

THE
DARK
WITHIN
US

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

To follow
T

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Cunningham', with a stylized, flowing script.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM

Publisher

Chicken House

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For Jade, obviously.



THE TWINS

Chloe-Lee and Joey were in a warehouse on an abandoned industrial estate when social services found them, about as far north and west in England as it's possible to go without a) crossing the border into Scotland or b) falling in the sea. How they got there no one could say, not least because the children themselves seemed to have no intention of telling.

The social-work team set up an emergency fostering arrangement with their newest recruit, one Martha Garstang, the site manager at the nearby Elrick Park holiday centre. This arrangement, agreed over steaming mugs of tea in hushed tones, was for the best. The trauma of it – living in a draughty old warehouse! That had to be the reason they were so – well, none of the team wanted to use the word, but it hung over their desks anyway – *creepy*.

The fresh air and serene greenness of Elrick Park should do them good.

Decision made, all that was left to do was paperwork. Not usually anyone's favourite task, but also somehow worse today because no one wanted to be in the team's cheerless, windowless interview room with these children.

Ultimately, a social worker named Jim drew that shortest of straws, leading the small children into the claustrophobic space. He kept the door open and let them sit closest to it, as per protocol, trying to ignore the sensation of being trapped in there with them.

'How old are you, Joey?' Jim asked.

The little boy took a seat on one of the grey plastic chairs, glanced over at his sister and grinned a closed-lipped grin before replying.

'How old do we look?'

Jim, for what it's worth, was newly qualified and perhaps oughtn't to have been handling a case this delicate. Perhaps, therefore, he could be forgiven for not responding that Joey stop being so bloody facetious and just answer him.

The thing is, as Jim *looked* at Joey, he wasn't sure the little boy seated in front of him was a little boy at all. The clothes didn't help; Joey had on a pair of corduroy trousers the colour of damp sand. He had a long-sleeved white shirt made of heavy linen, and braces held the trousers up at the front. Hanging over the back of his chair was a tweed jacket, the kind with leather elbow patches.

Where the hell the kid had found one of those to fit

him, Jim had not the foggiest. The fact he sat there in his shirtsleeves also revealed something else: on the inside of one of Joey's wrists was what appeared to be a tattoo. Which was impossible: who would tattoo a child? And yet there it was, a fine-line rendering of a feather.

Overall, the effect was of someone significantly older than the youthful boy sitting in front of him on a plastic chair, swinging his legs.

His sister was no better. She also had a wrist tattoo, perhaps even stranger than her brother's, depicting as it did an anatomically correct human heart.

The tattoos had to be those temporary ones you sometimes saw inside lollipop wrappers. It was the only explanation, because they could absolutely be no older than . . .

'About . . . ten?' Jim hazarded.

'Really?' Joey seemed surprised. 'I suppose ten will do. Don't you think so, Chloe-Lee?'

'I'm happy to be ten for the time being,' the girl replied with a sharp nod.

'We'll probably be ten for a while,' Joey warned her.

'So be it.'

So, Jim – rather out of his depth but relieved to have an answer – marked them both as being ten on his forms.

'Do you know your parents' names?'

'Not really, no,' Chloe-Lee answered. 'I should think they're dead by now. What kills most ineffectual human parents?'

'Oh, er . . . I don't know.' Jim swallowed, sure he *should*

have this information, but in the presence of the twins, all his training seemed to have flown out of his head. He was, however, confident that even if he could remember, it would not be appropriate to tell Chloe-Lee.

‘In that case, I suppose you ought to write that. We don’t know our parents’ names or whereabouts. At any rate, they won’t be back for us.’

She smiled at him then, and Jim recoiled. Not because of what she said, although it *was* strange, but because for the first time he noticed Chloe-Lee’s teeth – straight, white, and uniformly, terrifyingly, pointed.

The blood leeches from his skin as his eyes swung over to Joey, also grinning, also displaying the same row of shark-sharp teeth. To his horror, the children blinked, and when their eyes slid open again, they shone gold, from edge to edge.

‘Are you OK, Jim?’ Joey asked.

‘Um, I, er . . . I’m not sure I feel very well.’

‘Don’t worry about that,’ Chloe-Lee soothed. ‘Just write what we tell you to, and then you can go home and have a rest. How does that sound?’

‘That sounds great.’ Jim swallowed.

‘Good lad,’ Joey said.

So, the forms were signed off. The children expressed the desire to never see their parents again, even if they showed up (which they never did), and they skipped off to explore Elrick Park with their new carer, Martha Garstang.

Eventually she adopted them, giving them her

surname, and Jim remained their social-work contact – but to his immense relief, he was rarely asked to go anywhere near them.

Just as well, he told his boyfriend as they lay there in the dark, feet entwined beneath the sheets, because, well, all that happened over ten years ago now, and yet last time he was up there they still had those tattoos.

Worse still, they hadn't aged a day.



JENNY

In Jenny's defence, the demon caught her at a low point. Several low points, actually.

For starters, she didn't even want to be at Kai's Halloween party, except she'd fallen out with her auntie's boyfriend again and had nowhere else to sleep that night. Kai's taste in music was predictably rubbish, all bleepy-bloopy Scene Kid crap composed on Game Boys. By the time she arrived the booze was already out, and it also seemed everyone else had received a memo she hadn't: it was fancy dress. She glanced down at her black skinny jeans and oversized hoodie and reflected that if she'd dressed up as anything, it was 'Caspian Sanderson's girlfriend'. It was his hoodie, after all. She should probably think about giving it back at some point.

As if none of this was bad enough, as soon as the party

host saw her his face broke into what she could only describe as a 'leer', and he swaggered forwards, skinny legs encased in jeans so tight he looked like a stork, top half covered in a red and brown striped jumper several sizes too big for him.

'Oh,' he gloated. 'Turned up after all, did we?'

There was a long label peeking out from the hem of his top, so she reached for it, reading it before answering.

'I'm still not going to shag you, Generic Slasher Villain. And definitely not in your nan's bed.'

'Yeah, yeah.' He grinned, leaning in as though closer proximity to the overpowering smell of his aftershave was going to make her change her mind.

Ugh. Why were teenage boys the worst?

She sidestepped Kai's advances and made a quick turn into the living room. She knew it was the living room because as a kid, Jenny came here all the time. Before puberty and hormones and arrogance got involved, she'd actually kind of liked Kai Hodges.

But Kai's nan had just moved into a residential village, and the house wasn't due on the market for another week. At school, Jenny had heard him telling people this party was 'What she would have wanted – bit of a goer in her day, my nan.'

Which seemed unlikely, somehow. Kai's nan was their Sunday school teacher.

Still, there was something reassuring about the geography of the flat. It reminded her of being that innocent, Sunday-school-going kid, before she realized her family

wasn't even religious and just liked the free childcare. Before her dad got sick of playing happy families and pissed off, never to be heard from again. Before her mum stopped trusting people, all people, even her own daughter.

Careful, she warned herself. *No one wants to be the sober, crying girl.*

Jenny was only here tonight because she needed a distraction from all that. Idly, she wondered what her old Sunday school teacher would think about having a living room full of slutty cats and last-minute zombies.

Already, the party felt like a mistake. What she had wanted was a repeat of the old days, before her life got so complicated. A piss-up with some mates. If she got tipsy enough, she might even use some of her precious remaining credit to text her ex-boyfriend and tell him she was sorry about the other day. Maybe they could talk. Maybe he'd sneak her into his room like he used to, and maybe this time she'd give him what he wanted. Better Caspian than Kai Hodges, after all.

But things had changed. Tonight wouldn't go like that.

For one thing, when she stepped into the living room, she was surprised to find Caspian already there. He was dressed in something that could either have been a vampire's cape or one of his bedroom curtains, but even in costume, her eyes found him immediately.

Weird, she thought, *he doesn't even like Kai.*

As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she frowned. It was definitely Caspian, his long, lean silhouette folded into

a corner with a can of Carling in one hand and in the other—

Hang on.

Why did he have his arm around Amber Coombs?

Neither of them noticed her. They gazed at each other, a tiny smile playing on Caspian's face. Amber laughed, her hand pressed on Caspian's chest as though she needed to stabilize herself against him, fake blood dripping from her chin and into her corseted cleavage. As usual, she was wearing so much eyeliner she was more raccoon than girl. But Caspian wasn't making snide comments about this tonight. No, right now he was watching Amber like she was the most fascinating person he had ever met, as though if someone had yelled 'Jenny's here!' he would have asked 'Jenny who?'

Jenny's heart clenched behind her ribs. He broke up with her less than a week ago. What was he doing? She took a step back and hit the wall. She couldn't take her eyes off them, couldn't stop the flush of heat crawling over her skin, couldn't even find the energy to do what she really wanted, which was to snatch off the hoodie she was wearing – Caspian's hoodie – and *set it on fire*.

As she watched, Amber's face was suddenly very close to Caspian's.

Oh, no. Of all the people – of every human being on the face of the planet – why was he doing this with Amber?

She watched her ex-boyfriend lean in and kiss her ex-best friend.

She sensed tears coming, felt the tell-tale prickle behind her irises, and at the same moment noticed there were other people in the room too, their eyes flicking between her and them. Waiting to see how she'd react.

She sucked in a deep breath, straightened her spine against the wall, and pulled the hoodie off over her head. Underneath she had on a thin cotton band T-shirt; *The Bronx* spelled out in cracked white lettering. She dumped Caspian's hoodie on the orange and brown carpet and walked back out of the living room.

She stormed out of Kai's nan's front door into the cold of the cul-de-sac, blinking back what could only be tears of rage because they sure as hell weren't tears of anything else, thank you very much. Her glasses steamed up, heated by her cheeks. She couldn't see, but that didn't matter. She just needed to get away from the scene burnt into her retinas, of Caspian, and his tongue, and the way it slid, slick, into Amber's mouth.

Which is probably why she marched smack-bang, nose-first, glasses-ouch into the sternum of a demon. Or at least, she assumed that's why he had a pair of tiny prosthetic horns at his hairline.

'Jesus!' she snapped, reeling, rubbing the bridge of her nose where her glasses had dug in on impact.

'Not quite,' the demon grinned.

Other than the horns, he was dressed entirely normally, blue jeans and a faded Beatles T-shirt. She squinted up at him, noticing the way his floppy blond hair fell over the

subtle spikes. Possibly a little *too* subtle for this party, as costumes went, but that wasn't Jenny's problem.

'Are you all right?' he asked, a touch belatedly.

'Not really, no,' Jenny replied.

He didn't move, continuing instead to block her escape from the absolute hellscape that was Kai's house party.

'Right, well, it's been a real pleasure meeting you,' she said, 'but I have somewhere to be, so . . .'

'No, you don't,' the boy said, a crease puckering his forehead.

'Um, what?'

'You don't have anywhere to be. I mean, you *are* Jenny Hall, right? As in, "semi-homeless, directionless and angst-ridden with a chip the size of Blackburn on her shoulder" Jenny Hall?'

'And who the hell are you?' retorted semi-homeless, directionless and angst-ridden with a chip the size of Blackburn on her shoulder Jenny Hall.

'Duh,' he said, jabbing his finger up to his forehead. 'I'm a demon. And I'm here to make you a deal.'

Jenny did not have time for this.

'Whatever,' she snapped and tried to walk round him.

The demon's hand shot out to grab her arm, and she felt a familiar flash of blind rage. Before she really considered what she was about to do, she smacked him on the side of his head. Hard.

His face registered surprise, which wasn't unusual. Lads – they never expected her to hit them. Surprise was common, that and a moment of panic that someone might

have witnessed their pain at the hands of a five-foot-two emo kid.

Not that she was emo, obviously. She wasn't – it was just people sometimes *said* she was, what with the skinny jeans and the faded green dip dye in her otherwise mousy hair.

But just because she liked Fall Out Boy and Panic!, that didn't make her emo. She also liked crashing guitars and loud, screaming punks – but no one ever made *that* into an integral part of her personality, did they?

It wasn't like she punched people all the time. Mainly it happened when lads called her emo, or on the couple of occasions someone had tried to slide their hands under her clothes without permission, because apparently girls weren't real, with feelings and boundaries, and therefore didn't mind if their bodily autonomy was violated. Sometimes, Jenny reasoned, a quick jab to the ribs was necessary to show them she existed.

Usually they brazened it out, acted like her puny little fists hadn't caused them to so much as flinch. After all, girls who aren't real can't hurt you, can they? Sometimes they'd get angry at her when she hit them, but mostly they laughed it off, maybe even started flirting again, to prove they were fine.

The boy/demon/whatever responded differently. The surprise on his face lasted only seconds before melting into something else. He smiled, a self-satisfied kind of grin as though he'd at last found the missing piece of some invisible puzzle. He blinked, and there was something

wrong with his eyes – the black from his pupils blossomed outwards, ink on tissue, until there was no white left in them. Just a sheen of oily black from edge to edge.

‘I found you.’

‘Er, what?’

She had to admit, that trick with the eyes was cool, some kind of contact lenses or something, but this wasn’t a LARPing kind of party.

She was about to tell him exactly this when he yelled, ‘Zilch! I found her!’

‘*Don’t* call me that,’ a voice snapped, and as Jenny watched, some shadows from a neighbour’s hedge detached themselves and stepped forward.

‘What have you come as?’ Jenny asked as the shadows revealed themselves: a girl, as tall as the demon boy, but with an expression on her face as dark as her hair. She, at least, was wearing a proper costume: black leather, skin-tight on her legs, and a matching top that looked more like armour than clothing.

The girl ignored her, turning her sour expression on to the blond boy.

‘I think you’ll find *I* found her, Luc Pyro.’

Luc – since apparently that was his name – glanced slyly at Jenny. When her eyes met his, he winked.

‘Jenny Hall, meet Zillah Sixth Daughter, one of the elite Succubae of All Hell.’

‘Uh, hi,’ Jenny managed weakly, not entirely sure how to explain that whatever fictional universe they were referencing, she hadn’t read it.

Then Luc added in a stagey whisper, ‘Don’t let her scare you – she’s just a necessary evil.’

‘Well screw you very much too,’ Zillah muttered under her breath.

Evidently, Luc enjoyed winding up the scary leather girl, because his grin widened, and Jenny stared at his mouth. Not because he had a pretty smile (although he did), but because his teeth looked sharp.

It wasn’t something Jenny had ever noticed in a person before. A wolf on TV, sure, but not a human. And yet, that’s what held her attention. Shiny, white, sharp.

He switched the full beam of his pleasure on her, and next time he spoke his voice dropped lower, intimate. She had to stop herself leaning forward. *All the better to hear him, my dear.*

‘Your life doesn’t have to be squished into a bin bag in your aunt’s living room, you know.’

The shiny jet black of his eyes locked with hers, but it wasn’t his gaze that held her still, it was the words dripping from his mouth.

‘I can offer you something that this place . . .’ here he indicated the cul-de-sac Kai’s party had spilt into, ‘never will. I’m offering you a chance, Jenny Hall. To regain what you’ve lost. There’s an abyss inside you. An emptiness. You’ve known that for a long time, haven’t you? I can help. Come with me.’

His words rolled through to her bones, tempting. *What if . . .* but something primal told her to stop listening.

She sucked in a breath; Luc blinked, and the spell cracked.

‘Are you offering me drugs?’

If he was offering her drugs, she might even apologize for hitting him.

Zillah, who had been watching this conversation with something suspiciously like bored indifference until now, snorted.

Luc shook his head. ‘I’m not a drug dealer. I told you – I’m a demon.’

‘Don’t be a prick,’ Jenny sighed. ‘I can’t deal with this tonight.’

All at once, she was exhausted. She just wanted to go *home* – even if she wasn’t sure where that was.

Luc’s face fell. ‘You don’t believe me?’

‘Of course not!’ Jenny snapped.

Zillah muttered something that sounded a lot like ‘Told you so.’

Sick of this whole thing, Jenny moved to walk past Luc the Demon and Zillah Sixth Daughter.

‘Wait,’ Luc said.

Against her better judgement, she did.

‘At least think about it,’ he said. ‘You can find me at the funfair. You know, if you change your mind.’

‘Sure,’ Jenny said, laying the sarcasm thickly over her tongue as she walked away. ‘Or, you could go shag yourself.’