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WATCHING

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TERESA DRISCOLL

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Recipes for Melissa

Last Kiss Goodnight

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f THOMAS & MERCER

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JULY 2015

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CHAPTER 1

THE WITNESS

I made a mistake. I know that now.

The only reason I did what I did was what I heard on that train. And I ask you, in all truthfulness – how would you have felt?

Until that moment, I had never considered myself prudish. Or naive. OK, OK, so I had a pretty conventional – some might say sheltered – upbringing but . . . Heavens. Look at me now. I've lived a bit. Learned a lot. Pretty average, I would argue, on the Richter scale of moral behaviour, which is why what I heard so shook me.

I thought they were nice girls, you see.

Of course, I really shouldn't listen in on other people's conversations. But it's impossible not to on public transport, don't you find? So many barking into their mobile phones while everyone else ramps up the volume to compete. To be heard.

On reflection, I would probably not have become so sucked in had my book been better, but to my eternal regret I bought the book for the same reason I bought the magazine with wind turbines on the cover.

I read somewhere that by your forties you are supposed to care more about what you think of others than what they think of you – so why is it I am still waiting for this to kick in?

If you want to buy Hello! magazine, just buy it, Ella. What does it matter what the bored student on the cash desk thinks?

But no. I pick the obscure environmental magazine and the worthy biography, so that by the time the two young men get on with their black plastic bin bags at Exeter, I am bored to my very bones.

A question for you now.

What would you think if you saw two men board a train, each holding a black bin bag – contents unknown? For myself, the mother of a teenage son whose bedroom is subject to a health and safety order, I merely think, *Typical. Couldn't even find a holdall, lads?*

They are loud and boisterous, skylarking in the way that so many men in their twenties do – only just making the train, with the plumped-up platform

guard blowing his whistle in furious disapproval.

After messing about with the automatic door – *open, shut, open, shut* – which they inevitably find hilarious beyond the facts, they settle into the seats nearest the luggage racks. But then, apparently spotting the two girls from Cornwall, they glance knowingly at each other and head further down the carriage to the seats directly behind them.

I smile to myself. See, I'm no killjoy. I was young once.

I watch the girls go all quiet and shy, one widening her eyes at her friend – and yes, one of the men is especially striking, like a model or a member of a boy band. And it all reminds me of that very particular feeling in your tummy.

You know.

So I am not at all surprised or in the least bit disapproving when the men stand up and the good-looking one then leans over the top of the dividing seats, wondering if he might fetch the girls something from the buffet, ‘. . . seeing as I'm going?’

Next there are name swaps and quite a bit of giggling, and the dance begins.

Two coffees and four lagers later, the young men have joined the girls – all seated near enough for me to follow the full conversation.

I know, I know. I really shouldn't be listening, but we've been over this. I'm bored, remember. They're loud.

So then. The girls repeat what I have already gleaned from their earlier gossiping. This trip to London is their first solo visit to the capital – a gift from their parents to celebrate the end of GCSEs. They are booked into a budget hotel, have tickets for *Les Misérables* and have never been this excited.

‘You kidding me? You really never been to London on your own before?’ Karl, the boy-band lookalike, is amazed. ‘Can be a tricky place, you know, girls. London. You need to watch yourselves. Taxi not tube when you get out of the theatre. You hear me?’

I am liking Karl now. He is recommending shops and market stalls – also a club where he says they will be safe if they fancy some decent music and dancing after the show. He is writing down the name on a piece of paper for them. Knows the bouncer. ‘Mention my name, OK?’

And then Anna, the taller of the two friends from Cornwall, is wondering about the black bags and I am secretly delighted that she has asked, for I am curious also, smiling in anticipation of the teasing. *Boys*. So

disorganised. What are you like, eh?

But no.

The two young men have just got out of prison. The black bags contain their personal effects.

I can actually hear myself swallowing then – a rush of fluid suddenly filling the back of my throat and my pulse now unwelcome percussion in my ear.

The pause button is pressed, but not for long enough. Much too quickly, the girls are regrouping. ‘You having us on?’

No. The boys are not having them on. They have decided to be straight with people. Have made their mistakes and paid their dues but refuse to be ashamed.

Cards on the table, girls? Karl has served a sentence at Exeter prison for assault; Antony for theft. Karl was merely sticking up for a friend, you understand, and – hand on heart – would do the same again. His friend was being picked on in a bar and he hates bullying.

Me, I am struggling with the paradox – bullying versus assault, and do we really lock people up for minor altercations? – but the girls seem fascinated, and in their sweet and liberal naivety are saying that loyalty is a good thing and they had a bloke from prison who came into their school once and told them how he had completely turned his life around after serving time over drugs. Covered in tattoos, he was. *Covered*.

‘Wow. Jail. So what was that really like?’

It is at this point I consider my role.

Privately I am picturing Anna’s mother toasting her bottom by her Aga, worrying with her husband if their little girl will be all right, and he is telling her not to fuss so. *They are growing up fast. Sensible girls. They will be fine, love.*

And I am thinking that they are not fine at all. For Karl is now thinking that the safest thing for the girls would be to have someone who knows London well chaperoning them during their visit.

Karl and Antony are going to stay with friends in Vauxhall and fancy a big night to celebrate their release. How about they meet the girls after the theatre and try the club together?

This is when I decide that I need to phone the girls’ parents. They have named their hamlet. Anna lives on a farm. It’s not rocket science. I can phone

the post office or local pub; how many farms can there be?

But now Anna isn't sure at all. No. They should probably have an early night so they can hit the shops tomorrow morning. They have this plan, see, to go to Liberty's first thing because Sarah is determined to try on something by Stella McCartney and get a picture on her phone.

Good girl, I am thinking. *Sensible girl*. *Spare me the intervention*, Anna. But there is a complication, for Sarah seems suddenly to have taken a shine to Antony. There is a second trip to the buffet and they swap seats on their return – Anna now sitting with Karl and Sarah with Antony, who is telling her about his regrets at stuffing up his life. He only turned to crime out of desperation, he says, because he couldn't get a job. Couldn't support his son.

Son?

It sweeps over me, then. The shadow from the thatched canopy of my chocolate-box life – me shrinking smaller and smaller into the shade as Antony explains that he is fighting his ex for access, telling Sarah that there is no way he is going to have his son growing up not knowing his dad. 'Don't you think that would be just terrible, Sarah? For him to grow up not knowing his dad?'

Sarah is the one who is surprising me now – there's a catch in her throat as she says she thinks it's really cool that he cares so very much, because many young men wouldn't, would just walk away from the responsibility. 'I feel really awful now. Us banging on about Stella McCartney.'

And the truth? At this point I have absolutely no idea about any of it anymore. What do I know? A woman whose son's only access battle involved an 18-certificate film at the local cinema.

An hour of whispering follows and I try very hard to read again, to take in the pluses of the quieter generation of wind turbines, but then Antony and Sarah are off to the buffet again. *More lager*, I am thinking. *Big mistake, Sarah*. And this is when I decide.

Yes. I will head to the buffet myself on the pretext of needing coffee, and in the queue or passing in the corridor will feign trouble with my phone. I will ask Sarah for help – hoping to separate her from Antony for a quiet word – and give a little warning that she needs to step away from this nonsense or I will be phoning her parents. *Immediately, you understand me, Sarah? I can find out their number*.

Our carriage is three away from the buffet. I stumble into seats passing through the second, bump-bump-bumping my thighs, and then feel for my phone in the pocket of my jacket as I pass through the automatic doors into

the connecting space.

And that's when I hear them.

No shame. No attempt even to keep themselves quiet about it. Making out, loud and proud, in the train toilet. Rutting in the cubicle like a pair of animals.

I know it's them from what he's saying. How long it's been. How grateful he is. 'Sarah, oh Sarah . . .'

And yes, I admit it. I am completely shocked to the core of my very being. Hot with humiliation. Furious. Winded and desperate, more than anything on this planet, to escape the noise.

Also the shame of my naivety. My ridiculous assumptions.

I stumble across the corridor to the next set of automatic doors and into the carriage, breathless and flustered in the scramble to put distance between myself and the evidence of my miscalculation.

Nice girls?

In the buffet queue, I am listening again to the pulse in my ear as I wonder if someone else will have heard them by now. Even reported them?

And then I am thinking, *Report them? Report them to whom, Ella? Will you just listen to yourself? Other people will do precisely what you should have done from the off. They will mind their own.*

At which point my emotions begin to change and I am wondering instead how I came to be this out of touch, this buttoned up. This woman who evidently has not the first clue about young people. Or anything much.

Into my head now – a kaleidoscope of memories. Pictures torn around the edges. The magazines we found in our son's room. That night after the cinema when we came home early to find Luke trying to override the Sky security to watch porn.

So that on this wretched train, I find that I need very urgently to speak to my husband. To my Tony. To reset my compass.

I need to ask him if the whole problem here is not with them but with me. *Am I altogether ridiculous, Tony? No, really – I need you to be honest with me. When we had that row over the Sky channels and Luke's magazines.*

Am I the most terrible prude? Am I?

I do try to ring him, actually – that night from the hotel after the conference session. I want to tell him how I did the sensible thing and moved

to the other end of the train. Minded my own. The girls clearly quite streetwise enough.

But he is out and hasn't taken his mobile, being one of the few who still thinks they give you brain cancer, and so I speak instead to Luke and find that it calms me to hear him describe supper – a tagine from a recipe he downloaded on a new app. He loves to cook, my Luke, and I am teasing him about the state of the kitchen, betting he has used every appliance and pan on the property.

Then it is the morning in the hotel.

I so hate this sensation – that out-of-body numbness born of air conditioning, a foreign bed and lack of discipline over the minibar. My hotel treat – a brandy or two after a long day.

It is barely six thirty and I long for more sleep. Ten futile minutes and I give up, eyeing the sachets of sadness in the little bowl alongside the kettle. I always do this in hotel rooms. Kid myself that I will drink instant coffee just this once, only to pour it down the bathroom sink.

I stare at the line of empty miniatures, wincing as a terrible thought flutters into the room. I glance at the phone by the bed and feel a punch of dread, the familiar frisson of fear that I have done something embarrassing, something I am going to regret.

I turn back to the row of bottles and remember that after the second brandy last night, I decided to phone directory enquiries to track down the girls' parents. I go cold momentarily at the thought of this, my memory still hazy. *Did you actually ring? Think, Ella, think.*

I stare again at the phone and concentrate hard. Ah, yes. I am remembering now, my shoulders relaxing as I finally see it. I was holding the phone and then at the *very* point of dialling, I realised that I wasn't thinking straight, and not just because of the brandy. My motivation was skewed. I wanted to phone not because I was worried for the girls, but as a punishment, because I was angry at how Sarah had made me feel.

And so I did the sensible thing. I put the phone back down, I turned out the light and I went to sleep.

Good. This is very good. The relief now so overwhelming that I decide by way of celebration that I will try the instant coffee after all.

I flick on the kettle first and then the television. And that is when it comes. The single moment – suspended at first and then stretching, stretching, beyond this room, beyond this city. The moment in time in which I realise my

life is never going to be the same again.

Not ever.

The sound is muted from the late-night film I watched with the subtitles on to spare disturbing the guests next door.

But the picture is unmistakable. Beautiful. A photograph from her Facebook page. Her green eyes glowing and her blonde hair cascading down her back. She is at the beach; I recognise St Michael's Mount behind her.

And somehow my body has zoomed backwards – through the pillow and the bedstead and the wall – until I am watching the screen from much further away. This screen that is scrolling putrid, awful words: *Missing . . . Anna . . . Missing . . . Anna . . .* The kettle screaming angry clouds onto the mirror while I am planning the calls in my head all at once.

A black and terrible jumble of excuses. None of them good enough.

To the police. To Tony.

You have to understand that I was going to phone . . .

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CHAPTER 2

THE FATHER

Henry Ballard sits in the conservatory, trying very hard to ignore the clattering in the kitchen.

He knows that he should go to his wife – to help her, to console her – but he knows also that it will make no difference and so is putting it off. The truth? He wants just a little longer like this, looking out on the lawn. In this strange space, this addition to the house that has never really worked – always too hot or too cold, despite all the blinds and the big dust-magnet fan they had installed at ridiculous expense – he has managed somehow to drift into a state of semi-consciousness, a place in which his mind can roam beyond his body, beyond time, out into the garden where this very minute, in the early morning light, he is listening to them whispering in their den in the bushes. Anna and Jenny.

It was their favourite place for a year, maybe two, when they were into that hideous pink phase. Pink duvets. Pink Barbies. Pink tent bought from some catalogue and filled with all manner of girly paraphernalia. He had always refused to go near the thing. Now he wanted more than anything in the world to forget the milking and the hay, the VAT forms and the bank, and to float out there and make a little fire to cook sausages for their breakfast. Proper camping, like he promised to do so many times, but never did.

Now an almighty crash from the kitchen brings him back inside. She is picking up tins from the floor – a collection of bun and baking cases in all manner of sizes and shapes.

‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘Plum slices.’

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, Barbara.’

Anna’s favourite. A sort of flapjack with spiced stewed plums through the middle. He can smell the cinnamon: the spice jar is tipped over on the kitchen surface, the pungent spill a neat tiny hill.

Oh, Barbara.

He watches her picking up all the tins, her hands trembling, and simply cannot bear it.

And so, instead of helping and trying to be in any way kind or even decent, he goes into his study and sits by the phone so that five, maybe ten minutes later, he is the first to see the police car pull up again on the drive outside.

Something terrible wrenches in his stomach then, and he actually thinks for a moment of barricading the door – a ridiculous image of all the hallway furniture piled up high so that they cannot come in. There are two of them this time. A man and a woman. The man in a suit and the woman in uniform.

By the time he is in the hall, his wife is standing in the kitchen doorway in her apron, wiping her hands dry over and over and over. He turns to look at her for just a moment, and her eyes plead with him and with God and with justice.

He opens the door – Anna and Jenny rushing in with their school bags and tennis rackets, chucking them all onto the floor. Relief. Relief. Relief.

Then for real.

Their faces say it.

‘Have you found her?’

The man in his creased high-street suit just shakes his head.

‘This is the family liaison officer. PC Cathy Bright. We talked about her on the phone?’

He can say nothing. Mute.

‘Is it all right if we come in, Mr Ballard?’

A nod. All he can muster.

In the study they all sit and there is a strange shushing noise, flesh on flesh, as his wife rubs her palms together, and so he reaches out to take her hand. To stop the noise.

‘As we said before, the police in London – the Metropolitan team – they are doing everything they can. They’ve fast-tracked the case, given Anna’s age. The circumstances. They are in contact with us constantly.’

‘I want to go to London. To help—’

‘Mr Ballard. We discussed this. Your wife needs you here and there are things we need help with here, too. It is better for now, please, if we can concentrate on gathering all the information that we need. If there is any news – anything at all – I promise you that you will be told and we will arrange transport immediately.’

‘So has Sarah remembered anything? Said anything more? We would like to speak to her. If we could just speak to her.’

‘Sarah is still in shock. It’s understandable. There is a specialist team on hand and her parents are with her now. We are all trying to get what information we can. Officers in London are going over all the CCTV footage. From the club.’

‘I still don’t get it. Club? What were they doing in a club? There was nothing in the plan about any club. They had tickets for *Les Misérables*. We expressly said that—’

‘And there is a new development which may throw some light on that, Mr Ballard.’

The sound his throat makes as he tries to clear it seems too loud. Guttural. Gross.

‘A witness has come forward. Someone who was on the train.’

Phlegm. In his throat.

‘Witness. What do you mean, *witness*? Witness to what? I’m not understanding.’

The two police officers exchange a look, and the woman moves to the chair next to Barbara.

The detective does the talking. ‘A woman who was sitting near Anna and Sarah on the journey has phoned in after the police appeal. She says she overheard the two girls striking up an acquaintance with two men on the train.’

‘What do you mean, *acquaintance*? What men? I’m not following you.’ His wife is now gripping his hand more tightly.

‘From what she heard, Mr and Mrs Ballard, it appears that Anna and Sarah may have become friendly with two men. Who are *known* to us.’

‘Men? What men?’

‘Men who had just got out of prison, Mr Ballard.’

‘No. No. She must be mistaken . . . There’s no way. Absolutely no way.’

‘The police in London are going to try to speak to Sarah some more about this. Urgently. And to this witness. As I say, we just need to piece together as much detail as we can about what happened before Anna went missing.’

‘It’s been hours and hours.’

‘Yes.’

‘They’re sensible girls, officer. You understand that? Good, sensible girls. Brought up right. We would never – never – have let them go on the trip if we didn’t—’

‘Yes. Yes. Of course. And you must try very hard to stay positive. Like I say. We are doing everything we possibly can to find Anna, and we will keep you informed every step of the way. Cathy can stay with you. Answer any questions you may have. I’d just like to have another look at Anna’s room, if I may. We are hoping there may be a diary. Have a look at her computer. That sort of thing. Could you show me, Mr Ballard? While Cathy perhaps makes a cup of tea for your wife. Yes?’

He isn’t listening now. He is thinking that she didn’t want them to go. His wife. She said they were too young. It was too far. Too soon. He was the one who spoke up for the trip. *Oh, for heaven’s sake, Barbara. You can’t baby them forever.* The truth? He felt Anna needed to step away from the apron strings.

Away from the plum slices.

But it wasn’t only that. Dear God.

What if they found out that it *wasn’t only that*?

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CHAPTER 3

THE FRIEND

In a stuffy twin room of the inappropriately named Paradise Hotel in London, Sarah can hear her mother's voice whispering her name and so keeps her eyes resolutely shut.

It is a different room now. Identical but on a different floor. The one in which she unpacked with Anna remains off limits, though Sarah cannot understand why. Anna did not go back there. Did they not believe her? *She did not come back here. OK?*

In this room there is still a horrid, ill-defined smell. Something that reminds her of the back of a cupboard. Hide-and-seek as a child. With her eyes closed, Sarah wishes she could play the game right now. Ignore the smell and the temperature, her mother and the police, and play hide-and-seek. Yes. The time-slip version in which Anna is drying her hair around now – the tongs already hot for straightening afterwards – blabbing on above the drone of the motor about what they should do today. Which shop should they visit first? And was Sarah serious about trying on the Stella McCartney range because the assistant would be able to tell from their clothes that they weren't actually going to buy anything.

Anna. Sweet, infuriating Anna. Too skinny. Too beautiful. Too—

'Are you awake, love? Can you hear me, darling?'

Sarah, facing away from her mother still, opens her eyes and winces at the light fighting through the chink in the curtains to shape a triangle on the wall. She had lain on the bed fully clothed, refusing to get under the covers, so sure there would be news by now. Any minute. They would find her any minute.

'I'm glad you managed to drop off, love. Even just an hour. I've made us some tea.'

'I don't want anything.'

'Just a sip. Two sugars. You need to get something inside you. Some sugar—'

'I said I can't face it. All right?'

Her mother is in the same trousers as yesterday but a fresh blouse now,

and Sarah is thinking it is both typical and somehow inappropriate that she thought to bring a clean blouse.

‘Your father’s arrived. He’s downstairs. He’s been with the police mostly. They want to speak to you again. When you feel—’

‘I’ve told them everything I can remember already. Hours of it. And I don’t want to see my father. You shouldn’t have called him.’

Sarah and her mother lock eyes.

‘Look, I know it’s difficult, darling. You and your dad. But the thing is, he does care. And they’ve had some call, the police, that they want to talk to you about. After the coverage on the telly.’

‘Call?’

‘Yes. From some woman on the train.’

‘Woman? I don’t know what you’re talking about. What woman?’

Sarah can feel the same gaping hole in her stomach that she felt in those first terrible hours, while she waited with the police for her mother. While she was still woozy from the booze. Disorientated. *Where are you, Anna? Where the hell are you?*

Trying to give the officers just enough detail to make them take it all seriously but not enough to—

She gets up quickly now, feeling the crumple of her linen shirt against her waist as she moves, fussing with the hairbrushes, make-up bags and other junk on the dressing table.

‘Have you got the remote? I need to see the news. What they’re saying. What *are* they saying?’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea, Sarah. Drink your tea. I’ll tell your dad you’re awake. That they can come up now.’

‘I’m not speaking to them again. Not yet.’

‘Look, darling. I realise this is awful. For you. For all of us.’ Her mother is moving across the room now. ‘But they’ll find her, love. I’m sure they will. She probably went off to some party and is afraid she’s in trouble.’ She puts her arm around Sarah’s shoulders – the mugs of tea now positioned amid the chaos of the dressing table – but Sarah shrugs her off.

‘Are Anna’s parents here?’

‘Not yet. I don’t know. I don’t know what’s been decided about that. The police wanted to check some things with them in Cornwall.’

‘What things?’

‘Computers or something. I don’t know. I don’t exactly remember, Sarah. It’s all been a blur. They just want to get all the information they can to help with this. With the search.’

‘And you think I don’t? You think I don’t feel bad enough?’

‘No one’s blaming you, love.’

‘Blaming me? So why say *blaming me* if no one’s blaming me?’

‘Sarah . . . love. Don’t be like this. They’re going to find her. I know they are. I’ll ring downstairs.’

‘No. I need you to leave me alone. All of you. I need you to just leave me alone now.’

Sarah’s mother takes her mobile from her pocket and is just feeling around for her glasses when there is a tap at the door.

‘That’ll probably be them now.’

It is the same detective as before, but with a different woman police officer this time and Sarah’s father alongside.

‘So, is there any news?’ Sarah’s mother begins to raise her body from the chair but slumps back down as their heads shake a ‘no’ in stereo.

‘Did you manage to rest, Sarah? Feel OK to talk some more now?’ It is the woman police officer.

‘I wasn’t drunk. When we spoke before. I wasn’t drunk.’

‘No.’

The adults all look from one to the other.

‘We’ve had a look at the CCTV, Sarah. From the club.’ It is the detective’s voice now – firmer. ‘Some of the cameras weren’t working, unfortunately. But there are some things we’re not quite understanding, Sarah. Also, we’ve had a call from a witness.’

‘A witness?’

‘Yes. A woman on the train.’

She feels it instantly. The frisson. The giveaway. The cooling as the blood shifts.

Draining from her face.

ONE YEAR ON

JULY 2016

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CHAPTER 4

THE WITNESS

I never deluded myself.

I always knew what this week would be like. One part of me longing for it: the slim hope the anniversary coverage might kick-start things again for the investigation. But the other part: pure dread. People giving me that look again. *That woman. Do you remember? The woman who didn't say anything. On the train. Do you remember? When that girl disappeared? Christ – is it a year ago already?*

But I do still want it – the reconstruction on Crimecatchers, for the family. That poor mother. I just don't want to be a part of it.

You can understand that, can't you? I mean, I didn't mind them asking. Although Tony went ballistic when the police phoned up – surprised they had the gall.

You leak her name. You let everyone judge her and you think she wants to be on your television programme . . .

He still insists it was a deliberate leak – the press getting my name. We have no proof and I have got to the point, to be frank, where I am not sure I care one way or the other; all I know is that I cannot bear the thought of everyone turning up all over again. Raking it up all over again. Judging me. Hating me.

Even loyal customers in the shop giving me that slightly odd look. Deliberately not mentioning it.

The official version from the police press office is that there was no leak; they merely mentioned to a few reporters that the witness on the train was 'attending a conference'. But they must have said what kind of conference, otherwise how did the press know I was a florist? Whatever. Some of the press pack checked out the various floristry events, worked through the lists of delegates from Devon and Cornwall, and eventually landed at our door.

I still go cold, thinking about it.

Of course, if I'd been smarter they would have had no way of confirming it. If I had thought to say, *I don't know what you're talking about*, they would have had to leave it at that. But I didn't.

I know this is going to sound completely stupid but what I said in my complete disorientation on the doorstep was, *Who gave you my name?*

Why the hell did you say that? was the first thing Tony asked. *Jesus, Ella. You gave it to them on a plate.*

But I didn't; not really. I didn't let any of the reporters in. I didn't give them any quotes, I swear, but they still took my picture, and they phoned and phoned and phoned until we had to change the number.

'Harassment', Tony called it. *Hasn't she been through enough?* Bless him. My sweet, sweet man.

And then things turned really nasty. Horrid stuff on social media. Until in the end we had to close down the shop for a bit.

But here's the thing. As horrid as it all was, I still don't think I have been through enough. She's still gone – that beautiful girl. Most probably dead – almost certainly dead – although from what I hear, her poor mother still clings to the hope that she's alive.

And can you blame her? I probably would, too.

The police liaison officer for *Crimecatchers* told me that Mrs Ballard has given a really harrowing interview. I'm not even sure I can watch. Anna's mother has spent the last year collecting all this information on missing girls who have eventually turned up years later. You know – held captive by some loon, brainwashed and then finally escaped. They had to cut all that out of the interview, apparently, as it's not the police's focus at all. They obviously think Anna is most probably dead. This is about finding a killer, not finding a loon with a girl in his basement.

Out of sensitivity, they have kept all of Mrs Ballard's stories about Anna as a little girl. All her hopes and her dreams. That's apparently just the sort of thing that makes people phone in with new information. But it's all about finding the two men. Finding the body, I suppose. Makes me go cold to think of that . . .

And this is where Tony gets really angry. His take is if the police hadn't been so slow in putting out the appeal to trace Karl and Antony after I tipped them off, then maybe they would have stopped them doing a bunk. Most probably abroad.

As far as I can tell, the delay was something to do with Sarah. The police are diplomatic but, putting two and two together, it seems at first she denied ever meeting them. The men on the train. Said I was a fantasist. It was only when they went over all the CCTV footage and finally found a couple of

shots of them getting off the train together, and also outside the station, that the police even put their pictures out. Too late.

But that, of course, is where it all goes wrong and it all comes back to me.

If I had phoned in a warning in the first place. If I had stepped up. Stepped in.

You are not to think like that. You can't take the world on your shoulders. You did nothing wrong. Nothing, Ella. It was those men. Not you. You can't go on blaming yourself.

Can't I, Tony?

And I'm not the only one now.

The first postcard came a few days ago.

At first I was so shaken when I read it, I had to go straight to the bathroom. Vomited.

I can't explain why I felt so very scared. Shock, I suppose, because initially it seemed so threatening, so darned nasty. And then when I finally calmed down and thought it all through, I suddenly realised who'd sent it. And with that came a mixture of relief and crippling guilt. To be perfectly honest with you, I probably deserve it.

It was just anger. Not a real threat; just lashing out.

That first postcard was inside an envelope. A black card with letters cut out of a magazine. WHY DIDN'T YOU HELP HER? It was just like you see on a television drama, and not even very well done. Still sticky to the touch.

I was stupid; I ripped it up and put it in the bin because I didn't want Tony to see. I knew he would phone the police and I didn't want that. Them round here. The press round here. All that craziness all over again.

It took me a while to process it properly. To start with, I thought it was just another random nutter, but then I thought, *Hang on a minute, the anniversary appeal hasn't even been on the telly yet.*

The truth is the story has been forgotten. Until the programme tonight, no one else will have given it a second thought. That's how it works – why it's so difficult for the police. It's all people talk about one minute, and then the next, everyone forgets.

Then today another card arrived. Black again, with a nastier message. BITCH . . . HOW DO YOU SLEEP?

So that I see it even more clearly now. This *is* my fault. This is to pay me back, not just for what I didn't do for Anna, but for going down there in the summer.

I know exactly who the postcards are from now . . .

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CHAPTER 5

THE FATHER

Henry Ballard checks his watch and whistles for Sammy.

In the distance, he can see smoke just emerging from one of the holiday lets – a former barn that was once his father’s destination at this same time of an evening. The final check of the livestock before supper.

Henry still takes the same stroll each night himself, but with a quiet sorrow now.

Anna’s voice haunting him as he walks.

You disgust me, Dad . . .

Henry closes his eyes and waits for the voice to quieten. By the time he opens his eyes there is a stronger curl of smoke from the chimney ahead.

It all made *economic sense*, of course. The conversions. It became Barbara’s favourite phrase, and the bank’s, too. *Makes good economic sense, Henry.*

The agricultural success story that was Ladbroke Farm had been four generations in the making. It survived the rise and fall of local mining. It survived the changing tastes of the consumer market. It won rosettes for rare breeds. It even branched out into daffodils at one point. But the segue from full working farm to what his colleagues now dismiss as *Still playing at it, H?* took but a blink.

Tourism is the business he is in now, not farming. And yes – it makes absolute sense financially. One set of barns was converted and sold to pay off all the outstanding loans more than a decade back. A second set is now rental properties, and that is more than enough income on top of the teashop and campsite – and certainly more regular profit than his father or his grandfather had dared hope for.

The truth? They put in the slog, his ancestors. They paid off the bulk of the debts to the banks with blood, sweat and tears, too. And him? What has he done?

He has reaped the rewards. There isn’t an evening that Henry Ballard has not felt wretched about that.

So yes – he is still playing at it. Messing about on the fringe with his

sheep – barely worth the feed – and his tiny rare-breed beef herd.

He has taken this same walk with a heavy heart for years. And now, since Anna?

Henry winces again at the memory of his daughter beside him in the car.

You disgust me . . .

‘So what’s left now?’ he says out loud as Sammy nuzzles his hand, amber eyes turned up to check his master’s. The dog still sits under Anna’s chair every night during supper. Unbearable.

Henry pats Sammy’s head, then sets off for the farmhouse. He is dreading the evening ahead but has promised Barbara they will watch the anniversary appeal together, so he must not be late. They have talked at length about how to handle this, worrying about what is best for Jenny, who has perhaps coped the worst of all. The sister without a sister.

Only eighteen months between the girls – so sweet and so close, especially when they were little. Oh sure, there were fights, too, the usual sibling rivalry, but they were always friends by bedtime, often choosing to share a room, even though there were bedrooms to spare. Henry thinks for a moment of how he used to peek through their door to check on them last thing at night, all arms and legs and pink pyjamas, curled up in a double bed.

That punch to his gut again. Jenny is still not sleeping. Barbara is still not sleeping. He has no idea how they are all supposed to manage it, this TV appeal. The glare of the spotlight all over again.

An invitation to the studios in London was declined as out of the question. Barbara would never have coped with a live interview. No. Henry put his foot down, not least because time around the police made him so very nervous. So all the filming had been done in advance at the house. They had dug out an old video, too, from when Anna was tiny.

He pauses, clenching his fist at the memory of the camera in his hand; Barbara calling directions in the background. A gaggle of friends round for a birthday treat, all of them in fancy dress – cowboys and fairy costumes. A huge chocolate cake with candles. *Get some shots of her blowing out the candles, Henry. Make sure you don’t miss a shot of the candles . . .* He thinks of that other version of his wife – Barbara beaming and bustling, at her happiest when the house was full of children and noise and chaos.

Henry clears his throat and leans down to stroke Sammy’s head again, feeling the familiar wave of connection. Man to dog. Man and dog to land.

So – yes. They agreed to release some of the birthday video, as the

police said moving pictures tended to bring in more calls, which was, of course, the whole point. This first anniversary was a key opportunity, they were told, to resurrect interest in the case. To bring in new leads. To try to find the men from the train. But he and Barbara worry very much about the strain on Jenny. She is also in the clip chosen by the TV producers, smiling alongside her sister, and Barbara and Henry had sat down and made it absolutely clear that if Jenny were even the tiniest bit uncomfortable, they could say no and come up with something else, or ask if her image could be blanked out in some way. But what had broken Henry was how their elder daughter reacted.

It was as if she suddenly saw this light go on, a window of opportunity in the wretched grind of guilt and helplessness. Suddenly her eyes were shining and she was saying that of course she didn't mind people seeing her in a fairy costume with wings. *Dear God. If it might help them find Anna.*

And then she was off to her room, shouting that he was to follow her. There were loads of old pictures in boxes in one of the cupboards. She would dig them out. And could he call the police? *Right now, Daddy.* Loads of really great pictures. *Do you remember? When we used to fool about in those automatic booths. The gang. Me, Sarah and Anna and Paul and Tim.* She found an example – the five of them pulling faces – and held it out to him.

Henry sucks in the cold air as he remembers Anna in the centre of her friends, and closes his eyes.

You disgust me . . .

He had guessed the police wouldn't want the pictures. And they didn't. They just wanted the film. And when he told poor Jenny that the police were very grateful – and he and Mummy were, too – for all the time she had put in, finding the other pictures, her eyes had changed right back to how they always looked now. Sort of only half there.

'Come on then, Sammy. Time to do this.'

Taking his wellies off in the boot room, Henry can hear his wife calling up the stairs.

'Now are you sure you won't watch it with us, Jen? Down here? Daddy and I really don't like the idea – Oh. Hang on. I can hear – Daddy's back.'

He walks in his socks through to the kitchen.

'Great. Good. Henry. I've set it ready on the right channel and it's all set to record, too. The producer has been on from the studio and they're going to ring us. To let us know about the number of calls.'

‘Good. That’s good.’

‘Jennifer is still saying that she wants to watch it in her room. I don’t feel at all happy about that, Henry. Will you try talking to her again?’

‘If you like. But I spoke to her this morning, love, and—’

‘The thing is she doesn’t have to watch it at all, if she doesn’t want to. I’ve told her that. But if she does, I don’t want her to be on her own. I don’t see why she won’t be with us. We should be together for this. Don’t you think we should be together? As a family. Watch it together.’

Henry wonders if he should say it. The obvious: that they are no longer a family. He examines his wife’s face very closely and lowers his voice to a whisper. ‘Jenny doesn’t want to have to see our faces, darling.’ He means hers. Barbara’s.

‘Our faces?’ Barbara’s expression changes as she turns the words over for a moment. She looks away to the mirror in the hall and then quickly back at him. ‘Is that what she said?’

‘She didn’t have to, love.’

Henry continues to watch his wife very, very closely as she processes this properly. He makes himself look at her, right in the eye. He knows exactly why it is so difficult for Jenny to do this because he finds it so very difficult these days himself. To witness the depth of it all, written there, dark and dreadful at the very back of Barbara’s eyes. All day. Every day. No matter how hard she tries to dress it all up for Jenny with hope and smiles. With her scrapbook cuttings of the lost and found. And her endless baking.

‘But you’ll still talk to her? Before the programme?’ She is looking down at the floor now.

Henry steps forward and kisses his wife on the forehead. It is a kiss of duty and he does not touch her at the same time, for he knows the rules. Their limits. Their physical life on hold; or maybe gone forever.

‘I’ll just wash my hands and then – yes. I’ll talk to her.’

Jenny is sitting on the floor of her room, surrounded by bits of paper. Magazines also, and old photo albums, too.

‘Mummy wanted me to have another word.’ Henry scans the albums. Lots more photographs of the two sisters growing up. Matching bridesmaid dresses in one. Their first day at big school together. Most of the recent pictures are stored digitally, of course, but Jenny printed off a lot of favourites after her laptop crashed one year and she lost the pictures from a whole summer. They’d already been wiped from the camera. Irrecoverable.

‘It’s all right. I’ve asked Paul and Sarah and Tim to come over. Is that OK? I mean – Mum’s right. It might feel too upsetting to watch it on my own. But I can’t sit with Mummy. I just can’t.’

‘Oh. Right. I’d better have a word. Goodness.’ He checks his watch. ‘It’s just that your mother might not feel comfortable with so many other people in the house this evening.’

‘Oh, come on, Dad. These aren’t *other people*. They’re my friends.’

Henry presses his lips together. There is still an hour and a half until the programme is due to start. He takes a deep breath, trying to weigh up his own response before dealing with his wife’s.

Barbara will cater. Sandwiches and cakes and the like. Fussing.

Absent-mindedly he looks at his watch again. Who knows – maybe it will actually help Barbara to have something to fuss over. A distraction.

He is surprised that Sarah’s mother Margaret does not want her at home to protect her. It has been hard for Sarah. A lot of unanswered questions. Still no one quite understands the story of how the friends became separated in London, and some people have been pointing fingers.

Privately, Henry is not entirely disapproving. Better for people to be focusing on Sarah. . .

Downstairs, Barbara loads the last of the dishes into the dishwasher as he explains the new turn of events.

‘Oh right. I see . . .’

‘So – what do you think? Are you OK with this? With a houseful, I mean. I realise Jenny should have discussed this with us first but I didn’t like to criticise. Not today.’

Barbara wipes her hands on her apron and undoes the bow at the back.

‘I’m not sure it’s a good idea, Henry. That’s my gut instinct. I mean, I know how close they all are – *were*.’ She draws herself up, sucking in a breath.

Henry waits and they let the moment hang between them. No one knows what tense to use.

‘But everyone’s been so on edge lately.’ She is lifting the apron loop over her head. ‘Jenny included. I’m not sure it will be helpful. Not for Jenny. I don’t want anything kicking off. Not tonight.’

‘It seems to be what Jenny wants.’ Henry is still staring at his wife.

‘I’m not sure she *knows* what she wants, any more than we do.’ She sighs. ‘Oh, stuff it. Say yes.’ Barbara suddenly throws the apron onto the kitchen work surface. ‘It’s going to be horrible, whoever is in the house.’

Their conversation is interrupted by a thud upstairs. Jenny’s footsteps stamping around her bedroom above the kitchen – all the time shouting into her mobile. Most of it incoherent until they hear, ‘God, no. Please . . . no.’

Then a terrible noise of crashing and glass smashing as objects are apparently hurled around the room.

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CHAPTER 6

THE WITNESS

‘You need to take this straight to the police.’

‘That’s out of the question.’

‘I’m sorry?’

I’m thrown.

I take the latest postcard back, all the while examining Matthew Hill very closely. I had not expected this reaction. I have wrapped this new card in a plastic wallet taken from Luke’s school folder. One of those very slippery plastic wallets with holes pre-punched. Dangerous things. I slipped on one left on the floor once and bashed my shoulder really badly.

The latest message arrived like the others, in a plain dark envelope with a printed address label. But this one is even odder and just a little more threatening. Black background again, with the lettering stuck on. KARMA. YOU WILL PAY. To start with I thought it very strange – the link with Buddhism or yoga or whatever. Weren’t they about gentleness and kindness and forgiveness? But then I looked it up online and read about karma being interpreted by some people as a kind of natural justice or comeuppance – bad consequence for bad action – and I started to go a bit cold . . .

I have to make this stop.

‘I thought you investigated this kind of thing? That’s what private investigators do?’ I regret the mild sarcasm but I am tense, still staring Matthew Hill right in the eyes, just a little disorientated, too. His advert made it sound straightforward. *Exeter-based PI. Ex-police. Neat. Simple.* I had imagined I would say what I wanted. And he would do it. That this is how he earns his living. Like someone coming into my shop. *Birthday bouquet, please. Certainly.*

‘Look. I’ve been following the coverage. This is new evidence. The girl’s still missing, and when there is a live inquiry I have this rule that I don’t —’

‘Trust me, Mr Hill, this is *not* evidence.’

‘And you know this because . . . ?’

I pause for a moment, not at all sure how much I should share.

‘Look. I know who this is from. It’s from the girl’s mother, Barbara Ballard. She’s very upset with me. No. That’s an understatement. She is beyond upset, and who can blame her. I certainly don’t. I brought this entirely on myself. When the first postcard arrived I admit I considered telling the police. For a moment it really shook me, frightened me. We had quite a lot of hassle after my name was leaked and I thought it was more of the same. But I realise now what this is really about. There have been three, and so I just need you to gently warn her off, please. To stop this. Otherwise my husband will find out and then he will insist we go to the police, which I don’t want for her. She’s got enough to deal with.’

‘Well, I’m afraid I’m with your husband on this. You could well be wrong.’

‘Look – she comes to my shop. Twice so far. Just watches me through the window. She doesn’t know that I know. Obviously . . .’

‘Right. So when did this start?’ His expression has changed.

‘We’re talking in confidence? Yes?’

‘Of course.’

‘Good – because I am not reporting this, either. It really is my own fault. And I don’t just mean about the train. I went down there, you see. To Cornwall, last summer. To see the mother. My husband warned me not to and it turns out he was right. It was completely stupid of me. I see that now. Just one in a long line of mistakes I’ve made over this whole terrible business. The worst, as you will be well aware, was not phoning . . . not warning that poor family in the first place.’

‘You didn’t hurt the girl, Mrs Longfield. Weren’t there a couple of guys in the picture. Key suspects. Just out of Exeter?’

‘Yes. But that makes me feel worse rather than better, Mr Hill.’

‘Matthew. Please call me Matthew.’

‘*Matthew*. My husband says the same thing over and over. That this is not my fault. But I’m afraid it doesn’t make me feel any better. And I can’t bear that they haven’t found her.’

There is a hissing noise suddenly from an adjoining room. I glance to the door across the office, which is ajar, and Matthew Hill stands suddenly, his expression softening.

‘I tell you what. Would you like a coffee, Mrs Longfield? I make a pretty good cappuccino.’

‘Ella. And yes, please. It smells as if you know what you’re doing.’ I feel a smile, relaxing a little, my shoulders changing shape. ‘I am rather fond of good coffee.’

‘Espresso machine. Imported beans – my own mix. It’s a weakness.’

‘Mine too.’ I take a deep breath. ‘Sorry to be so spiky before. I was quite nervous, coming here.’

‘Most people are.’ His voice trails off as he disappears into what I presume is a flat alongside the office. He is gone for quite some time, eventually reappearing with a tray bearing two coffees plus a jug of foaming milk. I nod to the offer of milk.

‘So, tell me some more about this mother. About your visit to Cornwall. All of it. No holding back on me.’

‘All right. I don’t know how closely you’ve followed the case but there was an awful kerfuffle with the press when they found out that I was the witness on the train. The nationals got terribly excited. Sent all their feature writers down. Big-moral-dilemma headlines. “What would you have done?” and all that.’

‘Yes. I saw the stories.’ He leans forward in his chair, sipping at the drink.

‘All very unpleasant. I have a flower shop. It was so awful we had to shut it for a month and close our social media accounts, too. I found I couldn’t face people. Friends were very understanding but some people were a bit odd. Even regular customers. You could tell from the way they looked at me.’

‘I’m sorry. The fallout from cases is underestimated. People can be very unkind.’

‘Yes, well. Tony, my husband, was completely furious. Like I say, he is very protective. A sweet man – and he was furious that my name got out.’

‘And how exactly did that happen?’

‘We were never entirely sure. I was at a floristry conference in South London. Training and business-modelling. Officially the police insist that the press just got lucky and put the jigsaw together by tracing me as one of only two people on the course from Devon. But Tony suspects a deliberate leak to boost press interest in the case.’

Matthew pulls a face.

‘So you do think that’s possible?’ I ask.

‘Wouldn’t like to say. It seems highly unlikely. They wouldn’t want to

put you in danger.’

‘Danger? So you really think I might be in danger now?’

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to alarm you. It’s not as if you’re the only one who could identify these men. No. I really think it’s unlikely there would be a deliberate leak. An accidental one . . . that’s a different matter.’

‘Well – either way. Everyone knows now. I’m the woman on the train who did nothing.’

‘Tough for you, then?’

‘Yes. But nothing compared to what that family has been through.’

‘So why on earth did you go down there? To Cornwall?’

I can feel the sigh leaving my body and put the coffee down for a moment, cradling my head in my palms. ‘Completely stupid of me, I know. But the thing is, when I saw her, Mrs Ballard, outside my shop, just watching me, I recognised her from the press coverage – it was in the local paper such a lot. Anyway. It gave me the creeps, and when I thought it over, I felt it would be better to try to talk to her. I got it into my head that if I told her in person how very, very sorry I was and that I accepted she had the right to be angry – that if she could see that I was a mother, too, and how terrible I felt about her pain . . .’

Matthew’s face gives him away.

‘Yes. I know. Stupid of me.’

‘And she reacted badly?’

‘Understatement. She went completely berserk. Of course, I can see it now. I was being selfish. I had this fantasy in my head that if she could just see that I was a decent person and that I so badly regretted—’

‘Was anyone else there?’

‘No. Just the two of us. I took some flowers. A big posy of primroses, which I read were Anna’s favourites – which I can see now was probably the trigger. Made it so much worse. She became quite hysterical. Said she was sick of flowers and I had no place. No right. Floral tributes as if her daughter were dead. Which she doesn’t believe she is, incidentally.’

Matthew pours some more frothy milk into his coffee and offers me the same, but I put my hand over the cup.

‘Do you think it’s possible? That the girl is still alive?’

Matthew tightens his lips. ‘Possible, but statistically unlikely.’

‘That’s what we think. Me and Tony.’ For a moment my voice falters. I wish that I could feel more hopeful. I think of a recent television drama in which missing girls were found years later. I try to picture Anna emerging from a basement or a hiding place with a police blanket around her shoulders, but I cannot shape the scene in my mind. I cough, looking away to the wall of filing cabinets and then back, picking up my coffee cup once more. ‘So anyway. It was pretty terrible in Cornwall. I tried to leave. Apologising for disturbing her. She rather lost it.’

‘Physically?’

‘She wasn’t herself.’

‘Did she hurt you, Ella? I mean, if she hurt you, if she’s volatile, then you really ought to go to the police with this. They should know this.’

‘She didn’t mean to. A tussle on the steps outside – an accident more than anything. Just a bit of bruising. On my arm.’

Matthew is now shaking his head.

‘Oh, for goodness sake; it was my own fault. She’s not a violent woman. It wasn’t deliberate and I should never have gone there. Provoked her. But the point is, it shook me up a bit. I mean – I knew that she blamed me and I wanted to try to redress that. But the extent of her hatred. Her eyes.’

‘Which is why you think the postcards are from her.’

‘Don’t you?’

He shrugs, tilting his head from side to side.

‘I wish you had kept them all.’

‘Sorry. I didn’t want my husband to worry. He’s going for a promotion at work and has enough on his plate. Look, Mr Hill. Sorry – Matthew. If you won’t take this on for me, I will burn them. I’m not handing them in to the police, I can tell you that.’

Matthew examines my face very closely and shifts position.

‘I would like you to visit her, Matthew. You’re neutral and experienced at this kind of thing. I am hoping that you can put a stop to this without upsetting her further. Gently warn her off, but without involving the police and making it all worse for her.’

‘And what if you have this all wrong and it isn’t her? This mother who seems to have a bit of a temper on her.’

‘Well, then I will reconsider. And listen to your advice.’

‘Good. So we have a deal here, Ella? I try one visit to Mrs Ballard to see what I make of the situation, and if I’m still uneasy, you consider passing all this on to the police?’

‘You don’t seriously think this has anything to do with the investigation?’

‘In all honesty – probably not. If it’s not the mother, it’s most likely some saddy. But the team ought to be told.’

‘But my call?’

‘OK. We regroup after I’ve been to Cornwall.’ And now he is frowning, narrowing his eyes as he stands.

‘I take it you’ve heard the new development, Ella? This morning.’

‘I’m sorry?’

‘On the local radio this morning. After the anniversary appeal.’

‘No. What development? Has someone come forward? I missed it. What’s happened?’

Matthew winces. ‘They haven’t released a name, of course. But I’m assuming it’s the other girl. On the train. The friend.’

‘Sarah. Her name is Sarah. What do you mean? What’s happened to Sarah?’

CHAPTER 7

THE FRIEND

Again Sarah is pretending to be asleep, but this time it is more difficult. There are nurses to deal with, not just her mother.

‘Come on, Sarah. We need you to try to have a little drink. Yes?’ The nurse is gently tapping her hand.

Go away. Go away.

‘Why can’t you just keep her on a drip?’ Her mother has been clucking and fussing and crying alongside the bed for most of the night. ‘She looks terrible. She can’t sit up.’

‘Trust me. It’s better for Sarah if we can get her to stay alert and take a little drink herself.’

They are on a unit called HDU, which Sarah learns stands for ‘high dependency unit’. She has been conscious of the goings-on around her for several hours but has been feeling woozy and playing dumb.

They want to know precisely how many tablets she took. They keep asking this. She has listened in on conversations between the medical staff and her mother. Tests are apparently under way to determine how many tablets, but they take time and it would be much easier, everyone explains, if Sarah would just tell them.

The nurses have been trying to get her mother to take a nap in the family room and Sarah wishes so badly she would agree.

She feels too tired and dazed and wretched to feel guilty. She is sick to her stomach of feeling guilty; she just wants everyone to leave her alone.

Her mother is now telling the nurses that the last time they were in hospital was over an asthma attack when Sarah was in primary school. All the parents were allowed to bed down in the playroom next to the children’s ward. They slept on mattresses on the floor, though some got the luxury of proper fold-up beds.

This time there is no mattress or bed. Margaret spent the night like some ghost, wandering here and there to stretch her legs every few hours, alternating between the green plastic armchair alongside Sarah’s bed on the unit and the closed cafeteria that offered filthy coffee and snacks from

machines.

Sarah is now vomiting less. Still determined to say nothing.

How many tablets, Sarah. We need to know how many.

‘I don’t have many in the house. Paracetamol. Two packets tops.’ Sarah’s mother repeats this to the staff for the umpteenth time.

The truth? Sarah doesn’t remember how many tablets she took. She bought some at the corner shop and some at the supermarket. They have stupid rules about how many you can buy in each place.

It was the thought of the TV reconstruction. The push for new witnesses. That stupid bitch on the train.

Over and over she had told the police and her parents that it was all vicious lies. Have sex in a toilet? With a complete stranger? What did they think she was? How *dare* they.

But later Sarah had panicked. What if the TV show led to more witnesses? The whole case had gone quieter since the immediate aftermath of Anna’s disappearance. And of course she wanted people to help the police; of course she wanted Anna to be found. She just didn’t want anyone to find out the truth about her part in it all. Not that. Please not that . . .

‘Do you think we had better get the doctor again? Maybe a consultant? See what he thinks?’

‘I’m following the doctor’s very specific instructions. Please try not to worry. Sarah has stopped vomiting and it’s best we try to get her to take in some fluids herself. Trust me. It’s best for her. Then we can get a better idea of where we are.’

‘And what does “where we are” mean?’ Sarah’s mother is all agitation.

‘Shut up.’ Sarah cannot help herself. Barely a whisper. ‘Just shut up, will you? All of you.’

‘There we are. Good girl, Sarah. Come on, then. Let’s try opening your eyes and then we can see if we can sit you up a little bit, yes? We should have the test results back soon. Let you know how you’re doing. But it would be a great help—’

‘I don’t know how many I took. Right? I just don’t know.’

‘I think we should just leave her. Please.’ Sarah’s mother begins to cry, and Sarah can feel tears forming on her own face. She wishes Lily were here, but cannot say this to her mother. Yet another taboo subject.

‘I’m sorry . . .’

‘You have nothing to be sorry for, my darling. It’s going to be fine. Everything is going to be fine. I promise you. Everyone sends their love. Anna’s parents. Jenny and Paul and Tim and everyone. They just want you to get well.’

Sarah closes her eyes. Not true, is it? Truth is, they blame her. They’d said as much.

The night before the wretched TV programme they had all got together, supposedly for moral support, but it had all gone badly wrong. Spiralled down and down into this ugly place until there was a shouting match. The two boys really angry. Jenny crying.

The thing was, they were *all* supposed to go to London. All five of them. Anna and Sarah to celebrate the end of GCSEs and school uniform, and the older ones for fun. But it was like everything they tried to do. People were so flaky.

When they were little it was very different. The age gap never seemed to matter. Jenny and the two boys were two years ahead in school – but so what? Then in secondary school, when the older ones got part-time jobs, *everything* changed. They had more money suddenly. They wanted to do different things. And they started bailing on plans.

Sarah hated all the change. She especially hated people flaking out on things, and she spat out her anger in the row.

If you hadn’t all been so selfish. Made other plans. Maybe I wouldn’t have been trying to look after Anna in London on my own.

Paul had caved on the trip first. Offer of a week in Greece. Villa with a pool with his parents. Tim bailed next. Mad keen on walking. He was offered a trekking week in Scotland and wanted to see the Loch Ness Monster museum. Also didn’t fancy being the only bloke on a girls’ trip.

And then Jenny had the offer to see a band with her then boyfriend. And so it was only Sarah and Anna.

You still should have looked after her . . . The boys were both furious. *We don’t understand how you got split up . . .*

And then Jenny wondering why they didn’t have the usual pact. Watching each other’s back. *I mean it was London, for God’s sake . . .*

Sarah had wanted them all to shut the hell up. In any case, why was she the one who was expected to look after Anna? Why not the other way round, eh? Because Sarah was from the estate and supposed to be more streetwise?

Because Anna could be a bit of a princess? Was that it?

Of course they'd had a pact.

It was Anna who broke it, she shouted at them. All of them. At Tim with his selfish trekking holiday. Paul with his fancy villa. Jenny with her gig. She spat the lie at them just as she had spat it over and over to the police.

We said we would meet at the bar at 2 a.m. for a taxi to go home. She didn't show . . .

Anna broke the pact. OK? Anna didn't show . . .

I told you. I told you. I told you . . .

Her mother had tried to calm her about the TV programme. The woman on the train wouldn't be allowed to make false claims. Not on television. It was libellous. *She's obviously some kind of weirdo . . .*

But Sarah was petrified. What if other witnesses now came forward? From the train or from the club.

She remembers her father's reaction at the Paradise Hotel in London. At first she refused to talk to him. It had been years since he left the family, and she'd refused all contact. But her mother wanted him there with everything that was happening, and he went mental when the DI shared what the witness had said.

You calling my daughter a slut?

And so Sarah had sat at home before the television programme, terrified about what would come out. She was supposed to be going to Jenny's. To the farmhouse. All of the friends together. But then all the images had started to flash through her mind.

The club. That queasy feeling when she looked at her watch . . .

The row with Anna. *Don't be such a baby . . .*

The trouble with not telling the whole truth to the police was, sometimes, a year on, she couldn't remember exactly what she had said and what she hadn't said. She was petrified that all this stirring it up would make her slip up . . . and say the wrong thing.

So she had taken the tablets into the bathroom and said she was having a bath. And it wasn't as if she made this clear decision that she wanted to kill herself. Nothing that dramatic, nothing that black and white.

She just wanted the panic to stop, the waiting for the TV programme. The not knowing how much they would find out. She just wanted all of it to

stop . . .

Now, as the nurse helps her to sit, plumping pillows up behind her, someone new appears alongside the bed. Another nurse in a different-coloured uniform. She is older, looks more senior and is talking to her mother. Ominous whispering. Something about the test . . .

‘I didn’t mean to make you jump. It’s just the doctor would like a word.’

‘What is it? What’s happened?’

‘It’s best you come this way, please, Mrs Headley.’

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CHAPTER 8

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

On the drive down to Cornwall, Matthew phones home twice.

‘It’s just Braxton Hicks, Matt. I will ring if it changes. It’s fine. Braxton Hicks.’

‘I can come back. Stay home if you’d prefer? If you’re at all worried?’

‘I’m fine.’

Sally is eight months gone and insists practice contractions are nothing to be alarmed about. Perfectly normal. But Matthew is no longer doing *normal*. He has found everything alarmingly abnormal since the surreal experience of the childbirth classes. Dear God. Why had his friends not warned him?

Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer a caesarean, Sal? Some reckon they’re a lot safer, you know. And these days you can say. No shame in it.

Getting frightened, Matt? Sorry. But I’m not too posh to push. And it’s a bit late to chicken out now.

This whispered conversation had taken place with Sal sitting on a yoga mat in her grey sweatpants and a black T-shirt, with Matt following instructions on how to massage her back, thinking how very lovely but also slightly ridiculous she looked. From behind she looked her normal slim self . . . just this huge balloon stuffed up her top.

Sal was the envy of everyone in the class. *How come you’ve not swollen up all over?* The others displayed their puffed-up ankles and their puffed-up legs, pinched the fat padding around their backs and their arms.

God knows. I’m eating like a horse.

This was true. Matthew had never seen his wife pack away so much. Fish finger sandwiches late at night with mayonnaise and chopped gherkins. The stench of her farts these days was mind-boggling.

Piss off, Matt. I don’t fart. I am a pregnant goddess.

Matthew checks his phone one more time and smiles. Truth is, Sal even farts in her sleep now.

The phone confirms a strong signal. No text. He could ring just one

more time?

No. *Calm down, man.* She was getting prickly, the second call. Everything is going to be just fine. Not long to go.

Matthew checks the satnav – less than a quarter of a mile to the Ballards' farm – and pulls into a lay-by. Mel should be in the office by now. Good.

DS Melanie Sanders – hopefully soon to be DI Melanie Sanders – is Matthew's dearest police pal from the old days. There was a time, a million years ago, when he had a bit of a crush on her; had hoped for something more. But that was history. He told Sal all about it. Came completely clean.

No. That wasn't one hundred per cent true. He had not told her that he still got this slightly weird feeling in his stomach when he spoke to Mel. Not desire. Not that anymore. Just a feeling that reminded him of a whole different time, a different version of himself.

Three years out of the force, and Matthew hates to admit that he is still struggling to adjust.

He presses the button that links his dashboard to his phone and listens to it dial and ring.

'DS Melanie Sanders.'

'How many coffees have you had?'

'Matt?'

'I will ring off and ring back if you've not had your second caffeine hit.'

She laughs. 'You'd better not be after another of your favours.'

'Of course I'm after a favour. But it's two-way. I promise.'

'Oh, it's always two-way, Matt. I help you. And then I help you again.'

Now he laughs. 'Seriously. You up on the missing Ballard girl?'

'Just the family liaison gig. One of our team, Cathy, is assigned to the family. We get updates from London – when they can be bothered. Which isn't often. The DI on the case is a right little sir, between us. Why?'

'So any of the family ever in the frame, as far as you know? Mum and dad in the clear?'

'And why ever would you want to know that?'

'No reason.'

‘You’d better not be meddling in a live case again, Matt. We all know where—’

‘Don’t worry. If I have anything for you, I promise, cross my heart and —,’

‘Fingers crossed behind your back.’

‘You know me.’

They are both quiet for a moment.

Every time they liaise like this, Melanie tries to persuade him to reconsider. To go back into the force. She still reckons it’s an option despite all the water and the bridges, and swears that once she is sufficiently senior she will fix it, twist his arm. But Matt always turns it into a joke until they hit this silent little impasse. An understanding. She thinks he’s wasting his talent. And he’s frightened to think about that one too much.

‘OK. You didn’t hear this from me, Matt, but word is the parents’ marriage is not too hot. Hardly surprising. But no. Family all have alibis. Our brief is just to keep an eye on them. The DI on the case – did I mention he’s a patronising prat? – anyway, his focus is still finding the two guys on the train. Between us, there has been the usual cock-up liaising with our European friends.’

‘So – abroad then?’

‘Almost certainly. Not a squeak here. No leads at all. No forensics and nothing useful from CCTV, either. The Met are a bit touchy. Bit slow putting the brakes on border controls. But the anniversary appeal brought in some calls, apparently. We’re not being told much but I shall push. Hope to know more soon. Why?’

‘Nothing. Look, we must have coffee sometime soon. I’ll text you.’

‘So you really are meddling in a live case again?’

‘*Moi?*’

She laughs. ‘OK. And how’s Sal, before you ring off?’

‘Farting gherkins. Trust me – pregnancy is a smelly business. Seriously, she’s great. Looks beautiful and serene as ever, but the gherkins are bad news. I’ll text you about that coffee very soon.’

She is still laughing as he ends the call, checking the time on the satnav again.



The Ballards' farmhouse is at the end of a half-mile, single-lane track. It's like following the yellow brick road: the strange, concrete surface in a sandy colour is raised above the dirt on either side, which puts Matthew on edge wondering what the hell he's supposed to do if he meets another vehicle coming the other way. There are just two passing places along the whole stretch. Matthew is rather fond of his car, and is imagining the damage if a wheel slips off the side of the concrete platform. Could be very nasty.

So this is what people mean by living off the beaten track.

At the end of the drive, finally, he comes to the house. It's impressive: double-fronted with a fabulous climber – no doubt magnificent in season, though he is no gardener and does not recognise the species. The inadequate approach widens into a full drive at the front of the house, with a large turning circle, an impressive lawn to the side and a second track leading off towards barns in the distance. Matthew pulls up under a tree opposite the front door and puts his keys in his pocket. No need to lock up out here.

Mrs Ballard answers the door herself, which is a relief. A cliché in her floral apron. Matthew immediately feels guilty – forced now to look into those eyes.

'If you're a reporter, we have nothing more to say until the vigil.'

'I'm not a reporter. Could we talk inside, Mrs Ballard?'

Sometimes it works. Confidence and the official tone. As if he has the right.

'And you are . . . ?'

Not always.

'I'm a private investigator, Mrs Ballard, and I'm looking into matters relating to your daughter's disappearance.'

Her face changes. From caution through surprise, to a new hope so misplaced that Matthew feels guilty again.

'I don't understand. A private detective . . . So why are you involved?'

'It would be better if we could talk inside. Please?'

In the hallway, they stand awkwardly as Matthew glances towards the vases of flowers – at least four crowding a narrow table below a large mirror.

'I wish people wouldn't send them. Flowers. But they mean well. We're having a candlelit vigil to mark the anniversary . . .' She clears her throat. Regroups. 'So, I'm not quite understanding – Mr . . .'

‘Hill. Matthew Hill.’

‘You’re investigating my daughter’s disappearance privately? But why on earth would that happen? There’s a whole team in London working on this. Did my husband call you?’

‘No, Mrs Ballard. I was contacted by someone else touched by this inquiry, who is receiving unpleasant mail. And I am just trying to help put a stop to that, so that all resources can be directed where they need to be directed. To finding your daughter.’

‘Unpleasant mail?’

‘Would it be OK for us to sit down for a moment?’

She stills herself, apparently considering this, and finally leads him into the kitchen. Another cliché, with its huge blue Aga covered in drying socks. Mrs Ballard appears a little more nervous now, her hands fidgeting in her lap. She does not offer a drink.

‘You haven’t had any unpleasant mail yourself, I take it?’

‘No. Not at all. Lots of nice letters actually, from complete strangers. A few weird ones, admittedly, but never a nuisance or a problem. We show them all to the family liaison officer – Cathy. She’s still regularly in touch. So who’s been getting unpleasant letters? Not Sarah, I hope. You know that she’s in hospital?’

‘Your daughter’s friend from the trip?’

‘Yes. I was there this morning. At the hospital. They’re waiting on tests. Terrible. Terrible. Her mother’s in bits. We all are. As if it wasn’t all bad enough already. So is that what this is? Nasty letters to Sarah?’

‘No. Not her.’ Matthew looks Barbara Ballard directly in the eye and checks for discomfort. But no. She does not look away. Her eyes just contain the ache of the haunted.

‘I know this will be difficult for you, Mrs Ballard. But this mail – it’s been sent to the witness on the train. Ella Longfield.’

‘Oh.’ Her demeanour changes immediately, along with her tone. ‘*That woman.*’

‘Yes. I am aware from Mrs Longfield how you feel about her, and there is no intention, I assure you, of adding to your distress by bringing this up. But Ella is keen to try to put a stop to the mail without involving the police. She doesn’t want them distracted. From the main focus. Finding Anna.’

‘Bit late for that now.’

‘I’m sorry.’

She shrugs. Staring at him now. More defiant.

‘Look. I understand it must be very, very tough, Mrs Ballard. But I was in the force myself. There are good people doing their very best, I am sure of that. And the anniversary appeal. TV coverage normally helps to—’

She doesn’t take the bait. ‘Look. These letters – whatever they are. It’s probably better that you talk to my husband.’ She is standing up. ‘He doesn’t always hear his mobile and the signal isn’t always great, but I can try giving him a ring if you like?’

‘There’s no need to disturb him. So you can’t think of anyone who might send unpleasant mail to Mrs Longfield? Anyone else in the circle who has been particularly upset about everything. Spoken up angrily. About her part—’

‘Everyone’s upset, Mr Hill. My daughter is still missing. The vigil is tomorrow. And now, if you will excuse me.’ She is belatedly pulling herself together, overriding her manners as she realises, apparently, that she does not have to speak to him at all.

Matthew knows from experience that this realisation normally morphs swiftly into anger.

He holds out his card, which she takes, hesitating for just a moment before placing it in the pocket of her apron.

‘Have you told the police team about this hate mail?’ Mrs Ballard is still looking him very directly in the eye.

‘Why do you ask that?’

She does not reply.

‘Well. If you hear of anything which you think might be relevant – you will call? Yes?’

She nods.

‘The thing is, Mrs Longfield is going to have to take this to the police if the mail continues. And that’s not the way she wants to go. She thinks you all have enough to deal with.’

‘Does she?’

Matthew tightens his lips and nods a farewell.

Outside, he can feel Mrs Ballard watching him as he starts up the car and swings through a tight circle before pulling once more onto the

impossibly narrow road.

He checks the screen for his hands-free set-up. Nothing from Sal. He tells himself not to look back. To keep the upper hand.

And then he continues, steering ever so carefully and trying very hard to erase the image of Barbara Ballard's eyes.

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CHAPTER 9

THE FATHER

Henry sees the car approach the house as he is checking the sheep in the farm's highest and most exposed field. The wind is vicious up here, and he zips his coat right up to his chin, all the while watching the farmhouse below.

This part of the farm has always been a problem logistically. Tricky to access except by quad bike, and Henry has always had a difficult relationship with the quad bike on the hills. He has nearly turned it over more times than he will admit to Barbara. Once on the steepest gradient, he seriously thought the stupid thing was going to topple right over at high speed. Two wheels left the ground and he could feel the whole weight shift. It was just how they tell you. A flash of imagining: wondering how they would all cope when he left them behind.

He hears the echo in his head again. Anna's voice.

You disgust me . . .

That day with the quad bike had so frightened him that he went straight home and into the office alongside the boot room, and arranged online to increase his life insurance. Later, it caused the most terrible row with Barbara.

We can't afford more life insurance, Henry. What are you doing that for anyway? Don't be so morbid.

He promised he would cancel the extra premium while secretly wondering if he should reconsider the offer from a neighbouring farm to take on the awkward fields, which were a better match for their own livestock. But it was a question of pride. Still trying to pretend he was a proper farmer, not a tourist manager.

He stands now watching the car leave, the driver clearly nervous of the access road. Taking it slowly. No, Henry has decided he will *not* lease out or sell off any more of the land that his father and grandfather worked so hard to acquire. So what if the tourist side makes more sense on paper? The holiday lets. The campsite. He is still a farmer in his heart. And so he is thinking of his few sheep and his cattle, and also the increased life-insurance premium still in place.

He did not recognise the man who was just at the house. Tall and slim, but too far away to make out his face. For a moment Henry wonders if it was

the police and experiences the familiar jolt of adrenaline.

A year on and, unlike his wife, Henry is not waiting for their daughter to turn up alive.

Henry watches Barbara emerge on the doorstep to make sure the visitor has gone.

He is just thinking that he ought to head down there and find out what the hell is going on when there is a bleating behind him. He turns to see two of the ewes slipping on mud at the lower end of the field, sliding precariously close to the stream. Damn. He will have to go down there. Encourage them up to the higher and safer ground.

This exercise, with the ground so sodden, takes longer than he would like.

Stupid sheep. No brains.

He calls Sammy, who has his tail between his legs. Even the dog hates this field, looking at him now as if he were mad. *What are we doing up here? You normally bring the quad up here.*

Finally, with Sammy's help he coaxes the two stray ewes and the rest of the flock back up onto the higher ground. From there he moves them further still, through the gate to the neighbouring field which, though poor on grass now, is a safer option for the night. He secures the gate, calls Sammy back to his side and finally heads along the adjoining lane, back towards the farmhouse.

It is called Primrose Lane. Anna used to love it when she was little, because of the high hedges. Always keen to collect posies of wild flowers.

Race you, Dad.

Henry closes his eyes to this more welcome echo, and for a moment stands very still. He can picture her in her pink puffa jacket, with her pink bobble hat and her pink gloves. *Come on, Dad. I'll race you back.* The posy of primroses in her hand.

Only when he feels Sammy nuzzling at his leg does he open his eyes again.

OK, boy. It's OK.

He strokes the dog's head, takes a deep breath and marches back home. By the time he reaches the farmyard, Barbara has gone back inside.

In the boot room he takes off his wellies, ordering the collie, covered in mud, to stay.

‘So, who was that earlier?’

Barbara’s face is ashen as she comes through from the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron.

‘A private detective.’

‘What the hell is a private detective doing here?’

‘He says that Ella – that flower shop woman – has been getting hate mail.’

‘So what’s new?’

‘No. Not just stuff on social media. Actual letters or something. To her house. Nasty.’

‘And this is our concern because . . . ?’

‘I think this private detective thought I might have sent them.’

‘He accused you?’

‘Not in so many words, but that was the implication. As if he was doing me a favour. Warning me off.’

Henry pauses, narrowing his eyes.

‘And before you ask – no, I didn’t send them. Though I can’t pretend I give a damn who did.’

‘Well, I hope you told him not to come back. Do you think we should ring Cathy? Or the London team? Tell them about this?’

‘No. No point. I’ve told him not to come back. He says he’s going to report it to the police himself.’

‘And you didn’t say anything else? Anything silly, Barbara. About me.’

She looks at him very earnestly. Unblinkingly. Cold eyes.

Henry can feel his pulse increasing.

‘No, Henry. I didn’t say anything *silly* . . . about you.’

Henry sits on the old church pew which serves as their boot room bench.

‘Is Jenny home?’

‘Not yet. She’s gone into town. She wants a new coat for the vigil. Says she wants something warm and smart.’

Henry has made his feelings about the vigil perfectly clear from the off. He is not a religious man. It was the local vicar’s idea. Prayers and candles to

mark the one-year anniversary. It had originally been scheduled for Thursday . . . a year to the day. But once the TV reconstruction was confirmed, they decided to put it back to the Saturday. More convenient for people, too – the weekend.

Barbara lifts up her chin. ‘Sarah’s mother is saying that she hopes we can put the vigil back until Sarah is well enough to attend, but I said that wasn’t a good idea, that Sarah needs to concentrate on getting well. I think we should go ahead as planned.’

‘And you still think this is a good idea? This vigil.’

‘I have no idea, Henry. But people have been kind and they seem to want to do something. Also the press will take photographs, which helps to keep it in the public eye. Cathy says that’s good. To keep it in the public eye.’

‘And what about Sarah? Is she still claiming it was an accident? The pills . . .’

No one takes an overdose by accident, Henry is thinking. He tries to feel more sympathy for Sarah but finds that he cannot.

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CHAPTER 10

THE WITNESS

‘Why don’t you let me make the tea, love? Give yourself ten minutes for a change?’

I hear my husband’s voice but do not turn. From the top of the stairs, I keep my eyes firmly fixed on the mail on the doormat. In the sweep of bills and white envelopes I can see it, screaming at me. The familiar dark envelope. Printed address on a cream label this time.

‘I’m fine. Really. You know me, prefer to get going.’ I hurry down to grab the letters from the floor and bundle them into a pile, feeling the firm postcard inside the envelope and tucking it into the centre as Tony begins his own descent of the stairs.

‘Are you sure you’re all right, Ella?’

‘How about bacon butties? Tell Luke fifteen minutes, would you?’ I can feel my heart pounding in my chest and deliberately do not check my reflection in the hall mirror, not wanting to see the evidence. The flushed face.

I really thought that by calling in Matthew, this would stop; I honestly thought that I could avoid worrying Tony, who has been through quite enough already over all this.

In the kitchen, I rifle through the mail to hand Tony the circulars from the wine club and the bank. I know that I should tell him, and I have promised myself that I will soon. Very soon. Once I’ve spoken to Matthew. But he is going to be upset again and he’s snowed under right now, bidding for this promotion. I feel bad, because he expressly warned me not to go to Cornwall. Oh Lord. I had so hoped that Matthew would sort this.

‘Anything interesting?’ Tony is looking at the mail in my hand.

‘Insurance company. Multi-car deal.’

He pulls a face and turns away, as I switch on the oven and begin busying myself with the bread and the bacon, just as the phone goes.

‘I’ll get that,’ I say, wondering if it’s Matthew. I thought I asked him to ring me at the shop.

‘There’s something going on, Ella – isn’t there. Something you’re not telling me.’

‘Not now, Tony. Please. I’m fine.’ Damn. If it’s not the mother in Cornwall, we have to hand the mail over to the police. Right. I will have to tell Tony then.

With one hand opening a new pack of bacon, I pick up the phone, bracing myself to ask Matthew to ring back later, at the shop.

‘Is that Luke’s mother?’

‘Yes. Ella Longfield here. Who’s this?’

‘It’s Rebecca Hillier. Emily’s mother. I was hoping we could confirm arrangements. For the meeting.’

‘The meeting? I’m afraid I don’t understand.’

There is a very long pause. ‘Has Luke not spoken to you?’

‘No. Is something wrong?’

‘Look – there’s no way I’m dealing with this on the phone. I made that very plain to Luke. So – are you free tomorrow or not?’

Tony is now mouthing questions. *Who is it? What’s the matter?*

‘Well – my husband is playing poker with friends, so . . .’

‘Let’s say 7.30 p.m. At ours. Luke has the address.’

And then she hangs up.

‘That’s very odd. Very rude, actually. Get Luke down here, would you?’

‘What’s going on?’

‘I wish I knew.’

I begin to lay half a dozen slices of bacon on the tray, placing each one slightly overlapping so they just fit. With Tony’s footsteps back on the stairs, I quickly open the dreaded envelope.

WATCH YOURSELF, I DO . . .

‘Ella! I think you’d better come up here.’

Dear God . . .

In Luke’s room, I know immediately that things are bad, the dread switching instantly from the card to my son. These last couple of weeks, he has been running later and later, for shifts at the shop and for school. There has been a letter from the school about missed lessons, too. The suggestion of a meeting with his tutor. I have been meaning to sort it out, but with so much happening . . .

‘What the hell’s going on, Luke?’ Tony is at first more cross than worried.

Luke is curled up under the covers, fully dressed in yesterday’s clothes. Jeans and a thick blue-green hoodie. Sweaty. Smelly.

‘You feeling cold? Going down with something?’ I try to keep my voice calm. Feeling guilty that my eye has been off the ball.

‘Start talking, Luke. What is all this about?’ Tony is opening the curtains.

Luke, his eyes dark and hooded, does not reply.

‘I’ve just had Emily’s mother on the phone. Going on about some meeting. She was quite off with me. Seemed to think I would know. What meeting, Luke?’ I try not to sound angry.

Still he says nothing.

‘What is it, Luke?’ And now I am panicking. I am thinking – drugs? Shoplifting? Trouble with the police? No. Not my Luke, surely. My straight-As Luke, who was supposed to be in with a chance of Oxbridge until all this nonsense just lately. A phase, Tony reckoned. A little rebellion because the AS year was so much tougher than anyone expected. Maybe he’s just sick of exams. Is that it?

‘Please, Luke. Tell us what’s going on. Maybe we can help.’ Tony has softened his voice.

And then Luke takes us both by surprise and starts to cry. Great heaving waves of sobbing. Toddler tears, incongruous and dramatic and at the same time terrifying from this fully dressed six-foot-two boy wrapped in a blue striped Marks and Spencer duvet.

I know two things immediately.

That whatever has happened is very serious, and that I have been too distracted by the Anna Ballard case to even notice.

CHAPTER 11

THE FATHER

Henry is putting the tractor into reverse when Barbara appears on the doorstep.

‘What the hell are you doing, Henry?’

‘I’m getting things ready for your vigil.’

‘My vigil.’

‘Well it certainly wasn’t my idea.’

There are a few minutes when she just watches him manoeuvre the tractor. Angry, jerky movements to and fro. He hopes she will go inside. Leave him to it. But no.

‘I still don’t understand what you’re doing.’

‘Putting out some bales of straw. Seating.’

‘People won’t want to sit down. They won’t be here for long, surely.’

‘People always want to sit down. There will be some older people who *need* to sit down, Barb. We can’t put chairs out. I don’t want them to get too comfy or we’ll never get rid of them.’

‘Oh, you’re being ridiculous.’

Henry is thinking that this is a fine time to call him ridiculous. He never wanted the stupid vigil. In bed last night they had another spit-whispered row about it.

We could have it at the front of the house, Barbara had said when the vicar called by. Henry had quite explicitly said he would not support anything churchy – anything that would feel like a memorial service.

But the vicar had said the idea of a vigil was exactly the opposite. That the community would like to show that they have *not* given up. That they continue to support the family. To pray for Anna’s safe return.

Barbara was delighted and it was all agreed. A small event at the house. People would walk from the village, or park on the industrial estate and walk up the drive.

‘This was your idea, Barbara.’

‘The vicar’s, actually. People just want to show support. That is what this is about.’

‘This is ghoulish, Barb. That’s what this is.’

He moves the tractor across the yard again, depositing two more bales of straw alongside the others.

‘There. That should be enough.’

Henry looks across at his wife and is struck by the familiar contradiction. Wondering how on earth they got here. Not just since Anna disappeared, but across the twenty-two years of their marriage. He wonders if all marriages end up like this. Or if he is simply a bad man.

For as Barbara sweeps her hair behind her ear and tilts up her chin, Henry can still see the full lips, perfect teeth and high cheekbones that once made him feel so very differently. It’s a pendulum that still confuses him, makes him wish he could rewind. To go back to the Young Farmers’ ball, when she smelled so divine and everything seemed so easy and hopeful.

And he is wishing, yes, that he could go back and have another run. Make a better job of it. All of it.

Then he closes his eyes. The echo again of Anna’s voice next to him in the car.

You disgust me, Dad.

He wants the voice to stop. To be quiet. Wants to rewind yet again. To when Anna was little and loved him, collected posies on Primrose Lane. To when he was her hero and she wanted to race him back to the house for tea.

Barbara is now looking across the yard to the brazier.

‘You’re going to light a fire, Henry?’

‘It will be cold. Yes.’

‘Thank you. I’m doing soup in mugs, too.’ A pause then. ‘You really think this is a mistake, Henry? I didn’t realise it would upset you quite so much. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s OK, Barbara. Let’s just make the best of it now.’

He slams the tractor into reverse and moves it out of the yard and back into its position inside the barn. There, in the semi-darkness, his heartbeat finally begins to settle and he sits very still on the tractor, needing the quiet, the stillness.

It was their reserve position, to have the vigil under cover in this barn, if

the weather was bad. But it has been a fine day. Cold but with a clear, bright sky, so they will stay out of doors. Yes. Henry rather hopes the cold will drive everyone home sooner, soup or no soup.

And now he thinks he will sit here for a while longer, actually. Yes. It's nice here alone in the barn. He finds he does not want to move at all.



A full hour later, and Jenny turns up in the kitchen to check on her mother just as Henry finally takes off his wellies in the boot room.

‘You gonna be OK for this, Mum?’

Barbara is stirring two large stockpots of soup. ‘I’ll be fine. It’s just so difficult to know how many people will come.’

Henry stares at her back. ‘I’m sorry about earlier, love. I’m just a bit wound up.’

‘It’s OK.’ She does not turn to look at him but reaches out her arm to touch Jenny’s shoulder for reassurance.

‘And how is Sarah doing?’

Jenny takes in a deep breath. ‘She still wishes she could come. Her mum says she feels bad about missing this. And she’s still saying it was an accident – the pills. But we all feel so terrible.’

There is something about her tone that unsettles Henry. ‘What do you mean, *you all*? It’s very sad, but it’s not your fault.’

Jenny turns to her father. ‘Well, maybe it is, actually.’

‘What on earth do you mean?’

‘We had a bit of a row with her, before the TV appeal.’

‘Who’s we?’

‘All of us. Me and Tim and Paul.’ Jenny’s voice is now breaking up. ‘We’ve just been all over the place, with the anniversary. And with you guys arguing all the time . . . I don’t know. I went round with the others to see Sarah to talk about watching the appeal together. And it all got a bit heated. A bit out of hand.’

‘Go on . . .’

‘I suppose we all feel bad for bailing on London. If we’d gone, there would have been more people to look out for Anna.’

‘You can’t think like that,’ Henry says.

‘But the trouble is you do, don’t you? And so the boys were grilling Sarah again about why they didn’t stick together at the club. What exactly happened to split them up. Why she’s been so vague about it.’

And now Jenny starts crying properly.

‘We didn’t mean to make Sarah feel so bad. We just got carried away. I mean, I bailed on the trip because of John and the gig, and I’m not even going out with him anymore. I can’t believe I did that. Put a stupid boy ahead of my sister. We just all feel so *guilty* . . . For not being there – in London – ourselves. But we shouldn’t have taken it out on Sarah . . .’

‘And this row happened when?’

‘The night before the reconstruction on telly.’

Which is why she took the pills, Henry is thinking. *Jesus.*

Barbara’s arms are now around Jenny.

‘Right. So this is a pickle, sweetheart,’ she says. ‘But we are all of us struggling to handle it. You’re not to blame yourself. What you need to do now is to talk this through with Sarah properly. Explain that you don’t blame her.’

‘We don’t. Not really. We’re just . . .’

‘Upset. As are we all. I’ll speak to Sarah’s mum and see when you can visit her. Iron this all out. Now then. Dry those tears and get your new coat. People will be arriving soon. I’m going to help you sort this out, I promise. You’ll work this through with Sarah. OK? It’s going to be all right. We just need to be strong now, tonight, for Anna. Yes?’

Henry is looking at his wife and wondering how she ever learned this trick. Always knowing what to say with the girls.

Girls? He winces at the plural.

‘This is for Anna, remember. To keep our chins up for when Anna comes home. Yes?’ Barbara is wiping Jenny’s face with a tissue as the doorbell goes.

Henry shuffles through in his socks to find the vicar in a waxed jacket and wellingtons.

‘I won’t come in. Mud.’ He is smiling. ‘Nice idea to set up some seating, Henry. I just wanted to show you the little reading I’ve planned. Nothing too churchy, as we agreed. Just something uplifting and positive. And then I thought that perhaps you would like to say a few words, Barbara? You know, to thank everyone for their support and to ask the local press to keep up the

appeal for witnesses. That any little thing may help.'

Barbara smiles, and Henry watches Jenny disappear upstairs to fetch her new coat before suddenly calling to them from the landing window.

'Look. Look out of the window, guys. You have to see this . . . Come up here.'

The vicar, stirred by her sudden excitement, removes his wellies after all and follows Henry and Barbara up the stairs, where there is a clear view of the narrow lane to the farmhouse. In the fading light, it is mesmerising.

A thin line of all manner of lights weaving their way along the track: lanterns and candles and torches too, all glowing a trail in the shadows.

Henry surprises himself. His lip is trembling.

He watches the lights flickering and pictures Anna running ahead of him, pink gingham school dress beneath her coat, a posy in her hand.

Cathy, the family liaison officer, will be here soon. And he realises that it has all gone on long enough.

He is going to have to talk to the police.

He is going to have to tell everyone the truth.

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CHAPTER 12

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Matthew is making little pyramids from sugar sachets as DS Melanie Sanders enters the coffee shop, checking her watch. He has never been able not to fidget. It drives Sal mad. Right now he has challenged himself to have three pyramids standing at any one time. As soon as one collapses, he must make a new one before he tries to repair the old one. The table has a bit of a wobble on, adding to the uncertainty, and he is enjoying himself so much that he feels a ridiculous, childish pang of disappointment as he realises he has to stop.

‘Sorry to trouble you at the weekend, Mel.’ He stands and kisses her on the cheek, trying not to watch as the pyramids collapse with the movement of the table.

‘It’s OK. I’m working, actually.’ She is staring at the sugar sachets.

‘Force suddenly flush on the overtime budget?’ Matthew gathers up his debris and places the sachets back in the stainless-steel stand at the centre of the shiny wipe-down surface.

‘No. We have DI Halfwit down from London on the case you’re so mysteriously interested in. I’m babysitting.’ She raises her arm for the waitress and glances behind the counter before ordering a cappuccino.

‘So you’ve warmed to him, then.’

Melanie pulls a face and pokes out her tongue.

Matthew can feel his smile. It is so good to see Mel. She was one of the few coppers at training college who refused to drink instant coffee, too. Produced a little cafetière on the first day. They both got teased mercilessly. When they worked together, she had an app on her phone to identify the nearest cafés with proper espresso machines. Their perfect breakfast was chip butties and good Italian coffee.

Matthew stares at her and realises how much he misses it. Not just working with Mel. Working on the force. The sense of team, of collaboration. This.

‘OK, Matt. So are you going to tell me now what’s really going on, ’cos I haven’t got much time.’ She is widening her eyes now. ‘The DI is down to speak to the Ballards again. Fresh stuff from the TV appeal, I’m assuming. They’re not telling me much yet, of course, but I’m taking the family liaison

officer out there straight after this. What's going on? I really need to know why you're interested, Matt.'

Matthew glances around the coffee shop and then produces from his pocket an evidence bag containing a postcard and envelope.

Melanie turns it over to read the message and frowns before glancing back at him for an explanation.

'It was sent to Ella Longfield – the witness on the train. The flower shop woman. She called me in. There were two previous very similar cards that she threw away, unfortunately. Random postmarks. Liskeard. Somewhere in Dorset. And London.'

'And she didn't think to come to us?'

'Trust me, I said the same, Mel, from the off. But she seemed convinced they were from Anna's mother, Barbara Ballard. And she didn't want her to get in trouble. Feels guilty.'

Melanie lets out a long sigh as the waitress brings over her coffee.

'You don't change. This should have been handed in straight away.'

'Don't be unfair. This is what I do now, Mel. And you wouldn't have this at all if I hadn't persuaded Ella. Anyway. We both know it's more likely to be a crank than any kind of lead.'

'Is that your gut, Matt? A crank? She had quite a bit of trouble on social media after her name got out.'

'Yeah – a bit of a cock-up, that.' Matthew is checking Melanie's face as she turns the evidence bag over to examine the back.

'We really don't know how it got out, Matt. Honestly. But there's been a lot of noise upstairs about it. Press office furious. Anyway. We put quite a lot of time into investigating the hassle. To reassure her. Trying to make amends. But the feeling back then was it was likely just trolls or kids. Maybe Anna's school friends. Unpleasant, but nothing significant or linked to the enquiry. Or the two guys on the train.'

'So you think this is the same? Just some nut trying to frighten her?'

'I don't know. Quite a lot of effort put into this.' She is examining the card more carefully. 'Doubt we'll get any prints now but we'll try. Run it through the system. Probably just a random nutter. So – talk. Why does this Ella think it could be the mother?'

Matthew tells her about Ella visiting Cornwall. The fracas.

‘And she didn’t think to tell us about that either. Great.’

‘I don’t think it’s the mother. I talked to her, Mel.’

‘Jesus, Matt. This is a live investigation . . .’

‘And like I say, you wouldn’t have this handed in at all if it weren’t for me.’

Melanie dips her finger into the froth of her coffee. ‘I’m not looking forward to explaining this to DI Halfwit. You’re right, most likely another troll. But he won’t like not being told.’

‘What’s his problem then, this DI? Doesn’t sound as if they’ve got very far.’

‘He’s an arrogant pain. Looks about twelve. Wouldn’t mind that, if he were halfway competent, but he seems distracted by some new Soho murder case. Also, he seems to think I’m his personal chauffeur every time they’re down here. Which isn’t often.’

‘So could you be vague when you hand this over? Help me out?’

‘Keep your name out of it, you mean?’

Matthew tilts his head and feigns puppy eyes.

‘I know I’m a stuck record but you should have stayed in the force, Matthew. You know that, I know that, so you can stop with the butter-wouldn’t-melt.’

Matthew does not reply. Melanie is one of the few people who knows why he really left the force.

‘Come on, then. Share. What did you make of the mother, Matt? The family liaison officer reckons she’s straight.’

‘I agree. I don’t think she sent them. She didn’t slip up. I implied it was hate mail and she talked about them as letters, not postcards. But there’s something not right there, Mel.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘She pretended to want to call her husband. But I could tell from the body language that she didn’t really want him there at all. Bit odd . . .’

Melanie narrows her eyes again.

‘So what’s the deal with the parents, Mel? Are they really both in the clear? And what’s come out of the TV appeal? Anything promising?’

‘I tell you what. How about we talk about you becoming a dad instead.

Much more interesting.'

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CHAPTER 13

THE WITNESS

I was so lucky with Luke as a baby, though I had no way of knowing this at first. No benchmark; no experience.

To be frank, I was expecting it to be nigh impossible, trying to run the business with a baby. Everyone went so heavy on the dire warnings when I was in the last stage of pregnancy. *Brace yourself*, they all said. *Lack of sleep is a form of torture*, they said. *You'll have no time to yourself. No time even to take a bath in peace.* Blah de blah.

I got to the point where I seriously worried whether I would be able to keep the business going at all.

When does it get easier? I remember asking a friend with three girls. That was about two weeks before Luke arrived, and I will never forget her reply. *Oh, it never gets easier, Ella. Just wait until they're teenagers . . .*

I went home that day and cried and cried, catastrophising that the flower shop would have to be sold. But do you know what?

It wasn't nearly as difficult as they all predicted.

Sure – I remember the panic outside the hospital when we couldn't even strap him into the car seat, despite all our practising. I remember the sense of shock that they were actually going to allow us to take this tiny bundle home when we had not the foggiest what we were doing. I remember also waking in the night between feeds in those early weeks, convinced I had forgotten to put him back in his Moses basket and fearing he had fallen off the bed.

Where's the baby, Tony? Where did I put the baby?

But it was a surprise how quickly it all settled down.

Luke was this really placid, smiley baby, you see. An easy baby. My mum came to stay and I had to bring in help to keep the shop ticking over, but by week ten Luke was sleeping through the night.

He was the kind of child who, once fed and clean, was happy to amuse himself. I could pop him on a mat with a mobile overhead and he would just smile and coo.

You were never like this, my mother said. *He must get it from his father.*

Luke's placid nature meant I started back at the shop much sooner than

planned. We put up a hook from the ceiling and bought him one of those bouncy contraptions. He would sit in his little bouncy sling for hours, just jiggling up and down, watching me putting orders together and gurgling at all the customers. *Bounce. Gurgle. Bounce. Smile . . .*

I have been sitting on the bed here for goodness knows how long, replaying all these pictures of Luke in my head. I smooth the fabric of my trousers. I have been worrying what to wear but I'm not changing. *It doesn't matter what you're wearing, Ella. What you're wearing won't change this or fix it.*

What matters is that my son – my beautiful Luke – has been going through hell and I had no idea. None at all. I have been so distracted, thinking about Anna and her family in Cornwall and the blessed postcards, that I have not seen what is right here under my nose. That my poor son's life is in meltdown.

I was so shocked when he finally blurted it out. Again – so naive. I didn't even realise they were having sex . . .

'You ready, love?' Tony is standing in the doorway. 'Luke's downstairs.'

'Yeah. Sure.'

In the sitting room, I repeat to Luke what I have said so many times in the last twenty-four hours. That the time for regret and 'if only' is over, and we have to look this in the face now. All of us *together*. Reminding him that he is not on his own with this anymore. If she wants to go ahead and have this baby, we should support her. As a family. Luke should not feel that this has to involve them living as a couple. Or settling down. They are far too young for that. But he does have to offer to play a part in this child's life. To be a support. To face up to what has happened here. And we will support him. Them. The baby.

Luke's face is white. Tony's face is white. I wonder if I am the only one thinking how much more terrible it is for Emily's parents. She is sixteen . . .

We drive in silence. Twenty minutes. Luke offers directions for the final mile. The fact that we do not even know where his girlfriend lives says everything about this situation. I gave him lifts to the cinema. They met in town. Took the bus.

I wonder where exactly they have been having sex.

This thought leads me back to the train. To Sarah and that man. Wondering how they could do that. In a train toilet. And no – the irony isn't lost on me, remembering my shock. Me and my high horse.

I put on the radio but Luke asks me if I will turn it off, please.

Left at the postbox. Second right. There. It's the detached house at the end of this cul-de-sac. That one.

A nice house. Red brick with a climber around the porch. The windows look freshly painted and the front garden is immaculate. Neatly clipped lawn and beds of roses and lots of hardy geraniums. I don't know why I take all of this in. Maybe it is because I don't really want to get out of the car.

'So. You ready, son?' It is Tony who moves us forward. Opens his door first.

Luke shrugs. I look at him and see that he is still in shock. He keeps saying that they used protection.

We used a condom. I don't understand.

'Like I say, love. It is what it is. We're here for you,' I say. 'Now – come on. Let's go in.'

Emily's parents introduce themselves but we don't shake hands. None of us are going to pretend.

Emily is sitting all hunched up in a wide armchair, cushion to her stomach, as white as Luke.

'Emily didn't want us to meet like this but we felt – given how young they are – that a joint meeting was important.' Rebecca sounds as if she has rehearsed this.

I notice that her husband has his eyes fixed on Luke. I can only imagine what may be going through his head, but I want to erase what he is thinking.

He is a good lad, Luke. He has stuffed up, yes, but so has she. And I wish I had the courage to tell the father to *stop looking at my son like that*.

'Emily and Luke have been talking a lot about the options, but we feel we should know where the two families stand. Going forward.' Rebecca is looking at me.

'Well, I think you're right. It's important for us to talk. And the first thing I want to say is how sorry we are, as you must be – devastated, actually – that they find themselves in this situation so very young.' I can feel Tony's eyes on me and he tilts his head, a tiny sign of encouragement before speaking up to help me.

'My understanding is that they did try to be sensible. To be safe.' Tony turns to Emily's father but the response is a cold stare.

‘She’s sixteen.’

‘Dad, please.’ Emily glances across at Luke who is still white, staring at the ground.

‘What we want to make clear’ – I glance at Tony again and then back at Emily’s parents – ‘is that as a family we will do whatever we can to support Emily.’

‘Emily has decided against a termination. We want to be open about that. But she may want to consider adoption.’

I feel a punch of shock at this. Our grandchild . . .

Rebecca is looking her daughter in the eye. ‘We are still talking this through as a family. She has a lot to consider. A levels. University.’ Her voice breaks and I feel this terrible surge in the pit of my stomach.

‘Perhaps we can talk again about this?’ Tony clears his throat to continue.

‘We feel this should be Emily’s decision.’ Rebecca is now looking at her husband. ‘She will talk it through with Luke, of course. But we just wanted to check where we all stood. In terms of support.’

‘I’ve already told Emily that I’ll support her.’ Luke is looking straight at her. ‘I’ve told her that.’

‘Yes. Well maybe you should have thought about the consequences before you—’

‘Dad. Please don’t. *Please.*’ Emily’s voice is almost unbearably quiet.

‘So – is there anything else in particular that you need to know from us today? Other than that Emily and Luke have our full support?’ I can feel my left fist clenching with the tension.

‘No.’ Rebecca tilts up her chin. ‘I . . . We just wanted to make absolutely sure that everyone knows where we are.’ She stands, and I realise this is the cue for us to leave. That this was only ever about ensuring that Luke came clean with us.

I hand a piece of paper with my personal email address to Rebecca.

‘Thank you.’

And then we part in silence. No handshakes. Nothing more to say.

We drive back to the house in silence, too. It is real now. At seventeen years of age, Luke is about to become a father. I want to speak up – to say that I will bring up the baby. That they must not, under any circumstances, give

the child away. Luke's child . . .

And then as we pull into the drive there is another shock. Sticking through the letterbox is a new postcard. Half in. Half out. No envelope this time, and unmistakable. Black with bright lettering.

It is eight o'clock in the evening. Which means that whoever is doing this has been to the house.

I feel utterly overwhelmed as I stand outside the porch, imagining that other person standing in precisely the same spot. I am terrified of what this now means. For me – and for my family. I realise that I should have gone straight to the police. Told Tony. That I am properly afraid that everything is running away from me. I realise also that tonight shouldn't be about me and Anna and whatever these postcards may or may not mean.

Tonight should be about Luke.

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WATCHING . . .

9 p.m.

I like that she is not sure.

That is why I like to watch people. Have to do this.

I don't even remember how it began anymore. Only that it has become important. You need to watch, you see, because it is extremely important – to work out the difference between how people behave when they know they are being watched . . . and when they don't.

Some people, you see, are much the same whether they are being watched or not. But most people aren't. You don't get to find out for sure until you watch a lot.

Sometimes, and this is also important, you don't need to do anything very much. People will simply come to know. Give themselves away. Then the watching becomes more interesting because they will eventually turn. To a window. Or in exactly the right direction, and they will pull a blind or the curtains. Turn on a light. Or check a door.

Other times I have to help them out a bit. Stir it up. Until I can see the look that I have come to understand and is probably the thing I like the very best.

When someone feels they are being watched but is no longer absolutely sure . . .

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CHAPTER 14

THE FRIEND

Sarah is sitting up in bed, staring at the cold cup of tea on her locker. Why does her mother keep bringing her tea? She doesn't like the hospital tea. It smells funny.

Her arm is still sore from the drip. At first she didn't understand why all of this fussing had to go on for so long. She thought she would get her stomach pumped. Puke a bit. Say sorry. Go home. But no.

No one tells you the truth of this. But then – why would they? Anyone taking an overdose is supposed to want to die, so why would survival details matter? The problem, Sarah realises, still staring at the cold tea, is that she doesn't ever remember thinking that she actually wanted to die. She no longer remembers precisely what she was thinking when she took the tablets. There was just all this panic about what would come out on the new TV appeal. That maybe everyone would find out about what happened on the train. What really happened in the club . . .

Yes. Just panic. Wanting everything to stop.

But not a conscious choice to check out. Die. Not that, not really. And she certainly doesn't want to die now. Which is why it is so frightening to have to face up to the details. The obsession with her liver. All the tests. The whispering. The consultant looking so terribly grave when examining her charts.

Sarah can feel her hands trembling. When she looks down at them they are actually shaking, and she wishes that she had not looked it all up on the Internet. She wonders what dying really feels like. If it would really hurt. If you would know.

For a moment this makes her think of Anna, but she shuts this down. No. Anna is going to be found. Anna has to be found. It is like this twisted wrenching through her whole body. So torn. Wanting Anna back, but not wanting to be found out . . .

In the meantime, Sarah's mother is trying to play down the tests; she keeps using her sing-song voice, saying everything is going to be just fine. But everything is not fine.

Her liver tests are still borderline. It is day four. Day four is apparently a

very bad place to be.

They have given her back her phone and so yes, she has looked it up. Loads of people die of liver failure on day four.

Turns out surviving the paracetamol overdose doesn't put you in the clear at all.

Is my liver going to pack up, Mum?

Stop it, Sarah. You're going to be fine.

Not true. Her results are so borderline, she might need a transplant; it could go either way. It's hard to tell with livers, apparently.

She's had charcoal. And she's had the drug by drip that's supposed to help the liver cope with all this. But nothing is guaranteed. It's a waiting game . . .

What Sarah wants more than anything is her sister. Lily. But her mum won't talk about Lily, so all she has been able to do is message her on Facebook. But Lily hasn't replied yet. Hasn't updated her status for ages . . . The last picture was at some weird yoga retreat.

There is the sound of the curtain around her bed now. Her mother is back from the shop downstairs.

'I bought you these.' She has two magazines in her hand and the hospital cliché of grapes.

Sarah looks at her mother and feels a familiar and confusing myriad of emotions. Love. Anger. Frustration.

'I'd better phone your father. Tell him how you're doing.'

'No. Don't. I don't want him here. I want Lily.'

'Now come on, Sarah. He has a right to know the latest and if he wants to come—'

'Don't. I said I don't want him here and I mean it. Why won't you talk about Lily?'

'Lily made her own choices. Lily has her own life now. Your dad . . . he's been very worried.'

Sarah turns away. Bad enough that he had insisted on coming to the hotel in London. To talk with the police. Kept phoning. Checking up.

Maybe he was worried what she might say to the police.

Sarah looks at her mother, fussing with the grapes and the magazines.

Moving the box of tissues and pouring cordial from a bottle.

How many times has she tried to broach it? To talk to her mother. To take the pin out of the grenade. But it's always like this. She is dismissed. Shut down. The pin is popped straight back in. The pretence remains that their family is just a standard broken family. All very straightforward. Sad but neat. Nothing out of the ordinary. Loads of people get divorced after all.

Your father is gone. But we are going to be fine. It is all going to be civilised. We both love you very much still . . .

Occasionally, over the years, Sarah wondered about sharing the truth with Anna. But Anna had such a different life. Beautiful Anna. With her beautiful life.

Sarah leans back into the plumped-up pillows and closes her eyes.

'That's it, love. You have yourself a nice little nap. I'll read.'

They met in the third year of primary school, she and Anna. Back then, Sarah's dad was a lorry driver and away a lot. Her mother had always wanted to live in the country, so they bought a little two-bed modern terrace on a small estate on the outskirts of the village.

Sarah remembers how very shocked she was when Anna first invited her home to tea. The drive along the narrow lane to the huge farmhouse, with its chaos and its dogs and its line of wellingtons in the boot room which was bigger than her mother's kitchen. *Imagine*, she told her family. *A whole room just for boots and dogs. It's nuts.*

That first night after visiting the farmhouse, Sarah lay in bed, overwhelmed. Tea at hers after school was tinned spaghetti on toast, or oven chips made into chip butties. Only at weekends was there more effort, and even then it was from packets and tins.

At Anna's it had been surreal. Her mother made this incredible stew – rich and delicious with herb dumplings on top – and apple crumble with homemade custard. It was a Wednesday, and Sarah had imagined it was a big and special fuss for her, but Anna said no, just a normal tea. *Why? What do you like to eat?*

Anna's father came in from the fields to eat with them and was charming and funny, telling jokes, sitting at the table in his thick woollen socks and asking Sarah if she would like to come with Anna to see some of the new lambs.

Sarah looked around the table, watching Anna very closely, and it was like stepping back to watch from inside a strange bubble, realising that this

really was their version of normal. Not a show put on for a visitor at all. Anna's norm. Anna's very different life.

And it wasn't exactly jealousy she felt, but there was this awareness, a stirring inside that was uncomfortable because it was the first time she had had her own life thrown into such sharp relief.

Anna was so different from her in other ways, too. Beautiful and kind and patient. She had been the first to befriend Sarah when she was standing awkwardly in the playground – the new girl. Anna had invited her to join in with a skipping game. And later to play two-ball against the wall, chanting rhymes as they each took a turn, moving in to juggle the balls without letting them drop.

They were thrilled to discover it was a shared passion – the two-ball. They became known as the best in the school. That's really how it all began. Anna and Sarah. Best friends forever.

It was a long time before Sarah had the courage to return Anna's invitations. She had probably had tea at the farmhouse dozens of times by then. Stews and pies, lasagne and all manner of delicious offerings – always with a pudding to follow. Anna's favourite was this plum slice, like a flapjack with stewed fruit through the middle. It had a lovely smell, which Anna said was cinnamon. They would eat them cold as snacks some days when they played two-ball in the yard, and other times Anna's mother would warm them for pudding to be served with clotted cream or custard.

Often Jenny, Anna's sister, would have friends for tea, too, and the table would be crowded and noisy, like a party. Tim and Paul were regulars; Sarah was pleased because Tim was from the council estate and she liked that she wasn't the only one with a very different life. In fact, it made her feel better that Tim's mother apparently never cooked at all. She pretty much left him to fend for himself, which was why Mrs Ballard loved to spoil him – and everyone else, too – with her open house, her hotpots and her upside-down cakes.

Very quickly they became this little gang, with the farmhouse as their personal playground. They set up a camp in the bushes near the barns. On warm days, Mrs Ballard put a sprinkler on the front lawn so they could run in and out of the water in their swimming costumes before tea. Mr Ballard let them all ride in a trailer behind the quad bike, with the boys shouting *faster, faster*.

That first summer, the farm became a second home to Sarah. She was so happy.

And then suddenly, nearer Christmas, Anna asked outright. *Could I not come to your house some time, do you think, Sarah?*

I suppose.

Sarah had felt this twisted sense of nerves and shame and guilt, too, wanting to be proud of her family but worrying what Anna might think. She couldn't understand why someone who had such a wonderful home herself would want to go anywhere else. But if Anna was surprised by their tiny house and the oven chips and the baked beans, she certainly didn't show it.

It's so warm, she said as they snuggled up to watch television downstairs, under the throw her mother had offered them. *Your house is so warm, Sarah. Ours is always freezing in the winter.*

They stayed best friends into secondary school, where Sarah discovered something special of her own – that she was actually a lot smarter than she realised. It had been difficult to tell in the small pond that was the village primary. She always came top in the spelling tests; her writing was always displayed on the wall and she always got an A for maths. But there was very little competition. Then, in secondary school, Sarah's star suddenly shone more brightly. Top sets for everything – even maths, which Anna found a struggle.

Sarah took on a new role in their friendship, which made her feel proud and valued and able to offer something important back to the family who had been so kind to her. She helped Anna with her maths homework. Her essays.

Paul was bright, too, and it became a joke that he and Sarah were the 'boffins'. Paul was the son of one of Mrs Ballard's friends, and when he suddenly grew taller and quite handsome, Sarah looked forward to her visits to the farmhouse even more. Anna's mum and dad continued with the open-door policy even as the children grew. Eating more. Loudly chasing each other, climbing trees and playing hide-and-seek around the barns. Other parents complained about the noise and the food and the music and the mess, but Mrs Ballard never seemed to mind at all.

For a spell, with Sarah and Paul helping the others with their homework over plates of pizza and cakes and scones, everything felt so beautifully balanced. Giving and taking. Happy and good.

Yes. She remembered that golden period, during the first year of secondary school, as the happiest she had ever been.

Until, that is, the very end of that year. Another summer term. Sarah was twelve, nudging thirteen. Her mother was away, visiting an old school friend, and out of the blue Sarah's period started.

Her sister Lily was around at a friend's house for a sleepover and so Sarah began rummaging through her sister's chest of drawers, desperate for some sanitary towels. Stick-on ones hopefully, 'with wings', which she had seen in adverts and looked pretty simple to use.

But all she could find were tiny tampons in a box. She was horrified, opening out the instructions, trying to figure it out as her father came in.

Very soon Sarah was in tears. Absolutely mortified while he was telling her not to be so silly. That it was nothing to be worried or embarrassed about. *All perfectly normal*. Of course it would feel a bit awkward. And he was so sorry that her mother was away for the night, but she was not to be afraid or upset. This was just a part of growing up.

He put his arm around her shoulders and, for a moment, Sarah felt so very happy and relieved that she had the kind of father who wasn't fazed by this, who could talk about this stuff without it being truly dreadful and awkward. And then he took the instructions from her hand – the leaflet about the tampons. And he said the problem was that these were really for older girls and probably not suitable just yet. Sarah was about to ask if he could take her to the chemist to buy some of the sticky-backed sanitary towels, when her father said the important thing was to check. *So as not to do any damage*.

Sorry?

Well if you let me have a look. See how grown up you are. You know. Down there. We can work out if you can try the tampon straight away.

No. It's fine. I'll wait till Mum gets back.

Don't be silly. There is absolutely no need for you to be embarrassed about this. Periods are perfectly normal. Not dirty or anything to be ashamed about.

Looking back, Sarah knows, as she knew deep down at the time, that this wasn't OK at all. But she was in such complete shock. Had no time to process the situation.

And so she did the most terrible thing and also the only thing. She let him look. She let him feel whether she was grown up enough. And then he said, *No – probably not suitable for tampons. Not yet*. That he would pop to the shops and get something else for her. *No need to be embarrassed*.

She had sat on her bed with tissues stuffed in her pants to soak up the blood – frozen. Unable to move. Just sat there in this terrible silence. It was as if her whole life had shrunk suddenly into this tight, tight ball that hurt as

much as the pain in her stomach.

And the problem is, she still doesn't know what to do or what even to think. She still hasn't told her mother. Or anyone else. Not Anna. Not anyone.

The pin is still in the grenade.

When her parents separated very suddenly, she just refused to go and visit her father, which made both her parents very angry.

'You didn't drink your tea.' Her mother is moving the cup on the locker to set out the grapes, removing the cellophane wrapping.

Sarah looks at her. She looks at the cup of cold tea in her hand.

And the worst thing now? She cannot get out of her head how her father was always saying how very beautiful Anna was. At school concerts. At parent evenings. Everyone said that, to be fair, but Sarah has been thinking, with all these hours stuck in the hospital with nothing to do but think, that her father said that a lot more than most. Certainly more than felt comfortable.

She is very lovely. Your friend Anna. Very lovely girl.

'Anna's mother, Barbara, phoned to see how you're doing. Everyone sends their love. Apparently the vigil went very well. It was on the local news. And the gang was wondering if they could come and visit? Cheer you up?'

'The gang?'

'Yes. Jenny and Tim and Paul. They're very worried about you and would love to pop by.'

'No. I don't want that. Not yet.'

'Right. Well. If you're not feeling up to it. But it would probably be good for you. Barbara seemed very keen. You know how fond of you she is.'

'I said not yet. OK? When I'm home. Maybe when I'm home.'

Sarah cannot think about that now. She is suddenly thinking about a lot of other, more important and confusing things.

How she hasn't told the police the truth about what happened with Anna in the club.

And she hasn't told anyone about the text from her dad that night.

CHAPTER 15

THE WITNESS

Sometimes people ask me, *Why flowers, Ella?*

The truth is I cannot remember when life, for me, wasn't about flowers. Right from when I was tiny and I used to collect wild flowers on walks with my gran, mesmerised by the colours and the scents and the way you could make the whole impact and mood change by combining them in different ways. The simple, joyful sunburst of a huge fistful of primroses, then the softening and mellowing effect if you added in just a few bluebells for the surprise, the contrast. The hint of the Mediterranean, with the blue and the yellow together.

I would so love it when my mother let me pick flowers from the supermarket to put in vases at home, experimenting with the way they fell. Learning how tulips only look right if you put them in precisely the right height of vase so they weep over the rim. Not too much. Not too little.

I have never forgotten the joy of learning to revive roses with fresh water and cutting the stems super sharp at an angle. The miracle of them lifting up their heads again as if saying *thank you*.

It was no surprise that when I was old enough for a Saturday job, I knew precisely where I would try first. There was a small florist in the town I grew up in. I passed it every day on my walk to school, always stopping to examine the buckets of daffodils outside in the spring, glancing at the window displays. It wasn't especially inspirational, to be honest: standard bouquets, standard displays and too many carnations.

But I have never been more proud than when I was offered my regular six-hour Saturday shift. Up early to help sort the new stock, breathing in the heavenly scent of it all. The shiny ribbon. The rustle of tissue and cellophane. I learned very quickly to respect the popular tastes – the horror of those carnations and the ugly ferns. I was careful not to offend, biting my tongue at first. But as my confidence and my knowledge grew, I started to make little suggestions to our regulars. *How about sunflowers? Or lilies? Something a bit different for a change?*

And it wasn't long before the manager, Sue, allowed me to order in new things, and to make up my own little set-price bouquets.

You have a really good eye, Ella. You're a natural . . . You should do a

course.

So I did. A basic course for starters, then a second, more advanced course for wedding flowers, and a third for contemporary design. After that I entered a competition and made the local paper by winning a regional award.

The prize was a week working with a top florist in London, visiting the flower markets at the crack of dawn. Scary. Exhausting. Exhilarating. Heaven . . .

And then the unimaginable. After I had finished A levels, I did a year at college: floristry and business studies. During that year, my grandmother died, leaving an unexpected legacy to be shared between her five grandchildren. *Go travelling*, said my friends. *Blow it on a car. Or a world trip.*

No. Lying in bed at night, beaming, I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

I managed to negotiate the lease on this place. A shop of my own. Complete madness, my parents said. *Do you have any idea how many small businesses fail in their first year?*

And yes – they were right, in a way. It took much longer to come good than I expected. In truth, it provided little more than the minimum wage after costs, in that first year, and let's not talk about the hours I put in. But it *didn't* fail – quite the opposite by the time I got into my stride, in the second and third years.

I learned how to make the bread-and-butter earnings from weddings and seasonal holidays. Mother's Day. Valentine's Day. But the devil was definitely in the detail, I was sure of that.

To compete with the supermarkets, I knew I had to offer something distinctive. My floral USP was an informal, shabby-chic style, with homemade touches that set us apart. My bouquets were hand-tied before this was common practice. I used unusual twine, and handmade labels decorated with pressed flowers from blooms that had gone over.

I learned to waste nothing. Discounted posies when I'd over-ordered. Spent extra hours with the flower presses to ensure no waste.

Soon I was selling little cards and labels, as well as using them on my bouquets. A very useful extra-income stream.

And so this is where I am happiest. My shop. My creation.

Here in the shop I do not worry so much what people think of me or what I say – whether I am old-fashioned or an old head on young shoulders, which is what everyone used to say when I set this place up.

Here – where it is just 6 a.m. and the rest of the world is barely stirring – I am in my own little world, with orders to make up before we meet with the police back at the house. Back in the real world, where Anna is still missing and the postcards have started to frighten Tony as well as me.

I work carefully. A birthday bouquet to be collected at noon. Six table decorations for a dinner at one of the local hotels. Two cups of coffee. Three.

I work carefully, using my favourite secateurs. Bright red handles with the sharpest blade on the market. Superb.

And then the strangest thing. At around six thirty, maybe six forty-five, I leave the last of the table decorations on the counter, nearly finished, to use the loo, which is a tiny extension at the back of the unit. When I return to the bench, the secateurs are gone.

There is the noise of a car right outside and, I admit it, I am spooked. Thrown by this. I am normally so very careful with the secateurs, you see, not just because they are dangerous but because they are extremely expensive. I don't want them to drop on the floor. For the handles to crack. They are a bit like a chef's favourite knife. A lucky charm. I have two spare sets in the drawers but I don't feel comfortable using any others. They just don't feel the same in my hand.

I walk to the front door and stare out to the parking area outside. A single car has its headlights on full beam so I can't see who is inside. I check the shop door. Unlocked. But then I don't normally worry about this. Whenever I am here, I consider myself open for business. If anyone spots the lights on and calls in early, I want to *sell*. Will always take an order. But today, just this once, I put the latch across the top. I stand very still and find that my heart is pumping. I wait a while. Two minutes. Maybe more.

Don't be so silly, Ella. Don't overthink this.

And then the car finally pulls away and I feel my shoulders move, reminding myself that the neighbouring shops have flats above them and this is not so surprising. This early movement. Probably just someone off to work?

So I return to the workbench area at the back of the shop and am totally confused. From this new angle through the archway to the serving area at the front, I can see the secateurs resting on the top of the till. I honestly don't remember putting them there. Can't ever remember putting them there before. There is a slight slope to the top of the till, and this doesn't seem the kind of thing I would do at all. What if they were to slide off?

I look around me in the way you look around the kitchen when you can't find the ingredient you thought you had removed already from the fridge.

I am tired. That's it. *You are tired and you are on edge. Overthinking and messing up, Ella. Tony was right . . . you should have stayed home and done this later.*

Way too many thoughts pumping around my brain. I finish up the final decoration quickly and store everything in the cooler near the workbench – a sort of flower-fridge that keeps everything at the perfect temperature, all ready for my return.



Back at the house, Tony is in the kitchen in his dressing gown.

‘You OK? I’ve been worried. You should have let me come with you.’

‘It was fine. I wanted you here to speak to Luke. All done.’

His tone is just a little calmer now, but I can tell from the way he is standing, and also the dark shadows under his eyes, that he has not slept much either. He reacted just as I expected, more worried than cross. *You should have told me, Ella. No more secrets . . .*

Which makes me feel terrible. I showed him the most recent postcard. But I haven’t mentioned Matthew yet . . .

‘I don’t know how I feel about you working at the shop on your own now. Early like this, I mean. Until we know precisely what is going on. What the police say. I wish you had listened to me. Stayed home. Or let me come with you.’

‘I had to get the orders done, Tony. And anyway, it will just turn out to be some saddo. A spotty teenager with nothing better to do.’ I cannot make this sound entirely convincing, because I no longer know what I think. What I believe. How scared I really ought to be.

‘They called at the house, Ella. Whoever wrote that card called here. At the house.’

‘Yes. And you’re right – it changes things, and I realise now that I should have told you right at the beginning and I’m very sorry about that. But I am happy to take advice now. The police are going to be here in half an hour. I’ll listen to whatever they say, Tony. The only reason I wasn’t worried before is I honestly thought it was the mother.’

‘But can we rethink you working early on your own?’

‘If it will make you happier, I can try to juggle a bit in the future.’ I look

him in the face. ‘So did you speak to Luke?’

Last night in bed, Tony was the one to say it first. *Would you think I was mad if I said we should offer to adopt the baby?* I cried and hugged him tight, so relieved that he was thinking exactly the same thing as me. We agreed we are too old and it is probably completely insane, but there is no way we could let someone else bring up Luke’s child if Emily’s family can’t cope.

‘He says he’ll mention it to Emily later. She’s only ten weeks, so it’s a bit early for decisions.’ Tony puts his hand up to my cheek. ‘I think he was relieved, but it’s hard to tell. He’s still in shock.’

Tony goes on to say Luke would like to stop working at the shop down the line. He’s finding it too much with all the worrying. I completely understand, though I know it won’t be easy to find a replacement. The early starts put people off. But Luke must come first, so we will have to work something out.

‘OK. So let’s see what the police have to say, shall we? Talk again about Luke and the shop after that.’ I take his hand, still rested on my cheek, and kiss it.

To be honest, I am surprised that we are to see the London DI. Apparently he is down for an update with the Ballards in Cornwall, so will be calling in here on the way back.

Matthew has updated me. His police-contact friend handed over the earlier postcard. Nothing from forensics. No prints. But they want to see this new one, too. I have put it in a transparent freezer bag. Matthew says they will provide proper evidence bags and special gloves for me to use if any more postcards turn up. Better chance of getting prints, apparently. He has asked me not to mention him by name. To imply that I handed the postcards over to the police myself.

Tony has now stepped away and is looking under the sink, I assume for fly spray; there’s a bluebottle buzzing at the kitchen window. Eventually he gives up on the cupboard and instead opens the window to shush the fly out with a piece of kitchen towel, before turning back to me and tilting his head.

‘You look really tired, Ella. You doing all right, love?’

‘I’m fine. Just relieved you know about the postcards now.’

CHAPTER 16

THE FATHER

Henry is sitting at a favourite spot on the stone wall, which has an overview of the higher, troublesome fields. There is just a little mist still hovering around the river below, but the sheep are safely across the other lane and Sammy is happy. Henry smooths the dog's ears.

It is moments like this, watching the early sun burning off the mist, that he feels the most calm. He is thinking that he would like to put in some more fencing lower down in the largest of these fields, to keep the sheep from the muddy slope down to the river. But fencing is expensive. And Barbara is not up for spending on the farm.

New kitchens and new power showers for the holiday cottages? Bring it on. Paying some web designer to upgrade their search engine optimization, whatever that means? That apparently *makes sense financially*. But fencing? Feed? Tractor repairs?

Henry looks down at the dog, whose tongue is lolling as he pants from the joy of checking the boundaries of this field. And the one next door.

To Henry, this is what makes real sense still. A dog who happily races around the perimeter of every field he visits, returning to his master with a triumphant wag of the tail and meeting of the eyes to confirm that all boundaries have been checked.

Henry glances at his watch. An hour to go. He ought to get back. Have a shower. Have another row with Barbara. Try one final time to calm things down before he faces the music proper.

Come on then, boy.

He deliberately takes the long way round. Cannot face Primrose Lane today. Back at the house he is still in the boot room, hanging up his wax jacket, when Barbara appears.

'Where have you been? We need to talk some more, Henry. Before the police get here. I'm worried how much trouble I'll be in. We need to think of Jenny.'

'I'll come through.'

In the kitchen, she sits at the large scrubbed-pine table, drumming her

fingers. He stares at the kettle alongside the Aga, wondering about a cup of tea, but thinks better of it. Looks back at his wife.

‘I could be in serious trouble, Henry. I knew I should never have let you persuade me to lie to the police.’ She is pulling at the sleeve of her jumper, stretching it and then turning back the cuff.

‘It will be all right, Barbara. We’re setting it all straight. They will understand.’

‘Will they? Will they really?’

Henry closes his eyes. He is sorry that he has upset his wife. He is sorry that she is going through this on top of everything else. That he is a bad husband. But he is also very tired of having to say sorry a million times over, because it doesn’t help or change anything.

‘I’m sorry, Barbara.’

‘Well, with respect, it’s a bit late for that now. It’s perjury, isn’t it, to lie to the police?’

‘I think that’s just in court, love.’

Henry looks down at the floor. At his thick, grey woollen socks.

You disgust me. Anna’s voice again. In his head. In his car. In the passenger seat, refusing to look him in the face.

And in this moment he realises that there isn’t anything Barbara can say or the police can say to possibly make him feel worse than he already does.

‘I still don’t understand why we had to lie, anyway. I mean – do you have any idea, Henry, how it was for me that night, eh? Here on my own. Our daughter missing. Me here . . . all on my own.’

Henry closes his eyes and says nothing.

‘And by the way, I want you to move out.’

‘Oh, come on, Barbara. How is that going to help? Think of Jenny. And how am I going to keep the farm going if I move out?’

‘There is no farm, Henry. There hasn’t been a farm for years.’

He opens his eyes and meets hers.

‘And you wonder why this isn’t working out, Barbara? You marry a farmer and then you decide that you don’t want to be married to a farmer.’

‘That isn’t fair.’

‘Isn’t it?’

They sit for several minutes, saying nothing at all.

‘Right. So we see them together – the police, Barbara. And I explain why I asked you to lie the night Anna went missing. It will be fine. We’ll iron it out. I’m sorry I have upset you, but if you really want me to move out, then with respect I think what I do after today stops being any of your business. For now, I am going to have a shower before they arrive.’

Upstairs, under the stream of water which he turns up too hot deliberately, Henry feels the relief of it for the first time. The letting go, finally. For years he has allowed himself the delusion that he can keep going like this.

But now?

Henry turns his face up into the stream of water and has to adjust the temperature as the jet burns the tender skin. And for a short time he does what he hasn’t done since his mother died. In the stream of the hot water that turns his flesh just a little bit too red, Henry Ballard cries.

He cries for Anna, who will never be found. And who knows the worst of him.

You disgust me, Dad . . .

Afterwards, Henry shaves for the second time that day, selects a blue checked shirt, a clean pair of jeans and a navy sweatshirt. He does all of this on automatic pilot. He is long past the stage of trying to work out some script in his head. It will be what it will be.

When they arrive, there are three of them. A local DS called Melanie Sanders they have met a few times before and who seems quite nice; Cathy, their family liaison officer; and the tall, slim DI from London whom Henry has never liked.

From the off, the mood is markedly different from previous encounters. Cathy accepts the offer of coffee, which Barbara brings to the table on a tray, but the DI declines.

‘I understand you want to speak to us, Mr Ballard?’

‘Yes. I’m sorry. I feel very bad about this but I need to explain something about the night Anna went missing. I have something I want to clear up.’

The DI glances at the two women police officers and back at the Ballards.

‘Interesting – we must be telepathic, you and me, Mr Ballard. Because I came all the way down here to talk to you about *precisely* the same thing.’ He does not even try to disguise the sarcasm in his tone or the little twist of the knife.

‘You see, we had some very interesting calls after the anniversary appeal on television. Calls which we have found a little bit confusing.’

Henry looks at Barbara, whose expression is frozen.

‘So why don’t you go first, Mr Ballard.’

‘OK. So this is embarrassing. But I lied about the night Anna went missing, and I asked Barbara to back me up because I was so embarrassed. And I didn’t want it to distract from your investigation.’

Henry can feel his wife’s stare burning into him.

‘This is completely my fault. Not my wife’s. I had a few too many to drink. I wasn’t at home.’

‘Not at home?’

‘No.’

‘And you telling us this now, changing your story, wouldn’t have anything to do with the fact that you realise that we have new information?’

‘No. Of course not. How would I even know that?’

‘OK, Mr Ballard. So this new version of where you were the night your daughter went missing. Will it go any way to explaining how your car was seen near the railway station that evening?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Because, Mr Ballard, I am here today to ask you how it is that your car was seen on the evening of Anna’s disappearance near Hexton railway station. Not here at the farm, as you and your wife both told us previously. But near a railway station with a fast train to London. So my question is this. Did you go to London the night your daughter disappeared, Mr Ballard? Is that what you really want to tell us?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I didn’t. I was here the following morning. When we were liaising with the police. You know I was. That wouldn’t be possible. It’s too far. How could I possibly—’

‘Do you know what, Mr Ballard? On reflection, I think it might be better if we continue this a little more formally. At the local police station. DS Melanie Sanders will give us access to one of her nice interview suites, I’m

sure.'

Henry can feel a terrible panic rising within him. A sort of change of temperature which sweeps right through his body. His mind is in such turmoil that for a moment he cannot tell whether he feels too hot or too cold. Just somehow all wrong in the clothes he is wearing. The fabric too close to his skin. Clinging, as if he is still wet from the shower.

In the midst of this panic he looks at his wife, but there is no support or comfort there. Only terrible and wild confusion in her eyes.

'Shall we go then, Mr Ballard?'

Henry thinks that perhaps he should ask whether he has a choice. Whether this is an arrest—or a request. Whether he should get Barbara to phone their lawyer? Dig his heels in and actually refuse to go? But then he quickly regroups, thinking that he needs to be very, very careful. Saying the wrong thing or being uncooperative now could go very badly for him. Could be entirely misunderstood.

And so Henry Ballard stands, and as they walk outside he tries to calm himself, and decides, for now at least, to say nothing more at all.

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CHAPTER 17

THE WITNESS

I have been lying in bed thinking about karma. Silly, I know, but that postcard has really gotten under my skin.

I keep having these mixed-up dreams. Anna on the train. The noise of Sarah and her bloke in that wretched toilet cubicle. And then the shock over Luke and his girlfriend.

I'm not one for popcorn psychiatry normally, but you can't miss the irony, can you. And it just feels – I don't know – as if everything in my life is trying to teach me some terrible lesson and my brain just can't cope.

Some nights it gets so bad I get this tight feeling in my chest. Then I have to get up and make a cup of tea and then, of course, Tony gets up too – worried sick – which is the last thing I want. Spreading the guilt. What I try to do is go over it in my mind when I am on my own, playing rewind to think over and over and over about exactly how responsible I am for whatever happened to that poor girl. Wishing so much that I could go back and play it differently.

And then? The problem is, hand on heart, I still cannot go back there in my mind's eye and be anything other than appalled at the thought of that girl and that man having sex in that toilet so soon after they met.

I wish that I could bounce this off people properly. Ask them openly what they would have done. Whether they would be shocked or upset to be confronted by what I heard. The problem is that the police have only ever released information that the 'witness' overheard the girls being chatted up by the guys just out of prison, and that the 'witness' was shocked at how quickly they became close. How quickly they made unwise plans together. Dangerous plans.

I've been judged for that and that alone. For not stepping in because two country girls were being so clearly targeted by two guys with records. That's what all the social media and tabloid press has been about. *What would you have done? Would you have minded your own?* Two sixteen-year-old girls. Two guys just out of prison.

The police have never released the detail of the sex in the toilet, and asked me to keep it quiet for reasons of evidence, so I have only ever been able to tell Tony. He says I was right to be shocked – and that people would

keep their noses out of it if they knew all the facts.

We've talked it over again since this business with Luke and his girlfriend, and Tony says it's very different – a young girl having sex with a virtual stranger in a public toilet, and Luke and Emily making a mistake in a caring relationship. I know he's right, but I still feel a bit hypocritical now for judging Sarah so very harshly.

He's gone into work early today, my Tony. He's in retail himself, but a very different sector – selling cereals to supermarkets. He's acting regional manager and is up for the job permanently if his sales figures hit their target. I'm terribly proud of him, though it's a lot of pressure and I wish he didn't have to do so much travelling.

For now, with him away so much, I have promised to juggle my working hours so that I am not alone at the shop out of hours too much. At least not until we hear from the police and feel a bit steadier.

So this feels odd for me. A second cup of coffee in bed. It's 8 a.m., which for a florist amounts to a lie-in. I am having a really good think.

About karma.

Also, whether I am a prude. I mean, I certainly hold my hands up to being a bit out of touch. Naive to imagine that my seventeen-year-old son wouldn't be having sex yet. More and more I keep testing myself, worrying that I am a hypocrite over what happened on the train. Was my judgement about gender? Because my first thought was that Sarah clearly wasn't as 'nice' a girl as I had imagined, which is why I stepped away from the whole situation. Yet if it had been Luke? No. On reflection, maybe not so hypocritical, because I would still be totally appalled and shocked if a son of mine, or any young man, had done that with someone they had just met.

Maybe the truth is that I just like some boundaries. Because don't get me wrong, this is not about sex, per se; Tony and I get along very well in that department ourselves, thank you very much. I just think it's *private*. Sex. Not something casual; something to be talked about with strangers at dinner parties. And certainly not something to share with a complete stranger in a train toilet.

As for karma . . .

But now my mobile is ringing – the display confirms it's Matthew Hill. I check my watch. Ten past eight.

'Hello, Matthew. I was going to ring you, actually. To let you know that the London DI has postponed; he's coming round later now. Has had to stay

on in Cornwall for a bit. Some development with the inquiry, he said, which I am hoping means progress.'

'Well, I hate to disillusion you, but I'm afraid you can hold that thought. I've just spoken to my contact down in Cornwall and apparently the investigation is suddenly all over the place. Going right up a blind alley, from what I hear. But never mind that. Big news. I just got *the call*. My wife's gone into labour. I'm on my way to collect her right now. Feels a bit surreal, actually, but I just wanted to check in to let you know I may be out of the loop for a few days.'

'A few days?' I laugh. 'You may just have underestimated this, Matthew. But what lovely news. Please do let me know how it goes. Do you know if it's a boy or a girl yet?'

'No. Goodness. We don't mind . . .'

'OK. Good luck. Drive carefully and try to calm down.'

'I'll be in touch.'

And then I put the phone down and find that I am stilled. Matthew Hill clearly does not have a clue what is coming, and maybe that's not such a bad thing.

Because once you become a parent, you learn that love can involve more fear than you had ever imagined, and you never quite look on the world in the same way again. Which is precisely why I cannot cope with my part in Anna's disappearance.

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CHAPTER 18

THE FRIEND

‘So is it OK if I bring them through, love? Just for five or ten minutes? Might cheer you up. Nurse says she can make an exception so long as we keep it short.’

Sarah looks at her mother and knows that this is not really a question. Her mother has a very specific expression when she is shaping a recommendation as a question. She leans forward slightly, doesn’t blink and then raises her eyebrows, signalling that only the correct answer will actually be heard. Namely – yes. As a young child, Sarah would rail against this tactic, but she learned long ago that resistance is futile. And she has no energy for more lectures.

‘OK. But I’m feeling tired, so not for long.’

It’s day six, and Sarah has been reassured that her liver function is improving. The consultant is looking a good deal less concerned when he pops by the bed, and nurses now say that *everything is going in the right direction*. The psych team are finally off her back and there is even talk of her going home soon.

Sarah is not sure how she feels about going home. She is still reeling from how quickly her emotions shift from hour to hour. How she has so swiftly moved on from fear of death to impatience with the hospital and her mother.

And the other big bogey is back – worrying what will have come out of the television appeal.

The friends troop into the room looking cowed. Sarah is now in a side room just off the general children’s ward. At seventeen, she does not qualify for an adult ward, so this provision is to make her feel less awkward. Away from the babies. The nurses have told her she is ‘lucky’ that this side room was free.

Lucky?

‘We didn’t know what to bring so we decided on sugar. Your mum won’t approve, but hey.’ Tim is holding a little carton of biscuits and a box of fudge.

Sarah decides she will punish them all for as long as possible, and

refuses to look anyone in the eye.

Just last night she dreamed about them all at the farm, a birthday party Mrs Ballard threw for Tim. He must have been ten, maybe eleven. Anna's mum had been horrified when she discovered Tim's mother didn't bother with parties, and made this huge fuss – a big tea and a star-shaped chocolate cake with fresh cream. Tim and Paul brought a balloon-modelling kit and learned how to make sausage dogs, swords and hats. Walking along the narrow road from the farm to get her lift home after the party, she'd had a bright yellow sausage dog tucked under her arm. She had been so happy that day and so sad it was over. She had felt her expression changing; the two boys looking at her sideways. *Always hard to go home, isn't it?* She can't remember who said it, Tim or Paul, but she remembers exactly how she felt as she nodded – sad, but sort of guilty, too. She knew it was wrong to prefer Anna's family to her own, but she just couldn't help it.

And now? Sarah finally looks up and glances from face to face. She wonders what on earth happened to them all. When exactly did they stop being who they were to each other back then?

Jenny looks pale, and Sarah finds herself hoping she is remembering the horrible things she said during their row. It wasn't just the two boys who were cruel. But then a picture of Anna in the club flashes into Sarah's mind, and she closes her eyes and leans back on her many pillows.

'Sorry. Are you feeling all right? Do we need to get a nurse?' Jenny's voice.

'I'm fine. Just tired.'

'Right, yes. Of course. Look, we promised your mum we wouldn't stay long but we just wanted . . .' Jenny's voice trails off and she suddenly sucks in air.

'Look, we came because we wanted to say sorry. For what we said.' It is Tim who has stepped forward.

Sarah opens her eyes and looks again from one to the other. Tim. Paul. Jenny.

'We just felt so guilty. For swanning off to do other stuff. That's the truth.' Paul is fidgeting with his belt buckle. 'We shouldn't have taken it out on you.'

'You're sorry you said it . . . but you still think it's my fault?'

Sarah keeps her gaze on the boys. They had been the most outspoken when they had the row.

‘It’s those men. If they could just find those men.’ Jenny again.

Finally, Sarah takes a deep breath. ‘So – how did the TV appeal go? Many calls? I’ve got my phone back but not enough data to see it.’

The ice broken, they babble about how much the appeal helped. Loads of calls, apparently. Sarah lies again and says the pills really were an accident and they’re not to worry.

‘So you won’t do it again?’ Jenny’s tone is urgent.

‘No. I won’t. I promised my mum I would be more careful, and I couldn’t put her through that again. It was completely stupid. So tell me then. This TV appeal. What exactly did they show?’

Jenny says that she’s really pleased they used the lovely video of Anna, and also one of the photographs that she emailed the producer of the programme, but her mother was upset that her interview had been cut back so dramatically.

‘They edited out all the bits of her talking about other missing girls who have turned up and her saying that no one should give up hope – that any piece of information might be key to finding Anna alive.’

Everyone is silent for a moment.

Sarah closes her eyes again.

And then her mother is suddenly back in the room, ushering everyone out and saying that the staff have bent the rules and they don’t want to push their luck.

They each say goodbye and sorry, yet again.

After they have gone, Sarah’s mother sits on the chair next to the bed and fidgets. She smooths her skirt over and over.

‘What’s the matter, Mum?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Yes, there is.’

Her mother pours some cordial into Sarah’s empty glass and tops it up with water from the plastic jug. She examines the box of fudge as if reading the description on the back.

‘OK. So the police have been in touch again, Sarah. And of course the doctors say you are too poorly to see them. I wanted to keep this from you. You’ve been through quite enough but apparently they do want another little chat with you once you’re home, so I thought you should know. Prepare

yourself. So it doesn't set you back.'

'What about? What do they want to talk to me about?'

'Apparently there have been some more witnesses from the club. After the TV appeal. That's all I know.'

'But I've told them everything. Everything I know.'

'I know, love.'

'No. I don't want to talk to them again.'

'OK, love. I understand. No need to upset yourself. I'll try to explain to them that you need to rest.'

And now Sarah is leaning back on her pillows, closing her eyes and trying once again to block out the echo of Anna's voice. The desperation on her face that night in the club.

Please, Sarah. I don't feel safe. I'm begging you. Please . . .

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CHAPTER 19

THE WITNESS

About that promise I made to Tony not to do any more early stints at the shop on my own until the new alarms are installed . . . Well. You try getting a depressed teenage boy out of bed at the crack of dawn.

It's hard to be too cross. Luke promised he'd keep up the job until we find a replacement, but he wanders round like a zombie now. Always looks so tired. We're letting him stay off school for a few more days while everyone adjusts to what's going on with Emily. But it's hard to know how to play it.

This morning I banged on his door early, but no answer. I checked later and he just looked terrible. Bad headache, too – so I gave him some tablets and asked him to join me when he can. Tony is in Bristol so I have a dilemma. Duty to my customers versus safety and my promise to Tony. The only upside is the police have been pretty good. It's probably guilt for letting my name get out. They've been sending a patrol car past the house and shop every so often just to bump up 'presence'. They seem pretty sure it's just a saddo, but we're getting new alarms for the shop anyway, and I'm trying to tell myself it is all covered now.

The bottom line is that I decide to pop in early on my own – just this once – and will keep pestering Luke. He passed his test recently and Tony got him a Mini, so he can zip down in that once he's up to it.

By the time I arrive at the shop, I've messaged Luke twice more but had no reply yet. To be honest, I'm sad he wants to give up the job. Luke has been helping out at weekends since he was about fourteen; he used to be so keen and he's good with the customers. It made sense all round – it's extra money for him and I feel it instils a bit of discipline. Plus understanding what it actually feels like to be paid by the hour – both the slog of it and also the satisfaction when the day is done.

Tony's trip to Bristol is important vis-à-vis this promotion – they're deciding if they should rebrand their cereals – and I've decided I won't let him know about this. He'll get upset and worry about me being on my tod here in the dark.

So. *Concentrate, Ella*. I'm up against it. Six table decorations for a lunch at the town hall. It's a good gig and quite a regular booking through a catering contact, so I don't like to let them down. That's the problem with

repeat business: on the one hand, you're grateful for it and flattered, but on the other, you're always dreading that you might become dependent on it. Terrified to put a foot wrong in case the client goes somewhere else.

I normally draw up sketches and a mood board and agree those via email with the catering manager Kate. She's got a good eye herself and often posts pictures of my stuff on social media, which all helps these days. I've earned quite a reasonable reputation with her for doing something a bit different. So I don't like to slip up or get complacent.

Part of the whole drive to keep what I do looking fresh has been building up a good range of vases and props, so that I can really ring the changes. I just wish I had more storage space, though if I'm brutally honest, I probably spend too much on presentation. It's a fine line with a business as small as mine, but I think investing in kit helps win repeat business, and it's important to constantly surprise clients. It certainly leads to more photo shares on social media.

For this job, I'm using small galvanised-steel buckets; we've agreed an ultra-modern but vibrant look. I'm going with red anthuriums, white roses and Eustoma, against really glossy green foliage. It will look very striking with the white tablecloths and neutral room.

I'm always telling Tony that what you hope for with every order is that guests will ask, *Who did the flowers?* Kate is very loyal and always keeps my cards available. The only frustration for me is when conference delegates get in touch from far afield offering new work, as I can only cater within a certain radius.

Goodness. Time's going on and no word from Luke.

It's still quite dark and I'm thinking about another cup of coffee when I hear a car engine. I wonder if it's Luke, but I'm not sure it sounds like his Mini. The car pulls up outside. It stops. I stop.

Ridiculous. *It's just a car, Ella. Calm yourself.*

I stand very still, waiting for the car to move off, but it doesn't. The headlights go out. I tell myself it is probably someone for one of the flats.

I wait a minute or two and text Luke again. No answer. All is quiet now and so I turn back to the anthuriums. I tell myself to concentrate on the flowers. And then . . . Oh my goodness.

Someone is trying the door handle of the shop. It's locked, of course. *Christ.*

Luke has a key. It can't be Luke.

I pick up my mobile, ready to dial for help. I am thinking that if whoever's there forces their way in, I will run through the back and dial the police as I do so. Even as this plan takes shape in my head, I feel both ridiculous and simultaneously afraid.

There is more rattling of the door handle. I can't see who's there because of the blind drawn down over the glass section.

I keep very still. The only lights on in the shop are in the rear workbench area. I'm not going to the door. No way. There is a part of me that wants to believe it is Luke – that he has forgotten his key. But he would call out to me, surely?

Footsteps. Yes. Finally, I can hear someone walking away outside. Good. Good. Thank God. The car lights back on now. Driving off.

I wonder if I should phone Tony but then remember I'm not meant to be here on my own.

It is so odd that you can stand in a space – a place in which you normally feel so happy and safe – and then suddenly you can stand in precisely the same spot and feel like this completely different person.

I don't want to be this person.

I hate this new person.

I can actually feel tears coming now. And what I am thinking is, *You stupid, stupid woman. Why didn't you just do the right thing a year back? Give the parents a call when you were on that train and make this all their responsibility – their call – and not yours?*

Why, why, why? Why didn't you do that one, simple thing, Ella?

I don't know how long I have been standing here, but a glance at the big clock on the wall tells me it's too long. I am seriously up against it now.

Then my mobile rings and I jump right out of my skin. Luke's name.

'Were you just at the door?'

'No. What do you mean? I'm ringing to say I'm just setting off. But why so spooked, Mum?'

'Nothing. Nothing. Look, will you just get down here as soon as you can. You promised your dad . . .'

I hang up. And instantly regret my tone. Damn. I send a text to apologise.

Sorry. Just tired. Coffee machine is on.

And then I finally get back to the flowers and try to let myself soak up the brilliant colours and the scent. Concentrate on the work.

For a moment, I wonder if I have made the wrong choice with the buckets. Should I have gone for the mirrored square containers instead? No – it's too late anyway. I don't have time to start again. This will be fine.

It is light outside now, which is a huge relief as I can see the cars passing and parking more clearly without the blinding headlights. I no longer feel that ridiculous sense of being watched, as though I'm in a goldfish bowl.

Nearly 7 a.m. and the door rattles again. This time a text from Luke to confirm it's him. He really has forgotten his keys.

'Why do you lock the door, Mum? I thought you liked it when you got some impromptu trade.'

'Dad said it was a good idea. With these stupid postcards someone's sending.'

'I thought the police said it was probably some random saddo.'

'They did. And it probably is. But we just want to be a bit careful. You know, just to be on the safe side. How's your headache?'

'Gone. So – will you have to see them again? The police?' He looks worried, and I wish I had not said so much.

'Don't know. Probably not. It will all settle down again, I'm sure.'

'Well, if I find out who sent those postcards, I'll sort them out.'

'Don't say that, Luke. That's no help – to say things like that. We need to let the police handle it now. Not us.'

'That's not what Dad said.'

'Pardon?'

'Oh, nothing.' He looks sheepish. 'So you want another coffee, Mum? I'm starving, by the way. Got any food?'

CHAPTER 20

THE FATHER

Henry first held a gun in his hand when he was nine.

His father made him promise not to tell his mother. His uncle George was also there that day. They took him down to one of the lower fields, down by the river, to shoot rabbits.

Vermin, his father explained. Seven rabbits could apparently eat as much as a sheep. Hence they were a nightmare for the crops – also the vegetable garden. And their digging caused terrible problems for the livestock, too. Henry's father said that as a child himself he had once seen a calf with a terrible twisted leg after it lost its footing in a rabbit hole. It had to be shot, of course, but it had suffered horribly, crying out in pain, until the gun could be fetched from the locked cabinet. *Wretched rabbits . . .*

Much was made, that first shooting lesson, about the rules and about safety. The licence and the law. Henry was told that he would be allowed to have a shotgun himself when he was a lot bigger, but only when he had proved that he could take responsibility and follow every single rule to the letter. It was both within the law and essential to keep the rabbits under control, but they were not allowed to shoot badgers so it was terribly important to be careful.

His dad and his uncle explained the safety sequence. No livestock. No public access. Only in daylight. Always check that there are no other shooters ahead of you. Make absolutely sure you know where everyone in the party is before you fire.

Lying in the grass, his father set up the gun for him and taught him how it should be fired. He was warned that it would kick back a bit into his shoulder and he should brace himself for that. But he would soon get used to it. They would take him to a shooting range and to clay pigeon shooting, too, to help improve his aim.

First shot and Henry was absolutely horrified. Complete fluke. Instant hit. The shock of seeing the rabbit sort of leap, then fall. His father's amazement and immediate cock-a-hoop celebration were at complete odds with the feeling in Henry's own stomach. He didn't like to say, but a little bit of sick was suddenly in his mouth and he thought he might have to retch.

Well done, son. Seriously well done. A natural. My God, George. You see

that? He has a natural eye.

These days the gun cabinet is in the small office alongside the boot room. It meets all the regulations, though Henry wishes he had opted for the model with a combination lock. His basic steel version has a key that he has to store separately. Technically he is not supposed to tell anyone where this is and he is supposed to change its location regularly. In practice, he has more than once forgotten its 'new' secret location, storming around the house and cursing at Barbara and the girls. So his current routine is to keep it in his sock drawer, inside an old pair of red rugby socks he never wears. Henry finds this easy to remember and tells himself a thief is unlikely to rummage through his socks.

Just occasionally there is some drama on the news about a child getting hold of a gun and Henry gets himself in a panic, checking the red socks.

Today, Henry rises early in the sparse sadness of the spare bedroom. Barbara insisted he moved out of their shared room the moment he got back from the police station. There was no formal arrest and the police are still checking out his new story, but with Barbara urging him to move out completely, Henry realises that he has made things worse, not better.

So what did they say, the police? Why was your car near the railway station? I thought you said you were drunk. Slept in the pub car park? Why the hell won't you tell me what's going on, Henry . . .

He looks at his watch. 5.30 a.m. He checks the bedside table drawer for the key, which he took from the socks last night while Barbara was making supper. He throws on the same clothes from yesterday, discarded on a chair, and puts the key in his right pocket. Then he draws the curtains, wincing at a sky much too beautiful for this day. This mood. This plan.

Henry listens to his breathing for a little while, staring out at the patterning of the clouds. Cirrostratus. His father taught him about clouds, too. Essential for a farmer to be able to read the clouds. Cirrostratus clouds are like thin, almost transparent sheets on a washing line. They mean rain is on its way, and he feels the familiar, involuntary pull inside. The need to crack on. Get going.

Henry heads downstairs, being careful to be as quiet as possible, avoiding the third step from the bottom, which creaks the loudest. He walks through the kitchen to the boot room, where Sammy is all bright-eyed enthusiasm, wagging his tail.

Henry feels a lurch in his stomach as he meets the familiar amber stare. He pets the dog's head – *stay* – then heads through to the office, taking the

key from his pocket. Henry chooses his oldest shotgun, takes ammunition from the back of the wooden filing cabinet in the corner (not strictly very safe but he has let things slip a little), relocks the steel cabinet and walks back through to the boot room, where Sammy still stands, head tilted, waiting for permission.

‘No. Not today, boy. You stay here.’

The dog looks bemused. Ears back. He stands proud and moves slightly.

‘I said *stay* – you hear? Back in your bed. Now.’

Their eyes meet again and Sammy slinks back into his bed where he sits all beady-eyed, staring and panting, tongue lolling, as Henry leaves the room.

Outside it is cooler than he expected. Henry looks across to the little lawn opposite the drive, remembering once more the tents and the trampoline. The girls shrieking with laughter from a den in the bushes.

He remembers how Anna loved to be swung around by her legs in the middle of the lawn when she was very small. How sad he felt when she became too tall for it to be safe anymore.

You’re too tall.

Oh, please, Daddy.

You’ll bang your head. I can’t.

He remembers the vigil, which had so surprised him. It was quite touching that so many people came. The candles. The singing. Barbara and Jenny standing with their arms linked together, too upset to join in. Their lips tight, so they would not cry.

He looks back up at the house, the curtains all drawn upstairs still, and moves as quietly as he can on the gravel to the adjacent barn. He uses the small side door, leaving the large double doors for the tractor bolted at both top and bottom. He moves into the far corner to sit in the midst of the spare straw bales from the vigil.

Henry places the gun on the ground and feels his heart rate increase. Is he afraid?

No answer comes back.

Instead, a whole album of images plays out in front of him. A pack of cards shuffled and spread. Barbara and him on their honeymoon. Such different people. The girls when they were tiny babies. Anna with her fair hair; Jenny so dark.

Henry wonders if his subconscious is trawling the sentimental memories so that he can convince himself to bottle out. But – no. Very soon the police will find out he was not sleeping in the car because he was drunk. Very soon they, and Barbara, too, will find out the truth.

And then a new thought.

You idiot, Henry.

They will hear the shot from the house. Damn. They will come and they will find him. And they will see. Maybe Jenny, first. Why on earth did he not think of this before?

Henry takes his phone from his pocket, trying to work out a strategy. He could ring the police. Tell them to come. Yes. He could bolt the doors from the inside also, so the police will deal with it. Will this work? Or should he walk some distance from the house? Maybe up to the ridge?

But then someone else will have to find him. Some other poor innocent.

Only now does Henry truly realise that he has not thought this through at all.

Quickly he feels in his pocket for a scrap of paper. A pen? He finds nothing but some old receipts, a small piece of wire and an empty chewing gum packet.

He closes his eyes and feels the frown as he thinks of Anna's friend Sarah and her pills. Did she think it through? Mean it? Did she write a note? How will he explain himself if he doesn't leave a note?

Henry's heart is now beating so very fast that his chest is actually aching. He sets the gun ready – cocking it first with two hands – and then places it back on the floor, pointing at his neck.

For some reason he is thinking of a television drama in which the make-up artist said they used liver to create the blood and the mess of a brain, to make it look realistic. He imagines that he has already pulled the trigger and wonders what it will be like. Nothingness? Or something else? Henry is not at all religious so he does not know what he expects. But he is surprised to find that he is worried about pain.

Henry moves the shotgun slightly to face the ceiling of the barn, and makes a decision. No paper and no note, so he will have to ring. Yes. He takes the phone in his right hand again to make the call to the police.

He has the number of DS Melanie Sanders programmed into the phone, and decides he will speak to her first. He likes her. She seems straight. Decent. So much nicer than the guy from the Met. He hears it ringing. One

ring. Two. Three. He prays she will answer. Five. Six. His heart continues to pound as he closes his eyes tightly, praying it will not be some recorded message.

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CHAPTER 21

THE FRIEND

Sarah says nothing in the car on the way home while her mother chatters and chatters. She is to stay off school. Take as long as she needs. Build up her strength.

Her mother says she is glad Sarah has made up with her gang of friends, and that she must look to them for support now. No one is blaming anyone. There is to be no more *nonsense*. Why don't they have a pizza night soon? Watch a film?

Sarah is surprised to feel unsteady on her feet as they walk through the front garden. Probably all that time in bed. She looks at the three rose bushes below the sitting room window and notices the large number of blooms. When she was taken from the house in the ambulance she remembers lying on the stretcher and passing the flower bed by the front door. There were no blooms then. Now there are five. No. Six. It feels odd somehow, for this to have changed so quickly.

'Come on then, love. I'll make us a nice cup of tea.'

She doesn't want tea but says nothing.

Inside, she just stands in the sitting room in a kind of daze as her mother puts her small bag on the settee. Sarah looks at it. The tartan holdall. Inside is her make-up pouch, which she used so carefully in London. Eyeliner, mascara and her favourite lip gloss. She looks at herself in the mirror over the settee. No make-up today. Her eyes look small. Her lips dry.

In the reflection she can see photos in a variety of frames on the pine shelving on the opposite wall. There is a shot of her sitting in a paddling pool and blowing bubbles. Both of her parents are sitting alongside, smiling.

In another picture she is doing a handstand, her skirt flailing to show her white-and-pink spotted pants. She is frowning now, trying to remember who took the picture.

And then she scans along the shelf to see the picture of her sister Lily sitting on a bench on a holiday in France. She looks sad. No – not sad, that's not the right word. She looks sort of distant and disconnected.

Sarah can hear the noise of the kettle through the archway that leads into the kitchen.

‘Why did Lily really leave?’

‘Sorry. Can’t hear you over the kettle.’ Her mother moves back into the sitting room, standing and staring at her.

Sarah keeps her eyes on the photograph of her sister. ‘Why did Lily really leave us?’

‘I don’t think this is the time to be talking about all of that. You need to rest, love.’

Sarah tilts her head to the side and then turns to look her mother in the face. She can feel a prickle of tears coming and her bottom lip trembling. She knows how easy it will be for her mother to put the pin back in the grenade as she always does. As Sarah always lets her.

‘It was over Dad, wasn’t it? It’s why he left.’

The blood leaves her mother’s face.

‘Why do you say that? You know why your father left. We weren’t getting along . . . and when things blew up with Lily, it all got a bit—’

‘What things blew up?’

Sarah hasn’t seen her sister in three years. Sometimes Lily phones to check that Sarah is OK, but she hasn’t in a while. They are friends on Facebook, but when Sarah checks Lily’s page, she hardly recognises her. She is in some kind of hippy phase. Her hair dyed strange colours. Odd clothes. Living in Devon in some strange group set-up. Always posting stuff about crystals and healing. All yoga and candles. Reiki and spelt flour. Sarah still misses her; she cannot believe Lily has not been in touch lately with all this going on. Everything all over the news again.

‘I want to know the truth, Mum.’

‘Truth? You’re making it all sound a bit melodramatic, love. You’ve been through a lot. You’re upset. Your father and me, we just stopped working. That’s all. You know that we both still love you.’

Sarah holds her mother’s stare and tries very hard to read it, to burn her own gaze deep into her mother’s, to trigger the reaction she needs. But the kettle announces it’s boiling and her mother looks away.

‘I don’t want a drink, thank you. I’m going to lie down.’

‘How about a sandwich?’

‘I said I’m fine.’ Sarah grabs the overnight bag from the sofa and marches upstairs, where she closes the bedroom door, leaning her back

against it with her hand still on the cold ceramic doorknob. She remembers that Lily picked them out – new doorknobs for the whole house. *It's amazing how much difference small details can make.* It was in the phase when Lily was still talking about going to art college and was forever fired up about some project or another. Their tiny utility room was turned over to all manner of schemes. Felt-making or silk-printing one week; hand-dying of cotton sheets for rag rugs the next.

And then suddenly it all stopped. It was replaced by rows. Shouting and slamming of doors upstairs. Lily playing truant from school. Staying in bed all day. That sad look on her face from the photograph in France.

Sarah checks her watch and moves over to her desk to switch on the lamp, adjusting its arm so that it lights her work area perfectly. She fires up her laptop, impatient as it takes time to load and settle.

Her Facebook page is busy with new messages of support, wishing her well. Most of her friends seem to know she is home from hospital today. Word travels fast. She had to unfriend a lot of people who made unpleasant remarks when Anna first went missing. For a while she considered taking down her profile completely. She still gets the occasional nasty comment linked to a news report, but Sarah tries very hard to ignore them, banning anyone who oversteps the line. The truth is she can't bear what some people say, but worries even more about what might be said behind her back. So she keeps the profile going.

Sarah clicks through to her sister's page, where there is an updated profile pic – the ends of Lily's hair dip-dyed pink now. There's also a new batch of photos of some place she does not recognise: orchards and fields and soft-focus shots of yoga outside at dawn. A large group of people, arms linked, their faces turned away from the camera.

Sarah opens up a message to her sister and feels a lurch of sadness. The last time they chatted was not long after it all happened. She rereads all their messages. Lily had called a few times but Sarah was still in shock back then and had clammed up.

Now she feels very differently. She twists her mouth to one side and types. **I need to speak to you, Lily . . .** She is about to press send when she scans the message again, frowning and realising it is too vague; it's not enough to provoke a response. She adds her new mobile number and then types some more . . . **It's about Dad. I'm worried he had something to do with Anna . . .**

She leaves her finger poised over the send button, her heart pounding. For a moment she is not sure that she can do it. She doesn't know whether she

has the courage to finally pull the pin from the grenade. She puts both hands up to her mouth momentarily.

And then she lets out a huff of breath and presses send.

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CHAPTER 22

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

‘You seriously need to stop looking at me like that.’ Matthew’s wife is grinning at him, their new daughter sucking happily at her left breast. The baby, impossibly tiny but with an impressive mop of dark hair, has been gently lain on a pillow to shield Sally’s stomach after the caesarean.

Matthew cannot help it. His mouth is gaping, his eyes wide. It’s still all so . . .

‘I’m sorry. I just can’t take it in.’

‘I know. *It’s a miracle*, as you keep telling me, Matt. And I love that you’re like this, I really do. But you have to stop looking at me with that face.’

‘What face?’

‘The worship face. As if I’m suddenly some kind of goddess. It’s spooking me. Even more than your sex face.’

‘There is nothing wrong with my sex face.’ He pokes out his tongue.

Matthew is not about to admit that he actually checked out his sex face – in the bathroom mirror – in a fit of pique and paranoia, after his wife mentioned in the early days of their relationship that it was quite *interesting*. No one had ever mentioned it before. On reflection – namely the bathroom mirror’s – it was quite, not exactly alarming, but . . . *intense*.

‘Did I mention that I think you’re amazing?’ Matthew reaches out his hand to brush his wife’s arm and then stroke his daughter’s dark hair.

Daughter. He turns the word over in his head and takes a deep breath.

‘So, what are your plans for today then, Daddy?’

This question throws him. ‘What do you mean? I’m going to sit here with my two beautiful girls. What else?’

‘All day?’

‘Why not?’

‘Because if you sit there with that face all day, I will get no sleep, your beautiful daughter will get no sleep and you will die of boredom.’

‘This isn’t boring. This is . . .’

‘A *miracle*. I know, honey.’

Now they are both laughing.

Matthew turns to glance around the room, and then stands and walks over to the bag on the spare chair containing all the baby’s things. Soft and impossibly pretty things in white and lemon, because they did not want to know the sex of the child in advance.

They have the privacy of this bright, single room on account of the emergency caesarean. Matthew keeps his face turned away from his wife as he thinks again of the awfulness of it all. Eight hours of the torture they call labour, and then the horror of being told that the child was both in the wrong position and in distress and that a caesarean was essential. It was not at all what Sal had wanted, and he will never forget the look of fear and distress and shock on his wife’s face as they wheeled her along to the operating theatre, Matthew clutching her hand and trying to reassure her.

It is probably the reason for this sheer elation. This worship face. The overwhelming tidal wave of relief.

‘Look – my suggestion would be for you to go home now for a few hours. Get a shower and some kip. You can pick up my list of things and come back tonight. My mum’s calling back again this afternoon, and to be honest, I’m exhausted, Matthew. I could do with just sleeping.’

He turns and moves to sit alongside her on the bed. ‘You sure? Doesn’t feel right to leave you yet.’

‘You’ve been here hours and hours, darling.’

‘Nothing compared to what you’ve been through.’

She tightens her lips, and Matthew fancies he sees a glistening in her eyes.

‘Scary, wasn’t it?’

He just nods, afraid that his voice will crack if he speaks again too soon, coughing just to be sure.

‘Look, Matthew. I’m stuck here for days now, which we didn’t expect. So how about you work on your case a bit until I’m home.’

‘I wasn’t thinking about work.’ A lie.

His wife tilts her head. She knows him so well.

‘OK. Maybe just a little bit. But only because you see everything

differently once this happens.'

'What do you mean?'

'Oh, nothing.' He wishes he had not said this out loud; he doesn't want to link his beautiful little girl with work, with the new haunting in his head. Doesn't want his wife to make the link either. But the truth is that he cannot help thinking of so many things differently now. The image of Anna from her Facebook page, used in all the media coverage over the past year. Her mother, Barbara. Ella, too. He is thinking about all of it differently. There is a twist in his stomach and he finds himself swinging his right leg to and fro.

'Well, I think it makes sense for you to get some work done in between visiting me, and then you can pamper me when I'm allowed home.'

Matthew bites his bottom lip. Sal had planned to campaign to be allowed home as soon as possible. He was hoping to wind work right down during the first couple of weeks. But the caesarean and the compulsory stay in hospital have thrown everything out.

'OK. You're right. I'll go home, get your washing done, catch up on some work while I can and come back this evening. If you're absolutely sure?'

'I am absolutely sure.'

He kisses her very tenderly on the mouth, brushing his lips on his daughter's head.

'Amazing, isn't it?'

'A miracle,' she replies, her tone teasing but that glistening in her eyes once again.



Back at the house an hour later, Matthew finds himself pacing around. It's so bizarre to think that very soon they are to be back here. A family. Not just him and Sal but the three of them. He glances around, wondering suddenly if the place is big enough. In the corner is a large wicker basket, containing a few new things, many of which seem entirely alien to him. Something called a baby gym, which requires some kind of construction. Changing mats and the like.

It feels all at once wonderful and, yes, miraculous and absolutely terrifying. Matthew wonders if he is ready – if anyone is ever really ready.

He presses the switch to fire up the espresso machine and flicks through the mail. Nothing significant. He puts it on the kitchen counter and takes out

his mobile just as the green light signals the machine is ready.

Placing a porcelain espresso cup under the nozzle, he feels the disconnection that true exhaustion brings. That sense of not quite fitting into the space around him. He presses the button for a double, and with the other hand dials Melanie's number. To his surprise she answers instantly.

'I wondered how long before you'd be onto this. So how did you hear? Bongo drums, or are you psychic as I always suspected?' Melanie's voice is hushed.

Matthew feels the depth of his frown and pauses. He hasn't the foggiest what she's on about.

'News travels fast.'

'Does Ella know? Is that it?'

Matthew does not answer.

'Well, don't you share it with anyone because the proverbial is really hitting the fan now. As far as I know the media haven't cottoned on and that's how we want to keep it. For now, at least.'

Matthew stares at the promising crema on the top of his espresso, surprised that the bluff has worked. He takes a small sip, wondering what the hell could have happened. Until last night, the police teams in London and Cornwall wanted as much media coverage as possible. What is it that the police suddenly don't want the press to know?

'How about you tell me what you can, Melanie, and I share everything I've got. Also – I promise to keep an ear to the ground and tip you off if the media get wind.' Matthew has some good contacts among local journalists, and Melanie knows this.

'Strictly off the record.'

'Oh, come on, Mel. You know me. I may have stuffed up my own career but I'm not going to mess up yours.'

'OK, but not over the phone. How soon can you meet me in Saltash? Usual café.'

'I'll text you.'

'Good. And not a word to anyone. OK?'

'Deal.'

'Oh, and by the way, how is Sally? She's overdue now, isn't she?'

A rush of guilt sweeps through Matthew. For a few minutes, he had actually forgotten. No. Not exactly *forgotten* . . . more switched off. It astonishes him that he could let that happen, and wonders if this is how it is going to be. Work. Home. Entirely split-thinking. Suddenly the image from the hospital is back in front of him, vivid and lovely.

‘I’m a dad, Mel. A little girl. I have a beautiful little girl.’

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CHAPTER 23

THE FATHER

Henry stares around the police cell and finds himself thinking of Sammy. He hopes that Jenny will take him out for a good stretch of his legs, but then leans forward to put his head in his hands. Poor Jenny. To add *this* to all her misery.

He closes his eyes to the memory of the sheer, unmitigated mess he has made of this. Why, oh why, didn't he just have the guts to pull the trigger?

He has tried lying down on the hard, raised platform that passes as some kind of bed, but it hurts his back. The thin blue plastic mattress does little to shield the severity of the concrete slab. He wonders how long he will be held here. He looks at the door and shudders at the memory of the sound it made as it closed. Like nothing you can quite imagine until you are on the wrong side of it. Henry is not normally claustrophobic, but has never been tested in this way before. He is used to the outdoors. To freedom. To fresh air. He tries to remember what the law says. How long can the police hold someone in this way without charge?

They have taken his shoes and belt, and Henry is conscious suddenly that he is probably more used than most to padding around in his socks. Wellies stored in the boot room. No stomach for slippers. He is conscious also that he must have lost weight these past few days, for his trousers feel loose as he stands and walks over to the door with its horrid little viewing grille.

He thinks of Barbara and her plum slices. Of Anna turning cartwheels on the lawn. Her little gang round, running in and out of the sprinkler. What he needs is a Tardis to go back. Yes. To a completely different version of it all.

Suddenly Henry is filled with both impatience and rage. He has had enough of this. All of this. This place. This *bloody place*.

'Could I speak to someone please?'

No reply.

Henry kicks the door and shouts louder. 'I need to speak to someone.'

A few minutes and there is the sound of the grille cover sliding to one side, and the uniformed officer peers in at him. 'Could you keep it down, please.'

‘I want to get in touch with my lawyer.’

‘I thought you *hadn’t done anything wrong and didn’t need a lawyer.*’
The tone is pure sarcasm.

‘Well, I want my lawyer now. I know my rights and I’m not speaking to anyone until I get my lawyer.’

‘Okey doke. Duly noted. But we’re in charge in here and you’ll have to wait.’

Henry holds his stare through the grille. ‘I haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘Course you haven’t.’

Two hours pass, forcing Henry to face the humiliation of using the nasty open-plan toilet, praying for no movement of the viewing grille as he does so.

He has insisted on his own lawyer rather than a duty solicitor, which is apparently slowing things down.

When eventually he is given time alone with Adam Benson, who until now has only ever handled property matters and his will, Henry realises the severity of his situation and miscalculation. Adam is upfront about his limited experience handling criminal proceedings. Henry says he wants no one else involved. Adam’s advice is simple: *Tell me the truth. Trust me.*

‘Is there something you need to tell me, Henry? Because if there is, I would strongly recommend you do that now, so I can get on to some contacts who are better placed to handle your situation.’

The truth?

Henry pictures Anna sitting alongside him in the car. Her ashen face. *You disgust me.*



Henry can feel his bottom lip wobbling as he is led into the interview room with Adam already seated inside, opposite the wretched DI from London. The man Henry so despises.

‘You can’t hold me here. I’ve done nothing wrong. Nothing illegal.’

‘You pointed a shotgun at one of my officers, Mr Ballard. We call that *threatening behaviour.*’

‘You broke into my barn. I was startled. I was protecting my property.’

‘We broke in after you telephoned us in a very agitated state,

Mr Ballard, demanding to speak to DS Melanie Sanders. We broke in to prevent you from doing yourself or others harm. You know that and I know that, so how about we drop this nonsense about trespass. Save us all a lot of time.'

Adam turns his head, wide-eyed, and nods encouragement to Henry.

'I was distressed. It got on top of me. Anna's disappearance.' Henry can hear his heart pounding and tries to calm his expression. He suddenly very much wants to be home, to say sorry to Barbara and most especially to Jenny for the scene at the barn. All the shouting. The stand-off. Poor Sammy barking furiously outside. *The mess. This whole terrible mess.* He also wants to speak to Melanie Sanders, not this prat from London.

'Why can't I speak to DS Melanie Sanders?' When he phoned from the barn he had said he would speak to her. Only her.

'She's not working at the moment. We told you that when you phoned us . . . Now then. The last time we spoke *formally* . . . before this recent incident . . .'

The inspector is staring down at some paperwork. Henry assumes it is the statement from his last interview, the one after the TV appeal. 'You gave us your second version of where you were the night Anna went missing. So the *current* story is that your car was left near the railway station for most of the night because you had a bit too much to drink and decided to sleep in the back.'

'That's right.'

'And that's what you told your wife? The reason you asked her to lie for you?'

'Yes. I was embarrassed to have got so plastered. I didn't think it would look good.'

'But here's my problem, Mr Ballard. We've spoken again to the witnesses who phoned in after our television appeal programme, and they didn't see anyone asleep in the back of the car.'

'Maybe they just didn't see me because I was lying down. Or maybe they saw the car before I walked back to it from the pub.'

'Ah yes – the pub. The Lion's Head. Now, here's my other problem. I'm wondering, you see, why you didn't park in the pub car park. Also – no one at the Lion's Head seems to remember you being in that night.'

'It was busy. The car park and the pub. Packed, actually. Why would they notice me?'

Beneath the desk, Henry can feel his palms all sweaty suddenly, and

wipes them on his trousers. He turns to his solicitor who is writing things down, and wonders what the notes are for. He looks across at the black box recording the interview and wonders if they will get a transcript. The problem with lying, he is learning, is that you have to remember the details of the lie. To make them match each time. Each new version is making it more difficult.

‘How well do you know your daughter’s friend Sarah?’ The detective inspector has leaned forward suddenly and is closely monitoring his response.

‘I don’t know what you mean. She’s Anna’s best friend. Has been for years. She comes around the house a lot, just as all her friends do. We’ve always made them welcome.’

‘And when did you last see Sarah, Mr Ballard?’

‘Excuse me?’

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CHAPTER 24

THE FRIEND

Sarah is thinking about singing. One of the key things she quickly found she had in common with Anna – beyond the two-ball obsession of those early days – was singing. They were in the choir at primary school together and loved it. Then, in secondary school, they joined the musical theatre group together.

For a number of years, this hotbed of theatrical ambitions provided a rollercoaster of tears and tantrums, triumph and tragedy for the two girls. During years seven and eight, the camaraderie was for the most part entirely positive. The younger girls all sang together in the chorus. But once auditioning for bigger parts was in the mix, everything became more competitive. As the pool of hormones, longing and insecurities bubbled furiously, Anna and Sarah watched all the subsequent falling-ins and falling-outs with a new awareness.

While Sarah surprised many around her with her burgeoning academic talents, Anna became the better singer. By year ten, the two friends were both obsessed with the notion of becoming musical theatre stars. They each believed this to be perfectly possible and hatched a plan to apply together to study music and drama. They imagined sharing a flat and spending their days singing on a West End stage, ignoring the eye-rolling of Tim and Paul and all the adults in their families. Anna's father was especially dismissive.

I blame The X Factor for this, Anna. His mantra, sitting in his socks around the farmhouse dinner table, was that it was one thing to enjoy a school production, but quite another to kid yourself there was a career in it. *Do you know, you two girls, where most musical theatre students end up? Waiting tables and pulling pints. You want to stop all this pipe-dream nonsense and work towards a solid degree. The pair of you. Something that will lead to a job . . .*

Sarah and Anna ignored it all. They huddled up in Anna's bedroom, wrapped in her duvet, and watched DVDs of all their favourite shows back to back. *Cats. Phantom. Starlight Express.*

And then – joy of joys – at the beginning of year eleven, the drama department announced that the new production was to be the girls' favourite musical of all. *Les Misérables.*

Sarah sighs and looks at her watch, her eyes narrowing as she remembers it. That first discussion with Anna about which part to try for. She remembers sitting in Anna's bedroom as they fell silent, each realising with excitement and dread what lay ahead for their friendship.

There was suddenly no place for loyalty or compromise. They were each ready to sacrifice their very soul to play Fantine.

From the off, Sarah knew that Anna was more likely to get the part, but that did not stop her trying. In her own bedroom, she secretly watched Anne Hathaway in the film version over and over and over until she had perfected every nuance, every breath, every tear. To her shame, she began to hope Anna would catch a cold or that her father would ban her from the distraction during their important GCSE year.

But no. On the day of the audition, there they both were – best friends and arch rivals – wishing each other well in public but secretly harbouring new and confusing thoughts. Sarah was ashamed but consumed by the depth of her ambition and jealousy.

By 3 October it was all over. A post on the drama noticeboard confirmed it: Anna would play Fantine. Sarah would be in the chorus with the 'additional responsibility' of understudying Madame Thénardier. The baddie.

Anna's face said everything about the nature of her personality.

You want me to withdraw, Sarah? Honestly – if it means so much to you, I'll withdraw. My dad doesn't want me to do it anyway. I don't want this to be a thing between us.

No, don't be silly. I'm pleased for you.

And then for weeks and months she had to watch it all. The spotlight on Anna. Everyone amazed at her talent. All the boys, who dismissed the musical theatre crowd as *hysterical* suddenly seeing her in this new light, as rehearsals were filmed and shared on Facebook. Even Tim and Paul, who both hated musicals, seemed to become more tolerant, showing an interest in how things were going. Sarah still had a secret crush on Paul, and hated to see his funny comments on Facebook telling Anna how fabulous she looked in the costumes.

It was then that Sarah began her diversion. Not a conscious decision. More an experiment to boost her self-esteem . . . and then a steep and slippery slope. She discovered there were other ways to be popular with the boys. At first she felt powerful. She had her own spotlight. Then, very quickly, the grubby flip side emerged. Some gossip and nastiness on social media. A shared picture. And suddenly everything just ran away from her.

It wasn't long before she was openly being called a slag. An ugly rumour went round that she had given oral sex to two boys on the rugby team at the same party.

Anna, ever loyal, told her to ignore the haters. Sarah wondered if deep down Anna suspected she was going off the rails, but they never discussed it properly. Publicly, Anna simply stood up for her. She said that people made things up because they were jealous of how clever she was. Sarah never told her it was all true.

All of it.

That was when their little gang really started to fall apart. Was it because Tim and Paul heard too much from the other boys? Sarah had never been sure.

And now, checking the train timetable on her phone, she realises how badly she needs to go to Tintley, to discuss all of this with the one person who just might understand.

Lily.

For a whole year, Sarah has convinced herself that Antony and Karl are to blame for whatever has happened to Anna. But new and confused thoughts are bubbling up within her and getting stronger every day.

Because Sarah keeps thinking of her father turning up to watch the school's production of *Les Misérables* out of the blue. How much he went on and on about how stunning Anna was in the show.

And she cannot forget the truth about what happened in London. The truth about what happened in the club. And the text.

The text she has been afraid to tell *anyone* about.

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WATCHING . . .

8pm

I pick those I watch very carefully.

They need to be special. Sometimes I pick them because I love them and I know how much they need me, and sometimes I pick them because I hate them. I never pick anyone in-between. Why bother if you don't feel strongly?

Right now it is difficult because I have had to stop watching for a little while. It is frustrating. Churns me up – like needing a cigarette.

But somehow you have to stay calm. You have to be much cleverer than the people you watch. You have to keep your face looking just right. Speak in the right tone.

This is also the bit I am very good at.

The right face.

The right tone.

So that you don't know who I'm watching. Or why.

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CHAPTER 25

THE WITNESS

Luke got the text late last night. Emily has lost the baby. We were up most of the night talking, going around and around in circles.

Luke is so shaken – sadness and relief and terrible guilt all mixed up together. She won't speak to him on the phone. He got through once but she just cried, and texted him asking to leave her alone. She doesn't know how to feel. No one does.

I have never seen Luke this low. This sad. I am still keeping him off school. He is getting worried about how much he has missed, but I take the view he can either catch up or sit the year again if necessary. I very much want to stay around to support him today, but I have a dilemma again. I have wedding flowers to finish for a delivery van arriving at 8 a.m. The bouquets need to be at the bride's house by 10.30 a.m. latest, and the rest of the flowers at the reception venue soon after. I have tried phoning a couple of friends in the trade to see if they can take over the order as an emergency favour, but no one is free.

So what can I do? Let a bride down?

Tony is away for two nights meeting other area managers – one of those team-building specials. He couldn't get out of it, as the MD might be there. So I have to make the call. Is it wise to leave Luke, and is it safe to be in the shop early on my own now that the new security is in place?

We've had new locks and an alarm installed, but the blessed system has been malfunctioning and the families that live over the row of shops have been complaining. Something is accidentally tripping it. I've had three false call-outs so far, and quite frankly, I'm sick of it. The system cost us a lot of money and it isn't good enough. The installer keeps making excuses on the phone, implying it is something to do with the way I set it. But I am not stupid, and I have followed the instructions absolutely to the letter.

The last email blabbered on about the system needing time to settle down, as if it was a perm that needs a few days to drop. We're talking electronics. Science. I gave it to him with both barrels, threatened to call Trading Standards. The return email said that mice can set off the alarms. *Mice*? Can you believe it?

I had to go out to the shop at two o'clock this morning, leaving poor

Luke for a bit. So here's the confession. Instead of resetting it, I switched the stupid thing off. I know. But it's making things worse, not better. Waste of space.

It is 5 a.m. now, and I need to leave immediately if I am to get these flowers done in time for the delivery van. I make two cups of tea and take one up to Luke's room.

He is sitting up in bed, still dressed in yesterday's tracksuit.

'I made tea.'

He looks at me as if I am speaking another language. As if he doesn't recognise me.

'Do you think everyone in school will find out?'

'I don't know, love. I hope not.'

'Me too. I couldn't bear that. For Emily, I mean.' He puts his head in his hands.

'Look, love. I don't expect you to come to the shop with me. But your dad – he's going to be cross if he finds out I've gone in on my own again, so best we not tell him.'

Luke turns towards me with a strange blank look in his eyes.

'Is it safe for you to go in alone?'

'Yeah. Of course. Don't worry about it, love. We've got the alarm. It's perfectly OK. The police are sure the postcards were just from some attention-seeker. Nasty but harmless.'

'You sure? You want me to come?'

'No, love. You look terrible. I want you to rest and promise me you'll stay safe and, well, to remember that this is all going to be OK in the end. We are here for you. And I know it feels really sad and confusing right now, but it will get better.'

'Are you still worried . . . about that girl? About Anna?'

'No, love. I've tried to stop thinking about it. I'm worried about you now.'

I tell him then that I will be on my mobile and he is to ring or text immediately if there is any kind of worry. I won't open the shop today. Once the wedding flowers are in the van, I'll put the closed sign on the door and come straight home.

‘Is that OK, Luke? Will you be OK for a few hours?’

He nods.

‘Keep your phone on, love.’

Another nod.



There is never any traffic this time of the morning, and very soon I am sitting in the car outside the shop. Ridiculous, but I have started travelling with the door locks on. I haven’t told Tony this, and I don’t know what I am expecting to happen.

The truth is I keep getting this feeling at the shop that I am being watched. You know – that odd physical sensation, as if someone has ever so gently tapped you on the shoulder before you turn round to find there is no one there. I expect it’s paranoia. I’m not as convinced by the police’s reassurances as I’ve told Luke and Tony I am. I keep thinking about those secateurs.

I have thought about phoning Matthew again, but he has been out of the loop since his wife went into labour and I don’t want to trouble him. In any case, he is a private investigator, not a security guard.

I look around the car. No one seems to be stirring. The lights in the flats above the shops are still off. There are probably no more than a dozen to twenty paces between the car and the shop. I have done it a million times, day in and day out. I can’t let myself be like this.

Get a grip, Ella.

I take a deep breath, press the lever for the door locks, and get out of the car as quickly as I can. Shop keys already in my hand, I wait until I am in the doorway before turning to fire the key to lock the car. Heart still pounding, I am very soon inside the shop, making sure the door is pushed tightly so that the Yale lock connects. It is a special new lock that needs a key once it is closed, a bit like a hotel bedroom door. During the day, I keep it open with a flower bucket filled with daily specials. For now, I double-check it is fully closed and secure. Good. I leave the blind on the inside of the door down. You can see in through the window display, but that can’t be helped. I will be working out the back mostly, anyway.

I move quickly through to my prep area, taking off my coat and hurling it onto a chair while flicking the switch on the coffee machine. I am an order bunny. Last night I loaded the coffee machine ready for this morning while I was doing the six matching table displays which are sitting on the middle

shelf of the flower cooler. The blooms for the three wedding bouquets are all carefully set out in water on the bottom shelf, in the order I will make them up. The two bridesmaids' bouquets first, and then the bride's.

When I first started my business, I used to do all wedding flowers the day before. I was worried about running out of time and making a mistake. Now I know exactly how long everything takes and have more confidence. I prefer everything to be super fresh, so I only do bridal bouquets the day before if there are delivery issues or exceptional problems with flower selection.

I used to do the deliveries myself, too, but now I have an excellent guy helping me. Tom is cheap and reliable, he handles the flowers carefully, and he has never let me down. He'll be here in less than three hours, so I need to get cracking.

Today's order is for three informal bouquets with roses and large daisies – flowers that are easy to source. Informal hand-tied arrangements are my forte, but this bride wants traditional binding with ribbon. The bouquets don't take long, but I always build in spare time and I know I will be fine if I get going.

I love that the bride has gone for simplicity. Her dress has a lot of lace so she is sticking with very simple flowers for the contrast. Very wise.

Hot pink gerberas mixed with some tight rose buds for the two bridesmaids. I set everything ready at my workbench, cutting off strips of sticky floral tape and attaching them to the edge of the counter. Next I begin the first bouquet, selecting the best single flower as the centrepiece, and working outwards in a spiral to build up the arrangement. It goes well. The flowers are terrific quality and I am in a good rhythm. This doesn't always happen. Very soon I have the required shape and move over to the mirror that is set up specially so that I can check how the bouquet looks held in front of me. Good. Yes. I am really pleased. Excellent shape. I return to the workbench and use the tape to secure the stems: not too tight, you need to be careful not to damage them. Then I pop this first arrangement back in one of the vases ready on the workbench, glancing across to see that the coffee is ready. I pour a large mug, adding milk from my mini-fridge, and sit down.

It's only now, as I stop thinking of the flowers, that my mind wanders. The hook on the ceiling catches my eye – it's the one we used for Luke's bouncer when he was little, and I picture him bouncing and smiling. So happy.

I tried so hard to comfort him last night, but I just couldn't find the right words. And now I think of how close I came to being a grandmother and it is

too much. Tears. No sound: just the sensation of wetness on my cheeks. I let myself cry while drinking my coffee, the saltiness of the tears running into my mouth and mixing with the drink, and then I shake my head and reach for tissues from my bag on the counter. I wipe my face, sniff and turn to look back at the flowers.

Automatic pilot again. I dry my hands carefully on the towel by the sink and select double-sided ivory ribbon from the drawer – the expensive roll set aside for weddings – and the little packet of pearl pins. This bit needs real care.

I lift the flowers from the vase and use my favourite red-handled secateurs to trim the stems to an even length. Then I very carefully spiral the ribbon to cover the stems, turning back the end of the ribbon to make it neat, securing with the pins. I hold the arrangement at waist height to ensure it feels comfortable and check it again in the mirror, then I run my fingers up and down the ribbon to ensure there are no protruding pin edges. All good. It looks beautiful.

The next part is a little more challenging, as I need to make sure the second bridesmaid's bouquet matches exactly so there is no variation or imbalance to skew the wedding photographs. These are the things you learn with experience. How crucial attention to detail is.

I am just glancing at the clock above my sink when I hear it. I keep very, very still, frowning as the noise makes no sense. It sounds exactly like a key in the door.

From where I am standing, it is not possible to see around through the opening into the main shop.

‘Luke, is that you?’

No one else has a key.

Again, I keep very still, as if this will somehow negate my presence. Stop something bad from happening.

‘Luke – you’re scaring me. You all right, love?’

Again, no answer, and so quietly I reach for my bag, take out my mobile and dial for the police.

‘Whoever’s there, I’m phoning the police. You hear me?’

There is another sound, the door handle being rattled and then footsteps. I move to the doorway so that I can see through to the shopfront, where there is the glare of headlights outside. A car apparently reversing and then pulling quickly away.

Heart beating and my mobile still in my hand, I hear the emergency call connecting at last, just as I see it . . . through the glass. On the floor, just outside the door.

‘Police, fire or ambulance. Which emergency service do you require?’

I stare at the object on the ground, less than two feet beyond the door, and a tumble of confused images is suddenly whirring around my brain. None of the pictures make any sense to me.

‘I’m so sorry. I dialled by mistake.’ I hang up and walk over to the door. I unlock it, step outside and pick the object up, and then quickly lock the door again from the inside.

I press my other hand tight against my chest, willing my heartbeat to slow down as the questions boom in my head.

I hold the object in my hand and stare at it, as if this may somehow change what it is. I turn it over, incredulous at the familiarity of it. All the memories it so vividly stirs.

Then I dial Luke’s number.

It rings five, six times before he answers, his voice groggy. ‘What is it, Mum? I was asleep.’

‘You at home still?’

‘Yeah. Course.’

It makes no sense. Why would he lie to me? Why would he want to come down here and scare me?

I stare at the solid piece of plastic in my hand, stroking its outline with my thumb. I know that it is Luke’s. And I try to work out what on earth I am going to do now.

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CHAPTER 26

THE FATHER

Henry stares at the fly on the wall. He has no idea why the police are asking questions about Sarah. They won't explain.

He has been locked up for what feels like hours and the fly is driving him nuts. For a moment it is still and then it jumps – first diagonally about two feet, and next a second hop vertically. Henry narrows his eyes and tries to process the odd familiarity of this scene, searching his brain until the connection finally dawns.

He laughs out loud. *Norman Bates*. He laughs again, shaking his head at the surreal absurdity. The acoustics in the police cell are bright, and he listens for the echo of his laugh to fade, first externally and then inside his head. He waits for absolute silence, leaning forward to place his head in his hands momentarily before making a decision and standing up.

OK, Norman, so how about this time we kill the fly.

Heartened suddenly by this new resolve – the notion at last of something to actually *do* – Henry glances around the room to answer the next challenge: namely, what he might use as a weapon. For a moment, he considers removing his shirt and flicking it at the fly, but he imagines the custody sergeant peering through the viewing window at his slightly flabby bare torso and rejects this option. They still have his belt on grounds of safety. *Hmmm*. And then it comes to him. He looks down at his feet.

Henry removes his left sock, testing its stretch. The fabric is satisfyingly elastic. Good. Thankfully it is a cotton and wool mix, none of your nasty man-made rubbish. It will do very nicely. Next he keeps very still, seated on the blue plastic mattress, and waits. The fly moves several times again and then comes to rest halfway down the wall directly opposite him.

Slowly Henry takes aim, keeping the rest of his body as still as possible. *Patience, Henry. Patience. Wait . . . wait . . . and fire. Damn*. The sock strikes the wall at impressive speed but misses by just a fraction, the fly whizzing right across the small room.

Henry stands to retrieve the sock and sits back down on the bed, a new irony dawning. His lifetime battle with flies.

Ever since he was a little boy, he has hated to watch them bothering the

cattle. Felt just a little bit nauseous to see them crawling towards a cow's or calf's eyes as the poor animal flicks its tail and its ears.

He was made well aware of the risks, and not just to the livestock. In the kitchen his mother moaned loudly about the terrible diseases flies carried. High on the wall, she had a miniature version of the industrial fly zappers seen in restaurant kitchens. Henry would gaze at it, both mesmerised and ever so slightly sickened as the glowing blue bar buzzed another death sentence.

Meantime, out on the farm, his father schooled him in the options of fly control for the herds. It was an essential part of herd management, as the flies were not simply unpleasant but caused eye disease and low yield and all manner of problems. Once he finally took over the farm himself, Henry had grown used to the ghastly reality of assigning a sizeable chunk of budget each year to sprays and ear tags.

I truly hate flies, he is thinking now as he scans the police cell for his new foe. He guesses that it will be attracted to the horror that is the stainless-steel toilet bowl, and sure enough within a few minutes there it is, settled on the rim. Henry for a moment wonders how long before they release him, praying that it will happen before he needs a crap. He cannot bear the thought of the custody sergeant unlocking the door in the middle of that most personal of predicaments. Do they perhaps have a protocol? Peer through the viewing window first to let you finish?

The fly does not move. Henry stretches the sock for the second time, trying very hard to keep the rest of his body still. Now the fly is walking, at first inside the bowl but then back onto the rim – there is no seat – and anticlockwise. Finally, it settles again and Henry takes aim.

This time he is not only triumphant but absurdly jubilant.

‘Gotcha!’

It comes out louder than he intends, and very soon there is a new face at the viewing panel in the door. A different, younger custody officer, confirming a change in shift.

‘So what’s going on in here?’

Henry is now grimacing as he realises the price of hitting his target. His sock is now in the water with the dead fly.

‘My sock’s in the toilet bowl.’

‘And why the hell would you put your sock down the toilet? Trying to cause a blockage, are we?’

‘No. I was killing a fly.’

‘Well, you can fish it out yourself.’ And then the new face moves away from the door.

Henry ponders this for a moment, turning the phrase over in his head and wondering how he may use this to his advantage. They can’t surely make him put his hand down the toilet? No. He will make a formal complaint. He will tell his solicitor. He will write to the authorities. To the local paper.

He is just about to pipe up again with this absurd complaint when there is the sound of the door being unlocked and the new duty sergeant, apparently having reconsidered, appears wearing protective gloves, carrying a plastic bag and a plastic toilet brush set.

‘Stand over by the wall.’ The tone is clipped and Henry immediately obeys. Next he watches the young man fish out the sock using the toilet brush, placing it in the bag before pressing the flush button.

‘Did you see the dead fly?’ Henry is keen to be believed.

‘Never mind the flippin’ fly, how about you give me your other sock so we don’t have a repeat performance.’

‘I’ll have cold feet.’

‘Well you should have thought of that before you messed with our plumbing.’

Henry sighs, removes his remaining sock and hands it over.

‘When is my solicitor due back? He said first thing this morning. And have you checked out what I told the inspector last night? About where I really was when Anna went missing? Are you going to let me go now? You can’t just keep me here. I know my rights.’

The custody sergeant lets out a long huff of breath as he leaves the cell, relocking the door then speaking from the other side.

‘It’s not up to me, is it? Me?’ He holds up the plastic bag then. ‘I just do the dirty work.’

CHAPTER 27

THE FRIEND

Sarah is watching intently as Lily fusses with a kettle on an ancient Aga – a smaller and shabbier version of the range in Anna’s family kitchen. The Ballards’ Aga is dark blue and much wider, with more ovens. Anna’s mother was forever wiping down the chrome and the covers to make it gleam. This one is a grubby cream colour, with chips and a general air of neglect.

‘Tea or coffee?’ Lily delivers the question without turning, opening a cupboard alongside the range to take out two striking ceramic pots, dark green with large white daisies.

‘Er, coffee please.’

Lily is entirely different from Sarah’s memory of her. Much skinnier, funkier and with almost waist-length hair cut into a V-shape at the back, the ends dyed a very garish and unattractive pink. The hair colour and her new look have been the principal topic of conversation between the sisters since Lily arrived to collect her from Tintley railway station, each of them notably avoiding the issue of why Sarah is here.

Lily turns, leaning back against the Aga rail to explain yet again that she is very pleased indeed with her hair. She fingers it to illustrate that she has had the final four inches bleached so that she can use toners and vegetable dyes to *ring the changes*. So far she has tried aubergine, which was not a complete success, green, and now pink, which is her favourite, though she is worrying it will quickly fade.

But what does Sarah really think?

Sarah has said that it looks really cool, which isn’t entirely true, for she is disconcerted by this new version of her sister. The last time Lily visited Sarah and her mother in Cornwall was about three years ago, not so very long after the showdown that saw their father’s departure and Lily’s decision to leave home. She looked unwell then but more recognisable. Brown bob, regular jeans and a sweatshirt. At least a stone heavier.

She said the visit was just to reassure them that she was very happy in Devon – she was careful not to share precisely where she was – and that she had made good friends and was starting a new life which would allow her to paint and follow the things that mattered to her.

Sarah remembers wanting to say at the time, *Don't I matter to you anymore?* But she did not have the courage. Upstairs later, Lily had whispered, *Are you OK?* but in a tone of panic that somehow demanded she answer yes, and so Sarah did not tell the truth about how very much she missed her sister and how baffled and upset she remained over their parents' separation and the sudden disintegration of the family.

The clothes worn by this new Lily are faux-hippy. A calf-length cotton skirt and a peasant-style blouse with ribbons hanging down at the cuffs and chest, which might be tied in bows but are not. Though her body is covered up, Sarah can tell from the few bits poking out that her sister is much too thin. Bony thin, especially her wrists, which sport several bands of beads.

'I'm sorry I haven't phoned more often about Anna,' Lily offers suddenly as she turns away again to pour hot water into a large yellow cafetière. 'It must have been so awful for you.'

There had been a couple of phone calls soon after Anna disappeared, a card and some brief messages on Facebook. Sarah had hoped for much more, and could have done with her sister's support. Though she said she did not want to talk about it, she did really. Deep down. Would she have told her the truth back then if Lily had made more effort? Pushed her? She does not know the answer, so says nothing and waits for her coffee. On the train here she had imagined it all very differently. A tsunami of revelations. Tears. Hugs. Relief.

I am afraid Dad had something to do with Anna . . .

Why hasn't Lily asked?

Now that Sarah is here, she is not at all sure how this is going to turn out. She and Lily feel like strangers standing in this large and cluttered kitchen. The pin is firmly back in the wretched grenade.

'So have you told Mum you're here?'

'Not where. Just that I'm visiting you and that she's not to worry.'

'Good. I don't want her having this address.' Lily fidgets with her skirt, picking at some imagined bit of fluff or stain, and then Sarah feels her sister's gaze, unblinking.

'Perhaps if you phone her to confirm I'm with you, Lily.'

'You think I need to do that?'

'Yes. She's getting quite upset.' A pause. Sarah feels guilty. 'She's told the police I'm missing, that I've done a bunk.'

'Oh, Sarah, you should have told me that from the off. We don't want

the police round here.'

'Sorry.'

'OK.' Lily glances up at the ceiling and then back at Sarah, hands on her hips. 'I don't have a mobile at the moment. We try to avoid them. We share one for emergencies.'

Sarah finds this bizarre. No mobile? Curious as to who exactly she refers to, she takes out her own phone from her pocket, selects the number and dials, waiting for the sound of her mother's voice, and then hands the phone straight to Lily, widening her eyes.

'Hi, Mum. It's Lily here. This is just a very quick call to say that Sarah has told you the truth and you're not to worry. She's not missing. She's just with me for a few days and is perfectly safe.'

Sarah can hear her mother's voice leaking from the phone pressed to her sister's ear. A couple of words are loud enough to be heard. *Home*. A lot of babbling and then . . . *Police*. She tries to read Lily's expression. A deepening frown. Narrowing eyes. A quick movement of the head and then apparent interruption . . .

'Look, I can understand you're upset, Mum, but Sarah doesn't want to come home right now. There is no need to involve the police. She hasn't run away. She isn't missing, she's just staying with me . . . If they need to speak to her, they can do that when she returns.'

Another bout of louder intervention from their mother, Lily closing her eyes this time, wincing as she listens.

'Well, we are going to have to beg to differ on this. I will tell Sarah to keep her phone switched on so that she can pick up any texts. OK. Bye, then.' She holds the phone to her waist, apparently scanning for the button to end the call, and then holds it back out for Sarah.

'So, she doesn't change.'

Sarah shakes her head as the phone rings again immediately. The ringtone is one she downloaded in hospital. An old-fashioned trill phone. She had quite liked it then. It reminded her of old sitcoms. Here, it suddenly sounds ridiculous. The screen confirms it is her mother again. She rejects the call and switches the phone to silent as Lily turns back to finish the coffee, pouring it into two bright red mugs and raising a carton of milk by way of question, to which Sarah nods.

They stand there sipping, Sarah glancing for a chair, wondering again if she dares to open the conversation she so dreads. As if sensing this, Lily

suddenly announces that she is going to give her a tour. And then she is sweeping out of the kitchen, her skirt swirling as she moves, leading the way.

‘Come on. Let me show you round. You must meet people.’

Sarah is awkward as she tries to manage the mug as they walk, and has no interest now in a tour and certainly no interest in company.

The house is large and impressive, in a tatty, shabby style throughout. There are huge faded sofas in the sitting room, a wall of books in the dining room and an enormous sun room with plants everywhere. The floors are all original wood with bright rugs. Lily is talking non-stop as they walk. Three couples share the house with Lily and the owner Caroline, she explains. It’s not a commune but more a coming-together of the like-minded. They are all artists, mostly.

‘So do you have a job? I mean – what pays for all this?’ Sarah sips at the coffee as they stand in the middle of the sun room. She is wondering where everyone else is. Who precisely is home for her to meet today?

‘We all have jobs and we all contribute in different ways. Caroline’s parents own the house. Peppercorn rent.’

‘Lucky.’

‘We believe you make your own luck in life. That we are responsible for what we become now. Whether we fulfil our potential.’

Sarah hears an echo and remembers exactly the same words being shared when Lily came home that first time. She imagines it is a quote from the mysterious Caroline.

‘So what’s she like – Caroline?’

‘Caroline is *very special*.’ Lily cups her coffee in both hands. ‘Very special indeed. You’ll meet her later.’

‘And everyone is cool for me to stay?’

Lily smiles but says nothing. Sarah looks intently at her sister and decides enough is enough.

‘OK. So while I have you on your own, I really do need to talk to you about Dad, Lily. It’s why I came.’

Lily’s face changes instantly, not just turning pale but displaying an expression of something between dread and terrible exhaustion. She is very still suddenly. And then just as Lily draws breath to reply, a man appears in the doorway from the garden. Sarah had not noticed him walk across the lawn and is momentarily startled by the squeak of the door, almost spilling her

drink.

‘Sorry. Sorry. I didn’t see you.’

‘My fault.’ The man has his hand outstretched as he walks across the room. It surprises Sarah. The formality of shaking hands. He is dressed like Lily. Like something from a past era. Peculiar baggy trousers in bright green, tied in tight at the ankle. Navy T-shirt.

‘You must be Saffron’s sister?’

‘Saffron?’ Sarah turns to Lily, tilting her head and raising her eyebrows.

‘We all get new names here.’ Lily is smiling at the interloper. ‘This is Moon.’

Crikey. So this is a cult? She notices that Moon is wearing the same brightly coloured bands around his wrists as Lily.

‘Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Moon, and it’s very good of you to let me stay, but I really need to talk to my sister in private, please.’

Sarah had imagined that this claim, this reference to family, would be enough, but no. The man moves even closer to Lily and rests his hand on the beads around her left wrist. He stares into Lily’s face as if reading some secret there.

‘We’ve talked about this, Saffron. It’s up to you now. You want me to stay? Yes?’

‘What do you mean you’ve talked about this?’ Sarah is nonplussed and puts the coffee mug down on a small table so that she can straighten up properly. ‘This is our business. Family business. This is my sister and I need to talk to her about something important. In private.’

Moon does not move. *Is he Lily’s partner? Is that what this is?*

Lily says nothing to help, her face still in anguish. It is Moon who finally speaks again.

‘Remember this is your choice, Saffron. Do you want to talk to Sarah?’ A long pause. ‘Or not?’

CHAPTER 28

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

‘Double espresso.’ Matthew is fishing for a five-pound note from his wallet as Melanie appears alongside him.

‘Double? You sure that’s a good idea, Matt?’

He turns to beam at her, genuinely delighted, and kisses her on the cheek enthusiastically, which makes her blush. He reddens, too.

‘And for you, Mel? Cake? Toasted teacake? My treat.’

‘I need to be good. Over-caffeinated.’ Melanie scans the tea display, opting for Earl Grey with lemon and declining cake. This does not deter Matthew, who orders a slice of carrot cake and selects seats in a quiet alcove.

To his surprise, Melanie then produces a gift from her small rucksack. Pink paper with white storks and pink ribbon.

‘Oh, Mel. You shouldn’t have. When did you have time to do this?’ He is a little shaken – so touched.

It’s her turn to beam now as she insists he opens it. Inside is the sweetest babygro and matching hat, in white with pale pink hearts.

‘It’s gorgeous. I’m very touched.’

‘So what’s it like, then? Fatherhood?’

He takes a deep breath. Melanie is the first person he has seen beyond immediate family. Beyond the bubble of the hospital.

‘Completely overwhelming. Sal was amazing but it was a slog.’ He tells her then very briefly, sparing her the gory details, of the C-section drama. The horror of waiting in the corridor for news. The fear. Then the joy. Then this bizarre limbo of not knowing quite how to be or what to do, with Sally stuck in hospital for days.

‘So that’s why you’re working? I thought it was odd.’

‘It’s this case. Got under my skin a bit, Mel. And now . . .’ He pauses as the waitress arrives with their drinks, waiting for her to return to the counter, out of earshot. As Matthew watches her retreat, he notices her strawberry-blond hair and finds himself thinking of a baby-snatch case he worked on years back. The young mother had the same colour hair. Curly, too, just like

the waitress. He remembers that when she was being interviewed about what had happened, she had to break away suddenly to vomit. He had felt compassion for her, watching her sitting there with her hands trembling, pale and terrified. But only now does he realise, with shame, that he was also a little impatient, needing to get on with his job. Only now does he even begin to understand . . .

Matthew looks across to find Melanie staring at him.

‘You OK, Matt?’

‘Sorry. Miles away. Still not sleeping. I’m spending the mornings and evenings at the hospital, and catching up with bits and bobs at home in between.’

‘And working.’

‘And working, yes. Trying to tie up a few things before they come home.’

‘Well, I hope you don’t bank on helping to tie up the Anna Ballard case in that mix, because there’s a lot of muck hitting a lot of fans right now.’

She leans forward.

‘OK. So I am only talking to you because I trust you, and because right now I feel like doing the same as you did, and throwing in the towel.’

Matthew tries to read Melanie’s face properly. He is praying she is not serious. Just sounding off . . . Should he tell her that he often regrets it? That some days he wishes he could press rewind?

‘You do not quit, Melanie, you hear me? You are worth three of this DI what’s-his-face.’

‘Yeah . . . but we both know that makes no difference.’

Matthew just sighs, wishing he could say this were not true.

‘OK, Matt. So listen to this . . . strictly between us?’

‘. . . hope to die.’ They both know they have long since crossed all the lines; that this only works because they trust each other.

‘Our local office gets a call from Anna’s dad, right? He wants to speak *to me*. He says he will only speak to me. Turns out he’s in his barn with a shotgun.’

‘Christ.’

‘Exactly. So what does DI Halfwit decide? He decides not to tell me.

Worse – he arranges sneakily for me to be given the day off to keep me out of the picture, then he marches in with both left feet, and winds Ballard up by refusing to let him see me. Cocks the whole thing up so badly that Henry Ballard waves his gun at all and sundry and very nearly shoots himself in the process.’

‘Good grief. And now?’

‘They have the dad in custody and won’t let me anywhere near the place. One of the uniforms tipped me off and I’ve just spoken to the family liaison officer who’s with the mum, Barbara, at home.’

‘So why are they keeping you out of it?’

‘Who knows? Probably because I’ve sussed what an incompetent, jumped-up waste of space he really is.’

‘Please tell me you haven’t said that to his face.’

Melanie blushes.

‘Oh, Mel.’

‘Well the word is he’s also working on some serial killer case and, as far as I can see, doesn’t really give a damn about finding Anna Ballard. He’s lazy, just waiting for a body to turn up so forensics can sort it all out. He’s only down here because he has some mate locally to look up.’

‘Right. And they really think the dad is in the frame now? I mean – do you think he could have done it? What about the two guys just out of Exeter? I thought they were still the key suspects.’

Melanie leans back in her seat. ‘You and me both.’

Just at that moment, her phone rings. A new jazzy ringtone, which does not surprise Matthew. Mel has always been nuts about jazz. To celebrate passing out after their initial training, she organised a night at a fantastic local jazz bar. That was a seriously good evening.

Melanie takes the phone from her pocket, and Matthew nods that he understands as she gets up to walk away and take the call privately.

Matthew finishes his coffee and takes a sugar sachet from the ceramic bowl in the centre of the table. He is thinking of pyramids but checks himself. *Stop fiddling. Not today.* He replaces the sachet and waits for Mel to return to her seat.

‘It gets better. You are seriously not going to believe what’s happened now.’

Matthew says nothing, just raises his eyebrows.

‘OK. So first. I am up to see the chief. The little creep has reported me. Formal complaint.’

‘Oh God, I’m sorry Mel. Is this because of me?’

‘Hell no. They don’t know I’ve been talking to you. Anyway – never mind me, I can handle myself.’ She takes a deep breath. ‘Matt – they’re pushing for a media blackout, but I kid you not, there is no way they’re going to keep a lid on what’s going down now.’

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CHAPTER 29

THE FATHER

‘Why does this man have no socks on?’ The DI is staring at the sergeant escorting Henry into the room.

‘I’ve already told my solicitor I don’t want to wait for socks. I just want to get on with this.’ Henry takes his seat next to his solicitor.

The inspector mentions ‘for the benefit of the tape’ that Henry Ballard has made no complaint about the interview going forward while barefoot, though his tone and expression make it clear he remains personally unimpressed by this state of affairs.

‘So have you checked out what I told you?’

‘I do the questions, Mr Ballard.’

Henry bites into his bottom lip while the inspector skim-reads two sheets of paper in front of him. Henry, trying to read upside down, can just make out the name, which suggests they have indeed followed up the new version of his alibi.

April.

‘So – does your wife know about your affair?’

‘No, she doesn’t.’ Henry will not add that he is already on his final warning with Barbara. He had a stupid fling when the girls were small – when Barbara seemed more interested in Anna and Jenny and their friends than she did in him. It wasn’t serious and he deeply regretted it. When Barbara found out, she gave him a second chance but made it clear there would be no more chances if he let her down again.

‘And you really think she believes this nonsense about you sleeping in your car, Mr Ballard?’

‘I don’t know, but I would really rather she wasn’t told about April . . .’

‘I bet you would, but so far we have had three versions of your story. And it’s wasting my time. Do you really need me to remind you that this is a serious investigation?’

‘How dare you.’ Henry stands up, his chair making a loud scraping noise against the tiled floor.

‘Sit down!’

Henry ignores this. ‘My daughter is still missing. It’s been a whole year, and you still haven’t got a clue what has happened to her. You let the two main suspects do a bunk right at the start, and you think you need to remind me that this is *serious*.’

Henry’s solicitor puts a hand on his arm gently, signalling with his other hand to sit down, but Henry is fuming. He has played along with all this incompetent bull long enough.

‘If you had told us the truth from the off, Mr Ballard, you could have avoided wasting a lot of our time. Now sit down, please.’

Finally, Henry obeys. ‘So – has April spoken to you? Given a statement?’ He finds it strange to say her name out loud in company. Does not like to think of the police round there, stirring it all up. Net curtains twitching.

‘Yes. She has confirmed your latest version of events. Though you seem to make a habit of asking the women in your life to lie for you. You asked your wife to lie first, of course.’

‘None of this is Barbara’s fault. I told her I didn’t want the police to know how drunk I was. That I had planned to drive and had to sleep in the car.’

‘And she really believed that?’

Henry looks down at his bare feet, wondering if he should have changed his mind about the socks. He had assumed they would just let him go now. Why more questions? According to the rules, they had just one more hour to either charge him with something or let him go.

‘I shouldn’t need to remind you, Mr Ballard, that I can charge you with breach of the peace or threatening behaviour.’

‘I only got so upset at the barn because I wanted to speak to Melanie Sanders. I told you that.’

‘And why Melanie Sanders?’ His tone says more than the words.

Henry tries to read the inspector’s face, and picks up some signal that he needs to tread carefully.

‘I found her straight to deal with, that’s all. She’s been good to my family, along with Cathy, the family liaison officer.’

‘Right. Well, she’s on leave, as I have told you. And I’m in charge of this case.’

There is a lot of shuffling of paperwork. Finally, it is Henry's solicitor who speaks.

'Well, if that's all and you are now happy with Mr Ballard's version of events, I must request that he is released. It's been a very distressing time and he needs to be with his family.'

The inspector seems to be weighing this up when suddenly the door to the interview room opens.

'What now? Nothing to do with socks I hope?'

The sergeant moves across to whisper into the inspector's ear. The senior officer's expression now changes completely, and Henry is frowning as the DI confirms for the tape that he is leaving the room and needs to pause the interview for a few moments.

'What's going on?' Henry turns to his solicitor, who merely shrugs.

The inspector is gone for several minutes before returning to pick up his jacket from the back of his chair, and to announce that Henry is to be released without charge for now but the police reserve the right to make further inquiries and may need to speak to him again.

And then the inspector takes a deep breath, looking at Henry very intently. He announces next that there has been an 'unexpected development' in the police inquiry. His tone is different, guarded. He says that Henry will be driven home and more will be explained to him on the journey.

Henry is now completely confused. He had expected to phone Barbara, hoping that the April escapade would not have leaked and she would be prepared to pick him up. He wonders why the police are offering him a taxi service. He glances from face to face in the room; the atmosphere has definitely changed.

'What's going on? What's happened?'

'You will be told more on the journey, Mr Ballard.'

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CHAPTER 30

THE FRIEND

Sarah sits on the sofa and leans forward to put her head in her hands. She needs to *think, think, think*.

She needs to conjure the right words to shake the real Lily out of this distant, unrecognisable stranger. But the words just won't come, and instead she is thinking, as she does so often at night, of the last words she spoke to Anna. Of the horrible and angry exchange that she has not shared with the police and that she had planned to share here with Lily. The old Lily.

There are now three people sitting opposite, doing the funny touching-of-the-wrist-bead nonsense while Sarah wills them to get lost and let her speak to her sister. As well as Moon, there is a couple calling themselves Rainbow and Waterfall.

'So, is this a cult?' Sarah finally blurts out, staring at them and no longer caring if she causes offence. 'I mean – what's with all the wrist beads and the weird names?'

'It's nothing to be upset about, Sarah. It's a good thing. It's calming and healing.' Lily is looking directly at her, and she seems so terribly fragile that Sarah feels suddenly close to tears with frustration.

'OK. So if you don't ask these people to leave, I am going to say it all in front of them. About Dad, Lily. And unless I have got this completely wrong, then I think you know very well this is not a conversation you want them to hear.'

Finally, Lily turns to her strange new friends and asks them to leave her and Sarah alone.

'You really sure about this?' Moon is speaking very softly, staring right into Lily's eyes, and Sarah is certain now that they are lovers.

'Yes. I'm fine. I'll come and fetch you if I need you.'

Once they have all finally left the room, Lily closes the door and returns to sit opposite Sarah.

'What is this place, Lily? The way you dress now. The way you are. I don't like it and I don't understand it. I mean, we're sisters and yet you don't seem to want anything to do with me anymore.'

‘It’s not that.’

‘Well – *what* then? I mean, my best friend disappeared a year ago. She could be dead for all we know. And you’ve hardly been in touch.’

‘I’m sorry. I should have done more. You’re right. I am sorry. Look. I was in a bad way when I came here, Sarah. I needed space. I needed to get strong myself and to find a way to stay strong.’

They sit quietly for a while, and Sarah is thinking back to the scenes just before Lily bolted and her parents split. All the door slamming. The shouting, and worse: the words, spat more than whispered, behind closed doors. No one telling her what was going on. Their mother in such a state.

And next she is thinking of that awful scene with her father.

I just need to check if you are grown up enough . . .

She is trying to remember the timing more precisely. When was that? A few months before it all blew up? Yes. About that. The reason that she felt so very confused about the separation. Missing the dad she had always loved as a small girl, but also glad that he was gone, which made her feel guilty and confused and wretched.

‘Why did Dad really leave, Lily?’

‘Why do you think he may have had something to do with Anna? Why would you suddenly think that? Why would you say that?’

‘Because I’ve had a whole year to worry about it. And I think we both know why the two might be connected.’

Lily’s hand is shaking now, and Sarah cannot take her eyes off it. Her sister uses the other hand to pull down her sleeve and Sarah is remembering the other scenes at home. When Lily had started to skip school and to hurt herself. Digging at her arms with a compass from her maths set.

‘Dad did something funny to me once, Lily. I have never ever told anyone – not Mum, not Anna. No one. And I don’t even know what exactly it was or if I made too much of it. But it wasn’t right what he did, and it’s been going round and round in my head ever since all this business with Anna. And I need to know if you think I am mad, being suspicious about why Dad left. Mum has always point-blank refused to talk to me about it and I just thought he had an affair and hurt her. But I need you to tell me—’

‘Oh my God, Sarah. Did he really hurt you, too?’ There is complete shock now on Lily’s face, and tears forming in her eyes.

‘Not really *hurt* hurt.’ Sarah pauses and looks away. ‘He touched me. It

wasn't right . . .'

'Oh Jesus. When was this? More than once?'

'No. Just once. A few weeks before he left.'

Lily stands and paces to the window, turning to look out and then suddenly back at Sarah, her face dark.

'I should have gone to the police. Oh God, I am so very sorry, Sarah.'

'What do you mean, you should have gone to the police? What for?'

'Dad is not a good man, Sarah. He . . .'

Her right hand moves across to grip the beads around her left wrist, turning the larger ones around and around. 'Look. He did things to me. Often. I was too afraid to tell anyone.' All agitation, she moves to sit again. Leans forward. 'But then it got much worse and I was afraid he would hurt you too. I thought I was protecting you. So I told Mum – that he came into my bedroom. After we moved to the new house. But she just wouldn't believe me.'

'You told Mum? She *knew*?'

'Yeah. I thought she would go straight to the police, but she just told Dad and he said . . .'

A long pause. Lily is now desperately plucking at the beads around her wrist. 'He said that I was lying because I was attention-seeking; that I was screwed in the head and that it was all nonsense to distract from me skipping school. That I needed help – to see a shrink maybe.'

Sarah now has both hands up to her own mouth.

Lily wipes the tears falling onto her cheeks. 'So in the end I said that if Dad didn't leave, I would go to the police myself and report him.'

Sarah looks at the floor.

'I see now that I should have done that. Gone to the police. I am so, so sorry, Sarah. I just wanted it to end and I honestly thought it would spare you if he just left. I didn't realise he'd already . . . Anyway, he did go, but Mum still didn't believe me and wouldn't forgive me so I came here and I was in this really terrible state.'

Sarah now looks around the room, narrowing her eyes and thinking of them all. Moon and Rainbow and Waterfall . . .

'So what is this place, Lily? These people?'

'I found out about it through a helpline. Caroline offers it for people who – after this kind of stuff.'

'So all these people – Moon and the others . . .'

Lily just nods, and Sarah is shocked, regrouping and walking again through the scenes. Moon coming in from the garden. Shaking hands. Worried eyes.

‘People do think we’re odd. Some kind of kooky commune. But we don’t care. We find it makes us stronger to be together like this.’

‘But why haven’t you been to the police since, Lily?’

‘I did want to but I just wasn’t strong enough. And they don’t pressure you here. It’s up to us. Our choice.’

‘Is that why they are being so protective? They *know*?’

‘Yeah. They know everything. And they know I tend to spiral down again when I think of you. And home. And Mum. They were worried.’

Sarah is watching her sister’s hands again, trembling and fidgeting.

‘Well, I’m sorry. And I really don’t want to make it worse for you, Lily, but I need to tell you a bit about that night with Anna. It’s why I came here and why I’m so worried now.’

‘Go on then.’

‘I haven’t told the police this before because . . . Well. I don’t know why I didn’t tell them. I was scared I was being ridiculous. I thought it was Karl and Antony. But I’m more and more afraid that what’s happened to Anna is my fault.’

‘Why on earth would you think that?’

‘Dad texted me the night Anna disappeared. He knew from Mum that we were in town, and he wanted us to meet him at a hotel in London. Some swanky place he was staying at for his new job. Did you know he’s a manager now – big haulage firm? Anyway. I said no. But I showed Anna the text.’

‘You don’t seriously think she met him, do you?’

‘That’s the problem. I just don’t know. But we had this big row, me and Anna, and she said something which has played on my mind.’

‘I’m not understanding.’

‘She said she didn’t feel *safe*, Lily, because we’d had so much to drink. And she suggested I ask Dad to come to the club and see us back to our hotel . . .’

CHAPTER 31

THE WITNESS

I am in the kitchen with Luke, my mouth dry and my heart racing.

Tucked in my pocket is the flat piece of plastic I found on the floor outside the shop. A simple piece of plastic that has so confused me. Why would Luke lie to me? Deep down is he cross, with everything going on in his own life, that I've been so wrapped up in Anna's disappearance?

'You know that map-magnifier thing you had for the Ten Tors? The one they gave you with the medal?' I try to make my voice sound relaxed.

'What?'

'That plastic magnifier. Can I borrow it? Some of the new order lists are in really tiny print and I'm struggling to read them.'

I watch his face but see nothing that helps me. I wonder if he came down to the shop to check on me. Changed his mind. But why would he do that? Why lie? It makes no sense.

'I lost that ages ago. Why don't you just buy a magnifying glass. Or reading glasses?' He sounds irritated. 'Or are you too embarrassed to wear glasses?'

'When did you lose it?'

'Oh, for God's sake, Mum. What does it matter?'

My phone is on the worktop next to the kettle and it vibrates with a text. I ignore it.

Then my phone starts ringing. I move over and see that it is Matthew and hold the phone to my ear. What he says – speaking very quickly – is such a shock, it is difficult to absorb.

'We need to put the television on.' I am gesturing towards the shelf above the vegetable rack for the remote control.

'What is it? Who is it on the phone?'

'Put the TV on, Luke. News channel. Any news channel.'

He is fiddling with the remote for the small flat-screen that is perched on top of a bookcase full of recipe books and files. As the picture finally comes up, Luke scrolls for a news channel; there is no sound as the familiar

Facebook photo of Anna fills the screen with words scrolling beneath it. Dear God. Just like in the hotel all that time ago . . .

‘Put the sound up, Luke. Quickly.’

I am reading the ticker tape of breaking news as Matthew tells me the little he knows.

The scroll of words names Karl Preston as a suspect in the case of missing schoolgirl Anna Ballard. A second headline confirms that the streets around an apartment block in Spain have been sealed off by police after several gunshots were heard about an hour ago.

As the volume bursts in – much too loud at first – the picture is back to the studio, where the blonde presenter is shuffling bits of paper, holding her right hand up to her earpiece.

‘We don’t know any more at the moment, Ella. I’m going to have to go.’ Matthew’s voice in my ear is struggling to compete with the television now. ‘But I will ring you if I hear anything more at all. The police had been hoping for a media blackout, but the neighbour who phoned the police rang the local TV station straight after.’

I thank him, and lower my voice to ask briefly after his baby. He says he will be back at the hospital in a few hours but I can text if I need him.

And now Luke and I just stand in shock in the kitchen – the whispered word, *baby*, hanging between us – as the presenter sums up what they know.

‘It’s a confused picture at the moment, but from what we understand so far, police had called at the apartment block on a small development about two miles outside Marbella. They had been tipped off by someone who recognised a man from recent police appeals in the UK looking for two suspects wanted for questioning regarding the disappearance in London a year ago of teenager Anna Ballard . . .’

The presenter now links to a reporter on the telephone, who confirms that she is just beyond the police cordon at the scene.

‘Why don’t they link to live pictures of her? The reporter?’ I am glancing at Luke.

‘They probably don’t have a camera there yet.’ Luke is perched on the breakfast bar stool, the remote still in his hand.

Infuriatingly the reporter repeats everything the presenter has just said, but then finally there is more information from a neighbour, an eyewitness . . .

‘We heard gunshots about an hour ago and we thought it was a terrorist

attack at first. We just lay on the floor, absolutely terrified.'

'Where were the gunshots coming from and what exactly happened next?' The television screen is now split in two, showing the presenter in London on one side, asking the questions, and a map on the other, showing the location of the apartment block a few miles outside of Marbella. I remain deeply frustrated, badly wanting to see pictures from the scene.

'It sounded as if the gunshots were above us. Maybe the second floor, I don't know. We lay on the floor for a long time – me and my friend – and then after what felt like hours but was probably ten, maybe fifteen minutes, there were police outside our window at the back. They beckoned us to the window and said they were getting some people out of the block. They sort of shielded us as we moved under a covered walkway behind the apartments to a safe area. That's where I am now.'

'So are there other people still inside the apartment block?'

'Yes, lots. I think the police only moved a few out. I think it's mostly too dangerous. I did see a couple of people running out the front, but I think they were mad. I mean – whoever is shooting could just see them from the upstairs window. They could just shoot right at them if they wanted to.'

'And have the police said anything to you about what's going on now?'

'No, nothing. Just to stay behind the police tapes and that they will tell us when it is safe to go back to our flat.'

'And what can you see now from where you are?'

'A lot of police now – some with rifles, not just their handguns. There are vans everywhere and TV people arriving too, some of them in trucks. I think everyone thought it was terrorists to start with. I mean that's what you think, isn't it, these days?'

'We have reports coming in, as yet unconfirmed by police, that this whole operation is about a man called Karl Preston, wanted in connection with the inquiry into missing Cornish teenager Anna Ballard. Have you heard anything about that?'

'Yes, actually. It's what everyone is talking about on the street now. Apparently one of the people in the block recognised him from some media stuff. But if it's the guy I'm thinking of, we know him as Mark. And he's got really different hair. Much lighter now.'

'So have you seen the official police pictures of Karl Preston?'

'I have now on my phone, from all the stuff on social media, and it certainly looks like him. The face, I mean. Like I say, we know him here as

Mark. He's a builder, I think, working on one of the new developments.'

'Do you know him personally? What can you tell us about him?'

'Not much. He sort of keeps himself to himself. I think he lives with a woman. Bit younger. A blonde woman . . . Yeah. I've seen her on the stairs a couple of times but never spoken to her.'

I listen to this last exchange and feel the muscles in my stomach clench. Luke turns to me instantly, his eyes wide and unblinking. 'You don't think that could be Anna?'

'I have no idea.'

'But why wouldn't she run away? I mean if it's Anna and he was holding her, she would run away, wouldn't she? When he was at work.'

My heart is pumping in my chest, in my fingertips, in my neck, as if the blood is all of a sudden coursing too quickly around my body, and I realise in this moment that I have always assumed the worst, that Anna is dead. This new and unexpected possibility that she could still be alive is hard to process.

'I need to sit down.'

'I think we should phone Dad and get him to come home.'

'But he's so busy . . .'

Luke already has his phone out of his pocket and is scrolling through his contacts. 'You need Dad here. He needs to come home.'

And then, as he holds the phone to his ear, apparently waiting for a reply, his expression is changing. 'Jeez. Maybe she just ran off with this guy – Karl?'

'What?' This has not occurred to me and I feel myself frown, unable to make sense of all this. It is simply too much. The pieces of the puzzle won't fit.

'Well, maybe she isn't missing at all. Maybe all this guilt this past year is a waste of time, Mum. Maybe the truth is she hated her life in Cornwall and just did a bunk.'

CHAPTER 32

THE FATHER

Henry is sitting in the back seat of the police car, staring at the familiar landmarks passing in a blur. The bus stop. The war memorial, which today has a posy of white flowers. Henry tries to think why. Is it some kind of commemoration? He can't remember.

Next he watches a woman in a black mac pushing one of those ridiculous shopping trolleys. It is tartan, green and blue, and has a wobbly wheel that makes it veer to the right. Every now and again she has to swing the contraption to the left to correct this. Henry thinks she would be better off with bags.

In the front passenger seat, the detective sergeant is on the phone. Hearing just one side of the exchange is infuriating. There is clearly something significant going on, but so far he cannot work out what. Why did they suddenly let him go?

‘Can you please tell me what the hell is going on?’

At last the sergeant is off the phone and turns his body so that Henry can see the side of his face.

‘We can't say too much at the moment, Mr Ballard, but there is a police operation under way in Spain in connection with the inquiry into your daughter's disappearance.’

‘Spain? Why Spain? I don't understand.’

‘OK. So we were hoping for a media blackout but things have moved on ...’

‘What things?’ *Jesus Christ.*

‘A witness has identified Karl Preston as living and working in Spain, using a false identity. The witness apparently saw a rerun of the anniversary TV appeal. The local police moved in to arrest him on our behalf. The plan was for someone from our team to go over there. It can get a bit complicated, liaising with foreign forces. There are protocols. We have to tread carefully.’

‘So what's happened? What is he saying about Anna?’

‘Like I say, things have moved on. He's apparently resisting arrest. We have a live situation.’

‘Live situation? What the hell is that?’

‘It’s being covered on the news, Mr Ballard. Cathy is with your wife. You will be able to find out the latest when we get you home. To be honest, they probably know as much, if not more, than I do.’

‘And what about Anna? Is anyone saying anything about Anna?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Ballard. I don’t know any more.’



At the farmhouse finally, Henry sees a black and slightly battered hatchback parked outside. It belongs to Tim or Paul, he can’t remember which, and Henry feels a wave of irritation. Bad enough that the family liaison officer is here. Cathy has been kind enough, but he never forgets that she is a policewoman. Whereas Barbara has been way too pally with her.

Henry feels his muscles tense as they sweep past the barn. He is remembering the scene with the shotgun when he was taken away. Jenny in tears. And God knows how Barbara will be with him now. *What the hell is the truth, Henry? Where were you that night?*

But mostly his mind is whirring with all these confusing new possibilities. Spain?

Only after they have stood on the doorstep for a minute or two does Henry realise that the police sergeant is expecting him to use his key. His bits and bobs were returned to him as they left the station. Henry fumbles in his pocket and finally finds it. It feels formal and odd. The front door is rarely closed, and he normally uses the side entrance through the boot room.

Once in the hall, the sergeant explains that he will speak briefly to the family liaison officer and then leave, though Henry must stay at home or advise the police if he is making a trip anywhere. Any new information will be filtered through Cathy.

‘Understood? We may well need to speak to you again very soon.’

Henry shrugs, and then they move into the sitting room, following the sound of the television and voices. All faces turn their way.

Jenny is sitting on the right-hand sofa with Tim at her side. She has her hand up to her mouth and is very pale.

Barbara is in the high-backed chair nearest the television, both her hands also up to her mouth, almost prayer-like, pressed hard against her lips. Cathy is sitting on a footstool alongside her, her hand on Barbara’s back.

On the television, a reporter is standing in front of what looks like a

police cordon at the end of a narrow street. Bright blue sky . . .

‘We now have confirmation from the police that the man at the centre of this stand-off is believed to be Karl Preston – wanted for questioning in connection with the disappearance of teenager Anna Ballard . . .’

‘What’s going on?’ Henry is looking at Barbara, but she doesn’t move her eyes from the television.

‘Shut up, Dad. We need to listen.’ Jenny leans further forward.

The reporter continues. ‘The man is understood to live on the second floor. Shots were fired this morning when police moved in to arrest him. Some residents have managed to leave the apartment block, but many are still inside and have been warned to keep out of sight. Police have cordoned off the whole area now and have apparently advised all those within the exclusion zone to stay indoors and away from windows until this situation is resolved . . .’

‘What a cock-up,’ Henry says finally. ‘First you let him do a runner and now you can’t even arrest him without a pantomime. Jesus Christ.’

‘Shut up, Dad. Turn it over again, Tim. There was more on the other side. That woman who thinks she saw Anna—’

‘Saw Anna? Someone’s seen Anna?’ Henry feels his heart thump, fluid in his throat suddenly – almost choking him.

‘Oh, for Christ’s sake, be quiet so we can listen. Give me the remote.’ Jenny now takes the remote control from Tim and changes channels. Same scene – different reporter. In the meantime, Cathy stands and moves out into the hall with the sergeant. Henry watches them close the door, and is torn between listening to the television and trying to make out what they are whispering about.

Henry feels his heart pumping now as he listens to this new update from the different reporter . . .

‘With me now is one of the neighbours who was evacuated by police a little earlier – Amanda Jennings. Thank you for joining us, Amanda. I understand that you have seen this man, known locally as Mark, with a younger blonde woman?’

‘Yes, that’s right. They’ve been here about six months. He works as a builder. I haven’t seen her often. She sort of hides her face, keeps herself to herself.’

‘And have you seen the pictures of Anna Ballard? Do you think this woman could be her?’

The reporter is showing the witness her phone – presumably a photograph of Anna.

Henry holds his breath. There is absolute silence in the room now. One beat. Two. Three. The witness is examining the phone very carefully, tilting her head . . .

‘It’s Anna. He’s got Anna . . .’ Barbara’s voice is high with desperation, her hands now gripping each arm of her chair. ‘Oh my God, he’s got Anna.’

No one responds, but the two police officers are now back in the doorway, also watching and listening.

‘I couldn’t say. I’m not sure.’ The neighbour is shaking her head, still staring at the picture on the phone.

‘They should not be covering it like this,’ Cathy says from the doorway. ‘So irresponsible. The chances are he’s watching all this and it will just wind him up.’

‘Well they’re telling us more than you are,’ Henry spits. He can feel a terrible sickness in his stomach suddenly, thinking of his daughter.

You disgust me, Dad . . .

He looks from face to face as the television reporter hands back to the studio, promising an update shortly. *But now, the rest of the day’s news . . .*

Barbara first – he stares right at her but she will not look back at him. Does she know about the affair? Has Cathy told her? Then across to Jenny, who is crying silently, Tim’s arms around her shoulders.

Henry is suddenly in a bubble, not quite hearing properly. He is thinking of how sure he was until this very moment that his daughter is dead. It was terrible and too painful to imagine her gone at first, and yet paradoxically there was also this tinge of relief. That whatever horror had happened was *over*. That whatever someone had done to her was finished. In the past. That certainty had, in the strangest of ways, finally comforted him, because it was too unbearable to think of it being ongoing.

He looks back now at his other daughter, sitting with Tim. He is once more thinking of them as children together, fooling about in a paddling pool in the garden. Happy times. And yet, all grown up, the two boys had both swanned off instead of going to London to help look out for the girls. Never mind blaming Sarah, maybe none of this would have happened if the two chaps – Tim and Paul – had—

‘Tim. I think it’s probably time you went home.’

Tim looks bemused for a moment but then just stands up, running his right hand through his hair.

‘No. Sit down, Tim. I want him here. I invited him here.’ Jenny is glaring at Henry and he does not like her expression, which is something close to contempt.

‘This isn’t Apollo 13!’ Henry is surprised to hear himself roar this.

‘Don’t make jokes,’ Barbara spits. ‘How could you make a joke at a time like this?’

‘I didn’t say it as a joke. I mean it. This is sick. Like a peep show. Our daughter. Everyone watching . . .’

Tim is still standing, looking across at Henry, who now turns to Cathy. ‘How could the police let this happen? Like a reality TV show. It’s disgusting.’ And then his voice breaks and Henry is suddenly crying.

He is thinking that if she is still alive, then God knows what has happened this past year. Awful images in his head – so dark and so terrible that he is suddenly thumping at his head with the base of his palm as if this might make them stop. His little girl . . .

‘Come into the kitchen and I’ll make some sweet tea. It’s the shock.’ Cathy’s voice is infuriatingly calm.

‘I don’t want tea. I want everyone to go. You – Tim. This isn’t your business. I don’t want you here. Nor you.’ He is looking at Cathy.

‘Cathy has to be here, Henry.’ Barbara is speaking, her voice trembling. ‘And I agreed for Tim to come over. It’s what Jenny wants. This isn’t just about you, Henry.’

‘Well, maybe if Tim hadn’t disappeared on some jolly with his mates, we wouldn’t be here.’

There is a gasp from Tim, and from Jenny, too, but Henry doesn’t care. It’s true. When he first championed the trip to London, he thought that Tim and Paul were going to be chaperoning the girls. They had just finished A levels. Strong, strapping, decent boys getting ready for university. Barbara was never keen on the trip – wanted the girls to do something local and lower-key, but Henry had trusted the lads. By the time the boys backed out of the trip, it was too late for Henry to say no. Anna pleaded with him to talk her mother round. But the truth? There was no way Karl and Antony would have targeted Anna and Sarah if they hadn’t been alone on the train. Henry had made the wrong call . . .

‘I’m sorry, Mr Ballard.’ Tim is standing.

‘It’s not your fault, Tim. Don’t listen to him.’ Jenny is changing channels again and glancing from one parent to the other. ‘You need to all shut up and stop fighting. I’m sick of you two fighting. Anna could be there right now. In that flat in Spain, absolutely terrified, and all you want to do is wave guns around and shout at each other.’

Barbara now gets up and moves over to sit alongside Jenny to comfort her. She is stroking her hair and turning to Henry with a pleading expression.

‘It’s probably best I go, Jenny.’ Tim is feeling in his pocket for his keys.

‘No, Tim.’ Barbara reaches out for his arm. ‘Jenny wants you to stay.’

‘No. I’m sorry, Mr Ballard is right.’ Tim’s voice is shaking and he is looking at Henry. ‘I should have been there. It’s why I got mad at Sarah that time. Trying to pass the buck.’

‘Oh my God – *Sarah*.’ Jenny is suddenly taking her phone from her pocket, flipping between channels with her other hand, desperate for new information. ‘Has anyone been in touch with Sarah? This could tip her right over the edge again.’

CHAPTER 33

THE FRIEND

When she was small, Sarah was terribly afraid of the dark. She watched a film once in which an intruder hid under the bed. After that, she begged her mother to swap her bed with its creaky iron frame for a divan. No space underneath. But the bed was never changed and the young Sarah would lift the overhanging duvet every single night to check the shadows beneath.

She shared a room with Lily back then, and would often wake in the middle of the night, terrified after a bad dream. Sarah seemed to have the ability to recreate scary films scene for vivid scene, recasting herself in the role of star victim. No matter that she knew it could not be real; it *felt* real. But Lily could not sleep with the light on, and so there was a terrible stalemate. Sarah would whisper in the darkness, begging to have the lamp on. When a grunt said *no way*, she would next ask to be allowed to share Lily's bed. *Please, Lily*. But even when her groggy sister finally gave in, Sarah would find that she was too afraid to put her feet on the floor in the darkness, in case an arm stretched out from under the bed.

'Do you remember when you put a chair between our beds at night so that I could get across to yours from mine after a bad dream without touching the floor?' Sarah is looking at her sister, now older and so much skinnier and frailer. It feels as if the tables have turned somehow, and she is supposed to be the stronger one . . .

'Yeah. You were a right pain.' Lily smooths her skirt and smiles.

'Was that before the really bad stuff started?'

'Yeah. It was when I got my own room.' Lily looks away to the window for a time and they sit in silence.

Sarah is thinking of the horrible paradox: how pleased she was to have her own room when they moved, so she could keep a little night light on, and how horrified she is now to realise the consequence of that for Lily.

She looks at her sister and thinks of their father . . .

Sarah's phone vibrates on the table. She is worried it may be a message from the police.

'It'll be Mum again. Ignore it, Sarah.'

But it buzzes again. And again . . . and again.

Sarah picks up the phone, intending to switch it off completely, but the messages are not from their mother. All from different friends.

Put on the TV . . .

Have u seen the news . . .

Are you OK? . . .

OMG! Ring me . . .

‘We need to put the news on.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’ As Sarah waits while Lily reaches to the lower shelf of the coffee table for the remote, she is thinking that maybe their mother has upped the ante, made things worse? That maybe she has convinced the police that Sarah is really missing and they are running some kind of appeal? But as Lily finds a rolling news channel, the picture on-screen is not of her.

Anna. There she is again. The picture from her Facebook page, standing in front of St Michael’s Mount, her beautiful blonde hair blown back in the wind.

‘Police have now confirmed that the armed man inside the flats is wanted in connection with the disappearance a year ago of teenager Anna Ballard,’ a reporter says.

‘Dear God, what’s going on?’ Lily keeps the remote in her hand, leaning forward.

‘I feel a bit sick.’ There is the taste of coffee back in Sarah’s mouth. Unpleasant now. Bile, too.

‘You want something? A bowl?’

Not enough time. Sarah glances about and sees a waste-paper bin by the side of the sofa. She grabs it just in time, retching. Once. Twice. Not real sickness, just fluid. Retching over and over.

‘I’ll get water.’ Lily is gone, presumably to the kitchen.

Sarah keeps the basket on her lap and holds her breath, wondering if they are going to say that Anna’s body has been found. That she really is dead . . .

But no. There is a witness who says she has seen a young blonde woman. It makes no sense. They do not confirm that it is Anna, just hint.

Sarah changes channels, and each one seems to have a slightly different version. One witness is sure he heard five gunshots. Another says two. The ticker tape of headlines says there are no confirmed casualties but a large area is still fully sealed off.

Sarah checks her phone again to read the messages, in case one of her friends has more information. Facebook is going mad. Twitter, too.

She searches for Jenny's number in her phone – the Ballards will surely know the most – but as her finger hovers over the button to ring, she changes her mind and skims again through Facebook.

Lily is now back, with iced water. *Drink this.*

She sips the water but the taste in her mouth remains foul, and it is as if there is some kind of distance between her and the room around her. Difficult to explain. A disconnect. She feels a little bit dizzy, too. Maybe the retching. Her stomach.

'Do I need to get a doctor, Sarah? You look terrible. What did the hospital say? I think I should phone Mum . . .'

'No, Lily. They said I'm OK. My liver's OK. I'm just a bit weak still, from too long in bed.'

'When did you last eat?'

'I don't feel hungry.'

'OK. No food. I'll make another hot drink . . . with sugar this time.' Lily is standing again.

'Not yet. Please don't leave me on my own again.' Sarah is surprised at the pleading in her tone. The fear.

Lily must see this, too, because she tilts her head and sits down alongside Sarah, taking her hand in her own. It is meant to be reassuring, but Sarah can feel her sister's hand trembling. 'Oh, Sarah. Did you really mean to hurt yourself with those pills? Mum said it was an accident. That you took too many tablets for a migraine.'

'I don't know. You used to hurt yourself, didn't you? Did you really mean to?'

Lily's lip is trembling also now, and she grips Sarah's hand as she turns to look at the TV.

'So – what are they saying? Have they found her? It was nothing to do with Dad, then? It really was one of the men on the train?'

Sarah looks at the screen and does not know how to answer. There is a picture of Karl, and the presenter is saying he is the armed man believed to be in the flat. She does not know what to think. The shot switches back to the reporter standing in front of the police tape in Spain. Again she repeats the same stuff. Why do they do this on rolling news? Say the same stuff time and time again. Going round and round in circles.

The truth is this does not make it any better. She wants to believe Anna is alive, of course she does. But what has been happening this past year? And if they really did take her – Karl and Antony – if this has nothing whatsoever to do with her father, then it is still Sarah's fault. She will have to tell the truth about London.

She thinks back to the four of them in that train carriage. The flirting. Catching Antony's eye. She remembers the small tattoo at the nape of his neck. Wanting so much to touch it with her nail.

She remembers how very alive she felt. How when Karl and Antony went to fetch drinks from the buffet she said to Anna that she was glad that Tim and Paul bailed on the trip. She knew there was no way that Karl and Antony would have joined them if Tim and Paul were around, cramping their style. But most of all Sarah remembers desperately wanting Antony to like her and not Anna. She thinks again of how jealous she felt watching Anna in the spotlight in school. Everyone looking at how beautiful she was. How during that spell when Sarah quite fancied Paul, it was Anna he was always staring at, not her. Everyone seemed to have a crush on Anna back then.

And she can feel a tear on her cheek now, as she thinks again of what she did on the train that day. To make *sure* that Antony liked her the best.

'I'm in big trouble, Lily.' She does not bother to wipe the tears, watching the colour of her trousers darken with the little drips. 'I'm not a good person.'

'Don't say that, Sarah. This is not your fault.'

'Oh, but it is, Lily. Trust me, it is.'

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CHAPTER 34

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Matthew is staring at his daughter. 'She's smiling at me.'

'No, she's not. She's doing a poo.'

'Look.' He twists his body so that Sal can see better. 'That's a smile.'

'A poo. Trust me. Babies don't smile for the first few weeks. So, do you want to try your first nappy change?'

'Oh God. I don't know.' Matthew is shocked at the wave of fear. He has always promised to be hands-on. A modern dad. But he had no idea she would be this little.

'Well, you've got to learn some time. Wait until she cries and I'll supervise.'

'How do you know she's going to cry?'

His wife looks at him as if he has not been paying attention.

The intensity of the wail when it comes is still a shock. Matthew cannot understand how such small lungs can make such a loud noise.

He watches the strain on his wife's face as she struggles out of bed to help him.

'Still really sore?'

'Yeah. They've cut back on the painkillers. Bummer.'

'Ask for more.'

'Nah. I'm OK. Gotta get on with it. OK, Daddy. So first you need to get absolutely everything ready.' She points out the kit alongside the changing mat, which is on a trolley beside the cot. *Clean nappy, wipes, cream, nappy sack for the debris.* She chants this as if it is a military operation.

'She tends to cry until it's all over, so don't worry that you're hurting her. You're not.'

Matthew lays his daughter on the plastic changing mat and has already forgotten the sequence, panicking as he undoes the poppers of her sleepsuit.

'Pull it right up high or you'll have to change that as well.'

Right. Tabs on the stinky nappy first.

‘Oh my God. Is that colour normal?’ The stench is incredible.

‘For now, yes. It was worse yesterday. The poo changes colour apparently, as she settles.’

Matthew is appalled. Green poo. *That can't be right, surely?*

‘Quickly. The wipes. Hold her legs up and be careful not to sweep near her fold or you'll give her an infection.’

Her fold. Dear Lord. There's so much to worry about – Matthew is wishing that he had paid more attention in the classes they attended.

‘I don't have enough hands.’

Sal, rolling her eyes, shows him how to lift both their daughter's legs up with one hand while sweeping the new nappy in place and disposing of the debris. For some reason a chicken comes to mind. He pushes the thought away.

‘Talk to her.’

‘Doesn't seem much point to me.’ Matthew can hardly hear his own voice over the crying.

His wife laughs. ‘OK. Bit of talc, and some of this cream just here so she doesn't get sore.’

And then the miracle. At last their daughter stops wailing and is holding onto Sal's ring finger, turning her eyes to the side as if looking for her mother. Matthew watches. Waits. The moment is suddenly so tender, watching their daughter's face soft and settled, that Matthew is overwhelmed by a surge of disbelief and overwhelming love for them both. He looks from one to the other in this pause, and again cannot help thinking of his work. His past. That mother whose baby was snatched. Thinking of Ella. Of missing Anna. Her parents in Cornwall. The new lens on everything.

‘You OK, Matthew?’

‘Yeah. Yeah. Sure.’

He helps Sal to pick up their daughter and move her back to the cot.

‘It gets easier, Matt.’

‘Does it?’

‘Yeah. When they leave home, apparently.’

He laughs. She laughs.

‘She’ll sleep for a bit now.’ And then Sal eases herself gingerly back into bed. ‘Go on then, put the telly on. Check your case.’

‘I’m fine. I’m getting updates by phone.’

He has told Sally about the drama in Spain, but has been trying desperately hard not to let it encroach on this space.

‘They’re all talking about it. The nurses.’

‘Are they?’

‘Yeah, of course. I haven’t told them. You know. What you do. That you’re sort of involved. Go on – put it on. I don’t mind. Really.’

Matthew picks up the control from the foot of her bed and tries the BBC and then Sky. A text from Melanie has confirmed the negotiating team is on site now. She’s heard through Cathy, embedded with the Ballards, that Karl’s identity has been confirmed, though this is not being released to the media. He claims to have a hostage. Says it’s Anna. Again this has not been released publicly – though witnesses are giving interviews left, right and centre, and the police communications team are in meltdown, unable to control the situation at all.

‘Sounds as if it has all gotten pretty out of hand.’

‘Yeah. Wouldn’t want to be in the post-mortem meeting on this one.’

‘Do you remember you considered doing a psych degree? To retrain as a negotiator?’

Matthew merely smiles. It was in the early days, when he so badly regretted leaving the force, wondering if there was another way back. Another role. He even did a short preliminary course – an introduction to negotiating. Fascinating. But then the financial reality kicked in. How could he possibly afford to study when he had this new business to build?

‘It’s all changed so much, with suicide attacks.’

‘How do you mean?’ Sal is glancing at the cot. All still quiet.

‘Well, the gold standard for hostage situations used to be to avoid intervention at all costs. Nearly always goes pear-shaped. Biggest risk for fatalities.’

‘And now?’

‘Well, with suicide attacks, there’s nothing to negotiate. So they’re learning you need to go in pretty fast. Whole different approach.’

‘But the team in Spain now. That will be old-school? I mean – he’s just a

criminal, this guy Karl. Not a terrorist.'

'Yeah, sure. They'll try it by the book with him.'

'So how does it work, then? What happens now?' She is looking at the television screen.

Matthew shares what he learned. That they will probably try to use the landline. Assign one key negotiator initially. Work hard to build up a rapport.

'The aim is to calm everything down, especially when he's been trigger-happy. They won't mention Anna too much.'

'Why not?'

'The advice is to keep it all about the hostage-taker, not the hostage. Establish trust. Mentioning the hostage or hostages too much tends to rank up the stress. Though in this case they might ask for evidence she's safe. Given some shots were fired.'

'I still don't get it. How he could keep her hostage for a year without her doing a runner? Seems weird to me. Didn't they say he works on a building site? Wouldn't she make a break for it?'

This is no time or place to share what Matthew is really thinking. That maybe this guy Karl ties her up. Threatens her. God knows what; victims can get psychologically damaged quickly if the abuse is extreme.

'Could be Stockholm Syndrome, where the victim develops a misplaced bond through the trauma.' Matthew watches his wife as he says this.

'I've read about that, Matt, but I still don't understand. I'd definitely try to get away. I'm absolutely sure I would.'

'Enough.' Matthew switches off the telly, wanting the update but not wanting his wife and his daughter involved in this.

'Want a coffee or something from the machines?'

'Cappuccino. Oh, and chocolate. Nasty, sweet milk chocolate, please. Big bar.' She is smiling as she says this, and Matthew feels guilty because what he really wants is an excuse to make a couple of phone calls to Ella and Mel.

'And don't stay on the phone too long while you're away. I want that coffee hot when you bring it back.'

'Busted.'

She blows him a kiss and he wonders how he ever got this lucky. Sal has always understood what his work means to him, especially after what

happened – why he left the force. He pauses, realising only now why so many police officers struggle to balance work and home: both so important but both so full on, so emotionally intense. And he realises, too, that he was right – he will never get to do the psychology degree now. He thinks of the tiny bundle in the pink babygro, eyes drowsy but still searching for her mother.

Everything is so very different now. Life suddenly has different priorities. Yes – a different lens.

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CHAPTER 35

THE WITNESS

I am glad that Tony is coming home. Luke was right. I need him.

The problem is I feel so churned up, my head racing with so many thoughts. I wonder what is real now and what is paranoia. It is as if this whole past year has overloaded my system and I can no longer think straight.

Am I so stressed now that I am imagining things? The noises at the shop. Being sure I am being watched. That someone actually came in and moved the secateurs. Dropped the map-viewer outside. Did I imagine it all? Am I conjuring these things?

I don't want to believe Luke is capable of wanting to frighten me, however upset or neglected he might feel. It can't be that. So – what?

I am in the comfort of the sitting room, watching it all on the big television. No. Comfort is the wrong word. Nothing feels comfortable anymore. Even in bed at night, I just can't keep still, taking hours to drift off to sleep.

I have taken the maximum paracetamol dose today but they don't seem to be working. My head is still pounding.

Luke is upstairs, and pops down once in a while to offer a drink, probably prompted by his father by text, in the same way he's reminded of Mother's Day and my birthday. Every time he appears again at the door, I examine his expression closely, wondering if I should just ask him outright. Challenge him and get this sorted. Tell him that I won't be cross but that I need to know. *Have you been more upset with me than you're letting on? Over the sadness with Emily? Over my preoccupation with this Anna case? Did you come to the shop for some reason I can't work out?*

I look over at the bookcase alongside the media unit that holds the telly and the DVD player. On the top are favourite pictures. Luke as a baby. First day at school. Receiving his medal for his first Ten Tors. God, I was so proud that day. The schools make out it is a standard thing in Devon and Cornwall: to take on the 'ten tors', a walking challenge on Dartmoor, as if it is no big deal. A rite of passage for living in such a beautiful place. But the reality, to be frank, is a shock. I wouldn't want to do it in a month of Sundays, and I was surprised that Luke was so keen.

He likes basketball but is otherwise not someone you would describe as especially sporty. Never did the Scouts or anything like that. More into his music, really.

For the Ten Tors challenge, they have to walk in teams of six – with no adult supervision – and they have to carry all their own kit to camp overnight on Dartmoor. The routes are a minimum of thirty-five miles, to be completed in two days, and the terrain is dangerous if the weather goes pear-shaped. Which it very often does.

The army supervises the whole thing, and there are checkpoints at each of the ten tors to prove they have completed the route. But in between that contact, the young teams are entirely on their own. And things can – and do – go wrong.

Once a girl drowned during a training exercise. It was so shocking and there was a big review. I thought, maybe even secretly hoped, they might scrap the whole thing, but no. They just have very strict guidelines.

Schools right across the south-west take part and it gets seriously competitive. Grammar schools versus comps. Private schools versus state. Good-humoured but serious nonetheless. Every team hopes to come in first. Fastest.

The training programme stretches months, as the teenagers have to build up their stamina and skill set. Map-reading. Fitness. Camping. They have to carry tents and cooking equipment and sterilise their own water, too. Loads of kids drop out. But not our Luke. He really surprised us – not only did he stick at it, but in the end he was made team leader. And that first expedition went so well that he went back for more. He did the thirty-five-mile trek that first year, and the tougher forty-five-mile challenge last year.

So – yes. I was prouder than I can ever explain when he stepped up for that photograph to get his first medal. Hundreds and hundreds of teenagers milling everywhere, but I remember hearing his name over the tannoy and taking in that beam of pride on his face as he caught my eye. Right there in the centre of it all. His moment.

And now? Emily has ended their relationship and Luke feels terrible. So up and down. He was so different – so carefree – in that photograph, out there on Dartmoor.

The news from Spain has been going round and round in circles for hours and it is doing my head in. All the major channels have pulled back on the coverage as it is getting repetitive.

I keep thinking of the Ballards in Cornwall. What must this be like for

them?

And there it is again. That knot deep within my stomach. Because this really is it. The reckoning. No escaping the fact that I was right to feel guilty. That Karl or Antony or both of them took that girl and did God knows what, all because I made the wrong decision. Because I made a snap judgement. Because I got on my high horse over Sarah's behaviour.

I can feel my lip trembling but I chastise myself. *No, Ella. This is not about you; this is about Anna.* This is about facing up to it all now.

The only mystery that remains: the postcards. The noises at the shop. Who has been rubbing my nose in it? The postcards cannot be from Karl or Antony if they've been abroad all this time. So if it's not Mrs Ballard – who?

The key in the door at last . . .

I wait for the sound of the door clicking closed. The clumping of the overnight case. And to my dismay, it is a trigger. By the time he is in the doorway, I am openly sobbing.

'Oh my God, Ella. It's all right, love, I'm here now.'

His arms around me. My Tony. And I am all at once grateful for those arms and yet guilty also because I still haven't been one hundred per cent straight with him.

'There, there, love. Come on now.'

'It's all right. I'm sorry.'

'Don't be sorry.'

And then, after I finally get a grip, the truth pours out of me. Every single little detail this time. About hiring Matthew secretly to warn off Mrs Ballard when I thought the postcards were from her. About going to Cornwall, against Tony's advice, and upsetting her. About thinking that someone was watching me at the shop but not being sure if I am simply going mad.

'Right. That's it. How about we just close the shop for a little while? You take a break. We get that rip-off company to come back to check the alarms. And you listen to me . . .' Tony has his hands on the top of my arms, leaning in to make me look right into his face. 'This is awful. What's going on in Spain, I mean, and God knows how it's going to turn out. I've been listening on the radio and Anna's parents must be going through hell. But you didn't do this, Ella. This madman Karl is doing this. Not you.'

I don't reply. And now Luke is in the doorway. He looks pale and is

shifting from one foot to the other. 'Really glad you're back, Dad. And I'm really sorry I didn't come into work with you, Mum.'

'Please tell me you didn't go in on your own?' Tony grips my arms a little tighter, his eyes wide.

There is a long pause.

'Totally my bad, Dad. I've been so exhausted, so upset. But I've just put out some more feelers on Facebook to see if I can find someone to take over the job.'

'You haven't shared our personal stuff on Facebook, Luke?'

'No. No. Course not. I've just said I know of a great part-time job. I'll vet the responses. If anyone good replies, I'll pass them on to you to see what you think.'

'Well, that's good, Luke. Thank you. I expect your mum would rather pick her own staff, but put out feelers, by all means. So long as you don't share Mum's personal information. But I really don't want your mother there early on her own, meantime. Not until we know for sure how all this is going to turn out.'

'But it can't be the guy on the train, Dad. The person sending the postcards. Not if he's been in Spain all this time.'

'Could be the other guy from the train. Or some random nutter. Please, Ella. Just do as I ask from here on, will you? Yes?' Tony loosens his hold and leans forward to kiss me on the forehead and to wrap his arms around me.

Luke then disappears to make more coffee, and I know exactly what is going to come next from Tony. Sure enough, he is absolutely horrified that I have involved a private detective without telling him. He tries very hard not to sound angry but the disappointment on his face kills me.

'I thought you had told me everything.'

'I'm sorry. I honestly thought I could spare you and sort it all out myself without worrying you, Tony. With everything you've got on. Luke. This promotion.'

'Never mind what I've got on, I just can't believe you wouldn't *tell* me. And going to Cornwall? I told you that was a bad idea.'

'I know. And I guessed you would be cross and I just kept digging, I suppose. Trying to resolve it on my own. I do see now it was stupid to keep it from you. I'm so sorry, love. But I was honestly so sure it was Mrs Ballard to start with, and I didn't want to make it worse for her, to get her into trouble by

going to the police.’ I then tell Tony everything else. That Matthew has been liaising with a contact in the force in Cornwall. It is such a huge relief not to be keeping this to myself anymore, especially as Matthew has suggested we meet after his hospital visit so that he can update me. Now I won’t have to lie to Tony.

Sure enough, Tony says he wants to meet him ASAP. To put him straight.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I don’t think it’s right to be liaising with someone outside the force right now.’

‘OK. But you might feel differently when you meet him. He’s a nice man. Ex-copper and very experienced. He was the one who insisted I give the postcards to the police.’

Tony is about to reply when the news presenter announces they are returning to the scene in Spain for a new development. We both turn to the television screen to see the reporter still standing by the police cordon, with her hand up to her ear as if struggling to hear the link from the studio, and then there is a cut to a really shocking image. Full frame.

It is a grainy photograph, as if taken from a distance, but there is no mistaking it. A tall man at the window of a second-floor flat, with a blonde woman.

A gun to her head.

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CHAPTER 36

THE FATHER

Henry Ballard was brought up by the kind of parents who believe children bounce. No cotton wool. No fussing. *Best way to teach a child to swim is to throw 'em in the deep end.* His father's favourite saying.

It was this extreme faith in the innate resilience of children which saw Henry quite literally *bouncing* on bales of hay in the trailer behind his dad's tractor at the age of four, and learning to drive the tractor himself when he was barely twelve.

Looking back now on pictures of his childhood, Henry realises he was lucky not to be on a child protection list. Lines were definitely crossed. And yet? Somehow he and his two sisters not only *bounced*, but thrived. Apart from a broken leg at the age of eight when a cow kicked back as she left the dairy shed, Henry escaped largely unscathed.

And so, emboldened by a general horror of a 'nanny state', Henry approached parenthood himself with a similar, laid-back confidence. *They will be fine*, he heard himself saying over and over to Barbara as she fussed and fretted over high-factor sun creams and anecdotal evidence about skin cancer risks for 'outside workers', as their two daughters ran outside every summer morning, coming indoors only for refuelling.

Farms are dangerous places, Henry, Barbara would say in return while Henry tut-tutted.

You watch too many documentaries, Barbara.

And then little Anna turned five and contracted pneumonia. It started as a standard cough, which Barbara reckoned came from playing in damp hay stored in a side barn, but Henry said she was making too much of it. *She'll be fine.*

Only she wasn't.

The drama peaked with five days in the high dependency unit of the local hospital, including a twenty-four-hour 'touch and go' period when, disconcertingly, none of the doctors would look the Ballards in the eye.

Anna, linked by all manner of tubes to bleeping machines, looked unbearably frail as the little screen kept ringing its alarm bell to confirm that her oxygen saturation levels were very poor. The doctors explained each new

strategy, including a drug that could make her heart rate race temporarily but would apparently help her lungs.

One step at a time, the consultant said. *We fix the lungs, then we sort the heart rate.*

Henry is sitting in the lounge now, watching the news as he remembers so vividly sitting in the hospital alongside Anna's bed, racked with guilt as he watched the figures on those monitors. Feeling helpless. Feeling sorry. Sometimes praying to God but then remembering that he wasn't really a believer. Had nowhere to turn. No longer confident in the resilience of children. No longer laid-back. Carefree.

And now no longer the same man at all after his daughter, his beautiful Anna, sat beside him in the car that day he drove her to the railway station to catch the train to London. *You disgust me, Dad.*

Cathy appears at the door, with a large tray sporting their bright red teapot, a jug of milk and mugs. And then, just as she places it on the coffee table in the middle of the room, someone changes the channel again and there is an icicle through Henry's heart.

The picture at the window. A man – presumably Karl – with the gun to the head of his hostage.

Henry hears a strange sound escape from his own mouth, followed immediately by a much louder, horrific wail from his wife. A sound like that of a wounded animal, followed by fast and almost incoherent babbling.

'Oh my God. Oh my God. My poor baby. Henry. Henry – look. Oh no, oh no, oh no . . . We need to do something. Oh my God, tell me what we should do.'

She is standing. Then sitting. Then rocking. Then crying. And then standing again and pacing as she talks . . .

'We need to go there. I need to be there. Henry. Oh my God, I can't be here. I can't be in this room.'

The presenter is saying that the photograph, as yet unverified, is being circulated by a European news agency; that the man has now been clearly identified as Karl Preston but there is yet to be official confirmation that his hostage is Anna Ballard.

'They shouldn't be showing this.' Cathy is taking out her phone and strides towards the hall while Henry moves forward to try to console his wife.

'It's going to be all right, Barbara.'

‘How can you say that? How can you say that? We need to go, Henry. We need to go to Spain. We can’t be here. I can’t be here.’

By this time, Tim is trying to soothe Jenny, who is also crying. Henry catches Tim’s eye – the young man also in a state of apparent shock.

‘We can’t just go to Spain, love. Not yet. We need to be in touch with what’s happening.’ Henry glances about him. He is thinking that if they are on a plane, they won’t be able to follow the news. He looks finally towards the door, realising that he needs the opinion of the family liaison officer, but she is on the phone still in the hallway.

‘I could take Jenny to Spain if you like. Wait for you there?’ Tim is leaning forward, staring into Henry’s face. ‘Would that help? To at least have someone from the family there?’

Henry runs one hand through his hair, his other arm around his wife’s shoulders as she is sitting back down in the chair now, her head in her hands.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. Let’s see what Cathy thinks. This is all happening so fast. I don’t know what they will advise. No, no. I don’t think I like the idea of Jenny not being with *us*.’

And then Cathy is standing in the doorway, her face pale. Henry realises there must be more news, but her expression is not good and for a moment he is too afraid to ask what exactly the new information might be.

WATCHING . . .

Friday

Now everyone is looking at her and I do not like it.

I do not like it at all.

It is my job. Supposed to be me. Because I really understand, you see. I am the only one who knows how to watch over her properly. To keep her safe. To understand her. The only one who sees who she really is. How very, very special she is.

When I see other people watching her, looking at her, smiling at her, I get this noise in my head. It is like a clicking at first. Quiet clicking. And then it gets louder and louder until it sounds like thunder all around my brain. And then it thunders around the room and the sky and right out into space.

It's doing that right now. Getting louder and I don't know what to do.

I just need space to think. I need the noise in my head to stop and I need all of these people to . . . stop looking at her.

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CHAPTER 37

THE PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR

Matthew feels a yawn break as he reaches for the wiper switch. Mild drizzle – the most annoying kind, especially as he keeps forgetting to change the wiper blades. The soft spray of mist is just too much for the intermittent setting, but not wet enough for the full setting. He tries the washer spray. Empty. Hears his own sigh at the squeak of protest from the screen as he switches between the two wiper speed options. Too dry. Too wet. Too dry . . .

The radio news presenter is on the sport. Matthew checks his watch. There will be a summary of the headlines soon. Good. Bound to include the latest from Spain. Melanie has said he can phone again in case she gets an update from the family liaison officer. She is still fuming over being officially reported by the DI, which is why she is going so off-piste now. Also, she trusts Matthew; she knows he won't let her down.

He thinks of Anna, takes a long slow breath. He has a bad feeling.

He looks at the clouds. Drifting fast in the strong wind. And now he feels the paradox of a smile emerging on his face as he thinks next of his daughter in her silly pink hat in the hospital cot. Her temperature is apparently down a bit – nothing to worry about, the nurses say. Just a good idea to pop her under a lamp until she learns to regulate her body temperature a little better. As he left, Sally was settling down for a doze and little Amelie was snuggled up in her crazy pink headgear to keep her cosy under her lamp. Very sweet. Very funny.

Amelie. Amelie. Amelie.

Mine, he thinks. *Both mine* . . . It still feels so surreal. A family.

But – wait. The jingle for the headlines. Matthew turns up the volume so he can hear better over the annoying grind of the wipers. The presenter summarises what he already knows – *come on, come on, we know all this* – and at last links to a reporter on the scene who is interviewing a police spokesman. Some controversy over new pictures circulating on social media. The spokesman, with a strong Spanish accent, is saying that this is very unhelpful. That the police team are building a rapport with the hostage-taker and this is damaging. Dangerous. Irresponsible. The reporter is saying that it must surely be impossible these days to control things, what with social media. Next, the spokesman is agitated. Says he has to end the interview to

take a phone call but is urging people to please be sensible. Not to share these pictures. Please.

The news moves on to another story. Matthew checks his watch again and looks at the bag of washing on the passenger seat. He has agreed to pop in to see Ella and meet her husband, but he does not want to stay long; he needs to get home and get these chores done for Sally. Amazing how many babygros and bibs and bits and bobs a tiny baby can work through in twenty-four hours. There is also a list of things his wife needs. Lip salve. Tissues. Some kind of body lotion – he’s forgotten the name already and is glad she wrote it down.

Matthew tries a few different radio channels. *What pictures?* What the hell is going on in Spain now? He finds himself imagining the team briefings behind the scenes. He feels the familiar pull. The sense of loss. Regret. Remembers sitting alone in his new office soon after leaving the force, so desperately missing the sense of being part of something. Something really important.

So how are you adjusting? Sally asked him back then, night after night. He always lied. *Fine. I’m fine.*

Matthew left the force because he messed up. He was responsible for the death of a boy of just twelve. His boss begged him to stay, to take time out to reconsider and to go through some counselling. There was an inquest and there was an independent police inquiry. Both exonerated him of all blame but that made no difference to Matthew. He was the one who had to look the mother in the eye at the inquest. He was the one who woke at night sweating.

It had been a Thursday. Raining that night, too. He was called out by a small, independent supermarket sick of shoplifters. A boy had snatched some cigarettes while the manager was serving another customer and then bolted. Matthew happened across the child running down an alleyway not far from the shop. He gave chase.

Oi! You! Stop now . . .

Even as he ran, Matthew was planning to let the child off with a warning. He had done this several times. The lad was fast but short. Just a kid. But Matthew never got the chance to be lenient. The boy panicked and bolted over a fence and down a bank to the railway line.

Matthew shouted for him to stop but the boy ran across. It was a live line.

It was a terrible sight. A terrible smell.

Matthew was badly burned while pulling the child from the live rail.

I should never have chased him, he told Sally. If I hadn't made him panic, he would be alive. Two packets of cigarettes, Sally. Two sodding packets of cigarettes.

You were just doing your job. His wife stroked his hair. He always remembers how tenderly she stroked his hair as he talked and talked – all night.

And so Matthew turned his back on his job. Turned his back on supermarkets who wanted him to chase shoplifters, no matter their age. No matter their motive.

He decided to set up his own business, imagining that it would be better to pick and choose who he helped.

The only problem, as Mel so frequently reminds him, is that he is bored. Cut off from the really important cases. Not many people come to a private investigator with important cases. Too often it is missing people, who disappear because they do not want to be found. And wives worried about their husbands playing away.

Matthew fumbles in the glovebox and finds a forgotten chocolate bar. Good. Sugar. He is now remembering the negotiators' course. Being so surprised by the statistics. That the majority of hostage situations are actually resolved without injury. Of course, that was before suicide attacks. Before the new wave of very different crimes.

The team in Spain will hopefully be doing it by the book – old-school, just as Sally guessed. They would be praising Karl for keeping things calm. Keeping Anna safe. *Well done. You are doing great. This won't be forgotten. That you are keeping everyone safe.*

Matthew closes his eyes and wishes it were him. In the police van. On the phone. In charge.

Never use the word 'surrender', they were taught. 'Coming out' was the preferred phrase. *Let's talk about how you can come out safely, Karl. How we can help you out of there safely.*

During one of the seminars, Matthew asked how they were supposed to respond to demands. Didn't hostage-takers always make bonkers demands? A getaway car? A helicopter? And money. What was the official police response to ransom demands?

Never say no, the instructor advised. Just say, *I'll look into that for you, Karl.* Negotiators should always appear to pass requests through other people,

so any negativity or delays do not seem to be their fault. *I'm so sorry, Karl. They're telling me that's not possible at the moment. Let's talk about what is possible. How we keep everyone safe. That's going to really count for you. I'm doing my best for you, Karl, I promise.*

Matthew is still about fifteen minutes from Ella's house and can no longer bear the wait. He pulls into a layby. He has to know what all this blessed talk of pictures is about. He pulls out his phone and calls up Twitter. The images are everywhere. Shots from several different angles, of Karl with a gun to the head of a blonde woman, presumably Anna, at the window.

Matthew feels his heart race as he forces himself into that professional gear: the place where you fight the fear and the panic and you switch on your analytical brain. OK. What does this mean? What needs to be done?

He begins to analyse all the pictures as swiftly as he can. What do they really say? What is really going on? The problem is that in all the shots Anna has her back to the window.

Matthew finds maybe half a dozen different photographs taken from slightly different angles, and frowns. Feels his brain burning, sparks flying as involuntarily he makes connections he does not yet understand. In the force, he learned to trust his gut when this happened. To relax and look and wait.

It is a bit like that series of posters – Magic Eye – where you have to stare and relax your eyes until you almost go into a trance to see the three-dimensional image appear. Relax. Trust your natural ability.

He is flicking between all the pictures and doing this same thing. Something is not quite right . . .

He skims through the messages circulating on social media. The comments are meant to be kind but are seriously unhelpful.

OMG is he gonna shoot her?

There are some messages on Twitter from the police, too, in Spanish and in English, asking people not to take and share photographs, but it is clearly making no difference.

Jesus. A shambles. Matthew skims again through the range of pictures, this time searching news-agency coverage. Some seem better quality, taken by a long-range lens, possibly a press photographer? But most look as if they were taken on phones, perhaps from the window of upper-floor flats opposite the block where Karl is holed up. And then he finds a different shot taken from much higher up. Maybe the top floor of a block of flats, looking down at the window from a different, sharper angle. Now, at last, Matthew sees what

was troubling him in the other photographs.

He takes out his iPad to call up the same image and to zoom in a bit. Even as he is dialling Melanie's number he is emailing this image to her. She has to make sure the Spanish team have seen this.

Jesus Christ . . . they *need* to see this.

Five rings before Melanie picks up. 'Mel. I'm sending a photograph over right now. Karl at the window with his hostage. You have to get a message through to the Spanish team.'

'Matthew?'

'Sorry. Yes. It's Matt. On my way home from hospital.'

'I don't have the picture yet. What's going on? Remember – I'm persona non grata. Practically on gardening leave . . .'

'I don't think it's Anna, Mel.'

'What?'

'The girl with Karl. The girl he's taken hostage. I'm not convinced it's Anna.'

'But that's crazy . . . Oh, wait. The picture's through. OK, so what am I supposed to be seeing here?'

'Shoulder width. Wrong body shape, Mel. A rectangle, not a pear.'

'What?'

'OK. Right.' Matthew tries to calm his voice; realises this is going to sound as if he has finally lost his marbles. 'Sal – she's obsessed with the body shape stuff. What clothes to buy. Anna is a pear. Not fat, not at all . . . a very slim pear.'

'Jesus Christ, Matt. Have you got baby brain or something?'

'No, listen. This is important. I couldn't give a stuff about this, but one night Sal made me look at all this nonsense in a magazine. So I would stop buying her the wrong clothes as presents. Body shape apparently doesn't change much . . . even if you lose or put on weight. It's about bones. Skeleton. Fixed. Anna, from all the photographs her family shared, is a classic pear. Same as my wife. A slim pear. Tiny waist, slim shoulders and tiny upper body – slightly broader hips. This girl, the girl in the flat with Karl, is a totally different body shape. Straight up, straight down. Zoom in and look. Shoulders same width as her hips. No proper waistline. It only shows up in this photograph from the higher angle.'

There is silence for a while.

‘Are you seeing it, Mel? Check back with the file photos of Anna. Please. Compare them. Compare the shoulders.’

Another pause.

‘Christ. I think you might be right . . . But there’s no way the team’s gonna listen to me, blabbering on about body shape. I’m technically off the case until I see the chief and try to talk my way out of my meltdown with DI Halfwit.’

‘So how about phoning your mate . . . Cathy? The family liaison officer. I take it she’s with them? We need to know fast.’

Matthew can hear Melanie take in a long breath.

‘Please, Mel. If I’m right and this isn’t Anna, they need to take a whole different approach. Also – if this isn’t Anna . . .’ A pause. ‘Where the hell is she and what’s Karl playing at?’

A huff. ‘OK. I’ll send this pic to Cathy. See if she will very gently sound out the family. But she may point-blank refuse.’

‘OK. Look, I’m about to make a house call myself on the case. The witness – Ella? I promise to share anything I have if you’ll keep me in the loop. Please.’

‘OK. Though I might be looking for a new job myself.’

‘Don’t say that, Mel. I was banking on you rising through the ranks so I could make a comeback.’ Matthew is surprised to hear himself say this out loud for the first time.

‘You kidding me?’

‘Course I’m kidding.’ He isn’t. ‘OK. Speak to you soon.’

It takes about fifteen minutes to Ella’s home, the rain getting heavier so that he wishes he had thought to put a coat in the car. Matthew checks his watch. He needs to crack on if he’s going to get home in time to get the chores done and a decent night’s kip. According to Ella and all around him, this is soon to be the stuff of dreams. Poor Sally is having trouble breastfeeding and is already talking about switching to formula. Matthew doesn’t mind either way, but is picking up hints that he may well be taking a share of the night feeds. He is starting to wonder how on earth people do it. Work when they have newborns . . .

Pulling up onto the drive of the house, behind a large black BMW, Matthew realises that Ella’s husband must be home. He checks his phone – no

message yet from Melanie, damn – and braces himself for the rain between the car and the porch.

There is no light on in the hall, but after a few moments he can hear an interior door squeak, strained voices, the click of a light and then Ella is opening the door. She looks pale.

‘We’ve been watching it all on the news. Terrible. Have you seen?’

‘Yes.’

Matthew stamps his feet on the doormat. To the right there is a bamboo umbrella stand containing two large golfing umbrellas. A briefcase. The husband definitely home then. Matthew takes in that the briefcase is expensive, the leather well kept. A smart men’s raincoat on the nearest hook – silk lining.

Ella is babbling about the news coverage. How shocking it is for so many pictures to be circulating on social media. Matthew is just nodding, waiting to size up her husband’s attitude.

In the sitting room, the tension is immediate. Tony is introduced, his body language all conflict. Shoulders held tense. He shakes Matthew’s hand but is unblinking, then narrows his eyes, making no effort to conceal that he is weighing Matthew up.

‘I should have told Tony before. I realise that now. We normally tell each other everything, so I feel very bad indeed.’ Ella is looking first at Matthew and then her husband. Ping-pong paranoia. Ella is a very nice woman and Matthew does not like to see her distressed. ‘I was just so sure that the postcards were from Mrs Ballard, you see.’

‘And what do you think, Mr Hill?’

Matthew meets Tony’s stare and takes a deep breath. ‘I think it’s understandable that you would be worried, perhaps sceptical even, about my involvement. That’s why I was happy when Ella suggested this update. I am hoping I can allay any fears.’

‘I’m listening.’

‘I was in the force myself. I have a lot of experience and I still have good contacts. And between these four walls, strictly not to go any further, I think they are making an unholy mess of the Anna Ballard inquiry and I am increasingly glad to be involved. To help you, Ella – obviously. But also, I hope, to help get to the bottom of this case in any way I can.’

‘Well, that’s very noble, I’m sure, but my main worry here is my wife’s safety. That’s what we’re paying you for. Not to solve the Anna Ballard case.

That's for the police team. So – do you think Ella is in any real danger? These postcards?'

'Tony, please.' Ella continues to glance from one to the other. 'We're all worried sick about Anna. Of course we are, Matthew. Have you seen the photograph with the gun to her head? Do you think they will calm it down? Or use a sniper? What do you think? I feel so terrible. So worried. Just think what poor Mrs Ballard must be—'

Tony puts his arm around his wife's shoulders, kissing her forehead to quieten her, and Matthew watches closely. Tony smooths his wife's hair very tenderly and Matthew reassesses the aggression, no longer minding Tony's disapproval. He would be the same, were it Sal. No – it is good that Tony is protective.

'I've involved a colleague I trust, over the postcards. There is no way to be sure at this stage but it is more likely to be someone random who has latched onto the case. There is no evidence of a real threat as things stand. That said, I prefer caution until we know more and I have advised Ella to take care. Is there anything else to update me on? Anything unusual? Anything worrying you?'

Ella for a moment looks flustered. Fidgets with her hair. 'A couple of times I thought someone was watching the shop early in the morning. But it could just be paranoia. Headlights shining into the shop early. It just unnerved me because I'm jumpy.'

'You didn't tell me this.' Tony's eyes are wide with alarm. 'Right. That's it. No more working early in the shop.' He turns to Matthew. 'Back me up here, please. She just won't listen. We've installed new alarms . . . though it's all a bit shambolic.'

'Did you see anyone, Ella? Watching the shop?'

'No. It was just a feeling really. Probably because I've been so upset over all of this.'

'Well, my advice would be to close the shop for a couple of days while this situation pans out in Spain.' Matthew is staring directly at Tony.

'Hallelujah. My thinking exactly.' Tony takes a deep breath.

'But what about my flower orders?'

'Stuff the orders, Ella. I'll ring the customers and say you're ill. Recommend other shops – just for a couple of days.' Tony seems pleased, instantly happier, and signals the way through to the kitchen where he is more polite, offering coffee which Ella begins to make. The TV news is on in this

room, too, and they all glance at it when they hear a newsreader sharing the latest pictures from the flat in Spain.

While Ella is bustling over the coffee grinder and cafetière, Matthew checks his phone. Still no message from Melanie.

As Ella waits for the coffee to stew a while, she turns to Matthew. ‘So will they try to shoot him – Karl? Is that what they’ll do? I find it so unbearable, just watching and waiting.’

‘A negotiator will be trying to talk him down. Persuade him to come out. It’s a waiting game. They won’t opt for intervention unless they have no choice. If it is Anna, let’s remember he has kept her alive for a year.’

‘If it’s Anna? Who the hell could it be if it’s not Anna?’ Tony’s voice is incredulous and Matthew wishes he had not shared this.

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CHAPTER 38

THE FRIEND

‘You still haven’t explained why you feel it’s *your* fault, Sarah.’ Lily has made sandwiches on a large platter with slices of apple and peach, which she sets on top of the dresser in her room. ‘You really need to try to eat something.’

Sarah’s stomach is still unsettled. She looks at the platter, so carefully arranged, and then at her sister. The irony of Lily, all bones beneath her baggy disguise.

‘I don’t know if I can eat. You have some.’ Sarah watches her sister closely but Lily shrugs.

‘I ate earlier.’

Sarah lets the lie go. She scans Lily’s bedroom, at least pleased for this new privacy, fed up with Moon and the others poking their heads around the door and interfering downstairs, but she is sorry to be away from the large television. She flicks between social media and the news updates on her phone but is wishing now she had an iPad so that she could see better. Also a better data package. She has had warning texts that she’s at her limit. No money to top it up.

‘Would you mind calling it up on your laptop, Lily? The coverage?’ Sarah will not call her Saffron. She watches and tries to find a smile as a thank you, as her sister sets up the computer, searching for a rolling news channel.

‘OK. But don’t dodge the question, Sarah. This Karl is clearly a nutter and I’m so very sorry this is so frightening for you – what’s going on in Spain, I mean. But to be perfectly honest, I’m just relieved Dad wasn’t involved. And if Anna upped and went off with this guy Karl . . .’

‘She didn’t up and go off with him.’ Sarah lets this hang in the air and feels suddenly exhausted. It is a bit like that feeling when you stand on a bridge and there is this tiny part of you that wants to jump. To join the water. You know that you shouldn’t but you can’t help the feeling. And you know that there is this really important decision to be made in a split second and it is frightening. The consequence. The thin line between one choice and the other. Just like with the bottle and the pills, though she realises now that this did not end it. Solve it. Just made it go on and on and on.

‘At least, I don’t know if she did. Or if he took her, or spiked her drink or whatever, because the point is I didn’t look out for her. We had a bad row, me and Anna. And the truth is I just don’t know what the hell happened.’ Sarah realises as she listens to her own voice, gabbling suddenly, that she just needs an end to this. However awful and shaming and terrible. And her sister – this shrunken and sad version of the sister she has so missed – is her only hope for a full stop.

Lily sits on the end of her bed, her expression changing. A deep frown, then a sort of twitch of the head.

‘You need to tell me, Sarah. Please.’ Fidgeting with the bands around her wrist again, which makes Sarah want to cry for her. For them both.

There is a long pause. A deep breath that Sarah realises must be her own. And . . . *jump*.

‘We had agreed to stay at the club until about two a.m. and then take a taxi back to the hotel together. I was chatting with Antony to start with and Anna was with Karl. It was OK at first. We felt really grown up. I feel stupid admitting that now, but it’s the truth. But then they both sort of lost interest in us. They seemed to know quite a few people. Just wandered off. Pretty much ignored us.’ Sarah’s voice quietens as she remembers how it felt. How angry she felt. How ashamed and duped at how hard she had tried to make Antony like her on the train . . . How quickly he was off, laughing and flirting with other girls at the club. She had thought when they invited them out that it would be like a double date. She had imagined they would sit, the four of them. Dance. Have fun together. But no . . .

‘I always get it so wrong with boys . . . with men, Lily.’ She is looking up at her sister now. ‘They call me a slag in school.’

‘You are not a slag.’

She can feel tears on her cheeks and closes her eyes, not caring. ‘I just want people to like me.’

She keeps her eyes closed but can hear the creak of the bed as Lily moves to put her arms around her. ‘Shhh. Shhh. Sarah. It’s going to be all right.’

She shakes off the comfort. ‘No. It’s not. Anna came to me at about half past midnight and said that she wanted to go early. She’d had enough. She was tired. Very tipsy. But I was looking for Antony still. I was a bit drunk too, and really cross with him, so I told Anna not to be such a baby. To have another drink and to chill out.’ Sarah wipes her cheek with one hand, the salty taste of the tears now on her lips. ‘That’s why we rowed. She told me she

didn't feel safe anymore and I more or less told her to piss off. To make her own way back.'

'And that's when she suggested contacting Dad?'

'Yeah. She said that maybe we should get him to come to the club and see us back to the hotel. But I said she was being pathetic and if she contacted Dad I would never speak to her again.'

'Did you tell the police this?'

'No. *Of course not.* I lied. I said Anna was the one who didn't turn up for the taxi later . . .' Sarah opens her eyes to try to read her sister's judgement. Lily looks shocked, and Sarah remembers the look of shock on Anna's face, too. *Please. I want to go back to the hotel now. I feel a bit too drunk. Please, Sarah, I'm begging you . . .* She is wondering how much worse all their faces will look when they find out what happened on the train. With Antony.

'Later I couldn't find her. So I had to take a taxi on my own. I thought she would be back in our room already. Cross with me. I thought I would have the chance to get sober. Say sorry. But when she didn't come back to the hotel, I was in this incredible panic at first, that maybe she *had* got in contact with Dad.'

'Jeez.'

'I was so confused, Lily. Back then, I didn't even know if I was wrong to think so badly about Dad. Paranoid. But I started to think – what if Anna did phone his hotel and he came to the club? Met her outside or something. Oh, I don't know, just mad worries firing round my brain because of the way he is, Lily. But I was too scared to tell the police.' She looks directly into Lily's eyes, whose expression says she understands. 'And then Karl and Antony did a bunk and so I thought it was way more likely to be them. And this finally confirms it. That Karl just took her . . . and God knows what . . .' Sarah is openly sobbing now.

'So it *is* my fault. Either way, I messed up, Lily. I completely let Anna down.'

CHAPTER 39

THE FATHER

‘I’m wondering if you should phone the family doctor. Maybe a sedative or something? To help Barbara calm down?’ Cathy, the family liaison officer, is stroking Barbara’s back as she sits, head between her knees, on a chair at the kitchen table.

Henry is standing, hands on both hips, crippled by his own turbulent and twisted emotions. Fear. Guilt. Shame. *You disgust me*. That awful image on the television, which in the end he had to turn away from. That crazy lunatic with a gun to his daughter’s head. All he could think of in that moment was of his own shotgun, which the police have confiscated. Of wanting it back. To point and aim. To shoot him. Karl. Dead. *There. Take that*. In the chest. In the head.

He paces as Cathy soothes his wife and keeps looking up at him for direction.

‘I don’t want a doctor. I don’t want a sedative. I need to know what’s happening. Oh my God. My baby . . . my poor baby.’ Barbara’s voice is rising again and Cathy is shushing her, telling her to breathe calmly. To take long, slow breaths.

‘She has sleeping tablets but she doesn’t like taking those.’ Henry feels his lip trembling as he watches his wife’s shoulders heaving with the strain of trying to maintain control.

‘I really think you should lie down for a bit, Barbara. Upstairs. We’ll bring you any news. As soon as we hear anything at all.’ Cathy is still stroking Barbara’s back. ‘Are you sure you don’t want the doctor?’

Barbara looks around the room then, as if not seeing what is in front of her. ‘No doctor. I want to be in Anna’s room. I’ll lie down in Anna’s room.’ She gets up with an odd and worrying look on her face, trance-like, at this new purpose.

‘Get Jenny to go with her.’ Cathy is directing this at Henry, her eyes wide with concern. Henry, meantime, is helpless. Pacing. Not quite processing the information. ‘Get your daughter to go upstairs. Sit with Barbara. She mustn’t be on her own.’

Cathy’s mobile is ringing once more, and Henry again feels the shudder

that coursed through him when he first saw the picture on the television. Cathy says she must take the call, and so Henry moves back into the sitting room to tell Jenny to go upstairs, please, to help her mother.

Tim stands, clearly wondering what he should do. The television is now muted but the picture is of sports coverage. Henry feels a punch of outrage that the world is moving on already. Less than half an hour since that maniac stood his daughter by the window, gun to her golden hair, and the world has moved on to the football.

‘I really think you’d better go, Tim. Sorry. But it’s all just too much for us.’

Tim just nods, white and shaken, grabbing his coat from the back of the sofa. Henry hears the click of the front door as Tim leaves at last, then moves back into the kitchen, trying to listen in on Cathy’s call. She has gone through to the boot room and closed the door. Infuriating. Her voice is muted by the thick oak door.

Sammy has taken the opportunity to sneak through from the boot room, and sits now at Henry’s feet, eyes pleading for permission to stay with him in the kitchen. Henry looks at his dog. The glint of amber in his dark eyes. The loyalty. The concern, picking up the tension in the room. He is remembering the puppy on the front lawn, yapping and bouncing to and fro as Anna completed cartwheel after cartwheel on the grass. *Look, Daddy. I can do three in a row . . .*

Henry moves even closer, leaning right by the boot room door, but it is hopeless; he still cannot hear. Cathy is whispering. The desperation to know what is going on burns in Henry’s chest like a tearing of the flesh. He closes his eyes. His breath comes loud and laboured through his nose. Sammy is at his side again, nuzzling his leg. *Can I stay, master?* Henry pats his dog’s head and feels something inside him break as the dog’s tail begins to wag.

Finally, Henry moves over to the scrubbed pine table, on automatic pilot, sitting in the high-backed farmhouse chair vacated by his wife. Only now does he notice that the blue-checked cushion normally on the chair is lying on the floor, just under the table. For a moment he becomes fixated on the cushion, trying to decide if he should pick it up. For a few seconds this decision feels momentous; too difficult to make. And then he is telling himself how stupid and futile and ridiculous it is to even think about this; how little it matters if all the cushions are on the floor. Every stupid thing in this stupid room on the floor. He glances around, clocking all the china, the plates and the jugs and the bowls, and the paraphernalia on the dresser, thinking for a moment that he would like to sweep his arm across it all. Send it all to the

floor, to join the cushion. At last there is the familiar squeak of the boot room door, Sammy standing, tail stilled, wondering if he is going to be exiled.

‘That was one of my colleagues.’ Cathy walks across the room to stand alongside him.

‘News from Spain? From the team? What the hell are they waiting for? Don’t they have tear gas or something? When are they going to end this?’ Henry is surprised at his tone, which is more leaden than angry, not quite matching the words. His head feels the same and he lets it hang down again, looking back at the cushion, noticing a small stain in the left upper corner. Ketchup probably. Another image that makes him close his eyes. Anna lathering ketchup on a bacon sandwich.

‘Nothing more from abroad. No. But there is something . . .’ Cathy’s tone is unusually hesitant. A pause.

‘What now? A ransom?’ He has been waiting for this, actually, and opens his eyes. ‘Because if he wants money, we can get money. As much as he wants. We can sell the farm.’ Henry’s mind is suddenly racing, thinking of all the people he might ring. Who might chip in. Lend. Help.

‘No. Not a ransom. That’s not something the team in Spain would want to countenance, anyway . . .’

Stupid of him. How did he think that would play out? Henry stops all the imaginary calls to friends and banks. The local church. The online appeal for cash. He lets go of the scene in his head. A bag of money for Karl. Anna being released from a car, running towards him. *Daddy* . . .

His mind is exhausted from all the chopping and changing. The runaway ideas. The hopes raised and dashed. The horrible imaginings. From the news. All these blessed pictures on social media. The police aren’t going to let Karl go, ransom or no ransom. There is no obvious way to make Anna safe. Nothing he can do. That burning in his chest again. Fists clenched tight, eyes fixed again on the cushion.

‘I was wondering if I could ask you to look at a photograph, Mr Ballard.’

Henry notices the formality. Cathy has encouraged them to use her first name. She always calls Barbara by hers. At first she called him Henry, all tea and sympathy and tilting of the head. But since the barn and the shotgun and the interview, he is Mr Ballard. Will probably stay Mr Ballard from here on – a whisker from suspect status – until this is all resolved.

You disgust me, Dad.

‘This photograph, Mr Ballard. It hasn’t been shared widely. I should warn you, it’s another shot of Karl at the window with the gun. The very upsetting image. The one that was understandably too much for your wife. But it’s taken from a different angle. And it would help if you would look at it very carefully for me. If you think you’re up to that?’

‘Of course I’m up to it.’ A lie. Henry braces himself. He does not want to look.

Cathy passes him not her iPhone, but her larger iPad.

‘It’s a shot taken from the flats opposite. From a higher angle. It’s been tidied up a bit and there’s a zoom.’ She sweeps her finger across the screen to show him the second version.

Henry feels his lip trembling. ‘So what am I supposed to say? Supposed to be seeing?’ Torture. He doesn’t want to look at it. The gun. The hair.

‘Karl has refused to let his hostage speak to the negotiator. Also, he hasn’t sent a photograph through to the police team, which they have requested several times. It’s standard procedure. To calm things down and to reassure that the hostage is OK. It’s an exchange process. Bartering. If you send us a photograph or let us speak to the hostage, we will do this . . . Send in food, or another phone, or headache tablets or asthma inhalers or whatever it is he needs.’

The hostage? Why is she saying that? Why isn’t she calling her Anna? How dare she. This is his daughter. She should use her name . . .

‘What I’m asking is this. From this photograph, how sure can you be, Mr Ballard, that this is definitely Anna?’

And now Henry’s head is in a whirl. Is she serious? A maniac on a train talks his daughter into some seedy club after her theatre trip. He gets her drunk and God knows what. He kidnaps her. He takes her to Spain. He holes up in a flat with a gun and . . .

‘Please look at the photograph very carefully. Especially the girl’s body shape. Her waist. The width of her shoulders in particular. Is that Anna?’

Henry looks at the image, feeling the ache of his frown. Shape? What does she mean – shape? Only in this moment does he realise he has a terrible headache. Maybe a migraine; he has had it for hours now, ever since the police station.

The photograph is grainy, not good quality, especially in the zoomed version. The hair is definitely Anna’s.

‘I don’t understand. Who the hell else could this be?’

‘Please. Just look carefully.’

Henry stares at the girl, back to the window with a gun to her head. He finds that he is rocking his body now. He is thinking of Anna facing away from him, looking out of the kitchen window. *Look, Daddy, there’s that magpie, back again . . .*

What is he supposed to be seeing in this picture? Body shape? What kind of person asks a father to think about his daughter’s body shape?

In this photograph, Anna is wearing a tight jumper. Grey, though that might be distorted by the camera, the picture almost certainly taken on a phone.

Henry looks, as instructed, at the waist. The shoulders.

A jarring. Something not right. Oh my God . . .

‘Are you saying she might be pregnant? Is that what you’re implying?’ Henry is fighting very hard not to lose it. He does not want to lose control in front of this woman. He looks again at the photograph and again feels the jarring. Something he cannot quite understand.

‘No. That’s not what I mean to imply. Her shape. Shoulders. Waist. We all have a set shape, Mr Ballard – a ratio which doesn’t change even when we lose weight or put on weight. Or even pregnancy, though that isn’t what I meant at all. Shoulder-to-hip ratio. Does this look like Anna to you?’

And now Henry is holding his breath as the enormity of the question and the consequence is sinking in. ‘I think we need to call Jenny down here.’

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CHAPTER 40

THE WITNESS

I am relieved that Tony has finally gone upstairs to change.

‘He doesn’t mean to be like that.’ I am staring at Matthew, but my thoughts have followed my husband upstairs, watching him put his suit carrier behind the door. His toiletry bag back in the bathroom. Tired. Sitting on the bed. Worried for me.

‘No, don’t apologise. It’s good that he’s protective. I’d be exactly the same if it were my wife, and I’m actually very glad we’ve met now. It’s better. For you, I mean.’

I smile at this as Luke comes into the kitchen, rummaging in the cupboard for the biscuit barrel. I consider stopping him; I really should make something proper to eat, but the strain of everything has thrown me.

‘I’m sorry, Matthew. How rude of me – I haven’t even asked about the baby and your wife. How are they doing?’

The change in Matthew’s face is immediate, that bright and bemused sense of pride and disbelief, the punch-drunk expression of wonderment you carry in those early days. It’s touching. ‘Great, thank you. Really great. She had a C-section so is a bit fed up and a bit sore. Stuck in hospital for a few days.’

‘Tell her to make the most of the rest. This is Luke, by the way. My son. Luke – this is the private investigator. Matthew. Remember I told you?’

I watch closely as Luke eyes Matthew with a wariness to match his father’s. I feel defensive of both Tony and Luke suddenly. Matthew is right. It is good that they look out for me. I think of all that Luke has been through these past few weeks with his girlfriend, and feel disloyal and foolish for my suspicions over the stupid map-magnifier. How on earth could I have gotten myself into such a muddle? I will not tell Matthew and I will not challenge Luke. Maybe the wretched thing was in my own pocket somehow. Yes. Maybe *I* was the one who dropped it.

‘Are we having supper?’ Luke is blanking Matthew and staring at me.

Sometimes I wonder if life would have been easier for Luke with a sibling. Someone to confide in. Nearer his own age. We did try for another child. They never found anything wrong but it just never happened.

‘To be honest, I think I’ll order something in. Do you fancy Chinese, Luke?’

‘Great.’

Once he has left the room, I confide in Matthew just how big a trial it has been for the whole family this past year. My fault. Me not being myself; so preoccupied with this case, especially since my name was leaked. The wretched postcards. Longing for it all to *end*.

‘Are you sure there isn’t anything else you need to tell me? About someone watching the shop? You didn’t notice a car colour? Anyone odd hanging around? At the shop? Or here?’

‘No. Just an odd feeling, really. You know – that sensation when you feel someone is watching. Like I say, I’ve been so jumpy. Probably paranoia because of those stupid postcards.’

‘OK. Well, I’m sorry, Ella, but for now I’d better go.’ Matthew is checking his watch.

‘You’d be welcome to stay. Share the takeaway?’ Even as the words slip from my mouth I regret them.

‘No. Very kind but I have chores to do. But you know you can call me any time. If anything happens. If anything worries you.’

‘Thank you.’ I find I am embarrassed by the extremity of my relief that he will not be staying for the meal. It will be so much more relaxing for Tony and Luke. I really must learn to put my family before my blessed manners. I like Matthew, but I have to remember this is his job. I switch the channel on the television so we can just quickly check there is no update from Spain before Matthew leaves. As he reaches into his pocket for his car keys, I hear a text buzz on his phone.

‘Is it the case?’

He nods and is reading, his face darkening, before looking up at me.

‘OK. So this is in the strictest confidence, Ella. But there is some quite difficult news. I suspect it will be a while before this breaks openly. But I have a contact in touch with the Ballard family and . . . Well. I feel you should know this now.’

I brace myself, muscles taut in my stomach. Also my arms, palms pressed flat into my thighs. I am looking at the television, where the shots of the flat in Spain show that the curtains are now drawn. The scrolling headline along the bottom of the screen says there have been no new developments. But I am afraid that Matthew is going to tell me the worst. The bubble of hope

burst.

‘Is she dead? Has he killed her?’

‘No, Ella. The woman in the flat. The hostage. It isn’t Anna. We have no idea what the hell Karl is playing at. But it *isn’t* Anna.’

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CHAPTER 41

THE FRIEND

Sarah is lying in Lily's bed, staring at her sister asleep on the blow-up mattress alongside. Lily is doing the same sweet thing she did as a small child, the index finger of her right hand pressing the tip of her nose. When they were little, Sarah would tease her.

Why do you do that, Lily? Push your nose up when you sleep?

Helps me breathe better.

That's ridiculous.

I don't care.

The bracelets are still around Lily's wrist, and Sarah is wondering if she at least takes them off in the shower. Moon popped in earlier; Sarah is certain now that they are an item, but she is relieved he has backed off for now. Maybe Lily had a word when Sarah took a bath.

Sarah is exhausted, and though the bath was soothing, she always knew she would struggle to sleep. She wanted to take the mattress on the floor but Lily insisted. Even managed a joke. *I can keep an eye out for monsters under the bed.*

The room is thankfully not in pitch darkness. There is a small pane of glass above the door, letting in gentle light from the landing. Lily explained that a couple of others in the house suffer insomnia and bad dreams, so a gentle light is plugged in on the landing so they don't feel afraid when they have to get up in the night.

Caroline, the woman who owns the house, is apparently returning in the morning and Sarah is nervous. She needs to ask if she can stay a while. She can't bear the thought of returning to her mother, not after all she has learned from Lily. There have been more text messages, pleading for her to come home, but Sarah has been curt with her replies, saying only that she is fine and that she is with Lily. *Leave me be.*

But Sarah is torn – like Lily, she is relieved that her father is not involved in Anna's disappearance and yet it is a temporary relief, not a full stop. They surely have to do *something* about their father. They can't just pretend that the past didn't happen. What if he targets someone else? Won't that become partly their fault if they don't step up?

Sarah can't believe that their mother wouldn't believe or support Lily when she told her. And now she feels her eyes scrunched up tight as she realises she should have spoken up herself – done more to reach out to Lily, rather than blaming her for abandoning the family.

She moves as quietly as possible onto her back and tries to calm her thoughts, to examine the shadows around the room again. In the corner there is a shop dummy made of some kind of bamboo that Lily uses as a clothes stand, draped mostly with scarves and a patchwork poncho. In daylight she had admired it – *very boho* – but in the shadows it looks foreboding, like a headless person, and Sarah has to concentrate hard to pick out and identify all the items individually to make them less ominous. Scarf. Scarf. Poncho. *Just clothes, Sarah.*

And now, uncomfortable already on her back, she moves onto her side to examine the robe on the back of the door. It is so long that it trails on the floor, and Sarah finds herself thinking that they should move the hook higher up on the door. Yes. Just a few inches and the robe won't get stuck under the door when it's opened.

Then it is suddenly all confusion. Sunlight. The swish of curtains. A tinkling of glasses or crockery. Distant voices. By some miracle she has slept. Sarah can't believe it. There is a rattling of china right alongside her, and Lily has a wooden tray with two pretty cups of coffee and a plate of something triangular and ominously green.

'Avocado on toast. No excuses. You really must eat something today, Sarah.'

Sarah yawns and stretches. 'OK. Goodness. I can't believe I finally fell off.' She looks at the tray and reaches for a slice of the toast. 'I will if you will.' She dips her head to signal that Lily should have the other slice.

Her sister narrows her eyes, then takes the piece of toast and sits on the floor, pushing the mattress out of the way.

'I honestly didn't think I would sleep. Last thing I remember it was about three a.m.' Still Sarah's voice is distorted by yawning. 'So do you think Caroline will let me stay a bit? I can look for a job in a café or something.'

'I don't know. But I'll ask. Only for the summer, mind. You need to get cracking with your A levels.'

'Not sure I'll bother now.'

'Please don't say that, Sarah. I'm only asking if you can stay if you promise you'll finish your exams.'

Sarah shrugs. The toast is nice. The surprise of lots of pepper on the avocado. Lemon, too. Popping the final piece into her mouth, she reaches down to the floor to pick up her phone. A string of messages. Sarah sits up, leaning back against the wooden headboard and skims through them.

Oh God . . .

She can't take this in. Not Anna? How the hell can it not be Anna? What kind of new madness is this? There are messages from Jenny, from Tim, from Paul and other friends, too . . .

She swipes to a news app and asks Lily to put up the news feed on her laptop again.

'They're saying it's not Anna. The girl in the flat in Spain.'

'What?'

It takes a few minutes before the sound is up on the laptop. Lily and Sarah squeeze together on the edge of the bed, shoulders touching, to hear the reporter outside the flat in Spain confirm that the drama is finally over. Karl is now in custody, being questioned by police.

It's been confirmed that the young woman allegedly being held hostage by Karl is not the missing English girl Anna Ballard. Both Karl and the blonde woman in the flat are unharmed. Police are saying nothing further at the moment.

'Not Anna?' Lily is pale. 'This doesn't make any sense at all.'

Sarah feels her hands come up to her mouth – her index fingers pressing into her lips. She can feel her sister trembling through the touching of their shoulders.

'You know what this means, Lily?'

Her sister leans forward, head in her hands, and Sarah gently rubs her back as Lily begins to cry.

'I'm so sorry, darling. I know it's awful, Lily. I know it's not what you want, but we have no choice now.'

Lily carries on crying, and Sarah has no idea how to comfort her. They both know what they have to do.

They have to go to the police about their father now. They have no choice. Sarah has to tell them everything.

CHAPTER 42

THE FATHER

The next week sees a heatwave. A great sweeping ‘high’ on every forecast. Henry watches it with a quiet fury. The only time the weather people get it spot on – when you can look out the window and call it yourself. His daughter, meantime, is completely forgotten. No longer the headline. The local news is full instead of temperature charts, with chuffed tourist officers babbling about records being broken and how the staycation is back in fashion. *The best season in years*. All around Devon and Cornwall, faces turn a golden brown to match the grass.

Today there is a news report about dolphins being seen more regularly and in bigger numbers off the coast, and some marine biologist is saying there could be more sharks soon. Global warming.

‘Global warming – yeah, right.’ Henry is packing some more of his clothes into another suitcase, the TV on quietly in the corner of the bedroom. Every time he returns to the house for more belongings, he drags things out as long as possible, hoping that Barbara’s resolve will weaken. That she will make tea. Talk to him. Let him stay. But no. Her voice is now shouting up the stairs. She would like him to hurry up, please. To get his things before Jenny gets home. Their older daughter is out with Tim and Paul, apparently. Barbara says the boys have been her rock since things spiralled so terribly.

And now we are all back in the most appalling limbo, Henry thinks as he zips his case. *Anna is still gone. The news obsessed with the wretched weather. And I am in exile.*

Back downstairs, he tries one more time.

‘Can’t we at least talk, Barbara? Try again? For Jenny?’

‘Try? You have the nerve to ask me to try? After you practically blow your head off in the barn, and then I find out you have been putting it about on our very doorstep. Off with some local whore while our daughter . . .’

Henry still has no idea how Barbara has found out about his fling. She doesn’t know who yet, thank God, but she’s put the pieces together somehow. He suspects Cathy has deliberately let it slip, though she firmly denies this. Since the Spain debacle, their family liaison officer is no longer with them as much. Just checks in daily for a coffee and a chat. Probably embarrassed about the complete pig’s ear the police have made of the whole inquiry.

The Spain ‘siege’ turned out to be no such thing. They learned that the blonde in the flat with Karl was his new girlfriend. The two of them staged the whole hostage thing to try to negotiate for a getaway car. Made it up as they went along when the police first turned up to arrest Karl after the tip-off.

All the Ballards have been told since is that Karl seems to have an alibi for the night Anna went missing. Antony has turned up on the same building site in Spain, too. Both now in custody. Both denying any involvement whatsoever in Anna’s disappearance. Their story is that they lost interest in the two girls within the first hour at the club, and have no idea what happened to them. The lads say they went to a party with friends after the club in Vauxhall, which was always their plan. This new information has been cross-checked with witnesses and CCTV, and so far all the images and statements seem to confirm this story. To date, the Met team have not been able to find any gaps in the timeline that would suggest any involvement in Anna’s disappearance.

The two men say they only did a runner early the next morning for fear of being blamed or framed. They believed they would go straight back inside. So mates provided false passports and a boat crossing to France. Forensic teams have checked the flat where the party was held. New alibis are still being grilled. But so far – zilch. Karl’s girlfriend, the so-called hostage, is an English waitress he met in a bar six months back.

The Ballards have been assured Karl and Antony will almost certainly be heading back to jail for jumping parole and for Karl’s fake siege. But as far as Anna is concerned? The police seem slowly to be dismissing the two men as suspects. And they have no other leads. The DI is back in London, apparently distracted yet again by his serial killer case.

So, what the hell now? Henry keeps asking.

We are continuing enquiries. The case is very much still live . . .

In this heat, Henry is slowly facing his greatest fear. That they will never find their daughter; never find out what happened. To imagine this as his future – all their futures – is unbearable. He sees it in Jenny’s eyes, too. And his wife’s.

In this terrible limbo, Barbara has finally given in to antidepressants but seems to be suffering severe mood swings as a result. According to Jenny, the problem is that she refuses to take them every day, and the inconsistency in the dose is playing havoc with her system. Henry never knows how he will find her: dull and quiet, with all the light gone out of her eyes; or manic, cleaning the house over and over and shouting at him whenever he tries to reason with her.

‘You should see the doctor again, Barbara.’

‘It’s no longer any of your business what I do, Henry.’

He feels this punch inside. Not just guilt, he finds, but a deep and all-pervading sadness.

‘I still love you, Barbara.’ As he says this, he realises much too late that it is true, and he wishes he could turn back the clock to dilute his irritation, his dissatisfaction with this life – farmer turned campsite manager.

‘Well, lucky old me, eh?’

‘I’m not giving up on this family, Barbara. We have to think about Jenny.’

‘What family, Henry?’ She spits this out at him. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, we don’t have a family anymore. Anna is gone, and I don’t know that we are ever going to get her back. And Tim and Paul are thinking more about Jenny’s needs than you ever did.’

‘That’s not fair.’

‘Fair? I’ll tell you what’s not fair – that you don’t even have the guts or the decency to tell me who you were with when our daughter went missing.’

Sammy is standing by Henry’s side, and he can feel the tension in the dog’s posture. Tail down. Eyes down.

‘Oh, just get lost, will you, Henry. And take your dog with you.’

‘I’ll be in touch.’

‘Can’t wait.’

Henry wheels the suitcase behind him out to the Land Rover, and pretends it is heavy as he lifts it into the back. The truth is he is taking only a few items of clothing at a time, for the excuse to return, still hoping that Barbara will reconsider. He is finding it hard to believe that this is it.

All gone.

He glances one more time at the front lawn, closes his eyes to that picture of Anna turning cartwheels then sitting and smiling. Waving at him.

He feels his fingers flicker, wanting to wave back at her. Finally he pushes his lips together very, very tightly, opens his eyes and drives along the narrow approach road out to the holiday lets – one of the larger, original barns converted into a row of four units. For now, Henry is using one of the two-beds. It feels like playing at life rather than actually living it, not least because the neighbouring three units are full of holidaymakers, and the yard full of

bodyboards, wetsuits, laughter and an awful lot of sand.

Henry takes the suitcase into the sad little bedroom with its neutral walls, neutral bedding and fake oak floor. Barbara spent a lot of time explaining to him during the conversion that ‘practicality’ was the watchword. Also ROI, which he learned stands for ‘return on investment’. The fittings and fixtures needed to be neutral, hard-wearing and easily maintained, she explained. It was not about personal taste or personal choice but about ROI. He stares down at the ‘easily maintained’ floor and thinks of the richer, original oak floors in the upstairs of the farmhouse. The twists and the knots. The lumps and the bumps.

Henry lies on the bed and stares at the ceiling. He thinks of his preferred world. The real world he still clings to. The hay sorted, thanks to the weather. The lambs weaned and turned out onto the grass. What next? He must decide whether to begin ploughing the upper fields for next year’s cereals. Should he even bother? Is all this playing at farming going to continue, even? He looks around the room. The tiny pine wardrobe. The matching chest of drawers and bedside table. All too new. Too orange in tone.

He thinks of Sammy next door in his bed in the ‘easily maintained’ kitchen, the poor dog as utterly miserable and confused as he is. *What are we doing here, master?* those amber eyes ask every day. He closes his own and wills sleep to come, but there is the screech of the doorbell. Another horribly modern touch. High and shrill, unlike the older bell system at the farmhouse.

Who the hell . . . ?

Henry pauses, hoping they will go away, but the shrill noise is repeated. Then a third time. A fourth. Eventually he gets up to see his visitor peering through the central glass pane in the front door.

‘Oh goodness. Jenny. Jenny, come in. Sorry. I didn’t realise it would be you.’

His daughter glances around the mess that is his open-plan living. A pile of dirty crockery in the sink because Henry keeps forgetting to buy tablets for the dishwasher. His overalls thrown over the kitchen table and his muddy boot prints across the floor.

She marches across to the fridge and looks inside. She sniffs the out-of-date milk and shakes her head. The only other contents are some pre-packed sandwiches and two multipacks, one of sausage rolls and one of pork pies, bought from the local garage.

‘Right. That’s it. I can’t bear to see you like this. We’re going shopping together and then I’m cooking supper. Come on.’

‘No, love. You don’t need to do this. I said I’m fine.’

‘You’re not fine. Come on.’ She is jangling the keys to her car – a battered Fiesta. Henry bought it for the girls to share. Jenny passed her test first time, and Anna was due to start her driving lessons soon. Henry tries very hard not to think of this. He was actually planning to stretch to a second car down the line, so they could have one each.



An hour later and back from the local supermarket, Henry watches his daughter checking all the cupboards for pots and pans to make a bolognaise.

‘I’m being lazy using a jar of sauce but it’ll taste all right. Not as good as Mum’s, but better than pork pies.’

She is sizzling onion and garlic in a pan, and he watches her brown the meat and add the sauce, ashamed of his own inadequacy and wondering when she learned to cook. He hadn’t noticed.

‘I expect you think I’m a right old dinosaur. Not being able to cook.’

‘Wasn’t any need, up until now. Was there?’ Jenny looks pale and Henry is wondering what it is she has really come to say. He can sense it. The holding back. They tiptoe around each other while the food cooks, and he doesn’t push.

The meal is good and Henry is grateful and guilty all at once.

‘I forgot Parmesan, Dad.’

‘Never mind. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. Doesn’t feel right at all – you looking after me.’

‘So, is it true? You had an affair? Mum won’t say much. She just lies in bed a lot of the day now. She’s been sleeping in Anna’s room. Curled up with her old jumpers.’

‘Oh, darling, I’m so, so sorry you’re having to deal with this on your own, on top of everything.’ Henry takes a deep breath. He cannot look at her. ‘OK, I admit it. I was a stupid idiot and I really regret it but it didn’t mean anything. I promise you. I love your mum. And you mustn’t blame her for being so upset. She has every right.’

‘Do you think she will forgive you? Let you home?’ There is a wobble to her voice and Henry can hardly bear it. ‘It just feels as if everything is gone.’

Henry puts his hand out to take his daughter’s. The gesture makes her start to cry, and next she is saying something he cannot understand.

‘I’ve just had this awful message from Sarah, too. She’s still with her sister in Devon. And she says . . .’ Jenny looks into her father’s face, tears dripping unchecked down her own.

‘Look – Sarah won’t say why. She won’t give me any details. But she says we have a right to know that the police in London might be questioning her *father*. Over Anna.’

‘Bob? Sarah’s dad – Bob?’

‘Yes.’

‘But why? I don’t understand.’

‘I don’t know either. I mean – they questioned you. Is it that they question all the dads? Is that all it is?’

‘I don’t know. Bob? But why now? Bob’s been gone for years. I got the impression he wasn’t even in touch with his family.’

Henry feels the confusion shaping his new expression. The muscles straining with puzzlement. He glances across the floor from spot to spot. His wellingtons. The dog back in his basket. The empty shopping bags. A memory of Sarah and her parents when she was little at the village fair. Sarah and Anna on a ride together, new friends, with the four parents making small talk. Bob – tall and aloof. Handsome. A bit cocky. From the off Henry didn’t like him.

And then he remembers something else: how Bob was always taking photographs. Endless photographs of all the children. The family didn’t seem to have a lot of money but Bob had this expensive camera with lots of lenses. Proper camera bag. Barbara said it was nice that he wanted the memories but Henry thought it was a bit odd. Was rather glad when Bob left the village.

No. Surely not?

There is a strange new sensation in Henry’s stomach.

‘I need to phone Melanie Sanders. That nice DS. She’s back at work now. She’ll tell me what’s going on.’ Henry is standing to take out his mobile with one hand and raking his fingers through his hair with the other.

‘And you need to phone Sarah again. Go on, Jenny. Please. Push her to tell you what’s going on. Ring her now.’

But Jenny doesn’t move. Just staring at him, tears still dripping from her chin. ‘There’s something else, Dad.’

WATCHING . . .

Thursday

This is not good. Not good at all.

I don't like this heat. And she doesn't like it, either . . .

I have to think very, very carefully now. Must not let myself get muddled. I'm not good when I get muddled.

Most important of all, I need to stop all these wretched people, thinking that this has something to do with them when it has absolutely nothing to do with them . . .

Is none of their business.

If they had just let us be, it would have been all right. But people are so stupid. So now I have to do something to make it all stop.

No choice.

Their fault, not mine.

No choice . . .

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CHAPTER 43

THE WITNESS

So often this past year I have wondered what exactly makes us the way we are. I don't just mean the nature/nurture thing, I mean the sum of our personality and the decisions we make. All the thoughts that fire around our brain, even when we don't want them to. How we handle the issues of conscience and responsibility. Why I blame myself when others wouldn't.

Tony says my biggest problem is that I overthink things, that I take the world on my shoulders, and I just need to relax more and stop going over everything. I sometimes wonder if I would be a different kind of person if I could just learn the trick to do this. To stop with the analysing and concentrate on one thing at a time. But my brain simply doesn't work like that. Never has. I'm always thinking, thinking, thinking. A million things competing all at the same time. Constant and exhausting buzz.

Take today. Like everyone else, I am too hot, but I feel just a little bit embarrassed in short sleeves because my arms are not what they used to be. As I unpack the flowers, I keep getting a glimpse of myself in the mirror set up on the wall to check the bridal bouquets. How they look held at waist height. So that right now I am thinking not just of the flowers and the heat but of my fat arms – in fact, I have all of the following thoughts at the very same time. That I should put something up on the blog about how to keep flowers fresh in this weather. Yes. People like tips. That I need to sort out the flower presses with the stock that has 'gone over' in the heat, to make up some pretty labels and cards for the window. That I really don't like the way my arms look in the mirror here at the back of the shop and I wish I had brought a shirt. That I am glad Luke reckons he has found a couple of people who could take over his job. He's going to vet them first, then introduce them to me. Quite frankly, I would rather handle the whole thing myself, but there's been no response yet to my sign in the window and I don't like to burst his bubble. It seems to make him feel better to be helping with a replacement, so I am letting it be.

I am also thinking that I wish Tony didn't have to be away again. That we need to get someone in to check the boiler at home. That I need to do a sign for the window, recommending flowers that do well in this weather.

That it is not my fault after all, about Anna. But it still feels it somehow. I just can't let it go.

See what I mean? All these thoughts, all at the same time. Small wonder I get so many headaches.

I have ordered in extra lisianthus and roses this week, as both do well together and in these hot conditions. They're long-lasting and good value and very stylish. I must remember to put that on the blog, too. Personally, I like all white, but the purple lisianthus are gorgeous, so I've ordered more of both. I'll put most in the cooler, with a few on display to show how versatile they can be. They look so different in varying vase heights.

I am trying not to bother Matthew, not least because he is supposed to be taking a break now that his new family is home, but also because my part in this whole terrible case is technically over.

I still find it hard to believe. Karl and Antony apparently in the clear over Anna. A complete shock to everyone, me especially. Matthew says this kind of thing happens a lot during big investigations, a sudden and unexpected twist, which is why you always have to keep such an open mind.

Tony, in the meantime, sees it all more simply; he says I now need to just put the whole thing behind me. *You see. Not your fault at all. Never was, Ella.*

The problem is that I still keep thinking about her. Anna. That beautiful picture from her Facebook page, hair blowing back in the wind. Where is she? What happened to her really? I worry now, more than ever, that we may never find out.

Goodness – it's three o'clock already, and with all the urgent work done, I decide to stop this; to pop home to get a light shirt to cover my arms. Silly, I know . . . but we are who we are.

I finally make it home, and as I pull into the drive I notice that the curtains upstairs are still drawn. I must have forgotten them when I left. The garden's surviving surprisingly well in this heat. You get a few people raising their eyebrows when I pop the sprinkler on in the evening, but there's no ban so I don't really see why not. We pay the bill.

The porch door jams a little as I try to open it – a couple of those advertising booklets. I wish they wouldn't leave them. Such a waste of trees. I've registered for that system which is supposed to block junk mail. It's reduced the flow a bit but there's still a lot hand-delivered, which is infuriating.

Inside, I notice Luke has popped the pile of mail on the little bookcase by the front window, and I skim through it. Phone bill. Someone who reckons we might be interested in new windows. *No, thank you.* A letter from the bank

– that will be the interest rate for our ISAs. Down again. Then I see it. The horrid, familiar, dark envelope, cheap and thin and nasty, with the pale address label stuck on the front.

I lean back against the wall because I simply don't understand. It's over now. Finished. I didn't do anything wrong. Karl and Antony were *not* involved, so nor am I, not really.

My heart pounding, I pause to remind myself of Matthew's instructions. I move into the kitchen and fetch the little box of protective gloves and the evidence bags provided by the police. For a moment I think about popping the envelope inside, unopened, but I find that I can't do that. I have to know why someone would still do this to me. I mean – they must surely have heard on the news. That it wasn't Karl and Antony after all. So why would they still do this? Why?

With the gloves on, I rip it open. Same as before. Can hear my breath now. Find myself looking around the hall, through to the kitchen again. Can just see through to confirm that the bolt is across the back door. Good.

The postcard is black again. Letters cut out from magazines and stuck on. Messy. Not in a straight line.

I AM WATCHING YOU.

I stare at it, reading it over and over as I take out my mobile from my handbag, trying to calm my breathing as I dial Matthew's number.

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CHAPTER 44

THE FRIEND

Sarah has been dreading this meeting and sits at the kitchen table, tapping her nails against her mug of coffee.

The past few days – all the long hours with the police – have been utterly exhausting. Caroline, the linchpin of this home, refuge, commune or whatever you want to call it, has been kind and supportive and very obviously a rock for Lily, certainly more helpful than Sarah, who realises only now how desperately she underestimated just how bad going to the police would be.

She had expected swift progress – that the police would arrest her father and get answers about Anna quickly. But they can't seem to find him . . .

She thought, also, that she and Lily would be interviewed together and would be able to support each other, sisters side by side, but she found out too late this is not allowed because of rules to ensure one witness does not lead another. Separate evidence. Separate stories. Separate spells in the special little unit with its soft green sofa and a basket of toys in the corner which haunted Sarah as she realised, with a horrible tingling of her skin, that they were for young children being interviewed about equally horrid things.

The police leading the inquiry into Anna's disappearance were first up. She had to tell them the truth. About the sex on the train and her obsession with Antony. About the row in the club, how she told Anna not to be a baby and pretty much lost track of her from about half past midnight. That Sarah had refused to get the taxi with her when Anna wanted to go back to the hotel. Assumed Anna would be asleep when she got back there herself . . .

Next, the awful truth about her dad. The thing he did when she started her period. The text message the night Anna went missing that she had shown to Anna – asking for them to meet him at the bar of his hotel. The reason Sarah is once more worried he might somehow be involved with Anna.

Then it was poor Lily's turn. Sarah watched her sister being led into the room with the green sofa, while she and Caroline waited outside. Everyone was almost too kind. Just a little bit too fussy. *Tea? Biscuits?* Lots of offers of magazines and more drinks. But it all took ages and ages and ages.

'So, Sarah. Thank you for agreeing to this chat. It's just we need to make some decisions together.' Caroline has her hands cupped around her own mug. The familiar aroma of green tea.

‘Have they found my dad?’

Caroline shakes her head. ‘At least, they’re not telling us if they have.’ Sarah cannot stop looking at the bands on Caroline’s own wrists. It’s not difficult to work out why she runs this place.

‘So, the thing is, I’ve been talking to social services. About going forward now.’

This is unexpected. A sweep of dread through Sarah. Social services? She had no idea this place would liaise with social services. She thought it was independent. The reason it was so off-piste. Own rules. Own oddball way of doing things. No pressure to involve the police unless you want to.

‘It’s because of your age, Sarah,’ Caroline says, as if reading her thoughts. ‘And the fact that your mother wants you home. It complicates things.’

‘I don’t want to see my mother. Can I stay here, *please*? With Lily?’

Caroline nods, and Sarah finds that she is crying with the sudden relief, no longer hearing properly as Caroline goes on to explain about enrolling her in a local sixth form. The various protocols and conditions. That she will sort it all out.

Caroline reaches out to take Sarah’s hands and tilts her head. ‘Lily still has problems with her anorexia, and I am very concerned about how a trial over your dad – if it gets to that stage – will impact on her. So I need you to cooperate with my house rules if we take this forward. Not talking to people about why we are here – that sort of thing.’

‘Will I have to wear the bracelets and have a new name?’ Sarah has no idea why she asks this so quickly. It sounds rude and ungrateful. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to say that.’

But Caroline is laughing, which makes Sarah relax even more, the relief now reaching the tips of her fingers. Her toes. Her cheeks flushing.

‘You find all that a bit kooky, Sarah?’

‘A bit.’

‘No pressure, but you might find both help. The bracelets are terrific for easing tension. Something to fiddle with when you feel overwhelmed. I introduced them to help people who self-harm.’

Sarah is suddenly thinking of the marks on her sister’s arms before she left home.

‘What about the names? Why did you pick Saffron for Lily?’

‘Because she came here like someone who wanted to be invisible. To disappear. That’s why she stopped eating. And then one day, when I saw her painting, I saw this entirely different person. This vivid energy and colour on the page. Spicy. Evocative. Memorable. “Look at me.” And I felt that was who she was meant to be.’

Sarah cannot stop her tears, and Caroline squeezes her hands very gently.

‘There is a lot to sort out. Your mother wants contact and we will need to liaise very carefully over that. But if you accept my offer and you wanted a new name’ – again Caroline seems to be reading her mind – ‘I would suggest Dawn. Just something for you to think about.’

‘Why Dawn?’

‘Because you don’t like yourself very much, Sarah. And no girl of seventeen should hate themselves. Especially when they have experienced what you have. You need a fresh start, lovely. In my opinion, and it is just my opinion, you need the sun to come up.’

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CHAPTER 45

THE WITNESS

Trends are such a funny thing. Greenery is back, big time. Suddenly we can't get enough glossy greenery in to bulk out our bouquets and displays. All the restaurants and the brides want it everywhere. Green table runners. Green arches for the doorways. Luscious leaves everywhere. It is a bit like the popularity of baby names. Trends creep up on you. Suddenly everyone is called Amelia. Suddenly everyone wants *greenery*.

I don't mind, actually. Change is good and I enjoy gathering my own greenery from the garden and local lanes. I have always grown lots of hostas for the large leaves and curved shoots, and have found that cuttings from our laurel hedges are working well for larger displays, too. It is good to be doing new things, and to be frank, I need something to distract me. I hate this new limbo. Two weeks since that new postcard and zilch progress. I handed it straight over to Matthew, who passed it on to his friend Melanie Sanders. They ran the usual fingerprint tests, postmark enquiries, blah blah. Nothing. Whoever sends them must wear gloves. Turns out the haters can be clever as well as cruel.

Right now I am making up today's final birthday order while Luke holds the fort front of house. He is looking so much better, and the two contenders interested in his job are calling in to see him later while I'm in Cornwall with Matthew. He'll vet them first. I'll only see them if they are OK about the hours. I've had a couple of time-wasters over the ad in the window, horrified at the very early starts. I guess teenagers like their weekend lie-ins.

I set everything out as usual – ribbons, tape, pins – and begin the bouquet. A combination of roses and stocks, in pink and purple, with some rosemary for the scent. I do my usual trick of twisting and building slowly to keep the balance and the rhythm. It is a fortieth birthday bouquet, and so I add in a couple more flowers than usual as I remember my fortieth so well. I check the display, bind it, trim the ends and then pop it into a vase just to circle it, walking round to check from all angles before wrapping it in tissue and ribbon.

I pop it into the cooler and move through to Luke to remind him that it is not for delivery, that the husband is calling in for it later. It's prepaid, all written up in the book.

And then I check my watch and Luke is telling me not to worry about

the shop, that he has it all in hand, and reminds me he is seeing his potential replacements later. Girl first, then boy. They both did the Ten Tors same time as him apparently, so are solid. Used to early starts. Reliable. If they both seem sane, he will leave their CVs and contact details on the shelf under the counter and I can decide whether to see them myself or to advertise. He would like to stop working by Christmas at the very latest so that he can concentrate on his studies. *Is that OK?*

I smile. I like that Luke is doing this for me; that he is sleeping better and doing OK back at school. It's been a tough time.

And then the text comes. Matthew is waiting in his car outside. I don't want Luke worrying; I tell him I am off to see a potential client in Cornwall and will be back late afternoon. I kiss Luke on the forehead and he pulls a face, so I wink my goodbye and remind him to text if there are any worries. I warn him that Cornwall can be a bit patchy for signal, so not to panic if I don't reply immediately.

Climbing into Matthew's car, I smile at the evidence of his very different new life. Dark circles still under his eyes – the parental clutter of a nursery rhymes CD, spare bibs, a pink blanket in the back. A soft yellow duck on the parcel shelf. The 'Baby on Board' sticker, which Matthew tells me his wife insisted upon.

'You sure you're feeling OK about this, Ella?' Matthew looks over his shoulder as he reverses out of the parking space. I think of the headlights that so frightened me those early mornings in the past. This was the exact parking spot. It was probably someone in the flats above the shops. I put on my seatbelt and try not to dwell on it. *Enough now, Ella.*

'A bit nervous, but I want to come.'

I didn't honestly know what to think when Matthew first rang me. It was a shock. Mrs Ballard getting in touch with him. At first I wondered if it was to be some kind of formal complaint – me sending him down there that time. Suspecting her of sending the postcards. But no. Something even more surprising.

It is starting to rain and Matthew apologises. His windscreen wipers make an annoying squeaking noise. He tells me that replacing the blades is on a long list of things he may not get around to until his daughter goes to university. I laugh. He laughs.

'It gets easier,' I say. 'Once they sleep.'

'Oh, I'm not complaining,' he says, and he is wearing that open expression I so like. Relaxed. Straight. Kind. I find myself looking at his

profile and wondering again why he left the force. He avoids the question very cleverly whenever I raise it.

We make good time, stopping only to buy takeaway coffees. We listen to the radio mostly, and only once we are within ten minutes does he talk through his own strategy. Clever of him not to wind me up earlier.

The latest from the Met police is not good news. They have just discounted Sarah's father from the inquiry into Anna's disappearance. He was found in Norwich somewhere. I don't know the details, in fact I'm not supposed to know this at all, but off the record Matthew says that CCTV from the hotel he was staying the night Anna went missing, along with mobile phone tracking, has provided a cast-iron alibi. He was in his hotel room when Anna went missing. No question. Cameras in the hallway show he only emerged when Sarah's mum phoned him.

Mrs Ballard is now desperate. She wants to employ Matthew herself to review Anna's disappearance: to try to see if the police have missed anything. She believes the case has gone completely 'cold'. With no suspects left, the investigating team is being quietly reduced in number. Matthew, equally surprised by her sudden approach, says he has made it very clear that he is highly unlikely to be able to make progress alone. But he feels compassion for the family and wants to at least hear Mrs Ballard out. However, having been engaged by me first over the postcards, there is a potential conflict of interest and that's why he has asked me along.

'I remain almost certain that Mrs Ballard isn't behind the cards, but I need to see you in the same room to make this call. I hate to be so blunt and to use you like a guinea pig but that's where we are, Ella.' He has said this already to me on the phone, and I do understand.

'I can't just work for you both. But I do worry about whether this Anna case will ever be solved now. It's very sad for the family. Very tough.' He is glancing at me. 'But it's upsetting for you too, Ella. My first call is your feelings.'

'I know that. And I don't think I'll ever be happy until they find out what happened to her.' I pause. 'Do you think there's any chance at all she's still alive, Matthew?'

'Very little. But Mrs Ballard won't want to hear that. The mothers never do.' Again he glances at me and then at the baby clutter. 'I'm only coming to completely understand that now.'

We drive in silence for a time and I glance at him once, twice, finding myself frowning. 'Do you mind me asking again, Matthew. Why you left the

force?’ It seems such a shame to me; he seems so very good at this. So decent . . .

He keeps his eyes fixed firmly on the road ahead as we see a signpost for the farm, a right turning ahead.

‘Guilt.’ He says the word quietly, turning to me as I narrow my eyes. ‘There was a case. A child died. It wasn’t my fault, technically. But . . .’

I see his eyes change and wish I had not pushed him. I fidget with the seatbelt as he clears his throat and indicates to take the turning. I understand now.

‘OK. Here we are, then. You ready for this, Ella?’

I nod, and my stomach grips as we take the strange, narrow approach road to the farmhouse. I am thinking of that awful time I came down here myself. The tussle on the doorstep. The other reason Matthew says he needs assurance that Mrs Ballard has finally made peace over my own place in this.

As she opens the door, Mrs Ballard’s face is strained, her tone all effort. She looks older and thinner and I feel so sorry for her. ‘I can’t thank you enough for coming. Both of you.’ At first she cannot quite look at me. Not yet. And I see Matthew taking this in.

She fusses over making coffee, and though neither of us needs a drink, we accept her clattering about as an icebreaker. Something to ease things.

I admire the kitchen. The house. The large Aga. And then I feel embarrassed at my small talk, noting the pictures on the fridge. Anna as a little girl, unmistakable with her striking blonde hair. In most of the snaps she is with an older girl. Her sister, I assume. A few other photos with friends. A shot in a paddling pool. Anna doing cartwheels on the lawn.

Matthew kicks off the ‘business’ discussion. He asks Mrs Ballard outright if she understands that he remains engaged by me to investigate the postcards. Is she comfortable with this?

‘I understand from Ella that you visited her shop in the past? And that you were very upset when she called here once before.’

‘That was my fault,’ I say quickly.

‘No.’ Mrs Ballard leads the way through to the sitting room with her tray. It is a gorgeous room with French doors onto the garden. In the corner, a beautiful grand piano.

‘I was not myself, Ella. I apologise. I can understand why you might have thought it was me who sent the postcards, but I promise you I didn’t. I

came to the shop because at that time I did blame you. It wasn't fair, but I just didn't know where to put my anger.'

'I do understand.'

Matthew talks for quite a while about the difficulties of these kind of investigations. He talks about his contact in the force, about the frustration at the dead ends. The confirmation that Sarah's father, who remains in custody 'on other matters', has a cast-iron alibi for the night Anna went missing. Mrs Ballard says she's heard the same via Sarah.

'So, no suspects left.' Mrs Ballard puts down her mug. 'Which is why I need your help, Matthew. I have some savings.' The desperation in her voice is dreadful, and I watch her eyes as Matthew says he will need to think about things and get back to her.

There is this terrible impasse, and so I admire the piano, mention that I had lessons until my teens and regret giving it up. I move over to examine it close up and to take in the beautifully framed photographs along the top. Anna with her sister again, as bridesmaids. Family groups.

And then, such a shock. An extraordinary punch to my gut. The disorientation so great that I feel unsteady.

'Who's this?' I pick up the photograph and turn to Matthew and Barbara Ballard, an image from the past forming again in my head. Not understanding this . . .

'That's the girls with a friend. When they did the Ten Tors.' Mrs Ballard's tone is wary.

'But he was *on the train*.'

'I'm sorry?'

'This boy – the boy with the curly hair. He was on the train to London that day. When Anna went to London.'

'I'm sorry but you must be mistaken. No . . . no. That's not possible. He was away.'

'I'm telling you it was him.' I am looking at the photograph again and then at Matthew, who has stood up and is walking across to me. 'It was definitely him, Matthew. I nearly spilled my coffee on him . . .'

It was after that awful scene, when I passed the toilet. *Sarah, oh Sarah* . . . When I decided to move seats to the other end of the train. We were going around a bend. I lost my balance, walking through the aisle.

I'm sorry. The lid loose on my coffee.

It's OK. Don't worry. It's fine.

He looked right at me. Definitely him . . . That hair. Those eyes.

‘Who is this, Mrs Ballard?’ Matthew has taken the photograph from me and is holding it out to her, trying to make her look.

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CHAPTER 46

ANNA

July 2015

She is shocked and shaken but also angry with Sarah. She marches after her to try again, pushing through the people all crowded together, dancing and drinking. Suddenly the club is too dark. Too noisy. Too alien. The smell of sweat and alcohol everywhere she turns. She feels a little giddy.

‘We promised to stick *together*.’ She grabs at Sarah’s arm but can hear that her own words are slurring slightly – sees now that Sarah is unsteady, too. ‘We really need to go now. I don’t feel safe. Please, Sarah. I’m begging you . . .’

‘Oh, for goodness sake, don’t be such a baby, Anna. So dramatic.’ Sarah again shakes her off. ‘I told you already. If you want to go, just go. But I’m not ready. Why don’t you just lighten up. Have another drink.’

‘I’ve had enough here, Sarah. We need to go.’

‘Then – you go. I’ll see you later. Back at the hotel.’ And then Sarah is gone again, through the crowd, heading after Antony into one of the other rooms.

Anna stands very still, just watching her. She has to position her legs wider apart to stop the swaying. Everything is swaying. The room and the shadows and the lights and the people. The music pounding right through the floor and up through her body. She feels her eyes narrowing and her vision is ever so slightly blurred. She sees a man looking at her, swigging from his beer bottle. He winks. She looks away, suddenly all paranoia. Again checks her handbag, its long strap across her body. Checks the zip. Her purse. Her phone.

She follows the signs to the toilets and waits for a free cubicle. Puts down the lid. Sits down and leans forward to try to calm herself; takes out her phone. She skims the contacts. *Home*. She looks at the word, blurring in front of her. She thinks of her dad in the car. How angry with him she was. The photograph. Him and *that woman*. She lets her finger hover for a moment but then – no. She wipes her thumb against her dress. She considers the fallout; that her mother will never, ever let her do anything on her own again. She sits for a while, wonders how long it will be until she feels more steady. For just a moment, she thinks of Sarah’s dad but then remembers the warning . . . *If you phone my dad, I will never speak to you again.*

Anna has had too much to drink before, but never on her own. Not like this. She wishes that she had downloaded the app for taxis but Sarah had said she would do that.

She has no choice, then. Anna decides to go outside and hail a cab. She remembers that it must be a black cab, has read about the danger of fake minicab drivers. She feels afraid and so, to calm herself, she tries to picture herself in the back of the cab. Safe. Right up to the front door of the hotel. Where she will ring Sarah and maybe her parents next, even the police if Sarah *still* won't listen, still won't come . . .

Outside it is drizzling. There are a few people smoking. Quite a narrow street. Hardly any traffic. She waits a while and tries not to look at anyone. But no cars pass. No taxis. She sees the bouncer at the door and wonders if he might help her find a cab but he is suddenly distracted by a group of three men who are playing up because he won't let them in.

She is getting wet. Still feels so unsteady on her feet. And then . . .

'Anna. What on *earth* are you doing here?'

She turns, and relief and surprise and a whole myriad of emotions flood through her so that she bursts into tears.

'Tim. Oh my God.'

He is shushing her and she is embarrassed and relieved all at once. Wiping her face with her sleeve.

'Oh God, Tim, I'm so pleased to see you. But what on earth . . . I thought you were in Scotland?' She is clutching at both his arms, using them to steady herself. Confusion. Relief. Disorientation.

'Where's Sarah?' Tim is looking right into her face.

'In the club. She won't come. I'm trying to find a taxi. I can't make her come.'

'Well, you won't find a cab here. No chance.' He is glancing around the street. 'Come on. This way. Let's get you out of this rain.'

Tim is leading her then by the arm, and she expects him to take her into a doorway. A café or a pub or something. The tube? But he is saying that the tube stopped hours ago and they need to get to a place where they can order her a cab. 'This way. We need to take the night bus. Just a few stops. Then we can get you a taxi easily.'

They seem to be walking quite a long way. A bus stop. Then on the bus. No one else. She asks, 'Does the bus go near the hotel?' She gives him the

address again. He says no. It doesn't go that far. But she is not to worry. They will be able to order her a cab for the last stretch.

And then they are off the bus, walking again. And Tim is saying, 'Here it is. The flat. Here. We can get you dry and order the cab from here. Wait in the dry.' She can hear keys jangling. There is a porch which is keeping them dry. And then they are inside.

A narrow hall, then a sitting room with a bay window. Brown curtains.

He is explaining that this is the flat left to him by his father. To be rented out so the income can fund him through uni. That was the deal in the will. The reason he is in town. The trip to Scotland got cancelled. This flat is normally let. 'Remember, I told you all, when my dad died?'

She does, sort of. Vaguely. Tim's dad showed no interest in him all his life, then suddenly got cancer. Got God. Got in touch. No one else in his life, so put Tim in his will . . . She is glad to be safe. Out of the rain. But where is the tenant? And how far are they from her hotel now?

Tim says the tenant has just done a bunk and he's in town to tidy the place up. Sort out a new lease. He was planning to contact her tomorrow to explain Scotland was cut short; see if he could meet her and Sarah after all.

'I thought you girls were at a musical tonight?'

She explains how the club was recommended online. Does not mention Karl and Antony. Ashamed. She can hear her words slurring still and tries to speak more slowly. She feels so embarrassed; she does not want Tim to judge her. She is trying to sound sensible, but she is wondering now what he was doing near the club. He says he had a curry with a mate at an Indian nearby.

'Just as well, eh? You shouldn't be on your own, Anna. Not in London. Especially that bit. Dodgy area.'

'You were there.'

'It's different for blokes.'

And now Anna needs to sit down. She's still so woozy.

'Right. We need to make sure Sarah is OK, too,' he is saying. 'I'll go back for her once you're OK. She'll be safe in the club for now.' He is taking out his phone; she hears him ordering a cab for her. Double-checks the name of her hotel. He says cabs are more reliable this time of night when you order them to come to an address. They are saying it will be fifteen minutes. Not too bad. Right. So he will see her off safely, then he will go back himself for Sarah. Bring her to the hotel. Is she OK with this?

Anna is thinking that maybe they should have gone back in for Sarah straight away. She is grateful but confused, and begins to cry again. He is sitting next to her, his arm around her shoulders. Tells her not to worry. That it is *all right now, Anna*. He is going to make sure that everything is all right.

And then she closes her eyes. And she is remembering the awful picture Tim sent her this morning. Her dad with April – Tim's mum. She hasn't wanted to mention it, to think about it even, but wonders why he hasn't said anything either.

'Why did you send me the picture, Tim?' She is still crying. 'I mean – why this morning?'

It hit her phone just before her dad drove her to the station. Such a terrible shock.

You disgust me.

'I just felt you had the right to know. It was a terrible shock to me, too. I thought we should decide together what to do. Whether to tell your mum.'

'I wish you hadn't. I had a big row with my dad.'

'Sorry. I didn't think.'

'But how did you get it? The photo?' It was so graphic. So foul. Her dad and April. Naked. Her legs up in the air on the bed. Like porn. Disgusting . . .

And now Tim is standing, saying he doesn't want to talk about that anymore just now, and that he will make them coffee. It will do her good. She is thinking that there isn't time, surely. No point. With the taxi? But he says even a few sips will do her good. 'The state you're in . . .'

While he is gone, cluttering about in another room, Anna begins to glance around. And now she doesn't understand. There are quite a few books on one of the shelves. Walking books and map books. And there are magazines, too, ones she knows that Tim likes. She narrows her eyes. There's a stack – months' worth of them. She looks down at the coffee table: they're from the past three months. It doesn't make sense.

'You OK in there, Anna?'

'Fine.'

She reaches down to the shelf under the coffee table to find a book of walks in Cornwall. A frisson of unease passes through her. The book has several places marked with bookmarks. No. Not bookmarks. She flicks the pages to find that there are photographs marking the chapters.

The first makes her smile. It is a group shot – that birthday party her

mum threw for Tim. They are wearing hats made from balloons, and she and Sarah are clutching sausage dogs that the boys made. Tim and Paul.

She turns the pages to the next photograph, and then suddenly there is this truly odd feeling within her. Like a change of temperature. For it is a picture of her, taken from a distance. She is at her bedroom window looking out, just about to draw the curtains.

Anna can feel her heart rate increasing. Her muscles tensing. She flicks through the book to find more pictures – just of her. Her playing on the lawn. Her sitting in a tree. All of them taken from a distance.

She puts the book back and stands just as Tim returns with two mugs.

‘How long till the taxi, Tim?’

‘Not long now.’

‘I think I need the loo.’ She tries to hide that her hands are shaking by her sides.

‘Sit down. You’ll be back at the hotel in a moment. You can go there.’ There is a change in his tone. Clipped. Not nice. Not Tim. He is standing between her and the door.

She looks at him, the temperature even colder inside her.

‘The bathroom here isn’t nice, Anna.’

‘Oh, right.’

‘Drink your coffee. Just remember it’s a good job I found you.’ Finally, he sits and sips his drink. ‘A very good job I watch out for you, Anna. That I always watch out for you.’

‘Yes. Very true. I’m grateful, Tim.’ She is looking at the magazines and the book of walks, her heart thump-thump-thumping in her chest.

‘Did you say the tenant did a bunk?’

‘Yeah. Last week. We need to find another tenant.’ He has started to rock in his seat. To and fro . . .

She can feel her shoulders starting to tremble and is worried he will see this. She looks at the books on the shelves. Notices that some of them are A-level books. Tim’s A-level subjects.

‘Let’s wait in the doorway. Look out for the cab, shall we?’ She has stood up again.

‘No. Sit down. Drink your coffee.’ That clipped tone again. He twitches

his head. Rocks faster.

‘I think I need the air, Tim.’

‘You’re fine, Anna. You’re with me now. You’re fine when you’re with me.’

She sips her drink. She can hear her breath. Her pulse. Her heart. She can feel the dread building and building, the temperature falling and falling – but knows, too, even through the booze and the fear, that she must not let him see this. Little black dots on the edge of this scene, closing in. Not real.

‘Could I have some water, Tim?’

‘No. You’re fine.’ Tim has started to rock faster. To. Fro. To. Fro. He is all agitation suddenly. Strange, jerky movements of his head.

‘It’s OK. I’ll get the water.’ She stands and moves towards the door to the hall, slowly at first, but then faster and suddenly he is grabbing at her from behind. Instinctively she kicks back hard with her right leg and he recoils for a moment.

She makes it through to the hall, just feet from the door, but feels a blow suddenly to the back of her head. Blackness for a moment. Then her eyes open. She is on the floor. Black and white tiles, cool beneath her palms. A brass letterbox.

She is trying to scream but there is something over her mouth. Flesh. The smell of sweat. She tries to bite into the flesh but cannot open her jaw. She puts up her left hand to her head. A terrible pain. Blood on her hand as she puts it back down, still trying to move his hand from her mouth.

All the time he is saying things over and over. Mad things. That she is safe with him. *Only him.*

His voice, muddled and mad. And dreadful. That she needs to let him look after her. Watch over her. That it was much better when they were children. Easier to keep her safe when they were children . . .

She tries to crawl. That brass letterbox.

And then she hears a new sound, a sort of lashing through the air. He has grabbed at something from the coat hooks to their left. For just a second his hold on her is loosened. She lunges forward. The door. The latch. *Please . . .*

But there is something around her throat now, pulling her back. The smell of leather. Then a new pain. Much worse.

She can’t breathe. Choking, choking. She puts her hands to her neck. Tries to squeeze her fingers between the belt and her flesh.

She sees pictures suddenly, all swimming and changing and blurring. Her dad in the car. *You disgust me*. Primroses on the lane at home. Sammy, the dog – his head turned to look at her.

She is fighting and squeezing with her fingers. Trying so desperately to get back to them.

Her mother in the kitchen. The smell of cinnamon. Plum slices. *Ready, Anna . . .*

Squeezing, squeezing with her fingers.

Her father with Sammy on the lane. Walking back to the house. Ruffling her hair. *Primroses for Mummy . . .*

She is calling out to them, to all of them in turn, but they cannot hear her. Instead, this terrible gurgling in her throat. Pain in her chest. Still she fights and fights and fights . . .

Cartwheels on the lawn. Jenny smiling at her. Sammy yapping at her heels . . .

Please. She has to fight. She has to tell her father that she loves him really. She has to get back to them.

Please.

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CHAPTER 47

THE WITNESS

‘I’m telling you he was in Scotland.’ Mrs Ballard is just muttering. ‘I saw a picture on Facebook. Tim in Scotland. You’re wrong . . .’

I am staring at Matthew, bile suddenly in my mouth.

‘Tim has been devastated over Anna. He has always adored her . . .’ Mrs Ballard continues to babble. ‘No. No. Tim was in *Scotland*.’ All confusion. All terrible and dreadful confusion as Matthew takes out his mobile . . .

He is all sharp focus, and I am both impressed and somehow terrified by this – Matthew’s tone so clipped and urgent and fuelling the terrible dread inside me. He has his contact Melanie Sanders on the phone and is running conversations in stereo.

‘I’ll explain later. New key suspect, Anna Ballard case. Family friend. We have to get round there right now, Mel . . . Tim – what’s his surname?’ He has turned to bark the question at Mrs Ballard, who is still dazed, muttering about how wrong we are. That Tim has always worshipped Anna. Ever since they were little.

‘Tim’s surname. And address . . . *now*, Mrs Ballard.’

‘Blackhouse. Ryder Lane . . . I can’t remember the number . . . He’s a nice boy, a nice boy. I tell you. You’re wrong about this.’

‘Tim Blackhouse. Ryder Lane. Same village . . . Stay on the line, Mel, and I’ll tell you more as I get it. He was on the train to London with Anna. Other end of the train. Lied about being in Scotland . . .’

There is a pause as Matthew listens . . .

‘Don’t know, Mel. Hang on . . . Is there anyone who might know where Tim is today? If he’s not home. This is urgent, Mrs Ballard. Look at me, please. Really urgent . . .’

‘Jenny, I suppose. Jenny might know. She’s upstairs watching a film. I didn’t want her down here while I talked to you . . . I don’t want her upset.’

‘Call her down. Right now.’

Two minutes later and Jenny, taller and darker than her sister, is standing in the doorway, all angry, confrontational body language. Arms folded.

‘What’s going on?’

‘I’m an investigator, Jenny, and I need to know urgently how to find your friend Tim. I don’t have time to explain. Do you know where he is today?’

‘Devon.’

‘Where in Devon? Why is he there?’

She shrugs at first. Pulls a face. Uncooperative. ‘What’s it to you?’

‘This is really important, Jenny. The police need to know urgently.’

‘Dunno exactly. About a job. He didn’t say. Someone he met at the Ten Tors. He’s been on and on about it lately . . .’

‘About what? The job?’

And now there is a cold tremor through me. I am staring at the photograph from the Ten Tors. The date confirms it was the same year as Luke.

Confusion. A frown.

I am thinking suddenly of that map-magnifier that I found on the floor by the shop. It was given to all of them. All the teams who made good time. Dear God . . .

‘No. The Ten Tors. He’s been going on about the Ten Tors.’ Jenny’s voice, still angry.

I am standing up again now. Bile in the back of my throat.

‘What job?’ The panic in my voice makes everyone turn towards me.

‘Some shop. He didn’t say where. Look – he’s been very upset lately, OK? You need to leave him alone. Leave us all alone.’

‘Look, Jenny.’ Matthew’s tone is firm. ‘I don’t mean to frighten you, but this is about Anna. And we need to find Tim very, very urgently. Why has he been upset?’

‘He was getting out all the old photos. Of when he did the Ten Tors with Anna and everyone. He was looking for someone in the photos. Some boy he reckons Anna fancied. I don’t know why. I told him to leave it. Look – he’s just upset, OK? We’re all upset . . .’

‘Luke . . .’ It comes out like a cry for help. I want to be gone. In the car. I have to get back to him . . . I start to move towards the door. I don’t understand this . . . It makes absolutely no sense, any of this. But I have to get

back to him. And suddenly I can see them all milling about. Hundreds of them. I am looking again at the photograph and can see it. Anna getting her medal. All of them getting their medals . . . Luke. Tim. Everyone laughing. Everyone so happy.

‘My son Luke. He did the Ten Tors. The same year. He’s at the shop. On his own. Luke. We have to go, Matthew . . .’

‘Stop, Ella. Talk to me. Look at me.’

‘He’s seeing some people about taking over his job. Oh dear God. He said they were from a Ten Tors Facebook group. And I found something outside the shop, Matthew. I thought it was *Luke’s*. But I’m worried now . . .’

‘Right. Ring him. Ring Luke now on his mobile.’

I do as I am told, my hand trembling. *Come on, come on, Luke.*

‘There’s no answer.’ I turn to Matthew, heart pounding. The taste of bile still. All the muscles in my face hurting. Not understanding . . . Luke’s voicemail in my ear.

‘Try the shop line. Try to stay calm. Try to keep your voice calm, Ella . . . Did your son know Anna?’

‘No. No. Definitely not. I mean – he would have said . . .’ I am looking at the date on the photograph. The *same year* . . .

I dial again as Matthew is talking once more to Melanie Sanders. ‘Right – long shot, Mel. But Tim may be at the witness Ella Longfield’s flower shop. Trundale High Street. Her son’s alone there, Mel. He’s called Luke. I’d call it in as urgent. But no sirens . . .’

‘I don’t understand . . .’ I am the one now muttering. The line is ringing but no answer. ‘My Luke? Why my Luke . . . ? I don’t understand any of this.’

CHAPTER 48

LUKE

Luke is pleased with himself. Jessica seemed quite nice. A little bit on the small side and didn't seem too keen on lifting. Moaned about the Ten Tors doing her back in. That might be a problem, helping with the deliveries. She also had very long nails, he noticed. Might stop her from getting stuck in. But she was nice. Local. Friendly manner. Says she doesn't mind early starts and needs the cash. Mum would like her, so he will definitely pass on her CV.

He checks his watch. Tim next. Running a bit late. Not a good sign. Mum likes punctuality.

From the Facebook group, seems they both did the Tors the same year as him, though he doesn't remember them. Jessica or Tim. So many people. But anyone who could face the Tors has stamina. And commitment. So a good vetting process. Yes. Luke feels chuffed with himself for thinking of this. *Nice part-time job. Trundale shop. Interested? Message me . . .* He is glad things are slowly improving at school, and doesn't want to leave his mum in the lurch – wants to thank her for her support. But not many young people want to get up so early for a job. If she doesn't like Jessica or Tim, he'll leave it to her.

Luke glances through to the back of the shop to see that the coffee machine is nearly done. Good. He's gasping. He tidies up the clutter on the counter and notices a rose in the display on the floor, head hanging in shame. He takes it from the bucket and moves it into a vase out the back. Will try to rescue it later. For a moment, it makes him think of Emily. He gave her a rose last Valentine's Day. They have had a coffee together since everything and he is glad to have talked properly; that she knows how much he cares. How very sorry he is for all she went through. She is taking a break from school – a trip to stay with an aunt in France. She still doesn't want a relationship with anyone for a bit but has said he can write. He is pleased about that. And then the shop bell tinkles. Luke smiles, thinking again of his mum. She so loves the old-fashioned sound . . .

At first he doesn't imagine it can be Tim. Thinks it's a customer. He looks older . . .

'Hi. My name's Tim. Here about the job?' He stretches out his hand and Luke takes it, trying to conceal his surprise. Everything about this boy is sort of older than he expected. Clothes. Hair. Skin – a bit grey. Sunken eyes, too.

‘Right. Yeah. Great . . . Thanks for calling by.’

Luke babbles about the job. The hours. The duties. He asks Tim to sit at the stool by the counter. Just ten minutes and they can close for lunch for half an hour and have a proper chat.

A woman comes in, looking for a bargain. ‘Anything discounted?’ Luke shows her the sunflowers. Striking. Gorgeous – twenty per cent off. She takes them. Tim watches as he wraps them in tissue and sorts the cash and the change.

Luke is telling Tim that his mother needs someone early Saturdays and occasional Sundays to help with boxes and general sorting; also front of shop while she finishes the displays.

‘You happy serving?’

‘Oh. Yeah, yeah. Worked in a newsagent.’

‘Good. That’s great.’

But there is something about Tim that is a bit off. Difficult to pinpoint, and then as Tim leans forward, the smell hits Luke. Really bad BO. That’s a no, then. Luke pulls back and forces a smile. His mum won’t like that. Tim’s out, then. But he will be polite. Diplomatic, but he’ll keep it short.

‘So you don’t remember me? From the Ten Tors?’ Tim is staring at him.

‘No, mate. Sorry. But so many people. I did it twice, actually. The longer route the second time. You?’

‘Just the once. I did it the same year’ – he pauses – ‘as Anna Ballard.’

And now Luke is stilled. Tim is staring at him very deliberately, unblinking.

Luke stares back and is starting to get it. He narrows his eyes and thinks for a moment. Tim is looking at him really carefully; really oddly.

‘So – you a journalist?’

‘No. I’m not a journalist.’

‘Well, do you know what, Tim? I don’t think this is going to work out, mate. No offence, but—’

‘You telling me you don’t remember Anna Ballard?’

Luke is stilled again. *What the hell is going on here?* ‘Look. I don’t know what this is really about. But I’m not having anyone here upsetting my mum any more over the Anna Ballard case. So how about you just leave,

please.'

But now Tim has taken a photograph out of his pocket.

'Explain that, then.'

Luke is temporarily nonplussed as Tim slaps the photograph on the counter. The picture is from the melee after the medal ceremony at the Ten Tors. Scores of people. Luke scans the faces, narrowing his eyes to finally spot himself with two of his mates on his walking team. Andy and Geoff. To their right is a group of girls. One of them . . . Yes. He leans closer. It does look like Anna Ballard. It's a shock. He's of course seen her picture on the news. But Luke had no idea they did the Tors the same year . . .

'Look. I had no idea Anna Ballard was there that year. And I have no idea why you've brought this photograph. But I'm not going to discuss this with you. Understand? You need to go. Right now.'

Tim then backs away and Luke thinks, *Thank heavens. The guy's some kind of nutjob*. But instead of leaving, Tim puts the bolt across the door. Turns the sign to 'Closed'.

Excuse me?

Just standing by the door now, staring at him.

'Wooah.' A wave of more serious realisation through Luke now. He moves forward to sort this – the guy is not big, not strong, and Luke reckons he can shoulder him out of the shop and see if he will piss off. Or maybe he'll have to call the police. But Tim has slowly pulled a knife from his right pocket. His eyes are bulging and locked on Luke's.

'Through to the back. Now.'

Luke looks at the knife's sharp blade. He is thinking of his options. The back door. Phone. Kicking the knife out of the guy's hand. For now he puts his hands up slowly, just at waist height. 'OK, mate. So how about we calm this right down—'

'Through to the back, I said.'

Luke walks slowly backwards. He can't risk turning away from the knife. Remembers now that the back door is bolted. Christ.

'You and Anna. She liked you. She was talking to you. I watch. I see things. I *watch* and I remember—'

'No, mate. Really. I'm sorry but you're wrong. I don't remember her. It was just everyone happy together.'

‘You’re lying.’ And now Tim’s eyes are wild. Furious. ‘I watch her. I know—’

And then very suddenly Tim lunges forward and skims Luke’s right arm with the knife. A surface slash, but instant and excruciating pain. Blood immediately.

Luke is standing alongside his mother’s workbench and glances left. Remembers. Luke grabs for the coffee jug really fast and hurls the scorching fluid at Tim. Some of it flows down Tim’s leg and he calls out in pain. But it misses his face, and there is another lunge with the knife. This time a searing pain in Luke’s thigh. The fast seeping of blood onto his trousers.

They are on the floor now, and Luke is struggling to get up. Feels his thigh so wet. Tries to stand but the pain is terrible and next – a blow to his shoulder.

And then he sees just a glimpse – the glint of red, reflected in the mirror his mother uses to check her displays. The handles. Her favourite secateurs. The bright red handles just visible on the edge of the lower shelf. He uses the reflection to feel for them – stretching, stretching – and swings backwards. The terrible feeling of the blade deep into flesh. And then blackness.

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EPILOGUE

ELLA

Again the trends change. Autumn brides seem to want more white this year. Instead of a swathe of the rich, warm palette, they want just a splash of it for accent – the orange, burgundy, rusts and pumpkin colours. I am opting for the softer, creamy whites, which work better in this mix – also in photographs. We have a really good supplier for gerberas and dahlias in the strong, statement colours. Gorgeous. I'm using masses of them.

I don't mind more white, actually. So simple and classic, and I love that there are so many variations. Tony says, *White is white, surely*. Tell that to a paint chart, I say. Tell that to a rose. Or a tulip.

Today I have a whole range of whites spread across the workbench for a top table centrepiece. A favourite design – white roses just opening from the bud, with burnt orange calla lilies for the splash of colour. Very simple, but very striking.

I'm on my third coffee, working more slowly than usual. Seems to be the way these days. I daydream a lot, cannot help it, my thoughts often drifting to places I would rather they did not.

And now I pause, staring at the new secateurs in my hand. They still feel strange. Still unsure if the police will ever return my own. Evidence. Don't want them back, actually. What I want back is the old version of our lives.

Before . . .

I check the clock. Just one more hour until closing. A sigh. I must press on, get this done and into the cooler. We don't tend to get much trade at the end of the day, especially in the rain. Funny that the weather so affects what people buy.

And now I hear a rustle outside the door. The surprise of a late customer. The tinkle of a bell and the shaking of an umbrella. I stand and move through to the counter to catch her eye . . .

A shock. One of so very many.

For a time we just stand, eyes locked, and I do not know what to do. I can feel tears welling – the shock, I suppose, but it feels unhelpful. I wonder why she is here. Am nervous that she is here.

I am looking at her and I can hear my heart racing. I am remembering Matthew's voice on the phone.

They found Anna's body in a freezer. At Tim's secret flat – the flat that, according to the terms of his father's will, he was supposed to let, to help fund himself through university, but which, instead, he used as a secret bolthole. The flat where they found his diaries full of photographs and mad and shocking rants. Watching and photographing Anna since she was very young. Hating her to talk to anyone else. Keeping a record. Watching. Always *watching* . . .

Apparently he would sometimes have dinner with the family and pretend to go home, but instead would camp out in an old stone shepherd's building high on the ridge. Watch them all in the kitchen below. Watch Anna until she went to bed, making notes in his diaries.

'Ella. I'm sorry to surprise you like this. Do you have a moment?'

What to say?

I look at her, eyes sunken and sad and changed forever, and I wonder if there is anything to say between us. Wonder why she is here.

'Of course. Come through to the back. I was due to close soon anyway.' My manners again. Always with the manners.

I move to the door to switch the sign to 'Closed' and pause a moment, closing my eyes to the picture. I do not want to think of: DS Melanie Sanders standing on their doorstep, sent to break the news.

She has been given a promotion off the back of the case, but told Matthew she did not want it because she felt it was his work not hers. He talked sense into her, but I do understand. Such a struggle to go forward. She still wants Matthew to go back into the force. But he can't decide . . .

I move the spare stool through to the workbench at the rear but she opts to stand. Turns down coffee, also.

I wonder if it is my place to ask the questions. Do the small talk. How is she coping? But what's the point? How does anyone cope with this? I decide to wait. And find that I need to sit even if she does not.

'I was wondering how Luke is doing?'

Is this really why she came? I don't think so. But I think of him and I think of Anna and feel guilty that I am so glad mine was the child to live . . .

'Better, thank you. He is off the crutches. The shoulder is still tricky. He has quite a limp. But with physiotherapy, we hope . . .'

‘Good. I’m glad he’s improving.’

That’s not why she’s here. *Why is she here?*

‘I really am so very sorry about Anna, Mrs Ballard.’

‘Barbara, please. Call me Barbara.’ She has looked away.

My voice is cracking now, and so I pause. Take a breath.

‘I was the one who first brought him into the house, you know. Tim.’ She twitches her mouth to the left. ‘Into the family. Into Jenny and Anna’s little gang. I felt sorry for him. His mother never took any interest. Always off with her men. Did you know she had a fling with my husband? I’m sorry. I don’t know why I told you that.’

‘I’m sorry.’

Matthew told me everything. Tim’s diaries. He set up a camera in his mother’s room. To blackmail her lovers. Made some cash, then caught someone he did not expect . . .

Again we lock eyes, and I see her lips trembling as she nods. A jerky nod that says, *Don’t make me cry. Don’t say her name again, please . . .*

‘So, turns out it was my fault in the end. Tim. I felt sorry for him. Always out around the village on his own, even when he was quite little. I thought I was being kind. Feeding him up. Taking him in. But’ – she pauses – ‘turns out it was my fault . . .’

‘You mustn’t think that . . .’

I hear the echo of so many people saying the same to me, and regret the platitude. Guilt, we all learn, has its own rules.

‘He wants to come back, my husband.’ She is looking at the floor. ‘Funny thing is I am actually considering it. I miss him, you see.’

I find that I want to reach out to touch her arm. To offer some comfort. Something. But I don’t.

I am wondering if she will go to the trial. Matthew says the charges are to be murder and attempted murder. Tim is expected to plead diminished responsibility, but Matthew believes the murder charge will stick. Turns out Tim set up the alibi in Scotland with chilling calculation. Picked an outdoor pursuits centre that he knew logged walking parties only as they signed in on day one. He booked in three days ahead of Anna’s trip to London, supposedly for a week, but stayed for just twenty-four hours – enough time to post a couple of pictures on social media, careful to moan about limited Wi-Fi and just enough ‘presence’ to fool the police, who made only a cursory check on

his alibi. Later reviews of all the CCTV footage confirm he actually returned to Cornwall to sneak onto the London train among the final passengers, disguised in a hoodie and sunglasses. He then followed Anna and Sarah from the West End theatre to the club.

It's still not clear *why* he killed her. His diaries are rambling and incoherent – this obsession with other people looking at her.

I can't bear the thought of it all, especially my poor Luke having to give evidence now. The truth? I wish Tim had died; that he never came out of that coma. That it was all truly *over*.

There is an incredibly long pause, during which Mrs Ballard says nothing at all, and so I fill it by babbling about the flowers for the wedding – my love of calla lilies, especially the rich, deep colours. Burgundy and purple.

'I have something that I need to tell you. That's why I'm here, Ella. Is it all right to call you Ella?'

'Of course.' I smooth the fabric of my skirt, worrying and wondering what it is now.

'I was going through Jenny's room tidying up, and I found some stuff.'

I can feel my frown.

'Black postcards.'

A new stillness.

'I have talked to her, and she eventually broke down. Owned up. It seems it was Jenny who sent you the first two postcards. She is very sorry. Very ashamed. She was just very angry and lashing out. Like I did. I'm not saying that is any kind of excuse. But she is very young and she is very sorry.'

So Jenny? Anna's sister . . .

'There's more, I'm afraid.' She sniffs a little. 'When you sent Matthew down to see me, Jenny panicked. I told her that you suspected me, you see. I was cross about that. And so she decided to confide in someone. Someone close.'

Oh my God.

'Tim?'

'Yes. Unfortunately . . . Tim. It seems that's when he became more interested in you. Decided to send some more postcards himself. Also to start watching your shop. Such a twisted mind. We had no idea, but the police say he is very disturbed. This obsession with watching people. Anyway. That's

how he came to recognise your son. From the Ten Tors. Started watching him too. Got himself all muddled. All wound up . . .’

I hear a long breath escape. Feel the shape of my lungs change. I have wondered. Why Tim became interested in us.

‘So the point is I will completely understand if you want to inform the police.’ Her lip is trembling properly now. ‘Because you may well feel it is Jenny’s fault that Tim ended up taking an interest in your son.’

And so finally I understand.

Matthew said they found hundreds of photographs on Tim’s computer. Pictures from parties and the Ten Tors and school, with graphic and violent comments alongside the headshots of any boy he felt had taken an interest in Anna. Even spoken to her, completely innocently. However briefly. Luke was just unlucky. He genuinely doesn’t remember meeting her or talking to her.

I look down at the floor for a moment. I think of Luke, so proud when he finally put the crutches aside two weeks ago and walked across the room unaided. He has this terrible limp, but we are all pretending it will go. Hoping it will go. Also a dreadful scar on his thigh.

‘Thank you for coming here to tell me, but there is no need to tell the police. Nothing to be gained.’ I am thinking of Jenny – so young still. What would be the point? What does it matter if the police believe all the postcards were from Tim?

Mrs Ballard closes her eyes, the relief coursing through the muscles in a wave – first her face, then her neck, her shoulders. ‘Thank you, Ella.’

I expect her to leave, but still she stands. I wonder what she is waiting for.

She glances around the counter. To the cooler with the displays.

‘They have released her body now. For the funeral.’

Dear God . . .

I am fighting again. It will not help if I break down. Not my grief.

‘The director from the funeral parlour came last night to talk it all through with us.’

She pauses and I say nothing. Can’t find any words. None. Mute.

I am thinking of Anna on the train, green eyes all bright and beautiful and excited. Sixteen years old . . .

‘The thing is, he showed me some catalogues for flowers for the coffin.’

Her voice is still quite steady but there are tears running down her cheeks. 'And they were so terrible, Ella. The flowers. So awful.'

'I'm sorry?'

Still she is staring at the flower cooler. 'I know it sounds ridiculous. That it's what people expect. A wreath. But I can't have a wreath. I just can't have something so sad and grown up and horrible. I don't want a *wreath* for my daughter's coffin.'

She turns back to me to check my response, which is at first pure puzzlement.

'She's so young, you see. Too young for a wreath, don't you think?' At last she wipes at her face with the palm of her hand.

Still I don't know what to say to comfort her.

'And the thing is, when I came here once before, I remember you had this extraordinary display in the window. For spring. Folds of greenery like hills. Like a meadow. With wild flowers. Primroses and wild garlic and hedgerow flowers.'

'It was for a competition. I remember . . .' I won a prize for it.

'It was quite beautiful. And I was thinking on the drive here – that's what I would like. For my Anna. A sort of blanket of greenery and meadow flowers. Nothing like a wreath. And I know it's a lot to ask. Probably quite wrong of me to ask at all, given all that has gone on between—'

'It would be my privilege. I would be more than happy to do this for you.'

Our eyes lock one final time.

'I am quite happy to pay, of course, whatever . . .'

She leaves her email address, and I tell her I will send my design to make sure it is right. But already I have decided there will be no charge. Already my mind is racing ahead as we part. Already I am sketching it in my head. And planning. And thinking how I can weave all the greenery through some kind of mesh to make the folds for the base. Like a meadow – yes. And primroses? I know a supplier who has forced primroses. Greenhouse-grown. I will order scores. All he has.

I am making notes in my book, tears on my own cheeks now, knowing this must be truly special. Like nothing I have created before.

I can see it exactly. How it needs to cover the sadness that will be the oak and the brass handles – with the scent and the wonder of the meadows

near their home.

Primroses and bluebells. Wild garlic and campion. Pink and lemon and soft white petals. For a beautiful girl. Gone too soon.

For a girl – yes.

Much too young for a wreath.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for reading *I Am Watching You*. It is very special for me to see this book published, as the original idea came to me quite a while back.

I was travelling to London one day, when two young men really did get on with black plastic bin bags. When I found out why, I was both slightly unsettled and deeply intrigued, and so of course my author brain kicked right in. Nothing special happened on that real journey but my imagination was soon working overtime. What if this happened; what if that happened . . .

I was snowed under with a range of writing projects at the time, so I originally wrote up the idea as a short story. But Anna came to me quite strongly and it was like being haunted by her. I knew I had more to say and that it needed to be a book.

I worked as a journalist for many years and was always deeply affected by the impact of crime on so many ordinary lives – not just innocent victims but also witnesses. So many ripples. I think that's why this particular idea kept niggling at me. And when I finally came back to it and Ella also stepped forward as my character, I knew that I wanted to shine a light not just on Anna's family but on Ella's, too.

So you will understand now how special it is to see that germ of an idea all grown up. Thank you again for reading – and if you enjoyed the story, I would greatly appreciate a review on Amazon. They really do help other readers to discover my writing.

I also love to hear from readers, so feel free to get in touch. You can find my website at www.teresadriscoll.com and also say hello on Twitter [@TeresaDriscoll](https://twitter.com/TeresaDriscoll) or via my Facebook author page: www.facebook.com/TeresaDriscollAuthor.

Warm wishes to you all,

Teresa

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing can be a lonely business, and so I must thank my wonderful family and all my friends for their support, their belief and their tolerance when I have disappeared – holed up in the office, wondering if I would ever type THE END.

Special thanks, too, to my talented and patient editors Jane Snelgrove and Sophie Missing, who have nurtured this book with such care and insight—steady my nerve with great sensitivity when I was flagging! Thank you both so much.

Three cheers for all the readers and bloggers who have so kindly supported my writing. Your feedback and support mean the world.

And finally – a loud herogram to my wonderful agent Madeleine Milburn, who championed this departure from the very beginning. I owe you so much.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © 2015 Claire Tregaskis

For more than twenty-five years as a journalist – including fifteen years as a BBC TV news presenter – Teresa Driscoll followed stories into the shadows of life. Covering crime for so long, she watched and was deeply moved by all the ripples each case caused, and the haunting impact on the families, friends and witnesses involved. It is those ripples that she explores in her darker fiction.

Teresa lives in beautiful Devon with her husband and two sons. She writes women's fiction as well as thrillers, and her novels have been published in six languages. You can find out more about her books on her website (www.teresadriscoll.com) or by following her on Twitter ([@TeresaDriscoll](https://twitter.com/TeresaDriscoll)) or Facebook (www.facebook.com/TeresaDriscollAuthor).

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