



SILENT KILL

JANE CASEY

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A Note on Chronology.

Silent Kill is set in the spring after the events of *Cruel Acts*,
before *The Cutting Place*.

Chapter 1

‘Here we are. That must be the bus we’re looking for.’

‘What makes you think that, Georgia?’

I looked at Pete Belcott, trying to judge whether he was being sarcastic. He was staring out at the single-decker bus, his expression deadpan. It didn’t take a detective to work out it was the bus we were looking for; it couldn’t have been anything else. The vehicle was stopped at the side of the road, flanked by police cars. The hazard lights were blinking yellow and canvas sheeting covered some of the windows to hide whatever was inside. Someone had strung police tape around the bus, carving out space for the emergency crews on the pavement. Uniformed officers kept the crowds back, and there *were* crowds: there was clearly nothing better to do on a cold March evening on Clapham Common than stare at a parked bus.

Of course, what was inside it *was* interesting, but the most they could hope to see was a body bag on a stretcher, manoeuvred out through the door of the bus before the stretcher was loaded into a private ambulance for transportation to the morgue. I would be getting a front-row seat at the crime scene itself. I was lucky. This was the dream, wasn’t it? Murder investigation team, detective constable in the Met Police, solving crimes, locking up bad guys, taking charge. Everything I had wanted when I signed up for fast-track direct entry, skipping the tedious bits of the job. I was the elite, the best and the brightest, and I could have been doing a more lucrative job with better hours if I wasn’t happy.

And I was happy, I told myself.

I couldn’t admit, even to myself, that the job wasn’t what I’d hoped it would be.

I was leaning forward now, trying to take in every detail of the scene before I even got out of the car. Every new crime scene was a chance to prove myself, to do better. The tension was a knot in my stomach.

‘Pull in here. There’s a space,’ I said.

‘Yeah, I was going to, actually.’

I felt a twinge of irritation at the wounded tone in Pete’s voice. He made it his business to be offended by just about everything. He particularly disliked being told what to do by someone who was younger than him, and less experienced, and female. I knew I had a tendency to sound bossy. People had told me that often enough, and told me that I came across as a know-all. I thought wistfully of the stack of self-help books by my bed, bristling with Post-its, fat with folded-down corners, every margin crisscrossed with notes. The books were all concerned with effective communication and working as part of a team and being confident and self-assured, which were some of the things I struggled with. For the sake of a good working relationship, I knew I needed to stop ordering Pete around. I should ask his opinion now and then, and let him speak first. The trouble was, Pete hadn’t read the same books as me. He was quite capable of sitting in silence for an entire shift if I didn’t talk.

‘Are we the first ones here?’

Pete shook his head and pointed, proving my point about not using his words. I followed the direction he was indicating and saw a broad-shouldered man in a long dark coat. He was towering over a small figure wearing a driver’s uniform, who was shaking his head dolefully.

‘Oh, Derwent. Brilliant.’ I put a note of world-weariness into my voice and Belcott picked up on it instantly.

‘I thought you liked him.’

I said nothing. I knew what Pete was trying to imply and I wasn’t going to rise to it. Yes, of course Josh Derwent was attractive. He had the kind of tough good looks that always appealed to me. His confidence, his square, strong hands and

the way he moved suggested – to me at least – he would be a huge amount of fun in bed, not that I would go there because an office romance would complicate life far too much. That didn't mean I *liked* him.

On the other hand I didn't dislike him, despite his reputation for being difficult. No, my problem with him wasn't what he did, but what he didn't do. Before I started working with the team I'd been warned he was a massive flirt, and maybe he was, but not with me. I would never admit it to Belcott, or anyone else, but I resented the fact that Derwent had a glint in his blue eyes that he never wasted on me. I might as well have been invisible to him, or even a *man*. He just wasn't interested. At all.

I took out my phone and flicked to camera mode, turning on the front-facing camera with practised ease. My face looked back at me, immaculate. My foundation wasn't smudged, my eyelashes were starry with expensive mascara. Blusher gave me a flush of colour and a neutral lip gloss made my lips look fuller without being unprofessionally bright. I looked fine. I looked the way I was supposed to look.

'Mirror, mirror, on the wall.'

I turned the camera off and glared at Belcott. 'Appearances matter, Pete.'

'Turning up matters. Being there on time. Doing the job when you get there. How you look – that doesn't matter.'

'Yes, I can see that's what you think.' My voice was as cold as the raw wind that greeted me when I got out of the car. Scattered raindrops blew into my face, stinging my eyes. I slammed the door and walked across to the officer who was managing the scene, to give him my details. I was aware of the crowd watching me and held my head high, pretending I didn't even notice them.

'Detective Constable Shaw. Right, thanks.' The PC was young, black and painfully earnest. I gave him a dazzling smile of thanks and ducked under the tape, getting my bearings. Josh Derwent might be here but I hadn't seen Detective Sergeant Maeve Kerrigan yet. I scanned the scene

casually, wondering where I might find her. She always seemed to know where to be, how to look busy, how to look as if she was *needed*, while I stood around with gloved hands dangling at my sides. There was no sign of her, though, which meant I couldn't take my cue from her.

Well, there were advantages to that too. I felt my spirits lift slightly: if she wasn't here, maybe I'd have more to do. Not that I would take her place – not exactly. But if Derwent needed to discuss the case with someone, maybe he'd come and find me. Maybe he would sit on the edge of my desk, listening to my theories with respect and gain a new insight into me. *You're not just a pretty face*, I imagined him saying in the low, warm voice that he never bothered to use on me.

It was a fantasy as comforting as a hot bath, but it evaporated like steam as I looked into the bus: she was in there after all. I should have known she would be right at the heart of the scene.

A stocky figure stepped out of the bus: Kev Cox, crime scene manager.

'All right, Georgia? Got shoe covers to put on?'

'Yeah.' I pulled them out of my pocket, wishing I didn't have to step into them in front of the crowd. If I overbalanced and someone caught it on a mobile phone I could end up all over social media, and that was my worst nightmare. 'What have we got? They were a bit discreet over the radio.'

Kev turned so his back was to the crowds and the press. 'Understandably. It's a child.'

'A *child*?'

'A teenager. Schoolgirl. She's in the second row from the back, left-hand side.'

Even I could probably find a dead body on a small, empty bus, but I didn't say that. I was still processing what he'd told me: a teenage girl. That wasn't what I'd expected, though I couldn't have said what I *had* expected. I hadn't been thinking about the victim much, to be honest. It made sense of the close-lipped radio transmissions, and the grim look on DI

Derwent's face, and the quiet murmuring of the onlookers. Not a standard day at the office. A tragedy. I modified my expression accordingly, and thanked Kev as I pulled on my gloves.

The bus was a single-decker vehicle with twenty-four seats, mainly arranged in rows at the back, and it was as cold as a fridge. An emergency exit halfway along the bus hung open, the door dangling like a broken wing. The windows were pebbled with moisture, inside and out. Even though the doors were wide open the condensation from damp passengers hadn't yet evaporated, and the air was stale. I wrinkled my nose at it, so I was pulling a very unfortunate face when Maeve straightened and looked over her shoulder. She raised her eyebrows.

'All right?'

'Yeah. It's stuffy, that's all.'

She stared at me for a long moment and I fought the urge to fidget or apologise under the scrutiny from those wide grey eyes. The lighting in the bus was that particularly flat fluorescent light that deadens the best complexion and highlights every flaw. Maeve's skin was clear and delicately flushed. Her eyebrows and eyelashes were dark enough that she didn't need to add anything to them to look human, unlike me. It took me twenty products to create something approaching a natural look, and she did it by getting out of bed. It wasn't fair.

She turned back to what she had been doing: going through the bags that presumably belonged to the girl slumped on the seat near the back of the bus, where the window was covered with canvas sheeting. I guessed she was no more than five foot two or three, but not slight: her body was solid and her face was rounded with puppy fat. Most of her was hidden inside a giant navy-blue parka with a fur-lined hood, but underneath that she wore her school uniform – pleated skirt, V-neck jumper, white shirt, and a blue tie that was loosely knotted. Her nails were bitten, I noted, and her skin was marked with livid scarring: acne had dappled the area around her mouth and chin, and across her forehead. Black eyeliner was smudged

underneath her eyes and the remains of foundation clung to her cheeks. Her make-up had a harsh peach tone under the bus's lights, especially compared to the pallor of her skin.

‘Who’s our victim?’

‘Her name is Minnie Charleston. She’s a student at Lovelace School in Battersea.’

‘Is that a state school?’

‘Private,’ Maeve said shortly. ‘She was fifteen, according to her school ID.’

‘Can I see?’

She held the card out in a gloved hand and I studied it: in life, Minnie had a cheeky grin, complete with dimples. Her eyebrows had been plucked since the picture was taken. Two uncertain arches straggled across her face now, in place of the thick dark eyebrows on her card. A typical teenager, trying to turn herself into something she wasn’t.

Maeve was sorting through the contents of the girl’s bag. She paused to study an asthma inhaler, one of three that had been shoved in a side pocket of the bag.

‘So are we sure it’s murder? It couldn’t have been natural causes? If she had asthma, that could have killed her.’

‘Not unless it was armed with a knife.’ She pinched the edge of the girl’s coat and drew it back so I could see that the side of her torso was saturated with blood. ‘She was stabbed.’

‘Oh.’

‘Do you think the response officers and paramedics would have called us in for an asthma attack?’

‘No, of course not.’

She laid the coat back into place with a gesture that looked almost tender and went back to taking things out of the bag. ‘House keys. Phone – that’s useful, that can go to the lab for downloading. School diary ...’ She flipped through it, reading the entry for today. ‘Right, so she was going to extra hockey training at a club in Wimbledon. This bag has her kit in it, and

this one has her hockey stick, gumshield and shin guards. That backpack is what she used for schoolbooks.’

‘She wasn’t travelling light, was she?’ The girl must have been surrounded by clutter, I thought, hemmed in by it.

Maeve started unfolding the contents of the kitbag, which I privately thought was a waste of time. A hockey shirt, a hockey skirt that was crumpled from being wadded into the bag, thermal leggings and a white T-shirt with a black logo on it. The logo was a heat transfer that was threadbare from washing it: a zig-zag shape like a slanted Z with a line through the oblique. Maeve held it up so I could look at it. ‘What do you think that is?’

‘No idea. Band merchandise of some sort? She looks like an emo kid.’

‘Maybe. She doodled it on her homework book too, and on her bag.’ Maeve pulled out her phone and took a picture of the T-shirt, then folded it back into the bag. ‘I’ve checked everything now except her body – I’ll leave that for the PM. No drugs, no knife, nothing gang-related or illegal.’

‘Were you expecting to find something gang-related?’

‘When a kid gets stabbed on a bus in South London? Of course.’

‘She’s not exactly the gang type, is she? I mean, she’s white, upper-middle-class, posh private school, plays hockey ...’

‘And she could have a boyfriend who deals drugs, or she could be letting a gang use her bank account to launder money or she could be earning a bit of extra pocket money by selling dope to her pals.’ Maeve looked amused. ‘You don’t know many private-school kids, do you? They’re just as likely to be up to no good as the poorer ones, I promise you.’

‘She just doesn’t seem the type.’

‘Hard to tell.’ Maeve’s face changed and she sighed. ‘I’ll have to ask the parents about it, I suppose, when I go round later. That sort of conversation always goes well.’

‘Can I come with you?’

‘Um ...’ she drew the answer out until my nerves were jangling like wire hangers in an empty wardrobe. ‘OK. Why not.’

‘Great. What can I do now?’ I was distracted by a face at the window nearest me: Derwent. He was looking at Maeve, not me. She had no idea he was there until he tapped on the glass.

‘What is it?’

He mimed drinking and she shook her head, but with a smile. With a nod he stepped back, out of range of the interior lights, and disappeared into the darkness. He hadn’t asked me if I wanted a coffee, I thought, and pushed the hurt far down inside me so it didn’t show on my face.

‘Go and talk to the rest of the passengers,’ Maeve said. ‘We’ve managed to get hold of the ones who were still on the bus when someone raised the alarm, but they want to go home, understandably enough. Find out when they got on, if they saw her involved in a confrontation, if they noticed the girl seeming upset – that kind of thing. We’ve got good CCTV from the bus but we don’t know yet when she died, which seems quite important.’

I nodded. ‘Is that it?’

‘For now.’ She had paused to read the back of a book, a novel with a girl against a background of snowy pine trees on the cover. The book’s spine was threaded with white from reading and rereading. “‘Brought up in hiding, Narya is a walking target for the men who killed her family. But with nothing to lose, she’s about to fight back.’” I wonder ...’

‘What do you wonder?’ I was trying to follow her train of thought.

‘Nothing. Nothing at all.’

‘I’ll get going.’

She nodded, and there was something suspiciously like relief in her eyes now at the prospect of me leaving. I hesitated, wanting to say something useful or insightful, but I’d missed my moment. Maeve was staring into space, with

the abstracted air that made you want to know, passionately, what she was thinking.

But whatever it was, she wasn't going to share it with me. I went back outside, whipped off the shoe covers and went in search of the disgruntled passengers. They, at least, might be susceptible to a little bit of charm, even if my colleagues were immune.

Chapter 2

‘Do they know?’ I asked as the car pulled up outside the house: a double-fronted Victorian red-brick that was immaculately kept, from the Farrow-and-Ball tastefulness of the pale green front door to the pruned bay trees on either side of the porch. The curtains were drawn in all the windows, blocking out the night, but there was no sign of anything amiss.

‘They’ve been informed. Response officers went around earlier, as soon as we had an ID for her.’ Maeve was gathering her notebook and pen, distracted. ‘They said no to having an FLO and they don’t want a police presence outside the house if they can avoid it. I think they’re hoping to preserve their privacy as much as possible.’

‘We’ll make this quick,’ Derwent said over his shoulder to me. I was sitting in the back seat, like a child. ‘They won’t want to talk to us for long and they won’t be much help, more than likely. Still, we have to see if they’ve anything useful to tell us.’

‘Was Minnie an only child?’ I asked, and of course Maeve knew the answer.

‘No. Older brother, younger sister.’

‘That’s good.’

‘Is it? That makes up for losing one, does it?’ Derwent shook his head at me. ‘Wrong attitude.’

‘That’s not what I meant.’ I wouldn’t have said it to the parents, anyway, I thought, but surely it made sense that it would be worse to lose your only child than one of three.

‘If you say anything stupid, you’ll get us kicked out. Keep your mouth shut and just take notes.’

I opened my mouth to protest but thought better of it after seeing the look on his face. There were times you could talk DI Derwent around, and times you should do exactly what he said.

Maeve raised her eyebrows at him. ‘Are you OK?’

He grimaced and a muscle tightened in his jaw. ‘Not looking forward to this.’

She touched his arm lightly with the back of her hand. ‘Let’s get it over with.’

‘It’s so kind of you to come and talk to us. Really, it is.’

There was no correct way to behave when your child was murdered, I reminded myself, but Gail Charleston wasn’t what I would call devastated, at least outwardly. She sat on a sofa in the big kitchen at the back of the house, swathed in a cashmere jumper that she wore over leggings and flat knee boots. Soft lighting from underneath the cupboards and a few lamps that were dotted around the room made it feel strangely intimate, an effect heightened by her manner. She had long, expensively tinted hair, very good skin, subtle make-up and a trick of blinking extremely slowly while she spoke.

‘Where is Mr Charleston?’

‘He went to the hospital for the formal identification.’
Blink. Blink. ‘Can I offer you a drink? I feel like such a bad hostess.’

‘They don’t want a drink, Mum.’

I looked over to where Robbie Charleston was gripping the edge of the marble kitchen counter. He was short and slight but made up for that with excellent posture and good looks: untidy black hair and high cheekbones and the same thick black eyebrows as his sister, before she got her hands on them. He was wearing a black jumper that was unravelling at the cuffs with skinny black jeans. Unlike his mother, he looked as if he had been crying. The skin under his eyes seemed bruised and his knuckles shone as white as the work surface.

‘I still can’t take it in.’ Gail waved a hand with a graceful movement. ‘It seems unreal. Impossible.’

‘Who did it?’ Robbie again. He had plenty of confidence, I thought and a deep, expensive voice to match.

‘We don’t know yet, but we’re going to find out.’

‘I knew it was a bad idea for her to get the bus.’ He shot a vengeful look at his mother. ‘You should have collected her from school and taken her to hockey yourself. It’s not safe. Everyone knows that. Thousands of gang members wandering around here armed to the fucking teeth. Little white kids like Minnie are easy targets.’

‘Not just white kids,’ Derwent said levelly. ‘More often than not we’re looking for the killers of little black kids.’

Robbie shrugged. ‘Whatever.’

‘Had she been threatened?’ Maeve asked.

‘Not specifically.’ He held her gaze, his eyes burning with hostility. ‘Not as far as I know. But she got mugged for her phone a couple of times.’

‘Did she report that?’ Derwent asked.

‘No. What was the point?’

‘Catching them?’ There was an edge to his voice and Robbie’s chin went up, defensive.

‘That’s not what happens, though, is it? You take a statement and then nothing. No one ever gets caught for it. Just hassle, that’s all.’

‘Did this happen recently?’ Maeve asked quickly, before Derwent could get into a proper argument with the boy. Robbie sniffed.

‘Not that recently. One last year, one just after Christmas. I guess they know people get phones for Christmas. It was a brand-new iPhone. She was gutted.’

‘Well, that didn’t happen this time,’ Maeve said. ‘We found her phone in her pocket.’

‘Can I have it?’ Minnie’s little sister, Audrina, hauled herself onto a high stool at the kitchen island. She was a

smaller version of the girl from the bus, stocky rather than slender like her brother. She was ten, she had informed us.

‘Shut up, Audrina.’

‘Mine is shit, you know that.’

I looked to see if her mother reacted to the swear word, but her beautiful face was impassive.

‘Because you keep dropping it.’ Robbie ran his hands through his hair, clutching his head as if it ached. ‘I’m not talking to you about your stupid phone.’

‘Anyway, can I have it?’ Audrina turned her round eyes to the three of us, as if we might give her permission.

‘It’s gone off for analysis,’ Maeve said. ‘We need to see what was on it and who Minnie might have been talking to. We’re going to need to keep it for the time being, I’m afraid.’

‘Do you think it was someone who knew her?’ Robbie demanded.

‘We don’t know yet. It’s a possibility.’

‘So strange,’ Gail murmured, and Robbie’s expression darkened.

‘What’s that, Mum? Is it time for another pill?’ He glowered at us. ‘Don’t think she’s just like this because of Min. This is how she is all the time, isn’t it, Mum? Little pills that make life bearable. That’s why you couldn’t drive Minnie to hockey. It would have interfered with your lovely drugs.’

‘It’s medication, Robbie.’ She blinked at us sleepily. ‘He doesn’t understand. He doesn’t know what it’s like to live with anxiety. There are days I can’t leave the house. There are days I can’t even get out of bed.’

‘The au pair used to get me ready for school,’ Audrina volunteered. ‘Now I’m old enough we don’t need one any more. We never see Mum in the mornings.’

‘So you didn’t see Minnie this morning?’ Derwent asked Gail, who shook her head slowly. ‘When was the last time you saw her?’

‘Yesterday.’ She didn’t sound certain. ‘Or was it— what day is it today?’

‘Christ,’ Robbie said explosively. ‘What sort of mother are you? *I* saw Minnie this morning. She was fine. She was running late.’ His face twisted. ‘She took toast off my plate and I told her to fuck off. That was it. The last time I saw her.’

Audrina slipped off her stool and went to hug her brother as he crumpled, sobs shaking his body.

‘Did Minnie have any particular friends?’ Maeve asked, and Gail raised her voice to be heard over her son’s weeping.

‘She was popular. She was out a lot. She didn’t often ask people to come and stay here, but she seemed to have sleepovers and parties to go to all the time.’

‘Any fallings-out with anyone at school?’ Derwent asked.

‘Ups and downs, like you would expect from any group of teenage girls.’ Gail ran her tongue over her upper lip. ‘You could ask the school.’

‘Would your husband know more?’ I suggested, and she laughed.

‘Heavens, no. He wouldn’t have a clue.’

‘He’s a lawyer,’ Robbie said. His eyes were swimming in unshed tears, but he was back in control. ‘We never see him. He’s at work all the time.’

Gail nodded. ‘He loves to work.’

‘I don’t know why he went to identify her,’ Robbie said, folding his arms across his skinny chest. ‘I really doubt he could pick her out of a line-up unless she was wearing a name badge.’

‘Would you rather have money or love?’ I asked Maeve as we climbed the stairs to the second floor, without Derwent. He had decided, with the privilege of rank, that he didn’t need to stick around. The three children of the family had their own bathroom and bedrooms on the second floor, well away from their parents, as well as a small room that had belonged to the au pair. It was now a tiny sitting room with a TV in it. The

door to Robbie's room was firmly closed but the hot, rank sharpness of cannabis smoke hung in the air nearby.

Maeve had been considering my question. 'Being poor is awful but I'd never pick money.'

'They don't seem to have been keeping a very close eye on Minnie, do they?'

'To say the least.' She pushed open the door of Minnie's room and we stood for a moment, contemplating the truly magnificent mess. 'I've seen neater burglaries.'

'Robbie said the cleaner refused to come up here. I can see why.'

The room had a sour smell overlaid with perfume and a sickly-sweet odour I traced to drifts of spilled make-up on top of the chest of drawers. Pictures torn from magazines covered the walls, the edges rough and tattered. Clothes overflowed out of a fitted wardrobe in the corner and the bed was a lavish double sleigh bed; someone had chosen curtains and lampshades and paint colour with care, but I felt it hadn't been Gail or her husband. Neither of them had cared enough. Dust hung in the air and clouded all the surfaces.

'There's her computer.' Maeve shook out an evidence bag and set about sliding the laptop – a top-of-the-range Mac – into it. 'Have a look at the bedside table.'

I was planning to, actually. I held the words back and did a thorough search, widening my area of interest to the bed itself once I'd finished going through the clutter of books and keyrings and rubbish that had collected there. The sheets hadn't been changed for a long time. I noticed she had drawn the zig-zag symbol on the side of her bedside table in wavering felt tip, where it would be next to her when she slept. Under the bed was grim and I gave it the quickest look possible after almost putting my cheek down on a toenail clipping that was stuck in the carpet.

'Disgusting.'

'What did you say?' Maeve turned from the chest of drawers.

‘Nothing.’ I was still kneeling beside the bed. ‘Found anything?’

‘Not really. No drugs, no contraceptives, nothing that we should be concerned about. Some cash – not a lot. A bank card. An old phone.’

‘More than I found,’ I said. ‘It’s weird, isn’t it? You’d think she had everything she wanted, but she seems to have been almost neglected.’

‘If this was a council house, we’d probably be making a report to social services about the youngest one. They have everything material you could possibly need and no family life at all. Even putting the kids up here is all out of sight, out of mind.’ Maeve shook her head. ‘Poor Minnie. I wonder if she was doing anything to get their attention.’

‘School might be able to tell us.’

‘Tomorrow.’ Maeve checked the time. ‘Pete’s gone to the hospital to deal with Mr Charleston, so I don’t think we need to hang around.’

‘Definitely not.’ I caught sight of myself in the mirror that hung behind Maeve and reassured myself that I still looked OK – no dirt on my clothes or face, my make-up still mainly in place. I had chewed off the lip gloss, I saw.

‘What are you looking at?’ Maeve twisted to see, and her tone changed as she spotted the mirror. ‘Oh.’

‘I wasn’t really looking at anything,’ I said quickly, aware that my face was warming. ‘Just thinking.’

‘About what?’

I shrugged, at a loss. ‘About Minnie being given so much freedom, I suppose. I’d have loved that when I was a teenager, but I needed rules.’

‘Everyone needs rules, even if it’s just to have something to rebel against.’ She jumped. ‘What’s up, honey?’

I realised that Audrina was standing in the doorway, watching us.

‘Nothing.’ She looked around. ‘I want to move into this room. It’s much bigger than mine.’

‘We have to leave it as it is for now.’ Maeve crossed the room and ushered her out onto the landing.

‘Do you want me to do anything else?’ I asked.

‘I think we’re finished here. There’s nothing to point us towards a motive, as far as I can see.’

‘OK.’ I hurried to join her on the landing.

‘It could have been a chance encounter. She could have said the wrong thing to the wrong person on that bus, or just looked at someone the wrong way,’ Maeve said, almost to herself.

‘Always a possibility.’

‘Maybe she was mean to someone.’ Audrina had retreated to the top of the stairs, but no further. Her hair had an oily sheen to it, as if it needed a wash, and her lips were chapped. She swung on the bannisters, careless of the drop behind her. ‘She was always mean to me.’

‘That’s big sisters for you,’ I said lightly.

‘No, she was really horrible.’ The girl’s bottom lip stuck out for an instant, as if she was going to cry, but it was self-pity rather than grief that had brought tears to her eyes. ‘She never talked to me or let me go into her room. She never helped me. She used to kick me and pinch me, and she ripped my favourite dress once, to teach me a lesson. She was a cow, and I’m glad she’s gone.’

Chapter 3

‘Of course we are all very, very shocked about Minnie.’ Doctor Karen Chang shook her head slowly, with sorrow. The headmistress of Lovelace School was a tall woman with a long oval face and glasses. Her neat dark bob was threaded with silver that she hadn’t attempted to dye. Her eyes were intelligent and her manner was full of confidence; I could imagine her making all the difference for parents who were considering whether to pay the £9,031 fees per term at Lovelace. ‘It’s a horrible way for us to lose a member of the school. We are so careful to brief the girls about safety, but these things do happen, sadly.’

‘I’m surprised you don’t have a minibus to transport the girls from this place to the sports campus.’ Derwent, brutal as ever and unimpressed by the surroundings. He was sprawling in his chair, his legs stretched out in front of him. Something about being in front of the headmistress seemed to bring out the badly behaved schoolboy in him. Privately, I thought he could stop showing off and be a bit more respectful. The school had stunned me from the moment I walked into it. The buildings were modern, with floor-to-ceiling plate-glass windows affording us a view of the wide, lead-coloured Thames flowing past. In the distance I could see the straggling grey branches of trees in Battersea Park, still bare. It was clean, elegant, quiet and the exact opposite of the school I’d attended.

‘We do have a minibus,’ Dr Chang said calmly. ‘We transport our year 7 and 8 girls by bus. But we prefer to encourage the older girls to go out into the community. It’s all too easy to live in a bubble when you are from a particular social background. We do music and drama projects with the local state schools, for instance. And remember, they do travel

to school by public transport, for the most part, so they're quite used to navigating the local trains and buses.'

'I'd have thought they were all dropped off by chauffeurs.'

'Some of them are.' She held his gaze, not intimidated in the least by his grumpiness.

'Tell us about Minnie,' Maeve said. 'What sort of girl was she?'

'She was academically gifted, if not outstanding – we have a competitive exam for applicants to the school, so the standard is extremely high. She was at an acceptable level of attainment in all her classes. None of her teachers had mentioned any issues with her performance.' Dr Chang opened the file that was on the table in front of her and sifted through the contents, considering it. 'Really, she was doing quite well. Slightly below average in general, but the average here is not the same as in other schools. She was on track to do very well in her GCSEs.'

'Were her parents pleased about that?'

'I'm sure they were.' A certain reserve had entered Dr Chang's manner.

'Did you see a lot of them?' Maeve asked.

'No. No, I wouldn't say that. Some of the parents are more available and engaged than others. I wouldn't have expected to see Mr and Mrs Charleston at school performances or sports days, for instance, but he did come to parents' evenings. And they made a major financial commitment to the school in the form of a donation for our new building.' She waved a hand at an architect's model in a glass case that stood near the window. 'We've been fundraising for several years and Mr Charleston's donation put us over the line. He has been very generous.'

'Did you ever need to speak to them about anything else to do with Minnie?' Maeve asked. 'Mrs Charleston mentioned there were some ups and downs.'

Mrs Charleston had been completely dismissive of that, I thought, and wondered why Maeve was even bothering to

raise it. But as the silence lengthened from the other side of the headmistress's wide desk, I began to reassess it.

‘There were ... issues. At times. Suggestions that unfortunate things might have been said. It's regrettable, but of course teenage girls are still developing. Their brains aren't fully formed. They can lack empathy, and it's something we work on with them.’

‘Bullying?’ Derwent suggested.

Dr Chang gave an elegant shrug. ‘What counts as bullying for one child can be enjoyable banter for another. Occasionally people overstep the boundaries that we would like them to respect, whether it's to do with physical appearance or wealth or something else.’

I felt a wave of sympathy for poor neglected Minnie, a real poor little rich girl. What had her mother said? She went for sleepovers and to other people's houses, but she never invited anyone back. That told its own story. She was ashamed of her mother and probably self-conscious in a hundred other ways. The coat she had worn was oversized, massive, something to hide inside. She had tried to change her appearance, but her genes hadn't been kind. I'd seen a picture of her father now and she'd inherited his heavy, bulldog physique. Her brother was the one who'd taken after her delicate mother, and I doubted it made him happy either.

‘I don't wish to be unhelpful, but I'm surprised by your interest in Minnie's life.’ Dr Chang looked from me to Maeve to Derwent. ‘I was under the impression that she was attacked by a stranger. I don't see how that could have anything to do with the school, except for the obvious fact that she was in uniform.’

‘We don't know who attacked her yet,’ Maeve said.

‘But I was given to understand – I thought there would be CCTV from the bus.’

‘It's inconclusive.’ Maeve's voice was calm but Derwent scowled and shook his head, unable to hide his frustration.

Inconclusive. Maddening was another word for it. We had come back to the office after finishing the search of Minnie's room to find DS Colin Vale and Derwent glowering at the TV in the viewing suite. Colin was our resident tech expert, able to conjure magic from the least promising CCTV, but not on this occasion. The footage was clear enough. On screen, people took their place beside a sleeping Minnie Charleston, and travelled for a few stops, then got off to allow someone else to take their place. There was no dramatic moment where someone plunged a weapon into our victim; whatever had happened had been quick and subtle. Throughout the journey passengers had got on and lingered in the aisle, blocking Minnie from view for several long seconds at a time. Plenty of footage to watch: no answers so far.

'We've found that it's a good idea to start with the victim in a murder investigation anyway,' Maeve explained to Dr Chang. 'We need to get to know them, to understand what led them to be where they were at that particular moment in time. We don't want to assume that the person who killed Minnie was a stranger to her. If there's anything else you can tell us about Minnie – anything at all – we would appreciate it.'

Dr Chang frowned. 'I do take a pastoral interest in the girls, but the best person to talk to is probably Pauline Kennedy. She was her class teacher. She would have seen Minnie every day. You should talk to Pauline. She can help you.'

'I don't think I can help you.' Pauline Kennedy, slim and fair and younger than I had expected, was busy tidying her classroom – far too busy to stop and talk to the police. She had her back turned to us, organising books on some shelves, but the narrow crescent of her face that I could see was flushed.

'Why would you say that?' Derwent was deceptively polite. 'We were told you saw Minnie every day.'

'Yes, but she wasn't the sort to confide in me.' A glance at Derwent that only made her blush deepen. 'She was ... robust. She didn't need me. Some of them like to spend a lot of time with me. I hear all about their difficulties. Minnie was ... closed off, from me at least. She had a lot of friends. She had plenty of people to turn to if she needed them.'

‘That’s interesting, though – that she had a lot of friends.’

‘Is it?’ She gave a little laugh. ‘She was quite a leader. Quite forceful. She was a strong personality. Not everyone got on with her, but a lot of the class wanted to be friends with her.’

‘See, I knew you could be helpful. That’s not information we had before.’ He perched on a desk and folded his arms, making it clear, pleasantly, that he was going nowhere until she cooperated. I was always interested to see how other officers handled a difficult witness. He would be hard to imitate, I thought – he took up so much space and he had such presence it was impossible to ignore his scrutiny. Besides, with his long legs and the way he was sitting, he had basically trapped her in her corner.

As for Maeve, she was wandering around the classroom looking at the posters on the walls, lost in thought. I took advantage of her being distracted to stand next to Derwent, lining up on his team. It looked as if he and I were there together, and Maeve was just tagging along. I liked giving that impression.

‘Did she get on with everyone?’

‘No. Not at all. She had a serious falling-out with another student a few months ago. It was ... unpleasant. You know how teenagers are – they take everything to heart. And Minnie could be very sharp. She looked down on the other girl.’

‘Why was that?’ Maeve had turned, her attention caught by the teacher’s words.

‘Oh – Rosa was pretty and very clever. She was all of the things Minnie would have liked to be, I think. She had a full scholarship, and those are hard to come by. Minnie made fun of her for being poor.’ Pauline shrugged, uneasy. ‘I think there was more to it, but Rosa wouldn’t talk about it with us. Dr Chang was in a difficult position because Minnie was at fault but her father was a major donor to the building project, and – well, Rosa wouldn’t tell us what was going on—’

‘So it was easier to get rid of the scholarship girl.’ There was a hint of anger in Maeve’s voice but her face didn’t give

her away.

‘That’s basically what happened, yes. It’s not the decision I would have made, but then I’m not in Dr Chang’s position. And Rosa wasn’t asked to leave – not exactly. Dr Chang felt she would be happier elsewhere and her parents agreed. She went to a school that was better for her at the moment.’

‘Did Minnie confide in any adults other than you, do you know? Any other teachers?’ Derwent asked.

Pauline jumped as if she had touched an electric wire. ‘Um ... not *recently*.’

‘But she did at one stage.’ He leaned forward, softening his tone to coax her into trusting him. ‘Come on. We’ll find out anyway.’

She sighed and turned to face him. She was barely more than a schoolgirl herself, I thought.

‘I don’t think it’s relevant. It was just ... it was unfortunate.’

‘What happened?’

‘Minnie developed an interest in one of the male teachers here – Zach Roth. She had a bit of a crush on him, I think. He was a music teacher and she was quite musical, so she would find reasons to go to the studio when she knew he was there. She played the guitar and sang. She had a good voice – deep, not a soprano. She sounded like a rock star. You couldn’t put her in a choir or get her to sing classical music, but she had such a distinctive sound and she was determined to make something of it. She wrote her own lyrics – she’d even designed album covers and logos.’ Pauline shook her head. ‘It was a genuine interest of hers, but it also meant she could spend time with Zach, so she became kind of obsessive about it. And he was very much aware it was risky. A twenty-seven-year-old male teacher in a girls’ school might as well have a massive target painted on his chest. He was so careful to keep their relationship on a professional basis. He told her he didn’t have time to read her lyrics or listen to the music she recorded by herself. He did give her advice, but it was just the advice he would have given anyone. He never saw her outside of school,

he tried not to be alone with her, he maintained proper professional boundaries.’ She paused, almost short of breath. Her face was still flushed and her eyes glittered with distress.

‘I’m guessing things didn’t stay within those professional boundaries,’ Derwent said.

‘No, they did! But she didn’t like that.’

‘What did she do?’ I asked.

‘She threatened him. She said she would tell Dr Chang he’d behaved inappropriately with her.’

‘But would anyone have believed her?’ Derwent asked.

‘Even the suggestion might have caused trouble. Dr Chang doesn’t take any risks with that sort of thing. And ... and she had a couple of text messages from him that were completely innocent but without context you *could* think they weren’t. Song lyrics. He was *quoting* things. But if you didn’t know that, you might think it was ... inappropriate.’

‘What did she want him to do though?’ Maeve crossed the room, taking an interest again. ‘If he began a relationship with her, he would be in the wrong then too. He’d have got the sack either way.’

‘He pointed that out to her, but she didn’t care. She said she loved him, but I think she’d decided to destroy him if she couldn’t have him. Anyway, there was no question of him starting a relationship with her.’ Pauline pressed her lips together. ‘He would never have done that.’

‘So what happened?’ Derwent asked. ‘Dr Chang didn’t mention this to us.’

‘Dr Chang never knew about it. He left – not just the school, but teaching.’ She cleared her throat, blinking hard. ‘He was my friend. We started working here at the same time. I liked him. A lot.’

‘Do you know where he is now?’ I flipped open my notebook. ‘Can you give us his full name and contact details, please?’

‘He took a job with a band – The Inviolates. They needed some extra musicians for their Asian tour.’

I’d heard of them – I’d actually seen them perform at a festival once. They wrote folksy, quirky songs and had a passionate following of teenagers.

‘He could play anything, really, but he hated performing. He was shy. He just loved making music and because he wasn’t part of the regular line-up he could play on stage with them without attracting too much attention. They were in Thailand in November and – and there was an accident ... A moped crash. He didn’t survive.’ The tears spilled over. ‘He should never have been there. He loved teaching and making his own music so much.’

‘Do you have a picture of him?’ Maeve asked gently.

The teacher got her phone and scrolled through it, sniffing. ‘There. That’s him. That’s us together.’

They were smiling, leaning against one another. Zach was thin and handsome in an impeccably nerdy way – little round glasses, floppy hair, an actual cardigan. Unthreatening was the word that came to mind. Ideal for a teenager who was simultaneously drawn to men and frightened of them, who wasn’t pretty and didn’t know how to get what she wanted with charm. He must have been terrified of Minnie, and maybe that was enough for her. If he was scared, at least he was thinking about her. That was all she’d wanted, I thought – to matter to someone, even if it was because of fear, not love.

‘Were you in a relationship with him?’ Maeve asked.

‘No. I’d thought – but no. We were friends. Just friends.’ She touched the screen with a fingertip, then closed the image. ‘I miss him so much.’

Chapter 4

‘So our victim is Minnie Charleston.’ Derwent stood at the top of the conference room, a board behind him. He stuck a picture up: one I hadn’t seen before. In it, Minnie was smiling in a pink T-shirt. She was tanned and looked happy – innocent was the word, I thought. Young.

‘This picture is from last summer when she was on holidays with a school friend. Her parents couldn’t find a recent picture of her.’ Derwent looked around the room meaningfully to make sure no one had missed the significance of that fact – and yet, as Mrs Charleston had said, teenagers could be hard to photograph. ‘This is the one we’re going to share with the media when we make an appeal for further information and witnesses.’

He slid a second picture into place beside the first. ‘This is also Minnie Charleston.’

‘Quite a difference,’ DS Chris Pettifer commented, the loudest of the remarks that hummed around the conference room. The image was a selfie. Minnie had tilted her head to one side and was staring up at the camera through narrowed eyes. She was sucking her cheeks in and pouting. Blue-black eyeliner and purple lipstick smothered her features, blurring the shape of her eyes and mouth. Her bra strap had slid off one shoulder, framing a hand-drawn rendering of the logo she’d put on her bag and bedside table. It was positioned where she would probably have had a tattoo if she’d been older. I drew it in my notebook to remind myself to find out more about it.

‘How old was she?’ DCI Una Burt asked. We were presenting the case for her benefit, largely; she was fielding queries from her bosses and the media and not enjoying any of it.

‘Fifteen.’ Derwent shook his head. ‘We got this from the same friend, by the way. The lab are still working on downloading her computer and phone data. The friend didn’t want to share it with us, but her mother made her.’

‘She wanted us to see it to explain why she’d stopped her daughter from hanging around with Minnie,’ Maeve said from the back of the room where she was leaning against the wall. ‘She felt Minnie was a bad influence on her daughter, and she might have been right.’

‘The school were quite guarded about what they told us, but the friend’s mum was more forthcoming.’ Derwent looked smug, as well he might; he had charmed her into whispered indiscretion while Maeve and I spoke to the daughter. ‘Minnie was a strong character and not to everyone’s taste. She fell out with a few of her classmates, played favourites with others and generally caused trouble. Her parents weren’t involved with her or bothered about what she was getting up to as long as she went to school and got out from under their feet.’

‘Minnie’s mum told us she had lots of sleepovers with friends,’ Maeve said, taking over the narrative again. ‘Actually she was out overnight staying who knows where. She went to gigs in London and further afield. She was into rock music, heavy metal, that kind of thing. She even managed to go to Belgium for an illegal festival with some older friends by telling her parents it was a school trip.’

‘So she was out getting up to all sorts,’ Pettifer said heavily. ‘What does that have to do with how she died?’

‘Don’t know yet. CCTV wasn’t a lot of help, so we’re still trying to work out when she was stabbed and where, let alone who did it.’ Derwent shoved his hands in his pockets. ‘But it’s worth knowing that she wasn’t a typical fifteen-year-old, isn’t it?’

‘Probably that is a typical fifteen-year-old these days.’ Pettifer shook his head sorrowfully. ‘They weren’t like that when I was a lad.’

‘Have we had the post-mortem yet?’ Burt asked.

‘This morning.’ I shuddered. ‘It was grim.’

Burt raised her eyebrows at that. ‘Anything interesting?’

‘No drugs in her system. No alcohol.’ I tried to remember anything else the pathologist had said and got stuck on the memory of Minnie’s hands. The nails had been bitten down so the skin puffed up around them. I’d tried to look anywhere but at the table where the pallid, bloodless body lay, but I couldn’t tear my eyes away from her hands. ‘She was a bit overweight. No tattoos, no piercings.’

‘I don’t think we’re interested in her general appearance,’ Derwent said evenly.

I felt myself go red. ‘I was just getting on to the main part. She had a stab wound to the left side of her torso. The blade entered here.’ I pointed at my ribs, just above my bra strap. ‘It was sharp and narrow, like a skewer, and it didn’t have to be very long to reach her heart. She would have died quickly. Most of the bleeding was internal, which is why no one on the bus noticed for so long. Her whole chest cavity was full of blood. It was a clean injury.’

‘So we’re looking at the people who sat next to her,’ Una Burt said with the air of someone who has solved the case.

‘First and foremost,’ Maeve said. ‘There’s a small chance that she was stabbed before she got on the bus and managed to stagger on before she died, but we’re starting off with the bus passengers, given that we have good images of them. In any case, we need to find them because they’re witnesses. BTP have given me access to the records so we can match up the CCTV with the people who tapped in with a bank card or Oyster card, or a Zip card if they were kids. I’m still working on a couple of the IDs, but I’ve got pictures.’

‘Show us,’ Burt commanded her. ‘Thanks, Josh.’

Maeve started towards the front of the room, shuffling through her photographs as she went and not looking where she was going. Derwent was moving in the opposite direction, on a collision course. As he reached her, he put his hands on

her shoulders and steered her to one side to get her out of his way.

‘You could have stepped to one side,’ she protested.

‘Could have. Didn’t.’

She rolled her eyes and carried on, unmoved by his display of physical dominance.

I drew a heart on my notebook and coloured it in, then scribbled it out. Derwent wasn’t a hearts-and-flowers kind of man. I forced myself not to think about what he might be like instead. I really didn’t need the distraction of trying to decide if Josh Derwent would hold you down, in the right circumstances, or if he was one of those men who pretended to be tough but turned out to be gentle, and generous, and thorough ...

‘Minnie got on at the start of the route and sat on her own for the first three minutes or so. The first passenger who sat next to Minnie was this guy.’ Maeve put the picture on the board behind her. It was a still from the bus’s CCTV camera and sharply focused because Transport for London had invested heavily in their cameras: a young black teenager, his face obscured by the baseball cap he wore. His navy jacket had a distinctive white flash on the shoulder. ‘They’re still trying to identify him for us. A lot of school kids got on at the same stop.’

‘He’s not a child,’ Pettifer protested. ‘Look at the size of him.’

‘I think he’s a teenager.’ Maeve put a second picture beside the first, giving us a different angle on him. ‘He’s got massive feet and hands, but he’s skinny under that tracksuit, look. And one of the kids in uniform was talking to him before they got on the bus. He only sat beside Minnie for a few stops – he got off here, near Queenstown Road.’ There was a map of the bus route beside the photographs and Maeve wrote ‘1’ on it in marker.

‘And how was the victim after this lad got off the bus?’ Una Burt asked.

‘Hard to say. She had her eyes closed.’ Maeve shrugged. ‘I’ve looked at every frame of CCTV from every camera on the bus and we just don’t have a great angle on that seat, unfortunately. She gets on and seems to go to sleep straightaway, and no one notices anything strange about her until the bus gets to Clapham Common.’

‘Who else sat beside her?’ Derwent asked. He was standing at the back of the room where Maeve had been, his hands in his pockets.

‘Number two.’ She put the picture up and a sigh ran around the room at the sight of a woman in a niqab sitting beside Minnie. Only her eyes were visible and flowing black robes hid the rest of her from view.

‘This isn’t a problem even though we can’t see her face,’ Maeve said. ‘We’re pretty sure we have a name and address for her. We think this is Halima Bashir, who used her bank card to pay her fare. She doesn’t stay on the bus for very long either. She gets off near the doctor’s surgery here, on Lonsdale Road.’ Maeve wrote ‘2’ to mark the woman’s exit from the bus. ‘At the same stop, this guy gets on and sits down beside the victim. The bus was full at this point, as you can see.’

The picture was a white man in his early thirties with a small baby in a carrier on his front.

‘He’s got to be our prime suspect,’ Belcott said, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

‘I’d be surprised,’ Maeve admitted. ‘But stranger things have happened. He gets off at Clapham Junction.’ A ‘3’ went up on the map.

‘Doesn’t anyone walk anywhere any more?’ Derwent folded his arms, as annoyed as if he, personally, was paying their fares. ‘What’s the point in getting the bus a couple of stops?’

‘It was raining and cold,’ Maeve said patiently. ‘Passenger four is an older woman who sits beside our victim for a few stops. I’ve watched the CCTV a few times and I can’t see any interaction between them, but there is a bit of the tape where someone is standing in front of them having an argument

about sharing the space for a buggy, so I can't say for sure. Minnie doesn't seem to move at all. The older woman used her Freedom Pass, so we know she is a Mrs Helena Griffiths. She got on at a stop near the start of Northcote Road and got off at the end of it.' She marked the map.

'A pensioner.' Pete Belcott snorted. 'What a line-up. Who's likely to be carrying a knife out of that lot?'

Maeve looked at him with maximum disapproval. 'I'm not jumping to any conclusions. I'm going to speak to all of them and see what they have to tell me.'

'Is there anyone else?' I asked.

'One more. This kid.' She put the picture up. 'He seems to be a Spanish student. He spends the entire time that he's on the bus sitting with his back to the victim, talking to his friends who are sitting on the other side of the aisle. When he stood up to get off on Clapham Common, his friends noticed blood on his jeans and the back of his coat. He panicked but then he realised it wasn't his blood. They went and spoke to the bus driver, and the bus driver came back to check on Minnie. He discovered she was dead, called it in, and that was that.'

'Did we get anything from the passengers at the scene?' Una Burt asked.

'Nothing helpful,' I said. 'No one saw or heard anything. But most of them had only been on the bus since Clapham Junction or Northcote Road. If it happened before that, they wouldn't have seen anything anyway. She just looked as if she was asleep, from what they said.'

Silence fell in the meeting room, which was fairly unusual. We were all experienced enough to know that what should have been a simple and straightforward murder to solve was looking more complicated all the time.

'The murder happened right in front of the bus's cameras, and we still have no idea who did it, or when,' Derwent said grimly. 'Talk about bad luck.'

'Or good luck,' I said. 'If you're the killer, I mean.'

He stared at me for a moment, as if he couldn't believe anyone could say something so stupid. 'Yeah. If you're the killer.'

One day I'd learn to keep my mouth shut instead of saying whatever came into my head. Today, however, was not that day.

Chapter 5

Four detectives to interview one witness (who was possibly a suspect): it felt like overkill to me. But we were going into the heart of the Castle Estate in Battersea, a place where police were not popular, to say the least. Even Maeve hadn't argued when Una Burt told us to go in a group. I was nervous about being there, but I hadn't been able to come up with a reason to stay in the office.

It was two days since Minnie's murder and Passenger One had a name and a face, thanks to the efforts of BTP – he was Ashton Mayfield, aged fourteen, six foot two of gangly truculence.

'He's been interviewed before in relation to a stabbing outside his school and by all accounts he wasn't particularly helpful,' Maeve warned us. 'The officer who interviewed Ashton on that occasion identified him as a person of interest and found out a bit more about him. At that time, which was about six months ago, he was on the fringes of one of the medium-sized London gangs – SWB, the South West Boyz. He wasn't a suspect in the stabbing, but he certainly didn't say anything that would get him tagged as a snitch, even though he knew the victim well.'

'He's going to be fun.' Derwent was driving and I was sitting in the back seat, behind Maeve. On the other side of the back seat, Pete Belcott was staring at his phone, slumped down with his shirt gaping where a button had fallen off. I caught a glimpse of pale belly coated in black hair and looked away. Pete didn't have a girlfriend to tell him to go a size up, and he didn't have enough self-respect to realise it himself. Even though I wasn't looking at him, I was still all too aware of him sharing my space. He cleared his throat with a long-drawn-out wet sound as the car turned into the Castle Estate.

‘Christ, Pete.’ Derwent glowered at him in the rear-view mirror. ‘You could at least wait until you get out of the car.’

‘Sorry. It’s the tail-end of this cold. I’ve got a lot of catarrh.’

I groaned along with Derwent. Maeve’s voice cut through the noise in the car.

‘Is that him? On the balcony up there?’

I bent to peer through the windscreen. The estate was low-rise, three storeys high in long rectangular blocks. All of the front doors opened off one long balcony that ran along each level with a staircase at either end. The guy Maeve was talking about was standing halfway along the second floor, his attention on the phone in his hand. He hadn’t noticed us yet. ‘Same jacket,’ I said. ‘It’s got that flash on the shoulder.’

‘And he lives in number forty-four. That’s on the second floor,’ Pete said. ‘He’s outside his front door, near enough.’

‘That’s him.’ Derwent threw the car into a space. ‘Pete, you and Georgia go up the staircase on the left. We’ll take the right. See if we can grab him before he gets any ideas about running.’

It was a reasonable plan and maybe it would have worked if Pete had been a bit faster. I was behind him on the stairs.

‘Hurry up.’

‘I can’t. You can ... go past me ... if you like.’

I did not like. I liked having the soft, doughy bulk of Belcott in front of me, if I was honest, so he could tackle whatever trouble came our way first. ‘I don’t know how you’re going to pass your next fitness test.’

‘Don’t,’ was all he could manage, in a gasp.

We were almost at the second floor. I heard a shout: Derwent’s deep, commanding voice.

‘Stop! Police! Do not run!’

It was followed, inevitably, by the sound of running feet approaching our stairwell.

‘He’s coming this way.’ I put my hand in my pocket, looking for my Asp. Belcott already had his out – he had better reaction times than me when he needed them, despite his sluggish demeanour. I was still fumbling when a tall black youth cannoned off the wall opposite the entrance to the second floor and came towards us at speed. I thought he was going to crash into Belcott and had a vision of the two of them colliding with me, overbalancing, sending all three of us crashing down the stained concrete steps. I would be right at the bottom of the pile. It would be a bone-breaker at the very least – potentially fatal. I cringed against the wall, trying to get out of their way.

Belcott braced himself on the stairs, blocking the whole width. ‘Stop,’ he bellowed – your voice was your first weapon and sometimes it was all you needed, I’d been taught, though mine never seemed loud or commanding enough. On this occasion, the youth hesitated before grabbing the stair rail and vaulting over the bannisters. He dropped to the flight below gracefully, already in motion as he landed. I watched him race down the rest of the steps until he was out of sight. A moment later, Derwent flung himself into view and did the same thing, leaping over the rail with no hesitation and a swish of his coat. He landed with a grunt and checked for a fraction of a second to recover his balance. The boy – our boy, Ashton Mayfield – had the advantage and was making good use of it.

I sighed. It was disappointing. We’d almost had him and now he was going to be in the wind, and we still didn’t even know if he was a witness or a suspect.

‘Where the fuck were you?’ Belcott turned on me. ‘What were you doing?’

‘I thought he was going to run into us. I thought we would fall. I was trying to stay out of the way.’

‘Why aren’t you chasing after him?’ His face was glazed in sweat. ‘Don’t just stand there, Georgia. Make an effort.’

‘I—’

He pushed past me and lumbered down the stairs, swearing under his breath. I stood in the dank stairwell, my breath

clouding in the cold morning air. I didn't know what to do. *Something useful*, a voice in my head urged. *They're all going to shout at you like Belcott did*, another voice said. And a third voice said: *Maeve wasn't running after him either. You haven't done anything wrong.*

Instead of following Belcott down, I went up and out through the doorway to the second-floor balcony where the wind caught the breath out of my body and flung it back into my face. I looked out across the car park and saw Mayfield running towards the main road. He seemed to be limping – he had definitely slowed down – and I bit my lip. Maybe there was a chance we might get him after all. Derwent was flat out in pursuit, dodging through parked cars. He hurdled a low wall to cut a corner, gaining on Mayfield who risked a glance back. I saw the youth move his arm and something flew away from him into the hedge that bordered the estate, though I couldn't tell what it was.

Five seconds, at a guess, until Mayfield reached the main road. Four. Three—

Maeve stepped out from beside a van that was parked near the exit, holding her Asp. She swung it, aiming low and Mayfield panicked. He jinked out of range, overbalanced and sprawled on the tarmac. Derwent flung himself on top of him with an impact I heard from where I was standing. I clapped and gave a soft cheer before noticing I wasn't alone on the balcony. Eight or nine residents had emerged from their flats to watch the chase: some elderly, some young, one a night-shift worker yawning in pyjamas. They all had the same expression on their faces as they looked at me: mingled disapproval and distaste. I nodded to them.

'Good morning.'

Silence.

Well, we weren't there to make friends.

I hummed to myself as I walked back down the stairs.

'Nice one, guv.'

Derwent glanced up from searching Mayfield. ‘Where were you?’

‘I went up to the balcony to see where he went,’ I said. ‘Bird’s-eye view.’

He didn’t say anything but went back to checking the boy’s jeans, patting him down with care. Belcott was leaning against our car with his arms folded. His expression was the opposite of warm. I looked away from him. So what if I hadn’t followed him down to the car park? I’d had a good reason.

‘I got nothing, man. Let me go,’ Ashton pleaded.

‘Why did you run, Ashton? I told you not to.’

He shrugged. Without the cap, he looked younger. His face was soft and hairless, and his eyes were liquid with unshed tears. He was shaking. ‘I dunno. I was scared.’

‘Why?’

‘In case you shot me, innit. Some Black Lives Matter shit.’

‘We don’t shoot black kids in this country. We don’t even have guns, you twat. We just want to talk to you.’

‘I didn’t know that.’ He gulped. ‘My arm hurts.’

Derwent sighed. ‘If I take off the cuffs, will you promise not to try to run away again?’

Ashton nodded fervently.

‘If you make me run after you again, I’m not going to be happy, Ashton.’

‘I won’t, I promise.’

Maeve moved closer to him, in front of me. I wondered if she was even aware that she was blocking my view. I stepped to the side, irritated.

‘Do you know why we’re here?’ she asked.

‘No.’ He looked at Derwent. ‘Except he said you want to talk to me. But I don’t know why.’

‘We’re investigating a murder.’

His eyes went wide. ‘Murder? Shit.’

‘Minnie Charleston.’

There was no way he could have faked his puzzlement.
‘Who?’

‘That name doesn’t mean anything to you?’ Derwent asked.
‘Think about it.’

‘No. Never heard of her.’

‘You sat beside her on a bus two days ago,’ Maeve said.
‘She was a student from Lovelace School. She was stabbed to death at some point in the journey.’

‘For real? Fuck.’ He bit his lip. ‘Sorry. I didn’t know.’

‘Can we get you to come and talk to us about it? Look at some pictures?’

He looked away into the distance, not meeting our eyes. ‘I can’t help you. I don’t talk to coppers.’

‘Come on, Ashton,’ Derwent said, tired. ‘Do me a favour. It’s not a lot to ask, is it?’

‘No.’ His confidence was coming back. Maybe someone was watching who he wanted to impress, I thought, with a glance up at the flats. The balconies were full of onlookers, some of them filming. I felt their eyes on me, their hostility prickling on my skin like electricity. Ashton’s head was tilted back now so he could look down his nose at us. ‘If you wanted to talk to me, you’d have to arrest me, and I’ve done nothing wrong. You searched me and you didn’t find anything. You’ve got to let me go.’

‘What did you throw away, Ashton?’ At the sound of my voice, Maeve, Derwent and Ashton all turned to look at me with varying degrees of surprise. ‘When you were running. What was that?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Really.’ I took out my evidence gloves and put them on, then walked over to the hedge. I worked my way along it, trying to remember where he’d been when I saw it fly away

from him. It had to be something he didn't want us to find. Drugs, maybe, or a phone, or ...

I stopped and reached in through the spindly branches, triumph and relief sweeping through me.

'What have you got?' Derwent was leaning over my shoulder, his face close to mine.

'A knife.' I lifted it out with my fingertips. 'I saw him throw it.'

'I missed that.'

'I had a better view,' I said.

Belcott lumbered over and held out an evidence tube. I slipped the knife into it and he sealed the tube.

'Is this yours, Ashton?' Derwent demanded.

'Never seen it before in my life.'

'We'll see what the lab has to say about that. I'm inclined to think we might find your DNA all over it.'

'No.' He shook his head, frantic. 'No.'

'Good work, Georgia.' Maeve sounded genuinely pleased and I glowed with pride. Yes, it was pure chance that I'd seen him throw it from my vantage point, but they didn't need to know that.

Derwent turned to me. 'Do you want to do the honours?'

'I'd be delighted.' The only thing better than the satisfaction of making an arrest, I thought as I reeled off the caution (word-perfect, naturally), was the look of fury on Belcott's face.

Chapter 6

‘You’ve decided I’m guilty just because I’m black, I’m a kid and you can fit me up.’

‘We haven’t decided you’re guilty,’ Maeve said. Her hands were folded in front of her, on top of a closed notebook. Everything about her demeanour suggested she was completely calm and prepared to sit there for as long as it took to get some answers. ‘We’ve identified you as a suspect because you were in the right place to commit this murder, and you were carrying a weapon that might have been the murder weapon.’

‘No, I wasn’t. I didn’t have a weapon.’

‘We found it.’ Derwent leaned forward, his elbows on the table. ‘One of my colleagues saw you throw it away.’

‘I don’t carry a knife.’ Ashton hunched his shoulders. ‘I promised my mum. And I know too many guys who’ve been killed, you know. I try to stay away from all of that.’

He was sitting on the opposite side of the table from Maeve and Derwent, slumped in his chair. He was arrogant and talkative, which was good news for us because the more he said, the more information we got out of him. In the interview room, stripped of his cap, coat and attitude, he had a neat head, bright eyes and a quick smile. He looked like a child when he forgot to put on his tough-guy demeanour. A young black female solicitor sat beside him, her hair braided down her back, listening carefully to everything that was said. At the back of the room, Ashton’s mother sat on a chair with her arms crossed. She had cried the whole way to the police station, I’d heard, but she was dry-eyed now. Ashton was a minor and she was entitled to sit in on the interview. She was watchful, wary of us and the strange claustrophobic environment of the

interview room. The poor quality of the images that were being transmitted from the interview room made everyone look like a potato, except Maeve, I thought: high cheekbones made all the difference. All my expertise with expensive contouring palettes couldn't match the real thing.

'We know you're involved in the local gang, Ashton,' Derwent said. 'The South West Boyz. Does that ring a bell?'

A grin flashed across his face. 'Man. You like to sound like you know a thing or two, but you don't. My life. *The South West Boyz*.' He imitated Derwent and I found myself chuckling along with Pete Belcott, who was beside me, eyes fixed on the screen.

'Are you saying you're not in that gang?' Maeve asked.

'Definitely not.'

'But you might be friends with some of them,' she suggested.

'Not because they're in the gang. But yeah. I've grown up there. I know everyone, just about.'

'It's very hard to be friends with people in a gang and not end up belonging to that gang.'

He sneered. 'What would you know about it?'

'Am I wrong? I'm basing that on what I've heard from other police officers.'

'Yeah, you're wrong. Everyone knows I don't do that shit.' He sniffed. 'I stay out of it, I swear on my life.'

'Maybe your friends know that. Maybe everyone on the estate knows that. But do the rival gangs know?'

'How would I know that? I don't talk to them.'

Derwent sighed. 'What we're saying is that most kids carry a knife for their own protection, especially if they have lots of friends in one particular gang. It would be stupid not to.'

'It wasn't my knife. It wasn't.' He sounded definite.

‘The knife is at the lab right now. They’re testing it for your DNA, Ashton.’ Derwent waited for a response and got a shrug. ‘They’re testing it for Minnie Charleston’s DNA as well.’

Ashton gave an even bigger shrug at that. ‘OK, so first of all, I don’t know her. Second of all, I don’t carry a knife. Third of all, that knife isn’t mine. And finally, if you do find this girl’s blood on the knife, that doesn’t prove anything. Anyone could have put the knife there. That hedge is public property, know what I mean? It’s not my hedge. And it’s on the edge of the estate. You wouldn’t even have to live on the Castle to hide something there. People leave stuff like that hidden in bushes so they don’t get stopped carrying it. Everyone knows, you see the cops, you dump whatever you’re carrying. It being on my estate doesn’t mean shit.’

‘He’s right.’ The young solicitor glanced up from her notes. ‘You’ve got to link it to my client. Otherwise it’s just circumstantial.’

‘That’s why we’re testing it for his DNA.’ Derwent looked back to Ashton. ‘But if you want to get ahead of us and get some points for cooperating, tell us what happened on the bus.’

‘Nothing. Nothing happened. I don’t know why you won’t believe me.’ His voice cracked, and he looked mortified, a teenager for a moment instead of the streetwise young man he liked to pretend to be. ‘I got the bus, OK? I sat on the bus. I stayed on it for a few stops. I got off. Usually I would just walk, you know, but it was cold and raining and I didn’t feel like being outside. The bus was at the stop, so I took it. If I’d known how much grief I was going to get, I’d have kept on walking.’

‘Why did you sit beside Minnie?’

‘I don’t even fucking know who I sat beside! I just sat down in a free seat near the back.’

‘Calm down.’ His solicitor touched his arm. ‘It’s all right.’

‘It’s not all right! They’re trying to make out I killed someone! I never saw the girl before, I never spoke to her, I

never had any reason to attack her. The first time I heard her name was when you said it to me earlier. I didn't even look at her. She was a posh kid from a private school, that's all I know, and I sat beside her for five minutes. That's it. End of story.' He shook his head, close to tears. 'This is a fit-up. And I just want to go home.'

Half an hour later, Derwent walked into the room where Belcott and I had been watching the interview, took off his jacket and threw it onto a chair with unnecessary force. Maeve followed him in, easing her head from side to side as she loosened a kink in her neck. They both looked exhausted.

'Well? What do you think?' Derwent was rolling up his sleeves with quick, irritable movements, so the muscles in his forearms flickered in and out of view.

'He seems pretty sure it wasn't him,' Belcott said. 'He won't own up to the knife.'

'He's a good liar,' Derwent said through gritted teeth. 'You'd almost believe him.'

'Is he lying?' Belcott said it casually, but then glanced at me, giving himself away.

All right, fat boy, try to undermine me. Let's see how far you get.

'Of course he's lying. Georgia saw him with the knife,' Maeve said.

'Did she?' Belcott pursed his lips, ostentatiously saying nothing else.

'Yes. I did,' I snapped. Everyone looked at me and I felt myself blush. 'I saw him throw it away. That was how I knew where to look for it.'

'And you're sure it was the knife he threw.' Maeve didn't quite make it a question. I opened my mouth to say yes, and found myself hesitating. Was I sure?

'It was definitely the knife,' I said at last. 'There was a glint off it that was the blade. It was definitely metal.'

'And he definitely threw it in that part of the hedge.'

‘I thought so. It was hard to see. I didn’t really – I mean, I knew it was in that general *area*.’

‘Before you picked it up, was it caught in the branches?’

‘N-no. It was on the ground. But it could have fallen there when he threw it.’

Derwent had his hands on his hips. He was staring at me and I quailed at the attention. I always wanted him to notice me, but not like that.

‘Did you search the rest of the hedge?’ Maeve asked, and I shook my head.

‘I had a quick look, but once I found the knife ...’

‘Right.’ She walked out and Derwent followed her, a muscle tightening in his jaw as he went. *Danger here*.

‘Don’t say anything,’ I snapped at Belcott, who beamed.

‘Wasn’t going to. I think I’ll leave that up to them.’

Where they had gone, it transpired, was back to the interview room. Ashton and his mother came into the room looking confused: they had been set to have a half-hour off, and now they had been summoned to the room again, a bare five minutes after they’d left. The lawyer looked suspicious, quite rightly. It could have been a psychological game that Maeve and Derwent were playing. I might have suspected as much if I hadn’t known what was going on. I kept my eyes fixed on the screen and tried to work some moisture into my mouth, which felt as dry as the Sahara.

‘Thanks for coming back so promptly.’ Maeve’s voice was softer now. ‘I wanted to apologise.’

‘Apologise? For what?’ Ashton’s eyes were wide.

‘For not listening to you. I don’t believe the knife belongs to you and as a result we’re going to de-arrest you.’

‘Did the DNA come back already?’ the solicitor asked. She was frowning.

‘No.’ Maeve smiled. ‘We can wait for it if you want, but I’m sure it will be negative.’

‘I’ve been telling you the truth,’ Ashton said.

‘I know.’ She glanced at Derwent. ‘We know.’

‘We made a wrong assumption.’

‘Because you’re racists.’

Derwent leaned back in his chair. ‘No, we’re not. Maybe a bit short-sighted, that’s all.’

Beside me, Belcott cleared his throat. When I turned my head, he was revolving his tongue in his cheek.

Fuck off.

On screen, Derwent was asking, ‘What did you actually throw away?’

Ashton bit his lip and looked over his shoulder at the silent figure of his mother. She motioned to him to answer. ‘I – I didn’t want my mum to know.’

‘What?’ Maeve asked.

‘That I’ve been vaping.’ He was barely audible, his chin on his chest. Behind him, his mother was shaking her head. Her expression was thunderous.

‘It’s dangerous,’ Derwent said sternly.

‘Less dangerous than a knife though.’ Maeve smiled at Ashton.

Derwent flipped his notebook open. ‘What brand is it, mate?’

‘Why?’

‘We’ll get a team to look for the e-cigarette. Just so we’re sure.’

Ashton’s head snapped back, the cynicism resurfacing. ‘Yeah, you believe me.’ Sarcasm dripped off every word.

‘We do believe you,’ Maeve said quietly. ‘But our job is all about evidence. We have to prove what we say happened, and that means we need to prove what you tell us too.’

‘Look, we’re not going to cause you any more trouble,’ Derwent said. ‘We just need your help. A teenage girl died on that bus, Ashton. She was young and she had her whole life ahead of her, but she was stabbed to death. And we don’t know why.’

Ashton considered it. ‘Or who did it.’

‘Why is the first thing,’ Maeve said. ‘Once you know why, you usually know who.’

He nodded, interested now. ‘You know, I used to want to be a copper when I was little.’

‘We can give you some information about careers in the Met. They’re always looking to recruit from different communities.’

He laughed at her. ‘Yeah, no. I grew out of it.’

‘But you still basically want to know, don’t you?’ She tilted her head to one side, considering him. ‘You want to know what, and why, and who.’

He chewed his lip before he answered. ‘Yeah. I do.’

‘Tell me about what happened on the bus,’ Derwent said. ‘From the moment you got on.’

He sighed. ‘I saw there was a free seat in the second row from the back. I didn’t really look at the girl who was sitting there. She was my age, or near enough. White. I didn’t know her.’

‘Did she speak to you?’

‘No. She was listening to her music, I think. She had her headphones on, anyway. She didn’t even look at me.’ He shrugged. ‘The girls from Lovelace don’t talk to the likes of me, know what I mean? At least, most of them don’t. A few are all right, but the rest – they don’t even see us. We’re not in the same world.’

He went quiet for a moment, all the light and life gone from his face, and when he spoke again his voice was flat.

‘As far as they’re concerned, we might as well not exist.’

Chapter 7

Do I really have to tell you that the DNA on the knife didn't match Ashton? Or that they found an e-cigarette with his DNA and fingerprints on it, exactly where he'd thrown it? The knife had unknown DNA on it, from whoever had stuck it in the hedge, and 'from its appearance it had been there for some time'. I should have guessed, really. I should have noticed the rust on the blade, and felt the chill off the metal that should still have been warm from Ashton's body. I should have known better.

To give her credit, Maeve didn't rub my face in it. She didn't even tell me; it was Pete Belcott who made a special trip over to my desk to check that I'd seen the report from the lab.

'So you were wrong.' He'd grinned down at me, his spongy face happier than I'd ever seen it before. 'You made us all look like idiots.'

'Well, it doesn't take much effort with you.'

If anything, he looked even more cheerful. 'OK. But I'd rather look like an idiot than be the office joke.'

The office joke. The words burned through my mind for the rest of the day, and the next. The one thing I'd always feared was being laughed at, for any reason at all, but especially looking stupid or being stupid. Belcott couldn't have said anything worse to me if he'd tried.

Safe to say that after the knife debacle, I wasn't expecting to be involved in the rest of the investigation in any meaningful way, but I was wrong about that too. The next day, Maeve stopped by my desk.

'Georgia, are you coming with me?'

‘Yeah, of course.’ I hurried to put my coat on, jamming my arms into my sleeves in case she changed her mind.

‘What’s up, Sherlock?’ Derwent crossed the room. ‘Worked out whodunnit yet?’

‘Not yet,’ Maeve replied briefly. I could tell she was irritated by the nickname and I could also tell she had missed the tenderness in his voice when he spoke to her, even if he was mocking her.

‘Where are you two going?’

‘To interview Halima Bashir, the second person who sat beside our victim.’

‘Why can’t I go with you?’ he demanded, stepping into her personal space. He had his back to me and I had to guess at his expression from Maeve’s reaction to it. She held his gaze, not backing down.

‘Halima is a devout Muslim. She’s not allowed to speak to men who aren’t related to her.’ Maeve paused, considering it. ‘Or it’s a good excuse to avoid talking to people like you. Either way, you’re not invited.’

‘Can’t you convince her I’m not going to take advantage of her in the middle of an interview?’

‘Absolutely not.’

‘Oh come on.’ He sounded hurt. ‘I wouldn’t.’

‘You’re capable of it.’

‘Give a man a bad name. I haven’t done anything like that for years.’

‘And you should never have done it at all.’

He changed tack. ‘Look, I’ve seen where she lives. I don’t want you wandering around on your own.’

‘You’re not coming and that’s final.’ She looked at me. ‘Ready?’

‘Absolutely.’

I followed her out, aware of Derwent's brooding stare on my back, hot and dangerous, focused as a laser sight.

In the car, Maeve was silent. I lasted about three minutes before I gave in.

'Thanks for letting me come along.'

'No problem.'

'I didn't think you would.'

She gave me a wide-eyed stare. 'Why not?'

'Because of the whole knife incident.'

'The not-a-knife incident.' She grinned, then saw the look on my face. 'Oh Georgia, don't worry. Anyone can make a mistake in the heat of the moment. You saw something that you believed to be a knife, and you found a knife. The fact was, you were wrong about who it belonged to, but it got sorted out in the end.'

'I'm not racist.' I swallowed the lump in my throat. I *thought* I wasn't racist. I tried not to be biased. I'd spent the small hours staring at the ceiling, wondering how I could have got it so wrong. I had made an assumption. If he'd been white, would I have thought the same thing? I *thought* so, but how could I know?

'I didn't say you were racist. Ashton said you were, but we got over that. I think he'd have said it to us anyway. The cops don't have a great reputation on the Castle Estate.' Maeve shrugged. 'If anything, you thinking you saw the knife helped. It meant we could arrest him and interview him. When we told him we believed him about the knife, we got him to trust us. I think we got more out of him than we would have if we'd been nice to him from the start.'

'I thought I'd fucked up.'

'Oh, you did. But it didn't matter.' She glanced at me again. 'There's plenty you can learn from it. Think about it, then move on. But don't let it bother you too much.'

I nodded.

‘Let’s talk about Halima. She wasn’t all that keen to talk to me when I called her. She said she didn’t notice anything.’

‘Didn’t you believe her?’

Maeve shrugged. ‘I can’t tell if she’s telling the truth or if she just doesn’t want the hassle of being interviewed. Better to see her face-to-face, I think.’

‘Does she speak English well?’

‘She’s London born and bred, so yeah, I’d say so.’

I bit my lip. Jumping to conclusions again. I’d learned nothing.

‘She really didn’t want us to come to her flat,’ Maeve went on. ‘If I’d turned up with Josh, I think she’d have taken the opportunity to refuse to let us in. Her husband is very involved with their local mosque and I get the impression she doesn’t go out much. I don’t know if that’s his preference or hers, but tread softly.’

I nodded. I planned to say nothing at all, if I could avoid it. But then ...

‘Why did you want me to come with you? You could have done this by yourself.’

‘Two heads are better than one,’ Maeve said briskly. ‘You might notice something that I don’t. Besides, I thought you needed to get out of the office.’

Translation: I felt sorry for you because you made such a twat of yourself.

I should have been grateful, and I wasn’t completely unmoved, but I wished I didn’t need her kindness and thoughtfulness. I wished I could just do the job properly instead of getting it wrong, time after time.

Halima Bashir lived in a council flat on a 1980s estate, Stanley Court, that was much larger than the Castle where we’d picked up Ashton Mayfield but had an equally terrible reputation. The bus route was typical of London, swooping in and out of areas of great privilege and deprivation without fear or favour. Where it had ground to a halt was in one of the well-heeled

parts, in front of the big Victorian houses that overlooked Clapham Common, but its journey had taken it to some bleak bits of South London too.

‘I’d hate to live somewhere like this,’ I said as we parked outside her block. ‘There’s so many people living here, all crammed together. I’d feel like I was in a prison.’

‘It’s probably all right inside. You could make your own flat nice. Cosy, even,’ Maeve said vaguely. She was looking around, frowning.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘Just the people.’ She indicated with her knuckle rather than pointing, to be discreet. ‘Those kids over there.’

I saw a knot of five teenagers, all wearing black or grey tracksuit bottoms and black jackets, like a uniform. All had expensive trainers on and two had top-of-the-range wireless headphones slung around their necks, while one was wearing AirPods. Two bikes lay on their sides nearby: rental bikes that had surely been nicked rather than hired with a credit card.

‘Dealers?’

‘They look a bit young for that. Runners for dealers, more like. The dealers get them young – eleven or twelve – and they work until they’re fifteen or thereabouts. Then if they’re still alive and still on the streets they might make dealer status.’ She looked at me. ‘There’s a big gang problem on this estate. I don’t want to get into a stop-and-search situation here with no back-up. If they’re smoking weed, ignore it. If they say anything to you when we walk past, don’t hear it. Don’t look at them and don’t act as if you expect them to look at you. If you see something that looks like a knife or a gun, we’ll call it in when we get inside. An ARV can take care of that.’

‘Why don’t we just come back when they’re gone?’

‘Because they’ve seen us. They know who we are and they’d know why we were running away.’ She frowned, not looking at me. ‘I’m not leaving without doing what we came to do, so if you want to stay in the car, stay here. I’m going in.’

In the lift, I had to stop myself from leaning against the wall because there was a definite smell of wee from the scarred metal that lined it. My knees were trembling as if I'd done a ten-mile run instead of a sedate walk past a group of kids.

'OK?' Maeve asked, glancing up from her notebook where she'd been writing. Her hands didn't shake, unlike mine, which were balled in my pockets to hide the tremors.

'I'm fine.'

'You look pale. Press the button for seven, please.'

I took my gloves out of my pocket and draped them over the button before I pressed it. Nothing on earth was going to make me touch anything with my bare hands.

'Did you hear what they were saying?'

'Yeah, of course.'

'It was *horrible*.' I said it with more force than I'd intended and Maeve looked up again.

'They were just chatting shit. Trying to impress each other. They didn't actually expect you to suck their—'

'I know,' I said. 'I know. But it was a bit much. Maybe Josh was right.'

'About what exactly?' Maeve snapped. The doors juddered open. She strode out without waiting for a reply.

'About the two of us coming here on our own.' I hurried to catch up with her. 'He wanted you to wait for him.'

'He was being ridiculous.'

'He doesn't like to let you out of his sight.'

'He's overprotective. He doesn't think women are capable of looking after themselves – you must have noticed that.'

I had, and I hadn't actually minded it. He was tough and uncompromising and not afraid to weigh in physically when he needed to. I was quite happy to stand back and let him protect me, but I didn't say that out loud because Maeve would never have agreed.

‘If you hadn’t been able to come along, I’d have been here on my own,’ Maeve went on. ‘And I would have been fine. We are fine.’

I didn’t feel fine. I felt nervous and far from help. My radio was in my hand, just in case. Maeve could sneer at Derwent all she liked, but of the two of us she was the one who had ended up in hospital more often; she practically lived in harm’s way, it seemed to me. Then again, that was all part of the strange little tango she and Derwent did all the time, where she took risks and he pretended not to care.

Maeve had gone back to scanning the doors, looking for flat 76. ‘Ah, here we go.’ She tapped on the door and it opened almost immediately.

‘Mr Bashir?’

He nodded. He was young and fit, immaculate in black trousers and a white shirt, and he looked wary.

‘We’re here to see Halima.’

‘Yeah, I said to her I didn’t think it was a good idea.’

‘Let them in, Mo!’ The voice came from the sitting room, and in response he ducked his head and stood back. I’d assumed that he would be in charge, but it seemed as if Halima was the one calling the shots.

Halima was sitting on a sofa, unveiled, and beamed at us as we came in. I shouldn’t have been surprised but she looked like any other young woman who cared about her appearance. I never got used to the contrast between the public appearance of devout Muslims and their private life. Halima was twenty-five and stunningly pretty. Her make-up was worthy of a YouTube tutorial, and I found myself saying as much.

She laughed. ‘Thank you. I used to want to be a make-up artist when I was younger.’

‘You’re so good at it. Your eye make-up is perfect.’ It shaded from iron-grey on her lashline to pearly pale under her brow bone. Her eyebrows were like wings, thick and dark.

‘Good brushes and patience. You’ve got to keep blending it and blending it. Build it up slowly.’

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

Maeve grinned. ‘Rather you than me. I look as if I’ve gone ten rounds with a heavyweight if I try to do a smoky eye.’

‘How long is this going to take?’ Mohammed was standing in the living room doorway, jangling the change in his pockets irritably.

‘We won’t be long,’ Maeve said.

‘Is there any chance we could have a cup of tea, Mo?’ Halima asked.

‘Yeah. Of course. Milk? Sugar?’

‘Just milk,’ Maeve said.

‘Same for me,’ I said.

‘I don’t need anything.’ Halima looked up at him and to my surprise she winked. He smiled back at her before he left the room. He really was extraordinarily handsome. Halima watched him leave with eyes like stars. Then she sighed. ‘Sorry about my husband. He doesn’t usually boss people around but he’s being very protective at the moment.’ She said it proudly and then her hand went to her stomach. ‘I’m five months pregnant. He wants to make sure I don’t get stressed out.’

‘We’ll try not to upset you,’ I said.

‘You’re going to ask me about what happened on the bus and you don’t think that’s upsetting?’ She laughed, a brittle sound, and now she did look tense. It was as if her brave face had been for her husband’s sake. Now that he’d left the room, she was looking far less cheerful. ‘OK. Well, maybe you’re used to dead kids, but I’m not. I saw a report on the news the other night and I was like, oh my gosh, I was there. That was *my* bus. That would have been bad enough, and then you called me and told me I’d sat beside her ...’ She pressed her fingers to her lips, shutting her eyes, and I wondered if she was going to be sick.

‘Hopefully we won’t need to talk about anything particularly distressing, Halima.’ Maeve’s voice was full of sympathy. ‘I just need to know what you saw, that’s all.’

‘I don’t know where to start.’

‘Well, start at the beginning. Have you ever heard the name Minnie Charleston?’

‘Not until I heard it on the news this morning.’

Maeve nodded. ‘Did you recognise her?’

‘No. I’d never seen her before.’ She leaned back, running one hand over her stomach in small circles as she thought. ‘I didn’t really look at her, you know. I saw the seat was free and I just went for it. Even though I’m pregnant I don’t get offered seats very often.’ Her expression clouded. ‘My mum says it’s because my bump is too small, but the midwife promised me it’s fine.’

‘Did she speak to you when you sat down? Or look at you?’

‘Not that I noticed. I don’t get talked to much, though. It’s old people who try. They’re the ones who are most likely to give me grief, you know? Call me a letterbox or whatever. I don’t like to encourage them to chat.’

‘I can understand that. So she didn’t say anything?’

‘No. I thought she was asleep. She didn’t move or anything.’

‘Could she have been dead?’ I asked. ‘Or dying?’

She went pale. ‘You think she was dead already?’

‘No, no. We genuinely don’t know when she died. I’m just asking for your impression.’

‘Well, no. I think she was alive.’ She considered it. ‘I’m sure she was humming or coughing while I was sitting next to her.’

I looked at Maeve casually to see if she was thinking what I was thinking: it could have been her last exhalation. In which case, Ashton was back in the frame. Her face was unreadable.

‘You didn’t stay on the bus for very long.’

‘Just a couple of stops.’ She winced. ‘I should have walked, really. Don’t say anything to Mo. He likes to think I’m out there getting my steps in, but sometimes I get tired, you know? And I was going to the doctor’s for a check-up. I didn’t want to have to rush.’

‘I was wondering if something happened on the bus that made you uncomfortable – someone behaving oddly? Staring? Making comments?’

‘No.’

A rattle at the door made her fall silent. Mo came in with a tray and set it down on the table, concentrating hard on not spilling it.

‘Are you sure you don’t need anything?’

‘I’m fine, babe.’ Halima smiled up at him. ‘You could check on the washing machine. It’s not draining properly.’

‘I’ll have a look.’ He went out again and Halima rolled her eyes affectionately.

‘That’ll keep him happy for a while. What were you asking me?’

‘Whether anyone did anything inappropriate on the bus. Anything that made you uneasy.’

She shook her head, baffled.

‘On the CCTV,’ Maeve said gently, ‘it looks as if someone asks you to move straight after you sat down. An elderly man.’

‘Oh yeah. I forgot about him. He was a grumpy old sod.’ She shrugged. ‘He didn’t know I was pregnant. He had just had a hip replacement, he said, and he wanted to sit down. I explained I needed the seat. Someone else stood up for him. Then it turned out he was going to the surgery too, so I walked with him after I got off the bus. He held my arm because he was a bit wobbly.’ Her smile lit up the room. ‘Community outreach. Proof that Muslims can be helpful. He was grateful.’

‘I bet he was.’ Maeve sipped her tea and I remembered to drink some of mine, to build trust. There were places we visited where you’d get dysentery or something very like it if you accepted a glass of water, but this flat was spotless. ‘Halima, can you go back to the beginning again and tell me everything one more time? Just in case you remember any other details now that you’re thinking about it?’

‘I won’t.’

‘You had forgotten the grumpy old man,’ she pointed out.

‘Yeah, I had.’ Halima sighed. ‘OK. One more time.’

This time, she didn’t come up with any further details to interest us. She remembered two other passengers who had got on at the same stop as her, but they had remained near the front of the bus, well out of stabbing range.

‘And that’s it,’ she finished. ‘That’s all I know. Except ...’

‘Except?’ Maeve prompted.

‘Well, you need to speak to the guy who got on when I was getting off. He almost missed the bus. He had to run for it. He was sweating and I heard him swear at the driver because the doors closed just as he got to them. He thumped on the glass and the driver opened them again. He looked agitated, you know? Upset.’

‘We definitely need to talk to him. Can you describe him?’

‘Tallish, lanky, brown hair, white.’ Halima shrugged. ‘That’s all I really noticed. To be honest with you, I was mainly looking at the baby.’

‘The baby?’ I repeated, checking I’d heard correctly.

‘He had it strapped to his chest. It was crying and his face ...’ she trailed off, thinking about it. ‘He was just at the end of his tether. That’s what I thought. I thought, I hope you’ve got someone at home who can take over from you, because you should not be looking after a little baby in that state of mind. So I think you should talk to him. If anyone was fit to kill the other day, it was him.’

Chapter 8

It took some detective work to track down the man with the baby; it was my job and I actually enjoyed it. I'd printed off a couple of stills from the bus CCTV and taken them to the doctor's surgery, reasoning that the people getting off the bus had been heading there, so there was a chance the man getting on the bus had *come* from there. The receptionist was a young woman with thick glasses and straggly brown hair.

I introduced myself and explained why I was there. 'Do you recognise this man?'

She peered at the images for long enough that I had time to imagine a complete makeover for her: new make-up, contact lenses, a few highlights ...

'No. I don't know him. Sorry.' She slid the images back across her desk, under the scratched plastic screen that protected her from the public.

'Could you get other people to look at them? The doctors, I mean?' It was a large practice that hummed with noise. The phlebotomy clinic was in full swing and the attendees seemed to be regulars, nodding to one another and chatting as if it was a social club.

'The doctors are all busy with patients.' She pushed her glasses up. 'Besides, I don't think they would know him, necessarily. We have sixteen consulting rooms and we often have locums when our doctors are on holidays or off sick or doing home visits.'

'OK. Thank you.' It had been a long shot. I couldn't blame her for not knowing who he was, really; he might not even have been there. But if her eyesight was bad enough for her to wear those pebble-lensed glasses, maybe she just hadn't been able to see him in any detail.

I sidestepped a couple of elderly women in knitted hats like tea cosies, then headed for the door, glancing at the noticeboard next to it out of idle curiosity. Vaccinations Save Lives: Vaccinate Your Child Now. Travel Immunisations: Talk to Reception. Your Surgery, Your Community: Tell Us What You Think. Mother and Baby Clinic, Tuesday Afternoons. Free HIV Testing. Stop Smoking Clinic, Wednesday Mornings.

It had been the previous Tuesday when Minnie had got on her bus. Tuesday afternoon.

Mother and Baby Clinic.

Baby.

I queued up again. The receptionist looked at me blankly when I got to the front of the queue, which confirmed my suspicions about her eyesight. She brightened when I asked about the clinic.

‘Oh yes. That’s run by Helen, one of our nurses, and the health visitors. It’s very popular. You don’t have to be registered with the practice to come along and weigh your baby, get advice, that kind of thing.’

‘Is it just for mothers, or can dads come too?’

‘Oh, they’re all welcome. We get dads and nans and everyone, really.’

‘Are any of the staff from the clinic here now?’

‘Helen is doing the phlebotomy clinic at the moment.’ She bit her lip. ‘But there are lots of people waiting so she won’t be able to talk to you. You could come back when it’s over.’

I could, or I could point out it was a murder investigation and skip the queue. I was about to do just that, in fact, when I caught sight of a very elderly man lowering himself into his seat, withered and bent as an old tree. He was clutching a yellow laminated card with a number on it, the badge of honour for the blood-givers. There was something vulnerable about him, something that made me worry if he had enough to eat, and someone to help him wash his clothes, and someone

to help him get dressed. His shirt was loose and he had done up the buttons unevenly, so one side was longer than the other.

I felt myself blush, embarrassed to have even considered asking to interrupt the clinic. I could wait.

Ninety-three minutes later, the nurse came to find me where I was perched on the world's most uncomfortable chair, and two minutes after that I had a name and an address. It was that easy.

Wilf Potter was not a handsome man. He had a long, bony head with a narrow jaw, like a horse, and the skin around his eyes was bruised with exhaustion. Patchy stubble covered his face. Instead of sitting down, we were standing in his kitchen, which gave chaos a new standard to live up to. Every surface was littered with half-empty baby bottles, nappies, wipes, muslins, half-folded laundry, a vast steriliser, colic medicine and Calpol, plates, cups, a couple of vases containing dead flowers and rank water, unopened post and the general detritus of life on hold. I had made the mistake of leaning against the kitchen counter, and had a sticky smudge on the back of my jacket as a result. I dreaded to think what it might be.

‘But I don’t understand – how did you find me?’ As Wilf spoke, he swayed from left to right, patting the small bundle on his shoulder. ‘Go to sleep, little one. Go to sleep.’

The baby blinked, eyes wide, about as far from sleep as it was possible to be. It had some sort of hideous rash around its mouth and its head was covered in a thick yellow crust – cradle cap, Wilf had explained, and apologised, as if we cared. There was nothing nice you could say about the baby except that it might improve. Even the sleepsuit it wore had a faint brown tideline where some apocalyptic diarrhoea episode had left a mark.

‘The nurse at the baby clinic remembered you.’

‘Oh.’ His face flooded with colour and his movements picked up speed. ‘Oh, did she?’

Helen had been a large, good-looking woman with an imperturbable manner and an excellent memory. She had

known him instantly, and told me why.

‘Apparently you got quite upset at the clinic,’ I said.

He sighed. ‘Do you have any children? No? You?’

Maeve shook her head.

‘Well, don’t. It destroys your life.’ He rubbed the baby’s back and it made a couple of convulsive movements, jerking backwards, almost tipping out of his arms. ‘I wish I could put her down, but she cries if I put her down. You wouldn’t think anything so small could be so heavy.’

‘Could I take her for you while we chat?’ Maeve asked. ‘I do have nieces. They’re a bit older now, but I think I remember—’

‘She won’t settle with anyone else,’ he said proudly. His Adam’s apple bobbed as he laughed. ‘Daddy’s girl, aren’t you?’

I hated that phrase. Daddy’s girl indeed. ‘Mr Potter, I understand that you made a scene.’

‘They were patronising me. I’ve been doing this for ten weeks. On my own for three. I know what I’m doing.’

‘Why are you on your own? Where’s your wife?’

‘Hospital. She has post-natal depression.’ He swallowed. ‘It’s bad. Very bad. I had no idea. I thought it was normal to be a bit off after you have a baby, but her brother died while she was pregnant and she hasn’t got her balance back. She was – well, she needed to be away from Ciara. It wasn’t safe for either of them to be together. So I’ve taken leave from work and I’m doing it all by myself for the time being.’

‘I’m so sorry,’ Maeve said, as if she really was. ‘That must be awful for you.’

‘They don’t know when she’s going to get out, you see. They can’t say. It might be a week or months.’ His voice broke on the last word. I didn’t blame him; he looked as if he wasn’t going to make the weekend.

‘Are your employers OK with you taking the time off?’ I asked.

He nodded. ‘They’ve been really helpful. It’s a good thing they’ve let me take the time; I’m in no fit state to see clients.’

‘What sort of clients?’ Maeve asked. ‘What do you do?’

‘I’m an osteopath. I work at a clinic in Mayfair. There are four of us, so it’s not a disaster if I can’t be there.’

‘What upset you at the clinic?’

‘I said she wasn’t sleeping a lot. I asked if there was anything the doctor could give her to make her sleep, because I am losing my mind.’ He laughed again. ‘Can’t put her down, can’t get a break, can’t even make a cup of fucking tea. I had no idea it was a twenty-four seven job. And she’s the worst boss in the world, aren’t you, Ciara? Doesn’t matter what Daddy needs. Ciara comes first.’ He kissed her head. His voice had softened as he spoke, taking the edge off his words so I didn’t feel I had to call social services immediately.

‘What did they say to you?’ Maeve asked.

‘They just said that was babies. They said at her age I could expect it. They asked if there was anyone who could give me a break now and then. I said there wasn’t and they just *shrugged* at me and *laughed*. Not their problem, I suppose.’

‘Didn’t they know about your wife being in hospital?’

‘I told them. But they don’t care. No one cares. We’re just names and numbers. The health service is not fit for purpose. Health visitors are *demons*. The only one who called to the house told my wife she’d need to get rid of our cat, Harold, because when Ciara was crawling she might get into the litter tray and in the meantime he might sleep on top of her in her cot. Harold was old and had dodgy teeth and arthritis. No one would have adopted him if we’d taken him to a shelter. My wife took him to the vet and had him put to sleep that afternoon, before I got home from work. She couldn’t take the risk, she said. But Harold would never have gone near Ciara. He just purred at her. I did say she’d have to be in the fucking cot in the first place to let Harold sleep on her and as far as I

can see the second she touches the mattress she wakes up, but it was too late. He was gone. And I wouldn't mind but the health visitor must have known that Ciara won't be crawling for six months. She was biased against cats, or she just needed to say she'd given us some advice so she could justify her job – it was a box for her to tick, nothing more than that. But with the frame of mind that Anna was in ... she freaked out. Anna loved that cat. She loved Ciara. But she got so anxious, and paranoid, and then she was hallucinating ...' He trailed off and wiped his face on his sleeve, mopping up tears. 'Sorry. I'm ranting.'

'It's fine. I understand,' Maeve said, her voice warm with compassion. 'So naturally, you were upset when you left the surgery. Were you still upset when you got on the bus?'

'Yes.'

'And then you were angry with the bus driver?'

'Yes, I suppose I was.' He screwed up his face. 'I can barely remember. My memory is shot. It's the lack of sleep.'

'Do you remember the girl you sat beside on the bus?' I asked, dragging him back to the point. 'Do you remember noticing anything about her?'

'I remember her. She was taking up practically the whole seat with her bags and her coat.' He looked away, thinking. 'She had her music turned up and it was leaking from her headphones. Very annoying sound. You know when you can just hear the words but not the tune? That. She didn't try to talk to me. I was ready to do the usual age, name, not-a-great-sleeper conversation, because that's all I do now, but she didn't really look at me. She had her head down. I thought she was asleep. I was so fucking envious.' Wilf laughed hysterically. 'I thought, of all the luck. Sitting on the bus, having a nice kip, nothing to worry about except getting off at the right stop.'

The smile faded from his face as something else occurred to him.

'What is it?' Maeve asked.

‘I’m not proud of this.’ He winced. ‘I actually leaned on her when I was getting off. Deliberately. I wanted to wake her up. I’d tried shoving her bags over to her side of the seat, but she didn’t really react. I just saw red. I was thinking: why should she sleep in peace when I can’t? It all got on top of me.’

‘Did she wake up?’

‘She twitched.’ Wilf looked stricken. ‘I was ashamed of myself the second I did it. It was like – you know if you see a bottle on a wall and you knock it off, because you want to see it smash? And then you wonder why you did it? It was like that. I wanted to get her attention, I suppose, but she was only a kid. I shouldn’t have bothered her, and I knew it. I ran off the bus as quickly as I could.’

We had seen him on the CCTV; that was exactly what he had done, hoisting a heavy-looking nappy bag onto his shoulder, his knees knocking as he hurried down the aisle.

‘And you didn’t notice anything else strange on the bus? Anyone behaving in a strange way?’ I asked. Speaking of behaving in a strange way, Maeve was staring across the room at the kitchen table. It was all very well for her to check out of the conversation, but *someone* had to get us out of there or we would spend the rest of the day listening to him moan about how unfair life was and how miserable fatherhood was making him.

‘Nothing odd. It was a very unmemorable journey. Ciara was dozing. I was wondering if she needed a nappy change. Nothing else caught my eye, I’m afraid.’

Maeve reached into her pocket and pulled out an evidence glove. ‘Mr Potter, may I look in your bag?’

‘What? Why?’ He looked at it wildly. I was feeling just as confused.

‘There’s something in it that I’d like to look at more closely.’

‘Help yourself.’ He still looked nonplussed.

I watched Maeve pull the glove on as she inspected the nappy bag. She drew something out of the pocket at the side: a

pair of kitchen scissors with black handles and long, pointed blades.

‘Why do you carry a pair of scissors around in your nappy bag, Mr Potter?’ She tilted them so they caught the light.

‘Because it’s impossible to open the cartons of baby milk without them. I use powdered formula at home, but when we’re out it’s easier to use ready-made stuff. You try opening it one-handed while a baby is screaming in your ear.’

‘I’d rather not.’ Maeve was still peering at the blades. ‘I think I’d like to take these away for forensic examination, Mr Potter. Is that all right?’

‘I suppose. I’ll have to get another pair. One more thing for my to-do list.’

‘But at least the baby has gone to sleep,’ Maeve said with a smile.

‘Has she? Oh brilliant.’ His face fell. ‘Now I have to decide if I should hold her so we can both get some rest or try to put her down. I could really do with sorting out some food for myself. And there’s a wash to put on.’

‘We’ll let ourselves out,’ I said quickly, and led the way to the front door. As it closed behind us, I heard the rising air-raid siren noise of an outraged baby who was not happy about being woken up and wanted to tell the world about it. ‘Uh oh.’

‘Uh oh indeed. I’m never having children.’

‘Never?’

‘Never,’ Maeve said firmly, and took her evidence bag back to the car.

Chapter 9

The last passenger on our list to interview was the elderly woman who had travelled the length of Northcote Road beside Minnie Charleston. Pete Belcott had grudgingly agreed to talk to the four Spanish students about what they had seen, which involved waiting around for an interpreter and an appropriate adult just so he could get four different versions of the same unhelpful story. On the whole I preferred our job, especially since where we were going was a definite step up from the council estates we'd visited first.

'What do we know about Mrs Helena Griffiths?' Maeve asked me as she pulled into a parking space on one of the parallel residential roads that led from Northcote Road to Wandsworth Common. There had been nowhere to stop outside the house, a red-brick Victorian villa that faced the common, beautifully kept and with a shiny Mini on the drive.

'She lives in a nice house.'

'She does indeed.'

'Umm ... She's a pensioner. A widow. She lives alone in her nice house. She agreed to talk to us, but she can only give us twenty minutes of her time.' I leafed through my notes.

'That's about it. I can't think this is going to be very useful.'

'You never know,' Maeve said mildly.

'She's hardly a suspect.'

'Everyone's a suspect at the moment.'

'Even Ashton Mayfield?' I still felt guilty about assuming the worst of him.

'He's not top of my list, but he's not off it either.'

‘I’m inclined to think we should take a closer look at Wilf Potter,’ I said slowly. It felt risky to reveal what I was thinking, in case I was dead wrong, but Maeve was looking encouraging. ‘He was tired and stressed. He could have snapped. Lashed out at her. He admitting leaning on her – maybe that was to disguise that he was actually stabbing her at that point. If someone told us she’d cried out as he was standing up, he’s explained it.’

‘Just because she annoyed him by being asleep?’

‘Maybe. Or maybe he knew who she was.’ I was trying to put it together, fumbling towards a reason. There was something he’d said that had caught my attention ... not about the cat but before that. His wife? ‘He ran for the bus, didn’t he, even though he had the baby. He was determined to catch it. There are loads of buses on that route – he could have waited for the next one fairly easily.’

‘Good point. But we don’t have any evidence at the moment that he did anything. And we don’t have a motive.’

We had watched the CCTV many times, paying particular attention to the shove that Potter gave our victim before he got off the bus, but if he had the scissors or something else sharp in his hand, we couldn’t see it. The CPS would tell us they needed more than that if we approached them about charging Wilf Potter, and they would be right. No jury would want to send a man to prison for life based on what we currently had. If the scissors didn’t have Minnie Charleston’s blood on them, we would be nowhere.

‘You did well to find Wilf Potter for us,’ Maeve said, out of nowhere. ‘That was good police work.’

‘Thanks.’ I looked at her, surprised.

‘I know you don’t always feel as if you get it right. Sometimes you definitely get it wrong, like with Ashton and the knife.’ She was choosing her words carefully and instead of bristling at the criticism, I listened. ‘But I wanted to say that you’ve been doing a good job on this case, and I see how hard you’re trying. You’re getting better all the time, Georgia.’

A warm feeling filled my chest. ‘Thanks.’

Maeve nodded, as if she could tell it meant a lot to me. ‘Now let’s go and see if Helena Griffiths has all the answers we need.’

‘I’d like to be able to help you, but I don’t think I can. I’ve racked my brains trying to remember.’

I’d recognised Helena straightaway from the CCTV when she opened the door – the iron-grey straight hair, the dancer’s posture despite the fact that she was in her mid-seventies. Her eyes were a muddy shade of green but still sharp and unclouded; if there had been something to see, I felt she’d have noticed it. In person she gave me the strong impression that she wouldn’t tolerate us wasting her time. We had already blotted our copybooks by entering the house along with a gust of wind that blew papers off the hall table and sent them skidding across the tiled floor. I had hurried to pick them up, returning with a handful of post and leaflets that she took from me without thanks. Maeve had picked up a single envelope in the time it had taken me to retrieve everything else, which I supposed was the privilege of rank. When I was a detective sergeant I might find it beneath my dignity to scrabble around in a stranger’s hallway for post.

She had held it out to Mrs Griffiths. ‘This isn’t the sort of thing you want to forget to post, is it?’

The older woman had more or less snatched it out of her hand and stuck it under a small bronze statuette on the hall table. I peered to see the address printed on the envelope: Penalty Charge Notice, Wandsworth Council (Payments). A parking ticket.

‘At least you didn’t ask us to fix it for you,’ I said. ‘Most people do.’

She had given me a withering look and turned away. I rolled my eyes at Maeve behind her back and got an answering gleam of amusement.

‘Do you remember getting on the bus?’ Maeve asked now.

‘Yes, of course. It was at the bottom of Northcote Road. I’d been shopping and I decided to get the bus home.’

‘What were you shopping for?’ I asked, trying to find some common ground. She stiffened.

‘I hardly think that’s relevant to your investigation.’

Maeve turned to look at me and I read a warning in her eyes: *Don’t annoy her or we’ll get kicked out.* I had only been trying to make conversation. I cleared my throat, wishing that we’d been offered the usual cup of tea or a glass of water so I had something to do. After our windswept arrival, Mrs Griffiths had led us into a small sitting room by the front door, clearly determined to get our interview over with as soon as possible. It was a pleasant little room with floral upholstery on the chairs and sofa, and well-polished antique furniture, but the grate in the marble fireplace was empty and the radiator was cold. Neither Maeve nor I had taken our coats off. Mrs Griffiths didn’t seem to notice the chill in the air, possibly since it was emanating from her general direction.

‘When you got on the bus, did you notice Minnie Charleston?’

‘I noticed the empty seat beside her, so I sat in it.’

Maeve smiled. ‘That’s not quite true, is it? When you got on the bus first, the seat wasn’t free. One of the passengers who was standing in the aisle waiting to get off had put her shopping down on it and you asked her to move her bags.’

‘Seats are for people, not shopping,’ Helena Griffiths snapped.

‘But you could have sat in one of the other seats on the bus. Four or five were empty by then. Was there a particular reason why you wanted to sit next to Minnie?’

‘I like to sit in the middle of the bus, not at the front or the back, because sitting over the wheels is bumpier and it makes me nauseous. It’s far enough away from the door that there’s no draught. And I like to be high up so I can see more. And I prefer an aisle seat. I don’t like getting trapped by the window.’

‘OK,’ Maeve said, and made a note. Mrs Griffiths frowned.

‘There’s nothing strange about that, is there?’

‘Nothing at all. Did you look at Minnie before you sat down? Did you happen to notice anything about her?’

‘I didn’t notice anything in particular.’ She considered it. ‘I didn’t want to sit next to someone who was likely to interact with me. I just wanted to make my journey in peace. She seemed quiet and normal, although you never can tell with bus passengers.’ Mrs Griffiths picked a bit of fluff off her knee. ‘In any event, I didn’t pay much attention to my fellow passengers. I wasn’t going to be on the bus for long.’

‘Why didn’t you drive?’ I asked. ‘That’s your Mini outside, isn’t it?’

‘I often walk down to the shops. I don’t take my car everywhere. It’s bad for the environment and bad for me. If everyone took more exercise and drove less and ate with more moderation, we wouldn’t have this obesity problem.’

‘I’m sure that would help,’ I agreed, and got a withering glare in response.

‘I do know what I’m talking about. I was a doctor, once upon a time.’

That explained the no-nonsense attitude. I was aware of Maeve sitting up a bit straighter beside me: we had both underestimated Mrs Griffiths.

‘Then you would probably have noticed if Minnie seemed unwell,’ Maeve said.

‘I might have.’ Mrs Griffiths sounded uncertain. ‘I suppose so. But she wasn’t a patient of mine; I wasn’t thinking of her health. I was looking at the traffic and trying to predict how long it would take me to get home.’

‘Did you talk to her?’

‘No. She was very quiet. I thought she was asleep. She was quite pale and still.’ She blinked twice. ‘Do you think she had already been stabbed at that point?’

‘It’s possible,’ I said.

‘You arrested someone, didn’t you? A teenager?’

‘We did,’ Maeve said. Mrs Griffiths shuddered.

‘These teenagers killing one another. It’s terrible. An epidemic. They don’t think about the consequences of their actions.’

‘We’re satisfied that the teenager wasn’t involved,’ I said. ‘We let him go.’

She looked surprised. ‘Oh. Well, if you’re sure about that, then I suppose I’m wrong.’

‘Did you have any interaction with Minnie?’ Maeve asked.

‘No.’

‘And you won’t mind this question, given your medical background,’ Maeve said sweetly. ‘Did you notice any blood on your clothing after you got off the bus?’

‘Now that you come to mention it, I did have a mark on the sleeve and the side of my coat.’ She frowned. ‘I didn’t realise it was blood. The coat is olive green, you see, so it looked black.’

‘Could we take your coat away to test it so we can confirm it is Minnie’s blood? We’re still trying to work out when she was stabbed.’

‘I’m so sorry – I took it to the dry-cleaners the next day. I can’t bear wearing anything dirty.’

‘Which dry-cleaners?’ I asked.

‘All Kleen on Nightingale Lane.’

‘Could we have the ticket? They might not have cleaned it yet.’

‘Of course.’ She bit her lip. ‘But they did say it would be ready to collect today.’

‘We’ll take the ticket anyway,’ Maeve said. ‘You never know. We might be lucky.’

Chapter 10

As I let myself into my house the warm smell of cooking filled the air, comforting as a hug. I pulled off my shoes and checked them for mud – or worse – then put them neatly side by side under the coat hooks. I brushed the raindrops off the shoulders of my coat before I hung it up, and took the time to inspect my appearance in the hall mirror. Not bad – I was flushed from the cold and the damp air had brought out the curl in my hair, so a few stray spirals made a pretty halo around my face.

There was a low murmur of conversation from the kitchen that made me stop and listen – a question that was answered briefly. I thought for a second, then took off my suit jacket and undid a button on my shirt before I went to the kitchen door.

‘Something smells good.’

‘Neil is cooking for me,’ my flatmate Amanda said. She stressed the last two words: *Don’t think you’re included just because you live here.*

Neil was tall and gangly, with prominent ears and a goofy smile. He beamed at me and waved a wooden spoon to say hello. ‘Nothing special. Just a curry.’

‘If there are any leftovers, let me know,’ I said lightly.

‘Not likely.’ Amanda sipped her wine, staring at me over the rim of the glass with round, slightly protuberant brown eyes. It was her house and she had started out being friendly, but over time that had faded to semi-polite hostility. She was ridiculously well paid for her marketing job at a big legal firm, but it was tedious beyond belief. I was sure she envied me my job, despite all the sneering she did at the police.

‘I thought you might be working late.’

‘Not tonight.’ I went past her to the fridge and found a bottle of white wine. I tried not to drink too much but there were times that only a huge glass of ultra-chilled Chardonnay would help me to get over a long day.

‘So you’re staying in?’ Amanda sounded annoyed. I felt as if I was intruding at the best of times, and when she was clearly looking forward to a night in with her boyfriend, I should really offer to go out. I could go to the cinema or something, I thought. But I did pay to live there and the last thing I wanted was to go out again. Especially on my own. I needed company to take my mind off Minnie.

‘I’m really tired,’ I said. ‘I need an early night.’

‘Oh.’ She didn’t even try to sound as if it was OK.

Neil turned round, his face open and kind. ‘I can make a bit extra, Mands. If you’d like some, that is, Georgia.’

I gave him a dazzling smile. ‘That would be amazing. But only if it isn’t any trouble.’

‘I can chuck in a few vegetables to add a bit of volume. It’s not a problem, honestly.’

‘That’s lucky, isn’t it.’ Amanda put her glass down with a vicious clink that drew Neil’s attention to her. Too late, he realised he had done the wrong thing. He turned back to the curry, stirring it with extreme concentration. His shoulders were hunched as if he was waiting for a slap across the back of his head.

‘Very lucky,’ I said brightly, as if everything was fine. ‘I was wondering what I could cook with what I’ve got in the fridge. Can I do anything to help, Neil?’

‘You could chop some peppers and a few mushrooms.’

I rolled back my sleeves as I went over to the chopping board. It was beside the cooker, so we were shoulder to shoulder, our backs to Amanda. I glanced up at Neil and smiled before I picked up the knife, creating a bubble of intimacy that she was excluded from. He blushed. *That’ll teach you to be a bitch, Amanda.*

‘How’s work? Have you caught that girl’s killer yet?’
Amanda asked abruptly.

‘Not yet.’

‘Strange. I would have thought it was easy. It’s all on camera, isn’t it?’

‘The CCTV isn’t that helpful,’ I said quietly.

‘What’s this?’ Neil asked.

‘Georgia is working on the investigation into that schoolgirl who got stabbed on the bus.’

‘In Clapham? I saw that in the paper.’ Neil whistled. ‘Nasty case.’

‘It’s really unpleasant.’ I was scraping pepper seeds off the flesh with care. ‘We will get whoever did it.’

‘If you haven’t got them by now, what makes you think you’ll ever find them?’

I resisted the urge to turn and scream at Amanda, but I really wanted to ask her what she knew about it.

‘Police work isn’t like it is on TV. Sometimes investigations take months and months. There’s all kinds of evidence we need to collect before we can start narrowing down our list of suspects. The lab takes longer to give us results than you’d think.’

‘That’s fascinating,’ Neil said, and I risked a glance over my shoulder at Amanda, who was playing with her long brown hair and looking thoroughly peeved.

‘You must be under extra pressure because of her being a white private-school kid. No one would care if she was a black girl.’

‘That’s not true. We would investigate it in exactly the same way.’

‘Please. The Met is institutionally racist. Everyone knows that.’

If I had been Josh Derwent I would have let her have it. I imagined him stepping towards her, looming over her as he jabbed a finger in her face. *You are white, and grew up in Berkshire, and had music lessons and a pony and every privilege it's possible to have. What the fuck would you know about institutional racism?*

As it was, I concentrated on the job I was doing. 'We have to investigate the murders of a lot of young black kids because some of them get drawn into gangs and lead a more dangerous kind of life. Minnie is getting attention from the media because she's unusual, but that doesn't affect how we do our jobs. We want to get justice for all of them, not just the ones who get the headlines.'

'It's such a cool job,' Neil said, and I smiled at him again.

'It can be. I think these are done.'

'Thanks.' As he took the chopping board from me to scrape the peppers into the curry, his fingers brushed mine.

'I was thinking,' Amanda said, 'that what I'd really like to do tonight is eat quickly and go to the pub.'

'Really?' Neil looked surprised. 'I thought you wanted to stay in.'

'I've changed my mind. I just feel like going out.' She had picked up her phone and was checking her messages.

'Frenchie and Carl are going to the Page and Sword. Shall I tell them we'll see them there?'

'Sure.'

'I'll see if anyone else wants to come.' Her fingers flew as she frowned down at the screen. She lived within a few streets of most of her university friends, something I found mildly claustrophobic. She was always arranging impromptu nights out and last-minute dinner parties with whoever was around. She never included me, and I tried not to mind, but it would have been nice to be asked occasionally. I didn't have a lot of friends, especially women. I always got on better with men – until we slept together and they ghosted me. If that didn't happen, their girlfriends got worried about me being too much

competition and made them back off. If I thought about it too much I felt so deeply lonely I could barely breathe, so I didn't think about it.

'Do you want to come along, Georgia?' Neil asked. He looked over at Amanda, who was staring at him as if she couldn't believe what she'd heard. 'I thought she might like to meet Lewis.'

'Lewis,' Amanda repeated. 'No. That's not a good idea.'

'Why not?' He turned to me. 'Lewis is a great bloke. His girlfriend dumped him before Christmas and he's just starting to think about getting back into dating. I bet he'd love you.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.' He took out his phone and opened Facebook, then showed me the screen. 'That's Lewis. He's a photographer.'

I had low expectations but Lewis was surprisingly easy on the eye: lean in jeans and a white T-shirt, grinning on top of a mountain in bright sunshine. Sunglasses hid his eyes, but he had a great smile. 'He's cute.'

'I really don't think you'd get on.' Amanda put her phone down. 'Neil, can I have a word with you for a moment?'

He followed her out of the room, dog-like. I still had his phone in my hand. I looked at Lewis's profile again, memorising the details, thumbing through the pictures to confirm that he really was gorgeous and it wasn't just one lucky shot. He had a website for his photography; he wouldn't be too hard to track down if I wanted to find him. It was clear to me that Amanda had a longstanding crush on Lewis, who was approximately fifty times more attractive than her own boyfriend, and equally clear that she was far too plain to get Lewis's attention. I, on the other hand, might just be able to turn his head. I felt a thrill of excitement, mixed with the competitive instinct that was my blessing and my curse. I wanted to meet Lewis, and I wanted him to fall for me, because it would annoy the shit out of Amanda.

That wasn't the only reason – I wasn't a complete monster. I wanted to be with someone who would tell me I was beautiful

and appreciate me. I wanted to magic away the loneliness that seemed to run through me like the grain in wood.

I sighed and put Neil's phone down so I could stir the curry, just in time. The kitchen door opened and Neil came in, alone. Amanda would be sitting in the living room, listening to him doing her dirty work.

'Um, Georgia, I talked it over with Amanda and she thinks – well, she doesn't think it would be a good idea.' Neil looked as if he had been whipped soundly. 'She thinks he's not over his ex and – well, she thinks you wouldn't suit.'

'Oh really?' I kept my tone light. *Head up, Georgia. Don't let the hurt show.*

'Yeah. I shouldn't have said anything.'

'Don't worry. You were just trying to do something nice.' I smiled at him. 'I don't mind.'

'Really?'

'Five minutes ago I'd never heard of him. How could I possibly mind?'

'Great.' He looked truly relieved. 'I'm glad you're not upset.'

I laughed. 'Course not. Look, do you think this is done?'

He came over to look, leaning over my shoulder so I could feel his breath on the side of my face. 'Should be.'

'I'll get some bowls.' I turned and collided with him deliberately, pressing my breasts against him for an instant longer than necessary. 'Oh, sorry.'

'No, no. My fault.' His eyes looked glazed now, as the blood drained out of his brain.

'You know, you should come and cook here more often,' I said softly, and ran my hand down his arm, as if I couldn't stop myself from touching him.

'I – I'd like that.'

I held his gaze for a long moment, then sashayed over to the cupboard and reached up to get the bowls. He was staring at my bum when I glanced back at him, as I'd intended. For a moment I considered whether I should feel guilty about Amanda, who was sitting in the living room, oblivious. Then I dismissed it with a mental shrug. She only had herself to blame.

Chapter 11

I sat at my desk, pretending to work, but actually watching Maeve. She was focused on her computer screen, lost in concentration.

‘What’s up with her?’ Derwent had stopped beside my desk, but all of his attention was on the other side of the room, as usual. Once again I had the impression I was about as interesting to him as a stapler, and far less useful.

‘She’s watching the CCTV from the bus.’

‘Again?’

‘All morning.’

‘Why?’

‘No idea. She must be looking for something, but she hasn’t told me what it is.’

‘We’ve looked at every frame. There’s nothing to see.’

‘But it’s all we’ve got,’ I pointed out. ‘And there must be something to see, or Minnie would have walked off the bus and gone home as usual.’

Derwent shook his head and sat down on the edge of my desk, folding his arms. It was almost exactly what I’d imagined him doing – except that he was facing away from me. He wasn’t there because of me. It was the best vantage point in the office if what you wanted to do was stare at Maeve, and that seemed to be exactly what he wanted to do.

Maeve was compressing her lips as she watched the screen, barely blinking, not even seeming to breathe. I wished I could summon up that kind of concentration.

‘Do you think she’ll see something none of the rest of us have spotted?’

‘Yep.’ He sounded certain.

‘Really?’

‘That’s what she does.’ He glanced at me. ‘You must have noticed this. Give her a problem and she worries at it until she’s solved it. And I bet you anything she knows who did it already. She’s just looking to prove it.’

‘How would she know who did it? Guesswork? Feminine intuition?’ It came out with a biting edge and Derwent’s eyes narrowed. I moderated my tone quickly. ‘Just – wouldn’t she have said something in the meeting if she had a promising line of enquiry?’

‘Not if she has an idea she can’t back up yet.’ He turned back to look at her, running his thumb over his bottom lip as he considered her. ‘She learned that the hard way.’

I thought about the meeting, a nightmarish start to the day. It was becoming clear to me and everyone else that none of the witnesses had told us anything helpful at all and we were running out of ideas. A teenage girl stabbed to death in public, in full view of CCTV cameras, and the Met couldn’t solve it. The headlines in the newspapers were the opposite of flattering and, as far as the boss was concerned, we deserved the abuse.

‘You may or may not be aware of the rumours doing the rounds on social media about this case,’ Una Burt had said heavily. ‘If you’re not familiar with it, for the past few days comments have been circulating on Facebook and Twitter, suggesting that we are engaged in covering up a terror campaign. The suggestion is that Minnie was killed by an Islamic extremist group who are striking at random on public transport and we are keeping it hushed up because we don’t want to cause panic.’

‘What a load of horseshit.’ Belcott sniffed.

‘It’s ridiculous, but it’s also dangerous. I take it you’re all aware of the incident last night on the Piccadilly Line.’ Una Burt had scanned the room, looking for a reaction. ‘There’s a

young man in hospital this morning because another passenger thought he was going to stab him and panicked.’

I had seen the footage before the meeting: a short, nasty row with a large man holding the wrists of a skinny dark-haired youth, yelling for help. A bald man jumped up from his seat and punched the young man in the face. There was no way for the young man to dodge the blow or defend himself with his hands restrained as they were. The back of his head smacked into a partition on his way to the floor where he sprawled, out cold. The two men exchanged a handshake, grinning. Heroes.

Except that the young man was a Moroccan waiter, and wasn’t armed, and hadn’t been planning any kind of killing spree. He had just been on his way home from work.

‘We need to get this situation under control. The people of London deserve to feel safe as they go about their daily routines. Besides, a young girl lost her life and her parents deserve answers.’ Una Burt had glowered around the room. As if any of us were going to argue with her, I thought, and was immediately proved wrong.

‘They didn’t seem that interested when we interviewed them,’ Derwent had said sardonically.

‘Presumably they were in shock.’

‘Presumably,’ he repeated, in a tone that made it clear he disagreed. Una Burt bristled.

‘They had lost their child in the most shocking circumstances.’

‘No doubt they were not at their best,’ he had said evenly.

Burt had dismissed him with, ‘Anyway, you don’t have to like the family to want to find Minnie’s killer.’

She was right. You only had to want to have a career at the end of this investigation. I wondered if anyone else was beginning to feel a worm of anxiety twisting in the pit of their stomachs. This had seemed like such an easy case when I’d rolled up in the car that first night. It was anything but.

‘If this was some nutter who attacked her at random, it’s like looking for a piece of hay in a haystack.’ Belcott had looked around, seeking agreement. ‘London is full of weirdos. We know she seemed to be OK when she got on the bus, but what if someone stabbed her while she was waiting for the bus, or while she was walking to it? She might not have realised how badly hurt she was. That bus route goes past a major hospital. We don’t know for sure that she wasn’t heading there for treatment.’

‘But she was wearing her school uniform,’ Burt had objected. ‘It was clear that she was a child.’

‘That’s an invitation for a certain kind of pervert.’

‘What kind of pervert would that be?’ Derwent smirked at Belcott, who had reddened. ‘Hope you always remember to clean up your search history at the end of a session, Pete. I’d hate to see you get in trouble.’

‘Fuck off.’

‘We can’t discount that Minnie might have been deliberately and specifically targeted.’ It was the first time Maeve had spoken in the meeting.

‘Who wants to kill a fifteen-year-old girl?’ Belcott had demanded. ‘I mean, if it’s not a sex thing or terrorism?’

‘Someone who hated her.’

Una Burt had frowned. ‘She was popular in school, wasn’t she? No issues there or at home.’

‘I don’t think that’s quite right. But we haven’t made a connection between her home and school life and her death.’ Maeve had been looking down at her notebook, which did an effective job of disguising whatever she was thinking. I wondered if she was regretting speaking up.

‘We could issue a statement to the media implying that she might have been deliberately targeted. See if we can shake anything loose,’ I’d suggested.

‘Absolutely not.’ Una Burt had slammed her hand on the desk in front of her and I’d flinched. ‘The press will say we

are victim-blaming because we haven't been able to find her murderer – and I'm not sure they'd be entirely wrong.'

I had waited for Maeve to explain her reasoning, but she said nothing. And she had gone on saying nothing for the rest of the meeting. In fact, she had said nothing for the rest of the morning.

Maeve's phone rang and she came back to life. After a few pleasantries she listened intently, her pen racing over the paper in front of her as she scribbled notes. At the end of the brief conversation, she hung up, leaned back in her chair and sighed in triumph. Her shirt tightened across her chest, and the annoying thing was she probably wasn't even aware of the effect.

On the edge of my desk, Derwent seemed to have stopped breathing. I felt a bolt of pure jealousy run through me.

'Maeve is lucky to have such a good friend at work. I would love to have a special bond with someone on the team, like the two of you do, but it's just not worth the rumours.'

A muscle tightened in Derwent's jaw and he turned to glare at me. 'What rumours?'

'I suppose it's normal, when attractive people work together.' I leaned forward, pressing my elbows together so my cleavage deepened. 'Everywhere I've worked, I've had to deal with gossip about me and colleagues.'

'Must be awful for you.'

'It is. It really is. Women don't trust me and men have ... complicated feelings about working with me.' I glanced up at him with a look that I knew worked on 99 per cent of men.

Of course Derwent would have to be in the 1 per cent. His expression conveyed nothing more than cold disapproval.

'So? Don't fuck about, Georgia. What are you saying?'

'So it's good that you and Maeve don't let the office gossip stop you from spending so much time together.'

'I don't care what people say,' Derwent said.

‘I think Maeve might feel differently.’

He swivelled on the desk so he was facing me properly. I had all his attention, at last. ‘Has she said something to you?’

‘Not *exactly*.’ I leaned back. Now that I had started this conversation, I was slightly regretting it. Derwent was senior to me by a long way, and so was Maeve, and this was none of my business. In ordinary circumstances, he would have shut me down straightaway. I knew, though, that he wanted to know what people were saying. More to the point, he wanted to know what Maeve thought about it. He wanted to know what she thought about *him*. ‘Look, I don’t want to get involved. I know she’s not happy about what people are saying, that’s all. But if you spend all your time together, you can’t help making everyone think there’s something going on between you. I suppose that’s why she took me with her to do those interviews instead of you. Or maybe she just wanted a break from you.’

He winced as if I’d hit him.

‘You know,’ I said slowly, ‘it’s pretty clear you like her. You follow her around like a shadow. You take every opportunity to get close to her, but she doesn’t seem to notice – she doesn’t think of you that way at all. Maybe you should just back off a bit. For her sake, I mean.’

He took a moment before he answered me. ‘Have you said any of this to Maeve?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Can I suggest you don’t?’ The look in his eyes was making me feel slightly uneasy: yes, I’d spoken out of turn, but he could have laughed it off. He leaned closer. ‘If you say anything to Maeve – and I mean *anything* – that so much as *hints* at what you’re implying, I’m going to get you transferred to Traffic.’

In for a penny ... ‘How about we do a deal? I won’t say anything and, in return, you help me.’

‘Help you how?’

‘Look, I want to be better at the job. I need a mentor. You did it for Maeve. She’s learned a lot from working with you.’

He laughed but there was an edge to it. ‘Hardly. Learned what not to do, maybe.’

‘Maeve told me I was getting better, even though I keep making mistakes. I want to be better. I want to get it right.’

‘You’re asking the wrong person.’ He got up and stalked away, brushing past Maeve, who was standing at the printer. She looked after him, puzzled, and I went back to my notes, hoping I wouldn’t attract her attention. I really didn’t want to explain why Derwent had stormed out, and I also wanted to review my ideas about the case. One of the many things that bothered me about our conversation was that Derwent had assumed Maeve would find the answer, as if I was only there to make up the numbers.

There was something that had been tugging at the back of my mind, about Wilf Potter. I flipped through my notebook until I found his number.

‘Yes?’ He sounded harassed. I introduced myself and he sighed. ‘Sorry, I thought I’d answered all your questions already.’

‘It’s a bit of an odd one.’ I tapped my pen on my notebook. The entire case stretched out in front of me like a relief map: I could see the whole shape of it in a single glance. All I needed was a single answer. ‘What was your wife’s brother’s name?’

‘What?’

‘The one who died.’

‘What the hell does that have to do with anything?’ There was his temper, raw-edged and fierce.

‘Just answer the question.’

‘OK, OK.’ He sounded defeated, and I waited, so sure I was right that I could practically hear the name before he answered me.

‘Are you OK?’ Maeve had stopped by my desk this time. I was sitting with my chin in my hand, scrolling through internet

results.

‘Yes. Well, no.’ I sighed. ‘I had a whole theory about Wilf Potter and his wife’s brother. The dead one.’

‘Go on.’

‘I thought he was Zach Roth.’

Maeve’s eyebrows shot up. ‘And he’s not, I take it.’

‘Boringly, he’s not.’ I leaned back. ‘It all made sense, you know? It all hung together. Potter is an osteopath so he knows all about anatomy and where to stab someone. He had the scissors. He ran to get on the bus, as if he had seen Minnie on there. If Minnie hadn’t been playing games with Zach Roth he wouldn’t have had to leave his job and he wouldn’t have been in Thailand dying in a moped crash. His brother-in-law’s death has destroyed Potter’s entire life – there’s a motive for you. If his brother-in-law had been Zach Roth, I mean.’

‘But it didn’t come together.’ She looked sympathetic. ‘It happens that way sometimes. You get it wrong and get it wrong and then you get it right. No one remembers the mistakes if you get the right answer in the end.’

‘I’m basically going in the other direction.’ I nodded at the screen. ‘I did find out one thing. That symbol that Minnie wrote on everything – it’s called a wolf hook. *Wolfsangel* in German. A heraldic symbol.’

Maeve frowned. ‘Go on.’

‘Well, that’s the weird thing. It was a Nazi Party symbol in the 1930s and some divisions of the German Army used it as their emblem during the Second World War. It’s basically been adopted by neo-Nazi groups now, and white supremacists in the US.’

‘Has it?’ She leaned in, reading off my screen intently. ‘And it’s also known as a wolf trap. How very appropriate.’

‘Is it?’ I abandoned any attempt at pretending to know what she was talking about and blinked up at her. ‘Why?’

She was looking grim. ‘Get your coat. We have another interview to do.’

Chapter 12

In its own way, Nollingham Hall was as impressive as Lovelace School, although it couldn't have been more different. The Hall was an old country house a few miles west of Oxford, just about in the middle of nowhere. The building was High Victorian, heavily turreted and bristling with leaded windows. It was constructed of golden Cotswold stone, but years of rain and dirt had left it streaked with black. The house had been built in a hollow between the hills, and they seemed to rise around it protectively, like hunched shoulders. The sky was iron-grey as we approached it, and so were the bare trees and spiky hedgerows around it. Spring was stubbornly refusing to soften the edges of the landscape. The drive curved through grounds flecked with spindly daffodils, leading up to a gravelled area and a heavy porch, and as we got closer to it, Maeve shivered.

'I'm not sure how anyone's supposed to feel better in a place like this.'

'Maybe it's prettier in summer.'

'It couldn't be worse.' She stopped the car and scanned what we could see of the grounds. 'Look at them. Poor things.'

There were a few benches scattered on the grass, each with one or two girls sitting on them. The girls wore layers and layers of clothes to protect them from the cold air, but despite that it was clear they were very tiny and frail. Their limbs were as shapeless and slender as sticks. Pinched faces turned to look at us with a weary kind of interest. With their hair hidden by hats, they could have been any age from six to ninety.

'How long has she been here?'

'Four months, according to her mum.' Maeve sighed. 'I wish we didn't have to do this, but I think it's the only way.'

‘Didn’t her mother want to sit in?’

‘She said she’s been discouraged from visiting. Family tension is not a help when it comes to recovery, apparently. They had a few dodgy sessions and the psychologist in charge told her not to come back for a while.’

‘That’s a bit controlling.’

‘All part of the process, apparently. She said it was a relief.’

‘Ouch.’

‘I get the impression that she’s trying to be understanding but she just doesn’t get it. She’s frustrated with her daughter and it shows.’

That hit home. ‘If it’s not one thing it’s your mother, right?’

Maeve grinned. ‘Ain’t that the truth. Come on.’

I got out of the car and followed Maeve through the portico and the huge front door to a gloomy hall where the psychologist was waiting for us. What I had expected, in a vague way, was a grey-haired and bearded man with a fussy academic manner. What I got was a wiry thirty-something man with untidy brown hair and small glasses, wearing jeans and a close-fitting navy jumper. He was holding an enormous shaggy dog by the collar as it sat on its haunches and pawed the air, desperate to greet us.

‘Doctor Hardy?’ Maeve said.

‘Just call me Hardy. Everyone does. Get a grip on yourself, Bonnie.’ The dog lay down, her long pink tongue lolling. Her tail thumped the tiles. ‘That’s better. Sorry, she thinks it’s her job to be the welcoming committee.’

He shook hands with Maeve first, and then me, and I felt a tingle in the base of my stomach when he gave me a swift assessing look. It wasn’t the feeling I’d had when I saw the photographer’s picture on Facebook; I could have seen a hundred images of this man and never noticed him particularly. Nor was it that he had the dangerous edge that made Derwent so fascinating. It was that when he looked at me, I felt he really saw me.

Hardy wasn't at all the kind of man I would go for usually. Too clever, I thought. I wouldn't be able to get away with anything.

Anyway, I wasn't there to find a boyfriend.

'You want to speak to Rosa,' Hardy said. 'She's up in her rooms – I thought that would be a bit more relaxed than meeting in my office. She's not in trouble, is she?'

'The opposite of that.'

'Good. Well, we'll keep it informal.' He grinned. 'I try to keep things laidback but I'm fighting a bit of a battle with the décor. Victorian gothic has its charms, but this place looks a bit too much like a house of horrors.'

Music was playing somewhere near the top of the house: something light and poppy and out of tune with the surroundings.

'I like the soundtrack,' I said.

'K-pop. Not exactly what the previous inhabitants would have picked but I like it. We have street dance classes in the ballroom now and then. Anything to keep the ghosts at bay.'

I nodded, charmed in spite of myself. He was so steady, so self-possessed. I wondered how he managed it. 'How many patients have you got?'

'Twenty-two at the moment. All girls, but we do get male patients from time to time. The average stay is six months. Some of them stay longer. Some of them are dealing with a relapse – they might come for three months or even less.' He shrugged. 'We deal with them as individuals. They get what they need.'

'They look so ill,' Maeve said softly.

'The girls outside are the toughest ones to reach. They're out there because it's cold. Your body burns more calories when it's cold.'

She looked alarmed. 'Should they be out there, then?'

‘It’s a fifteen-minute break between classes. I make them wear warm clothes and leave them to it. It’s good for them to get some fresh air and sunshine, if there is any.’ He grimaced as the dog plunged at me again, dragging him forward. ‘It’s not a quick process. They’ll get better but they have to change the way they think as well as the way they behave. That’s down to them. We’re patient and we give them as much space as we can. I can’t make choices for them, or they’ll leave here and fall straight back into their old habits. So we give them a choice about as much as we can. Bonnie, *please* ...’

‘I’ll take her.’ A capable-looking woman with grey hair and wide hips strode across the hall and took hold of the dog. Immediately Bonnie stopped misbehaving and stood to attention. Each of her paws was the size of a saucer, and her head reached the woman’s waist. ‘Soppy idiot.’

‘She’s a trained therapy dog.’ Hardy rubbed his shoulder ruefully. ‘Trained to be a liability. The girls love her.’

‘I’m going to get them in now.’ The grey-haired woman eyed us curiously but stepped outside, taking the dog with her.

‘Thanks, Viv.’ Hardy clapped his hands. ‘Right. Let’s go and see Rosa.’

Rosa’s rooms were on the third floor, under the eaves. I had been anticipating institutional bleakness but it was a charming space, two linked rooms with dormer windows that overlooked a field full of sheep. The first room was a sitting room with two armchairs and a window seat. A desk was piled with textbooks and closely written sheets of paper. Every wall was decorated with photographs and postcards, hung in rows with mathematical precision. Hardy had explained to us that each room had a bedroom and a tiny bathroom, so the patients had privacy and space of their own.

‘It also keeps them from spending unsupervised time together, but we don’t emphasise that aspect of it.’

‘They must be a big influence on each other.’

‘Behaviour is contagious,’ Hardy said cheerfully, bounding up the stairs ahead of us. ‘Everyone just wants to fit in. You

get a group of kids who want to do well in exams and they'll all get better results. A group who want to cause trouble will cause ten times as much trouble as they would individually. The girls do support each other and make strong friendships but ultimately what I need them to appreciate is that they are all individuals. They can't shrink themselves to fit in the space they think they're allowed to occupy. They need to find a space that fits them.'

I wanted to ask him more about it, but we had arrived on the third floor by then, and I got distracted by Rosa's sitting room, and the neat lines of photos on the walls. I couldn't help comparing it to Minnie's dirty, depressing bedroom and the shoddy way she had stuck up tattered pictures, apparently at random.

'Rosa?' Hardy tapped on the door of the bedroom. 'Can you come out and join us? The police are here.'

She came out instantly, as if she'd been standing on the other side of the door. She was tiny – five foot two, at a guess, and childishly slight. She had dark curly hair and a delicate, clever face. Huge tracksuit bottoms hung off her hips and she wore a long-sleeved top with the cuffs pulled down over her hands. But her eyes were alive with interest and intelligence, and she didn't have quite the gaunt look of the girls outside. She was, Hardy had told us, doing better these days, although he felt she was still holding a lot back. He was cautiously optimistic about her progress. She was clever and determined. She would get there, in the end.

If we didn't send her off track, I added silently, and crossed my fingers.

'Thank you for agreeing to talk to us, Rosa,' Maeve said, and she nodded, edging towards the window seat where she curled up with her knees to her chin. Maeve sat in the armchair nearest her, and after an enquiring look at me, Hardy took the other one. I stood back in the corner of the room, near the door. I was there to listen, not talk.

'Do you know why we're here?' Maeve asked.

'You want to know more about Minnie.'

‘That’s right.’

‘I heard she was dead.’ Rosa covered her mouth with a cuff-covered hand after the last word.

‘Yes, she is. Do you know how she died?’

‘No.’

‘She was stabbed, on a bus, on her way from school to the sports ground in Wimbledon.’

‘Wow.’ Rosa looked at Hardy. ‘Don’t assume that means I’m pleased.’

‘You don’t have to justify your reactions to me.’ He was slouched in the armchair, relaxed and at ease and as imperturbable as ever, but I thought his mind was razor-sharp. As if he knew I was thinking about him, he glanced at me, and smiled. I found myself smiling back.

‘We haven’t been able to work out who killed her.’

‘Well, it wasn’t me. I’ve been here the whole time. I haven’t been home since Christmas.’

‘No, don’t worry. We don’t think you were involved.’ Maeve took out her notebook. ‘Can I show you something?’

Rosa nodded and Maeve held up the page from her notebook. ‘Do you know what this is?’

Her hand went to cover her mouth again and this time she actually gagged.

‘It’s all right,’ Hardy said calmly. ‘It’s just a drawing, Rosa.’

She had gone very pale and her eyes were tightly closed. ‘Can you ... can you put it away?’

‘Done.’ Maeve snapped her notebook shut. ‘I take it you do recognise it.’

‘Minnie drew it.’ Rosa swallowed. ‘On my locker. Other places. She drew it on my books. My desk.’

‘What does it mean?’ Hardy asked Maeve.

‘It’s a fascist symbol called a wolf hook or wolf trap,’ she said. ‘Very popular with neo-Nazis.’

Rosa shuddered at the word and Maeve leaned forward.

‘I don’t want to upset you, Rosa. I know you’re Jewish and I assume Minnie knew that too. The school told us she was bullying you because you had a scholarship, but that wasn’t the whole story, was it?’

She shook her head.

‘I’d like to know more about what she did, if you can talk about it.’

‘Oh – she tormented me. She read up on the Holocaust and tried to get me to *debate* it with her, as if I should have to defend the facts to her – as if I had to *prove* it.’ She smiled. ‘It always amazes me that people think we could have made up that big a lie on the spur of the moment. You wouldn’t make a claim that huge if it wasn’t true, would you? Like six million people – that’s too many. It’s too difficult to get your head around it. You’d go for something smaller and more manageable, wouldn’t you?’

‘That must have been very hard to deal with,’ Maeve said. ‘That wasn’t everything she did, was it?’

‘No. It wasn’t. She would go on and on about how I’d missed all the fun, and how I should be ashamed my family had survived. She said we must have lied and cheated to escape – I mean, we were British. My mother’s family had come from Austria in the nineteenth century but she had family there, up to the war, so we *were* affected by it.’ Rosa broke off. ‘I’m going off the point. Sorry.’

‘Don’t worry. It’s all helpful. What else did Minnie do?’

‘She printed out pictures from the death camps and left them where I would find them – tucked into books, in my bag, in my coat pocket. She bought about twenty pairs of old shoes from charity shops and put them in my locker, stacked up, so they would remind me of the displays at Auschwitz when I opened the door. She wanted to show me how easy it was to fake that kind of thing, and to upset me.’ Rosa took a moment, her eyes glazed with unshed tears. ‘And then there was the hair.’

‘Your hair?’ Maeve asked gently.

Rosa shook her head. ‘One of her friends told me it came from a local hairdresser. She told them she was going to do an art project with it, so they gave her a big bag full.’ She sketched the shape of it with her hands. ‘Disgusting. Hundreds of people’s hair. Old people’s hair. All mixed together.’

‘What did she do with it?’

‘She put it in my *food*. Clumps of it.’

Hardy made a small noise involuntarily – the first hint that he could be flustered by anything – and Rosa looked at him.

‘That’s what you were waiting for, isn’t it? That’s why I can’t eat anything. Every mouthful of soup, every sandwich – I keep expecting to feel the texture on my tongue. I can’t eat unless I know it’s safe.’

‘I can understand that,’ Maeve said.

‘It’s mad, you know. Totally irrational. This is a mental illness, not anything that’s really wrong with me.’ Rosa’s voice had risen. ‘I’m just indulging myself by not eating anything.’

‘That’s not true,’ Hardy said quietly, and Rosa – still gulping back tears – locked her eyes on him as if he was the only possible source of salvation in the room.

‘Can I change the subject?’ Maeve opened her notebook again and took out a photograph. ‘I found this on the school website. You were in a production of *West Side Story* with the boys from Castle Academy.’

‘Um ... yeah. I was. It was fun.’ She wiped her eyes on her sleeve, recovering quickly.

‘You were Maria, weren’t you?’

‘Last July.’ She sighed. ‘It feels like forever ago.’

‘I didn’t know you could sing, Rosa,’ Hardy commented.

‘I don’t do it much at the moment. But I really did enjoy it. The boys were hilarious once we got to know them. So quick. The banter was just constant.’ She laughed. ‘It drove the teachers mad, but they pulled it together when they needed to.’

‘Do you remember meeting a boy called Ashton Mayfield?’

‘Ashton?’ Her face lit up. ‘Sure. He was in the chorus. All mouth, that guy.’

‘Did you stay in touch with him?’

‘Um, I don’t know. I think we’re friends on Facebook.’ She tucked some hair behind her ear, suddenly shy. ‘Why are you asking me this?’

‘Did Ashton know about you leaving Lovelace School?’

‘Yeah. Lovelace did a concert with his school and he messaged me to ask where I was. I – I told him.’ She looked from Maeve to Hardy to me. ‘Is that bad? Should I not have said?’

‘How much did you tell him about why you left the school?’

Her face had reddened now. ‘I don’t know. A bit.’

Oh, Ashton. I felt as if someone had punched me. I really hadn’t wanted it to be him.

‘Did you mention Minnie?’

She shrugged and shook her head, but she didn’t look sure of herself.

‘Did he ever meet Minnie?’

‘She wasn’t in the production last year. Um ... she was hanging around in the music rooms a lot. So, maybe? But Minnie wouldn’t have spent any time with a boy like Ashton. She really didn’t like the co-productions with the Castle kids. She was glad to be left out – or she said she was.’ Rosa looked wary. ‘Do you think – do you think she really minded? And she was envious of me for getting the main part?’

‘I think Minnie was a very confused, very sad girl and no one ever taught her that being unkind wouldn’t make her feel better about herself. She was cruel to people around her but she was also desperately unhappy.’ Maeve leaned forward. ‘You know, you didn’t do anything wrong, Rosa. You couldn’t have made her be nice to you by changing your behaviour. That was all up to her.’

Hardy was nodding agreement, his head turned towards Maeve so the tendons stood out in lovely relief. I wanted to touch his neck. I wanted to lean my face against his and go to sleep for a hundred years.

You are here to work, Georgia.

‘That’s what Nana said.’ Rosa looked down at her hands. ‘I told her everything. More than I told my parents. I wanted someone to understand everything. She’s not a cosy kind of grandmother but she’s good when you need someone to talk to. She’s like you, Hardy – she never overreacts.’

He laughed. ‘You should see me when I’m parallel parking. Zero chill.’

I love you.

Madness. No one falls in love over the course of twenty minutes of general conversation. He hadn’t even spoken to me. I turned so I wasn’t staring at him and scanned the wall instead. Postcards that featured reproductions of Impressionist paintings, some familiar, some new to me. A collection of portraits, from Velasquez to Picasso, their eyes staring out steadily across the centuries. Photographs of scenery – sea, blue sky, white-coated mountains with black pine trees spiking up along their slopes. Family pictures. Rosa with her mother, both of them tanned and laughing, side by side on the edge of a terrace somewhere hot. Rosa with her father, her face rounded and childish, him in a suit. A much younger Rosa with her hair in pigtails, concentrating on stirring flour in a huge mixing bowl as an older woman watched.

Maeve closed her notebook again. ‘Thank you for talking to us, Rosa. You’ve been so helpful.’

Her words seemed to come from a long way off. I laid a finger on the picture of Rosa baking.

‘Rosa, is this your grandmother?’

‘Uh ...’ she was obviously surprised that I’d asked, but she leaned to see. ‘Yes, that’s her. That’s Nana.’

Chapter 13

It was a different experience, being in the actual interview room rather than watching the live feed. The room was even smaller than it looked on screen, but it was cold thanks to the over-efficient air conditioning that huffed out of a vent over our heads. Maeve had warned me to wear a jacket and I was glad I'd listened. I sat beside her, opposite a solicitor who kept mopping at his nose with a crumpled handkerchief. Beside him, Helena Griffiths sat in apparent relaxation, eyes fixed on the wall behind us as if we weren't there. I'd checked the recording equipment was working before going through the usual formalities to explain who was in the room. Then I sat back, out of the way, and let Maeve get on with pulling her story apart.

‘When we started looking into this case we assumed that our victim, Minnie Charleston, had been targeted at random. She was a schoolgirl, in uniform, on her own, on public transport. She had headphones on, blocking out the world, and she was half-asleep. A sitting target, in other words, for anyone looking for an easy victim. But we didn't discount the idea that she might have been killed by someone who knew exactly who she was. That meant *we* had to find out exactly who she was. We spoke to her family, her friends, her teachers – people who knew her far better than we ever could. And what we found at first was a typically mixed-up teenager. She was bright, she was popular, she was allowed a fair amount of freedom by her busy parents. She was musical. She was finding her place in the world and making the usual mistakes along the way. That's what being a teenager is all about.’

Mrs Griffiths sat, outwardly unmoved though I was willing to bet every word was sinking in.

‘But then we looked a bit closer. What we found was that Minnie wasn’t a nice girl at all. She was horrible, according to her sister. She was an unsuitable friend, according to the parents of her fellow students. She made one of her teachers so uneasy he left the school rather than continue to deal with her. We try not to speak ill of the dead but the truth about Minnie kept leaking out from what people told us. Her behaviour was wild at times – she lied to her parents and took risks and spent a lot of time on the internet, unsupervised.’

The woman sat up straighter but otherwise didn’t respond.

‘We’ve just had the lab’s report on Minnie’s computer and phone. It confirmed what we already suspected about her.’ Maeve opened her folder and took out a piece of paper which she slid across the table. ‘This symbol was written on Minnie’s schoolbag and on her books. It was screen-printed on a T-shirt she wore for hockey. Do you know what it is?’

No answer.

‘We found out it’s a neo-Nazi symbol – a wolf trap. Does that ring any bells?’

Nothing.

‘She drew it everywhere. It was the first thing she saw every morning and the last thing she saw at night.’

Mrs Griffiths seemed to shrink with distaste, a feeling that I shared.

‘We have discovered through her computer history that Minnie was obsessed with Nazism and white supremacists and neo-Nazi movements around the world. We think she found them through links she followed from YouTube music videos. What started out as fairly innocent music appreciation turned into something much darker and more dangerous as she was introduced to ideas and concepts she’d never heard before. She found herself in direct communication with people who were pushing far-right ideologies. She even went to Belgium to an illegal music festival that attracted performers from all over Europe and the US, that was shut down because the authorities became aware it was a neo-Nazi gathering. She was fully

committed to that set of beliefs – it became part of her identity. She was lost and it gave her a home.’

Maeve paused to take a sip of water and I waited to see if Mrs Griffiths would speak, or respond to what was presumably new information.

Nothing. I had to admire the restraint.

‘We think her obsession with it began after the departure of Zach Roth, the teacher who was her previous object of affection. He was Jewish, something that had intrigued her. We discovered from her search history she had spent a lot of time looking at information about Judaism – and particularly on how to convert to Judaism – last year. When she found he favoured other students who were better singers and performers than her – one Jewish student in particular – and he wasn’t interested in a relationship with her, she turned against him and found comfort in being anti-Semitic. It wasn’t his fault. She made her own choices, but it drew her towards the people who would radicalise her when she encountered them on the internet.’

Helena Griffiths covered her mouth and coughed, delicately. I waited, pen ready to make notes, but it wasn’t the prelude to speech. Maeve went on.

‘She spent many, many hours on Far-Right message boards. A lot of them are encrypted and we haven’t been able to see what she was saying, but it’s clear she was communicating with some of the worst people imaginable – the sort of people who should not be allowed any contact with children. She was unsupervised at home, and unhappy, and they provided her with a community. It’s something that happens with a lot of teenagers. Minnie was unlucky that her interests and her romantic disappointment led her towards influences that were dangerous and depraved – evil, in fact. And her classmates were unlucky that she brought those influences into school.’

The suspect swallowed convulsively.

‘Minnie was a bully,’ Maeve said calmly. ‘She was outwardly confident and dominant. She had a loud voice and she wasn’t afraid to shout other people down. When we asked

her school and her parents, we were told she had lots of friends, but I've been speaking to some of the girls from the class and they confirmed what I suspected. They were scared of her. They were scared to become a target for her abuse. She was vindictive and vicious, as only a teenage girl can be.' Maeve paused. 'I went to a convent school myself, so I know all about teenage girls being unpleasant to one another. It can get out of hand.'

No response.

'Let's talk about what happened at school.' Maeve waited for a moment and the white noise in the room pressed on my ears. 'Let's talk about Rosa.'

'This has nothing to do with Rosa,' Helena Griffiths said immediately in her low, husky voice. 'Please don't drag her into this.'

'Why did Rosa leave Lovelace School? She was thriving there, by all accounts. Until this year.'

Helena shook her head.

'She started missing school. She went home without permission on a number of occasions. The marks she was getting, even in her favourite subjects, were disappointing.' Maeve opened her folder and studied the contents. 'I spoke to her teacher. She said Rosa was encouraged to leave.'

'It was very unfair.' Helena snapped her mouth shut with an obvious effort; she didn't want to talk to us about this or anything else.

'It was unfair,' Maeve agreed. 'She was unhappy because she was being bullied. She was singled out for abuse by Minnie Charleston. Minnie was physically abusive – she punched her, kicked her, pinched her. She interfered with her food. She read books with white supremacist messages – she had one in her bag when she was killed, incidentally, with a main character whose name was an anagram of "Aryan", in case you thought it was a passing phase. She gave Rosa material denying the Holocaust had happened, and printouts of concentration-camp photographs that she alleged were staged.'

She ostracised her socially and threatened anyone who spoke to Rosa or sat with her. She filled Rosa's locker with old shoes in a reference to the museum displays at Auschwitz.' Maeve's voice softened. 'Rosa must have been very lonely and very unhappy.'

'How do you know all of this?'

'A few different sources. I spoke to the class teacher, Pauline Kennedy. She knew some of what was going on, but Rosa had refused to make a formal complaint. Pauline admitted the school had failed to deal with the situation. When Rosa left, that solved the problem, from the school's point of view.'

'It's a terrible school,' Helena blurted out, unable to stop herself. 'All they want is money. They only care about the school's image, not the girls.'

'The other person I spoke to was Rosa herself, at her rehab facility.'

Helena's eyes widened. 'How is she? How did she look?'

'Better. She's much better.' Maeve smiled. 'Are you close to her?'

'Of course. But I'm not allowed to see her at the moment. None of us can go and see her.'

'She said she confided in you while all of this was going on.'

'We often talked about it. I was born during the war, in Britain, but I grew up with the shadow of it hanging over me. My parents were terribly traumatised by what happened. If something like that could happen in Europe, it could happen in Britain too. My mother kept all of our documents with her, in a big handbag, with her jewellery sewn into the lining. She was afraid, always. She didn't trust anyone and she warned me not to think that people didn't notice we were Jewish. There was always anti-Semitism bubbling under the surface – comments people would make, opportunities that I didn't get. The first boy who wanted to go out with me was a Christian and our families were both horrified. It was unthinkable.' Helena

Griffiths stared at Maeve with that steady antagonism she'd shown us before. 'Things have changed. These people are empowered now. They dare to be open about their feelings. Palestine is nothing to do with British Jews and yet we are being targeted because of Israeli policies. It's just an excuse to abuse us. They don't really care about the Palestinians.'

'Rosa really suffered, didn't she?'

'It was hard. She didn't want to leave. She didn't want to give in. But it was better for her in the end.'

'I think my client has been very helpful here. I don't see any reason for her to be interviewed as a suspect.' The solicitor sniffed. 'A member of her family interacting with the victim is neither here nor there. Unless you have anything else—'

'We do.' Maeve's voice was heavy with sympathy and something that might have been regret. 'Mrs Griffiths, you told me you were a doctor.'

She nodded.

'I found out that you were a surgeon.'

'A long time ago. Before I had children.'

'What was your speciality?'

'I was a cardiovascular specialist.'

'It must have been unusual at the time for a woman to be a surgeon, let alone a heart surgeon.'

'I was very good. Nowadays I wouldn't have needed to give up, but there was no question of me going back to work after the children were born. Anyway, I felt I had lost my edge.'

'But you retained your knowledge. Your skills.'

'There isn't much call for a heart surgeon in everyday life. I've forgotten most of it.' She was watching Maeve with wariness and something that was almost amusement. She still thought we didn't know what she'd done. Excitement and tension made my mouth dry and I reached for water, attracting a flick of a glance from our suspect. She was fierce, I thought. She was absolutely capable of murder, if she needed to be.

‘Mrs Griffiths, your car was picked up on CCTV travelling on the opposite side of the road from the bus that Minnie was on, just before it left the terminus. You were stopped beside it for a couple of minutes, thanks to a lorry blocking the road in front of you. You would have been right beside Minnie, I think.’ Maeve leaned forward. ‘It’s human nature to look around when you’re stopped in traffic somewhere. You found yourself looking at a Nazi symbol that was written on a schoolbag that you recognised as belonging to a Lovelace student. The bag was pressed up against the window, wasn’t it? It was almost as if she had intended you to see it. And you knew immediately who was carrying the bag. The very girl who had tormented your granddaughter. The one who had been able to stay when Rosa was asked to leave.’ Maeve tilted her head, full of sympathy. ‘Minnie turned Rosa from a successful, outgoing, happy girl into someone you didn’t know, someone who starved herself and wouldn’t listen to reason. She broke Rosa’s spirit, and she broke your heart. It’s no wonder you snapped when you saw her there on the bus.’

Mrs Griffiths looked at the table, refusing to meet Maeve’s eyes. Her expression was stubborn.

‘We know you turned your car as soon as you could and headed up to Clapham Common. You took a different route, to get to Northcote Road before the bus did. Maybe you just wanted to talk to Minnie – to understand why she’d done what she did, and to explain what effect it had had on your granddaughter. Maybe you wanted to shout at her. Maybe you didn’t intend to kill her. But after you left the car on a side street – where it would get a parking ticket in due course – you went to a small hardware shop and bought a bradawl.’

Mrs Griffiths shook her head. ‘I don’t even know what that is.’

Maeve took out a photo from her file and slid it across the table: no one could say she hadn’t prepared for this interview. ‘That’s the type of tool you bought. A bradawl is used for scoring holes as a guide for a drill – it’s very sharp and narrow, like a long needle with a handle. We spoke to the owner of the shop. He remembered you. You were in a hurry and you

snapped at him when he tried to make conversation about the bradawl. You knew what you wanted and you knew you didn't have long to get it.'

'He's confusing me with someone else.'

'I don't think so. We looked at your coat, Mrs Griffiths. The dry cleaning had removed most of the blood, but we found a large rip in the lining of the pocket. The point of the bradawl had gone through the material. The lining of your coat was some sort of synthetic wadding, and Minnie's blood stained it.'

'Conjecture,' the solicitor said heavily.

'Evidence,' Maeve countered. 'It *is* conjecture to say that you intended to kill her, Mrs Griffiths. I don't know precisely what you intended – maybe just to threaten her, maybe to frighten her. Maybe you wanted to lash out and hurt her the way she hurt your granddaughter. But you ran to get on the bus – we have footage of you getting onto the bus and you're out of breath. You waited until the seat beside Minnie was free. You were prepared to tackle her, but then, once you were sitting beside her, you found she was asleep. She wasn't upset. She wasn't starving herself to death. She was living her life, completely undisturbed by what she'd done to your granddaughter.' Maeve opened the file and leafed through it until she found the page she was looking for. Her face twisted in distaste as she read it. 'In fact, she was proud of it. She boasted about it.'

'That *bitch*.' Helena Griffiths had gone white. The lines around her mouth deepened as her lips tightened. 'She deserved it. She deserved to die.'

'Did you kill her, Mrs Griffiths?' Maeve asked quietly.

We had enough to charge her with murder even if she didn't confess, I thought. There was no need to wait for her to say she had done it.

Maeve kept her eyes locked on Helena Griffiths, challenging her to answer. Silence filled the room, until the woman gave a deep sigh and bowed her head.

‘I thought it would wake her up. I thought I would hold the point of the tool against her while I talked to her, so she couldn’t get up and walk away. I knew she wouldn’t want to listen to me, but I thought I could make her.’ Helena sobbed, a harsh sound that seemed to surprise her. She covered her hand with her mouth as she regained control.

That’s it, I thought. That’s all we’ll get. She’s finished.

But she wasn’t.

‘It wasn’t *fair* that she was walking around flaunting her revolting beliefs and no one punished her for it. It wasn’t fair that she was able to get rid of her music teacher and my granddaughter and continue on as if nothing had happened. I’m so tired of it all – the sneers, the nicknames, the rudeness, the loathing. I’ve had a lifetime of it, and I’m *tired*. It’s not fair that I didn’t have a normal childhood. It’s not fair that my mother was afraid all the time, and taught me to be afraid. It damaged her and me. And it’s not fair that anyone should deny that, to score cheap points against a classmate. That girl needed to understand that what she was doing was cruel and dangerous, in so many ways.’

‘What happened?’ Maeve said. ‘Tell me.’

‘I pushed the tip of it against her chest, to wake her up. But then I ... kept ... pushing.’

Maeve nodded, encouraging her.

‘It was so easy. Too easy. I thought I could control her,’ Helena said dully, ‘but then I couldn’t control myself.’

Chapter 14

‘I feel sorry for Helena Griffiths.’

Maeve was pouring boiling water into a row of mugs to make a round of tea, which was as close as we were getting to opening a bottle of fizz since it was ten o’clock in the morning. She physically flinched when I spoke, lifting one shoulder as if I’d slapped her across the face. I felt a wave of irritation: *God, grow up, woman. If you’re going to mind this much about locking up a murderer, you’re in the wrong job.*

‘You don’t think we should have arrested her?’ Belcott asked me, and I folded my arms, prepared to defend myself against the sneer in his voice.

‘No, Pete, I don’t think that. I can just see why she did it, that’s all. Minnie Charleston was a nasty piece of work.’

‘She was just a kid.’ Maeve turned so she could look at me. Her eyes were hollow with exhaustion. I wondered when she had last slept. She had spent the night preparing for the interview; she had been in the office when I left and when I got in.

‘She was a horrible anti-Semitic bully.’

Maeve shrugged. ‘She was, but she would almost certainly have grown out of that. Teenagers do. They get obsessed with something and then they lose interest. She did a terrible thing to Rosa, but she might have changed as she got older. If Helena Griffiths hadn’t seen her on the bus, she would have had a chance to do better. Minnie probably didn’t even know why Mrs Griffiths attacked her. She wouldn’t have recognised her. Anyway, she didn’t know exactly what had happened to Rosa. All she knew was that Rosa had left to go to a new school. The head teacher told me they were very careful not to reveal that she was having treatment for anorexia.’

‘Because of her privacy, I suppose.’

‘Because it goes through a class of teenage girls like the norovirus. Half of the girls in my year spent their lunch hours throwing up in the school toilets or doing jumping jacks to burn off half an apple.’

‘Not you, though,’ I said. Maeve would have been far too strong-minded for that, even as a teenager.

‘Not me.’ But she looked sad, and withdrawn, and I felt a twinge of guilt. Every teenage girl had her own shadow of misery to drag round, from what I remembered of school. Just because I didn’t know what Maeve’s problems had been, that didn’t mean she had cruised through unscathed.

‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘Minnie boasted about getting rid of Rosa. She wasn’t sorry about what she’d done.’

‘Did she?’ Maeve asked, working her way along the row of mugs to remove the teabags.

‘You said she did. You had the printout in the file.’

She gave me a half-smile over her shoulder that warmed into a proper grin when she looked past me, to where Derwent had come to stand in the doorway.

‘Don’t tell me you fell for that one, Georgia,’ he drawled.

‘Oldest trick in the book.’ Belcott was looking smug.

‘She didn’t boast about getting rid of Rosa?’ I was still playing catch-up.

‘If she did, we haven’t been able to find a reference to it so far.’ Maeve turned back to the tea-making. ‘I said a lot of her online interactions were encrypted, didn’t I? There’s every chance that when we unscramble them we’ll find out what she said about Rosa on the neo-Nazi message boards. But all I had in the file was a note from Josh.’

‘What did it say?’

‘Unrepeatable, believe me.’ She glanced back at him and laughed. The tiredness and sorrow seemed to drop away from

her once Josh Derwent was there. I felt completely and totally excluded. Irritation sharpened my voice.

‘It’s not really fair to lie to Helena like that, is it? She loves her granddaughter and wanted to defend her. She’s had a lifetime of grief and suffering, and then you played a cheap trick on her to get her to confess to murder.’

‘Georgia—’ Derwent began, but Maeve cut him off. This time she turned around to face me properly, and her face was white from proper anger. I quailed, knowing I shouldn’t have said anything.

‘We didn’t need a confession from her, Georgia. We didn’t need to trick her. We had her on CCTV beside the bus, we had the parking ticket that showed she had left her car near Northcote Road in order to get on the bus, we had a witness who sold her the tool she used to kill Minnie, and we had blood inside her coat where she put the tool after she murdered her. The reason I lied to her – the reason I was so desperate to get her to confess – is that her best chance of being given a lighter sentence is if she takes the first opportunity to plead guilty. There is, as you’ve noticed, a stack of mitigation there.’

‘They’ll go for a plea to manslaughter,’ Derwent said. ‘Diminished responsibility or loss of control. In the circumstances, I think they’ll get it. She’ll be able to say she has PTSD because of her childhood.’

The interruption had given Maeve time to recover her temper, and she went on more calmly.

‘This way, the judge has to give her full benefit for her honesty in pleading guilty at the earliest opportunity. If she took us as far as a trial for murder, she would lose and she’d spend the rest of her life in prison. That doesn’t seem like justice to me.’

‘But you want her to be sent to prison.’

Maeve sighed. ‘I don’t approve of what Minnie thought or said or did, but she was a child. She didn’t have a supportive family. They let her down long before she and Rosa argued. If it was possible to put her parents in the dock beside Helena

Griffiths, I'd do it, because they're just as guilty as she is. They should have stopped her from getting drawn into that world. They were negligent, and they should be punished.'

'Yes, but—' I began.

'There's no happy ending here. There's the best possible outcome, which is a conviction that acknowledges the facts of the case, on both sides. And remember, even though I understand her actions, Helena was OK with us arresting Ashton. She wasn't worried about someone else taking the blame for what she did, even though he's so young and it would have blighted his whole life. He didn't matter to her any more than Minnie did.'

I hadn't thought of that and I suppose it showed on my face.

'I don't see her as a martyr, Georgia.' Maeve's voice was softer now. 'She wasn't going to admit to what she'd done because it was the right thing to do. She only confessed because she was angry. I knew she'd lose control if I pushed her far enough, just like she lost control on the bus.'

'You did a good job,' Derwent said. 'But then again, annoying people is your special skill, isn't it, Kerrigan?'

'Rude,' Maeve observed. 'I have many special skills.'

'Is tea-making one of them?'

'It's my greatest gift.'

He shouldered her out of the way so he could work his way down the row of mugs. 'Let's have a look. That one's too strong. It looks like tar.'

'That's mine,' Maeve said, rubbing her arm where he'd barged into her. 'You can't have that.'

'Don't want it. What's this one? Why's it so pale?'

'Georgia likes weaker tea.'

'Course she does.'

I felt the heat wash up into my face. What did that mean? Was he implying something that Maeve understood and I didn't? What did it matter if you liked your tea a certain way?

Derwent stopped at the last one. ‘Ah, this looks about right.’

‘That’s yours. I made it for you in your special mug,’ Maeve said sweetly, and stepped back as he turned the mug to see MR GRUMPY written on it. He glowered at her, then shrugged.

‘Could have been worse, I suppose.’

‘I’ll try harder next time.’

‘Oh, get a room. None of us will get any peace until you finally shag each other’s brains out.’

It was what I’d been thinking, but Belcott was the one who said it. There was an awkward silence as Maeve picked up her tea and walked out without looking at him. Her face was flaming.

Derwent sighed. ‘You never fucking learn, do you?’

‘It was just a joke.’

‘Not the funny kind.’

‘Sorry.’ Belcott grabbed his mug and scuttled out, head down. At least it wasn’t me, for once, with both feet wedged in my mouth. Derwent frowned at the empty doorway after he left, brooding on something. Then he turned to me.

‘Georgia.’

‘Yes?’

‘I’ve been thinking about the mentoring thing. If you really want me to, I’ll take you around for a while with me. You could be a good copper one day. You’ve got the basics. You just need a bit of experience.’

I felt happiness sweep up through me from my toes to the top of my head. I beamed at him. ‘Really? Are you sure?’

‘I can’t expect you to learn by leaving you to muddle through on your own.’ He looked at me – really looked at me, as if he was considering me in a new light. I hoped he liked what he saw – not my appearance, this time, but my potential as a police officer. ‘You’re right, it’ll make everyone safer if you’re better at what you do. At the moment you’re a liability.’

I've got to think about the team. I don't want you letting anyone down.'

I felt the smile freeze on my face. Of course, it wasn't about me at all, or my career. For *anyone*, read Maeve. If I wasn't good enough, I couldn't back her up.

'When you get in tomorrow,' he went on, oblivious, 'come and find me.'

'I'm not in tomorrow.' My tone was just short of sulky. 'I've got a day off.'

'The day after then.' He moved towards the door, then stopped as if he was aware he had sounded unfriendly. 'Doing something nice?'

'I'm going to see my sister.'

'I didn't know you had a sister.'

There didn't seem to be a good answer to that, so I settled for a kind of shrug.

'Well, have fun.'

'I will,' I lied. 'And Josh? Thank you. I really appreciate the opportunity.'

The lines around his eyes deepened in amusement. 'Here's your first bit of advice. Don't thank me until you've survived it.'

Chapter 15

‘So he’s going to help me to be a better copper. I really think it’ll make all the difference. I need that push to be excellent at what I’m doing. I’ve never felt completely confident, ever since I came out of training, and that makes me scared to take chances. It makes me too nervous to speak up, even when I think I’ve got something to say.’ I tried to laugh. ‘Mind you, I’m usually wrong about that. I was convinced the murderer was Wilf Potter. I’d decided Zach Roth must be his wife’s brother. It all hung together, but it was wrong all the same. At least I didn’t make a big deal out of it to anyone.’

I had told Maeve, but she hadn’t mentioned it again. She hadn’t used it against me or laughed at me. It was almost as if making mistakes was part of the job.

A blackbird took off from the tree over my head with a whirring chatter of alarm that made me jump.

‘God almighty. My heart.’ I could feel it thudding under my jumper, shaking the thin wool. ‘That’s the sort of thing I mean. I need to be more aware of what’s going on around me. I need to be calmer in the face of danger. At the moment I just get blindsided and then I panic, and flounder, and everyone can tell I’m off balance. You always said the important thing was looking confident, and then everyone would believe I’d know what I was doing. I’m sure you were right about that, but I haven’t got the knack. I don’t know why.’

Because you’re useless, the voice in my head suggested.

‘Because I’m useless. Not like you.’ I put my hand flat on the ground, seeking some kind of connection, some kind of warmth. The grass was cold and rough, still chilled despite the fact that the sun was doing its best to shine. ‘You were always a natural.’

My sister didn't say anything. No surprise there; it was eight years now since I'd heard her voice. A clank from the gate to the graveyard was my answer instead, and I twisted to see a woman struggling through it with a huge bunch of lilies. She was slim and elegant in a black coat and her fair hair looked as if she had come straight from the hairdresser, as indeed she probably had.

I scrambled to my feet and hurried over to her. 'Can I help with those, Mum?'

'I can manage.' She held out a cheek for me to kiss, without warmth. 'What are you doing here, Georgia?'

'The same thing as you. I always come here on her anniversary.'

'Do you?' She sounded vague. 'I don't tend to come at this time of day. I like to be here first thing, but Pam couldn't fit me in at any other time, so I changed my plans.'

Pam, her hairdresser. Who said I wasn't good at observing things?

She was looking down at the grave. 'Are you responsible for *those*?'

Those were yellow roses, the stems long and spindly, the blooms tightly furled against the March cold. 'What's wrong with them? Genevieve loved yellow roses.'

'They're quite miserable, aren't they? Quite pathetic. I don't know what florist you used, but they saw you coming.'

My cheeks were hot. 'It's not a great time of year for roses. The man said—'

'He said whatever he needed to say to persuade you to buy them and of course you fell for it.' My mother ran a knuckle under her eyes carefully, in case her eyeliner had smudged. Her make-up was thick, layered on the way she'd been taught when she was cabin crew, before she gave up her job. I sometimes wondered if I'd missed the time in her life when she'd been happy – if it had been when she was travelling the world, trim in her air hostess uniform, beaming at businessmen, or if it had been when she was a new mum, or

when Genevieve won her first gymnastics medal. All I could remember was this stiff, cold woman who had never got over the great tragedies of her life. The first was my father leaving her with two small daughters, preferring the boundless warmth and good humour of the plump colleague who had won his heart. He had left us behind without a second glance, my mother had reminded me every time I cried for him. He hadn't cared to fight for custody of us. We would have got in his way. Instead, my mother was stuck with us, so she couldn't have a life of her own. A familiar lurch of guilt made me put a hand to my stomach. It hadn't been my fault, but I felt as if it was.

My mother's second tragedy wasn't my fault either. It was lying at our feet, six feet down.

'Do you ever think about what she'd be doing if she was here?' If cancer hadn't taken her when she was twenty, my beautiful and clever and funny sister with her quick sense of humour and her endless energy ...

Mum looked at me as if I was insane. 'What would be the point of thinking about that?'

'I just wonder if she'd have ended up being a police officer. If she'd have liked it, I mean. I wonder if the reality would have lived up to her expectations.'

'She would have done it brilliantly.' She bent to lay the lilies on the grave. 'She did everything brilliantly.'

'She did. But it's a tough job. I've been working on a case that—'

'Georgia, do you mind? I want to think about Genevieve today. It's *her* day.'

I nodded, the words evaporating from my mind. I took a step back, and another, and then stumbled away to a small bench in the corner of the graveyard. I sat and watched her, ramrod straight and immaculate, heels together and toes at ten to two as she communed with her dead daughter. A memory made me cringe: the days after the funeral, and the uncontrollable howling misery that had consumed her. I'd sobbed too, crouching at the end of her bed, unable to help her

or myself. Once, despairing, I'd cried, 'I wish it had been me. I wish I'd died instead.'

That had got through to her. She'd rolled over and sat up to stare at me, wild-eyed, her hair frizzed around her head. 'What did you say?'

I'd repeated myself, snivelling. I was waiting for comfort, for reassurance. I was waiting for her to wrap herself around me so we could share our misery.

What I got was a hiss of rage. 'How dare you try to make this about yourself, Georgia? You are the most selfish girl. Get out of my sight. *Get out.*'

I'd crept away to my own room and wept all night until I was voiceless, my eyes puffy, my face bloated with misery.

She hadn't noticed or cared.

I shivered, coming back to the graveyard to see her making her way towards me. I was hunched inside my coat, freezing. How long had I been sitting there?

'Georgia.' She put a hand on my shoulder. 'Sit up straight. You look like an old woman.'

'Sorry.' I drew my shoulders back and lifted my head.

'That's better.' Her eyes scanned my face, examining me. 'You really need to look after your skin more carefully if you want to wear that light make-up. Every imperfection stands out. Unless you like to be blotchy.'

I looked down, frowning.

'Still no proper boyfriend?'

'No.' Hardy came into my mind, as he tended to these days, but I pushed him away. I didn't want to talk about him with her. Not that there was anything to talk about – except a look from him as I was saying goodbye that seemed to reach all the way to my heart. I had his contact details; I could speak to him whenever I wanted.

I hadn't got beyond staring at the phone number so far.

My mother smiled thinly. ‘If you keep giving the milk away, dear, you can’t expect anyone to want to buy the cow.’

‘That’s not – that’s not what I do. That’s not how people think.’

‘Isn’t it?’ Her eyes were cold. ‘When are you going to make something of yourself, Georgia? When I think of all the opportunities you’ve had, I could cry.’

‘I *am* something,’ I said. ‘I’m a detective constable with the Met Police. I just worked on a case that was on the front page of every newspaper in the UK.’

‘I don’t know anything about that. I don’t read the newspapers.’ She pulled her coat around herself. ‘Seen anything of your father lately?’

‘No.’

‘No. You were never his favourite.’

I looked up at her dumbly. For the first time, I realised I’d learned that impulse to be cruel from her, as if lashing out and hurting other people did anything to help me. I wanted to ask her if it made her feel better, or if she regretted it later like I did.

‘You have lines on your face already.’ She rubbed her thumb over the skin between my eyebrows as if she could smudge them away. ‘I didn’t have wrinkles until I was at least a decade older than you, and I used to tan because we didn’t know any better. I’d have thought you would look younger for longer. I think it’s time to look into getting some Botox. Freshen up a little.’

‘Mum,’ I protested, and she shook her head.

‘The bloom is off the rose, Georgia. You’ll never get it back now. The best you can do is try to hide it.’ She sighed. ‘It’s some comfort to me that I didn’t have to watch Genevieve grow old. She died when she was at the peak of her beauty.’

Genevieve had been swollen-faced, yellow, wracked with pain, skeletal. I felt nausea rise like a tide, along with defiance.

‘That’s not how it was. I remember her when she was dying and she wasn’t beautiful. She was broken. She suffered so much.’

‘I don’t like to think about it.’ Her face was shuttered, withdrawn.

‘Of course you don’t, but that’s no reason to compare me with her. I never come out ahead.’ I swallowed. ‘Maybe for once you could try seeing the good things about me instead of listing all the bad things.’

‘Such as?’

I stood up and faced her. ‘Such as the fact that I’m good at what I do. I make a difference in the world. It doesn’t come easily to me but I don’t give up. I may not be the best, or the quickest, or the funniest or the prettiest, but I’m good enough, and I’m getting better all the time.’

I’d never challenged her before. I had no idea how she was going to react, and for a moment, neither did she. Eventually she managed, ‘What makes you think that’s true?’

I had an answer for that too.

‘My sergeant told me I was.’ I swallowed the knot in my throat that was making it hard to speak. ‘Her name is Maeve. And I know it’s true because she’s never wrong.’

‘Well, that’s good,’ my mother said faintly. And then, ‘Good for you.’

‘Thank you.’

To my surprise, she leaned in to give me a light, awkward hug.

‘Call me soon.’

‘I will.’

‘And get a manicure, won’t you? Your nails are a disgrace.’

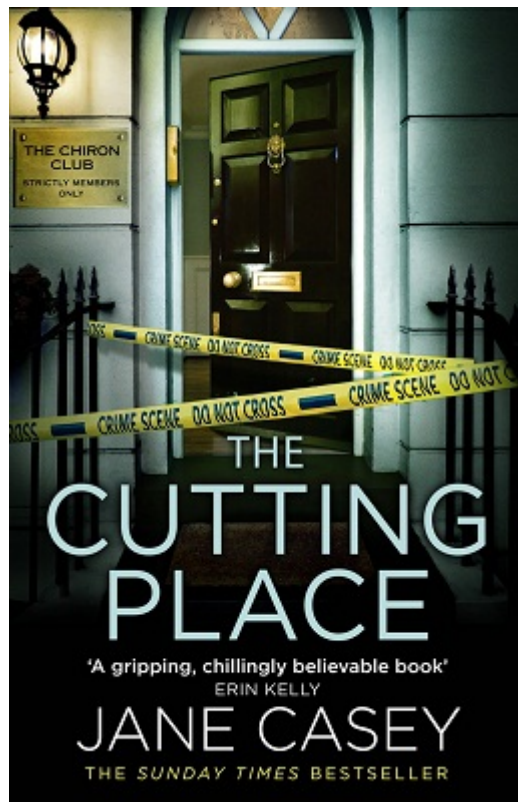
I curled my hands into fists involuntarily. Then I straightened them again, defiant. *Yes, that nail is broken, and my varnish is chipped, and I cracked that one during a search,*

and my cuticles are neglected. It's because I have more important things to worry about.

She walked away without saying anything more. I watched her go. Then I stepped carefully around the graves until I reached Genevieve's. Over my head, the blackbird began to sing again. This time it was a rippling, mellow sound, musical and joyous: a celebration instead of a warning. I stood there – alone, and not needing to be anything else – and listened to the birdsong floating up to the pale spring sky.

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For a few moments, it was the quietest place in London. The area under the footbridge was as hushed as a chapel while the black mortuary van was pulling away. A little group of us had gathered there to show our respects, photograph-still: uniformed officers, forensic investigators, a team from the Marine Police unit in their wetsuits, a pair of detectives and a small grey-haired woman in waterproofs and rubber boots standing to one side, her arms folded. Then the van disappeared from view and the picture dissolved into movement. Back to work. Life goes on.

The woman in waterproofs turned to me.

‘Is that it, then? Can I go?’

‘Not yet, if you don’t mind. I need to hear your account of what happened.’

Kim Weldon gave a deep, testy sigh. ‘I’ve been here for hours. I’ve told you everything I know already.’

She hadn’t told me, because I’d only been there for a few minutes, but I decided not to point that out. I was used to arriving at a crime scene last of all, the detective sergeant coming in with a notebook and a pen and an endless list of questions when everyone just wanted to go home. ‘I know it’s frustrating, Mrs Weldon, but we’ll try not to keep you for much longer. Do you need to let someone know you’re running late?’

She shook her head. ‘I live alone since my husband died. No one’s waiting for me. But I got here at five this morning and I’m tired.’

‘Early start.’ The comment came from over my shoulder, where DI Josh Derwent had apparently decided to take an

interest in the conversation. ‘That’s keen.’

‘Of course. It’s the best time to be here. Before all of ... *this*.’ She gestured at the footbridge over our heads, where the tide of commuters heading to work in the City formed a second river, flowing as ceaselessly as the Thames towards the great dome of St Paul’s. ‘It’s so busy now. I can’t even *think*.’

It seemed quiet enough to me, but Derwent nodded. ‘Let’s find somewhere more peaceful where we can talk. A café, or —’

‘The best place to talk around here is down there.’ She gestured over the wall to the foreshore, a strip of shingle a few metres wide that extended to the left and right along the river bank. ‘I can show you where I was. Easier than having to describe it all.’

‘How do we get down there?’ I asked.

‘There are steps.’ She set off towards them, moving briskly, and we followed her obediently. ‘But you’ll have to come down one at a time and mind how you go. It’s steep and it gets slippery.’

The steps were concrete and more like a ladder than stairs. The treads were so narrow I had to step sideways, juggling my bag and clipboard awkwardly, off balance. My long coat threatened to trip me up at every step. Kim Weldon was short and had a low centre of gravity, unlike me, so that explained why she had found it easy. On the other hand, Derwent was taller than me – just – and he had rattled down in no time, as light on his feet as a boxer despite his broad-shouldered build. He stood at the foot of the thirty or so steps and watched my progress, which didn’t help.

‘You could come down backwards.’

‘This is fine.’

‘Do you need a hand?’

‘I can manage.’

‘Only we all have other places to be.’

‘I know,’ I said through gritted teeth, concentrating on placing my feet carefully. The shingle below shimmered in the morning light, out of focus and dizzy-making.

‘Like a cat coming down a tree. I can call the fire brigade out to rescue you if you like. It’s not as if Trumpton have anything better to do.’

‘I’m fine,’ I snapped, and ignored the hand he reached up to help me down the last few steps. He stuck it back in his coat pocket with a grin that I also ignored as I made it to the shingle at last. Kim Weldon was watching us with interest. Considering I spent so much time assessing witnesses it shouldn’t have surprised me to remember it was a two-way process. I tried to see us as she might: officialdom in dark trouser-suits and polished shoes, Derwent’s hair cropped close to his head in a way that hinted at a military background, broodingly handsome. I was younger than him as well as junior in rank and aimed to be as neat, though my hair was already beginning to spiral free from the bun I’d trapped it in. We stepped around each other with the practised ease of longstanding dance partners. As a rule, Derwent was rude enough to me that even people who knew us well suspected we were sleeping together, or hated each other, or both. The truth was that we’d never slept together, and I only hated him from time to time. We were closer than most colleagues, it was fair to say – friends, after all we’d been through together. There was also the fact that he was my landlord. I currently lived in a one-bedroom flat he owned, though I fully intended to look for somewhere else to live. I just hadn’t got around to it yet. We bickered like children and trusted each other’s instincts without even thinking about it.

No wonder Mrs Weldon looked puzzled.

‘Where do we need to go?’ I asked her.

‘Along here.’ She gestured to the left of the bridge. ‘That’s the way I went this morning. I came down the steps around five, as I said. Sunrise is about half past five at this time of year but it was starting to get light. I could see well enough without a head torch.’

‘Do you do this often?’ Derwent asked.

‘Most days.’ She smiled, looking out across the river and breathing deeply. The air was fresh down by the water, and the hum of the city seemed to recede. Seagulls hovered overhead, peevish and mocking as they floated on the cool spring breeze. ‘This is my place. I’m a licensed mudlarker. I take what the river chooses to give me, whether it’s treasure or trash.’

‘Treasure?’ Derwent scuffed the shingle with the toe of his shoe. ‘What kind of treasure?’

‘Nothing valuable, exactly. But items of historical interest. And sometimes the trash is interesting too.’ She bent and picked up a small white tube. ‘What do you think this is?’

I peered at it. ‘A bit of china?’

‘It’s the stem of a clay pipe. I can’t date this without having the bowl, and the bowls are harder to find, but it could be from the 1600s. The pipes were in common use up to Victorian times. When they broke, they couldn’t be repaired and people would chuck them into the river.’

‘An antique fag end.’

She looked at Derwent sharply, her eyes bright. ‘You don’t see the appeal, Inspector. But that’s a little piece of London’s history. The man or woman who smoked it is long gone and forgotten, but we know they were here. I might be the first person to touch it since they flung it in the water.’

‘What sort of things do you find?’ I asked.

‘I’ve found Roman glass once or twice, and coins, and bits of pottery. Last year I found a medieval die made out of bone. How did it end up here? Maybe someone flicked it into the river because they’d had a run of bad luck, or maybe they stumbled as they boarded a skiff to cross to the other bank and it fell out of their pocket. There are a hundred possibilities, a hundred stories in one small scrap of history. My favourite was a bone hairpin that was a thousand years old. That’s in the Museum of London, now, with my name recorded as the person who found it. That pin will still be there long after I’m gone too.’

‘And people will know you were here,’ I said.

The fan of wrinkles around her eyes deepened as she grinned. ‘Everybody wants to leave a trace of themselves behind, after all – some evidence they walked the earth. One day someone might be grateful I was in the right place at the right time to find something special. That keeps me coming back.’

‘So what was different about this morning?’ I asked.

‘Nothing. Everything was the same as usual. At least it was until I found it. Then everything went sideways.’ A low chuckle. Kim Weldon struck me as the kind of person who didn’t allow herself to be unsettled by anything; if what she had found upset her, she had got over it by now.

But I noticed she said ‘it’, rather than what she had found.

‘Where were you when you saw it?’

She pointed. ‘See the white stripe on the wall? I was halfway between here and there. I always give myself a marker to reach because it’s too easy to get distracted and forget to keep an eye on the tide. You can get caught out – never happens to me but I’ve seen other people get soaked. So I always give myself a limited search area and then I go once I’ve covered it.’

A Thames Clipper barrelled past, ferrying commuters up the river, and the wake sent a wave that splashed over one of Derwent’s shoes. He stepped back quickly, swearing under his breath, shaking his foot.

‘It’s all right, the water is quite clean these days. They’ve even found seahorses down the river, near Greenwich, so it’s fresh. But you really need boots like mine, and you need to be more respectful of the river.’ She looked wistful. ‘I’ve seen grown men tipped over by a wave like that.’

‘I’ll bear it in mind.’ From his tone of voice, I strongly suspected that he wouldn’t be returning to the foreshore any time soon if he could help it, boots or no boots.

‘This way.’ The slight, upright figure crunched away from us to where a wooden post stuck out of the shingle, frayed

with age and the action of the water. ‘They used to tie up barges here.’ She pointed at the sandy edge of the river. ‘This is where it was.’

It.

‘And it was just lying there?’ I checked.

She looked baffled. ‘What else would it be doing?’

‘No, I meant – it wasn’t buried, or wrapped in anything?’

‘No, no. It was lying there on the shingle. I thought it was a tree root at first – you do get them washed down the river from upstream where the banks are overgrown. I was going to take a picture of it to put on my Facebook page, because it looked like a hand. But then, when I got a bit closer, I thought it looked a bit too much like a hand. And then, of course ...’ She shrugged. ‘It *was* a hand.’

‘Did you touch it?’ Derwent asked.

‘Before I knew what it was. I turned it over. It was palm down, with the fingers curled under it, you see.’ She held up her own hand to demonstrate, a loose fist with knuckles to the sky. ‘Then when I felt it, I knew it couldn’t be a root. Too soft. Too much give in it. But it wasn’t until I saw the fingernails that I was sure. It was such a strange thing to find that I couldn’t quite admit to myself what it was. I took some pictures of it and where I found it and then I picked it up. I was afraid it would be washed away before anyone came to recover it.’

‘You must have had a shock,’ I said.

‘Well, you expect to find bones here – this was London’s rubbish dump for thousands of years, and this area in particular was full of markets. But the bones tend to belong to sheep or pigs or cows. Sometimes you find a bit of a fox. I’ve never found a hand before.’ She faced into the breeze and smiled. ‘But then you never do know what the river will give you.’

At the top of the stairs, the Marine Unit were packing up to head back to their base at Wapping.

‘Finished for the day, lads?’ Derwent demanded as they went past us.

The sergeant stopped. He was mid-fifties and serious. ‘Tide’s coming in. We’re not going to find anything else here today.’

They had found three other pieces of tattered bone and flesh that had all been carefully preserved in coolers for transportation to the mortuary along with the hand. Thinking of what Kim Weldon had said about animal remains, I asked, ‘Are you sure that what you found is human?’

‘No idea.’ He heaved a bag onto his back. ‘But the pathologist will tell you if it’s not.’

‘Where’s the rest of the body?’ Derwent asked. ‘In the sea?’

‘Could be. Could be we’ll find some more bits in the next few days. We’ll be looking. Where we find things has a lot to do with the tide and the shape of the river. The way the water moves through it depends on whether the banks are concave or convex. You get lots of stuff washing up around Greenwich, for instance, and at Wapping, and at Tower Bridge. You won’t find as much on the opposite banks. So we have a few places to look.’

‘I never really thought about the tide coming up the river,’ I said. ‘I thought it flowed out to the sea and that was it.’

He shook his head, not even trying to hide his scorn. ‘Why do you think the flood barrier exists? There’s a clue in the name, love.’

‘I’m not saying I couldn’t have worked it out,’ I protested. ‘I’ve never thought about it before.’

He grunted. Clearly I was worth even less of his time now, which was a shame because I needed his expert knowledge.

I tucked a stray curl of hair behind my ear, widening my eyes to play up the helpless look. ‘As you can tell, I don’t know much about this. The river flows in both directions, so does that mean we can’t tell where the body parts might have gone in? Could they have been moved up here by the action of the tide?’

He wrinkled his forehead, considering it. ‘The tide moves things up but then it moves them back again on the way out, if you see what I mean. That makes it hard to pinpoint where items enter the water. They sometimes wash around the same area for a while.’

‘Could they have been dumped off a boat?’ Derwent asked.

‘Yeah. But why draw attention to yourself by hopping in a boat to dump body parts when you could slip them into the river from the shore? No one would have noticed if it was small parts, which is what we’ve found. People don’t realise but the river is a busy place. You wouldn’t want to be out there midstream and not know what you’re doing.’

He was right. I’d never realised how busy the Thames was with constant boat traffic: commuter boats, tours, barges loaded with building materials, small speedboats and larger vessels crewed by competent-looking people in high-vis overalls.

‘If the body parts turned up in this area, does this mean they were all thrown in the river here?’

‘I wouldn’t want to try to guess, love. But we only found four pieces. Better hope there’s more to come.’ He nodded briskly and strode away.

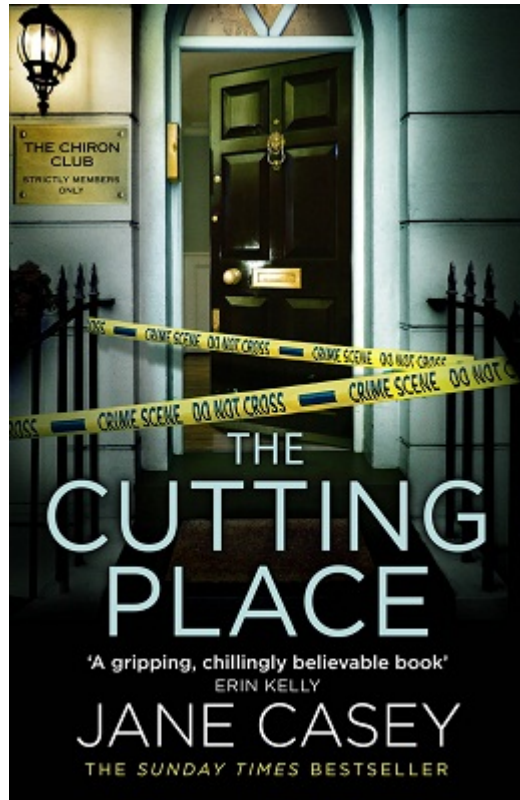
‘Thanks for the help,’ I called after him.

‘I don’t know much about this,’ Derwent cooed in my ear. ‘Please explain it to me, Mr Police Diver.’

‘And did he explain it to me?’

‘Sort of.’

‘So it worked.’ I put my notebook away. ‘But don’t get used to it.’



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[About the Author](#)

Jane Casey has written ten crime novels for adults and three for teenagers. A former editor, she is married to a criminal barrister who ensures her writing is realistic and as accurate as possible.

This authenticity has made her novels international bestsellers and critical successes. The Maeve Kerrigan series has been nominated for many awards: in 2015 Jane won the Mary Higgins Clark Award for *The Stranger You Know* and Irish Crime Novel of the Year for *After the Fire*. In 2019, *Cruel Acts* was chosen as Irish Crime Novel of the Year at the Irish Book Awards. It was a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

Born in Dublin, Jane now lives in southwest London with her husband and two children.

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