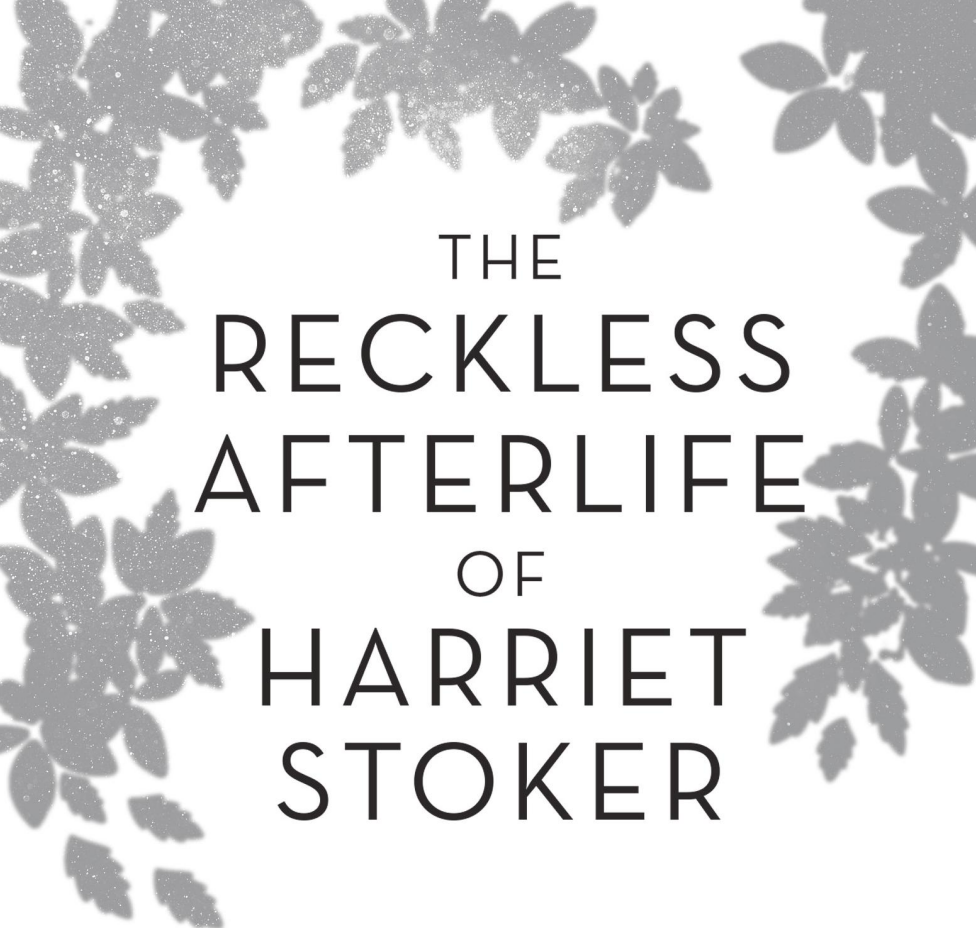


WHAT IF DEATH IS ONLY
THE BEGINNING?



THE
RECKLESS
AFTERLIFE
OF
HARRIET
STOKER

LAUREN JAMES



THE
RECKLESS
AFTERLIFE
OF
HARRIET
STOKER

LAUREN JAMES

WALKER
BOOKS

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or, if real, used fictitiously. All statements, activities, stunts, descriptions, information and material of any other kind contained herein are included for entertainment purposes only and should not be relied on for accuracy or replicated as they may result in injury.

First published in Great Britain 2020 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2020 Lauren James

Cover illustration © 2020 Lisa Horton Design

The right of Lauren James to be identified as author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This book has been typeset in Fairfield, Arial, Ubuntu, Verdana

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, taping and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-9112-1

www.walker.co.uk



It started with the grandmother.

Or did it? I get the order of things confused sometimes. There were a lot of deaths at one point, but they happened at the end. At the beginning, there was only one death. The girl with the camera.

I had known she would be coming for nearly four hundred years, but I still wasn't ready when she finally arrived.

The first time I saw her was when the Cavaliers and the Roundheads were marching into battle. The girl was doing yoga on the fire escape.

I think it was just after Felix...

But, no. That comes later. Let's go back.

Chapter 1

HARRIET

Twenty minutes before her death, Harriet Stoker stared up at the hazard signs peppering the entrance of Mulcture Hall. The signs were very informative, stating in huge black letters: *DANGER – DERELICT BUILDING! THIS BUILDING HAS BEEN FOUND TO CONTAIN ASBESTOS; UNSTABLE STRUCTURE – UNAUTHORIZED PEOPLE FOUND ON THIS SITE WILL BE PROSECUTED* and *DANGER OF ELECTROCUTION!* Harriet was impressed. Confident of her life choices, she began to climb the chain-link fence.

Harriet thought that even when newly built, Mulcture Hall must have looked like a place where architecture came to die. The colourful graffiti covering the pebbledash walls didn't detract from the overwhelming greyness of the old halls of residence.

She picked her way carefully through nettles to the entrance. It was nearly dusk, so she used her phone to shine a light through a crack between the plywood boards covering a window.

When a face lunged at her from the other side, Harriet

skidded back on her heels. She laughed. It was her own reflection.

She inserted a crowbar into the gap. The board came loose in a cloud of cobwebs and sawdust, and the glass of the window smashed with the first tap of her crowbar. With her hands wrapped in her woollen scarf to protect against the broken shards, Harriet climbed through.

Her stomach was squirming in excitement. She'd been imagining this moment for weeks, wondering what might be inside the building when she was supposed to be paying attention to lectures or helping her gran with housework.

There were endless legends about Mulcture Hall, passing from final-year students to freshers in a decades-old gossip chain. It was rumoured to be a local drug dealer's base of operations, *and* the entrance to a secret underground government facility. It was also apparently haunted by the ghosts of students and workers who had died here back in 1994. Supposedly, the halls hadn't been demolished yet because the Biology Department was running some kind of long-term experiment on fungal growth. Harriet wasn't sure she believed any of the myths.

The building smelt worse than she thought it would – a foul mix of damp and urine. The stairwell was filled with beer cans and ashes left by other trespassers. Wrinkling her nose, she took a picture with her expensive camera, which she'd borrowed from the uni's photography department. Her lecturers would probably think the mess was artistic.

Climbing the concrete steps, she peered up over the

banister at the remains of the roof several storeys above. Then she turned and looked at the first floor. There were doors falling off their hinges along either side of a narrow corridor. The nearest had been propped open, but someone had kicked in the lower half.

She slid through the narrow gap between the door and the frame, trying not to get dirt on her clothes. Harriet always chose her outfits very carefully. Today, she was going incognito, so she was wearing a charcoal-grey shirt tucked into khaki trousers.

A thin mattress was rotting on the floor of the small student bedroom beyond. Rubbish had collected in gaps between floorboards – a mix of bottles and crisp packets and the springs of an armchair. The walls were black with moisture.

Harriet took pictures of the intricate cracks in a greenish mirror; an enamel sink turned orange by the steady drip of the tap; neon graffiti distorted by peeling paint like a long-lost cave painting.

It was even better than she'd imagined. For her last photography project, Harriet had submitted half a dozen pictures of the ducks by the campus lake. Her feedback had said that even the most technically proficient pictures were unsuccessful if there was no emotional resonance. She'd only got sixty per cent for it. While Harriet didn't mind being called emotionless, she did want a good grade. Anyway, that wouldn't be an issue this time – the building was unbelievably atmospheric.

She climbed the next two floors, peeping around open

doors into other wrecked and ransacked bedrooms. The building had the sad, historical gloom of a bombsite, she thought, rolling phrases for her report through her mind.

In a tiny kitchenette on the fourth floor, there was an ash-tray on the counter, still full of a squatter's half-burnt curls of Rizla cigarette paper. Next to it lay a yellowing newspaper. She peeled open its mummified pages, catching sight of the words *Diana* and *Blair* before the paper collapsed into fragments.

FELIX

Felix heard the music first, drifting faint and muted from headphones as someone walked past. It took a huge effort for him to summon up the energy to open his eyes. When he managed it, there was nothing left of the intruder but a line of footprints in the dust.

Someone was here. *A human*. They must be playing music on a Walkman.

It had been so long since he'd last seen someone come inside the building. He'd imagined this moment for ever, but now that it was happening, all he felt was – tired. He was *exhausted*.

Felix should probably investigate the stranger. But the stairs alone seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle. Whoever it was would probably find their own way out. There was nothing in Mulcture Hall any more, not for a human.

Felix closed his eyes and drifted back to sleep.

HARRIET

Harriet adjusted the focus of her camera to capture a fern growing out of the top-floor banister, its fronds curling towards the light from beyond the collapsed roof. She caught a glimpse of darting movement in the periphery of her vision and spun around. Glass crunched under her feet, as her heart tripped over itself.

There was nothing but her own shadow, cast across the stairwell in the last remnants of twilight. She needed to calm down. The building was making her skittish. She was alone here. She was safe.

Harriet's phone rang, distracting her from the shadows. She pushed back her headphones to answer.

"How do you get iPlayer up again?" her gran asked, instead of a greeting.

Harriet patiently guided her grandmother through the process of selecting *Autumnwatch* on BBC iPlayer – a nightly occurrence.

She should tell her gran where she was. She had been the one to suggest Harriet come to Mulcture Hall to take photos for her project, after all. They'd walked past it when they'd toured the University of Warwick campus on an open day the year before. But her gran definitely hadn't meant that Harriet should come here alone, at night. She would be worried about her safety.

When she heard the theme music of *Autumnwatch* playing,

she said, “I’ve gotta go, Gran – I’m finishing my photography coursework. I’ll see you later.”

But her gran had already hung up. She hated it when Harriet talked through her favourite programme.

Norma had raised her ever since she was ten, after her parents had died. When she’d been accepted into university, Harriet had originally paid for a room in halls on campus, wanting to live away from home for the first time. But a few weeks before classes had started, her grandmother had tripped fetching the post in the morning and broken her ankle.

Harriet had cancelled the rent payment so that she could live at home and look after her. It was only a thirty-minute commute to the university, and the campus library was open all night, so she always had somewhere to go after the bars had closed. She never opened any of the books, but the WiFi connection was very strong, which was all she ever needed anyway. At least there, she didn’t need to go to bed at 9 p.m. so that she didn’t keep her gran awake.

Harriet usually filmed make-up tutorials in the stacks, recording herself contouring her cheekbones against a background of law books. It was less embarrassing to do it at night, when the only people who saw her were exhausted PhD students running on caffeine. She could handle talking to them. It was the students her own age who made her nervous.

It was starting to rain through the broken roof, in cold, heavy drops that ran straight down the nape of her neck. Shivering, she suddenly missed her overly warm room at home. She could

picture her gran sitting under a blanket on the sofa, with the electric fire roaring and the cat stretched out on the hearth.

Twisting to watch the flight path of a plane as it passed overhead, her foot caught on something. Harriet tripped over the edge of the stairwell, with nothing below her but five storeys of open air and the concrete floor of the foyer. She dropped her phone, throwing her hands out to grab on to something.

Her heart thundered. Her camera fell first, unhooking from around her neck and crashing to the ground into a thousand shards. Then Harriet followed.

It happened too fast for her to scream anywhere except inside her own mind. Her head bounced off a jutting steel beam, spraying blood as she twisted over once, twice before she landed with an audible crack of bones on the floor.

A pool of blood dripped from the split in her skull, gathering on the lurid green moss. Everything went black.

There it is. The death that started it all. It's interesting, seeing it from this angle. I've only ever seen it from the past before. It would have been easy to stop it happening. Just a little bit of pressure here and there – a nudge to take her down the stairs instead of walking up them. And nothing would have happened the way it did.

Father was always doing things like that when he was here. And later, when he...

Sorry, sorry, you don't know about that yet, do you? I suppose I should go in chronological order. Everything just makes more sense if you look at it backwards.

For now, let's go back to where Harriet Stoker is lying in her own blood. She's undeniably, irrevocably, dead. Below her, a fern is being slowly crushed. Above her, the shadows are gathering to watch.

FELIX

Felix flung open his eyes, gasping. A golden burst of energy spread through him, shocking him awake. He jumped up, shuddering like he'd just had a shot of caffeine.

What had...?

The intruder. The one with the music. Something must have happened to them. He hadn't felt fresh energy like this in decades. He hadn't expected to ever feel it again.

Felix ran through into Kasper's bedroom. To his relief, he was awake too. Felix couldn't imagine anything worse than being the only one to wake up.

"What year is it?" Kasper asked, opening one eye to squint at Felix. He was shirtless, stretching his arm over his head. The muscles all along his torso lengthened and contracted. There was a shock of blond hair in his armpit.

Felix exhaled. "Last I remember was 2009. You?"

"2011 – a cat died in here. You were sleeping."

Felix was disappointed he'd missed a cat ghost – and then felt promptly sick at the rush of emotion. His feelings kept changing so fast, and he wasn't used to it. He'd spent so long suspended in sleep, feeling nothing. When he was low on energy, he barely even dreamed.

The world was a lot to process again after all that time. Had the fresh air blowing through the window always smelt so rich? Had Kasper always smiled so widely? Felix almost couldn't bear to look at him.

Rima flew in through the open window, glowing with energy too. "Someone new has arrived!" she yelled. "Get dressed, get dressed!"

"What year is it?" Felix asked her. It couldn't have been that long since the cat. He had a brief memory of snow, fluttering in through his window. Winter had been and gone while they slept. Maybe it was already 2012.

"I have absolutely no idea! Have you seen Leah? Where has that girl got to? Let's go! I need to find Cody!" She twirled, jumping into the air and running through the door.

Kasper looked at Felix, raising an eyebrow. "Business as usual with Rima, then."

"I think we could be here for an eternity and she wouldn't change," Felix said. He took a deep breath, trying to control the deep wave of love that rolled over him. He'd missed them all – Kasper and Rima, Leah and Claudia. After so long starved of them, listening to their voices was like drinking rich cream.

While Kasper pulled on his shirt, Felix turned to examine himself in the mirror by the bedroom door. The glass had a crack down the centre. That hadn't been there the last time he had been awake. Then, the vines on the windows had only been tendrils, creeping up the bottom of the glass pane. Now they covered the room in green foliage, flooding over the carpet.

Perhaps it had been longer than he'd thought. They could have been dreaming for decades, sleeping through the days as

empty shells of their old selves. It was hard to tell when he still looked the same. He'd always be eighteen, just like the day he'd died.

Felix folded his crinkled collar back into place, then took off his glasses, rubbing them clean with the hem of his plaid shirt. He wasn't entirely sure how they managed to get so many smudges, considering he was incorporeal. It was one of the eternal mysteries of ghosts – and glasses.

Kasper nudged up against Felix's back and rested his chin on Felix's shoulder as he rearranged his hair in the mirror. He licked a thumb and smoothed his eyebrows flat. "Ready, loser?"

Felix folded his hands over his cuffs. It was starting, then. The peace between them never lasted long. "If you're done primping."

He let himself look at Kasper, feeling that deep ache in the centre of his chest. Had he really had these kinds of emotions constantly, before he fell asleep? Surely not. He wouldn't have been able to stand it.

Kasper walked through the door. "Let's go see who brought us back from the brink, then."

HARRIET

When Harriet woke up, the headphones around her neck were still blasting Janelle Monáe. She lay still for a moment, replaying the darkening sky, the sudden loss of balance as she tripped

over something unseen, the flash of brightness as she fell, and then nothing.

She could hear voices. She was surrounded by people, talking quickly. Arguing.

She must be in an ambulance on the way to the hospital. The voices were paramedics discussing her injuries. It was likely she was seriously hurt. She might have broken her leg, or worse. She couldn't feel anything, which had to be a bad sign.

She tuned in to their conversation, trying very hard not to panic.

“...can't just leave her lying—”

“You would say that! You always think that—”

“Oh, because what you think is so much more—”

“Would you two just shut the hell up. It's not—”

“Are we actually fighting about this right now? She's not even cold yet!”

There were so many voices she couldn't keep track of them; they were all talking over each other. She opened her eyes. For a moment, everything was blurry. She blinked, and her vision cleared. She was staring at a mouldy breeze-block wall. The voices around her went silent.

“H-heyyy...” someone said.

Harriet flicked her gaze around until she found the speaker – a short girl wearing a hijab and a nervous expression. There were three people huddled around her, none of whom were paramedics – in fact, they looked like students. They must have heard her fall and come to investigate. She relaxed.

Maybe she wasn't badly hurt, after all.

Clearing her throat around a lump of something dusty and thick, she asked, "What happened to me?"

They exchanged nervous glances with one another. A black boy in a neat plaid shirt said, "Are you – are you OK? You had an accident."

Harriet rubbed her eyes. She knew she probably *wasn't* fine. She ought to be in serious pain right now. But she didn't have a single ache or pain. "I was ... falling."

"You remember?" The boy adjusted his tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses. There was a smudge on one of the lenses.

Another boy spoke. This one was white and much more muscular, with a rugby player's shoulders and rakish blond hair. "Why *wouldn't* she remember?"

"Well, I don't remember when I di—" the other boy began, until his friend cleared her throat warningly. He cut himself off. "Di-di-ha. Uh – well, no, not as such..." He trailed off into silence.

While Harriet watched this display, feeling a little perplexed, the rugby player stared at him in disgust. "Chill out, Felix. Jeez."

"You're the one who needs to chill out!" Felix retorted.

Harriet didn't have time for this. She struggled to her feet, feeling just a bit off balance rather than injured. She must have hit her head, because her bun had been knocked to the side, but there wasn't the tender spot of a bruise.

"You fell from the top floor," the girl said to Harriet,

squaring her shoulders and looking determined. She was wearing a pyjama top that said *HERE FOR THE DRAMA!* in pink glitter cursive writing.

“But how did I survive? I would have died.” Harriet folded over into a lazy forward bend, testing herself for injuries. She wasn’t hurt. At all.

The girl looked embarrassed. “Yeah. Yeah, you would have.”

“So ... did something catch me?” Harriet stretched her back, running through a few other yoga poses as she tried to decide whether it was possible that she was in so much pain she couldn’t feel any of it.

The blond boy grimaced. “You died. You’re dead. Sorry, mate.”

“I’m...?” She must have misheard him. There was a lot going on – it was to be expected.

“You’re dead; we’re all dead,” he said.

Clearly, they were members of a Role-Playing Society or something. What other kind of students hung out in an old abandoned building during their spare time?

“Right. OK. Well, I’m just going to leave, so you can all get back to ... whatever—”

“You can just take a look at your body if you don’t believe us,” Felix said, gesturing behind Harriet and then quickly rubbing the back of his neck. “It’s a bit gory.”

Harriet sighed. She supposed she could play along, if it would get rid of them more quickly. She turned around. When she swallowed, the dusty lump was back in her throat.

Lying on the floor in a puddle of congealing blood was her body.

Harriet fought a surreal sense of dissociation. The world rolled around her as she tried to resolve what she was seeing with everything she knew to be true about the universe.

She was here. She was there.

She was dead.