

CHAPTER 1

THE WATCHER

ONE MONTH AHEAD: OCTOBER

IN the hooded darkness, he watches from a high window. Staring into the night. October has begun and leaves twist and fall. Between the trees he has an almost perfect view of a nearby street, and one particular house, the one with the black door.

Sometimes he sees the people in it come and go. Then he knows when the house is empty. Or when only one person is in it.

It is someone he thinks about often now, perhaps too often for his own good.

He is reading his notes. Notes about many things. About everything in his head. Or almost everything. In a notebook with creamy, thick, unlined paper, which he has bought for exactly this purpose.

Some of the things he writes are painful to remember and hard to put into words. There is a wetness on his cheek. He brushes it away angrily and takes a deep

breath, hardening his mouth and the muscles in his jaw. His eyes narrow.

He has almost reached the hardest part of his work. He feels in a hurry to move on but he must be patient. Precise by nature, he is military in his need for order, and things must be just right.

And now he has something else to consider, someone else. This has begun to intrude and to worry him. He wishes he did not need to think about it but he feels partly responsible. Guilty.

Trickles of rain run down the window. Stretching the stiff fingers of his left hand as if in pain, he touches the glass and traces the wriggling lines as they slither.

He stops watching and turns to something else. He needs a break from his note-making. There is something he had wanted to do earlier in the evening but he had made himself wait, tantalizing himself. Now he allows himself this small treat. He takes a pen with a good nib and begins to write slowly, on a small card, in well formed letters: *Odonata Anisoptera Libellula forensis*. And he blows the ink dry before placing it next to the insect sitting waiting in its plastic box: his new dragonfly.

He smiles. His insect collection has a new addition.

CHAPTER 2
INTRODUCING
CAT MCPHERSON
SEPTEMBER

ON the surface, life seems good for Cat McPherson. It is, you might say, perfectly imperfect – if it was perfect, people might be jealous of her. It has all the imperfections that keep her normal.

She is pretty, though she doesn't think so herself. She thinks her eyes are a murky grey, though someone more creative might call them steely dolphin blue; her nose, she thinks, is too long, though it isn't; she'd like her hair to be a paler blonde, even though many people pay good money for the colour that is naturally hers.

She's not annoyingly clever, though she can do well enough when she works. She isn't good at maths, but, let's face it, many people survive without being good at maths. She has all the normal worries, stresses, things to bug her, parents to say no to her more often than she'd like; but nothing she'd really need to wish away.

Personality-wise, she isn't perfect either. She's often

angry inside, or snappy or self-centred or wishes she was someone else or had different parents or more money or a whole new wardrobe. Or could eat chocolate without getting fat.

Pretty normal.

She has a younger brother – so, no, her life is *not* perfect. Perfect would be if he was older, and had fanciable friends who would fancy her. Instead of which, he's twelve years old, cocky and plays the saxophone, a lot, loudly, and irritatingly well.

Cat McPherson is known as a talented athlete. She's going to do it as a career. Everyone assumes. Her parents have nurtured this ambition. They are proud of their daughter's talent. What they don't realize is that the ambition is now more theirs than hers. Cat has had enough of the freezing early morning training sessions, weekends constrained by competitions or more training, loss of a social life, pulled muscles and feeling guilty about eating junk food. She is beginning to be irritated by being pushed and nagged or being told to read articles on sports psychology or books by Olympic heroes.

She's looking ahead – and whereas she used to imagine a life of medals and glory, now she sees regimes and injuries and not being allowed to eat rubbish if she wants. Winning is always important to Cat. It is part of her and gives her a buzz. But maybe that buzz is not enough.

She has not yet admitted this out loud. It is too new.

Well, she may have moaned vaguely about going to training on a rainy day or getting up in the dark

for swimming, but her parents have not taken this as anything important. They have continued to push her, in a normal parently way.

Besides, her grandfather was a brilliant athlete and all her life she has seen his trophies at her grandmother's house and been made to feel proud of him. He'd run in the Olympics, won a silver medal, and only injury had prevented him competing the next time and maybe winning gold. He died five days after she was born and his death was tangled in her birth. There's a photo of her tiny and screwed up in his arms, both of them in the same hospital, his eyes full of misty pain and pride and a huge smile on his face as though nothing would matter to him now that he had held her.

Cat's father is a GP and her mother a psychiatrist at the nearby psychiatric hospital. So they don't struggle for money, though at the end of each month they do wonder where it all went. They have avoided private school fees and they don't go skiing, but things still cost: the kids, two cars, meals out, an annual holiday, a large mortgage in one of Edinburgh's better districts, cosmopolitan Morningside.

It's an area where all sorts of people live side by side: writers and arty types, including some famous ones, alongside old ladies wielding walking sticks like weapons of mass obstruction as they battle their way into the charity shops; and frothy-haired judges, politicians, students, lecturers – all sorts.

It's a safe area.

You would think.

Cat lives in a tall, terraced, Victorian house. There are wooden floors, a Labrador, and a woman who comes to clean every week, wearing slippers and gliding around the house like polish, leaving behind her the scent of orange oil. The family eats together in the evening, though Cat's father is often not home in time: he comes back slightly tense and smelling of antiseptic.

Good, fresh food arrives on the table, usually cooked by her mother, who is not bad-looking, in a forty-five-year-old sort of way, and who will then spend the evening doing whatever women like her do.

Cat's bedroom in the loft conversion is decorated in two shades of purple and has an unused fireplace where Cat is allowed to put her collection of scented candles and incense burners. She has the usual technological gadgets, though not a television in her bedroom. And she's given up arguing about that one.

Her brother, though entirely capable of being intensely irritating, actually could be a whole lot worse. Besides, she is entirely capable of being pretty annoying in return. She practises hard.

All in all, even with the minor imperfections, you'd definitely say Cat was one of life's lucky ones. A winner.

Charmed, almost.

Safe.

Bad things happen to other people.