

The background of the cover is a photograph of a coastal scene. In the foreground, a dark, rocky shore leads up to a small, two-story stone building with a steep, white roof. The building has several dark, rectangular openings that look like doorways or windows. To the left of the building, the ocean stretches towards the horizon, with white foam from waves crashing against the shore. The sky is filled with heavy, grey clouds, with a bright light source, likely the sun, breaking through near the horizon, creating a dramatic, high-contrast scene.

**GWYN
BENNETT**

**THE
STOLEN
ONES**

**A COMPLETELY UNPUTDOWNABLE CRIME THRILLER
WITH A NAIL-BITING TWIST**

THE STOLEN ONES

GWYN BENNETT

ALSO BY GWYN BENNETT

The Dr Harrison Lane Mysteries

1. *Broken Angels*
2. *Beautiful Remains*
3. *Deadly Secrets*
4. *Innocent Dead*
5. *Perfect Beauties*
6. *Captive Heart*
7. *Winter Graves*
8. *Dark Whispers*

Saskia Monet Series

1. *The Stolen Ones*

The DI Clare Falle Series

1. *Lonely Hearts*
 2. *Home Help*
 3. *Death Bond*
- The Villagers*

CONTENTS

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Email Signup](#)

[Also by Gwyn Bennett](#)

[A Letter from the Author](#)

[Broken Angels](#)

[Beautiful Remains](#)

[Deadly Secrets](#)

One in a hundred men are psychopaths.

You probably know one...

PROLOGUE

The tall, thin man stood on the headland as though he were a granite sculpture, hewn out of the landscape, an abandoned art project. There was some truth in his appearance. Although he breathed, there was no warmth in his heart, just a cold, hard stone of a man.

In front of him was the sea and beyond it, just fourteen miles away, the French coast. Today, there was nothing. The world could have been subsumed by sea and cloud leaving Jersey a tiny island all alone, surrounded by a thick white curtain of fog. On the other side of the island, even the main conurbation of St Helier was struggling to be seen; its offices and blocks of flats disappearing into the descending clouds as though dissolving away to nothingness from the top downwards.

The soft white cloud was deceptive. Through a window it looked like a hazy downy whiteness, nothing more. Outside, cold fine rain relentlessly flew at his face. Icy pinprick droplets propelled by an easterly wind. His cheeks were flushed with cold, his lips numb. But he respected the freezing clouds for this dichotomy. Pillow-soft cotton wool hiding cold, painful tears which merged with his own.

He'd felt her beside him, and reached out for her hand to glove her chill fingers and bring them warmth. They'd stood silently defying the elements and relishing the complete absence of reality, like they had so many times before.

When he turned to look at her, she was gone.

Inside of him the burning charcoal of his bitter anger was white-hot. For months he had tended to its fire. The payback would be painful, there'd be no quick release for them. Just like she suffered for months, her heart and soul, her spirit, smashed into pulp until she could barely lift her head some days. They didn't give her a second thought. Never saw the broken butterfly that he'd held in his arms, night after night, until her wings stopped beating and she gave up on life.

His muscles were rigid, fists clenched, jaw clamped tight.

He was ready to begin the preparations.

Around him the fog steadfastly refused to lift its smothering white blanket, keeping the world hidden; but that didn't matter. He could already see the way forward clearly. It was time to seek revenge. For her, for him, for them all.

ONE

FOUR MONTHS LATER

‘Our final lot is this simply beautiful piece designed by Jersey’s own jewellery queen, Catherine Best. This dew drop necklace features a subtle pink Mabe pearl suspended on a bar of white gold. Hand-crafted and a timeless classic with a modern edge, it looks elegant and simply divine. Who will start the bidding at five hundred?’

Saskia Monet watched the auctioneer’s eyes scan the audience expectantly, proffering the delicate-pink drop necklace. In front of him were twenty tables of mostly women, dressed in expensive designer summer outfits, their fingers, wrists and throats already dripping in diamonds and gold. The tables ran along the terrace of the luxury Atlantic Hotel and into the garden in front of the turquoise pool. Large plant pots, mature shrubs, and trees under the cobalt-blue skies gave the setting a Mediterranean feel, aided by the hot, bright sun.

Behind the auctioneer a slight breeze blew off the water below the headland carrying the scent of salt and sea that mingled with the natural perfume of the garden and the heady odours of Jean Patou, Paco Rabanne, and Chanel. From where Saskia sat beside the prison governor, she could see the golden sands of St Ouen curving away beneath them. The English Channel a perfect reflection of the skies above.

A manicured hand shot up from a table. The auctioneer looked to his right. The woman, in her forties with long black hair, giggled with her lunch companions.

‘Table four at five hundred,’ he said, tipping his head to her. ‘Who will give me a thousand?’

Another hand directly in front of him was raised into the bright sunshine.

‘Thank you. This is worth over two and a half thousand pounds, and please remember every penny is going towards the rehabilitation of Jersey’s prisoners.’ His hand reached to his neckline. Saskia suspected that he regretted the decision to wear a black suit and bow tie in this heat. His face was damp with perspiration and red.

‘One thousand five hundred!’ a female voice shouted across the lawn that separated his small raised platform from the tables. Saskia looked over to the new bidder, a woman in a red Dior sundress with matching lipstick. A waiter was serving another bottle of champagne to her and the table, including to the only man in the group, who gave no recognition to him before the waiter slipped away.

The woman who had made the bid leaned into her male lunch companion. Saskia couldn’t hear what was said, but it was clear he’d given her a compliment because she batted her hand and eyelashes at him.

He picked up his champagne, taking the tiniest sip. Pale-blue eyes looked out from under a full head of lustrous black hair that sported subtle copper highlights thanks to the sun. He’d allowed some strands to fall across his tanned forehead. A relaxed look that went with his open-necked white linen shirt, and trousers which matched the colour of Jersey’s beaches. Aged around thirty, he was on a table of women, all of whom were more than ten years older than him and all of whom wore their wealth.

The remains of dessert were still in front of them, some plates carried smears of cream and whipped dark chocolate ganache, while others displayed crumbs or a stray slice left over from the selection of cheeses. A menu card on the table told of the oysters and beef carpaccio that had been offered for starters, followed by venison or butter-roasted brill fillet. Different wines had accompanied each course, ensuring increasingly enthusiastic bidding for the charity auction.

Before the auction, the handsome man seemed to have held his table enthralled. He was charming and very attentive to his lunch companions. He poured the wine if there was no waiter, ensuring their glasses were always topped up. He retrieved fallen napkins, and he helped them with their chairs.

Despite keeping busy attending to his lunch companions, the man's eyes occasionally strayed across to Saskia. The governor had given a short speech earlier thanking the ladies' lunch club for choosing their prisoner rehabilitation scheme as the charity to benefit from the day's auction. Paul Francombe had talked about the importance of ensuring that those who left La Moye Prison were able to find their place in society again and how humble he felt at their support of the initiative.

Saskia had kept quiet, except to make polite conversation. They were indeed grateful, but she disliked the veneer of social conscience that came with the event. She wasn't comfortable in this crowd. Dressed simply in a short summer skirt and top, there were no jewels around her neck or on her fingers; just some plain silver earrings in the shape of a teardrop. Her long dark-brown hair was pulled up in a messy bun in deference to the occasion. She was early thirties, with a slim athletic build, her make-up kept natural; just some mascara and eyeliner to enhance her green eyes, and pink blush across the freckles on her cheeks.

She looked over to the table as another bid was made by the handsome man's lunch companion and for a few moments her eyes locked onto his. A look of understanding passed between them before they both looked away and the auctioneer banged his gavel, pronouncing the necklace: 'sold for three thousand pounds.'

As soon as it was polite to do so, Saskia gave her thanks to their hosts and slipped out through the entrance of The Atlantic Hotel, underneath the climbing wisteria, and into the car park. She carried a motorbike helmet and flung a small leather backpack on as she walked. Her face showed no emotion. Behind her the sounds of the lunch party could still be heard as alcohol-fuelled conversation levels surged and

dipped, interspersed with laughter. The sun was heading towards its western resting place, the heat of the day fading.

She walked across to her motorbike and flung her leg over, revealing the skirt she was wearing to be a pair of culottes. She'd already changed her shoes. Instead of the strappy sandals she'd had on earlier, she was wearing a pair of trainers. Without any further delay, Saskia let her hair down and pulled the helmet over her head before turning on the ignition and riding out of the car park.

She rode right, down the hill and onto the Five Mile Road where St Ouen's Bay stretched out to her left, a few kite surfers still skimmed the calm sea left empty by the board surfers who would appear at high tide on the promise of larger waves. The kite surfers skipped and sped across the bay catching the sea breeze, no doubt winding down from a day in the office. On the huge sandy beach, little clumps of people were dotted around, mostly concentrated around the cafés and close to the granite sea wall out of the breeze. Some of them were getting barbecues out, ready for an evening on the beach.

The air that flowed around her was refreshing and welcome after the heat of the day. From behind her a police siren started in the distance, only just audible above the wind and squawks of the seagulls. The siren grew louder as the car gained on her, causing her to glance behind. It was an unmarked vehicle.

By the time she'd reached halfway across the bay, the car overtook her, a hand waving out the passenger window to tell her to slow down and stop. She did as she was told, throttling back the bike, and the car came to a halt around ten yards ahead of her.

The passenger door opened and a ruggedly handsome blond police detective got out, coming to a stop behind his vehicle and crossing his arms while he waited for her to dismount.

Saskia hesitated, taking in the man. She judged him to be mid to late-thirties, over six feet, and physically fit. A healthy tan showed that he didn't spend all his days in an office, but

his face and body language said that he meant business. There was something vaguely familiar about him. Saskia pulled her helmet off, shaking her hair free in the breeze, and waited for him to speak, a thin snake-like strand of fear curling its way around her gut. Every day she lived with it: the expectation that everything they'd built would one day fall apart. She kept it buried, but like Japanese knotweed, she could never get rid of it.

'Miss Saskia Monet?' the detective said by way of greeting.

'Yes. Is something wrong?' she replied, keeping her voice calm and measured.

'Detective Inspector Winter Labey, I'm following up on my email yesterday,' he introduced himself.

Saskia frowned, and tried not to show the relief that flowed through her. 'Don't you use telephones in Jersey, detective?' Her tone was light, not accusatory.

DI Labey's face almost smiled, before slipping back into a far more serious expression.

'Your phone's on redirect. The prison said you were at a fundraiser at The Atlantic but we just missed you.'

She sighed. 'My apologies for not replying to your email. You said you might need help with profiling for an ongoing case?'

'Yes. I presume you've seen the news about the children who've been kidnapped?' Winter didn't wait for her to reply – the whole island was talking about it. 'Well another one has been taken.'

'Another?' Her face registered both the shock and sadness she felt. 'That's three now...'

'Things are getting pretty desperate, as you'd imagine, and a colleague told me about your profiling work for the Kent police when you were in the UK. You assess convicted criminals day in and day out, in order to find out what motivated them to commit their crimes. I need someone who can understand who we are dealing with in this case, and why

they've taken those kids. I could take you to the latest crime scene now and you can talk to the family.'

Saskia looked at the detective's earnest face, waiting for her answer. She could see the hope in his eyes behind the mask of professional control. Most of all, she sensed the compassion within him, the need to find those three children and bring them back home to their families.

She wanted to help but if she did, it wouldn't be without risk – especially after what had happened in Kent. They'd been lucky then. It had been contained, and nobody was any the wiser. That danger was still present, but she also knew that she couldn't turn away. The trauma from her own childhood, indelibly seared into her soul, ensured that. How could she ignore another vulnerable child in need?

Saskia knew that her experience both in her work, and her private life, would be invaluable in helping understand who was doing this. Life had moved on since Kent. They'd moved on. Now she had to do what she could to bring those children home safely and just hope it didn't come back to bite her.

TWO

‘Impressive, this must be at least five million.’ Saskia had followed DI Labey and now found herself in the driveway of a large gated house. Immaculate mature gardens led up to an equally immaculate large white Regency-style manor house bathed in the early evening sunlight. It could be a photograph right out of *Country Life* or a high-end estate agency brochure, if it wasn’t for the bright blue and fluorescent yellow marked police car and black forensic team van parked in front.

She paused a moment to take in the property. It looked like it had been given a facelift not that long ago. The glass in the windows glinted in the sun. Recently cleaned. A security camera and floodlight were focused on the entrance area, and a wooden gate in the white-washed wall looked like it led into the back garden.

‘Five!’ exclaimed DI Labey. ‘This is Jersey, I doubt you’d get much change from ten. They’ve been here about four years, came in as high-value residents.’

‘All three families have been well off, but you’ve still not received a ransom request?’ she asked.

‘No. Nothing.’

‘Right, let’s take a look.’ She scrunched up the gravel driveway, noting that even the stones seemed to have been carefully chosen for size – nothing like the random gravel on her cottage path.

‘Her name is Lucy Carmichael, eight years old. They took her from the back garden. Forensics should be pretty much

finished by now. There's not much evidence, but they've been checking entry and exit routes and uniform were doing a fingertip search. We can go through the side gate here.'

Saskia followed DI Labey through the wooden gate. 'Was this locked when she was taken?'

'It locks automatically when shut so that it can't be accessed from the outside without a key, but from inside you can just turn the handle and it opens.'

'So did they exit here?'

'No, there's CCTV which covers all the front of the house and nothing was picked up.'

'Did Lucy know either of the other two children? Are the families connected?' Saskia's mind was running through a checklist of questions.

'Jessica and Lucy both go to St Michael's school, but are in different years. There's no known links between the two of them according to the school. Completely different peer groups. Katie is at St George's. Again, no known links.'

'They're both private schools aren't they?'

'Yes.'

'And the parents? Any connections?'

'We're talking to them, but you know what Jersey's like. It's easy to have tenuous connections with lots of people. At the moment there don't appear to be any substantial links.'

'Mmmh.' Saskia walked forward into the large garden and looked around. In front of her was an outdoor pool, with a granite pool house that Saskia deduced must also contain the pool heating equipment, judging by the solar panels on its roof. There was a small outdoor barbecuing and kitchen area and she suspected that inside would be a changing room and toilet. It was about the same footprint as her entire cottage.

A large lawned area sloped off to the bottom of the garden and was bordered by shrubs and palm trees. To the right, a Jersey cotil, a sloping bank that had been tiered and planted

with heather and ornamental grasses, rose up before meeting woodland.

‘The whole garden is fenced,’ DI Labey said, as she looked at the terrain.

A forensics officer in a white suit was just packing up a black box of equipment at the pool house. An orange crime scene marker was laid on the ground in front of Saskia, beside what looked like a wooden flute. Next to it was a kid’s bubble-making machine in the shape of a unicorn. Its inane smiling face an affront to the situation it found itself in.

‘Wooden flutes were found at the previous two kidnap sites,’ Winter said to Saskia as they walked up to the markers.

‘So he leaves a calling card? That’s interesting. He’s a game player then.’

DI Labey didn’t have the chance to reply as the forensic officer from the pool house walked up to him.

‘Where’ve you been? The Carmichaels are getting right stroppy in there,’ he said to the detective.

‘Getting some expert help,’ he replied.

The forensics officer took Saskia in, in a none-too-professional way.

‘A little over-dressed for a crime scene, aren’t you?’ he said, raising an eyebrow.

She didn’t take kindly to his tone and obvious innuendo and ignored him, turning to DI Labey.

‘Is it OK if I look around?’

‘Sure. You’re done here, aren’t you, Andrew?’ Winter asked the forensics officer.

‘Yeah. Didn’t find anything in the pool house besides fingerprints, but the place is stacked with them. Going to take a while eliminating all their rich pool party friends.’

DI Labey sighed.

‘The search team have gone into the woods,’ Andrew continued as Saskia walked up the garden, then stopped and turned round to look back at the house.

The kidnapper had been bold to snatch Lucy from the garden. It was open plan, with every window in the back of the property looking out onto the lawn. The only potential hiding place was the pool house.

‘She’s a bit of a ball-breaker, isn’t she?’ she overheard Andrew say in a loud whisper, confirming her initial assessment of the man. He had a thin, sour face; one that didn’t seem capable of warmth. She couldn’t hear DI Labey’s reply but she presumed it wasn’t to Andrew’s liking because he quickly left.

‘No CCTV in the back?’ she asked as she approached Winter.

‘Only at the front of the house.’

‘So, he had to get her out from here...’ she thought aloud.

‘Yeah, we found footprints. Looks as though they went up the cotil, and out through the woods. It’s only a thin line of trees and they’re fenced to stop public access, but we’ve found an area where the fence has been cut.’

‘That’s pretty risky, you must be able to see the whole of the garden and cotil from the house.’

‘Only the au pair was home and she was in the kitchen which is along the side of the house. She saw nothing. Had put a pizza in the oven for Lucy, went out to find her when it was ready and she was gone.’

‘You think he carried her up there? How big is she?’

‘She’s a slip of a thing. It’s more than feasible.’

They both contemplated the cotil in front of them. In other circumstances they could have been a pair of gardening fans admiring the plants.

‘I’m going to go in and calm the parents down, follow me as soon as you’re done out here,’ he said.

Saskia wandered back up the garden. She was glad she had trainers to climb the cotil and see how easy it might be to watch the house and garden. Although the slope was steep, the cotil's tiers acted like giant steps. It wasn't too difficult for her to get up, but she wasn't carrying a young child. Even a man would have to be reasonably fit and able to get himself and Lucy to the top quickly, but it was amazing how adrenaline could give you extra strength.

As she crowned the top of the cotil, a small team of police and another white-suited forensics officer came into view. They were bent over, scanning the ground for evidence. Immediately one of them walked over to her.

'Sorry, miss, this is a crime scene; you can't come up here,' he said to her.

'Saskia Monet, I'm a forensic psychologist, working with DI Labey,' Saskia explained. 'I just wanted to see what kind of view could be had of the house from up here, if it's possible they'd been watching prior to today.'

'We've not found any evidence that supports that yet, just entry and exit footprints,' the officer told her. 'But that's not to say that he didn't.'

Saskia nodded her thanks and looked out over the garden and house in front of her.

'Is it obvious that the trees lead to here? I mean any signs or anything on the fence that says this wood belongs to the house?'

He shook his head. 'No. There's a green lane on the other side. It's just fenced off,' he shrugged. 'You can't see the house from the lane.'

'OK, thanks.' She smiled and started her descent back down and out of their way.

Whoever had taken Lucy must have somehow watched the family and the property to work out their routines and knew that Lucy would be outside and there was only the au pair at home. They were clever and they were organised. She was victim number three. Would she be the last? Or was there

another family somewhere in Jersey being watched right now?
Another family who were about to have their world torn apart?

THREE

FRIDAY

DI Winter Labey could hear Des Carmichael's raised voice as he went into the house. He'd been veering from arguing and anger to subdued comforting of his sobbing wife all afternoon. Clearly he was having another of his angry phases.

'You should have been here. If you hadn't gone to get your sodding nails done...' Des's voice carried from the sitting room to the side entrance where Winter was brushing the soles of his shoes on the doormat to ensure nothing of the garden ended up on their pristine carpets. He'd contemplated taking them off altogether, but Des's aggression made him err on the side of caution. Unprotected toes could be easy targets and useless defences if things got too heated.

His eyes were momentarily distracted by the wooden sign hanging by the door above the shoe rack: *Sandy Toes, Salty Kisses*. There were variations of these in homes across the island. Evidence of happier times

'It's my regular weekly appointment. The au pair was here. She should have been fine,' Carol's sobbing voice brought him back to the reason for him being there.

'I told you she was useless. I'm gonna sue that bloody agency,' Des carried on. He'd already threatened Winter earlier with a lawsuit if they didn't find his daughter.

Winter walked to the sitting room door and knocked before entering, out of politeness and to save Carol's blushes, rather than for Des's benefit. He heard the room fall silent and entered.

Des was pacing up and down, his face flushed with anger and frustration. He was a stocky man in his fifties, probably about five feet ten, but had a thick neck and a solid body. He was not a man who had been born into money and while his businesses appeared to be totally legitimate now, Winter suspected that he'd started life on the edge of the criminal world. Now Des used his expensive lawyers to get what he wanted, rather than sending the boys round. He wasn't a man whom Winter would choose to spend any time with.

Carol and Des had been married for the past fifteen years, but they'd decided to part company three months previously. Winter didn't know the full story and whose decision it was, but it was something that would need to be investigated, just in case it was relevant.

Carol was obviously going through intense emotional trauma, her eyes swollen, skin blotched, yet her forehead remained wrinkle-free. She had clearly gone to some lengths, and a not inconsiderable amount of Des's money, to remain young and attractive – despite the fact Des was a good ten years older than her. The cosmetic enhancements might have given her a somewhat false facade, but underneath it all, she came across as a genuine person. No amount of make-up could hide her red puffy eyes and the pain she felt inside. Whatever their backgrounds and personalities, Winter was dealing with two incredibly distraught parents and that was what mattered.

‘Anything?’ Carol asked, hope in her eyes.

‘I'm sorry, nothing yet. But I can assure you we are putting every resource into finding your daughter,’ he said to her gently. His eyes couldn't help but flicker to the photograph of Lucy on the wall behind Carol. A pretty eight year old with a beaming smile and long black hair. She looked as she should, as though she didn't have a care in the world. Winter didn't have kids, but you didn't need to be a father to understand the pure torment it must be to have a child snatched away from you. The agonising thoughts of what might be happening to them, the inability to help and protect them.

He'd also come across plenty of couples like Des and Carol who dealt with their trauma in opposite ways. Des was

angry and wanted to lash out, Carol looked like if she could curl herself into a tiny ball and shut out the world, then she would. Their impending divorce meant the two of them were currently living separately. The breakdown in their own relationship was going to make this all the harder for both of them. The blame game had already started – and Des wasn't just lashing out at his wife.

‘She’s the third to go missing. You haven’t found the others. You’ve no idea where they are!’ Des spat at him.

Winter didn't rise to his aggression; he knew Des was hurting.

‘No, Mr Carmichael, but we will,’ he said with practised calm.

Des was clearly not convinced. He strutted up towards DI Labey, chest puffed, fists clenched. For a moment, Winter thought Des was going to take his anger out on him, but he carried on walking, storming over to the window overlooking the back garden as though he could somehow find the person who'd taken his daughter and use his fists on him. Winter could almost feel the heat from his fury radiating off him.

‘Who the hell’s that?’ Des changed tack, staring out the window. Saskia was standing in the garden looking at her phone: sending a message or email, or perhaps making notes.

‘That’s Saskia Monet, she’s a forensic psychologist. I’ve asked her here to help us build a profile of the person who has taken Lucy. She’ll want to ask you both a few questions, would that be OK?’

DI Labey looked to Carol for permission more than Des.

Carol nodded miserably.

‘Like I said, you haven’t got a bloody clue,’ Des retorted.

Carol looked as though she were about to collapse if she had to listen to any more of Des’s negativity. He seemed oblivious, or perhaps unbothered, by the effect his words and attitude were having on his wife.

‘Mrs Carmichael.’ DI Labey turned to her. ‘I would really appreciate a cup of tea, would there be any chance?’

‘Yes. Of course,’ Carol replied.

As Winter had suspected, she seemed relieved at the excuse to get away from her estranged husband and quickly disappeared into the kitchen.

Winter steeled himself and turned to Des.

‘Mr Carmichael, I need to know where you were when your daughter went missing...’

‘Me?’ His voice raised an octave. ‘You are bloody joking? You think I took my own daughter? Is this because of Carol and me? Has she said something? That bloody nousey cow of a friend of hers, Tracey? She’s been looking for a way to get at me. Is it her?’

‘No. I can assure you that nobody has made any accusations. We just need to eliminate you from the inquiry. It is purely routine; we ask everyone,’ DI Labey tried to reassure him in the calmest way he could.

‘I was in town at a meeting. Plenty of witnesses. We were at the Yacht,’ Des replied with a look of defiance in his eyes.

DI Labey was about to ask for the details when the door opened and Saskia walked in.

‘Here we go.’ Des turned on her instantly. ‘You gonna to do some psychobabble on us and tell me it’s all my fault too?’

Winter could tell by the change in Des’s body language and tone that he thought because Saskia was female, she was a softer target.

Saskia’s face was a perfect picture of professionalism.

‘Hello, Mr Carmichael, my name is Saskia Monet and I’m so sorry about your daughter. I appreciate you’re upset, but I want to help find her and so I’d just like to ask a couple of—’

‘Upset! You’re damned right I’m upset. Is that what your psychology degree taught you? You gonna talk some Freud shit and think I’ve taken her, like him? Always look at those

closest to the victims, right? I watch the TV programmes too you know.’ Des gesticulated at DI Labey.

DI Labey stepped forward. It was one thing him having to put up with Des’s aggression, but he’d invited Saskia to help with this case and he wasn’t going to stand by and let her be shouted at and intimidated.

‘Mr Carmichael, there’s no need to speak to Miss Monet in that way. She is trying to help.’

‘You do though, don’t you? You think I’ve done this.’ Des turned towards DI Labey, squaring up to him.

Winter could tell the man wasn’t thinking straight. The stress of the situation had got the better of him and he was beginning to act irrationally.

Saskia stepped between them. ‘Mr Carmichael, although your daughter is the one who is missing, it doesn’t mean that she is the real target,’ she said to him calmly and firmly. ‘It is very important that you answer our questions so that we can work out who has taken her and why. Would you take a seat please and we can talk?’

Saskia invited Des to sit down.

‘What? What do you mean?’ Des was blindsided by her statement.

Saskia stood her ground, encouraging him to sit and not saying anything further until he finally collapsed down onto the sofa.

‘What do you mean she’s not the target?’ Des asked her again.

‘We need to establish the motive,’ Saskia continued, seating herself in front of Des. ‘Why take Lucy? She’s clearly been targeted. This isn’t a random snatching. So why would someone kidnap her in particular? There are no similarities between the children. In cases like this, it is more likely to be something the kidnapper wants from the parents.’

‘What, you mean they want money?’ Des asked her and then looked up at DI Labey, ‘Have the other parents had

ransom requests?’

Winter didn’t have an opportunity to answer because Saskia took back the conversation.

‘I don’t necessarily mean a ransom, Mr Carmichael. I was thinking perhaps a personal or business vendetta. Have you had any disagreements of that nature?’

Des’s face visibly paled. The red anger leaving his cheeks as he stared at Saskia before putting his face into his hands.

‘Oh god...’

FOUR

FRIDAY

It was heading past nine o'clock by the time Saskia and DI Labey left the Carmichael house. The sun was almost sunk below the waves on the horizon and the long shadows of the night had started to creep along the ground. As they walked back out onto the neat gravelled drive, Andrew and his forensics colleague were just putting the final pieces of equipment back into their van. Behind them, an uneasy peace had fallen on the household, its occupants emotionally exhausted. Saskia hadn't said a word since they'd finished interviewing Des, Carol, and the au pair.

'Thanks for coming at such short notice,' DI Labey said to her, trying to gauge her mood, 'Do you think you'll be able to meet the other two families tomorrow morning? I appreciate it's the weekend and you've got your own job at the prison.'

'It's not a problem, I didn't have anything important planned,' she replied, then stopped walking and looked at him. 'But as long as you promise not to behave like a silverback again.'

'What do you mean?' Winter searched her face for clues.

'Earlier, you waded in with Des, like you'd just escaped the gorilla pen at Jersey Zoo,' Saskia said, raising her eyebrows in response.

'I was just...'

'Please don't. I've spent time alone with some of the most violent men in Britain. Believe me, I know how to look after myself. If you get defensive of me that is highly likely to just

inflare the situation. I've seen it happen countless times. Far better to leave me to deal with it calmly.'

'Right. Sorry,' Winter said, 'It's just I thought...' He didn't continue. One look at Saskia's face and he knew it was time to back off. She was right, he had donned his shining armour and waded in. He'd underestimated her. He raised his hands in surrender. 'OK.'

'Thanks.' She smiled, letting him know she wasn't going to hold it against him.

Saskia continued walking, past Andrew and towards her bike.

Winter couldn't miss the look on Andrew's face: he'd clearly heard the whole exchange.

'Not saying a word,' Andrew quietly muttered to Winter as he walked in Saskia's wake.

Winter wished he could wipe the smirk off the man's face.

'Miss Monet, Saskia?' he called after her. 'Before you go, I was just wondering if you had any early thoughts? First impressions?'

Saskia turned back round to him and stopped walking; he could see she was thinking through what she was about to say. He also couldn't help noticing how the last vestiges of daylight illuminated the left side of her face, shadowing long eyelashes and highlighting the contours of her cheek. He forced himself to look away in case she caught him staring. It was unprofessional, he needed to focus on what she was saying, not what she looked like.

'I'm going to need to speak with the other parents and review all the information you have,' she replied, bringing him back to the job. 'But from what you've told me and what I can see, I think you need to concentrate on the links between the parents, not the kids. The calling card is telling us that much.'

'You mean the wooden flute? There's been one left at every kidnap site, but we weren't sure about their significance.'

‘It’s very significant. I don’t believe the kidnapper does anything that isn’t well planned and executed. Are you familiar with the story of the Pied Piper?’

‘Of course, the kids’ story about the piper who got rid of all the rats.’

‘Yes. The story was probably based on real events in medieval Hamelin – but that’s not what’s important. The critical part is that in the story we read as kids, the rat catcher took all the children because the towns people reneged on the deal to pay him. I think that whoever is doing this – and I’m not sure if it is just one person or more yet – I think they have a personal grudge.’

Winter considered her words for a few moments.

‘So, a financial motive?’

‘Not necessarily. It could be a more metaphorical or a figurative meaning. But they feel as though they’ve been let down in some way, or even cheated. The children are all targeted, the kidnappings are clearly meticulously researched and planned, and yet there are no connections or similarities in the children.’

‘So you’re not considering the possibility it has a paedophilia motive? They might just want different types of kids.’

Saskia shook her head slowly, furrowing her brow. ‘It doesn’t fit. Of course they could be taking children to order, finding particular girls to fit what a client wants, but the level of planning and danger involved in all three kidnappings works against that. If you just wanted a long black-haired girl, you’d go for an easier opportunity. Our kidnapper isn’t fulfilling an order, he’s playing a highly strategic game.’

Winter was quiet for a moment as the implications sunk in.

‘The kids weren’t ever seen again in the story, were they?’ he said quietly.

‘I think there are different versions, depending on when they were written, but mostly no...’

‘So what’s the end game? What are they going to do with the kids?’

Saskia let out a big sigh and despite the fading light of the summer evening, he could see the sadness in her eyes. This case was going to be hard for them all.

‘I don’t know yet,’ she said quietly to him, ‘but I think this is just the start.’

FIVE

FRIDAY

The man flopped down onto his grubby sofa. He was beat. A full day's work, jumping in and out of the van, running up and down stairs, was enough to tire him out these days, let alone the extra job. He was stockily built, just below average height, and he'd been strong once. A life of manual labour had kept him fit, but it inevitably gave you niggles and pains, especially in the back and knees. That's why he'd thought nothing of it at first — not until it was too late.

The TV was on and one of the soaps was playing. The inane conversation of a family drama that never ended. It wasn't his cup of tea, didn't watch much TV at all besides the football and the odd documentary, but he thought it might help — just in case.

For a few moments he leaned back into the sofa and closed his eyes, feeling the deep, dark pull of sleep reaching out to him.

Not long.

A thumping noise behind him made his eyes shoot open again and he jumped back up from the sofa.

The girl had woken up and was now staring at him, wide-eyed with terror, her feet kicking at the bars of the cage. She was tied up with a gag around her mouth, her long black hair fanning out over her shoulders.

He smiled at her.

'It's OK. We're just playing a game,' he said to her. 'It will be fun. You'll see...'

SIX

FRIDAY

Saskia pushed her front door open and called out into the darkness to her cat. ‘Bilbo...’

The interviews with the Carmichaels and their au pair had been draining. The emotional depth of the situation had pulled her down, sucking her into their personal nightmare, and she’d ridden home with a thousand thoughts racing around her head. All of them focusing on one thing: the faces of three very frightened children. Even the amazing sight of the setting sun sinking into the sea across St Ouen’s Bay had failed to pull her out of the dark jumble of her mind. Thoughts of what the children might be experiencing were interspersed with flashes of memories. Cold, hard black and white vignettes searing into the colour of the burning red sun as though they were working with the sea to put out its fire.

‘Bilbo,’ Saskia called out again and reached for the light switch. Her cottage was down a narrow lane where there was no street lamplight, and her little sitting room was smothered in darkness. Bilbo must have been annoyed with her; he’d have usually appeared instantly mewing for his dinner. She’d been keeping him in during the daytime and only letting him out at night while he got used to their new home and its surroundings.

The light clicked on and instantaneously Saskia’s heart jumped right into her throat as she stepped back in fright, gulping down a scream.

There, sitting on her sofa with a smile on his lips, was the dark-haired man she’d exchanged a glance with earlier at the

charity auction.

‘Bloody hell, David!’ she exclaimed.

His smile broadened. It was a wicked smile: he’d clearly enjoyed her fright.

‘I have asked you not to do things like this!’ she shouted at him, her heart still banging in her chest. She threw her keys and motorbike helmet onto the stack of cardboard boxes behind the door – she’d still not fully unpacked yet – making her feelings clear.

‘I’m sorry,’ he purred back, ‘I didn’t mean to frighten you. Must have fallen asleep.’

‘Don’t bullshit me. I’m too tired. You don’t just fall asleep and your car wasn’t outside where you normally park it.’ The fright turned into anger.

Saskia crossed to the lamp beside the sofa and felt the bulb. It was warm. She glared at him.

‘You waited until you heard my bike and then turned the lights off.’

David smiled coyly back.

‘You just can’t help yourself, can you?’ she said to him. Truth was, she knew he couldn’t. Her fright and anger slowly fizzled into mild irritation and her heart rate returned to its normal beat.

‘You know me, Sis,’ he said getting up from the sofa and crossing to her, massaging her shoulders and upper back with his strong hands. ‘Will you forgive me?’

Saskia sighed. He knew that she always did. Always had done. She allowed him to press away the tension in her shoulder muscles.

Then she remembered Bilbo still hadn’t appeared.

‘Where’s Bilbo?’ Saskia spun round to face David. His face was impassive.

In her mind she saw him, holding on to Bilbo by the scruff of the neck, a murderous look in his eyes.

‘I let him out. He was making an irritating noise at the back door. Honestly I did,’ he continued, seeing the look on her face. ‘He went off into the night after some poor, defenceless little mouse.’ David almost pouted.

Saskia stared at him hard, searching his face for any indications he was lying.

‘I promised you I wouldn’t ever do that again. He’s out there doing whatever it is that cats do. Probably shitting in next door’s garden.’

Saskia gave him one last hard stare and went to the kitchen and her back door. It was still locked. If David was lying... She picked up Bilbo’s bowl and opened the door, banging the bowl and calling his name.

For almost two minutes she called out into the darkness, ‘Bilbo, dinner! Bilbo...’ Next door she heard Pushki, her neighbour June’s Yorkshire terrier, start to yap. It was coming up to half nine; June would still be up so she didn’t feel guilty.

‘Bilbo.’

Her eyes scanned the shadows in her back garden, the humped shape of the barbecue covered in its all-weather raincoat, the square backs of the chairs and her pots with their filigree plant branches rising up from solid bases.

‘Bilbo.’ Saskia banged her cat’s dinner bowl again. He never wandered far. She’d called him Bilbo because of his big feet and squat body. The fact that he was a lazy home cat who was about as adventurous as a doorstep had only become apparent later on.

She heard something. A tinkling of a cat bell and suddenly Bilbo’s dark form appeared on top of the wall at the end of the garden. Within seconds he’d jumped down and was weaving his way around her legs, purring.

Saskia exhaled deeply, feeling the tension in her body loosen. She suspected Bilbo was relieved too. It was way past his dinner-time.

Ten minutes later, Bilbo had his head in his bowl and Saskia had made two mugs of tea. She walked back into her sitting room to find David relaxing back on her sofa looking at his phone. He didn't even glance up as she came back in.

'Told you,' he said to her.

She ignored his comment and placed the mug of tea beside him on top of the coaster that said, *How many psychologists does it take to change a lightbulb? One, but the light bulb must want to be changed.* It had been a present from a work colleague.

'Why are you here, David? I sent you a text cancelling our session.'

David locked his phone and put it down, returning his concentration to her.

'Yeah, but I wanted to know what was more important than meeting with me.'

'Right, of course. Forever the narcissist.'

David smiled and raised an eyebrow.

'I was helping the police.'

He frowned. 'That it?'

'Yes. Some things are urgent and need my attention more than you.'

'Couldn't you have helped them some other time?'

'No, David. I couldn't.'

'Well, you're the one who says these sessions are important and I need structure.'

'I do, and they are.' Saskia sat down in her armchair opposite the sofa, studying her brother's face. 'Is everything OK? How has your week been?'

David turned away and shrugged. 'Fine. Saved some guy's life at work, but otherwise a bit boring.'

'Saved his life?'

‘Some French client was allergic to seafood. Somehow a prawn got into his brie and grape sandwich. He had a massive reaction. Couldn’t breathe. You should have seen his tongue. It swelled up like twice the size. His lips too. Looked like he’d had an overdose of filler. Everyone went into panic mode trying to help. Anyway’ – David smiled at Saskia – ‘yours truly found his EpiPen and saved him.’

‘You saved him?’ Saskia said again, focusing on David’s every mannerism. ‘That’s ironic considering how much you tell me you hate the French.’

‘Now, that’s a little harsh. Not all the French. Just our dear mother.’ He smiled, but it was one of his shark grins. The kind that looked warm and genial but was glacial and menacing.

‘You mean our dear mother who was beaten and nearly strangled to death by the psychopathic father you adore so much?’ She knew she shouldn’t react, but it just came out. Saskia was tired and she was more emotional than usual.

David’s face lost its charm and the muscles in his jaw hardened. His eyes went from a summer’s day blue to a steely-grey winter sky in seconds.

It didn’t faze her.

‘Now, let’s not argue. We both know where this conversation always ends,’ David said to her calmly, his voice low and smooth, eyes boring into hers. ‘I’m going now anyway, Jackie’s home.’ He got up from the sofa and crossed to the door to leave.

‘OK, we’ll chat properly on Sunday,’ Saskia said to his back, ‘but, David, before you go...’

He turned and looked back at her.

‘I’m helping the police with a case – profiling, like I did before. This can’t turn into a Kent situation again. I’ll keep it totally separate, well away from you.’

He shrugged at her. ‘I’ve moved on since then,’ was all he said, followed by a wave of a hand as he let himself out.

Saskia sighed and slumped back into her armchair, closing her eyes for a moment. She knew David had been testing her. Come to see why she'd cancelled their meeting. She was angry at herself for lashing out at him. It was always pointless, but he'd annoyed her with his sitting in the dark trick. Spending a day playing at being the charming chaperone at the charity lunch must have driven him to distraction. He'd needed to get a kick somehow and she'd been on the receiving end. She was grateful for one small mercy: that Bilbo hadn't been the target.

More importantly though, she needed to investigate the prawn sandwich incident. It was more than feasible that it hadn't been an accident at all, in which case David was starting to skate on thin ice again. She was the reason he'd not plunged into the extremes of his psychopathic personality traits before now — at least not recently. They both knew she was the only thing standing between the great life he'd managed to create for himself and a prison cell next to their father's. The glib way in which he'd just described a man nearly dying, and his clear fascination with the whole incident, was a big warning bell. She was going to need to reinforce the fact that he stood to lose everything if he started sliding that way again. Otherwise, the innate lack of fear and consequence that was the hallmark of his psychopathy would be his downfall. Perhaps, their downfall.

Tonight, Saskia needed to push her brother out of her mind and concentrate on three other families. Somewhere on this small granite island was someone with a grudge who had three young children's lives to barter with. What did they want and what were they prepared to do to get it? She needed to try to figure that question out and help DI Labey to reunite those children with their parents before it was too late.

SEVEN

FRIDAY

David left Saskia's cottage and walked the fifty yards further down the lane to where he'd parked his car so she couldn't see it when she came home. Clouds had slid across the sky and obliterated the moon and stars, leaving his short journey to the car in total darkness. A light breeze had picked up and was making the tree branches shake and rustle all around, but it was still warm. Granite walls lined both sides of the lane and as he neared his car, which he'd tucked into a gateway, he heard the sound of something large moving just beyond the wall. It seemed to be following him. The heavy footsteps and deep breathing would have made most people walk faster to their car, but David instead approached the noise and peered over the wall. He could just make out the large bovine forms of Jersey cows moving around the field.

David was satisfied that Saskia was telling the truth about why she'd cancelled on him. If he was honest with himself though, he was a little annoyed that she was helping the police again. Her job at the prison was fair enough, but bringing extra police presence into her life – his life – wasn't welcome. He also knew she'd be wondering about the French man and his sandwich. He'd touched a raw nerve when he told her about that and she'd totally ignored the fact he'd saved the man's life. He thought she'd be pleased.

The French client had arrived at the hedge fund firm David worked for, one morning that week. There were eight of them in the meeting, a sign of the client's importance. David's boss was leading, but he'd asked them to join him in order to ensure they could answer any questions that the client had.

The French man had arrived dressed in an immaculate suit, and was instantly arrogant and dismissive. He was a small man, thin and short, and clearly carrying a huge chip on his shoulders about his size, which he made up for with his attitude. But it was his Parisian accent, reminiscent of David's mother's, that had irritated him the most. They'd all sat in the meeting listening to him drone on as though he was the only expert on futures trading in the room. David had been bored, doodling in his company-branded notebook, until lunch was mentioned and the French client had said he didn't want to go out to eat. He had a flight to catch and wanted to carry on working. Instead they'd ordered in and he'd requested a brie and grape sandwich and given strict instructions that it not come into contact with any seafood as he was highly allergic.

It had been so easy, too easy really. He'd have liked a bit more of a challenge. David had excused himself for a toilet break and gone to the little supermarket just opposite their offices to buy a prawn sandwich. He'd taken just two prawns out and binned the rest. He'd timed it to perfection: the secretary who'd gone to get the sandwiches had just arrived back and while they were left unattended as she took plates and serviettes into the meeting room, he'd seized the opportunity to slip the prawns into the French client's brie and grape baguette. Then, he waited for the show.

It had been pretty impressive. The guy was an arse, but he hadn't lied. It seemed to take just seconds before he was struggling to breathe, clasp at his throat which was closing up in an anaphylactic reaction. It had been totally mesmerising watching how the man's body began to shut down. His throat, tongue and lips swelled up; he went red, eyes bulging, before the lack of oxygen turned his skin pale and he became faint.

When the Frenchman tried to indicate that he had an EpiPen, they'd all started searching for it. David judged that the man was gesticulating towards his briefcase, and sure enough found it tucked into a pocket. He slipped the pen up his sleeve.

He'd then simply watched the chaos in front of him. It had been as interesting observing his colleagues' reactions as it

had been seeing the French client nearly die. Two of David's colleagues – the youngest in the group – discussed whether to try a tracheotomy with a Biro and remained the calmest throughout. They debated whether to get a knife from the kitchen and one of them had dismantled a pen ready to shove into the man's windpipe once an incision had been made. David had been impressed and considered offering to make the cut himself. The only woman in the room efficiently directed instructions from the emergency services over the phone to their boss, who had worked with one of the other staff to lie the client down on the floor and loosen his clothing.

He was really struggling to breathe by this point. David had watched his face contorting, the terror in his eyes as his body and brain began to shut down. If the ambulance didn't arrive soon, the man might not make it. His eyes had started to roll in his head, his breathing barely a whistle.

For a few moments, David had considered just letting things take their natural course, watch the life ebb out of the man, but the thought of a lengthy investigation process and the drag of having to give police statements persuaded him to instead play the hero. He'd been through police investigations before; they were tedious and time-consuming. He didn't want to have to sit in a room with some earnest police detective talking about the boring Frenchman. So he had stepped forward, diving under the boardroom table and coming back up again triumphant. 'The EpiPen, I've found it – it must have fallen under the table!' he'd announced to the room.

'Inject him in his outer thigh,' the colleague on the phone to the emergency services shouted.

David had done as asked, jabbing it hard into the man's leg before stepping back to watch the effect.

The drug helped immediately, pulling the Frenchman back from the brink of death. Rasping breathing could be heard again and he'd opened his eyes as colour started to return to his skin. The paramedics arrived a few minutes later and he'd been rushed off to hospital. What had been an incredibly boring morning had become an interesting lunch and David passed the afternoon as the hero and centre of attention. The

secretary who'd bought the sandwiches had been in tears. She was a pretty young thing, so David hadn't minded being the sympathetic shoulder to cry on, until her mascara marked his white shirt and her constant sniffing got on his nerves.

His boss took away the client's baguette to try to work out what had happened, and the office returned to its more usual sedate state.

But Saskia didn't need to know all those details. All she needed to hear was that he'd saved the guy and been the hero. The rest had been purely for his own research and entertainment. No harm had been done. In fact not only was it the French man's fault for not being more careful and bringing his own sandwiches, but it had probably helped him. A timely reminder to be careful about what he ate and check his food first. David had actually done him a huge favour and prevented him from having this happen some other time when David wouldn't have been around to administer the EpiPen.

Reminiscing about the French client had filled David's journey home and he pulled up to the electric gates of the house he shared with Jackie, punching in the code before heading down the drive towards the house. The house wasn't his. Not yet. Jackie Slater was a property developer and she'd got the place for a good price before doing it up. Considering she'd arrived in Jersey without a job and just a suitcase to her name, she'd done well for herself in the ensuing thirty years. He respected her for that.

David drove his sports car towards the garage block. There were four garages and above them was a flat with an external side entrance. Allan, Jackie's driver and general man about the place, was in. The lights were on in the flat and David knew that Allan would check who was arriving. He was a nosy sod. Allan hadn't exactly warmed to David when he'd moved in. Not that David gave a monkey's backside about that. The guy just irritated him, always watching.

David got out of his car and walked towards the front door, the security lights coming on in turn as he made his way across the forecourt. He slipped his key in the lock, but before he turned it, David looked back towards the garage flat. Sure

enough, Allan was standing there, arms folded, watching him. David stared back, unflinching, before he returned his attention to the front door and went inside.

He could hear the television on and so David headed straight for the sitting room where he found an episode of *Love Island* playing to an empty room.

‘Jackie?’ he called out. ‘Where are you, darling?’ This was their favourite of the two sitting rooms in the house as it was more relaxed, more comfortable to lounge in. Even so, it was still ostentatious: gold and pink wallpaper, accents of gold on the cornices and ceiling rose. The sofas and chairs were covered in purple velvet, a kind of understated rococo style for the modern age. Not David’s first choice. He’d already decided to redecorate once the house was his.

His girlfriend appeared in the doorway from the kitchen, a glass of something bubbly in her hand.

Jackie was nearly twenty years his senior, but she wore it well thanks to the expert help of her London cosmetic surgeon. She carefully maintained her appearance and kept herself fit. Weekly appointments at the hairdressers, meditation and yoga, expensive clothes. It made their relationship far more bearable.

‘Hello, beautiful,’ David said, walking over to her and wrapping his arms around her waist. ‘Did you have a good day? Miss me?’

She smiled appreciatively at him and rested her arms on his shoulders, allowing him to go in for a long kiss. He knew just how to make her feel good.

‘Hello, handsome, of course I missed you,’ she purred back at him. ‘I hope the girls behaved.’ She raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh you know them. They were fine, although I think Suki had the hots for one of the waiters and Theresa had to virtually drag her home.’

Jackie giggled and ran her spare hand over his biceps and then down his muscular torso.

‘Just as long as they didn’t get the hots for you. Did you get your work done at the office?’ she asked.

He'd told her he was going to the office after the charity lunch: not even Jackie knew about his relationship with Saskia. They kept their familial tie to themselves.

'Yup, all sorted,' he said, kissing the tip of her nose.

Her hand carried on working down his torso to his trouser zipper.

'But I'm starving,' he added. 'So save that thought for a bit, would you?' He kissed her again and slipped past her into the kitchen.

'There's some of that smoked salmon roulade left,' Jackie said, following him in and sipping at her champagne as she watched him.

David crossed to the big American fridge and started investigating its contents, but his eyes were drawn to the kitchen window on his left, where a rectangle of light was visible above the garage block. Allan's torso a silhouette. His window looked directly into the kitchen.

'You celebrating?' David asked, nodding at her drink, and holding the champagne bottle he'd produced from the fridge.

'Yes, we closed a big deal today. Another site prime for development in the bag.' She beamed at him smugly.

David glanced back over to the window again. Allan was still watching.

'You clever girl,' he said smiling back at her, his eyes taking her in lustfully. He hadn't been in the mood for sex with her, but there was an added kick to it now. 'Perhaps I should give you a little celebratory reward.'

He spun her round and away from him, bending her over the kitchen table and lifting up her dress. Jackie laughed and urged him on as David made sure they celebrated right in front of the large kitchen window.

EIGHT

SATURDAY

Saskia hadn't slept well. She suspected the parents of the missing children had slept even less. She'd stayed up drawing mind maps of her theories and started to put together a profile. What she needed was to speak to the other parents and visit the scenes where their children had been taken from. DI Labey had sent her all the witness statements they'd collected so far and she'd started to organise a case folder on her laptop with a link chart to map potential connections between the parents and children.

It was Saturday morning, and she had been planning to finish off her unpacking – not that she had a great deal of 'stuff'. Most of what was in the boxes was extra crockery and curtains she'd brought with her, along with a few books that were either favourites or she still hadn't got around to reading. She didn't go in for ornaments and decorative things. Saskia liked her environment kept clean and simple; she had enough emotional baggage going on in her head, she couldn't stand to live in clutter as well. She would have liked to get rid of the boxes though. She'd been in Jersey for nearly two months, but settling in to her cottage had taken second place to getting up to speed with her work at the prison, and ensuring that David was stable.

They'd had to have their weekly catch-ups over Zoom since he'd left the UK for Jersey about a year ago. It wasn't ideal, not for picking up the subtleties of his high-functioning psychopathy. So it had been sheer luck when the Jersey prison psychologist left for a teaching position, providing a vacant role. Saskia hadn't lived in the island since she was about

three years old, but she'd promised to always protect her brother – and those who he could potentially harm – so she'd applied for the job and been accepted. It wasn't as if she was leaving behind anyone or anything important in the UK.

One thing that Saskia hadn't expected, however, was to help in a police inquiry again. But she'd learned her lessons. This time would be different. Last night David proved that he'd also matured. Back in Kent he'd seen her connection with the police as a threat; here he'd barely acknowledged it. That was good. It gave her hope that they really were making progress.

The majority of people in her profession, and out of it, didn't think psychopathy could be cured. Saskia agreed that group therapy and most other psychotherapies didn't work. In group sessions, lower-functioning psychopaths might be disruptive, causing arguments and upset. High-functioning psychopaths knew how to take over entirely, watching and learning how to manipulate the raw emotions on display. Plus, for those treatments to have an effect, the person had to want to change their behaviour and character. Psychopaths like David were quite happy with how they were and didn't see any need to change, although societal standards and expectations didn't agree with their view or actions, which was why they ended up in prison.

She was always looking out for new treatments both for her brother and her prisoners, and while Schema therapy had seen some results with those who were borderline in their personality disorders, she'd seen little impact on David so far. Instead, the only effective way to get her brother to behave was by constantly reminding him that if he wanted to retain the nice status he had in this society, he needed to play by the rules or risk losing everything. She had to appeal to his own self-interest. Saskia was realistic to know that he'd never develop empathy and a conscience, but his intelligence combined with her support could keep him successful and the rest of society safe. That's all they needed. She hoped that as he aged, like most psychopaths, he would also mellow.

Long before she'd trained as a psychologist and started working with some of the UK's most dangerous prisoners, her childhood had more than prepared her for dealing with psychopathy. Living with and surviving her father gave her an innate ability to understand those with the condition, and ultimately anyone who committed serious crimes. She spent her days working with those already convicted to understand why they'd taken the actions they had and trying to prevent them from doing it again. Her family life also gave her the raw experience from the victim's point of view, and that was ultimately the driving force to help the police. She wanted to stop an ongoing situation from turning into a tragedy – just like she'd done for her mother all those years ago.

Saskia had no children of her own – and never intended to with her genetics – but she could understand the pain the three families were going through, hoping and praying that their children would be returned to them, alive. If she could add just one piece of information that helped towards that goal, then giving up her weekend was a small price to pay.

DI Labey had said he'd pick her up at 9 a.m. as the first of their appointments with the other two families was out west. Saskia was only just getting to know Jersey and its people, but she'd already realised that many of the islanders talked about going 'out west' or 'to the east' as though it was a big trip, despite the island only being nine miles by five. Memories of the endless circle of traffic jams that was the M25, or the daily commuter traffic in pretty much any major town in the UK, made Jersey's roads a dream in comparison. Distance was clearly relative to your surroundings, and she'd already been told that it wouldn't take her long to get into that island mind set.

Saskia pulled on some lightweight summer trousers and a blouse, to look more professional for the families than the culottes she'd been in yesterday when DI Labey had taken her by surprise. The forecast was for another sunny day. A weekend when most families would be thinking about trips to the beach for a swim, or getting together with friends and family for a barbecue. Saskia was going to be visiting two homes where the weekend would be nothing but misery and

desperation. She chose sober colours rather than bright summery fabrics, out of respect.

DI Winter Labey pulled up outside her cottage at two minutes to nine. She grabbed a small shoulder bag with her phone and a notebook and locked the front door behind her. Bilbo had already taken up his daytime position on the windowsill, catching the warmth of the morning sun, and watched her with half interest as she walked down the path.

DI Labey had got out of his car and was making friends with Pushki next door, giving the terrier a scratch behind his ears.

‘He likes you,’ Saskia heard June say to the detective. Some days, June sat out front at a small white wrought-iron table and chairs, enjoying her breakfast in the warm morning sunshine.

The sight of DI Labey and the tiny Yorkshire terrier made Saskia smile. He was a well-built guy, not too muscular but fit and tall. Despite his bulk compared to the tiny little dog, the detective was gentle. It was nice to see that side of him. Different to the professional police officer she’d seen yesterday.

‘Morning, June,’ Saskia called out to her neighbour.

‘Alright, mah love?’ June replied in the distinctive Jersey way. To the unknowing ear, the accent sounded a little like a soft South African lilt mixed with some French, but had its own distinct patter.

June was a widow and her children had moved to the UK. Although she had plenty of friends and other relatives in the island, Saskia suspected that living on her own, she still got a little lonely at times. They occasionally shared a coffee or gin and tonic in the garden as they’d got to know each other better. June took a great deal of interest in the neighbourhood, always the first to report a broken lamp light, or overgrown hedgerows.

Saskia wondered what she’d think of her being picked up by a man. No doubt she’d have a few questions about it later.

Either way, it looked like June would approve of DI Labey because Pushki certainly did.

‘Ready?’ Winter said standing up straight, much to Pushki’s disappointment.

‘Yep.’ Saskia turned round to June. ‘Bye, June, have a good day.’ She waved and DI Labey also raised his hand to say goodbye.

‘You too, both of you,’ June called after them. Pushki wagged his tail and then, realising that the attention had stopped, belly-flopped onto the small lawn to continue his sunbathing.

Saskia didn’t expect it to be a good day – not unless they were able to find the three missing children.

‘We’re going to go and see Daisy and William Plover first,’ DI Labey said to her once they were in the car. ‘Their daughter, Katie, was the first to be taken on Wednesday. She disappeared from her after-school dance class. At first they just thought she might have wandered off, but the wooden flute was found and nobody had seen her, so we quickly escalated it as soon as we’d been informed.’

‘Can we see where she was taken from?’

‘Sure, it’s only about a ten or fifteen-minute drive from their home. No CCTV.’

‘No new leads overnight, I take it?’ Saskia asked, but suspected she already knew the answer.

DI Labey shook his head. ‘It’s like they’ve just disappeared into thin air. We’ve got a watch on all the ports, they’re even checking every single vehicle leaving on the ferries. It’s creating a logistical nightmare, but Customs have been working with us. Most people are being understanding and the ferry company is dealing with the delays. We’ve got officers monitoring the light aircraft coming and going, and up at Gama Aviation where the private and corporate jets arrive. That’s been a right eye-opener. Seems the wealthier they are, the less they like being asked questions about their private business.

‘Even the coastguard and volunteer lifeboat crews are supporting with watching for any ribs or other private boats which might go in and out of the smaller harbours around the island. It’s the only way we can be sure they’re not being taken out of Jersey. There are more officers coming over from some of the UK forces to assist. We just don’t have the manpower here to manage a hunt like this over a prolonged period of time. But I’m sure the girls are still here somewhere. I don’t think they’ve left the island, although the boss isn’t so sure.’

‘Why does he think they’ve been taken off island?’ Saskia asked, noting the wrapper for a brand-new car air freshener in his side door pocket. He’d obviously had a quick tidy up of his car that morning. At least the breeze through the open window alleviated the slightly sickly odour of synthetic mango. She hoped Winter wouldn’t suggest turning on the air-conditioning.

‘His initial theory is that they’re all going to be shipped to Europe as part of some paedophile ring. They’ve all been young girls and we’ve not received a ransom note.’

‘So how’s he explaining the wooden flutes?’

‘Reckons that they might be something to do with Pan. You know, god of sex,’ Winter said glancing quickly at her and away from the road.

‘Yeah, well clearly mythological musicians aren’t his *Mastermind* topic then. Pan pipes are quite different. Also, as I said yesterday, if it was a paedophile ring they’d be more opportunistic, grabbing whichever kids were the easiest and least likely to cause them problems. These children have been carefully targeted and taken at great risk to the kidnapper, so they’re important to him or them, personally.’

‘That’s my thinking too. To be fair to the boss it was just his initial hypotheses, understandable in the circumstances, but I’m coming round to your way of thinking.’

‘Good,’ Saskia replied firmly. She wasn’t sure if DI Labey was going to agree with every aspect of her theories, but she wouldn’t water them down just to get his or his boss’s buy-in. There was one thing that life had taught her, and that was to

stick to your convictions. Hers were based on experience dealing with paedophiles and people like the kidnapper, and on the factual evidence in front of her. By the end of today she hoped to have a much clearer picture of the kind of person, or persons, they were looking for.

The Plovers' house was a newbuild on a site with just three large, executive-style houses that called itself Clos de la Fontaine. Although not of the size and value of the Carmichaels' home yesterday, it would still probably cost over two million pounds on the Jersey housing market.

'Dad's high up in one of the banks and mum also works in finance,' DI Labey said to Saskia as they pulled up outside. 'There are two other children, both older, fourteen and sixteen.'

'The fourteen year old is a girl too, isn't she?' Saskia asked, thinking through the file of information on the family that he'd sent through to her.

'Yes.'

'Was she at the dance class as well?'

'She was. She's pretty distraught as you'd imagine. The school has arranged for some therapy sessions.'

DI Labey parked in a bay for visitors and they both got out of the car and started walking towards number three Clos de la Fontaine. 'We've got a Family Liaison Officer here,' he said to Saskia. 'You can have a word with them too if you like, she'll have a good insight into how the family is dealing with it.'

'That might be useful,' Saskia said just as the front door was opened by a woman in her late-forties.

'Winter,' the woman said, nodding at DI Labey.

'Amanda. DC Potter, this is Saskia Monet, forensic psychologist. Can you have a chat with her after we've finished up?'

'Sure.' DC Amanda Potter smiled at Saskia; she had a warm face.

‘How are they?’ DI Labey asked quietly, nodding into the house.

‘Same. In shock and still no ideas of who could have taken Katie.’

Saskia steeled herself for the interview ahead. For a moment she pondered why it was she found it harder to speak to distraught parents than psychopathic killers. This was way outside of her comfort zone, whereas she didn’t bat an eyelid if she had to sit alone in a room with a convicted killer. Her lack of fear had sometimes scared her, tapped into her paranoia about her own DNA, and at times like that she would need to prove to herself that she wasn’t like them – her father and her brother.

As she stepped into the Plovers’ home and saw the photographs on the wall, the warm embrace of family life all around her, it reminded her of the reason why their emotions made her uncomfortable. Her childhood had conditioned her to be familiar with cold, inhuman relationships, and the impact that had on others, but deep, genuine emotions and displays of love were not part of her own experience. She rarely encountered them even in her adult life, and instead focused on the sharp end of interpersonal relationships – the criminals who had done harm to others and society. While all her work was aimed at protecting the soft belly of human society, it was not a place that she frequented. The tidal wave of distress that came from the Plovers was completely alien to her and she found it almost overwhelming.

‘Good morning,’ DI Labey said to the two distraught people in front of them who were huddled together on a sofa.

‘This is DI Labey and Saskia Monet, who is a forensic psychologist,’ the family liaison officer said to Katie’s parents. ‘I’ll go and make us all a cup of tea.’ She left the room for the DI to lead the discussion.

‘Any news? Anything?’ Daisy Plover said to him before he could speak, her eyes searching his face for any indication.

‘We’re still investigating, but we have the island sealed off. She’s not going to leave Jersey.’

‘They’ve taken another one, haven’t they?’ William Plover spoke now. ‘Does that mean they’ve finished with Katie and Jessica? We know what the stats say, that the first forty-eight hours are the critical period and after that...’ He didn’t finish his sentence, it was too painful to voice.

DI Labey sat down and spoke gently. ‘We have no reason to think that they have harmed any of the children. This is a very unusual case so please don’t think that just because a previous incident had a specific result, that’s going to happen here.’

‘So why have they taken her? I can’t bear to think what they might be doing.’ Daisy Plover’s voice cracked and shattered along with her heart.

‘Mrs Plover, we don’t know anything about the motivation yet. You will torture yourself by making guesses, and I know that’s easy for me to say, but please try to remain positive. I’m convinced Katie is still in Jersey and we will find her.’

Both parents remained silent and William reached for his wife’s hand. She grasped his as though holding it could prevent her falling into a deep abyss.

‘We don’t want to cause you any further distress, but Miss Monet is a forensic psychologist who works with those who have committed crimes, identifying why it is that they have behaved in that way. She is building a profile for us of whoever has taken your daughter. If you don’t mind, she’d like to ask you a few questions.’

Saskia could see that Daisy was using all her energy to prevent the tears from flooding from her and her throat was too tight with emotion to speak.

William glanced at his wife and then looked at Saskia with determination. ‘Anything we can do to help, we’ll do it,’ he said.

‘Thank you, Mr Plover,’ Saskia replied. ‘I know that the police have asked you a lot of questions already, such as if you saw anyone hanging around beforehand and if Katie had been acting differently prior to her kidnap. They’ve also been trying

to see if there is any connection between Katie and Jessica Brown or Lucy Carmichael. I've read your statements, I presume you haven't thought of anything else?'

William Plover shook his head. 'No. They're at a different school and neither of them went to the same dance classes. We've also asked Victoria and Samuel, Katie's brother and sister, if they know the families, and they don't.'

'As DI Labey said, I have worked with some of the most dangerous prisoners in the UK, including men who have taken children. My experience tells me that it is very clear this is not a random kidnapping, that all of the children who have been taken have been carefully selected and yet they are all very different. It is also very organised and has taken some significant planning to be able to do this. I therefore believe that it is more likely to be a connection to you, the parents, that is the key to finding the kidnapper. Some kind of revenge perhaps. They want something from you.'

'Us?' William said as both of them looked shocked.

'Yes. Is there anyone that either of you have dealt with in your personal or professional lives, who stands out as being aggrieved about something you have done?'

William and Daisy were silent; Saskia could see they were thinking hard.

'I wouldn't focus on the last few weeks but longer term than that. This is something which would have happened months ago, possibly even years. The kidnapper hasn't rushed into this, they've carefully thought out their actions. Can I ask you both what you do as a job?'

'I work for the Jersey Financial Services Commission,' Daisy Plover said, 'but what I do isn't directly dealing with investigations of people who have transgressed the rules. I mean, as an organisation we ban people from working in financial services and monitor firms to ensure they are keeping up with the strict regulations we have in the finance industry here, but I just process registrations. I'm not involved in any of the enforcement side of it. I certainly have no recollection of any issues with people.'

‘What about socially?’

‘Socially?’ Daisy thought again. ‘No new friends. We’ve been over here about twenty years now, we came over with William’s bank, and most of our friends are through work or school. I’ve not fallen out with anyone if that’s what you mean?’

‘Could you please write down the names of everyone you know socially and think again about work. Perhaps it could be a disgruntled colleague, not just a client. That way we will be able to cross-reference them with the other families’ lists.’

‘Yes. I will do,’ Daisy replied. A little energy came back into her posture. It was a chance for her to do something productive that might help her daughter.

‘I work for one of the big high street banks,’ William said. ‘Things have changed a lot over the years, we work hard to ensure that we are supporting our customers as best as we can and try to assist them if they’re in financial difficulties. But obviously, we are still a business and we do sometimes have to foreclose on debts.’

‘Can you put together a list of all those clients where you have had to make those kinds of decisions? And as I’ve asked your wife, could you think about who you know socially too please?’

William nodded.

‘Now isn’t the time to have secrets and withhold information,’ Saskia said directly to them both. ‘This must be full disclosure, no matter how uncomfortable.’

William and Daisy glanced at each other.

‘I don’t think either of us has anything to hide, Miss Monet,’ he said to her.

She could tell she’d insulted them slightly, but that didn’t matter. The important thing was to get to the truth and save their daughter. She didn’t care if they liked her a little bit less because of it.

‘So you think they’re trying to get back at us? What does that mean for Katie?’ he asked her.

‘I can’t answer that, Mr Plover, but if that is their motivation then they are far more likely to be taking care of Katie as she’s a bargaining chip. There’s also one other thing...’ Saskia glanced over at DI Labey as she said this. ‘If this is the motivation then it’s more likely that the kidnapper will try to contact you directly at some point. That whatever their ultimate goal is, it will be you they want to get to. I’m sure DI Labey would agree with me that you mustn’t entertain dealing with this on your own. If you receive any communications, please pass them on. The police are here to help you and to get a successful outcome for Katie.’

‘Yes, thank you, Miss Monet,’ DI Labey added, ‘I can’t stress that enough, please do not try to communicate with the kidnapper directly. It will not only compromise the investigation but also potentially risk your life and Katie’s.’

Saskia looked at the harrowed faces of the two people in front of her and realised that no matter what DI Labey and she said, they would do anything to get their daughter back home – and that was probably exactly what the Pied Piper was betting on.

NINE

SATURDAY

Oscar Keyes had already spent ten minutes getting his shoes on and he still only had one foot ready for the great outdoors. At seven years old, he had the innate ability of being able to waste inordinate amounts of time doing simple tasks that should take thirty seconds. Part of the issue was his propensity for being distracted. Natasha had asked him to put on his shoes ready to go out shopping, but had already been in to check on him twice to hurry him up. Both times she'd found him pushing two small Lego race cars up and down the floor and around the shoes which should be going on his feet. After the second time, the offending race cars had been taken away until he was ready, but when she returned, another two had appeared, probably back-ups from Oscar's pocket. She had to admire him for his resourcefulness.

She was trying to make Oscar more self-sufficient. If they had to keep stepping in to help then he was going to struggle at school when it came to getting dressed and undressed for PE and games lessons. Persuading their son that being able to put on a pair of shoes was a vital life skill hadn't been going too well and her husband, Simon, was getting frustrated.

'If we don't get going soon it's going to be busy. We'll get all the lunchtime traffic trying to park as well. I wanted to be at the garden centre before mid-morning otherwise I won't have time to get everything sorted for the barbecue,' Simon said to her, arms folded across his chest.

'I know, it's just if I keep putting them on for him he's never going to learn,' she'd sighed back.

‘Can we save the life lessons for another day? That is unless you don’t mind our guests turning up while I’m still getting the garden sorted.’

Natasha had acquiesced and gone in to find Oscar lying on his stomach, both legs bent up so that his feet were in the air. It took her fifteen seconds to get his remaining shoe on the socked foot and shout to her husband that he was ready.

* * *

Natasha and Simon Keyes pulled their front door closed behind them and loaded Oscar into the car. The mother double-checked he was strapped in securely before getting into the passenger seat beside her husband. Neither of them noticed the man in a van who was watching them from across the street.

This wasn’t the first time the man had watched the Keyes. He had been there at school drop-off, and pick-up, been in the supermarket and in the car park outside. He’d noted down their routines and he knew that the little boy liked Lego. A brand-new set sat on the passenger seat beside him in the van, ready to use as bait.

Over the weeks, he’d studied the garden and house when they were all out. He knew the perimeter weak points, just like he’d known those at Lucy Carmichael, Jessica Brown, and Katie Plover’s houses. Everyone was pretty relaxed about security in Jersey. It wasn’t like in London or some of the other cities he heard about from his work colleagues. The wealthiest people had a few more security precautions in place but still, as long as he avoided the CCTV cameras, he had no trouble monitoring his targets and finding the best way to get the children.

Oscar wasn’t going to be quite as easy to pluck away from his parents. They had routines but they didn’t leave much room for their son being on his own. Oscar would be the youngest of the target children, which was probably why.

The Keyes pulled away from their house and he waited a few moments before following. It amazed him that nobody seemed to notice his presence. He was invisible, a skill he'd somehow acquired in life.

Patience was another of his traits, and right now he needed that. Inevitably Oscar's parents would get distracted or Oscar would become adventurous – and he'd be waiting for him. He just hoped it wouldn't be too long. Time was a critical commodity in this game and both his and Oscar's were running out.

TEN

SATURDAY

Once Saskia had asked the Plovers all her questions, she requested to take a look around Katie's bedroom. They'd agreed readily, emotional exhaustion sapping their strength for further interrogation. Saskia left DI Labey with them and walked up a staircase that was lined with studio photographs of the family. Five beaming faces in various poses, none of them with the slightest idea that one day they'd have their youngest member ripped away from them. Until this week, this had been a happy house, filled with love. She could feel the gaping wound where Katie had been, pulsing and bleeding.

Katie's bedroom was an homage to pink, cats, and unicorns. Saskia stopped in the doorway and took the room in. A variety of unicorns trotted along the windowsill, tails raised, heads high, like a troop of circus horses in costume. A little dressing table was populated with sparkly nail varnishes and a rainbow of scrunchies stuffed into a white porcelain cat pot. Katie's duvet cover and pillow was covered in a unicorn-pattern too, the bed's neat, uncreased state the physical evidence of the family's emotional crisis, its only occupant a fluffy white cat lying half asleep. When she'd walked in it had lifted its head, but Saskia had almost heard its disappointment. It wasn't just the humans who were missing Katie.

It was the epitome of a ten-year-old middle class girl's bedroom – and would have been heaven to ten-year-old Saskia. By the time she was Katie's age, her father was thankfully already locked up, but the nightmare with David had just begun. She'd never had much; they lived in a council-provided flat and her mother didn't have the spare cash to buy

her pretty things. By the time she was eleven and David was almost ten, he'd set fire to their flat and what little they did have had been lost. Katie's world and ten-year-old Saskia's couldn't have been further apart, and yet they had a connection. Both of them innocently forced into a nightmarish situation that wasn't of their own making.

Saskia looked through Katie's books and notebooks. She searched the young girl's drawers, and looked under the bed. She checked the wardrobe and opened the box of toys on the floor. She knew every possible hiding place for something precious or secret that you didn't want anyone to find. She knew because she'd used them all. Everything was as it should be. No malice had seeped into this bedroom: it was a pink haven for a little girl who had no concept of the evil which stalked the world. For Katie – for the Katie 'before' the kidnapping – those who were bad always lost to the good guys and gals in the Disney movies she watched, despite the odds. And yet now...

Would they beat the bad guy this time? Who would have ripped a child like Katie from her family? What motivation could create such a callous disregard for an innocent child? They could be psychopathic, immune to any feelings, or they could hold a deep hatred and anger within them that had turned into an inferno of revenge. There had to be a connection between the victims somewhere. Saskia was sure of it. None of these kidnappings were opportunistic or random. Looking around Katie's bedroom cemented her conviction that the connection had to be the parents.

When Saskia returned downstairs, the Plovers were sitting at a table writing out a list of names of all the people they knew. DI Labey had been talking in the kitchen to DC Potter and came back through once he heard Saskia coming down the stairs.

'Thank you for allowing me to look around Katie's room,' Saskia said to the Plovers.

'Did it help?' Daisy asked her, hope naked on her face.

‘It helped me see she’s a happy little girl and there was nothing to suggest this was going to happen. I think the most valuable thing you can do right now is finish your lists so that DI Labey can cross-check all of the connections between you and the other parents.’

Daisy had nodded with determination, although her chin crumpled and puckered, giving away her real feelings.

Saskia and Winter said their goodbyes and DC Amanda Potter stepped outside with them, out of earshot.

‘Miss Monet has suggested that there is a high likelihood that the kidnapper might try to contact the Plovers directly,’ DI Labey said to her. ‘Keep a really close eye on them, would you? It will be tempting for them to go it alone if they think it will bring Katie back.’

Saskia was pleased that DI Labey had taken her warning seriously: it meant he respected – and took on board – her input.

‘Where are the other kids?’ Saskia asked the DC.

‘They’re at friends’ houses. William and Daisy said they wanted to try to keep things as normal as possible for them and felt that just hanging around the house stressing wasn’t going to be good.’

‘It’s possible that the kidnappers got to Katie through them, but I suspect it’s unlikely,’ Saskia said. ‘Neither Lucy or Jessica have any siblings and involving Katie’s would be risky.’

‘I’ve not seen any evidence of guilt or remorse from them both. Just shock and upset,’ DC Potter confirmed.

‘We’ve asked the Plovers to compile a list of people they know through work and socially, so we can see if there are any common connections between the parents. Ask them about the neighbours too. This place looks like it’s a newbuild; find out about where they used to live and any potential suspects around there as well, would you?’ DI Labey asked.

‘Sure. Speak later,’ DC Potter replied and headed back into the house.

‘We’ve got an hour before we’re due at the Browns so we’ve enough time to visit where Katie was taken from,’ DI Labey said as they headed to the car.

‘You know if you need to get back to the station and focus on the investigation, I can always do that on my own?’ she offered.

‘No you’re fine. I was there just after she’d been taken and the place was in chaos. I’d like to go back and take a proper look now things are back to normal. Gives me a better feel for a place and what might have happened.’

They arrived ten minutes later at the hall where Katie Plover had been attending a dance class. Music and a woman’s voice shouting choreography instructions drifted outside through an open window, telling them that another class was going on inside.

‘So how did Katie get separated from the class?’ Saskia asked as they got out of the car and began looking around. The building had been a parish hall before the population outgrew it. Single storey and made of granite blocks, it had no car parking area which was no doubt another practical reason for the move to a new building. A few cars were parked along the road outside the hall, parents waiting for their children to finish the class and drive them home. Saskia wondered if some of them had decided to stay after hearing what happened with Katie.

‘We think she was lured by a bag. A couple of the other kids remembered seeing a bag just like the one Katie has. It was lying by the back door of the hall in a corridor outside the changing area. We suspect she may have thought it was hers, gone to pick it up and that’s when they made their move.’

‘She carried the bag around with her a lot?’

‘Yeah, it was her favourite. A pink backpack that her parents said she used to take out all the time.’

‘And it definitely wasn’t her own?’

‘No. We found hers still hanging up in the changing room.’

‘So they’ve watched her and figured out the easiest way to lure her.’

‘With Lucy Carmichael, we’re also working on the theory that a toy bubble machine she received was also from the kidnapper. Des and Carol didn’t buy it for her and they’re just double-checking with her godparents and other family and friends who might possibly have sent it.’

‘Clever. She’d go out into the back garden to use it, which is when they made their move...’ Saskia thought about the benign smile of the unicorn toy she’d seen yesterday. Somehow it reminded her of one of the psychopathic prisoners she’d known in the UK. He had the sweetest smile, it was quite mesmerising, but you only saw it when he was about to react violently. A sugar-coated acid drop.

‘Exactly. Which opens up the question of who delivered it because it had to arrive at the right time, when neither Des or Carol were there to question its arrival, but the au pair and Lucy were in and wouldn’t have known it wasn’t from anyone they knew.’

‘Can we look round the back to see the door where the bag was?’ Saskia pulled the conversation back to Katie and the hall they were at.

‘Sure, it’s round here. Again, makes sense that they would have taken her the back way as parents were waiting out front. We spoke to all of them, including Daisy Plover, and none of them saw anything.’

They walked down one side of the hall, along a narrow path lined by overgrown wild flowers and nettles which brushed against her arms as they walked through. Saskia dodged the stinging nettles and saw Winter do the same; both of them had short sleeves on, the weather far too warm for anything else. Once round the back of the hall, Saskia stood a moment, taking in their surroundings: beyond the small area of concrete abutting the hall, there were fields bordered by hedgerows and a handful of trees. Sparrows chirped noisily in the bushes and an occasional wood pigeon flew across the

field. Higher up in the sky were the ever-present white forms of seagulls, circling, always on the lookout for food.

Saskia crossed to the back door and tried to open it. 'It's locked.'

'Yes, it is now after what's happened, but on the day it wasn't because it's been hot and there's no air-conditioning in the hall so it had been left open for air flow.'

'Big blind spot along this back wall. I doubt anyone can see you from inside, but it would be risky if someone was to come outside. You'd be exposed.'

'There were two large wheelie bins on the left there.' DI Labey pointed to a space a few feet away. 'We think they'd have hidden behind those.'

'Were they always there?'

'No. The woman who holds the dance classes hadn't noticed they'd been moved, but the people who hire out the hall say the bins should have been down the side near the kitchen.'

'That's the other side to the one we came in?'

DI Labey nodded.

'So they've been watching her at least a week, if not longer. Known that she comes here on a Wednesday after school, thought through an object that's likely to attract her to walk away from the rest of the class, and researched how best to do it at this location.'

'We're asking anyone who uses this stretch of road and lives around here if they saw anyone hanging around or parked up in the weeks before. Nothing so far. As you can see parents park here all the time so it's not exactly unusual.'

'He's clever. He can also pre-empt the way you'll investigate and knows not to leave a trace,' Saskia commented.

'We did find footprints again down the bottom, just over there before you go into the field. There's a little stream and so there was soft mud. They look the same as those we found

yesterday at Lucy's house. Forensics are comparing the sole patterns. We suspect they went into that little row of trees there and off across the field. By the time that Daisy and Katie's sister realised that she wasn't in the changing rooms, and hadn't come out, nearly everyone had left and the kidnapper would have been long gone.'

Saskia sighed, and, squinting in the bright sunlight, looked to the trees, as though she would somehow see Katie peering out.

'What kind of person are we dealing with?' DI Labey asked her.

'Intelligent, professional, middle class. They will have been reasonably successful in life, probably well-educated, too, although it's possible they've lost that status. The brazen nature of the kidnaps shows that they're comfortable with the level of wealth that these families have, not fazed by class or money. Quite possibly they just blend into it which is why no one has reported anyone suspicious.'

'Which means it could be somebody that the families know,' DI Labey said turning to her.

'It could be. I think you're going to hear from them soon, assuming they've finished.'

'What do you mean finished?'

'Taking children. They're not going to start their game until they have the children they want. If there's no more kidnappings today, I'd expect they'll be in touch.'

'Game?'

'Yes. Taking the children is just the first move. They're leverage, not the end game.'

'How do you know that?'

'You've heard nothing from them, but they leave a calling card. It's almost like an invitation to their game.'

'So, when you say, "be in touch", do you mean a ransom note?'

Saskia shook her head. ‘This goes deeper than just one simple money transaction. They want the parents to suffer, otherwise they’d have submitted a demand already for Katie.’

‘But you think there might be more to come?’

‘I’m basing that on the fact we’ve not heard from them already. I’ve obviously no idea how many they are targeting in total.’

‘Maybe we should issue a warning for everyone to keep an extra close eye on their children, but with no evidence that they’re going to take another child, the boss might not agree to that. It could cause panic.’

‘I think most parents will already be on the alert. The story is all people seem to be talking about.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ DI Labey said, ‘I don’t want another family ripped apart.’

Saskia looked at the detective and saw the pressure on his face and in his body language. He’d promised Katie’s parents that she was still here and he’d find her. That was a big promise, and although Saskia could already tell that he was a man who would move heaven and earth to achieve that, he was up against a highly organised and intelligent adversary. Catching the Pied Piper was not going to be easy.

ELEVEN

SATURDAY

The Browns' house was tucked down a short road leading to clifftop walks around Jersey's dramatic north-eastern coastline. DI Labey pointed their house out, tucked behind wooden gates, but said it would be easier to park further down the road. Saskia could see lots of glass and imagined that the property would look out across the glistening sea towards France. They continued to a dirt car park where weekend walkers were disgorging excited dogs and children from their cars, or heading back to their vehicles with panting dogs and tired offspring. Gorse bushes surrounded the car park, and beyond, only sea and sky filled the horizon.

The sun was nearing its height as they walked back down the dusty road. There was no escaping its presence but despite its glaring heat, it wasn't like the oppressive, baked air of London. Most days there was a slight sea breeze bringing the air cooled by the water; and even when there seemed to be no wind, it still felt easier to breathe, the air free to come and go as it pleased.

As they walked, shoes scuffing at the rusty dust, DI Labey filled Saskia in on Jessica Brown. 'She's twelve and the only one to have been snatched while walking, almost certainly directly into a vehicle. I think that's because she's that much bigger and more likely to kick up a fuss, so they needed to contain her quickly and couldn't carry her off like Lucy or Katy, who were both small and light.'

'Where was she taken from?'

‘She gets the school bus home and that drops her back on the main road. It’s about a ten-minute walk from there to her house; it was along that route. We can walk it after we’ve spoken to her parents.’

‘Dad’s a doctor, isn’t he?’

‘Yes, they both are actually. GPs, but Christina works part time.’

‘Same surgery?’

‘Yes, and you know that the GP system is different over here to the UK, right? GPs are private businesses and people have to pay to see a doctor, unless you’re low income of course. So Nicholas and Christina own their practice. I believe there’s another doctor who also works with them. We’ve spoken to him and he’s alibied to the hilt. Patient consultations every day and no red flags that would give us any reason to suspect he’s connected to the other children or their families. Neither of the other families are registered at their practice.’

‘I didn’t know that about the GP system, thanks. Haven’t needed to go to a doctor here yet.’

‘So, you’ve been here, what, two months now? Enjoying it?’ DI Labey asked her.

Saskia felt his gaze on her cheek as they walked.

‘Yes. The prison is a pleasant change to some of the places I worked in the UK and I was lucky to find my little cottage to rent. But you know what it’s like when you move, there’s so much to get used to.’

‘I’ve always lived here, true Jersey bean with generations of us on the island. Happy to give you a tour or explain the Jersey way if you’d like,’ he said to her, then added, ‘once we’ve got these kids back to their parents.’

‘Thanks,’ she replied and glanced at him. Was that a friendly offer or something more? ‘Jersey bean, what’s that about? I’ve heard June say that.’

DI Labey smiled. ‘It’s from the Jersey bean crock, a traditional recipe here. It’s what Jersey people call themselves.’

You might also hear people say they're a crapaud, which is Jerriais – the Jersey dialect – for toad because we're the only Channel Island to have them.'

'Does that make me a bean and toad too, DI Labey? I was born here,' she said, smiling. 'We moved to the UK when I was three though, so not exactly many memories, or connections to the place.'

'That would depend on who you're asking. If you have several generations here, then definitely. Have you got family here?'

'No. My parents were from the UK and France. They've divorced and gone their separate ways now.' Saskia realised that her tone was suddenly firm and final. She didn't want to talk about them, and it didn't surprise her that it killed the conversation and DI Labey changed the subject. She must stop showing her sensitivity when it came to her parents. That was twice in as many days.

'Please call me Winter, not DI Labey,' he said to her as they reached the wooden gates.

'Likewise, Saskia.' She looked back at him, warming to him. He was caring, as well as intelligent and driven to help others.

The Browns were the calmest of the three sets of parents so far, but Saskia put that down to their medical training and experience dealing with upsetting situations with patients, rather than because they cared any less about their daughter. She was clearly their pride and joy. Jessica smiled out at them from the wall and bookcase in the sitting room that they were shown into.

'I work part time so that I'm always home for when Jessica gets back,' Christina was explaining to them. 'She prefers catching the bus because she rides home with her friend, rather than me picking her up.' She hung her head, the regret weighing her down. Christina Brown was a petite woman in

her late-forties with short blonde hair. She had delicate features, almost bird-like.

‘We’ve spoken to your former husband, Craig,’ Winter said to her, ‘he’s in Dubai and hasn’t been out of the jurisdiction, so we know that we can rule him out of the inquiry.’

Saskia had read that this was both Nicholas and Christina’s second marriages and Jessica was from Christina’s first relationship. Absent parents and stepparents were always looked at closely in situations like this, but Nicholas had a rock-solid alibi – as did Craig – because he was at work with patients. Nicholas’s former wife had died.

‘I never thought he would have. He was a womaniser, but our divorce was amicable, and he keeps in contact with Jessica. She was seven when he left but he mostly keeps out of our lives and lets Nicholas and I get on with it,’ Christina confirmed, giving a wan smile to Nicholas.

Saskia asked them the same questions she’d asked the Plovers, and then queried if there was anyone they could think of who might have a grievance with them.

‘We’ve not had any complaints to the General Medical Council, if that’s what you mean,’ Nicholas said, a little affronted.

‘No, it’s possibly something more subtle than that,’ Saskia replied gently. ‘Perhaps someone who blamed you for an outcome for themselves or a loved one, which may not have been your fault, but they viewed it differently?’

‘Nothing that comes to mind, but we’ll give it some thought,’ he replied. ‘I don’t see how this can be anything to do with us. We’re doctors. Good people.’

‘I’m not implying otherwise,’ Saskia reassured him, although her mind flitted to her psychologist training and the case study of Harold Shipman. He had been a GP, too, and yet had murdered over two hundred of his patients. Being good didn’t necessarily always go with the job title.

‘I don’t understand what you’re hoping to achieve with this,’ Nicholas directed his question to DI Labey, ‘I didn’t think British police used profilers. Isn’t this an American way of doing things?’

‘It’s more prevalent in America, yes, but we will occasionally use profiling because it helps us to understand a perpetrator and their motivations. In a case like this when there’s no obvious motive or suspect, Miss Monet’s experience could help us narrow down the field.’

‘Or send you off on the wrong track,’ Nicholas retorted, ‘no offence, Miss Monet, but I see patients every day that have been seeing some therapist or another who has encouraged their symptoms instead of just giving them a straight talking-to. Jessica has not been taken because of me or my wife, I can assure you of that, so don’t waste your time investigating us.’

‘As I said, Mr Brown, I’m not saying that it’s your fault, but we are trying to work out the connection between the children that have been taken,’ Saskia replied. Push back like this was something she was used to in her work, although she was a little surprised to find a modern day GP so obviously against mental health therapies.

‘Maybe there isn’t one. Maybe it’s just one sick-minded individual!’ Nicholas snapped.

Saskia decided not to defend her line of thinking any further. She could see that Nicholas had closed his mind to any discussion and was clearly insulted at her suggestion that Jessica’s disappearance was anything to do with them.

She took in the Browns’ home. It certainly had a fantastic view, huge windows and glass patio doors opened onto a tiny garden area, but the seemingly endless panorama of sea and sky more than made up for the restricted outdoor space. She could imagine watching storm clouds roll in across the sea, or just fall asleep to the moonlight dancing on the waves. Compared to the Plovers’ house, the decor was more controlled and clinical. The Plovers had been softer, like jumping on a slightly deflated bouncy castle, as opposed to a concrete floor. Their family life was a big warm bundle around

her, a home that felt lived in and used. Here, it was more show home, where everything had its place and you were expected to fit in and not make a mess.

Once they'd left, she let out a big sigh, partly from the relief at leaving the heavy atmosphere inside and partly out of frustration.

'He's a touch arrogant,' DI Labey said to her as they left the property, 'you can imagine that he might rub someone up the wrong way if they questioned his professional ability. I know you won't take what he said personally. You must get kickback all the time in your line of work.'

'Yeah, just a little.' Saskia smiled weakly at him. 'Question is, does he recognise his arrogance? People like him who are a little narcissistic, don't tend to identify someone's true opinion of them because their own opinion of themselves is over-inflated. He might be a good doctor, but everyone makes mistakes and misses something. He's going to deflect any blame and so might not recognise that a patient is disgruntled. He seems to be very much a physically focused medic without much regard for the psychological.'

'He also doesn't seem too keen on us investigating him – which therefore makes me want to dig a bit deeper,' Winter replied.

Instead of heading straight back to the car park, Saskia and Winter walked the route that Jessica would have taken from the bus.

'They could have easily driven along this track and grabbed her as she walked past. There aren't any houses nearby to see,' DI Labey remarked. 'We are still going through all CCTV on routes in and out of the kidnap sites. I'm hoping that we're going to spot a vehicle that's common to all three.'

'Where was the wooden flute found?'

'A few feet from here, along with her school bag which contained her phone.' DI Labey pointed up the dirt track to where a palm tree jutted up from the ground at the road side.

‘It was impossible to see tyre prints,’ he said regretfully. ‘Not much for us to see really.’ He scanned the horizon and then looked at his watch. ‘I need to get back to the station, we’ve got a briefing in forty-five minutes. It might be useful for you to come along to that if you’ve got the time. Hear from the rest of the team.’

‘Yes, absolutely,’ Saskia agreed. She needed as much information as she could gather if she was going to help find out what kind of person could be behind the disappearance of these three young children. Right now she had a good grasp of their personality, and their thirst for revenge, but for what? Somewhere in there was a pattern that they were missing, a vital link between all three families. She was going to need to try a lot harder if she was to help DI Winter Labey get the children back home.

TWELVE

SATURDAY

Jersey police headquarters is a relatively new building, situated on the outskirts of St Helier close to the tunnel linking the east of the Island with the south and the west. The mostly white and windowed structure is modern and efficient-looking, a busy working police station that serves the entire island. It is a complete dichotomy to the old Green Street cemetery it sits next door to where peace and rest are the rules.

Despite it being a weekend, the main office that the detectives worked out of was buzzing. As many essential staff as possible were working the case and they'd been bolstered by extra support who had flown in overnight from the UK.

Saskia had expected to see a board with all the faces of the children on it and various suspects' names, but guessed they did things digitally nowadays. The one nod to analogue were the maps of Jersey on the walls. There was the odd uniformed officer, but most of the people working in there were detectives in plain clothes. A few pieces of specialist communications equipment made it clear this was an active police operation, and not just a standard office.

'We can sit at my desk until the briefing starts,' DI Labey said. Saskia noticed it was one of the neater-looking desks in the room. DI Labey clearly believed in a clear desk, clear mind.

'I'll just get another chair,' he said and walked to another work station to bring a chair over.

She took the opportunity to scan his desk for anything that might give away something more about his personality. A postcard pinned to the backboard partition bore the photograph of a guy surfing on a huge wave and had the caption, 'I'd rather be surfing' on it. The detective's healthy glow suddenly made sense. He looked like a man who spent time outdoors not just in an air-conditioned office, and perhaps that's where she'd seen him before. When she first met him yesterday there'd been a vague feeling of recognition.

She'd already noticed that he didn't wear a wedding ring and there seemed to be no indication of a girlfriend or family displayed on his desk. Saskia wondered if the job was part of the problem. It wasn't as if he was lacking in the looks department. He was ruggedly handsome, but not the smooth, chiselled looks of her brother. Winter was blond to David's black hair, and had dark-green eyes. It was clear that Winter also didn't worry about the sun and sea on his skin, whereas Saskia suspected that David was already doing more than just plaster on his male moisturiser with added SPF.

'Here we go,' Winter said as he returned with the chair. 'I thought you could look at the map of where the children have been taken from first. We've also plotted out where they live and go to school, plus where their parents work. Put what we've seen today into context on a map.'

'Thanks,' Saskia said, concentrating on the screen that he'd brought up.

'Want an orange juice or croissant?' DI Labey asked her. He gesticulated to a table that was just a couple of feet from his desk. On it was a large plate that looked like it had once contained a mound of pastries, but now had just one solitary croissant remaining. Along with it were several cartons of orange juice and some bananas and apples. 'Or some fruit?' he added.

'No, I'm fine thanks, ate before I came out,' Saskia replied and returned her attention to the screen.

'There seems to be no pattern to the kidnap points,' she said to him a few moments later, 'other than opportunity.'

Usually, you'd find a perpetrator is territorial, doesn't stray too far from what they know, but as Jersey is such a small island that's probably less of an issue here.'

'Yeah, seems that way. But as you've seen, the kidnap points are all away from CCTV. None of them are around St Helier where there are plenty of cameras, so they're carefully chosen.'

'They're certainly smart. This has taken months, not just weeks of planning.'

Saskia leaned back in the chair and surveyed the map, trying to see if there was any pattern at all in what she was seeing. She was about to ask DI Labey another question when he suddenly launched himself off his chair and lunged at the croissant on the table nearby.

'Too late, Jonno.' Winter laughed at another detective who had been approaching.

The man sneered good-naturedly at him. 'You got lucky, buddy.'

'Lightning reactions, mate. Didn't you see how fast that hand was?' Winter did another lunge towards the table to demonstrate.

'You've won the battle, bud, but the war is not over,' Jonno replied, narrowing his eyes in mock anger. He picked up a banana and walked off. 'Until next time,' he said as he went, pointing the banana at Winter.

DI Labey turned back round to Saskia with a huge grin on his face. He had instantly become a school kid again, a side to him she hadn't seen before, and he obviously saw the expression on her face.

'The guy's a seagull. Any food and he swoops in,' DI Labey said to her in both explanation and defence.

'Couldn't you just share it?'

'Not likely. He wouldn't. Winner takes all.' Winter started to shove the croissant in his mouth, clearly enjoying not only the win but also the spoils of his victory. Then he stopped.

‘Sorry, you sure you don’t want some?’ He turned the croissant round so the untouched end faced Saskia. ‘I’m happy to share with you,’ he added, offering it to her.

‘You’re alright,’ she replied.

He didn’t need much more encouragement and within seconds all that was left were just a few flaky crumbs on his legs. Saskia knew that team banter and humour were the necessary psychological downtimes of a highly pressured job where humans had to deal with traumatic situations. She’d seen it often enough in the prison service.

DI Labey looked at his watch. As if on cue, an older man walked into the room and announced that the briefing was about to start.

‘That’s Detective Superintendent Graeme Walker,’ Winter said to her. ‘I’ll introduce you later.’

Winter got up, and Saskia followed him and the rest of the office as they trooped out and to a room with seats in front of a big screen where Det Supt Walker stood waiting for everyone to be seated.

‘I’ve just been upstairs and we’ve been promised every resource that we need to get these girls back home to their parents. UK are supporting. We already have six extra officers with us and a further six are arriving later today. In addition, we’ve been promised additional urgent DNA support and forensic specialists, as required. If we have any reason to suspect disposition sites, then search and rescue specialists are on standby.’

‘Disposition site means if we think the girls’ bodies have been disposed of somewhere,’ Winter said quietly to Saskia. He hadn’t needed to explain: she’d heard that term often enough in her life and career.

Det Supt Walker continued, ‘Customs, Coast guard, and volunteer lifeboat crews are supporting with monitoring of all borders. Our French counterparts are also fully informed and aware and French coastguard are assisting with the surveillance of the waters between us and their coastline. We

have full political cooperation and support from all agencies but it is down to us to find these girls. So, updates.’ Det Supt Walker looked towards Winter. ‘DI Labey, as investigating officer, do you want to lead?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Winter stood up and moved to the front of the room.

Saskia couldn’t help notice that the detective superintendent looked tired, and while she wasn’t a doctor, she’d go so far as to say his pale, clammy skin suggested he wasn’t well.

‘I think we’re satisfied that we’ve locked down the borders as best as we can and I am increasingly of the opinion that these girls are still in the island,’ Winter was saying. ‘Jonno, you’re exhibits officer, anything on the flutes or any other evidence?’

Jonno, who was sat in front of Saskia, spoke up. His demeanour was now professional, totally different to earlier.

‘We have a partial DNA result back from the first flute, but bearing in mind its location, this could have been transferred from the site – and it certainly isn’t showing up as matching anyone on the database. Still, it’s something to keep in the bag if we get a suspect. The other two flutes have been sent for urgent testing also and we’re awaiting those. They’re actually bamboo and made in India. I’m still trying to track down where they might have been bought from, but they’re a pretty cheap item available on Amazon and eBay and no doubt lots of other places. We’ve not got much else to go on apart from the bubble machine toy that was delivered to Lucy Carmichael yesterday. The packaging and toy itself are also in the UK for testing. There weren’t any prints on it besides Lucy’s and the au pair’s. No prints on the flutes either. It’s clear the perp is forensically aware.’

‘What about CCTV? Sarah, that’s you, right?’ DI Labey asked a woman in her thirties who was sat behind Saskia.

‘Yes. As we know, there were no cameras around the kidnap sites themselves so we are focusing on all the places that the girls frequented to see if we can spot someone

watching them prior to the kidnappings. We're also looking at all routes into and out of the kidnap areas for any potential connected vehicles. Slow progress; I could do with a couple more pairs of eyes.'

'You've got it. DCs Everton and Baxter, can you help DC Fuller's team please,' Winter said, but that was clearly an order not a question. 'If you need more, Sarah, just ask.'

She nodded her thanks.

'Mark, you're tracking down everyone on the sex offenders' register?'

'Yes,' a detective in his forties, oval-faced with a receding hairline, spoke up. 'Nothing flagging up to me yet. Most have alibis and none have any connections to the victims' families. I'm nearly done.'

'OK, who was looking into any visiting potentials? That you, Peter?'

'It is. So far nothing of any significance. There was one guy, but it was for an offence when he was only eighteen with a girl not that much younger than him. He's had a clean rap sheet since then.'

'What about potentials who aren't on the register?'

'I've ID'd a few that we should visit. One guy in particular who's staying at one of the Jersey Heritage sites, and another couple in a self-catering house.'

'Need support?' Winter asked him, making notes in the book he had with him.

'I'd get through them quicker, yes,' he answered.

'OK, could two of our newly arrived colleagues from the UK help DC Edwards here?'

'Yup.' Two young detectives' hands shot up.

'Thank you. Names please?'

'DCs O'Flanagan and Stewart.'

Winter scribbled in his book again. 'Right, any more updates or thoughts on where we're going with this?' he scanned the faces in the room. There was silence.

'OK, I'd like to introduce you all to Saskia Monet, who is a forensic psychologist at La Moye prison. She's helping to build up a profile of the kidnapper. Miss Monet, do you want to share what you have so far, having visited the families and the kidnap sites?'

'Since when do we use forensic profilers?' A tall man who'd been standing, arms folded, at the side of the room spoke up. He looked to Det Supt Graeme Walker as he said it, clearly trying to undermine Winter. Saskia had no idea what rank he was, but the body language said there was no love lost between him and DI Labey.

She saw Winter take a breath before he answered, the only indication of his irritation a tensing of his jaw muscle.

'Miss Monet has helped Kent police with a case and worked in high-security facilities in the UK, prior to coming to Jersey. I believe, as investigating officer on this case, that her input could be valuable and the boss agreed,' Winter said to the man.

Saskia could tell that Winter was making it clear he had the Detective Superintendent's support. She also wondered if he was going to get fed up with defending her presence.

When the detective didn't reply, Winter nodded to Saskia to continue. She stood up and stepped to one side to face the room.

'Hello, yes, as DI Labey has said, I've worked in the prison service for all of my career and spend my time interviewing convicted criminals to work out why they have committed the crimes they have. From what I've seen, I don't think your kidnapper is taking the children as part of a paedophile ring. I believe that the highly targeted nature of the kidnappings, the research and planning that has gone into them, and the fact we haven't heard from them yet, point to some kind of personal retribution. I also think the wooden flutes that are left at the scene are a nod to the Pied Piper story.'

He took the town's children because their parents refused to pay him for getting rid of the rats: it was revenge. That's what I think is going on here.'

'In that case, why are they all girls?' the detective with the crossed arms challenged again.

Saskia could see the scepticism on his face. She didn't rise to it. 'I suspect that gender is almost certainly irrelevant. They vary in age and it is the youngest, and therefore most compliant, of each family's children that have been taken. I think the connection is the parents and not the children.'

'We've asked each of the parents to come up with a list of people that could potentially have a grudge in both their working and private lives to see if we can spot any links,' Winter added, directing the information more to his boss than the challenger.

'The Pied Piper, the media are going to love that,' their detractor added, almost sarcastically. 'So, what kind of person do you think they are? That's one heck of a personal grudge they're holding.' He directed his question to Saskia.

It was yet another challenge, in words and tone, to her theory, but she chose to ignore it. The man was clearly trying to bully her. 'Well-educated, a professional, and they're not doing it for a ransom. It's much more personal and fundamental.'

'Not doing it for a ransom? OK, so how does this help us?' the detective asked Winter now.

Saskia hadn't finished and so stepped into reply. 'I think you need to focus on finding the link between the parents. It will be there somewhere.'

'Mmhm, I'm still not convinced. What's your opinion, DI Labey?' The detective folded his arms and peered down his nose at Winter.

'I think Miss Monet's hypotheses is certainly viable and the Pied Piper theory makes sense given what we've found so far. Miss Monet thinks we are going to hear from the kidnapper once they have finished taking children, and that

they're also going to try to contact the parents directly. We need to be vigilant and ensure the parents don't take matters into their own hands.'

Winter paused and looked at the faces in front of him before going on. 'There's a lot we aren't sure of, so we have to keep open minds, and we need to focus on what we do know. We know that they monitored the movements of the children prior to kidnapping them. That therefore has to be our main starting point. I want everyone who isn't working on a specific line of inquiry to be out there speaking to people around the kidnap sites and the family homes. Record everything they tell you. Somewhere in those eyewitness accounts could be the common denominator that will help us track down the kidnapper's vehicle or an individual. Any CCTV you can find that Sarah's team aren't already onto, whatever you have, get it in the system so we can cross-reference. There has to be something which ties these three kidnappings together and we need to find it.'

Saskia looked at the earnest faces in the room. The pressure was written on every single one of them. Experience told them that every hour that ticked by made it less likely they were going to find the three children alive – or even find them at all.

THIRTEEN

SATURDAY

The trip to the garden centre was uneventful but successful. After some negotiations and a near-marital argument, Natasha had persuaded Simon to buy a small patio heater, as well as an electric barbecue and some wood chips to go around the borders to make them look tidier. 'It's our first barbecue this summer and you know how it can get chilly in the evenings. You boys are usually warm enough, but us girls get cold easily.' Realising that the longer he argued, the longer they were going to be at the garden centre, Simon had agreed.

Oscar had played with his cars all the way there, but when they'd arrived, had moaned all the way round the garden centre. She didn't let him out of her sight, a habit she was usually in but even more focused on during the current situation with children disappearing. The news on the radio on the way there had been sober listening. A third child had been kidnapped yesterday.

'All girls, you notice,' she'd said to Simon, but that didn't stop her worrying about Oscar.

'Yeah. Doesn't sound too good, does it. The parents must be thinking about Madeline McCann and what happened to her family. Bloody awful,' Simon agreed.

They'd both been more protective of Oscar than usual, both consciously and subconsciously, and other families they saw at the garden centre looked to be behaving the same way.

By the time they arrived home, Oscar had fallen asleep.

‘Let him sleep while we unload,’ Simon said to her. ‘It will be much quicker.’

Natasha looked up and down the street.

‘He’s on our drive, we’ll not even be a minute. He’ll be fine,’ Simon reassured her.

She couldn’t see anybody in sight, and so she’d grabbed the other end of the barbecue with her husband and hoisted it out of the boot of the car. Then they both carried it in through the side gate to the garden. Natasha had glanced at Oscar as she’d gone through the gate, his eyes still closed, fast asleep. Then the strain of carrying the barbecue, which turned out to be a lot heavier and more awkward than she expected, took up her thoughts.

That was the last time she saw her son.

FOURTEEN

SATURDAY

After the briefing, Saskia and the rest of the investigating team headed back to their desks.

‘So, who’s my sceptic?’ she asked Winter directly as they sat down. She’d already noted that the man in question was nowhere in sight and she liked to know if there was an agenda she wasn’t aware of.

‘Detective Chief Inspector Chris Sharpe? Don’t worry about him, it’s me he was aiming all that at. Came over from the UK a few months ago and has a few chips on his shoulders. Seems to think anyone who was born here and has stayed local, is just a small town idiot. We get that from some of the incomers, big fish and small pond mentality. Think just because things are done slightly differently round here that we’re all backward. I reckon some of them also believe they’re not in on some kind of secret clique which all us islanders are, and so make themselves feel excluded.’

‘Really? I haven’t found that at all.’

‘No, exactly. He gets excluded from things because he’s an arse, not because he’s not from round here,’ Winter said with some gusto, and then quickly regained his professional composure. ‘However, we do have to keep an open mind on inquiries like this, and so no one theory is necessarily the right theory, especially as we’ve got no clear motive or suspect. We have to explore every avenue.’

Saskia nodded. ‘Evidence being where we should start—could I see the flutes?’

‘We don’t have them here physically as they’re in the UK for testing, but I can show you plenty of photos. You should look at the crime scene photos anyway as it might give you a better feel for the scene when the kidnappings occurred.’

DI Labey brought up files with the photographs and handed the keyboard and mouse to Saskia. ‘I’m going to check in on Sarah, I’ll leave you to it,’ he said and walked across to a bank of desks where the team were searching through CCTV.

Saskia studied the images of the flutes. The one from yesterday was just as she remembered it and the other two were virtually identical. She began scanning through the crime scene photographs, searching for any other clues as to who had ripped these families apart.

The low hum of voices and the sound of keyboards and mouse clicks as detectives worked through their allotted inquiry roles was suddenly interrupted by DI Labey’s mobile phone ringing across the room. The sudden silence that followed made Saskia look up. Everyone had stopped their work, carefully watching Winter on his phone.

Could this be it? Could they have had a breakthrough?

Winter ended the call and strode towards Saskia, heading for his desk. She moved away from his computer where she’d been viewing the images, sensing he needed it. He flung himself into his chair and clicked onto his emails. As he did so, other detectives stood up and gathered around him. Saskia waited and watched – she didn’t want to interrupt and ask what it was.

The email he clicked on was from the editor of the *Jersey Evening Post*, the island’s daily newspaper. There was no message, just an image. A photograph of a handwritten letter.

Once upon a time, in a land far away,
There was an island, where the rich like
to play,
Jersey was its name, a place of history
and nice beaches,

The most southerly British Isle at its
most outer reaches,

But, when begins my ditty,

Some time not long ago,

To see the islanders suffer so,

From greedy vermin, was a pity.

Four children – eight parents – £250,000 pounds withdrawn from each of their personal bank accounts by all four fathers, and placed in four separate clear plastic bags. Put them at the base of the rock on Green Island beach in the middle of the two tall trees at Rocqueberg at 11 a.m. OR... Three children – six parents – and a grieving mummy and daddy.

Remember, only the fathers at the drop-off site and they are to stay, facing the main beach and slipway. They mustn't move until I give the all-clear. No police or the penalties get higher.

Several expletives came from the group huddled around DI Labey's computer screen, but his immediate response was, 'Four? Has he taken another one?'

For the next few minutes the incident room resembled a bee colony under attack as officers rushed around trying to verify information. Just ten minutes after he'd read the email, DI Labey got the call to say that a seven-year-old boy, Oscar Keyes, had been snatched from his parents' car outside their home.

'I need to attend,' he said to Saskia. 'Can I call you later about what all this means?'

'Sure,' she'd said to his disappearing back.

Saskia tried to carry on with her profiling work for about another hour, but without Winter to point her to additional information, she wasn't going to make any further progress. She also didn't want to ask anyone else. There were very few

detectives left in the incident room and those that were looked stressed and under pressure. Until she was able to get information about Oscar and his family, she wouldn't be able to complete her profiling. She could analyse the poem and ransom note at home where she didn't feel so conspicuous.

Saskia was just on her way out of the office when Detective Chief Inspector Chris Sharpe walked in.

'So,' he said, the smug look on his face telling her exactly what he was about to say before he'd even opened his mouth. 'Your theory that the kidnapper will contact the parents and not ask for a ransom has gone out the window, don't you think? You should stick to dealing with those criminals we've already put in jail for you, Miss Monet, and not try to get involved in police work.' He walked off, leaving her no chance to reply.

She wasn't going to rise to his antagonistic approach, even if he was an irritating arse just as Winter had said. She was used to far worse in her line of work. It also wasn't the first time she'd come up against scepticism, and it wouldn't be the last. Plus, today's events didn't change her view. This was ultimately not about a ransom, but personal revenge; the poem said as much.

As Saskia headed home, the one consolation she had was that at least poor Oscar was the final child to be taken. No more families would have to face this trauma. The bad news was that the game had only just begun.

FIFTEEN

SATURDAY

He'd taken a big risk with this one. He could easily have been spotted by the parents or neighbours and he wouldn't be surprised if they'd clocked his van. Time was running out though. He'd had to be bold.

At least it had been easy. The kid was asleep already and so he'd not struggled as he drugged him. He was smaller than the girls, but surprisingly felt heavier, more solid. He'd never had much experience with kids so he'd not stopped to think about it before. It had been a relief to have some help at the other end when he'd delivered him.

'Time for my payment,' he'd said to the Pied Piper as the boy was transferred.

The Pied Piper looked at him and nodded. 'Monday,' he'd replied.

A couple of hours later after he'd finished his shift, he went home via the local Co-op to pick up food for the next couple of days. He treated himself, getting their premium range lasagne and his favourite dessert, tiramisu. His mother had been Italian, which probably explained his jet-black hair and olive skin. Nowadays the hair was grey and that healthy Mediterranean glow had faded. The face that looked back at him in the mirror was tired, drawn and gaunt from his weight loss, and the yellow tinge of his skin was becoming noticeable.

He'd never had much money; he couldn't remember a time when he'd not had to watch what he spent, eking out his meagre wages to survive Jersey's expensive cost of living. He

wasn't going to have to worry about that soon. He even bought himself a bottle of whisky – the best they had, blowing a chunk of his month's money. Monday was just a day away.

SIXTEEN

SUNDAY

Saskia groaned awake to Bilbo batting her face with his paw. Thankfully he'd at least had the decency to retract his claws as he hit her. She'd repeatedly ignored her alarm clock after a tsunami of thoughts had kept her up until the early hours and now, he was making it known that he didn't appreciate having his breakfast served late.

'You are such a spoilt diva, Bilbo.' She threw back the covers to head downstairs to the kitchen accompanied by her mewling slave driver.

Saskia put the kettle on and got Bilbo his breakfast after washing out his empty bowl from the night before. She looked out her kitchen window as though hoping to find a clue to where the four children were. A flashing sign that said, *Children this way*, or a little red squirrel beckoning her to follow, as if Katie Plover's Disney world could come to life. Her garden was empty except for the sparrows, who were noisily arguing amongst themselves like little feathered thugs. At least the weather was Disney. Another perfect day of blue skies and sunshine with a hint of a more active breeze circulating off the sea to ensure the temperature didn't get unbearable. A world away from the living hell of four young children and their families.

She was glad that DI Labey hadn't called her yet. She'd be embarrassed talking to him and sounding like she'd just got out of bed when he'd probably been up half the night and then back at work early. She poured the boiling water into her cafetière and then got the Jersey milk out of the fridge. Her

whole milk in the UK was nothing compared to the creaminess of the whole milk here and it had taken her a couple of weeks to work out the ideal richness. In the end, she'd discovered the 2.5% was best for tea and that she enjoyed the extra-creamy whole milk in her coffee. She poured some into a mug and warmed it up in the microwave. For a few minutes she'd stood in the kitchen in a bit of a trance, sipping her coffee, before the sight of Bilbo licking his paws having consumed his morning quota of crunchy kibble and dried shredded chicken, made her snap into action and head for the shower. Bilbo only had to saunter over to his windowsill for the day. She needed to carry on building a profile for the Pied Piper.

She got dressed and opened up her laptop, quickly checking her work emails to ensure nothing urgent had come in. One of the prison officers had emailed asking her to assess a new offender as part of the usual initial risk management process on arrival. He was someone who was no stranger to the prison, although she'd not met him before as he'd last been released before her arrival. Saskia booked a meeting time into the system and pulled up his records to read through beforehand. She'd need to make up the hours she spent on the investigation by doing some prison work in the evenings and weekend.

There was also an email from Winter asking if she'd be available for a Zoom call later that morning. She knew exactly what his first question was going to be, and she was more than ready for it. A text also came in from David to confirm he'd come by early evening after he'd been to the gym. It was going to be a long day. Saskia went and put the kettle on for another coffee.

Just before their Zoom call, Winter emailed again to let her know his boss, Detective Superintendent Graeme Walker, would also be on the call. She checked her background to make sure there was nothing unprofessional behind her, and dialled in.

Winter's face, with a blurred-out background, came up immediately. He was obviously in the office and had

headphones on. A short while later Walker popped up, sitting in what looked to be his home office. A bookcase was behind, showcasing various police publications, along with several photographs of him in uniform shaking hands with other officers and dignitaries. Saskia recognised the island's Lieutenant Governor who had recently been shown around the prison. The role was a five-year term for a senior retired member of the armed forces, an historic connection between the island and the British monarchy. It had been the wish of islanders to swear their allegiance to King John of England and not the French King back in the twelfth century, which had created the unique situation in the island – a British territory eighty-five miles from its mainland and just fourteen miles from France. It resulted in the countless sea defence towers being built all around the coast to repel the many attempts made by French invaders. The tiny little island had succeeded in that aim for centuries, until the Germans occupied the Channel Islands in World War Two, building coastal defences and bunkers of their own that still lay scattered around the island. Manmade scars that were preserved as monuments to those who had lived, died, and experienced the occupation. History that remained ever-present.

‘Thank you for joining us for this call,’ Winter started, bringing her back to the room. ‘You’re aware of what happened yesterday with the fourth child being snatched and the ransom note being delivered?’

‘Yes.’ Saskia nodded.

‘We have a few questions,’ Winter began, clearly trying to find the right words to start.

‘You want to ask me why I said that he wouldn’t make a ransom demand, and yet he has?’ Saskia helped him out.

‘Yes.’ Winter nodded and Det Supt Walker leaned forward in his chair.

‘I still believe that the money isn’t important. It’s just the start of his game,’ she said.

‘What do you mean and how can you know this?’ Walker asked, eyes narrowed.

‘There are several indicators. The complexity of it all for one thing. If money was the only motive, it would all be much simpler. He’d just want to get on with it and get the cash as quickly as possible so he could get out of here. Why ask for money unless you intend to disappear somewhere to spend it? The amount is another tell. It’s only one million. For four children? He could have asked for a lot more, especially here in Jersey which is known for its affluent society.’

‘Maybe he’s going to ask for more. Maybe this is just an initial demand,’ Walker pressed.

‘It’s certainly only his first demand. There will be more, but not necessarily financial. It’s psychological game play. The real motivation is in the method. He’s asked for the fathers to withdraw the money themselves and then he wants them to stand on a beach and wait until he gives the all-clear. That’s going to be like torture to those parents. By involving them he is making them feel like they are doing something positive towards seeing their children again. That means it will be so much harder when it fails. He wants them to suffer. His intention is to weaken them through expectation, so that when he asks for what he really wants, they will be so emotionally and psychologically drained that they’ll just do it.

‘The other indicator is in the poem. He talks of greed as though it’s an external feeling found amongst others, and possibly by implication, these families. He isn’t driven by greed himself.’

‘I’m not so sure. Perhaps you’re giving this person too much credit. They’re all well off or wealthy families. I think we have to take this ransom demand seriously,’ Walker said.

‘Of course you do. The Pied Piper knows that you’re going to have to go along with it, but this person has proven they are intelligent and thorough. He’s done his research well. If they really wanted that money then they’d know to ask for bitcoin, or for older notes which aren’t sequential so that they can’t be traced. They’d also have a far simpler way of getting the

money than making four men stand on a busy beach in the summer and place four bags of cash somewhere very public.’

Saskia watched as the thought sunk into Walker’s head.

‘How will he watch each of the fathers to ensure they take the money out?’ Walker asked, his tone still challenging. ‘We’re assuming it’s just one person, maybe it’s a gang.’

‘He or they don’t need to watch the fathers because he knows they’ll follow the instructions and do what he asks. They won’t risk not doing it,’ DI Labey answered for Saskia.

The detective superintendent hmphed. He was obviously still not convinced. ‘And, Miss Monet, you said that he would contact the families directly and yet he’s sent this open letter to the newspaper.’

Saskia suspected that a certain detective chief inspector had been bending the detective superintendent’s ear. ‘I still think that is what he will do eventually. This is not just going to be a one-off demand. There will be more, but he has made this a public humiliation. By bringing in the media, he’s simply ramped up the pressure on the parents, and on you.’

‘The thing is, it doesn’t matter whether we think the money is a motive or not,’ Winter interrupted. ‘We’re going to have to go along with it. We can’t risk him hurting one of the children.’

‘Exactly,’ Walker agreed.

‘The only thing I’d say,’ Saskia added, ‘is that I’d warn the parents that this might not be the end. That they shouldn’t get their hopes up too high. It’s going to be agonising for them.’

‘Well, we’ll see,’ Walker said in a somewhat dismissive tone that shut down their conversation. ‘Perhaps he just wants some money after all. I’ll come into the office in the next hour, Winter. Miss Monet, thank you for your time.’

With that, Walker disappeared from the call leaving just Winter and Saskia.

‘He doesn’t agree with anything I’ve said, does he?’ Saskia asked Winter.

‘I think he’s sceptical, reckons that one million is still a lot of money to some, but the big doubts have been planted by Sharpe who’s been questioning my judgement in asking you to get involved in this.’

‘I’m sorry. I hope it doesn’t get you into trouble,’ Saskia said to him.

‘Don’t be, I’m not sorry. This is my problem, not yours, so don’t apologise. You were spot on about the Pied Piper angle. That ransom note is a take-off of the Robert Browning poem. Plus I think you might be right about it being a link between the parents. But we’ll have to go ahead with the money drops as he’s asked and keep hunting for that link between them. He’s going to have made a mistake somewhere.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ Saskia replied, but if her profile of the kidnapper was correct, he’d been planning this for a long time and would have been thorough.

‘I’ll send you over all we have on Oscar Keyes and his family. I’ve asked the parents to write down everyone they can think of through work and socially as we did with the others, just in case tomorrow doesn’t pan out. I need to go and meet the UK specialists now who are over to help us with the ransom exchange. I’ll let you know how it goes.’

Saskia closed Zoom down and flicked the privacy slider on her camera. She looked out the window to the back garden and beyond. Rising above the end wall, the fronds on the cluster of palm trees at the bottom of her neighbour’s garden gently bobbed in the breeze and behind their house, the small hills around St Ouen’s bay rose up, green meeting blue sky.

The small spare bedroom acted as her office – if you could call it that. The room only really contained a desk and office chair, plus a bookcase with some of her psychology textbooks on it. Not quite as impressive as Det Supt Walker’s home office space. No doubt he’d have noted that and added it to his reasons why he thought she was just an amateur.

A sadness had settled on Saskia like the shadow of a rain cloud. It wasn't that the detective superintendent didn't believe her; it was her conviction that tomorrow's ransom drop was just a side distraction and the four children would be spending at least another day as captives. She also had the very definite impression that she was being pushed away from the investigation. If the detective superintendent was listening to Sharpe's scepticism, then they weren't going to agree to Winter still involving her. That meant she was unlikely to be able to get to speak to Oscar Keyes' parents. She could rely on Winter still sending through the information on the family though, but there wasn't much more she could do until she had that. Saskia decided to go and seek some sunshine and hope that the vitamin D she'd create from the UVB rays might give her brain a bit of a pick-me-up.

Saskia woke up on her sofa with Bilbo sprawled across her chest. After an hour in the garden chatting to June, she'd come in and found that Winter had sent through the information about Oscar Keyes and his family. She'd gone over it all before deciding to sit down and think through everything. At some point in the thinking process she'd obviously fallen asleep. Her disturbed rest last night must have taken its toll because it was nearly six o'clock before she woke up; that meant David would be coming round soon. She could have done without it. Today, she really didn't have the energy to face up to him and his mind games, but his comments about the prawn sandwich man on Friday had got her worried. They walked a fine tightrope with his psychopathy and she was his balance pole.

When six o'clock came and went, it didn't surprise her that David hadn't shown. His lack of empathy for anyone, even her, meant his timekeeping was rarely punctual. She got on with various chores, feeding Bilbo and putting a wash on. All the time her mind kept wandering to DI Labey and the investigation. Would they have made any headway? Were they any closer to finding the children?

It was Pushki who alerted her to David's arrival. June must have left her front door open, and unlike Winter yesterday, Pushki did not approve of her brother. It was incredible what a good judge of character dogs could be. Even Bilbo, who rarely batted an eyelid at mere humans, seemed to sense David's antipathy towards animals and made himself scarce whenever he was around.

Pushki's sharp yapping was determined and no doubt annoying to her brother. She opened her front door to make sure he didn't consider attempting to silence the dog himself.

'One good kick and it would be halfway to St Helier,' David growled as he walked into her cottage.

'That's why he barks at you. He senses what you're thinking,' Saskia said to him. 'Been to the gym?'

David's hair was still wet and he had the slightly flushed skin of a person who had just been exercising. Saskia caught the scent of something else too.

'Yeah, just popped in for a quick workout on the way over. Jackie's been busy all afternoon. Some client has flown in and she needed to show them around a new development.'

Saskia didn't say anything further – she'd save it for later.

'You look like a cat bed,' David added as he passed her in the hallway.

Saskia looked down at her clothes. He had a point. Her top was covered in Bilbo hairs. She stepped out the front door, brushing them off and trying to avoid them going up her nose as they floated around her in a cloud.

'Want a drink?' she asked as she walked back into the house.

'Water. Need to rehydrate,' he replied, flopping down onto her sofa and putting his feet up on her coffee table.

When she returned with two glasses of water, David was looking at the mind map she'd doodled on her notepad.

'What's this?' he asked.

‘That is the case I’m helping the police with. The kidnapping of the four children.’ She took it off him and put it out of his sight.

‘Oh yeah, heard someone talking about it. They’ll be dead by now so I don’t know why you’re bothering.’ He said it in a cold, matter-of-fact way.

‘Not necessarily,’ she replied, taking the emotion out of her answer. ‘And,’ she raised her eyebrows at him, ‘the whole island is talking about it so you might want to practice a bit more sympathy in your response.’

‘Oh, absolutely. It’s such a tragic situation for those poor parents.’ David’s face instantly switched into a look of empathetic pain, his bottom eyelid squeezing up, eyebrows flat and furrowed in the centre of his brow. It was so totally believable – if you didn’t know the truth. He settled back on the sofa and his face returned to its default pose of benign, charming neutrality.

‘So how have you been feeling in the last week?’ Saskia asked.

‘Like I said the other day, fine. Just the usual.’

‘I’d like to hear more about the French man and his sandwich,’ she prompted, watching him closely.

‘Not much to tell. We ordered in sandwiches and he was allergic to seafood. Somehow a prawn got into his and he had an anaphylactic episode – I think they call it. Nearly died.’ David looked at her as though butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth and he was just describing a glass of water being knocked over.

‘Do you know how that prawn might have found its way into his sandwich?’ Saskia tested.

David shrugged. ‘Who knows, but it’s done him a favour. He’s alive and now he’ll be more careful.’

‘How did it make you feel? It must have been frightening for your colleagues.’

Saskia watched as a smile crept onto David's lips, as though he was remembering a favourite holiday moment.

'Yeah. It was chaos.' He shrugged again.

'Is there an investigation into what happened?'

'Don't know. Nothing official, I don't think. The firm will want to keep it quiet.'

His lack of concern for consequence was one of the key areas that they'd spent a lot of time working on. That, and the need to not hurt or kill people. David had to realise that the buzz of risk came with repercussions.

'The client might still report it and there may well be an investigation even if your firm doesn't want one.'

David shrugged.

'Had he died, the police would definitely have got involved and they would be thorough. It would probably have been seen as a murder because there's no reason why prawns should be in a brie sandwich.'

'I think you're over-stressing, Sis,' David said coyly.

Saskia studied his face and attitude. He clearly wanted to move the conversation on.

'David, did you put the prawn in his sandwich?' she asked him outright.

He looked into her eyes, hesitating. 'No. Why would I?'

She was suddenly taken back to when they were children and she'd asked him a similar question. He'd given the same answer – and she'd known, even then, that he'd been lying.

'Did it excite you, or disturb you when he was dying?'

David studied her for a moment.

These sessions, where she relied on him reporting back to her on how he was doing, had big limitations. She needed him to tell her the truth. The more he hid from her, the more likely it was that he was slipping further into dangerous behaviour. The only way she could determine if that was the case was

through inconsistencies in his stories, and sometimes the tell-tale look in his eyes.

‘Be honest, David.’

He flicked his hair and tipped his head coyly, looking at her with his intense blue eyes.

‘I found it interesting. I know what you’re getting at, but I was the one who saved him. I found the EpiPen and injected him.’ David’s face took on a look of wounded victim.

‘But it was a close call, David. He could have died and it was no doubt traumatic for him and your colleagues.’

‘They’re all fine.’

‘You know what I’m saying, David. You’ve got a good life here, don’t end up like our father.’

He scowled at her. ‘I’m a lot more intelligent than our father and you know that. He was just a cheap chef. No control.’

‘And how is work going?’ She changed the subject, steering away from the topic of their parents, which never got them anywhere.

‘Fine. I’m expecting a promotion soon. They’d be mad not to.’

‘And Jackie?’

‘Fine.’

‘Is she happy?’

‘Yeah of course. She’s got a fit boyfriend who’s twenty years younger than her, why wouldn’t she be? I look after her. I buy her flowers. I give her massages. I make her feel good.’

‘You might want to consider having another shower before you go home then because I can smell perfume on you, which I’m guessing isn’t Jackie’s if she’s been out all afternoon and you’ve been to the gym!’

David frowned and sniffed at his top.

‘Really? He pulled his top off, revealing a torso that was taut and rippled with muscles. He sniffed at the top again. ‘I’ll change my top.’

‘If she finds out, you’ll be looking for somewhere new to live,’ Saskia warned.

‘She won’t find out. I stick to married women. They’ve got more to lose than me. I told you, I’m smart, Sas. You underestimate me.’

SEVENTEEN

SUNDAY

DI Winter Labey had struggled to sleep Saturday night, and the few scraps he did catch had been plagued by vivid nightmares. Four young lives were in the balance and he had to make sure he did everything possible to get them home safely to their parents. The nightmares didn't bode well and he knew that it wasn't the last he'd see of them. They'd wormed through into his waking day and were sitting festering in the back of his mind.

He'd gone straight into the shower, there was no day of rest for him. It had been a warm night and the forecast was for another scorcher and so he didn't add much hot water, instead enjoying the refreshing chill of a cool shower on his skin. Afterwards, he'd quickly shaved, allowing himself just a brief moment of inner reflection as he looked in the mirror. He remembered watching his dad shave, wishing away his childhood to the time when he too could be a big man and shave the stubble from his chin.

The years of innocence as a child were so precious. Had they been stolen from the four kidnap victims for ever? Winter knew he couldn't let the emotion of the case get in the way of his investigative skills. He was lucky that he didn't have to work somewhere like London where the murder squads would regularly be faced with the waste of young life trapped in a cycle of violence; knife and gun crime dictated by the drugs gangs that ruled the streets. When he'd first joined the force, he'd thought about spending some time in London. Thought it would be exciting, a real buzz, great experience. Then he'd started dealing with serious crimes and realised that each

trauma chipped away at him just a little. Perhaps he would have developed a thicker skin if he'd left this tiny continental backwater and joined a metropolitan world; but this was his home and he'd discovered that he didn't want to become a hardened cynic like Sharpe. He wanted to fight for justice where it mattered to him. In his own community. When it came to the criminals he could be as tough as the best of them, but, right now, he needed to find those four missing children so they could have the childhood that he'd had, being brought up in a beautiful island where crime was low and the sun and sea free.

Much as he liked Saskia Monet and respected her profiling, they still had to put all their resources into preparing for the ransom drop. They couldn't be sure that the kidnapper wasn't going to turn up and, more importantly, wasn't going to go through with his promise and leave one set of parents grieving. They had to follow the ransom request to the letter. It was going to be a long and intense day.

The UK's National Crime Agency had sent over a specialist from their Anti Kidnap and Extortion Unit, a detective trained in dealing with just these kinds of situations. After their Zoom call with Saskia, Winter had set to work preparing for her arrival. They were going to have a meeting the minute she landed, and prior to the main team briefing. She would be running the operation, but with his joint command as he had the local knowledge, and he wanted to be ready.

Detective Sergeant Lucy Thompson turned out to be a practical, down-to-earth individual, who got straight down to business, dumping her overnight bag by the desk she'd been shown to and immediately requesting a meeting room and coffee.

'Ever run one of these before?' she asked Winter when the door was closed and the pair of them sat across from each other.

He shook his head.

'No problem, always a first time. If you follow the procedures then we'll be fine, although I have to say this is

somewhat of an unusual case. I'm used to British nationals being kidnapped for either criminal or terrorist motives, but the circumstances of your case are pretty unique. Do we really have no idea who the kidnapper is and their motive?'

Winter felt her question like a criticism, but her face was open and non-judgemental. 'We think it's somebody trying to seek revenge on the parents, a personal vendetta, but we haven't found the link yet. A forensic psychologist who has advised on the case doesn't think the kidnapper is being serious with this demand. She said they won't turn up and it's psychological game-playing.'

'She might well be right looking at the terms of the demand, but we could also be dealing with a mentally ill individual who isn't in touch with reality. Either way, we'll play it by the book and hope we get a result. I assume that the newspaper hasn't published the letter?'

'No. We asked them to hold off until after.'

'Good, right, what have you done so far?'

'We've surveyed the whole area and spoken to the homeowner of the big house, Rocqueberg, on the headland above the rocks on the corner of the bay. They're happy for us to put cameras, and personnel if needs be, in the garden house that overlooks the beach.'

'It's a public beach, I take it?'

'Yes, and it will be busy. It's popular with families, especially as it's school holidays. There's a restaurant and takeaway kiosk there, with a proper hard-standing car park, and toilet facilities. It is a sheltered sandy beach with rock formations that means it's perfect for younger children to swim at high tide, and go rock pooling when the tide is out.'

'Bloody hell, this is going to be a logistical headache. We can't stop the public going because the kidnapper will know.'

'The car park is only small though. We can deter people by filling it up early on with our own vehicles.'

'Good. What's this little island?' DS Thompson pointed at the map that Winter was showing her.

It's what's given the place its name, Green Island, although actually that's not its original name,' Winter stopped, realising he wasn't giving a tourist guide, 'It's just a tiny tidal island, great for slightly older children to go exploring. This side of Jersey is very gently sloped, quite different to the north and more protected than the west, and with our big tidal reach, we have around two kilometres of extra beach at low tide. The sea at this time of year will slide in there, but fast as it's so shallow.' With everything he was saying, Winter knew that he was making her job harder. He could see her mind taking in all the extra information.

'OK. It's not going to be easy, but we can do this. Let's go meet the team and get started.'

Her can-do attitude was a welcome support to Winter and despite the tough circumstances, he knew the rest of his colleagues would appreciate it too. Within ten minutes they were gathered in the main briefing room and DS Thompson was addressing them, a fresh coffee in her hand. The atmosphere in the room was like before a thunder storm hit with whispered worries heating the air and causing them all to feel uncomfortable.

'We're going to need to place officers, posing as beachgoers, across the area,' she explained.

'Are you suggesting we take our own kids?' DC Peter Edwards asked, a look of shock on his face.

'No, we need you to be able to assist and not be worrying about your own children, but you are going to have to blend in.'

'You really think your Debs would be OK with you taking baby Henry to a beach on an armed police operation?' Winter smirked at his colleague, who shook his head of curly hair like a chaste schoolboy. 'I'd like to see you suggest that one,' Winter joked and the rest of the packed room broke out into laughter and smiles. They all knew Peter's wife, Deborah, because she was a uniformed officer, and although currently off on maternity leave, she was known for being vocal and

single-minded, and definitely the one making the decisions in their household.

‘And blending in doesn’t mean you get to wear your mermaid costume,’ Jonno shouted across to Edwards, who was used to his colleagues’ humour and could always see the funny side of it all.

‘And that also doesn’t mean stationing yourself at the café and working your way through their entire ice cream menu,’ Winter added, raising his eyebrows at Jonno, who held his hands up to protest his innocence. It was some much-needed light relief in an otherwise tense meeting.

Detective Sergeant Lucy Thompson brought them back to business. ‘We will have armed response teams on standby. We’ll be watching every inch of that beach.’

‘What about the restaurant staff?’ DC Everton asked.

‘We can’t run the risk of swapping out staff. We don’t know if he is one of them. He was clear that the fathers should go alone. This means we have to infiltrate and not replace.’

‘There are houses all along the sea wall, aren’t there?’ DC Sarah Fuller asked.

‘Yes. We are doing background checks on the owners. Does anyone know anybody who lives along there? We’ve spoken to the owners of Rocqueberg, but it would be useful to have eyes in one of the houses overlooking the car park and one on the other side of the beach,’ DS Thompson said.

‘We’ve got a family friend who lives in one of the older houses along the sea wall,’ DI Labey explained to her, before addressing the team. ‘But if anyone knows anybody in the new houses around the car park, then that would be useful.’

‘I think some friends of ours have recently moved in there, I’ll check,’ DC Edwards replied.

‘I understand that people kayak and paddle board around there too?’ DS Thompson said to the room.

‘Yes. So whoever is proficient in either, let DC Peter Edwards know. We will need to have some officers in kayaks

keeping an eye in case the kidnapper approaches from the sea. The beach is accessible at low tide from those on either side of it, but during the high tide, it's cut off.'

'So how does he think he's going to pick up the cash without anyone noticing?' DS Mark Le Scelleur asked now.

'We think he might wait until the tide comes in, then kayak possibly, or snorkel or scuba dive. Or he might try to create a distraction and approach via land from the St Clements Bay side. We also don't know if we are dealing with just one person here or a team. This is all assuming that they do turn up. Anything's possible.'

'And how likely is it that we think they're going to turn up? Didn't the psychologist from the prison say he wasn't after ransom money?' DS Le Scelleur pressed.

'That was pure conjecture. She said there wouldn't be a ransom demand and he'd contact the parents directly, neither of which have happened, so we go ahead with this operation and hope he turns up for the cash,' DCI Sharpe spoke up, quickly cutting in so that Winter didn't have the chance to reply. The DCI threw him a glance which was a challenge for him to disagree.

Winter knew which battles to fight and so he said nothing further. They needed to focus on getting the children back to their families, not office politics.

Winter had asked the families to come into the station late Sunday afternoon, so they could have a briefing and meet each other prior to the Monday drop. It was the first time they'd all been together and so he wanted to watch them closely under controlled conditions, looking for any signs that they recognised each other. If he'd had a choice, he would have had Saskia Monet there too, but right now, that was not going to be something his boss would agree to. He witnessed just one greeting, between Des Carmichael and Simon Keyes. They clearly knew each other. He would have to investigate their relationship further.

‘So, we’ve got to take out £250,000 from our bank account tomorrow morning and then stand on a beach until he turns up with our children? Is this for real?’

Predictably, Des was the most vociferous of the parents.

‘You’ve seen the note,’ Winter said to him calmly. ‘We are going to do everything he has asked, except rest assured that we will have the entire area covered with personnel and surveillance devices.’

‘We don’t have £250,000 in cash available,’ Nicholas Brown spoke up now. ‘It’s invested and I can’t get it by tomorrow. We just don’t have that kind of ready cash.’

‘We don’t either,’ Simon Keyes said.

‘We’ll sort that. My colleague will talk to you afterwards,’ Winter reassured them.

‘What about us? What do we do?’ Daisy Plover asked.

‘Yeah. Do we have to just sit at home and do nothing?’ Natasha Keyes added.

‘I’m sorry, but I would suggest that you do. If he does pick up the ransom, it’s possible the children might be dropped off somewhere else. We will keep you fully informed. But I do want to manage your expectations. This might just be a test, or a game to him.’ Winter had Saskia’s warning in his mind.

‘How do we know that it’s even him who wrote the note?’ William Plover asked. All the parents’ eyes turned to Winter.

‘We hadn’t released the information to the public about the wooden flutes. The only discussions about the link to the Pied Piper story were internal. I appreciate that we can’t be one hundred per cent sure, but the note said he had four children, even before we’d been told about Oscar. I believe that on the balance of evidence, the note is from the kidnapper. We have to go along with this.’

By the time Winter had finished briefing the parents and making the final preparations for the next morning, he was exhausted. He walked back into the office and flopped into his chair, staring blankly at his computer screen. Brain fried.

‘C’mon, mate. We’ve done all we can until tomorrow, let’s grab a quick beer before we go home,’ Jonno walked up to his desk, a sympathetic smile on his face.

Winter hesitated, but when the door opened and DCI Sharpe walked in, he shut his computer down and walked straight out with his friend.

‘The beak’s being a complete arse still I take it?’ Jonno said to him on the way down the stairs. Beak was the nickname they had for the DCI because not only did he have a prominent nose with nostrils that flared when he got annoyed, but he was always getting involved in everything – especially when it wasn’t his business.

‘That obvious?’ Winter replied with growling sarcasm that wasn’t aimed at Jonno.

‘Mate, you’ve just got to not take it personally. You know what he’s like.’

‘I know the guy hates me and I can deal with that. What irritates me is he’s quite happy to compromise an investigation in order to get at me. He won’t take anything that Saskia Monet has said seriously because I asked her to come on board. Now he’s bent Graeme’s ear about it too and I think that could be at the detriment of this investigation.’

They had reached the exit doors by this time and headed onto the street, past Green Street car park towards the pub. Jonno was silent for a moment.

‘You’ve just got to wait it out. If she’s right then Graeme will see that and the Beak will have to suck it up. Remember that kid, Jack Read, when we were at school? He had it in for you, kept trying to turn everyone against you, but eventually they all saw him for what he was.’

‘Yeah I know and I remember you stuck by me. Lifted his trainers when he wasn’t looking so he couldn’t do sports.’ Winter smiled at his friend, before his face dropped back into serious mode. ‘Thing is, time isn’t something we have with this case. There are four kids out there somewhere and I want to find them today and alive, not next week.’

‘We all do, mate.’

‘Yeah, you’re right. We’ve got a good team; he can’t take that away from us.’ Winter opened the door to The Forum pub. ‘Pint of Liberation IPA, I presume?’

‘Do bears shit in the woods?’ Jonno replied, smiling.

EIGHTEEN

MONDAY

Winter and DS Lucy Thompson set up the command centre in an unmarked van in the car park just above Green Island beach. To ensure no suspicion could be raised, DC Peter Edwards and DC O'Flanagan, both dressed in beach clothing, had driven the van there and gone off to the beach as part of the surveillance team. They'd had to go via a shop to get DC O'Flanagan some sunscreen. His fluorescent-white legs, not used to the Jersey sunshine, would otherwise have been burnt red by the end of the day and he hadn't thought to bring any when he came over to support the operation.

Inside the back of the van was a bank of TV screens with feeds coming from all the cameras and audio devices that had been placed around the area and on personnel and the fathers. DS Thompson had brought the van over from London with her and it had UK plates, but amid the holidaymakers' vehicles, it didn't look out of place. DC Edwards made sure to park it next to a French car to drive home its tourist credentials.

Everyone was in place before the four fathers arrived with their bag of cash each. It had passed low tide and the sea was on its way back in. Jersey has the third largest tidal range in the world, nearly doubling the size of the island on low tide. The water was still thirty feet away, but it would come in fast. The four fathers had been told to go to the left of the beach, and place the bags at the base of the large rock which was underneath and in the middle of the two tallest trees on the headland. They were to then move fifty yards away and wait, with strict instructions to not move, no matter what.

‘Tide’s going to be up to them by midday,’ DI Labey said to DS Thompson. ‘The cash will be under water and they’re going to be in it up to their waists by one o’clock.’

‘You don’t think he’s coming, do you?’ she said to him, studying his profile.

Winter turned to look at her. She was a slim woman in her late-forties, with eyes that had seen more than their fair share of trauma.

‘Honest answer? No. It’s just too risky here. I know I’m not experienced in this, but when have you ever seen a ransom drop like this one?’

DS Thompson sighed. ‘Always a first time, but can’t say I don’t share your doubts. Anyway, I guess we’ll know in the next few hours.’

The next few hours were without doubt the longest of Winter’s life. He couldn’t imagine what Des, Simon, William, and Nicholas were feeling. The tension was palpable. Every one of the surveillance team was constantly scanning the land, sea, and air – just in case a drone was deployed. They had officers on one of the memorial benches that sat along the sea wall. Another pair hung around the busy kiosk at the restaurant, keeping an eye on the ever-present queue waiting for ice creams and cold drinks. There were officers kayaking, sunbathing, and rock pooling. If something was going to happen, they had plenty of personnel at the ready.

Winter was scanning all the video screens in front of them and monitoring the audio, he tuned in to the conversation that the fathers were having. Simon Keyes had started the topic.

‘I know I’ve done work with Des Carmichael here, but I don’t recognise either of you other two. Have our paths crossed?’

There was silence on the audio feed. Nothing but the background squeals and chatter of families on the beach, accompanied by the screech of a gull.

‘I’m trying to work out why he’s chosen us. Our children. We must all be connected to him somehow,’ prompted Simon.

‘Connected to him yeah, but not to each other,’ Nicholas Brown had returned.

‘I just thought that if maybe we all knew each other somehow, then that might give us a starting point. Help the police.’

‘I think we should just focus on what’s happening now. He might turn up at any moment,’ William Plover shut the conversation down.

Winter detected that William was the most stressed of the four of them – he could hear it in his breathing. For a while, their audio feed returned to just the sounds of the beach. All around them were happy families, children playing and laughing, parents chatting. The smell of suntan lotion and the lunchtime aroma of food from the Green Island restaurant, mingled in the salty breeze.

Occasionally one of the team would check in, or flag up somebody who looked out of place. Usually it was just a local popping to the beach for their lunch break or to meet up with someone.

Another hour later and the four fathers were hot and thirsty.

Des swore. ‘What’s he playing at? We’ve been here easily three hours and nothing. The bloody sea is nearly up to the money.’

He was right. While they’d been standing there the sea had slithered in, silently filling gulleys and gliding up the beach. Here there wasn’t the warning crash of waves to tell them it was coming, like they’d usually have at St Ouen where the beach was open and unprotected.

‘Should we move it?’ Simon Keyes asked.

‘No!’ William shouted. ‘We aren’t to move. You know what the instructions said. If you move you could risk one of our children’s lives. My daughter’s life.’

Half an hour later and one of the surveillance team reported that the money was about to be washed into the sea.

Winter could see it from the camera on the headland.

‘Maybe that’s his plan and he’ll pick it up from there. Keep a really close eye out for someone with a snorkel or scuba gear,’ Winter ordered.

‘The tracker would alert us if the bags start to move,’ DS Thompson replied.

‘Not if he takes the money out the bags,’ Winter added.

He could see the beads of perspiration on her forehead. Her cheeks were red. The pressure and the heat was getting to all of them. Winter watched as a drip of sweat slowly broke away and trickled down her temple. It made his own temple itch. His eyes switched between the drop and the screens and back again. The air inside the van was hot and heavy. The tiny fans on the roof were doing nothing to increase the air flow. It was in the mid-thirties outside with the sun beating down on their steel prison. Winter longed to throw open the back doors and breath in some fresh air. Better still, he wanted to head straight to the shoreline and head in for a swim.

Half an hour later, the beach and car park were packed. The local swimmers had come down for high tide and the four fathers were now standing in several inches of sea water. The bags of money were nowhere in sight. Beachgoers were looking at the men warily, wondering what they were doing. It had resulted in less people choosing to be in the area near to them, which was one positive. On the audio feed the sounds of a happy summers day on the beach continued, belying the stress which all of those involved in the police operation were feeling. Sounds of children’s laughter, families chatting and splashing in the sea. Seagulls soaring overhead looking for easy pickings among the beach goers’ picnics.

‘What you doing?’ A little boy had splashed up to the fathers in SpongeBob SquarePants swimming shorts.

‘Minding our own business,’ Des retorted.

The little boy was only around six years old, but instead of being fazed by Des's rude reply, he stood there staring, looking up at them.

'Buzz off, kid,' Des growled.

The boy didn't move, then a woman's voice came to them from further up the beach.

'Charlie. Charlie! Come away. Come here.'

The boy had stared a few moments longer and then turned and headed towards his mother.

'The money's gone,' Simon Keyes said and all four of them turned to look at the area where nearly four hours previously it had sat at the base of the big rock. The sea was now lapping all around it.

William started to panic. 'He's going to think we haven't brought it.'

'Don't be stupid. He knew the tide was coming in. It's probably part of his plan.'

'I can't take much more of this,' William's voice was muffled. On one of the cameras, Winter saw that he'd bent forward, putting his hands on his knees, and was almost panting.

'You're having a panic attack. Breathe slowly and deeply,' Nicholas told him, switching into professional mode.

'Pull yourself together,' Des helpfully added.

Just as this was going on, three minibuses drew up in the car park not far from where Winter and DS Thompson were sitting in the van. All three were packed full of young children. Several young adults, wearing bright lime green and yellow T-shirts proclaiming Le Bas Summer Camp, were trying to corral them out of the coach and into an organised human train to walk down the slipway to the beach.

'We have approximately thirty children about to arrive on the beach,' DI Labey quietly said across all channels.

The fathers couldn't hear what the police were saying.

William was still bent over, trying to breathe. 'I can't do this anymore. I think I'm going to pass out,' he said weakly.

'You have to. It's my son's life at risk here,' Simon spat back at him.

'If the money's gone then he should bring our children here soon so just hang on,' Nicholas suggested.

At that moment, the human train of children arrived at the top of the slipway and began spilling down and onto the sand.

All four men looked up. Their eyes desperately scanning the faces, hunting for one they recognised.

There was a scream and somewhere a child began crying.

'Katie? Katie?' William shouted across the beach towards the influx of children. 'I think that's Katie,' he said breathlessly.

Three pairs of hands reached out to hold him in place, but they were too late, he stumbled off into a run, splashing through the sea and then across the beach, kicking sand into the faces of sunbathers, knocking down sandcastles and leaving a trail of havoc. He was heading straight for the pack of children who were oblivious to the incoming trauma. Behind him, Simon Keyes had also started to run. 'I think that's Oscar,' he'd burst out, hot on the heels of William.

'Katie!' William cried out again just as he tore into the pack of children. Several of them screamed.

Winter barked orders to his team.

'This could be a distraction, or this could be it. Public safety is paramount. Everyone move.'

Another mother, near to the group of children, lashed out at Simon as he tried to turn her son around to look at his face.

The beach erupted in confusion and panic as parents grabbed for their children and the police officers moved to try to keep things under control.

William dropped to his knees and sobbed as the little girl he'd thought was Katie, hid behind one of the playgroup team.

Along the beach, somewhere below the waves, the bags of money lay on the sea bed.

NINETEEN

MONDAY

The flat, if you can call it that, was dark and not particularly clean. It had once been a potato packing shed, but had been converted into flats back in the days when there were very few regulations and little to no tenant rights. Things had changed a lot since then and new laws meant the landlord had already told them he was selling up to a developer. The place would have to be gutted and properly converted, electrics upgraded, and the rotting windows replaced. That meant there would be no way any of the existing tenants would be able to afford the extortionate rents that would inevitably be charged.

He didn't care about that.

Today was payment day.

He'd called in sick to work. No point going in anymore. The job had served its purpose and he'd wanted to prepare.

He had spent the day sorting through things. It wasn't like he had much of any significance. All there was were a couple of photograph albums and his father's signet ring. It only fitted his pinky finger and he'd always worried about it getting lost, so he'd never worn it when going out. He slipped it on as he looked through the photographs.

It was an album of the dead. His grandparents, parents, and other relatives, all long since passed on. He supposed that somewhere he might have some distant cousins or something, but nobody that he'd ever met or spoken to. Nobody that his parents had ever mentioned. Nobody who cared. He had no children to pass the album on to.

He knew these images so well that he could hear their voices still, feel them with him, the warmth of their personalities and the embrace of memories that furled around him. Without him, they would just become black and white facsimiles of people captured by light reacting with chemicals. They would find their way into a skip or a bin. Perhaps someone might find them and look upon them, wondering who they were and what their lives had been. Wondering why nobody loved them enough to keep them. He couldn't leave them to be scrutinised by strangers, and he couldn't take them with him.

He poured himself another large whisky, then he took the photos out of the album, one by one, and burnt them. They curled up and smoked, as though he was releasing their souls.

He picked up one of his mother. She was laughing into the camera, her face alive and without a care in the world. Those had been the good days. It wasn't long after this photo was taken that she started to get unwell. The doctors said the cancer was inoperable and so he'd watched her slowly shrink and die. His memory of her wasting away in a hospital bed still brought a sickness to his stomach. It had been undignified and painful, the stench of the rot inside her indelibly seared into the membranes of his nostrils. There was no doubt that treatment and care had improved massively since then, but it had left a lasting impact on him. He smiled at her happy face, committing it to his memory so that when he closed his eyes he would still see it etched onto the back of his eyelids. Then he struck another match and set her free.

Once he'd gone, the police would eventually come round the flat and inevitably a photograph of his own face would find its way into the papers or online on one of those news sites. He'd kept one of himself, one he liked. It would be a short-lived fame but at least it would be an image that he'd chosen. Eventually his face would be pulped or find its way to the bottom of a cat litter tray. He'd be turned to ash just like the rest of them in his album, but it would be on his terms.

He heard the key go into the front door lock. Pay day had arrived.

TWENTY

MONDAY

Saskia had found it difficult to concentrate at work. The new prisoner, who was no stranger to La Moye, hadn't been a particularly taxing interview. She'd heard him laughing and joking with the guard as he was brought to her office, and he'd been polite and cooperative in their interview. He was one of those men who were ripe for their rehabilitation programme. A petty criminal, who wasn't violent, he kept stealing because he had a poor educational background and no job skills. The prison was working hard to create opportunities for men like him to learn new skills so they could leave and earn their own living and not have to keep on resorting to crime in order to get by. She'd made a note to suggest that he be considered for the scheme. With a three-year sentence, that would no doubt be shortened for good behaviour, this might with any luck turn out to be his last visit.

The rest of the day had been spent mostly on paperwork, writing up a report on a prisoner she'd assessed the previous week, and attending a couple of meetings with other community support agencies. Saskia had kept looking at the local news to see if there were any updates on the Pied Piper case, but she'd seen nothing. That didn't bode well and she couldn't stop thinking about it all day.

As her weekend had been spent working, Saskia decided to head to St Ouen for a surfing de-stress after work. She was itching to call DI Labey and find out what had happened, but she knew he needed to focus on the case and would call when he could. Besides, if she was being pushed away from the investigation, it might mean he was unable to update her.

Saskia had to remind herself that it wasn't about her, it was about the children.

She rode her bike home and picked up her beaten-up old Golf estate, hoisting her surf board onto the roof rack and quickly changing into her swimming costume, pulling some shorts and a t-shirt on over the top. Towels and her wetsuit were flung into the boot along with a warm top for afterwards. When she'd lived in the UK, Saskia had spent holidays down in Cornwall where the buzz of surfing had soaked into her bloodstream with the salty water. Here in Jersey she could indulge in it whenever the sea allowed, feeling the freedom of being out on the waves where her mind could be released from the prison of her own life and experiences. There was no long drive to get there: nowhere was far from the sea in Jersey.

Her favourite spot was an area where there were some rocks in one corner under the sea wall. Just down from Kempt Tower, one of the many Martello towers around Jersey's coastline. It sat on the narrow patch of sand dunes that ran between the wall and the road at St Ouen. Built to protect the island from the French, Kempt Tower was now a holiday let, with an open invitation to foreign visitors, whatever their nationality.

She pulled up in the dirt car park which was inevitably already filled with other surfers' vehicles, but she got lucky. A family with young children were just pulling out and she managed to get their space right up against the sea wall. In front of her the golden-white sands of St Ouen's Bay stretched out on both sides. The weather forecast was for stormy weather later tonight and so the waves had started to pick up, giving reasonable surfing conditions. The winds were offshore, but later that evening were forecast to turn onshore and rise to gale force six or seven. Saskia would be safely tucked up in bed by then.

The families had all abandoned the beach as the sea reclaimed it as its own. This was now hers and those who also lived for the high tide and she got out of her car drawing the scent of salt and seaweed into her lungs, and looked out across the bay at the bobbing surfers waiting in the swell. They

weren't the best waves she'd seen, but there were some good ones and the swim would be refreshing on its own. She didn't have long before the tide would turn again and so she'd quickly pulled on her wetsuit and headed down the concrete steps and launched herself into the sea.

The cold, salty water enveloped every one of her senses. It was the best therapy. She had to concentrate on the conditions, on swimming, and on making sure she didn't get slammed into someone else. The exhilaration of catching the wave and riding it into shore made the endorphins surge around her body. She lived in the moment, just her and her board trying to master the sea. Her body came alive with the exercise, and for the first time in days, her mind was freed.

Forty minutes later, the tide was turning, waves started crashing into each other as the pull out became stronger than the pull in. Saskia paddled back to the fast re-appearing beach and took her board back up to her car.

There were several cars and camper vans with their boots and back doors open, and surfers in various stages of getting changed; some out of wetsuits, others unpeeling the neoprene second skin from their bodies. There were people sitting chatting on the sea wall, wrapped in towels, and some had beers and barbecues out. Wetsuits and wet towels hung from the railings, or were laid out on the wall to dry from the remains of the sun and the heat coming from the granite stone where it had soaked up the sun's energy during the day.

Saskia pulled her wetsuit off and dried herself with a big towel before pulling her shorts and t-shirt on over her damp costume. She contemplated just getting into the car and driving home, but the view was amazing. The sun hadn't set yet, but it was heading towards its western bedchamber, glowing orange in readiness. For as far as the eye could see in front of her was the ocean. Saskia breathed the sea air down deep into her lungs. It was too beautiful to just drive away from. Instead she closed up her car boot and went back down the steps to the beach. She sat on a small ledge of concrete that ran along the bottom of the sea wall and leaned into the wall,

closing her eyes to let the warm sun bathe her face and the heat from the wall soak into her damp back.

The sounds of the sea, the gulls, and the distant murmur of voices above her and along the beach, reminded her of when she'd been a child. There were very few memories of their time in Jersey because she'd been so young. They'd left for the UK by the time she was three, nearly four.

Most of the memories of her childhood were laced with trauma and what she could recall of Jersey had been no exception. It must have been not long before they left for the UK. Their mother had taken her and David to St Brelade and in her mind's eye it had been a huge expanse of golden sandy beach. Initially it had been fun. She had a recollection of paddling in the sea and trying to build a sandcastle. Her mother smiled and laughed, which weren't common occurrences when their dad was around, and the big, wide beach seemed to free her from her usual introverted self. It had been contagious. But it didn't last long. Two women had approached her mother and an argument had started.

Saskia couldn't remember what was said but she knew it was about her father and something he'd done. She remembered her mother shrinking to a nervous, shamed wreck and her grabbing their hands and dragging them off the beach. David had screamed at the top of his voice, incandescent with rage at being pulled away from the sandcastle he'd been building. He was only eighteen months old, maybe two, but he'd kicked at them both, biting his mother's wrist until it drew blood when she picked him up to carry him. Everyone had stopped to stare at the commotion, which got even worse as her mother had battled to get David into his car seat. He was rigid with anger, red-cheeked, and clawing at their mother's face as she leaned into the car to strap him in. Saskia didn't see her mother cry often. In hindsight she realised it was because the tears had been wrung out of her long before Saskia was aware of their possibility. That day, they'd driven home to the screaming of David and the silent sobs of her mother.

Saskia didn't feel upset at the memory. She had long ago learned to detach herself, although sometimes that detachment

worried her. Was her genetic make-up playing a role? Did she herself have psychopathic traits? She knew it could be hereditary – she hadn't needed her psychology training to realise that. When she had these moments, she could wind herself up into a paranoid frenzy which would only be relieved by forcing herself into a distressing situation and waiting for a reaction. It was her biggest fear. That instead of a warm human heart inside of her, there was instead the regular drum beat of a cold psychopath.

Saskia had taken her phone with her onto the beach, and after a few minutes it rang, pulling her from her thoughts. Winter's name came up on the screen.

'Are you able to talk?' he asked.

'Yeah, I'm actually sitting on the beach at St Ouen,' she replied.

There was a moment's silence.

'Whereabouts are you? I'll meet you there, if that's OK? I could do with de-stressing.'

Saskia returned to basking in the warmth of the setting sun, like Bilbo on his windowsill, soaking up the last heat of the day while she waited for DI Labey to turn up. She could tell from his voice how the day had gone.

Twenty minutes later, she heard his voice above her. He was greeting some of the other surfers up the top and she realised it was from here that she'd first seen him, that's why he'd seemed familiar. A flash memory of him in a wetsuit walking up the beach from the sea, carrying a surfboard, came to her.

There was the sound of footsteps on the sand and Winter sat down next to her, holding out a cold beer. She thanked him but didn't press him for news. She knew he would tell her when he was ready. One thing she'd learned in her psychology career was that gaps in conversation weren't wasted time that needed to be filled with chatter, they were valuable moments to gather thoughts and find the truths inside. They both sat

silently with their backs against the warm concrete sea wall – not that it was a cold evening, but it offered some comfort. The sea had receded and now it was the turn of the dog walkers to claim the bay as theirs. People and canines of all shapes and sizes running or walking across the sands, silhouetted against the early evening sky.

The beer was a welcome sight and felt good as its cool amber liquid travelled down her throat, neutralising the salt from the water that she had inevitably taken in during her surf.

‘So, you were right,’ he sighed heavily. ‘He didn’t collect the money and he didn’t deliver any of the children home.’

‘How are the parents?’

‘William Plover was taken to hospital for observation. He had mild heat stroke and had a panic attack on the beach. He started hallucinating in the end, he was convinced he’d seen Katie.’

It was Saskia’s turn to sigh heavily. She had expected it, but nevertheless it was a disappointment.

‘The money just sat there until the tide came in and was still there when it went out. There was total chaos on the beach. One man took a swing at one of our officers because he thought he was trying to snatch his son, Simon Keyes got a cut to his face where a mother hit him with a plastic spade. There were kids crying and mothers screaming. It was a complete nightmare.’

‘Has he contacted you again?’

‘Not yet.’

‘He will. Soon.’

They both took a sip of their beers.

Winter turned his bottle round and round in his hands as his mind worked through the day and its consequences.

‘Do you think he’ll hurt one of them?’

‘You know I can’t really answer that, but my gut feeling is no. He still needs them as his bargaining chips to play his

game.’

‘That’s what I’m hoping too.’

Saskia had looked into Winter’s eyes then and seen the magma of emotions bubbling within him. They were the opposite to her brother’s intense, hypnotic gaze which when fixed on you, was like jumping into a freezing plunge pool. While David could be charming and attentive when he wanted to be, he would never be able to recreate Winter’s eyes which were human, warm, and vulnerable while also being capable of professional intelligence. She looked away, unsure of how he’d made her feel. Resisting the flush and fluttering inside.

They sat in silence for a few more minutes, staring out at the sea and its never-ending waves. Watching the seagulls swoop and glide, and following the slow decline of the sun towards the waves on the right side of the horizon.

‘Did you know a blue whale fart bubble is big enough to fit a horse inside?’ Winter suddenly said.

Saskia turned her head to look at him, he returned her look and they both smiled.

‘I think that’s an urban legend,’ she replied, returning her gaze to the sea. ‘Can’t imagine anyone’s ever got close enough to measure one or survived that amount of gas – that is if they even fart at all.’

Next to her Winter chuckled. ‘Nope, you’re probably right, but I like the idea of it anyway.’

The pair of them sat staring out to sea imagining a horse out there somewhere floating around inside a giant bubble. Then it brought the image of the unicorn bubble machine at the Carmichael’s house to Saskia’s mind.

‘Any headway with Lucy’s bubble machine?’

‘We might have a lead. The team has been talking to everyone around the kidnap sites, and scanning CCTV. We think there may be a delivery van at some of the sites and it’s just being cross-checked. It would make sense.’

‘Let’s hope so. You know, it’s quite possible that there’s more than one person involved in this.’

‘Yeah, I know. We’re not finding any connections so far with the lists that the parents have given us but we’re still working on it. The ransom demand was a big distraction for us, but I’m not going to let it be a setback.’

‘I’ve been looking again at the poem he sent. It suggests that money may have been the original trigger, or at least forms a part of the original trigger for this,’ Saskia continued. ‘Where he says that Jersey is an island where the rich like to play, but then goes on, *To see the islanders suffer so, From greedy vermin, was a pity*. He’s implying that our four may have at some point been greedy and hurt him or others financially. You’ve got a bank manager, a business owner, lawyer, and doctor. And there’s something else about the four of them. None of them are locally born. Des and Nicholas have come in under the high net worth scheme, and Simon and William with their firms under licence. When the Pied Piper mentions *vermin*, it implies something that doesn’t belong and has invaded.’

‘So you think that makes it more likely the Pied Piper is local?’

‘I think it’s a good possibility, yes. You’ll know more than me about how incomers are viewed. I’ve had nothing but a warm welcome in my experience, but then that might not be typical.’

‘I think it is. We’re a friendly island generally, but it does depend on the individual. Some of the wealthy come in and act like they own the place, which doesn’t exactly endear them to Jersey folk. I’ll get someone to take a look and see if any of our four have been rubbing people up the wrong way.’

‘Des would be a good place to start,’ Saskia added with an eyebrow raise.

‘Yeah, that’s for sure.’

Winter took a final swig of his beer. ‘I’m beat. Going to head home and get a good night’s sleep to start again

tomorrow. Put today behind us. Shame I missed the surf,' he added nodding out to sea.

The sun was starting to dip below the waves in the west, a big burning red ball that was colouring the sky orange and yellow. The wind was picking up, the front vanguard of the storm out at sea and heading their way. Saskia also headed home to her little cottage and the hungry face of Bilbo at the window. It had been a frustrating day for the inquiry, but every minute she spent with Winter made her even more convinced that he was a man who wouldn't give up until he'd found those children.

TWENTY-ONE

MONDAY

David got a taxi to meet Jackie at the Greenhills Country Hotel in St Peter. He was supposed to be there for six o'clock, but he'd hung around at work, finishing off some boring paperwork as he suspected it would be more interesting than the conversation he'd have to endure for the next few hours. The client Jackie had met yesterday was staying there and had invited them both up for dinner. He had to play his role – it was the price he paid for being Jackie's partner – and so after reminding himself of what his ultimate goal was, he'd eventually forced himself to go.

When he arrived, he found them in the sitting room area to the right of the entrance. A bottle of champagne was in a bucket of ice and they were all laughing about something which he suspected he wouldn't find funny at all. He sighed: it probably wasn't their first bottle. He'd need to catch up.

'David!' Jackie spotted him and waved him over. He'd put on a smile.

'Lee, Julie, this is my partner, David Carter,' she introduced him, resting her left hand on his backside. It was a subtle gesture, but David didn't miss it. He also didn't like it. She was claiming her property.

'A pleasure to meet you, young man,' Lee said, standing up to shake his hand. He was in his sixties; a big, brash, balding northerner with a passing resemblance to David's father on a bad day. Julie, a red-headed Irish woman, was also in her sixties, with the expanded waistline of middle age combined with good living.

‘My pleasure entirely,’ David schmoozed, giving a big smile to them both. ‘My apologies for being late. I had an important client meeting at work. You know how it is.’

‘Absolutely, and when you’re building your career like you are at your age, well, you just gotta put those hours in. Let’s get you a glass of bubbly.’ Lee waved a waiter over and asked for a glass.

David looked around the hotel’s sitting room. It was part granite with cream walls, wooden floors, and a beamed ceiling. The granite fireplace with its black wrought-iron insert sat redundantly in front of them. It was relatively cool in here, thanks to the granite walls, but it was a nice evening outside and would be more pleasant sitting in the courtyard, which was sheltered from the building wind.

‘Not fancy sitting outside?’ David asked Jackie.

‘No, Julie’s hay fever is playing up,’ Jackie said quietly to him.

‘So, David, Jackie tells us you’ve only been in the island for just over a year, how you finding it? Not too tame for a young fellow like you?’

And so the evening progressed with David feeling like the young nephew out with an ageing uncle and aunt. Dinner was fine, although there wasn’t enough of it, and he’d had to fill up on bread and champagne. By the time ten-thirty came round, he whispered to Jackie that he had a headache and they finally said their thanks and made their excuses to leave.

‘God, they were dull,’ David said to her as soon as they’d walked out the hotel.

‘They’re about to invest a huge amount of money into my new development for when they move over here as high-value residents, which pays for our holidays and our lifestyle,’ Jackie said to him.

David might not be adept at interpreting the emotions of people, but there was a clear tone to her voice which made him wonder if she was annoyed with him.

Then she added, ‘But yeah, they’re dead dull.’

The boring evening was topped off by the sight of Allan in the car park, leaning against Jackie's car waiting for them. Allan opened the back door for Jackie to get in. David walked around to the other side and let himself in, slipping behind the driver's seat. He made sure to push himself forward, digging his knees into the back of the seat.

'You never did tell me how you lost your licence in the first place,' David said to Jackie as they pulled away from the hotel.

'A minor altercation with a Lycra-clad cyclist after a fantastic lunch at The Royal Yacht. The guy made such a big fuss, but I was over the limit, so whatever.'

'Seems a bit harsh, losing your licence on your first offence.' David looked at her side profile in the dim light inside the car.

Jackie turned and smiled coquettishly back. 'Well, he had to give up work after. I put a few dents in him as well as his bike.'

David smirked, 'I love that about you. You just don't give a fuck.' He leaned across the back seat of the car and kissed her. As he sat back up straight, he didn't miss Allan's eyes watching in the rear-view mirror.

When they got back home, Allan's boyfriend Kevin's car was parked outside his flat.

'Say hi to Kevin for me,' Jackie said to Allan as they walked across to their front door.

Later, David went into their en suite bathroom to find Jackie in her silk nightie, standing at the sink cleaning her teeth.

'Don't you ever get creeped out having Allan around all the time?' he asked her as nonchalantly as possible.

'No, why'd you say that? I quite like knowing he's always there if I need him. He's never let me down. Whenever I need taking somewhere or picking up, he's there.'

‘But I’m here for you now,’ David walked up behind her, wrapping his arms around her semi-naked body, running his hands over the silk, kissing her shoulders, and looking at himself in the mirror.

‘That’s different,’ Jackie said.

‘But he’s always watching us. Watching me. It’s creepy.’

Jackie turned round, her face serious. ‘Look, he’s been with me for years now. He’s always been reliable, and I like him being around. I’m not going to even contemplate letting him go. You’ll get used to him.’

That last statement was more like a *You’ll have to get used to him.*

Then she’d smiled. ‘Besides, he probably fancies you. He can’t help that, now can he?’

Jackie had started to run her hands over his body, but he was definitely not in the mood.

‘I’m sorry, darling. I’ve still got that headache.’ He smiled apologetically. ‘Do you mind if we skip it tonight?’

TWENTY-TWO

TUESDAY

Exhaustion meant Winter slept well. The storm had only woken him briefly, the sound of the rain being hurled against his bedroom window pulling him from sleep. He'd rolled over and pulled the duvet over his ears, slipping straight back into sleep with that comforting feeling he used to get as a child when the world outside was cold and wild, but inside he was warm and safely tucked away.

He awoke to find it had rained and leaves and petals had been ripped from the trees and bushes, and scattered across pavements and the roads. It was still breezy, but the storm had mostly moved on by the time he arrived in the incident room at 7:45 a.m. A red-eyed DC Sarah Fuller greeted him, her face creased with tiredness, and yet there was an energy about her which could only come from getting the scent of their prey.

'I think we're onto him,' she said to Winter the second he set foot in the office. 'We've literally been here all night.' She nodded over to a bleary-eyed DC Everton and Baxter, 'We've found the same delivery van multiple times in all our key areas of interest. Same van, no clear visuals on the driver but we've got the registration details so the delivery company must know who was driving it.'

DC Fuller beckoned Winter over to her desk. On her screen were countless stills of a white Ford Transit van with the PM2U logo.

'Parcels Matter to Us. They're quite big, aren't they? Do a lot of the Amazon deliveries,' Winter asked.

‘Yup. People are used to seeing them around so you don’t really notice them, but I’ve also cross-referenced some of the witness statements of people who live around the kidnap sites and a PM2U van has been mentioned a few times.’

‘Brilliant work, you three. Have you compiled this lot in a report for me?’

Sarah nodded.

‘Thank you. Right, head off home, all of you, I think you need some sleep. We’ll take over and go and pay PM2U a visit.’

Winter wasted no time in making phone calls and mustering the team. This was their first solid lead. Could PM2U man be the Pied Piper? If he was, then they might have those kids home with their parents by lunch time today. It had been a struggle to get out of bed this morning, he’d been heavy with tiredness, but now he was positively zinging with adrenaline. Sarah’s energy was contagious.

The team arrived quickly, filling the incident room with excited chatter about what the day would bring. He knew that every one of them would have gone home last night feeling deflated by the failed ransom drop and had similar nightmares to his own. When you worked on a case with children involved, it was always harder. The responsibility they felt to ensure a happy ending was palpable. You could almost taste it in the air.

Before Winter could even think about turning up at the PM2U depot, he needed to get a team on standby ready to move in and make an arrest as soon as they could. There had to be no room for error, no chance that their suspect would get wind of them coming and disappear along with the children. Winter called an impromptu briefing.

‘Jonno, until we get a name and address, I’ll need you here to deal with anything this end. The boss has agreed to firearms support if we need it. I think go softly if we can. We don’t want to risk one of the kids getting hurt. But I’d like them available and standing by once we’ve got the location.’

‘Sure.’ Jonno nodded.

‘I’m not going to go in heavy to the depot. Going to make it look like we’re just making standard enquiries just in case he gets wind of it and reacts. So, Pete,’ Winter addressed DC Edwards, ‘I want you with me, OK?’

DC Edwards nodded vigorously. His curly hair and young face gave him an unthreatening look which could be useful when needing to go in softly-softly, or deal with nervous individuals.

‘This could be it. I don’t want a word of this breathed outside of this room, unless it’s to those who strictly need to know. We can’t risk this getting out and alerting the Pied Piper or upsetting the parents. That clear?’

They all murmured ‘Absolutely’ or ‘Yes’ in response. Winter looked around the faces in front of him. He saw the adrenaline buzz in every one of their eyes: they were as hungry for this as he was. The determination in their body language and the set of their jaws. Yesterday’s fiasco had been emotionally tough on all of them. They wanted to get this case solved. They wanted payback.

Two minutes later, the adrenaline-fuelled euphoria was temporarily suspended when the editor of the *Jersey Evening Post*, Harry Wilde, called Winter’s mobile.

‘We’ve got another message from the Pied Piper.’

Winter listened to the demands being read out. It was bad timing, but perhaps they might be able to get this sorted before he had to put the parents through any more trauma.

‘Can you sit on this again until we have some things set up at our end?’ Winter asked Harry.

‘How long? Our deadline is lunchtime. I can get this written up ready, but if you think the investigation is going to take a turn, I’d like to be the first to know.’

‘Give me until one p.m. and we’ll have an exclusive statement of some kind for you.’ Winter knew Harry and that his sense of community was as strong as his hunger for news.

He knew he could trust him to hold back and not risk something bad happening to the kids.

‘OK. Presume you’ll send someone over for the original note?’ Harry replied.

‘Yup, they’ll be round in a few minutes.’

Winter moved fast. He asked one of the DCs to head round to the paper offices in Bath Street to pick up the note. It would be sent immediately to Forensics. Meanwhile, Harry had sent through an image for him. Winter brought it up on his computer screen, swallowing a frustrated sigh as he saw what it said.

The note was the same style as the previous one, a take-off of the Robert Browning Pied Piper poem.

Rats!

In Jersey they were big and greedy

Sucking the blood of those who were needy

Without a thought for those who they hurt

They lied and cheated, trampling them into the dirt

So what to do about those selfish vermin?

How to stop them and teach them a lesson worth learning?

Take the things that they love so they feel our pain

That is my role and the Pied Piper is my name.

Four children, eight parents, one press conference admitting it’s their fault. They should have been watching them.

Or three children, six parents and a grieving mummy and daddy.

Broadcast live today at 5 p.m. No more chances...

Winter was immediately on the phone to Det Supt Graeme Walker.

‘Boss, we’ve had another note. This time he wants a press conference involving the parents.’

‘Shit!’ was his boss’s immediate reaction. ‘Does it mention yesterday? Does he say anything about whether the kids are all alright?’

The tension in his boss’s voice came across loud and clear.

‘He talks about four kids still but warns that there are no more chances.’

Winter almost felt the huge sigh of relief his boss let out at the other end of the phone line.

‘So, what’s your plan?’

‘I’m going to go ahead with the operation to find out which of the PM2U drivers was assigned to the van we’ve logged. I’ll put the team on standby for an arrest and search of premises and as soon as we have a name, we’ll go in. The JEP will hold off releasing news of the note until 1 p.m. I’m confident we’ll get this done by then. I’ve promised the editor an exclusive statement, so could you work something up with comms?’

‘What about the parents?’

‘We don’t tell them anything until we’ve seen if this lead pans out. By one o’clock we should know if we’ve got the Pied Piper in the bag and their children on the way home, or if we’re going to need to organise that press conference. We tell them then, before it goes public.’

‘OK. Good. Go and get him, Winter. Bring those kids home.’

TWENTY-THREE

TUESDAY

DI Winter Labey took a big breath in and out before he put his hand on the car door handle. DC Edwards looked at him. He recognised the same adrenaline and tension on his face. They'd driven in almost silence, each of them mentally preparing for whatever was ahead. Jersey's speed limits had tried Winter's patience and he'd nearly resorted to putting his blue lights on to get there quicker. With most roads only 30mph and their fastest road, the double laned Victoria Avenue, just 40mph, it had been sorely tempting. He'd resisted, wanting to ensure nothing drew any attention to them.

'Let's do this,' Winter said opening the door.

The sun had returned to the island and was fast evaporating the residual rainwater from the surface of the roads and car park. It made the air feel warm and humid, with the damp odour of wet dust after the dry spell.

They were in an unmarked police car and had parked in one of the visitor bays at the PM2U depot up near Jersey airport. The smell of aviation fuel was also in the air here and one of the British Airways planes was just taking off, roaring towards the end of the runway that overlooked St Ouen's Bay.

Winter walked slowly along the row of PM2U vans parked up against the side wall of the brick warehouse, scanning their registration plates. There were no windows along this side of the warehouse, but there was a CCTV camera, and so he tried to look as natural as possible.

‘It’s this one,’ he said to DC Edwards. ‘Definitely this van from the CCTV images.’ Winter thought a moment. ‘OK we’re going to change tactics slightly. He might be in there now. You stay out here and monitor the building while I go in. Get the rest of the team mobile in case we need them. And no heroics. If he does make a dash for it, get back-up. Don’t make yourself the first fatality.’

‘OK, I’ll just do a walk around and check exits.’

Winter nodded, dropping down to a crouch to tie up his shoe lace in order to give Edwards time to get into position. Winter relayed their plan back to the rest of the team by subtly talking to his lapel, where his radio microphone would pick up his voice and fill them in. Then he slowly stood up, smoothed himself straight and sauntered around the building, walking past the mirrored office windows and through double glass doors into the depot.

It was a warehouse, not designed as a welcoming space for customers, so on his left was just a glass window with a sliding hatch and a sign that said ‘Enquiries’. Winter peered into the office: it was empty. That wasn’t going to derail them; in fact it gave him the perfect excuse to get nosy and walk into the main depot area.

The double wooden doors in front of him had a keycard entry system, but somebody had propped one of the doors open with a fire extinguisher. On the right-hand wall was a gallery of photographs underneath a heading which said, ‘Delivery driver of the month’. Miguel Abreu was currently top dog. Under his smiling photograph were five stars and comments from customers. *Always smiling and friendly. Goes above and beyond. Thanks for helping my mother out.* Winter looked at the other drivers’ smiling faces. Could one of them be the Pied Piper? He pulled out his mobile phone and took a photograph of the board.

‘Going into the main depot, nobody in the office,’ Winter whispered quietly into his lapel. He slipped through the wooden door and quietly stepped into the big warehouse. Inside were rows of metal shelving which were partially stocked with parcels of various sizes and shapes, and large

plastic bin hoppers, full of more parcels. A radio was playing somewhere down the other end, towards the cargo door. The big roller shutter was open, giving a view of the side of the runway. Winter recognised Channel 103, the local commercial station on the radio. An advert was playing for an online furniture retailer.

Winter didn't move. He scanned the entire place, searching for any signs of life and other potential exits.

'Only exits appear to be front reception and cargo door at the back which are both open,' he alerted DC Edwards.

There must be somebody here. Was the Pied Piper hiding in the shadows? Did he realise the game was up?

Winter knew that besides DC Edwards, there was a team racing their way towards them, ready in case things turned ugly. He took a deep breath.

'Hello?' He shouted now into the void of the warehouse. 'Hello, anyone here?'

A shadow moved across the far wall behind the racks. He couldn't see anything clearly. There was no telling if the man was carrying a weapon of any type; if he was coming in for the attack, or just responding to his greeting. Winter strained to see the owner of the shadow but there were too many parcels on the shelves. Then he saw feet in trainers coming towards the end of the rack.

A middle-aged man with thick glasses appeared around the end, holding a scanner and a sheet of paper. He looked surprised to see Winter.

'Hi,' he said coming towards DI Labey, 'can I help? You after a parcel?'

Before Winter launched into his cover story, he fished. 'There was no one in reception.'

'Ay, two drivers phoned in sick, got another two on holiday. Had to send one of the office staff out on deliveries. I'm on my own here. What can I do for you?'

Winter thought on his feet.

‘Ah right, I wondered why there were so many vans parked up outside. Are you the manager?’

‘Ay.’ The man peered at him through his thick lenses, clearly trying to weigh up what Winter’s business was and if he was going to have to deal with a complaint.

‘I wonder if you can help me then. Are your drivers always assigned to the same van?’

The man’s eyes narrowed further, having the effect of making him look like a mole peering out of its hole.

‘Ay,’ he said slowly. ‘What of it? If you have a complaint about their driving we have an online form for that. Has to go via head office and all, cos of the insurance.’

Winter decided he was safe to come clean. There was just the man and him, he could call DC Edwards if the guy suddenly changed his manner, but something told him that he wasn’t who they were looking for. He’d not detected any wariness on the man’s part at all.

‘DI Winter Labey,’ he said, pulling out his ID. ‘I need to know the name of the driver of one of your vans, along with his shift pattern and home address.’

The man recoiled as if he’d burnt him.

‘What’s the problem? What’s happened?’ He looked at the photograph of the van that Winter held up for him to see on his mobile phone. ‘That’s Francis Melton’s van, that is. He phoned in sick yesterday. Not heard from him today, mind.’

‘Would you be able to give me his home address then, please, and shift pattern? I’d like to know the areas and the times he was due to be delivering.’

‘What you want with Francis? He’s a solid bloke. Drives responsibly. That van hasn’t been in any accidents.’

‘I need the information now, please,’ Winter pressed. Since he’d dropped the customer cover story, he had assumed a more authoritative stance. They needed to move fast.

The manager got the message and nodded quickly, walking off towards the front office. ‘This way.’

‘Is Francis likely to turn up for work today?’ Winter asked him.

‘I doubt it. Should have been in two hours ago. Like I said, he called in sick yesterday. I just assumed he was still unwell, was going to call him later. I’m a bit stressed here, you know. Trying to manage all this on my own.’

The man had started to whine now that he knew he wasn’t talking to a customer but someone in authority.

‘I’m going to have one of our officers stay here with you for an hour or so, just while we pursue our enquiries,’ Winter said to him. The last thing he wanted was for the man or any of the other drivers to alert Francis they were onto him. He also wasn’t sure that it was Francis.

‘DC Edwards, could you arrange for two uniformed officers to attend, please?’ Winter spoke to his radio microphone.

The manager looked at him with eyes wide open.

‘So what’s he done? Why you after him?’

‘I’m sorry, Mr—’

‘Campbell.’

‘I’m not able to divulge any information, this is an ongoing inquiry. I will also be impounding the van for forensic examination.’

‘Bloody hell, how am I supposed to run a business here?’

Then Winter saw a thought cross Mr Campbell’s mind and a look of horror went with it. Winter wondered if he’d put two and two together with the investigation; everyone was talking about the Pied Piper.

‘He’s not been stealing parcels, has he? You’ve not had customers complaining?’ the man asked, clearly his worst nightmare being a little closer to home than worrying about other people’s children.

‘No. Not that I’m aware,’ Winter reassured him, but doubted that by the end of the day he’d be feeling in the least

relieved. Someone from PM2U's head office would no doubt be on the next plane to sort out the public relations fall-out.

TWENTY-FOUR

TUESDAY

Saskia woke up with a headache which was undoubtedly due to the broken sleep, thanks to last night's storm. She'd been woken in the early hours by hard rain against the glass panes and the wooden sash windows rattling and banging in the wind. She wasn't used to the storms that could blow in off the sea ferociously and then disappear as quickly as they'd arrived, and this was her first strong winds and rain since she'd moved into the little cottage. Covering her ears with the duvet or pillow would have helped, but for Saskia it wasn't an option. The wind reminded her of the bangs of her father's anger. She'd always had to be vigilant as a child, ears on constant alert, even when asleep. She still felt that need to have her ears unhindered in case danger sounded its presence. The noise of the storm might have disturbed her sleep, but it had calmed her mind to hear it.

Her working day started with challenges of its own. She'd been asked to talk to a male prisoner who a couple of the guards suspected was the source of some disruptive behaviour in a wing. He wasn't violent or aggressive and there hadn't been any overt physical bullying, but one of the most experienced guards thought he'd been manipulating the younger and more impressionable inmates.

'Don't get why I need to be here. I'm missing horticultural activity,' he said to her. His arms were folded across his chest in defiance and he leaned back in his chair, almost looking down his nose at her. There was no attempt to charm or hide his contempt. It was clear he thought this whole exercise below him.

‘I wanted to chat to you about how you’re getting on. You’ve been here eight months now. Index offence was fraud.’

‘Yeah,’ he shrugged, ‘you’ve got my notes. I shouldn’t be here.’

‘Why’s that, Michael?’

‘I never hurt anybody. I’ve been put in here with a bunch of low-life criminals. Do you know the guy in the cell next to me has been in and out so many times he can’t even remember how many. Last time, lost his temper in a pub and smacked someone when he’d only been out three days. On the other side is a bloke who tried smuggling a load of cocaine into the island hidden in his car on the ferry. Do I look like I should be mixing with those kinds of people? You’ve trashed my reputation and taken away my rights.’

‘But your crimes did hurt people, didn’t they, Michael?’

‘I just did a few signatures and copied a few documents, that’s all.’

‘That’s not quite true, is it?’

Michael’s face grew darker and he sat up taller.

‘So I bet you feel superior sitting there, don’t you?’ he said, his voice lower, more measured.

‘No. You’ve been sentenced for your crimes and are being punished. As I said, I just want to make this a positive experience for you and the rest of the prison population. Are you frustrated?’

‘What? Now you’re coming on to me?’ He rubbed at his groin area, leering at Saskia.

‘I think you know that I don’t mean sexual frustration, Michael. You’re more intelligent than that.’

Saskia watched his face. He dropped the leering look and she could see him thinking through what other chinks in her armour he might be able to take advantage of.

‘You’re new, aren’t you? Perhaps you don’t know how things are done around here. I used to get on with Frank, no

problem,' he tried, bringing up her predecessor in the role.

'I've only been here a couple of months, but I know exactly how things work. This isn't my first job.'

'How old are you?'

'We aren't here to discuss me, we're here to talk about you, Michael.'

'I thought the whole purpose of these little sessions was to build a relationship – a rapport?' he added the last part with some sarcasm.

'That's part of it, yes. I hope you will talk to me honestly and not feel like you have to play games.'

'I think you're out of your depth. You don't really know what you're doing, do you? Where did you get your qualifications from?'

'Are you bored in here, Michael?' Saskia ignored all the baiting and questions. Michael was intelligent; he'd been a lawyer before being struck off and imprisoned. He'd gone to Exeter University and been named a rising star by the Law Society of Jersey.

Michael sighed and relaxed back into his chair, studying her again.

'Yeah,' he said simply, a look of resignation on his face.

Saskia breathed an internal sigh of relief. Progress at last. Now she could do something about it and solve the behavioural issues. They'd talked for another twenty minutes or so and then she'd made a few recommendations to the Activities and Employment panel. See if Michael could be given a job that would keep him more engaged.

After her discussion with Michael, Saskia drove into St Helier for a meeting with a Community Service supervisor who had monitored another one of their prisoners a couple of years ago, following a previous brush with the law. He'd just found his way back to La Moye, but there had been some inconsistencies in the interview he'd had with Saskia last week and in the documents that she'd been given, and she was

concerned that he might be more of a risk to himself than had previously been thought. She wanted to speak to somebody who had dealt with him in the past to get a feel for his likely state of mind. Their conversation confirmed her suspicions. Saskia immediately phoned up the Safer Custody department at the prison and recommended that he got put on suicide watch and entered into treatment.

Before she returned to the prison, she decided to go into the police headquarters and see how Winter and the team were getting on with the inquiry, and if she could help.

The woman at the police reception desk phoned up to Winter to let him know Saskia was there.

‘He’s sending someone down for you,’ she said to Saskia as she put the phone down.

A minute later, a young detective appeared at the security doors and beckoned her through.

‘We’re just about to go in and arrest him,’ he said to her. ‘The boss is having a final briefing with the team and then they’re going to head out.’

‘Arrest the Pied Piper?’ Saskia asked.

‘Yeah. He’s a courier driver. His van was seen at all the kidnap sites.’ The young detective was virtually running up the stairs and Saskia had to rush to keep up with him. She could feel the adrenaline pumping through his pores.

Inside the incident room, she immediately spotted Winter who had on his Kevlar body armour vest over his shirt and was talking to a small huddle of officers who were similarly dressed.

She walked towards them, hovering on the edges so as not to interrupt.

‘OK, let’s go,’ Winter said to the team and then looked up to see her.

‘Miss Monet, we’re about to arrest a suspect, you’re welcome to watch the operation from here. They’re going to be monitoring everything. He’s a delivery driver. DC Stewart

here will show you where you can watch. I'm sorry, I have to go.'

Saskia's mind was racing. A delivery driver? That made sense with how he was able to take the children, but didn't fit the profile of who she thought the Pied Piper was – unless he'd taken the job purely to enact his revenge.

'Do you know much about the suspect?' she asked DC Stewart.

'Not yet. Just that he's been a delivery driver for the past couple of years, and before that worked in the building trade. Lives alone. Phoned in sick to work yesterday and hasn't turned up again today, which ties in with the ransom demand. I think the boss is worried about the fact he lives in a flat. Where do you hide four kids and not have the neighbours notice? It's a bit tense because we don't know what we're going to find in there.'

DC Stewart had taken Saskia down the corridor to a room where a bank of screens showed the feeds from the body cams worn by the team.

'Everyone's in place,' he said to her. 'The suspect lives in St Clement so Winter and the team will be there within minutes.'

Saskia could hear Winter's voice. He was authoritative and sounded calm, but she could bet the nerves and adrenaline were pumping around him. Could this really be it? Were they going to find the Pied Piper and rescue the children?

'You've just come over from the UK, haven't you?' The young detective asked her while they waited for the teams to get to the location.

'Yeah, a couple of months ago,' she replied, looking at him.

'Seems really nice over here,' he said, 'my first time. How you finding it?'

'I was actually born here, but left when I was three so grew up in the UK. It is nice here. Beautiful island obviously, and I love the mix of British with a continental twist. Good sense of

community too, and the prison inmates are mostly a lot easier than what I had to deal with in the UK.'

'Yeah, low crime rate. Why'd your family leave?'

Saskia had a stock answer for that question. The reality was she didn't know the full reason, but suspected from what she'd gleaned over the years that her father had started what would eventually turn into his murderous spree in the UK. She didn't think he'd ever killed in Jersey, but men like him rarely started with murder. More often than not they would build up to it with increasingly violent offences. 'My dad got a new job in the UK,' was what she told DC Stewart.

On the screens in front of them, the team had arrived in a small car parking area outside an ugly square block of a building that looked more like it should be a warehouse than flats.

Winter held back as a tactical team approached the front door. There was no intercom, just a key lock so they went straight into battering it in to get entry. These were uniformed officers, in full helmets, body armour, and with shields. It was understandable: they had no idea what kind of response they were going to get inside. She heard them calling out and banging on a flat door.

'Police. Open up!' And then the sound of splintering wood.

For a few moments, Saskia was taken back to her childhood. She was just seven years old, they'd left Jersey and she was in the kitchen of their house in the UK, screaming at her father who was on the floor straddling her mother with his hands around her throat. She could still feel the danger and power of his anger; see her mother's terrified face as the life began to slip from her. The desperation in her little arms as she beat on his back with her fists, like a fly on a bear. She'd almost been unaware of the police smashing down the door. The splintering of the wood somewhere in the background. The shouts of 'police, open up'. Then big strong arms had hoisted her up and away from her father. She'd watched as four police officers wrestled him away from her mother,

fighting him to the ground, having to use all their strength to keep him down and get the handcuffs on him.

The officer holding her had tried to carry her from the kitchen, but she'd not wanted to leave, desperate to see her mother breathe. Her little hands had found the door frame and then clung on with every ounce she had left as she'd screamed at her mother to wake up.

Two police officers were knelt on the floor beside her mother, checking her pulse and calling to her, trying to get her breathing. After what seemed like forever, but could have only been seconds, her mother had gulped at the air, her body arching up to draw life back into her lungs; rasping breath defying her husband.

Saskia had gone limp then, allowing the officer to take her from the room. The last thing she'd seen was another officer picking up David and carrying him out after her. David's face was as impassive as it had been throughout the whole incident. He'd stood in the corner silently watching as Saskia had phoned the police and then attempted to stop her father herself. Later the psychologist said he was suffering from post-traumatic stress, but Saskia knew otherwise. She'd always known.

'Police, come out where we can see you!' The shouts on the screens in front of her brought Saskia back to Jersey police station. She watched the internal flat door give way. Hoping, praying that inside were four children, alive.

TWENTY-FIVE

TUESDAY

David decided to get himself a coffee on his way to the meeting with his boss. He'd emailed him earlier, asking David to meet him in his office at eleven forty-five. It was just coming up to twelve.

As he walked towards the kitchen area in the large open-plan office, he could see that there was a group of his colleagues gathered around someone's phone. One of the women, Emily, who worked in HR, looked up as he approached. He could tell from the way she looked at him that she fancied him. She was moderately attractive, but too willing and easy to be an exciting conquest. David was more interested in her boss who was married and kept herself at a distance. Much more of a challenge and a guarantee of no repercussions. Saskia would be proud of him; he did listen to her and try to curb his indifference to consequence.

'David, have you heard?' Emily said as he approached. 'The police are raiding a flat in St Clement looking for those missing kids. Someone is livestreaming it.'

David looked at the excitement on her face and wondered just why it was that she should be so animated.

'Really!' he replied laconically.

He saw her face change to a look of surprise and disappointment. Saskia's words from the other evening came back to him.

'It's such a tragic situation for those poor parents.' David changed his facial expression instantly. 'I hope they find them.'

Let me know, won't you? I've got to go and see the boss.'

The eagerness on her face returned and she nodded energetically, returning her gaze to the livestream.

David kept his own features as a mirror of their own, leaning over and looking at the livestream for good effect. Once he'd made his coffee and was able to walk away from their excited, inane babble, his face relaxed back into its neutral pose. He took a sip of his black coffee and knocked on his boss's office door, walking in straight away without waiting to be called.

'David!' his boss exclaimed as though he hadn't been expecting him after all. He was sitting talking with the head of HR, Cassie Evans. David took in Cassie's dress which showed her bare legs and ankles nicely.

'Come in, I wanted to talk to you about the other day,' Steven Wood said, waving David forward unnecessarily.

Steven Wood had one of those boyish faces which gave him a youthful look despite being in his fifties. Pale-green eyes also helped and sat well with his greying hair. David thought he was a good-looking chap all in all, for his age, although he'd started to let himself go around the midriff. David had noticed a belly creeping over the top of his trousers in the last few months.

Steven and Cassie were sitting on the sofa and chairs in his office, so David walked over to join them, placing himself opposite Cassie so he could give her his undivided attention.

'You're probably wondering why Cassie's here,' Steven began. 'I asked her to join us because I wanted someone from HR here to show we're following fair procedures. This isn't a formal disciplinary hearing or anything,' Steven quickly added, 'but I think we need to have a formal conversation.'

David smiled at Cassie. 'Of course, Steven. I've nothing to hide so more than happy to have Cassie here.' He smiled again but she glanced away.

'Right, well. I wanted to talk to you about what happened with Laurent.'

‘Mmhm.’ David smiled at his boss, turning his attention to him and sipping his coffee. ‘How is he doing?’

‘Doing? He’s fine, I understand, but obviously angry about what happened and considering whether to make a complaint.’

‘Angry?’ David replied. ‘Why is he angry? Surely it was an accident and he was lucky?’

‘Well... I don’t know. We’ve spoken to the café that made the sandwiches and they insist that there was no way that a prawn could have got into Laurent’s sandwich. Esther, who ordered them, had made it clear that it must be seafood free and not contaminated. The staff in the café remember that and are adamant that they were ultra-careful.’

‘Well, we all make mistakes, don’t we, Steven?’ David said smoothly.

‘I’ve spoken with everyone who was there. Nobody went out of that room prior to lunch, except you and Esther.’

‘Well that’s not quite true, is it? Max and Laura both went to the toilet.’ David raised his eyebrows.

‘Well, yes,’

‘And if I’m not mistaken, so did Laurent.’

‘He did, but you were the only one who was out the room around the time the sandwiches arrived back in the building.’

‘You’re not suggesting that this had anything to do with me are you?’ David looked from Steven to Cassie. ‘I was the one who saved him. I was the one who found his EpiPen and you’re trying to blame me?’

‘I’m not blaming you, I just need to know what you were doing when you left the room.’

‘I went outside to take a personal call. My girlfriend was upset. A friend of hers had been in an accident. I would have liked to leave and go and comfort her, but I thought you needed me here, so I’d stayed but was obviously concerned about her and wanted to check she was ok.’ David looked to Cassie as he spoke, checking to see if his words were having an effect. ‘If I’d have known that I was going to be treated like

this then I'd have just told you I was leaving. But then Laurent might be in a morgue now because I wouldn't have been there to find that EpiPen.'

Steven looked ruffled and glanced at Cassie.

'Look, as I said, David, I'm not accusing you.'

'Well it's sounding that way, Steven. I'm disappointed that you clearly don't trust me. Why don't you call the police, get them in to investigate it? I'd be happy to tell them the same as I've told you. Even if the media did get hold of the story, they'd have nothing to say because Laurent is fine.'

'Well, no, we don't really want this going outside our four walls. We're trying to keep a lid on it.' Steven looked even more ruffled now.

David knew he'd be particularly sensitive about the firm's reputation being sullied. The last thing he wanted was police and the press.

'Why would you even think that I would do such a thing?' David pushed, hurt etched across his features.

'Well, I don't know. I guess some people like to be the hero.'

'Oh my god, you are telling me that because I saved the man's life, I must have been the one who did it?' David looked to Cassie. 'Is this for real? Are you saying that I should ignore the EpiPen in the future and not try to save his life because if this is what it gets me, then I'm going to think twice.'

'No, no, no, that's not what I'm saying. I've been speaking to everyone.'

'What about Esther? She had the most opportunity. Have you accused her too?'

David sat shaking his head and looking upset. Then he bowed his head and looked up at Cassie wounded.

'OK. We'll leave it there then. I'm sorry if you felt I was accusing you, I wasn't. We are all very grateful that you found that EpiPen,' Steven said.

David moved as if he was going to leave.

‘Before you go, just one more thing. It’s come to my attention that you’re encouraging some of the clients to increase their risk appetites. That’s not how we do things here and I’d like you to rein it in a bit. Futures are risky enough without pushing the boundaries. If clients start losing big amounts of cash then that’s going to come back and bite us.’

David gave a small, compliant smile. ‘Of course, Steven.’ He stood up to leave. He glanced at his coffee cup. It was empty and he left it. Steven could take the mug to the kitchen.

As he walked out the office, anger bubbled inside. Not because of the prawn conversation – he’d half expected that – but because Steven had criticised his client handling. How did he know what David’s clients wanted? They had plenty of money. If they lost a bit, they’d make far more back another time. And who was it that had brought this to Steven’s attention?

David walked straight past the gaggle in the kitchen, still glued to the livestream of the police raid. He wasn’t in the mood for pandering to their pathetic needs. He didn’t like being watched or controlled – by anyone. Someone in this office had better watch their own back.

TWENTY-SIX

TUESDAY

A mile away, Francis Melton's flat door gave up to the battering ram, and Winter was beckoned forward. He followed the team in to the sounds of, 'Police, show yourselves' but heard nothing in return. Had Francis already gone? If he'd been off work yesterday he could have left at the weekend and nobody would be any the wiser. But what about the kids?

Winter's biggest fear was walking into the flat and finding four small bodies. He knew it was what all the team were thinking; the desperation to have a happy ending to this case was palpable.

'Sir!' He'd only just stepped into the hallway when one of the team beckoned him into what he presumed was the living room area. Other officers were checking the bedroom. Winter walked in to see a man sitting on the sofa, his head lying back. Mouth open, eyes closed, as though he was asleep and snoring. But Winter had seen enough dead bodies in his career to know that Francis Melton was no longer with them.

'All clear,' another officer said as he came out of the bedroom.

'No sign of the children?' Winter asked them. They all shook their heads and their eyes went to the large metal cage in the corner of the room. 'OK thanks, guys, clear out and let's get Forensics in.'

Winter wanted to shout and swear at the top of his voice, but he had to keep it together. He was sure the kids had been here – or at least one of them had. Inside the cage was a

blanket and a plastic bottle of water, half drunk. No animal drank out of a bottle of water like that.

Winter stepped closer to the body to see if he could see how he'd died. This would be too much of a coincidence to think it was natural causes. There was a strong smell of whisky, and an empty bottle and glass on the table. The lone glass suggested he hadn't been entertaining. There were no stab wounds or any evidence of blood loss. No ligature marks on his neck. Had the man taken an overdose? Yet there was no evidence of pills, no grainy residue in the glass. No needles or smoking equipment. Could it be poison?

Winter's mind raced through the implications of what they'd found. Francis Melton couldn't be the Pied Piper, he must be just the middle man. The one who had the opportune cover of being a delivery driver, to be able to take the children. Had someone murdered him, perhaps to silence him? But there was no sign of a struggle or break in. Surely it couldn't have been natural causes?

Winter carefully looked around the flat for a phone or any kind of indications as to what kind of man Francis Melton had been. Some utility bills and bank statements on the side showed he was paid up and had a small amount of money in his account. That made debt a less likely motive.

There was no computer, but if he had been murdered, his killer could have taken it. Winter bagged an old mobile phone he found in the kitchen. He'd take that straight back to the analysts. It wasn't a smart phone so that would make getting access easier.

There was nothing else of interest in the flat. It looked like a typical home of a single man who didn't earn much and kept himself to himself. Forensics would be able to take a closer look around the place. Right now, Winter was no closer to understanding the personality and motive of this man.

He returned to the sofa and looked again at the body of Francis Melton. It had been a peaceful death – not one that the parents of the four children would think he'd deserved. As soon as Forensics had taken their photographs and swabs, they

needed to get his remains to the pathologist. Winter's experience told him this was murder and that the killer had to be the Pied Piper. Questions were, how and why? Francis had never fitted Saskia Monet's profile and he couldn't have sent the note this morning because he was already dead. So had the Pied Piper cleared up his loose ends? Eradicated any chance that someone could identify him? Perhaps he had intended to pick up the money yesterday and pay Francis off, but when that failed he was left with only one option: to silence him.

He recognised Francis from one of the photographs at the depot. He'd lost weight since that had been taken and there was a look to his skin which told of an unhealthy man.

In front of Francis was an empty photograph album, a plate with a pile of ash, and some matches. He'd been burning photographs. Why? Winter could make a guess but it might be useful to get Saskia's view on this scene as well. He hoped she would be watching the feed at police HQ.

Winter didn't want to touch anything further and risk contaminating evidence and so he backed out the room. A team of white-suited forensics officers were already amassing in the corridor outside.

'We need this all as fast as you can. It looks like the kids were here at some point. We still have four children out there to find and somewhere in that flat might be a clue as to where they are. Who's crime scene manager?'

'I am.' A middle-aged woman held up her hand.

Winter recognised Trudy Hayman's eyes above the paper mask she wore.

'We'll be thorough and we'll prioritise finding those kids,' she said to him.

'I know you will, thanks. DS Jonathon Vibert is working Exhibits,' Winter told her. He knew they were both dedicated and thorough. 'I need that body in the pathologist's lab as soon as we can. We need to know cause of death. If you spot anything material at all, call me.'

Winter walked back out into the fresh air and sunshine, the bright summer day contrasting to his mood. Over the car park perimeter, there were more houses and he could see a young man at an open window with a phone raised.

‘Get him to stop filming and find out if he saw anything before today,’ Winter shouted to the nearest uniformed officers. But he could bet that whoever the guy was, he’d have been blind to the comings and goings of Francis Melton and it was only the blue lights and police action that he felt worthy of using for his social media channel.

Winter leaned against his car and sighed. He’d been so hopeful. For a few minutes he allowed himself to just stand and mourn the loss of what he’d hoped would be a victory. Then he gave himself a mental shake down and a reminder that there were still four young children out there who were relying on him to get this investigation back on track. This was still a breakthrough. There was no solid proof yet, but he was sure Francis was the one who had kidnapped the children. He was also sure he’d been silenced and that meant the trail had gone temporarily cold again.

Perhaps somewhere in the flat, Francis had written something down in case the Pied Piper turned on him. Perhaps there’d be a link to the man who held four young children’s lives in his grasp. What Winter did know, was that the pressure had increased. The Pied Piper now knew they were on his trail and he’d just shown them that he was more than capable and willing to commit murder.

TWENTY-SEVEN

TUESDAY

Winter had to hold the phone away from his ear. Des Carmichael was shouting so loudly that there was no need for a speakerphone. Anyone in the incident room who was within a few feet of DI Labey could hear every word he was saying.

‘You promised to keep us updated and I have to find out from a friend that there’s been a raid on some flats! It’s all over social media. Why are the families the last to find out. What’s going on? Have you found them?’

‘Mr Carmichael, the inquiry moved very swiftly this morning. We identified a person of interest and immediately acted on that information. I can assure you that I was about to update you.’

‘So have you found them?’

‘No. I’m afraid we haven’t.’

There was a string of expletives from the other end of the phone. Winter didn’t respond. Instead, he let a hurting man vent his frustration.

‘Mr Carmichael, we have heard from the Pied Piper again and he wants a press conference with all the parents.’

More expletives.

‘I understand your frustration, Mr Carmichael, but we have made some headway and so if we can stall him and prevent him from doing anything we would all regret, then we will have to play along with him. Could yourself and Carol please come to the station at four o’clock? We’ll fill you in with the

latest developments and talk about how we are going to handle the press conference.'

There was a grunt from the other end of the phone and then the call ended.

Winter was left looking at his mobile in surprise.

'He's not the most pleasant man, is he?' DC Edwards had been closest to Winter and heard the full conversation.

'No. I get that he's hurting but I suspect he's not the most pleasant even at the best of times. How much have we looked into his background?'

'His online trail has been carefully managed. We've put in requests to Scotland Yard and the National Crime Agency in case they have anything on him, especially from before his legit businesses were set up, but nothing's come up. We're asking around here, people seem reluctant to talk. The man threatens to sue at the slightest provocation and has the financials to back it up.'

'Then there must be something. Somebody must be willing to talk. Look harder.'

Winter sighed. He'd been a bit short with the DC: that was his own frustration coming out. He left the main office and walked down the corridor to where he'd put Saskia Monet, out of the way of the eyes of the DCI and Detective Superintendent. She was reviewing information about Francis Melton, and photographs of the crime scene from his flat and he wanted her opinions.

'How you getting on?' he said to her as he walked in.

She looked up at him and not for the first time, he was struck by how beautiful her eyes were.

'I don't think the burning of the photographs is to hide any images of the Pied Piper. Why burn all of them? It's like some kind of ceremonial burning, one by one. Anyone destroying evidence would just throw things into a pile and set them alight. I think Francis Melton was expecting to die. He was preparing.'

‘Maybe he was just looking at them before he destroyed them to go on the run, or perhaps he didn’t have anywhere to burn them all at once?’

‘No. There’re other indicators. The kitchen is clean. No dirty dishes left out. And look at what he’s wearing. Those clothes are smart. Why would you put on smart clothes when you’re at home alone for the evening? He wanted to create an impression of himself and his life, the way you would if you were expecting visitors. You’d smarten yourself up. The burning of the photographs suggest to me that he didn’t want strangers seeing those who were precious to him. It was a way of keeping control of his past. They’re old photos, we can tell that from the dates that had been written in the album, so probably his parents and his childhood.’ Saskia pointed to a photograph of the album which she’d magnified.

Winter squinted and nodded at the date.

‘Then there’s his photograph. The only one left and clearly placed on the table as though he’d left it for people to find. I think that was him trying again to have some control over what image of him gets used once he’d gone. It could have been that he was planning on running, but there’s no packed bag and he’s been drinking whisky so not planning on driving anywhere. I believe he was staying in.’

‘I see what you’re saying. This is more like a suicide scene than a murder one.’

‘And you’re sure he was murdered?’

‘No. I’ve got no evidence yet. There was no sign of a struggle and no indications that he’d had a visitor. But they could be forensically aware and eradicated any trace of themselves and then staged this scene.’

Saskia nodded.

‘I don’t know is the answer, but it’s my first instinct. I admit it could be suicide but there’s no evidence of anything that he could have used to take his own life himself. Nothing in the flat at all and Forensics haven’t found anything that

wasn't obvious. It's too much of a coincidence for it to be natural causes, surely?'

'You'd certainly think so,' Saskia agreed.

'He's at the pathologist's lab now. I'm about to head down there quickly before I meet with the parents. See if there's any indication as to what killed him.'

'The cage definitely looks like at least one of the children was there, although probably not for long.'

'No. We are now looking at every CCTV we can get our hands on to try and track his movements over the past ten days. He had to move those kids on to wherever the Pied Piper is holding them. Question is, what's the connection between Francis Melton and the Pied Piper? We've looked at the phone we found and it's got nothing on it apart from the odd photograph of a parcel. So, how did they know each other and communicate? Was there a burner phone? And why did Francis agree to do this? He's got no criminal record. By all accounts he was a quiet man who worked in the building trade for most of his life and then latterly as a delivery driver. Thankfully we've also found no evidence of any kind of interest in paedophilia in his flat.'

Winter sat on the side of the desk near to Saskia and scrubbed at his head as though it could somehow encourage the answers to appear.

Saskia thought for a few moments. 'The Pied Piper is a smart man. He must have been able to trust Francis Melton in order to work with him on this, so there has to be a bond there. Did he promise Francis the ransom money? Maybe, greed is a big motivator, but it is also quite corruptive and we know that the Pied Piper doesn't like greed. If the Pied Piper isn't driven by money I don't think he would have trusted somebody who was.'

'So what do you mean? Why would he have trusted Francis?'

Saskia pulled her mouth down and furrowed her brow. 'I think it was something far more personal, far more intrinsic to

either both of them, or just Francis.'

'What, you think they were having a relationship?'

'No. Not like that. I think the Pied Piper was able to offer Francis something. Something he knew he needed or wanted more than anything. Something that ensured his trust and silence.'

'So they had to have a relationship somehow.'

'Definitely. This isn't a met him down the pub kind of trust. I'd look at all the professionals that Francis could have had any dealings with, doctors, lawyers, etc. I presume you've checked out all the neighbours already?'

'Yeah. I'm pretty certain none of them are involved. We've got a single mum, a recently divorced bloke, and a pensioner. None of them would fit the profile and they are all cooperating. We're doing some more checks, but I think we can discount them. So what about this press conference? Why's he asked for that?'

'Oh that one is easy. He's making them admit that they weren't watching their children at the time he snatched them. He wants to watch the guilt on their faces for himself. He wants to see their pain and have them shamed in public. Making them suffer is his reward.'

'Evil.' Winter said shaking his head and thinking of the eight people who would soon be tearing their hearts out under the media spotlight.

'Not in his eyes it's not. I don't think the Pied Piper believes he's evil at all. He's just seeking justice for something that means more to him than anything else. Something that he's prepared to go to jail for, or perhaps lose his life over.'

'They're the most dangerous.' Winter said sadly. 'No fear of the consequences; just a highly driven motivation.'

TWENTY-EIGHT

TUESDAY

Winter Labey found Dr Imran Chaudhry bent over the examination table in the pathology suite, his assistant Leo Troy watching and taking notes. He was peering closely around the upper torso of the now-disrobed Francis Melton and dictating some notes to his mortuary assistant.

All three of them were dressed from head to toe in white forensic oversuits, with masks and gloves to prevent any contamination of the body. Winter had a particular sensitivity to death. The smell repulsed him, perhaps because his brain so closely associated it with the emotional trauma he was exposed to in his job, or maybe because of a childhood memory.

When he was younger they'd had two cats, and one of them had been his constant companion. Lilly, a large black and white cat who behaved more like a dog than a feline, followed him around and sought out his company, unlike Milly who could have taken or left him. One day Lilly hadn't been there when he woke up, and didn't appear after school or for her dinner. They'd searched everywhere for her. It had been four days later when the smell alerted him, that he'd found her. She was in the hedge at the end of their garden where she'd been tossed by whoever had run her over. The smell of death could still bring back that memory and the struggle to comprehend why.

The why was what had driven him throughout his whole career, and what brought him to Dr Chaudhry. Like most of his colleagues, this wasn't a popular task, but it was a necessary

one. He was here for those four children. Finding out what had ended Francis Melton's life was a critical clue in their hunt for the Pied Piper.

In order to try to mitigate against his childhood memories and the gut-wrenching stench of cadavers, whenever he knew he was going to the morgue, Winter would rub some scented oil onto his wrist. If he held his wrist to his nose, he could smell it through the white coverall whenever the stench got too much. It was a technique some others used with perfume, but you had to be careful because whatever scent you chose, it would invariably become entwined with the experience of being at an autopsy. The last thing you wanted was to be sitting having a romantic dinner at a restaurant and discover a fellow diner had on that same scent. Great for losing weight, but not so great for digestion.

'DI Labey, perfect timing,' Dr Chaudhry said. The pathologist straightened up and stretched his lower back from where he'd been bending over Francis Melton.

'You found something?'

'Well, still early days yet. As you can see we've not opened him up, although I have put him through the scanner. Most importantly we need toxicology results and I understand we've been promised fast track on those.'

'Yes.' DI Labey nodded, eager to hear what he had to say.

'OK. First things first. Mr Melton here had terminal cancer. Way past the point of no return. He probably only had a few months, maybe a year to live at most. He was likely getting close to the point where he would have had to start restricting his lifestyle.'

'Had he been receiving treatment?'

'Not according to his medical records. Saw the specialist but when they explained it was terminal, he never went back.'

'I need the names of all the medical professionals that he met please, and when.'

'No problem, Leo here can get that information for you.' Dr Chaudhry nodded to his assistant. 'Now, more to the point,

you wanted to know whether it was suicide or was he murdered? Well...'

The pathologist enjoyed the suspense. It wasn't Winter's first occasion to be on the receiving end of his theatricals. He would raise his long, bushy eyebrows and look out from underneath them as though goading you to come up with the answer yourself.

'On the face of it,' he continued, 'there's nothing to suggest any third-party involvement, however, I have spotted some small needle marks and a slight resulting bleed around his chest area.'

'Needle marks, so he was injected with something?'

'It looks that way yes. Has to be a third party because not only would it have been extremely difficult to inject himself at that angle and area, but I'd say it was expertly done so your question about what medical professionals he'd seen, is quite a pertinent one.'

'So you're saying this must have been someone with medical training?'

'I'd say that is quite likely because they knew where to inject to get straight into the bloodstream. If it was an amateur, they would likely plunge a needle in to any target area. This person injected with precision. Unlikely to have been a skill they'd learned off YouTube.'

'Any ideas of what they injected?'

'Not yet. We're running the bloods through any tests we can do here and obviously sending them off for more detailed analysis. But if you wanted me to hazard a guess?' Dr Chaudhry waited for some encouragement to go on.

'Your opinion would obviously be welcome,' Winter prompted, bringing his wrist up to his nose.

'Well, I would say that bearing in mind where the needle has gone in, I'd guess it was either a large shot of adrenaline, or some other substance aimed at stopping his heart, or possibly air, which of course is not detectable.'

‘Air?’

‘Yes, air entering the pulmonary venous system can create an embolism in the coronary arteries and result in cardiac arrest. My lunch would be on cardiac arrest as the ultimate cause of death with somebody having injected into his coronary arteries, either a substance or air.’

‘So it was murder.’

‘On these preliminary findings, I believe so. Obviously we need to do a lot more investigation, but as an initial opinion, I’d say that’s looking highly likely.’

‘Would he have known what was going on? I mean if someone approached me with a big needle and went for my heart, I think I’d fight back.’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? No signs of any other wounds on him and he was found in a relaxed pose. The whisky might have meant he was fast asleep, inebriated, but even so you’d expect him to struggle at the first jab. We’re looking for any kind of anaesthetic to see if he was incapacitated in any way first. Swabs around his nose and mouth have been taken.’

‘Thank you, Dr Chaudry, I have to meet with all the parents now, but if you find anything else that you think could help us find his attacker and identify him, please get in touch immediately.’ Winter turned to leave. Then a thought crossed his mind.

‘Don’t suppose you have the name of his GP handy? It’s usually on most medical records.’

‘His GP? Leo, is that on the medical information there?’

‘Yes,’ the young man said, ‘GP was a Doctor Nicholas Adam Brown.’

TWENTY-NINE

TUESDAY

Saskia had returned to the prison after her visit to the police station. There'd been nothing further she could add to the inquiry and she was more concerned about being a burden and further annoying Winter's bosses. It hadn't gone unnoticed that she'd been hidden away in a room this time. A part of her was pleased that Winter still valued her input, but it was irritating that the DCI was so small-minded.

After a couple of hours cooped up in her own office doing paperwork, she had gone outside, unlocking the final door of the administration block and stepping into the fresh air of the prison's internal perimeter. The huge outer fences of La Moye dominated the eyeline, a square of high-security fencing close to the edge of the cliffs on Jersey's westerly tip. Not far from here, the iconic La Corbière lighthouse stood against the elements at the end of a tidal causeway. Views of nothing but ocean, open to sun, wind, and storms. Such a contrast to the enclosed yard that the prisoners had access to. The sea breeze could find its way inside and choose to leave when it liked, but for the prisoners at La Moye, there was no freedom until their release date. They got the weather, but they certainly didn't get the views.

Saskia was enjoying her new job. It was in many ways more interesting than some of the UK prisons she'd spent her career at so far, because La Moye, being the only option in Jersey, held every category of prisoner: men and women, and a vulnerable protection unit for sex offenders. It was a medium-security prison, but had at one time held the notorious drugs

trafficker Curtis Warren before his conviction and transfer to a category-A prison in the UK.

Some weeks in the UK, she'd spent every day in interview rooms with violent male offenders. Here, one hour she could be talking to a female prisoner who was contrite and missing her kids after being jailed for embezzling some money from her boss, and the next, a male convicted paedophile who still failed to recognise his guilt and the damage he'd done to his victims and his family.

There had been a big refurbishment project going on for years at the prison, with new staff areas and modern cell blocks being built. The old prison blocks were closed, waiting for demolition. Saskia had walked around them when she'd first arrived. Dismal, dark, narrow walkways that barely allowed for safe passage due to the narrow distance between the opposing cells. They didn't have toilet facilities in the cells either, so up until a few years ago when the blocks were closed, prisoners still had to slop out. Sixties facilities which survived into the twenty-first century. That had all changed now, although there were some who thought the 'fancy' new facilities were wasted on the convicted.

Saskia had just passed the vulnerable unit and was on her way to Hogarth wing to see a female prisoner, when she saw one of the guards escorting a male prisoner coming towards her. The guard, Patrick Byrne, was one of those who would have liked to see more Dickensian facilities and treatment for the prisoners. He was a big man with a full beard. His stomach, which strained at the white shirt he was wearing and topped his black trousers, belied his true strength. He walked, one hand on the chain that hung from his trousers and carried a full set of keys for the many doors that had to be opened before entry or exit to any area. At his side, the young male prisoner looked thin and scrawny compared to his bulk.

Saskia hadn't run a full series of diagnostic tests, but she could recognise a psychopath when she saw one. He declared himself a born-again Catholic, hiding behind the religion to give himself some sense of outward morality and a higher purpose in life. His religion was his excuse for what was

essentially cruel behaviour by seeking to shame those who he didn't think lived up to the strictest moral codes. Unfortunately, prison officers didn't have to be screened with a psychopathy test and so Patrick Byrne got to be God in a place where he could so easily belong on the other side of the fence. He was one of the old guard who had been there for many years and would probably fail the psychometric testing that was done for new recruits these days. His length of tenure also meant he was difficult for the governor to get rid of.

The prisoner was just a petty thief who was in for the first and hopefully last time. He was what people would have described as a cheeky chappie, always had a joke or a quip. Today that cheerfulness was nowhere in sight and Saskia recognised fear in his downturned head and demeanour. A cut across the top of his forehead told of something more.

'Hi, Jake, been in the wars?' Saskia greeted him cheerfully.

'Slipped and banged my head, miss,' he said to her, head still bowed, eyes flicking to the guard next to him.

'Hope it doesn't hurt too much,' she said back cheerfully. Saskia knew it was a lie. The more likely story was that Jake had been his usual cheeky self to the wrong prison officer. Patrick wouldn't take kindly to anything that he saw as disrespect.

Saskia had first come across Patrick in a staff meeting when she'd only been in the job about three weeks. They'd been discussing how to handle a prisoner who was being disruptive. Saskia maintained it was because the man was struggling to communicate his anxiety and he needed psychotherapy, individually and then in a small group. Patrick had sneered at her and then addressed the rest of those present in the meeting.

'That's all just fluff and nonsense,' Patrick had said, shooting down all that she'd suggested. 'I've been working here for fifteen years now, our new psychologist has been here less than a month. Levi has been here before. What he needs is

to learn his boundaries or he'll just think he can get away with whatever he wants.'

Patrick had looked at her then, the contempt for her profession in his eyes. She knew exactly where she stood with him.

Luckily the other professionals in the room had backed her way of thinking and the prisoner did get the therapy he needed. Last she'd heard, he was now a productive member of the prison population and there was even talk of possible early release. Unfortunately, the snub to Patrick's authority and opinion had been clearly held against her because after that day, he'd been more than taciturn, virtually bordering on aggressive in his attitude towards her. They were never going to be friends. Perhaps he realised she recognised him for what he was, or maybe his innate narcissism meant he just saw her as an irritating challenger.

Saskia made a mental note to talk to Jake some other time when he wasn't under the influence of Patrick, and see if she could find out what really happened to his head.

She liked most of the rest of the staff at the prison. Patrick was a definite outlier, and everyone knew to avoid him. As she walked past and carried on her way, she felt his eyes boring into her. Of everyone at the prison, the murderers, the drugs couriers, the thieves, and the sex offenders, it was ironic that it was a prison guard that she feared the most. Of all of them, he was the most dangerous.

Saskia reached H block and so she put the big key into the first of the doors to gain entrance. It opened and she locked it behind her, before attending to the next door. As she opened this one, the sound of laughing and female chatter reached her ears. They currently had well under a dozen female prisoners at La Moye, and it was like walking into a shared dorm community. The feeling contrasted sharply with the underlying air of tension that went with the testosterone in the male wings where violence was an ever-present threat. She allowed the chatter to wash over her and drown out the thoughts of Patrick and of the faces of the four frightened children being held

somewhere in Jersey by a man who believed he had morality on his side.

THIRTY

TUESDAY

Winter Labey had arranged for all the parents to meet at the police station at 4 p.m. His first priority was to give them an update on the investigation. Media and social media were in a frenzy over the raid on Francis Melton's flat and the conspiracy theorists were joining in. He'd promised an exclusive interview with Harry Wilde, the Editor of the JEP, in return for their cooperation with the Pied Piper's notes. What he had hoped was that instead of announcing the press conference, he was going to be announcing that they had arrested a man and found the children. Instead, he now had a murdered accomplice and they were no closer to knowing the whereabouts of the children.

The one piece of information he did now possess, was that Nicholas Brown had been Francis Melton's doctor. This was their first firm link between one of the parents and the Pied Piper. So, how did it fit in to the puzzle?

'I want to go and speak to the staff at the Browns' surgery,' Winter said to his team as soon as he'd returned to the incident room. 'I want to know if they remember Francis Melton, and if there was any reason why he might have a grudge against Nicholas. Sarah, can you come with me?'

DC Sarah Fuller had come back in for duty after taking the morning off to sleep. Winter suspected that the GP office staff might be female and so having a woman with him might help with rapport.

'Sure, boss.'

‘Mark, you know what to do if the parents arrive before I return. I’ll make sure I’m back in plenty of time before the press conference.’

On his way out, Winter grabbed a sausage roll, bottle of water and a coffee from the canteen. He needed to be quick because time was ticking on and they were going to have to get ready for the press conference. No time for lunch. He had a hunch about the Browns and wanted to do some more digging.

‘What do we know about the surgery set-up?’ Winter asked Sarah as they drove to St Saviour where the surgery was based.

‘So,’ Sarah said, consulting the notes she’d brought with her, ‘Nicholas and Christina own it. He bought her ex-husband’s share off him, but they also have a locum working there as Christina is only part time, and have recently also taken on a dentistry practice to add to their offering. I think a skin specialist visits once a month too, according to their website.’

‘We know that both the Browns were married previously. Christina’s ex is in Dubai so out of the picture, unless he’s playing a blinding game long distance. Nicholas’s wife died of breast cancer a few years back. I want to know more about the relationship with Francis Melton, and their private lives. If you can concentrate on the office staff, I’ll talk to the other doctor, what’s their name?’

‘Dr Richard Ingle,’ Sarah replied.

Dr Richard Ingle wasn’t overly pleased about having to postpone his patient consultations to speak to DI Labey.

‘We are extremely busy, Detective, I’m already ten minutes behind.’

‘I promise I will only take up a few minutes of your time,’ Winter said to him, standing firmly in his consulting room and not budging. He didn’t show his mild surprise at the fact that Dr Ingle didn’t seem interested in helping them bring the Browns’ daughter back.

Richard Ingle had sighed. 'Go on then.'

DI Labey sat himself down on the patient's chair next to the doctor's desk, opposite the large framed photograph of Grosnez Castle on the wall.

'Can you tell me how you came to be working at the surgery?'

'I applied to their advert. Christina works part time and they needed another doctor. I was working in the UK, fancied a change. I couldn't afford a practice of my own here, but they got me a licence to work.'

'Are you aware of a patient called Francis Melton?'

'Melton? Is he one of mine?'

'No. I believe Nicholas was his doctor. He had terminal cancer.'

'He's not that fellow who accused Nicholas of malpractice, is he? Said he didn't diagnose his cancer in time?'

'Quite possibly.'

Richard Ingle shook his head. 'You're better off speaking to Nicholas about him then. I remember him coming in and shouting, upsetting the staff and the patients. We had to threaten to call the police before he'd go. Unfortunately, we all have to deal with the occasional individual who is looking for someone to blame.'

'Have you had issues with any other individuals?' Winter tried.

Richard Ingle scowled and Winter qualified his question.

'Are there any other patients who might possibly bear a grudge against the practice or the Browns personally?'

Ingle shook his head. 'No, why would there be? We're doctors here, DI Labey, not loan sharks. We try to do our best for our patients.'

'I appreciate that, Dr Ingle, but someone, or perhaps more than one person, has taken four children and we need to find

the motive. So far, we have a connection through Francis Melton who clearly had a grudge against the practice.'

'I'm sorry I can't help you with that. I'm only here for another couple of months and then I'm returning to the UK. I've not got involved in the politics of the practice.'

'Did you leave your family back in the UK?' Winter asked, looking towards a photograph of Dr Ingle with his arms around two young children.

'No. Is my private life of concern here, Detective?' Ingle had suddenly become defensive.

'No, Dr Ingle,' Winter replied.

'If you're done, then I'd really appreciate it if you could let me get on with my job and the next patient.'

'Of course. My apologies.'

Winter left Dr Ingle's consulting room and went back to the receptionist.

'Is Marcus Wilson the dentist in?'

'Yes, end room. He's just finished with a patient so should be available for a few minutes.'

Winter thanked her and glanced up to see Sarah in the office behind chatting to two women. She looked as though she was getting on far better with them than he had with Dr Ingle. Winter knocked on the end door which was quickly opened.

'Come on in, Detective.' A man Winter presumed to be Marcus Wilson smiled and beckoned him in. 'I've a few minutes between patients. My dental assistant is just on a break.'

Marcus indicated a chair for Winter to sit on and perched himself on the examination chair.

'Thank you for seeing me, Mr Wilson. As you know we are investigating the kidnapping of the Browns' daughter,

Jessica, and three other children. How long have you been working here?’

‘I joined about eighteen months ago. It was just after Nicholas had bought out Craig’s share of the business and I think they needed the extra income from me renting the room. We are totally separate businesses, although obviously we refer patients to each other.’

‘I see. Have you been aware of any patients who might have an issue with the Browns?’

‘An issue? No. Nobody has said anything to me, but you know I only work part time here now so I might have missed something.’

‘Does the name Francis Melton mean anything to you?’

Marcus shook his head. ‘I don’t think so, but I won’t remember the name of all my patients so I could get my assistant to check our records for you.’

‘Thank you, I was thinking more in relation to the doctor’s surgery.’

‘Ah, no. I really don’t have anything much to do with them. As I said, we’re a separate business and if I’m honest, detective, I come in, do my job and leave. I’m not one for chatting and gossiping.’

Winter looked at the earnest man in front of him and agreed. He couldn’t imagine him standing chatting with the ladies in the office, or being the kind of person who would take to the somewhat vain Nicholas Brown.

‘Have you got to know Dr Ingle at all?’

‘Richard? Not really, only to say hello to. He also keeps himself to himself. I think he’s leaving soon, doesn’t seem to have been all that happy here.’

‘Do you happen to know why?’

Marcus shook his head. ‘I get the impression he has some personal issues, but I don’t want to talk out of turn. You should speak to him.’

‘OK, thank you, Mr Wilson. If you do think of anything that might help us with our enquiries, please get in touch.’

Winter hadn’t gleaned much from either Dr Ingle or Marcus Wilson, apart from the fact that finances were clearly an issue for the Browns and the evasive Dr Ingle might have personal issues. Could either of these two factors relate to their inquiry?

He waited for Sarah to finish up and then the two of them returned to the car. He was eager to hear what she’d found.

‘So, spoke to all three of the office staff, and one in particular, the receptionist, remembered Mr Melton. Apparently about eighteen months to two years ago, he came in several times complaining of pain and tiredness. Saw Doctor Brown, but he gave him iron pills and some painkillers and sent him away. Happened a couple of times until, eventually, he sent him for tests and cancer was found. Melton apparently went into the surgery after and demanded to see him, said he’d signed his death warrant by being incompetent and not catching the cancer sooner. If he’d been referred when he first went in then it would have probably been curable. It was apparently all very upsetting and then that was the last she saw of him.’

‘So Francis Melton definitely had a grudge against the Browns. That could be the motive for taking Jessica,’ Winter thought out loud. ‘Miss Monet said it would be something very personal. Did you ask if there were any other incidences like this? I’m wondering if the Pied Piper had an experience like that?’

‘There was nobody else who has accused him of mis-diagnosis. The only other upset that she mentioned was a woman who took her own life. Seems Dr Brown isn’t overly sympathetic to people who are having mental health issues, he’s very much an old school, stop moaning and just get on with it, type. This woman was apparently pregnant too, which is why the receptionist remembers it so well.’

‘It’s not unusual for a surgery to have a patient who has taken their own life, but it might be worth looking into just to be sure.’

‘There was something else she said too – alluded to it rather than blatantly came out with it. She obviously didn’t want to be disloyal, but she said that Nicholas and Jessica weren’t getting on.’

‘What kind of not getting on?’

‘Well, she tried to backtrack when I started asking her about it, saying it was just the usual teenage hormonal stuff, but she resented him and said her mother might have stayed with her dad if it wasn’t for him.’

‘So, did Christina got together with Nicholas before she was divorced?’

‘That’s what it sounds like, but we don’t know when the marriage broke down.’

‘Check with the school in case Jessica had said something there. Anything else?’

‘There had been a period when the practice was struggling financially.’

‘Yes, I got that impression from Marcus Wilson too.’

Do you think they could have asked for a loan from William Plover?’

‘Ask him. Get them to check if the Browns are customers. Also whether they’ve been refused a loan.’

‘You don’t think...’ DC Fuller didn’t finish her sentence.

‘Open mind, Detective,’ Winter replied. ‘We also need to look into Dr Richard Ingle, dig around and find out if he has any skeletons in his closet.’

As soon as they got back to the station, Winter knew he was going to have to go straight into the meeting with the parents. They didn’t have long before they’d need to get organised for the press conference.

He put his hand on the meeting room door. Inside were eight extremely emotional people. Right now, he'd rather be facing a room full of criminals than desperate parents expecting him to find their missing children. He steeled himself and pushed the door open. Eleven faces turned to look at him. Three of his colleagues, the family liaison team, were already in the room clearly trying to keep them all calm as they'd waited for him to arrive. The room was thick with tension. They were people on the edge.

He had expected them all to erupt with questions, but it was silence that met him. Winter wasn't sure which was worse.

'Thank you all for coming in today. I wanted to first let you know about the operation that we undertook this morning. It came to our attention that a delivery van had been seen in the areas around where your children were taken from. We were able to track down the driver and went to his flat to arrest him. I can now inform you that regrettably, the man was found dead and there were no indications of where the children might be.'

As he expected, the silence was burst by a cacophony of questions, sobs, and one fist on a table. Winter held his hand up.

'Please, let me finish. I know this might not seem like the good news you had hoped for, but it does mean we are on the right tracks. We are getting closer. Forensics officers are combing the flat to see if we can find anything that might link this man to the Pied Piper and give us any indications as to where the children are being held.'

'Was it suicide?' Simon Keyes asked.

Winter thought a moment before answering. He wanted to be honest with them, but if he told them they believed it was murder, that would put the thought of the Pied Piper as a killer and not just a kidnapper, in their minds. What would be kinder? They had no proof yet anyway that a third party had been involved.

'Our inquiries are still ongoing,' was all he said to Simon.

‘Ongoing, that’s all you ever say,’ Des spoke up, true to form. ‘Now we’ve got to do this bloody press conference.’

‘Yes. You’ve all seen the note. We need to comply to give us more time to find the children.’

‘Why’s he doing this?’ Daisy Plover asked. ‘It’s mental torture. First the ransom and now this public humiliation.’

‘We think that’s exactly what he is aiming to do. Make you all suffer. I return to the question I asked you all a couple of days ago: do you know anyone who might have a grudge? This is a personal vendetta. We believe that you have all somehow had dealings with the Pied Piper. The question is how?’

Winter looked at the eight faces in front of him. None of them looked as though they had that answer and yet somebody clearly had reason to think otherwise.

‘We’ll go through the arrangements for the press conference now, so if you’ve any questions about that, please let me know.’

‘What about social media? We’re being attacked constantly by people on Twitter and Facebook; they’re saying we’re bad parents. They’ve accused us of taking our own children, of being in some kind of organised group to make money out of this,’ Natasha Keyes said. ‘And now you want us to publicly say it’s our fault because we weren’t watching our children?’

‘Yeah, Nicholas has had so much flack because he’s a stepfather. They all think he’s got to have done it,’ Christina Brown added, reaching out for her husband’s hand as she spoke.

‘We can ask people to refrain from speculation, but there is little that we can do unless they are breaking the law. There are countless people who are attracted to traumatic situations like this and will attack those involved to boost their own follower counts. Any specific threats that you receive, you must bring them to our attention. Tell your family liaison officer, or contact me directly. We will act swiftly.’

‘We had three twenty-somethings turn up at the house last night. They were doing some kind of TikTok video, prying into the garden and through the windows of the house. One of them even went through the bin.’ Natasha looked as though she was ready to collapse with the strain.

‘I know, and officers arrested and cautioned them,’ Winter replied. ‘I’m sorry you have to deal with this but it’s become a regular in any high-profile cases now. The social media algorithms give more profile to those who create controversial content. That just fuels the so-called content creators to make more like it, and spreads their false information and conspiracy theories even wider. Unfortunately, everyone seems to be an amateur sleuth these days and they don’t see the human beings behind the story. The majority of them wouldn’t say these things to your face. We will use whatever powers we have to stop them so report everything you need to but I would also urge you to stay off social media. It won’t help you to find your children. It will only upset you.’

‘Well this press conference isn’t exactly going to make things better, is it?’ Simon added.

There was nothing Winter could say in response. For the next half an hour, he and the family liaisons talked the parents through the plan for the press conference, until a knock sounded on the door and DC Everton stuck his head around.

‘Boss, can I have a word?’

Winter’s heart jumped. Could this be a lead?

Once he stepped out of the room, DC Everton updated him in a low voice. ‘DC Pete Edwards asked me to pass on a message to you. He’s spoken to a business associate of Des Carmichael’s, reckons he was incredibly litigious. Pete has had another look at the list that Des supplied and doesn’t think he’s declared anywhere near the full run of names. Thinks he’s holding back.’

‘Now why doesn’t that surprise me? Des Carmichael and Simon Keyes have an existing relationship. Simon has obviously helped Des with some legal issues but most of Des’s list were UK based. I think we need to revisit Des and Simon’s

lists. Push their buttons and find out if they've been transparent. Simon might be holding back due to client privilege, but if either of them want to see their children again alive, they're going to have to start coming totally clean.'

THIRTY-ONE

TUESDAY

Nicholas Brown looked incredibly nervous when DI Labey asked to speak to him alone. Christina insisted that she went with him. Winter wasn't sure if that was because she didn't totally trust her husband and thought they might divulge something that she herself didn't know, or because she was there for support. Having a child kidnapped, and experiencing this level of stress, put a lot of strain on a relationship. But, he could imagine that after the experience of her first marriage and womanising husband, she might be a little possessive with the second. Every one of the family dynamics were important. They couldn't ignore anything because at this stage there was no knowing what the catalyst for the kidnappings was, or who was behind them.

Winter was quick to reassure them that it wasn't specifically about Jessica, which seemed to go some way to appeasing the panic on their faces.

'We have found a connection between yourself, Dr Brown, and the man who we recently found deceased.'

Christina let out a little gasp.

'The man who was the delivery driver?' Nicholas said incredulously, looking from Winter and then back to his wife.

'Yes.' Winter took out the photograph that they'd found in the flat of Francis Melton.

Nicholas pulled a face and shook his head. 'Nope. Doesn't ring any bells.'

‘He was a patient of yours.’ DI Labey pushed the photograph closer.

Nicholas and Christina both peered at it again.

‘Was that the guy who threatened you because he said you’d not diagnosed his cancer?’ she asked her husband.

The realisation dawned across Nicholas’s face. ‘Oh him! Yes. Started accusing me of being incompetent. Upset the whole surgery one day. I did my best for the man but we’re not miracle workers, you know.’ Nicholas looked at Winter for some kind of understanding.

‘We will be asking for all your records on Mr Melton. He was heading towards the latter stages of cancer, and had been told it was inoperable. If he believed that you didn’t diagnose his cancer earlier, when there was an opportunity to do something about it, then that could be his motive for taking Jessica.’

‘No, no, no, no.’ Nicholas Brown jumped up from his chair, leaving his wife sitting, broken.

Winter watched as he paced up and down the room, fists clenched tight. Was it anger, frustration, or fear?

‘I also need to ask you both another couple of questions,’ Winter said, looking at Christina. She was raw with anxiety. ‘What was your relationship with Jessica like, Dr Brown. I understand that there was some tension?’

‘Who said that?’ Nicholas spun round, anger pinching his face.

Winter looked to Christina.

‘She’s becoming a teenager, hitting out at us both,’ Christina said, coming to Nicholas’s defence. ‘She blamed me for the marriage break-up and for her dad moving away but that’s just not true. Her father had repeatedly cheated on me. It’s true that we were still married when I met Nicholas, but our marriage was over by then. I was going to leave him, I’d just not gathered the courage and the strength.’

‘And the practice?’

‘It was mine and Craig’s. Nicholas bought out his share of the business.’

‘Did you need a loan to do that, Dr Brown? I suspect that buying half of a doctor’s practice isn’t cheap.’

‘I know exactly what you’re getting at and you’re as bad as those internet trolls. Do you not have any other leads, is that it? Go for the divorcees, the stepfather, it’s bound to be him. He needs money and besides she’s not his kid.’ Nicholas stood, feet firmly planted, back rigid, facing DI Labey. An angry bull ready to charge.

‘We have to be thorough, Dr Brown, and we need to look at all possibilities.’

‘This is just bloody ridiculous. I didn’t do anything wrong with that Melton man. You know it’s not always easy to diagnose everything. We rely on the patients to be honest and clear about their symptoms. You don’t even know if that was the reason why we were targeted. I get on perfectly well with Jessica and I have worked bloody hard to build that practice with Christina. Why would I want to kidnap our own daughter and three other children?’

Nicholas clearly ran out of incredulity and energy and slumped back down into the chair next to his wife. Christina was sat back bowed, head hanging, staring at her hands which were twisting in her lap. Nicholas reached out for them and held them in his.

She didn’t respond. She looked beaten.

‘Dr Brown, I’m not suggesting you are the kidnapper, we are investigating your links to a man we know to have been involved. You appreciate that we have to look into every situation.’

Winter looked at Nicholas’s face: it was defiant. He had clearly given no thought to Francis Melton, and while Winter appreciated that they must see a lot of patients, it surprised him that he hadn’t somehow stuck in his mind. Saskia had said Nicholas was a little narcissistic, that his over-inflated opinion of himself might mean he didn’t recognise when a patient was

disgruntled and deflect the blame. But he was right. At present there was no proof this was definitely the catalyst for Jessica's kidnap.

'We don't know for sure why any of your children have been taken, no. But it is the first definite link we've found and so it needs to be investigated. I have no idea yet how the others fit into this, but I need you now to have a very serious think about if there are any other patients like Mr Melton who weren't happy. Christina, this includes you. It's possible that the Pied Piper is also a patient or former patient of yours. It doesn't matter if you think their claims are incorrect. What matters is if they think they have a valid complaint or reason to want to seek revenge.'

'OK,' Nicholas replied.

'I understand that there was a female patient who took her own life. We need to look into that incident too, so any information you can supply could help give us that breakthrough we need.'

Nicholas shook his head.

This new information had definitely opened up a can of worms with the Browns, but so far it was all circumstantial and there was no proof that any of it related to the Pied Piper.

'I'll leave you both to talk. We've only got fifteen minutes before we need to leave to get to the press conference.'

There was no further response from either of them. Winter wanted to ask about Dr Ingle, but first he'd get his team to do some digging. Right now wasn't the time. They needed to talk as doctors, parents, and as husband and wife.

Winter slipped out the room and returned to where the rest of the parents and the family liaison officers were waiting to be taken to the press conference. He motioned to DC Amanda Potter, who got up.

'Can you go and keep an eye on the Browns. Best to probably wait outside. I've just told them about the connection

with Francis Melton and some other information which has come to light, and I think they're still taking it in. Keep your ears and eyes open, would you? I've asked them to think of any other patients who might have a grudge.'

'Sure, boss,' Amanda said and left.

Winter approached Des Carmichael, who was sitting a little apart from Carol, typing a message or email on his phone.

'Mr Carmichael?'

'Yeah?' Des replied without taking his eyes away from his phone.

'I'd like half an hour of your time after the press conference please.'

Des stopped what he was doing and looked at him. 'Why?'

'I'd like to run something by you, that's all,' Winter said. He wasn't being totally straight, but if he made it sound like he wanted to question him, then he already knew Des well enough to know that he would start complaining again.

'Sure,' Des replied and returned his attention to the phone.

Winter wanted to know what the business relationship was between Des Carmichael and Simon Keyes. He needed to speak to Simon too, but with client confidentiality, Simon wouldn't be as forthcoming as Des could be. That was if Des wanted to tell him. He'd already shown how litigious he could be. When Winter first met him he'd threatened to sue the au pair agency and the police. That was a character trait Winter couldn't ignore.

Back in the incident room, Winter asked his team for any updates.

'Not getting anywhere fast with known associates for Francis Melton,' DC O'Flanagan reported. 'Neighbours said they rarely saw him, and he never had any visitors. Work colleagues reckon he came in, did his job and left. Didn't go to any social events or meet anyone afterwards for a drink.'

Nothing in his flat to indicate he was a member of any clubs. We've just received his bank records, but nothing flagging up on first glance. The guy was a loner.'

'Don't just look for recent connections. Miss Monet thinks this has taken months to prepare for and I agree. We need to look around the time that he got his cancer diagnosis, that's a good year to eighteen months ago. Perhaps even as far back as two years when he started feeling unwell. What was he doing then? Who was he seeing? We think the Pied Piper is a well-educated, professional, and intelligent individual, so who did Francis meet or associate with at that time, who could fit that description?'

'OK, boss.'

'And get a list of every doctor, current and retired in the Island. If Melton's killer has some kind of medical training, then the Pied Piper could be on it.'

'What about nurses? They're often trained to inject.'

'You're right. Do it.'

Winter looked at his watch. It was nearly time to leave for the press conference. He took himself to the toilets to splash some water on his face and wash his hands. He felt clammy with the stress, as though the tension was oozing out of his pores. Winter stood in front of the mirror and looked at himself.

Was he doing the best he could for these families? Was he missing something? Had he made the right decisions? If they didn't make any headway very soon, he knew that the investigation might get taken out of his hands. On a case this big and important, they had to make progress fast or someone else would be brought in to give a fresh pair of eyes on the situation. If it meant those kids came back alive and safe, then he'd readily step back, but he honestly thought he was giving this his best. He was desperate to end the pain he saw in the parents' eyes. To find those children. Alive. He was sure they were getting closer, but just not close enough.

THIRTY-TWO

TUESDAY

Winter had asked to see the journalists in a closed-room briefing prior to the press conference. The communications team had been told to double check all of the credentials of those who attended. This was to be a very carefully stage-managed event. It had been forced on them by the Pied Piper, but Winter was damned if he was going to have it all run via their agenda. He was also determined that the Pied Piper didn't slip into the room posing as a journalist so that he or she could get closer to watch the suffering.

'Everyone has been verified,' Melissa Rogers said to him when he arrived at the venue. 'We've got international, UK, and local media here.'

'Thanks,' Winter said to the departmental head of comms. 'I doubt he'll turn up, he can watch it online or on TV, but can you have your team on alert for anyone who arrives and isn't recognisably media?'

'Will do,' Melissa replied.

Winter knew he could trust her to be both efficient and discreet. In her early forties, she'd worked her way up through the ranks in the comms team and understood the sensitivities and legal issues that came with working on active cases.

Winter walked through the main hall where the press conference was going to take place. The long table at the front had been set up with ten chairs for all the parents, Detective Superintendent Graeme Walker and Winter, and there were jugs of water and glasses ready on the tables. Several camera

operators were in the audience area, setting up their recording equipment. As Winter headed towards a side room filled with the waiting reporters, a text came through on his phone.

Hope all goes well today. Speak soon x

It was from his mum and made him smile. His parents always looked out for him. It was good to know somebody had his back.

Winter heard the reporters before he opened the door. The room was packed full and as he walked in, their heads swivelled as one to scrutinise him, like a flock of seagulls on the beach, and they fell instantly silent.

‘Good afternoon,’ Winter said to the collection of journalists waiting for him. The story had obviously attracted a lot of attention and he recognised some big name reporters from the UK, as well as foreign and local press.

‘No recordings please; I’m talking to you all off the record and I ask that what I say does not get shared publicly,’ Winter said as one reporter took out her phone. ‘I wanted to talk to you all privately before we go through to the press conference. I’m speaking to you on behalf of the families here today.’ He looked around the room at the faces watching him, checking for any signs that they weren’t going to be compliant.

‘Four families have been torn apart by somebody calling themselves the Pied Piper. That person has sent a demand that this press conference be held and that the parents take the blame for not watching their children. The parents have already come under attack on social media. What has happened is not because they were bad parents; the Pied Piper has another agenda. I am asking you to please report this press conference with humanity, empathy and in the context of why it is being held. Nicholas and Christina Brown, William and Daisy Plover, Simon and Natasha Keyes, and Des and Carol Carmichael, are going to be baring their souls in front of you today. All I ask is that you report this for what it is. A cruel exercise being forced on them by an individual who is holding their children’s lives in their hands.’

Winter stopped and looked around the room. In most of the faces he saw empathy. Some, he still just saw hunger for a headline, but he hoped he'd said enough.

'What do you mean by "another agenda"? What is the Pied Piper's agenda?' one of the reporters asked.

'I'm not going to answer any questions relating to the case in here. You are free to ask them in the public domain once we get in the hall. This conversation was purely to appeal to you to give the families some leniency and to allow them some privacy. They have not chosen to come forward publicly, this has been forced on them. What they will say in there is not the truth, it's what they think the Pied Piper wants to hear. It's to save the lives of their children.'

The reporter nodded, his chin creasing and mouth turning down at the corners. Winter had hit home.

'Thank you. I'll see you all next door,' Winter concluded and left the room. He had thought about getting one of comms or his own team to stay behind in the room and listen in on what the reporters said, but it was pointless. They would each do what they and their editors wanted. He just hoped it would be the right thing and he'd got through to their humanity.

Ten minutes later, Winter and the eight parents filed into the main room to face a sea of media faces and cameras. They walked like the condemned heading to the gallows. Even Des was feeling it. Winter watched them, feeling their pain. Saskia had been right: the farce on the beach, and this, were destroying them psychologically and emotionally. As if the trauma of having their child taken from them and not knowing what was happening to them wasn't enough, the Pied Piper was rubbing salt into their wounds over and over again.

'Thank you for coming along today for this press conference,' Detective Superintendent Walker kicked off. 'This is an extremely difficult and sensitive case. Four young children are missing and an individual calling themselves the Pied Piper claims to have them. As you know, a ransom note was sent to the local paper. The families complied with the terms of that note but no money has exchanged hands and the

children have not been returned. The second note was received, asking for this event. The families will now comply with the demand on that note; I quote: *Four children, eight parents, one live TV conference admitting it's their fault. They should have been watching them.*' The detective superintendent paused and looked at the audience in front of him. 'I will hand over to William and Daisy Plover first.'

William and Daisy gave each other a glance of support and he pulled his right hand, which clasped his wife's, from his knee and onto the desk for all to see their unity. Daisy spoke first.

'I would like to say to the individual who is holding our daughter, Katie, please let her come home to us. She is loved. We and her brother and sister are missing her and we desperately want her home. Katie, stay strong...' Daisy's voice cracked and she nearly broke, but then she swallowed hard and lifted her chin up to the watching audience and cameras. 'We love you, sweetheart,' she said, before Daisy turned and looked to her husband.

William's chin was creased with emotion and his mouth twisted in the effort to speak and hold back his tears. 'We are so sorry that we weren't watching you, Katie. It is our fault that this has happened and we hope you can forgive us.' William managed to get the words out before a sob exploded from him and he bowed his head, unable to look at the faces staring at him, or the cameras.

Winter had never been to a press conference where the room was so silent and hushed. Nobody moved or said a word. It was like watching a group of condemned innocents at their execution. There was a sense of collective shame and helplessness. Some of the reporters and camera crews were also hanging their heads, unable to look at the raw emotions in front of them. Perhaps they were parents too, one step closer to being able to imagine the traumatic despair that the eight individuals in front of them were going through.

Winter looked at the cameras broadcasting the event live and recording it for the agony to be played over and over again. Somewhere out there was the person for whom this

whole event had been arranged. What kind of human being were they? Did the pain they were watching touch their soul? Or were they so cold and cruel that they were already planning their next torture? Most importantly, where were those four little children – and were they still alive?

THIRTY-THREE

TUESDAY

After Monday's meeting at work, David had decided that Cassie should be his current challenge, a little distraction to keep him from getting bored at work. During his lunch hour, he'd visited Bambola Toymaster near the market and bought a fifty-pound Lego set. Cassie had twin eight-year-old boys. She had a photograph of them on her desk and he'd heard her talking to some of the other women about them when they hung around the kitchen area, so he figured that they were important to her. One of the things he'd heard her mentioning was their passion for Lego.

He'd smuggled the Lego back into the building in a Co-op carrier bag: he didn't want her knowing that he'd been to the toy shop. An hour or so later, he casually walked by her office to see if she was in. She was so he went and fetched the Lego and knocked on her door.

'Hi, Cassie, OK to come in?' he said giving one of his best smiles.

'Sure, come on in, David.' She waved him forward.

David stepped into the office and closed the door. It was a general unwritten rule in their place of work that if she had her door shut that meant she was in a meeting and not to be interrupted because it could be confidential. David didn't usually care much for rules, but he'd use this one to his advantage.

Cassie searched his face for a reason as to why he wanted to see her.

‘Do you want to talk about yesterday’s meeting?’ she asked.

‘Not particularly,’ David replied. He also didn’t want to sit on the chair that she was expecting him to settle in, because he would be separated from her by her desk. Instead, he walked round to the side of her desk and pulled the Lego set out of the bag. ‘I won this in a charity raffle. Teenage Cancer Trust. A friend’s son passed and we’d been trying to raise funds in his memory. Such a terrible disease. I’d bought so many tickets and I’d already told them to redraw another prize, so when this came up I thought perhaps your boys might like it.’

He handed across the Lego Star Wars set. Her face lit up.

‘Oh my god, David, they would just love this. But are you sure? I mean you could sell it or something.’

‘I would far rather it went to some children who will enjoy it. I wasn’t sure if they were into Lego so that’s good.’

‘Not into Lego? They live and breathe the stuff.’ She beamed at him.

‘I bet they’re good at making it too. Would probably take me a whole day to do this,’ David fished. He was hoping she’d offer to show him some photographs and then he’d be able to get in closer to her, step into her personal space as he viewed them. He knew how these things worked. He had tried and tested methods of seduction. Over the years he’d become adept at assessing where he was and how far he could push it with a woman – or man. Sex was sex.

‘I’ll take a photograph once they’ve built it.’ Cassie smiled up at him.

He smiled back, holding her gaze until she turned away.

‘Sorry about your friend’s son,’ she said to him. ‘I can’t imagine how they cope.’

For a second, David had forgotten his backstory, then his brain kicked in. ‘Thanks, it was so tragic, the poor parents and he was such a nice lad. Brave right to the end and always smiling. Harry Kane gave him the biggest smile though.’

‘Harry Kane, the footballer?’

‘Yes, sent him a video message. Freddie loved his football.’

‘Wow,’ Cassie said.

‘Yeah, what a legend that man is. When I spoke to him and told him about young Freddie, he didn’t hesitate, agreed straight away.’

‘That’s such a lovely thing to do,’ Cassie said more quietly, smiling at him in a different way now.

‘Only wish I could have got him a longer life,’ David said, dropping his head and sighing heavily.

‘You are such a kind man, David,’ Cassie said to him.

For a moment he thought she might reach out and touch him, but then her computer pinged and she tensed up.

‘Oh damn, is that the time? I have a meeting in a couple of minutes,’ she said, looking to her screen.

‘I’ll leave you to it,’ he cheerfully replied, heading for the door. ‘See you later and I look forward to seeing that photo.’

David walked off with a smile on his face. It had worked. A few more sessions like that and he reckoned he’d have her over a desk in no time.

David’s good mood only lasted until he got home. There was no Allan in his flat window to watch him arrive, but he found out why when he walked into the house. Allan was standing in their sitting room, his hand on the back of their purple velvet sofa, watching their TV.

David swallowed his irritation and walked over to Jackie, putting his arm around her waist and kissing her hello.

‘Hello, beautiful, did you have a good day?’ he asked.

She was distracted. ‘We’re just watching the awful press conference that the parents of those children have been forced to do. That Pied Piper is just plain evil.’

He saw the disgust and sadness on her face and reacted.

‘Oh god no, he’s not hurt them, has he? I was in back-to-back meetings all day. Not had the chance to breathe and didn’t turn the radio on in the car because my head was just pounding.’

‘No,’ Jackie said, ignoring his attempt at sympathy and attention. ‘They still don’t know where the kids are. He’s making the parents do a public press conference to say it was all their fault. It’s just heart-breaking watching them, look.’

David looked at the TV.

‘Thank you, William and Daisy Plover,’ a police officer was saying. ‘Now, Christina and Nicholas Brown.’

The camera focused on a couple, mid-forties.

The man cleared his throat and looked directly at the camera, ‘I am so sorry for whatever you think that we, I, have done, but this isn’t Jessica’s fault. Please, I apologise, I’ll do whatever you want, but please let Jessica come back to us.’ The man looked to his wife and both of them wiped away tears.

Jackie was transfixed.

The woman on the TV spoke next. ‘We should have been watching you,’ she said. ‘I’m so sorry, baby, this is our fault. We should have been there. We love you.’ She collapsed against her husband’s shoulder and he put his arms around her, burying his face into her hair.

David found it surprising that they weren’t bothered about looking so weak in public, but when he looked at Jackie she was also in tears.

‘Sweetheart,’ he said, putting his arm around her and hugging her to his side. When he’d first arrived she’d been rigid, focused on the television, but now he felt her melt into him and heard a little sob.

‘It’s terrible, those poor parents,’ he said, kissing her forehead and smoothing down her hair. He could feel Allan’s eyes boring into his back, but he ignored him.

‘We’ve only just got back, Allan picked me up from L’Horizon.’ Jackie said to David. ‘I can’t watch this anymore. I’m going to get changed.’ She pulled away from him and added ‘Thanks, Allan, see you tomorrow,’ as she left the room.

David watched her leave and then turned round to see that Allan was still standing there watching the television. He reached over for the remote control and turned the TV off, spinning back round to face him.

Allan looked at him as though he was something he’d trodden in.

David’s muscles tensed with anger.

‘Haven’t you got something to do?’ he spat.

‘Not particularly, but Kevin’s over later and I’m cooking,’ Allan replied cockily. ‘I just helped Jackie in with her shopping.’

‘Did you enjoy the show the other evening?’ David asked him, a wicked smile appearing on his lips. He walked up closer to him, lowering his voice. ‘Fancy a piece of my arse, do you? I saw you watching me in action.’

Allan’s whole body and face tensed and he held David’s gaze. ‘No. I’m just worried about Jackie.’

David could see the frisson of excitement that went through Allan as he stepped closer to him. There was no missing the fact he wanted to fuck him, but he also clearly didn’t trust him.

‘Oh really. Do you think I’m a gold-digger? Or are you just jealous that you can’t get your hands on me? That it wasn’t you being fucked over the kitchen table?’

Allan gritted his teeth and stared at David.

‘You don’t love her,’ he spat back.

‘Get out of our house,’ David growled at him. ‘I know how to take care of my girlfriend. You are just the hired help and hired helps can easily be un-hired.’

‘Yeah? Like to see you get that one past Jackie,’ Allan snarled back at him, but he walked out, leaving David fuming behind him.

As the front door slammed, David clenched his fists. He knew Allan was right. Jackie wouldn’t agree to getting rid of Allan. That particular task was going to have to be down to him.

THIRTY-FOUR

TUESDAY

Saskia Monet sat on the sofa in her little cottage watching the press conference that was taking place just a few miles away in St Helier. Two of the families had already laid their hearts on the line, and now it was Simon and Natasha Keyes's turn. Saskia hadn't spoken to them – it had already all become too awkward with the DCI's attitude – but she recognised the same haunted expression on their faces that she'd seen first-hand in the eyes of the other six parents.

'Oscar, we should have been watching you,' Natasha was saying. 'We were literally one minute in the garden, but we shouldn't have let you out of our sight. It is our fault, but please, please, Pied Piper, let him come home to us.' She looked like she had been bursting to get the words out and done, her eyes pleading at the camera.

'We love you, little man,' Simon added, 'Mr Pickles is waiting for you.' His voice shook with the emotion of his words.

Winter was along the table from them, his head bent. The weight of responsibility from the case pressing down on his shoulders.

The camera panned to some of the audience at the press conference. She saw hardened journalists with tears in their eyes as they witnessed the exposed pain of desperate parents.

Saskia's eyes were dry, and as usual that made her question herself; analysing her reactions and self-assessing her character traits. It was a habit she had got into years ago, from

when she'd first started studying psychology. Her base fear that she'd inherited her father's genetic predisposition to psychopathy dominated her subconscious and her nightmares. What if she lost the ability to empathise like David? Stopped caring about anything but herself and turned to stone. She refused to let it happen.

When that fear took hold of her, Saskia would prod at her inner weaknesses, expose herself to pain, and scratch her heart to make it bleed; anything to force a reaction that could prove she was still human. That she could feel deep emotions and experience guilt and compassion. Anything to prove she wasn't like him.

It was hard for her to develop close relationships with people. Those she had experienced into her adulthood, had been distant, violent, or parasitic. It had been animals who saved her. Kept her soul warm and enabled her to care. She could say 'I love you' to an animal, but she'd never said it to a human. She definitely didn't love her father, and the relationship with her mother was complicated. She supposed she loved her, but their mother was needy and damaged. It was difficult to love someone who had been fractured into a thousand tiny pieces and glued back together again. Her mother was never quite the same.

Then there was David. Saskia knew what he was, but he was her little brother. The little boy she had promised to protect and take care of when she was just four years old and he was two. She could still remember the night she'd made her vow.

They'd moved back to the UK about a year earlier and her dad had just lost his job again. Their parents were arguing, her dad frightening and violent. At this stage he was only occasionally hitting their mother; they came to realise later that he was saving his real anger for the women he strangled when out of the house on one of his late-night walks. He was kicking and punching the furniture while her mother screamed at him to stop, and Saskia had woken, terrified by the noise. She'd slipped out of bed and gone to check on her brother, but he hadn't been in his room. Panicking, she'd searched

everywhere for him, looking under the beds, in cupboards, in every room, but he was nowhere to be seen upstairs. She could still remember the feeling as she stood at the top of the stairs, the shouting and vitriol rising up from below her.

Every molecule in her body had told her to stay upstairs where she was safe, but she had to find David. Halfway down and she'd seen him. He was standing at the bottom of the stairs, listening and watching. His little face impassive. Saskia had grabbed his hand and dragged him back up, pulling him into her room and shutting the door. She'd hugged him tight and whispered into his little ear, 'It's all OK. I'll always protect you, I promise.' Even at that moment she'd sensed he was different to her. His little body had stayed rigid and he'd looked at her as though he couldn't understand why she was so earnest. But she'd made her promise.

She would never give up on him. Unlike some in her profession, Saskia believed that psychopaths could be helped, they could be taught to live in society and not damage it. David was living proof of that. He wasn't perfect, but together they negotiated the many challenges that his condition presented. She wouldn't let him end up like their father.

THIRTY-FIVE

TUESDAY

He'd sat watching the press conference live online, listening to all their simpering apologies. Jessica Brown's parents, Katie's, Oscar's. He savoured their words, the anguish on their faces and in their voices. After all they had put her through, put him through, he had no sympathy for them. Their pain was a long cold drink on a summer's day. This was justice.

Finally, it was the turn of Des and Carol Carmichael. There wasn't the united support that the other three couples had shown. Des sat isolated and stiff at the end of the table, while Carol looked like a crumpled tissue that had been discarded on a seat. She spoke first.

'Lucy, baby. I am so, so sorry for not watching you. Not being there when you needed me. I love you, baby.' She said it quickly, desperate to get the words out of her mouth before they became crushed by the emotional landslide in her throat. He could hear her pain.

Then Des took over, his face determined and set. 'To the person who has our daughter, you're right, I should have protected her, but you have no right to do this. To use my daughter for whatever sick agenda you have...'

Carol looked terrified at Des's outburst. 'Des,' she whispered, putting her hand on his arm, 'think about Lucy.'

He shrugged her hand off and continued, staring into the camera, 'You won't get away with this—'

‘Stop it!’ Christina Brown screamed at him. ‘Shut up. You’ve no right, we’ve all said we’re sorry. It’s our children too.’

‘Des, Des, stop,’ Carol begged him, tugging at his sleeve again.

‘This is bloody ridiculous,’ Des said to them all, his face like thunder. ‘And you people,’ he said now turning to the journalists and the cameras, ‘you have no right to judge us. Someone must know who this man is, must know where our children are.’

The two police officers on the table had both stood up, ‘Mr Carmichael, please calm—’ but they didn’t have the chance to finish what they were saying.

‘I’ve had enough,’ Des spat, and jumped up from his chair, pushing his wife’s hand away from him and marching off camera and out of the hall.

The room erupted. Carol ran after her husband, and the other parents quickly decided it was time to exit too, getting up and walking out.

He wasn’t surprised. Des’s selfish arrogance had been the catalyst for everything that had happened to them and the others. His greed had ruined their lives and there he was acting as though he was the victim. He probably wouldn’t even remember her. Might recollect what he’d done, but have no concept of the person he had hurt. The beautiful woman he’d destroyed.

So Des thought he was better than all the other parents. That he could be the big man and stand up to the Pied Piper.

It was time to see if he was ready to be the hero. Time to up the game.

THIRTY-SIX

TUESDAY

Des Carmichael had had enough of this shit show. The police were getting nowhere and the pathetic public spectacle of remorse and guilt was a travesty. Why had he even agreed to do it? He'd already been in contact with a few private investigation and security firms. If the police couldn't find Lucy, then he would. He'd get some professionals in.

He walked straight out the building, ignoring the shouts of Carol and the police officers. He was going solo. Time to do this his way.

Des decided to walk through town, marching down King Street and towards Charing Cross. He was still raging and to clear his head, he decided to get a coffee in the Pomme D'Or's café. At this time he was unlikely to bump into a business associate, earlier in the day it was corporate event city. Once inside he chose a table in the far corner and turned his back on the rest of the café. He didn't want to be disturbed. There were a couple of people who looked like they were on business meetings, but most of the rest of them at this time were holiday makers, looking out the windows and watching the world go by.

First off, he was going to take to social media. If there were hundreds of people, if not thousands, out there who were talking about the Pied Piper, then he needed to tap into that. Get them to spread the message that someone must know who they are. A bit of citizen policing, that's what was needed. Shake things up a bit.

Des didn't mince his words. He took to Twitter, calling on people in Jersey to root out paedophiles and report any neighbours acting strangely. *Your children could be next*. He didn't care if it inflamed the public fear. He tagged in the media, politicians, and those who were sharing their own theories on the case. He also called on the Pied Piper to stop being a coward and come out and show his face. Once Des had posted to Facebook too, he emailed a few business associates, asking them to help spread the word. Then he sat back and downed his coffee, allowing the buzz and satisfaction of taking matters back into his control again to settle in his stomach.

His phone rang. DI Labey. Des stared at it buzzing and vibrating on the wooden table. He had no intention of answering. A little later a message popped up to say he had a voice message. Carol called him next. Same process and message. He looked to see how his Twitter posts were doing. They'd already garnered over a hundred comments and likes. He flicked through some. Quite a few were from women sympathising with their situation, hoping that they were going to find Lucy. Some blamed him and said it was his own fault, but others joined in with his rallying cry. They shared the post and called people to get out there and hunt the Pied Piper down.

Des felt quite pleased with his afternoon's work and so he strolled back to his flat, avoiding the main shopping areas so as to not bump into anyone who might be involved in the investigation.

He slipped through the back streets and narrow alleyways, and into his apartment building, one of the newer blocks built by Jackie Slater's development company. Several estate agent signs were still up advertising the final available flat in the building. Des had the penthouse which gave him views over town and up the hill to Victoria College, the boys' school which resembled a small castle on the horizon, flags flying from its turrets. Lucy went to the sister college's prep, Jersey College for Girls Preparatory School, across the road. The memory of his daughter on her first day in reception class

came back to him, along with the anger that somebody had taken her from him.

By the time he opened his flat door, he was in a bad mood again. Not being in control of the situation was winding him up badly.

He didn't see it and so kicked it across the wooden floor. A white envelope that slid across his hallway with a hiss. Des's skin immediately started to prickle. Post got delivered to their mailboxes downstairs. This was hand-delivered and the envelope simply said: *Des Carmichael PRIVATE*.

He stared at it as he walked through into his living room, and then could stand the anticipation no more and ripped it open.

If you want to see Lucy and get her back, meet me at midnight, Grosnez Castle and let's talk. Bring £5k with you but come alone. I'll be able to see if you have involved the police or anyone else and Lucy will end up on the rocks. The Pied Piper.

Des smiled and thumped his breakfast bar. The Pied Piper had bitten and he was clearly getting nervous. Just five k? That smacked of desperation.

Grosnez was a ruined castle on the north-west corner of the island, right on the edge with a drop to a rocky death below if you went over the wrong side. The only person who was going to go over the edge was the Pied Piper. He'd make damned sure of that. Forget a prison sentence, he deserved a death penalty. It would be self-defence, after all. Des had been a good fighter in his day and he was still fit. The Pied Piper had underestimated him.

Des looked at the place on Google Maps. He could understand why the Pied Piper had chosen it. It was exposed, and the drive or walk up to it was open. You'd spot someone coming easily, although if they cornered you, there could be no escape. The Pied Piper was taking a big chance that Des wasn't going to involve the police, but of course he wasn't. Not after the last two farces that they'd presided over. He'd go and face this man himself and get his daughter back. Everyone

had a price. He would find out what the Pied Piper's was – and bring Lucy home.

THIRTY-SEVEN

TUESDAY

DI Winter Labey had followed the parents out the hall where the media conference was being held, and found seven of them in various states of upset and anger.

‘Where’s Des?’ Winter asked Carol, who was awash with tears and being comforted by DC Amanda Potter.

‘He left,’ Amanda explained. ‘Gone before we could stop him.’

Winter swore to himself. There was his chance gone to talk to him about his relationship with Simon and Des’s less-than-complete client list. He was about to walk away when he had a thought.

‘The list that I asked you both to compile, do you think Des put down everyone? Or is there a chance he’s held back?’ he asked Carol.

‘I never got involved in his business dealings so it’s hard to say, but I might remember some of the run-ins he had,’ Carol replied, drying her eyes on her sleeve.

Winter took out his phone and showed her the list that Des had sent him.

She hmphed. ‘Well I can tell you just from how short this is that he’s not been totally honest. You should talk to Simon Keyes. He did most of his litigation.’

‘OK, thanks.’

Winter walked away from the others and dialled Des’s number.

It rang and then went through to voicemail. He left a message.

‘Mr Carmichael, it’s DI Winter Labey. I appreciate that you’re feeling very emotional at the moment, but could you please get back in touch with me urgently. I need to pursue a line of inquiry with you. Thank you.’

Winter ended the phone call and looked over to see his boss on the phone too. No doubt to the chief officer. They were now going to have to repair whatever damage Des had done and hope that the media still reported responsibly. The biggest question though, was how would the Pied Piper react to Des’s outburst?

Winter looked for Simon Keyes, who was standing drinking a glass of water on his own, staring vacantly at the wall.

‘I need a word,’ he said to him. ‘You said that you and Des Carmichael have a business relationship and you’ve done some work for him. I need to know exactly what that was and who was involved.’

‘I thought Des had given you a list of names like you asked us for?’

‘He did. But it doesn’t look like he’s been totally honest.’ Winter got his phone out. ‘This is the list he gave me. Are there names missing, and are they people you and he have started legal proceedings against?’

Simon squinted at the names, taking the phone from Winter and scrolling down. Slowly he began to shake his head.

‘No. I mean I’m not going to remember all of them, but there are definitely some I can remember which are not on that list.’

‘I need those names,’ Winter said to Simon, looking him straight in the eyes and holding his gaze.

Simon looked away.

‘It’s client confidentiality. Can you not ask Des again? I can’t just release all the details without his permission.’

Winter watched Simon Keyes's face and detected an element of fear in him.

'You do realise that it could be one of those clients who is the Pied Piper. One of those names could have your son?'

Simon shuffled on his feet. 'Most of what we did never went to court. Once people got a legal letter or two they just backed off. It wasn't huge amounts usually, but they couldn't afford to fight him.'

'Why? What had they done?'

Simon looked even more uncomfortable. 'Usually it was because Des was refusing to pay a bill or something, said a contractor or service hadn't been good enough. They would try to take him to small claims court, or sometimes the amounts were much bigger, and he'd hit back with legal letters. They knew how much he was worth. His pockets were far deeper so invariably they just gave up because they couldn't afford the legal fees and he would threaten to counter sue or send them the bill for his legal fees. Even the ones with legal insurance often gave in because it was too stressful.'

'So you mean he bullied them so he didn't have to pay his bills?'

'Look, I'm a lawyer. I do what my clients ask me to do. It was just money,' Simon stated.

'Only it's often not, is it? It's people's businesses, their livelihoods, reputations, possibly family homes and their mental health that are at risk. I need that list of clients now.'

'Ask Des. If he doesn't agree, it would be better if you applied for a court order,' Simon tried.

'What would be better?' Natasha had walked up to them and looked at her husband questioningly. Simon looked as though he'd just been caught with his hand in the sweet jar.

Winter was incredulous, but he suspected that Simon was worried about being sued himself. He didn't have any time to argue the point further, because Det Supt Walker had finished his phone call and walked over to him.

‘We need to go in and finish off this press conference. The media have questions for us and we need to keep them onside after Des’s outburst.’

Winter turned to Simon before he left. ‘I need that list. You know as well as I do that if we have to apply for a court order it could take weeks. If you want Oscar home I’d suggest you consider very carefully how far and how important client privilege goes in this case because the Pied Piper could very well be one of those names.’

Simon nodded and looked at his wife, fear and guilt smeared across his face.

The next forty minutes were gruelling for Winter. While the reporters might have been respectful of the parents, they had certainly saved up their harshest questions for the police inquiry. Winter was left in no doubt that people thought they were being incompetent in not having found the children yet.

If he thought that was tough, the minute they had wrapped it up, a call came through from control to say that a mob of angry people were trying to break into a convicted paedophile’s house to search for the children. Winter watched the camera crews and reporters scrambling to get out of the hall. They’d obviously got wind of it too. This was all they needed. Melissa Rogers rushed over to them.

‘It’s Des Carmichael, have you seen his tweets?’

Winter looked at his phone. ‘Bloody hell, the idiot. That’s all we need. Every officer pulled into calming down public disorder is going to be one less helping to find the Pied Piper.’

‘You go and see if you can track him down and shut him up. Arrest him if you have to. I’ll coordinate the mop-up,’ the detective superintendent instructed.

Winter tried Des’s phone again, but it went straight to voicemail. He called Carol in the hope he’d gone back to the family home.

‘No. He’s not here,’ she said. ‘I’ve not seen him since he walked out of the press conference.’

Winter sighed. He had to find Des Carmichael – and he’d start with Des’s flat.

Des Carmichael wasn’t somebody he had warmed to right from the outset, but his latest behaviour and the revelations from Simon about his extremely selfish bullying ways, had definitely made his mind up. He wondered how Carol could have stayed married to him for so long.

Winter took the stairs up to the fourth-floor penthouse apartment Des owned. The slight odour of newly painted walls still hung around in the stairwells. When he reached the fourth floor, Winter banged on Des’s front door and called out to him.

‘Des if you’re inside, open up. You have caused trouble with your tweets which is hampering our investigation. I urgently need to talk to you. I need a list of who you and Simon have undertaken legal proceedings against. I asked you before for this and I know you haven’t been totally honest. It’s highly likely that the Pied Piper is one of those people. If you don’t supply me with those names then I am going to have to apply for a court order.’

Winter thumped on the door again but he heard nothing from inside.

Where was Des Carmichael?

THIRTY-EIGHT

TUESDAY

Des Carmichael heard DI Labey knocking on the door of his flat, but he had no intention of answering. He'd withdrawn money from the nearest cashpoint, topping it up with what he had at home, and then he'd hired one of the electric EVie hire cars on the app. He didn't want the police tracking his movements through his own vehicle, and an electric car was also nice and quiet. All he'd need to do was walk to where it was currently parked and off he went.

In the meantime, while he waited, he laid low. He even turned his phone off in case they could track it and see that he was hiding in his flat. He'd have to turn it back on again when he went to pick up the car, but that was fine. He'd shut it off once he was en route.

With a few hours to kill, Des thought long and hard about what he should take with him to protect himself. There was nowhere in the island that he'd have been able to buy a stab vest even if the shops weren't shut, so he called the private investigator that he'd used in the UK and offered him double his rate, plus a bonus, to jump on a plane with a stab vest and come over to find Lucy. The guy moaned about having to let other clients down, but the financial reward had finally convinced him. He was booked on a flight due to get in at about eight-fifty that evening. Des had told him to come straight to the flat with the vest and he'd give him the list of names to investigate at the same time.

'You find her, there'll be a fifty grand bonus in it for you,' he'd said to the man. 'But not a word about any of this to the

police or the whole deal is off.’

Des then looked at what he had that could be used against the Pied Piper. He took a knife, his fish gutter from his angling kit, which was incredibly sharp. He’d bought a top-of-the-range kit a couple of years ago when a client had asked him if he wanted to go fishing on their boat. He’d only used it the once and the knife had never come out of its sheaf. They’d caught one mackerel and ended up giving that to the seagulls. He carefully stored the knife in the pocket of the combat trousers he was going to wear. He’d got these for an exercise he’d gone on with another one of his clients – some kind of team-building experience where they played at being soldiers for a couple of nights. It had been enjoyable. Tonight was going to be a different kind of fun.

He wished he still had the heavy torch he’d taken on that trip, but it was still at the house with Carol. Des had already decided that he would get up to Grosnez early. Allow his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. It should be a clear night and the weather forecast told him the moon was around three-quarters visible so it should give enough light to not need a torch. A torch would make him an easy target anyway. The only reason he’d wanted to take it was because it was so heavy: it would have been a useful tool to hit someone with.

What he did have was a canister of tear gas which he’d bought in France. The CS gas could be bought legally over there for personal defence and so he’d bought one when he’d last been over. He intended to use it the second he was face-to-face with the Pied Piper. That would incapacitate him. He managed to find some cable ties too from when he’d moved recently. They were long enough to go round someone’s wrists. He’d spray him, knock him to the ground and tie his hands behind his back. Then he’d find out just why the Pied Piper thought he had any right to take his daughter.

Des was buzzing with anticipation. If the kidnapper had in any way hurt Lucy, he’d made up his mind he was going to kill him. He might not be as in shape as he had been in his youth, but he kept fit enough training in the gym three days a week.

The thought of Lucy's terrified face kept coming into his mind. She was his daughter. He had no right. The anger flared up and subsided with his adrenaline. The so-called Pied Piper was not going to get away with what he'd done.

He clock watched, the minutes ticking away slowly. At around nine forty-five pm, there'd been the pre-arranged knock on his flat door which told him the PI had arrived with his stab vest. Des opened the door and took it, handing the private investigator an envelope with the list of names in that he'd printed off earlier.

'Pay a visit to everyone on that list. One of them might be the Pied Piper. Find out if there's any way four kids could be being held at those addresses.'

The man had nodded and Des had closed the door. He'd thought about asking the man to act as back-up tonight, but quite apart from the fact the Pied Piper might spot him and not hand over Lucy, Des didn't want any witnesses to what he intended to do with the kidnapper. He had no intention of letting him walk away.

Des tried on the stab vest. It was heavier than he'd expected and pulled on his shoulders and lower back. He put a shirt over the top to try to hide it. The Pied Piper wouldn't be expecting him to be this prepared. Finally, he checked and re-checked the things he was taking with him, and at half past ten, he slipped out of his flat, keeping to the shadows in case the police were watching, and went to pick up the car to head to Grosnez.

THIRTY-NINE

TUESDAY

Winter had just got back to the station when he got the phone call from Simon Keyes.

‘Have you found Des? Has he given you the list?’ Simon asked.

‘No. I can’t find him.’

There was silence for a moment, and then, ‘I’m sending you the list of all those who I’ve had any legal dealings with for Des,’ he said to him. ‘He’s a highly litigious man with deep pockets and uses the law to get what he wants from people. But getting Oscar back is more important than what Des Carmichael could do to me or my career. I’ve noted any that were particularly acrimonious.’

It was great news, but Winter wished he’d had that list days earlier. The children had been missing for several days now and they hadn’t heard from the Pied Piper since the press conference. He couldn’t bear thinking about the fact it might be too late.

It was nearly eight o’clock and there were only a few officers left working in the incident room. Nearly a week of working long hours, flat-out to bring the children home, was starting to take its toll on all of them. Their desks and the bins next to them told of long hours surviving on caffeine and quick meals at their work stations. The ransom drop at Green Island had been hard, a day of being on tenterhooks, all senses alert, followed by the aftermath of trying to calm the public

and the parents. It wasn't just the families who were suffering. His team were running on empty.

Winter went straight to his desk and checked his emails, allowing his eyes to only briefly look longingly at the surfing postcard in front of him while his computer woke up. He clicked on Simon's email and scanned through the list. He recognised a few of them. People his parents knew or had talked about and one of them was the plumber he'd used a couple of years back. Ordinary people with small businesses.

Winter sighed. Across the other side of the room he could see DS Jonathon Vibert still at his desk. He walked over.

'Alright, mate,' Jonno said to him, lifting tired eyes from his screen. 'Did you find Des?'

'No. He wasn't at his flat and won't answer his phone, but Simon Keyes has sent through the list of people that Des Carmichael started legal proceedings against in the last few years. It's nothing like the list Des gave us and it's surprisingly long. This means that there could be a good chance that the Pied Piper is on that list. We need to go through every single name, cross-reference with the other lists we got from the parents, and anything we have on Francis Melton.'

'Right.' Jonno looked around the room.

'I know it's late, mate, but I think this is our best shot at identifying him. I just wish that Des had given this list to us days ago.'

'I'll call some of the others back in to help,' Jonno said, sitting up straight in his desk chair. 'We can do this,' he added, giving his friend and boss a weak but encouraging smile.

Winter knew he could rely on him.

'Cheers, Jonno. In the meantime, I'm going to assume that Des Carmichael is no longer cooperating with us. I'm going to circulate his description and make sure he is arrested for inciting violence through social media. It's not a charge that will keep him in custody, I know, but at least we will get him under control for a while and get to question him about this list.'

The second Winter started walking back to his desk, he heard Jonno on the phone to their colleagues. The team were tired, but he knew they'd make the children their priority and give every last ounce of what they had.

Winter was grateful that DCI Sharpe had left for the day – in any case, his number wouldn't be on Jonno's list. Winter called Detective Superintendent Graeme Walker and told him what he was doing, then he ordered in pizzas. This was going to be a late one, if not an all-nighter.

It was times like this that Winter was glad he lived alone. Nobody to disappoint or disturb at home. When he'd first started as a detective, he'd still been living at home with his parents. Jersey property prices meant it had taken a few years on his police wages to save up for a flat of his own, and in the end he'd only finally been able to do it because his parents had given him some money to help with the deposit. They were comfortably off, not wealthy in Jersey terms, but his father had worked in the finance industry all his career, and his mother had worked for the government once Winter and his brother were old enough. They had a good-sized four-bed house in St Lawrence with a garden front and back.

He'd appreciated having meals cooked for him and washing done, but as he got more into his career, he'd found himself constantly apologising to his mother for not turning up at meal times or waking them both up when he came home late. He suspected that their offer to give him some money towards a deposit on his own place had as much to do with them wanting to have some time to themselves, as giving him his freedom. Either way, he'd gratefully accepted it and been in his flat for the past three years.

He suddenly remembered that he'd not responded to his mum's text, or called them for a few days. He'd been so caught up by the case. He sent a quick text to touch base and then returned his full attention to the computer screen in front of him.

He had to push thoughts of his own family out of his mind and concentrate on the four families who were currently being torn apart by the Pied Piper. He needed to find those children.

In front of him, the more than thirty names were just black on white words, but behind each one, there would be a story to tell. The team were going to have to investigate every single one of them; find out who had had their lives destroyed by Des Carmichael and his legal threats. Could one of them be the Pied Piper?

Winter had one more phone call to make before setting up the meeting room for the team. He picked up his mobile phone and called Saskia Monet's number. Something told him that having her insight would be useful, an independent pair of eyes with the experience of having interviewed countless offenders. She might see something that they couldn't.

Saskia picked up.

'Is there any chance you could come into the incident room and help us go through a list of suspects? I could really do with your help?'

FORTY

TUESDAY

‘Why didn’t Des hand over this list days ago?’ Saskia stood looking incredulously at the thirty or so names that were on the screen in front of them.

‘Didn’t want his dirty laundry being aired. He’s a bully.’ Right now Winter would have liked to get his hands on Des Carmichael for all the trouble he’d caused and most importantly because not handing over this list sooner could have cost four children their lives.

‘But his own daughter’s life is at risk...’ Saskia shook her head.

‘Tell me about it. But the main thing is, we have it now and we need to work out if one of these is the Pied Piper.’

‘Right.’

‘The team have been digging up some background information about each one, so we’re going to sit down and go through them and come up with a shortlist. Can you sit in on that and please, ask any questions or raise any concerns you might have.’

She followed him through to a meeting room where the team were already sitting around a big table, discussing the list.

‘OK. Let’s hear the background on each of these names and what they’re doing now. I gave you five each. Let’s get started. Jonno do you want to kick off?’

‘J.M. Geddes,’ Jonno said. ‘Plumber. Did a whole load of work at the Carmichael house but Des refused to pay because he said that they had a leak in the upstairs bathroom. Mr Geddes tried to fight him for a while, but eventually gave up as his own legal bill racked up. Retired early.’

‘Does he appear on the Plovers’ or Browns’ list?’

‘No, and both their kids are working in the UK, so no likely disgruntled family member.’

‘Could Geddes and his wife be working together?’

‘Highly unlikely, she’s got multiple sclerosis and is in a wheelchair now.’

‘I’ve got one that’s another couple, younger,’ DC Edwards spoke up. ‘Building contractor. Husband and wife owned it. Again, did a whole load of work for the Carmichael house. They weren’t the main contractors, that was a big firm and funnily enough, they’re not on this list as I suspect they’d have deep pockets and lawyers of their own. This was a small local contractor who worked on the pool house. I’ve seen photographs of inside that pool house and it’s top-notch fittings. They’d have been in hoc for a lot of money if the Carmichaels didn’t pay, which they didn’t. The business filed for bankruptcy after the bank called in a loan and they were unable to pay sub-contractors and suppliers.’

‘And was it William Plover’s bank?’

‘It was.’

‘They’re definitely worth further investigation then.’ Winter nodded.

‘I’ve got a similar one, Alice Skelton. She was the interior designer who did the Carmichael house. Her business filed for bankruptcy. Nothing more about her though, not even sure she’s still on the island and she’s not on the Plovers’ list,’ DC Sarah Fuller said.

‘Look into whether Alice Skelton was married or had a partner.’

‘Has anyone come across somebody with any form of medical training?’ Saskia asked around the table.

They all shook their heads.

‘Have you got any more information about how Francis Melton died?’ Saskia asked Winter.

‘He was given a huge dose of lidocaine, a local anaesthetic which basically stopped his heart. Pathologist said that with the whisky as well it was a pretty peaceful murder as they go. We’re working on the potential theory that this might be what Melton wanted. We’ve found information on his phone where it seems he had been searching for options to end his life. He’d looked into going to Dignitas in Switzerland, but I don’t think he could afford it. That fits with what you’d said about how it looked like he’d prepared for it. The burning of the photographs, leaving out the one of himself. This also gives increased credence to the possibility that the Pied Piper is a doctor.’

They carried on going around the table. There was one story after another. All small businesses or single traders that Des Carmichael had cheated out of what they were owed.

‘This one was only for fifteen hundred pounds,’ DC Stewart said. ‘The legal fees that he’d have spent refusing to pay the bill would probably have not been much less.’

‘I don’t think it’s just about the money with Des Carmichael,’ Saskia said. ‘He enjoys the domination and his personality means he sees anything that isn’t exactly as he wants it, as a personal snub.’

‘Why didn’t any of these businesses just go to small claims court and fight it out there?’ DC Peter Edwards asked.

‘I suspect that those letters Simon wrote were pretty persuasive. Most people are terrified of being sued and having to spend a fortune on legal fees. It’s not just money but it’s also reputation and stress.’

‘He’s left a trail of misery,’ Winter said, shaking his head.

‘Boss, I’ve found something interesting,’ DC Sarah Fuller looked up from her laptop. ‘Alice Skelton took her own life

seven months ago. Skelton is her maiden name, she used that for her business.'

'Who was she married to?'

'On it,' Sarah replied, her fingers working across her laptop keyboard.

'Right everyone cross-check the Browns' list and the Plovers' for Alice Skelton.'

Heads bent down to scan the lists, and then shook around the table in response.

'She might be there under her married name...' Winter said, looking to DC Fuller.

'Got it. Her next of kin was her husband, Marcus Wilson.'

'Marcus Wilson! That's the name of the dentist who works at the Browns,' Winter said.

'He used to be my dentist,' DC Edwards said, 'didn't know his wife had died, she was pregnant. He'd told me they'd been trying for ages too. She'd have been due a few weeks ago probably.'

'The Browns' receptionist said they had a female patient who took her own life.' Winter was sitting up straight now, his eyes bright with possibility. Someone get onto them and find out if it was Alice Wilson or Skelton.'

'On it,' Jonno said.

'Dentists use lidocaine and are trained to inject,' Saskia added. Her heart rate had increased along with probably every other person around the table.

'But she's not on the Plovers' list,' DC Edwards looked up, disappointed.

Winter stood up and paced up and down the table a few moments, working through all the scenarios. He grabbed his mobile from his desk and dialled the Plovers.

'Mr Plover, it's DI Labey, I'm sorry to disturb you but I need to ask you a question. That list you gave us of the

account holders who had loans called in, would that include people who had died?’

There was a silence on the other end of the line for a few moments and Winter wondered if William Plover had heard him.

‘It might not,’ he said, ‘data protection and all that. We might have taken them off the main system, but we’d have to keep their details because of financial regulations so we’d still have their information.’

‘Could you urgently find out for me please if there is anyone who died in the last year, who might have otherwise been on that list?’

‘Yes, yes, leave it with me. I’ll call you straight back.’

‘Right.’ DI Labey looked around the room at the table full of faces looking at him. ‘Are we agreed that out of all those names, Marcus Wilson is our prime suspect with his wife Alice as the catalyst? Find out where he lives. Every bit of intel you can on him.’ Winter looked at Saskia.

She nodded. ‘It sounds like he’d fit the profile perfectly. Professional, access to lidocaine and knowledge of injecting. Lost his wife and unborn child, no other dependents so he’s got nothing to lose; and that also explains why he’s taking their children. In his eyes, they took his.’

Jonno finished his phone call and looked up at them.

‘Christina Brown just confirmed it was Alice Skelton who took her own life. She remembers it because she thought it particularly sad as she’d been pregnant. She had no idea it was Marcus Wilson’s wife.’

‘This is it,’ DI Labey said, a tiger pacing in his cage. ‘I think we may have found the Pied Piper. We just need the Plovers to confirm now.’

Five minutes later, William Plover called his mobile.

‘I have two deceased accounts that weren’t on that list. A Robert Broadhurst trading as RB Mechanics, and an Alice Wilson, trading as Alice Skelton Interior Design.’

Winter didn't need to tell the team what William had just said. His face and fist punch said it all.

FORTY-ONE

TUESDAY

Des Carmichael drove up towards the far tip of the island, turning left and past the Jersey Race Club where the narrow road carried on to just one destination, Grosnez Castle. It was eleven o'clock by the time he'd got there, and so he pulled over alongside the track where he could just about see the solid structure of the Grosnez Castle walls at the tip of the headland, and killed the lights. He was going to sit and allow his eyes to become accustomed to the dark. Maybe he'd even see the Pied Piper drive past on his way to the castle. There was only one road in and he was next to it. The Pied Piper would be a sitting duck.

It was quiet on the headland at this time, just the distant crashing of the waves on the rocks up ahead, and the occasional shriek of sea birds. He couldn't recognise their shrill peeping noises – never taken much interest in wildlife – but he knew they weren't seagulls. Slowly his eyes began to pick out more detail. Around him was heathland, gorse bushes and the like, no trees up here in what was probably shallow sandy earth on top of granite rock.

The occasional small bobbing shape of a rabbit drew his eyes. No foxes here to terrorise the rabbit population.

Des listened for any sounds, constantly on guard, checking his rear-view and side mirrors in case the Pied Piper crept up behind him. He wondered if perhaps he was coming on foot, along the headland, pulling Lucy along with him. Des sat in the dark imagining the moment he would fold his arms around his daughter again and the Pied Piper would be reduced to the

weak man – or possibly woman – that they were. He'd thought many times about who they might be. Which one of the many people he had faced in litigation, which name that had been written on the many lawyer's letters he'd signed off on. Would he even remember? He'd beaten them once, and he would do so again.

Finally, at five to midnight, he turned the car back on and drove the rest of the way down the narrow road with the headlights off, until he reached the gravel car park at the end. In the electric car he had driven as silently as possible but he knew that the second he turned into the gravelled car park the wheels would scrunch, giving an audible warning to the Pied Piper. He stopped on the tarmac and turned off the engine.

There silhouetted against the moonlit sky, was the remains of the fourteenth-century castle, which by daylight gave unhampered views across the sea. Now little more than a stone gatehouse with ruined walls, it had once been a large fortification, a refuge for islanders during French invasion. It hadn't fared too well when it came under attack. Des hoped he was going to do a lot better in his battle tonight.

The night sky shone through the gate, a curved entrance that peaked to a point at the top. Des knew that the ground underfoot was uneven, rocky, and gravelled with only the occasional grassed area. He would have to tread carefully.

He sat in the car for a few minutes, waiting. Looking and listening. There was no evidence that anyone else was here. No car, no sight or sound of the Pied Piper or Lucy. Des was already on high alert, adrenaline pumping around his body met by anger. If this was another one of his wild goose chases...

Des closed the car door quietly and slowly walked towards the open gateway, scanning all around him. Nothing.

He pulled the canister of tear gas out of his pocket, getting it ready to spray in his face if he suddenly appeared.

There were still no sounds except the waves of the sea below. Carefully, Des stepped through the stone side gate entrance, unable to go through the main arch and wary in case someone was hiding behind. Nothing – unless the Pied Piper

was hiding behind one of the low granite walls which formed ancient footprints of rooms on the left hand side.

Des slowly and cautiously walked towards them. Should he call out, let him know he was there? Perhaps Lucy was hidden somewhere.

‘Lucy? Lucy, it’s Daddy. Are you here?’

He peered over the top of the low granite wall and saw nothing but dirt floor and rocks.

Des heard him before he saw him. Footsteps disturbing the gravel and stones on the dry earth coming from behind the granite gateway. He spun round ready to attack and defend, ready to reclaim his daughter. What he saw made him gasp in shock.

FORTY-TWO

TUESDAY NIGHT/EARLY WEDNESDAY MORNING

Marcus Wilson lived in a converted farmhouse in Trinity. Most of the fields around it had long ago been sold and it now stood in a small patch of land with a garden and a yard large enough for around six cars to park in front.

Winter and the team, which had now swollen to include tactical support officers, were looking at the property on satellite imagery and street view.

‘If he’s holding the kids there, he’s got no neighbours, so it’s perfectly feasible nobody would have noticed them.’ Winter said.

‘What if we’re wrong? What if he’s not the Pied Piper?’ DC Stewart asked.

‘Then we’re back to square one, but something tells me that this is our man. The dots all link up. I spoke to him at the Brown’s surgery and he never once mentioned his wife.’

The team had mobilised fast and within the hour they were ready to drive to the Trinity property.

‘There could be four children inside so we are going to need to be extremely careful. If he gets wind that we’re there then he might harm them. I want everyone in place ready, before we show our hand.’

Adrenaline kept Winter’s heart thumping all the way to Trinity. They had taken their most discreet vehicles and already earmarked where they could park near to the property.

Everyone was on tenterhooks. There was no joking around, in fact, no discussions going on at all unless it related to the operation. Every one of them were hoping that this was it and they were about to rescue four young children.

The plan was for the team to surround the property and after Winter had knocked on the door, to move in and secure it. There didn't appear to be any security cameras which was good, and the team, including armed response officers, had filed onto the property, keeping in the shadows. Radios silent, hand signals only.

There was no obvious light on in the house but there was one car parked in front. Winter held back, waiting for the all-clear that everyone was in position, and then he walked straight up to the front door and knocked. With absolutely no evidence against Marcus Wilson, they couldn't go in heavy and break the door down and had to play it safe. Winter would engage with the dentist first and if there was any sign at all that he might be their man, the rest of the team would converge.

There was no reply to Winter's knock on the door and so he tried again. Still nothing.

'Mr Wilson,' Winter called through the letterbox opening.

Silence.

The thought that they might discover a similar spectacle to what they'd found at Francis Melton's home began to take hold.

He used his flashlight and peered in through the nearest window. It was a sitting room. Empty. Nothing remarkable.

'Someone check the outbuildings,' Winter whispered into his radio microphone as he walked around the perimeter of the house. The next window turned out to be into the kitchen. Again, empty. Nothing to report. Round the back were two more large windows. As Winter used his torch to scan the interior, he thought he saw a dark figure dart out of the room.

'I think there's someone inside. All eyes on exits,' he said to the team.

Finally, to the last window. The curtains were partially pulled across and so Winter had to peer through the gap to see inside, to what looked like a dining room, or at least had been. His torch found part of a wall and a photograph of William Plover and his family taken outside their house. Winter stopped, heart banging, breath shallow and rapid. The wall was covered in photographs and pieces of paper. He couldn't see the other photos clearly, or what the papers said, but he'd seen enough to know that it was some kind of plan – this had to be the blueprint for the Pied Piper.

‘It's him. I've found evidence. Let's go.’

Almost at the same time as Winter had given the command to go in, a shout came up from round the front of the house.

‘Stop. Police.’

More shouting, and as Winter ran back round, he could hear a scuffle in the front yard.

‘We've got him,’ a triumphant officer announced to him as he reached the gravelled parking area.

In front of Winter were four police officers handcuffing and restraining a man dressed in black clothing.

Winter glanced to the house; the front door was open. ‘Search for the children,’ he shouted to the team and watched as a stream of officers ran inside.

He followed them into the house, listening to the shouts and call outs as the team worked their way through every room. With every shout of ‘clear’, his heart plummeted. Winter made his way to the room at the back. Pushing open the door and turning on the light, his eyes were met by a room covered in surveillance photographs and notes. All four families, their routines all detailed.

Marcus Wilson was their Pied Piper.

But where were the children?

‘Nothing, boss. They're not here.’ A sergeant stood in the doorway, the disappointment on his face mirroring Winter's. Anger rose up inside him and he marched straight outside to

where Marcus was still lying face-down, prone on the gravel car park.

‘Where are they?’ he said, walking up to him, ‘Where are the children?’

FORTY-THREE

WEDNESDAY

Des Carmichael gasped in shock as the first needle went into his leg. He'd not had a chance to react, but he quickly brought up the CS spray and attempted to spray the man in the face. A bright torch beam suddenly blinded him, causing him to spray wildly to try to get his target. Des felt another prick into his arm, and then again in the other leg. What was he doing? Was he injecting something into him?

How could the man be moving around him? He shielded his eyes and darted away from the torch beam. It had been placed on one of the walls, and the man had slipped back into the shadows.

'Where's Lucy?' Des shouted to him. 'Lucy? Lucy, are you here?' Des scanned the area, now lit up by the torchlight. 'Come out, you bastard. You said you wanted to talk, I've got your five grand. I trusted you and came alone but if anything happens to me, I've left instructions. If I don't make a phone call in ten minutes then the police will be here.' Des stood, every muscle in his body beginning to quiver, his heart banging in his chest as though it would burst through his rib cage. Why was he feeling so shaky?

'We both know that you didn't tell the police, did you, Des?' A shadow stood up across from behind one of the low granite walls.

'Where's Lucy?' Des shouted, and made to cross over towards him, only his legs felt unsteady and he stumbled, his toes kicking a protruding rock instead of being carried over it. The muscles not obeying his mind.

Des started to panic. ‘What have you done to me?’ he cried out.

The shadow stepped forward.

‘Lidocaine. It has numbed your muscles and made them useless.’

Des’s mind was working on overdrive. He’d been injected in both thighs, and his right arm, that meant only his left arm would work properly. He should still be able to reach his phone. This could quickly get out of control. Des fumbled in his right pocket for his mobile, attempting to get his right arm to work, and failing, so instead reached around with his left. His hand found the device, but it was turned off. He pressed the side button, praying that the screen would light up quickly.

He took his eyes off the shadow for just a few seconds, but it was enough. As he looked back up and registered that the man was no longer standing across from him, he heard the gravel shift beside him and then felt the impact as the man broadsided him, shoving him to the ground. Dust and grit went into his mouth and nostrils, the air knocked out of him. His phone flew from his hand and when he looked for where it had landed, it was gone.

Des scrambled to get back up, struggling to make his useless legs and arm work. Instead he felt another prick go into his right arm, then one into his calf muscle. He was being slowly paralysed.

‘Who are you?’ he shouted into the shadows. ‘Why are you doing this? Is Lucy here?’

The man stepped forward but his face was still in the shadows, the torchlight silhouetting his face.

‘No. I wouldn’t expose a child to this kind of trauma. She’s someplace safe.’

‘You said you’d give her back.’

‘I will. But not to you.’

‘Is she OK?’

‘Yes. They are all fine.’

‘What do you want? Money? I can give you money. A million? I’ve got your five thousand in my car, but I can get plenty more than that.’

‘I don’t want your money.’

That floored him. ‘Then what?’ Des asked.

‘I wanted you to suffer. Like you have made so many others suffer.’

Des tried again to see his face, tried to place the voice, wracked his memory for any recollection of where and when he’d met this man.

‘You won’t remember me because it wasn’t me who you killed,’ the man said as if in answer.

‘I’ve never killed anyone,’ Des’s voice had risen several octaves. ‘Is this about the fight back in London in the eighties?’

‘No, Mr Carmichael. This is about my wife. My beautiful, creative wife. She had her own interior design business. It meant everything to her. Then you came along. At first you were charming, getting her to redesign your house. She loved taking on the project, talked about it to me. Recommended local builders and contractors to you and they turned the tired featureless property into a stunning home for you and your family.

‘But you don’t like paying for things, do you, Des? If you can find a way, you find fault and you refuse to pay, look for opportunities to make some money, it doesn’t matter from whom. And that’s exactly what you did. But you only do it to the little people. Not only did you ruin her business financially, but you ruined her reputation. She felt so guilty when the builders had to declare their business bankrupt because you wouldn’t pay them either, and then the carpet-fitters nearly had to close. She ran out of money and clients and the bank called in the debt she’d raised to keep her business afloat.’

‘It’s not my fault if she didn’t do her job properly.’

‘But she did. She did what you asked. And she wasn’t the only one. You’ve used your money and the law to threaten and bully people. You know they won’t dare fight you because they can’t afford the legal fees, or they’re so overwhelmed with the stress of it all. You get your lawyer to bombard them with letters, frighten them into thinking they could never win.’

‘Is that it? Is that what this has all been about? I’ll pay you some compensation, how’s that? You let me go and give me back my daughter and I’ll give you two million pounds.’

‘Yeah, and I’ll be able to fly away and live happily ever after, won’t I?’ The man sneered. ‘Does everything have a monetary value in your life? Is there nothing that’s too precious?’

‘Yes. My daughter. Tell me how much you want.’

The man turned away from Des and sighed, looking out across the black sea in front of them. A ship was slowly crossing the horizon. Far offshore on the dark sea, lit up from stern to bow. Probably heading to a UK port. Its slow pace was therapeutic. Other than the solitary boat, there was just the blur of tiny lights visible in the distance where Guernsey rose from the waves.

Des desperately searched around for some way to hoist himself up off the floor. A weapon, anything.

‘You haven’t asked her name. Do you even remember my wife?’ the Pied Piper asked Des, not turning to look at him.

‘Yeah, course. The interior designer.’

He turned back round to look at Des, his face catching the light for the first time.

‘Her name was Alice. Alice Skelton to you. She was a kind, gentle woman. Would have gone out of her way to help anyone, but eventually she was unable to help herself.’

‘That’s not my fault.’

‘It was your fault. You destroyed her. Took away her dream of owning her own interior design business. Made her

feel worthless. It wasn't about the money – we could have survived financially, it was about what you did to her confidence and reputation. She'd worked so hard. But you never gave it a second thought, just counted your money and carried on.'

Des clearly realised he was getting nowhere with his previous attempt and so he changed his tactics and his tone. 'Look, I'm truly sorry about what happened. Let me make up for the damage I've caused. I can understand you are upset but if you give back the children then everything will be fine. I can pay for a good lawyer for you, even speak on your behalf. Tell them you were reasonable.'

The man turned away from him again and stared out across the sea as though searching for another ship on the horizon.

'I was going to be a father. Alice was pregnant but she fell so low that she couldn't see any kind of a future. She went to her GP; he told her it was just anxiety about being a new mother. Basically told her to be quiet and get on with it. When the bank refused to support her and she had to close the business, that was the last straw and you still kept on, sending your legal letters and refusing to pay, accusing her of professional misconduct. You say you didn't hurt anyone, but you killed her and our unborn child. She took her own life because she could see no other way out.'

'You can't hold me responsible.'

'Can't I? Alice isn't the only one you've done this to. I know other local businesses who have had to close because you've refused to pay invoices. Family firms losing their livelihoods. What gives you the right to do that?'

'I'm sticking up for my rights. It's business. That's what happens.'

The man said nothing for a few moments and Des began to hope that he was winning the argument, so he continued.

'It can be hard in business, I know – I've lost money before now, but these things happen...' Des watched and waited for the man to look at him again.

The Pied Piper turned to face him.

‘I think Lucy would grow up to be a better person if you weren’t a dominant influence in her life.’

‘What? No! She needs me, I’m her father.’

‘Maybe, but she’ll still have her mother and I’m sure Carol will meet someone else who can be a father figure to Lucy, and a better husband.’

‘No. You can’t kill me. Think about my daughter, she’ll be so upset.’

‘Actually, it’s only her mother she’s asked to see, not you. She’s not asked for you once.’

Tears started to form in Des’s eyes.

The man continued. ‘Carol will be glad to see the back of you. No messy divorce to have to deal with. So who does that leave, Des? Who will care that you’ve gone? I can think of a lot of people who will say good riddance, but nobody who will miss you.’

For once, Des said nothing.

The man looked out over the sea again. He watched as a cloud slowly crossed over the moon, turning the world inky black. Behind him the torch kept their little corner of the world illuminated.

Des started to try to shuffle away. This conversation was going nowhere and he was scared. Inch by inch, he dragged himself through the dirt and grit towards the gatehouse entrance. He didn’t know where he could go to escape, what he could do without power in both arms and legs. But maybe, maybe the injections would work off faster if he kept moving.

* * *

The moon reappeared, casting its reflection on the sea, as though it were a long white road on the waves that Marcus Wilson could step onto. He looked across the headland; Alice

was there. She looked beautiful in the moonlight, waiting for him to finish what he'd come to do.

The Pied Piper turned, looking at the man who was now lying slumped on the floor, his eyes wild and scared. Des never got his hands dirty. Never had to look into the eyes of the people he was hurting. He just issued an order and signed a letter. Let the law and his deep pockets do the dirty work.

He walked around Des to where he'd hidden his bag and took out some more syringes. He could see that Des was already shaking from the adrenaline in the lidocaine injections he'd given him. A few more into his heart area and that should be more than enough to end things. It had worked for Francis Melton. That had been a gift, the payment Francis had wanted for helping him. The next few months would have meant pain and a slow degeneration of dignity. He'd given him peace. He understood Francis's reasons. If only he'd been able to talk to Alice before she thought it had been her only option.

With Des, it was different. He'd never been a violent man – there was no longer any anger coursing through him, only great sadness and a tiredness like he'd never felt before. Alice's life had been ruined because of Des, and the life they'd built together taken from him. He didn't want anyone else to suffer because of this man.

'You don't have to do this. I promise you I won't tell anyone. I'll pay you some money and you can let me go. I'll make it worth your while.' Des's whining continued and broke into his thoughts.

No more. Time to end this. Then, he would need to finish what he'd started. He needed to deal with the children and their mothers.

FORTY-FOUR

WEDNESDAY

The pale face of the man Winter now knew was called Andrew McGregor peered out from the back of the police van. Winter was fuming. He'd already tried Des Carmichael's mobile again to verify the man's statement, that he was a private detective brought over by Des to find his daughter. From the sheet of paper the man had in his pocket, they were pretty sure that his story was going to stack up. It was a list of names similar to the one that Simon Keyes had already given them.

Des had known all along that he'd been keeping back information and he'd clearly decided not to hand it over to the police inquiry, but to instead pay for his own investigator. Whatever the outcome, Andrew McGregor was facing a charge of breaking and entering, and probably contaminating a crime scene. He'd told them that he'd done exactly as Winter had, looked between the curtains into the room at the back and seen the photographs on the wall. When he'd realised that Marcus Wilson wasn't in, he'd decided to go in and check it out.

'Why didn't you phone us immediately?' Winter had asked between clenched teeth.

'Mr Carmichael didn't want you involved. I'm working for him. If the kids had been there, or anyone had been hurt, course I'd have called you.'

The fact was, the kids weren't there – and neither was Marcus Wilson. They knew who the Pied Piper was, but they were still no closer to knowing where.

‘Get him out of here,’ Winter had said to the officers who were going to drive the van back to the station.

‘Hey! You can’t do that. I’m working. I won’t get paid if I don’t report back,’ the muffled shouts from the van disappeared as Winter strode away. He’d leave the PI to stew for a few hours and then get one of the DCs to interview him, although he doubted there was going to be anything he could tell them that they wouldn’t find out at Marcus Wilson’s house.

The room Winter had seen through the curtains carried the story of how Marcus and Francis had staked out the families, working out their routines and when and where would be the best opportunities to snatch the children. What it didn’t appear to tell him was where the children had then been taken. They’d searched the house again, this time looking for hidden rooms or cupboards – anywhere that four little children could have been locked away. They found nothing. No signs they’d even been there.

As the first light of day began to illuminate the sky, Winter had gone outside to sit in the garden, exhausted and exasperated. Where would Marcus have taken the children? His brain was too furred up with tiredness to be able to think straight anymore. His eyes dry and scratchy, and there was a dull throbbing in his forehead where a headache was trying to establish a nest. It was at moments like this that he wished he’d listened to his career adviser at school and gone into the finance industry instead. Spent his days sitting at a desk earning probably twice his current salary with only money and not lives as his responsibility. Of course, even in these moments, he knew that was never going to be a choice he’d make.

His body told him to head back home and get at least a couple of hours sleep, but Winter couldn’t let up now. Marcus Wilson would know they were on to him. That made the situation doubly dangerous for the children. They needed to find them now, not in twenty-four or forty-eight hours’ time. There had to be another property connected to the Wilson’s.

Winter’s mobile rang. Even its battery was running low.

‘Sir, we’ve just had a body reported at Grosnez Castle. Dog walker found a man slumped and dead just inside the gate. First responders think it could be Des Carmichael.’

‘Shit, OK. I’ll be right there. Keep the place locked down, it might well be a crime scene.’

The adrenaline woke him up, although his eyes were still tired and blurry. Winter blue-lighted his way to Grosnez, driving as fast as he could through the narrow back lanes lined with granite walls. At this time of the morning it was the occasional tractor trundling along the road at speed that would be likely to present danger. You could come head-to-head with one quite easily around some of the blind corners where the roadside vegetation obscured all efforts to see, and the machines invariably took up most of the road.

Before he’d got in the car, he’d called the incident room to ensure Forensics and a pathologist were alerted. Was this another murder or had Des simply collapsed from natural causes due to the stress? He didn’t strike him as a suicide risk. His mind went to Saskia’s words and how she was convinced that the Pied Piper would contact the parents directly. Winter got on the radio again.

‘Send someone round to Des Carmichael’s flat. Make sure they’re suited but get them to look for any kind of a note from the Pied Piper. If he sends notes to the press, then it stands to reason he’d use the same tactic if he had contacted Des. Call me once they’ve checked. Also, get onto the other three families and make sure they’re OK. Don’t alert them to what we think might have happened to Des – we’ll need to speak to Carol first – but check on them subtly, would you?’

Winter drove as fast as the track up to Grosnez would allow him. As he saw the silhouette of the ruined gateway on the horizon, the various emergency responder vehicles also came into sight. An ambulance had been called first, and its paramedics were just packing up to leave as Winter turned into the dirt car park in a cloud of dust. One of the paramedics quickly shut the back doors to the ambulance, frowning over at Winter before getting into the cab of the ambulance.

‘Sir.’ A uniformed police officer walked towards him as he got out of his car. ‘Deceased male in his fifties, found by a dog walker, a Mr Alexander Le Cornu, at just gone six a.m. this morning. Been out here all night by the looks of him. Pretty much full-on rigor mortis present.’

‘Who identified him?’

‘We both recognised him from the press conference yesterday and the call out to apprehend him if seen,’ the officer said, nodding at his colleague who was standing guarding the entrance to the gateway.

Winter strode over and addressed them both.

‘OK, let’s set up a crime scene log, please. Who has been in there and when. I’m going to go in now to check and then nobody else until Forensics get here, OK?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Winter carefully stepped on the granite stones, keeping a close eye on the ground in case there was any evidence. He stopped when he reached the gate itself, silhouetted against the panorama of sea in front of him, for anyone who was watching from behind.

On the ground in front of him was a man, lying half on his back and half on his side, as though twisted. His arms splayed out. He was dressed in army fatigue trousers and at first looked to be larger than Des Carmichael, but it was the layers of clothes that gave that impression. There was no mistaking the face – and no mistaking that he was most definitely dead.

‘Any signs he’d been attacked?’ Winter turned and spoke to the young officer behind him.

‘Paramedic said there’s some grazing to his hands and his clothes are quite dusty, he thought maybe he’d fallen, but no head injuries and so he would have said most likely a heart attack, but he was wearing a stab vest which suggests he was expecting trouble.’

Winter didn’t step down from the gate. There could be footprints around the body, although he doubted it in this

terrain. What he really needed to know was if there were any injection marks on the body. For that, he needed Dr Chaudhry.

Before he left, Winter walked over to the man who had found the body. He was sitting in the police car, having been checked for shock by the paramedics, his Jack Russell dog on his lap. Winter introduced himself and asked him to repeat how he had come to find the body and if he'd seen anyone or anything else.

'Can I ask you please not to tell anyone about who you think this might be and what's happened?' he said to the man. 'I have to go and tell that man's family the tragic news and I don't want them hearing it third hand from social media.'

The man had nodded. 'Can I go now? I was supposed to be getting into work early and I've got to get my dog home first.'

'I'm sorry but would you mind just waiting for the forensics team so they can take a cast of your footprints in case we need to isolate them?'

'So are you saying you think he was murdered?' the man said, his eyes widening.

'I'm not saying anything at present, Mr Le Cornu. I just want to be sure that we have all bases covered. Is that OK?'

'Sure. Can I at least call work to tell them I'll be late?'

'Of course, but like I said, no details please.'

Alexander Le Cornu nodded vigorously and immediately pulled his phone out to make the call.

Behind him, Winter heard cars coming up the track. Honorary police officers had come from the parish and set up a traffic cordon further down to prevent any other members of the public from driving up to the ruins. He hoped that this was the forensics team and possibly even Dr Chaudhry.

As he watched them head along the track, Winter's mobile rang.

'Sir, it's DC O'Flanagan. I'm at Des Carmichael's flat. There's no reply, do you want us to go in?'

‘Yes, absolutely. I’ve seen the deceased and it’s definitely Des. You need to look and see if there’s a note from the Pied Piper in there. I’ll hold.’

A thought crossed Winter’s mind and he returned to the young officer guarding the gate.

‘Did you check his pockets at all?’

‘We did. Looked for ID. There was nothing except a knife and a small can of CS spray was on the ground nearby.’

‘What about his car?’

‘There’s only one vehicle unaccounted for and that’s the electric EVie car over there.’

‘I thought that was the dog walker’s,’ Winter replied.

‘No, sir. He walked along the headland from the other side of the race track.’

‘No car keys?’

‘No, those electric EVies have virtual keys which you get through the app, sir.’

‘So he had to have his phone somewhere then,’ Winter thought out loud.

‘Yes, sir, but we didn’t find it on the body.’

Winter walked over to his own car and went into the boot where he pulled a pair of blue nitrile gloves from a box, along with a clear plastic evidence bag. Then he headed across to the small black BMW.

In his earpiece, Winter heard the sounds of a door being broken down. DC O’Flanagan was clearly gaining access to Des’s flat. Winter tried the door of the car and it opened. He peered at the interior, it looked empty.

A breathless DC O’Flanagan came back into his earpiece. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘We’ve found a note. *If you want to see Lucy and get her back, meet me at midnight, Grosnez Castle and let’s talk. Bring*

£5k with you but come alone. I'll be able to see and if you involve the police or anyone else then Lucy will end up on the rocks. The Pied Piper.'

'OK. Good work. Can you bag it, see if there's an envelope and get it into Forensics ASAP.'

Winter opened the glove compartment. Inside he saw a clear bag with what looked to be cash inside. Des had clearly brought the five k but the Pied Piper hadn't taken it.

Saskia had been right. This had probably been the Pied Piper's game plan all along. Directly contact the parents. So had Lucy been here? He was going to have to get the coastguard to search below on the rocks. He prayed they'd find nothing.

Winter returned to the station where the rest of the team were either filtering in for their day's work, or staggering in from the night's raid on Marcus Wilson's house. The latter were bringing the former up to date.

'We've just found the body of Des Carmichael at Grosnez,' Winter announced to the room.

Winter looked over to where DC Amanda Potter was just tucking into a yoghurt with fruit and granola for her breakfast.

'Amanda, really sorry to do this to you, but I can't leave the inquiry right now, so could you please go to Carol and pass on the news? We need to tell her ASAP before it leaks out. You know I'd usually do it but...'

'Course. I'll leave right now. The way she was talking about him yesterday, she might not be as upset as you'd think!'

'I wouldn't bet on it. In my experience the dead seem to attain sainthood the second they've left this mortal coil.'

Amanda, true to her word, took one last mouthful of her breakfast and was straight out of the office.

Winter messaged the other two officers in the family liaison team to ask if they could check in again with the Keyes

and the Browns. If Des had been contacted directly by the Pied Piper, it was feasible that the others could be too.

‘I’m going to get some coffee, you lot start work on figuring out where Marcus Wilson could be holding those children. He’ll have had to leave them last night to deal with Des.’

‘Unless he has other help,’ DS Le Scelleur suggested.

‘True. We don’t know he’s working alone. Go through the rest of Des’s list too and track down every name on it.’

‘Sir, sir?’ DC Everton tried to catch Winter’s attention.

‘Just had Sarah and Cheryl on the phone. They can’t get hold of Carol, Natasha, or Christina. They’re not answering their phones.’

‘Shit! Check Daisy Plover too. Maybe he’s going for the mothers now.’ Winter’s head was about to explode. The situation was going from bad to worse and now he had not only four children, but potentially four mothers missing.

DCI Sharpe walked into the room, his face like a bulldog chewing a wasp. Winter couldn’t deal with him right now. Saskia came into his mind. She’d been right about the Pied Piper all along. Perhaps she might have some ideas as to where he was hiding out. He left the incident room and made the call.

‘Hi.’ She sounded sleepy. Winter had forgotten how early it was still. For a few seconds his testosterone took over from his professionalism and he had a vision of her lying in bed. Then the dire situation of the children swamped all personal interest.

‘Sorry to wake you so early. We know who the Pied Piper is: it was Marcus Wilson. We’ve found evidence at his home, but he’s nowhere to be seen and Des Carmichael has probably been murdered.’

‘Bloody hell!’ came Saskia’s response down the line.

Winter realised that he’d hit her with quite a lot. ‘He hasn’t had the kids at his house. We don’t know where he’s hiding

them. I know it's asking a lot, but any thoughts?'

There was silence.

'It's all about what's happened to his wife, so it's likely to be somewhere that was significant to her, or to them both as a couple.'

'How can we know that?'

She sighed deeply. 'I don't know. Was she from Jersey? What was important to her besides Marcus and her work? Where is she buried, or did he scatter her ashes somewhere significant? Look in her studio, any clues in there?'

'Her studio?'

'Yes, was there not a studio with an office at their home?'

Winter thought for a moment. He was so tired he was beginning to doubt himself, but no, there definitely hadn't been. 'No. No there wasn't, so where did she used to work? Thank you, Saskia.'

Winter didn't wait for Saskia to respond. He was off the phone and hunting for the location of Alice Skelton's former office.

FORTY-FIVE

WEDNESDAY

Natasha Keyes had been on the phone to her sister when the letter came through the door. The envelope simply said *Natasha Keyes, Private*. She'd picked it up and placed it on the kitchen table while she was talking, but something about the letter intrigued her. It sat white and nondescript on the brightly patterned kitchen table cloth. She'd ended her phone call, opening the letter with trepidation.

If you want to see Oscar and get him back, go to Bell View Cottage, near to the Priory Inn at Devil's Hole for 11 a.m., but come alone. Tell no one.

He's looking forward to seeing his mummy.

The Pied Piper.

Her stomach lurched and she nearly retched. Was this true? Would she really get Oscar back, or was this a trick? She looked at the clock. It was ten-fifteen. Should she tell Simon? If she did, he would insist on coming with her. The note said to go alone. What about the police? She didn't have long to make a decision.

There was only one thing she cared about right now and that was getting her son back. Natasha wrote a scribbled note to Simon, who was working in their home office, and slipped out the door. She had to do this. Had to go and see if she could find their son.

FORTY-SIX

WEDNESDAY

Winter and a team were already en route to Devil's Hole, when a call came in from the incident room.

'We've just had Simon Keyes on the phone. Natasha had a note from the Pied Piper. He's told her to go to an address at Devil's Hole in St Mary if she wants to get Oscar back.'

'Bloody hell! That's similar to the note that Des got. We're not far, but I hope we're not too late.'

They travelled at high speed through the lanes, keeping tight on bends but also having to be aware of pedestrians because most of the lanes didn't have pathways next to them. They'd careered round one bend and then had to swerve to avoid a female jogger who was running with her headphones on.

'Drives me bloody crazy when they run on roads with those damned headphones on. Asking for trouble,' Winter exclaimed to Jonno who was driving.

Jonno was concentrating so hard on driving as fast and as safely as he could that he said nothing in response.

They pulled in to the car park outside the Priory Inn pub, where the walkers visiting Devil's Hole itself also left their cars. As it was the height of summer, the large car park was virtually full.

'That's Carol Carmichael's car,' Winter said, recognising the Range Rover. 'Has he called them all here? What's he planning?'

Winter and Jonno got out of the car and waited for the armed response team to disgorge from their vehicles. The cottage was just down through the trees.

‘There are coastal cliffs all around here, surely he’s not going to...’ Jonno didn’t finish what he was going to say. He couldn’t. Didn’t want to voice the possibility.

As soon as everyone was assembled, Winter and Jonno ran down the path through the trees, past the dark pond that contained the statue of the devil who leered out at them as they sped past.

Winter had four young faces in his mind. Every step he took he prayed he was going to find them alive and well. Images of the Pied Piper standing on the cliff edge with one of the children, tormenting the watching mothers, came into his mind. How much suffering did he think was enough? How unhinged was this man? Grieving for his wife who’d taken her own life after Des Carmichael had ruined it. Was he going to take the lives of their wives too? Was that the plan?

Through the trees, the tiny cottage garden came into view. Winter held his hand up to the team and indicated that they should fan out around the cottage, quietly.

He listened for the sound of voices, pleading. Nothing was carried to him on the breeze.

They eased forward, keeping low. They saw no one.

Were they all inside? Or had his team been too late?

Winter indicated to a couple of the officers to carry on down the path towards the cliffs, while they continued their approach towards the cottage, just in case the Pied Piper and the four mothers had already left.

His heart was beating so hard in his chest that he was sure others would hear it.

Where were they?

Then he heard something. The sound of a sob.

Winter counted down and they ran up to the cottage in formation. He put his back to the wall trying to peer through a

window. It was dark inside, the trees surrounding the cottage casting their shadow, and he could only just make out shapes.

He edged around the building to the wooden back door, which was unlocked and ajar. Now he heard more voices. Women – and children.

Winter pushed the door open a crack to peer inside, ready in case he had to defend himself or go on the attack.

‘Police,’ he shouted and he and two other officers burst in through the door.

There, in the middle of a small artist’s studio, were Carol and Lucy, Natasha and Oscar, Daisy and Katie, and Christina and Jessica. They were hugging each other and crying. Alone, and every one of them had huge smiles on their faces.

The Pied Piper had given the children back.

FORTY-SEVEN

WEDNESDAY

The fact that the four children had been found alive and well was all anyone talked about all afternoon at work. They'd been glued to social media and the online news, lapping up every single detail they could get. Emily from HR had delighted in telling David how apparently all four children had watched TV and played games for all the time they'd been missing and the Pied Piper had been really kind to them. He hadn't been quite so kind to one of the fathers, however. He'd been found murdered at Grosnez.

David had tried to block all the inane chatter out, but it had put him in a bad mood when even Cassie didn't seem interested in talking to him at all, but was just as keen as the others to find out about the miraculous return of the children.

It meant that by the time he got home, he was already decidedly grumpy. Kevin's car was outside Allan's flat and the pair of them were standing talking by the side of it. When David got out of his car, he heard them laughing and caught them looking over in his direction. Were they laughing at him?

He burst into the house and went straight to the fridge for a drink. Jackie was in the kitchen surrounded by various boxes and platters of food.

'What's going on?' he said to her.

She looked up at him, taken aback by the abruptness of his appearance and the tone of his voice.

'We're having a small dinner party,' she said, 'introducing Lee and Julie to a few other high net worths.'

‘I’m not in the mood,’ David said, yanking open the fridge door and pulling out a bottle of beer.

‘Well I’m sorry, David, but we are entertaining tonight and so I’d appreciate it if you would quit the foul mood and go find yourself a smile and get out your work clothes because they’re going to be arriving in about half an hour.’

David spun round, his face like thunder, glaring at her.

‘This is my house and they are my clients,’ Jackie said, glaring right back at him. ‘Why are you in such a foul mood? The whole island’s been celebrating because those kids have been found, and you look like you’ve swallowed an Asian hornets’ nest.’

David clenched and unclenched his fists. He thought about his father strangling his mother because she’d dared to stand up to him and tell him that she was making a cottage pie for dinner and he was going to have to like it or lump it. His blood felt like it was raging, but Saskia’s face came into his mind. No. He didn’t want to lose everything. He had a lot more to gain yet. It might be Jackie’s house right now, but that was not how it was going to stay.

‘I’m sorry, darling. A stressful day at work,’ he said. His voice and face instantly softened.

In front of him, Jackie relaxed. ‘You’ll enjoy it, and Max and Lisa Fuller are coming, you wanted to meet them, see if you could persuade them to dabble in your futures trading scheme.’

‘You’re right,’ David said, putting the beer down and walking over to her. He put his arms around her and kissed her. ‘Sorry.’ He looked around him in the kitchen. ‘Looks like we’ve got plenty of food.’

‘Yes, I managed to get the caterers to do us a good menu, but it was such short notice they couldn’t get any staff to serve. Allan and Kevin are going to help out.’

David didn’t allow himself to bristle at that news. At least the two of them would realise their place. He’d enjoy being served by them both.

‘Anyway, I don’t want us to argue because I’ve got to go away tomorrow for a couple of days,’ Jackie said to him, a little pout forming on her lips.

‘Leaving me?’ David said jokingly. ‘How long for?’

‘Probably until Monday. It’s my mum. The care home called, I’ve got some things to sort out. Won’t exactly be a fun weekend.’

‘You poor thing,’ David said, kissing her on her forehead. An instant idea forming in his own mind about how he could have a little bit of fun while she was gone.

Later that evening, when everyone was in full conversation, the wine flowing, and they were just waiting on dessert, David slipped away from the party and went upstairs. He knew where she hid it. The diamond necklace that she’d bought herself for her fiftieth. It was worth a lot of money, but he wasn’t interested in it for that reason. He took the necklace out and put it in his suit pocket. Then he wiped the box down, ensuring his prints were cleaned from the surface. Finally, he went back downstairs to the kitchen.

He waited until Allan had gone into the dining room, leaving Kevin alone.

‘Kevin, could you chuck this in the bin for me please?’ David said to him, passing over the box.

Kevin looked at it. ‘You sure?’ he asked. He put the plates of dessert in his hands down on the table and took the box.

‘I’m sure,’ David said.

The man did as he was told, turning and chucking the box into a bin bag where they’d been putting all of the rubbish from the party, and then picked the desserts back up and carried them to the dining room.

Quickly, David retrieved the box, holding it with a serviette so that his fingers wouldn’t get on it. Then he slipped outside to where Kevin’s car was still parked. He knew it wouldn’t be locked and so he opened the passenger side door,

which was facing away from the kitchen window, quickly turning off the interior light. Then he wedged the empty jewellery box under the passenger seat so that it couldn't be seen and wouldn't move.

Job done, he returned to the party and his profiteroles with Jersey cream.

FORTY-EIGHT

THURSDAY

Saskia had just come out the shower and got dressed when someone knocked on her door. She wasn't expecting anyone, or any deliveries, and so she'd peered around the curtain. Parked outside her cottage, she saw David's car. Her mind clouded, was something wrong?

He knocked again. Not one for being patient. Saskia ran down the stairs to answer.

'David, is everything OK?' she said to her brother as she opened the front door.

He gave her one of his smiles. 'Absolutely. I just need a favour,' he said stepping into the hallway and shutting the door behind him. 'It's Jackie's birthday coming up and I wanted to get her something really special. Managed to buy this necklace from one of the jewellers in town, but I don't want her finding it before her birthday. Would you look after it for me?' David pulled a diamond necklace out of his trouser pocket.

'Wow,' Saskia said looking at the cut diamonds. 'That must have cost you an arm and a leg. Why isn't it in a box or something?'

'It will be, it's just I had to give Jackie a lift somewhere this morning and so I couldn't smuggle the box out of the house as well as the necklace. I'll bring that round when I come for our next session.'

Saskia looked at her brother's face. 'Is this for real, David?'

He frowned, knitting his perfectly plucked eyebrows together. ‘Absolutely. You keep telling me to take care of her and do nice things. This is nice, isn’t it? I’m really trying, Saskia. But if every time I make an effort you don’t believe me or you question me, that’s really hard. And not very encouraging.’

‘Right. Sorry. Which shop did you get it from?’ Saskia asked, hoping not to sound like she was quizzing him.

‘Aurum,’ he replied without hesitation. ‘It’s yellow and white gold with an oval diamond in the centre and pear-shaped diamonds around the edges.’

‘Well it’s amazing, David. Jackie is very lucky.’

‘She is,’ David replied. ‘Gotta go, need to head into work. Look after it. Hide it somewhere safe in case you get burgled.’ With that he turned and left. As he shut the door, Saskia heard Pushki’s usual greeting for David as he barked at him. She went upstairs to find somewhere inventive to hide the necklace.

* * *

David walked down Saskia’s path, a smile playing on his lips. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a blur of brown rush out from the neighbour’s house and the yapping dog began leaping up the wall trying to get to him. That dog was really beginning to irritate him. David walked to the end of the path where his car was parked, the dog following him along its boundary wall and to the gate at the bottom. If he opened the gate, the dog would be bound to come out and bark at him some more. He could close the gate and then drive off, making sure he drove over the dog on the way.

David put his hand on the neighbour’s gate and looked at both Saskia’s cottage windows, and the neighbour’s. He was about to flick the latch up when the old woman came bustling out of her house calling the dog.

‘Pushki, Pushki, be quiet. You’re harassing the poor man.’

David switched his face into a pleasant smile.

‘I don’t think he likes me,’ he said to her.

‘Pushki, stop,’ the woman said, trying to catch the bouncing dog that was still yapping and attempting to get to David on the other side. She took a small bone-shaped dog biscuit out of her pocket. ‘Here, good boy,’ she said as the dog sniffed the treat and took it, instantly shutting up. The woman picked the dog up. ‘Naughty boy, you must be more friendly to Saskia’s visitors,’ she said kissing the top of its head.

David had to control his top lip from turning up in disgust.

‘It’s quite alright,’ he said to her amiably, but at the sound of his voice, the dog started yapping again, dropping its biscuit treat onto the ground.

‘Oh dear, I’m so sorry. We’d better go inside,’ the woman said to David, smiling at him. She turned and carried the dog back into her cottage. It clambered round in her arms so that it was looking over her shoulder at him. It didn’t let David out of its sight until they’d disappeared inside.

David looked down to where the dog biscuit had fallen, on his side of the gate. He placed his right foot on top of it and ground it into the earth.

FORTY-NINE

FRIDAY

Winter lay on his stomach, paddling with both arms on either side of the surf board. His lips tasted salty, his tired eyes were stinging a little from the sea water, but he was in his element. The stiffness in his shoulders that had built up over the past week was now breaking down with each wave he caught back to the beach. Out here he had nothing to think about except whether the next swell was a good one and could he meet it just right? The only sound was the roar of the tide and the splash of the surf. Nothing but him, his board, and the sea.

He turned towards land and sat back, looking behind him at the incoming wave, judging its speed, its angle, whether it was clean or going to be a messy break.

It looked good. Winter double-checked there was no one else deeper in that he'd drop into and seeing it clear of other surfers, burst into action. Using his strong shoulders and arms to paddle forward until he felt the wave pick him up and the board lift. With the momentum now carrying him, he popped up on the board, standing, keeping his arms loose, his feet planted and knees bent. He found his centre of gravity and then turned the board across the wave, riding the curl. The endorphins surged around his body like the sea spray, his heart beating fast, his mind free.

The wave took him into shore and as his board slipped into the shallows, he jumped off, picking it up before the sea could drag it back with it. St Ouen was never crowded, there were around thirty or so fellow surfers and some others just there

for the view. He blinked through his salty eyelashes and looked up the beach. She was in her usual spot. Winter unstrapped his ankle from the board and walked back to his car to deposit his board.

‘Alright, Snowy?’ Another surfer high-fived him on the steps.

‘Good, mate, thanks,’ he returned. His nickname in the surfing community was Snowy because of his name and his blond hair. He’d had it ever since he’d first become a regular down here, at fourteen. His hair had been even blonder then. There was a big crowd of regulars who came down and he’d drunk beers and barbecued, surfed and laughed with most of them over the years. There were those who were fairweather fans, only appearing when the sun returned in late spring, and then there were those like him who surfed all year round. Not when there were storms, he wasn’t that crazy. Jersey had some of the best surfing in Europe, some good swells could build up over the Atlantic Ocean and with the island’s warm waters compared to the UK, it had seen a popular surf scene since the 1960s.

At his car he peeled his wetsuit from his body and hung it over the railing. It would be fine there while he went back down to the beach. He stopped a moment to look out across the bay and breath. It had been a tough week, but it had ended well. The relief surged through his body. He loved his job despite the stress. He loved to surf, and he loved this island. He wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else. Life was good.

* * *

Saskia closed her eyes and allowed the sun’s warmth to soak into her skin. It was always cooler on the beach with the breeze coming off the sea, but there was still enough warmth in the air and radiating from the granite sea wall against her back, to ensure she was comfortably warm. She breathed in deeply, relishing the salty air and letting out a big contented sigh. Her toes dug into the sand, feeling for the cooler, damp grains beneath the surface to soothe her feet. There was a

distant murmur of voices further along the beach and the last of the surfers were coming out of the sea. Waves spent, heading off back to the ocean. It was the end to a good week. Four children safely reunited with their families.

The sound of footsteps came padding along the sand towards her.

‘Thought I’d find you here.’ Winter sat down next to her, letting out a big sigh of his own.

Saskia opened her eyes and smiled at him. He held out a bottle of beer to her and smiled back.

‘Glad to see the back of this week,’ he said, although it was more to himself than her.

‘Where do you keep magicking these ice-cold beers from?’ she asked, smiling her thanks.

‘Mini fridge in the boot of my car, like any self-respecting surfer,’ he replied and looked at her with a smirk. ‘I do have soft drinks in it too,’ he added.

They both took a swig and looked back towards the water.

‘Do you have him?’ Saskia couldn’t help asking.

‘Not yet. We’re still searching for him. He’s disappeared, but he can’t go far. He won’t get off this island so it’s just a matter of time. We’ll get him.’ He took another swig of his beer. ‘I have to say you were spot on with your profiling, Miss Monet,’ he said to her.

She turned to see him smiling.

‘Glad to be of help,’ she replied, smiling back.

‘The boss ate a bit of humble pie and admitted that although he’d been sceptical, he was now converted, although the DCI wasn’t quite so forthcoming. Now we know just how useful you can be, we might need to call on you again sometime. If that’s OK?’

‘That’s OK,’ she said smiling and returned her gaze to the sea in front of them.

‘So why do you reckon he asked Des to take five thousand with him to their meeting at Grosnez? We can’t work that one out unless he planned to use it to get away and then just forgot to take it after killing him.’

‘No. I think it was because he knew what kind of a man Des was. By asking for less money than he had before, it would make Des think he was desperate. That he could buy him off. It was an added incentive for Des to go and meet him alone because he thought he was weakening.’

‘So where do you think he’s gone?’

‘Mmhm,’ Saskia replied. ‘That I don’t know. He’s a man who doesn’t think he has anything to live for.’

‘No. Just like Francis Melton. We found two burner phones at Marcus Wilson’s house. It details all their arrangements about the kidnappings and also that Francis had been trying to figure out some way of being able to get access to assisted dying. He couldn’t afford to go to Dignitas so we reckon his payment was exactly what he got. Revenge on the doctor who failed to diagnose his cancer on time, and then a painless end. We think that they started colluding after Marcus witnessed Francis’s meltdown in the Brown’s surgery.’

‘At least they didn’t hurt the children.’

‘No. They were, as you said, bargaining chips. He spoilt them rotten according to them. They were allowed to watch whatever movies they asked for, eat pizza and burgers, he got them whatever they wanted, apart from their parents.’

‘Is Carol alright?’

‘She’s fine. Des hadn’t gotten round to changing his will so she’s going to be a wealthy woman. I think she’s upset about his death, but getting Lucy home safely has helped.’

Winter took in a big breath of sea air and let it out again slowly. They were silent for a few moments.

‘How was your day?’ he asked her.

‘Yeah, the usual mix,’ she said thinking about those whom she’d interviewed and the meetings she’d been to.

‘Don’t you find it difficult sitting in a room one-on-one talking with psychopaths and those who are just plain evil, day after day?’

‘Not really. I don’t feel like they’re evil as such, just broken people, potentially dangerous broken people. The psychopaths are quite simple to understand. Once you know that they basically have no social emotion and empathy, you realise they are driven purely by self-interest. It becomes easier to deal with them. It’s some of the others that are harder to fathom.’

‘Yeah, unfortunately I still get surprised by the things people will do to each other,’ Winter said and looked back out at the waves.

In front of them, their attention was caught by a small crab scuttling out from some seaweed and skipping sideways across the sand.

‘Did you know that crabs can taste with their feet,’ Winter said to her.

She turned and smiled at him.

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah, the whale fart bubble might not be scientific fact, but that is.’

They both smiled at each other again before looking back across the beach. In the distance La Rocco Tower, another of Jersey’s coastal defences, sat amidst the waves, the spray making it look slightly hazy. Jersey had faced many enemies over the years and its coastline was marked and scarred with the attempts to keep them at bay. The island hadn’t faced one quite like the Pied Piper, until now.

Saskia felt her shoulders and body relaxing. Winter was easy company. She liked him.

‘So what you going to do with your weekend, now you’re actually going to be able to get one?’ she asked Winter.

‘Well, I’m not sure I will get much of a weekend. We’re not finished until we’ve caught the Pied Piper, but I think

myself and the team will be having some time off to sleep. Apart from having a lie-in tomorrow and spending some time on my sofa with several bottles of beer and my Netflix subscription, I've also promised my mother that I'd go round to theirs for Sunday lunch.'

'That sounds nice,' Saskia responded.

'Yeah, it will be good to see them. Mum no doubt will cook us a nice hot roast dinner to eat in the heat of the summer. She hasn't quite got her head around salads on a Sunday. I think she still feels the need to feed me up.'

Saskia thought about her own mother. She'd not heard from her for a while. Their last contact had been when Saskia told her she was now living back in Jersey. She didn't mention David. Her mother had said that maybe she could meet her in St Malo sometime, Saskia could hop on the Condor ferry for a day trip, but they'd not set a date. Maybe it would happen, maybe it wouldn't. Marianne Monet spent her life moving around, unable to settle, not because of her innate fear that her husband might break out of prison and track her down, but that her own son might. That David might try to finish the job that his father had started.

Saskia hoped that time had mellowed David since his adolescent years when he'd been at his most unpredictable, and now he'd made a good life for himself. But, she too wouldn't take the chance. She never told David when she'd spoken to their mother, and she certainly never said where she might be living.

For once in her life, Saskia felt relaxed with her life in Jersey and her job. The reason she'd moved over here, her brother, also seemed to be settled and under control. She'd no doubt there would be challenges ahead, but for now his psychopathy seemed to be on an even keel.

Life was good sitting on a beach in the warm evening sun watching the sun set with a bottle of cold beer and a man who was easy company by her side.

FIFTY

FRIDAY

David made sure he got home a little early from work knowing that Jackie had got the mid-afternoon flight to the UK. Allan was home, but he too was alone. There was no sign of Kevin's car.

David parked up and went to look in the garage. He was going to need a few things, one of them being some kind of preferably waterproof tarpaulin, and he was sure he'd seen one folded up and stored on the shelving at the back of the garage.

He turned the lights on and went to take a look. Just as he'd located it, a voice came from behind him.

'Looking for something?' It was Allan.

David turned, a big smile on his face. 'Just wondered if we had any washer fluid, mine's running low.'

'Sure we do.' Allan walked across to the shelves and pulled a plastic container from behind something else and showed him.

'Great, thanks,' David replied, smiling at him again. 'I'll sort it out tomorrow.'

Allan put it back.

'Actually, you know what, there was something I wanted to talk to you about,' David said.

Allan turned and looked at him.

'We seem to have got off on the wrong foot. I wondered if maybe you'd like to join me for a barbecue and a few beers

tonight. Get to know each other a bit better and clear the air, for Jackie's sake. What do you say?'

Allan was studying his face. He looked surprised.

'Would be good to get things sorted before she returns, don't you think?' David added.

'Yeah, sure. Why not,' Allan eventually said.

'Great, see you at, let's say six-thirty then,' David replied and walked off towards the house, a big smile on his face.

David had done his research and he was prepared. Everything was perfect. The barbecue coals were white-hot by the time six-thirty came around and he put the sausages and burgers on, just as Allan came through into the garden.

'Grab yourself a cold beer,' David said, nodding to the bucket filled with ice and beer bottles.

'Cheers,' Allan replied, sitting down on one of the garden chairs that David had manoeuvred into place next to the barbecue.

'Hope burgers and sausages are OK,' David said to him.

'Perfect.'

'No Kevin this evening?'

'Nope, just spoken to him. He's going to get an early night,' Allan replied.

David smiled back. 'Looks like it's just the two of us then, cheers,' he said, walking over to him and clinking his beer bottle. 'You know I meant what I said, about us starting over,' David then added. 'I don't want Jackie upset.'

'I agree,' Allan said, looking up at him.

'You look a little tense,' David replied, putting his beer down on the small table. 'I'm really a nice guy you know.' He smiled again.

Allan returned the smile. That was his cue.

‘Come here, I’ll get you to relax. Give you one of my famous David Carter shoulder and neck massages.’

David moved round to the back of the chair.

‘You don’t need to, it’s OK,’ Allan protested, but once David’s hands were on his shoulders, kneading the tension out of his muscles, he relaxed into it.

David waited for the man to drop his head forward. He wanted his neck exposed so he could try to count the vertebrae. It wasn’t going to be an exact science, but he reckoned he’d get it pretty accurate.

While he waited, David looked out across the garden. He’d always wanted a place like this, a pool with lawn and patio, all to himself. He could have some great parties here too. He’d outshone his father by miles.

A minute or so later, Allan dropped his head forward as he relaxed and David used his fingers to feel for the vertebrae. Then he took the thin knife from his pocket and plunged it into Allan’s lower neck. Not too deeply. He didn’t want to kill him.

The bottle of beer dropped from Allan’s hand, the amber liquid trickling out onto the lawn and into the dry earth.

‘What...?’ Allan tried to speak.

David took his hands away and walked round to where he could see the driver’s face clearly. His features were contorting. David wasn’t sure if it was pain or something else.

‘That’s just incredible. You can’t move now, can you?’ David asked him. ‘But you’re still alive. Perfect. You know, I really wasn’t sure that was going to work. If you sever the spinal cord in the right place and not too deep, it paralyses but doesn’t kill. Too high and I might have killed you, you’d have been unable to breathe, but I think I’ve got it spot on. Don’t you?’

David smiled and nodded at the terrified man in front of him.

‘Oh crap, I’m burning the sausages,’ David darted over to the barbecue and used a pair of tongues to put the sausages

onto a plate. 'Don't suppose you'll want yours now,' he said to Allan. 'Hope you won't mind if I eat mine?'

David slipped the sausage into the hot dog roll, smearing some red ketchup on top and then sat down on the other garden chair. He let out a contented sigh. Life was good.

EPILOGUE

FRIDAY

The tall, thin man stood on the headland as though he were a granite sculpture; hewn out of the landscape. In front of him was the sea and beyond it, just fourteen miles away, the French coast, detailed with tiny buildings and modern wind turbines.

The woman had been enjoying the view and the sight of the sun beginning to set in the west. When she saw the man she called to her dogs, worried that the two big Labradors might startle him. He was close to the edge. She bent down to put the two bouncing black dogs on their leads. Better safe than sorry, she told herself.

When she looked up, the man had gone.

*

If Saskia Monet's first case had you racing through the pages to find out what happened next, sign up here for more about new books in the series.

[Sign up here!](#)

EMAIL SIGNUP

If you'd like to hear when my next book is out, sign up below to my mailing list.

[Sign up here!](#)

We won't share your email address, and you can unsubscribe any time.

ALSO BY GWYN BENNETT

The Dr Harrison Lane Mysteries

1. *Broken Angels*
2. *Beautiful Remains*
3. *Deadly Secrets*
4. *Innocent Dead*
5. *Perfect Beauties*
6. *Captive Heart*
7. *Winter Graves*
8. *Dark Whispers*

Saskia Monet Series

1. *The Stolen Ones*

The DI Clare Falle Series

1. *Lonely Hearts*
 2. *Home Help*
 3. *Death Bond*
- The Villagers*

A LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

Dear reader,

Thank you so much for choosing to read *The Stolen Ones*, the first in the Saskia Monet series. I hope you've enjoyed meeting Saskia and Winter, and perhaps even David! I have to say he's not a brother I'd like to have, and as you can see the dynamic between the three main characters is only going to get more 'interesting'.

If you would like to sign up to my publisher Storm Publishing's mailing list to hear when the next book is out, then you can do so here:

[Sign up here!](#)

I also have my own readers' club, with a free novella and other bonuses including competitions, deleted scenes and news of all my latest releases. It's free to sign up at www.gwynbennett.com. You can unsubscribe any time, but it would be great to keep in touch.

If you enjoyed this book and could spare a few moments to leave a review that would be hugely appreciated. Even a short review can make all the difference in encouraging a reader to discover my books for the first time. Thank you so much!

[Review here!](#)

The characters of Saskia and David have lived with me for many years. I wanted to explore that struggle between the professional psychologist and expert and her own family history and loyalties. It is going to be a roller-coaster journey for her.

I decided to set the book in Jersey, which is where I've lived since 2006, as the scenery and history here are so dramatic and unique. I was lucky to meet my husband, who is Jersey born, in the UK and we moved over with our young family, two rescue dogs and geriatric goldfish. Despite what you might read in this series, the island does have an incredibly low crime rate and is a beautiful place to live (and the vast majority of folk are not here for tax purposes!). While the places that you will read about are real, none of the characters are.

Jersey-born Winter is the antithesis of David, with a thirst for justice and in protecting his home island and its people. Jersey has a strong community spirit and a long history of defending itself, initially from the French when islanders chose to align to the British crown, and then surviving the occupation by German forces during World War 2. Both legacies that remain in the coastal defences, which are still very much evident today. That history of marauding invaders also goes back even further, as the discovery in Jersey of the largest hoard of Iron Age gold and silver coins in Western Europe, has shown. I hope that you get a feel for the island and its people through this series.

Finally, I'd like to thank the team at Storm Publishing for all the work they've done in helping bring this book to you. This includes Kathryn Taussig, my publisher; Natasha Hodgson and Nicky Lovick for their editing and proofreading, and Eileen Carey for the fabulous cover. Most of all, thank you for being part of this amazing journey with me and I hope you'll stay in touch – I have so many

more stories and ideas to share and without you they'll just stay trapped in my imagination, driving me crazy.

Happy reading,

Gwyn Bennett



BROKEN ANGELS

A HEART-STOPPING CRIME THRILLER THAT WILL HAVE
YOU ON THE EDGE OF YOUR SEAT

To catch a killer, you have to think like one. Perfect for fans of Angela Marsons, Rachel McLean, J M Dalglish and Criminal Minds.

Harrison Lane isn't like the other detectives at New Scotland Yard. Born to a single mother and raised in the American southwest – where he learned expert tracking skills from his Native-American stepfather – nobody knows what to make of strong, silent Harrison. The other cops think it's strange he doesn't touch coffee or alcohol, that women can't keep their eyes off him, and that he's always put on the cases no one else can solve...

When a body is discovered in the dark shadows of Fenton Woods, even Harrison's rare abilities are put to the test. It's a haunting scene: guttered candles dot the ground around the young victim's lifeless body. Harrison recognises the ritualistic behaviour that is the mark of a dangerously twisted killer.

As he delves into the case further, Harrison visits an eerie Victorian cemetery, dredging up a chilling memory from his own past. His young, beautiful mother, shrouded in black and gripping his hand. He doesn't know why they were there, but the terror he felt has stayed with him.

While Harrison tries to make sense of his traumatic flashback and how it might be linked to the case, **a local child is abducted.** Can Harrison conquer the demons in his own past and catch this twisted killer before another innocent life is taken?

Get it here!

BEAUTIFUL REMAINS

A TOTALLY CAPTIVATING MYSTERY THAT WILL HOOK
YOU FROM THE START

Dawn creeps over the horizon, illuminating the body lying on the marshy ground. He looks peaceful, young, healthy. But there is no bloom of life in his cheeks, his eyes are cold and dead...

When Head of the Ritualistic Behavioural Crime Unit, Dr Harrison Lane, is called to desolate Wicken Fen to assist with a murder investigation, he can't believe what he sees. Curved iron horseshoes hold down the body of a young, athletic man, and birch leaves rest delicately upon his torso, but it's what lies above the leaves that interests Harrison...

A small bone hangs around the young man's neck and Harrison immediately recognises it as a magical talisman, said to bring the wearer great powers. But it's from an ancient sect which some believe has links to the devil.

The victim is soon identified as local jockey Paul Lester. Searching his home, Harrison discovers a thick white envelope containing horsehair and cryptic directions to a meeting place.

With a sickening feeling, he suddenly understands why Paul was targeted; he was a member of another secret society: The Horsemen. Could that mean that other members are in danger?

But Harrison can't get the detective in charge of the case to take his worries seriously. Then another victim is found dead, pinned down by horseshoes, and his worst fears are confirmed. Harrison knows the fastest way to stop this killer is to infiltrate

the society, but can he discover their secrets and work out how the killer is tracking them before it's too late?

Fans of Angela Marsons, LJ Ross and Rachel McLean won't be able to stop reading this totally gripping crime thriller.

[Get it here!](#)

DEADLY SECRETS

A TOTALLY ADDICTIVE CRIME THRILLER THAT WILL
KEEP YOU UP ALL NIGHT

The small boat drifts gently down the river, twisting slowly with the current. Lying on the bottom, a still figure is dressed in midnight black robes, holding a single red rose in cold, pale hands...

When two students at ancient Durham University make a gruesome discovery, Dr Harrison Lane, Head of the Ritualistic Behavioural Crime unit, is summoned to investigate. A young student has been murdered, satanic symbols etched across their chest, and Harrison is disturbed to see the upside-down hangman's cross, the devil's symbol of justice. To Harrison, there's no justice here, and he vows to uncover the truth.

The student was popular, and the police can't find a motive for the murder. Meanwhile, rumours of ghost sightings are spreading like wildfire across campus, and they all seem to be circling around one location: Palace Green, a popular meeting place in the very oldest part of the university.

Then Harrison discovers an unsolved cold case – a student who went missing a year ago, presumed drowned. Wondering if it could be related to the recent death, he digs into it further – what he finds sends shockwaves across the campus. Is something deadly and sinister happening in the heart of the university?

As Harrison comes closer to the truth, he realizes that the stakes have never been higher. With a killer on the run and a ticking clock counting down, Harrison must confront the demons from his own past and face down a dangerously powerful adversary to finally uncover the truth.

Get it here!

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Copyright © Gwyn Bennett, 2023

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the prior written permission of the copyright owner.

To request permissions, contact the publisher at rights@stormpublishing.co

Ebook ISBN: 978-1-80508-246-0

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-80508-248-4

Cover design: Eileen Carey

Cover images: Shutterstock

Published by Storm Publishing.

For further information, visit:

www.stormpublishing.co