

'My daughter is no revenge killer'

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW
by Kathryn Knight

WHEN in 2020 Rachel Fulstow clicked on the profile placed by Michael Hillier on dating website Hinge, she was immediately struck by his commendable qualities and desire to meet some-

one who shared the same values.

He was, he wrote, 'honest and loyal' and 'a gentleman' who was looking for someone 'caring with good morals'.

And certainly, at first, he seemed every bit the good catch. 'Initially, he appeared loving and respectful towards Rachel,' recalls her mother Jenny today. 'He seemed intelligent, articulate, interested in my work in the NHS.'

No one could have guessed where this promising love story would end: with the pair in prison, both convicted of murder.

Equally astonishing is the fact Fulstow had never even been at the crime scene. She was 100 miles away at her home in York when, on November 24, 2022, Hillier, now 42, drove to the Wigan home of self-employed electrician Liam Smith, 38, shot him in the face then doused him in acid.

Rachel was ultimately prosecuted under the law of joint enterprise after Hillier insisted she had conspired with him to plan the attack as 'revenge' for being 'graphically raped' by Smith following a date with him.

TODAY, Fulstow, now 40, is three years into a 30-year prison sentence for murder, a conviction her mother, together with appeal lawyer Jeremy Moore, is trying to overturn.

They insist she was not Hillier's co-conspirator, but the victim of a coercive and abusive relationship.

'I'm not the mother of a murderer: she's been convicted of murder, but she's not a murderer,' Jenny, 71, a retired cancer nurse specialist, told the Daily Mail this week. 'There's a man out there who isn't alive, not because of Rachel, but because of a monster that she had a relationship with.'

It is an extraordinary turn of events for someone raised in a loving, middle-class family in Yorkshire – an 'independently minded, delightful, happy, social little girl', as Jenny recalls, with friends who remain loyal to this day.

After graduating from Leeds Metropolitan University in 2008 with a 2:1 in international tourism management, Fulstow worked as a wedding co-ordinator for hotel chains including Radisson and Hilton, before moving into property management. She was able to buy her own home in York.

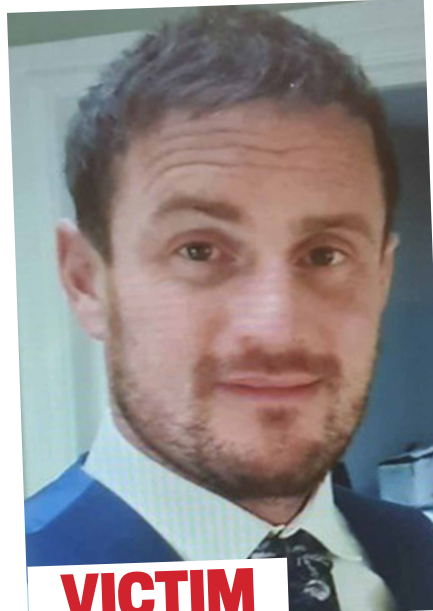
Just one thing was missing: although she'd had a number of long term relationships, by her mid-30s Fulstow had still not met Mr Right.

'Rachel was ready for a loving, stable, permanent relationship and had been actively seeking someone,' says Jenny. 'She wanted her own child and would have been a wonderful mum.'

When Fulstow matched with Hillier on Hinge – unwittingly setting in motion a chain of events that would end with the killing of a man she had met just once – she was full of hope.

On paper, however, they were an unlikely match. After leaving education with few qualifications Hillier worked as a plasterer as well as becoming involved in the cannabis trade. In his early 30s he had been given a suspended sentence for GBH after assaulting a man who threatened him and his brother over a debt.

Despite their very different backgrounds, the pair hit it off instantly. There were holidays to Brussels and Andorra, and a trip to London where



VICTIM

the couple stayed at the Shard.

Jenny, too, was impressed – at first. Gradually though, her positive feelings gave way to unease. 'He had sent Rachel very abusive, demeaning WhatsApp messages which she shared with me,' she says. 'She made excuses for these, blaming his abuse on his mental health problems. She asked for my advice and, to my now shame and deep regret, I suggested "everyone deserves a second chance."'

What Jenny didn't know was the extent of Hillier's abuse: on more than one occasion Hillier had smashed up her daughter's home, captured in photos on her phone.

'Rachel shared with me the full truth of the relationship immediately after her conviction and, like a light-bulb moment, some of her behaviour with me then made sense,' Jenny says. 'For example, her avoidance of us meeting at her home, suggesting another place such as a cafe – I now know she was scared of my seeing the damage Hillier caused. Her sense of shame, embarrassment and fear of being in an abusive and coercive relationship overrode her natural instinct to tell me how she really felt.'

WHAT Jenny also did not know is that behind this toxic relationship lay another, apparently unconnected encounter – one which had taken place before Rachel Fulstow even met Michael Hillier, and which would prove catastrophic.

In September 2019, Fulstow had matched on Tinder with Liam Smith, 36, former soldier and father of two from Chorley who ran his own business as an electrician. They arranged to meet, and given the distance, Fulstow arranged a hotel for Smith to spend the night in after he had travelled to York for their date. She had intended to return home afterwards but went back to his room.

Exactly what happened there remains disputed – as does the conversation she had with Hillier about it later. Fulstow has insisted Smith made 'non-consensual' sexual advances and continued to have sex with her after she told him to stop, before eventually stopping and apologising. She did not view what had happened as rape, and the pair went for lunch the following day. Yet when



Rachel Fulstow is serving 30 years for the fatal shooting of a man she once dated – even though she was 100 miles away and says she knew nothing about it. As her mother, a retired nurse, blames her coercive partner, who do you believe?

she shared the encounter with Hillier in early 2022 – part of what she maintained was his obsessive desire to know the details of every man she had been intimate with – he was enraged.

Influenced, she said, by an extreme moral code surrounding how women should behave, he initially called her a 'slag' for having had a one-night stand before deciding she had been raped, sparking an obsession with Liam Smith that led to a revenge plot, ten months in the making, about which she knew nothing.

Hillier's account could hardly

have been more different. 'It was decided straight away that something was going to happen to Liam Smith,' he would later tell Manchester Minshull Street Crown Court.

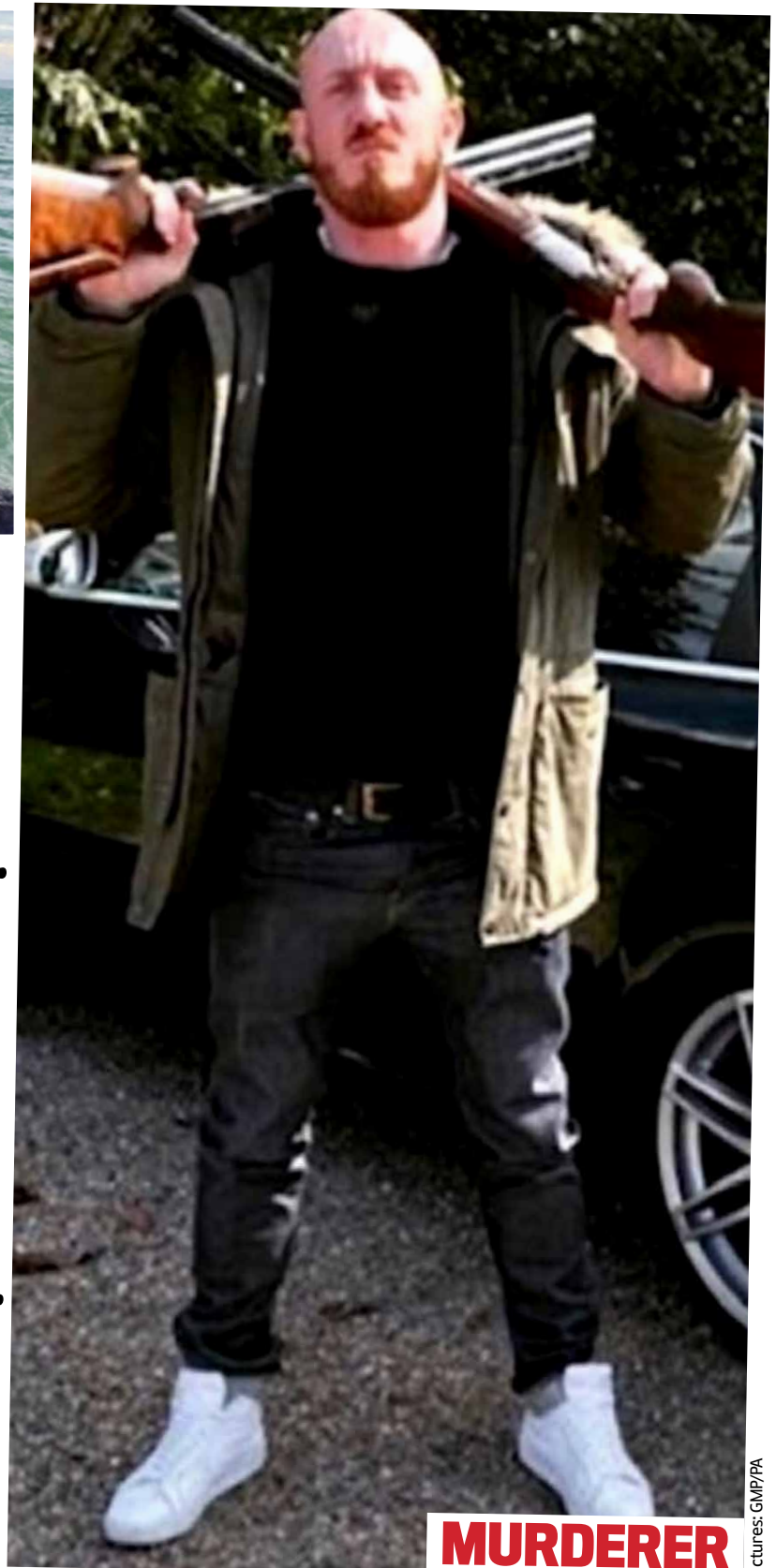
That conflict – over what Fulstow knew, what she agreed to and whether she ever intended that Smith should be seriously harmed – would eventually sit at the heart of the murder trial.

What is beyond question is the horror of what happened next. On November 24, 2022, having scoped out the scene three weeks earlier, Hillier drove a Mitsubishi Shogun

bearing false number plates from his terraced home in Sheffield to Smith's home 74 miles away.

Unaware that he was being targeted because of an encounter with a woman he had last seen more than three years earlier, Smith was lured out of his home at 6.40pm by the sight of a stranger in his car outside.

He paid for his curiosity with his life. After walking towards Hillier's vehicle, he was shot with a blank-firing pistol, legally bought in Nottingham and modified to fire a pellet and ball bearing, before being doused in acid. Flee-



MURDERER

Tragic: From left, Liam Smith, Michael Hillier and Rachel Fulstow in the Caribbean and Hillier posing with guns

chester Police puzzled over why an ordinary family man should have been targeted in such a grisly and apparently premeditated attack. Hillier and Fulstow departed for a holiday to Jamaica.

Photographs posted by Hillier on social media showed them drinking cocktails, riding horses through the Caribbean surf and frolicking in waterfalls.

'A breathtaking natural beauty among breathtaking natural beauty,' he wrote beneath one photo of his partner. Fulstow would later insist Hillier had said they had to act normally and she was too terrified to do otherwise.

'I knew not reporting him, not instantly leaving and not telling anyone was morally wrong, but it's what I had to do to protect myself,' Fulstow later said. 'I did not feel safe with him. He was out of control.'

Yet the net was closing in. Detectives were able to link Hillier to the Shogun after intelligence from South Yorkshire police linked him to another vehicle that contained the false plates he used. In the absence of a murder weapon or DNA evidence, this proved crucial in placing him at the scene.

And through Hillier, the police came to Fulstow, who they initially treated as a witness. Yet during a lengthy police interview, she repeatedly lied to officers, denying she knew anything about Smith's death.

It was a decision which would prove hugely damaging. Other circumstantial evidence emerged. Police discovered internet searches on Fulstow's devices, including one for the term 'Electrician Wigan' in May 2022 and another for the street where Smith lived. Under cross-examination at her subsequent trial, Fulstow claimed she had simply been 'nosy' because Hillier kept bringing Smith up.

More troubling still were searches after the murder for 'police response times' and 'response times for ambulances'. And also: 'Does acid corrode stainless steel?' She would later say she made the latter search after learning of Smith's death because she wanted to know whether his mobile phone would have been destroyed in the attack.

Whatever the explanations, taken together with her lies to police, it was enough to transform Fulstow from witness to suspect. She was charged with murder and remanded in custody.

For Jenny, the news was incomprehensible. Until her daughter's arrest, she had never even heard Liam Smith's name.

'I was horrified and confused and felt the police had somehow made a massive mistake,' she recalls. 'My overwhelming feeling was one of disbelief.' That disbe-

Six days later, as Greater Man-

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lief continued as the case moved towards trial – setting the scene for a bitter courtroom battle in which Fulstow and Hillier would present different accounts of what had happened.

Claiming he had been ‘blinded by love’, his decision-making further clouded by an addiction to prescription drugs, Hillier insisted his girlfriend had been behind the revenge plot.

Then, ten days into the six-week trial, Hillier changed his defence statement, claiming Fulstow had been not merely aware of the plot but its mastermind: that she had planned the route to Smith’s house, supplied the acid used in the attack and conducted experiments to test the handgun.

Fulstow denied all these claims, but this ‘about-turn’ proved catastrophic for her. ‘While the case was adjourned for a short while to allow the defence to respond, they didn’t get a proper chance to do so,’ Fulstow’s appeal lawyer Jeremy Moore told the

Daily Mail this week. At the heart of the case was the doctrine of joint enterprise, under which someone can be convicted of murder despite neither carrying out the killing themselves nor being present when it happens, if the prosecution can prove necessary participation and intent. The prosecution case was that Fulstow had done precisely that: jointly planned the attack with Hillier and helped him carry it out.

HER defence – that she had no knowledge of the murder, and had been too frightened to come forward in its aftermath – was rejected and in August 2023 both were unanimously convicted of murder. Hillier was handed a minimum term of 33 years and Fulstow 30 years, the sentences increased because a firearm had been used.

For Jenny, who attended every day of court, the verdict was devastating. ‘I was horrified and shocked that anyone could believe Rachel was capable of planning,

encouraging Hillier and generally assisting him to carry out such a horrific crime.’

There is, of course, another family for whom the consequences of that November night are permanent. Liam Smith’s parents Phil and Julia spoke after the trial of their ongoing devastation, describing their son’s murder as sending ‘complete shockwaves of grief and despair’ through those who loved him and of the cataclysmic loss for his two sons, then 11 and 14.

‘Not only was Liam a devoted father, but he was also a dearly loved son, brother, uncle, cousin, grandson and friend,’ Phil Smith said.

It is a loss Jenny is conscious no legal argument about her daughter can diminish.

‘I will never forget that Liam Smith was a victim of Hillier’s obsession with Rachel, and for his loved ones not to have him in their lives any more must continue to bring unbearable suffering,’ she says. ‘I still have my daughter in my life, what is left of it, in a very limited way and I am profoundly aware of that. However, she too is a victim.’

It is why, after Fulstow’s first appeal was rejected by the courts, Jenny is pinning her hopes on an application to the Criminal Cases Review Commission. At the centre of the renewed challenge is the argument that the jury did not hear the full story of her relationship with Hillier.

‘This was a man who had a history of obsessive relationships, and what really emerges is that this was an incredibly coercive and controlling relationship which the jury did not get an opportunity to hear about,’ says Jeremy Moore.

‘I feel a great injustice about the label my daughter now carries,’ adds Jenny.

‘She did not murder Liam Smith. She had no knowledge of any firearm, and she was nowhere near the crime scene when the firearm was used.

‘How does the justice system equate that fact with a 30-year sentence?’

KUROSU

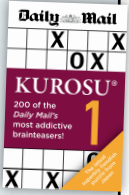
EVERY day in the Mail you can play Kurosu, the most addictive brainteaser since Sudoku. There are two rules:

1: Fill in each space with either a nought or a cross so there are no more than two consecutive noughts or crosses in any row or column. Important note: diagonals don’t count.

2: Each row and column must contain three noughts and three crosses.

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FROM THE DAILY MAIL ARCHIVE

AUGUST 12, 1987

POP queen Madonna may meet the Princess of Wales. Diana is said to be planning a surprise appearance at one of the singer’s sell-out Wembley concerts next week. Buckingham Palace would not confirm that Diana will be in the Royal Box but a senior executive of Madonna’s management company confirmed plans are under way.

AUGUST 12, 2005

THE nuclear stand-off with Iran reached a deadlock last night after Tehran rejected an international demand to halt its atomic work. [A United Nations] resolution expressed ‘serious concern’ over Iran’s resumption of work at its uranium conversion plant at Isfahan on Monday.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

CASEY AFFLECK, 51. The US actor won an Academy Award for playing a grief-stricken janitor in Manchester By The Sea. The younger brother of Ben Affleck starred with him in Good Will Hunting. However, director Gus Van Sant said: ‘He said he didn’t want to play the character. It was kind of up to us to beg him.’

MICHAEL BRUNSON, 86. ITN’s former political editor secured his greatest scoop in 1993 when Prime Minister John Major – assuming his microphone had been switched off – described three Eurosceptic Cabinet members as ‘bastards’.

BORN ON THIS DAY

JOHN NATHAN-TURNER (1947-2002). The Birmingham-born longest-serving producer of Doctor Who worked on the series for 20 years and with six of the (then seven) Time Lords. He axed robot dog K-9.

GEORGE IV (1762-1830). George III’s son became prince regent when his father was declared insane, and king in 1820. Derided for his profligacy, womanising and corpulence, according to one historian: ‘Never ... has a sovereign died so unlamented, nor has the person of the monarch retained so little respect after death.’

ON AUGUST 12...

IN 1898, Hawaii was annexed to the United States.

IN 1964, Great Train Robber Charlie Wilson escaped from Winson Green prison in Birmingham. He was captured four years later.

WORD WIZARDRY

GUESS THE DEFINITION:

Tracklement (coined 1954)

A) A pole slung across a stream to stop cattle passing. B) The payment of arrears. C) A savoury condiment served with meat.

Answer below

PHRASE EXPLAINED:

Rough diamond: Someone whose kindness is concealed by a rough, unpolished manner; it comes from newly mined diamonds not shining before being cut and polished.

QUOTE FOR TODAY

Our enemies ... never stop thinking about ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we. George W Bush, 43rd US President

JOKE OF THE DAY

MY doctor can’t stop checking my reflexes... He gets a kick out of it. Guess The Definition answer: C

Compiled by ETAN SMALLMAN and ADAM JACOT DE BOINOD