



SHE HAS NOWHERE
LEFT TO TURN...

THE RUNAWAY

ALI HARPER

Ali Harper

The Runaway

Аннотация

She has nowhere left to turn... A twisty, compelling, thought-provoking new crime thriller from a major new talent. ‘Outstanding, gritty and hard-hitting, yet woven with humour’ Jo Jakeman, author of Sticks and Stones ‘Edgy and fast moving’ Danuta Kot, author of Life Ruins A body without a name...One night, the body of a young woman is found, naked but for a necklace, tied to a statue outside a block of luxury flats. There should be an outcry. But the police rule it a suicide, and move on. A case where nothing is as it seems...Private investigators Lee and Jo, owners of No Stone Unturned detective agency in Leeds, are tasked with looking into the case. Who was the woman? Did she really kill herself? A world where danger lurks around every corner...As they investigate, Lee and Jo uncover shocking secrets. And when they see links between this case and another they are working on, they are forced to question – is any woman ever truly safe in this world? And are they risking their own lives by delving too deep? Praise for Ali Harper: “I adored this rollicking crime caper” Rachel Sargeant, author of The Perfect Neighbours ‘I loved the humour that Harper imbued every page with’ Liz Mistry, author of Unquiet Souls ‘This book is a brilliant high-wire of a novel’ SJ Bradley, author of Guest

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The Runaway

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This one is for my netball team.

We've never lost a game – we just occasionally run out of time.

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Chapter One

I was bent double when she pushed open the office door, my sides aching so much I thought I was going to wet myself. A moment before, Aunt Edie had been up the set of stepladders, brushing away the cobwebs in the cornices with a bright blue and purple plastic feather duster. Jo had made some joke about how it was fortunate we didn't have any men in the office as the sight of Aunt Edie's pop socks would drive them wild, and Aunt Edie had swiped at her with the feather duster. The steps had toppled, Aunt Edie grabbed hold of the filing cabinet and the pot plant on top of it got knocked over, landing on Jo's Afro. Jo was spitting out polystyrene balls and dry compost when the bell chimed and this young woman, with dreads and a silver cannabis leaf nose stud, marched into our office.

Aunt Edie was the first to recover. 'Welcome to No Stone Unturned,' she said, clambering down from the filing cabinet. 'The,' – she rhymed the word with bee – 'the most successful private investigation bureau in the north of England.' She pushed past me, stuffing the feather duster behind Jo's chair as she bustled across the room. 'Edith Caudwell, Office Manager.'

Aunt Edie had been installed as receptionist only the week before, having swapped her terraced house in Accrington for a housing association flat down the road from our offices in Royal Park. 'Are you missing someone, pet?'

‘My boyfriend,’ the woman said, her eyes settling on Aunt Edie. ‘I don’t know where he is and I need to find him. Like now.’

She held the left sleeve of her rainbow-coloured top in her right hand, twisting the material. I glanced across at Jo and noticed a polystyrene ball clinging to her eyebrow. I was about to point it out when our visitor’s face crumpled and her shoulders sagged, like someone had let the wind out of her.

‘Oh, now. Don’t you go getting yourself worked up,’ said Aunt Edie, putting her arm around the woman’s shoulders. They were almost the same height, which is no height at all. ‘Come on, take a seat and tell us all about it. Did you read about these two,’ – she turned and pushed Jo’s DMs off the desk – ‘in the papers? If anyone can find your missing fella, they can.’

I pulled a face at Aunt Edie. Our first case had gone well, but if this woman hired us to find her missing boyfriend, it would make her only our second client. My lungs buzzed at the thought, although it was early days and she didn’t look like she could afford shoes, let alone private investigators. However, if I’ve learned one thing from living in this part of Leeds, it’s not to judge a book by its cover. Trustafarians, Jo calls them. Kids that get off on looking poverty-stricken while their parents run Barclays.

‘We’ll go through to the back room,’ I said, having finally got control of my vocal cords. ‘Tea would be great, Aun— er, Edie. Would you mind?’

Aunt Edie pouted. I knew she itched to get the details, but she was the receptionist, something Jo and I had gone to great lengths

to explain when we agreed to let her work here. Tea-making went with the territory.

‘I’m Lee and this is Jo,’ I said to the woman. ‘What’s your name?’

She held her hand over her eyes, like we might not notice her crying. ‘Nikki.’

She didn’t volunteer a surname and I didn’t push it. Jo grabbed a new client file and I led the way to our interview room. It’s tiny, the proportions not helped by the dark laminate panelling that lines the walls. We’ve got a card table with a green felt top, three wooden chairs and a punch bag strapped to the ceiling in the far corner. ‘Take a seat, Nikki,’ I said. ‘And take a minute. We’ve plenty of time.’

She sank into a chair and held her head in her hands.

‘Fag?’ asked Jo, tugging a pack of Marlboro Lights from the front pocket of her dungarees and taking her own seat at the table.

‘Please.’ A hand snaked out, with silver rings on every finger, even her thumbs. ‘Oh, shit, no. I can’t. I’ve given up.’ Her head bowed. ‘Why the fuck anyone ...?’

Her voice trailed off, or maybe I just didn’t hear the end of her sentence. I swallowed and took the last seat, the one across from Nikki. I dragged it a little to one side, set it at an angle. Jo opened the file, glanced at me and cleared her throat.

‘So, probably best to start by taking some details. Nikki what?’

‘Cooper-Clarke,’ she said. She put her hands on the table and sat up a little. ‘With an e.’

‘With an e.’ Jo raised an eyebrow as she wrote on the form. ‘And your boyfriend’s missing?’

Nikki nodded, and I heard the sound of tinkling bells. It took me a moment to trace the source – Nikki wore silver rings in her dreads. I scooped my hair back off my face and tied it up with a spare band I had round my wrist.

‘Let’s start with the easy ones,’ said Jo. ‘What’s his name?’

Nikki wiped her eyes on the hem of her top. Questions are good. We’re trained from childhood to want to provide answers. ‘Matt,’ she said. ‘Matt Williams.’

‘That’s great,’ I said, in what I hoped was an encouraging voice. Jo frowned at me. I interlaced my fingers, let my hands rest on the table. It felt weird, like I was praying. I unlaced them and folded my arms across my chest.

Jo kept a stream of easy to answer questions coming – occupation, phone number, height, weight, next of kin, date of birth, star sign – until Nikki’s shoulders had fallen an inch or so and she’d lifted her gaze to meet Jo’s. ‘Pisces,’ she said and tried to smile. ‘Creative genius.’

‘Frustrated alcoholics,’ said Jo as she glanced at me and shifted in her chair.

‘I’m Virgo,’ I said.

‘When,’ said Jo, ignoring me and speaking to Nikki, ‘did you last see him?’

‘Saturday.’

Jo checked the calendar we had tacked to the wall. ‘The

eighth?

Nikki shrugged.

‘What happened?’ I asked. ‘When you last saw him?’

‘Nothing,’ said Nikki, turning to me. Her eyes were almost violet and I wondered whether she wore coloured contact lenses. ‘Nothing,’ she said again, as if that was the most frustrating thing. ‘It was just ordinary. Friday night, we went to The Hyde, played some pool. He stayed at mine. I got up Saturday, went to the Union. That’s the last time I saw him.’

‘You’re a student.’ Jo raised an eyebrow at me.

‘English Lit.,’ she said. ‘Saw the article about you in *The Gryphon*.’

‘And Matt’s a student too?’

‘MSc.’ The bells tinkled again. ‘Actually, can I have that fag?’ she asked Jo.

‘How was he when you left?’ I asked.

‘Asleep.’

‘And no one’s seen him since?’ asked Jo, as she pushed the pack of Marlboros across the table.

Nikki rested her hand on it but didn’t pick it up. ‘His mates have,’ she said.

‘Go on,’ said Jo, and I didn’t know whether she meant to tell Nikki to take a fag or to carry on speaking.

‘We were supposed to be going to a party on Saturday night – but I didn’t go coz I felt like shit. Ha.’ She forced out what I think was supposed to be a laugh but sounded more like a shriek.

I watched her fingers tremble over the cigarettes. ‘I spoke to him on the phone that afternoon, asked if he fancied coming to mine instead, but he wanted to go. So he went. No one’s seen him since.’

‘He disappeared at the party?’

‘Tuff said he left him there.’

‘Tuff?’

‘His best mate.’

‘Where was this party?’

‘Lincolnshire.’

‘Lincolnshire?’ Geography’s never been my strong point but that struck me as a long way to go for a night out.

Nikki’s hand left the cigarette packet and picked at the tassels on the edge of her sleeves. ‘Sunday afternoon, I went round to Matt’s. Tuff was there. I asked where Matty was and Tuff was like really cagey.’

‘Matty went to the party with Tuff?’ Jo asked as she continued to scribble the information down.

‘Whose party was it?’ I asked.

‘A free party,’ she said.

‘You mean, like a rave?’ Jo asked.

‘Wasn’t that the nineties?’ I said.

Jo pulled a face at me. ‘Whereabouts in Lincolnshire?’

‘Don’t know.’ She picked up the cigarettes and extracted one from the packet. ‘A field somewhere.’

I glanced at Jo and she stuck out her bottom lip. I’ve known

her long enough to know what that look means. Jo's one of the most open-minded people I've ever met, except when it comes to men. Truth is, since she caught Andy, her ex, in bed with another woman, she's got about as much faith in men as she has in the Tory government. Not that I can talk. But I know my failure with the opposite sex is down to me, not them.

Jo put her pen down and pulled her fingers through her hair. A drop more compost fell out. 'How long you been seeing him?' she asked.

'A year. Nearly.'

'Have you thought,' – Jo paused and passed Nikki a lighter – 'have you thought maybe he's dumped you?'

Nikki lit her cigarette, her eyes half-closed against the smoke. She didn't speak.

Jo tried again. 'How would you describe your relationship?'

The questions were getting too complex for Nikki. I saw a fresh batch of tears threaten. 'He hasn't dumped me,' she said.

'Wonder where Edie is with that tea?' I made a half-hearted attempt to get up from the table, but Jo glared at me.

'Why hasn't he rung anyone?' Nikki screwed up her nose and exhaled the smoke from her lungs. 'His phone goes straight to voicemail.'

'Does he have a job?' asked Jo.

'No, but he's missed his final tutorial. He's so close to finishing, why disappear the week his dissertation is due to be handed in?'

‘Maybe that’s why he’s disappeared.’ Jo glanced at me again and this time the look was serious. ‘Maybe the pressure was getting to him. Does he suffer from depression, low mood, anxiety?’

Nikki’s violet eyes flashed. ‘He hasn’t killed himself, if that’s what you’re thinking.’

Jo pressed her fingertips down on the edge of the table, making her knuckles crack. ‘Exclusive?’ asked Jo. ‘Or open?’

‘Exclusive,’ said Nikki, without a moment’s hesitation. She pushed the lighter back across the table to Jo. ‘He’s lovely. Ask anyone. He’s—’

‘You can’t think of a single reason why he might have needed to get away?’

‘No. I mean, at least, no, I don’t think so.’

I felt sorry for her, as I watched her trawl her memory banks, because I’ve been there. I know what it’s like to try and find a clue, something you may have missed, a sentence that with hindsight had a different meaning, an action that foreshadowed subsequent events.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said again. ‘I wanted him to stay in with me. He needed a night out.’

‘Have you been to the police?’

‘No.’ She turned to me and I sensed she was glad of the distraction. ‘I didn’t want to get anyone into trouble. That’s why I came to you.’

‘Trouble?’

‘Drugs,’ Jo said, folding her arms across her chest.

Of course. It was only Wednesday. If this guy had gone to a rave on Saturday night it was possible he hadn’t come down yet. We’d probably find him in a field, telling a tree how much he loved everyone.

Nikki rubbed her face with her left hand before speaking. ‘He’s not really a drugs person.’

I leaned closer to her, inhaled some of her second-hand smoke. Its warmth crept down my throat. ‘What does that mean?’

‘Well, he does. Sometimes. But, I don’t know ...’ She leant back in the chair. ‘I’m worried about him.’

‘Maybe the party isn’t over,’ said Jo.

‘It’s been four days,’ said Nikki, her voice rising.

‘You tried his family?’

‘I don’t know where they live.’

‘You’ve been together a year and you don’t know where his family live?’

‘I know it’s Somerset.’

‘He never took you to meet them?’ I was surprised at that. Not that I’d ever been to visit a boyfriend’s parents, but I’d never had a year-long relationship either. As I’ve probably already said, I’m not the relationship type. And one of the reasons I’ve never had a year-long relationship is because I don’t ever want to meet someone’s parents. Or, more to the point, have someone want to meet mine.

‘They don’t get on,’ Nikki said but I got the feeling she wasn’t

happy with the situation.

Jo stretched out her fingers. ‘Best thing you can do is relax,’ she said. ‘Men are like dogs—’

Nikki wrinkled her nose. ‘I need to find him now.’

‘Dogs,’ said Jo, crossing her arms behind her head. ‘Simple needs. The trick is not to—’

‘You don’t understand,’ said Nikki, grinding out her half-smoked cigarette into the ashtray. ‘I’ve not got time to—’

‘What’s the rush?’

As the question came out of my mouth I realized I already knew the answer. ‘You’re pregnant,’ I said.

She nodded and another wave of tears welled, smudging her eyeliner before spilling down her cheeks.

‘And Matt knows,’ said Jo. I knew from the tone of her voice what she was thinking.

‘No.’ Nikki shook her head and a tear flew from her cheek and landed on Jo’s new client interview form. I watched it absorb into the paper. ‘He doesn’t know. I didn’t even know. I only did the test the day before yesterday. It sounds stupid, but I never thought. I didn’t feel right Friday, thought I’d eaten something bad. Felt sick all weekend. Then Monday, I was watching *Jeremy Kyle*, and this girl with the most awful mother ... well, anyway, it just hit me. I went to the chemist, got a test and two minutes later there’s these two blue fucking lines.’

‘How pregnant?’ Jo asked.

‘Who can remember the first day of their last period? I mean,

Jesus.’ She paused and I felt the rage radiating from her.

I was lost, but fascinated. Like when you pass a car wreck on the motorway. I didn’t want to look but I couldn’t help myself.

‘How pregnant?’ said Jo again.

‘His birthday.’ She let the words hang in the air.

‘So,’ said Jo, re-reading the form, as I tried to remember whether Pisces was February or March. ‘What’s that, two months?’

I glanced at Jo. I know very little about pregnancy but I know there’s a cut-off point, when it all becomes a definite rather than a possibility. From the look of Nikki’s wide eyes, that point wasn’t too far away.

As if to reiterate my thoughts she said in a quiet voice, ‘I’ve not got long.’

The unspoken words hung between us all. I didn’t envy her. I dodge decisions whenever possible. This one was inescapable. Not deciding was a decision all in itself.

She seemed to sense my sympathy because she grabbed my arm and her eyes bored into mine. ‘I can’t do this, not without him. My mum’s going to flip her wig. And my dad ...’ She didn’t finish the sentence, crumpled like a wet cardboard box. I wanted to say something comforting but I couldn’t think of the words.

Aunt Edie chose that moment to crash through the door.

I stood up, bashing my knee against the table leg. I took the tray from Aunt Edie and set it on the table in front of us. Aunt Edie passed a box of tissues to Nikki as I hovered by the door,

my back to the wall. The room felt smaller than normal.

I try not to think about the past. Nothing good comes from raking over coals or making plans for an unpredictable future. There is only the here and the now. But I couldn't stop the images flooding my brain. Another young woman I once knew, who didn't mean to get pregnant.

Fiona.

My half-sister.

A sister I didn't know I had until four or so years ago, when I first set out to find my dad, a man who'd disappeared the day I was born, a man I'd never met. A man I now wish I'd never met, pray I'll never meet again. The man that haunts my nightmares. It's his face I see when I jolt awake in the pitch-dark, panicked and drenched in cold, wet sweat.

I wasn't there for my seventeen-year-old sister when she discovered she was pregnant. I wasn't there when she had to break the news to our father. I wasn't there to protect her. I'll pay the price for that as long as I live.

I watched Aunt Edie cluck around, handing out mugs of builder-strength tea, and knew that it didn't matter whether Nikki Cooper-Clarke could pay for our services. It didn't matter that Jo was convinced Matt had done a runner because somehow he'd sensed his girlfriend was up the duff. I knew there and then that I'd go and find him and I'd force him to face up to the consequences of his actions. Decision implies rational consideration of the facts. Choice is a leap of faith. In that

moment, I chose.

We'd got our second case.

Chapter Two

I mumbled something about having to make a phone call and left the room. When the three of them came out, a few minutes later, I was behind the desk, pretending to type up case files. As Nikki left, her cheeks mascara-streaked, I asked her to bring in a photograph of Matt – the most recent she could find. She nodded and I promised her we'd give it everything we had. For an awful moment, I thought she was going to hug me, but the desk blocked the space between us. 'We bill by the hour,' I said.

'I've paid the deposit.' She gestured towards Jo, who, I noticed for the first time, held a wad of £20 notes in her left hand.

*

'Poor lamb,' Aunt Edie declared from the kitchenette, once Nikki had gone. 'Still, least it's not like it was in my day. She'd be shipped off faster than you could say, "Up the duff without a paddle." Never knew who was going to disappear next. It was like those murder-mystery parties where they pick you off, one at a time.'

'Let's start with his mate,' I said to Jo. 'Clearly Nikki thinks he knows something.'

I googled the address Nikki had given us for Matt, The Turnways – up near the cricket ground. 'No time like the present.' I grabbed my jacket from the peg by the door. 'Come on.'

Jo drove the company van as I gave directions. We found a

nice little residential street in the heart of Headingley. At least, it was probably a nice little residential street once upon a time, before students had overrun the area and landlords disregarded their obligation to keep properties in a good state of repair. The houses were identical, substantial semi-detacheds, arranged in a gently curving semi-circle. Jo parked up and we knocked on the door, waited a few minutes, knocked some more. No answer. I patted my jacket pockets for a pen.

‘A note?’

Jo wrinkled her nose. ‘Let’s keep the element of surprise. Least till we know what we’re dealing with.’

‘What then?’ I glanced up, spotted an open window on the first floor. An open sash window. No window easier to get through, even without my ironing-board physique.

Jo caught me scoping it out and shook her head. ‘Give him a chance. We’ll come back.’ She left the garden and strode towards the van. ‘Let’s try the uni.’

*

We detoured via the office to drop off the van – getting into the University of Leeds’ car park is harder than getting into Glastonbury. ‘Nikki gave us the name of his tutor, didn’t she? I’ll get the form.’

‘I’ve had a Martin Blink on the blower,’ said Aunt Edie as soon as I stepped through the door. I keep telling her she watches too many cop shows.

Martin Blink. I grinned. If it wasn’t for Martin Blink, Jo might

be on remand in Armley nick, waiting for some pen-pusher to decide whether self-defence is now an offence. ‘What’s he want?’

‘Says he’s got a case for you,’ Aunt Edie said in a tone that suggested she had trouble believing him. ‘A suicide.’

‘We’re a missing persons’ bureau.’ I hung my jacket back on its peg. The day was warmer than I’d realized. ‘What we going to do with a suicide?’

‘Wouldn’t give any details,’ Aunt Edie continued. ‘Like I might not have the wherewithal to take a proper message.’ She tutted and balled up the piece of paper in the palm of her hand. ‘Insisted on coming to see you.’ She took aim at the wastepaper bin next to my desk. ‘I told him we can’t have people dropping in willy-nilly. I told him, you’re both busy women.’

The ball of paper flew through the air and landed dead centre in the bin.

‘Not that busy, Aunt Edie.’

‘He said you’d make time for him.’ She raised eyebrows at his temerity. ‘I said, “Oh, will they now? And who might you be?” Bloody cheek.’

‘He’s the journalist I told you—’

‘Retired journalist. Talks like he’s part of the team. Well, I told him, I don’t care who you are, you have to have an appointment.’ I narrowed my eyes. ‘And did you make him one?’

Jo pushed open the door. ‘Come on,’ she said, tapping at an imaginary watch on her wrist.

‘Martin Blink wants to see us,’ I said.

‘Ace. Let’s go.’

‘He needs reminding that this is a female detective agency, isn’t it?’ Aunt Edie looked to Jo for support.

I’ve given up trying to explain the difference between a detective agency and a missing persons’ bureau to Aunt Edie. At times I think she’s deliberately trying to misunderstand.

‘That’s right, Edie,’ said Jo. ‘No persons with dangly bits will ever work in this office.’ She made a diagonal cross over her left breast as she spoke. ‘You know what it’s like. Let one in and they’ll all want to start waving them around.’

I frowned at Jo. I put my hands on my hips and tried to adopt a managerial tone. ‘Did you make him an appointment?’

‘In the diary.’ Aunt Edie sniffed.

‘When?’

‘Half past four.’

‘Today?’ I glanced at the clock.

‘I squeezed him in.’ She switched on her computer screen and took a seat at the desk. ‘Not that he was grateful.’

*

It’s only a ten-minute walk from our offices to the uni, through Hyde Park, the decompression chamber between city centre and student-ghetto. Jo found the Earth and Environment building on a map of the campus while I checked the form. Nikki had given us the name of Matt’s tutor – Professor Kenrick, or Kennick.

We found the name – Kendrick – on a tutorial list; office was on the eleventh floor. It was already two o’clock in the afternoon

and it appeared that the university had done its main business of the day and was winding down to home time. We passed several empty seminar rooms as we marched along the corridors, reading the names on the doors. We climbed another flight of stairs and encountered an identical set of corridors before we found the room we were looking for. I glanced through the window. A woman with short hair, hunched over a desk.

Jo knocked and pushed open the door. 'Professor Kendrick?'

The professor glanced up from her desk, and the familiar feeling of being a schoolgirl in the firing line washed through me. I braced myself for her displeasure at being disturbed. She looked us both up and down.

'You've found me.' She placed her pen down on the pile of paper in front of her and pushed her glasses up into her short, spiky hair. 'And provided a welcome distraction. What can I do you for?'

'We're looking for Matt Williams.'

The professor inclined her head. She was younger than I first thought. Perhaps not even forty. 'Popular chap.'

'We're private investigators,' said Jo. 'We need to talk to him.'

The academic stood up and I realized how tall she was. Impossible to miss, she must have been over six foot. In the small room she took on almost comedy proportions.

'I do beg your pardon. I thought you were students.' She brushed down her rumpled suit trousers with one hand as she held the other out to shake Jo's. 'Private investigators. Fascinating.'

‘Thanks,’ said Jo.

‘How long have you been in this line of business?’

‘Long enough,’ said Jo.

‘Do come in, and close the door. If I move this pile of papers,’ she grabbed a stack from a chair in the corner of her shoebox-sized room, ‘you’ll even be able to have a seat.’

Jo didn’t move and as I was stood behind her, I didn’t either. The professor didn’t appear to notice as she continued to rearrange the boxes and piles of paper. ‘So, Matthew. Matty, I believe the girls call him. Obviously, I’m too old to be swayed by his charms, but not so old I can’t appreciate why he causes such a stir.’ She turned to smile at us both.

‘Do you know where we might find him?’ asked Jo.

‘Afraid not. Haven’t seen him, not recently.’

‘It’s rather urgent,’ said Jo.

She finally cleared both chairs and crossed to the doorframe. Jo moved aside to let her pass, which put Jo deeply inside the room. I followed, inching past the professor, straining to avoid body contact. After glancing out into the corridor, Professor Kendrick closed the door and returned to perch on the edge of her desk. She folded her hands across her knees. ‘Take a seat.’

Jo sank into one so I took the other. This gave Professor Kendrick an even bigger advantage and she loomed over us. Her white shirt tucked in at the waist, emphasizing her slender frame. ‘Now, what’s this about?’

‘Matt’s missing,’ I said. ‘No one’s seen him since a party on

Saturday night.’

‘Then I suggest you talk to admin and see whether they’d be willing to contact his parents. You can leave—’

‘We’ve spoken to his mother,’ Jo lied.

Professor Kendrick raised her voice and continued speaking as if Jo hadn’t interrupted, ‘Your number with me, and if I see him, I would certainly be happy to pass it on. Although I suspect he may be in hiding.’

‘In hiding? Who from?’

She pulled her glasses down to the brim of her nose. ‘From whom?’ She peered at me over the top of the frames. ‘Well, from me I suppose. It’s the deadline for his dissertation. We were supposed to be having a final run over it on Monday afternoon and he didn’t show. Not like him, I must say. I intend to email him.’

I didn’t like the feeling of claustrophobia that had settled over me as soon as Professor Kendrick had closed the door. I like always to know my escape route, and as we were on the eleventh floor, she’d just sealed the only real option.

‘Any concerns about his work up until this point?’ asked Jo.

‘No, he’s a committed student. One of my best. More or less on target, as on target as any of us ever are. But he’s not the first student to go AWOL in the month running up to submission. What did his mother say?’

‘She hasn’t heard from him,’ Jo said, and even I wouldn’t have known she was making this up. ‘That’s why we’re here.’

The professor stuck out her bottom lip. ‘She’s hired a firm of private investigators to find him? As far as I’m aware she hasn’t contacted the university. I’m his supervisor, I’d expect that message to come to me.’

I pretended my interest had been caught by the poster about climate change pinned to the wall.

‘You said he was popular,’ said Jo. ‘What did you mean by that?’

Professor Kendrick’s grey hair fell forward to partially obscure her glasses. She flicked it away with the back of her hand. ‘You’re not the only ones looking for him.’

‘Other people are looking for him?’ I asked.

‘Other women.’

‘How many other women?’

She smiled. ‘I am perhaps exaggerating for dramatic effect. Forgive me, a knee-jerk reaction to reading the musings of my undergrads.’ She nodded at the pile of papers that towered on her desk.

Jo raised a single eyebrow. ‘How many?’

‘Undergrads?’

‘Women looking for Matt.’

‘Two, that I’m aware of.’

‘Of whom you are aware?’ I couldn’t resist.

‘Who?’ asked Jo, shooting me a look that left me in no doubt I should shut up. I went back to the poster.

‘I’m not sure it’s any of my business.’

I'd had enough of the professor, and I worried the oxygen supply was depleting. I'd never survive working in this rabbit hutch. Books lined the walls, giving it an underground bunker-like feel, despite its high-rise situation. 'People are worried,' I said.

'What did they look like? The two women looking for him?' asked Jo.

'One had hair like rattlesnakes.'

'Dreads?' said Jo. She turned to me. 'Nikki.'

'Nikki?' asked the professor.

'His girlfriend.'

Professor Kendrick nodded. 'I've seen her hanging about before.'

'What about the other one?'

'Well, I'm not one to gossip, and there might not be anything in this.'

'We're professional private investigators,' said Jo. She showed our police-issued identity card. 'It's not gossip, it's helping with our enquiries. Anything you tell us will be treated in the strictest confidence.'

The professor's brow creased as she took in the badge. 'The police are involved?'

'They've been informed,' Jo lied again.

'And?'

'They share your view – nothing too ominous in a student disappearing the week before his dissertation is due.'

Professor Kendrick put Jo's ID down on her desk. 'There was an incident. A strange incident. Not strange, that's too strong. Was it yesterday? What's today?'

'Wednesday.'

'Yes, must have been. I wasn't in Monday, not in the morning. Yesterday morning, Sally from the office came to see me to say she'd caught a young woman taking mail from the pigeonholes. The student pigeonholes. She'd asked said young woman what she was doing, and, she said, the woman had seemed,' Kendrick paused, searching for the right word, 'flustered.'

'Did she stop her taking the mail?'

'Of course. Not that any of it would be of any interest. Hell, it's not of interest to me and I wrote most of it. The system is mainly used for hard-copy submissions and leaflets about forthcoming symposiums, information we can't email. To be honest, hardly anyone uses them anymore. I can't think why on earth—'

'It was Matt's pigeonhole?'

'She may have thought she'd find a timetable, perhaps.'

'Where's Sally now?'

'Probably her office.'

Jo got up, filling the air space between me and the professor. I wondered again whether there was enough oxygen in the room to support three people. If anyone was going to keel over, like the sacrificial canary in the coal mines, it was going to be me.

'Can we talk to her?' Jo asked.

'Follow me.'

*

Sally was housed in a much bigger office, but she shared it with at least three others.

‘Could we have a word, please,’ said Professor Kendrick, indicating to the middle-aged woman to step outside the room.

‘These two young women are private investigators,’ the professor said to Sally once we were all standing together in the corridor. ‘They want to know more about the woman you saw interfering with the pigeonholes yesterday.’

Sally’s cheeks reddened but I didn’t read anything in to it. The smallest hint of official enquiry can cause some people to colour up.

‘I didn’t recognize her so I asked her what she was doing.’

‘Professor Kendrick says you thought she was flustered.’

‘She struck me that way.’

‘What did she take?’

‘Nothing. I didn’t let her. I asked her what she was doing and she said she was on the wrong floor. She left very quickly.’

‘Can we see the pigeonholes?’

Sally glanced at the professor.

The professor shrugged. ‘Well, they are open mailboxes. We’ve never considered locking them – which goes to show how uncontentious the contents are.’

‘They’re this way,’ Sally said, and we trooped round the corner to where the lifts were.

Outside a room that bore a plaque stating ‘Earth and Earth

Sciences Department’, was a grid of shelves – four wide and about a dozen high – each one about the size of a shoebox. Each box had a name tag. Matt Williams was easy to find – the last one on the right-hand side.

‘Are you sure it was Matt’s pigeonhole she was interested in?’

‘Yes,’ said Sally. ‘It was the bottom one.’

‘Can I?’ I crouched so I was level with Matt’s mail.

‘It goes without saying I’m not condoning such behaviour,’ Professor Kendrick said.

I scooped up a handful of paper. The professor was right. Flyers about upcoming conferences, speakers from foreign countries coming to lecture, discount offers on everything from books to nightclubs. I frowned at Jo and handed the pile to her.

‘Are you sure she was taking mail?’ I turned back to Sally. ‘Perhaps she was leaving him a note?’

Sally pulled a face as she considered what I’d just said. ‘I didn’t think of that. But if she was, why didn’t she just say? Instead of running off?’

Jo sifted through the papers. And sure enough, there amongst the bumf I caught a glimpse of A4 lined paper, torn from a book and folded in half. I snatched it and opened it up.

Professor Kendrick peered over my shoulder as I read:

Matt. I'll be in Old Bar, Thursday two o'clock. Be there. I mean it.

The note wasn’t signed but there was a letter at the end of it. The letter ‘S’. No kiss, not underlined, just an S and a full stop,

all in purple biro.

‘When did you see this woman?’ Jo asked Sally.

‘Yesterday, just before lunch.’

I turned to the professor. ‘What’s he like, Matt?’

‘Bright. Well-bred. Popular.’ She pushed her glasses back up her nose. ‘I ought to inform administration.’

I wasn’t keen to get any kind of authority involved, not until we knew what we were dealing with. ‘He might just have had a row with his girlfriend.’

‘And you said his parents are aware?’

‘If there’s another woman on the scene,’ said Jo, waving the piece of paper in the air, ‘he might be in hiding from his girlfriend. Case she breaks his legs.’

‘The eternal curse of good-looking men.’ Professor Kendrick shrugged her shoulders. ‘I imagine.’

‘Of course, the girl you saw might not have left this note. It’s not dated.’ I turned back to Sally. ‘What did she look like?’

Professor Kendrick took off her glasses, polished them with a cloth handkerchief.

‘I don’t know,’ said Sally. ‘She was young. I assumed she was a student.’

‘Glasses? Braces? Blonde, redhead?’ asked Jo. ‘Clothes?’

Professor Kendrick returned her glasses to her face and checked her watch. ‘I expect she wore clothes, didn’t she, Sally?’

Sally’s cheeks grew pink and she threw a grateful glance at the professor. ‘I didn’t take much notice, I was late for my meeting.

She had dark hair, I think. About this long.’ She pointed to her shoulders.

‘Young, female and dark, long hair? Anything else?’

‘I’m sorry. I’m not very good at this kind of thing.’

‘Anything at all.’

‘Eyeliner,’ said Sally with a note of triumph in her voice. ‘I remember thinking she wore too much eyeliner.’

Great. That should narrow it down to well over eighty per cent of the student population, even if you included the boys.

‘Well,’ said Jo. ‘Here’s our card. If you remember anything, give us a ring, let us know. There’s a ... an office manager if we’re not available. You can leave a message with her.’

Chapter Three

We trudged back up the hill towards the office. We hadn't found out a right lot, and it was hard not to feel a bit deflated. We decided we'd wait till teatime to go round to Matt's house on The Turnways again, see if anyone turned up. Before that we were meeting Martin Blink.

Martin arrived at the offices on the stroke of half past four. He limped through the front door, and Jo jumped up from her desk and hugged the life out of him. They'd spent a lot of time together, after our last case, when Jo was in hospital recovering from her surgery on her shoulder, and I was trying to handle the chaos of the aftermath of what had happened. I think now he sees her as his protégée.

I hung back, tried to position myself so that Aunt Edie wouldn't see Jo's eyes tight shut in the embrace. 'Good to see you,' I said. 'How you doing?'

He didn't answer me, staring instead at Jo, running his eyes up and down her frame like he was looking for weak spots.

I tried to see Jo through Martin's eyes. I know I take her for granted. She's the stronger one, I mean, mentally – the least neurotic person I ever met. To Jo everything is black or white. There's the wrong way and the right way. Good versus evil. If there's ever anything on her mind, she'll go out, get hammered and forget about it. She doesn't have brain worms – the things

that wriggle around in your headspace, won't let you go.

I had noticed that since the last investigation she was smoking and drinking a bit more than she used to, and I was keeping an eye on it. But who wouldn't be, in her position, after what had happened? She'd been shot and the physical scars were still healing. The mental scars might take even longer. She'd get there though. I'd make damned sure of that.

Jo seemed to pass Martin's inspection, because he took a step back, nodded and said, 'Doing all right, kid.'

And I felt my shoulders give a little.

'I'm hanging in there,' said Jo.

She pushed a chair towards Martin and as soon as he sat down he didn't look old. His face tells a lot of stories – frown lines buried deep in his forehead, but laughter lines like spiders' webs criss-crossing from the corner of his eyes and disappearing into his hairline. When he's not trying to walk you'd think he was in his fifties.

'Doing just fine,' said Aunt Edie.

'Any ghosts?' said Martin, setting a battered leather briefcase on the desk.

Jo glanced at me and a wash of something that felt like acid burned my veins. I know she hates talking about the fact she killed a man. Even a man as bad as the one she killed. I tell her she did the world a favour, but I know she doesn't believe me. Not yet.

'I'm coping,' said Jo.

‘It’s ace to see you, Martin.’ As I said the words I felt my breathing deepen, so that air made it past my chest and into the rest of my body. ‘What brings you here?’

‘Private matters.’ He tapped one finger against the side of his nose and then glanced across at Aunt Edie. ‘If your receptionist here could make us a cup of tea, I’ve a thirst like the Sahara. You got a room we could talk in?’

I think I actually ducked. When I did dare risk a glance in Aunt Edie’s direction, she was holding on to the back of her office chair, her knuckles white under the fluorescent lights.

‘I’m the office manager, not the receptionist,’ she said in the tightest of voices.

‘Sorry, love.’ Martin held up his hands. ‘Didn’t mean to cause offence.’

Aunt Edie bridled but managed to bite her tongue. She pushed her chair under the desk. ‘I’ll happily put the kettle on,’ she said. ‘And I was going to leave a bit early tonight, so no need to go through to the back. You can have the place to yourselves. Talk about your privates to your heart’s content.’ She stared unblinking at Martin as she spoke.

I felt my cheeks burn.

Once Aunt Edie had switched the kettle on and her computer off, she buttoned up her coat and let herself out.

Martin loosened his tie.

‘Got off on the wrong foot there.’

‘Don’t worry. Her bark’s worse than her bite,’ I lied. ‘So, come

on, spill.’

‘I want to hire you girls.’

‘Hire us?’

‘Women,’ said Jo.

‘I want to hire you women?’ asked Martin. ‘Really?’

Jo nodded and put her feet up on the desk.

‘OK,’ said Martin, shrugging his shoulders. ‘I want to hire you women.’

If I’ve got a weak spot, it’s lonely old men. You see them, shuffling round Morrisons, mismatched clothes, in need of a haircut. I can’t bear to think of them fumbling with the tin opener and being unable to reach out to people. Jo gives me hell for my sexism and it’s true – I don’t worry about women in the same way. I guess I think women have an advantage.

I knew Martin was divorced, that he lived on his own, but I didn’t like to think of him living with the ghosts of the disappeared.

‘You’re missing someone?’ I wondered who it might be. He’d never mentioned much about his private life.

‘Been thinking, since you solved that last case. You found the answer to something that happened seventeen years ago. You went back and found something we all missed.’

‘Couldn’t have done it without you,’ I said. ‘And the—’

‘Enough, already. Don’t need to be damned with your faint praise, thanks all the same. Never doubted my investigative skills.’ He fiddled with the clasp on his briefcase and pulled out

a newspaper. ‘But sometimes you got to wait till the window opens.’

‘Go on,’ said Jo, taking the paper from him.

‘Page thirteen.’ He pulled at his tie and loosened the knot. ‘Another one I never got to the bottom of. And this one nags me, buzzes round my head like an angry wasp. You know, when the 3 a.m. gets you?’ He looked to Jo and I found myself feeling resentful. I’m more than familiar with the early hours, thank you very much.

Jo read while Martin continued, ‘One that won’t let me lie. And I thought well, if you could have a go at it, maybe the time is right.’

‘The body?’ said Jo.

‘Let me see.’ I peered over Jo’s shoulder, saw a small article, only a few lines with the headline: ‘Police discover woman’s body in garden of luxury flats.’

‘It’s worth a crack, that’s what I’m saying.’

We heard the kettle whistle in the kitchenette out back. Martin Blink looked up at the clock. ‘Sun’s almost over the yard arm. You gi— women got a local?’

Martin doesn’t know about my issues with alcohol. Not that I’ve had a drink since the last case. And I try not to beat myself up too much about that one. Surely anyone in that situation, faced with the immediate prospect of their own death, would succumb to one last shot? Especially when it was one of the finest whiskies money could buy. So fine that when I close my eyes, I can still

taste it.

But before that one slip, in extreme circumstances, it had been nearly a full twelve months since I'd given up drinking.

I know now that that's the difference between the addict and the social drinker. To the addict, it doesn't matter how long it's been since the last one, because they're focused on the next. The social drinker can enjoy a drink, the one they have in their hands – as a self-contained event, an occasion all in itself. Which is a nice idea, but a single drink doesn't exist for the addict. The addict is thinking about the future, about what will happen when the one in their hands runs out. To the addict one drink is only ever the start.

Addicts are people who have never experienced enough. Enough of what, I don't know. Therapists would tell you they haven't had enough love. I don't know about that. I just know there's never enough alcohol to get me out of my mind.

'Well?' asked Martin.

I nearly said no, but I caught the look on Jo's face. And, I reminded myself, it's good for me to be challenged. An opportunity to reassert my faith, my resolve. Least, that's what the textbooks tell me.

I switched the phones over to the night-service and unhooked my jacket from its peg. 'There's The Brudenell,' I said as Jo's eyes lit up. 'Just round the corner.'

Chapter Four

The Brudenell is a social club but it's not like your average working men's club. For a start, nearly everyone in it is a student and probably not one of them has ever done a full day's work in their lives – at least, not the kind of work that working men's club implies. Recently, The Brudenell has been building a solid reputation as a kind of secret gig venue, with unadvertised performances by some big-name bands.

We were seated in the bar less than ten minutes after leaving the office, Martin and Jo both with pints – Landlord for Martin, lager and lime for Jo. I nursed a blackcurrant and soda. I can't drink cola because the caffeine makes my heart race, and I'm never sure what else to order. 'Let's hear it then.'

He glanced around but it was still early, even by student standards. The closest drinkers were seated three tables away. 'Trouble was no one was pushing for it to be solved. A body – young girl – young woman, a prostitute—'

'Sex worker,' said Jo.

Martin nodded and took a swig of his pint. The head of his beer left a foam moustache along his top lip. It suited him, matched the white of his hair. 'Sex worker. Like it. Anyway, that was as far as they got. A body. A sex worker, they decided. No one ever came forward to claim her.'

'Murdered?'

Martin popped a Fisherman's Friend in his mouth and crunched. 'She was dead. That's about the only fact. Police decided it was suicide although they never found a note. Pathologist said somewhere between twenty-two and twenty-five. Autopsy showed she'd carried a child. Slip of a thing. Bruises that looked like she'd had some kind of fight, but they were old – not related to her death.'

'Suicide?' I know I've got an issue with suicide. To me, it's selfish and passive-aggressive – a way of handing on your problems to someone else. It's the easy way out. Jo gives me hell for my views but I can't seem to change them. It's like they're ingrained in me. I took a sip of my blackcurrant and tried not to gag. 'How she do it?'

He slapped me on the knuckles. 'Not proved.'

'Well, how'd she die?'

'Poisoned.'

'Poisoned? What, like an overdose?'

'Strychnine – know how that works?'

I shook my head.

'Starts with twitching. Facial muscles go first.' Martin clenched and unclenched his fingers, balling his hand into a fist, then flinging his fingers back. He still wore his wedding ring and it squeezed the flesh of his third finger. 'Spasms spread throughout the body, progressing to convulsions as the nervous system runs out of control.'

'Weird way to kill yourself,' said Jo.

‘Eventually the muscles that control breathing become paralyzed and the victim suffocates,’ Martin continued. ‘Stays conscious and aware the whole time up to death – in fact the nerves of the brain are stimulated, gives heightened perception.’

‘Christ,’ said Jo.

He took another mouthful of beer. ‘Hard to think of a worse way to go.’

‘Where’d she get strychnine from?’ I asked. ‘Is it legal?’

‘It was. Used by mole-catchers – but you had to be a licensed pest controller to get hold of it. Police never found where she got it from, least not that they told me.’

‘You don’t think it was suicide?’

‘She was found in the communal garden of a block of flats, overlooking Roundhay Park.’

I’d never been to Roundhay Park, but I’d heard of it. It was out to the north of the city, only about four miles away; but we’ve got Hyde Park right on our doorstep, so why travel?

‘She killed herself outside?’ asked Jo and I knew by the tone of her voice that she didn’t believe it. I could see where she was coming from – when you think of suicide, especially women, you think of pills in the bath, head in the oven. But then there were the jumpers, I thought. Beachy Head and that bridge near Hull. They were outdoors.

‘Perhaps she didn’t want a relative to find her,’ I said. ‘I mean, if it was suicide, and she’d killed herself in her own flat, chances are it would have been someone she knew who discovered her.’

Perhaps that's why she went to the garden – she wanted a stranger to find her.' Which, I thought, although I didn't say aloud, made her more thoughtful than your average suicide. I don't know how the tube drivers ever recover from what they must see when someone decides they can't go on.

'She didn't live in the flats,' said Martin.

'Oh.' I considered this for a moment. It didn't make sense. 'Why would you kill yourself in someone else's garden?'

'Where *did* she live?' asked Jo.

Martin shrugged. 'That's the trouble. We don't know. No one knows who she is. No ID on her; all they found was a train ticket from Nottingham. Like she'd travelled all the way from Nottingham to kill herself in the garden of this particular block of flats.'

'She must have known someone in the flats,' I said.

'She'd tied herself to a statue. Right in the middle of the grass.'

'If they didn't know who she was, how did they know she was a sex worker?' asked Jo.

Martin shrugged again. 'Don't know. And I've got to tell you here, after ...' He paused, looked at Jo again. 'After last time. I want to put my cards right out there on the table, so you know what you're getting into. I didn't like the way the investigation was handled, if you catch my drift.'

'Come on, Martin,' I said. I banged my drink down on the table harder than I expected and caused the table to wobble and Jo's pint to slop. I lowered my voice. 'You can't put your cards on

the table and then ask us to catch your drift. What do you mean?

Jo mopped at the spillage with a beer mat.

‘The policeman in charge. I had my doubts. That’s all. Nothing concrete, just a feeling that perhaps he wasn’t as committed as he could have been.’

‘Wasn’t committed or was bent? Massive difference.’

‘Lee,’ Jo said. She put a hand on my arm. ‘We’ve got to come to each case blank, you know that. Empty.’

I reminded myself to breathe. Martin looked at me and then at Jo, like he was watching a tennis match.

‘I don’t know why he decided she was a sex worker. That’s all. Maybe she was known to the police, or him; maybe he was working from the fact that no one ever claimed her, the bus driver’s impression ... I don’t know. It might not be important. Anyway, to me it felt like she was trying to tell someone something. She was naked. Did I say that?’

‘She committed suicide naked?’

‘Bollocks,’ said Jo.

‘The report said she was naked as the day she was born except for a necklace,’ said Martin.

‘If she was naked, where was her train ticket?’

‘All her clothes were folded neatly next to the body. The train ticket was found in bushes less than three metres away.’

‘Might not be hers then?’ Jo said.

‘It had her fingerprints on it. And they found a bus driver who thought he remembered her getting the bus from the station.’

‘Did they check the CCTV?’

Martin nodded. ‘Nothing.’

‘Not a lot to go on,’ I said.

‘I looked into the residents. Posh flats, owned by the well-to-do. Rob Hamilton was one of the residents.’

Even I’ve heard of Rob Hamilton and I don’t watch TV.

‘If in doubt, deal,’ said Jo.

I frowned at her.

‘That’s his catchphrase,’ she said.

‘And Jimmy McFly lived there too – the celebrity chef. Before he got done for drunk driving.’

‘Didn’t he go out with Gabby Fairweather?’ asked Jo. She pointed a finger at me. ‘She left him when he went to prison. Before she met that singer from that boy band.’

I was totally lost.

‘The Wranglers. God, what was his name? Chris somebody.’

For a radical feminist socialist, Jo is surprisingly well-informed on celebrity culture.

I turned to Martin. ‘Anyone with any links to the body?’ I said, my voice a little pointed.

‘I’ve got the full list here.’ Martin bent to pick his briefcase from the floor, opened it and took out a reporter’s spiral bound notebook.

I read the neatly written label on the front. Jane Doe; 29 August and the year. I did the maths. Almost seven years ago.

‘There were a couple of people of interest. One resident who’d

been prosecuted for tax evasion.’ He flicked through the pages of the notebook. ‘There.’ He pointed to a name that had been highlighted. ‘And Blake Jeffries – the whisper was he’d made his money on the club scene ... and not just through door entry charges, if you know what I mean.’

Jo grabbed for the notebook before I could get there and settled herself to read its contents.

‘You mean drugs?’ I said.

‘According to a source. I looked into it but nothing provable.’

‘We’re a missing persons’ bureau,’ I said. I folded my arms. ‘She’s like the opposite of missing. She’s found. I mean, all right, she’s dead, but she’s not—’

Martin opened his mouth to say something but Jo got there before him. ‘Somewhere she’s missing,’ she said. ‘That’s the thing. These women, they’ve been isolated—’

‘What women?’ I asked.

‘Cut off from society, precisely so no one cares when they’re abused, raped, killed ... whatever.’

‘What women?’ I said again.

‘Sex workers,’ said Jo.

I knew her patience was stretching and truth was I was trying to stretch it on purpose. Don’t ask me why. I get like this sometimes. You’d think I’d learn, but no.

‘Somewhere,’ Jo said, ‘they’re missing.’

‘Somewhere there has to be a family or a past lover,’ Martin explained, and I noticed the similarity in the two pairs of steely

blue eyes staring at me. ‘Or a friend. Someone who’s missing her. She had a child. That child must be somewhere, wondering where their mother is. She died anonymous. Seven years later, no one even knows her name.’

Jo continued to flick through the pages of Martin’s notebook. There didn’t seem to be many, perhaps half a dozen, the rest of the pages virgin white. I knew from the way she closed the front cover I wasn’t going to get much say in this one. Resistance was futile. ‘And that’s all you got?’ I asked. ‘A list of people who lived in the flats and a train ticket?’

‘They’re a subclass of people,’ said Jo. ‘Cynics might think these women are bred for abuse and murder. Most sex workers grew up in care.’

‘We don’t actually know she was a sex worker.’

‘Abusers, murderers know they stand a good chance of getting away with the shit they get away with—’

‘She wasn’t murdered. And we don’t know she was abused.’ Jo obviously wasn’t going to let any of the facts stand in her way.

‘Because no one cares,’ she said, her eyes boring into mine. Her voice was so loud the people at the other table had stopped speaking.

‘I do care,’ I said. ‘I just think we need to be clear—’

‘They’re the world’s missing, the world’s lost.’

‘OK.’ I held my hands up.

‘They’re so missing, so off radar, no one even knows they’re missing. They’re more than missing, they’re fucking invisible.’

‘That’s the thing,’ said Martin, nodding with approval at Jo. ‘There was no one stamping feet, demanding answers. The case got pushed aside. She had no one. That’s why it won’t let me go.’

‘If the kind of men who prey on these women knew there were people like us out there, people who care and want to find out what happened, maybe, just maybe, it might make them think twice before they do the fucked-up shit that they do.’

‘OK,’ I said. The expression on Jo’s face made me feel like crying. ‘I guess it wouldn’t hurt, having a look at it.’

I turned to Martin because I couldn’t bear to look at Jo anymore. ‘You don’t have to pay us though, we owe you one.’

‘We owe you more than that,’ said Jo.

He drained his pint and waved at the barman, indicating another round, the same again. I wanted to point out it wasn’t waitress service, but the barman smiled and reached up for a pint glass from the rack above his head. Martin turned back to us.

‘I do have to pay you. And I’ll tell you why. If I don’t, I have to be nice to you because you’re doing me a favour. There’s no pressure on you to succeed.’ He grinned at me and the twinkle returned to his eye.

‘You want to be able to boss us around, is that what you’re saying?’ said Jo.

‘Precisely.’ Martin patted Jo on the hand. ‘And besides, that battleaxe you’ve hired as your receptionist, sorry, office manager ... she’d kick all our backsides if you said you’d taken on a freebie. I need to be able to stand my ground with her.’

Jo shook her head. ‘You’ll learn. Complete surrender is the only way with Aunt Edie.’

‘Yes, well, I’m too old. And you know what they say about old dogs and new tricks. I don’t surrender to anyone. Never have, never will.’

Jo laughed and it struck me that I hadn’t seen her laugh for ages. Not like that, head back, square white teeth on show.

Chapter Five

We stayed in The Brudenell till closing time. Martin had booked himself a couple of nights in a B&B on Cardigan Road in order to watch the cricket. As Jo tried to wheedle another round out of the barman I noticed the skin on my forearms was scratched red and tugged my sleeves down. Once the barman had convinced Jo there wasn't going to be any after hours, we poured Martin into a taxi from the rank opposite and I linked arms with Jo as we waved him off, Jo swaying as I held onto her. When the taxi turned the corner, I half-pulled, half-pushed her up the hill towards our flat on Hyde Park Road.

She stumbled over the kerb on Royal Park Mount and fell on her arse. I tried to pull her up, but Jo found it too hilarious for words and I gave up and sat next to her at the roadside. We shared a fag, which got so damp from the tears streaming down her face I had to light another. I put my arm around her shoulders and her body warmth seeped into me. Must have looked like a right pair. Just as I thought she'd fallen asleep and I'd have to roll her up the hill, she clambered to her feet.

'Chris Goodall.'

'Who?'

'The bloke from The Wranglers.'

'Right.' I had no idea what she was talking about, and I'm not sure she did either.

‘The one who went out with Gabby Fairweather. After she finished with Jimmy McFly.’

I nodded.

‘Doesn’t matter. It’s not important.’ She took a moment to steady herself and then set off at such a pace that I had to jog to keep up with her.

When we got to the flat, I let us in as quietly as possible so as not to disturb our downstairs neighbour, who happens to be the only full-time worker within about a two-mile radius. She hates us and our unsociable hours. I went into the kitchen to put the kettle on while Jo crashed into the front room. When I joined her with a freshly brewed pot of tea – milk in a jug, just how she likes it – she was out cold on the settee with her Doc Martens still on. I put the tray down, untied her laces, tugged the boots off her feet and fetched the duvet from her bed. I floated it over her body. She looks different asleep, less fierce, her face softer, unlined.

She didn’t stir so I took the crumpled Rizlas, the tobacco tin and the tea tray upstairs. My bedroom is in the attic, a bolthole from the hustle of the streets. My bed nestles in the space beneath the dormer, and the garret window looks out over the treetops of Hyde Park. Here I can convince myself that I’m not in the city, that there’s clean air and a world of space. I lay half-propped on my pillows, trying to memorize the star constellations. I made a spliff, but my heart wasn’t in it and I stubbed it out before I was halfway done. A line from an old Billy Bragg song looped in my head. It’s never the same after the first time, but it doesn’t stop

you coming back for more.

The next thing I knew the alarm clock glowed out 4:03 a.m. I lay in bed feeling unsettled and trying to remember my dream, but it floated just outside my grasp, leaving me worried but without knowing why. I'd fallen asleep without closing the curtain and when I saw the first trace of dawn across the park, I pulled on a pair of denim cut-offs and my T-shirt and went downstairs.

Jo was still comatose on the settee, so I opened the front room curtains, knowing that before long the sun would be beaming down through the tall sash windows. Jo grunted and turned away.

I laced my trainers on the bottom stair, shoved a jacket and notebook in my backpack, then jogged, slowly, my usual two laps round the park. I intended to stop there, then walk round the corner to the office and pick up the van, but the sun was breaking through the red clouds, and I got into my stride and decided to run down into Woodhouse and then up The Ridge to Headingley. Leeds 6 doesn't really stir much before lunchtime and I live for these glimpses, the moments when I'm the only one awake.

By the time I got to Headingley sweat dripped from my forehead, but the voices had gone. It was almost eight, so I sat on the brick wall of a flowerbed until Sainsbury's opened, bought a bottle of water and made my way through the empty streets to The Turnways.

As I got close to number 24 I saw the curtains were still open and the house looked just the same as it had the previous day.

The thought crossed my mind that perhaps it wasn't just Matt that had done a disappearing act. I walked up the path, hammered on the door and jumped when it opened straightaway.

'Yes?' said a young woman in a round-necked striped jumper. She had mid-calf-length boots on and I had the impression she was about to go out. I felt underdressed next to her, in my T-shirt and knee-length shorts. I wished I'd put my jacket on before knocking on the door.

'Sorry to bother you,' I said. 'Is Matt in?'

She frowned. 'Who are you?'

I wasn't used to doing this without Jo and it reminded me how much I rely on her, especially to break the ice. 'I'm Lee, Lee Winters. I'm a private detective.' It sounded stupid to my ears, but I persevered. 'Investigator. I run a missing persons' bureau. We're ... I mean, I'm looking for Matt.'

'Oh,' she said. Her forehead creased and she paused for a moment. 'You mean someone hired you? Someone hired you to find Matt?'

'Is he in?' I straightened my spine, adjusted the weight on my feet so I grew a couple of centimetres.

'No. No, he's not here. Haven't seen him since last week. I don't know where he is.'

'Can I come in?'

She checked the time on her watch. 'I've got lectures.'

Not at eight fifteen in the morning, she didn't. I might not have spent that long in higher education, but long enough to learn

the basics. I took a step forward. She held her ground and so we stood too close to each other, so close I could smell the mint of her toothpaste.

‘It won’t take long,’ I said.

She hesitated. I knew she didn’t want to talk to me but I guessed she was too polite to say. ‘I said we should have reported it,’ she said, ‘but Tuff thinks he’s holed up somewhere. He’s about to submit his dissertation.’

‘Tuff?’

‘No. I meant Matt’s about to submit his dissertation.’

I was having difficulty keeping up with the conversation. ‘Who’s Tuff?’

‘My flatmate. Matt’s best friend.’

I went for it, taking another bite out of the distance between us, and this time she stepped back which allowed me to move inside, into the hallway. I swung the backpack off my shoulders. ‘I’m going to need to take notes.’ I opened the drawstring and pulled out my notebook. ‘You got somewhere we could sit?’

‘I guess. Front room.’ She pointed to the first door on the right.

‘I’m Lee,’ I said again. ‘What did you say your name was?’

‘Someone’s hired you to find Matt?’ She emphasized the word hired, and I read it to mean paid.

‘Yeah.’ I followed her into the front room, which was neat and tidy by student standards. The coffee table had a pile of textbooks on it, a picture of a microscope on the front of the top one. I took a seat in the armchair and turned to a clean page in my notebook.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Who?’

‘What?’

‘Who hired you to find him?’

I cleared my throat. ‘I can’t tell you. It’s against—’

‘Nikki,’ she said. She shook her head and stared right at me.

‘I’m guessing the police told her to fuck off?’

‘I’m not at liberty—’

‘She’s nuts.’

I gestured at the chair opposite me, trying to indicate she should take a seat. She didn’t comply, choosing instead to stay standing by the door. ‘She’s nuts?’ I wrote the word nuts in my notebook, looked up at her again. ‘Like you mean she has a mental health issue?’

She stood with her back to the wall. ‘She’s nuts about Matt.’

‘Maybe she’s worried? I mean, you said yourself you don’t know where he is.’

She picked at her fingernail. ‘Matt has that effect on women.’

I saw where this one was going. I offered up my usual silent prayer of thanks that I’d put all that behind me. I’m not quite a virgin, but it’s been so long I might as well be. It’s better that way. Me and men, me and relationships, it’s just not my strong point. Play to your strengths, someone once told me. I tried to keep the knowing tone from my voice. ‘How long you lived with him?’

I failed.

She swiped her dark fringe back with one hand so that she

could see to stare at me. ‘We share a house.’

‘Why don’t you take a seat?’

She pointed a finger at me. ‘I’ve never, ever thought about him that way. Which is probably why this houseshare thing works.’ She stepped forward and moved the pile of books out of my way so I could put my notebook on the coffee table. ‘This is our second year. They’re both all right, mostly.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Well, you know, I’ve had to break it to them that the cleaning fairy doesn’t exist. And Matt spends more time in the bathroom than any woman I’ve ever met, but apart from that, it’s OK.’

‘How old is Matt?’

‘Twenty-three.’

‘And he’s an MA student?’

‘MSc.’

‘And, sorry, I don’t know your name?’

‘Jan.’

I wrote that down. ‘When did you last see him, Jan?’

‘I’m sure Nikki’s told you.’

I opted for flattery. ‘It would be great to hear it from you. Just to make sure I’ve got my facts straight.’ I grinned at her. Aunt Edie’s always saying I’ve got a nice smile and I should use it more.

Jan took a breath, released it slowly. ‘I was away for the weekend. Went back home to see my parents.’

‘When?’

‘Last Friday.’

‘Where?’

‘York, well, just outside. All I know is Matt and Tuff went to a party – on Saturday night. These outdoor parties – you know?’

I shook my head. ‘I’ve heard of them but thought they’d got rid of them back in the nineties. They’re illegal now, right?’

‘I don’t know much about it.’ She finally lowered herself into the chair opposite me and rubbed at an imaginary spot on her jeans. ‘Sounds like a bunch of hippies, taking drugs and dancing till sunrise, but Nikki’s got them into it. Tuff came back on Sunday, about lunchtime, he said – I wasn’t back. He said Matt stayed.’

‘When did you get back?’

‘Teatime. I was hoping to get some work done. Fat chance. Nikki came round, twice, looking for Matt.’

‘Sunday evening?’

She nodded.

‘What did,’ I checked my notes, ‘Tuff say had happened to Matt?’

‘I didn’t see Tuff till Monday.’

‘He got back Sunday lunchtime, you said?’

‘Yes, but he’d gone out again by the time I got here. And I was in bed by the time he came home. I didn’t see him till Monday.’

‘And?’

‘And he said he came back Sunday lunchtime and Matt had decided to stay at the party.’

‘Did he say anything else?’

‘Not really. Nikki came round again, screaming that she’s going to call the police. Like I’m personally responsible for the fact that her boyfriend’s not here.’

‘Must be hard for her —’

‘Matt’s problem is he’s too pretty. He’s got too many options.’

‘You mean – there’s someone else?’

‘I wouldn’t blame him, that’s all I’m saying.’

‘You really don’t like Nikki.’ It wasn’t a question, more a statement of fact. I probably sounded peeved. I hate women doing other women down, especially over a man.

‘I don’t not like her. I just wish ... Oh I don’t know.’ She stood up. ‘Tuff’s right. Matt’s probably holed up, writing up his dissertation.’

‘His tutor says he should have just about finished it.’

‘I think that’s probably being optimistic.’

‘Have you rung his parents?’

‘Tuff’s known Matt the longest.’

‘Where is Tuff?’

‘He’ll be at uni by now.’

I frowned and glanced at the clock on the wall above the fireplace. ‘Bit early.’

‘Yeah, well.’ She smiled for the first time and I had the sense that she felt better for talking to me. ‘They’re both feeling the pressure. And the library opens at 8.’ She paused a moment, drew a breath. ‘It is weird.’

I thought she meant the library. ‘Weird?’

‘Tuff’s, well, I don’t know. Maybe it’s just the stress.’

‘Tuff’s what? What were you going to say?’

She didn’t answer me, was lost in her own thoughts. ‘If Matt’d taken his laptop with him, I’d agree he’s holed up somewhere, ignoring Nikki and trying to get his dissertation finished. But he went missing at a party.’

‘Could he have come home on the Sunday? If Tuff was out and you were out? Maybe he picked up his stuff?’

‘Maybe. I did have a look in his room, but it’s impossible to tell. I’d have thought he’d have left a note though if he’d done that. Unless he didn’t trust us not to tell Nikki. That’s the only thing I can think of – he wants to disappear till he gets it in.’

‘How long’s he got?’

‘It’s due Monday.’

‘And you don’t think you should ring his parents?’

‘He did disappear before you know.’

‘Disappear?’

‘Well, took off for a few days. Never said where he’d gone or anything.’

‘Did you ever find out where he went?’

She shook her head. ‘That was before Nikki.’

‘What’s their relationship like?’

Jan pulled a face. ‘Nikki knows Matt’s out of her league – that’s what’s driving her mental.’

‘He must like her. They’ve been going out together for nearly a year,’ I said.

‘Yeah.’ She shrugged her shoulders like she was genuinely bemused by the whole thing.

‘Is there someone else?’ I asked again.

She hesitated and I knew she was searching her conscience. I leaned closer to her. ‘We’re just trying to make sure he’s OK,’ I said. ‘We’re not looking to get him into trouble.’

‘Last night, I got a few phone calls where the phone was silent every time I picked it up. I don’t know whether it was Nikki, or just ...’

Jan’s gaze had fixed on the window. She stood up and crossed the room and stared out into the street. I couldn’t see what had caught her interest. She swore under her breath and it sounded like a gust of wind.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘That’s Matt’s car.’

I got up and peered out of the bay window in the direction she pointed, followed her gaze to the burgundy Volkswagen Polo parked a few hundred yards further down the street. I hadn’t noticed it on my way there, but I’d come from the other direction.

Jan turned and ran from the room. I followed her, through the front door back into the street. I wondered how I’d not noticed it earlier, but I’d been focused on the house, and a car with a smashed window isn’t that much of an unusual occurrence in Leeds 6. As I got closer though, I realized it wasn’t just a smashed window. In fact there wasn’t a single pane of glass intact – front and rear windscreen, every window, shattered. Another couple of

steps and I realized the headlights and taillights were destroyed as well. The shards crunched under my feet.

‘Shit,’ said Jan again.

‘Vandals?’ I said.

Jan looked up and down the street. ‘Why just his car?’

She had a point. There were other, more attractive cars parked along the street. ‘Which is Tuff’s?’ I asked.

‘Tuff doesn’t have a car.’

‘Oh. How did he get back from the party?’

‘Should I ring the police?’

‘He must have come back in a car. The party was in Lincolnshire.’

Jan stood blinking at the Volkswagen like she was willing the glass back into the panes. I looped around it and tried to read the message it sent. Anger. Raw, unchannelled anger, you could smell it. Every single body panel was dented, same for the bonnet. It looked like it had been attacked with a baseball bat.

‘Didn’t you hear anything?’

‘You don’t think Nikki ...?’ Jan’s voice tailed off.

I frowned as I considered the idea, but it didn’t add up. ‘Don’t think so. I mean she’s worried, but she didn’t strike me as angry. Least, not this angry.’

‘What should I do?’ Jan turned to me and I realized she’d got worried for the first time.

‘Phone the police. Report it.’

‘And tell them Matt’s missing?’

I still find it difficult to think of the police as anything other than the enemy. Too much soft drug consumption. That's my soft drug consumption, not theirs. But I remembered the roasting we'd got from not involving them earlier in our last case. 'Don't think you've got a choice,' I said. I peered in through the driver's window. Or the space where the window once was. 'Radio's still there. Doesn't look like anything's been stolen.' The glove box was closed. I pulled my head back out. 'Is Tuff insured? To drive it?'

'I'm not dealing with this,' Jan said. She held up her hands in front of her like she was trying to stop traffic. She turned towards the house. I still had my notebook and pen in hand so I wrote down the registration number and followed Jan back across the road.

'I don't know anything about it,' she said, talking to herself. 'This is Tuff's problem.'

I followed her into the house, back into the front room. She picked up a denim jacket from the back of the settee. 'I don't know anything. I haven't got time. I'm late. They're not the only ones with deadlines.'

'Why don't I tell Tuff, then he can sort it?' I said. 'You said he's at the library?'

'Not my drama,' she said, still shaking her head.

I stuffed my notebook into my bag. We were obviously leaving. 'What time will he be there till?'

'Don't know. He works Thursdays.' She grabbed a bag and a

ring binder from the floor in the hall.

‘Works where?’

‘The bookshop.’ She was out the front door, standing on the step waiting for me to leave so she could shut the front door. ‘The one opposite the uni.’

I stepped out of the house and she slammed the door behind me, locked it and put the key in her pocket.

‘What time does he start?’

But she didn’t hear me. Or if she did she didn’t acknowledge it. She was already out of the gate and headed down the street towards town. I watched her stride away until she turned left at the end and disappeared from sight.

Chapter Six

I caught the bus to Hyde Park Corner and threaded my way through the streets back to the office. Aunt Edie was at the computer, two-finger typing and swearing under her breath as I slung my bag onto my desk. I noticed Jo was wearing her hangover lipstick – dark purple, like crushed blueberries.

‘Where’ve you been?’ she asked.

‘Matt’s house.’

‘Why didn’t you answer your mobile?’

‘Oh.’ I pulled open my desk drawer and rummaged. ‘It needs charging,’ I said, holding my new iPhone aloft.

‘You’re supposed to charge it at night so that it’s ready every morning,’ Jo said, snatching it off me and plugging it into the wall socket. ‘How many more times?’

‘I went for a run – had a chat with Matt’s housemate, Jan. She said he disappeared once before – didn’t show for days.’

‘Told you,’ said Jo. ‘He’ll show up with numb nuts and a hangover, I’d bet money on it. Or he knows she’s preggers and he’s moved to the Outer Hebrides. You know what men are like.’

‘But,’ I said, crossing the room and pulling the file from the cabinet, ‘his car’s been done over, like, seriously done over.’

‘Crap,’ said Aunt Edie.

I frowned at Jo. ‘What’s she doing?’

‘She’s doing my head in, that’s what she’s doing.’

I glanced back at Aunt Edie. Her glasses had fallen to the tip of her nose and her lips were pursed but she didn't appear to have heard Jo's comment. I raised my eyebrows at Jo. We both know Aunt Edie doesn't take criticism well.

Jo shrugged her shoulders like she didn't care. 'She's typing up Martin's notes. Thought I might as well get her doing something, seeing as how we didn't know where you were.'

I put my notes from my interview with Jan into the file and thought about what we had. A possible date in Old Bar today at 2 p.m. And Tuff. We needed to speak to him – it looked like he was the last person to see Matt – and maybe he could shed some light on what had happened to Matt's car. The bookshop was opposite the university Union, which housed Old Bar. It made sense to combine the two appointments, not that Tuff knew we were coming. A glance at the clock above the filing cabinet told me it wasn't even ten. I dropped the file with my notes onto Aunt Edie's desk so she could type them up later. She peered at her computer screen and cursed again.

Call me sensitive, but I was picking up on an atmosphere. Luckily, I've been mates with Jo long enough to know what she needed. 'Why don't we take a drive to see the flats where the woman's body was found? Martin said they overlook Roundhay Park. There's got to be a café round there somewhere. I'll buy breakfast.'

Jo and I left the office together. I didn't even take my jacket. The van was parked just round the corner, and I clambered into

the passenger seat and got that buzz I always get when I know we're leaving our normal. A trip. Probably I need to get out more.

We had to negotiate the mad ballet dance that is the Sheepscar Interchange, which involved a few car horns and Jo sticking the Vs up out of the window as the satnav lady fired directions at us. We eventually joined Roundhay Road, which takes you out to the north-east of the city.

Leeds 6 is a bubble: it insulates against the real world. Its only inhabitants are the young, the impressionable and the idealistic. The shops are all takeaways, off-licences, laundrettes and taxi firms, so there's never any pressing reason to go anywhere else. But as Jo drove us down a hill, into Roundhay Park, and we caught a glimpse of the enormous lake, I thought perhaps we should have made more of an effort and visited before.

'I googled Roundhay Park this morning, while you were out, running.' Jo made the last word sound like a euphemism.

I rose above it. 'And?'

'It was bought by the mayor of the city, for the people of Leeds, a couple of hundred years ago.'

'That was nice of him.'

'Before that it was privately owned. There's a stately home at the top.'

I peered out of the windows but all I could see was parkland.

Jo turned into the car park at the bottom of the hill and reverse parked into a space. 'Roundhay Park had its own serial killer, once upon a time,' she said.

‘The Park Killer? That was here?’

You couldn’t live in Leeds and not have heard of the Park Killer. He was a serial killer who’d killed all of his female victims in parks, hence the moniker. He’d been caught by a late-night dog-walker, who’d discovered him cutting up his final victim in bushes and had made a citizen’s arrest. According to folklore, the dog, a black Labrador, had pinned the killer down, holding him until the police arrived. Some people claimed the Park Killer had been inspired by the Yorkshire Ripper, who’d stalked Leeds’ streets back in the seventies, but the truth was no one really knew what had motivated him to do what he had done, because the Park Killer committed suicide in prison, before his case had come to trial. I glanced around.

‘He killed two women here,’ Jo said. ‘Think the others were in Meanwood.’

‘Fucked up,’ I said.

We climbed out of the van and surveyed our surroundings. ‘The flats are up there,’ said Jo, pointing to the crest of the park.

‘Food first,’ I said. I’m not stupid. Hanging out with Jo when her blood sugar is low is taking your life in your hands.

We made our way over to the Lakeside café – a wooden building jutting out over the lake – and I ordered us both a full English breakfast with an espresso for Jo. We sat on the balcony, the sun glistened off the water, swans and ducks glided past, and I filled Jo in on the details of my conversation with Jan while we waited for breakfast to arrive.

‘Matt could have easily popped home Sunday,’ Jo said when I told her everything I could remember. ‘Picked up his stuff and bought a single ticket away from planet parenthood.’

‘Seems weird that he’d know Nikki was pregnant before she even did. And Jan said she couldn’t tell whether any of his stuff was missing.’

‘He’s probably out getting laid in between typing up his dissertation.’

‘What about his car?’

‘Or getting laid while some woman types up his dissertation. A woman on my course did that. Typed up her boyfriend’s dissertation. He dumped her like a week later.’

I paused as the waitress arrived and handed us two plates brimming with sausage, eggs and beans. Jo poured vinegar onto her fried eggs – she likes them dripping with the stuff.

‘There’s the note in the pigeonhole as well,’ I pointed out. ‘Someone else is looking for him.’

‘Could be weeks old, that note. And from anybody.’ Jo spooned a forkful of baked beans on her slice of bread, folded it over and took a bite.

‘We’ll find out this afternoon,’ I said. ‘Even if Matt doesn’t turn up, the person who wrote it might.’

‘Might,’ Jo stressed as she chewed on her baked bean sandwich.

‘Not like we’ve got anything else to go on.’

We ate the rest of our breakfast in silence. I watched the colour

return to Jo's skin as she ate. When her plate was empty she poured the last of her coffee down her throat and licked her fingers. 'Delish. I'll have that sausage if you're not going to eat it.'

*

After breakfast, we climbed the steep hill to the flats at the top. When I think flats I always picture council sky-rises, like the ones that mark the edge of the city in Little London, or new-build student halls of residence, which remind me of battery hen coops. These flats weren't like those. White stucco, with huge portrait-shaped windows, built on the crest of the hill overlooking the park and the lake. Location-wise, it didn't get much better. Apart from the wooden café, there wasn't a single building in sight from the top of the hill, just miles of green parkland.

Jo put her hands in the small of her back as we surveyed the vista. 'Not bad, eh?' Roundhay Park stretched before us, a natural flat-bottomed bowl, with what looked like a cricket pitch at its base. I was reminded of school and my geography teacher droning on and on about glaciation. We were high up, above the trees. From where we were it looked like you'd be able to trampoline in them. 'U2 played there,' said Jo, pointing down the slopes. 'And Madonna, Bruce Springsteen, Robbie Williams, Ed Sheeran – apparently the acoustics are well good.'

Martin's notes included a detailed description of where the woman's body was found. To get into the grounds we had to walk down a small road that ended just behind the flats. The gates were open and it was easy to slip inside. A car park with

more than its fair share of convertibles and BMWs stood between us and the rear of the building. Surrounding the car park were well-established trees and shrubs. ‘What are we going to say? If anyone asks?’

That’s the thing about leaving the Leeds 6 bubble – you become aware of how different you are to ‘normal’ society. It’s unusual to see anyone over twenty-five in Leeds 6 and the dress code is relaxed to say the least. I was still wearing my denim cut-offs and Jo was in her hangover outfit – baggy trousers she’d picked up in Thailand and a sweatshirt that had the neck and cuffs removed.

In the park and around the café, I’d seen old people walking dogs, kids running around, an Asian couple feeding the ducks, mothers with prams. The prams had made me think of Nikki. What a weird thing, to grow another life. I shook the thought from my head and concentrated on our surroundings.

‘We’re gardeners,’ I said. ‘Here to price up a job.’

Jo tugged Martin’s notebook out of her bag. ‘OK.’

I wasn’t sure that anyone would fall for it because the gardens were immaculate. The hedges ruler straight, the soil finely tilled, the roses all neatly budding. We made our way down a small path, around the building to the front – the side of the flats that overlooked the park – Jo reading from Martin’s notes. ‘Middle of the garden, by the statue.’

‘The statue?’

‘Apparently.’

‘Of?’

‘There.’ We rounded the corner and sure enough there was a statue in the middle of the front gardens. A statue of a woman, naked and kneeling, holding what looked like a large pitcher, water flowing from it into the well next to her.

Jo read from Martin’s notes. ‘Vic. discovered by statue, right wrist attached to statue’s right arm. Cable tie. Black.’

‘Weirder and weirder.’

Jo paused from reading. She dropped her bag on the floor and looped a full circle around the stone woman, the gravel crunching under her feet as she walked. When she’d done the full three hundred and sixty degrees she turned to me. ‘She’s like the suffragettes, chaining themselves to railings. Solidarity?’

‘Who is she?’ I peered up close at the statue woman’s face, freckled with lichen, her hair tied in a topknot, the ponytail swirling around her moss-green neck. ‘Aquarius?’

‘Don’t know.’ Jo crouched to the ground and pulled the camera out of her bag. ‘Knew this baby would come in handy.’

‘Martin’s right,’ I said. ‘There’s something wrong here.’ I couldn’t put into words why, but every part of my body refused to accept the narrative we’d been given. I glanced around the garden. It was completely cut off from the park by an eight-foot hedge, anyone in the park wouldn’t be able to see into the gardens. There were three benches arranged at the east, west and south ends and bird feeders swung from a metal pole. The beds were planted with the kind of shrubs that don’t take much looking

after. Jo snapped pictures of the statue as I tried to put my sense of unease into words. ‘You’d be scared someone would see you for one thing.’

Not someone from the park, but someone from the flats. I glanced up at the many windows of the numerous flats that overlooked us. The windows got bigger the higher up the building you went – so that on the top floor they were floor to ceiling. Huge windows. I counted the number of floors and did a rough estimate. At least sixty of them.

‘Would have been dark,’ said Jo. She put the camera on the stone at the base of the statue and picked up the notebook again. ‘Vic. discovered by newspaper boy: 6.50 a.m.’

‘Time of death?’

Jo flicked through the pages. ‘Pathologist reckoned she’d been dead between three and four hours.’

‘Let’s give her a name. I don’t like calling her Vic.’

‘Vicky?’

Despite myself, I half-smiled. That’s what I love about Jo. Even in the hard times, the darkest of dark times, she can make me smile. ‘Why would the newspaper boy be round here? The entrance to the flats is at the rear.’

‘No, there’s another one there, look. Some residents must use that one.’

‘We need a plan of the flats. I’ll put Aunt Edie on it.’

I kept looking up at the windows, hit by the enormity of the task ahead. There must be at least thirty flats in the building,

thirty owners to track down – possibly more because some of the flats would have been sold in the seven years since our woman’s body had been discovered. Some of them were probably sublet. The theme tune to *Mission Impossible* started up in my mind. I tried to get a more precise count of the number of windows, and that was when I first noticed her.

On the third or fourth floor, the face of a woman, an older woman, pressed against the glass, the palm of her hand also raised and touching the window. When she saw me spot her, she pulled back, so quick I wasn’t sure whether I’d imagined her. Just a dark space where she once stood and perhaps the smudge of her fingerprints, although I was far too far away to see for sure. ‘This place gives me the creeps,’ I said to Jo.

‘Nutter. This is the pinnacle of human achievement. You live here, you’ve made it. Bet these cost a bomb,’ she said.

‘Someone’s watching us,’ I said, scanning the building again. The hairs on the back of my neck prickled and I felt the shudder run all the way to my toes.

Jo lifted the camera and rapid-snapped photos of the building. Nothing moved but I couldn’t shake the feeling. I stepped away from Jo and tried to imagine the scene. A naked woman, cable-tied to the statue. I sat on the ground next to the statue, held my wrist against hers.

Jo returned the camera to the bag. ‘There’s something missing. Something we’re not seeing.’

‘Besides her clothes?’

‘Yeah, besides her clothes. Although, actually they were there; Martin said they were neatly folded, next to her body.’

I shook my head. ‘Who’d get naked to commit suicide?’

‘I know right.’

‘So what’s missing?’

Jo flicked through Martin’s notebook. ‘We’ve got a list of her possessions. Brown ankle boots, scuffed. Denim-effect dress, belt, bra, red knickers. Train ticket dated 28th of August – the day before her body was found. Stamped.’

‘Didn’t Martin mention a necklace?’

‘Yes. She was wearing that. The only thing she was wearing.’

‘Go on.’

‘The train ticket was found in bushes near the body.’ We both glanced around at the perfectly manicured shrubs. ‘So where was her purse?’

‘Good point. Maybe she didn’t have one?’

‘And the other thing – what did she carry the strychnine in? Had to be some kind of container.’

‘Is it a powder or a liquid?’

‘Her bag’s what’s missing,’ said Jo, bending to scribble something in the notebook. ‘It’s obvious. Every woman has a handbag.’

I pulled a face at that. I’ve never owned a handbag in my life.

Jo straightened up. ‘Women that wear dresses have handbags. Dresses don’t have pockets.’

I thought about this. ‘She’d have needed money for the train

fare.'

'She would have had a handbag,' said Jo, again. 'S'obvious. Can't believe we didn't think of it sooner.'

'Maybe there was one and Martin's not noted it.' I glanced at Martin's pristine notebook and knew I was clutching at straws.

'We need to speak to the police – the person in charge of the original investigation,' said Jo. 'DI Roberts, according to the notes here.'

'Wasn't that the one that Martin said he wasn't sure about?'

'And what about the necklace? What kind of necklace was it? It's got to be important if she kept it on.'

'Wonder what they do with it? The evidence? Do they store it all somewhere?'

'It's an unsolved case,' said Jo. 'They can't throw everything away. There must be a warehouse somewhere with Vicky's possessions in it.' Jo's eyes lit up at the thought.

'You're right,' I said. 'We're going to need to speak to the police.' My heart sank at the thought. Neither Jo nor I are keen on involving the police in the business, even though we know it's going to be unavoidable at times. We've both grown up seeing them as the enemy – due to a couple of student demonstrations where they've seemed more concerned with social control than upholding the freedoms of the general public.

Jo sat on the bench by the bird feeders and wrote something in Martin's notebook. I took a walk around the small enclosed garden before taking a seat next to her and lighting a cigarette.

‘Why here?’ I said. ‘She caught a train from Nottingham. Why come all this way to die? Martin’s right, it’s like she was trying to draw attention to something, but what? The flats? Someone who lived in one of the flats?’

‘Possible.’

‘The statue?’

‘The park?’

‘If it was the park, you’d think she’d have killed herself in the park.’

‘What about the Park Killer?’ I said. I’d been unable to get him out of my thoughts since we arrived.

‘He’d been dead five years before Vicky got the train here.’

‘Maybe she wanted someone to find her,’ I said, looking up again at all the windows in front of us. ‘I mean, before she died. Maybe it was a cry for help.’

‘Aspirin is crying for help,’ said Jo. ‘She’s hard-core. She didn’t want to be found, not alive at any rate.’

‘How did she know the statue was there?’

‘Maybe she didn’t. Maybe the idea only struck her when she got here.’

‘What about the cable tie? She had to have brought that with her. Is there anything on that in the notes?’

Jo flicked through the pages of the notebook. ‘No. Only that they’re standard issue, available in every DIY shop in the country. Black plastic.’

‘She chose this spot. It’s so, so,’ – I struggled to find the right

word – ‘premeditated. There’s no reason to ever come here unless you were coming here.’ What little road there was stopped at the flats, the rest was trees and parkland. ‘And naked. Why would you strip to commit suicide?’

‘It was August,’ said Jo, as if that made any sense at all.

I shook my head. ‘It’s another statement. Naked and tied.’

‘The statue’s naked.’

‘Why go to all this trouble to make such a statement but then not leave a note?’ I kicked at the grass. ‘It’s like she wanted to make a statement, but it’s one no one can understand.’

‘Maybe the message wasn’t aimed at us. Maybe it was aimed at someone else.’

I thought about this for a moment.

‘Maybe it wasn’t suicide,’ said Jo.

That was the thought that had been playing in my head since the moment I’d seen the statue. Maybe she’d been forced to ingest the strychnine. Maybe she’d been tied to the statue once she was already dead. ‘We need to know more,’ I said. ‘More about her, more about her background. Jesus. How are we going to do that if the police didn’t even manage it at the time?’

Jo slung her backpack over her shoulders and linked arms with me. ‘Martin doesn’t think the police were trying very hard.’

‘Well, we’re going to try harder. Much fucking harder,’ I said.

Jo grinned at me and I noticed she’d got lipstick on her teeth.

‘Right.’

‘First things first. We need to know who she was. Martin’s

right. Somewhere she's missing. We need to find out who's missing her.'

Chapter Seven

When we got back to the office, I rang directory enquiries and got the number for the missing persons' helpline. I rang them straight away and gave them the few details we had for Vicky Doe: white, female, previously given birth, aged between twenty-two and twenty-five when she died seven years ago; possibly from either Leeds or Nottingham. Not much to go on really.

'I'll check our database,' the woman on the phone said.

'The police probably checked at the time,' I said.

'You never know. We get new reports all the time – sometimes for people who've been missing for years.'

'Why would someone not report them missing at the time?'

'Sometimes it takes a while for people to realize their loved ones are actually missing, not just out of touch.' She checked herself. 'But you shouldn't get your hopes up too high. Hundreds of women go missing and are never reported.'

It makes you think, doesn't it? Hundreds of women go missing and no one ever reports their disappearance? I glanced across at Jo and she raised her eyebrows as if to say I told you so. And of course she had. I'm not naive, I know there's a lot goes on in this world that most people would rather not know about, but it takes a lot to have *no one* care – to have no one in your life that cares enough to report you as missing? These women were ghosts, drifting in and out of people's lives, not having made

enough of an impact to even be sought.

The woman on the phone said she'd get someone to call me back, but warned it might take a few hours.

'I'll put the kettle on,' said Aunt Edie, as she dropped an envelope into the out tray.

'We need you to get us a plan of the flats. Either from the management company, or the fire service or something,' I said to Aunt Edie.

'Don't forget – we've got to be at Old Bar at two o'clock,' Jo reminded me. 'Are we going to walk?'

I glanced at the clock. It was just past one.

'It'd be great if Matt just turns up,' said Jo. 'Easiest case ever.'

'Mmm. Although Nikki's still got the job of breaking the news to her parents.'

'Poor mite,' said Edie, coming back from the kitchen. 'She rang this morning to see if there was any news. I told her she'd have to be patient.'

'We can call in and see Tuff while we're there – he works in the bookshop just opposite the uni. Jan seemed to think he knew something but wasn't telling. And he needs to report the damage to Matt's car.'

The click of the kettle sounded and Aunt Edie made to get up, but I beat her to it.

'My turn.'

I picked up Aunt Edie's mug.

'Tenner still says he's with a woman somewhere,' said Jo.

‘He might be finishing his essay. They work very hard, these students, and no one gives them credit,’ said Aunt Edie, as I made my way through to the back.

Which would make him difficult to find. I poured the water from the kettle. He’d be leaving the house only to buy fags and Pro-Plus tablets. I thought back to our trip to Roundhay Park and how out of the ordinary it had felt. As a general rule, Leeds 6 residents don’t travel. They might go home to see their parents once a term, but other than that they wore grooves in the pavement going from Leeds 6 to the edges of the city and back again. Chances were Matt was holed up in a house a stone’s throw from where I was standing. Didn’t make the job any easier though.

‘Or trying to ditch a clingy girlfriend.’ I used my back to push open the office door as my hands were full with the three mugs of tea. I turned to see a grimace on Jo’s face and Nikki standing in the front office. She wore a pink and orange top that reminded me of ruby grapefruits.

‘Clingy girlfriend?’ The bangles on her arms jangled.

‘Another case,’ said Jo. ‘Take a seat.’

‘Who said that?’

‘Nikki, hi,’ I said, my knuckles burning against the mugs. I put them down on Aunt Edie’s desk. ‘What brings you here?’

She carried an envelope, which she waved at me while she spoke. ‘Clingy?’

‘Come on in, take a seat. I’m glad you’re here.’ The lie was

obvious to the both of us. I sat at my desk and pulled out the notebook from the top drawer. I gestured for her to take a seat, but she ignored me. ‘We’ve made extensive enquiries.’

‘Have you found him?’

‘We’ve spoken to his tutor, people at the uni, his housem—’

‘Jan. Jan told you I was clingy. Bitch.’

I flicked through some pages, pretending to scan my notes.

‘Jan told us it’s not the first time Matt’s done a runner.’

‘Have you found him?’

‘No.’

‘No? Nothing?’

‘We’ve got a few leads to follow up.’

‘Like?’

‘Listen,’ said Jo. She guided Nikki into the seat in front of my desk. ‘You have to let us do our job. We’ve not had twenty-four hours yet. As soon as we know anything, we’ll tell you, I promise.’

‘I brought the photos.’ She handed me the envelope. I flipped it open and pulled out half a dozen snapshots of a man: standing on a beach in a pair of shorts in the first one, his torso bronzed and firm. *Nice*, I caught myself thinking. *Nice ... if you like that kind of thing. Which I don’t. I mean, I can appreciate art – doesn’t mean I want to learn how to paint.* I handed the pictures to Jo.

‘Probably the next step is to contact his parents,’ I said. ‘Unless —’

‘Mmm,’ said Jo. ‘Tasty, isn’t he?’

Nikki glared at her for a moment before turning back to me.

‘Unless?’

‘Just saying,’ said Jo as Aunt Edie crowded in for a look.

‘Someone may have arranged to meet him.’ I put a hand up to quell the excitement that that news generated. ‘We don’t know whether he’ll show. He might not have got the note.’

‘The note?’

‘I can’t tell you anymore at this time, Nikki. Jo’s right – you have to let us get on with things.’

‘Do you know anyone with the initial S?’ Jo asked. ‘Someone who might want to meet up with Matty?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m going home this weekend,’ she said. ‘It’s my dad’s sixtieth.’ She slung her shoulder bag on the desk, and in doing so knocked over my mug of tea. Aunt Edie threw herself across the desk and grabbed my laptop. Boiling hot liquid seeped across my desk and burned through the leg of my denim shorts.

‘Sorry,’ said Nikki, a wobble in her voice. ‘It’s like an alien has taken over my body. I can’t stand it.’

Aunt Edie sat the laptop on the filing cabinet and went through to the kitchenette as Jo moved everything off my desk and onto Aunt Edie’s. I did a quick risk assessment and led Nikki over to the coffee table and chairs in the corner of the room. ‘Take a seat.’

‘I just want to eat and throw up. That’s my whole life. And I can’t do this without Matt.’

‘Look,’ I said, almost pushing her into the chair, ‘we’ll go along to this meeting. Even if he doesn’t show up the person might

know something about where he is.’

‘Where is this meeting?’

‘Nikki, you have to leave this to us. Trust me.’

Aunt Edie came back into the office with an armful of tea towels. I glanced up at the clock on the wall. ‘We’ve got to run. Here, drink Jo’s tea. Edie will look after you, won’t you?’

Jo unhooked her jacket from the peg by the door and we bustled out the door.

We got to Old Bar ten minutes before 2 p.m. We were looking for a young woman with long hair and too much eyeliner. Not the most accurate description to go on, but at least we now had a photo of Matt. I wouldn’t have any trouble recognizing him if he showed up.

We got a drink and took a table. Jo pulled a packet of cards from her pocket and we played a game of Spite and Malice. I was grateful she’d brought the cards – I’m never very sure what to do with my hands when I can’t wrap them around a cold pint of lager.

We’d only been there a few minutes when another woman entered the room and sat down. She didn’t order a drink – just sat at a table and took out a file. Once she’d settled, Jo sidled up to her and said in that conspiratorial way that she has, ‘You waiting for Matt?’ The woman frowned and shook her head.

Jo returned to her seat and we played another three or four games (I won but I don’t think Jo’s heart was in it) until another lone woman entered the bar. She didn’t look like our woman –

because her hair was short, really short – but there was something about her demeanour that made me stare at her. She was furtive, wary almost. Like she was sticking to the shadows. I glanced at the clock. It was twenty past two. She bought a pint and made her way to a table at the far side of the room. Jo and I carried on playing, but I couldn't help glancing over every minute or two. Her pint sat, untouched, on the table in front of her. Women drinking alone are still a rarity, even now. Jo saw me noticing her and raised an eyebrow. Worth a shot, I knew she was saying.

I packed away the cards as Jo crossed the room. I watched her place both her palms on the table and lean across to the woman. The music had increased in volume since we'd arrived and I knew Jo was having to raise her voice to make herself heard. I watched the woman's face turn from indifference, to engaged and then to something else I didn't quite recognize from my position at the other side of the room. Was it fear? She'd jolted when Jo had first approached her, like she'd been disturbed from her own private world, even though it was clear she was waiting for someone.

I slipped the boxes of cards into my pocket and made my way to join them.

'... not until you've told me who you are,' the woman was saying.

'Keep your voice down.'

'Fuck off.'

'Hang on.' I pulled one of our business cards from my back pocket. The trouble is, in the Students' Union, everyone assumes

we're students. 'We're private investigators,' I said. She snatched the card from me and I noticed the tremor that seemed to run through her entire body. 'We're looking for Matt,' I said.

She turned to stare at me and her huge green eyes were like pools, open wide, framed by the longest black lashes and thick eyeliner. She was stunningly beautiful in a Betty Blue kind of a way. 'Why?'

'We can't tell you that.'

'Do you know?' she said. The fear in her voice unmistakable, she might as well have unwrapped it and placed it on the table in front of us.

'Do we know what?' asked Jo.

'We found your note,' I said. I felt the need to reassure her, although I didn't really know why. 'That's all we know – that you're looking for him too.'

She stared at me for a moment and I knew she was working out whether to trust me. 'I don't have his phone number. He didn't reply to my Facebook message. I didn't know what else to do.'

'He's not answering his phone,' I said. 'We've tried too.'

'He's not coming, is he?'

I shook my head. 'No one's seen him since the weekend.'

She nodded, like she wasn't surprised. 'I don't know what to do,' she said. Her voice quiet, matter of fact.

'Shall we go somewhere else – somewhere where we can talk?' I asked. Jo wasn't saying much, I noticed. 'What's your name?'

'Sara.'

‘I’m Lee. This is Jo. Maybe we can help you. You’re trying to find him. We’re trying to find him. Maybe we can help each other.’

She stared at me like she had no idea what I was talking about.

‘Find him, I mean,’ I said. I coughed to clear the frog in my throat but it didn’t seem to make any difference.

‘You won’t,’ she said.

‘Not saying much for our fine detective skills.’ I tried a smile to show I was joking.

‘He doesn’t want to be found,’ she said.

‘Well, we’ve been there before.’ I frowned at Jo. She hadn’t said a word for the last minute.

Jo licked her lips and the saliva shone under the UV light. ‘At least hear us out,’ she said. ‘Give us half a chance.’

Sara nodded. ‘No point waiting here. What was I thinking? Fucking moron.’ I didn’t know whether she was referring to herself or Matt. She pulled the pint towards her and necked half of it.

‘Shall we—?’ Jo started, but I didn’t get to hear the end of her sentence because a dash of orange filled my vision and I heard someone shout, ‘Where is he?’

I felt the wet splash of cold lager down my right thigh. The other leg of my shorts was still damp from the cup of tea incident back at the office. Sara’s forehead creased up.

‘Get lost.’

‘Don’t you dare, you cow.’

I turned round, already knowing what I was going to see. Nikki, standing behind me, empty pint glass in her hand, her face red, spit flying from her lips. ‘Might have known you’d be sniffing around. Can’t keep your hands—’

‘All right, Nikki.’ Jo grabbed her arm. ‘Let’s not turn this into an episode of *Eastenders*, eh?’ She turned Nikki around and pushed her in the direction of the exit.

‘I want to know where he is,’ Nikki shouted over her shoulder. She hurled the pint glass to the floor and shards of glass splintered across the wooden floorboards.

The barman stared at us. He wasn’t much older than Nikki. I looked at Sara. She shrugged her shoulders.

‘Shall we?’ I said.

Sara drained the remainder of her pint and stood up. It felt like every single person in the bar had stopped speaking. Sara, to give her credit, held her head up and made her way through the bar towards the door.

A man with a nose stud put his hand on my arm. ‘That was my pint,’ he said, gesturing towards the remains of the glass Nikki had smashed.

‘Sorry.’ I tried to shake his hand off.

‘You owe me a pint.’

‘I didn’t chuck it.’

‘Your mate did.’

I lost sight of Sara as she disappeared through the door of the bar and into the corridor outside. I fished in my pocket and found

a crumpled fiver and shoved it into his hands. 'Here.'

When I emerged through the door into the corridor outside, Sara was over by the far wall, bent down to tie her shoelace.

As I got closer, I realized she wasn't tying her shoelace. In fact her boots didn't have laces.

'I can't deal with this,' she said, and I saw that she was crying. Not crying like she was sad. Crying like she was in pain.

'What's the matter?' I said. I glanced around for Jo.

'Leave me alone,' she said. And I wanted to, I really did. Emotional scenes are not my strong point.

She jumped up, turned and ran and I hesitated, didn't know what to do. I'd probably be able to match her for speed but something held me back from chasing. I scanned the corridor again and saw Jo, the back of her, heading the other way, leading Nikki in the direction of the laundrette. I considered the options for a moment. The look on Sara's face scared me. I couldn't let her go. I yelled, 'Back in a minute,' to Jo and set off. I chased Sara through the Student Union building, up from the basement, out through the main door and down the steps into the courtyard.

I was still wearing my trainers so I had the advantage. There were lots of students milling about but Sara was tall so she stood out. She turned left and ran in the direction of Hyde Park, but when she got to the end of the courtyard, she paused, turned and stared at me. I was fifty yards behind. She shook her head at me, took a sharp left and disappeared. I felt chastened by her stare, but I carried on. A porter came out of one of the buildings

pushing a trolley stacked with cardboard boxes, I had to pause a second so that we didn't collide. When he'd moved, I continued on round the corner, watched her climb up the steps to one of the buildings, a substantial terraced house. I put on speed, felt my heart start to pound and charged after her. I pushed my way through the front door.

'Where you running to?' asked a man sitting behind a reception desk.

'Did you see a woman come in here? With black hair?' I took a breath, tried to compose myself.

'You have to sign in,' he said. 'Who's your appointment with?'

'Did you see her?' I turned and surveyed my surroundings. There was a staircase up to the left and off the corridor on the right-hand side of the staircase there was another three or four doors. All of them closed.

He stood up, I think to show he was much bigger than me. He stared at me, like he was waiting for the answer to his question rather than having any intention of answering mine. 'You're not a student of this department,' he said.

'What is this department?'

'There's a sign on the door,' he said. 'You can read it on your way out.'

I thought about arguing with him, but knew it wasn't going to get me anywhere. It wasn't going to get me inside. I shrugged like I couldn't care less and turned to leave. As I closed the front door behind me I noticed the sign by the side of it: 'University of

Leeds, School of Fine Art and Cultural Studies'. I'd be back.

*

I found Jo and Nikki sitting on the wall outside the Students' Union. Well, Jo sat and smoked while Nikki paced, chewing a thumbnail.

'What the fuck did you do that for?' I shouted at Nikki soon as I was close enough.

'It's not my fault.'

'You just chased off our only witness.'

Nikki snorted air through her nostrils. 'Might have known she'd be involved.'

'Who is she?'

'She's sex mad. Everyone knows.'

'What?'

'Nikki thinks Sara might have "stolen" Matt,' Jo explained, raising her eyebrows and shaking her head at the same time.

I took the cigarette from Jo's fingers and had a drag. 'Stolen him?'

'Yes,' said Jo. 'Kidnapped him, held him against his will in her sex dungeon. You know, like women do.'

I didn't think Jo was helping. 'We needed to speak to her,' I said to Nikki. 'She might have been able to help. Do you want us to find your boyfriend or what?'

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I can't take the sitting around.'

'So, Sara knows Matt?'

Nikki sat down on the wall next to Jo and folded her arms

across her chest. ‘They’re both in Greenpeace. She thinks she’s God’s gift.’

I remembered the look on Sara’s face. It didn’t strike me as the look of someone who thought they were God’s gift. What did she know? What did she want from Matt? I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. ‘Who told you where we’d be?’

Nikki didn’t answer. Jo and I glanced at each other.

‘Aunt Edie,’ we both said at the same time.

‘It wasn’t her fault,’ Nikki said. ‘I asked her for a glass of water, and while she was out of the room, I read the notes she was typing up.’

I made a mental note to have a word with our receptionist-stroke-office-manager when we got back to the office.

Chapter Eight

We managed to dump Nikki in the Students' Union and, once I was convinced she wasn't following us, Jo and I made our way out of campus and across Woodhouse Lane to the university bookshop.

We pushed through the door and looked around. A tall gangly man stood behind the till; a couple of young customers browsed the shelves. I headed to the counter. 'Tuff?'

He frowned at me. 'Yeah?'

'Hi, we'd like to talk to you.' He looked confused, and I realized I used the word 'we' and Jo was not by my side. I glanced around and saw her over in the Sex and Gender Section, her head at a right angle to her body. I turned back to the man in front of me. 'I'd like to talk to you. Have you got a minute?'

He didn't look busy. 'Well, I'm at work. What's it about?'

'It's about your housemate, Matt Williams.'

I know I didn't imagine it. A look of complete panic passed through his eyes. He turned his attention to the pile of books he was stickering with price labels.

'You know where he is,' I said.

'No.'

'So he's missing?'

He didn't speak.

'Are you worried about him?'

‘Who are you?’

I showed him my badge. He held it steady in my hand so he could read it. ‘Private investigators? Really? Who—?’

‘I know you left him at a party on Saturday night. You drove his car back on Sunday morning, but you left him there.’

‘I’ve got to work.’

‘You took his car and left him in Lincolnshire. How did you think he was going to get home?’

‘He said he’d get a lift. There was a crew from Leeds.’

‘Are you insured to drive his car?’

‘What, so you’re the police now?’

‘No, the police are the next people you’re going to be talking to, if we don’t find Matt. That car that you drove back, illegally, from an illegal party where I’m fairly certain you were taking illegal substances, that car has been smashed to bits by someone who doesn’t seem very happy, either with you or with Matt.’

He carried on stickering the books, and I knew I wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know.

‘You saw his car?’ I asked.

‘Nothing to do with me.’

‘Jan says it’s your responsibility to report it.’

He picked up an armful of books and made his way from behind the counter to one of the shelves. I followed him.

‘It’s in your interests to help us find him.’

He stacked the books on the shelves in silence, seemingly engrossed in his task.

‘Come on, Tuff. As far as we can work out, you were the last person to see him alive.’

‘He’s not dead.’ There was scorn in his voice.

‘How do you know?’

‘Why would he be dead?’

‘Well, he’s missing. Someone’s trashed his car. His girlfriend doesn’t know where he is.’

‘Yeah, well. She might be glad of that one day.’

‘Meaning?’

He didn’t answer my question. I pressed on. ‘I thought you were best mates.’

‘That makes two of us.’

‘You’re very cryptic.’

He put the last book on the shelf and turned to face me. ‘He’ll be back. And when he is, it’s up to him to tell everyone what’s going on.’

‘You left him at a party at the weekend and he’s not back by Thursday and you’re not worried?’

‘No.’

‘He missed a tutorial.’

‘Peak.’

‘Did something happen at the party? Did you guys fall out?’

‘No.’

‘Did he meet a girl? Is that why he stayed?’

‘Don’t ask me. I left early.’

‘Why?’

'I had to give someone a lift.'

'Who?'

'No one. Look, when Matt turns up, I'll ring you. He can explain.'

'You left him in the middle of the countryside, took his car, you don't know how or if he managed to get back to Leeds, but you're not going to help us find him because you're being loyal to him?'

'Something like that, yes.' He walked back to the counter. Jo was waiting with a couple of books in her hand.

'That makes no sense,' I said, as I trailed behind him.

He shrugged and I had the feeling it didn't make much sense to him either.

I took a stride forward so that I was standing between him and the counter. 'Who's Sara?'

A look of pure panic flashed through his face.

'How's it going?' asked Jo. 'Any joy?'

'There's something you're not telling us,' I said.

'Do you want to buy those?' he asked Jo, as he pushed past me and got behind the till.

'If we can't find him, Tuff, we'll have to go to the police,' I said. 'And they're going to be way less understanding than us about a lot of this stuff ...'

'That's £12.98,' he said.

We didn't bother going back to the office. I phoned Aunt Edie and told her she could go home early. Jo made us fish-finger

sandwiches and we ate them with the TV on. Not that we were watching it; I just think neither of us were in the mood for talking.

Jo was in the bath when my phone rang. I took the call into the front room, switched the TV off.

‘Is that Lee Winters?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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