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The edge of the
spotlight...

...conceals more
secrets



THE SPOTLIGHT KILLER STORIES

EXCLUSIVE BONUS CHAPTERS FOR NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBERS

Warning: This story contains major spoilers for events of *The Spotlight*

‘**W**hat’s your perfect day?’ Alice asked, late one night, curling her body into his. They’d had this conversation before, but she didn’t care. It was like reading your favourite book, over and over, until you memorised it, the pages growing soft.

Her perfect day changed a lot. Sometimes she was on the moon; sometimes she was back on Earth, barefoot, following the path of the River Neath, wading deep and letting mud ooze between her toes. Sometimes she was on a stage, blinded by the lights.

Tim’s perfect day always stayed the same.

‘It starts at noon and it never ends,’ he said, a yawn punctuating the words. ‘I wake up next to you, eat chocolate cake for breakfast... watch cartoons and no one to tell me to stop...’

‘You’d watch cartoons all day?’ Alice’s laughter was a flutter in her throat.

Without her glasses on, the room was a pleasant blur, the white blobs of unfinished wedding dresses rising up against the darkness. The night had turned chilly, but Tim was so warm. His big frame was solid, immovable. It felt possible that, in a million years, he’d still be here, next to her.

‘Maybe not all day.’ He nuzzled close, his beard scratchy. ‘Maybe find something else to do in bed...’ He kissed her lazily.

She'd been sixteen when she'd met Tim, at youth theatre in Cardiff. He was her leading man; eighteen, but he looked and sounded older, with brown stubble and a baritone voice. Alice's shyness manifested as coolness, so she ignored him for weeks. There were rehearsals where she'd say nothing but her scripted lines. He'd chat away to her like they were friends, but her voice crawled back into her throat.

One night, at a party among theatre nerds, Alice got drunk – her first time – and went over to Tim, wavering on the spot. 'Would you kiss me? Please?'

They laughed about it later. Tim liked to tell the story, while Alice covered her eyes in mortification, though secretly she cherished the memory. 'No,' he'd said, 'I want to take you out, hold your hand, walk you home, and kiss you when you're stone cold sober.' (He did, and they were inseparable after that.)

Now they were in London, ready to take on the world. No matter that their flat was only one room, with a mattress that dipped in the middle.

In bed, their kisses grew deeper and he rolled on top of her. She stopped him. 'Tell me the rest.'

He made a little *ugh* noise in the back of his throat, but he was smiling, his brown hair hanging in his eyes.

'Fine... the perfect day... I'd go to the cinema, pay for one movie and then hide from the usher and sneak in and see them all. Hours and hours of movies, till you forget where you are.'

'When I'd get out, it would still be light, just about, still be warm, the sun setting. I'd get beer in a plastic cup and sit in the park.'

'Then I'd go to a gig, music so loud your skull feels like it's caving in. And I'd kiss the prettiest girl in the club—'

'Who's that?'

He rolled his eyes. ‘It’s you. Obviously it’s you. I’d kiss you’ – he did – ‘and convince you to come with me into the bathroom stall...’

‘Stop, that’s nasty,’ she said, but she was smiling.

Another kiss.

‘We’d dance all night,’ he said.

‘What happens afterwards?’ Alice asked dreamily.

‘I told you. Nothing, because the day doesn’t end. It’s a perfect day and it never ends.’

*

‘Your dad’s gone a bit strange,’ Gran told Alice, ‘but he’s all right.’

At the age of five, Alice nodded like she understood. She didn’t know much about strange, but she thought maybe she was strange, too. Always in her own little world, her own wonderland, running away from home to find fairies in the woods.

(Did it count as running away if no one noticed you were gone?)

She lived with her father and her grandmother, in a house that smelled of cigarettes and rose perfume and soiled cat litter. Her mum had left for a job in Bristol and forgotten to come back, or so it seemed to Alice.

Theirs was a house that simmered with arguments, so Alice sang, to make her family forget they hated each other. She sang and she sang and she—

‘Stop that caterwauling!’ Her dad slammed the door to his bedroom in her face. The orange cat flinched, darted along the hallway.

Alice went to her grandmother, crying. Gran sighed. ‘Give it a rest, love.’ She was dressed in her rain bonnet, fighting to get her sleeves into a slithery-loud mac. ‘I need to pop to the shops.’

Alice knew it was a lie. When Gran said she was going to the shops, she was actually going to bingo with her friend Irene and she’d be hours and hours.

Aw, don't lock the door, Alice said, or maybe she just thought it.

Gran gave her a hard look. 'You be nice and quiet and don't disturb him.'

Alone in the living room, Alice got out her library book of animal facts and started turning the pages, pretending she could read. She pretended often and she wasn't sure who her audience was, but she felt certain she was performing for someone. *What a clever girl!* the invisible audience would say. *What a sweetie! What a love!*

Thud.

The noise interrupted her fantasies. She got up, tiptoed down the bungalow's hallway and cracked open the bedroom door. She was tense, expecting Dad to start shouting at her. Instead, he was on the floor.

She flung the door wide and rushed to his side. He was wheezing, like he couldn't catch a breath. Sweat was pouring off him, and his eyes were huge and desperate. When she called out – 'Daddy! Daddy!' – it was like he couldn't hear her. She shook him, her tiny hands pulling at the solid mass of his chest, but all he spoke was gibberish.

In some remote part of her baby brain, she knew he was dying. She went to the front door, even though she knew it was locked. Returning to the bedroom, she lifted the old rotary phone on the bedside table. She didn't know how to dial. When she held the receiver to her ear, using two hands, the dial tone whined.

Daddy was still panting, grasping at the air, but there was a feebleness to his movements. Seconds later, the will seemed to drain out of him.

Alice shouted for her mum, hoping her words could make her appear, even though she hadn't seen her in a month. She shouted for Granny. She shouted for Grampy, even though he'd died when Alice was a baby.

Silence.

She didn't know what to do.

I'll make Daddy a cup of tea, that always made things better, doesn't it?

Alice could just about reach the kettle in the kitchen, even though Gran had forbidden her from touching it. This was an emergency, though. Carefully, carefully, she boiled the kettle and made tea in a mug. She brought it through to Daddy, careful, careful not to spill.

'Daddy, I made you this... so's you can feel better.'

He didn't reply. He was still now, like he was sleeping. But she knew he wasn't sleeping.

Alice sat by his side, watching him, as the tea cooled. It got dark. The rain stopped. Alice peed her pants because she didn't want to leave his side. The puddle of urine cooled, too.

Death was a puddle, not of piss, but a pool of darkness. It crept outwards from Daddy in the hours that followed, encompassing Alice, too. For those hours while she waited (four, in all), Alice was dead, too. Her small fingers grew cold and stiff. Her shallow baby breaths faded away to nothing.

A key turned in the lock of the front door. It startled her back to life.

*

'You must have been very scared,' Gran said to her later. She was hollow-eyed, her skull visible as she puffed on a cigarette.

Scared? Alice wrinkled her brow. No. Death was a darkness you could touch, she'd realised that day. It had a physical presence. You could make friends with it, welcome it in, with a cup of tea.

In the years that followed, Alice's fascination with death grew. She crouched down beside a mouse that was caught in a trap, watching the way it struggled. She lingered beside decapitated pigeons at the roadside, memorising the way their innards mashed outwards, all over the tarmac. One day, left alone, she dug up Gran's old cat, the one that had died when Alice was four. She wanted to see what had become of him, cocooned in a bed of soil.

‘What are you doing? You horrible little girl!’ Gran’s face was red. Her spit hit Alice in the eye.

‘I’m sorry, I’m sorry...’ Alice began to cry, on automatic, squeezing out the tears for Gran, for the invisible audience who cooed and said ‘aw, poor honey’ when she cried.

Alice learned her lesson. She learned to keep her fascination with death a secret.

She was special. Unlike others, who were too weak, too ordinary, she had a special relationship with death. She could welcome it in like an old friend.

There was a bird, tiny and brown, who’d come to her window sill. She left sunflower seeds for him. One day, he hopped into the palm of her hand. She squeezed. And he died.

He was so beautiful in death. She kept him in her room, in a shoebox, shrouded in pink tissue paper, until he began to stink.

‘It’s those bloody mice again,’ Gran ranted, blitzing the house with air freshener.

Fearing her angry words, Alice took the dead bird outside and across the stream and buried him. She made it a ritual: laid flowers, sang a song, borrowed some solemn-sounding words from her cousin’s wedding the month before. She and Death were bound together, for all eternity.

*

Alice and Tim, Tim and Alice. To their new friends in London, you couldn’t think of one without the other. Life was an adventure, with Tim trying to make it as an actor and Alice building her music career. It didn’t matter that they lived in a tiny, mouldy flat next to a main road that roared even at 3 a.m. It didn’t matter that there was never any money. They had love.

Love, love, love...

Alice played every gig she could get booked for, working as a seamstress the rest of the time in order to make rent. The flat was always filled with wedding dresses, Alice hunched over, doing tiny hand stitches at 2 a.m. Tim would come home drunk. ‘You’re no fun anymore,’

he mumbled, ‘always working.’ The barb hit home. But, if she didn’t work, then what? They’d be out on the streets. They sniped, they fought, they said grudging apologies, and they did it all over again. It began to feel like Alice’s childhood home.

Still, there were moments, nights that popped bright as a flame. Alice and Tim would go out to see a band on a Friday, at the dive bar around the corner. Her in red lipstick and a vintage dress, with her grandmother’s sapphire glinting at her throat. Him in a rumpled suit with a skinny tie. For those few hours, everything was perfect.

Under the gloss of perfection, there were signs something was wrong. He was still big, but the weight was melting off him. He never had any money, even though he worked shifts at a local pub. Something was wrong? No, it couldn’t be. Love... love conquers all. Love makes the world go around.

‘What are you doing?’ Alice opened the door to the bathroom and he startled.

‘Nothing...’

He tried to pass it off as weed, but she saw. White powder. He was smoking heroin.

She had only ever wanted to be pure and clean, bobbing and curtsying, being such a clever little girl for her invisible audience. Now Tim had sullied himself – he’d sullied her, too. The darkness was curling inside him.

They broke up for a time, leaving her alone in their single-room flat with all those wedding dresses for company. Months later, he showed up at the door, banging, banging, banging at midnight. Wild-eyed and panting. He’d scrawled an A on his chest in marker pen. A for Alice, she supposed, but it made me think of *The Scarlet Letter*. She let him inside, her tainted lover, her broken bird.

‘I’ll get clean, I’ll do it for you,’ he said.

But he didn’t. He didn’t. He didn’t!

Still, there was love, wasn’t there? Love conquers... Loves makes the world...

Her friend Lee sat her down, the two of them on a park bench, a robin flitting close, hoping for breadcrumbs. ‘Listen, mate.’ He ducked his head, hiding behind the brim of a baseball cap, avoiding her gaze. ‘Listen... there’s another girl.’

‘What?’ Alice wasn’t following.

‘Tim. He’s seeing someone else. It’s been going on for months. He’s talking about marrying her.’

She stood up and the robin zagged away. ‘You’re wrong, it can’t be...’

Lee winced. ‘Sorry, mate, I’m sorry.’

When she confronted Tim later, he didn’t deny it. He just broke down in tears. ‘But I love you. I love *you*.’

Numb, she told him to leave. Afterwards, she got into bed, sliding into the dip in the centre of the mattress, alone in that tiny room, surrounded by white dresses. Nothing mattered. There was a cold cup of tea on her nightstand and there was Daddy, sitting in the armchair. In that single room, there was Alice and Death, alone together.

Tim, my love...

He’d ruined her. He’d ruined everything. He was poison, infecting the whole world.

And his sentence? His punishment? What did he deserve?

*

When Alice and Tim got out of the cinema, the day was still light, just about. It was still warm, the sun setting. They lazed on the grass in the park, drinking beer out of plastic cups until the twilight drained away. As darkness descended, they ambled out of the park gates and towards the dive bar round the corner from their flat.

‘Big man!’ Tim high-fived the security guard on the way in.

‘Hi Craig...’ Alice said with a small smile. He tipped an invisible hat at her. Craig was a shrugging Black guy whose face hinted at a smile but didn’t quite commit to it.

Inside, a band was setting up on stage, people jostling in close. The air in the room was humid, crackling with energy, a thunderstorm on its way.

‘You look so sexy tonight.’ Tim pulled her in close, his hand grasping the lace hem of her white dress. His eyes were unfocused.

In her stomach, there was a strange shifting feeling. Sometimes she’d feel like she was really in love with Tim and they’d be together forever. Sometimes she’d imagine grabbing his skull and smashing it against the wall, so it would shatter into a million pieces. The pieces would become butterflies.

As the band started their first number, Alice whisper-shouted in his ear. ‘Let’s go to the bathroom. Some privacy...’

He was rocking out; he didn’t hear her.

‘I have something for you...’ She rustled a wrap from her pocket. That got his attention. He always wanted drugs more than he wanted her.

He kissed her, sloppily, to make up for the truth. They shoved and squirmed through the crowd, towards the toilets. The gents smelled of piss and dirt, wallpaper torn from the walls.

She offered him a snort of heroin, but he found a needle and wanted to inject it. He seemed to have forgotten all his promises about giving it up.

He was nodding, unsteady on his feet. When he stumbled into a cubicle, he sat down heavily on the closed toilet lid. ‘Shit, yeah, shit...’

She followed him into the cubicle. He was still conscious but barely. She mopped the sweat from his brow, her hand small and cool against his skin.

‘I forgive you,’ she whispered.

‘I love you,’ he said, but it sounded like a reflex.

Liar. Whatever this was, it wasn’t love.

His eyes fluttered. His lips were spit-slick and pink. She bent to kiss him. Her necklace bounced against his jaw.

She pulled the knife from where it was hidden in her bra. ‘Goodbye.’

Bang.

The door to the bathroom opened. There was the rat-a-tat-tat of footsteps. Someone was whistling. Alice shoved her cubicle door shut with her elbow and held her breath. Tim tried to say something, but she put a hand over his mouth.

Shit, who had seen her come in here? Her bag was next to the sink. Someone might recognise it. Her feet, in dainty little heels, were visible under the door. Someone might see.

There was the sound of a long stream of piss, the splatter as it hit porcelain. In the cubicle, Tim’s eyes were open, looking up at her. The first inkling of fear registered in those muddy brown eyes.

Finally, after what felt like an age, the pissing man left the toilets and they were alone again – Alice and Tim and Death.

When she slashed Tim’s wrists, he shook and jittered, but he seemed too surprised to fight back. Blood spurted out of him, showering her white lace dress with red. Everything was so slick that she dropped the knife. It landed with a clatter.

Death didn’t come as quickly as she’d expected. He was panting and then he was squealing. On the other side of the bathroom door, the band was still on stage, the bassline skull-shakingly loud. Surely no one would hear Tim in here. Surely...

He bucked against her and she unbalanced, falling to her knees. He crashed onto the floor next to her, jerking in a final fit. His big body was immovable in the space. She cringed backwards.

Where was the knife? In the gloom of the stall, blood pooling on the floor, she felt around for it. Where was it?

She needed to leave, she needed to get out of here, so that she could fabricate the story that he'd slashed his own wrists. But not without wiping down the knife. Not while her fingerprints were on its handle...

Beside her on the floor, Tim had grown quiet. He was still breathing, but just barely. She couldn't resist caressing his cheek one last time. Love, love, love...

He released one final bellow and she reared backwards, stuttering out of the cubicle, still on her knees.

A second later, the door to the bathroom burst open. It was Craig, the bouncer.

'What the fuck is going on in here.'

She knew how she looked. She rose to her feet and caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Blood on her white dress. Blood in her hair. Blood on her face. She looked like what she was: God's own avenging angel.

There was one single second where Alice met Craig's gaze dead-on and she thought, *I'll have to kill you, too.*

Instead, she broke down in tears, gabbling out her story. *I found him like this... I was so worried... he was acting so weird... talking about death... I didn't think he'd actually do it... oh, my God, my Tim, my love...*

Craig put an arm around her, his voice gruff. 'We'll get you out of here, darling, don't worry.'

She nodded, sniffing her thanks.

Her tears were perfect. She was perfect. All that youth theatre training came in handy. And the blood on her dress? It only proved how she'd tried heroically to save him.

On the outside, she remained distraught. Inside, she experienced a swooning euphoria. Her mask only slipped for a second, when a giggle made its way out of her throat. Perhaps Craig caught it, but she smothered her laugh with a cough and renewed her tears.

Alice had always loved to sing, but in the months that followed, she began to write songs as well. Tim's death was the true birth of her creativity. That was his gift to her, she realised. He died so that she could become something more. That was beautiful. That was love.

*

Alice loved Hailey. Of course she did. The three of them, Jitterboo, they were kindred spirits. But Hailey was chaos, she was hubris, she was a wildfire burning up everything she touched.

The answer came to Alice in dreams, in song lyrics, in a melody she couldn't get out of her head.

Honey, pull down the sky now

Deep water like wine, you haven't the time

Honey, what happened to sundown?

Stolen by moonlight...

'What's your perfect day?' Alice asked Hailey.

'Ah, not this guff again.'

They were lazing on yellowed grass on the banks of the loch, the sun bright enough that Hailey's eyes were closed. Alice's fingers itched. How easy it would be, to reach over and grab her by the throat, nails clawing through skin.

Hailey's eyes slitted open. Her face softened as she angled toward Alice. 'No such thing as perfect, hen.'

'I'd like your birthday to be special, though...'

Hailey shrugged, settled her head on the grass, her voice a murmur. 'Sure, perfect, whatever.'

*

It was past midnight and the loch house was cool, dark. Hailey lolled on the sofa, a glass of red wine balanced precariously next to her.

‘Let’s go for a swim,’ Alice said, appearing from the shadows. She was wearing a swimsuit, navy merging with the darkness. Her favourite sapphire necklace sparkled at her throat.

Hailey yawned. ‘I’m sleepy.’

Alice stooped to pick up the wine glass. White sediment was settling at the bottom, from the pills she’d crushed up for Hailey’s drink.

‘It’s beautiful outside,’ Alice said. She pulled Hailey upright with a tug of her arm. She was strong, since the record exec had told her she was fat and should be in the gym six days a week. She nudged the rim of the glass towards Hailey, who drank from it automatically. *Here, Hailey, you love drugs so much, have some more.*

‘It’s dark...’ Hailey’s voice was a whine, but she let Alice lead her to the glass doors. She was stumbling a little, but Alice was there to support her.

They stepped out on the deck. The loch was silver, moonlight spilling across its surface.

Like a mother and a small child, Alice helped Hailey out of her clothes, till she was dressed only in mismatched bra and knickers. Hailey’s head was nodding, but she kept shaking it off. ‘It *is* nice out here...’ she slurred.

With the barest push, Alice nudged Hailey into the water. Splash!

Hailey surfaced, her mouth gasping, her eyebrows raised in surprise.

Alice grabbed one of the floatie boards from the deck. She sat on the edge of the wooden slats and slipped into the water, savouring its chill, the smell of algae. Using the board to keep herself afloat, kicking with her legs, it wasn’t difficult to pull Hailey along after her.

The other girl was dead weight already. Her eyes were glassy and unfocused. She muttered something that might have been ‘don’t’, but she wasn’t strong enough to resist.

Inside Alice, there was a welling of euphoria. Hailey belonged to her. She would belong to her forever. *She’s giving me her life.*

They were in the middle of the loch now. Alice ducked under the water and tugged Hailey's leg, playful. Laughter, a bubble underwater, broke from her mouth. She tugged Hailey's leg again. Just a joke.

When Alice resurfaced, Hailey was spluttering. Something of the old tiger had come back. 'Don't fucking do that again.'

Hailey made a spasm of an attempt at swimming away, but she wasn't strong enough. Alice pushed at her shoulders, holding her under the water. Hailey squirmed and flailed, but it was no good.

Alice pushed her down beneath the surface again. She cradled the other girl's head against her chest and murmured, 'Shh, shhhh...'

The moon slipped behind a cloud. For a moment, out on the water, it was completely dark. The stillness was dreamlike. The only thing that broke the silence was the gurgle of Hailey's last breath.