



STOP ME

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CHAPTER 1

On Monday, February 5th 2007 johnnya@apex.com received an email.

howdy doody,

on vacation

slim, attractive dreadlocked babe with a fun sticky-out bellybutton, likes rabbit fur

forward this email to ten friends

each of those friends must forward it to ten friends

maybe one of those friends of friends of friends will be one of my friends

if this email ends up in my inbox within a week I wont slit the bitches throat

can you afford not to send this on to ten friends?

vk

On Tuesday, February 6th 2007 johnnya@apex.com deleted the email without reading it.

johnnyb did the same; johnnyc's girlfriend opened their shared inbox, read the email and was troubled by it. She discussed it with her boyfriend when he came home from softball and he told her to delete it.

johnnyd was thirteen. He added the following:

am forwarding this because it freaks me out. If you want the bitch to die don't forward!!!!!!!!!!

Of remaining johnnies e-z, only sixteen people read the email. johnnyt showed it to his wife. It alarmed them both. They decided it was a sick hoax but forwarded it anyway. They added:

*Sorry about this, folks. This is obviously a practical joke but passing it on. Make your own decision.
John and Pat*

They went to bed but couldn't sleep because of it. johnnyt's wife was furious with him. She'd been against the idea of going online in the first place. Did two people in their eighties really need to have a computer if that's the sort of thing it brought into their home?

Of the remaining fifteen random johnnies the email was sent to, only one more person didn't immediately delete it. johnnyv probably wouldn't have forwarded it but his daughter, who unknown to him was up-to-speed with his iPhone, had opened his emails and sent the message to everyone in his address book.

However, despite the rapid proliferation of the email from its starting point of johnnies d, t and v, on Tuesday, February 13th 2007 a package with a local postmark arrived at the Wyoming Police Department. It contained a bedraggled rabbit skin scarf. Wrapped in it was the boiled jawbone of Cody Solomon.

Even though it had arrived in thirty-eight thousand inboxes worldwide, police in the vicinity were completely unaware of the email. Cody Solomon was an itinerant prostitute with dreadlocks and an inverted navel.

On Monday, November 12th 2007, leosharpe@techflex.co.uk found an email in his work inbox. It had already been forwarded hundreds of times and had reached him because he was in the address book of a small travel insurance company he'd emailed fourteen months previously.

howdy doody,

on vacation in the uk

slim, attractive brunette with capped teeth

forward this email to ten friends

each of those friends must forward it to ten friends

maybe one of those friends of friends of friends will be one of my friends

if this email ends up in my inbox within a week I wont slit the bitches throat

can you afford not to send this on to ten friends?

vk

Leo had heard about the other emails that had been sent. It had been all over the TV news. He knew that vk stood for Vacation Killer and that seven women had been murdered in the US, two in Germany and one in the UK. The story had gradually become more prominent and then front page when it appeared vk had targeted the British Isles. Teresa Strickland had been his first British victim. A customary block email had been circulated ten days before her jawbone had been sent to Wandsworth police station.

He did consider forwarding the email, but instead picked up the phone and reported it to IT. As the hysteria about vk had risen, so had the amount of hoax emails. They told him to delete it.

Ten days later, Vicky Cordingley's jawbone was sent to Southwark police station. It had capped teeth.

A month later Leo was still troubled by his failure to forward the email but tried to put it from his mind as he prepared to tell Laura about the surprise trip he'd arranged as a Christmas present. The Lake District was Laura's favourite destination and Leo had soon adopted it as his. They both enjoyed being alone together and didn't seek the company of others like so many of their friends did. They could lose themselves in its remoteness and not see another soul for days.

A waitress deposited a plate of appetisers on the low table in front of their usual sofa in Chevalier's Bar and Laura thanked her before dumping her coat on the

arm and making her way to the ladies. He anticipated her reaction when she got back, her smile wrinkling the band of freckles across the bridge of her nose and puffing her henna curls from her face to kiss him.

He felt excitement expanding in his chest. He was useless at keeping secrets and marvelled at how he'd managed to keep his mouth shut. They'd both taken the afternoon off for Christmas shopping and the plan was to have a boozy lunch and then go home for a cosy dinner in the evening. After she'd left the house for work that morning he'd also decked out the rooms with a secret stash of decorations he'd been stockpiling – it would all be waiting for her when they got back. Leo nibbled an olive off a stone and, having decided how he would break the news, settled back and waited for Laura to return from the ladies.

At first Leo thought she might have been chatting to Hektor. He was the fifty-something owner of Chevalier's and Greek sugar daddy to a procession of female staff members. His effortless, Mediterranean good looks normally resided nonchalantly between the kitchen and bar. So it was over ten minutes before Leo rose from the sofa and went to find Laura, first checking the different levels of the bar and then tentatively poking his head round the door of the ladies. There was no sign of her.

Laura worked on the first floor of the Opallios office block behind Chevalier's but he knew she wouldn't

be there. He knew before he left the bar by the back entrance, crossed the street and buzzed the intercom to be let in. The rain re-invigorated itself while he waited and pinged off the grill while an incoherent voice asked him to identify himself.

‘Leo Sharpe...Laura’s husband.’

His feeling of dread mounted as he climbed the stairwell, but he had his anger to keep it in check – did Laura not realise how her wandering off would worry him?

When he got to the first floor Maggie Allan-Carlin, Laura’s boss, was there to meet him. He vaguely recalled being introduced to her at an office party some months before.

Laura had worked at Opallios for over two years. The small but prominent company dealt in international metals and minerals markets and Laura was a promising trainee analyst under Maggie, who was co-director and married to its founder, Joe. Maggie was elegant in an angular way, deeply tanned and fifty-something. Her dyed black hair was always drawn back severely from her face and tied in a bun.

‘Leo?’ Her dry throat rasped his name and let it hang in the air as if to test its relevance to the pristine atmosphere in the office.

‘Is Laura here?’ But as he watched a frown attempting to crease her Botox work he immediately regretted wasting his time.

‘Wasn’t she meeting you to go Christmas shopping?’

Leo nodded silently. Maggie began to say something else but he didn’t hear as he was already halfway down the stairs.

He felt prickling spines of unease piercing the tops of his shoulders when he re-entered the bar. He checked the ladies for a second time and didn’t register the protests of the two occupants. Neither of them was Laura. He briefly caught his own reflection in the vast mirror – rain had plastered the hair to his face and panic was soaking through his features. The man who stared back at him was a complete stranger to the shaved, twenty-nine-year-old face he’d been greeted by over the sink that morning.

It was then he realised the un-Laura like behaviour was not her own choice.

He sat back down on the couch and stared at the barely touched dish of olives. He told himself he wouldn’t be angry with her if she came back. A couple hovered, waiting for him to vacate his seat and eventually he snapped at them, telling them he was waiting for somebody. They left but the bar was busy and as other smaller groups of people took their place, they eyed the seats too.

Where had she headed when she’d left him? Leo had no more registered her progress to the ladies as he would have if they’d been at home. The bar was long and narrow but split into three levels. The toilets were

on the middle level. She could have turned into them or carried on into the other bar. Whatever she'd done – even if he tried to watch her from where he sat – she would have been out of sight.

A waitress tried to take away the dish.

'Can you leave that, please?' He looked at her waist.

'Are you going to order anything else?' she replied in the same blunt manner he'd used.

He got up a few moments later and, as he left, turned to see people sitting in the seats and the plates being removed.

He left Chevalier's by the back entrance again, crossed the street and buzzed to be let into Opallios. Over an hour had passed since they'd sat together on the sofa. Laura had said she was popping to the ladies two minutes after she'd arrived. Leo climbed the stairwell again concocting unlikely scenarios that meant she'd returned to the office and would be sitting back at her desk.

'Still not found her?' Maggie's expression had softened and genuine concern registered.

Leo swallowed and shook his head helplessly.

'I'm sure she'll turn up.' She didn't sound convinced. 'Let's see if her car's still here.'

She took him down the back staircase to the staff car park to see if Laura's Peugeot was still there. It was.