

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS by B A Paris

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This novel takes the subject of psychological cruelty within a marriage to a whole new level. It is both chilling and heart wrenching in equal measures.

THE PLOT

Grace and Jack Angel appear to have the perfect marriage. They have a lovely house and are so devoted to one another they are never apart. Jack is handsome and a respected lawyer, while Grace has charm and elegance. To the outside world they are the perfect couple. However, when the front door closes, nothing could be further from the truth.

Forced to give up her prestigious job, Grace is kept locked up all day in a small room with bars at the window. The only furniture in the room is a bed. In the en suite bathroom, she is allowed just a slither of soap, toilet paper and a small hand towel. She eats only when Jack can be bothered to bring her food. It is a living hell that Grace has been subjected to for 18 months, allowed out only when Jack accompanies her... and even then she has to be careful to act normally in front of others for fear of punishment on their return home.

Grace's sister, Millie, has Downs Syndrome. She boards at her school on weekdays, with the help of a carer. Grace is devoted to her and tries to visit her at the weekends. Knowing Grace would do anything for Millie, Jack habitually denies her access to her sister as a punishment for disobedience. It is also clear that Jack intends Millie to be his next victim.

When Jack declares he wants Millie to live with him and Grace when she leaves school, everyone thinks it a magnanimous gesture on Jack's part. However, to Grace it is her worst nightmare.

As Jack's plans begin to fall into place, Grace knows she must somehow protect Millie from suffering the same fate as her.

MY REVIEW

'Behind Closed Doors' is a novel about one man's perverted need to manipulate and terrorise the woman in his life, in order to feed off her fear. It paints a chilling portrait of brutal and psychological torture by means of imprisonment, starvation and the cruel use of his victim's vulnerable sibling as a means of control. It also demonstrates that appearances can be deceptive. Pure evil does not always wear an ugly mask.

Told from the perspective of his wife, Grace, the story begins with Grace and Jack hosting a dinner party for their close circle of friends. Everything is perfect – the meal, the wine, the house... and the couple themselves. To everyone present, they have the perfect marriage. However, to one guest at least, it all seems too perfect, although she cannot put her finger on the reason why.

With the scene set, each chapter then alternates between the past and the present. In this way, the reader gradually discovers the truth behind the façade, and why Grace could be so totally fooled by such a monster.

Jack Angel is deceptively portrayed as a perfect gentleman. He is handsome, charming and attractive to women. However, Jack is searching for a particular kind of woman. A woman with a weakness he can exploit. Grace's weakness is her sister, Millie.

Psychologically scarred as a child by his own father's cruel treatment of his mother, Jack has come to regard all women as weak and beneath contempt. Spurred on by his father, Jack begins to emulate his psychotic parent's behaviour. Unfortunately, carried away with violent enthusiasm one day, he accidentally kills his mother but successfully manages to frame his father for her murder. Deprived of a victim, he now needs to find another woman to terrorise to acquire the adrenalin rush he craves. Marrying Grace means he has his own constant supply.

By contrast, Grace is an extremely caring person, and therefore easy prey for Jack. Ever since her parents rejected her sister, Millie, at birth, she has always put her sibling first, even to the detriment of her own happiness. As not many men want to take on the responsibility of a Downs Syndrome child – and Grace is not prepared to abandon Millie – she begins to think she will never get married. Therefore, when Jack comes along – showering both her and Millie with charm and affection – it is easy to understand how she is drawn into his web. We all want to be loved... and love makes you blind.

Although both the main characters are compelling and credible in their own individual ways, the one who overwhelmingly stole the show for me was Millie. Despite her disability, she is the only one who can see Jack for what he is... mainly because he had pushed her down the stairs on the day of his wedding, to prevent her from being Grace's bridesmaid.

When Jack takes them both out for lunch one Sunday, Millie asks Grace to accompany her to the toilet – the only place they can be sure of being alone. Worried for her sister, she tells Grace: *“Jack bad man, very bad man. He push me. He push me down stairs.”*

Although Grace finds her claim hard to believe, she has to agree with Millie's analysis. However, she is desperate to stop her from repeating the statement to anyone else – especially Jack – for fear of reprisals. Jack had already mooted the possibility of claiming Millie sooner than planned, and Grace is determined not to give him the excuse.

Fortunately, Millie is far more intelligent than people give her credit for. Thanks to her surprising intervention, a ray of hope finally blossoms in Grace's otherwise unbearable existence, ultimately supplying her with a means to save them both before it is too late.

This truly is an edge-of-the-seat psychological thriller. Far from being slow burning, it is a full onslaught of blatant cruelty, hidden from view 'behind closed doors'.

Unfortunately, with real life cases of incarcerated and abused women reported on the news, Grace's situation is all too believable, furnishing it with a chilling reality. With every unimaginably cruel act Jack subjects Grace to, my heart went out to her. The author paints such a vivid picture of Grace's emotions, I was immediately able to imagine the fear, terror and despair she felt.

Although not an easy read, it is nevertheless a compelling one and I urge you to stay with it until the end. I can guarantee you will never trust a good-looking man again.

THE AUTHOR

B A Paris is from a Franco/Irish background. She was brought up in England and moved to France where she spent some years working in Finance before re-training as a teacher and setting up a language school with her husband. They still live in France and have five daughters. This is her first novel.

'Behind Closed Doors' is published by Harlequin MIRA (an imprint of Harper Collins Publishers) and is available in eBook and paperback format. It can be purchased from Amazon and Waterstones.