

# **SERIAL CHILLERS**

**THE WITCH IN THE WOODS**

# For Teddy: thank you for always helping me with ideas. I love you, too. x



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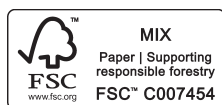
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# SERIAL CHILLERS

THE WITCH IN THE WOODS



JENNIFER KILLICK



LONESOME RIDGE

Where the  
river runs red

MARY'S CAULDRON

EAST LIFELIGHT

WHITE DOORS

HILLSIDE HIGH

EXECUTION SQUARE

BLOOD DOORS

AMBER DOORS

TEAL DOORS

NORTH LIFELIGHT

WEST LIFELIGHT

APOCOLAND

MAP OF  
HAZARD

SOUTH LIFELIGHT

THE SINK

PRISON

AUNT ROBIN'S

BLACK DOORS

## CLOSE-UP OF EXECUTION SQUARE

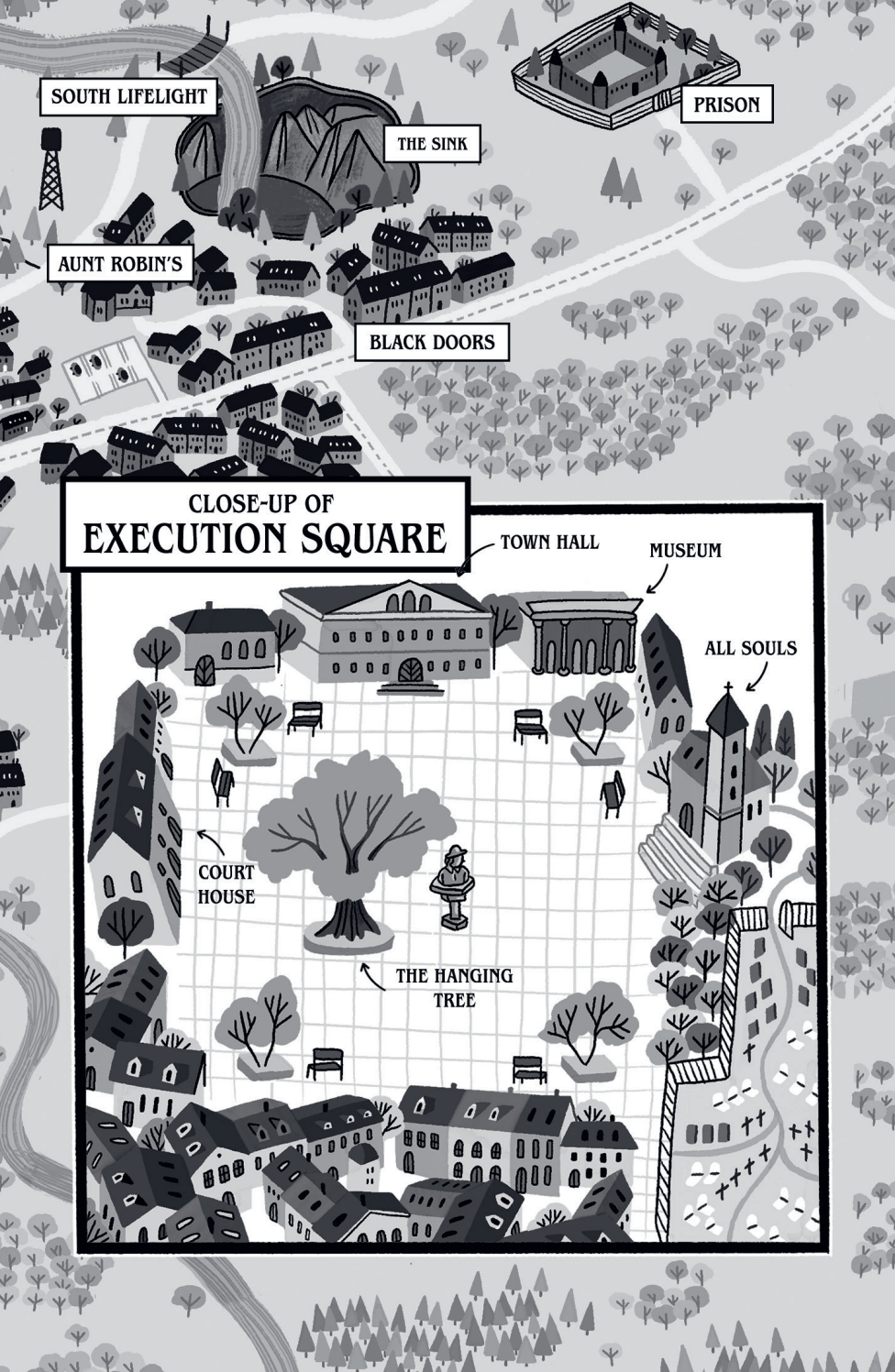
TOWN HALL

MUSEUM

ALL SOULS

COURT  
HOUSE

THE HANGING  
TREE







## CHAPTER ONE

# MONDAY MONSTERS

**'M**onday morning. Eight thirty. Execution Square. Definitely the start of the end of the world.' My words come out even more miserable than they were in my head. It's too early to be trekking across town for the lamest school trip ever. A day out at Hazard Museum is peak boredom when you've lived in the town your whole life (which is basically everyone in our class) and have been there a million times already.

'You know what, Travis? I'm kind of looking forward to it – I've never been to the museum,' Zayd says.

*Almost everyone.*

I look across at my best friend's wholesome little face and instantly feel bad. Zayd and I met six months ago when he moved to Hazard with his family and started at Hillside High School. I found him wandering the halls one day, totally lost, after some Year 9s gave him fake directions and sent him down to the basement for his maths class. He looked like a stray puppy. We've been tight ever since. He's always there. Always making the best of things. Always laughing at my jokes. Top mate in every way. The least I can do is

not suck the fun out of his first Hazard-based school trip.

‘OK, let me rephrase that: Monday. Eight thirty. Execution Square. Definitely the start of the Best Day Ever,’ I say, trying to set my enthusiasm at max.

‘Yessss!’ Zayd whoops, then he looks at his phone and makes a face. ‘Although, it’s technically eight thirty-eight, now, and we’re officially late.’ He picks up the pace a little.

‘Oh man, Ms Tiwana’s going to kill us,’ I say, picking up the pace too, my attempts at optimism already crashing and burning. I look across at Zayd and wish I’d chosen my words less dramatically, because he looks like he’s going into panic mode.

‘Oh flip,’ he says. ‘Maybe I’ll get my first Hillside High detention. Or maybe Ms Tiwana will noose us up on the hanging tree.’ He’s laughs nervously like he’s trying to be ‘whatever’ about it, but I know he’s genuinely worried. I walk faster.

‘You know what?’ I say. ‘It’s going to be fine. Ms Tiwana’s too distracted by dating apps and loser teacher TikToks to remember to actually punish us. She’ll just yell a bit and then forget.’

‘Yeah, you’re probably right,’ Zayd says.

‘Of course I’m right,’ I say, breaking into my fullest, most irresistible grin. The Smile is my most powerful feature. The Smile is a gift . . . no: a weapon. It’s like

I have my own sigma power. And it never fails – if I direct the Smile at someone, it's like they *have* to smile back. I try not to use it too often, because I feel like it needs charging up in between gos or it loses effectiveness. But I use it now, and it's good to see the stress drain out of Zayd's face as we hurry towards Execution Square.

It's mid-June, so I didn't bring a hoodie with me. But, like in all the best horror movies, the weather's reflecting my inner sense of doom. The sky is smoke grey, and the air just cold and damp enough to make a bad day worse. We half walk, half jog through the narrow stone streets that weave like a maze through this part of Hazard. It's all right angles, dead ends and sudden random sets of steps that if you didn't know they were there you would definitely trip up, or fall down. In Old Town Hazard, what should be a five-minute walk takes at least five times as long.

The buildings here are tall and skinny – all of them separate, but leaning towards each other like groups of Year 10 girls whispering about you behind your back. They're so close together that they might as well have been joined up, but instead they have gaps in between. Tiny, pointless gaps. So thin and shadowy that not even weeds can grow.

'When I was younger, I used to lie awake at night, worrying about the gaps,' Zayd says, looking at the

dark, narrow space between two houses like it's gonna portal-suck him into a death realm or something.

'Your family only moved here six months ago,' I say, trying not to peer into any of the pencil-slim voids. 'So, like, when you were twelve?'

'Yeah. A man can change a lot in six months, Trav.' Zayd sighs the sigh of a guy who has come to understand what moving to a town like this does to a person.

'Were you scared about incredibly skinny monsters hiding in them?' I ask.

'Yeah,' Zayd says. 'Skinny monsters means hungry monsters . . .'

'Good point.' I nod. 'The most dangerous kind.'

'But also I got stressed at the thought of losing things in them. If you drop something between one of those gaps, you're never getting it back.' He shudders. 'I could never live in a blood door.'

Every one of the houses is different. Different shapes and configurations. Square windows, cross-hatch windows, arched windows. Some with steepled porches. Some with overly tall chimneys. No two the same. But they all have two things in common. They're all made from stone that when you look close up is veined with the thinnest lines of red, but from more than an eyeball away just looks slate grey. And they all

have the same red doors. Not varying types of red – some lighter, or darker, or more pinkish or brownish. They're all the exact same shade, as decreed in Hazard law. Officially it's called 'carmine', but to us it's just the colour of blood.

'Teal doors for the win,' I say. 'Cos Zayd and I both live in the teal door part of Hazard. Further out. More normal. Wheelie bins and hedged gardens. And an unsettling number of missing cat posters. So not *totally* normal. But better than the blood doors.

I hear a familiar voice slicing between the gaps in the buildings like a human crow squawk, and now it's my turn to sigh, with the full weight of my chest. 'Talking of monsters . . .'

'Travis and Zayd,' Ms Tiwana, our history teacher, says as we finally turn out of the tight tunnel of streets and into Execution Square. 'Do you think we have nothing better to do than stand around waiting for you all morning?'

Bit unfair, 'cos we're only fifteen minutes late, which isn't *all morning* by anyone's definition except hers. I don't know I'm doing it, but I must roll my eyes, 'cos Ms Tiwana suddenly looks even more mad.

'Something you'd like to say, Travis?' she asks.

I see the whole history class behind her, turning to watch how this is gonna play out. Like I'm the lame antelope in a wildlife documentary, and Ms Tiwana is

the hungry lioness. I think about pulling out the Smile again, but it's too soon.

'He was just saying how bad he felt for being late, Ms Tiwana,' Zayd says. 'We practically ran all the way here.'

'You're such a pick-me, Zayd,' Seline hisses from the huddle of students standing behind Ms Tiwana. She's smart and popular – an annoying combination. All shiny hair, shiny lips, shiny fingernails, like she's filled with luxury, rich-person life sap instead of blood, guts and bones, like the rest of us. 'Although why anyone would want Travis as a bestie is one of life's great mysteries. Am I right?' She looks around at the rest of the class, and of course they all laugh and mutter stuff about losers. Even Danielle joins in. Danielle who used to fight anyone in primary who called me names, but is now glued to Seline's side, twenty-four seven.

'At least Zayd has mates 'cos people like him and not because they've been bullied into it,' I say, glaring at Seline, and then meeting Danielle's eyes for half a second before crumbling in patheticness like an over-dunked biscuit and staring down at my feet.

'Excuse me,' Ms Tiwana shouts. 'I was under the impression that you all left primary school years ago, so why are you squabbling like seven-year-olds?'

She launches into a lecture about behaviour, and I switch off, my eyes sweeping the view around me.

It's like a habit. Wherever I am in Hazard, I always check my surroundings . . . for danger, I guess, though I'm never sure exactly what kind of danger I'm expecting to find. There are too many creepy stories and unsolved disappearances to rest easy here. Too many urban legends that seem like they could maybe be true. And too many strange people that you feel like you can't trust.

Execution Square should feel safe, 'cos it's the hub of the old town and always busy with people. The town hall takes up most of the opposite side to where we're standing – its double red doors open to let a stream of council workers into their offices. To the right is All Souls church, and to the left is the police station and courthouse, where criminals are held and sentenced. In the old days the guilty ones were then shipped to Hazard prison, or worse, dragged out to the hanging tree in the centre of Execution Square. It's still going strong, the old hanging tree – its knotted trunk is so thick that two people with their arms outstretched can't even reach a third of the way around. I know, 'cos Danielle and I used to try every time we came here. Its branches creak eerily, even in the slightest breeze, making me think about the people they used to string up there. But the prison is closed now, and the hanging tree is just a tourist attraction. It gets decorated for all the different

holidays – Easter, Halloween, Christmas, Guy Fawkes, New Year . . . literally any excuse. Which is weird because a ton of people were killed there. But people come to Hazard for its legends, its history and its horror. Fun to visit. Not so fun when you're stuck here. Watching over everything is a larger-than-life statue of one of the town's founders: Dante Da Santos. I guess it's supposed to make us feel safer, like he's guarding the residents of Hazard. But to me old Da Santos has the opposite effect, adding another layer of sinister to an already creepy-ass vibe.

My eyes are drawn up and away from the square, to the steep hills that border the east side of town. They linger on a dark patch of forest that instantly makes me feel cold. And not just missing-my-hoodie cold. I'm talking goosebumped-skin and shivers-down-my-back cold. There are places in Hazard that are creepy enough for even the biggest non-believers among us to stay away from. And that spot on Crag Peak, the highest of the hills, is one of them.

Because those of us who've grown up in this town – we all know the risks of living in Hazard. Its story is basically a long list of tragedies – the kind where people die, or are so traumatised that they're never the same again. Being a resident of Hazard feels like balancing on the brink of imminent disaster. Even in the day-to-day boring parts, you're never really safe.

And if you venture into those other places – the ones that come with myths and warnings – then it's one wrong move and you're dead.