THE SOCIETY FOR SOULLESS GIRLS

LAURA STEVEN
“But it is the same with man as with the tree. The more he seeks to rise into the height and light, the more vigorously do his roots struggle earthward, downward, into the dark, the deep – into evil.”

– Friedrich Nietzsche
PART I

ROOTS
Every kid has a moment in their childhood when they realise just how terrifying the world can be. A moment when they realise there are far scarier things out there than Big Foot and boogeymen and monsters hiding under beds. For my parents’ generation, it was the Cold War. For my younger cousins, it was the Lockerbie bombing. For my friend Shannon, it was the unconscionable existence of Mr Blobby.

For me, it was when a girl from my hometown died in the North Tower murders.

Janie Kirsopp was a quietly intelligent violinist in her first year at Carvell Academy of the Arts. Her parents had driven her the hundreds of miles from Sevenoaks to rural Northumberland, said tearful goodbyes to their shy, uncertain daughter, and promised they’d have the best Christmas ever to make up for their time apart. Janie had begged them to take her home, said she’d made a mistake and that she didn’t want to be so far away from them, that she’d request a transfer to one of the elite
music programmes in London instead. They had kissed her on
the forehead and told her to stick it out for a couple of months
and see how she felt then.

But before Christmas came, Janie was dead.

Her pretty, hook-nosed face dominated newstands across
Sevenoaks. Photos of her on holiday in the Canaries as a child,
of her toothless primary school picture, of her performing at
the Royal Albert Hall with the National Youth Orchestra.
Splashy headlines about hot new leads, about prime suspects
and grisly forensic evidence.

Yet the notion of murder was still completely abstract to me
until I saw my own parents crying at her funeral. They knew the
Kirsopps from church and had attended Janie’s christening
eighteen years earlier. They could still remember her white tulle
dress, her ivory sandals the size of seashells; her shining, cherubic
eyes as she was baptised. And now her body was shattered at the
bottom of a cold stone tower hundreds of miles away.

That was my before and after. I was only nine, yet my whole
understanding of reality shifted on its axis.

Janie’s death was the second in a string of unsolved murders
that ultimately lead to Carvell’s closure. So my parents
understandably had reservations when I announced, during my
last Michaelmas term of sixth form, that the soon-to-reopen
arts academy would be my first choice of university.

Well, ‘reservations’ is putting it mildly. My mother
threatened to saw my legs off if I so much as mentioned
it again.
At first they thought I was winding them up; playing the kind of cruel joke only teenagers have the genuine apathy to execute. Then, when I was invited to interview, they flatly refused to drive me up. I’d always been bloody-minded, so I caught two or three trains until I was within throwing distance of the campus, then got a taxi the rest of the way.

A shiver had run down my spine as the North Tower came into view from the end of the sweeping driveway, its spires and crenellations silhouetted against a grey autumn sky. There was something so alive about the old convent building; something that swooped and pulsed like a murmuration of starlings. I’d always romanticised the place, despite its history; it brought to mind old parchment and knee-deep piles of crunchy red leaves, cellos and dark windowpanes and snow.

The thing that made me truly fall in love with the campus, swiftly and irrevocably, was the immortal cat. Salem wasn’t immortal in the traditional sense – her body changed with each reincarnation, from scrubby ginger to slender Siamese – but her soul was said to be the same as it was hundreds of years ago, back when the convent was still in operation. She stalked the same route around the priory every day, visited the same wooded glade every afternoon to bathe on the sun-dappled branches, and curled up in front of the same log fire every evening after a little nip of brandy and milk. When I saw her slinking along the windowsill of the chapel on my campus tour – she had been a sleek Bombay black for the last few years – I felt as though I was witnessing something ancient and
sacred, something tapped into a supernatural pulse. I wanted to be part of that more than anything.

Be careful what you wish for, as my beloved Goosebumps books used to say.

Almost a year later, I could practically feel Dad’s apprehension as we pulled up that same sweeping driveway on my first day as a Carvell student. His knuckles gripped the stitched-leather steering wheel so tightly they turned white. I knew he was thinking of Janie – tulle dress, tiny sandals, cherubic eyes, dead body. I knew he was thinking of how he would never survive if that was me. I knew he was wondering if it was too late to fetch my mum’s hacksaw.

After I was offered a place, my parents had eventually come around to the idea of me attending Carvell. They weren’t happy about it, exactly, but nor were they expressly forbidding it. Despite a ten-year closure, Carvell still offered one of the most prestigious and competitive English literature programmes in the country, with published novelists and internationally acclaimed academics among the glittering faculty. There was one eccentric lecturer, Professor Sanderson, who taught a Gothic literature seminar that was rumoured to send students mad. I didn’t tell Mum and Dad about that one.

Plus, the nightlife was practically non-existent – there was just one students’ union and a couple of old-fashioned parlours on the campus – so the chances of me choking on my own vomit or drowning in a river were slim. Then the hockey scholarship sealed the deal.
Still, now that we were actually here, traipsing around Willowood Hall in search of my dorm, I could tell Dad was having second, third and ninth thoughts.

‘Are you sure about this, kiddo?’ he asked, hands gripped tightly around a box of books.

He looked up at the North Tower, squinting against the late September sun, teeth working at the corner of his mouth like they always did when he was nervous. He’d worked in construction for decades, so was no stranger to physical risk of his own, but it was different when it came to me. He couldn’t even stomach watching me play hockey. So now, to be leaving me on the site of Janie’s death, on the day of my nineteenth birthday – the same age she was when she died – was a little too much for him to handle.

I grinned, hoisting my hockey bag further up my shoulder. ‘Of course I’m sure, you goof.’

In truth I was nervous too, but I didn’t want to show it.

The apprehension wasn’t just about the school’s bloody past, or what would happen if old demons came back to haunt it. I was also afraid that I would fail under the lofty academic pressure. Because the reality was that I’d lived in the same small house in the same small town all my life.

What if I didn’t rise to whatever challenges were in store for me at Carvell? What if I was only a great hockey player – and a great writer – in the small world of Sevenoaks?