

KILL ME AGAIN

Rachel Abbott

Prologue

It was raining when they came for me. I was staring out of my window watching fat raindrops flow down the glass, streaking across the reflection of my pale face. I was regretting the impetuous decisions I had made – even though at the time they had seemed right – and wondering what was going to happen next in my life.

When the knock came at the door, I didn't even check who it was. I thought I knew. I thought I had been forgiven. I hurried to the door, pulling it wide, smiling to show my visitor how pleased I was to see him.

I knew instantly it wasn't the person I had been expecting. I felt a surge of fear travel through my body as I tried to close the door, but it was too late. A second face appeared around the door – a face that matched the first in every detail. Two sets of identical features, their shiny cheeks almost cherubic as they reflected back the light from my hall.

I looked at the matching Chinese masks, and my legs nearly gave way beneath me. The plastic a smooth yellowish flesh tone, the eye sockets diamond-shaped, empty, revealing the glare of human pupils beneath.

I didn't have time to scream. A gloved hand shot out and grabbed me around the throat, squeezing tighter and tighter until I was sure I would pass out. *Why were they here? What could they want with me?*

They spoke quietly, without the rough accent of local thugs that I was expecting. Somehow that made it worse. They were here for a purpose, and I had no idea what that was. They didn't speak to me; they spoke to each other, as if I wasn't even there. The urgency in their tone was at odds with the smiling faces of the masks, and every inch of my skin rose in prickles of terror.

I could see the first man's teeth between the red lips of the mask. They were pressed together, the pale shape of his mouth wide and straight, as if the effort of choking me one-handed was too much for him. The two sets of lips – a human flesh pair within a solid plastic pair – made my blood freeze, but still I couldn't take my eyes from the mask and the glimpse of the person I could see beneath.

The second man grabbed my arms and fixed them tightly behind me with something hard and cold that bit into my skin. And then came the gag – between my teeth, tearing into the corners of my mouth, the rough material chafing my flesh.

The two men spoke again, but their words blurred in my head and became little more than a buzzing sound.

I watched as the first man went into the hall. He was leaving us, pulling off his mask as he reached the front door. He didn't know I'd seen him, reflected in the hall mirror. I realised that seeing his face, knowing I would recognise him again anywhere, could be the end for me. I looked down quickly, hoping neither man had caught my eyes, watching, recording the chiselled features and the slightly hooked nose, knowing my fear had imprinted every detail into my memory. It was a face I would never forget.

The second man turned to look at me, his mask firmly in place.

'And now we wait,' he said.

1

Wednesday

The foyer of the eight-storey office block was flooded with bright light, which only served to emphasise the impenetrable blackness of the car park beyond. The receptionist had left for the night and Maggie Taylor waited inside the glass doors, peering out into the night. She glanced over her shoulder, watching in vain to see if the red light above the lift would change and begin to count down. Maybe the doors would slide open to reveal another late worker, someone who would be happy to walk with Maggie through the deserted car park – a vast empty stretch of dark tarmac leading into the distance, her lone car sitting waiting for her somewhere out of sight.

The weather warnings had provided the perfect excuse for people to leave early, though, and she was sure nobody would be coming to her rescue. She could kick herself for staying so late, knowing there was nothing that made her more anxious than a large empty building that seemed to echo with silence.

A sound behind her sent tiny spikes of fear up Maggie's arms, and before she could turn she felt a hand low on her back. She spun round and let out a huge breath.

'Jesus, Frank, don't creep up on people like that. You scared the life out of me.'

The slight form of Frank Denman stood half a metre behind her, a guilty smile on his thin face.

'Sorry, Maggie,' he said, looking down at his feet. 'It's these brothel creepers. I bought them for comfort, and of course they do make me look a couple of inches taller, but they barely make a sound on a solid floor.'

She couldn't help but smile back at him. He had saved her skin once today, and it wasn't his fault she was as jumpy as hell. He was a quiet, easy man who never seemed at all fazed by the terrible people he sometimes had to come into contact with.

'Why are you standing here?' he asked. 'Dreading the thought of the cold night air? I would have thought you would have been keen to get back to that man of yours you're always going on about.'

'Oh God, do I really talk about him that much?' she said, pulling a face. 'Sorry. How boring of me.'

Frank was one of the few people Maggie had got to know reasonably well since she had moved to Manchester seven weeks ago. As a defence lawyer, she had needed a psychologist on more than one occasion to help her understand the likely success of a plea of mental incompetence for one or other of her clients, and she and Frank had shared a few sandwich lunches. He was a great listener – no doubt an asset for a psychologist.

'Let's make a move, shall we. Or has our charming client today given you the heebie-jeebies?'

She didn't want to admit even to Frank how their mutual client had unnerved her. It was her job to deal with people like him, for goodness' sake. She just wasn't used to criminals who stooped as low as this one had.

'Come on,' Frank said. 'I'll walk you to your car.'

He leaned forward and pulled the door open, and they stepped out into the silent car park.

'“Out of the night that covers me, Black as the pit from pole to pole...”' he said quietly as they inhaled the frigid air.

Maggie glanced at him as the door swung to behind them. She heard a soft click then a clunk as the locks dropped into place.

'Sorry,' Frank said with an embarrassed smile. 'Just a line from a poem that sprang to mind.'

'A cheery little number, if you don't mind me saying so,' Maggie said, nudging him gently with her elbow. 'Anyway, I'm off now. You don't need to walk me to my car, really you don't. I'm being a bit pathetic. But it's good to know you've got my back.'

Frank gave her a small bow. 'That I have, my dear.'

Maggie laughed. She loved his occasional formality. 'See you soon, no doubt,' she added and with a small wave set off in the general direction of where she thought her car might be.

She turned up the collar of her coat, but once away from the shelter of the building it offered little protection from the sleet-like rain that assaulted the skin of her cheeks with hundreds of tiny, icy arrows. Turning her head to left and to right and with a quick glance over her shoulder to check there was nobody else about, she hurried towards her car, following the same path she had taken a dozen times without a moment's concern. Tonight was different. Tonight she sensed the threat of the shadows, which seemed to circle her, growing ever closer. Even with Frank within shouting distance, she felt uncomfortable.

Her new Audi was parked about as far away as it could be from the bright lights of the office building, and as her eyes sought out its dark shape she remembered how she had smiled when told that the colour of her much-loved car was Phantom Black. Now it seemed more like an omen as it merged seamlessly into the moonless night.

Maggie pressed the remote, and the double yellow flashes of her indicator lights gave brief warmth to the monochrome scene. With relief she grabbed the door handle and pulled on it sharply. She jumped into the car, pressed down the central locking switch and leaned back hard against the headrest, breathing again, only to jolt forward and spin round, nervously scanning the rear seat.

'Jesus,' she muttered, turning back and thrusting the key into the ignition. Glancing in her rear-view mirror she could just make out the silhouette of Frank, still standing where she had left him. *Bless him*, she thought.

She knew her fears were irrational. But today she had met the devil himself and he had warned her – warned her of something but she had no idea what. She was an experienced defence lawyer, but the firm she had worked for in Suffolk, where they had lived until recently, dealt with the tamer end of the criminal spectrum and the villains had seemed so normal. She had longed to work on more complex cases, but with the exception of one or two infamous cases for which nobody had as yet been charged, serious crimes there were few and far between. This man today, though – Alf Horton – was the worst she had ever met.

'I'm so pleased to meet you, Maggie,' he had said, holding out his hand to shake hers. She had looked at the dry skin on his face and had known exactly how his hand was going to feel.

As she briefly touched his paper-like flesh in the obligatory handshake, thinking of the dead cells that would have been transferred to her own clammy fingers, Horton continued to speak.

'I've heard all about you, and I'm so looking forward to getting to know you better.'

What could he know about her? She had fought to keep all expression from her face as she went through the process of asking the standard questions to begin to formulate his defence. Ten minutes into the interview, she was relieved to receive a call from the custody sergeant to say that Frank had arrived to begin his psychological assessment. He would be watching and listening from the adjoining room. As Maggie replaced the receiver, Alf leaned across the table towards her, discoloured teeth showing between dried, split lips, and she felt herself backing away as far as she could, so not even his breath could touch her.

'Watch yourself out there, Maggie. Nowhere's safe.'

Some days she wished with all her heart that she was a prosecutor and not a defence solicitor, because this man – this sadistic monster who had hurt so many people – had finally been caught red-handed, and was as guilty as sin. She wanted to see him locked up, preferably for life. That was not the way she was supposed to think, though.

Manoeuvring out of the car park and onto the busy wet streets of central Manchester, she kept seeing the eyes of her client, as flat and dark as twin disused railway tunnels, daring her to explore their chilling depths. She had calmly gone through the details of the numerous violent assaults he was charged with committing, every one against a frail, elderly lady, and she had seen his tongue whip out of his smiling mouth to wet his lips. He was reliving the torture and abuse, and his eyes momentarily glazed over

before returning to their flat stare. Maggie had felt an almost unstoppable urge to jump out of her chair, pick it up and smash it over his head.

Perhaps she should have refused to take the case, but she had been so lucky to get this job with a top firm of solicitors. They were offering her the chance to become a partner, so against her better judgement she had smiled and agreed to represent Horton. She had had her share of clients who sickened her with lack of remorse for their crimes, but there was something about this man that made her flesh crawl.

And what had he meant when he said, 'Nowhere's safe'? The memory of his expression as he spoke those words was fixed in her mind, and as she drove through the city centre each passing pair of headlights appeared to project a holographic image of his face floating just beyond her windscreen.

Maggie pulled quickly off the road and into a bus bay, leaning forward to rest her head on the steering wheel.

'Get a bloody grip,' she said to herself. She reached up and pulled her long dark hair free from the doughnut holding it in place at the back of her head. Opening her bag, she threw the grips and bands in, hoping that the switch in appearance from criminal lawyer to wife and mother would restore some rational thought. She twisted the rear-view mirror and groped around in the bottom of her bag to find a lipstick.

Better, she thought as she looked at her full red lips.

There was a bang on her rear window. Maggie spun round, suddenly anxious about whether she had locked the doors. There was a laugh. A group of teenage boys stood on the pavement, preening themselves, pretending to put lipstick on and shake their hair, one making obscene gestures with his right hand. They weren't even worth a look of disgust.

Maggie wrenched the mirror back into place and pulled back out into the road, focusing on nothing more than what Duncan might have cooked for their dinner that night.

2

The roads were terrible. The sleet had quickly turned to snow, and as usual Manchester was ill-prepared. Maggie had seen a couple of cars slide into the kerb already, so knew she had to take it slowly, much as she was anxious to be home. Desperate for some normality in her day she spoke to the car's Bluetooth connector.

'Call home.'

She waited. Nobody picked up. Funny that. The children should have had their tea by now and be getting ready for bed. At least Lily should. Maybe it had snowed a lot more at home, and it would be just like Duncan to wrap them up warmly and go outside for a snowball fight. She decided to leave it five minutes and then try again.

In the nearly two months since they had moved to Manchester the children had settled into their new school, but Maggie was concerned about Duncan. As a couple they had decided long ago that Maggie should be the principal earner and Duncan the main carer for the children. It made sense. Duncan accepted that Maggie could bring in much more than he could earn as a plumber, and so now he only took jobs that he could finish in time to do the school run. Both he and the children had seemed to be thriving under this arrangement, and Maggie had to admit that it was wonderful to come home to a meal cooked for her. She made a point of taking over the cooking at the weekend to give Duncan a rest, and it worked.

Duncan had been surprisingly unenthusiastic about their move to Manchester, though. In her view there had been nothing much keeping them down south – except perhaps the weather, which without a doubt was better than the cold and wet of Manchester – and Duncan had seemed to finally recognise the sense of it. Maggie's huge pay rise had probably helped, but still Duncan had seemed resigned rather than excited about the move, and maybe it was time they had another chat about it. She wanted them to be as happy here as they had always been, and for the last couple of weeks Duncan had definitely been quiet.

It was time to try calling them again. She waited and listened and was about to end the call again when the phone was answered. *Thank God.*

'Hello. Josh Taylor speaking.' Josh sounded as timid as he always did on the phone. Lily aged five had far more confidence than her older brother.

'Hey, Joshy. I thought you'd all be outside having a snowball fight or something.'

'No.' That was her son. Monosyllabic.

'I'm going to be a bit late, I'm afraid. The roads are awful because of the weather. Can you put Daddy on the phone, sweetheart?'

'He's gone out.'

'What's he doing? Clearing the drive?'

'No. He's gone out.'

Maggie took a deep breath. Sometimes her son's lack of words could be frustrating.

'Okay, love. Where is he exactly?'

'I don't know. He started to make the tea, but then he went out. In his van.'

Maggie screwed up her face in puzzlement.

'So who's there with you and Lily?' Josh didn't answer immediately. 'Josh?'

'Nobody. There's just me and Lily.'

A jolt of shock fired through Maggie's body. What did Josh mean?

Her limbs suddenly felt leaden, as if everything she was doing was in slow motion. 'Daddy has gone out in his van? Are you sure, Josh?'

She heard a sigh from the other end of the phone and then, as if a dam had burst, her son started to speak. 'Yes, Mum. I told you. He was making our tea, and then he stopped. Me and Lily are starving. He's been gone ages. He came into the sitting room to say goodbye.'

'And what did he *say*?' There was a loud blare of a car horn and Maggie realised that the traffic lights had changed to green.

'He said he was sorry.'

Maggie's head was spinning. She needed to get home. Her kids were in the house alone – an eight-year-old and a five-year-old in a dark old vicarage at the end of an unmade cul-de-sac. She didn't know the neighbours – didn't know their numbers – hadn't bothered to invite people round yet. She had been so keen to get them all settled.

'Josh, listen to me, sweetheart. Take the phone and go into the kitchen.' She listened to her son's faint footsteps. 'Okay. Now pull a chair over to the door and stand on it. I want you to fasten the bolt at the top of the door. Do you know what I mean, baby?'

Logically, she knew there was nothing to panic about. She would be home in less than half an hour, and Josh was nothing if not sensible. But after today's meeting and Alf Horton's warning, all she could see was the black outline of her house against the night sky and a stranger approaching the door.

Striving to keep the tension from her voice, she spoke to Josh again.

'How are you doing?'

She heard some grunts as he struggled with the door.

'Okay. Done it.'

'Right, Joshy, I need you to go to the front door and do a double turn on the lock there. Do you know what I mean?'

'Course I do. Then you won't be able to get in, Mum.'

'That's right, love, but when I get home you can look through the window and check it's me, and you can undo the lock. Okay?'

She listened while he did as she had asked.

'Now listen to me, Joshy. Whatever you do, don't let anybody and I mean *anybody* – even if somebody says he's a policeman – through that front door. Only me or Daddy when he comes back. Do you understand, darling?'

'It's not hard, Mum. Just you or Dad. Nobody else.'

'I'll be home as soon as I can, but I'm going to phone Auntie Suzy and ask her to talk to you until I get home – then you won't feel so alone. Is Lily okay?'

'Yes.'

Maggie breathed in and let it out slowly, keeping her tone level for her son. 'Can you be a bit more specific, love. What's she doing?'

'Lying about two inches from the TV screen watching that stupid film. Again.'

It would take a bomb going off to dislodge Lily from the TV if she was watching *Frozen*. Trying desperately to stop the panic from spilling over and passing her fear to Josh she told him she was going to be as quick as she possibly could, but to wait for the call from Auntie Suzy.

Hurriedly disconnecting she called her sister.

'Don't ask me any questions, Suze. Please call Josh and keep him on the phone until I get home. Dunc's not there for some reason. The kids are on their own. I know I'm being moronic, but until I'm back can you keep him talking? Please? I'd do it myself, but the signal drops in a few places on the way home.' She knew Suzy would hear the panic she was no longer able to control and would do what she asked without question.

All Maggie wanted to do now was call Duncan. To ask him what the hell was going on. How could he leave his children alone in the house? What was he *thinking*? She didn't know whether to be livid or terrified. Her worry about Duncan had to come second, though. In her mind all she could see was two

heads – one a mop of dark curls, the other covered in wispy white-blond waves. Two young children alone in that house, and she thought of all the things that could happen, that could go wrong.

Her voice trembling, she whispered, 'Call Duncan,' into her phone, almost afraid of what he would say. She heard the dialling tone. She heard the staccato tune made by the numbers. And then a long continuous tone.

Duncan's phone had been disconnected.

3

It had to have been the longest half-hour of Maggie's entire life. She desperately wanted to slam her foot down hard on the accelerator, but knew that would be a mistake. The snow had settled on the main roads, and as she drove further north it was coming down more heavily with every minute that passed.

Her fear was tearing her in two. She focused on her worry about the children, but thoughts of Duncan kept slamming in, knocking her sideways. What on earth could have happened that would force him to leave the kids at home on their own? Where had he gone? As far as she knew, he hadn't had much chance to get to know anybody locally. To be honest, he hadn't seemed inclined to make the effort, so she had decided to give it a while before inviting people round. If he wanted time to get used to the idea of living here, she would give it to him.

Despite his initial reluctance, when Duncan realised how excited Maggie was by the challenge of defending criminals who had done more than the odd bit of burglary, he had smiled and said it would be fine. And then they had found the house and he had started to get excited. A Victorian vicarage, it needed a lot of work, and he had said he was looking forward to it.

It was dark down the end of the cul-de-sac, and one of Duncan's first jobs in the spring was going to be to cut back some of the overgrown trees to let light in. The silence of the property that she loved so much when she was curled up with her husband and children in front of their wood burner didn't have the same appeal when she thought of Josh and Lily alone there. The tall windows were single-glazed – another job on the soon-as-possible list – so easily broken; so easy for a grown man to climb through.

She was getting closer now, and she remembered the first time they had travelled along these roads with the children a few short weeks ago.

'We're nearly there, kids,' Duncan had said, grinning at them in the rear-view mirror as Lily squirmed with excitement and Josh gazed out of the window taking in every detail. They had arrived at their rather decrepit home, but the children saw nothing of that as they raced across the bare wooden floors trying to decide who was having which bedroom. Duncan had even picked Maggie up and carried her over the threshold, as if they were newly-weds. She had loved it. But that was Duncan. From the day they met he had been attentive and romantic, and even after ten years of marriage every now and again he still surprised her. That day she had appreciated how lucky she was.

At last Maggie turned into their road and bumped her way along, unable to see the potholes in the unmade surface for the deep snow. She didn't care. She could see the house ahead, every light blazing from the huge windows, and was glad. Maybe Suzy had told Josh to switch them all on.

The car skidded to a halt at an angle on the drive and she jumped out. She had already kicked off her stupid power heels for fear of falling flat on her face on the slippery ground, and she ran barefoot through the snow to the front door. She opened the letter box and called through.

'Josh, it's Mummy. It's okay now, darling. You can open the door.'

She waited, transferring her weight from frozen foot to frozen foot. Where was he? Why wasn't he watching out for her?

'Come on, Josh,' she whispered, the cold now forgotten as she longed for some sign of life from within the house.

After what seemed like ten minutes she saw the sitting room curtain move slightly and Josh's face, pale against his mop of dark curly hair, appeared in the gap, the phone pressed against his ear. He gave her a little wave. *Thank God*. It looked like he was okay, which meant they were both okay.

She saw him speak and nod, and then the curtain fell back into place. A minute later she heard the double lock turning. Finally the door opened.

More than anything, she had to keep calm. She had to try her best not to convey her confusion and panic to her son. She sometimes forgot how young he was because of his serious attitude to life – a total contrast to his fidgety, perpetually cheerful sister.

'Hey, Joshy. Well done, looking after Lily. She's okay, is she?'

Josh nodded, staring at her feet. 'Where are your shoes?'

She almost wanted to laugh. Trust Josh to notice that.

'Is Auntie Suzy still on the phone?' she asked.

Josh nodded, handed her the phone and sauntered off into the sitting room as if nothing unusual had happened.

'Hi, Suzy. Thank you so much for keeping him talking.'

'What's going on, Mags? Where's Duncan?'

'I can't talk now. I'm sorry. I need to see to the kids, and I need to keep this line free in case Duncan tries to call. You know my mobile's a bit flaky here. Look, I'll call you later, or tomorrow. I don't know what's going on, Suze. I'm bloody furious with him. I know he wants to bring in some money, but if he's left the kids to go and deal with a faulty boiler...'

She quickly thanked her sister said goodbye before she could give in to the desire to list all the things she might do to Duncan. The lack of any response from Duncan's phone was nagging away at the back of Maggie's mind, but in this weather that could be down to a poor signal from the local tower.

For now, her priority had to be her children. She pushed open the door to the sitting room. Josh was on the sofa, staring at the screen of his iPad mini. Lily was lying on her stomach far too close to the television, swinging her legs and banging her feet together in time to the music.

'Mum, can we have something to eat, please? I'm starving, and Lily's been moaning for ages.'

'I have not, Joshy,' Lily said without turning round. 'That's a fib.'

'I'll make you something in a minute, but first can you tell me what happened when Daddy went out?'

She could see that Josh was worried, and she felt bad for not doing a better job of protecting him. Lily ignored the question.

'He was making our tea. Then he came in to say that he had to go. He went into the garage, probably to get some tools. I expect somebody's got a burst pipe or something.'

That would have made perfect sense if it hadn't meant he would be leaving the children alone in the house. Surely he wouldn't do that for some stranger's burst pipe?

Maggie sat down next to Josh and stared into thin air, trying to calm down. Duncan wouldn't have done this without good reason. She was going to have to wait until he got home and stay calm.

As she pushed herself off the sofa to go and see what she could make for the children's tea, Josh muttered something.

'Sorry, Josh. What did you say?' she asked.

'I just wondered why he needed a posh bag to go out on a job.'

Maggie sat down again.

'What do you mean?'

'When I went to wave to him from the window he was carrying the bag you use when you go away for work.' Josh shrugged.

Maggie felt her chest tighten and pushed down the fear that was rising through her chest. She knew which one Josh meant. And she knew Duncan would never use that to carry his tools. It was a weekend bag – brown leather.

Maggie leaned forward and gave her son a hug, which for once he reciprocated. She was struggling to hide the fact that something was terribly wrong, but he was a perceptive child.

'Thanks, Josh. I'll make you some food in a moment, but keep an eye on Lily for me, would you?'

Maggie left the room and raced upstairs to their bedroom, pulling open drawers at random. A few clothes were missing; his toothbrush and razor had gone from their en-suite bathroom too. She stood still and stared at the empty space where Duncan's toiletries should be. She felt her throat tighten and her eyes flooded with tears.

Garage, she thought. Josh said he went to the garage.

She ran downstairs and out through the connecting door into the garage. Standing to one side against a breezeblock wall was a dark green metal cupboard, a cupboard that had been padlocked since she the day she had met Duncan. Now both doors stood open, the padlock hanging loose. The cupboard was empty.

Duncan had gone.