

MI LI5E

JODY MEDLAND



## PROLOGUE

DANIEL STAGGERED UP THE STAIRCASE of the plush new apartments that overlooked the Thames. He paused to check he had the right tools in his oversized jacket. Picking locks was the first thing he'd learnt under the guidance of the Ministry and now he could do it faultlessly, even with his eyes closed. But on this day, his mind was far from clear and his hands were unsteady.

He arrived at his victim's door wishing he wasn't bound to comply with orders, orders he had followed blindly and without question, until he met Lauren. Only then did he begin to question the morals behind the Ministry's decisions. Now she was gone, taken by those who raised him as a punishment for his doubt. It was a cruel move, one that made Daniel feel he no longer owed his masters anything.

The door clicked open, Daniel stepped inside, closing it silently behind. He scanned his surroundings. No movement, but the sounds of a running bath. He reached into his jacket and pulled out a jellified transparent mask. He pulled it routinely over his face, stretching it tightly, manoeuvring the perfect fit. The effect was harrowing to anyone who saw it, and there was a certain tragedy in the fact this was the last thing they ever saw.

Daniel glided through the apartment, led by the soft, unsuspecting movement of a woman who hummed gently as she walked from the bathroom to her bedroom. She wore a silk kimono and sat at her dresser as she filed her toenails. Behind her, Daniel inched forward with cat-like silence, his eyes watering as he monitored her. She seemed nice. What could she possibly have done to incur the wrath of his bosses?

Daniel opened his jacket and pulled out the weapon that his employers had requested. There really is something quite menacing about a hammer when it's used on anything other than metal and wood. The look of bewilderment soon turned to fear as the woman turned to face the stranger in her room. The only kindness he could afford was to get it over with quick, but this was made impossible when she screeched and threw things and clawed at him with more force than he'd been expecting.

*Blood all over my hands*, is all Daniel thought as he slayed his victim. *Senseless, mindless blood*. Volleys of claret squirted violently across his expressionless mask as he struck her one last time. She lay alive but helpless, gasping for air. He tossed the hammer to one side and diverted all his energy to his hands as he squeezed the last breaths from her lips.

It was never usually this messy, even when he took down men of great stature, but she'd put up a respectable fight considering she was armed with nothing but a nail file and the feminine items that lay on her dresser. It could have been because she was fierce, it could have been because he underestimated the task, but more likely it was because he hadn't been able to concentrate, not like usual.

As the woman's heart failed, Daniel's grew stronger and beat faster. What remained of her face peered up at him like a broken porcelain doll, and suddenly he was overwhelmed with emotion. Never again would this woman fall in love with a stranger. Never again would she experience feelings of excitement, happiness or joy. All outstanding hopes and dreams would remain unlive. She was nothing now but a mere statistic, another victim attacked in their home, another person who'd died too young.

Once again, the Ministry had won.

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Beginning of the End

The low purring of an engine sounded faint against the heavy rain and the scraping of windscreen wipers. Inside his jet black Jaguar Daniel wore a forlorn expression. His unbranded mobile phone, slick and subtle in design, lay vibrating in the passenger's seat. An unrecognised number illuminated the screen, but Daniel didn't flinch. The phone stopped, revealing this was the eighteenth missed call.

Daniel looked tired, carrying sadness in his shoulders and anger in his eyes. His full name was Daniel Jacobs – at least, that's who he'd become. After years of loyal service to the Ministry his childhood was a blur. Only vague reminiscent memories shed any light on where he came from.

He often experienced vivid thoughts that were triggered by the strangest things: a word, a colour, a smell, usually when he least expected it, but he could never determine whether they were flashbacks or random thoughts. This kept him in a mental state of limbo, and not being able to tell the difference between a memory and a daydream made friendships hard to come by, let alone keep.

The vibrations returned. Still Daniel didn't bother to answer. He didn't even care to glance in the handset's direction. Instead, his gaze was locked forward, staring pensively through the speckled windscreen towards a monstrously tall brick wall that stood across the deserted street. It was early afternoon, but the dark grey clouds had already gathered on what was a wonderfully gloomy day. Daniel revved the engine and breathed heavily as he considered his suicide.

The phone stopped, allowing Daniel to collect his thoughts. His anxieties quietened and he became unexpectedly calm as he embraced a moment of clarity. He was ready. He put one hand on the steering wheel and clutched the leather tight. Only now did he appreciate how pleasant it was to touch. His other hand dropped to the handbrake and hovered like a retracted spring ready to thrust itself into action. He puffed out his cheeks and closed his eyes. It was time.

He opened his eyes with determination, leaned forward, tested the accelerator once more, released handbrake. Then the phone rang, and the clarity Daniel briefly enjoyed had vanished. He grabbed the handset angrily. Another victory for the Ministry.

‘What?’ he barked. ‘What do you want?’

‘You are fifty-two minutes behind schedule,’ a female voice replied, free from all emotion. ‘You must carry out your duty immediately.’

‘For what? What’s the purpose here? What are we actually achieving?’

‘Don’t ask questions. Your subject is due to leave the premises in thirty-seven minutes. He must be eliminated. No exceptions.’

‘What you gonna do?’ goaded Daniel, sadly. ‘Kill me, too?’

‘Focus! You’re an officer. Do your duty.’

The line went dead. Daniel frowned, considered his options, revved the engine loudly once more and looked back to the wall. He yelled as though in pain and threw his phone across the car in frustration, releasing the handbrake and veering past the wall at speed as he made his way to the destination.

With each manic turn of the wheel and every stomp of the pedals, Daniel showed his disapproval. A fresh and prominent scowl made his turmoil abundantly clear. He was lost, like a child in the wilderness with absolutely no sense of direction.

The rain beating off the windscreen evoked short, hazy memories of a warm and cosy retro kitchen. He imagined himself as a child sitting at a breakfast table. A nearby window presented the back garden. The sky was similarly gloomy with sinister looking clouds

watering the countryside. Young Daniel's head lay on the table, his eyes observing the raindrops as they raced down the glass via their own unpredictable route.

The concentration displayed by the youngster was typical of his personality, for he never got bored of seemingly mundane occurrences. Instead, he would always sit calmly trying to figure out *why* things happened the way they did. Never did he take things for granted or take a person's word as gospel, which antagonised those around him. Many people were not accustomed to being challenged, least of all by a child.

Daniel's eyes examined the glass as he sought clues for what made the rain move the way it did before his mother entered. She was a beautiful woman with a gentle, caring nature. She usually exuded calmness and confidence but in this particular memory there was an unmistakable level of trepidation in her voice.

'Okay. I've finished my make up,' she announced.

Daniel, still distracted and only half listening, replied lazily. 'M-m, h-m.'

She stood immediately behind her son, staring at him. Unaware that he could see her reflection in the window, her eyes began to well up. Daniel turned around and scrutinised her tears, which moved in a similar manner to the rain. Flustered, she wiped them away, looked down, fidgeted with her handbag, but try as she may, she couldn't hide her unrest from Daniel.

'Where's Dad?' he inquired.

'He's already in the car waiting for us.'

'Oh, okay.'

She stood before him and forced a smile, but it didn't hide her sadness. He could tell she might burst at any moment, like an overly heavy water balloon spilling out from all sides. It was also abundantly clear that she wanted to hug him, but for some reason she was showed remarkable restraint.

'Come on, Jacob. Time to go,' she said, with regret in her voice.

*Jacob?*

It had happened again. What he felt sure was a genuine memory had relegated itself as nothing more than a random thought. His name was Daniel. Of that, he was certain.

The screeching of wet tyres was followed by the loud honking of a horn, snapping Daniel into reality. In front of him, a bald, tubby cabbie showed his disapproval to an elderly man who'd almost stepped in front of him. The pedestrian acknowledged his mistake before the cabbie pulled away in outrage.

Daniel was surrounded by the high-rise buildings of Liverpool Street. Scores of suits and briefcases crisscrossed on the pavement, each locked in its own routine, too busy to exchange niceties, or even looks, with passers-by.

*London. What a dive*, though Daniel in a loathsome manner that surprised even him. He'd been content in the city until very recently.

He shifted focus to a particular building and monitored the reception area. Enormous panes of glass made everything conveniently visible as he sat silently in his car, observing people as they reported to the front desk on their way in and out.

His phone rang again. This time, he answered immediately, greeted by the same monotone voice.

'You have only twelve minutes before your subject leaves the building.'

'Why do we do this, Jane?' asked Daniel in a far calmer tone. 'I mean, what good are we doing anybody?'

'I must ask you again to stop calling me that.'

'Well I have to call you something. You're the closest thing I have to a friend.'

'Eleven minutes, forty-seven seconds.'

The line went dead once more.

Daniel chewed his lip as he placed the phone in his jacket, his eyes falling back to the reception area.

Daniel pushed the glass with his gloved hands, rotating the doors as he entered the building. He made confident strides across the glistening marble floor and approached an attractive receptionist on the desk. He wore a smile that was warm and disarming.

‘Hello,’ he began.

‘Good afternoon, sir. How can I help you?’

‘I’m here to see Mister Dunne.’

‘Okay . . .’ she checked her papers. ‘Can I ask what company you’re from?’

‘Sure. I’m Daniel Jacobs from the Ministry of Defence.’

Daniel stood with a deadpan expression as the lift pinged at every level it passed. He wondered how his life had come to this. He truly believed that after all the years of loyal service he’d given to the Ministry, they’d feel obliged to grant his only request. What he learned was that he was a prisoner, perhaps too good at what he did, too valuable to lose. Therefore, his innocent request was met with anger, and perhaps even fear, by the elusive beings who ran the Ministry. Now the woman he loved was dead, and he faced the very real possibility of spending his entire life following orders, pursuing conquests and finalising deals. This was what drove him to the brink of suicide, something he felt sure he’d revisit.

Despite his wavering anger and his inability to think straight, he believed, as he always did, that his actions were to serve the greater good. He knew he’d never fully understand the relevance of his work – who ever did? – but the Ministry had assured him on countless occasions that his contribution was “of vital importance,” and who was *he* to question *them*? When all was said and done, it was the Ministry who found him after he fell victim to his parents’ neglect. It was the Ministry that sheltered him, clothed him and fed him. They taught him the difference between right and wrong and protected him from the outside world. They had raised and nurtured him. Without them, he’d be nothing.



Like any loyal servant, he did feel resentment towards his owner from time to time, but deep down in his heart of hearts, he felt protected. What's more, he knew nothing else.

Finally, the lift stopped and the doors opened. Daniel felt for his mask, which lay hidden in its secret compartment under the seam of his jacket. The cold, creepy facial screen was essential for him to wear during a killing. It morphed him into someone else, and he grinned as its presence was confirmed. He was ready.

He stepped into a busy workspace as people manically talked on their phones and tapped at computers. Daniel surveyed the outskirts of the room as he walked unobtrusively around them. He soon saw a strong oak door with the words, *Robert Dunne, Managing Director*, etched onto it. He approached, twisted the handle, and stepped inside of the private office without breaking stride. The heavy door closed behind him.

Robert sat at his desk with his sleeves rolled up, his greying hair and bloodshot eyes revealed a man who had aged far beyond his forty years. He looked up and eyed Daniel with immediate anxiety.

'Can I help you?' he asked, fighting the trepidation in his voice.

'Mister Dunne?'

'Who, uhh . . .' he cleared his throat. 'Who's asking?'

'My name is Daniel Jacobs. I'm from the Ministry of Defence.'

Robert's blood ran cold and his skin flushed white. 'From the Minist--' He fell silent and his eyes watered as he let out a nervous chuckle. 'They told me you'd say that.' He sat back in disbelief. 'Whoa, this is really happening.'

'I'm afraid so.'

Robert looked around the room, searchingly. 'I have a family. Three kids: two girls and a boy. I don't know how my wife will cope without me.'

'People are resourceful. They'll find a way.'

The man looked pensive, then grunted as the feeling of worthlessness sank in. The ghost of a sad smile became visible.

'I guess you're right.' A million regrets seemed to cross his mind at once before he spoke softly. 'So, how's this done?'

'It can be done any number of ways. I personally prefer not to have any hassle. You're due to leave work any moment now. I recommend you leave with me, act as you would on any other day, and when we're outside, I'll give you your options.'

'Right.'

Robert considered the rather bleak advice and, with a forced smile, accepted it.

'I keep a bottle of whiskey in the drawer right here. Just for when I really need it. Do you mind?'

Daniel walked over to him, pointed to the top drawer of the desk. 'This drawer?' he asked, to which Robert nodded. 'You won't mind if I get it for you,' tested Daniel.

'No.'

Daniel pulled the drawer open. The whiskey bottle lay inside, about a quarter full. Daniel placed it on the desk.

'You got a glass?'

'Don't need one,' Robert shrugged, unscrewing the lid before taking a few large gulps. He gasped, satisfied. 'It's the simple things I'm gonna miss.'

'Are you ready?' hurried Daniel, who'd already been generous with his time.

'Not at all, but there's nothing I can do to change that now, is there?'

Robert looked up searchingly. Daniel's eyes shied away, lowering to the floor. Robert sighed as any shred of optimism was lost. He screwed the lid back onto the bottle and placed the whiskey back on the table, now knowing the remainder of the drink would outlive him.

'Okay, let's go,' pushed Daniel, assuming more of an authoritative tone.

Robert stood up and made his way to the door. Daniel watched him closely as he glanced at the family photos on his desk for what he realised would be the last time. He

stumbled as the gravity of the situation took hold of his knees. Nobody would know it, but inside, Daniel was also upset.

‘I am sorry, you know.’

Robert stopped, stared, and smiled in amusement. ‘Yeah. Me, too.’

He opened the door and absorbed the familiarity of his office one last time, flicked off the light, and left the building with his killer.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Process of Elimination

Inside the bathroom of a dingy hotel, Daniel scrubbed his hands to remove the masses of blood that clung to his skin. He rolled up his sleeves and lathered soap up and down his arms as his special rubber mask lay in silent judgement on the sink.

This was his twenty-first killing. Like anything, Daniel had learnt that you get better with practice, making less mistakes as well as developing a stronger stomach for the ordeals to which he'd become accustomed. The key was in the preparation, and knowing the Ministry were there to cover his tracks if needed occasionally made him feel untouchable. But this didn't make eliminations any more enjoyable.

Daniel refused to view the lives he'd taken as murder. He had total faith that each subject must have acted atrociously for the Ministry to sanction such severe action. It was always for the greater good. Even if he didn't perform the eliminations, somebody else would, and they may not be so delicate. The thought of another agent taking great time and pleasure eliminating someone after he'd refused seemed almost worse than doing the act itself, so he never tried to resist.

You'd think there were only so many ways to react when faced with death, yet there was always something a little different with each of Daniel's victims. Some acted surprised, some protested their innocence, some resorted to bribery, others even made a vain attempt to escape. This always humoured Daniel as he knew there was no escaping the Ministry, yet their determination was mildly admirable.

One thing most victims did share was a recognition of how blessed a thing life was. Even the down and outs suddenly found a reason to live. That's why Daniel was always

prepared for a fight. Take Mister Dunne, for example. He'd been expecting his fate for months and, in some ways, Daniel's arrival came as a mild relief. He'd certainly expected a far more frightening conclusion than Daniel, a young, handsome, well-mannered Englishman, to enter his office. But despite making peace with his pending death, he still felt the need to fight for survival come the end. A less experienced officer may have wound up in trouble, but Daniel was too long in the tooth to be surprised and swiftly dealt with the resistance that came. Still, beating a human to death tended to spoil his mood, and his morale had plummeted again.

Once the blood was off, Daniel filled the bath with hot water and sat like a foetus cradling his legs, his head resting against his knees, his eyes locked in a trance.

It wasn't healthy, but after taking a life he'd made a ritual of reliving the subject's final moments over and over again. It was a form of self-punishment, and he felt he at least owed the victims that. He remembered the look in Mister Dunne's eyes, in all of their eyes, when they knew beyond all doubt they were going to die. The fear. The loneliness. It was harrowing.

Over time, Daniel tried training himself to view people as expendable beings, in much the same way a farmer viewed cattle. Eventually, he wouldn't see a beautiful oriental woman looking amazed as she captured the sight of Nelson's Column, but just another tourist that London could do without. It wasn't about gender or race, but necessity, for when you don't know who you'll have to dispose of next, connecting with people on any level becomes too hard.

Eventually he became so good at dismissing people's attributes that when someone did manage to win his emotions, it turned his world upside down. Only three people had ever managed to make him feel loved. In turn, these were the only people that Daniel loved back. Sadly, it seemed that whenever Daniel did love someone, they never seemed to last long.

Daniel recalled one of the most pivotal days of his life. Although only sixteen, Daniel had been with the Ministry for little over nine years. Back then, it was a much simpler time, mainly because the Ministry had a face – and it came in the form of a middle-aged man named Anthony Smith, or “Smithy” to his close friends.

Smithy was a tall man who enjoyed his jokes, his drink and his food. In fact, he had the appetite of a lion. His silver hair and fashion sense gave him the rather unsubtle appearance of a gangster. People would be intimidated by him at a first glance, fearing that he was out for trouble, but this was wildly inaccurate. In reality he was a gentle giant who’d chosen to take Daniel under his wing. He was fiercely protective of the young boy and soon became the closest thing he had to a father.

It was Smithy who showed Daniel the ropes and taught him exactly what was expected of him. It was Smithy who taught him discipline and helped tailor Daniel’s exceptional natural talents into a powerful government weapon. And when the time came, it was Smithy that helped Daniel through his first kill.

Only hours had passed since he’d turned sixteen. Smithy had thrown a birthday party for him. Being a Gemini, the sun was usually guaranteed to make an appearance and therefore, Smithy embraced the weather by hosting a lavish barbeque. It was so difficult to maintain any kind of friendship when working for the Ministry, but Smithy seemed to have the balance right and he managed to gather quite a crowd. His friends, were an eclectic bunch: bookies, estate agents, DJs, filmmakers, dry cleaners, chefs, artists, sportsmen and ladies of the night.

Daniel recalled the bizarre mixture of people and remembered how striking he found it that everyone was happy. Smithy made them wear party hats and, with that, all inhibitions were lost. It was amazing what a small plastic prop could do, be it a hat, a pair of glasses, or a mask. Almost like magic, actions that seemed alien to a person seemed so easy once their face was covered, as though they were no longer themselves, as if they were somehow hidden.

Mid-way through the party, Daniel overheard Smithy on the phone. He'd adopted a grave tone. Usually when the guy was angry, everyone would know it. But on this occasion, he remained calm, hung up, and swallowed his unrest, forcing a warm smile before thrusting himself back into the party.

When the guests had left he sat Daniel down and explained that the Ministry wished for the youngster to perform a task, something he'd never done before. With calmness and delicacy, Smithy explained that a female named Valerie Marks had done wrong. The details were irrelevant, he said, yet her existence was proving to be a risk for both the Ministry and our great country.

He explained that, on the odd occasion, the Ministry would request eliminations, that each subject was guilty of something beyond comprehension, and that secrecy was always key. When Daniel asked why, the big man insisted that pleasure should never be taken from an elimination, and that not knowing what the subject had done was the best way to ensure that.

Despite his words, Daniel could sense that his mentor was torn, and he didn't agree with the Ministry setting such demanding challenges for an innocent kid, but something kept him strong and led him to support the Ministry.

Daniel had learned that it was very much frowned upon for members of the Ministry to maintain any kind of contact with each other, and the thought of them working together when it wasn't requested would ordinarily result in severely heavy punishment. Yet, for some reason, Smithy had insisted on being part of Daniel's first elimination.

'Over my dead body is the kid going through this alone,' he'd said on the phone.

Daniel recalled the trepidation in the car as Smithy drove through the night. Ordinarily, he was full of stories, offering help and advice for his young companion. But not on that night. Instead, he played a cassette that he'd made for Daniel's birthday, a compiled mixture of his favourite songs. This kept Daniel relaxed whilst Smithy felt anxious for the two of them.

That all changed the moment they pulled up outside of a large semi-detached house in Hatfield. Reluctantly, Smithy turned off the lights. He let the tape play a moment longer before switching off the engine. He sat quietly, as did Daniel, until Smithy eventually looked over to him and pulled a plastic children's mask from the side panel of his door that he'd brought from the party.

'Wear this,' he requested, softly.

'Why?'

'Because this way, it isn't you,' Smithy answered, cryptically.

Smithy had an uncanny knack of saying things that were deeply profound. Some things made sense right away, others took time to understand, but each of the countless lessons lived inside of Daniel and were still surfacing even now, as though he were still looking out for him. In fact, when Daniel closed his eyes and thought hard enough he could almost completely relive past events or feel Smithy's giant hand gripping his shoulder in a firm but supportive manner, the way he did as they approached the back of the semi-detached house. It was in complete darkness and Daniel could feel his heart beat wildly as Smithy leaned down towards him.

'It's time,' he whispered, as he handed the boy a knife.

Smithy tested the back door, which practically fell open. He shook his head, seeming almost disappointment. 'Why are people so goddamn trusting?' Calmly, he stood to one side, hinting for Daniel to walk past. With slow, anxious footsteps, he did.

Inside, the house was quiet. The soft, blue moonlight shone through the windows, making the outline of the staircase clearly visible. Together, they crept upstairs to where the owners lay fast asleep. There were four doors, and only one was slightly ajar. Logically, Smithy was drawn to it. He crept forward and pushed the door open ever so slowly before peeking into the room. He silently withdrew and shook his head before walking to the next door. He opened it expertly, peeked around, and retreated once again. Daniel was completely absorbed by Smithy's reactions as he continued along the corridor, opening the



next door, where he lingered. Eventually, he recoiled back into the landing, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Once composed, his eyes snapped open and he looked at Daniel. Trying to remain strong, he approached the kid and whispered in his ear.

‘Every single part of you is going to resist this, and trust me, if you think too much, you’ll fail. It’s absolutely imperative you don’t let her scream.’

With these words, the reality the situation had begun to sink in. Daniel’s hand that held the knife shook manically, his lip quivered, and he became rooted to the spot. Smithy noticed and grabbed him tenderly with both hands. He looked directly in his eyes.

‘Just think of your favourite song,’ he suggested. ‘Let it play in your head and relax. Before you know it, it’ll all be over.’

He stared at Daniel with strong intensity whilst caressing his hair, trying to calm him down. It worked, and as Daniel nodded to indicate he was ready, Smithy straightened himself and reopened the door for the young boy to enter, the plastic mask resting on top of his head.

Daniel’s confidence was immediately rocked upon entering the room as he was hit with a nasty surprise. The cosiness of the room, the innocence of the wallpaper and the miscellaneous collection of toys and teddy bears on display made him queasy. His eyes landed on a small bed in the far corner of the room, where a young girl lay fast asleep.

Panicked, he spun around, only to see Smithy close the door. He tested the handle silently, but Smithy held firmly from the other side with a strength Daniel couldn’t contest. He stopped and turned as the realisation hit: he *had* to do this, for the Ministry had requested it.

The stillness of the girl was endearing. Her slow, gentle breaths hypnotic. Daniel inched closer, attempting to remain unobtrusive, but he felt sure she’d hear his heart trying to pound its way out of his chest. He walked closer, then closer still, unable to stop himself looking around the room, absorbing the surroundings in more detail. Something about it felt oddly familiar, but what? Before he could figure it out, he noticed the girl was directly

beneath him, dreaming what seemed to be the sweetest of dreams. At least, he hoped it was. He wished it was a dream she could stay in forever as he stood staring at her, wondering what this young, seemingly innocent girl could have possibly done to warrant the Ministry's order.

Daniel gripped the handle of the knife as tight as he could. He closed his eyes as he searched for motivation. He thought back to earlier that evening when Smithy's latest squeeze had pulled him up to dance to a song by Doctor and the Medics: *Spirit in the Sky*. Very faintly, he began to hum the tune as he raised the knife with uncertainty.

*Don't let her scream*, he recalled as he gauged her body, contemplating the best way to achieve a silent kill. He considered her chest but wasn't sure how easy it would be to strike the heart, or how hard he would have to stab to break through her ribcage. He monitored her throat thinking that, if nothing else, she surely wouldn't be able to scream once the knife had entered. He imagined killing her time and time again, weighing up the pros and cons of each method. The visions made him nervous. His blood ran cold and he stepped back, realising there was no way he could go through with it.

He looked around the room once more searching for a way out. In doing so, he didn't find an answer, but something dawned on him. He'd figured out what felt so familiar. It was something he'd felt unconditionally as a child, but seldom since. It was love.

A wave of emotion overcame his eyes fixed on a wooden rocking chair. He remembered his mother rocking and cradling a baby in a pink onesie. She smiled affectionately and read the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. In the memory, Daniel was sat on the floor gripped by his mother's words as she exaggerated every twist and turn for dramatic effect.

'What...?' Daniel whispered under his breath. 'A sister?'

The memory was perplexing as he'd had no recollection of a sibling before. Surely there was no way he could have forgotten *that* – was there?

*Maybe that's why they abandoned me? For her. For my sister! She came along and everything changed. They didn't want me anymore.*

At the worst possible moment, the young girl stirred in her bed. Daniel looked at her, his face contorted as an odd mixture of love, resentment, confusion and panic combined. She opened her eyes and froze at the sight of the stranger next to her bed. Her mouth fell open as she inhaled, in preparation of a horrified wail.

He remembered how time stood still. It was as though he was wading through water, with every moment a slow-motion struggle slow-motion. He pulled the mask down over his face and lunged forward, piercing her skin with the knife as it penetrated her throat. He never forgot the sound it made – a light pop, like a sharp pencil entering an apple. Other than that, she didn't make a sound.

As he pulled out the knife, she put both hands over her throat. She attempted to scream but could manage nothing more than a whimper. She tried to get up. Without a second thought Daniel pushed her back and straddled her, pinning her on the bed as he plunged the knife into her torso. Again, she tried to scream, but lay silent, staring up at the boy in the mask. He stared back and pushed the knife still harder, wriggling it around inside her body.

Smithy was right. The mask worked. And Daniel didn't feel like himself as he watched the young girl breathe her final breaths.

Daniel and Smithy sat in silence on the ride home. Oddly, Smithy was the one who seemed the most upset. Daniel looked over his shoulder as he pondered.

'How come we had to bring her with us?' he asked.

'Because performing your first elimination is hard enough without having to worry about the mess. The Ministry don't like dealing with questions. A missing person is easier to cover up than murder.'

'So, what are we gonna do with the body?'

‘We’re gonna burn it, then we’re gonna bury it,’ answered Smithy, bluntly.

Daniel sat in silence as he imagined doing that to the corpse. ‘Can we play my tape?’

‘No!’

‘Why not?’ Daniel whined.

‘Did you enjoy it?’ asked Smithy.

‘What?’

‘Did you enjoy it?’ he repeated, raising his voice.

Daniel sat quietly for a moment. ‘I-I don’t know, I . . .’

‘The answer is no,’ Smithy fumed. ‘No, you did *not* enjoy it. You did not!’

Smithy snarled as he spoke. Daniel had only seen him this worked up on a couple of occasions. Both times, it led to something bad.

‘You’re too good a kid to—’ Smithy’s voice cracked and he worked to compose himself. ‘You did a good job, kid,’ he finally added. ‘And I’m proud of ya. I am. But when we’re asked to do this, we do it and we move on. We *never* gloat, we *never* feel proud of ourselves and we *never, ever* enjoy it, you understand?’

He gave Daniel a stern look. Daniel nodded but Smithy continued to glare at him until he felt satisfied the youngster meant it. He then looked back to the road ahead.

‘Good. You’re a good kid. Now sit there and think about what you did. Think about every last detail until you’re ready to let go, and then never think of it again. Once you’ve done that, you can have your music.’

Daniel watched him as he continued to drive. As skilled as he was at reading people, he never failed to become surprised by Smithy. The man had so many stories, so much history and some of the most complicated beliefs that there was always something more to learn. Daniel doubted he’d ever suss the man out completely. At that moment, it was clear the elimination had triggered strong sadness and pain within Smithy, but Daniel would never ask questions, he wouldn’t dare, as respecting other people’s privacy was one of the first lessons he ever learned from his mentor.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JODY MEDLAND is an award-winning screenwriter, author and playwright whose work is renowned for its strong characters and original concepts.

In 2013, Jody wrote his debut feature film *The Adored*, which went on to enjoy worldwide distribution, winning Best Film at the Durban Film Festival in South Africa as well as earning three official selections in Poland, Germany and the USA.

In 2015, he released his debut paperback novel *The Moors*, which was the first print book launched by publishing company, Pen Works Media.

Jody's interactive novel *The Somerton Man* is due for release in 2018, and he was recently commissioned to write a TV Pilot for an original political thriller, titled *Shadow Empire*.

Alongside this, Jody is currently developing four original plays, two of which are intended for their first run in London in 2018.

When not juggling his numerous projects, Jody can be found spending time with his daughter in Devon or people-watching in Crouch End whilst sipping on his Waitrose latte.