

**The murder of a loved one is traumatic enough** — what is even harder to bear is when they are killed by someone who takes their own life, leaving no one to stand trial, and no chance of justice for the living. On average there are *two murder-suicides a month* in England and Wales, every one a distressing, confounding heartache. Kelly Fitzgibbons, shot to death by her partner, who then turned the gun on himself, is remembered here by her twin sister Emma Ambler and best friend Kerri Harris

*Pictured from left*  
EMMA AMBLER, KERRI HARRIS and  
KELLY FITZGIBBONS



*Words by*  
ANDREW WILSON



# 'Kelly's world revolved around her girls... their deaths have caused so much destruction to everyone close to them'

Soon after her 40th birthday, Kelly Fitzgibbons started to make a list of all the things she wanted to do before she turned 50. Some of her dreams were lavish, such as a trip on the Orient Express or taking her two young daughters to Disneyland, while others were more modest: joining a baking class, going to a drive-in cinema. But her bucket list wasn't all about having fun. Her aspiration to get her silver donor card, a recognition that a person has given blood 25 times, was an indication of her compassionate, caring personality.

Yet she never got the chance to fulfil these ambitions. On 29 March 2020, three months after her 40th birthday, Kelly was found murdered – shot to death – at the house in Woodmancote, West Sussex, that she shared with her long-term partner, self-employed builder Robert Needham, 42. At the crime scene, the police also found the bodies of the couple's two children, Ava, four, and Lexi, two, as well as the family dog. The culprit was Needham, who, after the killing spree, turned his shotgun on himself.

'Kelly was a wonderful human being – she was warm, caring, funny and had such a contagious laugh; she lit up a room,' says Kelly's twin sister, Emma Ambler, 42. 'She was a fantastic mother, dedicated and devoted, and her world revolved around her girls – it was the role she took most pride and pleasure in. Their deaths have caused so much destruction to everyone close to them.'

As the surviving relatives of the victims observe, with the crime of murder-suicide – or homicide-suicide, as it's often described – there is no one to stand trial, and no justice for the living. Families and friends are often left in limbo, desperate for answers, fractured by shock, grief and anger.

One of the most common motivating factors in murder-suicides is the end of a relationship or the threat of separation. However, in the case of Kelly Fitzgibbons, the family appeared to be a happy one. 'I still don't have any idea why Rob did it, and the last time I spoke to the police they said they hadn't found anything "significant"', says Emma.

Kelly was 26 and working as a legal secretary when friends introduced her to Rob, a good-looking man two years her senior. In April 2006, Kelly moved into the house of one of her best friends, Kerri Harris, whom she'd known since secondary school. 'I was with her and Rob a lot in those early months; it was obvious that Rob doted on Kelly,' says Kerri, 41, who lives with her husband Steve, 47, and daughter Gracie, nine, in Southwick, near Portsmouth. 'He'd do little things to surprise her and they always seemed like a really good match. Over the years, she was the social secretary of our group. She always wanted to try new things, and go to new places. Rob was quite quiet, not outgoing, the opposite

to Kelly in lots of ways. But he had friends from school and mates who were in the same line of work – he certainly wasn't a loner.

'I would have been 14 and Kelly 15 when we first met at Bourne Community College in Southbourne. It was an almost immediate friendship. Kelly was really cheery, positive and happy. She was very sociable, not in the sense of wanting to be the centre of attention, but she liked being around people. She had a big, warm smile and you could hear her laugh miles away. We were friends from our teenage years through our 20s and 30s.'

In August 2015, Kelly and Rob had a daughter, Ava, and two years later Lexi was born. In 2017, the couple moved into the large detached house owned by Needham's mother, Maureen, in Woodmancote, so as to keep an eye on her after his father's death. Needham embarked on an extensive renovation project, and the family lived in a converted self-contained space with two bedrooms at the top of the house, and a kitchen and dining room on the ground floor. Kelly would do errands for Maureen. Every so often, Kelly would meet up with Kerri and her daughter, Gracie. Needham was a keen fisherman and took up pheasant shooting, for which he was granted a gun licence. 'But that didn't worry anyone,' says Kerri. 'It wasn't a big deal at the time.' He was without a gun for a number of years, but in March

2020, a week before the murders and unknown to anyone else, he went out and bought a shotgun.

At home, all was seemingly normal, despite the anxieties of the first Covid lockdown. On Friday 27 March, Kelly posted a photo on her Facebook page captioned, 'Our walk for the day,' along with a love-heart emoji. Taken by Kelly, the picture shows Needham with the family dog, Billy, a Staffordshire bull terrier, and the two young girls walking through fields in the spring sunshine. At around teatime on the Saturday, Kerri received a message from Kelly in a group chat with a photograph of a climbing frame that Needham had erected in the garden, together with the words, 'This should keep them busy,' referring to Ava and Lexi.

That Saturday, Emma and Kelly talked via a video call. 'Kelly was her normal, chatty self, and we spoke about lockdown and how weird it was knowing we couldn't go out,' she says. 'Kelly chatted to my daughter, then I spoke to the girls – Ava showed me her marbles and Lexi was running around just being her lovely, noisy self.'

At around 9pm, Kelly and Rob ordered a Chinese meal. It was the last time anyone saw them alive.

By Sunday Emma had still not received a reply to a text she had sent on Saturday night. She started to message other friends, including

Emma Ambler photographed at home by Clare Hewitt





# ‘When they kill themselves as well as the victim, it’s a sense of “I own you – you’re coming with me”’

Kerri, and family members, but there was no news of Kelly.

By this point, Emma was panicking. She was convinced something awful must have happened. ‘I said to my husband, “I know she’s not alive,” and he looked at me as if I was crazy,’ says Emma, who lives with her husband, Tom, 51, and two children in Birmingham. ‘But I had an instinct something was terribly wrong. I said, “I don’t know what it is, but I know I’ll never see her again.” I just knew. Perhaps it was a twin thing, that sense you know what your twin is feeling and thinking. We were so, so close.’

Emma lived 140 miles away from Kelly so she asked some relatives nearby to go to the house in Woodmancote. When the police arrived, they discovered the bodies of Kelly, Ava, Lexi and Needham, all of whom had died from shotgun wounds.

‘Emma called me to say that they were all dead,’ says Kerri. ‘To begin with, I assumed it was something like a gas leak. She rang back later and told me that it was looking like Rob had done it. I understood the words, but I couldn’t take them in. I just lost it and I went into shock. I was trying not to let my daughter see me like that. I didn’t sleep that night, and I couldn’t stop shaking for several days. I kept asking myself: how, why?’



In England and Wales there are on average 23 recorded homicide-suicides each year – around two every month. The rate varies from year to year – between April 2010 and March 2011 there were 46 murder-suicides in England and Wales, while between April 2018 and March 2019 there were only 18 cases. The perpetrators are mostly men, the victims usually women. ‘Whatever official figure exists, I can promise you that’s an underestimation,’ says criminologist Jane Monckton Smith, professor of public protection at the University of Gloucestershire. She says that although the rate of domestic violence increased during lockdown, it’s too early to say whether there have been more murder-suicides during this period – the data isn’t in yet.

‘It would be reasonable to assume that the actual number, not necessarily the rate, of homicide-suicides will have increased [during lockdown],’ says Dr Sandra Flynn, lecturer in psychology and mental health at the University of Manchester. ‘The proportion of homicide offences where the person took their own life is on average 4.75 per cent over the past decade. Therefore, if homicide (rather than domestic violence) has increased during lockdown, the number of homicide-suicides is likely to follow the same trend.’

According to an overview of studies carried out in 2011, the rate of murder-suicide in Europe has ranged from 0.05 per 100,000 people per



**Above** Kelly Fitzgibbons and Robert Needham. **Below** Their daughters Ava, four, and Lexi, two



year in England and Wales and the Netherlands to 0.2 per 100,000 per year in Finland – four times as many. In America, the rate is higher, varying from 0.27 in Kentucky to 0.38 in central Virginia (per 100,000 people per year).

At the end of last month, the bodies of British expats John Boyes, 64, and his wife, Kathryn, 65, were discovered at their home in Boudrac, south-west France. French police claim that Boyes beat his wife with a baseball bat and strangled her before he hanged himself in an outhouse – although his brother, Robert, 60, has questioned whether the deaths were a result of murder-suicide and is calling for a full investigation.

This is just the latest in a number of cases reported in the past 18 months. On 19 March 2021, Ken Flanagan, 26, murdered his mother, Karen

McClellan, 50, at her home in Newtownabbey, north of Belfast, before stabbing to death his girlfriend, Stacey Knell, 30, and then killing himself.

On 10 April 2021, the bodies of National Trust volunteers Jonathan Metcalf, 72, and his wife, Sally, 68, were found at their £500,000 home in Woodbridge, Suffolk. Sally died from compression of the neck, while Jonathan hanged himself.

On 4 May 2021, at the Majestic Hotel in Harrogate, 29-year-old childcare specialist Chenise Gregory was stabbed to death by her ex-partner Michael McGibbon, also 29, who then killed himself. A statement released by Chenise’s family said, ‘We’re heartbroken to learn that our beloved Chenise was lured to her death at the hands of her controlling and manipulative ex-boyfriend.’

On the morning of 18 June 2021, 23-year-old Gracie Spinks was tending her horse, Paddy, in a paddock in Duckmanton, Derbyshire, when she was attacked and murdered by a man who had stalked her. The police discovered the body of her killer, Michael Sellers, 35, in a nearby field.

According to research published in the journal *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* in 2016, a typical perpetrator is a 44-year-old white man, while the average victim is a 38-year-old woman. The study, which examined 60 cases of homicide-suicide in England and Wales, also concluded that nearly two-thirds of victims were in or had been in a relationship with their killer. Knives or other sharp instruments were the most commonly used weapons in murder, while hanging was the most frequent method of suicide. The same study found that only 12 per cent of perpetrators are women. In May 2018, former *Playboy* model and author Stephanie Adams killed herself and her seven-year-old son, Vincent, after a reported custody battle.

‘Homicide-suicides are different in nature compared with cases of homicide only or suicide only, making them a unique form of lethal violence,’ says Dr Flynn, one of the authors of the 2016 study. ‘In these cases, individuals attribute blame both externally towards the victim, resulting in acts of outward violence and aggression, and also inwardly towards themselves, leading to suicide. While there are clear overlaps in the characteristics of homicide and suicide cases, it is the assimilation of both these behaviours that make this act so distinct.’

But what drives people to murder and then to suicide? ‘These men – because they’re mostly men – are controlling, possessive and jealous,’ says Professor Monckton Smith, author of the book *In Control: Dangerous Relationships and How They End in Murder*. ‘When they kill themselves as well as the victim, it’s a sense of, “I own you – whatever I do to myself, you’re coming with me. I’m not going to let you escape this.”’

For years, domestic homicides have often been



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regarded as spontaneous crimes of passion, a scenario that has little basis in reality. In truth, these killers, motivated by patterns of coercive control, spend weeks, sometimes months, planning the deaths. According to Professor Monckton Smith, there are steps that can be taken to prevent such murders – in her book she outlines the patterns of behaviour that she calls the 'homicide timeline'. And, if you're in a controlling relationship, you need to be aware of the warning signs.

'If the man is possessive and controlling from the get-go, don't see that as romantic, don't see that as love,' she says. 'If you're further down the line and you're trapped in a relationship and your partner starts threatening suicide, be concerned because they intend to take you with them. I can't put it any more starkly than that.'



The inquest into the deaths of Kelly Fitzgibbons and her family has been delayed four times; at the moment it's scheduled for July 2022. Friends and family have racked their brains for clues, sifting through memories and past experiences, but the motivation for the murders remains a mystery.

As far as anyone knows, Kelly didn't suffer from domestic abuse or coercive control. 'And there was nothing to suggest that Kelly was thinking of leaving Rob,' says Kerri. Could it have been financial pressures? While it's true that, in October 2019, Needham's building company was dissolved, the couple had bought a second home that they'd hoped to rent out. 'My sister was working and it wasn't like they suddenly didn't have any money,' says Emma.

Since the murders happened at the beginning of lockdown, some of the initial newspaper reports linked the deaths with Covid restrictions. 'But Rob got the gun the week before lockdown and personally I don't think it was anything to do with Covid,' says Emma. 'Normally, he'd work at weekends, but we know he didn't that weekend, and instead spent time with the family. I wonder – because he'd made it a nice last day for them – whether it was all planned and premeditated.'

The only clue lies in Needham's medical history. 'We do know that Rob had suffered from depression in the past,' says Emma, who works for the NHS as a commissioning manager of mental health services, and is aware that the majority of people with mental health issues do not go on to commit this kind of crime. 'I think he made the awful decision that, because he wasn't happy, his family should not be allowed to enjoy or even live their own lives.'

In the summer of 2021 Emma met with Jess Phillips, the Labour MP for Birmingham Yardley who included Kelly's name in a list she read out in Parliament, detailing the 118 women killed by men between 11 March 2020 and 11 March 2021.

'One of the issues I talked to her about was gun licences and the loopholes that exist in the law,' says Emma. 'It's a difficult balance between individual rights and the safety of the general public, but if someone has had recurring depression or mental illness, or has been found to have lied on their initial application form, I don't think they should be allowed to have a gun. It's not as if they're applying for a swimming pass – they're applying for something that can kill.'

'Something needs to change because as we saw in the tragedy in Plymouth [in August 2021, 22-year-old Jake Davison shot and killed five people before turning the gun on himself] these horrific incidents are just going to keep happening. I knew absolutely nothing about gun licensing until I lost my sister, but I've been appalled and shocked by how many people in the UK hold a gun licence and how easy it is to obtain one. If Rob had never had access to such a deadly weapon, there may well have been a different outcome – he may have just taken his own life and not the lives of the whole family.'

To forge something positive out of the traumatic experience, Emma has founded the Kelly Fitzgibbons Foundation, which aims to provide help and support to families of those lost in similar circumstances. 'If I hadn't set up the charity, it would have been so easy to drown in grief,

anger and negativity,' she says. 'We'd like the foundation to be a place that can provide all the information a family will need to get them through what is likely to be the worst time of their lives. It's as if your life has suddenly turned into what feels like a TV drama.'

Kerri feels as if she's been irretrievably changed by the murder of her close friend and her two young daughters. Whenever she's doing something nice for her nine-year-old, like putting up a Christmas tree or wrapping a birthday present, she feels the loss particularly keenly, knowing that Kelly and her girls will never be able to experience such simple pleasures again.

'I can't get my head around the fact that Rob took away their futures, their lives,' says Kerri. 'Kelly did all these lovely things with her girls and wanted them to have the best start in life and to have all these wonderful memories. He ripped that away from them, and from all of us.' She makes an effort to choke back the tears as she speaks. 'I will never understand why he couldn't have just taken his own life. Why did he have to take theirs too?'

*National Domestic Abuse Helpline:*

*0808-2000 247; Samaritans: 116 123;*

*kellyfitzgibbonsfoundation.org.*

*Andrew Wilson's novel Five Strangers, under the name EV Adamson (HarperCollins, £7.99), is out in paperback now*

The property in Woodmancote, West Sussex, where the murders took place

