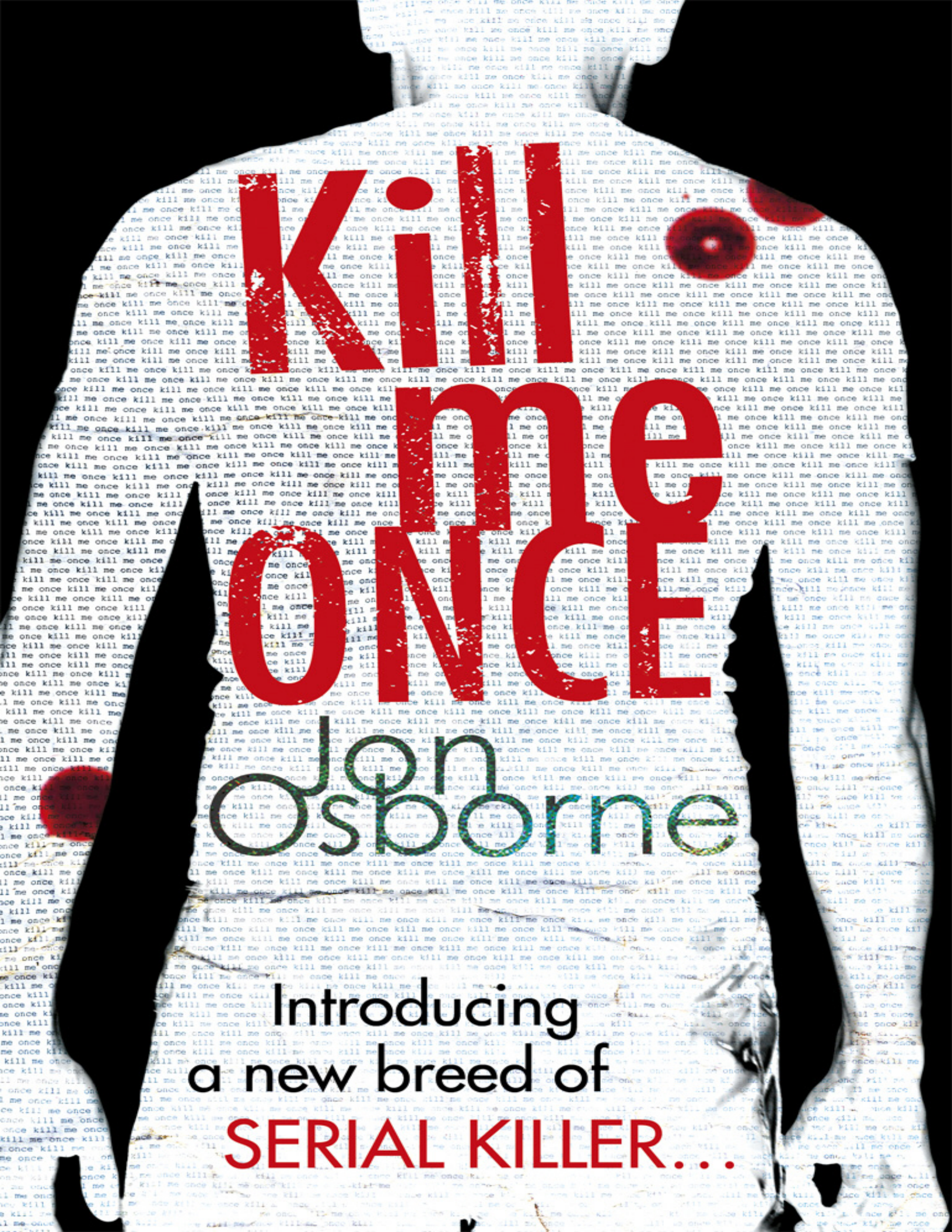




Kill me once

John Osborne

Introducing
a new breed of
SERIAL KILLER...



KILL ME ONCE

JON OSBORNE



arrow books

About the Book

'Terrifying, suspenseful and genuinely original, *Kill Me Once* will chill you to the bone' Karin Slaughter

Nathan Stiedowe is seeking perfection – and he has been learning from the best. Recreating some of the most sickening murders in history, his objective appears chillingly simple, but his true motive remains unclear.

On the trail of this sadistic monster is FBI Special Agent Dana Whitestone. Driven by the brutal childhood slaying of her parents, Dana's relentless pursuit of the most evil and twisted criminals has seen her profile many violent cases. But never has she encountered a maniac as demented as Stiedowe, or a mind as horrifyingly disturbed...

Fiction

www.rbooks.co.uk

Contents

[Cover](#)

[About the book](#)

[Title](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Part I: Becoming Richard Ramirez](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

Part II: Channelling Dennis Rader

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Part III: Updating Richard Speck

Chapter Thirty

Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Thirty-Two

Chapter Thirty-Three

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Thirty-Six

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Chapter Forty

Chapter Forty-One

Chapter Forty-Two

Chapter Forty-Three

[Chapter Forty-Four](#)
[Chapter Forty-Five](#)
[Chapter Forty-Six](#)
[Chapter Forty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Forty-Eight](#)

[Part IV: Reprising David Berkowitz](#)

[Chapter Forty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Fifty](#)
[Chapter Fifty-One](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Two](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Three](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Four](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Five](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Six](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Fifty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Sixty](#)
[Chapter Sixty-One](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Two](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Three](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Four](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Five](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Six](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Seven](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Eight](#)
[Chapter Sixty-Nine](#)
[Chapter Seventy](#)
[Chapter Seventy-One](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Two](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Three](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Four](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Five](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Six](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Seven](#)

[Part V: Reshaping John wayne Gacy and Redeeming Nathan Stiedowe](#)

[Chapter Seventy-Eight](#)
[Chapter Seventy-Nine](#)
[Chapter Eighty](#)
[Chapter Eighty-One](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Two](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Three](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Four](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Five](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Six](#)
[Chapter Eighty-Seven](#)
[Epilogue](#)

This eBook is copyright material and must not be copied, reproduced, transferred, distributed, leased, licensed or publicly performed or used in any way except as specifically permitted in writing by the publishers, as allowed under the terms and conditions under which it was purchased or as strictly permitted by applicable copyright law. Any unauthorised distribution or use of this text may be a direct infringement of the author's and publisher's rights and those responsible may be liable in law accordingly.

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781409038498

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Arrow Books 2011

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Copyright © Jon Osborne 2011

Jon Osborne has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work

Apart from references to actual figures and places, all other names and characters are a product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition, including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by
Arrow Books
Random House, 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road,
London SW1V 2SA

www.rbooks.co.uk

Addresses for companies within The Random House Group
Limited can be found at:

www.randomhouse.co.uk/offices.htm

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 9780099550921

As everything, for Khloe

KILL ME ONCE

Jon Osborne has been a newspaper reporter for a decade, most recently for the *Naples Daily News* in Florida, where he covered everything from bake sales to triple murders. He is a veteran of the United States Navy. He is currently at work on his second thriller.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First thanks goes to my wonderful literary agent, Victoria Sanders, whose tireless dedication to this project provided the rock-solid foundation. She truly is the best, and I will be eternally grateful for everything she has done. Also to agency Editorial Director Benee Knauer – whose countless reads and structural suggestions were invaluable – and to up-and-coming agent Chris Kepner, who I know will have a long and outstanding career in the industry. Thanks, everyone, for hanging in there when the seas got choppy.

To everyone at Random House UK – especially Kate Elton and Georgina Hawtrey-Woore. From the first phone call to the final edits, Kate and Georgina embodied the genteel side of publishing I always imagined existed, and I couldn't ask for better editors or nicer people to work with. Thank you, ladies, for everything. Thanks also to Nick Austin for his wonderful eye for detail.

To author Jeff Shelby – who showed me how a true pro does it. Also to retired FBI agent James Jessee, who selflessly ensured that all the procedural elements were in place. I still owe you that dinner, Jim.

Finally, I would like to thank my family. My parents, Richard and Della, made me the person I am today – so please direct all complaints to them. Thank you, Laura Osborne, for changing my world for the better the first time I laid eyes on you. We'll always be like 'peas and carrots'! To Madison and Justin, for letting me in, and to my sisters – Kathleen, Elizabeth and Julie – for sharing my childhood and making it so much fun to be a kid.

PART I

BECOMING RICHARD RAMIREZ

'I love to kill people. I love to watch them die. I would shoot them in the head and they would wiggle and squirm all over the place, and then just stop. Or I would cut them with a knife and watch their faces turn real white. I love all that blood.'

Richard Ramirez, aka 'The Night Stalker', who murdered at least thirteen people between 1984 and 1985.

CHAPTER ONE

Los Angeles - Friday, 12 November - 10:30 a. m.

Red, orange, yellow; green, blue, indigo, violet. Of all the colours in the rainbow, orange was by far Nathan Stiedowe's least favourite, but on this morning it was making itself blessedly useful by warming his skin.

Thank God for small favours.

He stared directly up into the blazing ball of fire in the sky, not blinking, not feeling pain in his eyeballs like a normal person would. Then again, he'd always been different, hadn't he? Different and *weird* - or so he'd been told countless times since childhood by his parents and schoolmates.

Legend had it that he didn't cry upon receiving the painful round of inoculations all children received as one-year-olds. Not a single tear. The nurses were amazed - and horrified - by his complete lack of reaction when the sharp needle punctured his baby-smooth skin.

What the hell was wrong with him? they frantically wondered, fear in their voices as they scurried about. *We must run more tests immediately.* It was just plain *weird*. *All* babies cried.

Not Nathan.

Then there was the time in fourth grade when he'd broken his ankle in three places while playing soccer on the playground during recess. His terrified classmates had actually *heard* the bone breaking - or so they'd breathlessly

informed the playground monitors – a loud crack that had sounded like a thick dry tree branch snapping underneath enormous pressure. But Nathan hadn't cried then, either. Not a whimper. Like everything else in life pain was only a state of mind and if your mind was strong enough you could simply block it out. Didn't anyone understand that?

The names had followed after that, of course. Names that would stick with him throughout the remainder of his schooldays. Freak. Nutcase. *Weirdo*.

Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me.

Nathan smiled sardonically. Who cared what they called him, anyway? To paraphrase old Billy Shakespeare, what the hell was in a name? Did a rose by any other name not smell as sweet?

These days the hopelessly childish nickname they'd pinned on him was 'The Cleveland Slasher'. For Christ's sake, how cartoonish was that? But as usual a press corps hungry to sell more papers had gone straight for the jugular. With Nathan's journalism background he understood that better than most, even if he knew that *he'd* have done a much better job chronicling a case that could surely land the right reporter with the proper motivation a goddamn Pulitzer Prize.

Nathan shook his head. *Fuck it*. In the grand scheme of things names were of little consequence here. The only thing anyone needed to know about him was that he'd soon be considered the most perfect serial killer who'd ever lived. And once he was done sharpening the thorns on this particular rose – sharpening them to the point they drew *gallons* of blood – it was something they'd never forget. Not his parents. Not his former classmates. *Especially* not the thieving bitch in Cleveland, Ohio, who'd so carelessly stolen his life all those years ago.

But first there was work to be done, so that was the primary task of the day.

Nathan had already had a busy morning – an exquisitely beautiful fifth murder followed by the long plane ride back out to California – but a killer's work was never done, was it? Not for the good ones, at least. Certainly not for the *best* one.

Running was a strange way to prepare to kill people, but he knew he had to do it if he wanted to be the best there'd ever been. And he *did* want to be the best. God knew that much. Ever since he was a little boy (*freak, nutcase, weirdo*) he'd always felt the need to contribute his own special slant to the events of the past. To erase the jumbled chalkboard and start over from scratch. To make things better than they were. To make them *clean* again.

This morning it was hill repeats in Los Angeles's Griffith Park under the steady California sun. Hill repeats sucked ass, especially for a man Nathan's age. Spring twenty-five yards up the steep incline, jog down and repeat. The thighs would burn and ache like they were on fire, the chest would gasp helplessly for air and the sweat would pour in endless rivers down the back.

Most athletes would do this drill ten times, maybe fifteen if they were seriously world-class and really looking to build up a strong aerobic base. But that wasn't enough for Nathan. Never had been. He knew he had to push himself harder, faster and *longer* than all the others if he truly wanted to be the best killer of all time, so he forced himself through an agonising twenty trips up the steep hill before finally beginning the short jog back to the cheap motel he was temporarily calling home.

Running was the key for this one. It would establish him as a real player and set the tone for the other murders to come. And unlike most people out there running away from

their own fucked-up pasts – *chickens running around with their heads chopped off* – he was running toward his future now. Running *for* his future. At least that was what he kept telling himself. Hell, one of these days he might even get around to believing it.

But it was fucking *hot* outside. Nathan had no trouble believing that. Over the past couple of days an Indian summer had slapped LA around like a husband would a mouthy wife, taking her by the throat and throttling hard. Eighty-eight degrees and air so heavy with humidity you could probably wring it out like a saturated washcloth if only you could get your fingers around it.

The sun was the sizzling yolk in the centre of a robin's-egg sky, beating down on his head like a solar jackhammer wielded by an especially malevolent god as he struggled out of the park on cast-iron legs a good ten times heavier than when he'd first started out this morning. But at least the exquisite fatigue in Nathan's aching muscles let him know that he'd accomplished *exactly* what he'd set out to do.

He knew there was no way in hell that Richard Ramirez had trained like this for *his* killing spree. Fat fucking chance. Wan and gaunt, with hollow cheeks sucked in around twin dead eyes, the only time when the Night Stalker had probably ever run was to the nearest corner store when he'd been looking for another pack of off-brand cigarettes to further pollute his wheezing lungs.

Nathan shook his head and chuckled to himself as he left the park. *The Night Stalker*. What a joke *that* was. When you really looked at things with a critical eye, it was amazing that Ramirez had ever been given a nickname at all.

Outside the park, his rubber-soled Nike cross-trainers slapped rhythmically against the cement and pushed the

hot pavement back in consistent five-foot increments. Reaching up, he slid an annoying layer of perspiration away from his eyes and frowned suddenly. What the hell had been Richard Ramirez's problem, anyway? How could he have let himself be so fucking careless? So goddamn *unprofessional*?

If you wanted to become a master of your craft – to become a killer so far above reproach that not even your harshest critic would utter a single bad word against your work – all it took was a little bit of thought, a little preparation, a little goddamn *discipline* to get it right. What was so hard about that?

Absolutely nothing, that was what. If you wanted to be the best then you had to swallow your pride and become a student of the game first. That much went without saying. And if nothing else Nathan had always been an extremely diligent student, carefully studying even the tiniest details of how the heavyweights who'd come before him had operated inside the killing zone.

That was why he was going to be the best there'd ever been. It was as simple as that.

Lost in his thoughts, the bouncing breasts fifteen feet away knocked him out of his reverie and back onto the cracked sidewalk snaking its way along the boiling shore of the Pacific Ocean. Seagulls squawked noisily in the blue sky above and a strong westerly wind heavy with sea salt whipped hard through his full head of thick brown hair as he summoned up his best smile and nodded to the pair of attractive college-aged blondes jogging by in the opposite direction. Wearing matching sweat-soaked sports bras and barely-there Adidas running shorts, the little sluts held up their flawlessly manicured hands and smiled back at him in return.

Kill the right way, they seemed to be telling him.

Nathan chuckled again when they had passed and lowered his head, forcing himself to pick up his pace despite the fingernails of pain clawing at his sides. Hell, if even the stupid whores out here in sunny Southern California knew that much, just *what*, exactly, was so goddamn difficult about the equation?

Again, nothing hard about it in the least. Nothing to give him the slightest pause or reason for concern. There was no room for conscience here. Killers killed: it was what they did. It was their *job*, for Christ's sake. The good ones never got caught. The best ones were still talked about hundreds of years after they themselves had given up the ghost. But there was only room for one at the top of the heap – the unquestioned dominant lion of their special pride, as it were – and that was a title Nathan fully intended to claim for himself.

Now it was time for the dominant lion to show off his sharp white teeth and let out a thunderous roar.

Finally back at the run-down motel fifteen minutes later, Nathan couldn't help flinching at the building's outward appearance – dull, square, busted-up, a real shithole from ass to elbows – but he knew the anonymity that it provided was well worth the sacrifice of having to live there.

Waves of reflected heat shimmered up from the baking pavement like a troupe of drunken belly dancers in a crowded bar while he carefully picked his way through the rusted-out cars littering the blacktopped parking lot. Datsuns, Cadillacs, Chryslers – even a forty-year-old Pinto featuring a smashed-in back window. Moments later Nathan's taut calf muscles were bouncing him up the concrete stairs on the outside of the building two at a time like a pair of stiff new pogo sticks until he reached the third floor, where he pushed open the rickety wooden door to Room 312 and locked it behind himself before kicking off his brand-new running shoes and tossing his room key onto

the queen-sized bed that was covered by an especially garish paisley comforter.

Sweat poured down his temples as he sat on the bed and peeled off his ankle-length socks. He sighed contentedly. The lack of air conditioning provided a temperature exactly how he liked it best.

Hot.

It was one of the main reasons he'd come to LA, though certainly not the most *important* one.

His Oakley board shorts, plaid Armani boxers and soaking-wet Billabong T-shirt came off next. Completely naked now, Nathan rose to his feet and strode over to the full-length mirror in the corner to check himself out.

I look stronger, he thought, admiring a shredded midsection positively *rippling* with lean muscle. *I bet I could outrun an entire goddamn country if I really wanted to.*

But it would be just a small group of people he'd need to outlast tonight.

A cold rush of adrenalin flooded into his loins at the thought, and he felt himself begin to harden slowly. Only a few more hours left now until he'd find out if all his hard work and meticulous preparation were going to pay off. It had taken the laying of a lot of irritating groundwork, to be sure, but now that he had the attention of the thief back in Cleveland, tonight frightened little girls all around the Renaissance City could rest just a little bit easier as a result.

Nathan laughed out loud – a deep, throaty laugh that filled the room and vibrated his vocal cords like the strings on a perfectly tuned bass guitar. If they'd tried, could they have possibly picked a grander nickname for Cleveland – a city widely considered the shittiest place to live in all of the United States?

He shook his head to clear the thought away. No matter. As he'd established earlier, names were of no consequence here. And for better or worse he'd moved his one-man act on to the bright lights and fertile hunting grounds of LA. Soon he'd be recognised as the very best serial killer who'd ever lived. But for now it was simply time for the greatest show on earth to begin truly in earnest.

Lights.

Camera.

Action.

CHAPTER TWO

Cleveland, Ohio – 8 p.m.

What unspeakable things my eyes have seen.

The line from an old TV movie flashed through Dana Whitestone's mind as she slipped on a pair of paper shoe-covers and watched a balding forensic photographer named Doug Freeman lean in for a close-up of the little girl's spilled intestines. The flashbulb popped brightly once, followed by the electric sound of rewinding film. Not for the first time, Dana wondered how Freeman had the stomach for his job. How did *any* of them?

A uniformed Cleveland cop nodded to her and scribbled something down on a clipboard. As the first person at the crime scene he was responsible for establishing the perimeter, closely monitoring everyone who entered and exited. The fewer people inside the yellow tape the better the chance of maintaining integrity.

They were on the seventh floor of a Section-8 apartment complex on the east side of Cleveland, the hardest hit sector of a hard-luck city recently named the second-poorest metropolitan area in the country. Last year they'd been Number One but this year Detroit wore the tinfoil crown.

Dana had been on a dinner date downtown when she'd received the call but she hadn't been especially sad to leave. For all their silly commercials, Match.com had slim offerings in the boyfriend department. Still, idly picking at a dozen mild chicken wings and washing them down with a

quick succession of ice-cold Miller Lites while an overweight accountant from Parma stared at her breasts across the table had to be better than *this*.

She tied a paper mask over her mouth and nose and glanced around the apartment to make sure that everyone else was wearing the proper protective gear. Dana didn't want to miss out on the chance of catching a killer simply because somebody in the room had a cold. 'What's her name?' she asked.

The photographer looked up with his own mask tied on, making him look like a crestfallen surgeon documenting a hopelessly botched job. 'Jacinda Holloway,' he said. 'Eight years old.'

'Who found her?'

'The mother.'

'Where's she now?'

'Hospital.'

'Nervous breakdown?'

'You got it.'

Dana crossed into the room along the established entry/exit point - a crucial element in all crime scenes - and knelt beside Freeman for a closer look. Automatically shifting into investigator mode, she popped two pieces of Citrusmint Orbit into her mouth to mask the smell of beer and pulled on a pair of thin latex gloves.

She reached out a hand and lifted a slender wrist six inches off the floor, then did the same with a swollen ankle. No need for emergency medical care, that was clear, and Dana was thankful the EMTs had recognised that. Few people compromised crime scenes more than medical personnel. Not that Dana blamed the EMTs for their zeal. Saving lives *was* the most important consideration, after all - even more than catching killers.

She squeezed her fingers gently around the girl's ankle and frowned. Full rigor mortis had set in, indicating that she'd been dead for about twelve hours. Dana glanced down at her watch. At eight a.m. the little girl should have been in school learning her times tables, not lying dead in a pool of her own blood. Still, school wasn't always Priority Number One in this neighbourhood. That said - why hadn't the mother found her earlier? And why had the little girl been left unsupervised in the first place? She was only eight years old, for Christ's sake. Much too young to look after herself.

Doug Freeman read Dana's thoughts. 'Drug problem,' he said. 'Apparently the mother left last night and didn't come home until a couple hours ago.'

Dana shook her head. The killer had probably been watching the little girl for weeks to know that the mother would be gone all night. No doubt it was a common occurrence with the woman. But when she'd left last night she'd let the fox slip right into the henhouse unimpeded and that had cost her daughter her life.

Dana forced back the anger she felt rising in her chest and continued to examine the body. The undersides of the little girl's arms and legs looked bruised, a purplish colour where the blood - no longer circulated by a beating heart - had settled into dense pools beneath her soft skin. *Lividity*, they called it.

Dana glanced down at her watch again and estimated the time of death at eight a.m. before jotting it down in her notebook. Extensive documentation was a focal point of the US Department of Justice's *Crime Scene Investigation: A Guide for Law Enforcement* - the research report that had come out in 2000 under the then Attorney General Janet Reno. Even though each federal agency had its own idiosyncrasies, as a general rule they all tried to follow the guide when it came to matters of evidence identification

and protection. For her part, Dana considered it nothing less than her personal bible.

The manual was a step-by-step explanation of how to process crime scenes, and Dana had memorised it early on in her career. Some people kept diaries as a way of chronicling their lives. Not her. If anybody ever wanted to see a record of *her* existence, all they had to do was take a look at the cardboard box in the back of her closet – the one filled with a hundred notebooks similar to the one she was holding right now.

Shootings. Stabbings. Strangulations. They were all in there; all filled with questions pertinent to each case, some of them answered, too many not.

Where exactly had the bullet entered the skull? In the front or back? Which ribs did the knife separate before piercing the wildly beating heart? Had the killer used a cord to choke the life out of his helpless victim, or had he simply used his bare hands to get the job done?

The notebooks were what defined who Dana was now. Not much of a life, she knew, but at least she was still alive, which was a hell of a lot more than she could say for poor Jacinda Holloway.

The little girl's naked corpse had been posed, frozen in death in the middle of some perverse jumping jack: arms lifted in a V over her head; thighs forced three feet apart below her mutilated torso. A broken-off broom handle jutted from between her legs.

Dana gritted her teeth and slid her stare over the length of the defiled body. Viscous fluid leaked down from the little girl's split-open belly to the tiny hairless triangle between her toothpick-thin brown thighs. Her brown eyes were fixed and staring straight ahead, slightly rolled up into the back of her head as if she was trying desperately to look at her

own eyebrows. The look of surprise etched on her small brown face would remain there for ever.

There had been a time in Dana's life when a horrific sight like this would have wrenched her perceptions adrift and caused the entire room all around her to melt rapidly away into some sort of surrealistic Dali painting. But those days were most decidedly in the past: she was a consummate professional now - right down to the point where it had robbed her of the ability to express even the most basic human emotions. Anger wasn't an option for her. Not any more. Neither was grief. Emotions only got in the way.

If you never cried, your vision never got blurred, right?

She stretched her neck and looked sideways at Freeman. 'You done yet?'

The photographer got the message at once. *Pound sand.* 'Yes, ma'am. She's all yours.'

Dana gave him a small smile that never quite reached her pale blue eyes - not that he could see it through the mask, anyway. 'Thanks, Doug.'

The room was buzzing with harried crime-scene technicians bumping shoulders in their haste to catalogue every last carpet fibre in the place, but a quick once-over told Dana everything she needed to know. Ritual child killing. Posed body. Grotesque sexual molestation.

The maniac who'd already murdered four little girls around Cleveland had struck again.

She slid her tongue across her teeth in disgust. They'd been after the Cleveland Slasher for three months now but hadn't come up with even a solid *clue* yet, which was highly unusual in serial-killer cases. Normally these guys were so focused on taking care of the raging hard-ons poking out of the front of their pants that they left more than enough evidence behind to point out their identities. But that

wasn't the case here. Not with this guy. He was different. Something other than the overwhelming compulsion to control weaker people through sex was driving him to kill.

But what was it?

Dana shook her head to clear the thought away and forced herself to concentrate on the task at hand. Sighing, she quickly ran through the facts they knew: five dead bodies in ninety days. All five little girls under the age of ten. All five raped with a broom handle and split right down the middle like autopsy patients. As far as evidence went, the cleanest crime scenes she'd ever come across.

But maybe even this guy – as good as the bastard undeniably was – was starting to get just the tiniest bit sloppy now. In his apparent rush to leave the apartment he'd left the murder weapon behind this time – a wickedly serrated hunting knife coated in dark dried blood that now lay on the uneven floor right next to the lifeless little body that he'd so viciously hacked to ribbons.

Transfixed by the sight of the weapon, Dana was immediately stung by just how *insignificant* it looked. No more than six inches long with a cheap plastic handle. Something you could easily pick up at Wal-Mart for the grand total of fifteen bucks.

How could something so mundane do so much irreversible damage?

She turned to a passing crime-scene tech and pointed to the knife. 'Has that been photographed yet?'

The woman nodded. 'Yes, ma'am.'

'Good. Could you bag it up for me now? I'd like for you personally to take it over to the lab for analysis.'

The woman bristled, looking slightly irritated at the assignment.

Dana lifted her eyebrows. 'Is that going to be a problem?'

The woman blushed. 'No, ma'am.'

'Great. Thanks a lot. I really appreciate all your help.'

As the female tech bagged the knife Dana quickly scanned the rest of the room. Five feet away from the eviscerated corpse a silver-framed photograph sat on a chipped mahogany end table next to a plastic-covered couch. Yesterday Jacinda Holloway had been an especially beautiful little girl. A tiny little thing with a toothless grin. No more than three-five or six, sixty pounds soaking wet. Big glossy brown eyes and a round angelic face accented by tight intricate hair braids and an array of colourful plastic barrettes that sprouted from her head like cornstalks.

Today was a different story.

'You OK, Special Agent Whitestone?'

Irritated by the interruption, Dana swivelled her head to the left and watched a Cleveland cop lean over with a pair of long metal tongs to pluck a bloody white surgical glove off the floor. Sergeant Gary Templeton straightened back up and held the glove in front of his eyes for a closer look. 'Sick bastard coated the inside with moisturising lotion again,' he reported grimly.

In his early forties, Templeton, a decorated fifteen-year veteran of the force, had been at each of the four previous murder scenes, finally requesting FBI assistance after the third one. Normally it was the smaller departments that asked for help from the feds - lab personnel and facilities were just too expensive for them to afford - but Cleveland PD was large enough to maintain those resources for itself. What they needed here was *investigative* help, so Dana had been assigned to the case, effectively taking control.

Following 9/11 the FBI's role had changed dramatically. They routinely worked more closely with local law enforcement now, partnering up even when there were no direct federal implications. One thing was for sure: they'd come a hell of a long way since the 1960s, when J. Edgar Hoover's guerrilla tactics had the Kennedy administration shaking in its boots. These days the feds and locals were at each other's disposal practically upon request, with little of the boundary-protecting or rancour that had defined their relationship in the past. There were still pockets of resentment on both sides, of course, especially when the FBI barged into local investigations uninvited, but that wasn't the case here: when Templeton had noticed the similarities at the Holloway apartment to the previous murder scenes it had been he who'd called Dana away from the crowded bar.

Dana looked him over again. Close-cropped silver hair framed a rugged face punctuated by piercing blue eyes. Hard muscles like croquet balls strained against navy-blue shirtsleeves. The first time she'd laid eyes on him three months earlier she'd instantly pegged Templeton as a pumped-up Richard Gere with a gun, spliced with a healthy dose of Clint Eastwood for good measure. An excellent cop and definitely not the kind who spooked easily. So when she'd heard his voice on the other end of the line when he'd called her to the scene earlier in the night she'd immediately known that the Cleveland Slasher had struck again.

The moisturising lotion the killer was using was an old trick. It had been the same thing at each of the four previous murder scenes. He always left one glove behind, always coated it with lotion to absorb the oil on his finger pads and prevent them from lifting prints. Normally fingers moved around inside gloves sufficiently enough to smear prints and make classification almost impossible, but this