

You'll never
find me

THE DISAPPEARED



A L I H A R P E R

Ali Harper

**The Disappeared: A gripping crime
mystery full of twists and turns!**

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Harper A.

The Disappeared: A gripping crime mystery full of twists and turns! /
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YOU'LL NEVER FIND ME...A twisty, compelling, characterful crime thriller from a major new talent.**NOT TO BE MISSED!**A distraught mother...When Susan Wilkins walks into No Stone Unturned, Leeds's newest private detective agency, owners Lee and Jo are thrilled. Their first client is the kind of person they always hoped to help—a kind woman desperately worried about her son, Jack.A missing son...The case seems simple—kid starts college, takes up with the wrong crowd, forgets to ring his mother. But very quickly, Lee and Jo suspect they're not being told the whole truth.A case which could prove deadly...Their office is ransacked, everyone who knows Jack refuses to talk to them and they feel like they're being followed...it's clear Lee and Jo have stumbled into something bigger, and far more dangerous, than they ever expected. Will they find Jack, or will their first case silence them both for good?

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The Disappeared
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Dedication

For Harvey and Maggie

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Chapter One

Had I known our first client would be dead less than twenty-six hours after signing the contract, I might not have been so thrilled when she pushed open our office door.

I once read that hindsight is always twenty-twenty, but I disagree. Hindsight distorts the picture, makes us believe we could have done something different, something better. Hindsight opens the door to 'if only' and the 'if only' is what kills you.

It had been five weeks, four days and six hours since we'd opened for business and in all that time no one had so much as glanced through the window. Despite adverts in every local listings magazine, the only phone calls we'd fielded were cold ones – did we want double-glazing, roof repairs, a conservatory? Jo had been getting increasingly aggressive with each caller. The strain was getting to both of us.

I was alone in the office that Friday afternoon. Jo had nipped out in the company's battered Vauxhall Combo, ostensibly to buy printer ink – but really, I knew she'd be checking out the latest surveillance equipment at The Spy Shop, down on Kirkstall Road. Jo's my best mate, business partner, and a gadget freak: not always in that order.

I'd been at my desk when I'd noticed the woman pacing the pavement opposite. I'd watched her through the gaps in our vertical strip blinds. She'd smoked two cigarettes, crushing out the stubs with the heel of her boot. Truth is, I'd been willing her to cross the street and come on in.

So when she did step through the door, my pulse quickened and my mouth went dry. I slid my packet of Golden Virginia into the top drawer.

She was nervous, obviously so. She had blonde hair, cut kind of choppy round her face and she kept touching it, scratching at the back of her neck.

'Hi,' I said. I almost fell over the desk in order to shake her hand. She allowed our palms to touch for less than a second, but long enough for me to register the coolness of her skin. 'Welcome to No Stone Unturned.'

She glanced around. Our office used to be a corner shop, situated at the end of a red-brick terrace, so it has windows on two sides. The rent is cheap, and the interior walls are panelled in a wooden laminate that wobbles whenever we shut a door or slam a drawer too hard.

I watched her drink in the details – the cheap brown carpet tiles, the battered filing cabinet we'd bought from Royal Park Furniture Store – purveyor of cheap crap to low-class landlords. I noticed the pot plant Jo had supplied was looking thirsty.

'Are you missing someone?' I asked.

'Sorry.' Her voice was soft, well-spoken – the kind of voice that could have worked for The Samaritans.

'That's OK,' I said. 'It must be diff—'

'Could I speak to an investigator?'

I straightened my spine, remembered to ground myself through the soles of my feet. 'You are. I'm the ...' I wanted to say proprietor but settled for 'lead investigator.' Jo would have punched me.

'Oh.' A crease appeared on the woman's forehead. I cursed the fact we'd given up wearing suits on day four.

'I'm Lee,' I said, 'Lee Winters.' It still felt like a lie on my lips, even though three months before I'd made it official. I wasn't born Lee Winters. The Buddhists believe you shed your skin every seven years, and changing my name was my way of forcing the process. I pointed at the two armchairs and coffee table in the corner of the room. 'Take a seat.'

She didn't move. I positioned myself between her and the exit and gestured at the seats again.

'I shouldn't have come,' she said.

'Give it a chance. Why don't you tell me what the problem is, and we'll see if we can help?'

‘I didn’t know where else to turn.’ Her right hand twisted the gold band on her wedding finger. She turned it round and round, over and over. The ring seemed loose, a little too big on her slender fingers. I examined my own bitten fingernails, the silver rings I wear like knuckledusters. As she opened her mouth to speak, I heard a noise behind me. I turned to see Jo pushing through the door, a box of paper in her arms and a Spy Shop carrier bag dangling from her wrist.

‘Hi, Jo.’ I raised my eyebrows and nodded, trying to telepathically answer her unspoken questions.

Jo dropped the reams of paper on the edge of my desk and beamed at the woman. ‘You’ve come to the right place,’ she said.

Jo sounded so certain I felt my shoulders relax. The woman stared at Jo. Most people do. Jo inherited her Afro-Caribbean curls from her Jamaican grandfather on her mother’s side. Her startling blue eyes came from her Liverpudlian dad. They make a stunning combination. It must have been windy out – her hair was wild even by Jo’s standards. The woman turned to me.

‘Is there somewhere private we can talk?’ she said, pushing up the sleeve of her dark jacket.

‘Go through to the back room,’ said Jo, putting a casual arm across the woman’s lower back and propelling her forward. ‘I’ll make you a nice, strong cup of tea. Looks like you could use one.’

We’ve got three rooms out back. I use the word ‘room’ in its broadest sense – you have to step outside the kitchenette in order to open the fridge, and how anyone could ever use the gas cooker is a mystery. There’s a toilet next door, but when you sit on it, your knees graze the door. The windowless back room contains a punchbag, as well as a small wooden table covered with decaying green felt, and three chairs. The bag came from the boxing gym round the corner and dangles from the ceiling. I’d spent much of the previous six weeks in there, punching till my arms ached and beads of sweat flew, trying to fight the worry that I’d blown my inheritance on a business that wasn’t ever going to see a client.

The back room also has a broom cupboard – now converted to Jo’s spy equipment store – which has a safe cemented into the brick wall at the back of it. That small metal box had sealed the deal when we’d been looking for premises. We figured the previous tenants must have been dope dealers.

I cleared a space on the table by stashing the playing cards to one side and setting the ashtray on the floor.

‘You smoke in here?’ She didn’t miss much, I thought.

‘No. Well, only in emergencies. I mean, sometimes clients—’

‘Would you mind if I smoked?’ she asked.

‘Oh. No, not at all. I’ll open the kitchen window.’

When I got back, she’d lit a long, dark brown cigarette, and I noticed the tremor in her hands. Jo popped her head round the door and handed me a new client file.

‘Right, yes,’ I said. ‘Thank you.’

I heard the click of the kettle from the kitchenette. I opened the file, spread it on the table in front of me and cleared my throat. ‘So, how can we help you?’

‘I don’t think you can.’ She blew a cloud of smoke into the air. ‘I was stupid to come.’

I bristled at that. It’s personal – the business; my chance to put right what I’ve done wrong. OK, this woman was our first potential proper client, but it wasn’t like we didn’t have previous experience. Besides trying to track down my own dysfunctional family, last year Jo and I travelled to the other side of the world to find a missing person – Bert’s wife. Bert lived next door to my mum, took care of her in what turned out to be her last years. Me and Jo managed to track down his missing mail-order bride, in Thailand, despite not knowing the language. We have a natural flair for finding people.

‘You had your reasons,’ I said.

‘I saw your ad. About reuniting families.’

I extracted Jo’s Initial Enquiry Form and read the tag line out loud. ‘Are you missing someone?’

‘Yes.’

I waited a moment, but she didn't expand. I coughed again and wished I had a glass of water. 'Who? Who are you missing?'

'My son.'

Another silence. 'What's his name?'

'I don't know what to do.'

I tried to sound like a well-seasoned investigator, battle weary. 'Start with his name.'

'Jack.'

I made a note on the form as she exhaled. Instinct told me to stick to simple questions. 'Age?'

'He's 22.' She stubbed out the first cigarette, which was only a third of the way smoked, and lit another straightaway. 'I was very young,' she said, in answer to a question I hadn't asked. But it did make me think. I stared at her, but she held her cigarette to her lips almost permanently, so that her hand obscured the bottom half of her face. It was hard to put an age to her. Older than me, but I'd be surprised if she'd hit forty. 'He's had problems.'

'Problems?'

'He's driven us to our wits' end. We've given him everything. Cash. Car. You name it.'

'And now he's missing?'

'Not a word in three months.'

I wrote that down. 'Tell me about the last time you saw him.'

'Christmas. He came round for dinner, borrowed twenty pounds.'

'This was to your house?'

'Yes.'

'In Leeds?'

'Manchester. But he came back to Leeds. He's a student here. Or he was.'

'Where does he live?'

She sat a little straighter in the chair and leaned in. 'That's why I chose you. You being so close, I mean. The last address I had for him was a squat on Burchett Grove. It's not very far from here.'

I got a shot in my veins; the feeling's hard to describe, like I'm kind of coming alive. A trail, a scent of someone. I knew Burchett Grove. Locals called it Bird Shit Grove. It was ten minutes away, in Woodhouse, an area of Leeds favoured by the politically earnest. This was my neck of the woods.

'Which one?'

She put her hand in her jacket pocket and took out a piece of paper, ripped from the pages of a spiral bound notebook. She handed it to me. 'I hate going round there.' Her whole body juddered as if to prove her point. 'The last time I went, they said he'd moved. I don't know if they were telling the truth.'

I probably grinned, reading the address. There are two squats on Burchett Grove, and I've known people living at both of them over the years. If he was there we could have the case cracked in minutes. I might even know the guy. 'You got a photo?'

She picked her handbag up from the floor and flicked the clasp. After some rummaging she pulled out a photograph of a lanky teenager in school uniform.

I frowned at her. 'A recent one?'

She closed her eyes for a moment. 'He hates having his photo taken. That's the sixth form. He dropped out a few months after that.'

'When did he move to Leeds?'

She scratched at the back of her neck again. 'Five years ago. Hired a van, insisted on doing it all on his own.'

'What will you do if we find him and he doesn't want to see you?' This was a standard question we'd agreed to ask everyone. We weren't naive. Families often split for good reasons.

She squared back her shoulders. 'I can live with that,' she said. I caught a glimpse of an inner steeliness and I believed her. 'I just need to know where he is, that he's OK.'

I told her what we charged, and she nodded. Jo had included a blank contract in the file. I passed it to her and read upside down as she printed her name. Mrs Susan Wilkins. As she filled in her address details, she glanced up at me.

‘There’s another thing. You have to promise you won’t contact my husband.’

She stared at me with piercing blue eyes. I shrugged. No skin off my nose. ‘You’re the boss,’ I said.

‘He’s washed his hands of Jack. He’ll go berserk if he knows what I’m doing.’ She pushed the contract back to me, the still-damp ink glistening in the fluorescent overheads.

‘You haven’t put your mobile.’

‘I dropped it,’ she said. She raised her eyebrows at me. ‘Silly of me. They’re replacing the screen. I’m staying at the Queens. Could we perhaps agree a time each day where I call you and you give me a progress report?’

‘OK.’ I handed her a business card with my mobile number, and she tucked it into her jacket pocket. I cleared my throat. ‘So, there’s just the matter of the fees.’

‘Yes.’ She opened her bag again and paid the deposit – two hundred pounds – in cash, counting out ten-pound notes from a brown envelope. No Stone Unturned, Leeds’s brand new missing persons’ bureau, had its first client.

And it promised to be a straightforward case – middle-class kid, starts college, smokes dope, forgets to ring his mother. We’d have this in the bag by the weekend, I remember thinking. I had no sense of what was in store for us. Now, as I sit here, trying to write this report and pick through the pieces of the last few days, it’s easy to see that the signs were all there, I just didn’t read them. We fit the pictures to the story we want to hear. And what I wanted to see was a middle-aged, middle-class woman, desperately seeking her son.

Chapter Two

Mrs Wilkins didn't stay for the cup of tea that Jo had made. She had to get going, she said. I fed Jo the details while our client nipped to the toilet and then we escorted her out of the offices and back onto the street, doling out promises like those lanky kids in town hand out club fliers.

'This'll be a piece of cake,' I remember saying.

'You'll know as soon as we do.'

That last one from Jo as we made our way to the back street where we keep the van parked.

I turned to Mrs Wilkins. 'Do you need a lift somewhere?'

'I'm parked down there.' She gestured towards the Royal Park pub, and I wondered what kind of car she drove. I hoped it hadn't been nicked in the time she'd been in our office. She didn't appear worried, but then she didn't know these streets like I did. Royal Park is an area of Leeds that's an uneasy mix of local scallies and the poorer students. It encourages a healthy, non-materialistic outlook among its residents. As Proudhon said, property is theft. Round here, anything worth nicking is nicked.

Mrs Wilkins's parting comment was that she'd ring us first thing the next day. Saturday, 9 a.m., she said. The clock ticked, and my pulse raced alongside it. I couldn't wait to crack our first case, Jo was desperate for a smoke, and Mrs Wilkins had less than twenty-five hours to live.

We jumped into the van. True, we could have walked. Burchett Grove is less than half a mile away; but getting Jo to do any kind of exercise is harder than getting a decent pint in the Hyde Park.

Burchett Grove sits at the top of a triangle of narrow streets that form Woodhouse – a mix of students and locals – mainly long-haired, cloth-capped hippies accompanied by dogs on pieces of string. There's also the local pub, The Chemic, and, best of all, Nazams – the best curry house in Leeds.

We pulled up at the far end of the street, just before the scruffy rows of brick-built terraces meet The Ridge. The Ridge always scares the hell out of me – a long strip of woodland and ankle-deep mud that separates Woodhouse from Meanwood. Woodhouse is students and hippies, Meanwood is Leeds born and bred. The Ridge feels lawless, a no man's land, a sea of used condoms, empty cans of Special Brew, and spent syringes – the Russian roulette of country walks. Most women I know have got at least one tale of being followed by some random pervert down there. I avoid it whenever I can, preferring to do four times the distance but stick to the roads and the streetlights.

The curtains weren't drawn at number 16 but the house was in darkness. The last time I'd been here we'd smoked so much I'd got tunnel vision and had had to walk all the way home with one eye closed.

We marched up the small path, and Jo pounded on the door. A minute later a head appeared at one of the upper windows. I saw a flash of black hair.

'What the fuck do you want?' a voice called out.

We both stepped backwards. 'Just calling,' said Jo, her leather jacket and Afro more effective than a warrant. I held up a hand. It was obvious we belonged.

He opened the door a moment later. I had the idea we'd woken him up but I'm not sure why, because he was dressed, although his feet were bare, his toenails clean and square. I vaguely recognized him from around.

'Jesus,' he said, 'thought you were the cops or something. What you hammering on the door like that for?'

'Looking for Jack,' I said. I tried to keep my tone steady. 'Jack Wilkins.'

He shook his head. 'Wrong house. Never heard of him.' He moved to close the door, but Jo put the palm of her hand against it.

'Don't make this hard,' she said, in a voice I didn't recognize. 'It really doesn't need to be.'

‘Is he in?’ I asked.

The guy rested his arm on the doorframe, so that his T-shirt rose up and I caught a glimpse of black hair just beneath his belly button.

‘He doesn’t live here anymore.’

‘When did he leave?’

‘What’s it to you?’

I hesitated, uncertain whether answering his question would breach client confidentiality, but before I’d decided one way or the other, he sighed heavily and held the door open wider.

‘I get it.’

Got what? It struck me as an odd choice of sentence, but before I had chance to ask what he meant, Jo had stepped on to the doorstep.

‘We need to speak to him,’ she said. ‘Urgently.’

‘The gear,’ he said. He took a step backwards. ‘Wait there.’ He turned and walked towards the rear of the house.

‘Play nice.’ I rested my hand on Jo’s arm. ‘We want him on our side.’

‘What gear?’ she said, as she shrugged my hand off and trailed after him inside the house.

I waited on the doorstep for a minute or so, unsure what to do. A group of students were making their way up the hill. I felt weird just standing there, so I followed Jo, pausing in the hallway to close the front door. By the time I caught up, the two of them were in the kitchen, glaring at each other, Jo with her hands on her hips. I caught the end of her sentence.

‘A few details.’

There was a table in the middle of the room and washing-up stacked to the left of the sink. The room smelled of fresh paint and bleach. The guy said nothing.

‘Nice place,’ I said. ‘You lived here long?’

‘Could murder a brew,’ Jo said. ‘Stick the kettle on.’

‘Murder.’ He nodded his head. His dark fringe got in his eyes and he kept pushing it away with his hands. ‘Nice.’

‘It’s a figure of speech,’ I said. I had the feeling I wasn’t keeping up with the conversation.

‘Course it is.’ He turned to fill the kettle with water. ‘A brew.’

There was something in his tone that made me doubt his hospitality, but Jo didn’t seem to notice. ‘Ace,’ she said, pulling out her tobacco pouch. ‘Mind if I smoke?’

‘Knock yourself out,’ he said, retrieving three mugs from the draining rack. He wiped each one thoroughly with a clean white tea towel.

‘You said you’ve got his stuff?’ I said. ‘Could we take a look?’

‘You used to be in Socialist Students, didn’t you?’ he said to Jo.

I flinched inwardly. Jo hates being reminded of that time, especially since she’d been asked to stand down as branch secretary when they’d found out she was seeing a copper. Of course, Jo hadn’t exactly been thrilled about what Andy did for a living – but you can’t choose who you fall in love with. Anyway, since that time she’s been more of your freelance revolutionary.

‘Saw you at the Corbyn rally,’ he continued. ‘Pants.’

I wasn’t sure whether he was saying the rally wasn’t good, or Pants was his name. Jo didn’t seem bothered either way, shrugging his comments off, like she was engrossed in rolling her cigarette. Her tongue stuck out between her plump pink lips.

‘Class War,’ he said.

Still no comment from Jo.

‘So, Jack,’ I said, feeling a change of subject was called for. ‘When did he leave?’

He ran a hand through his floppy dark hair. ‘I have no idea where he is.’

‘But he lives here?’

‘Used to. He skipped. A week or so back.’

‘Oh.’ My thoughts of a quick and easy solution to our first case sloped off into the middle distance. ‘Know where he went?’

He shook his head. ‘I have no idea, I swear. Did a runner, proper moonlight flit. Took Brownie’s PS4 with him.’

I took a seat next to Jo as the kettle boiled. ‘Any clue where he might have gone?’

‘Uh uh.’

‘Did he leave a forwarding address?’ I knew as the words came out of my mouth that they were overly naive.

‘Ever heard of someone doing a moonlight flit and leaving a forwarding address?’

‘Pants, what’s your problem?’ said Jo, folding her arms across her chest and leaning back in the chair. ‘It’s not like we’re not asking nicely.’

Pants stared at her, like he wanted to say something, but he checked himself.

‘You said you had his stuff,’ I said. ‘Does that not mean he’s coming back?’

‘No idea. He didn’t tell me his plans.’

‘Can we see it? His stuff?’

‘You mean the stuff from his room?’

‘Yeah, I guess.’ I still had the feeling we were speaking in riddles.

Pants thought about this for a moment, then he shrugged. ‘What do I care?’ He moved across to a door in the corner of the room and flicked back the bolt. ‘It’s in the cellar.’

I glanced at Jo. Was it wise to follow a man we’d only just met into a cellar? Possibly not, but six weeks of punching a leather bag had made my biceps swell and there’s a confidence that comes with that. Besides there were two of us, and he was barefoot.

‘After you,’ Jo said to him.

Pants went first, I followed, and Jo brought up the rear as we made our way down the narrow stone steps. When Pants got to the bottom he flicked a light switch. He nodded towards half a dozen bin liners in the corner of a small room that might have been where they once delivered coal. My first reaction was to grin.

‘That’s everything.’ Pants said. ‘I mean, apart—’

‘Can we look?’ asked Jo, already inspecting the bags.

Pants looked at me like he was daring me to say something. I shrugged as he squared back his shoulders. OK, we hadn’t got Jack, but we’d got his stuff: surely the next best thing. There had to be something in there that would tell us where he’d gone, who he was with. An old phone would be great. And we had something we could tell his mother. I practised the words in my head. *Yes, that’s right, Mrs Wilkins, we’ve a few leads we’re working on.*

‘Can we?’ I asked.

‘Bring them up. It’s freezing down here.’

I hadn’t noticed the temperature, but Pants’s bare toes were crunched up against the cold concrete.

Jo and I grabbed the necks of the nearest bin liners.

‘Pen’s supposed to be taking them to the charity shop.’

‘What’s in them?’ asked Jo, as we followed him back up the stairs, lugging the bags behind us.

‘Crap,’ said Pants. He returned to the kettle, poured the just boiled water into the mugs, while Jo and I went back for the last bags.

When we’d brought them back upstairs, Jo said: ‘They’re not very heavy.’

‘Clothes mainly.’

That wiped the grin from my face. I frowned, trying to make sense of what we knew. ‘He took Brownie’s PlayStation but left his own clothes?’ I tried to undo the knot at the top of the first bin liner, but it was tight.

‘Don’t open them in here,’ Pants said to me. ‘I’ve just hoovered.’

‘Has he got any mates?’ Jo asked. ‘Anyone who’ll know where he went?’

‘Only Brownie, and he doesn’t know.’

‘Where is Brownie?’

‘Out.’

‘Out where?’ said Jo, in a voice that said she was trying to be patient.

‘He’s gone to try The Warehouse again.’

We waited for him to expand.

‘Jack works there. Or he used to. Brownie’s gone down, looking for him.’ He opened the fridge and took out a carton of rice milk. ‘You’re not the only ones, you know. He owes his share of the gas bill.’

That surprised me. People living in squats pay gas bills? Struck me as a bit pedestrian. ‘Not the only ones what?’

‘How do you know he left?’ asked Jo, sitting back down at the table and returning to her roll-up.

‘What?’

She lit the end, her eyes screwed up against the smoke. ‘How do you know he’s not dead?’

Sometimes I hate Jo. She has this way of putting into words the things that lurk in the corner of your mind, the things you don’t want to think about. She just puts it right out there, like there’s nothing to be scared of. Pants kicked the fridge door shut with his foot.

‘He’s not dead.’

‘How do you know?’ Jo stared at Pants without blinking.

Pants didn’t say anything.

‘He might have fallen in the canal,’ Jo said.

‘What you trying to say?’

Wasn’t it obvious enough? I flinched as Jo continued to bat around the possibilities.

‘Been mugged, got run over?’

Jo listed the various tragedies as I tried not to think how plausible each of them sounded. More plausible than someone doing a runner in the buff with his housemate’s PlayStation.

‘Did you try the hospitals?’

Pants raised his eyebrows.

‘How do you know it was him that took the PS4?’ Jo paused and tapped the end of her cigarette into the ashtray on the table.

‘It’s obvious.’ He put two mugs on the table in front of us with a bit too much force, so that a splash of hot liquid leaped over the rim. ‘Who else? There was no break-in.’

I thought I saw him frown, his features darkened for an instant.

Jo didn’t let up with the questions. ‘Have you rung his family?’

He mopped at the spilt tea on the table with a dishcloth and then rinsed it in the sink. ‘He didn’t—’

‘Sounds like you didn’t give him much of a chance,’ said Jo.

I took my first sip of scalding tea. I love it so hot it burns the skin off the roof of your mouth. ‘She’s right,’ I said, after I’d thought about it for a moment. ‘If my flatmate went missing—’

Jo didn’t let me finish either. ‘Ever heard of the benefit of the doubt?’ she asked.

Pants folded his arms across his chest. The beginnings of a tattoo poked out under his T-shirt sleeve. ‘You didn’t live with him.’

‘He could be dead in a gutter for all you know,’ said Jo.

I got a sudden flash of my Aunt Edie, although she’d have said ‘dead in a ditch’. Guilt clawed my stomach lining. She’s my only living relative, and I hadn’t rung her in weeks.

‘Don’t you take the moral high ground with me,’ he said, his voice lower, quieter. He turned away.

I didn't understand the sneer in his voice. My gaze followed his. I could see the tops of the trees on The Ridge through the kitchen window, still bare from winter and fading against the darkening sky.

'His family's not heard from him for three months,' I said. 'You can understand why they're worried.'

He reached for a packet of Silk Cut that was on the high up mantelpiece above a gas fire. He lit one, inhaled in a way that made me think my initial hunch was right – he'd only just got up. As he exhaled he turned back to face us.

'Oh, we heard from him.'

My patience snapped. 'He's rung?'

His gaze flicked to me like he'd forgotten I was in the room. 'Would have been nice,' he said. 'But no.'

'Then?'

'Wait on,' he said, disappearing through the kitchen door towards the hall.

Jo pulled a face, like she didn't know what he was on about either.

He returned a moment later carrying a brown envelope. He held it upside down over the table and an Old Holborn tin fell out – the old-fashioned kind, orange and black with a row of what looked like Georgian houses on the lid. It clattered onto the table. Jo and I glanced at each other, a weird feeling blooming in my chest.

'Go ahead,' he said. 'Open it.'

Chapter Three

A feeling of dread crept over me. Don't ask me why. I'm starting to believe in sixth senses and I'm learning to trust my gut. It's taken years, but, after what happened, well, let's just say I learned the hard way. I knew whatever it was in that tin it wasn't good. It had its own aura, a bad vibe, or some kind of shit.

Jo picked up the tin. It didn't rattle, and I knew by the way she held it in her hand it had weight to it. She glanced up at Pants, then me, and she prised off the lid. I held my breath.

Inside was a small plastic bag plump with brown powder. I kind of hoped it was demerara sugar but a voice inside me said I was clutching at straws.

'Smack,' said Jo, her voice rising like she was asking a question, but one to which she already knew the answer.

'Really,' said Pants, the sarcasm hard to miss.

'So ...' My brain tried to make sense of the messages my eyes were feeding it. 'What? He posted you heroin? In lieu of the bills?'

'Read the note.' He tugged it out of the brown envelope, a piece of scruffy A4 paper, folded into quarters, and handed it to me. He dropped the envelope on the table. Jo held the bag, still inside the tin, to her nose. Then she gave it to me, and I did the same, like we were seasoned sniffer dogs. Pants went to stand back by the sink.

I unfolded the note and read it out loud.

"Soz, guys. Leeds does my head in. When they come looking for me, give them this and tell them I'll sort the rest when I can. Sorry bout ..."

There was a word crossed out and I couldn't make out what it said. Instead he'd continued, "everything, but the less you know the better. Keep the faith. J."

'Did you know he was into smack?' asked Jo.

Pants looked uncomfortable. 'Dunno. I don't want to know.'

'Who's "they"?' I asked, as I read the note again.

'Funny.' He glared at me. 'Just take it and don't come back.'

'What?'

'I'm serious.'

'No,' I said, as the realization of what he was thinking crept over me.

'This isn't how it was supposed to be,' he said. 'Not when we set it up. I don't want to get involved.'

'No,' I said again. 'I've been accused of a few things in my time, but heroin dealer was a new low. We're private investigators, working for his family.'

'Yeah, right.' From his tone it was clear he didn't believe me. 'His family.'

'Did you call the police?' Jo asked as she replaced the lid on the tin.

'What, to come to our squat to talk about the heroin one of our housemates just sent us?' Pants stood with his arms folded across his chest. 'Take it and go.'

'Can we take his stuff too?' asked Jo. She stuffed the tin into her jacket pocket. I frowned at her. She took a slurp of tea as she got to her feet.

'I guess. We're not planning a car boot.'

My cheeks felt warm. I hate misunderstandings. But in my experience, these things are hard to unravel. The more you pull, the more you tangle. Still, I gave it a limp shot.

'We're not drug dealers, you know.'

He didn't show any sign that he'd heard me. Instead he continued to speak to Jo. 'I just want it out of here. We're on dodgy enough ground as it is.'

Jo had already stubbed out her cigarette, readying herself for the task of moving the bin liners. I folded the note, picked up the envelope and shoved both in my pocket. Pants helped us lift the bags out to the pavement in silence.

There were seven bin liners in all, added to the Old Holborn tin full of smack, and we had quite a haul. We crammed the sacks into the back of the van.

‘If anything happens, will you let us know?’ I handed him a business card.

He frowned, like he’d seen everything now. Smack dealers with business cards. I couldn’t think what to say. The more I protested the lamer it sounded. I stuffed the last bin liner into the van, and when I turned round Pants was already back in the house. The front door banged closed.

‘Don’t think he likes us,’ I said to Jo. She was crouched in the road by the driver’s door.

‘Whatevs,’ she said.

‘He thinks we’re dealers.’

‘Who cares what he thinks? He’s a bloke.’

Jo’s never been what you’d call a man’s woman and you can’t really blame her. When she was twelve, her dad ran off with her Girl Guide leader. He’s just had twins with his latest girlfriend, Stacey, who’s only three years older than Jo. Jo says he’s trying to be the Paul Weller of gastroenterology.

But lately she’s got worse. Five months ago, she caught her last boyfriend – Andy, the copper – in bed with the station typist, and since then she’s declared herself a political lesbian. Whether a political lesbian is the same as an actual lesbian, I’ve yet to discover, but Jo ranks men only a point or two higher than amoeba on the evolutionary scale.

I watched her trying to prise open the plastic cover on the inside of the driver’s door with a screwdriver. ‘What you doing?’

‘Trying to find somewhere to stash this. Case we get pulled.’

My discomfort grew. I wasn’t in a hurry to have anyone else suspect us of drug dealing, and particularly not the police. We drove back to the office in silence, the sky turning a dusky pink.

The offices felt safe, familiar. As soon as we’d carried all the bags inside, I locked the door and flicked the lights on. I made us a cup of tea while Jo quickly devised an inventory form on our second-hand PC. We sat in the front office, and Jo printed off a copy as I opened the first bin liner. Pants, or someone from the squat, had tied big knots in the top of each one, and it took me a few moments to prise it undone, the black plastic straining against my stubby fingernails.

‘Right, one thing at a time,’ said Jo. ‘Remember, this could be evidence.’

I paused. ‘Should we wear gloves?’

‘Shit, yes,’ said Jo, and I could tell she was pissed off she hadn’t thought of it. ‘I’ll run to Bobats.’

Bobats is the local hardware store. It’s open more or less twenty-four hours a day, and it sells everything from firelighters to lock cutters. I wasn’t sure it would sell gloves though; but sure enough less than five minutes later Jo was back with a box of disposable ones. We grinned at each other as we both pulled on a pair.

‘Remind you of anything?’

I shook thoughts of plastic speculums and wooden spatulas from my mind. ‘Probably should have thought before we handled a tin of heroin,’ I said.

Jo held the tip of her pen against the paper she’d attached to a plastic clipboard. ‘OK, what’ve we got?’

‘First up. A black jumper. Men’s.’ I looked at the label. ‘Marks & Spencer. Anarchy in the UK.’ I grinned. Jo didn’t respond. ‘Size: Large.’

Jo scribbled down the information.

‘Yeuch.’ I pulled out a pair of blue-grey underpants, glad of my latex. ‘Undies.’

That was all the first bag contained – clothes, and not all of them washed. The second one was a bit more interesting – a handful of textbooks, a biography of Bowie. A couple of ring-binder files with notes and hand-outs from the university sports psychology department and what looked like an

advert dated May 2013 cut from the pages of the *Manchester Evening News*. “Three Unforgettable Years. You will always be in my heart. *Ciao*. Roberto Mancini.” I turned it over. It had traces of Blu-Tack in the four corners. ‘Who’s he?’

‘Philistine,’ said Jo. ‘Manager at Man City, till he got sacked. Used to play for Italy.’

I put the advert to one side and carried on searching. At the bottom of the second bag I found a wallet containing an array of plastic cards – one for the National Union of Students complete with his photograph. I put that up on the desk as the photo was newer than the one we had. Also in the wallet were a couple of credit cards, past their expiry dates, and one that confirmed him as an organ donor. I tried not to see that as a sign. There were a couple of cardboard cards tucked in a pocket behind the leather – a library card and an out-of-date membership card for Alderley Edge Cricket Club. I guessed the wallet hadn’t been used for years. There was no money.

Jo continued checking the pockets in the heap of clothing in front of us. I’m not known for my colourful wardrobe, but it seemed Jack didn’t wear anything but black. She held up another pair of trousers, and a pair of underpants fell out of the leg. I shuddered. They say clothes maketh the man. If that’s the case, the man we were dealing with was shapeless, full of holes and had a bit of an issue with personal hygiene.

It wasn’t until the third bag that we discovered there was a whole lot more to Jack Wilkins.

Chapter Four

Jo had taken off her gloves and given up writing everything down. Mainly, I think, because she couldn't keep coming up with alternative ways to write, 'shapeless black jumper' or, 'pair of black canvas trousers with ripped hole in the knee'. As I watched the mountain of jumble grow higher, I did wonder what Jack was doing for clothes. It was March, but still bitterly cold – hardly time to be dispensing with jumpers. Had he decided on a whole new wardrobe direction or had he gone somewhere that clothes didn't matter?

Which, of course, begged the question, where don't clothes matter? I sparked up a fag and mulled it over. Two answers came to mind: a nudist beach in the South of France and the bottom of a lake. For some reason I couldn't get the second one out of my head. I glanced at the clock. Four hours we'd been on the case, and I'd been quietly confident we'd have something for Mrs Wilkins by now. If not her son himself, at least news of his current address. Instead, all I could tell her was that he was mixed up in the supply of Class As and was probably naked.

Jo stood and crossed the room to retrieve the third bin liner. She left behind her a space on the floor, the brown carpet tiles resembling an island in a sea of black clothing. I watched her wrestle the knot for a few seconds, before giving up and ripping a hole in the side of the bag. A volcano of balled-up pairs of socks erupted. Jo frowned.

'How many?'

The contrast of the neatly paired socks, different colours – blue, grey, tan – next to the heap of the rest of Jack's clothes struck me. 'They're all brand new,' I said, picking up the pair that had rolled closest to me. They had that unwrinkled freshness of having never been worn or washed. 'Why would you have a million pairs of brand new socks?'

Jo freed two socks from their conjoined ball. She held them up, like Christmas stockings, then cocked her head to one side, her eyebrows knotting. I thought I heard something, a scrunching sound. Jo let one sock drop to the floor, and I watched her wrinkle up the other, like she was about to put it on. She turned it inside out, and as she did a wad of tightly folded paper popped out. Jo's blue eyes shone. She's got the most amazing eyes has Jo and the make-up she wears accentuates them, so that sometimes I catch people transfixed as they're talking to her. She grinned at me as she smoothed out the bundle, and I realized what it was we were looking at.

'Wowzer.'

I did the same to the pair I was holding. An identical wad of cash fell out. I picked it up and smoothed out the clutch of twenty-pound notes. I counted them out, as Jo snapped on another pair of gloves. When I'd finished I stared at her.

'Ten. Ten twenty-pound notes. Ten times twenty? That's two hundred quid.'

Jo nodded, indicating she had what I had. We both checked our second socks. Same result.

Jo grabbed a third pair. I didn't, I was too busy trying to do the maths. I assessed the piles of socks. At least fifty pairs. Two hundred quid in each sock, two socks in each pair. That's like what? My brain refused to do the sums, so I reached for my phone off the edge of the desk, as Jo popped out another wedge of cash.

'Twenty grand.' I sat back on the floor, propped up against the wall. 'Give or take ...'

Neither of us spoke for a moment. I felt a shiver, like someone had breathed down the back of my neck. I ran to the window and tugged the string that pulled the vertical blinds closed, making sure every centimetre of the dark glass was covered.

'Get me some envelopes,' said Jo. 'We need to get this straight.'

Jo un-balled sock after sock and counted out piles of cash, every so often stopping to tuck a wedge of notes into a brown envelope and write something on the front.

I sat back and tried to work out what was going on in Jack's life. If he owed his dealers, why didn't he just hand over the cash? Why leave it at his house, wrapped in pairs of black, brown and blue socks? Why leave his clothes behind? Had he been planning on coming back?

'Sixty,' said Jo, when she'd sealed the last pile of cash into an envelope.

'Sixty grand?' I felt light-headed.

'Sixty pairs of socks. Twenty-four grand.'

I crossed my legs and reminded myself to breathe from my belly and let the weight sink into the floor through my sitting bones.

'Well. Our first case has been good for business, even if we haven't solved anything,' said Jo.

'We can't keep it.'

'You think we should give it to his mum?' From the tone of her voice, I gathered Jo didn't think much to this idea.

'I'm thinking his dealers are bound to come looking for it sooner or later. His note.' I pulled it from my pocket. 'It says, "when they come looking for me". They must know where he lives.'

Jo reached up to help herself to a handful of rubber bands from the desk tidy and bundled the envelopes together.

'Why would he post smack but not mention the cash?' I asked out loud. Another thought hit me. We'd just removed heroin with a street value of God knows what and twenty-four grand in cash. 'Shit. They're going to go to his house and—'

'We left them our business card,' Jo finished the sentence for me. She straightened up from her position and stretched out her back. 'Might not be a bad thing. They can come round here; we can give them the money; they tell us where Jack is. Everyone's a winner.'

'Mmm.' I wasn't convinced. 'If it's that easy, why didn't Jack give them the money?'

'He got greedy?'

'If he got greedy, why'd he leave it behind?'

'Maybe he got scared.'

'If he got scared, why'd he run without his clothes?'

'I dunno.' Jo was obviously bored playing twenty questions, which was a shame because I had a whole stack more. She got onto her knees, used the desk to pull herself to standing. 'I'll lock this in the safe for now.'

She went through to the back room with twenty-four neatly labelled envelopes, a thousand pounds in each.

'Don't forget this.' I lobbed the tin of heroin at her, and she caught it one-handed. While she was gone, I stuffed Jack's clothes back into what was left of the bin bags. There were two more bags still to open.

'The safe's full,' said Jo, coming back into the room. 'Find anything else?'

'More clothes. Some copies of the *Socialist Worker*, an old bus pass. Not much to show for a life, is it?'

'He's not doing bad. Twenty-four grand in savings.'

'Hardly think they're savings.'

'But still—'

'What's not here?' I asked. 'If these are all his worldly goods?'

'No computer, no iPad, no phone,' said Jo, sitting on the edge of the desk.

'Good point. Pants said he'd nicked Brownie's PlayStation. So he's taken electrical goods.'

'To sell.'

'Doesn't make sense. Why nick a PlayStation and leave behind twenty-four grand?'

'No toothbrush. No toiletries.'

'We should ask Pants about that. Maybe they're in the bathroom. It would be useful to know if he took his toothbrush.' I scrawled a note on the pad on the desk.

Jo yawned. ‘What now?’

It wasn’t like we had much to go on. ‘Let’s try The Warehouse. They might know something there. And we might bump into Brownie.’

It struck me that I should have taken a notebook to the squat. My memory’s not great at the best of times. I felt like a schoolgirl with an appointment to see the headmaster. How was I going to explain this to Mrs Wilkins?

When I first had the idea for this business, I’d had visions of the kind of experiences Davina McCall and Nicky Campbell preside over on *Long Lost Family* – the ecstasy on people’s faces as I reunited them with lost loves. Not that I’m in it for the gratitude, but I want to make a difference. I know what it’s like to live with the ghosts of the disappeared.

But I had this quiet but persistent voice inside me, saying that that kind of arm flinging, oh-my-god-I-can’t-believe-it’s-you, tears, laughter, hugging experience wasn’t going to be happening. In fact, the monologue inside my head continued, I should keep my nose out. Dealers, large sums of money, smack. It was obvious nothing good was going to come of this.

But it’s like I’ve got this kind of death wish when it comes to family. I’m driven by something I can’t explain, something about belonging and the self-awareness, the understanding that comes with it. I need it to work out.

I need to find the family that works. Because Christ knows, mine didn’t.

Chapter Five

We took the bus into town. Perhaps not the obvious mode of transport for professional investigators, but it's a habit that's hard to break. Besides, the number 93 rattles down Woodhouse Lane at a rate of about one every minute, ferrying students into town and college. And there's never anywhere to park in Leeds.

It was early enough that The Warehouse hadn't opened for the night. The big black doors were closed and there wasn't a doorbell, so we hung around outside till we saw a young blonde woman turn the corner and push through the side door. We jogged to catch up with her before the door banged shut. Jo asked her if we could speak to the manager, and she said to come in.

Once inside, she told us to wait by the main door. No one goes to The Warehouse for the décor, but even so I was taken aback at the state of it, empty of its clientele and with the lights on. Bare, damp walls, the floor littered with cigarette burns, the seating areas stained and ripped.

I watched the woman who'd let us in cross to the bar and speak to a bloke with a straggly beard. She returned and told us Bill wasn't in yet, but wouldn't be long. She invited us to wait, asked if we wanted a beer. Jo nodded at the same moment I held up a hand to say no. I sighed, but on the inside.

At first, me giving up drinking had been a bit of an issue to our friendship, but Jo's adapted now. We'd both known if something didn't give, well, if something didn't give, something would have given. Probably me. That didn't mean it didn't hurt watching Jo swig from a bottle of Tiger beer that had beads of condensation on the glass.

Jo sat while I opted to stand, rehearsing my lines for Jack's mother: *It's not gone quite as well as we hoped, Mrs Wilkins, but ...*

A tall, gangly man made his way across the dance floor towards us. He must have been six foot seven, a long, lean streak of piss. 'You're looking for me,' he said, and it didn't sound like a question.

'You the boss?' asked Jo.

'Bill,' he said. I held out my hand but he either didn't see or he ignored it.

'Nothing going at the moment, but if you come back next week, I might have something.'

'Sorry?'

Jo stood up. She has this trick of making herself look taller than she actually is, but they still looked like a comedy duo as they faced each other. She wasn't much above his waist.

'We're not looking for a job.' She made the word 'job' sound like something you might scrape off the sole of your boots.

We followed him as he made his way towards the bar. He turned his head and spoke to us as he walked. 'What then?'

The dance floor stuck to my boots as we crossed the room. The seating areas looked manky under the harsh lights, and the heat of the bulbs was making me sweat. God knows what the temperature would get like when the place filled.

Bill ducked beneath the bar and lifted a crate of beers onto the black melamine. He pulled half a dozen bottles out by their necks and stacked them on the shelves behind him.

'We're looking for Jack,' I said. 'Jack Wilkins.'

He froze for a brief second, so brief I wondered whether I'd imagined it and then resumed his shelf-stacking. 'Why?'

'He's a friend. We're worried about him.'

'You and the rest of the world.'

'Pardon?'

'No idea.'

'What?' Jo was on tiptoe at the bar, straining to hear him.

He turned round, wiped his hands down his trousers. 'He was on the rota, last week, three shifts. Didn't turn up for any of them.'

'Has he rung in sick?' I asked.

'Still don't see why this is your business.'

Jo leaned over the bar, and I saw Bill's eyes drop to her cleavage. When he got back to her face, he flinched as Jo glowered at him.

'We're looking for a friend who appears to have disappeared. No need to be defensive.'

Bill's gaze flicked to the outskirts of the room, and I knew he was looking for the door staff. No sign of them, which was fortunate, as Jo'd had an altercation with one, heavily tattooed, the last time we were here. The list of places we haven't been escorted out of is getting shorter; although since I stopped drinking I've adopted the role of minder. As soon as Jo shows signs of wear and tear I steer us back up the hill. It's not that she goes out looking for trouble, but she can't keep her mouth shut when she's had a few – insists on intervening in any situation, particularly if there's a political or feminist perspective that needs raising. She's obliged to rescue women from unwanted male attention, or to point out issues of gender inequality that may have been overlooked by pissed-up blokes who are out hunting, looking to get their rocks off.

Bill turned his attention back to Jo. 'Don't come in here—'

'We're private investigators,' I said. 'We've been hired by his family. No one's seen him or heard from him and they're worried. About to call the police.' I shrugged my shoulders in what I hoped was a disarming manner. 'We're trying to find him before that happens.'

He scooped his hair back and tied it with a piece of elastic he had plucked from his wrist. 'Still don't know where he is.'

'When did you last see him?' I asked.

'He came to collect his wages.'

'When?'

'Pay day's Friday.'

'So you saw him last week?'

'Week before.' He dumped another crate of beer bottles on the counter and unpacked it, turning his back to us in order to stack the shelves. We waited a few moments before he glanced over his shoulder at us and said: 'In fact, when you do find him, you can tell him from me, he's sacked.'

'Are you worried for his well-being?' asked Jo. 'Have you alerted the relevant bodies?'

'Come again?'

'An employee doesn't turn up for work, doesn't ring. Don't you have some kind of duty of care? To make sure he's OK?'

Bill pulled himself up to standing and turned to face Jo. 'Who do you suggest I ring?'

'The guy's disappeared and no one gives a fuck,' said Jo. 'Who said society is dead?'

I moved to stand on the left-hand side of Jo so that I was between the two of them. I tried to ease her down the bar, away from Bill, using slight pressure from my right hip. Jo stood firm.

'Do you know anyone who might know where he is?' I asked.

Bill continued to stare at Jo. 'You want me to ring his mother every time he don't turn up for work?'

I felt genuinely sorry for Bill. He'd ended up on the wrong side of Jo, and when that happens you've got no chance.

'Did you ring him even?'

'Dint need to. His housemate came here. Said he'd done a runner and took his Xbox.'

'Pants or Brownie?' I asked.

'Come again?'

'The housemate?'

'The guy with the piercings. Dint catch a name. Carly'll know.'

‘Who’s Carly?’ I asked, but Bill clearly considered the conversation over.

He lifted up the part of the bar that snapped to the wall, allowing him an exit route, and picked up the two empty crates. He strode off back across the dance floor without saying goodbye.

I put my hand on Jo’s arm. ‘Steady tiger,’ I said. ‘Doesn’t help to get people’s backs up.’

‘It was a PlayStation last time we got told that story.’ She turned round and leaned against the bar.

The blonde girl returned, the one who’d let us in originally, and took over the space behind the bar that Bill had left. Jo persuaded her to sell two bottles of Tiger beer and asked her to point Carly out to us. She glanced around the cavernous space then gestured towards a young woman coming out of the women’s toilets. She carried industrial-sized toilet rolls, wearing them like bracelets. I led the way across to her, Jo still swigging her ice-cold beer. Leastways, I assumed it was ice-cold. Ice-cold and smooth as honey.

‘Hi,’ I said to Carly.

She frowned, an I-don’t-think-I-know-you kind of a frown. She had green eyes, and freckles splattered across the top of her nose like paint drops.

‘Bill says you might be able to help us?’ I waved in the direction of the bar even though Bill was long gone. ‘We’re looking for Jack.’

A burst of noise splintered through the sound system, bringing the place to life. Sound echoed off the walls as the lights dimmed. The DJ had obviously arrived.

‘What you want?’ Carly shouted to be heard.

Jo raised her voice to compete with the music. ‘We’re looking for someone and Bill says—’

‘You found him?’ Even in the dim light I could see her face grow pink.

Jo was still shouting out the remainder of her sentence: ‘know where his mate is?’

‘You know Brownie?’ I asked, my throat feeling the strain. Was the music always this loud in clubs? I haven’t been in one since I gave up the booze. I’ve somehow always managed to persuade Jo to get out of town before last orders. I realized as we stood there that I’d never come clubbing again because nightclubs are not intended for sober people. Being out of it is part of the deal.

‘How?’ Carly shouted.

‘What?’ yelled Jo.

We all frowned at our separate conversations. My eardrums pounded. Carly beckoned us into the toilets she’d just stepped out of. A hundred memories assaulted me. I always end up in the toilets, no matter what club I go to. In fact, most of my happiest memories of nightclubs are in the toilets. There’s something safe about the confined, women-only space. The volume decreased by a decibel or three as the door closed behind us.

‘You know Jack?’ I asked.

At the same time as she said: ‘Who are you?’

‘We’re looking for him. Know where he is?’ said Jo, offering her one of the bottles of beer she’d just bought.

‘Oh.’ Carly’s face fell. ‘No. Wish I did.’ She stacked the toilet rolls on top of the counter next to the sink, and I caught sight of the watch on her wrist. Almost nine.

‘When did you last see him?’

‘What’s it to you?’ she said, taking the bottle of beer Jo held out and putting it down on the side, next to the sinks. ‘I’ll get sacked.’

‘We need to find him.’

‘Why? Who are you?’

‘Do you know where he is?’

‘No.’

I didn’t trust her. There was something about the way she refused to make eye contact.

‘We need to find him,’ said Jo. ‘We believe his life is in danger.’

Carly turned away from us and sank her face into her hands. Silence. I watched her run her fingers over her skin like she was washing her face. Finally, she peeled her fingers from her eyes and said: 'He's disappeared off the face of the earth.'

I stared at her. She reminded me of someone, but I couldn't think who. She looked like she might cry as she picked the beer back up. 'I shouldn't really.'

'Do you good. You're upset. Not heard from him then?' said Jo.

'No, not a word,' she said. 'Who are you?'

'Friend of a friend,' said Jo, as I wondered where she was going with this.

'What friend?'

'One of his mates. From college. She's worried about him. What about you?'

'I work with him, is all,' she said. "'Friend of a friend"? Who?'

'She doesn't want people to know,' I said.

Carly turned to stare at me. 'I don't believe you.'

'You don't have to believe us,' said Jo.

'Is it Liz?'

I glanced at Jo and we made a face at each other, like maybe we were nervous that Carly was on the right track.

'You can tell her to get lost. He's not interested.'

'Because he's interested in you?' Jo asked, her voice sceptical.

A silence followed; well, as silent as you can be when there's drum and bass throbbing in the background. Don't be afraid of the silences, someone once told me, they tell you more than the bits in between. Sure enough, she cracked.

'We've been seeing each other, a bit. On and off. You know.'

'Fuck, yes,' said Jo, with heartfelt meaning. She checked her lipstick in the mirror. I love that Jo wears make-up. I've never got further than black eyeliner, which I can't live without. But beyond that, I've never understood how women know what goes where. Jo's an expert. Watching Jo get ready for a night out is to watch an artist at work. She can paint herself into a whole different person. 'When was it last on?' she asked Carly.

Carly took a mouthful of beer then turned to the mirror so that she was side by side with Jo. I stood back, observing their mirror reflections from a distance. Carly tugged at her curls, like she was trying to get them to stay in one place. They disobeyed her immediately, springing back into their own chaotic arrangement. She sighed and gave up. Carly looked about nineteen, cute in an Annie kind of way. If I had to guess, I'd say she was one of those students who probably came from some poxy little village in Cumbria or Northumberland and was thrilled to be living it up in the city. She pulled a stick of mascara out of the back pocket of her jeans.

'That's the weird thing, you know?'

I felt like a voyeur – didn't know what to do with my hands, so I turned and studied the signs on the condom dispenser.

'We've been, like, seeing each other nearly four months. Always more off than on. His choice.' She stuck out her tongue at her own reflection. 'He's got ... issues. Wouldn't walk down the street with me when we first got together.'

'Been there,' said Jo.

I tried not to let anything show on my face, but inside I marvelled at what women put up with. Carly went out with someone who didn't want to be seen in public with her? And Jo had too? What the fuck?

'But then, lately,' Carly continued, 'we've been more on than off. I thought we'd turned a corner. Even talked about going travelling together. Said he wanted to get his head sorted.'

'Heard that too,' said Jo, cynic to the core. 'They never mean it.'

I abandoned the condom dispenser and watched for Carly's reaction. Her eyes grew brighter in the mirror.

'Two weeks ago, he said he loved me. First time ever.'

'You believed him?'

'Yes.'

'Then what happened?' asked Jo, puckering up her lips like she might just kiss her own reflection.

'He disappears.'

'Typical,' said Jo, and I braced myself for a diatribe.

I watched their reflections, half-fascinated, half-repulsed. So intimate and intense, the kind of scrutiny I could never face. Jo took a deep breath, applied a deep red smudge of colour to her lower lip.

Carly wiped a finger under the eyelashes of her right eye, creating a soft black line that made her eyes appear bigger. 'He was supposed to meet me at the Hyde Park cinema, week last Sunday. Never showed.'

'Did he ring?'

'No.'

'Has he disappeared before?' I asked.

'Not for this long.' Carly's voice wobbled again. 'It's been nearly a week.'

'Tell me about the last time you saw him,' said Jo.

I watched her hesitate. 'It might help us find him,' I said, trying to draw the words out of her.

Water drizzled from the tap at the far sink. I tried to turn it off, but it wouldn't budge. Carly shrugged at her reflection.

'Just over a week ago, last Thursday. We both worked here. Thursday. Normal night. Afterwards he came back to mine. We hung out, watched a film. Then, you know.' She paused, and I envied her the memory as a small smile flickered across her face. 'That's when he told me he loved me.'

The sadness returned, and she drank more beer. 'He got up the next morning, we got breakfast at Chichini's. Said he had to go see someone but asked if I wanted to go to the pictures on Sunday. Said to meet him outside at eight. That's it.'

'Did he seem worried about anything?'

'You know what he's like. Always worried about something, but he never lets on. He can't sit still, always has to be doing something.'

'What does Brownie think?' asked Jo.

At the mention of Brownie's name, a wall sprang up. Carly's tone, her whole demeanour changed. She straightened up. 'I don't give a fuck what Brownie thinks.'

'Bill says he might be in later,' I said.

'He's always in later.'

'He might know where Jack is.'

She shook her head so that her curls bobbed. 'He's looking for him. That's why he comes here every night. He's following me, thinks I'll lead him to Jack.' She wiped at her eyes in the mirror. 'He's bad news.'

'Bad news how?'

She tucked the mascara brush back into its bottle and turned to stare at Jo. 'Come on, *friend of a friend*? Balls.'

Jo glanced at me, and I nodded.

'We're private detectives,' Jo said, handing over another of our cards. She hitched herself up onto the worktop next to the sink, next to the toilet rolls, sitting with her legs swinging as she lit a fag. 'We've been employed by his mum. She hasn't seen—'

‘Jack’s mum?’ The disbelief in Carly’s voice was about the same I’d expect if Jo’d said we’d been hired by the Tooth Fairy.

‘Yeah,’ said Jo, exhaling smoke into the small room. ‘She’s not heard from—’

‘Jack hasn’t got a mum.’

That stopped us. The music continued to bounce off the walls and the tap at the far sink continued to drizzle, but I had the feeling everything else stood still.

‘Everyone’s got a mum,’ said Jo eventually.

‘Yeah. And Jack’s died when he was 5.’

Chapter Six

The three of us stood there in the women's toilets, staring at each other as we let Carly's statement sink in. This time it was me that cracked.

'She can't have.'

Carly turned to face me, so I could see the back of her head in the mirror. She folded her arms across her chest. 'She did.'

'Jack's mum *died*?' I repeated. I saw Mrs Wilkins in our offices, twisting the wedding ring on her finger.

'He could be telling you a sob story,' said Jo. 'Blokes'll tell you anything if they think they're in with a mercy shag.'

Carly shook her head in a way that didn't brook any argument. 'She was killed in a car crash. He was in the car. He survived. She died. He's never got over it.'

No one spoke.

Jo frowned at me. I felt panic stir in my belly.

'You need to be careful,' said Carly. 'This woman could be anyone. What did she look like?'

'What about his dad?' Jo asked.

'Never talks about him. Never talks about his past. All I know about his dad is that he's a workaholic. They have no relationship. Jack never goes home.'

'Where is home?'

'He doesn't have one. He was sent to boarding school when he was like 7.'

'His dad must live somewhere.'

'Some posh village outside of Manchester but, I'm telling you, Jack has nothing to do with him. He sells cars,' she said, like this was the worst thing a man could do. 'He's only into making money. Jack hates him. Wherever Jack is, it's definitely not with his dad.'

She seemed certain on that fact, so I didn't press it.

'What were you going to see?' I asked.

'What?'

'At the Hyde?' The Hyde Park Picture House is a small, independent cinema nestled among the red-brick terraces. It shows arty films, often subtitled – the kind of film I can never understand.

Carly stared at me without recognition.

'On the Sunday, when Jack didn't show?'

'Oh, right. The Ken Russell one – what's it called it – Daniel something.'

'*I, Daniel Blake*,' said Jo. 'Awesome.'

It was difficult to think of anything else to ask, so we left Carly in the toilets. She wrote her number down on the back of one of our business cards, and I promised her we'd be in touch if we heard anything.

'The custard thickens,' said Jo as we hit the pavement and the chill evening air.

'Do you believe her? About his mum being dead?'

'Dunno.' Jo shrugged her shoulders – like the fact our client may have told us a pack of complete lies was a mere blip in an otherwise ordinary day.

I pictured Mrs Wilkins in our offices. Remembered the shake in her hands as she crushed out a cigarette. 'She's got to be his mother,' I said as we headed through town, no real idea what we were going to do next. I felt the need to burn off some energy, see if I could outrun the smell of beer that was clinging to my clothes. My throat ached. 'If she's not his mother, why would she want us to find him?'

'He'll have been spinning Carly a sob story. You know what blokes are like. Lying, cheating—'

'You reckon?' I clutched at the paper-thin straw Jo offered.

'We need to talk to Brownie.'

‘She could be his stepmother. Maybe his dad remarried.’

‘Maybe,’ said Jo, but her voice lacked the conviction I was looking for. ‘When you next speaking to her?’

‘She’s ringing at nine tomorrow.’

‘So, ask her then.’

‘We can’t wait till tomorrow. We need to know who she is.’ The words fell out of me, without me really knowing what was coming next. ‘She’s our client, the whole fucking point of why we’re here. She said she was his mother. Why lie? Maybe that’s a thing – we need to get ID from people.’

‘Ring her then,’ said Jo. ‘That’s why I bought you a phone.’

‘She didn’t give me her number.’ I tried not to notice Jo’s raised eyebrow. ‘She’s staying at the Queens.’ I grasped her arm. ‘She said not to ring her husband. Said he’d go apeshit if he knew what she was doing.’

‘Might be true,’ she said.

‘Or she might not be Jack’s mother; in which case, ’course she doesn’t want us ringing his dad.’

Jo put a calming hand on my arm. I shrugged it off. ‘Why don’t we drop by?’ she said. ‘It’s not that far.’

The Queens Hotel underlines Queens Square – the first thing you see when you come to Leeds by train. Even in the dark it stands out – a huge silver-white building that looks up at the whole city, while its doormen in funny suits look down on the mere mortals milling around its streets. Mind you, at that time of night – half past nine on a Friday – I could understand their disdain. On the walk down, I hadn’t seen a single person who wasn’t rat-arsed.

One of the doormen gave us a questioning stare as we climbed the front steps, but he let us in all the same, once Jo announced we were meeting someone.

Jo marched up to reception. She’s never fazed. ‘We’re supposed to be meeting one of your guests,’ she said to the male receptionist. ‘Could you let her know we’re here?’

The receptionist looked cynical. ‘You have a room number?’

Jo glanced at me. I shook my head. ‘It’s Mrs Wilkins,’ she said. ‘Mrs Susan Wilkins.’

He hesitated but turned to the screen in front of him. He typed in a few letters, then turned back to Jo and smiled without warmth. ‘I’m afraid we don’t have anyone of that name staying at the hotel. Was there any—?’

‘You’re sure?’ I asked. ‘Late thirties or something, blonde.’

‘We have over two hundred guests—’

‘From Manchester? Staying the whole weekend.’ I leaned across the desk. He tilted the screen away from me. ‘Wears big, kind of round, earrings. Like pearls.’ I made weird hand signals in order to help him imagine what a woman wearing earrings might look like.

‘I’m afraid I can’t help you.’ He turned to indicate our opportunity to waste his time was now over. The telephone rang, and his hand shot out to pick up the receiver. ‘The Queens. How may I help?’

Jo grabbed my arm and moved me away from the desk.

‘Maybe she used a false name,’ I said. ‘She doesn’t want her husband to know what she’s up to.’

‘Maybe,’ said Jo. I had the sense she was humouring me. She led us through the foyer and back out the front doors.

‘She’s got to be his stepmother. Who else would be looking for him?’

Jo pulled a face at me while I realized that was possibly a silly question.

‘She wasn’t a drug dealer,’ I said. A middle-aged couple on their way out for the night frowned at me as they passed us on the steps. I lowered my voice. ‘She didn’t even smoke fags properly.’

Jo shrugged, grabbing my arm to pull me across the road, ducking between the cars.

‘Drug dealers aren’t going to hire private investigators.’

‘They might,’ said Jo.

‘If she is his stepmother, and she’s disappeared, she could be in trouble. Maybe the dealers have found her. Maybe they’re trying to get her to pay up to cover her son’s debts. She did say they’d helped Jack out financially in the past. She could be in trouble.’

We crossed the square. ‘There’s nothing we can do,’ Jo said. ‘We haven’t got a phone number.’

I bristled at that, couldn’t help feeling that Jo was blaming me for not correctly completing the form.

‘We have to hope she rings tomorrow like she said she would.’

‘I did ask,’ I said. ‘She said it was better if she rang us. Maybe she knows about the drugs. Maybe he’s been in this kind of trouble before.’

Jo shrugged, and we walked up through the city in silence, both lost in our own thoughts. It wasn’t until we reached the Town Hall, right in the centre of town, I realized I had no idea where we were headed.

‘Where we going?’ I asked Jo.

‘Brownie,’ she said, rolling a fag as she walked.

‘How do we find him?’

‘It’s quarter past ten, Friday night, he’s an anarcho-hippy, lives in Woodhouse. Where do you think?’

When you put it like that, it was obvious. ‘The Chemic,’ I said.

Chapter Seven

The Chemic is the local pub in Woodhouse, with a taproom full of anarchists and hippies. The lounge is a bit more upmarket, but not much. Everyone in the pub, including the bar staff, either is or was a student, once upon a time.

It was heaving, as always on a Friday night. I waited in the corridor outside the toilets until Jo came back from the bar with two pints of lager.

‘Soz,’ she said, when she saw the look on my face. ‘Force of habit. What do you want?’

‘Nothing. Actually, a bag of peanuts,’ I said, just because I wanted to have something to do with my hands.

She thrust the two pints into my hand and disappeared back into the lounge. I felt the coldness of the glass through my fingertips. My taste buds moistened, and I tried to swallow. Of course it’s tempting, but not really, not when you know where it ends.

I decided to go through to the taproom, see if I could find a spare five inches of space before someone knocked the drinks from my hands. I’d already had a guy with a rat’s-tail spill the best part of his pint of Landlord down my back.

Jo came back the second time. ‘Brownie is the guy in the black eyeliner.’ She shrugged a shoulder in the direction of the far corner. ‘According to the woman at the bar.’

I turned to observe a group of blokes, all in their twenties, sat round a table. I hazarded a guess that they’d graduated five or so years ago, were probably signing on while trying to avoid the onset of real life, life outside of The Chemic.

We squashed into a corner near the dartboard and waited. I tried not to stare at the guy with the eyeliner, but his collection of facial piercings didn’t help. He had spikes coming out of his top lip that made him look like a porcupine.

‘Wouldn’t want to get too close,’ I said. ‘How does he kiss?’

‘Careful,’ said Jo. ‘You’re in danger of sounding like Aunt Edie.’

Jo had drunk both pints by the time Brownie finally got up and made his way across the room towards the toilets. I elbowed her in the ribs, and she downed the last dregs as I followed him out of the taproom towards the gents.

‘Brownie?’

He turned and struggled to focus on me, wondering who I was, how I knew his name. Up close I counted four spikes through the skin under his nose, each one nestled in a bed of stubble that would classify as a moustache if he didn’t shave soon.

‘Yeah?’

‘Hi,’ I said. I smiled with the confidence that comes of being the only sober person within a hundred-yard radius. ‘I want to talk to you.’

‘I need a piss. Can you wait a sec?’

Jo bustled into the corridor behind me. ‘Just a few questions,’ she said. ‘About Jack.’

‘Jack? What about him?’

‘We’re private investigators,’ Jo said.

His expression changed. He glanced up and down the short corridor, like he was looking for the camera, or the police, or something. ‘Private investigators? Fuck off.’

‘Honest, we are.’ I nodded, still feeling a sense of pride and disbelief at the idea. ‘We just have a few questions. Only take a minute.’

‘Looking for Jack?’

‘That’s right. People are worried about him.’

‘Hang on a sec. I’m desperate. I’ll be right back.’

He pushed through the door of the gents.

I turned to Jo. 'Did you see that look on his face?' I asked.

I noticed Jo's eyes weren't focusing and realized she was hardly going to provide any kind of insights at this stage in the evening.

'He looked scared,' I said.

'Scared?' said Jo. 'What, of us?'

'Go outside and keep an eye out.'

'For what?'

'Case he does a runner.'

Jo sloped off through the back door. I paced the small corridor for a few seconds. Another bloke lurched past us, wearing a purple tie-dye T-shirt. He pushed open the door into the toilets and went in. I caught a whiff of men's urinal before the door closed in my face.

How long did it take for a man to take a piss? Not long in my limited experience. I counted to ten, a feeling welling inside me, a kind of certainty.

I cursed my own naivety as I pushed open the gents' door. The guy with the purple T-shirt stood swaying at one of the stalls, his back to me. Otherwise the room was empty. Fuck. I must have sworn out loud, because the guy turned, frowned and ended up pissing over the floor, his pee splashing my Docs. I clocked the open window and swore again.

'Did you get him?' I yelled to Jo through the open space but there was no reply. I sprinted back through the corridor and out into the car park. Fifty metres ahead of me, his head ducked into the wind, Brownie was sprinting at full throttle. Jo stood in the smoky back porch. 'That's him,' I shouted. 'He's done one.'

'Shit,' said Jo. 'Where's he off to?'

There was only one way to find out.

I filled my lungs with oxygen and took off after him.

The Chemic stands at the bottom of the hill on which the red-brick terraces of Woodhouse are built. There must have been a quarry somewhere close because the streets all have names like Back Quarry Mount Terrace and Cross Quarry Street. Brownie had taken off up the hill, away from the main road. That direction would take him through a dense warren of back-to-backs to his house on Burchett Grove.

Before I gave up drinking, I wouldn't have run for a bus. But these last few months, I've had to do something with the time I used to spend getting wasted. That's a lot of time to fill, I've discovered, and as I took off after him I realized that I'm actually quite fit. I've always been skinny, some would say malnourished, but lately I've added stamina to my frame.

I heard Jo running behind me, but I knew I was leaving her behind. That was another thing in my favour. Brownie and Jo both had alcohol in their systems, disrupting coordination and slowing their pace. I caught up to Brownie in next to no time, three streets past The Chemic, up a flight of stairs that led between the houses. The question mushrooming in my mind, as I grew nearer and nearer, was what I was going to do when I caught him.

'Wait,' I shouted after him. 'Only want to talk to you.'

He didn't reply, instead found an extra burst of energy and zoomed forward. I glanced behind and saw Jo appear round the corner of the street I'd just run up. Even from this distance I could see her breath like clouds of smoke around her. I hesitated a second or two, but then something pulled me forward, a natural desire for answers. Why had he legged it like that? He couldn't be scared of two women. I increased my pace, noticing he'd crossed the street ahead, veering to the left. He wasn't going home. I knew in the pit of my stomach where he was headed.

'The Ridge,' I shouted behind me, no idea whether Jo could hear me. 'He's running for The Ridge.'

Sure enough, he took the small side street that led nowhere. I heard the click of the gate that opened onto the scrub waste ground. Great. Did I mention I hate The Ridge?

Adrenaline pumped into my veins, endorphins kicked in – a heady combination. Like the acid freaks, who believe they can fly. I only wanted to ask him a couple of questions, for fuck's sake. I pushed through the gate and followed into no man's land.

It was pitch-black, obviously. It was past last orders and there are no streetlights on The Ridge. As soon as I'd taken five, six steps inside I knew it was a stupid thing to do. But then, I reminded myself, the same had to be true for Brownie. He had to be somewhere close, hiding out. He couldn't keep running: too many tree roots, too many obstacles. And he'd make too much noise.

Instinct made me crouch, squatting on my haunches, allowing the air to go still so I could listen. Sure enough, as the silence settled around me, I heard a low panting to my right. It sounded like a dog, biding its time.

I stayed down, figured no one would be looking for me at ground level. My eyes grew a little more used to the dark, silvery light from the moon occasionally appearing between the clouds. I didn't move until I spotted him, a dark shadow, huddled against a clump of bushes. I calmed my heart rate by breathing deep and waited for my moment.

When the moon ducked behind a cloud, I launched myself. I hit him at waist height, fastening both of my arms around his torso and using the whole of my body weight to knock him off his feet. We slid down the slope together, him desperately trying to stay upright, me pushing for horizontal momentum.

I won.

We crashed through bushes, through small clear patches of mud and grass. Halfway down his legs finally gave up the fight and we rolled the last half together, getting bashed by rocks, discarded glass bottles and broken branches. We didn't stop until we reached the path at the bottom, the one next to the stream. The gravel hurt my knees as I threw myself on top of him, eager to maintain my advantage.

'What the fuck did you run for?' I shouted. Pissed off, because I'd caught my cheek against something on the way down and it hurt like hell.

I could barely make him out. All I knew was I was sitting on his belly and his legs were behind me.

'Bitch.' He didn't shout, just said the word, like it was a quiet statement of fact. His tone made me madder, and I punched him right in the chest, dead centre, just below the solar plexus – took the wind right out of him.

He tried to throw me off, and I had to ride him like a bucking bronco. I had his arms pinned and his coordination sucked. He was fatter than he'd looked running up the hill.

'Don't talk to me like that,' I said, when he'd got his breath back. 'I wasn't rude to you.'

'Jesus, lady. What's your problem?'

I don't know whether the moon came out at that moment, or my eyes had become still more accustomed to the dark, or whether I had a moment of psychic illumination, but I realized something. The guy I was sat on didn't have porcupine-pierced lips. This guy was old and smelled of piss and Special Brew. This wasn't the guy I'd chased through the streets of Woodhouse.

This guy wasn't Brownie.

Chapter Eight

I scrambled to my feet, brushed down my trousers like I could rub off the smell, the dirt, the bits of leaves and God knows what I had stuck to me.

‘What you doing hiding out in the bushes, you freaking weirdo?’

‘Can’t a man take a leak without ...’ He tried to sit up, but he lacked the coordination skills required for the task.

Please let his trousers be up, I thought, praying now for the moon to duck back behind its cloud. Pitch-black was preferable to the reality I was facing. But the moon resolutely ignored my pleas. Instead it seemed to brighten, illuminating the man on the ground in front of me.

He was dressed against the cold, some awful stinking anorak tied round his middle with what looked like a piece of rope. He had a woollen hat on his head. His breathing was shallow and fast, and an awful thought struck me. What if I’d caused him to have a heart attack? He didn’t look in the best of health. Guilt flooded my system. I held out my hand and tried to pull him to his feet.

‘Sorry. I thought you were someone else.’

He got as far as his knees and put a hand on the ground to steady himself. He bent over, almost doubled up and I braced myself for his collapse. I’d be charged with murder. I deserved nothing less.

‘Don’t suppose you’ve got a cigarette?’ he wheezed.

‘Course.’ I dug out my packet of Golden Virginia. ‘Help yourself. Here, let me make one for you.’

As he pushed himself upright, I tried to roll him a fag. My hands shook, and my mouth was so dry I could hardly summon up the spit to seal the paper, but I managed to produce a fat one. He took a seat on a fallen tree trunk and reached for the cigarette.

‘Light?’

‘Yeah, sure.’ I handed him my lighter and watched him attempt to spark it into action three or four times. When the burst of flame finally came it illuminated his face for a brief second, so that I could see the ruddiness of his skin and the weather-beaten lines that zig-zagged across his forehead. I said nothing as he slipped my lighter into his pocket.

‘Could have killed me,’ he said.

I didn’t tell him the thought had already occurred to me. I didn’t say it because I knew there was still time.

‘Minding me own business, nice and quiet like.’

‘I am so sorry.’

‘Crashing through the bushes ...’

‘Do you think you should go to hospital?’ I didn’t like the way he was breathing. His chest rattled like someone shaking a tube of Smarties. It didn’t help when he inhaled a long, deep lungful of smoke.

‘A wild animal.’ He coughed and spat onto the ground.

‘I’ve got a phone.’ I patted my pockets. What had I done with my phone?

‘Nearly finished me off.’

‘I could ring an ambulance.’ Please don’t make me ring the police, I found myself thinking, and cursed my own selfishness. I couldn’t leave him here.

‘Me leg might be broken.’

‘Lee?’ Jo’s voice floated down across the valley, filling me with relief. She’d know what to do. ‘Lee?’

‘Jo.’ I cupped my hands around my mouth to make my voice carry. I tried to think what directions I could give. ‘Down. Down here.’

The man stood up. ‘Who’s that?’

He looked terrified. The sounds of Jo crashing through the undergrowth didn't help. I could hear her swearing as she stumbled down the hill.

'Got the price of a cup of tea?' he asked. 'Something for the shock.'

'Course.' I rooted around in my jeans pockets, emptying all the cash I had. I handed him a fistful of loose change and a couple of scrunched-up notes as Jo appeared, a small twig caught in her bleached blonde fringe.

'What happened?' asked Jo, panting like a steam train. She frowned at the old fella. 'Where's Brownie?'

'I've just attacked this poor man.' They say confession is good for the soul. For me, it just meant another flood of curdled guilt. 'Thought he was Brownie.'

'Could have killed me,' the man said, for the second time. 'My time of life.'

'Well, she didn't,' said Jo. 'So perhaps you'd better be on your way.'

'Dodgy ticker.' He banged his chest. 'Doctor says it's bad for me to get stressed.'

'But you're all right now,' said Jo.

'We don't know that for certain,' he said. He brushed the dirt off his coat. 'Could have internal bleeding.'

'Serves you right,' said Jo.

'Jo!'

'Go find someone else to wave your willy at,' said Jo, ignoring me. 'Else I'll call the cops.'

Just as I was about to take issue with her lack of care for the elderly and the infirm and the disadvantaged, just as I was about to argue about stereotypes and jumping to conclusions and judging a book by its cover, the man leaped to his feet, turned his back to us and sprinted off in the direction of the beck.

'How did you know?' I asked, as we watched him go.

'Obvious, innit?' said Jo. 'Come on, let's get the fuck out of here. This place gives me the creeps.'

Chapter Nine

We climbed back up the embankment hand in hand, taking it in turns to pull each other up through the undergrowth until we found the top path, which leads to the gate. ‘Why didn’t you answer your phone?’ said Jo. ‘I’ve been ringing you for the last ten minutes. I didn’t know where you were.’

‘I think I left it at the office.’

‘Useful.’

The sarcasm wasn’t hard to miss. Jo knows I hate mobiles. I hate the idea of being permanently available, that anyone can just crash into your world, without warning. My hatred isn’t my fault, it’s genetic. According to Aunt Edie, my grandmother would never have a landline in the house because she thought the whole concept was plain rude. And we never had one at home because there was no one my mum wanted to speak to.

I tried to deflect the conversation onto another path. ‘How come you missed him climbing out of the window?’

Jo didn’t reply so I linked arms with her and we headed back towards Woodhouse. As we got to within a hundred yards of the gate I heard it click. A moment later an Asian guy in a dark jacket entered the woods. I felt Jo tense beside me, but we carried on walking, although our pace slowed. He hadn’t seen us, and we had the advantage, because he was nearer the gate and hence nearer the streetlights of Hartley Avenue. I don’t know what it was, but there was something about the way he was looking around that made me wary. Like he was checking out whether he could be seen by anyone in any of the houses that back onto The Ridge.

Then he saw us. I felt Jo straighten her posture, and I did the same, remembering to stare him straight in the eyes. He turned from my gaze, said nothing as we passed. I told myself I was paranoid, that I was seeing danger in everyone and everything.

My heart rate didn’t return to normal until we got back onto the pavements and the streetlights burned out their reassuring orange glow. We saw students threading their way through the streets on their way home from The Chemic and life felt safe and normal again.

‘Something’s not right,’ I said. ‘Why did Brownie take off like that?’

‘Guilty conscience?’

‘Why?’

‘Involved in the dealing?’

It wasn’t outside the bounds of possibility, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d been frightened when I’d told him who I was. Not just frightened, terrified. In fear of his life terrified.

‘What now?’

It had to be getting on for midnight, and after my sprint and subsequent excitement in the bushes I was exhausted. And sober.

‘Nothing we can do,’ said Jo. She stooped to retie the laces in her Docs and brush off some of The Ridge which had stuck to her clothing. ‘Let’s go home. Sleep on it.’

We linked arms again and the warmth of her body next to mine felt comforting, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep until I’d made some sense of the last few hours.

‘You can, if you want. I’m going to the office,’ I said. ‘I want to write everything up. We’re missing something. Something obvious.’

I knew as soon as we turned into the street. For starters, we hadn’t left any lights on, and yet pools of light fell onto the pavement outside the office windows, no sign of our discreet vertical blinds. We both started jogging, slowly at first, turning into a sprint the closer we got. By the time we were a couple of hundred feet away I could see that the door had been kicked in, boot marks still present on the wood. My heart pounded in my chest.

I've never had anything before, nothing that I've owned. I'd never bought a stick of furniture in my life before we started the business. To see it all trashed broke my heart. By the time Jo followed me into the main office, I'd realized everything we had had been destroyed. The computer lay on the top of a heap of broken furniture, its screen smashed, wires trailing. The hard drive was missing. All Jo's neat files had been ripped up, jumped on and added to the pile of debris in the centre of the room. The coffee table, Jo's pot plant, everything we had, destroyed.

The blinds lay on the floor, next to the slashed cushions with their foam insides spilling out. I picked up a pair of Jack's trousers, and the pieces of cloth fell from my hands. They'd been shredded.

'The safe,' said Jo, sprinting through to the back room. I followed her but didn't get far. As she ran out, a figure ran in, cannoning into us both, knocking Jo to the floor and pushing me into the wall. I banged the back of my head, and by the time I'd got my balance, the person was out the door.

'You OK?'

'Twat,' said Jo, getting to her feet.

I turned and followed. By the time I got outside, the figure was halfway down the street, dark trousers, trainers. He ducked his head as he passed under a streetlight, but I caught a glimpse. Enough to see he was a white lad in a hooded top. He turned and lobbed something at me, but it missed, and I continued the chase. I was faster than him, even if this was my second track event of the evening. I caught up as he tried to dodge round the corner of Royal Park Road. I threw myself at his legs, grabbed him around his knees. He stumbled but I didn't bring him down. He kicked out and caught me in the chest, which made me lose my grip. I scrambled back to my feet and rounded the corner, just in time to see him throw himself into the open rear door of a car parked at the kerbside. The car must have had its engine running, because it took off, tyres screeching to get traction with the road before he'd closed the door. I stopped running, knowing I had no chance. I'm shit at cars, no idea of make or model. All I saw was that it was dark coloured. Kind of square-looking.

Two chases and nothing to show for either of them. I kicked the wall and collapsed to the ground in pain. Thought I'd broken my toes. I sat on the pavement for a moment, trying to catch my breath, my lungs cracking with the sudden influx of cold night air. When the throbbing in my foot subsided, I stood up and retraced my steps, stopping to pick up the item he'd thrown at me. A tin of black spray paint.

Jo was waiting for me on the doorstep of the office. 'Complete and utter twat.'

She led me into the back room. The table and chairs had been smashed against the wall, you could see the indentation of chair legs in the laminate. The padlock remained on the door to the broom cupboard, but a great big hole had been smashed through the bottom panel. Jo's equipment store had been plundered, most of the contents smashed on the floor. 'Didn't get the safe though,' Jo said. She'd already unlocked the padlock and she threw back the door. The poster was still on the wall, and the safe behind undiscovered. I felt a rush of pride in that little metal box. Something had survived.

'What's the landlord going to say?' said Jo as we stepped back into the main office and stared at the spray painting on the wall.

'"Be scarred"?''

'Think it means "scared",' said Jo.

They could fuck off. I wasn't going to be scared. Or scarred. Not of sneaky cowards like this. Anyone can break in when there's no one home.

'Well,' said Jo. 'We've obviously rattled someone's cage.' She said this like it might be a good thing.

'Come on,' I said, the pain in my toes helping to focus my thoughts. 'See if the kettle still works. I'll make a start. Better add burglar alarm to the list.'

We had an office toolkit, basic, but we'd bought a hammer and nails to hang pictures, and a screwdriver to put up a set of flat-pack furniture. I found the hammer by the back door and with a bit of effort I managed to get one of the desks back into a vaguely usable condition, although I had

to prop it up with the remains of the coffee table. The other desk was a write-off. Luckily, we hadn't splashed out on anything state of the art.

Jo came back into the main room to report that the tea bags had been nicked, which added insult to injury. She turned her attention to bagging up Jack's clothes. The furniture that was beyond repair, the green felt table from the back room and the office chairs, I smashed up into smaller pieces before collecting up the sticks of wood and building a small bonfire in the backyard. I swore as I worked that whoever had done this wasn't going to get away with it.

The upstairs tenants returned from a night's clubbing not long after two. They were wasted, but that made them so sympathetic I nearly cried. They kept hugging us, pupils wide as jammy dodgers, and one of them went up to their flat and returned with tea bags, milk and two new mugs. I swept the remains of our old crockery into the bin.

We all knew what it was like to be burgled, living in Leeds 6: LS6. No one even mentioned calling the police. We hadn't got round to sorting out insurance, so there seemed little point in trying to get a crime reference number.

'We should ring a locksmith,' I said. 'Oh, shit. They've nicked my phone.'

'Lee.' Jo put her hands on her hips.

'It's not my fault,' I said. 'I'm the victim of a crime.'

'It's twenty quid a month we pay for that phone. For the next two years.'

'Lend me yours.'

'No.'

'Fine, I'll use the landline.'

Jo held up the broken body of the telephone.

I was saved by one of the ravers. 'Don't worry. I've got an old one my mam gave me,' he said, and he scampered off, this time coming back with a white plastic phone with a built-in answer-machine.

'Thanks,' I said, fighting back the tears again. Any act of kindness was bringing me to my knees. I tried to get a grip by calling an emergency locksmith. He promised to be there within the hour.

After a while the upstairs lot left, promising to help us redecorate in the morning. I knew they'd be lucky to have come back to earth by then, but I said thanks anyway. They trotted off back to their upstairs flat, not seeming unduly concerned. Burglaries happen all the time in LS6.

But I knew better. This wasn't a burglary. This was a warning.

Chapter Ten

We got the office as straight as we could and then went home. I didn't sleep at all and by the time I heard Jo's alarm clock go off on Saturday morning, I'd made a full set of notes, including a timeline that started with Jack's Christmas visit to his parents, and ended with our burglary.

'He must have started seeing Carly just before he stopped contacting his parents. And that's another thing that doesn't add up.'

'Morning,' said Jo, coming into the front room in her Snoopy pyjamas.

'Mrs Wilkins said she hadn't heard from him for three months, but he only disappeared a week ago.'

'Tea?'

'Why didn't he contact his mother in all that time before?'

Jo yawned and stretched her arms. 'We're sticking with the theory she is his mother?'

'Stepmother. If his real mum died when he was 5, it stands to reason his dad's going to remarry. No man's going to stay on his own all that time, not with a young kid to look after.'

Jo moved her head from side to side like she was trying to find the balance on a set of scales.

'OK.'

'So why didn't he contact them in all that time?'

'Cause he had a new girlfriend? Too busy shagging to ring?'

'I hate that word.' I pulled on my Docs and tied the laces. 'A new girlfriend doesn't explain three months of not ringing. I'm thinking his drug-taking's getting out of control.'

'Did you get any sleep?' asked Jo.

I knew there was a piece of the jigsaw we were missing. I couldn't get the thought to properly form in my head. I had a list of questions – like why had Jack told Carly he loved her the night before he disappeared? Why had he left the cash behind? And why had he posted the smack to the squat and not the dealers it belonged to? If he owed them cash, why hadn't he just paid them out of the money he'd left behind? And why hadn't he taken his clothes? Or got in touch with Carly?

Next to each question I'd written as many possible answers as I could think of. They ranged from 'because he didn't know' to 'because he's dead'. The money was the most puzzling thing of all, and I couldn't help thinking that if I could find the answer to that, I'd be a whole heap closer to discovering what had happened. The only thing that made any sense was that either Jack had been taken away, against his will, or he didn't know the cash was there. Perhaps the dealers had kidnapped him. But then who would pay up?

Jack's letter, plus the fact that there hadn't been a ransom demand, at least not one we knew about, suggested he hadn't been kidnapped, so I was working on the second theory. Jack didn't know the money was there. Which, of course, begged the questions: who would hide twenty-four grand in someone else's socks? And why? One thing was certain, Brownie knew something.

'Hello?' said Jo. 'Tea?'

We needed to go back to the beginning, and to me the beginning spells the nuclear. We'd met Jack's mother, or at least someone who claimed to be his mother. Stood to reason we now needed to meet his dad. See what light he could shed. Was Jack's mother dead? Was Mrs Wilkins really a stepmother? And if she was, what kind of stepmother? The kind her stepson confided in? I hoped so, for his sake. Because I know better than anyone, if you've lost your mother, and your dad's an arse, you need someone on your side.

Mrs Wilkins said Jack's dad had washed his hands of his son. I already knew what I thought of Mr Wilkins. 'We're going to speak to his dad,' I said to Jo.

'Thought you promised we wouldn't?'

‘That was when Mrs Wilkins promised me she was his mother. And that she was staying at the Queens.’

‘Fair enough.’ I noticed Jo’s pyjama buttons were done up wrong. ‘How?’

‘She wrote down the address on the client contact form.’

‘Like that’s going to be right. Face it, Lee. Everything she’s told us has been a lie.’

‘I’ll google him.’

‘What? Mr Wilkins, Manchester?’

I pushed her in the direction of the door. ‘Get dressed. We need to get to the offices. She’s supposed to ring at nine. If she can’t get through on my mobile, she’ll ring the landline.’

Jo disappeared into the hall and came back a few moments later with a wooden rounders bat that she kept in the understairs cupboard. Not that she’d ever play rounders, but she’d read somewhere that if you beat up a burglar with something that you could reasonably be expected to have in the house, you wouldn’t get arrested. Fortunately, we’d never been called upon to test this theory. She swung it lightly, like she was warming up. ‘What about the dickheads that broke in last night?’

‘We’ll deal with them later.’

The offices were depressing but I didn’t intend to hang around too long. It was almost nine by the time I got there. Jo detoured via Bobats to buy padlocks and more bin liners. I didn’t want to miss Mrs Wilkins’s call. I was fairly certain Mrs Wilkins would ring; she’d been desperate the day before. That kind of desperation doesn’t go away.

Sure enough, at three minutes past nine, the phone the upstairs neighbours had given us trilled. I grabbed the receiver, but Jo got to the hands-free button before me.

‘Hello?’

‘Hi. It’s Susan. Susan Wilkins.’

I exhaled.

‘What news?’ she said. ‘Did you get into the squat?’

‘Where are you?’

‘My hotel.’

‘How is it at the Queens?’ asked Jo. ‘I hear the breakfasts are pretty good.’

‘Never mind that,’ said Mrs Wilkins. ‘How are you getting on?’

‘We’ve run into a couple of problems,’ Jo said, and I hated her for being so blunt, for not shying away from the truth.

‘Nothing serious,’ I lied, as I took a seat on the broken coffee table that was propping up the desk. ‘But there’s a few questions we need to ask.’

‘The main one being—’

I cut Jo off with one of my hard stares. I don’t do them much, so when I do, Jo takes notice. I felt the skin on the back of my neck prickle.

‘What’s happened?’

I guessed what she was thinking. It’s obvious, if you’ve ever lost someone. You think the worst. You think about dead bodies, and possible suicides, cold canals, horrific car smashes. You think about the pictures you thought you’d never have to imagine, the headlines that used to read like fiction, things that would never happen to you. I wanted to reassure her, but I wasn’t sure I had the words.

‘You see, the thing is, Mrs Wilkins, we spoke to his girlfriend and she says—’

‘Carly?’

‘You know her?’

‘No. Not really.’

‘You know her name,’ I said.

‘He mentioned her, the last time I saw him.’

‘At Christmas,’ Jo said, her voice rising like she was checking a fact.

‘I wasn’t sure whether it would develop into anything serious. I assumed they’d split up. Does she know where he is?’

‘No. She hasn’t seen him. He was supposed to meet her, and he didn’t show up.’

‘Meet her where?’

Jo opened her mouth to answer, but I didn’t give her chance. Something about the whole situation was giving me the heebie-jeebies. ‘We can’t give out that kind of information. Not at this stage in the investigation. We’re eliminating people from our enquiries.’

She paused, and I heard her light a cigarette. ‘What did they say at the squat?’

‘Same. He disappeared last Friday – no one’s seen him since. Well, no one we’ve spoken to.’

‘He was good friends with someone in the squat. Brownie, I think he said. Have you spoken to him?’

I didn’t like the way she seemed to know more than she’d let on the day before – *yesterday* she knew nothing, now it was like she was directing us around our own investigation. I decided to grasp the nettle. ‘I’m afraid we’re going to have to ask you a couple more questions.’

‘Like?’

I inhaled. There was no polite way to put this. ‘His girlfriend, Carly, is under the impression that Jack’s mother, well, that Jack’s mother passed over.’ I know, don’t ask me why – I’ve never said ‘passed over’ in my whole life before. ‘When he was 5.’

Mrs Wilkins muttered something that sounded to my ears like: ‘Never talks about it.’

‘What?’

‘Nothing. Just, obviously they’re very close.’

‘So,’ I said, when it became obvious she wasn’t going to volunteer any information. ‘Do you know why she might have said that?’

‘I do.’

Another silence that seemed to stretch into the distance. ‘Why did you tell us that you’re—’

‘Jack’s stepmother. I married his father after his mother died.’ She cleared her throat. ‘He was heartbroken. Still is. It’s taken years for him to come to terms with it. She was an amazing woman.’

‘Must be hard. To match up to a dead, amazing woman,’ said Jo, pulling a face at me as she spoke into the phone.

‘I don’t look at it like that,’ came back Mrs Wilkin’s voice. ‘I feel grateful to her.’ Jo stuck two fingers down her throat and pretended to vomit. I don’t know whether Mrs Wilkins had an inkling of what was going on in our offices, but her next sentence seemed pointed and directed at Jo. ‘Women shouldn’t be in competition with each other. If more women—’

‘Why didn’t you tell us?’ interrupted Jo.

‘Didn’t seem relevant,’ she said, and I heard her light another cigarette. ‘To all intents and purposes, I am Jack’s mother. He’s a lost soul, was a lost soul, when I met him. Haunted, really.’

‘You got any other children?’

‘Am I under investigation in my own investigation?’

There was ice in her voice and an awkward pause as Jo and I glanced at each other.

I flinched first. ‘It’s just the more background we have, the better and the quicker we’ll find him. Has Jack got any siblings?’

‘Have you managed to find out anything? Besides he’s got a girlfriend?’

Jo and I had rehearsed this on our way down to the office that morning. How much to tell.

‘He’s moved out of the squat,’ I said. ‘And he didn’t leave a forwarding address.’

‘And he hasn’t been into work to collect his wages,’ Jo added. ‘No one’s seen him for a week.’

‘We were wondering whether we should go to the police,’ I said.

‘I hire a team of private investigators and your first idea is to go to the police?’

I screwed up my courage. ‘We’re worried something may have happened to him. Something, you know, something bad.’ I prayed Jo wouldn’t revisit the list of possible catastrophes.

‘No.’ Mrs Wilkins’s voice was firm down the phone. ‘No, I’d know if something, something like that had happened to him. I don’t want the police involved, not until I know what this is about.’

I glanced at Jo. Neither of us had been particularly keen on the police idea. We’d always seen them as the enemy, the hard black line on demonstrations, the invisible tail on stoned car journeys, the possible tap on the line as we ordered our recreational drugs. And, of course, after what happened with Andy. Well, let’s just say it’s hard to contemplate the idea of voluntarily involving them in our lives.

‘Did his flatmates say anything about where he might be?’

‘Not really.’ We’d decided not to mention the letter. Or the drugs. ‘He did a moonlight flit.’

‘What about Brownie then? Have you spoken to him?’

‘We’ve still more interviews to do,’ said Jo.

‘What’s the plan?’

Interesting question, and at that point I couldn’t put into words the sense of unease that was hanging around my shoulders like a cloak. I knew she wouldn’t be that chuffed if we told her our next move was to track down her husband. I knew she had a very clear idea as to how we should run the investigation and poking around, testing the edges of her story, wasn’t it.

‘We need a phone number,’ I said. ‘We need to be able to contact you. We’re out and about for the rest of the day.’

‘Where?’

‘Following up some enquiries on the girlfriend,’ I said.

‘What enquiries?’

That was as far as I’d got. ‘She’s from Huddersfield,’ I improvised. ‘Her parents might be hiding Jack.’

‘I want an address,’ Mrs Wilkins barked down the phone. A pause. Her tone softened. ‘I’m sorry. It’s a difficult time.’

I could feel the tension emanating from her down the telephone line. I raised my eyebrows at Jo. ‘We’ll get back to you as soon as we have something concrete. But we need a number.’

‘What happened to your offices?’

‘Ah.’ I fingered the telephone wire. ‘You’ve been?’

‘The front door is boarded up.’

‘We’re having some work done.’

‘You’ve been burgled. Who by?’

‘Kids. It’s a crime-ridden area. It’s nothing—’

‘What did they take?’

‘Nothing. There’s nothing to take. We have a security system. Nothing of any value is left in the office.’

‘The place looked trashed.’

‘Just kids—’

‘This isn’t happening fast enough,’ she said.

‘Give us a chance.’ I know I sounded petulant. ‘We only started yesterday. We’re making progress,’ I said as I crossed my fingers behind my back. ‘These things don’t solve themselves overnight.’

‘I can’t stay here,’ she said.

‘Where’s here?’ I asked at the same time as Jo said: ‘We went down to the Queens.’

A barely perceptible pause. ‘I had to move,’ she said. ‘I think ...’ her voice trailed off and for a moment I suspected that she was holding her hand over the receiver and talking to someone else. When she returned to the phone call, she spoke slower. ‘I think someone’s following me. I’m frightened Jack’s involved in something, something bad.’

‘Who would—?’

‘I’ll give you a number. Got a pen?’

Jo pulled one out of the front pocket of her dungarees, and I took down the number that Mrs Wilkins repeated twice.

‘Ring me on that, two o’clock. I’ve got to go.’

The dial tone sounded before I had chance to say goodbye.

‘Did you buy that?’ I asked Jo.

‘What, that about her being his adopted mother?’

‘Step,’ I said. These distinctions have always mattered to me.

‘She sounded worried,’ said Jo. ‘Why’d you tell her Carly’s parents might be hiding Jack?’

‘She sounded stressed,’ I said, refusing to recognize Jo’s look of bewilderment. I glanced at the biro marks on my left forearm. ‘Why would anyone be following her?’

‘You made it sound like we’d produce her son in time for lunch.’

‘I had to tell her something.’

‘We’ve got more chance of finding Madeleine McCann.’

‘You don’t know that. His dad might know something.’

I wasn’t convinced. All we were beginning to discover was how little we actually knew.

The next thing was to see if I could get the number for Mr Wilkins. I knew this was going to get us into deep trouble with our own client, but I needed some facts confirmed.

‘Where’s the form?’

The filing system, such as we’d had, had been three lever arch files that stood on top of the cupboard that housed the electricity metre. All those files had been torn apart and discarded in the middle of the room and then I’d bagged their ripped contents into bin liners as part of the tidy up process the night before. ‘Bollocks.’

I prised open the knot of one of the bin bags, the one that crunched, and sifted through the papers in there, but I couldn’t find the form.

‘It’s not here.’ I upended the only other bin liners that contained paper. The rest were full of the remains of Jack’s stuff.

Jo came over to help me search and we went wordlessly through the papers, now strewn all over the floor, one more time. And guess what? It wasn’t there. There wasn’t a single piece of it in evidence.

‘That’s weird. They wouldn’t take the form, would they?’

‘They might. Whoever burgled the office is looking for Jack. Maybe they’re on their way round to his dad’s house too.’

‘Give me your phone.’

Jo passed it across, and I googled ‘Wilkins + Manchester’: 800,000 results. The first twenty or so pages were about Ray Wilkins, a defender for Manchester United. Apparently.

‘This is hopeless. We’ll have to go there.’

‘Where?’ said Jo.

‘Manchester.’

‘Why Manchester?’

‘Mrs Wilkins said she was from Manchester.’

‘Only we can’t believe a fucking word she tells us,’ said Jo.

‘Didn’t Carly say he was a car salesman?’ I added ‘cars’ to the search bar, which narrowed the results to a mere 65,000.

I stared at what remained of Jack’s possessions, scattered on the floor. ‘The thing from Mancini – he’s a Man City fan.’

‘There’s people living in Japan that support Man City.’

‘You’re forgetting our clue.’ I pounced on the wallet.

Jo stared at me. ‘We have a clue?’

I opened it up and rang a finger through the various pockets. Nothing there. I rummaged through the papers on the floor. ‘Jesus, that’s gone as well.’

Jo’s forehead scrunched. ‘His blood donor card?’

‘The membership card – remember? Here it is!’ I pounced on the small rectangular piece of cardboard among the debris. ‘Alderley Edge Cricket Club. Junior member.’

‘Junior member?’

‘It’s expired. But that’s where he’s from. Bet you.’

‘Alderley Edge? Was that where Beckham lived?’

‘Google it,’ I said, chucking her phone back at her.

Jo tapped the screen. “‘Alderley Edge”,’ she read. “‘A village and civil parish in Cheshire – fourteen miles south of Manchester”.’

‘Carly said a village.’ We were on the right track, I could feel it.

Jo frowned. ‘So we’re going to drive around Alderley Edge looking for Jack’s dad?’

‘He’s got a car dealership. He wants people to find him.’

‘You don’t know his business is in Alderley Edge.’

‘Any better ideas?’

Jo pulled a face. ‘We should tidy this lot away again.’

‘Let’s just get there.’

‘Wild fecking goose chase.’

‘Worth a shot,’ I said.

While Jo scooped the crap back into the bin liners, I paced the office, stopping only to scribble a few more questions on my notepad. Even if we didn’t find Jack’s dad, I wanted to see a bit of where Jack was from, get some of the background – and not just through the eyes of his stepmother. What does a stepmother know? Even assuming Susan Wilkins was who she said she was.

One fact remained. Jack had done a runner and I suppose the thought was in my mind that he might have gone home. We reach for the past in times of trouble, it’s instinctive. The same way I still think about my mother anytime there’s a success or a failure. No matter she’s been dead four years. No matter that even when she was alive, she’d be too wrapped up in her own misery to take any notice of me, or my life. It’s in all our bones. We want someone to share the highs and lows with.

We were on the road less than twenty minutes later. Jo stashed the rounders bat on the back seat and then climbed behind the steering wheel. I can drive, but I’m not a natural. I’m more your wing pilot – roll cigarettes, read maps, watch out for signs, that kind of thing.

The clock on the dashboard said twenty to eleven as we arrived in Alderley Edge. It was the first day of the year that felt like it had any warmth to it, and I felt like I was coming out of hibernation – like I was waking up. It was obvious, we needed to come to the beginning to work out what had happened at the end.

Chapter Eleven

Alderley Edge is posh. Wide verges, houses set acres apart from each other. Doesn't fool me though. Life is never like the chocolate box, no matter how much cash you have.

'So,' said Jo, as we drove past the village green for the second time. 'What's the plan?'

'The newsagents.'

The man behind the counter couldn't have been more snooty if he tried. He took one look at me and wouldn't give an inch, no matter how much I tried to persuade him I was a professional. It struck me again that we needed proper ID. A business card wasn't enough. I gave up and went back to the car.

'Not keen to lend a hand?' said Jo.

'We'll have to go door to door,' I said. 'A place this small, someone's got to know.'

It was almost eleven o'clock and it appeared most residents of Alderley Edge did stuff on Saturday mornings. There was no answer at the first four houses we tried. A lanky streak of a teenager answered the fifth door we knocked on, but didn't seem to know his own name, let alone anything about Jack Wilkins.

We marched up and down the drives of the next dozen or so houses, encountering hostility at every turn. One woman shooed us off the drive with a broom. The only person who was anything approaching polite was a harassed-looking young woman who I guessed was the nanny. She invited us in for a cup of tea, which I took as a sign she was desperate for adult company. I didn't blame her – I could hear the wail of at least two children in the background.

'This could take all day,' said Jo, as we trudged back down a rhododendron-lined drive towards the village centre.

When a man who must have been 90 opened the next door we knocked at, I was all for packing up and going home. He was wearing a brown dressing gown that looked like it was made out of felt, rope like icing piped round the edges.

'We're looking for Mr Wilkins?' said Jo. 'We believe you might know him?'

'You'll have to speak up,' he said.

'Mr Wilkins,' I said, raising my voice. 'Owns a car dealership somewhere around here.'

'Or Manchester way,' Jo muttered under her breath.

'What about him?'

'You know him?'

'I know everyone.'

My heart lifted, and I couldn't resist turning to Jo and smiling.

'Pardon?' said the old man.

I faced him. 'Do you know where his business is?'

'What business?'

'Mr Wilkins's,' I added, my throat feeling the strain.

'You'd better come in. Don't want everyone staring.'

We followed him in to the strangest house I'd ever been in to. On the one hand, it was probably the wealthiest house I'd ever been inside, but it was also the dirtiest. And believe me, I've been in dirty houses. Antique furniture sagged under the weight of piles of books, papers, dust, tins of opened cat food, the tin lids still attached but peeled open. Ashtrays, empty bottles of whisky, wine. Bowls that may have once upon a time contained fruit now contained light bulbs, rotten vegetables, cans of WD40.

'Sit yourselves down. Don't get many visitors these days.'

He lifted a fat ginger cat from one of the kitchen chairs and dropped it to the floor. It hissed at me, before finding itself a corner on a pile of newspapers.

'So what do you girls want? Tea, wine, whisky?'

‘Tea, for me,’ I said. I glanced at the washing-up next to the sink. ‘I’ll make it.’ It would save me the problem of deciding where to sit seeing as how Jo had grabbed the chair the cat had vacated.

The sink was one of those white pottery ones that are square and fashionable now, but this one was probably from the first time around. I tried to organize some kind of system, stacking as much as I could on the worktop. I eventually found the plughole, scooping out the heap of rotting tea bags that had congealed there. The dark gloopy liquid drained out, and I had an empty bowl. I even found a plug.

‘So, Mr Wilkins. Do you know him?’ asked Jo.

‘Lived here fifty-seven years. Know everyone.’

‘Know his son, Jack?’

‘Who?’

Jo repeated the question louder as the old fella lit a Dunstan. Jo took the one he offered to her.

‘Terrible business,’ he said before coughing.

‘What was?’

‘Pardon?’

‘What was a terrible business?’

‘They moved here ’94. Day after Blair got elected.’ The old man shook his head, like it was more than the neighbourhood that was going to the dogs.

‘Blair was elected in ’97,’ said Jo.

‘Leader of the Labour Party, not the Government, sweet cheeks. Dawning of a new era. New money, you know. You can always tell by the plants.’

‘The plants?’

‘Got no idea, these young ones.’

I glanced out of the kitchen window. The back garden was like a field – at the far end were so many trees it looked like a wood and made it impossible to see where the garden actually ended.

‘You seen Jack lately?’ asked Jo, her tone nice and conversational.

‘Who?’

‘Jack Wilkins. The son.’

‘Don’t get out much these days. Too much to do in here.’ He waved an arm around as if he was showing us a load of unfinished projects. He poured himself a slug of whisky into a glass, three-fingers deep. For a moment I envied him. The guy was rich and old. What did he have left to fear? Might as well get pissed from the moment he woke up till the moment he collapsed.

‘What about Mr Wilkins?’ said Jo.

‘Nick Nickerless, I call him. Ladies’ man.’ He drank from his glass without flinching. ‘Women love him. God alone knows why.’

For a moment I thought he was going to cry, but instead, he fell backwards into the only comfy-looking chair in the room. Another cat squawked and made a beeline for the door. ‘Young whippersnapper. I’ve told him a thing a two, in my time. You mark my words.’

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