

KILLING ELIZABETH



SIMON GOODWAY

Killing Elizabeth

Chapter One

Kelly Walsh could no longer feel her arse.

She'd been slumped in the doorway of Jack's Potato Shack for two hours. She wore thermal underwear, but it was threadbare, and this was mid-October. It was raining and cold, so cold. She was sick of the cold.

People with homes had no idea. When it got a bit nippy they could crank up the radiator and settle down with a mug of hot chocolate. Christ, what Kelly would give for hot chocolate! Her life afforded her no such luxuries: for Kelly, cold was the greatest enemy, one that stalked her for most of the year, never far away, never letting up, and never showing any mercy. And so she sat, shivering and numb, with nothing to look forward to but the still colder night, and with no clear idea of when she might next feel any sensation in her buttocks.

So far she'd made two pounds and forty-seven pence.

She wasn't a panhandler, not really. If asked she'd say she got by on her wits, with a little help from her friends and a lot of meals at drop-in centres. Of late, though, she'd grown wary of charity and government schemes. She was seventeen and looked younger, which meant those bodies established to proffer assistance judged this best achieved by reuniting Kelly with her family. Even hot chocolate wasn't worth *that*.

And so she was reduced to begging. Youth and beauty lent her a natural advantage – an instinct to avoid the gaze of the homeless conflicted with the impulse to steal a glance at a pretty girl, and once eye contact was made guys felt obliged to toss her a few coins. It helped that her patch was just down the street from Dick's, and on the other side of the road: anyone crossing to avoid him would embark on a direct course for Kelly, and vice versa for those travelling in the opposite direction. They both did quite nicely out of the arrangement.

Most people walked right past. She'd heard the homeless described as invisible, but that wasn't Kelly's experience: it was hard to feel invisible when you could watch every pedestrian consciously plotting a route to avoid you. It was the most attention she'd had in –

Her thoughts were interrupted by a man with a bunch of flowers falling over her.

“Fuck!” He crashed down on the pavement, flowers flying everywhere. They comprised a vast bouquet of roses – or had, five seconds earlier – and must surely have obscured his view, so Kelly wasn't surprised he hadn't spotted her. It was annoying, but since he'd fared worst in the collision, irritation was offset by amusement.

“Sorry, sorry,” he muttered, staggering upright. He wore the uniform of an office drone under a hooded coat, his arms and legs sodden from the rain-drenched street. By the time of day, Kelly judged him homeward bound. Pity: it would be funnier were he heading into work, but you had to get your laughs where you could.

He swore again under his breath then stooped to retrieve the roses as he gabbled further apologies. When it was clear the flowers would never again make an attractive posy, he threw them back down in exasperation and finally afforded her his full attention.

“Are you alright? I wasn't looking where I was –”

“It's fine, don't worry about it,” said Kelly tersely. She wanted him to leave – an apology was all well and good but it wouldn't buy her dinner, and while her patch was doubling as the stage for his vaudeville routine she was getting a wider berth from the public than usual.

“Let me make it up to you,” he offered, producing his wallet. This was more like it. “I'm a bit short

at the minute, but I can give you... ah, you see the thing is I've only got four quid, and I'll have to replace those flowers. I mean I realise your needs are more pressing, but it's my wife, you see... it's the first night of her new play, I always get her a bunch of flowers on her first night. You don't know what she's like, she'll kill me if –”

“It's fine, really,” Kelly interjected, more forcefully this time. “No harm done.”

“Oh, well it's very good of you to see it that way. I'll, er, leave you to it then. Sorry again about the tripping thing, and the money thing, and, er, everything. I'll get out of your way.”

He looked her in the face, flashed a brief smile and left. It was their first exchange of glances – he'd been avoiding her gaze, presumably embarrassed by his performance – and though it lasted only a moment it left Kelly stunned, for it was a face she'd seen before.

It was the face of the man she thought about every night, and what she thought was this: if ever I see him again, I'll have my revenge.

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“I hate you! I wish you were dead!”

“You ungrateful bitch! You wouldn't last five minutes without me!”

Vern Boyle hunched down on the bed, drawing himself closer to the laptop as though this action might drown out the screams from beyond his door. The barrage of insults and obscenities was nothing new, but familiarity didn't make them any easier to ignore.

His best bet was immersing himself in his own little world. To that end, he opened a new tab in his browser and considered his next victim. He settled on the denizens of *Missing-Person-Seekers.com*, a forum for the exchange of tips and techniques on tracing estranged loved ones. There was a guy calling himself *Train_Lover*, a regular on the site who'd done some time and been unable since release to contact his only relative, a grown-up son. With a view to revealing himself as the kid, Vern had been posting on the forum for a month or so – innocent, low-key posts, agreeing or sympathising with other users, building plausibility for a greater pay-off. He'd been careful to reveal little about his character but that he was searching for his dad – nothing unusual on this board.

The build-up had gone on long enough. It was time for the punchline.

“Why don't you rot in Hell, you malignant old crone?”

“And who'd clean up after you then? You'd stew in your own filth!”

Vern selected a photo of the son from *Train_Lover*'s personal website and uploaded it to a face ageing app, then clicked on the *Age Me!* button and went for a piss.

The bathroom was engaged by Eric, no doubt having one of his legendary shits that last upwards of an hour, so Vern was forced to venture downstairs. Eric was his mum's current bloke, the latest in a line of potential second husbands. So far none had matched up to the original, and he hadn't exactly set the bar high. Vern's dad could best be described as a well-meaning loser. Eric, and all the other Erics, were just losers.

His dad had left six years ago when Vern was twelve, too dazzled by her tits to work out that the pretty young thing he was fooling around with presented less of a long-term prospect than his loving family. For all his faults, he'd been self-appointed mediator in the never-ending slanging match between Vern's mum and sister, and with his peacemaking skills out of the picture the house became a battleground. Vern withdrew to his bedroom with the laptop and kept out of it.

It was no coincidence he started trolling in this environment. He had no intention to involve himself in the War To End All Wars taking place around him, but it would be tough to watch so many bullets flying overhead and not want to shoot *someone*. The anonymity of the web let him do that

without fear of retribution, which suited Vern fine. Tormenting strangers online was one of the few pleasures in his life, pleasures that could be counted – and mostly practised – with one hand.

On his return to the bedroom his laptop was displaying a picture of the son looking every day of thirty-five. With a bit of digital manipulation Vern had him removed from the setting of the original photo and standing in front of Stonehenge. He posted the result to the forum along with an invitation to submit witty captions. The site was a place to pool resources, but it was also a community of people with a shared pain, and they would often lighten the mood with such diversions.

Now, would Train_Lover take the bait?

Vern killed some time composing a post on the Brimley Christian Friends website explaining why there isn't a God. He was pleased with the result. It was a classic piece of trolling – a string of ridiculous assertions that wouldn't bear the slightest examination, too stupid to warrant a response. But the idiots wouldn't be able to resist, and in half an hour there'd be a page of apoplectic replies. It would be *hilarious*.

Trolling, he would explain to anyone who'd listen – not many did – wasn't just about winding people up. It was about showing up fucktards who took everything on the net oh so seriously. Really, if some prat got their panties in a twist over what some randomer said to them online, who was to blame? He was doing them a favour. They weren't going to get better until someone showed them they had a problem.

Fact is, people only take offence if they secretly think you might be right. Dis their religion and you'd better run for cover; tell them they've got a purple beard, and no reaction. They *know* that isn't true, so can afford to dismiss it. Anyone who rose to the bait didn't have any business being in the pool.

He went to see how his thread at *Missing-Person-Seekers.com* was progressing. There were a couple of feeble attempts at witty captions, and then – yes! – a post from Train_Lover himself! Result!

Oh my god... i'm shaking as i write this... Wookie, I'M YOUR DAD!!!! I can't believe i've been talking to you on here for god knows how long and we never knew! You look older in your photo but it's definitely you, isn't it, Daniel? I'm going to PM you my phone number, give me a call! This is so exciting!!

This was hilarious! It was even better than the time he'd posted those flashing GIFs on that forum for epileptics. See, people will believe anything on the net. It's their own stupid fault if they don't check their facts. Now for the pièce de résistance.

Jesus, I just checked your website through your profile. It really is you! There are pictures of me as a kid on there! Hi, Dad.

I'm not going to be calling you. I've been trying to find you so I can give you one message, which I can do right here.

You fucked up my life, you fucker! You sad, stupid old man... yeah, real great parenting, getting yourself banged up through fucking incompetence. I'll fucking kill you if I see you again, so you can fuck right off and stop trying to fucking find me. OK?

He cackled, imagining the shock on the guy's face when he read this message. He'd implore his son to forgive him, but that was the last post Vern would make on *Missing-Person-Seekers.com*. The art was in knowing when to stop.

A bleep informed him of a new email. He tabbed to his mail client to take a look.

Well this was weird. It was from some guy called Lewis Tremaine. He'd have written it off as spam

without a thought if it wasn't for the subject line:

Vern Boyle: meet me in The Red Knight at 8 o'clock.

The Red Knight was just down the road. He opened the message.

Hello Vern, my name's Lewis Tremaine. I've been watching you. I have a little business proposition which I think will benefit both of us. Interested? See you at 8.

That was all it said. Vern had never received anything like it before. What did this Lewis guy mean, 'I've been watching you'? Should he go? It could be a trap, but equally it could be a fantastic opportunity.

Vern glanced at the time. 19:42. He'd better make his mind up.

Hell, anything to escape the war zone for a couple of hours. Anything to inject a glimmer of excitement into his life. He shut down the laptop and grabbed his jacket.

“Mum,” he shouted as he ran downstairs and made a dash through no man's land. “I'm going out!”

He managed to shut the front door behind him just before the teapot hit it.

*

Adrian Hadley arrived home with a feeble bunch of petrol station flowers.

“Elizabeth! I'm back!” he called. No reply.

Most likely she was in the bathroom. Her run as Janet in *The Rocky Horror Show* started this evening and she'd be getting ready. They had a large house courtesy of Elizabeth's television career, and the bathroom was on the top floor. Chances were she hadn't heard him.

Adrian crept upstairs with exaggerated stealth and the intention to surprise. The stairs orbited a central well – from the ground floor, you could see all the way up to the chandelier on the ceiling of the third, and from the third, you could see a long drop. It wasn't a great place to live if you suffered from vertigo. Adrian had never liked it much – he'd have preferred somewhere smaller, but Elizabeth couldn't see the point in being wealthy if you didn't make sure everyone knew it, and Elizabeth got what Elizabeth wanted.

Adrian duly reached the upper storey and tried to avoid the creaky floorboard outside the bedroom, thereby causing it to creak all the louder. Happened every time. He should have learnt by now, really.

He paused at the bathroom door. Still no sound of Elizabeth, but she was sure to be inside. He steeled himself for a moment, then jumped into the doorway and shouted: “Surprise!”

“Bloody hell Adrian! What are you trying to do, kill me?” Not amused then. Adrian wondered, now he stopped to think about it, why he'd thought she would be.

“Sorry. I got you some flowers.”

He held them out. As a peace offering they were fairly underwhelming. One of the heads fell off.

“They're a bit... wilty,” scowled Elizabeth. “Look, go and put them in water. I'll be down soon.”

Adrian did as he was told.

Having retreated to the living room, he sat on the sofa and waited for her to join him. Norbert, a large Akita, padded over and growled. He was Elizabeth's dog really – he'd never liked Adrian much. Adrian often got the impression that his wife and the dog talked about him behind his back.

When Elizabeth entered a few minutes later Norbert leapt to his feet, trotted across the carpet and

panted happily. She gave him a distracted pat.

“You look fabulous!” said Adrian. She'd be changing into her costume as soon as she got to the theatre, so he couldn't understand her need to dress up before she went out; but it was her big night and he wanted to show support, so he rose from the sofa and gave her a kiss.

“Watch it, I've just done my make-up!”

“Sorry. Silly of me. Now are you sure you don't want me to come along this evening?”

“Why would I want that?”

“Well, you know. Moral support.”

Elizabeth looked at him blankly for a moment then shook her head.

“I'm sure I'll cope. I'll see you later, okay?”

“Oh, right, yes. Good luck then. Break a leg!”

She left, and Adrian was alone again – unless you counted Norbert, which he didn't. He turned on the TV.

After surfing through a hundred and twenty-seven channels of rubbish, he abandoned that idea and switched it off. Sitting back, he found himself thinking once more of the homeless girl he'd run into earlier. Ordinarily, with her drab clothes and greasy hair, she wouldn't warrant a second glance – indeed, he must have walked past many times, never seeing her at all – but when events impelled him to pay attention, he'd seen through her hygiene issues to possibly the most beautiful girl he'd ever met. Her life circumstances were harsh, and you could see that in her eyes: but within them too shone an innocence and inner beauty, all the more remarkable for the adversity that might so easily have dimmed such traits. Throughout their encounter he'd felt rather spellbound, and consequently spent most of it staring at the pavement; something he regretted, wishing instead that he'd taken the opportunity to better admire her exquisite face.

He made a cup of tea. While waiting for the kettle to boil he wandered into the hallway and looked up to the chandelier at the top of the house. One of the bulbs blinked off.

He thought some more about the girl. What was her name? What misfortune had led to her situation? It was tragic that someone with such obvious spirit and intelligence should find herself in that position.

The kettle whistled. He poured water into his mug and mixed in the sugar thoughtfully.

That bulb would need replacing. He could do that this evening. The corner shop would be shut, necessitating a trip to Tesco, but the excursion was really no more than his husbandly duty. That it would mean walking past the homeless girl's patch hardly entered his thoughts, though naturally while he was passing he might as well say hello and slip her a fiver to make up for the inconvenience earlier. It wasn't like he was going out of his way to see her, so that was fine.

Norbert started to growl. Adrian ignored him and got his coat.

*

Vern entered the Red Knight with little idea of what to expect.

Though the pub was just down his street, this was the first time he'd ventured inside. Pubs were for people with social lives and Vern wasn't a very social person. He had friends on the net, of course – his fellow trolls tolerated him at least – but in real life he kept himself to himself. Living with his mum and sister, it was a necessary adaptation for survival.

He got a Coke from the bar and looked around for this Lewis Tremaine person, the unfamiliarity of

his surroundings doing nothing to ease his nerves. His discomfort perhaps went some way towards explaining why he searched for two minutes before it struck him that he didn't have a clue what the guy looked like. Happily, it was at this point that Lewis found him.

“Vern!” called a voice from behind his back. He turned to face a figure he hadn't noticed previously, silhouetted at a table in the darkest corner of the bar room. The guy didn't look like a homicidal maniac, but there was always the chance he was a trolling victim out for revenge, so Vern approached with caution.

“How did you know it was me?” he asked. Lewis beckoned him to sit.

“The pale complexion from excessive hours spent at a computer terminal, the terror etched across your face; the latter, incidentally, quite without cause. I'm Lewis Tremaine. Pleasure to meet you.”

Vern's first impression was of an intelligent, confident man, maybe a little self-satisfied, certainly well educated, and not at all the kind of person who would want to associate with Vern.

“What's this about?”

“What indeed,” said Lewis with a smile. Something in his manner was unashamedly patronising, as though he considered himself entirely superior to his companion and took Vern's agreement as read. He sipped his wine and leaned forward conspiratorially. “I wonder if you know what an astrolabe is?”

There was that tone again – like the answer was inevitable. Sadly he was right, and though itching to claim otherwise, Vern knew he'd get caught in a lie. He shook his head.

“An astrolabe is an astronomical instrument used to determine the positions of the stars. If memory serves, they reached Europe around the thirteenth century and were employed for, oh, four hundred years or so.”

If he *was* a trolling victim out for revenge, giving a history lesson was a very strange way to go about it. Vern relaxed a little.

“Oh, yeah, that sort of astrolabe,” he replied unconvincingly. “What's that got to do with me?”

“Some of the finest were produced for royalty during the Renaissance. Perhaps the greatest instrument-maker of the time was Gerard Mercator, who in 1541 designed an astrolabe for Emperor Charles V. It was reported to be the most exquisite and beautiful ever made, but was subsequently lost to history.”

“If you want me to find it, you've got the wrong man. I wouldn't know where to –”

“It was found five years ago,” Lewis interrupted, “in the attic of an ironmonger's shop in Leuven, Belgium. As for how such a remarkable item came to rest in so ignoble a location we might speculate indefinitely, but it was certified as genuine and sold at auction to an anonymous bidder. It went for two point seven million euros.”

“Two point seven million? That's about...” Vern tried to calculate the value in British currency, but had neither the mathematical aptitude nor any idea of the conversion rate. Lewis helped him out.

“Two point four million pounds.”

“Bloody pissbuckets. That's a lot of money.”

“I know,” grinned Lewis. “And we're going to steal it.”

*

Disembarking from his bus in the town centre, Adrian headed up the High Street towards the big Tesco. Elizabeth would be pleased that he'd replaced the bulb. He really was a very thoughtful

husband. Now, let's see – was that homeless girl still there?

She was! Adrian had to stop himself from running across the street, though the fact that his bus was pulling out in front of him helped. When it passed, he crossed sedately and approached the teen with some trepidation. It dawned on him that after their unpleasant encounter she might not be entirely delighted to see him again.

“Er, hello?” he opened timidly. “It's me, from earlier. With the flowers?”

She looked around. Her face expressed mild surprise, but not open hostility.

“Hello,” she said. “You haven't come to fall over me have you?”

“I'll try not to this time. No, I was just passing – thought I'd pop over and apologise again. And, um, give you this.” He proffered a twenty pound note. “For your trouble. I've been to the bank now.”

“Thanks,” she said, treating Adrian to a smile. She had a beautiful smile. He felt his heart melt.

“How did your wife like the flowers?”

“Not too well, if I'm honest. There was only one bunch I could afford, and they were a bit tatty. I think I'd have been better off making the best of what was left of the roses.”

“Well, you're not too late,” said the girl, nodding down at the street. A couple of broken stalks remained, trodden into the pavement. Adrian laughed, thrilled that she'd bothered to make a joke. That had to mean she liked him a little bit.

“I'm Adrian by the way.”

“Nice to meet you Adrian. I'm Kelly.”

“God, you must be freezing out here. Look, why don't you have my jacket? I was going to get a new one anyway.”

“If you're still trying to make up for earlier, the twenty quid covers it.”

“No, it's not that. I'm just... concerned.”

“Thanks. Really, I appreciate that. Most people aren't.”

“So, the jacket...?”

“Tempting, but if I was wearing any more layers I wouldn't be able to move my arms.”

Adrian wondered whether she'd mind if he sat on the pavement beside her to continue their chat. But then he'd get wet trousers, and when he departed her last view would be of his soggy bottom, and that wasn't how he wanted her to remember him, so he remained standing.

“Well there must be something I can do for you,” he said. “Tell you what, I'm starving – why don't I take you for a meal? You'd be doing me a favour, really – Elizabeth's doing her play, so I'm on my own this evening. There's no way I'm going to a restaurant alone, and I can't cook for toffee... not that you need to cook for toffee, you eat it straight out of the wrapper, but you know what I mean. The point is that if you don't accompany me I'll probably end up going hungry, then stuffing myself with a box of Jaffa Cakes later on.”

It wasn't the most suave of chat-up lines, and Adrian regretted the mention of his wife, but Kelly seemed amused and not entirely repelled by his proposal, so he thought he might have got away with it.

“Yes, alright then,” she said. “You're on.”

“Brilliant! I know a lovely little place, just round the corner. Follow me!”

He led the way beaming. He couldn't have been more pleased with the way that had gone.

Walking beside him, Kelly was pleased too. She hadn't supposed she'd see him again so soon, or

that it would be such a simple matter to form a bond. It seemed she was already well on her way to becoming a part of his life: and when she had, she would destroy it from within.

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