

THE  
DARK  
WITHIN  
US  
JESS POPPLEWELL



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
[www.chickenhousebooks.com](http://www.chickenhousebooks.com)

Text © Jessica Popplewell 2024

First published in Great Britain in 2024  
Chicken House  
2 Palmer Street  
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS  
United Kingdom  
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,  
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

Jessica Popplewell has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs  
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded,  
decompiled, reverse engineered, used to train any artificial intelligence  
technologies, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and  
retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic  
or mechanical, now known or hereafter invented, without the  
express written permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Micaela Alcaino  
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd  
Printed in Great Britain by Clays, Elcograf S.p.A



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-915947-18-5  
eISBN 978-1-915947-20-8

*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 demanding 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 leached 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.