

A *SUPERNATURAL THRILLER*

KILLING

A

DEAD

MAN



SIOBHIAN R. HODGES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siobhian R. Hodges is a Leicestershire-based writer, administrator, and author of the new novel ***Killing a Dead Man***. She has wanted to be a writer for as long as she can remember, completing her first novel when she was just thirteen.

Siobhian has a BA (Hons) in Creative Writing and Film Studies from De Montfort University and an MA in Creative Writing from Loughborough University. During her studies, she was both scriptwriter and script editor for *Gatling Gun Productions* – a non-for-profit film company set up by her dad and sister. With her experience in and passion for film, Siobhian's novels and short stories can often be described as cinematic.

Although her debut novel, *Killing a Dead Man*, took ten years to complete, Siobhian has simultaneously been planning and writing six other YA thrillers that we can soon expect to see.

In her free time, Siobhian enjoys reading, long walks with her partner, and raiding the biscuit cupboard! Her favourite authors are Patrick Ness and Kevin Brooks – if you haven't read their work, you definitely should!

Want to know more about Siobhian R. Hodges or
Killing a Dead Man?

Visit her website at
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**For my sister, Aisleen,
and my brother, Ciaran.**

PROLOGUE

FIVE YEARS EARLIER

When I got back to the hotel room, Mum and Dad were furious and Danny was still missing.

The tears had already started and my legs shook so much I could barely stand. Ten-year-olds shouldn't feel this kind of panic. It felt just like one of those nightmares that makes you sweaty and breathless.

Dad stepped forward, gripping my arms to keep me steady. I'd never seen him look so serious. It made my stomach churn. "Where's your brother?" he asked.

"I don't know!"

They were just as worried as I was. Dad ordered me and Mum to stay put and call the police while he searched the streets. He had a picture of Danny on his phone that he was going to show to anyone he crossed paths with. He'd question the whole of Devon if that's what it took.

The hotel door hadn't even closed behind him

when Mum picked up the phone and started dialling. The call didn't last long as long as I thought it would. We waited together but I guess the seriousness of what was happening didn't hit me until the police turned up. Their uniforms terrified me. Back home, Dad was a constable himself, so I was used to being around police – just not like this. They weren't here for a casual chat with Dad; they were here for Danny. That made everything different.

One was called PC Halls, but I forgot the second woman's name as soon as she'd said it. She had red hair, though, like my Uncle Ryan.

Mum pulled me towards her as the two policewomen scribbled stuff down in their tatty black notebooks. They asked me a ton of questions and I answered as best I could, telling them about the kids we'd been with and the game we'd been playing – I knew their names, but I didn't know where they lived. I told them we left the beach even though we promised Mum and Dad that we wouldn't. And then I told them about the forest: the gap in the fence, the brook, the clearing, the barn, the dead tree...

I told them that Danny hadn't even wanted to be there in the first place, that I'd left him, that this was all my fault.

Mum held my hand the entire time. She said nothing as the policewomen explained the next steps they were going to take. She didn't even seem mad that we'd broken our promise.

When PC Halls and PC Red-hair finally left, it

was almost three a.m. I'd never stayed up that late before. Mum closed the door behind them and then turned to me.

“Go to bed, Jordan,” was all she said. No more questions. No more hand-holding.

I don't know if she expected me to sleep. How could I, with Danny still out there? Instead, I closed the bedroom door behind me and shut myself off. *I left him*, was all I could think, *Why did I leave him ...?*

I sat on the floor with my knees propped up, leaning against the wall next to the door at the end of my bed. The light from the living room lit the threshold. Mum was silent and I ended up in a sort of trance, staring at Danny's empty bed through blurry eyes.

I wasn't sure what time it was when Dad came back, but the sun had just started to bleed into my room. Mum burst into a fit of tears, an explosion of agony. I knew exactly what that meant: still no Danny.

I clutched my aching stomach and pressed my face into my knees, suppressing a sob of my own. A stab wound would've hurt less than this.

Days dragged and nights lingered. Time passed but nothing changed. My head was filled with worry and empty of everything all at the same time. The hotel manager said we could stay another week without charge while the police looked for Danny, but we didn't need that long. It was only

five torturous days later, on a sweltering Saturday afternoon, when we got the call: “We think we’ve found your son,” Police Detective Cooper said. He’d taken over the case three days ago. He was the one who told us Danny was lying by a creek in the forest we’d been playing in. Dad went to identify the body.

My brother had been murdered.

* * *

The funeral was back at home in a plain town called Woodlock. There were no clouds in the mid-August sky, just the strong rays from a sun too bright for mourners.

Mum cried into a handful of wet tissues. Her eyes seemed bloodshot all the time now, and her thin face was always red and puffy. She’d stopped wearing make-up, hardly ever washed her hair and seemed to live in the same baggy jumper and jeans. She’d made an effort today, though: black dress, flat shoes, veiled hat. She still wasn’t wearing make-up, but at least her hair was clean.

Dad stood between us, his body locked in place, standing tall but looking twice his age. He stared into the distance as he held my mum, keeping her from collapsing to the ground.

I stood on my own, away from everyone, feeling the full weight of loneliness pressing hard on my chest. I’d stopped listening to the priest. I didn’t believe in all that Heaven and Hell stuff, and I didn’t

need to hear about all the hearts Danny had touched or whatever. I *knew* it was a tragedy. I *knew* he'd be missed. I was living it every damn day. Nobody could put our loss into words. Danny had been taken from us and I wanted whoever did it to suffer in a way no one had ever suffered before.

So far, the police had no leads and hardly any evidence to go on. Whoever did this had covered their tracks well. The case was still open, but it didn't look like the monster would be caught any time soon.

I stared down at the small coffin as it was lowered into the ground. *How the hell did this happen?*

The air was still and – other than Mum crying and the priest priesting – the cemetery was silent. I took a breath. This wasn't right. It should've been *me* in that coffin, forever buried beneath cold dirt. Not Danny.

I balled up my fists, digging my fingernails into the palms of my hands as I imagined pressing something sharp into the killer's empty heart.

That's when I felt it.

A cold hand gripped my left shoulder. The only person close enough to reach me, though, was my dad. I looked up at him, but both his hands were still holding Mum.

My forehead started tingling. I looked away, confused ... And there he was.

It was him. I *know* it was. I couldn't see him but ... I could feel his presence. I know that sounds

weird, but I don't know how else to describe it. It was just a *feeling*, like if you close your eyes in a room full of people you can still sense them there.

The air was cold and heavy where he stood, even when he lifted his hand from my shoulder. I smiled at him and then I felt him smiling back.

“What are you looking at?” Dad asked, finally noticing me.

“Nothing,” I said. I didn't tell him I'd sensed my brother until a week after the funeral. Danny had followed us home and he barely left my side after that. Mum got really upset whenever I brought it up but I could hardly keep quiet about it. They needed to know that Danny was still with us. I'm not sure why they couldn't sense their own son, same as I wasn't sure why they sent me to see a psychiatrist less than a year later. I wasn't crazy or anything. But at least I still had Danny to help me through it all.

CHAPTER ONE

TUESDAY - PRESENT DAY.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

The class gathered round for a piece of the action, encircling me and Matt. Mr Anderson had only left to fetch extra copies of *Othello* but that’s all the time Matt would need to plant a few swift punches in my sorry face. I looked from the grinning crowd to Matt’s hard stare.

“What’s the matter?” he snarled. “Afraid I’ll smash your face in?”

My mouth was as dry as the dust under the supply cupboards. I watched him outstretch his arms and flex his fingers. The gesture was saying *come and get me*, but I wasn’t taking the bait. He was far bigger than me, the result of his deep-fried diet.

“Where’s your imaginary friend now?” he sneered.

“I don’t have an imaginary friend—”

“*Liar*. Kevin said he saw you talking to yourself

again in registration this morning. That's why you don't have any *real* friends!"

He cracked his knuckles, and as I scanned the kids around us, searching for a gap in the crowd, Matt took a step towards me.

He shoved me in the chest and the crowd made a noise.

"Come on, wuss," Matt said, looking me up and down. "Fight back or I'll kick your teeth in."

My palms grew moist. *You'll kick my teeth in no matter what I do*, I thought.

He outstretched his arms again, this time as if offering me an easy shot. I didn't move. Surely, he wasn't serious.

Matt shrugged. "Suit yourself."

His beefy knuckles slammed across my face and the crowd cheered again. Fucking... Ow! I stumbled but managed to avoid the humiliation of falling over. The gloves were off.

I saw Matt ready himself for another punch but when it came, I somehow dodged it. That's when the air turned cooler, thicker, beside me. My forehead tingled and my body buzzed with a new energy. Although I couldn't see him, there was no mistaking Danny's presence.

And there was nothing I could do to stop him intervening. He felt colder than usual – a sign I'd come to recognise as him gearing up for something.

Please, I thought, directing it to Danny. *Don't do anything dangerous ...*

He'd already left my side, though.

"You just gonna stand there or what?" Matt said. He took a step towards me and then seemed to trip on nothing, landing by my feet. The response was instant. Everyone burst out laughing.

"You're in for it now," one of Matt's friends said to me, as though I was the one who'd pushed him over.

I ignored him, stifling a laugh of my own. To everyone else, it looked like he'd lost his balance or tripped on his shoelace. I knew better. He was lucky that was all Danny did to him.

Matt's acne-riddled face was redder than usual with a combination of rage and embarrassment. "Think that's funny, do yuh?" he spat.

He got to his feet and squared up to me. Just thirty seconds ago I would've felt threatened, but with Danny next to me I knew I was safe. I just prayed he wouldn't take it too far this time. My brother was so mad. Goosebumps had formed along my pale arms and I even noticed a couple of bystanders glance up at the closed windows, checking for the source of the sudden draught. It wasn't the weather. Danny was about to unleash an attack Matt would never be able to match.

Matt rolled up his sleeves and I tensed, bracing myself for whatever he had planned. I was trying to think of all the humiliating ways Danny might choose to get back at him when I heard Mr Anderson's muffled voice outside our classroom. It

was over, and Matt knew it.

The temperature in the room returned to normal. Satisfied that Matt was no longer a threat, Danny was gone again.

“It’s a good job your brother’s dead,” Matt muttered. “Otherwise there’d be two ugly wimps I’d have to beat the shit outta.”

He shoulder-barged me on his way back to his desk but the pit of my stomach had already dropped to my feet. He only wanted to get a reaction out of me. I knew that.

My hands started shaking. I couldn’t control it. I ground my teeth together as though trying to crush his hideous words – and then something inside me snapped.

I went for him.

“YOU’RE SCUM!” I yelled, spittle flying from my lips.

The circle of kids was broken, their cries a mixture of surprise and excitement as we rolled on the floor with each other, punching and kicking.

I scored a few good hits and the adrenaline masked the pain from Matt’s blows. I was vaguely aware of Mr Anderson telling us to break it up but my instincts had taken over. Matt was going to get what was coming to him.

We crashed into one of the desks, knocking off somebody’s work and pencil case. My elbow skidded on a sheet of paper and Matt took his chance, ending the fight with three heavy punches before

Mr Anderson managed to drag him off me.

“I said break it up!” Mr Anderson shouted.

Someone restrained me from behind. I looked up and, to my embarrassment, found Mr Johnston – the head of the English department – holding me back. “That’s *enough*, the pair of you!” he bellowed, right by my ear.

I flinched. I’d never heard a teacher shout so loud before. I’m guessing it was a first for Matt, too, because it wiped the perpetual snarl from his face. “Right, pack your things,” Mr Johnston said.

“But *he* started it!” Matt dared to protest, pointing an accusing finger at me.

Mr Johnston held up his hand. “I don’t want to hear it.” He looked at us both in turn, nostrils flaring, his thick eyebrows so furrowed they almost joined in the middle. “This is *unacceptable* behaviour. I’m taking you both to Mrs Patel.”

I swallowed. I’d never been sent to her office before. I’d heard from others that she could be ruthless – not that I was expecting anything less.

As Matt and I gathered our things, Mr Johnston added, “If you boys give me *any* form of trouble, I’ll be sure to suggest a punishment far more severe than a couple of weeks’ suspension. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes sir,” I muttered.

Matt nodded, and then the two of us were marched out of the classroom.

The adrenaline had worn off by this point. In

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its place was a horrible taste in my mouth. I didn't know how Matt could walk so tall. I kept my head down, shoulders slumped, not wanting to be seen by anyone.

A sickly feeling formed in the pit of my stomach as I imagined the number of different punishments I could face. And don't even get me started on Mum and Dad's reaction to all this.

CHAPTER TWO

I scuffed my shoes on the thin carpet outside reception and wondered how many other pairs of feet had done the same while waiting to see the head teacher.

Mr Anderson had come down a few minutes before to hand over a small pile of papers to Mrs Patel. I'm not sure what they were but he passed me without a glance, and that bothered me. Everyone knew Matt was a troublemaker but why blank me like I was no better? I decided I didn't like Anderson anymore.

Surprisingly, Matt didn't say a word the entire time we sat there. I reckon it was because "parental back-up" was on the way. Mrs Patel refused to see us until our parents showed, and since Matt literally lived around the corner, his mum got there first. She looked like she smoked at least forty a day. And even though her clothes hung off her stick-thin body, I

could see traces of Matt in the over-confident walk, the set glare, the jutted chin ...

The receptionist ushered her and Matt through to Mrs Patel's office, leaving me by myself. The waiting area was quiet once again – until the receptionist sat back down at her desk, and then shouting erupted from Mrs Patel's office. I only heard one voice, though, as if Matt's mother was having an argument with herself. I tried to make out what she was saying but other than “*It ain’ ‘is fault!*” and “*Yoo don’ know nothink!*”, I couldn't decipher much.

She was still going on when my own mum turned up.

The receptionist welcomed her and, since Mum's stomach was the size of a beach ball, offered to bring the signing-in book over to her in the waiting room. Mum refused, though, signing herself in at the front desk like everyone else. She was past eight months now. I'd soon be a brother to someone again, and here I was causing unnecessary stress. I felt even shittier now.

I looked down at my feet. It was a good call because I could feel her gaze before she'd even squiggled her curly signature, her scowl clear enough to picture without looking.

“Aren't you going to tell me what happened before we go in?” she asked. Her voice was flat, but it was better than yelling. That would come later.

She lowered herself into the plastic chair next to me.

I said nothing.

“Jordan, this is serious. I thought things were getting better.”

“They *are* getting better.”

“Then why am I here?”

I sighed. Matt’s crow of a mother didn’t lay into *him* as soon as she got in.

“I just don’t want this bullying stuff to start up again,” Mum said.

“I’m not getting bullied!” That was a lie. Whenever anyone found out about Danny – about how I still talked to him – they just couldn’t help but tease me. It’d died down a little since Christmas but the snide remarks and shoves in the corridors were still there. It was just easier not to tell anyone. I knew Mum and Dad wanted to help but having them demand teachers to confront people like Matt only made it A) humiliating, and B) worse. They *wanted* a reaction. Reporting petty crap only escalated everything.

“Really? Well from what I can see –”

“For God’s sake, Mum. Can you just –”

I was about to say something I might regret when Mrs Patel’s door finally opened. We both turned to watch her lead Matt and his crow-mother to reception. The pair of them looked fed up, like this was a complete waste of their time. Personally, I think they were just craving another smoke. And then I heard Mrs Patel say firmly to Matt, “Don’t forget to come and see me on Monday.”

Matt had been suspended. I bit the inside of my cheek. Did that mean *I* would be suspended?

The bell above my head rang for lunch. Man, how I wished I was anywhere else right then.

Mum looked at me – God knows what she was thinking – and then Mrs Patel called us in. I could still hear Matt’s mother bitching in reception as the door closed behind us, trapping us in a room that smelt of lemon. Whether Mrs Patel had eaten one at break or it was a type of air freshener, I wasn’t sure. It reminded me of my local dentist, though. I hated it.

Mrs Patel shook Mum’s hand before gesturing for us to take a seat in front of her desk. The chairs looked much comfier than the plastic ones in the waiting room.

We sat down (I was right – they were much comfier) and for a brief moment I thought about how out of place Matt’s mother must have looked. Mrs Patel’s office was super-organised. All her documents were in plastic wallets piled in two silver filing racks on her desk, and at least a dozen labelled ring binders were stacked on shelves and in cupboards. It wouldn’t surprise me if she’d colour-coded everything too.

“Thank you for coming at such short notice, Mrs Richardson,” Mrs Patel began. “But we have a very strict ‘no fighting’ policy here at Doorston High school that Jordan broke today. Isn’t that right?” She turned to me, cupping her hands and placing

them lightly on her desk. That's when I noticed the thin stack of papers Mr Anderson had handed over earlier. They looked like statements. He must have made the class write them when Matt and I left. "Would you mind telling us what happened in your English class today?"

"A fight broke out," I said dumbly.

Mum's face said it all.

"Yes, I'm quite aware of that," Mrs Patel continued. "What I want to know is, who did what and why."

I couldn't look at either of them. Instead, I focused on a groove on the side of Mrs Patel's desk and began to talk.

I told them how Matt had always been the bully class clown, and how he just had something in for me ever since we started Doorston High. I didn't tell them *why* he had something in for me. I didn't want Mum to know and it was irrelevant anyway.

"So Matt threw the first punch?" Mrs Patel confirmed, after I'd finished my story. She checked this against a few of the statements.

"Yes, Miss," I said, noticing how stiff Mum looked beside me.

"But apparently you lunged at him. Is that right?"

"Does it matter?" Mum said, her voice a notch away from sounding exasperated. "I'd lunge at him too if he hit me. It's self-defence!"

"Mrs Richardson, I believe you're missing the point." She indicated a particular statement in

her hand. “The fight had already ended. Matt was walking away. It says so in all the statements.” She turned to me. “Or are they all making it up?”

“No...” I began, but Mum interjected again.

“There’s only so much a person can take before they –”

“Before they lash out, yes,” Mrs Patel finished. Her voice was calm but her eyes were as sharp as blades. “What Jordan *should* have done was approach a member of staff right away.”

“There should have been a teacher there anyway! Who was supervising at the time?”

There was a brief pause. I wasn’t sure where this was going but I couldn’t see either woman backing down. I quickly jumped in with the answer I’d been meaning to give before Mum had interrupted.

“I only went for him because he mentioned my brother.” I didn’t know who had reported what or how much they had told, but Mrs Patel looked taken aback by this. “He said he was glad my brother was dead, before threatening us both.”

I thought Mum was rigid before. Now she looked as though all her joints had been set with cement. She wrinkled up her nose, as though a bad smell had entered the room.

“I wasn’t aware of that,” Mrs Patel confessed. For the first time throughout this entire conversation, she looked uneasy. “Nevertheless –”

“What do you mean, ‘nevertheless’? My son is on medication because of his brother’s death – it’s in

your school's medical files. Look it up!" Mum leaned forward, gripping the polished wooden armrests hard enough to make her knuckles milky white. "If Jordan is going to be ... *tormented* about it, then I'm glad he 'lashed out'. He was defending himself and I'll back him up every step of the way."

For some reason, I felt like crying. Not because I was sad. Too much was going on, I guess, and seeing Mum so pent-up from what had happened ... I thought she would've blamed me. Instead, she was defending me. I took a breath and kept it together. I was sure I'd get a rollicking once we were alone but for now, she was on my side.

Mrs Patel cleared her throat. "I understand that Jordan's circumstances are different, but that does not justify what he did in class. *Nevertheless* ..."

She emphasised where she left off, pausing briefly, for whatever reason. Mum raised her eyebrows, waiting to hear how Mrs Patel was going to spin this. "... Besides the odd hiccup from when he's been bullied, I see that Jordan has a clean record."

Mrs Patel turned back to me. "I'll be letting you off with a warning, Jordan."

I relaxed a little. She was still going on about how, if I got into any more trouble I should tell someone immediately, and that she would ask my teachers to keep an eye out for me. All the usual stuff they're supposed to tell you, basically. It wasn't enough for Mum, though.

When it became clear that Mrs Patel was wrapping

up the conversation, Mum asked, “What about the other boy? What’s going to happen to him?”

“I’ve suspended him for the remainder of the week. When he returns, he’ll be on a one-month contract where he will have to report back to me every lunch time so I can monitor his class behaviour.”

I could see Mum mulling this over. I still doubted it was enough for her, but she didn’t say anything.

I was waiting for Mrs Patel to dismiss us when she surprised me by asking if I needed to take the rest of the day off.

“I think that would probably be best,” Mum said, and although I didn’t say anything, I agreed. The thought of facing everyone in class after lunch was overwhelming.

“Very well.” Mrs Patel shook Mum’s hand again and walked us through to reception. Two girls from the year above me were now in the same plastic waiting-room chairs Mum and I had sat in. They didn’t look like troublemakers. Then again, neither did I.

“Make sure you catch up on the lesson you’ll be missing,” Mrs Patel said to me after I’d signed out. “And don’t forget to revise for your exams.”

I nodded – as if I was actually going to do that. I was biting the inside of my cheek again. This time it was to contain a smile that was pressing forward with the thought of freedom. Surely, if you were involved in a fight you weren’t supposed to be

rewarded? Leaving school almost two hours early was a godsend!

Or so I thought.

It wasn't until I saw the look on Mum's face that I realised this was far from a reward. Matt may have been suspended and put on contract, but I seemed to have a much harsher punishment: driving home alone with Mum.