Riley, I’d like you to meet Samira Jewell.’

‘I prefer Sam, if that’s OK?’

‘Indeed. Well, whilst Father Michael sees to, umm—’

*Wow! Seriously?* Mayfield doesn’t know my name? I’ve been here five flipping years.

‘Guy. Guy Mortimer,’ Father Michael offers.

‘Ah!’

Yep. Figures that’s all *I* get. But then she looks at Riley and those clouds on her weathered face waft away, replaced with sunlight and frickin’ rainbows. ‘Samira, I’d like you to meet Our Lady’s most promising star, Riley North.’

I suck in a breath. I might just vomit.

‘Riley is head of your year. He’ll be conducting your orientation today.’

‘Hi!’ Golden Balls offers Sam his hand. ‘Welcome to our school.’

But Sam doesn’t shake it. Instead, she stares down at it as if it’s offending her. Perhaps she has a germ phobia, or maybe, just maybe, she too can see the tiny traces of blood on it. She stares at it for a moment longer than awkward. Her eyes drop to me before returning to him and, though I can’t quite believe it, she leaves him hanging.

Riley snaps his hand back like he’s been scalded. And he has.

*Ha!*

Riley North got burned.

Gran comes to collect me. She’s not meant to drive any more, but Dad’s managing a funeral and Mum was still asleep. On the school nurse’s insistence, we go to A&E, but there’s been some big pile-up on the motorway and from the constant stream of ambulances outside, there are far more people needing urgent treatment than me. When my turn does finally come, the doctor prods my nose, which hurts like hell, and confirms it isn’t broken. He holds up a mirror to prove it.

The bright ward lights illuminate the plum-coloured bruise under both eyes, and my nose looks even more bulbous than it

feels. Riley messed me up bad. I can only imagine what his reaction will be tomorrow.

More piss-takes. More pain.

Gran turns into our narrow country lane, and the house comes into view. Just seeing our converted farmhouse with its perfect symmetry settles me. I know living in a funeral parlour might freak a lot of people out, but to me it's home and I wish I could stay here, amongst the fields and the woods, and never have to go to school again.

All the cars are out, and as I walk in the door, the house is strangely silent. I guess Mum must still be in bed. The reception rooms have been laid out for a wake, so I head upstairs to my bedroom. At the top, I catch sight of myself in the mirror and cringe. My face is a mess, but as far as the school's concerned, I fell. I told Gran the same thing, and she didn't push. Come to think of it, no one did. To the powers that be, it would be inconceivable that He-Who-Can-Do-No-Wrong could ever do such a thing. There were at least thirty witnesses filming in that corridor. How many will come forward and show that video?

Exactly.

Grabbing my sketchpad, I slump down at my desk and start drawing, purging my anger on to the page. An unspoken threat. A silent promise. The hate that hides inside. Over and over, faster and harder, my pencil flies across the page until

finally, I'm free of it . . . and done. I stare at the image for a long moment and, *God!* So dark and vicious and wrong. Swallowing my guilt, I rip it out and toss it in the bin, instinctively reaching for the matches. But no. A good Christian would confess, pay his penance and—

Who am I kidding?

I strike a match, drop it in, sit back and watch it burn.

I don't remember falling asleep. My phone reads 2.58 a.m. and the house is still. Rolling on to my side, I sit up and wince. The mother of all headaches pounds in my brain. Someone's left some painkillers beside my bed, so I grab a few and toss them back.

And then I hear them.

Voices.

Outside.

I pull back the curtains to see multiple red and blue lights flashing at the end of our drive. My insides concertina. We're the only house on the bridleway, and my first thought is for Mum. Rubbing away the sleep, I spot not just an ambulance out there, but several police cars and a fire engine.

I bolt across the hall. 'Mum, Dad! Wake up!'

Mum sits up and switches her lamp on. From the state of her hair, it's clear she hasn't showered in days.

*It's not her fault. It's not her fault.*

'Mum! There are police outside.' My voice sounds nasal,

muffled, like I have a cold. I reach for a tissue, blow my nose gently, and drop it in the medical waste bin at her side.

She eases herself out of bed with a heavy sigh. 'I know.'

The other side of the bed is flat, the covers barely ruffled. My stomach drops. 'Where's Dad?'

'He's fine.' She takes a sip of water. 'Nothing to worry about. They found a body in the woods.'

Only in my family would those two sentences work together.

'Where?'

'I'm not sure exactly, but they're treating the death as suspicious. The hospital morgue's full, due to that traffic accident, and the coroner's asked if we can store the body here overnight.' She gestures to the window. 'Dad's over there now.'

'A suspicious death? In Langbury?' That makes no sense. Nothing bad ever happens here. The air's so thick with goodness, it's often hard to breathe.

Mum nods. 'Someone reported seeing a fire and the next we knew, that lot showed up.' She shivers and reaches for her dressing gown. Shrugging herself into it, she has to double-knot the belt and I realize how thin she's become. 'Come here and let me have a proper look at you.' She reaches up, her hands cupping the thing formerly known as my face. 'My poor darling. Whatever happened?'

'It's nothing. I fell.'

I pull free to watch the activity at the end of our drive but can't see much. 'I'm gonna head down to the kitchen, get

myself a drink,' I lie. 'You go back to sleep.'

She doesn't object and gets back into bed. Pulling the covers up, I kiss her forehead and switch off the light. 'Night, Mum. Love you.'

'You too,' she murmurs.

Creeping downstairs, I slip my trainers on and take the track behind our house that leads to the woods. My eyes adjust quickly to the moonlit shade and, careful to avoid the police barriers, I follow my favourite running route to the local picnic spot known as the Knotted Tree. It's not long before I spot the crime scene investigators, their white forensic suits stark against the trees in the dark. Hanging back, I crouch down low in the undergrowth.

A windowless tent sits in the clearing, and they've cordoned the area off with police tape. Thanks to the floodlights, I can see everything. A crime scene photographer is at its centre, her lens focused on the ground. But from nowhere, an owl, spooked by the flashes, swoops down so close I cry out and fall into the brambles.

Sharp thorns cut into my hands and knees, but I can't move in case she—

'HEY!' The photographer's head snaps up. 'There's someone over there!'

*Shit!*

Within seconds, two officers hurdle the bushes and drag me out into the clearing. A tall man with glasses marches over.

‘Who the hell are you, and what were you doing there?’

‘I-I wasn’t spying.’

He raises his eyebrows.

‘OK, so I was looking but—’

‘Guy?’ From behind him, Dad hurries over, wearing the same white coverall as everyone else. ‘You can’t be here.’

The man glares at him. ‘You know this boy?’

‘Yes, I apologize, Inspector.’ Dad’s tone matches the disappointment on his face. ‘This is my son.’

‘I’m sorry. I woke up, saw the lights, and . . .’ My mouth goes claggy.

*What, Guy? Wanted to see the body? Like the morbid, sick-in-the-head freak everyone thinks you are.*

Behind them, a woman emerges from the tent carrying a transparent evidence bag, and I gasp. The inspector calls her over and gestures to it. ‘Do you recognize this? Know who it belongs to?’

I stare at the item within, my gut resembling the Knotted Tree, and nod.

The inspector huffs. ‘And?’

I can feel his eyes on me. But I can’t pull mine from the bag’s contents.

A school tracksuit top, with its number emblazoned in gold.

*Our lucky charm.*

No more.