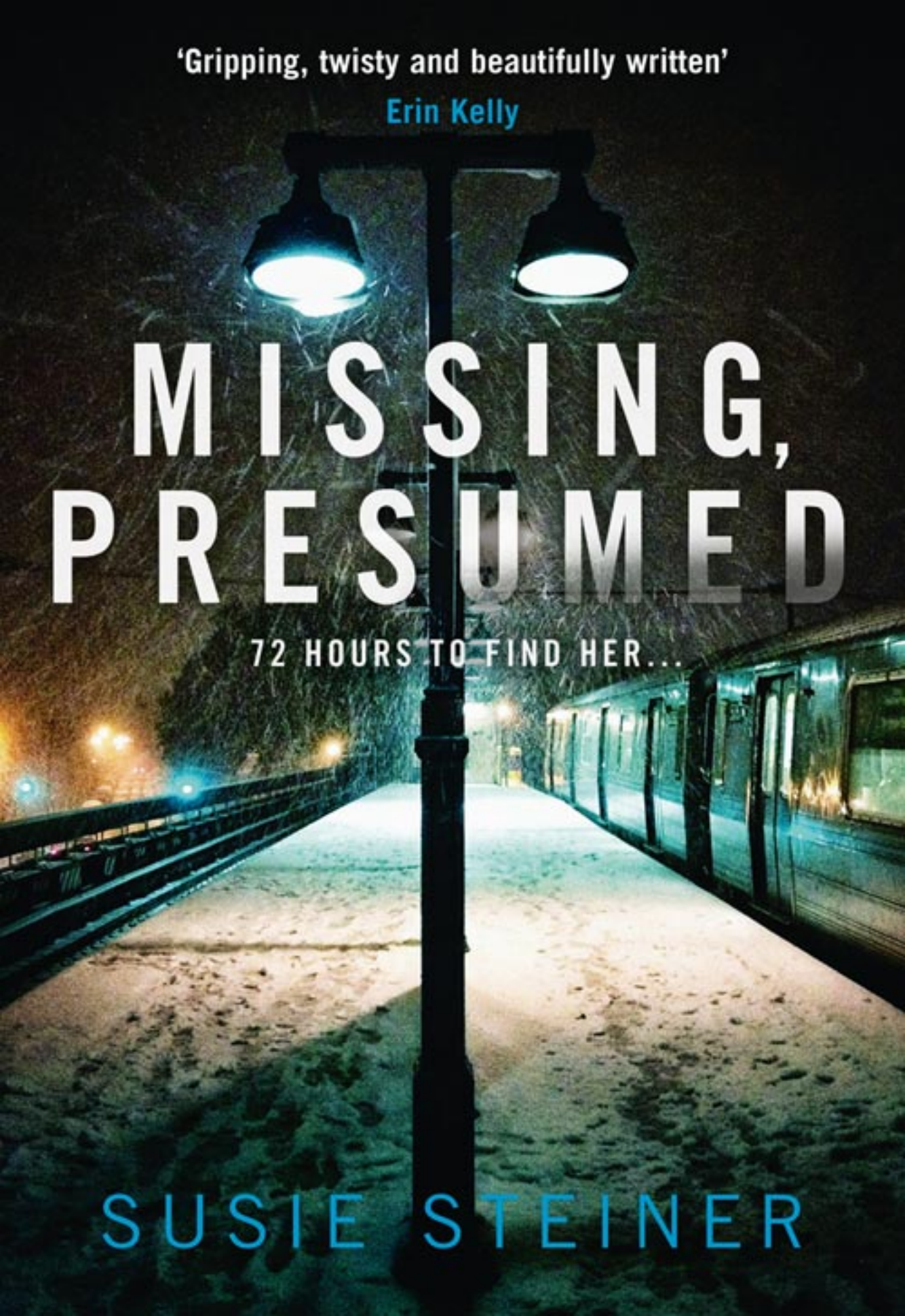
'Gripping, twisty and beautifully written'
Erin Kelly
MISSING, PRESUMED
72 HOURS TO FIND HER...
SUSIE STEINER

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
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Manon

She pulls out a swivel chair and wheels herself next to Colin, who smells of bonfires – the obscure brand of cigarettes he smokes.

'What's her phone telling us then?' she asks.

'In terms of the victim's usage, nothing past 8 p.m. on Saturday night, when she texts the friend, Helena Reed,' says Colin.

'What does she say in that last text?'

'"There in five. E."'

'Anything else?'

'Before the party she does some texting. Someone called Jason F.'

Manon reads Colin's screen.

What time u getting there? E

Later, somewhere to be first.

Don't be long, will you?

Why not?

Wouldn't like you to miss anything . . .

'There are others, too,' Colin says. 'She texts her tutor, Graham Garfield, to say, "Hope to c u tonite." He replies, "What's going down?" Trying to pretend he's not fifty-seven, if you ask me.'

'And she says?'

'"Karaoke, tequila, and bad behaviour." To which he replies, "On my way!"' says Colin.

'What about Facebook?'

Colin clicks on his screen and up pops a collage of Edith – her neck, her arms, brown legs crossed, laughing, her head thrown back. Edith cuddling a cat. Edith in cut-off shorts. Edith wearing a Stetson. Black and white, some with colours blown out by Instagram, which gives them a smoky, Seventies sheen. Beneath these are comments to the tune of 'Gorgeous!' and 'Beautiful, beautiful girl' and 'Stunning'. Each photo is 'liked' by Will Carter. In a few she's in a living room, stretched out on the sofa with her feet in Will Carter's lap as he nurses a goblet of red. In many of the images, another girl is somewhere off-centre or in the background, curled in an armchair reading; just a half of her face, a lick of her hair.

Over four hundred photographs.

'They're all of herself, pretty much,' says Colin.

Edith's posts are random music lyrics, Bruce Springsteen mostly. The odd literary article about Seamus Heaney or Toni Morrison. Bo Diddley is my new jam. Nick Cave is my new jam.

'She has four hundred and eighty-two "friends",' Colin adds, drawing quote marks in the air.

'D'you know how many I've got?' says Manon, a yawn

stretching her face, while Colin scrolls down. 'Four. One's my dad. One's the electrician. I'm not even sure I know the other two.'

'She's a member of these groups,' says Colin, clicking again. 'Guerrilla Gardeners.'

'What do they do?'

'They grow food on communal ground. Recipes . . . Here's a photo of a hot pot they made using free veg picked from a community wasteland garden. She's a member of Cycle Power – a lobbying group which aims to ban cars.'

'Scroll up a minute. What's that?' says Manon, pointing at the screen.

Colin clicks on the image and Manon reads Edith Hind's caption:

Bunting made from recycled copies of the* FT. *Happy Christmas, planet!

She and Colin look at each other.

'It's a wonder she wasn't murdered sooner,' says Colin.

'Those are exactly the sorts of thoughts I want you to keep to yourself,' Manon says, rising. 'Keep at it, Colin. Her hard drive, Google searches, matches on all her phone records.' And then she marches across MIT to Harriet's office.

'So what was the interview with Carter like?'

'Seems genuinely worried,' says Harriet, hitching at her bra strap. 'Keeps crying, pacing, asking for an update on the search. We need to be all over his weekend in Stoke. We can ask the Hind parents a bit more about their relationship, and the friend, Helena, whether there was anyone else in the background, boyfriend-wise. Tabs are already ringing the press office, Fergus said.'

'It won't be like Soham,' says Manon. 'Not in this climate, not after phone hacking. Things have changed.'

'Don't bet on it, not with her parents being who they are.'

'Who are her parents?'

'Sir Ian and Lady Hind. He's an ear, nose, and throat surgeon. Fits the Royal grommets or something.'

'Oh God.'

'Yup. We have to tread carefully; the type who'll complain over anything.'

'Is it a ransom job then? He must be worth a bit.'

'We'd have heard from them by now. Anyway, I'm not handing this to any centralised fucking crime unit, no way.'

She gets up, pacing behind the desk, as if the speed of her thoughts is physical. The wings of her jacket are pinned back by her hands on her hips. She's full of fire, unbridled. If Manon ever went missing, she'd want Harriet to head up the search.

'Once Polsa's on board, the pressure will ease off a bit,' Harriet says, as much to herself as to Manon.

The police search adviser and his specialist teams knew how to find people, or at least where to look. They would take the search further and wider than that clumsy first night: across meadows, along railway tracks, into woods, behind the doors of lock-up garages, in attics and cellars, and soon enough down below the opaque surface of rivers.

Harriet looks at her watch. 'Eight thirty. If she went missing shortly after midnight on Saturday, then we're talking thirty-two hours. It's sub-zero out there.'

'I'll send someone to bring in the friend, Helena Reed, shall I?'

'Yup. I'll go and talk to the parents. Urgh, this is the bit I hate – they'll be frantic. Then I'm meeting Fergus in the press office. We'll probably do a short briefing at 11 a.m., just me

and the agencies and locals. Got to get those photos of the girl out and an initial appeal. We need to look at her bank activity. Can you start someone on that?'

Manon and Davy slip into interview room one, where Sir Ian is pacing in a navy wool coat.

'So, hang on a minute, you're saying there isn't a DCI on duty to run the search for my daughter?' He has an imperious face, straight nose, pale eyes and thin lips. Charles Dance without the ginger colouring.

'DC Walker and DS Bradshaw enter the room,' says Harriet to the recording device. 'It's quite normal, Sir Ian, for a DI to run a case such as this. If you'd like to sit down, there are a number of things we'd like to ask you.'

'What I want to know first is who is conducting the search. Who is *actually* out there in the snow, searching for her, because if she's injured—'

Lady Hind, who sits at the table opposite Harriet, takes his hand and holds it to her cheek, then kisses the back of it and this seems to give him pause. Her hair is grey, in a straight bob, with a beautiful streak of white framing her face. Her coat hangs expensively, her fingers glinting with diamonds.

'Sit down, darling,' she says, her voice quavering with suppressed tears. 'We must help them in any way we can.'

Sir Ian takes up a chair next to his wife.

'Thank you,' says Harriet. 'Edith's phone shows a few missed calls from you over the course of the weekend, Sir Ian. Were you having trouble reaching her?'

'We always have trouble reaching her, don't we?' he says to Lady Hind. 'She's terrible at calling back. So we call, and we call.' At this he gives Harriet a strained smile. 'We were anxious to know her plans for Christmas, weren't we, darling?'

'She hadn't told you her plans for Christmas?' Manon asks, directing the question at Lady Hind.

'Edith's fond of prevaricating. She can be . . . non-committal, would you say, Ian? With us, anyway. We'd agreed she and Will would spend Christmas with us in London and then she'd said, "You never know", or something to that effect.'

'You never know what?' asks Manon.

'I took it to mean she couldn't be certain Will would join us.'

'So there was trouble between them?' Harriet says.

'No, not trouble,' says Lady Hind. 'Ambivalence, I'd say. They're only twenty-four, after all. They're not married.'

'And this ambivalence,' says Harriet, 'would you say it was more on her part than his?'

'Yes,' says Lady Hind.

'Has there been any violence between them – heated rows, say? Would Edith have reason to be fearful of Mr Carter?'

'No, no, no,' says Sir Ian. 'It's not like that. It's ordinary stuff. Will is a marvellous fellow, devoted to Edie.'

'But if he sensed her feelings were cooling, perhaps—'

'Detective, we are not that sort of family. I'm sure you deal all the time with people whose lives are chaotic, who drink and brawl and abuse one another. But none of us – these things are not part of our lives, our experience. I'd be very surprised if Will is involved in this.'

'Right,' says Harriet. 'Can you think of anyone who would want to harm Edith?'

The Hinds look at each other, their expressions bewildered. 'No, we really can't,' says Lady Hind. 'Can you tell me, how do you . . . Please, you have to find her, I can't . . . The thought of her lost, you see . . .' Her eyes brim as she looks at the officers, one to the other.

'I'll explain how we go forward from here,' says Manon.

'Search teams will work in concentric circles out from the house and, at the same time, we'll be building a picture of Edith, working outwards from her most intimate circle – yourselves, Will Carter, Helena Reed. We'll look at all aspects of her life, based on what you tell us, her phone, computer, bank cards. So it's important you leave nothing out.'

'She doesn't have any bank cards,' says Sir Ian. 'She feels the whole banking industry is corrupt. According to Edie, if none of us used banks, then the whole global economic collapse wouldn't have happened. It's not a view I share, but she holds these beliefs very strongly. If she could pay everyone in muddy vegetables and repaired bicycle tyres, she would, but her landlord wouldn't have it.'

'OK, so how does she live? Where does her income come from?' asks Harriet.

'Me,' he says. 'I give her a MoneyGram transfer via the Post Office every month – £1,500 on the first. She pays the rent on the cottage in cash to the landlord – that's £750, I think. He lives next door. I pay the utilities directly from London. The rest she lives off.'

'So there would've been quite a lot of cash in the house,' says Harriet. 'She would have been seen collecting wads of it at the Post Office . . .'

'Look, I feel it's risky,' says Sir Ian. 'And I've argued with her about it. I've said I'd rather she has a bank account into which I can transfer the funds. But she just won't have it. She says someone has to break with the status quo. I think she'd prefer not to receive any money from me, to do everything her own way, on her own terms. Twenty-four-year-olds are like that. So I don't argue with her because I want her to have my help.'

'Also,' says Lady Hind, 'and we discussed this, oh God,

endlessly, because it worried us, but we reason that £750 goes more-or-less straight to the landlord, so it's not as if it's all under the bed.'

'You get to a point,' Sir Ian adds, and it's as if he and his wife's sentences are a continuation, 'where you don't want to fall out with your children because you don't want to lose them. The balance of power shifts, you see. I want her to have my money and these are the terms on which she'll have it.'

'How many people know about this cash arrangement?'

'Well, Will, of course. We have sort of been supporting Will by default because he lives in the house and we pay for the house,' says Lady Hind. 'As to others, Edith doesn't keep quiet about her views. She's quite vocal.'

'So this weekend,' Harriet says, 'there should have been how much in the cottage, at a guess?'

Sir Ian glances at his phone. 'It's the nineteenth, so she's halfway through the month,' he says. 'Christmas is a bit more expensive, so I'd imagine no more than £300. Surely not enough for someone to . . .'

'You'd be surprised,' says Harriet. 'Why not pay her rent directly? Why not transfer that, like the utilities?'

'The landlord gives her a slight reduction in return for cash-in-hand. I assume he's fiddling his taxes somewhat.'

'Fifteen hundred pounds is a generous allowance,' says Manon. 'Is she extravagant?'

'Quite the opposite. Edith believes in treading lightly on the earth.'

'But she has a car.'

'An electric car,' says Lady Hind. She swallows, and Manon sees she's keeping down a swell of desperation. 'A very old electric car. A G-Wiz. It used to be my run-around. Edith needed it when she moved to Huntingdon – to get to lectures

and supervisions at Corpus and to Deeping, which is only half an hour from here.'

'We'll need to take a closer look at Deeping, I hope you don't mind – get our forensic teams out there,' says Harriet.

'It's almost impossible to get to without a car. Middle of the Fens, about three acres,' says Sir Ian. 'Quite a rough place, really. Edith loves it there but, like I say, without the G-Wiz . . .'

'She might have gone with someone else,' says Harriet.

He nods. 'Would you like my keys?'

'No, it's all right, I've got Edith's set. Can I ask, is there any way she could gain access without her keys? A spare set at the property, perhaps?'

'Yes, in the porch, high up. If you feel along the architrave, there's a key resting there for emergencies,' says Sir Ian. 'The house is in the middle of nowhere. Hardly anyone even knows it's there, so we're quite lax on security.'

Harriet is writing in her notebook. She looks up and says, 'Now, we just need to get an account of your movements over the weekend so we can eliminate you both from the enquiry.'

'Yes, of course,' says Lady Hind. 'We were at the theatre on Saturday night with friends. *King Lear* at the Almeida. After the theatre, we went for supper at Le Palmier – six of us. We left there about midnight. Yesterday, we were at home mostly with the fire on – it was so *cold*. Ian went to the office briefly in the morning, didn't you? I made a monkfish stew for lunch. In the afternoon, we pottered about at home, reading, I watched bits of a film – one of those World War Two black and white ones. Ian was in and out of his study. In the evening, I took a delivery from my florist – she was getting all her Christmas orders out, hence why she was delivering so late on a Sunday. Then – this was about nine – Will rang, worried sick about Edith.'

'And your friends at the theatre,' Harriet says. 'Could we have a list?'

'Rog and Patty,' says Sir Ian, looking at Harriet's notebook. 'That's Roger Galloway and his wife Patricia. I'm sure their security detail will confirm everything for you.'

Manon, Davy, and Harriet shoot a glance at each other and Harriet says, 'A word outside, you two.'

'Don't say anything,' hisses Harriet, like an angry swan. 'Don't fucking say anything until we're in my fucking office.' Manon is right behind her as she pelts up the staircase. Those, she thinks, are some mightily clenched buttocks.

Once in her office, Harriet turns, breathless. 'Fuckety, fuckety fucking fuck,' she says. 'Right, I've thought of a name for this case. We're calling it Operation Career Fucking Suicide.'

'Let's just calm down,' says Manon. 'So he was at the theatre with the Home Secretary. All that means is that his alibi probably stacks up.'

'Ye *think*?' says Harriet.

'It probably is quite tight, to be fair,' says Davy.

Manon and Harriet look at each other, Harriet turning up her palms.

'Right,' she says, 'so if we thought the press were all over it before, we should see what happens when they get hold of this. Not just the Royal Family, but "did the Home Secretary interfere with the investigation in any way?" Well, that'll be the *Guardian*. Before I know it, I'll be in front of some sodding select committee at the House of Commons having my career buried under a steaming pile of procedure. I predict a call from Galloway to the Commissioner in—' she looks at her watch – 'oooh, the next couple of hours?'

This was the nightmare of being the SIO: pressure from every quarter, having to make decisions about which lines to investigate in what order of priority, trying to work out which information is important and which can be discarded, and all those decisions being scrutinised from above and often from outside.

'Let's not get bamboozled by Ian Hind,' says Manon. 'We still need to confirm their movements.'

This appears to have a calming effect on Harriet, who takes a deep breath and allows her shoulders to drop.

'Yes, right. You're right. Let's put a call in to Galloway's security detail. I want you two to drive out and scope this country pile, Deeping. See if that key's been disturbed. And I want CCTV from the Post Office on the first of December – see who was looking over Edith's shoulder when she picked up all that cash. Get Kim to check whether the landlord was paid his rent. I'm assuming he was interviewed during house to house. This is looking more like aggravated burglary by the minute.'

Manon and Davy make for the door.

'And from now on,' Harriet calls after them, 'we treat Sir Bufton Tufton downstairs with the utterly slavish deference he so richly deserves.'

On one of the rare occasions Harriet had come to Cromwell's and got drunk, she'd told Manon she had two consolations in life: swearing and Elsie.

Elsie was ninety-three with Parkinson's. She lived in a care home, which had been raided by Harriet during an investigation into abuse of the elderly. Elsie had been in better shape then, standing with the help of a frame in the pink, over-heated hallway. She'd regarded Harriet with beady, critical eyes – they all saw it. It was as if the team stood still, as Harriet

and the old girl locked on to each other. *Some enchanted evening.*

Elsie shuffled into the room to be interviewed, her shins thick, the colour of pine in tan tights, chenille slippers on her rigid, calcified feet. Harriet asked Elsie if she had been mistreated by any of the staff at the home. 'Don't be *silly*,' Elsie barked, and Harriet had been momentarily chastened. The balance of power was all with Elsie, who snapped and criticised ('Ever done this before, dearie?'), but Harriet persisted. Nightgowns removed how? What if the soup was unfinished? And if you wet the bed?

Gradually it emerged that Elsie believed her forgetfulness merited the odd slap. Her shaking hands drove them mad, you see. She couldn't dress any more – well, that's bound to get their backs up. Who'd want to dress a scrawny old bird like me?

Harriet said to leave it there just for now, and she fled the room. When Manon next saw her, she was leaning against a panda car, smoking a cigarette, looking furious and tearful at the same time. This is what Manon likes most about Harriet – no, not likes, understands: she isn't on an even keel. She feels the work in every fibre and it hurts her.

'I'm going to shut that fucking place down,' she said, the cigarette tight between her fingers. 'And that manager's going to prison.'

Harriet got Elsie out of there by nightfall, much as she protested. The care home was taken over by new owners and the manager received a year's sentence for wilful neglect, which was suspended 'for previous good character', so she walked free, confirming all Harriet's suspicions that the courts are 'a fucking joke'.

Manon knows that Harriet, and most of their colleagues, cleave to the view that criminals either get off or get off lightly; that the system is stacked against the police. She's aware that

if police officers were allowed to draw up the legislation, it would probably contain the words '*and throw away the key*'. What worries Manon is she's joining their ranks. It can often feel as if they're fighting a tide of filth and losing; you only needed to do a week in child protection to lose any liberal tendencies you ever had.

Harriet became Elsie's visiting daughter, because Elsie had no children of her own – she was twenty-five when the war took the boy she loved at Arras in 1940. His name was Teddy and she kept a photo of him by her bed, but Manon thought he was more an emblem of what had gone wrong. Elsie had had an abruption in her life. Grief had held her up, during which time she worked in a munitions factory and discovered how much she liked to work, when it had never really been an option before. When she emerged from mourning after the war, she found herself looking at a timer where the sand was running low.

'There were no men left,' she told Harriet, laughing. 'None who wanted an old spinster in her thirties like me, at any rate. It just never happened for me, the family thing.'

Harriet called on Elsie every week and Manon occasionally went with her, witnessing between them a conspiratorial warmth. Elsie looked at Harriet with mischievous eyes, saying, 'Thrash you this time.' They played cribbage, or bridge when they could make a four with other stooped residents in the care home, though death often intervened ('Wilf not here?' 'Not any more, no.'). Blackjack, beggar-my-neighbour, sudoku, and crosswords. Then, as Elsie became more vague – the shaking and the vagueness accompanying one another as if staying fixed in thought and deed was ungraspable – the games became more infantile: Guess Who?, Connect Four, puzzles, and pairs.

Elsie humanised Harriet, who had a tendency to be hard. She was the obligation that made her feel stretched and needed.

Her joyful complaint. That drunken night when Harriet had confided in Manon (her kindred spirit in singleness and childlessness), she said, 'When you don't have kids, everyone assumes you're some fucking ball-breaking career freak, but it's not like that. It's more, y'know, a cock-up. It's something that happened *to* me. Elsie gets that. Plus, I really fucking hope someone will visit me when I'm pissing my pants in a care home.'

Davy and Manon drive out of HQ car park in an unmarked car that wears its snow like a jaunty hat, but as soon as they turn out of the gates, they slow to a halt. The traffic is always terrible on Brampton Road, a permanent feature of their forays out on jobs, but this queue has been made worse by the diversions set up around Edith Hind's house on George Street, combined with considerable rubbernecking from the fine folk of Huntingdon. Davy taps on the steering wheel with his gloved hand, a marker to Manon that he is unperturbed.

'This'll take hours,' says Manon, slumping down into the passenger seat and wedging her feet onto the dashboard, her knees up. She has her phone in her lap, texting Bryony.

Can't do lunch. High-risk misper just blew up in my face. M

'Sarge,' says Davy.

'Hmmm?' she says, and she looks up to see Davy casting anxious glances at her feet and at the spotless fascia of his glove box.

'You couldn't—'

Her phone bleeps.

No worries. Am loving my court papers. Nothing cd tear me away. Not even pepper-flavoured water. B

'Sorry, what?' she says to Davy.

'Your feet,' he says, with another furtive glance at the offending boots, as if they might detonate.

'It's not even your car,' she says, her fingers working on her phone. But she takes her feet down.

Tomoz maybe. M

Is Harriet losing the plot?

Yep. Crapping herself. Victim's family mates with Galloway.

Holy Shit.

Yup.

At least your career isn't in cul-de-sac. May chew arm off if have to do more filing.

Go away, please, am in middle of Very Important Investigation.

All right, Mrs Big Tits. Laters. PS. It's always the uncle. Or the stepfather. Or the boyfriend. Or possibly a complete stranger.

'How was the date, by the way?' Davy asks.

They are moving now – *at last* – having turned off onto the A14 towards the Fenland village of March.

'Don't ask.'

'Can't have been that bad.'

'Can't it?'

'Well then, there'll be others – other responses to your ad.'

'It's not an ad, Davy. I'm not selling roller blinds. It's a profile.'

And what a work of fiction that 'about me' section is.

Genuine, easy-going. I love life and laughter, a bottle of wine with friends, cinema and walks in the countryside. Passionate about what I do. Looking for someone to share all this amazing world has to offer.
Age: *35*
Looking for: *fun/a long-term relationship/let's see what happens*
Likes: *sunshine, the smell of fresh coffee, walks on the beach*
Dislikes: *unexpected items in bagging area*

Manon cut-and-pasted most of it from someone else's profile – a woman called Liz Temple from Berkhamsted, who claimed life was not about 'sheltering from the thunderstorms' but 'learning to dance in the rain'. Except the bagging area joke – that was Manon's and she was pretty pleased with it, feeling it made amusing reference to emotional baggage, of which there was a surfeit on the Internet.

Were she to tell the truth, her profile would go something like:

Misanthrope, staring down the barrel of childlessness. Yawning ability to find fault. Can give off WoD (Whiff of Desperation). A vast, bottomless galaxy of loneliness. Educated: to an intimidating degree. Willing to hide this. Prone to tears. Can be needy. Often found Googling 'having a baby at 40'.
Age: *39*
Looking for: *book-reading philanthropist with psychotherapy*

training who can put up shelves. Can wear glasses (relaxed about this).
Dislikes: *most of the fucktards I meet on the Internet.*

'Mustn't give up, Sarge,' says Davy.

'Like I'd take relationship advice from you. Still treating you mean, is she?'

'She keeps me on my toes.'

'That's one way of putting it.'

Davy is twenty-six but seems still a boy; has been in the force since eighteen, and something about him is irresistible to Manon. He has this naive intensity – like an only child, neither at home with the adults nor one of the children – and those enormous ears always on the alert. His affable demeanour and positive outlook have earned him the nickname 'Silver' among the DCs. Silver Lining, the boy who's always looking on the bright side. He thinks the world might still come right if he just tries hard enough – which he does, all the time, mentoring at youth centres and looking out for every troubled child who crosses his path. But every silver lining has a cloud, and that cloud is Chloe.

Manon has seen them together more than once, though she and Davy never socialise outside the safety of office dos, Davy being of a different generation and this gulf becoming canyon-like outside the familiar hierarchies of work. One evening, however, they found themselves in the same pub, The Lord Protector on Mayfield Road. Manon was in a group from the station – a rowdy bunch, all pissed and telling terrible jokes ('Invisible man's at the door. Tell 'im I can't see 'im. Hahahahahaha.'); Davy sat in a quiet corner with Chloe. Table for two.

Manon had watched them as the hubbub went on around

her: Davy all animation, eyes on Chloe as if she were lit by some celestial cone, describing something to her. Chloe was looking over his shoulder, her face unmoving. She was a woman in a perpetual sulk and Davy was forever chivvying her out of it.

'Face like a slapped arse,' said Kim Delaney, looking across the room with Manon. 'Dunno what he sees in her.'

But to Manon it makes perfect sense. Davy's at his best when rectifying. He often comes into the office with a carrier bag destined for the youth centre where he volunteers – 'Choccy Weetos for Ryan', 'Rex needs socks' – and the brightness in his eyes tells her how much satisfaction this tenderness gives him. Warming up a frozen, miserable girlfriend is his destiny. If Davy got together with someone indomitably cheerful . . . well, Manon doesn't know what he'd do with himself. End it all, probably.

'I believe this leads to the abode,' he says, as they turn down a wooded track. Bare tree branches bend over the car and verges rise up on either side. The sky seems to darken as the countryside burgeons around them.

'Drop the Shotley guff, will you?' says Manon, irritably. Davy loves the jargon they inculcate at police school. He's forever saying the suspect 'has made good his escape' with his 'ill-gotten gains'.

'Bit peckish?' says Davy, reaching into his pocket for a rich tea biscuit, which he hands to her.

'This place is a bit Hansel and Gretel, isn't it?' says Manon, eating the biscuit and peering up at the menacing tree fingers that reach for each other above the windscreen. The car is rocking over stones.

'Shouldn't be far down this track,' says Davy.

The track is bordered by logs, sawn ends forming a honeycomb

grid. Their tyres plough through mud, which splinters with ice in places. The light lowers a notch, soaked up by the seaweed-gloss leaves on a row of bushes – rhododendrons, Davy says – ribboned with snow.

He is hunched towards the windscreen as they emerge in front of an ivy-clad house, broader than it is tall, with a pitch-roofed porch and a carport to the side. The house is ensconced in countryside, the woodland growing denser and darker to the sides and behind them.

With their arrival, a sensor light has clicked on above the front door – a rectangle of fire in Manon's eyes. The ivy running up the walls of the house is straining in at the windows, whose wooden frames are painted greyish green.

'Glad I'm not Polsa having to search this place,' she says.

Davy turns off the engine so that all they can hear is its ticking and a blackbird, its lonely cry seeming to tell them the place is deserted.

Manon pats along the high shelf of architrave in the porch, and there it is, among dust and dead insects – the key. She puts it in an evidence bag, then uses Edith's set in the lock. The brass knob, green-gold, is icy even through her latex gloves, and its round skirt-plate rattles loosely. They step into a black-and-white tiled hall with slate-blue walls. The house smells of wood smoke and the outdoors – an oxygenated, muddy smell that is not quite damp. An umbrella stand is filled with brollies and walking sticks, and to their left – Manon peers around the door, painted mustard yellow – is a boot room, wallpapered with Victorian images of birds as if in a shooting lodge. She squats next to a line of wellingtons – one black pair and three green – and touches the mud that cakes them.

'Davy?' she calls, and he appears by her side. 'Does this look fresh to you?'

She swaps places with him and follows the hallway out to a baronial-scale lounge. The ceiling is double height, the walls blotchy with blood-red lime wash. There is a grand open fireplace with white stone surround – the sort you could rest an elbow on when you came in from fishing in the Fenland rivers. A charred black scar runs up the back of the brickwork in the hearth. Manon squats beside the grate but it contains only the cold, crocodile husks of burnt-through logs.

The fire is surrounded on three sides by red sofas patterned with fleur-de-lys and collapsing with age and gentility. She can imagine the Hinds reading their Dickens hardbacks or their subscriptions to the *New York Review of Books*, fire roaring and some string music playing in the background.

From the lounge is a staircase leading up to a minstrels' gallery and off it, the bedrooms. Manon is feeling her way, the house cast in painterly shadows. Swathes of muddy colours curling up the staircase or viewed through an open bedroom door: mustard, rose, slate blues and grey, one leading on to the next. She pushes open a door to a vast bedroom – Ian and Miriam's, she assumes, because it is furnished with a grand French bed, its headboard framed in ornate gold and upholstered with grey linen. There is an imposingly dark French armoire, too, its bottom drawer slightly open. Manon walks to the window – a long cushion in the same grey linen has created a window seat with two Liberty-print pink blossom pillows at either end. From here she can see the front drive and their car, and she has an urge to go towards it, to drive away.

She jumps at the sound of a door slamming and her heart thuds in the shadows of the mansard window.

'Boss?' calls Davy, entering the room.

'Have you checked all the downstairs rooms?'

'I have.'

'Right, well, let's check the rest of the rooms up here and the outbuildings. Then Polsa can take it from there.'

'Not a bad little bolt-hole,' says Davy.

Manon shivers. 'Gives me the creeps.'