

Prologue

Am I awake or asleep and does it matter anyway? Day is night and night is day, filled with nothing worth having. Black, all black and nothingness for as far as my eyes can see, which is no distance at all. It doesn't matter where I sit, lie or stand as I've not yet learned how to cope with this relentless, tedious blindness.

I freaked mum out today by telling her I wanted to die. Wasn't being dramatic ... I meant it, but won't be repeating those words to her. Couldn't bear hearing the agony in her voice again. I couldn't see it, but I imagined the pained look in her green eyes. Yes, I still remember what green looks like, and what my mother's face looks like, but it scares me to think I might one day forget. Mum will age. Her copper-coloured hair that matches mine, will turn grey, but now I'll never be able to see it.

My life's in tatters, all down to HIM, that twisted, murdering bastard, Tile X. How could someone I've called my closest friend destroy my retinas with that flash of blinding blue light, the last thing I ever saw, inside the bathroom that had for so long been our sanctuary from the world? Months have passed since then. Every day, I despise him more. Okay, I admit it, I was trying to kill him at the time he blinded me, but I had good reason, didn't I? I did it for the good of everyone in my family, possibly the entire world. Tile X is far too dangerous to have around. There are plenty of blank hours for me to dwell on what he's done, through me. I lie vegetating on the sofa with little to do except catalogue the disasters he's caused, through me.

It started, and ended, in the bathroom inside this family home in Manchester ... what's Manchester to me now? I might as well be existing on the moon as here in Manchester, now that I can't see it. What I'd give to limp around the Arndale Centre again and enjoy the shops and people right now. Wait, what was I saying? Oh, yes ... I was talking to myself about how this mess all started. I do a lot of talking to myself now that Tile X is dead after I commanded him to kill himself. His

weird, otherworldly image vanished off the surface of the two-inch square bathroom tile, leaving just a plain surface. Anyway, that's according to what my brother Tristan told me on that terrible day, just before the ambulance zoomed me into hospital, blind and scared. I wasn't surprised the tile turned blank. That's what happened to the abstract images on the other tiles each time someone died or was injured by Tile X ... and me, of course. I'm almost as guilty as him, but I try to comfort myself with the thought that I was the mostly accidental protagonist, but that evil little bastard was the instigator. If Tile X hadn't reeled me in, my poor dad would still be alive.

The list of deaths and injuries caused by Tile X, with mostly accidental, on one occasion deliberate, help from me, churns over in the dark world inside my head as I lay here on the sofa listening to tedious daytime telly. First to come a cropper was Jake Forsythe from school. Once my bullying enemy, I now consider him to be my only friend. Tile X saw to it that athletic Jake's legs were crushed after I bitched to the tile about Jake badly bullying Seymour Proudfoot, another physically challenged boy in our class. I've limped all my lonely life like Seymour does, so I know all about physical disabilities. Now I have blindness to add to the list of hardships. Fabulous!

Jake has no clue I was the reason he now must use crutches when walking. The doctors had said he's lucky to be walking at all; small mercies. Nobody's even suspected all the terrible stuff I've done after befriending a talking bathroom floor tile about three years ago. You think I'm crazy, don't you? I wouldn't have believed it myself if it hadn't happened to me. I was, and still am, just a solitary, disabled schoolgirl from a poor northern family ... or should I say ex-schoolgirl if I had my way. Scared to return to school as a blind girl with a gammy leg. I'd be a target just as I was before, only more so. I didn't ask for Tile X to talk to me, but he did, every day until the monster blinded me.

Next on my list of disasters was my dad, Keith Drummond, adulterous, dope-head, layabout of this parish — no, stop, I

shouldn't speak ill of the dead. I loved him really, so did mum and his other six kids. Yes, six. I was pissed off with him after he hurt mum by cheating on her with some blonde slapper from around these parts. Made the mistake of blabbing to Tile X about how I wished dad was dead because he'd hurt mum so much by cheating on her. Next thing I knew, he'd frozen to death in a freak snowstorm on Saddleworth Moor. Nowhere else had snow, just the Moor. I'll never forgive myself for that slip of the tongue, but I hadn't meant him to literally die. Just a figure of speech, but Tile X jumped on it.

I wasn't so sad about that vile bully Patricia Blunt's hair setting alight because of her dodgy hair tongs. Can't even remember what I said to Tile X in the bathroom before Patricia's 'accident' but my words certainly were effective. Ha! Sorry, I shouldn't laugh, but you should have seen her afterwards. That'll teach her to be such a vain bully. Poor Jake must put up with the daft bint swooning over him at school now I'm not there. Doubt I'll ever return to that school. Probably end up at some school for blind kids or something, who knows? Doctors say I'm too depressed and in shock to think about studying for now. Suits me. Just want to die.

Then there was big, butch Carl, dad's best friend. Couldn't stand the guy when mum took up with him so soon after dad died, especially after I secretly looked through the kitchen window and caught them at it. Made me want to vomit. They were unaware I'd seen their filth, but I made Carl's life a living hell from then on. When she brought him to live with us, his days were numbered. Can't bring myself to think about how he died in his old van. Blood everywhere apparently. This time, I meant for him to die after he'd slapped me, and told Tile X as much.

I knew then I was a murderer and that another death or injury could very well happen, accidentally, as in dad's case, or deliberately, as in Carl's case. Tile X and I were too dangerous to stay together, which is why I panicked one day and sentenced my tile friend to death, inadvertently sentencing myself to a world of blackness. Just as well Tile X is no more. Wish I was no more if this is all I'm left with. It's so boring

existing with all this nothingness, just lying here on the sofa waiting for mum to fetch Tristan home from nursery and for annoying Lizzie to come crashing through the front door after her day at school. Lucky bitch. If Tile X was still alive, she'd have been next on the list; she's one annoying sister. Wasn't close to dad's other three kids from his first marriage to Carole and never see them these days. My own mum's eldest daughter, Emily, might as well not exist as she's away at university. Technically, I never see anyone and never will now I'm blind ... and it's driving me crazy. Rot in Hell for doing this to me, Tile X, you evil, vindictive scumbag! Second thoughts, if you're in Hell, you'll be feeling right at home.

Chapter 1. A terrible realisation

Serena gasped as the blurry image of her mother's worried face started to break through the swirling darkness that had been the teenager's prison for ten months. Her time confined to her red-brick, terraced home in a busy Manchester street seemed more like decades than months. The frustration at having to grope around in constant inky blackness was relentlessly pushing Serena to the brink of despair.

She felt worse knowing she'd brought her visual disability upon herself by challenging Tile X, her one-time best friend and ally. He'd blinded her as punishment for attempting to destroy him. Serena believed that she'd rendered the two-inch square tile harmless, having paid a terrible price in so doing. Little did she realise that he remained unharmed after she'd commanded him to kill himself inside her bathroom refuge all those interminable dark months ago. How could she have realised? The flash of blue light that had immediately followed Serena's command had blinded her, so she assumed he'd been destroyed just as her sight had been. There'd been no clue that the malevolent tile was now nestling safely, as belligerent as ever, inside her aggravating younger brother, Tristan's, toybox. The ginger, freckly four-year-old had secreted the tile away in the confusion that had followed his sister's blinding.

'I can see! I can see! Well ... I can just about see your shape anyway, mum,' Serena shouted in excitement, leaping up from the sofa where she'd been lounging despondently.

'Really, Serena? That's fantastic!' Beatrice shrieked, grasping Serena's shoulders as though planning to shake the sight back into her daughter's eyes.

'Ouch! You're digging your nails into me,' Serena yelped, trying to pull away to save her skin.

'Sorry — I'm just so excited. Can you still see me?' Beatrice asked, her face alight with anxious smiles. Serena couldn't fully see the smile, but she sensed it.

'You're faint, but I can definitely see a moving head and the shape of your hair. It's like you're floating under water.'

Serena blinked hard and rubbed her eyes. The more she

rubbed them, the wider her smile spread as her mother came more into focus. Serena soon found herself bounced back into the complex world of colours and three-dimensional shapes she'd once inhabited, until that ghastly day when Tile X had punished her so cruelly by stealing her sight.

Serena was clueless her return to the world of the sighted was also courtesy of Tile X. He'd grown bored and restless, lying neglected and unloved in the toy box next to Tristan's bed. The trouble-making, lethal entity lurking within the tile had no interest in trying to ensnare a four-year-old boy like he'd beguiled Tristan's sister. The over-energetic child had been annoying him to distraction with his noisy games and whining. Tile X yearned for the companionship he used to enjoy with Serena. The girl possessed an imaginative, susceptible brain that he'd enjoyed manipulating. He knew there'd be far more opportunity for him to cause mischief and mayhem with Serena as his only ally.

She's been blind for long enough. Hopefully she's now learned never to cross me. We still have much to do. Crushing Jake Forsythe's legs, setting Patricia Blunt's hair on fire and a couple of deaths is not much of a legacy. I'd be letting the side down if I chose to resign myself to festering in this trashy toybox. His Unholiness, The Host, will be displeased with me if I give up and languish here in this jumble of Lego, toy cars and some disgusting unidentified objects, Tile X had thought earlier that day, before deciding to generously restore the gift of sight to an ecstatic Serena.

Oblivious that her former companion remained intact, Serena gave him no credit for the mysterious restoration of her vision. Beatrice and her daughter shed joyous tears of relief. It appeared that the life sentence of blindness had been lifted. Part of Serena feared it might turn out to be a temporary reprieve and she might still be cast back into the claustrophobic gloom at any moment. As the days slid by, it seemed likely that her vision had permanently returned. The entire household heaved a sigh of relief.

Mr Julian Staincliffe, the elderly ophthalmologist, was baffled after Beatrice took Serena to his surgery to be

examined following the return of her sight.

‘You told us that Serena would be permanently blind, yet she can see. How could that have happened, not that we’re complaining,’ Beatrice asked the eye specialist.

Staincliffe hated to admit he had no clue how a destroyed pair of retinas could suddenly revert to tiptop condition. After several tests and much head scratching, the specialist was forced to admit that the fortunate adolescent had been miraculously cured of her serious affliction. Having examined the girl’s eyes whilst she’d been blind, he knew beyond any doubt that her condition had been untreatable and she would remain permanently blind. It troubled him how quickly and thoroughly her destroyed retinas had healed for no discernible reason.

Despite the heat of that summer’s day, a shiver ran down his spine as the two smiling females left his office. Their demeanours were a million miles from the distraught mother and blind, downcast daughter that had turned up in his consulting room ten months ago. He’d listened to their curious tale of a blinding blue light, source unknown, shining inside their bathroom which seemed to have destroyed Serena’s retinas. The ophthalmologist’s unease had nothing to do with Beatrice; it had everything to do with the mysterious aura surrounding her offspring. As it was his last consultation of the day, he stayed on late at work to search his books and the Internet to find similar cases, but found no answers to his niggling questions about her miraculous recovery, worthy of Lourdes.

Whilst Serena had been lost inside her solitary, sombre, unseeing world, a tangible cloud of despair and concern had hung over the Drummond household. Beatrice had been beside herself with stress, fear and concern over her daughter’s uncertain future. The death of Beatrice’s lover, Carl, inside his car in a deluge of blood played intensely with her emotions, the horror of his passing was still keeping her awake at nights. The pain of his loss was a knife relentlessly jabbing at her heart. Beatrice’s world would have been shattered if the twice-bereaved woman had been aware of her middle daughter’s

intentional part in Carl's demise. There was also the matter of Serena's unintentional involvement in the icy death of Keith, Beatrice's husband, on Saddleworth Moor. Beatrice remained blissfully unaware that her daughter was joint murderer with Tile X. Each would have been unable to have killed Keith or Carl without the existence of the other. Serena and Tile X were co-dependent killers, linked forever.

With the blessing of sight now mercifully restored to Serena, the entire household seemed to exhale deeply with relief and joyous gratitude. She was soon well enough to return to school, much to the delight of Serena and her classmate, Jake Forsythe. They'd been badly missing each other's company. When he'd visited her at home during her ten months of blindness, her demeanour had worried him. She seemed to have thrown in the towel, morosely resigning herself to a sightless world. Jake had chosen not to visit her as often as he might have, because Serena had seemed to push him away from her. She'd known that her life would become so different to his and had decided to set him free, so she could suffer alone in silent darkness.

Whilst Serena had been absent from school, Patricia Blunt, much to Jake's dismay, had yet again started to circle around him like the love-sick vulture she'd been before he'd annoyed Patricia by befriending Serena. Patricia, the unpleasant school beauty, now sported a much shorter hair style after Tile X, triggered by vengeful words from Serena, had set Patricia's enviable flowing ebony locks alight with her styling tongs. Although no longer a bully, Patricia refused to relinquish her attempt to win Jake back from Serena, despite the handsome, crippled, teen's lack of interest in her.

Patricia was so full of self-love she refused to believe that Jake didn't also love her. Patricia kidded herself that he was merely hiding the fact extremely well. The truth was, Jake didn't even like Patricia. He was still hampered by his crutches due to his mangled legs. They'd been crushed under the mysterious, unidentified vehicle that had no wheels, according to Jake, that had been sent by Tile X following Serena letting slip a few careless, angry words. Jake still felt ashamed about

how he, leader of a gang of bullies, used to terrorise pupils, including Serena. It was a source of amazement to them both that they were now friends with more in common than their physical disabilities; Serena had limped all her life, but Jake was new to using crutches. Having lost support from his former gang now he was no longer powerful in the school, Jake felt vulnerable and scared of predatory, loved-up Patricia. For an easy life, he occasionally talked in the playground to the raven-haired, precocious beauty, but only under sufferance, not out of choice. She mistakenly took his few words to her as a sign her quarry was madly in love with her.

Jake's heart bounced like Tigger when he spotted a smiling Serena limping towards him on the school bus one Monday morning. Beatrice had kept her daughter off school for a few days to acclimatise to regaining her sight so unexpectedly. She'd feared that the improvement might possibly be temporary, but her daughter's vision seemed perfect, much to everyone's enormous relief.

'Shift your crutches so I can park my bum,' Serena said to Jake with a cheeky grin.

'Christ, I'm stoked to see you!' Jake said, struggling to shove the awkward metal contraptions out of her way so she could share the bus seat with him.

'Ditto. Nearly died of boredom at home. Now my sight's back, Lizzie, Tristan and even mum have returned to their usual annoying selves,' Serena said.

'Hardly believed it when you sent me that Facebook message telling me you can see again,' said Jake. 'Mum and dad send their love, by the way.'

'Can't wait to visit you all again sometime soon hopefully. Missing your mum's macaroni cheese like crazy,' she said, wishing she'd eaten a bigger breakfast because she suddenly fancied a huge plate of the tangy, gloopy comfort food.

The bus chugged up outside the school gates. Serena felt elated as she and Jake limped behind the less physically-challenged pupils. Sadly, the miraculous return of her sight failed to cure her gammy leg. Their disabilities had drawn the unlikely pair together in the first place. Serena had almost

forgotten the fact that Jake had been a bully before his horrific leg injuries, damage that she still blamed herself for; almost forgotten, but not entirely. Jake might still have the capacity to be a nasty piece of work, but she preferred to give the still attractive boy a second chance; it might also work in her favour in the future.

Without the blond, blue-eyed, former football star's friendship, she'd be virtually friendless, although she'd grown closer to Seymour Lightfoot in the months before her sight had been snatched away from her by a vengeful Tile X. Seymour also had chronic problems with his lower limbs, which led Seymour, Jake and Serena to form a kind of disabled Three Musketeers against a harsh world, unsympathetic and often cruel to those inflicted with disabilities of any type.

Seymour's thin, wan face lit up endearingly when he spied his two friends limping towards him as he sat on their regular bench, waiting for the dreaded sound of the school bell that would soon summon them to class.

'Wow! Serena, mate, you can see! I was so scared we'd seen the last of you around here,' Seymour shouted.

He jumped to his wobbly legs, then awkwardly fell sideways onto the wooden bench, having overestimated his physical abilities in his excitement. An unhelpful cheer went up from a nearby group of boys who all used to be part of Jake's gang.

'Whoa! Steady on! We don't want you knackered yourself!' Serena said, pulling the embarrassed boy upright. 'It's great to be back, Seymour. Well, kind of ... we've got bloody Miss Lomax first lesson, according to my timetable. Wish I'd stayed off another day so I could miss the dubious pleasure of one of the cow's Maths lessons.'

Before Tile X had seemingly disappeared from her life, Serena had often thought how wonderfully liberating it would have been if she could have dished out the same sort of retribution to her Maths teacher as Tile X had done when he'd wiped out Carl at Serena's command. In Serena's biased opinion, the vicious, young Maths-wielding harpy deserved to die in a tsunami of blood, as had happened to Beatrice's live-

in, muscle-bound lover, Carl, who Serena had despised.

Serena lay on her bed that night, listening to Lizzie's snores and grunts coming from the bed next to her own. She'd endured yet another run-in with the sarcastic teacher during first period. *Tile X would certainly have come in handy where Miss Lomax is concerned. Just as well I destroyed him or I'd be sorely tempted to ask him to dissolve the witch in acid, or choke her windpipe with abacus beads, or perhaps see to it for her to be stabbed to death with a million compass point jabs. Poke, poke, poke!*

She smiled as she imagined the teacher's screams of pain as the blood flowed. Yes, Serena's hatred of her Maths teacher ran deep. Tile X could feel the negative energy flowing out of his former confidante from his toybox lair across the landing in Tristan's bedroom. He smiled ever so slightly, biding his time.

'We really must get together again soon, Serena,' Tile X murmured.

The muffled, hissing voice failed to completely wake the scrawny young boy lying in the bed beside the toy box, but Tristan heard him nonetheless. He lifted his heavy eyelids for a few seconds, mumbled something nonsensical about Bananas in Pyjamas, then fell back into a deep sleep.