



# Then She Vanished

## (Detective Gina Harte #17)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** It's dark as the young woman leaves work. Crossing the empty car park alone, she thinks about the warmth of her little house. But she doesn't make it home that night. Or ever again...

Thirty years ago, Ruth Pritchard's sixteen-year-old daughter, Elissa, went missing. Police were called, neighbours were interviewed, and even Ruth's own husband was investigated, but the case went unsolved. Elissa disappeared forever.

Now, Ruth watches the local news and hears about another girl gone from the same streets where her beloved daughter was last seen, and her heart races. A distinctive red scarf was found at a crime scene, and she recognises it instantly. It belonged to Elissa.

After Ruth alerts the police, they rush to speak to her, but nobody answers the door. Her small home stands eerily quiet. Just like her daughter before her, Ruth has vanished into thin air.

Friends say that Ruth suspected someone close to home took Elissa. Others say she never trusted her husband again after he was questioned by police. Did she finally discover the truth behind her daughter's disappearance? And will her friends and family ever see her again?

**Total Pages (Source):** 67

# Page 1

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## PROLOGUE

### SQUIRT

‘Dad, I’m bored.’ He shuffled in the passenger seat as his dad puffed on his roll-ups, filling the car up with smoke. He always felt car sick when his dad smoked, but his dad would never stop.

‘I’m hungry,’ he whined, hoping his dad would take him home. He liked it a lot when his dad left him alone in the house, when he went to work or had meetings. He got to watch TV – something which his dad otherwise forbade.

‘Can you take me back? I’ll be good, I promise, and I’ll tidy up my room.’ He wouldn’t, but his dad had asked him to do it several times this week already.

His dad brought his arm down, catching his chin and chest with a thud. The boy withdrew as far as the broken passenger seat would let him, but, as always, he was too late and his dad was too fast.

‘Shut the hell up, Squirt. Shut. The. Hell. Up . Before you drive me insane and I flip.’

Withdrawing his arm, his dad sucked on his roll-up again and puffed a cloud of smoke in his eyes, making them water.

He hated being called Squirt. In his dad’s words, he called him Squirt because he was wet behind the ears, like wee. He didn’t know why his dad had said that, as he’d never had wee behind his ears. And now it looked like he was crying, which his dad

hated, and he needed a wee. He wondered if he should tell his dad. Maybe he'd let him get out of the car and go behind a tree.

His dad scratched his beard, turned the radio up and the same song that they heard all the time came on: TLC's 'Waterfalls'. His dad quickly turned it off and grabbed him. 'Get your head down, Squirt.'

'Why?'

His dad reached across, pulling him further down. 'Because I said so. You do as I say. Got it?'

The boy shook his head and swallowed. He knew whatever they were doing was wrong, but he didn't know why. He only knew that his dad was acting strangely and the veins at either side of his face stuck out in blue ridges. 'Dad, I need a wee.'

His dad passed him a plastic cup from the glove compartment. 'Use this.'

Tears began to fill his eyes. His dad knew he couldn't wee when someone was listening or watching.

'Don't be a stupid baby.'

'I think I can hold it.' He wasn't sure he could, but he'd rather go in his underpants than in the cup in front of his dad.

'Whatever.' His dad sighed. 'Today, Squirt, I'm going to teach you the facts of life. Do you know what they are?'

He shook his head. 'Is it to do with the rabbits?' He knew that when they'd had rabbits, the two had played together and they'd had baby rabbits. He remembered his

dad trying to talk about the facts of life then, but he didn't really understand what he meant. He knew that it took a boy rabbit and a girl rabbit to make baby rabbits. Maybe if his dad let him go to school like all the other children did, he might know more. At almost twelve and only ever home-schooled, he felt like he knew nothing.

'It's not about the rabbits. You know about the rabbits, don't you?'

He nodded, even though he didn't know much.

'Well, this goes deeper. It's about humans . There are things I need to teach you. You need to learn how to become a man.'

'Is that why we're watching that girl?'

The girl seemed nice; older than him. He assumed she must have left school, as she worked at the café. Or maybe she just had a Saturday job there. Some of the kids on the programmes he watched had Saturday jobs.

'You got it.'

'I wonder how much older than me she is.'

His dad snorted. 'Makes no odds: old enough to bleed , old enough to breed . Girls are different to us. What do you see when you look at her?'

He shrugged. He wanted to say that she looked like the girls he sees on the TV, but his dad would shout at him for watching TV. Only his dad was allowed to watch it. Actually, she looked more like Melanie from the band All Saints. He liked Melanie, she was cool for a girl.

'She seems nice.'

The girl passed and they both sat up. 'She's not nice . Look what she's wearing. No respectable girl dresses in a skirt that short. What does it mean when a girl dresses like that?'

He didn't know what his dad wanted him to say, so he shrugged.

'She's a slag. She's asking for it.'

'Asking for what?' He scrunched his brows.

'Facts of life, Squirt.'

He toiled over whether to ask the next question, but it slipped out of his mouth anyway. 'What's a slag?'

His dad stared at the girl's back until she turned a corner at the hardware shop. 'One that does the facts of life with just about anyone. They wear those clothes to tell men they want us; that they want to do those things with us, like your rabbits. You get me, Squirt?'

Again, he didn't, but he nodded anyway. 'Yes, can we go home now?' If that was his lesson for the day, maybe it was over now.

His dad smirked and let out a laugh. 'No, this is just the start. Buckle up. You know how we play games at home?'

He nodded. 'Like when we play chess?'

'Exactly. But we can also play games with people. When we're out there, we smile, we are polite. We are the inventors of how people see us.' His dad paused and Albie frowned as he struggled to understand what his dad was saying. 'Who am I, Squirt?'

‘The white knight.’ That’s what his dad always called himself.

‘And who are you?’

‘A pawn.’

‘That’s right, son, but what is even lower than a pawn?’

‘A girl.’

‘Clever boy. You’re learning fast. Life is a game and today starts a new game. Let’s play.’

## Page 2

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ONE

Monday, 2 September

Joby hated that his dad had dragged him out of bed to help on the farm. He didn't want to become a farmer. He hated driving a tractor as much as the early mornings. More importantly, he loved music, and songwriting was everything to him. His dad glanced across the yard at him, eyebrows raised as Joby chewed on a long piece of grass. 'Get on with it. The fence won't fix itself.' His dad lowered his brows and smiled, telling Joby that he wasn't being too serious.

He held a hand up and exhaled slowly through puffed cheeks. 'Whatever, old man,' Joby replied. His dad waved and began trudging back towards the barn.

Hoisting his tool bag off the ground, Joby loaded it onto the back seats of their muddy Land Rover. Gerty, their sheep dog, jumped on top of it, wagging her tail. 'I guess you can come too.'

It was a good job they didn't have sheep or any other animals, because Gerty was absolutely useless, but she was cute and Joby loved that she wanted to come along. He put the four-wheel drive into gear and it hopped down the mud path, all the way over to the barley and wheat fields. They would soon be harvesting the beets, which Joby didn't mind. He got out of the car. It was easier to walk the rest of the way with all the trees ahead. He liked the walk through the woodland. It gave him the chance to work on his lyrics.

'Gerty,' he called, as he opened the back door and flung the tool bag across his

shoulder.

Yesterday afternoon, his dad had been livid. It wasn't the first time a careless driver had taken the bend at the edge of their land too fast and crashed through their fence, and it wouldn't be the last. Joby wished they didn't have to keep fixing it, but if they didn't, the fly-tippers would soon pass the word along and their land would look like the local tip. There was still a lot of junk left from the last episode, and he had yet to finish loading it into the boot to take to their skip.

He escaped the morning sun under the trees. Snatching a long, gnarly stick from the mossy ground, he threw it as far as he could. Gerty ran after it, her tail wagging. She dutifully brought it back and he threw it again.

The sunshine cast dappled light across the woodland floor. A few trees had started to turn from green-leaved to an array of oranges with tinges of red. The large oak he walked under had always been his favourite. He remembered when he and his mates used to have a tyre swing attached to it and would spend hours there having fun. He thought back to those times in the hope he'd come up with some new lyrics. A faint melody came into his head, which he hummed.

No, the song and tune sounded naff, but then again, people liked that kind of thing. Look at all the mush over love and nostalgia – it sells, and that's what he wanted.

He stopped and closed his eyes.

The scent of wood and grass tickled his senses, and the warmth, the birdsong... it was all too cliché. He needed to dig deeper, but his mind wasn't really producing anything today. Maybe he needed to get angry at the world, the injustice of everything, and throw in some real angry emotion.

He knew why he was struggling – Gerty was nudging him. He opened his eyes and



patted her on the head. 'Maybe I should write my next song about you.'

She barked.

He continued to walk as he let his mind wander into the ever-growing song in his head. It was something , and something was better than nothing. He needed some inspiration. He'd smoked some weed with Dodge a few days ago, hoping it would help, but all it did was make him sick.

He sighed and continued lugging his tool bag towards the fence, trudging over the stile as Gerty lay on her belly and shuffled under it.

That's when he saw a car blocking the entrance.

Stepping back, he hid behind a tree. There was a man at the wheel. He knew the man hadn't broken the fence as it was already broken and there was no sign of any damage to the bumper of his car. He was leaning back in the driver's seat, but slightly hunched at an angle. Maybe he was ill and had pulled over? It looked like he was having a nap.

Joby wondered what he should do. Was it okay to tap on the window and ask the guy to back out and park on the road? He took a deep breath. Of course it was. The man was trespassing.

Gerty darted out from behind the bush and began jumping up at the passenger door. 'Gerty, get back here now ,' Joby said in a loud whisper. He pulled his phone out, wondering if he should ask his dad to deal with the man. Joby hated any kind of confrontation, unlike his dad who would literally die to defend his land.

' Ow !' A blackberry thorn caught his hand and blood began to seep down his arm. He wiped it on his jeans. He was being a wimp. His dad would have no problem

asking the man to back out of their land; his mother wouldn't either, even his grandad wouldn't. Joby had to deal with it.

The man in the car didn't look threatening; he hadn't even moved. He was probably ill and just needed a bit of sympathy before Joby asked him to move on.

Feeling more reassured after giving himself a pep talk, Joby stepped out of the brambles and crept towards the car. Gerty jumped up at the car, sniffing, her front paws on the passenger door.

Joby bent over to look through the passenger window. He tapped lightly so he didn't alarm the man, but the man didn't respond. Using the back of his sleeve, he wiped the dust from the window. The man's lips and face were reddish, and a trail of vomit had stained his shirt. Joby recoiled.

On the back seat of the car, he could see an empty vodka bottle. He took a deep breath and forced himself to look again and bang on the window.

'Mister, are you okay?'

Maybe he'd stopped to drink the vodka and then hadn't wanted to drink and drive? Joby had passed out and vomited on himself when he drank the huge bottle of Dodge's dad's home brew. He remembered being really embarrassed. He never wanted anyone to know, but Dodge had shared it with everyone at school and all the other kids pretended to heave before laughing whenever they saw him. That was ages ago and he forgave Dodge soon after.

'Mister? Hey, wake up!' He knocked again, then he walked around the car in the hope that one of the doors might be unlocked. Maybe he could give the man a little shake. He had a bottle of water in his tool bag. If he gave it to him, it might help the man sober up. Gerty yelped and tilted her black and white furry head to the side as

she waited at the foot of the car bonnet.

Joby gasped as he spotted the hose that had been slid into the slightly open passenger window. It led to the man's exhaust.

No! They'd had a talk about mental health at school, and male suicide was a huge issue. The engine was turned off. Maybe the man turned it off and was okay. Or maybe his fuel had run out.

He went to pull the door open, but it was locked.

'Wake up!'

Joby stumbled back. The man was dead: he couldn't see the rise or fall of his chest.

'Think, think...' He did a first aid course last year. He needed to check the man's pulse.

After checking all the doors and finding them locked, he glanced around and saw a huge stone. He prised it out of the mud and slammed it as hard as he could against the back-seat window, smashing it and reaching in to unlock the door.

The stench hit him instantly.

That was no normal stench.

He leaned over the passenger seat and dry-heaved as he reached over and unlocked the driver's door. As he stepped back out, he filled his lungs with crisp, clean air before opening the driver's door. He placed two fingers on the man's wrist, then his neck.

There was no sign of a pulse.

Joby grabbed his phone and called the police. That's when he saw the bloodied sheet in the passenger footwell and the almost illegible note in the centre console, that faded at the end into a scribbled mess.

Save her and tell her I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt her. I only ever wanted to love her, but I failed.

## Page 3

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### TWO

Detective Inspector Gina Harte opened the emails on her personal phone again. It had been weeks since the previous big case, during which time the last spate of horrible messages had come. One particular message had chilled her because she knew who it was from: her ex-brother-in-law, Stephen Smithson. The very man who was convinced that she was to blame for his brother, Terry's, death.

Still, she hadn't reported or shared any of the messages with her Detective Chief Inspector – and secret lover – Chris Briggs. She hadn't wanted to ruin their closeness or their weekend getaway in Scotland the previous week. She knew Chris would be angry that she'd kept them from him.

Her mind wandered back to Stephen. He knew she wouldn't report him because, in the past, Briggs had threatened to plant evidence of a crime on Stephen in order to protect her. The last thing Gina wanted was a war with Stephen and for all that to come out if Stephen decided to call their bluff. She looked at the message again. It seemed Stephen was prepared to risk it all to make her life a misery rather than just get on with his life.

She needed to deal with him all on her own without Briggs knowing. But while he had an army of online psychopaths and misogynists to help him, she had no one.

She reread the one particularly chilling subject line from Stephen, or VenMan, the name he'd used online in the past.

From: VenMan

To: GinaH

Subject: Bitch needs to pay. Likes it rough. (Dark web dox: call to action). Check out Men-R-Takin-It-Back.

She logged on to Men-R-Takin-It-Back using a VPN and began trawling the comments as MikeTheMan. Stephen had tried to get the group members to attack her over email several times, but they wanted more information and so far he hadn't released her actual address or full identity. Stomach churning, she read some of the few and far between email headers.

My sex dungeon awaits you.

Whore deserves to be trashed from the inside like the garbage you R.

I will find you and I will shove it anywhere I want, BITCH.

Her heart banged away. She'd lived and breathed this type of misogyny back when she was married to Terry, until she had nudged him down the stairs to his death all those years ago to protect their baby daughter from his violence. She gnawed at the skin on the inside of her cheek. Stephen was doing his best to get Gina to confess to this. He only had a hunch, but it was the truth, and Gina had always struggled to keep the lie bottled up inside her, and he knew it.

So many years had passed for Gina – her daughter, Hannah, was all grown up now, with a child of her own – but her past would never stop haunting her. Terry's brother, Stephen, would never move on until he had destroyed her.

It was coming, just not right this second. But, as always, that threat was carried in the breeze and one day it would turn into a cyclone.

Gina's work phone buzzed in her hand, making her flinch. She pulled her quilt off her legs. Her cat, Ebony, jumped up on the end of the bed, meowing for food.

'Jacob,' she said as she answered.

Detective Sergeant Jacob Driscoll cleared his throat before speaking. 'We have an incident, guv. Looks like a man died by suicide in his car, but there's more. The officers who attended the scene found a few... disturbing things.'

'Like what?' She placed her personal phone on her bedside table.

'There were packets of sanitary towels and tampons in a bag in the back of his car. There were also some ready-made sandwiches and three Goosebumps books that had been taken out of Cleevesford Library on Saturday. There's an old, scuffed library card without any personal details on it.'

'Do we know roughly how old he is?'

'The officer at the scene thought maybe he was in his forties. Goosebumps books are normally read by kids, aren't they?'

Gina recalled that Hannah used to love them. 'Normally, yes.'

'There's more. There was also a sheet soaked in blood from what looks like a cut to his wrists... and a note. I struggled to read it as it's scribbled but I can make out some of what it says, " Save her and tell her I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt her. I only ever wanted to love her, but I failed. " It looks like he tried to write more but the rest is illegible.'

'Do we know who he's referring to? Have we identified him?'

‘No to both, and the plates on the car are false. One of the officers managed to locate the Vehicle Identification Number on the car, and it matches the country of origin, the manufacturer and the vehicle type, but the registration is for a car that has been scrapped, and the plates belong to another scrapped car, not the blue Ford Fiesta they’re on here.’

‘I’m going to get up quickly and meet you at the scene. Can you message me the location?’

‘I’ll do it right now. I’ve been told that the land is owned by Cawley’s Farm, but the car and body are situated at the edge of their land. Their sixteen-year-old son found the body. He also broke the window thinking he could help the man, before realising he was dead. An officer will obviously need to speak to him, too.’

‘Has Bernard been called?’ She hoped crime scene manager, Bernard Small, was on his way with the forensics team.

‘Yes, he should be there by now, or at least close by. Officers were cordoning off the road when I last spoke to them, and they were preparing a board ready to be positioned on the roadside to appeal for witnesses.’

Gina scrunched her brow. ‘We can’t assume he died by suicide, obviously, and if anyone saw the car it might give a more accurate time of his death.’ Her phone beeped. ‘I’ve got the location.’

‘Great. The car is positioned off-road on the farmer’s field. You’ll see there’s a broken fence where another vehicle previously crashed into it; it’s on a dangerous bend.’

‘Thanks for the warning.’



As she ended the call, she thought about the words on the note: save her and tell her I'm sorry. I didn't want to hurt her. I only ever wanted to love her, but I failed.

Save who and sorry for what ? Hurt? How hurt? She thought about the sanitary products and the books before sending a message back to Jacob.

We need someone on missing persons. Bring up the files of every young woman or girl who hasn't come home as expected, who has left home and not made contact since. Start with those who have gone missing over the past five years. If she's out there and hurt, we need to find her.

## Page 4

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### THREE

Stomach still churning as she drove, Gina knew she had to call her ex-mother-in-law, Hetty, to see if she could speak to Stephen on her behalf. She couldn't go on like this. Maybe she could ask her to tell her son to butt out of her life.

'Hello?' a woman said.

'Can I speak to Hetty, please?'

'I'm sorry, that's not possible.'

'Not possible?'

'Sorry, are you a friend? I'm her carer.'

'Err...' What was she? Definitely not a friend. 'I'm her ex-daughter-in-law.'

'I'm sorry to tell you that Hetty had a stroke. She's asleep at the moment. Plans are underway to transfer her to a home.'

'Is Stephen there?' The urge to heave was strong. The last thing she wanted was to ever have to speak to Stephen again, but she had to find a way of closing down this online harassment without involving Briggs.

'Her son?'

‘Yes,’ Gina replied.

‘I’m afraid not. Do you know where he is? She could really do with the support of a relative. Are you two close?’

‘No.’ Gina hung up. Stephen was out there somewhere and Hetty was in no position to tell him to back off.

As Gina pulled up at the crime scene, she spotted the forensics van and two police cars. Jacob had parked behind them. She stepped out onto the roadside and hurried up to where PC Smith was guarding the outer cordon. A traffic officer gestured for the stream of rubbernecking drivers to hurry along. She half-jogged up the hill, trudging through the long grass that led to the damaged gate. As she stared down, she saw the small blue Fiesta parked alongside the woodland. Bernard was already toggled up, as were his three assistants. One of them was taking photos and filming while the others were placing crime scene markers at the scene.

‘Alright, guv,’ PC Smith said as he held the crime scene log out for her to sign.

She took the pen and Jacob came running over, all toggled up. ‘Here’s a crime scene suit.’ He passed her the bag and she began to put it on by the roadside. She pulled the white coverall over her black trousers and sage-green blouse before zipping it up. Then she slipped on her boot covers and mask.

PC Smith moved out of the way, allowing her onto the scene. Bernard held a hand up. ‘I’ll just be a moment,’ he called out, before turning around to speak to his assistants again.

‘Any further developments since we spoke?’ she asked Jacob.

He shook his head. ‘I haven’t managed to speak to anyone yet. The boot was opened

by the officers who attended first.'

With a note like that, Gina wasn't surprised. 'No one else in the car?'

'Nope. The boot was empty, except for an old jacket that looked to be about the same size that the man would wear. It's already been bagged up, along with the library books and a few other things.'

'Has anyone tried to contact the library? The books might lead us to the girl's identity.'

'I tried, but it's too early. It's not open for another half an hour and the emergency number didn't help, either.'

'After we've finished here we'll head to the library. It should be open by then.' She checked her watch.

'DI Harte.' Bernard waved them over.

She led the way. 'Can you talk me through what you have so far?'

He nodded and leaned over her with his lanky frame, his grey beard neatly tucked into his beard cover. 'As always, we have a long way to go, but follow me and stay on the stepping plates. As you can see from the markers, we have all sorts. Litter, cigarette butts, so many bags of rubbish. We'll take it all in and sort through it later. As for the man, it's looking like he died by suicide. He hasn't been moved post-mortem. We have an initial suicide attempt that didn't work: it looks like he cut his wrist with a pocket knife and used the sheet to clean himself up. The cut definitely didn't kill him. The cause of death is looking likely to be carbon monoxide poisoning, but we need to confirm that in the post-mortem.'

‘Time of death?’

‘I would say between ten and twelve hours ago.’

Gina lifted her crime scene suit at her wrist to see the time. It was nearly nine in the morning. ‘So, between nine and eleven yesterday evening?’

Bernard frowned, creasing the lines on his forehead. ‘To be on the safe side, make it between eight and midnight.’

‘Have you managed to search the whole car yet?’

Bernard shook his head. ‘Not yet. As you can see, the team are on it, so if there is more to find, we’ll find it. We’ve yet to check under the seat, under the car mats and under the spare wheel. Then there are all the panels. We’ll strip those out when the car is taken to the compound.’

She followed Bernard, clunking on the metal plates until they reached the vehicle. Glancing through the open driver’s door, she took a deep breath. The man’s reddish lips definitely suggested carbon monoxide poisoning. His checked shirt came apart where his belly had forced the buttons at the bottom, and his grey-threaded dark hair had been slicked back with some strong gel. ‘Has an officer scanned his fingerprints with a portable scanner?’

Nodding, Bernard stepped a little closer. ‘Yes.’

‘If he’s on our system, we should be able to identify him. Jacob?’ She turned to her colleague. ‘Could you quickly call PC Smith and get an update on that?’

Jacob pulled out his phone and stepped to the side.

Gina glanced ahead at the woodland, imagining what it would have looked like the previous night. It had been cloudy, so he would have probably arrived in darkness, even if he had arrived at eight. It wasn't a busy road at that time so he could have easily parked in the field without a single person seeing him. She pictured him with the interior light on in the car as he struggled to cut his wrists, and she shuddered at the thought.

'Bernard, you say he tried to slash his wrists with a pocket knife. Do you have the knife?'

'Yes. It's a small flick knife. The blade is only one and a half inches long and it's not particularly sharp.'

'Have you found a phone?'

'Not yet.'

She continued to play out the scenario in her head. He knew he might not be able to go through with cutting his wrists. He'd come prepared with the hose. One thing was for sure, he had been determined to end his life.

Jacob began walking back towards her.

'Any news on his identity?'

He shook his head. 'He's not on our system.'

She scrunched her brows. 'Great. Let's hope the library can help, then.'

One of the CSIs waved a hand towards them and called Bernard over. Gina and Jacob waited in silence as she saw the two of them talking. 'What is it?' Gina asked as

Bernard began walking back.

‘We’ve found a phone. Isobel is just bagging it.’

‘We need to take a look.’ She hoped it hadn’t run out of battery.

Bernard took it off the young female CSI and passed it to Gina in the clear bag. As soon as she saw that it was a burner phone, her shoulders dropped. There would be no social media accounts or internet history on that phone. She turned it on and hoped that it would come to life, and to her surprise, it did. She began scrolling and she could instantly see that it had been completely wiped of everything.

The CSI waved her arm again. ‘We have something else.’

Gina followed Bernard and they watched as Isobel pulled at something that had been secreted in the car seat upholstery.

‘It’s a photo.’ The CSI placed it in a bag and passed it to Gina to look at.

Gina couldn’t tell if the photo was old or new. There was nothing showing that could help her date it. The girl was looking down, her brown, straggly hair almost covering her whole face and the crack on her lip looked raw. There was some brown pigmentation on her left porcelain-white cheek that looked like a birthmark. Her thumbnail balanced gently between her two front teeth, behind a smile that looked forced. On the magnolia back wall, Gina could see a shadow that didn’t belong to the girl.

It was broad and imposing. Was it the man in the car? Who was she to him, and was she the one who needed saving?

There was a sketch pad on the mattress and a nearly finished drawing. The lines were

perfectly formed. It was of a girl clutching a red scarf. Squinting, Gina spotted an actual red scarf with a cupcake design poking out underneath the girl's bottom.

Gina turned over the photo and written in the bottom right-hand corner, in scrawled capital letters, was one word: SORRY .

She passed it to Jacob. 'Can you take a photo and message it back to the incident room straight away?'

He took it from her. 'It's a shame we can't properly see her face, guv.'

A part of her knew that the man in the car had left them no real clues. 'In his note he claims to be sorry. He even wrote it on the back of the photo. He also tells us to save her, but the note is scrawled which doesn't give us a lot to go with. Why? Whoever she is, she's out there somewhere, and look at her...' Gina swallowed.

She knew what someone in captivity looked like and that girl in the photo screamed captive.

'He has left her somewhere.' Gina's heart began to pound. 'And if we don't find her, she will die.'



## Page 5

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FOUR

After following Jacob in her car to the library, Gina pulled up behind him. Her phone beeped. It was a message from another weird account, and there was an image attached. Her fingers began to tremble as she read the message.

To: GinaH

From: The punisher

Subject: Sexy MOFO needs choking.

She wants to pay for hurting our brother. His brother is our brother. Hurt a brother, you hurt us all.

I'll choke you. Horny bitch! Address???? You know you want me to.

She clicked on the attached photo. She didn't want to look but she couldn't ignore it. Her eyes had been superimposed onto a younger-looking face, and the body trussed up in black leather with breasts that were definitely not hers. She stared into the eyes again. The dark shading underneath along with the slight creasing that was more prominent on her left eye was a match. The black-walled bedroom and the shiny red silk sheets weren't hers either, neither were the chains holding the woman captive.

She closed the message. She hoped the body was AI generated and not a real woman. It had to be. It looked too fake.

Bile began to rise in her throat as she thought about the freaks who were targeting her.

It was all starting up again.

Right now, she hated Stephen more than anyone in the world, and finding him would be near impossible.

As Jacob tapped on her car window, she cried out. With a banging heart, she opened the car door and forced a smile.

‘Have you just had some bad news? You looked a bit jumpy just then.’ He raised his brows.

‘Er, no. Just tired. Library’s opening.’ She inhaled and exhaled slowly a couple of times as she got out of the car and followed him towards the library.

A woman in a mini dress and huge round glasses began unlocking the glass doors. They automatically slid open and she smiled.

‘I love to see eager readers,’ she said, as she turned her back to them and retreated into the huge room filled with desks, computers and racks upon racks of books. She took her position behind the main desk and began typing.

Gina stood at the counter and held her identification up. ‘I’m DI Harte and this is DS Driscoll. We need to speak about one of your users.’ She scrolled through the photos on her work phone and opened the photo of the library card.

‘I don’t know how much I can say because of data protection,’ the woman replied with a smile.

‘A man was found dead this morning and this card and books from this library were found in his vehicle. Someone took three books out on Saturday using this card. We’re trying to identify him and you are our only hope. As you can see, the details on this card are smudged, but there is a reference number on it.’ Gina held her phone in front of the woman’s face to show her the photo of the card. ‘You will be helping us to identify him.’

She swallowed and sighed. ‘Oh no, that’s horrible news. I guess I can take a look, then. I hope it isn’t one of our regulars.’ Gina really hoped it was though.

The woman pushed her glasses up her nose. ‘Let me check our system.’ She tapped a few keys on her computer while gently biting her bottom lip. ‘It appears to belong to Calvin Harris. Address, 17 Bolton Avenue.’

‘Did he come in on Saturday and check out some books? Can I see his details?’

The woman turned her screen around and Gina scrolled to his personal details at the top. Calvin Harris was in his late seventies, so he couldn’t be their John Doe.

‘Do you want me to print out everything from his account?’

Gina nodded. ‘That would be really helpful, thank you. What’s your name, by the way?’

‘Selma Allcock.’ She pointed to her name badge. ‘Might take a while to print this lot out. Looks like it goes back twenty years. That’s not to say the account isn’t older, we just had a different system then.’ The librarian paused.

‘What is it?’ Gina asked.

‘It seems he comes in for books aimed at children and teens. I guess people like

reading what they like reading. I love the Goosebumps series.’ She shrugged.

‘Do you have CCTV?’

She nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Can we see your CCTV for Saturday?’

‘You want to see Calvin Harris?’ She glanced back at the screen. ‘I can see that he took those books out using our manual system over there at twelve minutes past eleven in the morning.’ She nodded towards the counter containing a computer and a drop-off box for returns. ‘Bear with me.’ Selma hurried over to another computer and began clicking away. ‘Here he is.’

Gina and Jacob walked around and leaned over the screen to take a look. She could see it was their dead man – he was even wearing the same shirt – but one thing was for sure, he was not Calvin Harris.

Another woman walked in and placed her bag down before staring at Gina. ‘Selma, what’s going on?’

Selma looked up. ‘One of our users has been found dead. Rona, you were working on Saturday, weren’t you?’

‘Yes, and I recognise that creep.’

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

FIVE

GIRL

I can smell the lilies and the poppies. It's summer, and I'm lying in a field of long grass that is tickling my legs, my shoulders and the back of my neck. A butterfly lands on my face and I can't help but smile. It's a red admiral; I remember seeing one once and thinking it was the most beautiful creature ever. I painted a picture of it in watercolours and stuck it to my bedroom wall. My art teacher tells me I'm talented and that I could make it as an artist one day. That is all I want, but I dare not tell my parents, not yet. I think Mr Preston will put in a good word for me at parents' evening; he said he'd tell my parents how talented I am and that I should pursue art.

I swallow as I think of my friends, remembering our fallout. It was silly really. I wasn't even in the school play, I just painted the backdrops, but I let them down. I shouldn't have offered to help backstage. Firstly, I have zero organisational skills. Secondly, I'm clumsy. Thirdly, I'm easily distracted. I was meant to bring the giant toadstool onto centre stage for the final act, but I carried the vine-covered chair on instead. Then my bestie forgot her lines and the next person didn't come on. Another kid came on in his place and delivered the last line, ruining the whole plot and the final act. Everyone awkwardly bowed to the crowd as a few random claps filled the auditorium.

It was all my fault.

Maybe I'm meant to be here alone right now. Maybe this is where I get to think about what I ruined and how, when I get home, I can make it up to them.

‘Hello, little caterpillar,’ I say, as I laugh at its many legs and hairy body. I don’t like the green ones or the ones without hair, but I like the furry ones.

It passes fast, too fast for a caterpillar. It’s getting away and I can’t reach it anymore.

‘Come back. I don’t want to be on my own.’

It’s lonely here, and it was lonely yesterday, too.

I smell the almost sheer, cupcake-patterned scarf wrapped around me, and there is a hint of perfume on it. I hug it closely. All I want is for someone to talk to.

I shiver.

Happy thoughts, happy thoughts: slobbering dog kisses, cat meows, chocolate pie, bubble baths, new make-up, the sound of my mum’s cheesy eighties pop music and my dad’s face when I tell him I’ll play chess with him.

That’s when I hear the clunking of the metal door above.

Please let it be anyone but him.

I scrunch my eyes even tighter, so I don’t have to look at my surroundings; so I don’t have to look at him. Come back lilies, come back butterfly and come back caterpillar. Please don’t leave me.

That’s when I feel his breath on the back of my neck.

On opening my eyes, I see the reality of my situation. I can no longer smell the flowers; all I can smell is the scent of my own gradual decay, and all I see is a damp, brick wall lit up by the shaft of light coming from the opening above.

‘Turn around without my permission and you die!’

I remain still. His dreams are now my dreams. They have to be if I am to survive.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

SIX

Rona led Gina and Jacob into one of the study rooms at the back of the library. ‘We shouldn’t get disturbed here.’

Gina entered the chilly box room while Rona turned the light on. It reminded Gina of one of the cells back at the station, only smaller and carpeted. There was a desk, a computer and one chair. Rona quickly left and came back with two folded plastic chairs. She positioned them against the wall and they all sat.

Jacob got his notebook out, while Gina shifted in the chair to get comfortable. Rona’s long, honey-streaked blonde hair flopped forward as she pulled herself in a little closer. Gina introduced herself and Jacob and Rona gave them her full name.

‘I guess you want to know what I thought of him, the man on the CCTV?’

Gina nodded. ‘He was found dead this morning and we’re following up on some leads.’

‘You two are police detectives, so you wouldn’t be here if he’d had a heart attack. Does that mean he was murdered?’

Gina scrunched her brows, wondering how much to say. ‘It doesn’t look that way, but there is more to the case, which is why we’re here. Can you tell me why you referred to him as a creep?’

Rona looked down and frowned, as if trying to work out what to say, when someone



knocked at the door.

‘Come in,’ Rona called. Selma entered with a tray of drinks and left them on the desk. ‘Thanks, Sel.’ Rona handed them out and sipped her coffee.

She sighed. ‘I said what I said because he is a creep. I’m going to start at the beginning: my daughter often hangs out at the library while I work – I don’t like her being alone at home all day when she’s not at school. She’s thirteen now, by the way, and I know a lot of parents don’t mind their kids being at home on their own at that age, but she’s quite sensitive and she gets lonely. She’s like me, too, a total bookworm, so quite often she’s here sitting in the beanbag zone reading. One day, I found him – the man that Selma had up on the screen – sitting next to her. He seemed a bit too comfortable, laughing with her, telling her how much he loved Harry Potter – that’s what she was reading at the time. I heard my daughter getting carried away as they talked about the characters and who their favourites were. To me, it sounded like he was trying to groom her, and he was sitting so close it definitely made me uncomfortable. Why on earth would a man of his age sit on a beanbag and chat to a young girl?’ Rona paused.

‘Go on.’

‘Actually, that sounds a little judgy, that’s why I gave myself a bit of an internal ticking off. I mean, just because he’s a grown man, why can’t he like books aimed at kids? In fact, lots of people love them, especially Harry Potter . I also thought that, maybe, I’d not seen the situation as it was; maybe he hadn’t been sitting that close and it was just me, thinking he had. But it did make me keep a closer eye on him from that point onwards. I noticed that he came in roughly once a month and took a few books out.’

‘You can never be too careful when it comes to your children,’ Gina said, knowing what she went through to protect Hannah, when she was a baby. She’d do it all again

in a heartbeat. ‘How long have you worked here?’

Rona paused. ‘Two years and three months.’

‘And when did you first see this man talking to your daughter?’

‘About two years ago, when she was eleven.’

‘Did you see him talking to your daughter often?’

She shrugged. ‘I think it’s happened maybe seven or eight times.’

Gina wondered if anything else had happened. ‘Can you tell me about the other times?’

‘About a month or two after that first time... it was winter and my daughter was helping me make a Christmas-themed book display. The others here don’t mind her helping out. After we’d finished, she went to the back of the library to do her homework. I remember it was quite late, so it must have been a Thursday. We open late on Thursdays.’ She paused. ‘I went to check on her, to see how she was doing, and there he was again. This time he was sitting on her desk. It was our first Christmas without her dad – we lost him to heart disease, so she was pretty vulnerable at the time. We were grieving badly. Anyway, it looked like they were laughing, so I interrupted. He got off the desk when he saw me, and he said something strange like, “I was just showing her a photo of my puppy”, then he quickly left.’

‘Did you ask your daughter what else he might have been saying to her?’

‘I did, but you know what kids are like. She told me he was just showing her a photo of his puppy and some rabbits on his phone. We did have a little talk about grooming

and paedophiles, but she shrugged me off, saying “gross” and that he wasn’t like that, that it was just a photo of his dog and a meme with dancing rabbits in it. She accused me of overreacting.’

Gina waited for Jacob to catch up before giving Rona the nod to continue. ‘And after that?’

‘He could tell that I wasn’t happy with him speaking to Molly – that’s my daughter’s name – so he backed off. He’d come in, get some books and go. I soon forgot all about him until... June this year.’

‘What happened in June?’

‘I saw them talking, again . She seemed to be twiddling her hair between her fingers, and he was leaning against a rack of books. I stood at the other side of the shelf and listened. He was telling her about his daughter and how alike they were – I thought that explained the children’s books, but I still didn’t trust him.’ She swallowed. ‘He was telling Molly how much she’d get on with his daughter. He said she was home-schooled and didn’t have many friends, and he asked if he could give her his number so that he could arrange for them to do something together. He said that his daughter was a similar age and they both loved reading. That’s when I interrupted them. I told him that my daughter wasn’t going to his house, and I grabbed the bit of paper he’d written his number on and I stuffed it back in his pocket.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He shook his head and looked at me like I was crazy, then he went on about his daughter and that he had meant every word. I didn’t believe him. Then?—’

‘Did you report it?’

She blew out a breath. 'I was going to, but me and Molly argued like mad. She said I'd embarrassed her and myself. She said he'd told her all about his daughter before and that she was in a wheelchair. He'd even shown her some photos, and she thought he was a great dad and that I was mean. It got me thinking that maybe I was wrong.'

'Did you tell anyone else your worries?'

'Only my other colleague, Francis, but she always seems stressed so I don't like to burden her with my problems. She cares for her elderly mother who's always having falls. I briefly mentioned him to her, but she didn't know who I was talking about.'

'Did you mention him to Selma?'

'No, she's only been here two months. I've been showing her the ropes. I mostly train Selma.'

Gina knew she had to ask about the last time that Rona had seen their dead man. 'When did you last see him?'

'Saturday, when I was on shift. I don't see him anywhere else, though, and I use all the shops around here.'

'How did he seem?'

She inhaled and breathed out slowly. 'Er... he tried to avoid me, for obvious reasons. He didn't spend long looking for books, and I saw him checking them out on the self-service. He looked a bit of a mess. When he used to come in and talk to Molly, he always looked quite, er...' – she looked up – 'fashionable, I suppose? Jeans, trainers, T-shirt and overshirt. Combed hair. Last Saturday, his T-shirt was crumpled and he had a short unruly beard. He looked like he wasn't looking after himself. I was just glad Molly wasn't there and that he left quickly. That really is everything.'

Gina glanced at Jacob. They were dealing with a man who appeared to have developed a bit of an obsession with a teenage girl. She wondered, too, if the man really had a disabled daughter at home, who needed him when he was never coming home.

Was she the girl in the photo? But it was highly suspicious that he was using a library card that wasn't his.

She thought about the note in his car. Why would he want them to save her?

There was a girl somewhere who needed to be found.

She had to speak to Molly; find out if the man said anything to her that she didn't share with her mother. 'Ms Sailsbury, where is your daughter now?'

'Her friend's parents have taken them to Drayton Manor for the day.'

'Can you come into the station after work to make a formal statement?'

'Of course. Was I right to worry about him?'

Gina pressed her lips together, not knowing how much to disclose. 'We don't know, but it would also really help if we could speak to your daughter.'

'She'll be home about six this evening. Shall I come then and bring her with me?'

Gina nodded. 'Yes, please. That would really help our enquiries.'

Rona stood and grabbed her coffee cup off the desk. 'I'll see you then.'

She opened the door and Gina saw a line of tiny children, all laughing and chatting as

they headed to the beanbag area.

Her phone beeped. It was Detective Constable Paula Wyre, calling from the station.

‘Guv, we have a witness. Someone has come forward after seeing the board on the road. He saw a man standing on the railway bridge last night, about half a mile down the road. The witness pulled up in his car and tried to talk the man down. The man got down off the bridge and told the witness to get lost. The witness thought he saw him throwing a phone over the bridge before he walked off.’

Gina glanced at Jacob. ‘Can you ask the witness to come in and make a formal statement? We need some officers down at the bridge, too, to see if they can find the phone.’

‘Yes, but there’s more. The witness said he walked off muttering to himself, something on the lines of, “I’m sorry, someone will come for you. I’m a monster.”’

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### SEVEN

Gina and Jacob left their cars at the end of the road. She quickly finished eating a banana and placed the bagged skin in her handbag. Lunchtime had come and gone and Gina hoped that small offering to her stomach might just stop it rumbling. Parking was tight by Calvin Harris's mid-terraced house.

'They might be related,' Jacob said, as if reading her mind. 'Maybe John Doe is Calvin Harris's son.'

Gina stepped from the pavement onto the mossy slabs that led to Mr Harris's front door. The house had brand-new grey cladding all over the frontage and the front door stood proud from the facade, neatly decorated with a false leafy wreath. She knocked and several minutes later, a teen boy answered. A line of acne led from the crease of his nose to his forehead.

'Hello, I'm DI Harte and this is DS Driscoll.' They held their identification up. 'Are your parents or guardians in?'

'Er, my mum's in the bath and my dad's at work. I'll call Mum. Come in.' He stood away from the door and let them into the small but modern lounge. Gina stepped onto the shiny wooden floor as the young man called up the stairs. 'Mum, the police are here to see you.'

'Huh,' the woman upstairs shouted, sounding as if she'd just woken up.

'The police are here. I'll make a drink.' He came into the living room. 'Do you want

to sit?’

‘Thank you,’ Gina said as she and Jacob sat on the leather settee.

‘Can I get you a coffee or tea?’

Gina and Jacob both requested a coffee and the young man went into the kitchen, leaving them alone. Gina could hear footsteps above so she knew the woman wouldn’t be long.

She glanced around the room, taking in the wall of photos next to the television, wondering if she could spot a photo of their dead man, but she couldn’t. Calvin Harris may not even live in the same house any longer, but the occupants might know where he moved to.

The woman hurried down the stairs wearing a fluffy bathrobe, her hair gathered up in a pink towel. The boy came back in and placed two cups of coffee down on the glass table.

‘Thanks,’ Gina and Jacob murmured. ‘Can I take your name, please?’ Gina asked, as Jacob started heading up a page in his notepad.

‘Can you tell me what this is about first?’ She frowned and folded her arms.

‘We found a body this morning, and we need to ask if you know someone called Calvin Harris.’

This time she raised her brows. ‘I’m his daughter, but it can’t have been my dad you found; he’s been dead for nearly a decade.’

‘We know it wasn’t Mr Harris, but the man we found was using your father’s library



card. We didn't know he was dead, though; we were hoping to speak to him. Could I please take your name now?'

'Josie Pickard.'

'Do you know how someone could be in possession of your father's library card after all these years?'

She sat on the armchair closest to the window and remained silent as she thought.

'I remember Grandad mentioning being burgled years ago, Mum. Could it have been then?' The boy knelt on the floor, the other side of the coffee table.

Josie began fiddling with the tassels on a cushion. 'Maybe.'

'Could you tell me a little about the incident?' Gina asked.

'I know my dad called the police. I think it was... let me think.' She began counting on her fingers silently. 'Eighteen, maybe nineteen years ago. He was just a baby.' She nodded towards her son. 'I came over here straight away. I grew up in this house and it hurt to see that some pond scum had ransacked it. You should have records.'

Gina made a note to check out the incident. 'Did they catch anyone?'

Josie shook her head. 'No. My dad didn't even know when it happened as he'd been on holiday. He saw the damage when he got back. The burglar came in through the back and took his old phone, a bit of money he kept in a drawer, his camera and the wallet he doesn't use. My dad always had two wallets. The one he took everywhere, with his current account card and a bit of cash in it. The other one housed the credit cards he barely used and a load of loyalty cards. It is possible that his library card was in that wallet, too. He did cancel his credit cards, but there was no attempt to use

them. So, do you think this dead man was the man who burgled my dad?’

‘We don’t know, but it is a possibility.’

‘Actually, I recall that some of his loyalty cards were found nearby. The burglar had ditched them.’

Gina wondered if their dead man had simply found the library card on the path and decided to use it. Maybe he wasn’t actually the burglar. ‘Where were these cards found?’

‘Just outside the back garden.’

‘Can I take a look?’ Gina asked.

‘Of course. If you think it will help, but it was such a long time ago.’ Josie stood and led Jacob and Gina through the narrow-fitted kitchen, out of the bifold doors.

‘What’s behind the gate?’

‘Resident parking spaces – we all have a space allocated to us there. There’s no space on the road. It’s also a courtyard with only one way in, so no one comes here apart from residents and guests of residents. It was the same when my dad lived here.’

Gina walked to the end of the garden and peered over the gate. She wondered if the person who picked up the library card had been a resident. ‘Where exactly were the cards found?’

Josie opened the gate, her slippers slapping on the road with each step. ‘Here, right next to my dad’s parking space. Dad didn’t have a car, he preferred the bus; he liked to chat to people.’

‘Did he have many visitors?’

‘Only one around that time, and police couldn’t find him after the burglary. He used to like playing chess with this man who popped over now and again. Dad used to like him and they sometimes met at the pub.’

‘Do you know his name or anything else about him?’

‘Not really. He lived close by and would park in Dad’s space when he visited. I know he had a daughter, too, and he was always asking dad’s advice as he was struggling to look after her on his own.’

‘Did you ever see him?’

‘Sorry, no. I know he had a Transit van – Dad mentioned this friend had picked up a second-hand bed for him.’

‘Did your dad say how old this man’s daughter was?’

‘No, she was disabled, though, which is why he never brought her out. I know my dad had invited her around with him and he thought it odd that his van wasn’t equipped for a wheelchair user. Oh, Dad mentioned that he home-schooled her, too.’

It sounded like the same man Rona had been describing, but this was years before.

‘Which pub did your dad meet this man at?’

‘Always the Angel Arms. He loved that pub. That’s where the chess club used to meet.’

Gina knew that none of the current staff at the Angel Arms had worked there back then, so there was no point asking them. Then she thought about the group of older

men who were always playing dominoes. Maybe they would remember Calvin Harris and this friend who played chess with him.

A flutter of panic filled her chest as she thought about John Doe's daughter.

Rona mentioned that her daughter, Molly, had seen a picture of a girl in a wheelchair, but Calvin Harris and this man were friends nearly twenty years ago.

Something was terribly off, and Gina knew she had to find this girl – or woman –before it was too late.

The items in John Doe's boot suggested he should have gone back to her and he hadn't.

How long would she survive without him?

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

EIGHT

GIRL

Today, I'm eating Mum's home-made pizza. She makes the dough with yeast – I know that because I help her. We roll it out and wait. While we wait, we make the tomato sauce, slowly reducing fresh vine tomatoes with garlic, fresh basil and olive oil. Mum is a chef and she has tried so hard to teach me things. She said that nothing in life is as good as fresh, wholesome food.

As it comes together and the cheese grills, the kitchen is filled with the most amazing smell and my mouth waters. When I grow up, I want to be just like Mum. She said we can have our own restaurant – Mum and daughter making the best food ever. I can hang my artwork up in it to sell.

As I bite, I allow each flavour to roll around my tongue before I begin chewing. Appreciating every bite is what Mum and I do. We don't watch movies while we eat, we savour our food. Mum says food needs to be enjoyed to its fullest. We are so alike it makes me want to cry. Did I say how much I love my mum?

Tears begin to roll down my cheeks as the dried bread and cheese cloy in my throat. All I want to do is go back in time and tell her I'm sorry. I told her I didn't want her to pick me up after the school play. I said she'd embarrass me in front of my friends. If only I hadn't been so mean to her.

I bet she's glad I'm not there. Maybe I deserve this.

Him stroking my hair makes me want to shiver, but I suppress the movement. If I flinch, it will give me away. Right now, he's feeding me and that's all I can ask for. If he doesn't come tomorrow, I will die down here.

'Look at me,' he says.

I don't want to turn my head. I don't want to pretend to smile, but if I don't he'll be angry and he'll hurt me again.

Slowly, I turn my head with the best smile I have. 'Thank you for the sandwich.'

He stares at me for too long, but I keep that smile going.

I wish I could say that he was a complete stranger, but he isn't. I know him and I thought he was so nice when we first spoke.

He places a dress down on the bed: a blue pinafore he's teamed up with a frilly, white blouse. I'm sure the dress will come down to my calves. Next to it, he places a thick pair of white tights and some flat pumps.

'No girl of mine dresses like a slut. Put them on.'

I look around at the cell. The butterflies in my mind have long gone and the smell of pizza has been replaced by the scent of my own urine.

He leans back against the cold wall, his muscles taut and a stern look on his face. I don't want to change in front of him. 'Can you turn around, please?'

He smirks. Leaning forward, he grabs the neckline of my vest top and thrusts me against the wall. My feet dangle and I'm choking.

His dreams are my dreams.

I allow myself to go limp, to submit to his will, and that tells him he's won. His grip loosens and I fall onto the stone floor, crushing my tailbone. I don't yell or scream. I inwardly cry.

'Change.'

As I peel off my vest top and mini skirt, I hold my hands over my bra and pants and stop. He hasn't left me any underwear and I don't want to take them off. I have never stripped in front of anyone except Mum. I have kissed two boys and I allowed one of them to touch my breast over the top of my school shirt, but that's it.

Tears fill my eyes and I hope that he has one shred of decency. He reaches towards me and I let out a little shriek and close my eyes, but he doesn't touch me. I open them again and he is now passing me the dress. I want to snatch it off him but I take it gently.

'Thank you.' Then I slip it over my head. He goes to take the cupcake scarf, but I grip it, my knuckles white.

He lets go of it. 'Keep it for being a good girl.'

With that, he turns around and walks up the metal ladders and out of the hatch.

I break down.

I climb the rungs and try to push the hatch, like I have done several times now, but it is firmly locked. I climb back down, feeling the walls again, and I stop at the wall with the metal door in it. I bang, but all I can hear is the echo. My imagination runs wild as I try to picture what might be behind the door.

We're underground. Maybe there's a way out through that door. I don't remember getting here. I don't know if I'm in the country or a town.

I long to hear the birds singing. I miss cuddling my cat so much.

I run my hands all around the door, trying to find a weakness somewhere, but I'm not hopeful. No one can break down a locked metal door – no one!

That's when I feel something sharp.

I pull at it and the tears spill out and my body shakes. I am holding a whole fingernail, and the dried brown around the edges must be blood. It's painted in a chipped pink varnish.

I pound on the door, shouting.

The lights go off and a dot of a red night light is all I see. I bang on the door again. 'Are you in there?'

The owner of the nail has to be behind the door. There are others, just like me, and I now know, I am not his first.



## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

NINE

Evening was falling, and Gina sipped her fruit tea as she waited for Rona and her daughter to be interviewed.

Jacob entered the kitchen. 'We have Rona's statement, now it's time to speak to her daughter. Shall we keep them in the family room?' He poured himself a coffee.

'Yes. We want her to feel at ease. It's not going to be comfortable for her. I just hope she can help us.' Gina paused. 'Is there someone with them?'

Jacob nodded. 'PC Benton is specially trained in this field. She will be helping them through the investigation and assisting with follow-up help for Molly and Rona if needed.'

'Great. I can't stop thinking about that girl in the photo.'

Detective Constable Harry O'Connor ran in, light from above bouncing off his shiny head. 'Guv, they found something at the railway bridge.'

'What is it?'

'A smashed-up phone. A train had gone over it so it's not recoverable, but there was another photo and it's of our dead man and the same girl.'

He turned his phone around to show Gina and she felt her legs turn jelly-like. The sight of the same skinny, pale girl, again with her hair flopped over her face. This

time she was wearing a long blue dress while sitting hugging her knees on a clean bed. Gina couldn't see any of her facial features except her round chin and a forced-looking smile. Next to her was their John Doe holding one hand out as he took the selfie, a smile on his face, his other arm around her shoulders. The girl was clutching something – it was the red cupcake scarf.

‘Get the team gathered in the incident room for a briefing. As soon as I’ve spoken to Molly, we need to formulate a plan. Call everyone in. Any planned days off are now cancelled.’

Her worst fears had been confirmed.

She placed her drink on the counter and beckoned Jacob to follow her to the family room. She walked in first to find Rona sitting on the couch talking to her daughter and PC Benton sitting in a chair near the door. The slight girl placed her feet down on the floor, tapping them in her chunky trainers. Her baggy jeans rode up slightly, exposing a pink sock.

‘Hello, Molly. Thank you so much for coming to talk to us. Has your mum spoken to you yet?’

The girl nodded and parted her straight, blonde fringe. ‘She said it’s about Calvin.’

Gina watched as Jacob made a note. John Doe had been careful to make sure he used Calvin’s name while in the library. ‘It is, but his name wasn’t Calvin.’

‘Mum said.’ The girl gripped her mother’s hand. ‘I’m so sorry I didn’t listen to you, Mum.’

‘It’s okay, love. Just tell them all you know.’

‘Mum said he’s dead.’

‘That’s right,’ Gina replied.

‘What about his daughter?’

‘We are very concerned for her right now, and we need to find out who this man is so we can help her. Can you tell me about him?’

Molly swallowed and looked into her lap. ‘He told me she needed a friend as she couldn’t leave the house, and he said she liked reading, too, as he was getting books out for her. I...’

‘It’s okay, Molly.’ Rona nodded for Molly to continue.

Molly stood and grabbed her hair as she walked over to the door and sobbed.

‘What is it, love?’ Rona followed Molly and hugged her. ‘You can tell me anything.’

‘I don’t want to tell you. I hate myself.’

‘Tell me what?’

Gina tilted her head. ‘You’re doing really well, Molly, and we are so grateful you are telling us this as it will help us a lot. I can see this is hard for you. Can we get you anything?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I just want this over with.’

Molly and Rona both sat back down, and Molly turned to face Gina, who could see the pain etched in the girl’s face. ‘He came in a few weeks ago when you weren’t at

the library, Mum. I can't remember when. Maybe it was the beginning of August. I was just reading after school for a bit, actually I was meant to meet Paul from school to do homework, but he bailed on me.'

'Did that creep hurt you?' Rona clenched her fists.

Molly slammed her hand on the coffee table. 'I need to tell this my way, okay?'

Rona nodded and pulled out a scrunched-up tissue from her pocket, then dabbed the corners of her eyes.

'When he came into the library that day, he gave me his number. He said his daughter had been really depressed and that he'd told her about me. He said she was really excited to meet me. I asked for her number, too, but he said she didn't have a phone. He said that she was really sick and that phones made her worse – something to do with microwaves – but she could use his phone for a little while. I didn't really understand.'

Rage surged inside Gina, but she managed to contain it as Jacob continued noting everything down. 'What happened next?'

'We messaged back and forth over the next few days. He sent me photos of their dog and their house, and he asked if I'd like to watch a film and have a takeaway with his daughter one night. I said yes.'

'Did he mention her name?' Gina hoped he did.

'Yes, her name is Luna.'

'Did he say how old she is?'

‘No, just that she was about my age and he wanted us to be friends.’

‘And after you and he messaged, what happened then?’

Molly began to scratch her head, then she hunched over, elbows on her knees. ‘Mum, I didn’t mean for it to happen.’

Rona wrapped an arm around her daughter. ‘Whatever happened is not your fault, okay?’

The girl sat back up and nodded, her red, puffy eyes stark. ‘He said he’d pick me up one evening that weekend. I waited at the bus stop on Cleavesford High Street. He pulled up and I got in his car. He was meant to bring the dog with him – he messaged to say he’d just left the park with the dog. I didn’t think about it at first, but as soon as he pulled off, I thought, where is the dog ? I asked him and he laughed, saying he’d dropped the dog off at a friend’s house. It didn’t make sense. He pulled over on a country lane and I asked him why. That’s when he...’

‘You’re doing really well, love.’ Rona’s hands were shaking.

‘He told me he really liked me and that he thought that I liked him, too. I tried to laugh it off, and I said that Luna would be waiting for us. He put his hand on my leg and I froze. I looked around and it was almost dark. There were just country lanes ahead and behind and I didn’t know how I’d get home if I ran out of the car.’

Rona sniffed. ‘You can call me anytime from anywhere, you know that. I will always come.’

‘I know, but I knew you’d be angry that I got in his car, especially as I knew you didn’t like him. When I asked if Luna was expecting us, he shrugged like she suddenly didn’t matter. I knew then that something was seriously wrong. He grabbed

me, but I hit him, then I opened the car door and ran. He tried to chase me, but I hid behind a tree for about an hour. He kept shouting for me to come back; that he only wanted me to go to his house to meet Luna, that she was expecting me. A part of me felt like I'd gone way over the top. He called again, saying he didn't mean to accidentally touch my leg, and to come back, that I wouldn't be able to find my way back to Cleavesford, and that he'd take me straight home if I wanted him to. I felt stupid by this time. My mind kept replaying when he'd touched me and I thought that maybe it was an accident, but I didn't want to be near him so I kept quiet. Eventually he left.'

'Where did you go then?' Gina wondered how Molly had got home.

'I kept walking in the dark until I found a road sign.'

'And which road did you end up on?'

'Hereford Lane. I called Paul, begging him to come and get me. Paul is seventeen and he has a car. He picked me up and he dropped me home. I told him that I'd been seeing a friend and I couldn't find a bus stop. He looked at me like I was on another planet, but he was also meeting a boy he fancied so he was eager to drop me off. Mum,' – she turned to Rona – 'you were at Betty's house.'

Rona piped up. 'Betty is my neighbour. She lost her husband earlier this year and I have been spending a lot of time with her.'

'Anyway, when Paul dropped me off, I had a shower and went to bed, and it was then I decided I didn't want to meet up with Luna or see Calvin again. I was angry with myself for getting into his car, and I was so ashamed because even I know it was a stupid thing to do, but I trusted him. After that night, all I wanted to do was forget about it and move on.'

Gina cleared her drying throat. Her mind had been whirring with how terrified Molly must have felt. ‘Molly, you’ve been through a traumatic event. PC Benton here’ – she nodded to the PC – ‘will inform you of what help there is available because you’ve been through a lot.’ Gina paused. ‘Do you still have the messages he sent you?’

‘I deleted them as I didn’t want Mum to see them. I also got a new phone with a new number three weeks ago. I downloaded a few things onto my computer to transfer over, but did a factory reset on the old one, which I sold to a second-hand shop.’

‘Was it a contract phone?’ Gina knew they could contact the service provider for the messages, and that would give them a date of when Molly was in John Doe’s car.

Molly looked at her mum and shrugged.

Rona nodded. ‘Yes, it was.’

Gina let out a slow breath. ‘I’ll get a police officer to take those details when we’ve finished here, if that’s okay?’ She hoped they could bring them closer to identifying the man and finding the girl but realistically, she knew she wouldn’t have that information immediately.

‘Of course,’ Molly said. ‘I just hope that Luna is okay.’

Molly’s shoulders slumped again and she hunched over. ‘Wait, I saved a photo of Luna that he sent me. I have it on my phone.’ She thumbed through the menus until her photos came up, then she passed the phone to Gina.

Gina looked at the photo of the young girl sitting in the wheelchair. Her dark hair had been neatly tied back with a bow, and she had the widest smile. Everything about the teenager looked glossy, which was a far cry from the photos they’d found at the crime scene.

It wasn't the same girl.

There was no birthmark on the girl's cheek and the photo was so crisp, with just the right amount of background blur, that Gina could tell it had been professionally taken. This was not the girl in the photo but it was a lead.

'Could you please send me this photo when we finish speaking?'

Molly nodded.

'Do you remember what type of car he was driving?'

'It was small and blue. I don't know the make.'

Gina knew that John Doe had been found in a stolen blue Ford Fiesta. 'Can you remember anything else he said; anything about where he might live or his home life, hobbies, interests?'

'I think he said that Luna likes the horses that were in the nearby field. I don't know which field. He also said they play chess and that she's really good, but she still rarely beat him. I found what he said next a bit weird: he said he would never allow her to beat him, that to win, you had to plan several moves ahead, and that Luna couldn't even plan her next one.'

'Did he ever mention Luna's mother?'

'She left them, that's all he said. I didn't like what he said next, but I thought that maybe she'd run off with someone else. He called her a slag.'



TEN

RUTH

Ruth Pritchard yawned. Several people piled out of the leisure centre, with gym bags thrown over their shoulders. She needed to get a move on and set up for the badminton match. It was going to be a late one.

She thought of Eric, her handsome silver fox. He'd already be at her house, and she couldn't wait to get home and snuggle with him, especially after the talk they'd had. It had cleared the air as far as she was concerned. After coming out of a long and tough marriage, she hadn't been sure about getting in too deep with Eric. The mere mention of cooling things down had left such a sadness on his face, she'd felt awful. What was she thinking? She only hoped that she hadn't pushed him away. She had some making up to do.

A girl passed her, hair wet from swimming. Ruth held up a hand. 'Have a good evening.' The coffee shop queue was getting longer. Ruth was longing for a macchiato.

'Ruth, could you take the dance class poster down from the window? That started a week ago,' her supervisor said. He hurried past before she even had chance to reply.

She checked her watch. So much to do and so little time, and now she needed to remove that poster, too.

Jogging towards the double-length glass window, she began to peel at the corners of

the poster, but the tape covering the last corner had split. Annoyed, she began to dig her nail under it in an attempt to get a grip. 'Got you,' she said, as the poster flopped down. She scooped it up and scrunched it into a ball, before tossing it into the nearby bin.

As she was about to turn and head to the sports hall, she stopped and saw a woman staring at her. Most of her hair was covered by a baker boy style cap, and her long mac almost reached the pavement. A small child in tracksuit bottoms and a puffy coat began pulling at the woman's coat. She leaned down and scooped the small child up in her arms before casting one more intense stare Ruth's way and leaving.

The humidity from the swimming pool wasn't enough to control the shiver running through Ruth.

Something about that moment wasn't right, but the woman was gone.

She checked her watch : late, late, late.

Her trainers squeaked on the floor as she turned and ran towards the sports hall, the woman's intense stare still emblazoned in her mind.

### ELEVEN

Gina was glad the incident room was buzzing with talk of the case. The board had been populated with information, and all the locations relating to the case had been pinned on the large map.

O'Connor sat at the far end, typing away on a desktop computer. He paused as he brought the image of the girl in the wheelchair up on his screen.

As Gina inhaled, the sickly scent of salted caramel gateaux hit her nostrils, making her crave sugar. That's when she saw the cake proudly displayed on the middle of the table, with only a small chunk missing. Jacob grabbed the knife and began to cut himself a large piece.

'Mrs O accidentally mixed an order up. She was meant to bake this in two days for a party, so she said we could have it. I thought we could all do with the sugar to keep us going.' O'Connor prodded a teaspoon into his slice and began eating.

Gina knew she had to give the cake a miss. She was trying to reduce her cholesterol, not send it through the roof. 'Any updates from forensics?'

DC Wyre brushed her poker-straight black fringe behind her ears. 'Nothing as yet. The body has left the scene and the car has been taken to the secure compound. We should know more later. There are mountains of items taken from the car scene and the railway bridge. It's all still in the process of being booked into evidence.'

'Have the statements from everyone on Cawley's Farm been uploaded onto the

system?’

Wyre nodded. ‘Yes, there was nothing showing a connection to the family that own the farm.’

Trainee DC Kapoor hurried in with a tablet and took a seat at the back. DCI Briggs entered and headed straight to the front of the room before stopping at the board. Everyone hushed as he proceeded to speak. Gina saw how crooked his tie was and she wanted to reach over and straighten it. He smiled at her as if he sensed her thoughts.

‘Just to update you all, I’ve issued a press release relaying only basic information about the incident. I will be working with an artist overnight to try to come up with a sketch of John Doe that we can share tomorrow. We can’t exactly use the crime scene photos. I will also ask the artist to draw the girl, too. Again, the photos are too disturbing to show the public. Gina, how have the interviews gone today?’

She poured herself a glass of water from the jug on the table and stood next to him. Grabbing a pin, she pressed it into Hereford Lane on the map. She followed that with another pin on Cleavesford High Street bus stop. ‘Jacob and I have just been speaking to Molly Sailsbury, the daughter of the librarian, Rona. I’ve updated the system about Calvin Harris. Is everyone up to speed on that?’

Murmurs of ‘Yes’ filled the room.

‘Great. We know that John Doe was using Calvin Harris’s library card and was pretending that was his name to Molly. It appears Molly was groomed by John Doe – I’ll call him John Doe until we’ve formally identified him. She met up with him at this bus stop in Cleavesford.’ She pointed to the pin she had pressed into the map. ‘He picked her up in a blue car and took her to the other pinned location, which is Hereford Lane, where she said that he assaulted her. She was scared and managed to

escape from his car. From speaking with Molly, we know that John Doe plays chess. This links him to the real Calvin Harris as Calvin's daughter said that he had a friend he played chess with. They met at the Angel Arms. Jacob and I are going to head over there next to see if any of the longstanding regulars remember him, or more importantly, can identify John Doe. Molly also mentioned horses near to where he lived so it's possible we are looking at a rural location. Then again, he might have mentioned horses to draw poor Molly in but we need to look into it. Kapoor?'

'Yes, guv?' Kapoor looked up from her notepad. 'I also checked on Cawley's Farm and they don't own any horses.'

'Can you research local horse ownership? You could even check records with the local vets. Check riding schools, petting zoos and farms.'

Kapoor nodded.

'Wyre, are you looking into missing persons?'

Wyre looked up. 'Yes, and I haven't found anyone matching the girl's description so far, but I'll keep looking.'

'Great, thank you. I know you've already contacted the service provider regarding Molly's phone, or should I say Rona's as the contract is in her name. Can you stay on top of them? Keep chasing to see if they can get hold of Molly's messages? Molly can't remember when this incident occurred, but it was only last month so the service provider should still have them. If we can obtain the messages, they will give us exact dates and times.'

'They've been cooperative so far, guv. I'm hoping they get back to us soon, but I wouldn't hold out any hope for it being tonight.'

‘O’Connor, how are you getting on with the photo of our girl in the wheelchair?’

He placed his hands on the desk and pushed his chair away with his feet, rolling slightly. ‘Bad news.’

‘How?’

Briggs also leaned in to hear what O’Connor had to say.

‘It appears the photo of the girl in the wheelchair is a catalogue photo taken from a company selling mobility aids. She’s a model. I did an image search online.’

Gina sighed and placed both hands on the main table. ‘We knew she wasn’t the girl in the other photos; he was obviously using that to lure Molly in. What we do know is that there’s another girl out there, and I don’t know how long we have left to find her. We need something, anything . Don’t let me hold you all up any longer.’

She stepped out of the main room and began to take a few deep breaths. Her personal phone beeped again. She grabbed it out of her pocket and almost froze as she read the email.

It was an internet alert she’d subscribed to, set up on the name VenMan.

She clicked on the link, which took her to another forum. She went to click it, but it came up with a login.

Damn . She couldn’t access it, and there was no option to set an account up.

Her head went slightly woozy and she hurried further away from the commotion to steady herself against the wall by Briggs’s office where she read the only thing she could, the header.

When a murdering bitch takes one of our brothers, they take us all. This is war! When will you all stand up and take action??? This brother needs you.

‘Gina, are you okay?’

As Briggs placed his warm hand on her lower back, she popped her phone back into her pocket and smiled. If only they were back in Scotland, enjoying cosy walks and dinners where the real world didn’t matter. She hated hiding things from him but she had to deal with this herself. ‘Yes, it’s just this case. The thought of that girl out there somewhere. We don’t even know who she is or what he’s done to her.’

She paused and wondered if she should tell Briggs about the messages. She’d covered them up for so long. Then she dismissed that thought. She could handle Stephen by herself. Things were going to get tougher yet; she just needed to ride it out until Stephen got bored. She swallowed. That mock up, using her eyes, had crossed another line. He’d made his next move and she had nothing to come back at him with.

‘What’s the plan?’ Briggs’s question snapped her back to the present.

She wished she could tell him that the plan was to find Stephen and work out a way to shut him down before some psycho turned up at her doorstep, but that was her problem. ‘Go to the Angel and see what we can find out from some of the longstanding regulars,’ she said instead.

‘You haven’t seemed yourself lately, Gina. I feel like you’re shutting me out.’ He opened his office door and gestured for her to follow.

‘I’m fine, absolutely fine.’

‘Really? Shall I pop over to yours later, then, or maybe we could eat together?’ He turned away as Annie from corporate communications hurried past them. Gina looked

down. ‘Didn’t think so. Have I done something? You haven’t been the same since the last case. I thought we were good. I mean, we were good in Scotland. What’s changed?’

She didn’t need this kind of pressure in her life. Once she’d sorted Stephen out, she’d tell him. ‘Look, I said I’m fine.’

She left him standing as she hurried back to the incident room. If even one word about the emails and the online harassment slipped out of her mouth, the whole story would slip out. So far, no one had mentioned Briggs, and the best thing she could do was keep him out of it. If it helped for him to believe she was trying to avoid him, then she would let him think that.

‘Guv.’ Jacob met her in the corridor.

‘What is it?’

‘Forensics found something on that bloodied sheet from John Doe’s car. Someone has written a note in charcoal on the corner – it’s a bit smudgy, but it’s clear enough. It says, “I’m scared he’ll die and if he dies, I’ll die. Is there anyone out there?” ’



### TWELVE

### RUTH

The shimmering tea lights floated in the crystal bowl of water that Eric had placed in the centre of the table. Ruth stood speechless at the entrance of the dining room, instantly forgetting the weird woman standing outside the leisure centre earlier.

No one had ever gone to this much effort to make her happy. Eric came up behind her, his polo shirt covered with her stripy apron. 'Hello, my love,' he whispered. 'I've made you a really special dinner. It's beef bourguignon.'

'Is it my birthday?' she joked.

'It's better than that.' He nudged alongside her to finish laying the table, then he stood to face her. His neatly cut grey hair and beard melted her heart. A thought went out to Gary, her ex. He was definitely still upset that she was with Eric, but that wasn't set to change anytime soon. She had a right to be happy. The years were slipping away and she'd been apart from Gary for eleven months now. She was in her sixties and, for once, she was living life for herself.

She swallowed as she tried to put her past pain out of her mind, then she kissed Eric gently on the lips. 'I'm sorry about the other night. I got nervous about jumping in too soon but I also know I hurt you. You mean everything to me and I don't want to lose you. You've really been my rock and I know I haven't appreciated you as much as I should have but I've had so much on my mind.' She paused. 'I love you, Eric.' She looked at him. He was her sunshine in the storm. Gosh, that sounded corny in her

head. She was so glad she hadn't said that out loud to him.

'Good, because I love you.' He turned towards the table and started to make a swan out of a serviette. It wasn't working, but she admired his attempt and laughed as he dropped the scrunched-up tissue on the table.

Gary still hadn't moved on and she knew he'd do anything to have her back, but their relationship had become one based on trauma and pain. It had festered for years and turned toxic. She felt guilty at wanting to jump for joy that her decree absolute had arrived in the post earlier that day.

Eric was the complete opposite to Gary: he was lovely and attentive to her needs, faithful – she had to add that to the list. Gary had regularly come back with another woman's hair stuck to his clothing or smelling of perfume, and he always lied to her, saying it was nothing. It almost drove her crazy in the end.

She trusted Eric not to cheat on her.

He cooked and cleaned too. With Gary, she'd felt like the hired help without any pay.

'Thank you,' she said with a smile. Forget Gary, if only for tonight.

Eric pulled the dining chair out for her, taking her jacket as she passed. Once she'd sat, he nudged the chair in.

It had been a long day at the leisure centre. She'd stayed late to oversee a badminton match, but she was home now. Her mouth began to water as he brought the casserole dish through and placed it on a trivet. Moments later, he returned with a dish of buttered greens and creamy mash, which he served to her.

'Right, I hope this is to your standard.'

He grabbed a bottle of champagne from under the table. She gave him a toothy smile: it wasn't just any champagne, it was Dom Pérignon. No supermarket brand for this meal. Eric was so sweet he made her heart melt.

'To my standard? It smells wonderful, besides, just you cooking for me means so much.'

'Right, I want to propose a toast.'

As the cork popped, Ruth let out a tiny shriek of excitement. 'A toast. How exciting.' She knew he was also excited about her divorce coming through. He carefully filled two flutes and passed one to her. As she sipped, the bubbles tickled her nose and made her giggle like she was twenty again.

'Yes, my love. A toast to us. It's been a whole three months, and they have been the best of my life, which is why I've made this meal. You know I love you with all my heart.' He paused.

'To love.' They clinked glasses. 'Can I try this lovely food now? The smell is making my mouth water.'

He nodded. 'Yes, I hope it's okay.' He waited for her to try it, nervousness etched across his face.

She popped a bit of everything onto one forkful, and the moment it hit her taste buds she was in heaven.

'This is amazing . Now I know you can cook this well, the job is yours.'

She started telling him about her day; about the match and the players, about some woman who had complained that her kids kept getting verrucas.

‘I don’t know which bit of “we disinfect the floors all the time,” she didn’t understand. They’re probably not washing their floors or towels at home. Anyway, she went off on one, screaming and shouting that she was going to complain to the manager, then she cancelled her membership. People!’

Again, the strange woman outside came to the forefront of her mind. Her long mac and the child standing next to her. Who was she? Ruth went to tell Eric about her but changed her mind. The woman was probably just waiting for someone.

Eric laughed as he finished his champagne and the last of his meal. ‘It’s been a long day for you. Nothing eventful happened at home. I had to pop to the shop and put a few orders in, then I came here to cook.’ He placed his napkin on the table. ‘But, I hope you’ll remember this day forever, and not because of some woman screaming about verrucas.’

She scrunched her brow. ‘I’m never going to forget this meal. You know...’ A tear formed in the corner of one of her eyes. ‘No one has ever cooked for me like this before.’

‘Good, because I want to spoil you like mad. There’s more.’

‘More? Oh, Eric, you’ve done enough.’ She struggled to contain her emotions. ‘I am so happy and silly.’ She wiped the trailing happy tear away.

He stood and cleared his throat, then he instructed the smart speaker to play ‘Endless Love’.

‘You’re my first love. I know we found each other late in life, but I have never felt like this, Ruth. I thought I’d loved before, but now I know I haven’t. This is the real thing for me, and I hope it is for you too.’ He began fiddling in his pocket, going red in the face as his hand got stuck, then he fell to one knee beside her. ‘Ruth, will you

marry me? I love you more than anything or anyone in this whole world.'

Tears began to fill both her eyes this time. This was her chance to start again. She'd never forget her loss, but she deserved happiness.

Maybe they could pool their assets; sell both of their houses and move into their very own home. She wanted to move away, to start again with Eric. Most of all, she loved him. That was all that mattered.

'Don't keep me waiting. Besides, I might not be able to get up soon. You know I have an arthritic knee.'

'Yes.' As he stood, she flung her arms around him. 'Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes,' she kept saying between kisses. Her gaze landed on the chess strategy book that sat on a pile of other books on the dresser. She pulled away. 'How did that get there?'

Eric looked back. 'The books?'

She nodded. 'The chess book.'

'I forgot to put those back in your cupboard when I was looking for the napkins. Sorry.' He paused and scrunched his brow as he looked at the books. 'I didn't know you liked playing chess.'

She thought she'd given Gary all his things but she must have missed the chess book. It wasn't hers. 'I don't.'

The doorbell rang. 'Who could that be at this time?' Eric walked towards the front door and peered through the spyhole. 'It's Gary.'

Her stomach dropped. She hated that he'd moved into the house opposite after they

split their assets. She got the house and he got all the money, which amounted to enough to buy his own house. He could have gone anywhere, but he chose the house on the opposite side of the road, where he could see through her front windows all day long. That was another reason to sell up and go.

She snatched up the chess book and placed it on the sideboard before opening the front door. 'What do you want?' He'd been drinking, she could tell, and she knew it was because he would also have received his decree absolute in the post.

'You've left your bin out. It looks unsightly. Oh, and that dirty snake's car has a flat tyre, someone probably slashed it.'

'I hate you, Gary. Mind your own bloody business and don't come to my door again.' She grabbed the chess book and pushed it into his chest.

Gary turned and staggered off with the book under his arm. All she could see was the back of the denim jacket she had always hated, the one with the picture of two horses that he thought made him look like a cowboy. Ridiculous. They lived in modern-day Warwickshire, not the Wild West. She slammed the door.

'That bastard!' Eric went to open it again, but Ruth held it closed.

'Don't, he's not worth it. We knew this would happen when he opened his post.'

'You need to move out of this house. I can't keep coming here with him living so close. Every time I pull up, he glares at me from that grimy bay window and now he's slashed my tyre.'

She nodded and smiled. 'You're right. I will put the house on the market tomorrow and Gary will never harass us again. Please don't let him spoil this moment.' She went to kiss Eric.

He responded, but he seemed a little sad. Ruth knew that he wanted to storm out there and have a go at Gary for slashing his tyre, but she was grateful that he didn't. She was already the centre of all the gossip in the cul-de-sac.

'Good, because if this carries on, I won't be responsible for my actions. I've never hurt anyone in my life. I'm a peaceful person, but he... he's pushing me to my limits, and if he ever hurts you...' He sighed. 'We need to call the police.'

She scratched her nose and sighed. 'We can't prove he damaged your tyre. They won't do anything.'

The police were the best option, she knew that deep down, but Gary had been through hell just like she had, and despite his behaviour, she couldn't bring herself to report him. He needed time to be able to move on from his feelings for her. When two people had such a tragic shared history, time was a gift, one she was willing to give Gary.

'Fine, but I'm getting you a camera tomorrow and putting it up. You shouldn't have to take this. I mean, his behaviour isn't on and it's not the first time he's done something like this. These are the kinds of things that happen in inner cities, not in quaint little villages. You can't keep letting Gary get away with things.'

She shivered. She couldn't tell Eric the whole truth, that Gary was watching her. She'd seen the outline of someone in her garden last night. It had to have been Gary.

'Okay. Tomorrow we camera the place up, and if we catch him in action we go to the police. Agreed?'

She didn't have the heart to tell Eric that she still wouldn't go to the police. Gary would come around. Their divorce was just raw and he was suffering.

‘Agreed.’



### THIRTEEN

Gina pulled up in the Angel Arms's car park and Jacob parked next to her. As she stepped out, she grabbed her bag and walked towards the main entrance with Jacob. She could see a group of men sitting in the bay window behind the leaded windows of the pub. On entering, she watched them placing dominoes down in turn.

'Have you both come to join us? It's domino evening.' Elouise stepped from behind the bar, her hair in a French plait, finished off with high-heeled shoes and a pencil skirt.

Gina shook her head and smiled. 'No, sorry.' Despite Elouise being in her fifties now, she always looked amazing. Gina felt like a complete mess.

'Does work bring you here?'

'Yes. Do you mind if we ask you a couple of questions?'

'No, but I have to stay in the bar. I'm on my own tonight. Take a seat.' She gestured at the stools. 'Drinks?'

Gina ordered a couple of coffees for her and Jacob. It had been a long day.

'And some crisps, guv.'

She felt her stomach grumbling, too, as she tapped her card to pay. After this call, she'd be able to go home to grab a few hours' sleep before heading back to the station

for their seven a.m. briefing.

Before sleep, she was going to delve into the world of Men-R-Takin-It-Back to see if Stephen – or more so, his online alias, VenMan – had been up to anything on there. She feared that she was barely going to get any sleep at all.

After sipping the filter coffee, she grimaced at its harshness. Jacob opened his crisps and began to crunch on them. She scrunched her nose up at the scent of cheese and onion.

‘So, what d’you want to know?’ Elouise poured herself a small glass of wine.

Gina pulled her work phone out. ‘I know you haven’t been running the Angel for many years, but I do know that, fifteen years ago, your father was the licensee, before he sold it.’ Gina remembered the creep-of-a-landlord after it left Elouise’s family, and she was glad he was gone.

‘You are going back a bit. I used to manage it when he went on holiday. I had my nail bar back then.’

‘Do you remember a regular called Calvin Harris?’

She pressed her red lips together and furrowed her brows. Light glinted off the optics behind her. ‘I can’t say that I do, but I bet some of the guys over there might know him.’

‘He used to play chess.’

Elouise glanced across at the men and one of them laughed as he slammed a domino on the table. ‘Wally over there used to play chess. He’s a bit of a grandmaster. If anyone remembers a fellow chess player from that long ago, it’ll be Wally.’

‘We obviously don’t want to disturb their fun but,’ – Gina glanced back – ‘we need some information on Calvin Harris. Someone’s safety depends on it and it can’t wait.’

‘I watched the news earlier. Is it anything to do with the man found dead in his car?’

Gina knew that Briggs had not mentioned how John Doe had died in his press release, so she kept tight-lipped.

‘It’s an ongoing investigation, so I can’t say anything, but it would really help if we could take Wally somewhere to talk.’

‘I understand.’ Elouise glanced into the back room where the pool table was kept. ‘It’s empty in there. I’ll put the jukebox on in here, too, if you want some added privacy.’

‘Thank you.’ Gina drank the rest of her coffee and Jacob popped his empty crisp packet down next to his cup. She slid off the stool and headed towards the table of men with her identification. ‘Sorry to interrupt. Wally?’

‘Hang on, I’m about to take this lot down.’ He placed his last domino on the table and the others roared and headed to the bar. ‘What can I do for a lovely young lady like yourself?’

‘I’m DI Harte and this is DS Driscoll. Would you mind if we go into the other room to talk?’

The jukebox began to blare out ‘Hey Jude’ by The Beatles, and a couple of the men began to sing along as they waited for their fresh pints. Gina nodded her thanks to Elouise for distracting them.

‘Of course not, but we’ll be starting a new game in a minute.’

‘We promise not to keep you long.’

The man struggled to stand, his shoulders and upper back hunched over. He leaned towards the other seat, grabbed a walking stick and began to hobble towards the back room.

Gina and Jacob slowly followed until he found a seat next to the pool table. Wally groaned as he bent down to sit. ‘Oh, to be young and fit again like you two are.’

They sat opposite him and Jacob was poised, ready to take down any information that might help them. Gina had pulled a seat with a back from another table. She didn’t feel young or fit, and sitting on a stool would give her backache.

‘What can I do for you? I’m assuming you’re not here to arrest me, but if you are I don’t know what I’ve done.’ He burst out laughing. ‘Actually, when I was drunk sometime back in 1972, I stole my neighbour’s window box. I didn’t even want it, but when I sobered up, I thought I’d get caught out if I gave it back, so I took it to the tip. I gather you don’t want to know about that?’ His porous red nose shone under the pool table’s trio of lamps. ‘I’m pulling your leg,’ he said to Gina as he laughed.

She smiled. She couldn’t imagine Wally ever being in trouble.

‘What do you want to know? I’ll help in any way I can.’

Gina tucked her loose strands of brown hair behind her ears. ‘Do you remember a man called Calvin Harris? He used to come in here, probably up until his death ten years ago. He was a keen chess player, like you, so we wondered if you knew him.’

Wally let out a burst of laughter. ‘That man started coming in here over twenty years

ago thinking he was the best. I beat him with fool's mate within a minute. The most obvious two moves and he didn't have a clue. I couldn't forget Cal. He was keen, though, I'll give the man his due. He swallowed his humiliation, learnt to play and he became a brilliant contender. You haven't come here to hear about all our games though, have you?'

Gina inhaled and let out a slow breath. 'It sounds like you had some fun times, and I wish I could chat to you for longer, but we're investigating a case. Do you remember a man he was friends with? A younger man who used to go back to his house to play chess with him.'

Wally stared at Gina, his creased eyes almost glassy. 'There was one man, and I didn't like him. He started to hang out with Calvin all the time and Calvin stopped meeting us as much.' He began muttering years under his breath. 'I'd say it was around 2007, as this man was present when one of the best wins I've ever seen happened. Felix Burton, the winner's name was. I could never forget that moment because the whole room was on their feet as he won. Calvin had brought this friend along to watch.'

'Would Felix Burton know him?'

'Felix died two years later and no one knew Calvin's friend. That man kept himself to himself.'

'Do you remember Calvin's friend's name?'

'No. I don't think Calvin ever introduced us. I just remember that he made me feel uneasy and I told Calvin that he shouldn't be taking strangers back to his house, but he thought the man needed a bit of help in life, a bit of guidance. Calvin was a soft touch. He was the type to take in waifs and strays, which is okay, but this one was weird.'

‘In what way?’

‘The way he used to stare at the girls.’

‘The girls?’

‘If you look out of the bay window where we play dominoes, there used to be a café opposite. It wasn’t a chip shop like now. It was a proper place. Instant coffee and bacon sarnies. He used to watch the girls coming and going in a pervy kind of way, or should I say girl . There was one he seemed to have a thing for. Apparently, she turned him down, and he used all kinds of derogatory language that I won’t repeat when it came to her. The man had a daughter. He was asking Calvin’s advice as she wasn’t well and he was having to home-school her. Something didn’t add up. Why wasn’t he at home with his little girl? And why was he perving on the girls at the café? I think Calvin told me that his ex had left him, but I didn’t believe him. I told Calvin as much and Calvin told me I was being stupid and unfair, that he was a young dad with a little girl who needed a bit of help. I also told him he needed to watch out for his own daughter, which Calvin took umbrage at, but I don’t think their paths ever crossed.’ He paused in thought. ‘It’s funny, isn’t it, how you don’t forget a person who stood out like a sore thumb, regardless of how much time has passed?’

‘Do you know how old he was?’

‘He had a beard and really messy facial hair, which I think probably made him look older than what he was. I’d go with mid to late twenties, but I’m not good with ageing people. He could have been older or younger, and he only really played Calvin so he didn’t mix with the rest of us. I’m guessing that, as he had a child who needed educating, the child must have been at least five.’

‘Is there anything at all you can remember about him; something that might help us identify him?’

‘He had a van. I know that because Calvin was trying to update things in his house and this man was picking up bulky furniture items for him.’

‘Do you know where he lived?’

‘No, but there is something on the tip of my tongue, I just can’t think. Argh, this is so frustrating.’ He pressed his lips together, frowning. The crowd in the other room started singing ‘Yellow Submarine’.

‘That’s it. He had a job. As well as looking after his daughter, he used to work part-time at a company that made ready meals, somewhere on Cleevesford Industrial Estate. He wore this red cap with Florida written on the front of it, but he’d never been there. I know that because I asked him.’

Gina knew of one factory that produced ready meals and they were still going. She waited for Jacob to jot that information down.

‘He had dark hair and an earring. He wore one small hoop earring. I remember that because it fell out and got caught in his beard one day and I told him.’

‘You’re really helping us. Is there anything else?’ Gina hoped that Wally could tell them more, but she feared that the information he had in him was coming to an end.

‘He mentioned a woman called Marie. Again, he was derogatory. He made comments about her...’ Wally placed a hand over his chest and pointed at the breast area. Gina nodded to Jacob to message the team. They needed information on Marie, the ready-meal factory and chess clubs.

Wally continued as Jacob typed a message out. ‘He said her tops were too low-cut and he called her a slag because she left him. That is not a word I’d use. I have daughters. Maybe now you know, you could find Marie. Maybe she worked at the

factory, too. Find Marie.'



FOURTEEN

KEELEY

Tuesday, 3 September

Keeley should have appreciated the sound of the birds tweeting just before the sun was due to rise, but she didn't. She hated leaving her kids and husband in bed while she headed out to do her cleaning shift at Cleevesford High. Every weekday was the same: she rose at four thirty and showered.

Before leaving, she had checked on the twins and seen they were sleeping deeply. The weekend couldn't come too soon, and it was only Tuesday. She needed to start looking for something to do in school hours, ready for when the boys started Reception later in the month.

The walk was the same every day: she left her house, crossed the high street and began the twelve – yes, twelve – minute walk away from the shops to reach the back road leading to the school. Each morning, she looked at the houses where rich people lived, just like she was doing now. All detached with at least four bedrooms, and gardens that seemed to reach for miles. Glancing up, she could see that all the windows were closed.

She shivered. There was a slight chill in the air.

The end of the path was near and the school was in sight. Just one more road to walk down. She looked at her phone: it was now five fifty.

Glancing ahead at the school car park, she could see that the others were already there and a few lights were now on. The art and science block were lit up. She inhaled, knowing her job was the PE hall and it was time to buff the floor. As soon as her shift was done she was going to go back to bed for a couple of hours.

Someone driving a white van pulled up just shy of the school gates. It was too early for tradespeople. Maybe the driver was lost.

The engine stopped humming. She walked around to the driver's side, past the huge white panel where she heard a click noise, and went to peer through the window.

Strange, there was no one there, but the keys were still in the ignition.

Whoever was in there must have shimmied out of the passenger side. It was quite a big cab, enough room to do that fairly easily, but why?

She spotted something dangling from the rear-view mirror and leaned in for a closer look, just as someone slid the doors open on the other side. There was a loud bang followed by a yelp.

'Hello, are you okay?' She wanted to walk around, but the whole situation felt strange. Maybe the best thing she could do was hurry towards the school. She could see Lucie dancing around through a window, earphones in as she waved around a duster.

Then she heard loud, rasping breaths, which made her neck tingle.

'Hello?'

She stepped slowly to the end of the van, her heart starting to bang. She didn't know anything about first aid, and the person around the final corner of the van sounded

like they needed help. What if there was blood? She'd have a panic attack if there was.

Grabbing her phone, she pressed 999 without hitting the call button, just in readiness.

Be brave, Keeley.

'Help!' the male voice gasped.

She hurried around and saw the person's legs hanging out of the side of the van. Darting towards him, she leaned in.

'It's okay, I'm calling an ambulance—' Her finger hovered over the call button as she furrowed her brows.

The man lying in front of her was nothing more than stuffed clothes.

How could she not have noticed that the legs had no shoes on the end? Someone was pranking her, and it wasn't funny.

The new caretaker at the school was a bit weird, maybe it was his idea of a joke. It wouldn't be the first time. When she had cleaned the gym toilets, he'd left a load of strawberry sauce all over the showers. She thought she'd been walking into a murder scene and she'd ran down the corridor screaming and saw him and the others laughing. It was meant as fun and she took it as that, but right now he was scaring her.

'Xavier, you didn't scare me. Whoever's watching and waiting to film me run away screaming, you can quit now.'

In fact, they were being stupid. She was thirty-five, not ten. All she wanted to do was

finish work and go home, not be late and have to work overtime because of a practical joke.

‘You didn’t scare me,’ she said, yet her phone trembled in her hand. Who was she kidding? ‘Okay, I’m going to call the police because you’re a weirdo, Xavier.’

That’s when someone came up behind her and knocked her phone flying.

She watched as it crashed to the road, smashing to pieces. As she turned, she caught sight of the figure in a ski mask as he grabbed her arms and spun her around, his hands gripping her while his knuckles dug into the small of her back as he nudged her closer to the stuffed clothes.

‘Get in the van,’ he said in a hushed tone.

‘No !’ she screamed, then she screamed again. Someone from the rich-people houses had to hear her, because Lucie sure as hell wouldn’t.

He nudged her forward so she was doubled over, her legs on the pavement and her face buried into the dummy’s stuffed shirt.

She couldn’t breathe.

While wriggling, she freed a hand. As he tried to lift her legs into the van, she pushed back with all she had. She thought of her children. If she ended up in the van, she might never escape. Was he going to rape her or kill her?

She kept fumbling underneath the stuffed clothes and felt a solid cylindrical object. She grabbed it and he weakened his grip slightly.

She turned to gasp in a few breaths, and with all she had she swung the travel mug

around and hit him in the neck. He began to gasp and his grip loosened.

She used her other hand to pull him off her.

Stumbling away, she began to dart in the direction of the school, heading through the main gate waving her arms in the hope that Lucie would see her, but Lucie had gone.

That's when she felt his hand pulling the back of her jacket, just as the sun was coming up. She fell to the pavement. He yanked her up and began dragging her weakened body back towards the van.

‘ Help !’ she screamed, but it was no good.

No one was listening as he thrust her through the side door and into the van.

### FIFTEEN

Gina woke up gasping. In her dream, several men in masks had thrown her into some sort of dungeon. Some had been tapping away on their computers, others filming her while their friends defiled her. Breathing in and out, she gripped her quilt. She was home, she was safe, her house was alarmed and she had cameras pointed at her front drive and the back garden. Had anyone tried to come for her, she'd have got an alert on her phone. She quickly checked them. The one on the back door had gone offline again. As soon as the case was over, she needed to get it replaced.

She pulled her quilt off her, then Ebony jumped on her bed meowing for food. Cuddling Ebony was helping to calm her heart rate. She kissed the back of her furry head, never more grateful to see her little friend.

Her laptop was still open at the end of the empty side of her bed. The constant monitoring of Men-R-Takin-It-Back was really getting under her skin. The photo she'd been sent had barely gained any traction, thank goodness. But she was definitely a target, and the messages had continued. What disturbed her more, however, was how these sickos relayed their fantasies online.

How to make women uncomfortable while walking out at night. If they cross the road, cross too, catch up and match their pace, make them feel your presence, make them know you're the man.

It was all a misogynistic game to them.

She shuddered at what she'd been reading. These were the type of men who were

sending emails to her, and very soon they'd be phoning her or even turning up at her door.

She hadn't seen any sign of Stephen back in the area, but he had to be.

She thought of how he might look now, his face and neck gnarly from the burns he'd suffered in the past after the fire ravaged him. She remembered that case well. Stephen had been central to it. She thought he'd have learnt from his past and stayed away from his misogynistic ways, but no, he was back at it again.

He'd stand out.

She read another post on the forum.

They can't prosecute you for crossing a road or staring, but that bitch will remember how uncomfortable she felt for life. Maybe she should have stopped being a whore and going out all night, teasing pricks. If you have the power, don't let those bitches get the jobs. Keep them where they belong. We can take our rightful position back. We have nothing. They've taken it all from us. Our masculinity, our careers, our children – everything. They don't fight wars. We die earlier or we kill ourselves, and they get it all. That's why Men are Taking it Back. Real men!

She stretched and Ebony jumped down. She picked up the new laptop she only used for browsing, hoping that the VPN would keep her identity safe. There was someone she needed to contact: slimy journalist, Pete Bloxwich. She'd do that later.

As the previous owner of BoyzRTakinItBack, she wondered if he was behind this site, and she still had the leverage she needed to bring him down. Had he resurfaced and changed the word Boyz to Men on the new website? She and Pete had a deal. She kept the fact that he was behind that horrible website a secret, in exchange for him leaving her alone.

Her buzzing phone made her flinch. 'Hello.'

'That was fast. I'm gathering I didn't wake you?' Briggs asked.

'No, I was just getting up.'

'There's been an attempted kidnapping outside the back of Cleevesford High. A man in a ski mask tried to force a woman on her way to a cleaning shift into a van. She's very shaken up and forensics are on their way. Can you head over now?'

John Doe had a white van that he used to collect furniture for Calvin Harris. It might be a coincidence, but given the photos of the girl and the fact that a woman was nearly kidnapped, she doubted it. She had to consider that John Doe wasn't working alone.



### SIXTEEN

Gina pulled up around the back of Cleevesford High. She'd called Jacob and he was on his way too. Bernard had already arrived. Gina watched as two uniformed officers cordoned off the road and path at both sides of the entrance. The large metal gates were open and she could see a couple of cars parked within the school grounds.

'Morning, guv.' PC Shaf Ahmed called out as he held the log. She went over and signed.

'Morning, Shaf. Where is the victim at the moment?' Gina glanced around. She could see an ambulance, but it was open and devoid of a patient.

'In the school with PC Smith and forensics.'

'I'll head up there now. Can you tell DS Driscoll where I am when he arrives, please?'

He nodded. 'Will do. Bernard said to cross the road and walk on the grass. Basically, walk around the cordon. He doesn't want anyone to step on the road until the rest of his team have been over it, and they're on their way.'

'Of course. Thanks.' She crossed the road and began walking on the grass verge all the way to the playground. The door to the sports hall was open and people milled around inside. Paper cups full of coffee and tea were being poured by a man with long blond hair. Gina stepped inside and everyone turned to look at her.

PC Smith walked over. 'Alright, guv. The victim, Keeley Moore, is in the PE teacher's office.'

She nodded for him to follow her over towards where a pile of gym mats lay. 'What do you know?'

'She's shaken. A paramedic is in there at the moment and Bernard is, too. Her clothes have been bagged, swabs have been taken and she's been given some spare clothes from the PE stash. No worrying injuries, just a few cuts and bruises.'

She ran her fingers through her hair, knowing that they wouldn't have the results for a while. 'Who are all the other people here?'

'The man serving the drinks is Xavier Whitmore, he's the caretaker. The woman in the blue vest top is Lucie Wilde.' He glanced at his notebook. 'I was just starting to talk to the others as you came in. More details to come later. The two huddled at the side of the hall are a year head and the PE teacher; both arrived after the incident. The other cleaners were on site when the incident happened, as our victim starts half an hour after them – at six – each morning. The caretaker lives in a building on the other side of the school and he lives alone.'

'Thank you. Can you check to see how organising the door to doors is going? I've only ever really come in through the front entrance of this school, so driving around the back is new to me. I noticed a row of large houses on the road to the right when you leave the gate. Their gardens back onto the school field. We need to see if any of them saw or heard anything.'

'I'll check on that.'

She saw Bernard leave the office and walk towards the hall with a box of samples. 'I'll just go and speak to Bernard. Let me know if any of the officers on foot find

anything.’ She hurried over to the crime scene manager.

‘DI Harte.’

‘Bernard. Anything you can tell me?’

He shook his head. ‘Nothing yet. I have to get all the samples to the lab. The rest of the team have just arrived. They’re going to start checking the area where the van stopped and where the perpetrator chased the victim.’

‘Great, I won’t stop you as I know you’ll have a lot of work to do. Are the paramedics still with the victim?’

He nodded. ‘They’re just finishing up.’

A man ran through the door. ‘Where’s my wife? Keeley ?!’ he yelled. Jacob followed him in and pulled him to one side.

The paramedics left the office and a dark-haired woman with cuts to her face came out of the room. ‘Morgan !’

The man left Jacob and ran over and flung his arms around her. ‘I had to come. Don’t worry about the kids. Norma next door is looking after them.’

‘I’m okay.’

He pulled away from his wife. ‘You are not okay. Some crazy just tried to kidnap you. That is not okay.’

Gina watched as Keeley’s husband wiped the tears off her cut face. She knew she had to interrupt. ‘I’m DI Harte. Would you mind if we talked in the office, Mrs Moore?’

Mr Moore, can you just wait out here? Have a coffee with the others while we talk.'

'Of course. Just call me if you need me, Keeley. I'm not going anywhere.'

'I know this is hard and you'd probably prefer to be with your family after what you've been through, but I'd like you to tell me everything while it's still fresh in your mind,' Gina said. Jacob pressed his lips together in a sympathetic smile.

'I don't know about fresh. It all happened so fast.' She took in a sharp breath. 'I've never been so scared in my life.' Keeley rubbed her glassy eyes as Gina led her back towards the PE teacher's office where they all took a seat.

Gina pushed the netball match forms into a neat pile so that Jacob could use the desk to make notes. Her foot connected with a pair of muddy football boots under the table as she pulled her chair in.

Keeley zipped the hoodie up over the Cleevesford High School T-shirt. 'It was horrible. Nothing like this has ever happened to me. I just never saw it coming, and...' She began to tear up.

Gina spotted a box of tissues and passed them over the table. Keeley took one and wiped her eyes. 'I know having to think about it all again is hard, but it would really help us if you can tell us, in your own words, what happened.'

After sniffing, Keeley nodded. 'I walk the same route every day, Monday to Friday, to start work at six. Nothing about my journey felt odd or different, but when I arrived at the back gate, I saw the white van parked on the road outside. No wait, it pulled up as I was approaching. I kept thinking, there wouldn't be any deliveries this early.'

'Do you know the make of the van?'

She shook her head. 'It was large and had a sliding side panel. That's all I know. I didn't really take any notice of the registration number. I was still tired.'

'What happened next?'

Keeley began playing with the zip as she scrunched her brows. 'I looked through the driver's window as I passed, but there was no one there, which was strange as they'd just pulled up. I thought, maybe they shimmied across to the passenger side and left out of that door. I wasn't listening for an opening door, so that's what must have happened. Then, I heard a voice crying out in pain from the other side. I'm not sure if I heard the side door being slid open then.' She paused.

'And then what did you do?'

'I remember freezing. Despite having children, and with all the scrapes they get into, I have a phobia of blood and injuries, like broken bones.' She scrunched her nose up slightly. 'In my mind, I thought maybe the man had hurt himself and I imagined a scene of carnage. All I wanted to do was run away. Then I think he said something else. I don't even remember whether it was a pained murmur or a cry for help, so I knew I had to help him. When I walked around the van...' She bit her bottom lip for a second.

'What did you see?'

'Legs hanging out of the side; legs in jeans. When I reached them, I saw that they weren't real, just stuffed clothes. It was confusing, but not alarming. I was expecting to see a horrible injury or something, so I relaxed and called out for Xavier, the caretaker.'

'Why did you call out for him?' Gina thought that seemed like an odd thing to do.

‘He plays pranks on me and some of the others. It’s normally quite innocent and just for laughs. One of his recent ones was to squirt red strawberry sauce all over the showers before I cleaned them. I ran out so fast and screamed my head off. The others were laughing. They don’t know about my phobias, and similar jokes have been played before on everyone at some point. It’s just a bit of fun to pass the time away, and mostly started by the younger cleaners.’

From the look on Keeley’s face, Gina could tell that the incident hadn’t been born out of a practical joke. ‘So, you see these stuffed clothes and what next?’

‘I had my phone in my hand and I said something like, “I’m going to call the police”. Then, out of nowhere, the attacker came up behind me and knocked my phone flying. It’s now smashed to pieces and he started trying to force me into the van. He had my wrists behind my back. I managed to wriggle free while my head was pushed into the stuffed shirt. I thought I was going to die.’ She let out a slight hiccup of a cry. ‘I managed to get hold of a travel mug I found under the clothes and I hit him with it. I don’t know where I hit him. Somehow, I escaped his grip and ran.’

‘Where did you run to?’

‘Past the gate, onto the pavement. I kept screaming, but no one heard me and I knew he was catching up. He managed to grab my jacket and he dragged me back to the van where he tried to force me into it. I thought he was going to kill me. All I could think of was my boys and Morgan. I wondered if I’d ever see them again, so I kicked out with all the strength I had. He yelped and I saw him double over. Maybe I caught his groin. I must have for him to look that hurt. Then I ran all the way to the school and the first person I saw was Lucie. She locked the door behind us. We looked out the window, but the van was gone.’

‘Did you see any of the other staff at that time?’

‘Joan, Ally, Ted and Cara came running as they’d heard me screaming and crying in the sports hall.’

‘Did you see the caretaker, Mr Whitmore?’

‘No, he doesn’t always come by until after shift. He opens up around five thirty and then goes back to his house on site, so I wouldn’t expect to see him.’

‘You say it was a man, can you describe him?’

‘He had a man’s voice, or a deep voice. A masculine build. Not well built as in hugely muscular, but strong arms and angular. He was wearing, I don’t know, maybe combat trousers in a sandy colour, a black long-sleeved T-shirt, black gloves and the ski mask.’

‘Ski masks have a horizontal oval slit where the eyes are. Did you look at his eyes?’

‘It was all so fast. I know he was a white male.’

Gina watched Jacob note all that down. ‘How about eye colour?’

Keeley shrugged. ‘I barely saw his eyes. His eyebrows didn’t look too dark in colour, but I’m not sure if I’ve added that detail after.’

‘How about his height?’

‘He was taller than me. I’m five-seven. I don’t know how much taller he was, and he was wearing black boots.’

‘Was there anything else, maybe a smell, a sound or something you saw that might help?’

Inhaling slowly, Keeley took a moment. She closed her eyes and hugged herself. 'He had strong body odour, but I guess that isn't much help. Let me try to think about the van again. When I glanced into the driver's side, there was something hanging from the rear-view mirror. It was a chess piece.'

'Do you know which chess piece it was?'

Keeley shook her head. 'Hang on, it was the horse, a white one.'

Gina thought back to when she had learned to play chess as a child, with her own father. The horse, or the knight, moved in an L-shape and could jump over other pieces to land on a blank square. Maybe the killer was trying to say he could go anywhere, over anyone and not be noticed.

Or maybe it was just a chess piece.

'Here's my card. If you think of anything else, please call me straight away. An officer will take you to the station shortly so you can give a formal statement.'

She nodded. 'Okay. Can I go and see my husband now?'

'Yes, and thank you. I'm sorry about what happened to you today. You must have been terrified.'

'I still am. What if he's coming back for me?'

'One of the team will talk to you about what happens next. We don't yet know if this was a targeted attack, so I'd like a family liaison officer to join you when you get home, and we'll be stationing an officer outside your house for your safety.'

'Do you think I was chosen by some sicko?'



‘At this stage, we don’t know, but some of the details you have provided make me think that.’

‘Have there been more attacks?’

‘We are investigating another case that might be linked. When I know more I will let you know, but for now your safety is paramount.’

‘What about my children? They’re at home with my neighbour, Norma.’

‘How well do you know Norma?’

‘My boys have known her all their life. She’s our babysitter when Morgan and I have an occasional night out. It wasn’t her. She’s lovely and in her early seventies.’

‘We will get an officer to go over to your house right away to check on your home and to make sure Norma and the boys are okay.’ Gina nodded to Jacob and watched as he sent a message to Shaf in the other room. Shaf had taken the victim’s details and he’d be able to send one of the team out to check.

‘Wait, there is something else, but I don’t know if it means anything?’

‘Any little detail is important.’

‘Last week, on a couple of mornings, I saw a blue car parked up at the end of the road with the posh houses. I don’t know the name of the road. The one that runs alongside the school entrance. There was someone sitting in the driver’s seat. I don’t think that is really anything, but I don’t normally see people just parked up and sitting in a car at that time.’

‘Can you describe the person in the car or the car itself? Make or model?’

‘It was just small and older looking, sorry. And I couldn’t see who was in there, I just saw an outline through the back window. Do you think he was watching me and then he came back with a van?’

‘Which days were those?’

‘Err, Thursday and Friday.’

‘What time?’

‘Just before six in the morning. The car was already there when I stepped onto the road.’

John Doe was found in a small blue car. Gina wondered if it was John Doe who had been watching Keeley. Maybe it was the second perp or just another blue car driver. ‘We don’t know, but it’s looking likely.’

Keeley’s hands began to tremble. ‘I need to see my husband and check on my children.’ She stood, slid her chair under the other side of the desk and left.

‘What are your thoughts?’ Gina asked Jacob.

He closed his notebook. ‘I think we definitely need to interview the caretaker, Xavier Whitmore.’

‘Agreed. He wasn’t at the scene. Although wouldn’t Keeley have recognised his vehicle if it was him?’

‘I guess we need to see if he hired a van and left it parked up close by. I’ll add it to the list of things to look out for. Another mention of chess and her seeing someone in a blue car, guv. That’s all more than a coincidence.’

Gina nodded. 'There are clear links to the two cases. Who is working with John Doe and why did this man try to kidnap Keeley Moore? Have we checked the CCTV?'

'Yes. The CCTV facing the gate doesn't reach far enough to capture what happened to Keeley Moore. It caught her running up the path. The CCTV at the other side of the school didn't capture anything unusual.'

'Guv.' Shaf tapped on the open door and entered.

'What's happening out there?'

'There's a general sense of worry and panic. One of the officers conducting the door to doors has found a potential witness. A woman had a confrontation last week with a man driving a blue Ford Fiesta and it left her unsettled.'

SEVENTEEN

GIRL

My teeth chatter and I can't feel my fingertips. Weeks have gone by, but still I cling to the hope that he will let me go. I hug the cupcake scarf, holding it close to my heart. I don't know why, but I kept that fingernail. I keep thinking, who was the girl before me and where is she now? I tried so hard to make her hear me, but I have come to the conclusion that there is no one else behind that metal door. If there was, she would be shouting back to me.

The red light makes me nervous, and as much as I hate seeing him, I want him to come back so that I can experience proper light again. I think of the school theatre and getting accidentally caught in the spotlight with the wrong prop. I wonder if my friends have forgotten what a mess I made of things.

Maybe they're not even remotely missing me.

As that light came on, I stared at all those eyes in the audience, my heart beating like crazy. I would happily double that embarrassment to leave this dungeon.

I want to hug my cat, Meowdon.

Tears run down my cheeks as I think of the sky. I don't even care if it's cloudy or raining. My mum always moans about the rain and the weather in this country, but I would literally trade my right arm for a glimpse of the wet stuff. I imagine running outside with a huge grin while I dance in the puddles. That's what I'll do when I go

home.

I punch the mattress and then I do it again and again. I'm feeble, I know it, and there's no way on earth I could fight him off and escape this hellhole. He barely feeds me, knowing that I'm getting weaker and weaker. That's the way he likes it. He's deprived me of light and starved me to kill what strength I have.

I yell out and run my fingers over the metal door handle. 'I'm hungry,' I yell. What's the point? He isn't listening. If he was, I'd ask for another blanket.

A crackle comes from above. 'I'm going to open the metal door. Can I trust you to be a good girl, because good girls get privileges? Do you understand me?'

He's speaking to me through an intercom system. He's been listening to me crying all this time and only now he speaks. I've tried so hard to be nice and get into his mind when he's brought me food, but I'm dying here and I don't want to die.

A thought flashes through my head as I imagine what it would be like to suddenly not be able to breathe. Would the world go black? Would I panic so hard that it would be the most terrifying moment of my life? My heart beats rapidly and I feel faint at the thought. Stop thinking like that, I say in my head. I am going to live. I nod and stare up, wondering if he's watching me.

'Do you understand me?' he yells, making me jump.

I nod rapidly until my neck hurts. 'Yes, yes, I understand.' My voice quivers and I can't help it.

'Good.'

He is watching me. He's been watching me all this time and I feel like throwing up.

He's watched me use the bucket, he's watched me pretend to talk to my mum, where I've told her how I need her to rescue me. He's watched me sleep.

I feel like I've been violated. Do I cry in my sleep and speak my deepest thoughts and fears out loud?

A click echoes through the underground cell. 'Press the door handle and go through.'

What if it's a trap? I found that fingernail. Once that door closes, does something terrible happen.

I stand there shaking.

After spending so much time wondering what's behind that door, I can't step forward. 'I can't.' I whimper a few times as I try to speak, but can't get my words out. 'I don't want to die.'

'And I don't want to kill you. Go.'

I open my mouth to ask about the other girl, but I think better of it. The last thing I want is to make him angry.

Standing, my legs are like jelly, but I place my hand on the icy metal handle. I stuff the cupcake scarf into the pocket of the blue dress.

'Enter.'

That's all he says and his voice is monotone now. 'She who makes a brave move will be rewarded.'

I don't trust him, but I do know I have to move forward. I can't spend another day,

night – whatever it might be out there in the real world – shivering on this mattress.

Pressing the handle, I nudge the heavy door open and step towards whatever is over the threshold.

‘Step inside and close the door.’

‘I can’t.’

‘Do it,’ he yells.

I run into the darkness and close the door. It clicks. I try the handle, but the door is locked.

I can’t get out. I can’t see. I can’t breathe.

As I gasp and hit the door, vibrations begin to rattle around me. ‘Let me out. I can’t breathe.’ I bang, over and over again, then a dim light comes on and I close my eyes. It hurts to see light after so long, so I shield them with my arm and peer out until my vision has adjusted.

Tapping on the stone floor, I step forward and remove my arm from my face completely so I can take in my surroundings. I feel as though I’m walking through a metallic arch which has a spaceship feel, well the spaceships I’ve seen in films. The vibrations get louder and I feel a puff of air coming from the vents above. I’ve seen this kind of thing before when I watched a documentary with my mum about preppers. They build underground bunkers just in case the apocalypse happens. Metal racks of dried foods are stacked up and at the other side is a small kitchenette that looks like a caravan we stayed in when we went to Wales one year for a holiday. My mouth waters as I spot a chicken and mushroom pot meal. I am so hungry I could eat the dry noodles now.

I'm relieved to see a sink and a microwave. Curiosity gets the better of me and I slide a drawer open. There is a packet of plastic knives, forks and spoons.

'I am the only person with a code to the hatch. Anything happens to me, we both die. Do you understand?'

I nod.

'Good. We're learning fast, aren't we?'

I nod again. He is watching and listening all the time. I can't see where he's put the cameras. The ceiling is panelled. There is a smoke detector and strip lighting. Maybe the cameras are built into those. If I wanted to reach the ceiling, I couldn't. It's too high. I'm only five foot two and I can't see a chair or a mattress. Am I meant to stand all the time? Maybe there is something more comfortable through the door at the end of this huge capsule.

'Go through the next door.'

I do as I'm told and press the door handle. This door is much lighter than the other, and as I open it another light comes on.

'The lights will be on from seven in the morning until nine in the evening, every day.'

I stare at the small double bed nestled into the end of the capsule. There are a pair of curtains on the wall, but there are no windows.

I flinch as the sound of tweeting birds comes through a speaker and it is swiftly replaced by rolling waves, then rain. 'I will make sure that things feel as normal as possible. You will wake up to one of these sounds every morning and I'll leave whichever one I choose running until lunchtime. After all, I want you to be happy



here. Do you like what I have done for you?’

‘Yes,’ I say through chattering teeth.

‘Sorry, I can see the temperature is low. I’m turning it up now. Open the drawers to your left.’

Sliding the top drawer of a five-drawer chest, I can see that there are several folded cardigans in a stone colour.

‘Put one on. They’re yours. There are clothes in the other drawers. They are all yours. There is washing-up liquid under the sink and some soap. You have everything you need in the capsule. Open the door to your right.’

Again, I do as I’m told. Just like in the caravan, there is the tiniest toilet and shower set up ever, all in stainless steel. I should be angry. I’ve been kidnapped and almost left to die at times, but I am so grateful for a toilet and a shower, I start sobbing with happiness. I close the door and wave.

The voice bellows through the speaker system. ‘Come out of the bathroom.’

He can’t see me in there. I almost want to do a happy dance, but instead, I open the door and step out.

‘Go back into the kitchen area.’

I close the bathroom door and head back towards the food, and I’m salivating. I’m imagining the taste of those noodles and then I spot little pots of long-life fruit and I just want to rip them open and pour the contents down my throat.

‘I have left you a meal plan. If you eat all your food too soon, you will have none left.

This has to last you a month. Look at the chart.' I can't see it, but I keep looking. 'It's at the end of the rack.'

I see it. It's half covered in a red apron that is hanging off a hook. I doubt I'll need an apron for what I'm about to microwave.

For a moment, I imagine I'm back with Mum, chopping up the onions and chillies to make her signature puttanesca sauce to go with our home-made pasta, and I wonder if I'll ever eat that dish again with my lovely mum. What I will be eating is one sachet, rehydrated with water or something microwaved, twice a day and a fruit pot for lunch. I also have fifty boxes of Cup a Soup and mashed potato pots that I can ration myself as snacks.

'Bend down and look at the bottom rack.'

Bent over, I squint. It's a little darker down here and the lighting isn't strong. I see a box.

'Take the box and go back into the bedroom.' I hurry, hoping that I'm getting ever closer to eating. 'Next to the bed is a pull-down table.' I fumble with it until I find the release and a plastic table with two legs drops down from the wall fixings. 'Open the box.'

'It's a chess set,' I mutter under my breath.

'Set it up on the table and close the bedroom door.'

With severely trembling hands, after closing the door, I set up the board like my dad taught me and I step back.

'Good girl. You can play white so you go first. Make your opening move like your

life depends on it.'

I move my king's pawn. 'King's pawn to 1.e4.' I wait for him to respond.

The door clicks and the lights go out.

I didn't make the right move. He's going to kill me.

### EIGHTEEN

Gina sipped the tea that the witness had given to her, and Jacob leaned back into her huge marshmallow of a couch, as they faced the massive garden with the covered-up swimming pool. ‘Thank you for speaking to us, Ms Abiola. You say you had an altercation with a man in a blue car last week. Can you tell us more about that?’

‘I can do more than tell you – I have cameras and I caught some of it. Oh, there isn’t any sound, and I only captured our legs as the camera mostly points to my drive, so actually I will need to tell you.’ She began playing with a long black braid that fell over her shoulder. ‘I’ll tell you first, then I’ll play the incident. It literally lasted less than a minute, but he was horrible.’

‘Do you live here alone?’

‘Yes, but I have so much security, I’m not worried. If anyone messes with any lock or window on this house, the alarm goes off so loud it would wake the whole of Cleevesford.’

‘When did the incident happen?’

‘Just after five in the morning of Monday the twenty-sixth of August, so last week. I was leaving for the airport – I travel for work regularly and I had to be up early to catch my flight to Paris. As I watched the electric gates open, I saw his car there and I was so angry as he was blocking me in. I have signs up to stop the parents doing exactly that, as I have to come and go a lot. But it was early, so I knew it wasn’t one of them dropping a kid off at school. Then I spotted a man asleep in the car, so I

tapped on the window and asked him to move. He seemed angry that I'd woken him, so he shouted something back. I couldn't work out what he was saying as the windows were closed.'

'What happened next?'

'I wrenched his passenger door open – I was angry now. I really needed to be on the road, so I shouted at him again, asking if he was stupid as there were signs everywhere telling people to not block my drive. It escalated a bit. He shouted something I couldn't quite catch followed by...' Ms Abiola swallowed and paused.

'What did he say?'

'I will not repeat it. My mother brought me up to be better than that, but I will tell you that it was racist and misogynistic. Then he leaned over, grabbed the car door to close it and sped off.'

Gina almost wanted to shiver. She knew the type that Ms Abiola had had to deal with all too well. 'Did you report him?'

She shook her head. 'No, I was in such a hurry by now, I vowed to look at the footage later and report it, but there is no sound and the footage is awful, so awful you can't see the registration number or him. I thought it was pointless.'

'Did you speak to any of the other neighbours about this?'

'No, I only got back from Paris last night. I haven't even unpacked and I'm back at work today.'

Gina spotted the woman's small executive trolley, its lid open due to being rammed full of paperwork and a laptop. 'Can you describe the car?'

‘Dirty. It smelled funny, or he smelled funny. It was like mould and damp, or like a shower that’s going mouldy. The car was blue – more of a dark blue than a sky blue. My CCTV footage is in colour so you’ll be able to see the shade. It was a Fiesta. I know that as I bought my son one when he passed his test.’

‘How about the man, can you describe him?’

‘I was standing on the pavement in my heels, trying to look down. That made it difficult. I did see him when he was asleep. He was wearing a black baseball cap. As a guess, he was probably in his forties. He had a bit of brown stubble, and a round belly where his T-shirt had ridden up. He drove off before I could see any more. I really wished I’d looked at his registration number, then he would be easy to find.’

Gina knew that wasn’t the case if they were talking about the same man, and she was more convinced than ever that they were, especially as the description matched perfectly. But, of course, the description was of their John Doe, and he was dead. The driver of the white van had to be his accomplice, as she’d suspected earlier.

‘How could I have been so stupid? It’s just amazing how fast things like this happen, and how little you see.’

‘You’ve given us a great description of him, and we believe it might have been a stolen car anyway.’

Ms Abiola puffed out a breath and began scrolling on her phone. ‘Where do I message this footage to?’

Gina pulled out a card and passed it to her. ‘Me, please. And keep my card. Should you remember anything else, please call me anytime.’ Gina’s phone pinged.

‘Done, and thank you, I will. About the other incident, down at the school, is

everyone okay?’

Gina thought it best not to reveal any details as yet. ‘Did you hear anything between five forty-five and six fifteen this morning?’

‘No, my soundproofing is really good in here.’

‘Can I see your CCTV for those times?’

The woman began to scroll. ‘Of course.’ She passed her phone to Gina. ‘Just press play. You can see the timestamp at the top of the screen.’

Gina pressed play and could barely see through the huge iron gates. ‘The gates were closed.’

‘Oh yes, I forgot. I guess the footage is no good. The gate blocks the road.’

‘We may need to speak to you again, but for now, thank you for your time.’

Jacob’s phone beeped as they both stepped outside. PCs bustled up and down doing door to doors. Gina pulled out her work phone to check her messages. ‘Any updates, Jacob?’

He ignored her as he continued reading his messages.

‘A family liaison officer has been despatched to Keeley Moore’s house.’

‘That’s good news. How is Ellyn, by the way?’ One of their other family liaison officers had been injured during the last case and had ended up in critical care.

‘I heard she is still recovering with her parents, but she should be back with us before

Christmas.'

A message from O'Connor flashed up on Gina's phone. 'Another chess piece has been found. Bernard's team bagged it up. It's a white pawn and it was found near the bushes where John Doe died.' She pictured John Doe, sitting in his car with his engine running throwing the chess piece out of the window. Had he felt like a pawn in all of this?

Another message pinged up. Gina summarised it for Jacob. 'We have a name and address for the factory, and it's open now. It's called Crastone Foods Ltd. We need to update the team, but we won't be making the morning briefing. We need to head over there now to see if we can find Marie.'



NINETEEN

GIRL

This past year, I've discovered that losing does have consequences. He doesn't come to see me anymore, and quite often he forgets to turn the lights on, like now. I made my move on the last game and it didn't pay off. I should have castled and tucked my king away safely, and just maybe I wouldn't be stuck here in the dark. Using my hands, I let my fingertips lead me to the kitchen, where I pour some water into one of my noodle pots and leave it. I can't even warm them in the microwave. I wish the power was back on.

His words keep ringing through my head. 'It's your fault. Your heart wasn't in the game. When your heart is in it, everything is better.'

I prod the noodles. Rock hard and the stock in them is barely creating any flavour without the addition of heat.

I wonder what my mum is doing now. If it's lunchtime or evening, she would be at the restaurant. I hope she's still on pasta-making duty. She loves making fresh pasta. I can almost smell the walnut, ricotta and fresh herb fillings that she used to stuff in the ravioli while experimenting. In my mind, I'm reaching out and taking one of her egg yolk raviolo, it's bursting in my mouth as I bite. It was always coated with pancetta crumb. Then I reach in and take some hard noodles and feed them carefully into my mouth. I've stopped recognising the flavour, they all just taste like monosodium glutamate. There's no distinction between chicken and curry flavours, all it does is coat the back of my throat and gullet and leave a disgusting taste in my mouth,

however hard I brush my teeth.

So, this is me, a year on.

I live in the capsule. I talk to myself in my head all day, like this, in a bid to stave away the crazy tunnel I was going down those first few months. I used to hallucinate figures and faces in the dark. I was convinced I saw my dad one time, but it can't have been. It wasn't my dad, it was my crazy, crazy mind.

The darkness is taking my breath away. I go to place the noodle pot on the tiny bit of workspace I have, and my breath goes. The noodles fall to the floor and splash up my legs, and no doubt on the hem of my dress. I try to suck in air, but it's as if there isn't any.

I can't breathe. I am going to die in here.

Maybe if I bang, he will come. After all, he's always watching and listening.

He must know I'm dying here. He cares for me; I know he does. If he's out there, he will come.

'Can't breathe...' I manage to stutter as I stagger into the bedroom, using my hands to lead the way. Knocking the chessboard and pieces onto the floor, I crawl onto the bed, knowing this is where I will die, and suddenly I can fill my lungs. Reaching out, I grab the cupcake scarf and hold it to my cheek and sob loudly.

I'm not dead.

The lights go on and my heart rate begins to calm down a little, even though the room is swaying. It's like I'm drunk, but this is how it always feels. He knows I won't die when I get like this, but it feels like I will.

In a bid to try to make this horrible feeling pass, I gaze around at all my drawings: my lovely mother and a drawing of Meowdon with his long whiskers. Then there are all the sketches of my rooms in here, from every angle. I draw what I see, I don't imagine things well. I draw myself as I imagine I look, but they're not my best.

His voice booms out. 'Calm down. Just take a few deep breaths and you'll be okay. Then you can go and clean up the kitchen and make some more food. Actually, don't. Tonight, I think we should celebrate. I know you lost the game, but you've paid for that. You deserve a takeaway. What do you say?'

No, no, no, I don't want to celebrate, but I don't want to be alone. I can't stand it anymore. All I have is him, and he dreams that one day he will trust me enough to take me out of this capsule, and I think we're close. All I do is shrug.

'Okay, if you don't want takeaway, we can just go back to darkness and you can get an early night.'

'No,' I yell. I need the lights to stay on. I need my drawings and my cupcake scarf. I don't want to go back to seeing swirls in the dark and feeling my way around. For anyone else that might wonder what that's like, every minute feels like hours. There is no TV, no radio, no music, no chat with anyone. After a while, I begin to chat to people who aren't there. 'Lights on, lights on.' I grip the scarf and hug it.

'Have you ever had Prosecco?'

My mum let me try some of hers a couple of times – only a few sips, but I don't want him to know about me and Mum. He doesn't belong in our lovely world. I shiver as I wonder if I even belong anymore. I'm not the same person. 'No.'

'Clean up the mess and get two plates out on the chess table. No chess tonight.'

He's gone. I know he has, and if he's going to get a takeaway he won't be watching me. I quickly grab a load of kitchen roll and mop up the spillage, throwing the soggy towels in the bin, then I hammer on the door.

'Help,' I yell. I run to the back of the capsule and do the same. Having tried this so many times, I know it won't work, but I will never stop trying.

Then I stop. He's told me how horrible his life has been; that everyone he has ever cared about has left him. After all this time, he's just starting to trust me. My mantra plays in my head. His dreams are my dreams.

That went fast. The door clicks and he enters with a pizza box and places it on the table where he sits on the bed next to me. This time is different. He is wearing new clothes and aftershave. He uncorks the Prosecco, fills up a plastic cup and passes it to me.

'It's nice, try it.' His smile is warm and I want it to stay that way, so I drink. The liquid is acidic and I don't like it, but I continue to drink, then I hiccup. 'Not too much at once.'

He opens the pizza box and places it on his lap as he snuggles up next to me. 'It's your favourite, pepperoni.'

Pepperoni is his favourite, and for the sake of getting out of this one day, it is mine too. 'Thank you.'

'See, I do care. You might not think I do, but you are all I care about. You're my total world, you know that?'

I'm almost salivating as the smell of savoury sausage and hot cheese hits my nostrils. I am hungrier than ever for some freshly cooked hot food. I nod.

‘What did you do wrong earlier?’

I shrug.

‘You lost the game on purpose, didn’t you?’

I want to scream no. I didn’t lose on purpose and I don’t know why he keeps thinking I do. He is really good at chess, and I lost. There’s no way I can reason with him at all so I don’t answer. ‘Thank you for this lovely food. It’s really kind of you to bring it.’

‘That’s okay. You are my angel, you know that. Actually, I’m going to call you my angel from now on. Shall we call tonight a rebirth, for both of us?’

I will literally call tonight anything, and if he wants me to be his angel, I will be. I just want the pizza.

‘A rebirth.’ I hold my plastic glass up and he knocks his against mine and we drink.

The Prosecco is going to my head. I never drink and I’m feeling woozy already, and my hunger is getting worse. He looks into my eyes and all I wonder is if he knows how hungry I am.

‘Good. Tuck in.’ He nudges the box in my direction. I take a slice and it flops at the end. I have to hold it at my eyelid to feed myself, and he looks overjoyed as I ram it into my mouth and chomp on it.

‘It makes me happy to see you like this, enjoying something I’ve done for you.’ He pauses as I swallow my mouthful. ‘I hope to make you even happier.’

He takes the pizza off me and places it into the box as he takes my chin and gently kisses me.

I freeze.

Did that just happen?

He holds his glass up again and clinks it against mine. 'To us.'

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### TWENTY

Gina stood with Jacob outside the large grey Crastone Foods building. The intercom crackled and the scent of fish pie filled the air as they stood by the vent.

‘Hello,’ Gina said into the microphone. She’d already introduced herself and Jacob to three different people through the intercom, and she wasn’t sure who she was even talking to anymore.

‘Come in,’ the crackly voice said as the door buzzed open.

Gina pushed it and they both stepped into a high, white box with massive posters covering the walls. She stared at the huge silver-skinned fish that took up most of the back wall, then her gaze travelled to the carrots and onions.

Jacob walked over to the desk. ‘I wonder if anyone is on their way.’

As Gina walked over to him, a man in a ruffled shirt collar and a smart jacket came through the door. ‘Welcome to Crastone Foods, how can I help you?’

‘I’m DI?—’

‘Harte and DS Driscoll, yes, it was me you spoke to through the intercom. But how can I help you?’

Gina spotted a staff photograph behind him, and she wondered if one of them was Marie. ‘We need to speak to someone who works here, or worked here.’

‘Okay, when did the person you’re looking for work here?’

Gina did a quick recce in her head. ‘Possibly between 2006 and 2009.’

The man raised his arched brows. ‘That’s a long time ago. Very few of the current staff were here back then. I’ve only been here for three. Give me a name and I’ll see what I can do?’

‘Marie.’

‘And does Marie have a surname?’

Gina leaned on the counter and frowned. ‘Marie is all we have. Is it possible to speak to someone who worked here back then?’

He held a finger up. ‘Let me try one of the line managers. Nina used to work here then. Bear with me.’ He picked up the phone and asked for her. ‘Nina, there are two police detectives who would like to speak to you in reception.’ He nodded a couple of times and ended the call. ‘She’s on her way to the staff sitting room. Follow me.’

They followed the man along the corridor, up a flight of stairs and right to the end, where they were greeted by a room full of couches and a door leading to a terrace overlooking the rest of the factory units in the area. ‘Take a seat and help yourself to drinks from the machine. She’ll be with you in a minute.’ With that, he left.

A clonking sound got louder and louder until a short-haired stout woman wearing thick glasses entered. ‘I’m Nina, and you are?’ She took a seat opposite them and placed her water bottle in the middle of the table.

‘DI Harte and DS Driscoll. We’re sorry to interrupt your work, but we need to ask you about an employee who worked here a few years ago – Marie? Your colleague



tells me you worked here back in 2006.'

'That's right. I wasn't a manager then, but I was here. I remember Marie; she worked here for a couple of years and we had lunch in the canteen together sometimes. Of course, I don't have the dates of her employment as it was such a long time ago, and as you can appreciate, those records are most definitely archived now. I can speak with HR and accounts, see if they can investigate but it would take a while.'

'That would be really helpful, thank you,' Gina replied. She also made a mental note for one of the team to check with HMRC, although she doubted she'd get any information from them immediately. She really hoped that Nina would be able to help her.

'Actually, 2006 was a big year for us, as it was our twenty-five-year anniversary and we had a huge party. It stands out more than the others so you might be in luck. A photo taken at that party is still on our website, and Marie is on it.'

'Can we see it?'

Nina pulled her phone out and came around to Gina. 'This is the news page on our company website. You have to scroll a bit through the photos, but you can easily find it.' She pinched her fingers and expanded the front row of faces. 'The woman on the left is Marie. Of course, she might have changed somewhat by now. It was a fair few years ago.'

Gina nodded to Jacob and he began to search for the same photo on his phone to message the information back to the incident room. 'Do you remember Marie having a boyfriend back then?'

'She had a fair few but they didn't last more than a couple of dates. I mean she was young, fun and pretty. But she did end up in a short relationship with another man

who worked here as a temp. Before you ask, we don't keep temp records. They would be with the agency we used and they are no longer in business. Anyway, his name was Colson. I remember that because she kept bleating on about him when he first started. It was all Colson this and Colson that. She fancied him like mad. I guess that's why he in particular stuck in my mind.'

'Can you describe Colson?' Gina really wished she had the artist's sketch, rather than working off a description. She hoped it would be sent to her soon.

'From back in 2006? Er... a bit quiet, brown hair, skinny, dull. I wondered what she saw in him, but she said he was sweet.'

A couple of staff members came in and began queueing at the coffee machine. Nina checked her phone. 'Hang on, it's lunchtime so it's about to get packed in here.'

'Do you have a surname for Colson?'

'As I said he was a temp. The agency would have had that information. He was an unreliable idiot back then. I remember Marie lying to our supervisor at the time, saying he was ill when he wasn't. She told me she didn't know where he was, but she didn't want him to get laid off.'

They had a name: Colson. It was a start.

She waited for Jacob to note that information down. From the description Wally had given her about the man at that time, their suspect had facial hair and wore a red Florida cap. Colson could have just not been wearing the cap and was clean shaven when he was with Marie but Gina didn't want to dismiss any of the other potential men who Marie had been involved with. A crowd sat at the next table and began to speak loudly and play with their phones. 'Do you mind if we continue to talk on the terrace, where it's quieter?'

‘No, of course not.’ Nina led the way.

As they stepped out, a breeze whipped around Gina’s legs. ‘Thank you. Can you tell me more about any of the other men she dated?’

‘There was a blond guy, built like a brick shithouse who was a boxer. And another one who worked in an office somewhere. I used to tease her and call him City Boy. I don’t really remember any others. Oh, there was one, he was another temp, and I think Colson hit him.’ She began to scratch some dry skin from the groove in the side of her nose.

‘What happened there?’

‘Don’t remember. You’d have to ask Colson.’

‘Do you have any contact details for him or Marie?’

‘Yes to him, no to Marie. Actually, I don’t have his contact details, but I see Colson hanging around outside the bookies on Cleavesford High Street a lot. Every time I pass, he’s smoking outside before going back in. You might find him there. I said hello to him a few times but he doesn’t recognise me anymore. As for Marie, she left back then and I never heard from her again. I don’t think she resigned, she just stopped coming. I think she had family problems.’

Gina frowned, wondering why Nina hadn’t mentioned this information earlier. Better late than never, she guessed.

‘Oh, I think I remember something else. Marie’s surname... was something like Blair or Blaine. It began with a B.’

‘Would anyone else here know?’

‘I doubt it. I’m one of the longest-standing members of staff here, apart from the directors, and they had zero to do with the production line, not even at the big party in 2006. They pretty much only mingle with the office staff, and Marie didn’t work in the office back then.’

‘May we speak to the directors? Maybe they’d remember the other men you mentioned.’

‘I doubt it and it’s not going to happen anytime soon as one is in Jamaica on holiday, and the other is permanently overseeing our sister site in Belgium and won’t be back for another month, and then he’ll only be here for meetings.’

Gina cleared her throat. ‘I’m going to arrange for a police officer to work with you in taking statements. It may be that we have to interview the directors online if they’re not here.’

‘Okay, it’s worth a try. Like I said, I doubt they’ll be able to help but you never know. As for the other information you need, it will take a lot longer to check out the archives and I can’t make any promises that we’ll find what you’re looking for, especially temporary staff records, but we’ll do everything we can to help.’

A pigeon landed on the metal rail. Gina stepped back a little and waited for Jacob to catch up with the notes.

‘What’s this about, if you don’t mind me asking? I liked Marie so I hope she’s okay.’

‘We’re just following up on an incident and Marie’s name came up.’

‘I heard the news, and the only thing everyone is talking about right now is the dead man found at the farm. It’s not Colson, is it?’

‘We don’t have any more information as of yet, I’m sorry.’ Gina knew the description of Colson didn’t quite fit John Doe’s but there was an accomplice to consider.

‘I get it, you can’t tell me, but I remember thinking it strange that Marie never came back to work soon after Colson left. No one knew what her family problems were. We weren’t friends, so I never checked on her. I asked HR, but they just said she’d called and said she wasn’t coming back. It was strange, that’s all. She did mention something that concerned me.’

‘What was that?’

‘She thought someone had followed her home from work one evening. Some of our lines go all night, and one shift finishes at ten in the evening. It was the same then. She told me she didn’t want to do lates or nights again after it happened. Again, I think Colson would know more about this. Check out the bookies.’

### TWENTY-ONE

As Gina and Jacob headed back to the incident room, she peeled her banana and quickly stuffed it in her mouth. Then she got her notes out and staked her place at the main table. O'Connor finished typing his notes up on the system before joining her, while Wyre was updating the boards. Kapoor placed a tray of glasses and a jug of water in the centre of the table.

Briggs cleared his throat. 'I'm about to hold a press conference. Wyre has come up trumps with the scarf.' He pointed to the photo of the girl sitting on the dirty mattress with the drawing. 'It's quite unique with the cupcake print. Wyre, tell us what you found.'

'This scarf is made by a local designer who sells at craft fayres. It's her print and she's been going for the best part of forty-five years. We originally did an image search on a small part of the pattern and it was enough to bring up the whole scarf, which led us to her. She obviously can't remember who bought the scarf – she's made a few thousand over the years – but the good news is she still has one, and she has brought it to the station.' Wyre pulled the scarf from a paper bag and pinned it to a board.

Briggs began to straighten his tie. 'So, I am going to share a few facts about the incident in the press conference, but I'm mostly going to appeal to anyone who recognises this scarf as a link to a missing person. We also now have the artist's drawing of John Doe, so we're hoping someone who knows him will come forward.' He pressed his lips together.

‘I hope it works because we need to find the girl in the photos and fast. It has to work.’ Gina threw her banana skin in the bin.

‘Gina, do you have any updates?’

She stood and poured a glass of water before heading to the front, next to Briggs. ‘Obviously, we have a strong link between John Doe and today’s attempted kidnapping of Keeley Moore: chess pieces. A white knight and a white pawn. I’m thinking these mean something. The white pawn was found close to where John Doe died, and the white knight was hanging in the van used in Keeley Moore’s attempted kidnap. Does our kidnapper see himself as the white knight, and was John Doe merely a pawn in all this?’

She paused before continuing. ‘Jacob and I have been to the Angel Arms where we managed to find someone who knew Calvin Harris, whose library card was found with John Doe at the scene. The source told us he recalled Calvin striking up a friendship with a younger man who lied about having a disabled daughter, and their common interest was playing chess. We haven’t been able to identify this man, but we suspect he is our John Doe. We also suspect that John Doe tried to kidnap Molly Salsbury, too, after grooming her at the library. Our source at the Angel also led us to Crastone Foods, a factory on the industrial estate that produces ready meals, and an employee called Marie, who he claims used to date our John Doe. We went there today and spoke to an employee called Nina, who remembered Marie working there – unfortunately she couldn’t give us a surname, but she believes it began with a B. Obtaining the company records back then might be impossible. They only have to keep them several years by law but Nina was willing to check the archives. They wouldn’t have the details of any temporary staff and the recruitment company who sent them are no longer in business. I’ve sent an officer to try to speak with the directors via Zoom or Teams as they’re not in the country, but Nina said they wouldn’t have anything to do with recruiting temps or shop floor management. Marie quit the company in 2006, but not before she told Nina that she had been followed

home one night.'

Gina paused and scrunched her brow. 'Sorry, there is so much to take in here, and I know time is against us. Jacob and I will update the system in more detail as soon as the briefing is over. Nina did mention that the man Marie was dating was called Colson, and she often sees him hanging around outside the bookies on the high street. It could be him – he could be our John Doe. She also briefly dated a couple of other men. I've added the information that Nina gave us to the system so bear them in mind. There was another one who we have no description for. We don't know if Marie went on a date with him but for some reason Colson hit him.'

Gina paused. 'Looking at that girl in the photos.' She pointed to them on the board. 'She can't wait. John Doe's accomplice must be running desperate after a failed kidnap attempt. Can we see the artist's drawing of John Doe?'

Briggs slipped it out of the A4 envelope he picked up from a desk and held it up. 'It might not be an exact resemblance, but it's close.'

Gina took in the man's features. He had a slightly round nose and quite a high forehead. 'I know this is a long shot, but can we run it through a programme and add a red Florida baseball cap to it, and put that drawing out, too? It might help jog someone's memory from back then.'

Briggs nodded. 'I can do that. I'll pass it to Garth in digital forensics. I have half an hour before the press release, so I'll go and sort that now.'

He left the room leaving Gina to handle the briefing. 'O'Connor, can you check in with Keeley Moore's family, see if they're okay, and check in on the FLO. Who is the FLO?'

'Orla Cartwright. She's with them now. We also have two cars positioned outside



Mrs Moore's house. We asked if there was anywhere else the family could stay in the meantime. They are going to Mr Moore's parents' later this evening. We have their address. It's in Droitwich and Orla is going too. We're going to keep an undercover car outside their house while they're gone, just in case the kidnapper goes there.'

'Great. I'll feel better if the family are out of the area. We can't guarantee that whoever tried to take Mrs Moore this morning won't try again. Stay on it and keep me updated. Wyre?'

'Yep?'

'Anything coming up with missing persons? That girl in the photos must be missed by someone, and that note gives me the creeps.' She pointed to a photograph of it that was pinned next to John Doe's photo. 'Save her. How can we save her when we don't know where she is or who she is?' Gina began to pace.

'I don't have anything as yet, guv. The birthmark isn't mentioned as a feature for any of our mispers, which is making it harder.'

'How old is she now? Is this photo current or old? If he was pretending to have a daughter back in 2006 or 2007, and he was in his early twenties... who knows. What we do know is the photo he left for us of the girl in the wheelchair was a complete lie. It was a catalogue photo. The girl looks to be about fifteen and she didn't have the birthmark. That birthmark is so distinctive. Anyone who had ever met her would recognise her. We know so little at the moment.'

'Could we release a photo of the girl, maybe an artist's drawing again?' Wyre asked.

'I was wondering that. We can't release those photos with her on the dirty mattress.' Gina paced towards the window and stared out. 'If we do release a drawing, and the man who tried to kidnap Keeley has the girl, he might cut his losses and kill her. We

can't take that risk. It's going to have to be down to good old-fashioned investigating. We can't put her at more risk. Jacob?'

'Yes.'

'We need to quickly update the system and hurry to the bookies, find out if Colson is there or if anyone has seen him, or if indeed he's not been seen because he's our John Doe and he's dead. We'll take the artist's drawing. I'll need backup as we have to consider that he might also be the accomplice. If he is, he could run. If anyone runs and disappears, the girl's life could be at risk. We can't have that happening. Kapoor?'

Trainee DC Kapoor sat up straight and smiled. 'Yes, guv.'

'Can you liaise with PC Smith and organise backup to attend with us. We need the two adjacent roads covered, the path that runs along the back of the terraced houses and both ends of the high street.'

'I'll get onto it now.' She stood and left the room.

'The caretaker, Xavier Whitmore, did anyone interview him earlier?'

O'Connor spoke. 'One of the officers at the scene took a statement. He said he unlocked the school and went back to bed.'

'Any links to a white van?'

'Not as far as we know. We're still looking. He has a red Mini registered to him.'

She checked her watch. 'After the bookies, we'll head over to the caretaker's house and speak to him again.'

Gina went back to looking out the window where she could see the press starting to gather outside the conference room. She stiffened and almost lost a breath when she saw Pete Bloxwich. He glanced up, his stare locking on her. Eyes wide, he would not look away and she wouldn't either. He held a hand up as if to wave, but his sombre expression didn't change. The journalist had worked with Stephen in the past, their sole aim had been to get her to confess to being involved in Terry's death.

Her personal phone beeped. She felt her hands quiver as she unlocked her phone and clicked on her emails. There were twelve, all headed up with disgusting words that made her want to throw up, but the last one made her freeze. It was from Pete.

You just couldn't leave it alone, could you, Gina? What the hell can of worms have you opened now????

### TWENTY-TWO

#### RUTH

The stress headache had spread across her whole face. Leaving work early had been the best thing for everyone. The leisure centre could cope without her. As she pulled up outside her house, she glanced across the road at Gary's. He was there, staring through his window at her, slowly shaking his head. Heart pounding, she knew she had to get out of her car and hurry inside the house. He vanished from the window, which meant one thing: he was going to try to catch her in the street to talk.

He ran out of his door, towards the road. She grabbed her bag from the passenger seat, but it got caught on the handbrake. Hands shaking, she fumbled with it, but the more she tried to free it the worse it tangled up.

She flinched as Gary tapped the window.

Releasing her bag, she stepped out. 'Leave me alone.' She went to walk off, but he grabbed her arm and spun her around.

'That hurt, get off me.' She shrugged him off and gripped her bag close to her chest.

'Sorry, that's the last thing I wanted.' He held his hands up. 'I wanted to apologise for last night. I got the decree absolute.' He began to scratch his stubble.

'We both knew it was due.'

‘But that doesn’t make it any easier. We were married for over forty years. You were my everything, my angel, and what we went through – no other person should have to go through that. I have no one, but you seem to have shackled up with him.’

‘Why are you doing this, Gary?’

He shrugged.

‘You moved into that house so you could spy on me all day long.’

‘I did not. I love it here as much as you do. This place is where we have all our memories.’ He swallowed. ‘My memories. I think of our daughter playing out on this street, riding her scooter up and down. I will never leave. This isn’t all about you.’

She bit her thumbnail. ‘So why are you always looking at me through that window?’

‘I’m not looking at you.’ He paused. ‘Okay, maybe I am, a bit. Sometimes I just want to talk to you, but I can’t because you’re always with him. When we split up, do you remember what we said?’

She didn’t want this conversation. People say what they have to when it comes to ending a relationship, and she had hoped Gary would move on.

‘You said we’d still be friends, and I miss you. You’re the only person I can talk to; the only person who understands what we’ve been through.’

A tear began to drizzle down the right side of her face. She blinked to try to stop any more from emerging. ‘I can’t keep going over this. It’s killing me and you can’t keep slashing our tyres. Eric wants to call the police and I don’t want the police to be involved.’

‘Wait.’ He held one of his huge hands up and dropped it to his side. ‘I did not slash any tyres. I saw the flat and told you, that was all.’

‘You’re lying. No one around here would do that to Eric.’

‘Well, they did because it wasn’t me.’

She stared into his eyes, wondering if he was lying. She knew he could lie. ‘I could never trust you and I can’t trust you now. You’re a great liar, Gary. I should know.’

He huffed and stepped back. ‘I never lied to you, not once. All those things you accused me of, they were in your head. I guess we’ll both find out who is doing all the damage now that you have a camera.’

She turned around to see the camera pointing towards her and Gary. ‘Oh, Eric said he was installing a camera for me.’

‘Do you really think I could be that petty?’

That was a question she couldn’t answer. She had no enemies, as far as she knew. Most people really liked her. The neighbours were friendly in their close-knit community.

‘I wanted to tell you something last night, but it kept going through my head and I’d convinced myself it was stupid.’

‘What, that you’ve been sneaking around my garden when I’m alone in the house, watching me like some sad creep?’

‘Here we go again. Don’t you think I have better things to do than stalk you?’ She stared at him, hoping for some clue as to whether he was lying, but he didn’t crack.

‘If someone is sneaking around the garden, maybe you should call the police.’

He smirked. It was slight, but she saw it. She’d drop it for now and hopefully catch him in the act, or maybe she’d ask Eric to put another camera up out the back.

‘Go on, then, what did you want to tell me?’ She rolled her eyes. Gary had already kept her longer than needed.

‘I came around yesterday, in the morning while you were at work. I wrote a note, well an angry note, so I’m glad I didn’t post it. I was always a bit impulsive, but you know that already. There was something on your doorstep. I came around later to tell you, but just saw red when I kept hearing Eric in the background, so I didn’t mention it.’

‘What was it?’

‘A chess piece. The white queen.’

### TWENTY-THREE

Gina walked with Jacob along the high street after parking in the supermarket car park. She glanced up and down, spotting the two police cars. 'Everyone's in position, guv.' He popped his phone in his pocket as they approached the betting shop.

She pushed the door open, her attention flitting across the several screens showing various sports – mostly horse racing. A man shouted before throwing a betting slip in the bin. Gina headed to the kiosk, passing the many roulette machines that sat against all available walls. Coins dropped, people banged the sides in fury at lost money and others studied form on their phones. 'I'm DI Harte, this is DS Driscoll. We need to ask you a couple of questions about someone who frequents this establishment.'

The middle-aged man in a tracksuit scrunched his brow. 'Who?'

Straight to the point, she liked that. 'Someone called Colson. We've been told he's a regular here,' Gina replied.

'I don't know that name. Do you have a photo?'

She pulled the artist's drawing of John Doe out of her bag. 'Do you recognise this man?' She pushed it under the plastic divider.

He stared at it. 'I'm not sure. We get a lot of people in here.' Gina took the picture back and wondered how accurate the drawing was. It looked a lot like John Doe to her.



‘Do you work here every day?’

‘Yes, apart from Saturdays.’ He glanced along all the flashing machines, all the way to the TVs at the back, then he scratched his forehead. ‘There’s a regular called Col, I always thought his name was Colin, but actually it could be Colson.’

Gina glanced back. ‘Is he in here now?’

‘No, I had a word with him last week. It was a bit sensitive, if you know what I mean.’

‘Sensitive?’ Gina needed more than that.

The man exhaled. ‘I shouldn’t be telling you this because it really is personal, but I’m guessing that you’re here for a good reason. Col has a problem. He’d been particularly agitated this past month, then he came in really drunk and said he’d lost everything. His flat, his savings and his girlfriend. He wasn’t spending that much here, just small amounts on races, like a pound at a time. He confessed he was gambling online all day. I told him to go and sort his life out. He took a couple of leaflets for charities that help people with gambling addiction.’

Gina wanted to make a sarcastic quip on the lines of, I’m sure you did . She knew these gambling companies didn’t care at all about the lives they destroyed.

‘I refused to take his bet and he got all shirty with me and hit the divider, so I told him to get out and not come back, then he kept shouting that he didn’t have a home anymore. I didn’t know what else to do with him.’

‘When did you last see him?’

‘I don’t know, probably last Thursday.’

‘Do you have CCTV?’

‘The only CCTV that was working that day was the camera pointing to the safe. There was a bit of an outage, but that camera works off a different system. It was only fixed yesterday, so no.’

A cascade of coins began to fall from a machine, and a man fell to his knees to pick up the spewing money.

‘Did he ever mention anyone called Marie?’

‘No, we didn’t talk, really. It’s not like we were friends. He came in to feed the slots and put a bit on the gee-gees. I used to befriend people when I first started, but it always ends in tears when they’re on a losing streak, so I keep to myself behind this screen.’

If Colson had been at the bookies last Thursday, he could still be their John Doe. It would make sense, but then again, she’d have thought that the man behind the counter would have recognised the drawing if he was.

The man behind the counter began to stare at something behind them. ‘It’s your lucky day. There’s Col. Oi, you’re banned,’ he shouted at Colson.

As soon as Gina turned and held up her identification, Colson darted back out the door. She and Jacob followed him, and as soon as he ran past the supermarket, she heard Smith shouting, ‘Stop!’ while dressed in uniform.

Colson held his hands up as other officers surrounded him. An image of the girl on the mattress filled her head. Colson was, at the very least, a clue in all this, and at the very most, the accomplice who attempted to kidnap Keeley Moore.

And now they had him.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### TWENTY-FOUR

‘We have no evidence as yet against Colson, guv,’ Jacob said. ‘I’m glad he’s agreed to a voluntary interview.’

She nodded. ‘Let’s get in there now. That girl needs us, and we need to know who he was to Marie, and if he is , or if he knows , the man in the red baseball cap.’

She entered. ‘Mr Ferguson, I trust everything has been explained to you.’

His dark brown fringe stuck up like he’d slept on it and not combed it before coming out. His unkempt appearance befitted a man who’d lost everything, and the small room was beginning to fill with the scent of his nervous sweating. Beads glistened in a line across his forehead. He wiped them away with the arm of his polo shirt. ‘Yes, I didn’t mean to run. Like I said, I thought you were debt collectors. They ring all day and they kept turning up at my flat before I got evicted. I explained everything to the copper who brought me in. I’m sorry about that.’

‘Okay, so we’ll get started.’ Jacob pressed the recorder button and introduced Colson Ferguson for the tape.

‘That’s me, Colson the total loser. Literally.’ He paused. ‘Sorry, carry on.’ The tremor of his hands told Gina that he needed a drink, or a fix, of whatever his poison was. He looked down at his hands. ‘It’s drink. Like I said, loser.’

‘We’re not here to judge and we’ll give you some information on establishments that help with that before you leave.’

‘Can we just get on with it?’

‘You used to be in a relationship with a woman called Marie back in 2006 or 2007, is that correct?’

He stared wide-eyed and scrunched his brows. ‘That’s what this is about? Seriously? Some woman I dated a million years ago. I’ve lived with someone, left her and had two more serious relationships since then, not to mention dated a load of women. What about Marie?’

‘Tell me about her. Was she seeing anyone else around the time you were with her, or just before or after? Did she mention anyone?’

‘There were others but I can’t remember anything about them. It was ages ago.’

‘We spoke to someone you worked with. They said that you hit a man while you were there.’

He rolled his eyes. ‘I pushed an idiot out of the way. I was seeing Marie and I could tell he liked her.’ He paused. ‘I shouldn’t have pushed him. It was stupid.’

‘Do you remember what he looked like?’

‘He was wearing a white hair cover and a white coat. That was the uniform. Everyone looked a bit samey. He left while I was there but Marie said he was a bit weird. I can’t remember him. It was so long ago and I temped at so many places at that time.’

‘It’s not every day you end up pushing someone. Wouldn’t he be a person you would remember?’ Gina asked.

He shrugged. ‘I should but I don’t. I was young and stupid back then; I pushed a few

people and got into my fair share of meaningless scuffles. What can I say? I just don't remember him.'

'Did Marie ever mention a boxer or someone who could have been referred to as City Boy?' She glanced at her notes to make sure she got that name right.

'Nah, Marie didn't tell me everything. We weren't exclusive. We both dated other people. She was pretty and popular. I don't know either of those people.'

Gina pulled out the sketch of John Doe. 'Do you recognise this man?'

He barely looked at the picture. 'Nope, but then again, I've had that many jobs I could have met him but he's not standing out.'

'How about the red baseball cap?'

'Nope. Again, I'm not saying I've never met him but I don't recognise him.'

Gina placed the picture back in the file. Their John Doe would have worked at the factory over a decade ago. He could have changed a lot.

'Is Marie okay? Has something happened to her?'

'Quite the opposite, we are trying to locate her. Do you know her surname?'

'Yes, it was Blaine.'

'Have you seen her since?'

'Nah, I hated the factory we both worked at. I got sick of stinking of fish every day, so I left. I don't know what happened to her after that. We didn't keep in touch.'

‘Did she ever mention being worried about something while you were together?’

He leaned back and began to grind his teeth while he was thinking. ‘She thought someone followed her home one night, but I think she was just being a bit melodramatic.’

‘What makes you say that?’

He shrugged. ‘Well, she was okay. No one attacked her.’

‘Do you know where she lived back then?’

‘Yes, I picked her up to go out one night. She lived with her dad and nan. She had a cousin, too, who used to come and have lunch with her sometimes.’

‘Do you know the name of her cousin?’

‘It may have been Lissy, but don’t quote me on that.’

‘Did you have an address for Marie?’

‘I don’t know the name of her road back then, but the house was directly opposite to the Cleevesford Cleaver. It used to be a bed and breakfast. It’s a hostel now, I think. She probably doesn’t live there anymore, but it might be worth a try.’

‘Mr Ferguson, do you play chess?’

‘I used to be on the school chess team, but not since then.’

‘Do you or have you ever owned a red baseball cap?’

‘No. I’m not that man in the picture you showed me.’

‘Do you have access to a car?’

He looked from side to side. ‘Err, no.’

‘Where were you between five and eight o’clock this morning?’

‘Asleep.’

‘Where?’

‘In my van.’

‘So, you have access to a van? What van do you drive?’

‘A Mercedes Sprinter.’

‘What colour?’

‘White. Why?’

‘Where do you park your van when you sleep?’

‘In a car park at Cleevesford Nature Park.’

Gina tried to envisage the route from the nature park to the back of Cleevesford High School. There were no automatic number plate recognition cameras along that route. He could have easily driven to the location and attempted to kidnap Keeley Moore.

‘Where is it now?’



‘On the road behind the bookies.’

‘Do you know someone called Keeley Moore?’

‘No. I mean, yes. Oh shit.’ He stared at her. ‘I, err, she... I want a solicitor. No comment.’

He knew Keeley.

He was in the area and he had a van that matched the description given to them. Before he could hide anything, they needed his van and phone.

‘Mr Ferguson, I’m arresting you on suspicion of the attempted kidnap of Keeley Moore. You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defence if you do not mention when questioned something that you later rely on in court.’

Gina exhaled. They were hopefully one step closer to finding the girl.

### TWENTY-FIVE

#### RUTH

Ruth passed Gary a black coffee, just how he always enjoyed it. He took a sip before placing his hands on the kitchen table. 'Who would leave a chess piece outside my door?' She checked her watch and hoped that Eric wouldn't turn up while Gary was in the house. He'd been livid at the state of his car, but Ruth believed Gary when he said he didn't slash Eric's tyre. And why would he make up some story about a chess piece being left at her door?

'How am I meant to know? It is odd though, isn't it?' He pulled a small, red velvet jewellery pouch from his pocket and placed it in the middle of the wooden kitchen table. 'Here it is. I shouldn't have taken it. It was obviously meant for you. Again, I'm sorry. I've been such an idiot.'

A flutter in her heart made her hold her breath for a few seconds. The Gary sitting opposite her was her Gary, the Gary she loved before years of heartache; before taking each other for granted had ruined what they had. Before his secretive behaviour and the longer hours at the farm had bothered her. It was definitely another woman or women .

Then she thought of Eric, the man she was in love with now. 'We've been through a lot, haven't we?' She grabbed the velvet pouch and tipped the white queen out.

'What's that?' The diamond in her ring glinted and Gary stared at it. 'Are you marrying him?'

‘I, err, yes. I said yes. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean for you to find out this way.’

He shook his head and looked into his lap. ‘I never thought it would come to this. You’ve always been my only one, Ruth, always.’ She half rolled her eyes. ‘You can’t marry him. He’s not the man you think he is.’

She stood. ‘You know, for a minute I felt like we were getting somewhere, moving on. Do you think I don’t know Eric? I’ve been seeing him for months.’

Gary smirked.

‘Stop that.’

‘What?’

‘That smirk, like you’re looking down on me. You always did it, and God I hated it. Get out.’ She pointed towards the hallway.

His smile dropped. ‘I miss her. Do you still think about her?’

A lump formed in her throat. ‘I am not talking about this now. You know where it took me and I don’t want to go there again. I’m happy now, but you had to try to bring me down again by mentioning the past.’

He slammed his hand down on the table and stood. For a split second, she feared he might throw her table over. ‘The past? You want to talk about the past? I bought this table. We had family meals here. Christmases, birthdays, we both cried at this table each time we lost one of our precious babies, after...’ She could see he still felt that pain, too. The monthly disappointment after the hopeful positive tests, and then the loss. ‘I never thought I’d lose you. Never.’

‘You made sure I did. You drove me away with your horrible drunken behaviour and the cheating you’ll never admit to. You’re such a liar, Gary.’

‘You make up so much shit. I drove you away? For years, I didn’t know who I was anymore, but I thought you would have stood by me. I was always there for you, but when I needed you, you abandoned me, and now you are wearing that cheap-as-shit-looking rock on your finger.’

‘How dare you. Just go,’ she screamed. ‘Get out.’ She ran around the table and began pushing him out of the kitchen and along the hall.

He reached out and grabbed a framed photo from the sideboard and held it to his heart. ‘Don’t you want the truth? We can still find out what happened, you know. You and me, together.’

Breathing heavily, she stopped trying to push him. He was much stronger than her. ‘All I ever wanted was the truth, but we both have to accept that we don’t know what happened and we never will. I didn’t abandon you, Gary, I couldn’t look at you. Each day for years, when I woke up next to you, all I could see was her and the fact that I couldn’t carry another child. You were that constant reminder, and it broke me too, and you were just never around.’

‘I know and I’m sorry. We can heal each other. Please, Ruth, give me another chance. I know I wasn’t the husband you deserved, but I will step up. Do you remember our first date when I told you that you were the one? I was eighteen, I’d just started uni and you’d sneaked into the student bar at sixteen. Student night, remember?’ He smiled.

She couldn’t help but remember that filthy bar in Birmingham, with its sticky carpets. She’d asked Gary to get her a drink and offered to give him the money to go to the bar, but he’d bought her that drink and the next three before nervously asking her to

go out with him the next night. She remembered the dorky-looking boy with the spots and messy hair.

‘What did I say to you a week later?’

She didn’t want to say it out loud, but she’d never forget that moment and those words. He told her he knew she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. She thought it would fizzle out, that she’d meet more boys at college and he’d meet more girls at uni, but they’d soon become inseparable.

A year later they were parents. Young but happy. He quit uni and she quit her course, but they were so, so happy.

A tear slipped down her cheek. If only they could go back to simpler times.

‘Please don’t marry him.’

‘Gary, this is all too much for me, you have to go.’

He turned to the door, went to open it and stopped. ‘I didn’t want to tell you this, but if I don’t I will never forgive myself. You are making a huge mistake, maybe the biggest one of your life.’

‘I’ve already made the biggest mistake of my life. I... I...’ She nearly choked on her words.

‘You have to forgive yourself.’ He paused. ‘I never blamed you once, you know, and it killed me to see how you blamed yourself all these years.’ He moved towards her and wiped the tears that were now spilling from her eyes.

‘Whatever you have to say, it’s nothing in comparison.’

‘I’ve done something and I’m not proud of it.’

She pulled away. ‘Did you slash Eric’s tyre? If you did, just say.’

‘No. I told you I didn’t. Why would I lie? If I did it, I’d happily tell you.’ He blew out a breath. ‘I followed him.’

Her eyes widened as she clenched her fists by her side. ‘How could you? You sound insane. Get the hell out and don’t come back. I knew it, all this talk about her, about the past, you’re just playing with my feelings, trying to manipulate me. This is all a game to you.’

‘I’m not the one who’s trying to manipulate you. Open your eyes.’

She pounded his chest. ‘Get out or I’ll call the police.’

He grabbed her fists. ‘For heaven’s sake. I’m on your side here.’

‘On my side? You followed Eric like some psycho stalker.’

‘He doesn’t live in that house you go to when you stay at his.’

‘So, you stalk us both ?’

‘Shut up and listen. This isn’t about me or you, it’s about him. That house is on a holiday rental site. Look it up. How long have you known him?’ He let go of her hands.

‘I... err...’

‘Let me answer that for you, four months, five maybe, and now you’re engaged. He

has another house with a nice little wifey. He has grown-up children with families. They all look really happy together when they have Sunday dinner. He's never here on Sundays, is he?' He pulled out a piece of paper from the pocket of his jeans and placed it on the sideboard. 'Here's his real address. I knew he was shifty, and there it is in black and white. I'm done. Go and see for yourself, then maybe you can start trusting me.'

'He has a sister and he spends those Sundays with her and her family. She's recently lost her husband. They're close.'

'Men do not kiss their sisters the way he kissed her when he left the house the other morning.' He turned and left, leaving the door wide open as he crossed the road to go to his house.

She slammed the door closed and kicked it before adjusting the framed photo of her beautiful daughter, Elissa.

Her mind went back to the woman staring at her from outside the leisure centre. Had that been Eric's wife, sussing her out? Had the woman wanted to march in and have it out with Ruth for stealing her husband? Maybe she had held back because she had a child with her.

Then her phone beeped with a message from a withheld number. She read it and screamed. 'I hate you, Gary.' He really had sunk low with his mind games this time.

She misses you. Are you ready for the truth? I know where Elissa is.

### TWENTY-SIX

Gina hated having to leave Colson Ferguson in a cell, especially as he'd looked so shifty after she'd mentioned Keeley Moore, but they had so much to do and he was enforcing his right to silence. 'Did you tell Orla, the FLO, what was said in Colson's interview?'

Jacob pulled over outside the caretaker's office. 'Yes, Keeley Moore and her family have arrived at her husband's parents' house now and she is staying with them. I said we'd go and talk to Keeley later, like you suggested. If she finds anything out, she'll let us know straight away.'

'Great, when we've finished with the caretaker, we'll head over. What's the caretaker called again?' Gina asked.

Jacob began searching on his phone. 'Xavier Whitmore. From the statements we took, we know he's a bit of a prankster, that's why Keeley Moore thought the van pulling up with the stuffed legs sticking out of it was a joke, not a ploy to try and kidnap her.' He turned the ignition off.

'Who's looking into Marie?'

'O'Connor has organised to go with a PC to check out the houses opposite the Cleevesford Cleaver, to try to find out if Marie still lives there, or if anyone can remember her.'

'Let's hope they do.' Gina felt her stomach churning a little. A second day had almost



passed and they still had no idea who the girl in the photo was. 'I hate to say this, but Keeley's attempted kidnap makes me slightly relieved. If the girl in the photo is trapped somewhere, there is another person who will feed her and...' She took a couple of breaths and closed her eyes for a moment as she tried to digest what she was thinking.

'And what? I think you're thinking what I'm thinking.'

She nodded. 'Or she might be too much trouble and he might just kill her. If so, why did he try to take someone else? Is the girl already dead? Was he going to replace her? We have nothing here. I don't know where we're going with this one, and all I can think about is that girl.'

She thought of all the emails she'd received. Those were the types of men this girl was probably up against. She was nothing to them. She was something to own, control and keep for whatever sick games they had planned, looking at the state she was in in the photo.

Her mind wandered to Pete Bloxwich and she shivered. The last thing she needed was him coming back to the area and testing whether she'd out him or not, at the risk of being outed herself. That threat had kept them both out of trouble, but was he prepared to go down to take her with him?

She almost choked on the lump in her throat as she swallowed. Between Pete, possibly Stephen, and the hideous mystery emailers, her past was closing in on her faster than ever.

'Don't worry, guv. We'll catch a break. Let's just get on with the policing. We have Colson Ferguson in custody for now, and the press release has taken place. By this evening, the drawing of John Doe and a picture of the scarf will be out there.'

‘On the other hand, if it is Colson and the girl is still alive somewhere, she’s on her own. We can’t think for one minute that she doesn’t need us right now. You saw how bad she looked in those photos.’ Gina felt her hands tremble. ‘We need to let him out by morning and keep a tail on him.’

Jacob sighed. ‘We’ll check with the team later, see if they’ve found and taken his van in for a search. I hope they hurry. For her sake.’

The floppy-haired caretaker ran across the road in almost darkness, holding a huge bunch of keys. They stepped out of the car. ‘Mr Whitmore?’ Gina held her identification up. ‘We saw you earlier in the sports hall, following the incident. Can we go inside and speak?’

‘I told you all everything I knew: I was in bed at the time. One of the cleaners came over to tell me what happened and woke me up.’

‘I know, but we need to follow up on that. It’s just routine.’

He popped his key in the lock and turned it until it clicked. ‘Come in.’ He pushed the door open and a musty smell escaped.

Gina stepped in first and Xavier turned the main light on in the hall, then led them to the kitchen. The worktop was covered in laundry, pairs of his jeans twisted in a bundle and crumpled T-shirts. ‘Sorry about the mess, I wasn’t expecting visitors. Take a seat at the breakfast bar.’

Gina glanced at the small, round kitchen table that was topped with car magazines. Her gaze reached the patio doors and the small, slabbed garden covered in mulched up leaves.

‘What do you need from me?’

Jacob sat and took a notebook from his satchel. He nudged the houseplant out of the way and water sloshed over the top of the overwatered plant. He soaked up the spilled water with the sleeve of his jacket before placing the book on the surface.

Gina leaned against the breakfast bar, knowing that if she sat she might not want to get up. 'Were you on your own this morning between five and six fifteen?'

'I live here alone, and before you ask, I'm single, so I was on my own. I did unlock the school at five-twenty so the others could get in.'

'Tell me about the pranks?'

'Oh, come on.' He frowned. 'Some of us, the staff, I mean, do a few silly things to brighten up our days before the kids arrive.'

Xavier didn't look much older than the kids at the school. She looked a bit closer at the crease in his forehead. Maybe he was in his late twenties?

'I left a broomstick with a mask attached for Ally to find, and Ally put the skeleton from the science block in the cleaners' cupboard, which scared Keeley once. We also squirted some red syrupy stuff, or something like that, in the showers and she's scared of blood. It's just fun. We all do it.' He tucked his long hair behind his ears. 'Okay, it was stupid and I know how it sounds, but I like one of the cleaners, Cara. I mean, I would like to ask her out. She's a lot of fun and I guess we are a silly and bad influence on each other when it comes to the jokes. The job gets boring for them and the hours are a bit on the antisocial side. It brightens the day up a bit.'

Gina had read the statements and she knew that Keeley had been working with Cara at the time. 'You said you didn't have a car or vehicle in your statement, but you have a red Mini registered to you.'

Gina knew that a search came back confirming that he could drive, and they knew the blue Fiesta had been stolen. Maybe the white van had, too. She knew they had Colson Ferguson in custody and his van was going to be checked out, but they weren't home and dry yet.

'My Mini is in my parents' garage. It needs a lot of work, but I don't have the money to fix it yet. It's old. I didn't think about that when you asked me about vehicles because I don't drive it at the moment.' He wrote down a phone number and address. 'Here's their details, if you want to check.' He passed the piece of paper to Gina.

Apart from the fact that he had no alibi, there was nothing else against him. Definitely not enough to bring him into the station. PCs had searched the area and they didn't see a suspicious white van close to the caretaker's house. She pulled out the artist drawing of John Doe and held it up. 'Do you know this man?'

He stared at it for a few seconds. 'Yes, I've seen him at the school.'

'When?' Gina stood up straight and Jacob stopped writing.

'Before we broke up for the summer holidays in July. I can't remember when, but I found him loitering by the PE block. He seemed odd and he was on his own. He looked really nervous when I stopped him, but he began to babble about how he had a daughter he'd been home-schooling and he asked about schools in the area. He seemed quite clueless.'

Gina thought back to the girl in the photo. At the time John Doe was playing chess at the Angel, he claimed to have a young daughter. Even if the girl was a toddler then, that would make her about twenty now. Far too old to be going to high school. The girl in the photo they had was definitely nowhere near twenty, but then again, if she was malnourished and being held against her will, she might not have developed like an average person. 'What happened? Did he go into the school or speak to the head?'

Xavier shook his head. He unscrewed a bottle of water. He poured some into the sopping-wet plant before taking a sip. 'He said he'd call the office or return with his daughter. I mentioned seeing him to one of the year heads later, but they said that no one had called so I guess he changed his mind. Things got busy, and I didn't think much more about why he didn't call.'

'Did he say anything else about his daughter?'

'He sounded like any proud father. Said how clever she was and how he'd come to his limits of what he could teach her at home. He had a photo of her in his wallet. She seemed like a little mouse, hunched over on a chair and looking through her long fringe. She had a birthmark on her cheek.'

'A birthmark?' Gina leaned forward, eager to hear more.

'Yes, a large one. I can't remember whether it was on the top of her left or right cheek, now. It was just unusual. That's why I remember her.' He paused. 'Wait, he used her name.'

He closed his eyes and clicked his fingers a few times. 'It'll come to me in a minute.' He clicked his fingers again. 'Stupid brain. It's on the tip of my tongue... That's it, when I asked the year head if someone had enquired about a student, I said I'd met her father and he said his daughter's name was Luna.'

Luna, the same name that Rona Sailsbury's daughter, Molly, had mentioned.

'Did he speak with an accent?' She wondered if he was originally from Cleevesford or the local area.

'He sounded like he was from around here. Maybe there was a hint of Brummie, but it was barely noticeable.'

‘Excuse me a moment.’ Gina stepped outside, leaving Jacob to carry on speaking to Xavier, while she called Wyre.

Wyre spoke immediately. ‘Great news, guv. We have Colson Ferguson’s van. It’s on its way to the compound now.’

‘That is good news. Jacob and I are at the caretaker’s house and I think we have the name of our missing girl. It’s the same name Molly Sailsbury gave us.’

‘Great, I’ll run it through mispers. What is it again?’

‘Can we double-check all missing persons details with the name Luna? We’re looking at ages thirteen to eighteen. I know we thought Luna was completely made up when we ran that catalogue photo, but she’s cropped up again.’ She thought about the age once more. ‘Actually, check up to the age of twenty-five. Something isn’t adding up here.’

‘I’ll call you back in five. I’m looking now.’

Gina couldn’t help but feel they were one step closer to finding the girl.

To finding Luna.

TWENTY-SEVEN

RUTH

As Ruth pulled up in a lay-by just down the road from the address Gary had left her with, she stared at the large house hidden behind a thick, tall row of conifers. The winding drive led to a larger one, where Eric's car was parked outside the double garage. She checked the message he'd sent her while she'd been driving.

I'm with my sister. She's really upset and needs me. I'll see you later. By the way, was Gary in your house earlier? I saw him on the new camera. I hope he gave you the money for my tyre.

She knew having CCTV was a good idea, but she hadn't realised Eric would have access to the live footage.

It felt like he'd been watching her.

Damn, Gary had planted the distrust in her mind because he was turning into a sad, bitter old man. He was angry because she'd moved on and found Eric. Anger brewed up within her.

She scrunched her brow and put her long-distance glasses back on. Eric passed the window and began hitting a remote control against his palm before pointing it. Her being here was stupid, and if Eric saw her it would be a gross breach of his trust.

She couldn't do it.

She turned the ignition and went to put the car into first gear, when something white caught her peripheral vision. Eric's sister had joined him and she was wearing a white top. He passed her the remote and nodded. The woman slapped him on the arm playfully and smiled.

Ruth smiled along with them. She wished she'd had siblings, although his sister looked a lot younger than him. Maybe she was in her forties or fifties. He'd never mentioned her age.

She took in the woman's features, or at least what she could see: mousy-brown hair, white top and an A-line skirt, her hair up in a chignon. Very sophisticated.

She couldn't be angrier at Gary, and she was angrier at herself for falling for his lies. She pictured him back at his house, laughing about the stupid chess piece. What a joke, trying to tell her that someone had left it outside her door. Gary had a chessboard because he used to play chess. The only person she should be spying on right now was him.

Eric stepped towards the window and picked something up from the sill. Ruth ducked, hoping he wouldn't see her car.

She had a common car – there were lots of silver hatchbacks around – and she doubted he'd think for one minute that she was watching him. In fact, she wasn't. As soon as he turned around, she was going to let that handbrake off and pull away, then go right back home and give Gary a piece of her mind.

She peered over the bottom of the window. Eric's back was to her again. A few specks of rain began to hit the windscreen. Sitting back up properly, she pulled her seat belt across her chest and plugged it in before taking one final glance.

That's when she saw the woman and Eric, her Eric, kissing and hugging. Gary was



right, no way would any person kiss their sister like that.

Rage began to pump through her veins. If it wasn't for the fact that she was technically the other woman, she'd march right up to his door and give him the biggest piece of her mind ever.

She tried to wiggle off the ring he'd placed on her finger the night before – the ring that was meant to represent her new start with the man she loved – but it was stuck. She instantly regretted slamming her hand on the front panel of her car, dislodging the fan button.

Great, she'd damaged her car now, too.

She hated Eric so much, but she hated that Gary had been telling the truth more. And she hated that Eric had seen her through the CCTV.

As soon as she got home she was going to rip it from the wall.

Eric opened the front door and stepped out into the light rain. He glanced her way and her face burned with humiliation. Had he seen her, or was he looking at something else? Before she got the chance to answer her own question, she sped off, sickened by the whole situation.

What a fool she'd been.

Eric's wife was also definitely not the woman who had stared at her through the leisure centre window, she was much taller. This woman was prettier than Ruth, definitely much younger, and completely innocent in all this.

Was she officially a home-wrecker now? No, she hadn't wrecked anyone's home yet, and she wouldn't.

Continuing her relationship with Eric went against everything she believed in. As soon as she could get the ring off her finger, she was going to throw it in his face and tell him she never wanted to see him again.

The thought hurt so much. Just that previous night was the happiest she had been in ages.

Her phone beeped. As soon as she'd driven far enough to put distance between her and Eric, she pulled over into a car park to read the message. She assumed Eric had seen her, and that this would probably be a message from him now.

She angrily prodded the phone to open the text and frowned. She removed her long-distance glasses and squinted as her eyes adjusted. Once again, it was a message from a withheld number:

I know what happened to your daughter and I'm going to help you. I am so scared right now, but I know I need to do the right thing. If he finds out I messaged you, he will hurt me, so if you tell anyone, you will never hear from me again and you will never know the truth. Keep your phone on and wait for me to make contact again. I wish there was another way, but my life is in danger.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### TWENTY-EIGHT

Gina kept staring at her phone while Jacob drove them to Droitwich to speak to Keeley. Twenty minutes had passed and Wyre still hadn't called back. Darkness had fallen and the only sound in the car was the swishing of the wipers. She answered her work phone as soon as it rang. 'Wyre.'

'Sorry, guv. There is no one at all called Luna who is registered as missing in the whole of the UK, and I still haven't come across any misper with that very distinctive birthmark.'

She sighed. 'Thanks for looking. Back to the drawing board with finding out more about the girl, then.'

Gina shivered as she thought about the man in the ski mask who had tried to kidnap Keeley. Why?

They needed to find Luna fast. John Doe was dead. Their attempted kidnapper was dangerous and violent. They had to find him before it was too late.

'Can you update the system with the name? Our missing girl is Luna, or is known as Luna. I'll get Jacob to message you his notes in a minute.'

Wyre paused for a moment as if in thought herself. 'I'll definitely bear that in mind. I'll do a bit more searching on the name Luna.'

'Oh, and Wyre?'

‘Yes?’

‘Any news on finding Marie?’

‘O’Connor has just come in with updates. He found out where she used to live, but she’s no longer there. The team has spoken to some of the neighbours and left notes for those who weren’t in. A couple of people remembered her and her family from back then, but no one knows where she moved to once her nan died.’

‘Thanks. Keep me updated. Oh, and can you send me all the misper files, too, when you get a moment?’

‘Will do.’

Gina ended the call.

Jacob turned into the road the satnav was leading them to. ‘This is it.’

He stopped outside the small chapel, surrounded by scaffolding and vans. Gina gazed alongside the house and all she could see were fields and trees in the darkness. A message popped up on her phone.

I’ve just arrived back at the station after the family asked me to leave. Thought I’d check in with you as I just heard you were on your way to speak to them.

Orla

‘Looks like they dismissed the FLO.’

As they stepped out, a security light dazzled her. After another step, two more security lights came on and a camera that had been attached to the gothic-looking

frontage swivelled to face them. Gina pulled the huge bell rope and it made a deep ding-dong sound.

Morgan opened the door. 'Come in,' he said, standing to the side.

The double-height building was quite a spectacle, the space echoing the children screaming and running around upstairs. A spacious new kitchen stood at the far end, but they'd stepped into the lounge side where two plump couches had been positioned around an inglenook fireplace. The walls looked freshly plastered, but not painted.

'Keeley is just getting the kids to sleep. As you can imagine, they think all this is an adventure.' Loud giggles and footsteps came from above.

'This is a beautiful property.' Gina spoke louder, over the children.

'It is. My parents are property developers.' He continued. 'Normally, they just fix a place up, but they love this one so much they're staying here. They're just getting the roof fixed, hence all the scaffolding. Such a big job. Take a seat by the fireplace. Can I get you both a drink? We've got some cappuccinos, hot chocolate or latte pods?'

'A latte, please.' Gina's stomach rumbled. A milky drink might just stave off the hunger for a while. Jacob asked for the same.

As Mr Moore headed over to the kitchen and began making the drinks, Gina turned to Jacob and whispered, 'There were three vans outside this property – one of them was white. I just can't work out a motive, and white vans are common.'

Keeley entered from the back, walked over to her husband and said something that Gina couldn't hear over the spluttering of the coffee machine. She grabbed two cups and brought the drinks over, placing them on the hunk of tree that was the coffee

table.

‘Sorry about the chaos. We were just about to get the boys to bed which is proving to be impossible. Have you found him, the man who tried to kidnap me?’ She sat opposite Gina and Jacob, and her husband came to join them, passing his wife a glass of red wine and keeping one for himself. One of the children chuckled and ran up and down the stairs.

‘We are following some leads and we have made an arrest.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t catch that.’ She turned and shouted, ‘Boys, can you give Mummy a break?’

Gina spoke louder. ‘We’ve made an arrest.’

‘Who is he?’

‘We are still investigating. The suspect hasn’t been charged, but I’ll keep you updated when we know more.’

Mr Moore sank back into the cushions and sipped his wine. ‘But it’s probably him? That’s good. He’s off the streets and hopefully once you’ve got your evidence, we can go home. I love my parents and all, but we need our own space.’

‘Where are they now?’

‘Oh, they’ve gone out for the evening. They knew you were coming, so they said they’d leave us to talk.’

‘There are a lot of vans outside.’ Gina wondered if Mr Moore would happily talk about them.

‘Yes, as I said, my parents are property developers. They use the vans, and my dad is a brickie, too.’ He scrunched his brow. ‘Wait, you don’t think my dad tried to take Keeley, do you? He didn’t. That’s ridiculous. You can take a look in the vans, if you like. Keeley would recognise the van, wouldn’t she?’

Keeley guzzled her wine down in one go. ‘The van from this morning was a lot older than my father-in-law’s fleet, and a bit longer, and he doesn’t have chess pieces dangling from the rear-view mirror. It wasn’t his.’ She placed her empty glass on the table.

‘Do you want another one, love?’

‘No, I’m okay,’ Keeley replied to her husband.

Gina knew that her next line of questioning might be sensitive. ‘Would you mind if we speak to your wife alone?’

Keeley tilted her head and linked her hands in her lap.

‘I’ll go and try to read the boys a bedtime story.’ He placed his glass on the table and headed towards the back of the room. ‘Call me when you’re done.’ He went up the stairs.

Gina glanced up, wondering if Mr Moore could hear them, but the boys began to shout and scream again. They’d be lucky to hear each other. She edged forward a little in the hope of hearing better. ‘Do you know a man called Colson Ferguson?’

Keeley began to bite her nails. ‘I don’t want to talk about him, not now, not here.’

‘We have him in custody.’

She stopped biting her nails and held both hands out, palms up. ‘Why? He has nothing to do with this,’ she replied, glancing at the stairs at the same time.

‘Mrs Moore, someone tried to kidnap you earlier. We’ve had to explore all avenues, and Mr Ferguson is an avenue.’

‘How did you even find out about him? I didn’t tell anyone.’

Gina didn’t want to use the word coincidence, but then again, she didn’t believe in coincidences – Ferguson had come up in the investigation for a reason. ‘Tell me about your relationship?’

‘There is no relationship.’

‘There was though, wasn’t there? We’ve spoken to Mr Ferguson.’ Gina could just tell. Mrs Moore’s body language was screaming affair .

Her eyes began to water up. ‘This is going to kill Morgan. I should have come clean and told him, but I didn’t want to be the person to ruin everything. Please can we not do this?’

‘We have to, I’m sorry. There is a dangerous person on the loose and that person might strike again. What we haven’t mentioned to the press is that we believe someone else’s life might be in danger, and time is against us. You need to tell us what you know.’

Keeley stood and walked all the way back over to the kitchen area. She grabbed the bottle of Valpolicella, came back and topped her glass up. She gripped the stem of the wine glass and took another sip. ‘It was a good month ago, at least. My in-laws were away, Morgan’s mum was visiting her sister and his dad was at some property seminar in London. When we came over for dinner a few days before, one of the boys



had left his favourite teddy behind and I said I'd swing by to get it. Morgan stayed at home and I drove here. We have an emergency key, so I thought I'd just nip in and nip out.' She paused and glugged the wine again.

'What happened when you got here?'

'I let myself in and Colson was here, standing in the kitchen, wearing my father-in-law's dressing gown. I didn't know who he was at that point. My father-in-law, Tristan, used his name when he called down for Colson to hurry back, and I knew straight away that they'd been sleeping together. That's when he saw me. I ran upstairs to Tristan and he begged me not to say anything. Colson followed, grabbed his clothes and left.'

'Did you see him after that?' The children began running around upstairs and another one cried, protesting that he wasn't tired.

'No.' She frowned as she ignored them. 'Wait, I've seen him once since getting a pasty from the café, when I was going to the hairdresser's on the high street in Cleevesford. He came out with it and went straight into the bookies. I must confess, I ducked into a doorway because I didn't want to see him again. I had this awful dilemma: Tristan is a great man and if I said anything, it would blow our family apart and I don't want that. My husband is also a great man and I hated keeping something so big from him. I decided not to say anything and I don't want to say anything. My father-in-law was going through a hard time of it. He's been stressed and, I guess, a bit lost.'

'You've discussed this with Tristan Moore?'

'Yes, after Colson left that day, he came down looking all sheepish and ashamed. We had a long chat about how he felt my mother-in-law, Moira, had seemed distanced from him, that I didn't understand what it was like to feel invisible. He said he'd met

Colson at the Angel Arms one night when my mother-in-law was away visiting family. He's been a bit depressed lately. I actually felt sorry for him. Please don't break up their marriage. It's already on thin ice. They've both cheated on each other in the past.'

That wasn't what Gina had been expecting.

'Are you sure they didn't see each other again after that?'

'My father-in-law was devastated, so I think it was over after that.'

'We will need to speak to him down at the station.'

'Can I tell him? When they get back?'

Gina glanced at Jacob and nodded. 'First thing tomorrow morning, I need him there.'

'Okay, I'll bring him myself.'

Gina pulled the artist's drawing of John Doe from her bag. 'Do you recognise this man?'

'I'm not sure.' One of the children started shouting and the running around started again. 'Sorry, they're a nightmare to get to sleep.' She half glanced back at the drawing, then looked up at Gina. 'He could be anyone my in-laws use for their projects but I don't think so. I see so many people come and go around here.' She leaned towards the stairs. 'Mummy will be up in a minute.'

'Sorry, love,' Morgan called down the stairs, then the kids started shouting and giggling as they ran up and down the stairs.

‘Do you know of a girl called Luna...’ Gina almost wanted to put her fingers in her ears to block out the mayhem as a piercing scream made them wince.

‘Mummy. I want Flopsy and Daddy has lost him,’ one of the kids yelled.

‘... or anyone with a large birthmark on her left cheek?’

‘Birthmark on a cheek, sorry, I can’t say that I do. There is something else about Colson, though, and this will embarrass my father-in-law, but I think it needs saying.’

‘Go on.’

‘Colson tried to ask him for money. They barely knew each other, and Tristan knew Colson was going through a hard time because he was living in a van. Colson asked to borrow two thousand pounds for a deposit on a flat.’

‘Did Mr Moore lend him the money?’

Keeley shook her head. ‘He said no. I mean, apart from the obvious of what they did, Tristan barely knows Colson. That day, when I caught Colson here and left him in the kitchen while I went upstairs, he took some money. Tristan didn’t report it because he didn’t want Moira to know. He had five hundred pounds for the scaffolder in the kitchen cupboard and Colson stole it. Tristan called Colson later that day, saying he wanted it back, and Colson said that if my father-in-law bothered him again, he’d tell my mother-in-law about their really long and passionate affair – that didn’t happen, by the way. He made it all up. There was no really long affair and I believe my father-in-law when he said it was a one-off.’ A crying little boy with a red face ran into Keeley’s arms. ‘I’m sorry, can we do this tomorrow? As you can see, we are dealing with a lot. I will come in tomorrow morning. What I will say is, Colson is dangerous and nasty.’

### TWENTY-NINE

#### RUTH

After tearing down the camera and binning it, Ruth popped the stepladder back into the understairs cupboard, then she marched over the road to Gary's house.

Darkness had fallen fast, even though the slight drizzle had stopped. If Eric messaged now, she'd tell him where to go. Gary was an idiot, but he was no danger to her. She had no idea who slashed Eric's tyre – probably some kids or even a random person. It happened, even in nice, quiet villages.

She had decided to mention the message she received to Gary. It concerned him as much as it did her, and if there was the slightest chance she could see her daughter again, she was going to take it. The messenger sounded scared. Nerves fluttered in her stomach. There had been prank sightings over the years, but this one felt different.

Banging on the door, she waited. Why didn't Gary have a doorbell like normal people?

She looked up at his duck-head knocker that was covered in muck. No way was she touching that thing. He was never that filthy when they lived together. Oh yes, that's because Ruth did all the clearing up after him.

Gary might have been right about Eric playing her, but he was no better. He, too, had made her life a misery. At least she had found out what Eric was like now, so he

couldn't do the same.

She banged again. Where was he? He barely went out, and she didn't think he'd gone to work today at the farm. She stomped over the mucky front garden that Gary had dug up with something that looked like a rotavator the other week. She almost tripped over a soft clump of earth as she reached the smudgy bay window and peered in the gap around the sheet being used as a makeshift curtain. Thank goodness it had got dark so no one could see her. The neighbours liked to gossip.

She saw a thin strip of light at the back of the dark room. If only he lived near one of the very few street lamps in the area, she'd be able to see more.

She banged on the window, hoping that he'd hear. Cupping her eyes, she leaned her face against the glass and tried to peer in. The strip of light was coming from underneath the living room door. Gary must be in the kitchen, but why wasn't he answering?

Again, she thought he wouldn't go out and leave the light on. She remembered him always going on at her about how much it cost when she accidentally left lights on around the house.

Trying not to fall over the mounds of earth, she pulled her phone out and used it as a torch. Finally, she stepped back onto the path and began to walk around the side of the semi-detached house.

Something wasn't right.

Gary would never ignore her knocking at his door. For a moment, she wondered if talking about their daughter earlier had opened up those wounds.

They had lost their daughter, Elissa, all those years ago, and not knowing what had

happened to her had been the worst thing. She pictured Gary going home alone, earlier. He probably started drinking. Had he been depressed and done something stupid?

A lump formed in her throat as she reached the back garden, the light from the kitchen reaching halfway down. Beyond that, she knew there were trees, but she couldn't see that far. Her shoulders and neck prickled with nerves as she glanced into the dark void.

A crack of a branch, the shuffling of an animal escaping the garden and the sounds of the night sent a shiver running through her whole body.

Creeping towards the kitchen window, she looked in and puffed a breath out.

Either Gary wasn't there, or he wasn't answering.

The first thing her gaze hit was the pile of dirty dishes and takeaway cartons. The worktop was covered in empty wine bottles and crushed cider cans. He was living in a mess.

The two kitchen chairs either side of his Formica fold-out kitchen table were empty. There was no sign of Gary.

She banged on the window again. 'Gary,' she called, hoping that his neighbour wouldn't look out the back window and wonder why she was loitering. She tapped again. He had to be in.

She peered in again and almost toppled over in shock as she spotted the chessboard on the table. She wiped the smudged windows with the sleeve of her coat and stared. It was all set up perfectly, but there was one piece missing. The white queen.

Her phone beeped again with another message.

You have to meet me. He's going out soon and we won't have long. If you tell anyone, you will never hear from me again because he will hurt me. Elissa needs you. Wait for my next message.

THIRTY

RUTH

Elissa, her lovely, wonderful daughter. She began to choke up. If the messenger was toying with her, it was cruel. Something told her that it was real, though; that this person was risking everything to tell her the truth about what happened. She wouldn't go to the police or Eric. She couldn't trust that man anymore. The only person she wanted to share this with was Gary, but he wasn't in.

Shivering, she glanced through Gary's kitchen window again. Telling her that someone had left a chess piece outside her door had been a weird thing to do and it was creeping her out. He was creeping her out.

She read through the messages again and nervous palpitations hammered in her chest. Was she ready to know what happened to her daughter? Yes, she was. She'd been kept in the dark all this time, looked at sympathetically by all the neighbours. She was the woman whose daughter vanished in 1994. Her beautiful Elissa.

She stared at her phone in the dark, hoping for another message soon.

After giving up on Gary being home, she tried his number, but the call went straight to voicemail.

She hurried back onto the road just as Eric called. She was tempted not to answer, but she did.



‘Ruth. Can we talk?’

‘Yes. Let’s start with this. I don’t want that damn camera, so it’s gone.’

‘I thought I was helping so you could see when Gary was lurking around. I was going to put the app on your phone when I saw you next. But we need to talk about something else, don’t we, Ruth?’ He paused as she held her phone to her ear. ‘You were at my sister’s house earlier.’

She arched her brows and headed back towards her house. ‘Sister? Just go away, Eric. You’re a liar.’

‘You saw me with my sister. I said I was helping her with her telly.’

She opened her front door and turned the hall light on. ‘I saw you kissing her.’

‘Ruth, how can you say that?’

She shook her head in despair. ‘Eric, I know my own mind and I know what I saw. She’s your wife, isn’t she?’

He sighed down the phone. A few silent seconds passed between them before Eric answered. ‘I’m going to leave her, I love you .’

‘You lied to me. You made me think we had a future. You proposed to me.’ She went to pull the ring from her finger, but it was still stuck. ‘I want you out of my life. I’ll mail the ring to your wife.’ She went into her house and slammed the door.

‘Ruth, I love you , not her. I love you. Please.’

‘I can’t deal with this right now.’ She ended the call. All she could think about was

the messenger. Eric could wait.

Leaning against the door, she let her tears fall before heading into the kitchen. She tried Gary again, but there was no answer.

He had some explaining to do.

She picked up the chess piece and held it tightly. It was obviously the piece that Gary had taken from his own chess set.

She checked her messages again. Nothing.

When was the mystery messenger going to make contact again?

She pressed on the local news app and saw a breaking news video. The news blared out and she watched as a DCI began delivering a press release.

A photo flashed up. She gasped as she saw the cupcake print scarf being shown in relation to a missing person; how it could help police with a current case they were working on.

Then they flashed up a sketch of the man who was found dead in the field.

‘If you recognise this scarf and can help us with our enquiries, please call the number on the screen.’

The news reporter took over then, and began talking about how the locals had raised enough money to plant fifty trees by the nature park.

Elissa had an identical scarf.

Ruth knew because it used to be her scarf. She hadn't given it a second thought until now and she hadn't seen that scarf since Elissa had disappeared.

She ran upstairs and fell to her knees beside her bed. She pulled the box from underneath and began leafing through the photos of her beloved daughter – and there it was, the photo of Elissa wearing that very scarf.

The more Ruth thought about it, the more she knew that Elissa had been wearing it the day she vanished. Ruth ran into Elissa's bedroom and began opening and closing drawers. All her daughter's clothes and personal items were still there, just as they were on the day Elissa vanished.

Panic filled her chest and she shrieked out a sob. How could she not have noticed that the scarf was missing, especially as she'd bought it from a craft fayre and it had been so expensive?

She grabbed her phone and began to search for the hotline number online, and she hit the call button. 'I know whose scarf that is,' she said with a quiver in her voice. 'It's Elissa Pritchard's. She's my daughter and she's been missing since 1994.'

Her phone beeped with another message.

'Can I have your address, please?' the officer on the line asked. 'We'll get an officer to come to your house right away. Please hold the line for a moment.'

'Five Hollyhock Crescent.' She pulled her phone away from her ear and swiped down to check the message.

You have to come now. He's gone. Your daughter needs you. Remember her favourite place, the place where you were the day before she went missing? Go there. We don't have long. No police or he will kill her – and me.

### THIRTY-ONE

#### RUTH

Ruth pulled up at the nature park, leaving her car in the car park opposite the closed café. The police kept trying to call her back. She cut the calls. If the messenger knew she'd called the police, they might run, and she'd never see Elissa again.

An owl hooted in the distance and there was no one around. The nights were getting cooler now and she'd left the house without a jacket.

Back in 1994, she'd sat on the bench in these very grounds, eating ice cream with Elissa. She crossed the car park, walked for a few seconds down the path and headed to their bench while she carried on replaying that day in her mind. Her daughter had decided to ditch school and start working at that awful café full-time. Gary had gone ballistic, walking out of the house to go to the pub after he'd shouted at her.

Ruth tried to hold back her tears as she remembered the arguing in their house earlier that day. All the neighbours had heard, in fact, Elissa's disappearance had led the neighbours to blame her and Gary to begin with. People said he was a hot-headed, disciplinarian father, who was too strict, and they said Ruth had been a bad mother, leaving her daughter at home all day to her own devices.

People had been so quick to judge and the police had put them through the wringer.

What if Gary had something to do with their daughter's disappearance? He was so strict with Elissa, and with every boundary she pushed he'd punish her. Their house

had been like a war zone every time she left for work at that café.

Ruth had never lost hope that Elissa was still out there. She reread the messages and another popped up.

Head to the car park.

Her knees felt like jelly as she stood, and the trembling in her lower legs was making her feel unsteady on her feet. The woman messaging was risking everything to help her get to the truth.

All those years of looking had drained her and Gary. Several years ago, they'd literally given up. The police had said, at the time, that Elissa had got in with a bad crowd who hung around the streets drinking and shoplifting.

Who was the messenger scared of?

She kept walking and finally spotted headlights through the shrubs. Then it went dark again.

She crept along the winding park path until she reached a white van. There was no one inside. She pressed her nose against the driver's window and all she could see was the edge of an object dangling from the rear-view mirror as it caught the moon's light.

It was a chess piece – the white knight.

A flash of material then caught her gaze. Her heart almost stopped as she saw the cupcake scarf on the passenger seat.

'Elissa,' she called, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes.

A heavy object struck the back of her knees. She turned to see who it was as her legs buckled, her knee crunching on the gritty road. Her leggings tore and hot wetness began to spread around her knee. She knew she'd been cut and was bleeding.

Placing her hand on the wound, she flinched. There was so much blood.

'Elissa,' she shouted. Maybe her daughter was in the van?

She went to crawl away, dragging herself across the car park, but her attacker was right behind her. She grabbed what was in her pocket, but how was her card wallet, phone and crunched tissue able to help?

Her wallet fell open and a couple of cards slipped out. As she glanced up, all she could see was the outline of a person holding a bat, wearing a mask.

Her attacker's eyes glinted as the moonlight caught them, just before the bat was brought down on her head.

Her phone rang. It had to be the police or Gary.

She hoped it was the police. If it was, they might come for her.

She flung her wallet as far as she could.

As she lay there dizzy, she tried to speak, but her voice came out like a gargle.

In her mind's eye, all she could see was her beautiful Elissa. First the little girl whom she loved more than anything in the whole world, then the angry teen eating an ice cream in the very park Ruth was now lying in.

She went to scream and then felt the full blow of the bat again. She knew, then, he

wouldn't stop until he'd killed her.

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

THIRTY-TWO

GIRL

He tells me I've been here for over two years now. This capsule is my home, and since he's started listening to me and my needs, life is easier.

I have my books. He gets lots and lots of books for me, and I love reading so much. It takes me to places I can only imagine.

Being in solitude has made me dig deep into myself. He told me it would, and I fought it for so long. Fighting was such a waste of time. I shudder as I remember the early months, the first time he kissed me, the moment our relationship changed.

He was my captor, the man who took me, but now I knew why: he loved me and I failed to see that for a long time.

I meditate, which is what he told me to do. Sometimes, we meditate together, and I feel it, like he said I would – the deep, spiritual connection that we have.

'Look inside yourself. You have all the answers,' he'd say. And I believe him.

We were always meant to be.

He told me a truth; one that took me a long time to comprehend. We were together in another life. I was his one true love and he was mine. He's lived many more lives, and so have I, and this is the one we met again in. Once he explained everything, I



knew we could never part.

I hear his voice in my head, telling me our true love story. 'It was during the plague. We lived in a castle and I did everything I could to protect you. The disease came for us in a chest of gowns that were my gift to you, and I am sorry, my darling, my angel. I regretted that moment throughout time. Then I found you again. Fate had played its hand. When I saw you on your own that night, I recognised you straight away, and after waiting for centuries, I knew I couldn't just let you go. You do understand, don't you? I didn't want to take you off the street that day, but there was no other way. I had to get you here, with me, in solitude, so you could find those memories of us again.'

And I did find them. I remember them because I lived them. I've always felt broken, but now, after years in this capsule, I feel whole again.

His dreams are my dreams, too, because I feel them. As long as I have him, I don't need anyone.

Back in our previous life, we had no children; he told me that and I saw it when he helped me with my past-life regressions.

I feel tears spilling down my cheeks. As I think about our story, our lives back then, it saddens me that we did not create a life, someone who could be alive now.

I glance at the pills on the worktop. I've religiously taken them since I've been here – well apart from our first time – but now, I want to do something for him that I couldn't do back then. What we have is precious.

I throw the pills in the bin. It's time to start showing him how grateful I am that he found me.

‘I love you,’ I whisper, at the camera above.

### THIRTY-THREE

Wednesday, 4 September

The briefing back at the station had been frustrating. Gina had hoped they'd have an address for Marie Blaine by now, but her name wasn't coming up in any of their searches. Nothing had so far been found in Colson's van that proved he could have attempted to kidnap Keeley Moore, either. It had been stuffed with a mattress, a travel kettle and what Keith in forensics had described as a month's supply of dried ramen, but they were still looking.

Colson had a connection to Marie, and also a connection to Keeley through Tristan Moore – was that too much of a coincidence? And where was Marie? Gina pondered the rest of the investigation. No more information had come to light with regards to the other men Marie had dated and the interviews with the company directors had also given them nothing. One of them had to be John Doe. It was frustrating that the leads were drying up.

It was almost one thirty in the morning when Gina pulled up on her drive and stepped out.

Her security light didn't come on.

She glanced at the other houses on her small row in the middle of the countryside, and they were all in darkness. That was to be expected.

Maybe she needed a new security light. At least she had her CCTV camera. She

shuddered at the thought of the back one not being online. She needed to fix it, and soon.

Her personal phone had remained quiet for the rest of the day, but she was still going to do a search for Pete Bloxwich as soon as she got in. The number he'd messaged her on had been withheld. She was going to tell him straight that, unless he stepped back out of her life, she would forward his messages along with the dirt she had on him.

It might mean the end of her and her career, but some of those messages had been vicious. Besides, she knew he wouldn't want everything to get out. It would ruin him, too.

They both had too much to lose, and with him being a journalist, he could easily get his side of the story out there faster than she could blink. She needed to get on top of all this before it leaked into her professional life.

One threat, and Pete would soon crawl back into his box and leave her alone.

She pulled her keys from her bag and heard a thump coming from around the back of her house. Ebony meowed and ran out of the bushes along the side of her house and Gina laughed. It was just the cat.

'Hello, you.' She bent down and picked Ebony up. Her cat butted its head against Gina's chin as she placed the key in the lock and turned it.

Her hallway felt different.

She flicked her light switch, but the light didn't come on. Maybe there had been a power cut. Putting Ebony down, she grabbed her personal phone and used the torch.

The cat meowed from the kitchen and she knew Ebony needed feeding. Hurrying through, Gina grabbed a pouch from the cupboard and squeezed it into the cat bowl. She placed it on the floor and Ebony ran over and began eating.

Removing her coat, she placed it over the back of a kitchen chair and opened the fridge. Instinctively, she reached for the kitchen light switch and it came on. Maybe there had been some sort of surge and the hall light had tripped?

She grabbed a bottle of cold water and some leftover pasta salad that she'd made the other day, and began chomping on it as she kicked her shoes off. She'd check the fuse box once she'd eaten.

A door creaked above as a gust of wind bellowed outside.

That didn't feel right.

Could she have left an upstairs window open? Her hands were shaking.

She blew a breath out slowly. She was letting those messages – and Pete – get to her. She was home and she was safe.

Grabbing her phone, she started looking at the footage from the camera at the front of her house, whizzing through the whole day until she was seeing the live feed again. No one had come to her door except the postie at ten that morning. Ebony had walked across the drive several times, but that was it.

She left her dinner on the table, and followed the breeze upstairs. All she had to do was close the window and chill the hell out.

She stopped on the top step, holding her phone out to light up the landing, and she flicked the bathroom switch.

Nothing seemed out of place.

She pressed the camera app on her phone, showing the view of the main camera outside her front door again. There was still no one there.

The back-garden camera was still offline.

She peered into her bathroom and saw that the window was on the latch, so she pulled it closed. The spare room was as she had left it, spare bed made up and a pile of her clean laundry on the chair under the window. The curtain began to blow as another breeze caught it.

That must be what was causing the breeze to travel through the house.

She shivered. It might be early September, but it was chilly at night.

Hurrying over, she closed it and went back down to open the cupboard under the stairs. She flicked the only switch that had tripped and heard the click of the hall light coming on.

It was nothing. Just her imagination playing her up.

She strode back to the kitchen to grab her food, and then noticed that one of her drawers wasn't closed.

Opening it fully, she saw that all the tea towels had been ruffled and the random lighter and tin opener that used to live there had been moved. Then she opened the next drawer and saw that some of the knives had been placed in the fork section of the holder.

Running into the living room, she opened the cupboard to her sideboard and noticed

that a couple of boxes containing house paperwork were not in the order she kept them in.

Her heart was banging.

She hurried back upstairs and peered out of the spare room window into her back garden.

That was when she saw that her camera had been broken and was lying on the slabs below.

Running into her bedroom, she began checking her drawers and bedside tables before returning to the spare room.

Someone had been in her house.

Everything was only slightly out of place, but she knew someone had been through her things.

Had Pete Bloxwich been in her home looking for the memory stick? Or was it one of the sickos who had been sending her emails. It was obvious now, he had to have climbed in through her spare room window after damaging her camera.

She went over to the window again, looking out. There was a slight platform under that window where the previous owners of the house had built the kitchen extension, and her bin was just underneath it. She never left her bin there.

She googled Pete Bloxwich and his website came up. Heading straight to the contact page, she typed out a message.

We need to speak! What the hell are you doing stalking me at work???

After hitting send, she'd been left with no option but to call Briggs. Just as she went to call him, a voice came from behind her. 'Hello, Gina.'

She grabbed the nearest thing she could find – the iron – and held it in front of her chest. 'Come any closer and I will cave your head in.'

Pete Bloxwich stood there and held his hands up. 'I wouldn't do that if I were you. Besides, I'm not armed, and I have no intention of hurting you, but oh, that doesn't matter, does it? You'll probably just push me down some stairs and claim it was self-defence.'

How dare he? Bloxwich had gained illegal entry into her house and now he was blocking her only exit out of the room. 'I will expose you and everything you did. How you set up the MenRTakinItBack website. Your readers would love to know what a misogynist you are. I still have proof.'

He waved a hand dismissively. 'Oh, Gina, I can also play tit for tat, but that's not why I'm here, so why don't you shut up and listen.'

'Or why don't I just call for backup and cave your head in with this iron?'

He shrugged. 'Do it. It'll be a lot messier, though, and right now you need me. If you hurt me, I can't help you out of this sad mess, and things will only get worse for you.'

She put her phone in her pocket and the iron down on the bed. 'Speak.' Her thudding heart felt as though it was in her throat.

'I've actually come to help you. Believe it or not, I closed that website down and someone has hijacked and rebranded it. They're even using my old profile name as the administrator so this will come back to me. Unless we work together, we're both over. I can end this. It will take time, but I can do it.' He smacked his lips. 'I just have



conditions.'

'Stuff you and your conditions?—'

'Gina, just shut up. Our relationship isn't a democracy, it's a dictatorship, because how I see it, I hold all the aces. I have the necessary skills and time. You have neither, because this is currently going around the forum.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. After a bit of scrolling, he held up a photo.

It was like the air had been sucked out of Gina's lungs as she gasped. In the photo, she was blindfolded, in her underwear and tied to a metal ring in the shed covered in bruises.

That had been taken when Gina was about two months pregnant with Hannah. Terry had come home angry and drunk and she'd pushed him away from her. Their argument had led to him knocking her over. Terry had changed before her, tearing her clothes off and dragging her out to the shed in the cold. She had no idea he'd taken photos. She had looked so different back then; so scrawny.

'Next time it might not be a photo of you wearing a blindfold and the world will get to identify you. Lovely Stephen put this up during the last stint and someone saved it and recirculated it. Your lovely ex-husband must have had quite the collection of photos from your past. Some psycho happened to get hold of this one and republish it, and this time, people are liking what they see and they're all looking for you.'

'That's not me.' Her stomach roiled.

Pete nodded slowly. 'Don't try to deny it, Gina. We both know it's you. I dig deeper than MikeTheMan ever could. There are no depths to where I will go to get my facts.'

She shivered at the mention of her pseudonym on the site. How did he know?

‘There are paths in this rabbit warren that you are not privy to. The release of your address is barely a click away and I’m going to temporarily stop that from happening until I can come up with a permanent solution. I will put an end to this, but I need time, and I also need something else.’

She shook her head and clenched her fists until her nails pierced her hands. ‘You’re not having that, no way.’

‘For heaven’s sake, Gina. I don’t want to be here. I started a new life. I’ve been living in a cutesy cottage in Devon with an amazing woman I met on Tinder, then all this reared its ugly head. I can help myself and I will help you, too, but only if, when it’s all over, I can have all the copies of our last conversation.’

‘You mean your confession? How you were behind the BoyzRTakinItBack forum, showing you to be the woman-hater you are?’

He nodded. ‘Exactly. Like you, I want a second chance in life. I want my hideous past to be buried for good. Sometimes humans do stupid things in the heat of the moment, and I’d just come out of a really fucked-up relationship back then and was angry, okay? Does it mean I should pay for that mistake for the rest of my life? Neither of us should. We both have so much in common and we can get out of this unscathed.’

‘Don’t bank on it.’

He smirked. ‘Said the murderer to the ex-misogynist.’

She sighed. She had so much more to lose. ‘I am not a murderer.’ She had never confessed to anything.

‘Stephen thinks you are, but whatever, I literally don’t care anymore.’

‘How do I know I can trust you?’ she asked.

He scrunched up his nose and shrugged. ‘How do I know I can trust you ?’

‘Okay.’

‘Do we have a deal then?’ He held his hand out.

Gina let out a long breath through puffed up cheeks. ‘Get out of my house, fix this, and go back to Devon. I never want to see you again. Do all that, then we have a deal. Agreed?’

‘I want exactly that, partner.’

‘Get out, and we are not partners,’ she yelled. ‘I will never partner up with a piece of shit like you.’

He shrugged, turned his back and left.

Gina had no option but to let Pete help her and she knew it. That very fact made her want to cave a wall in with her bare fists. She also felt for the new woman in Pete’s life. Once this was all over, she had to help her see what kind of a man she was living with. But first, she had to do everything she could to save herself, otherwise she was no good to anyone. Pete would have his time; it just wasn’t now.

### THIRTY-FOUR

Gina tossed and turned. Every time she nodded off, she thought she heard a creak in the house and her mind kept telling her that Pete Bloxwich might come back. Her cat purred next to her, totally unaffected by a stranger coming into their house as she sprawled across the side where Briggs normally slept.

Gina knew that trying to sleep was pointless. She'd had no choice at all but to tell Briggs, and he, too, was on tenterhooks now. Gina had made the decision: if Pete double-crossed her and she was exposed, she would take the hit and do whatever it took to protect Briggs.

She threw her quilt off her body and stretched, before checking her phone again – it was only two thirty in the morning.

She needed coffee. Green tea or chamomile wouldn't help in the slightest; it was all too much and she needed full-on caffeine because she didn't want to sleep.

For now, she had to trust that Pete Bloxwich was actually going to hold up his end of the bargain, because she had a job to do. Luna was out there somewhere – if the girl's name was even Luna – and she needed to be working around the clock to find her. She pictured this young girl, trying to imagine her point of view in the photo of her on the mattress, the shadow of the photographer cast on the wall, her hiding beneath her fringe.

After walking downstairs, she flicked the kettle on and grabbed her clumped-up old coffee in a jar and spooned a block into a cup. She'd missed coffee more than

anything but needed to keep off the caffeine due to her heart scare. As it boiled, she peered out into her dark garden and checked that her door was locked – again.

Marie, Colson and the Moore family kept whirring away in her mind as she struggled to find the links between them and the girl in the photo, and they still couldn't identify John Doe.

She thought of Luna again. Was she alone right now, or was she being tormented by the accomplice who tried to kidnap Keeley? Was Colson a part of it all? There was no evidence so far that his van was used in the attempted kidnap, but he was capable of theft and making threats, from what Keeley had said.

Her work phone began to buzz in her pocket. She answered. 'Jacob.'

'Guv, despatch just called. A woman called in earlier. She recognised the scarf from the press release and ended the call abruptly. She claims her daughter, Elissa Pritchard, who went missing in 1994, had one exactly the same. They've been trying to call the woman back, but her phone went offline about ten thirty last night.'

That was four hours ago. 'Did they get her address?'

'Yes, Five Hollyhock Crescent. An officer headed to hers, but there was no one in. There was no car on the drive, but we can see she has one registered to her. I checked in with Wyre to see if the name Elissa Pritchard came up in her searches and it hadn't for some reason, but it was a long time ago. None of us were working in Cleevesford at the time, and the station was small back then. The filing system was apparently a bit chaotic, but I think that's an understatement.'

'Do we know where the files are kept for Elissa Pritchard's disappearance?'

'In the archives. Kapoor was still at the station when I left. She's going through them

all now, but I'm not anticipating her finding them anytime soon.'

'Do you think Elissa's disappearance has anything to do with the girl in the photo?' Gina wondered if Elissa had a birthmark.

'I don't know. We really need to get hold of her mother. We've managed to trace her phone to its last-known location.'

'And where is that?'

'The car park at Cleevesford Nature Park.'

'That's where Colson had been staying in his van.'

Jacob murmured in agreement. 'I still wonder if he's involved in some capacity with the recent goings-on, but he was in custody all last night. It's too soon to dismiss him yet. Can you sleep?'

Gina exhaled and sipped the coffee that she'd just made. 'No.'

'Shall we check out the car park? I know PC Ahmed is on duty – I could call the station and request that he meets us there?'

Biting her bottom lip, Gina decided that was the best plan. Why waste time fretting about her own situation when she could actually be doing something to help Elissa or the girl in the photo.

She swallowed. It might even be her last ever case given what was happening to her. 'I'm on my way.'

Twenty minutes later, Gina pulled up. There were no other cars in the car park, until

Jacob pulled in behind her, followed by a police car. They parked near the entrance and got out, holding their torches in front of them. Gina grabbed her own torch and met them in the middle of the car park.

‘Let’s have a look around the perimeter; see if we can find any evidence of her being here. Do we know the name of the missing girl’s mother?’

Jacob nodded. ‘Ruth Pritchard.’

‘It’s odd that she called about something so important and then hung up. Let’s take a look around.’ Gina walked along the back, and just to the other side of the trees she saw a small blue Citroen. ‘What does Ruth Pritchard drive?’

‘A Citroen C3 Plus.’

‘It’s back here.’ The other two headed towards the car. Gina carried on looking along the trees at the back and began flashing her torch across the grit. A line drawn in the tiny stones caught her attention. It looked thick, too thick to be a tyre mark; more like someone being dragged across the car park.

A flash of something on the grassy bank made her turn her head and stare until it returned. She took a few steps forward and shone her torch at it.

Reaching out, she parted the entangled branches and gasped.

‘Guv, it looks like there’s blood over here on a couple of supermarket loyalty cards with her name on them.’

‘I’ve found a card wallet.’ Gina pulled on a pair of latex gloves and gently picked up the brown leather wallet and opened it. ‘It’s Ruth Pritchard’s. Her driving licence and bank cards are in it, and there’s blood smeared across it. Something has happened to

Ruth Pritchard. The kidnapper failed earlier when he tried to take Keeley Moore and now the mother of a missing girl has been taken. Get a team down here – forensics, officers, dogs, the lot.'



### THIRTY-FIVE

After leaving a team of CSIs at the car park, Gina, Jacob and PC Ahmed arrived at Hollyhock Crescent. Lights began to come on and curtains twitched. A man came out of the house directly opposite and stood in his doorway. Gina grabbed her torch again, leaving Jacob and PC Ahmed to discuss the door to doors and to check if anyone who came out had seen anything.

Stepping up to the window left of the front door, Gina peered through and could see a dining room. The window on the other side of the house showed a long living room. A tartan snuggle blanket half lay over the sofa and the footstool.

She held her hand up to Jacob and pointed to the side path, and he put a thumbs up to her. Following the slabs around, they led to a gate. She popped her torch under her arms and slipped on a pair of gloves before opening the unlocked gate. The garden was in total darkness and there wasn't a light on in the house at all. She continued forward and flashed her torch through the kitchen window.

A chill ran through her as she saw a chess piece on the table.

A white queen.

Hurrying back around, she called Jacob over. PC Ahmed left him to cross the road and talk to the man.

'Have you spotted something?' Jacob asked.

‘A chess piece on the kitchen table. The kidnapper’s calling card. He has her. Somehow he must have lured her to the car park. Despatch said she was in the middle of telling them about her daughter who had disappeared, then she hung up on them. Reading between the lines, I think the kidnapper has used her daughter’s disappearance to get to her.’

Jacob breathed out slowly. ‘We should see if any of the neighbours are up for talking.’

Nodding, Gina followed him back towards the drive. She had to get into the house. ‘Wait, we don’t know if Ruth Pritchard has made her way back without her car somehow. She might be in that house and hurt. Can you call PC Ahmed back over?’

He nodded and hurried over the road.

She crept towards the letterbox and peered in. She could see the slightest of outlines and it looked like a sideboard. Jacob and PC Ahmed ran back to her and PC Ahmed spoke. ‘Guv, the man over the road is her ex-husband. He has a key to the house because he used to live there with her, and he said he’s been really worried about her lately.’

‘Ask him to bring it. It’s either use the key or we have to use the battering ram. She might be hurt in there. We know someone is bleeding as we found blood on her wallet and cards. If she’s not here, maybe there’s some clue in the house as to where she might be. Our priority is locating her and knowing she is safe.’

Jacob pressed his lips together before speaking. ‘I’ve just got word back from the scene. Dogs have arrived, but they haven’t found Ruth.’

With that, Jacob went back over the road. She watched him explaining to the man what they were going to do. The man went back into his house and came out with a

set of keys and they walked back to Gina.

Gina took the keys and turned them in the lock. Jacob waited behind her to go in as the man waited on the drive. 'Ruth, it's the police. Call out if you're in here.'

Nothing.

'I'm DI Harte and I have DS Driscoll with me. We're coming in.'

After a walkthrough of each room, it was clear that Ruth was not in the house, but the sight of the chess piece unnerved Gina. Ruth was in imminent danger.

She stood in the doorway of Ruth's bedroom and saw a pile of men's clothes draped over an ottoman. As she reached the bottom of the stairs, she saw the man claiming to be her ex-husband still on the drive. 'Do you stay here sometimes?'

He shook his head. 'No, we're...' He paused. 'We're divorced. She's been seeing someone.'

The clothes belonged to someone else. 'Can I take his name?'

'It's Eric Hathaway. He's not a good man.'

Gina furrowed her brows and stepped closer to him.

'In what way?'

The man looked up at Ruth's neighbour, peering out of the window. 'I think you need to come to mine so we can talk. The neighbours like to gossip around here.'

### THIRTY-SIX

Gary Pritchard placed a cup of coffee on his tiny kitchen table. Gina sat in one chair and Jacob sat opposite. Gary leaned against his overflowing sink. The smell of fried fish hanging in the air turned Gina's stomach, and the pile of empty bottles and cans told a tale of sadness. The yellow tinges to his features also told her he was possibly a drinker, or he had a bit of liver trouble. He stared at Gina. 'What do you want to know?'

'How long have you and Ruth Pritchard been divorced?'

He placed a large hand in his jeans pocket. 'Two days.' He huffed out a bitter-looking smirk. 'We've been apart for most of the year, but the decree absolute has just come through. I won't lie, I still love her, but I blew it.' He paused. 'We lost our daughter many years ago. By lost, I mean, she vanished, but you probably already had that on file.'

He began pulling at a dirty, torn nail before picking his calluses. 'It was the start of a very long end. We tried for so many years to have another baby – not to replace Elissa, you understand. There was this huge void in our lives.' He shook his head. 'Anyway, it never happened. I couldn't bear the sadness in our house. Every time I got home from work, Ruth would be walking around like some ghost of her former self, and I bottled up my feelings.'

He paused. 'I had to try and be the strong one. We lost our child and then our babies. Our bond became one that was based on loss and we got unhappier by the day. It went on for too many years.' He turned away from them and stared out of his kitchen

window. 'I'm sorry, I need a minute.'

'We're really sorry for your loss, Mr Pritchard. It sounds like you and Ruth went through a lot. Have you seen her today?'

'I saw her yesterday. I had the day off work, so I popped over. Actually, I wanted to say I was sorry. On Monday night, Eric was there, and I noticed that his tyre was flat, so I knocked on the door to tell her.'

'How did she seem?'

'She was okay. I felt a bit bad for disturbing them on Monday night, but we spoke yesterday, she was friendly and she invited me in for a drink. I told her something, something about Eric, and she was really upset.'

He turned back around to face them. Jacob kept scribbling notes to keep up.

'What was she upset about?'

'I think I could have told her in a nicer way, but I was feeling really smug that I had this dirt on Eric, partly because I still love Ruth. I know it's wrong, but I enjoyed telling her...' He looked up and took a couple of deep breaths.

'What did you tell her?'

'Eric has a wife, grown-up children and a lovely family. From what I saw, he looks really happy with them. He'd been in a relationship with Ruth and lied about being single. The man is a womanising snake. I could see right through him, but she seemed to worship him with his designer clothes and shiny car. And there he was, Eric the liar. He's a typical, smug, player. Just after a bit on the side.'

‘How do you know all this?’

‘I saw him from the other side of the pub, out with his family a month or so ago. It was busy but I just kept catching sight of him through the crowd. I was meeting a mate for a drink at a pub between Alcester and Redditch, and what looked to be his whole family were out celebrating his wife’s birthday. One of the staff nudged through everyone at the bar with a huge cake covered in sparklers. When I glanced over next, he was kissing the woman. He later came up to the bar, totally ignoring me. That’s when I spotted his wedding ring, the one he obviously takes off when he’s with Ruth. Can you believe he even tried to chat the woman up who was serving him?’ He rolled his eyes. ‘I’m ashamed of what I did next, but I did it with Ruth’s interests at heart: I followed them home that day, keeping my eye on Eric the whole time. I knew I had to find a way to make Ruth see the truth. Without proof of his other life, she’d have just thought I was being angry and bitter. Anyway, they pulled up at their gorgeous house and the family all went back to there, too.’ He shook his head. ‘It took me ages to tell her. Every time I considered it, I backed out, but yesterday I saw she was wearing an engagement ring. I couldn’t let her humiliate herself, so I blurted everything out and she was really upset. I gave her Eric’s family home address – not the place he pretends to live, where he conducts his affair with Ruth.’

‘We’ll need the address of Eric Hathaway and the address of the house he’s pretending to live at.’

He grabbed a Post-it note and jotted both addresses down before passing them to Gina. ‘His real home is only about twenty minutes from here. The other one is on a holiday let rental site.’

‘Where were you yesterday evening from around eight to two a.m. this morning?’

‘Here. I’ve been home all night. I watched a bit of TV and went to bed.’

‘Can anyone corroborate that?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. You could ask some of the neighbours. My car has been here all night.’

‘What do you drive?’

‘A white Honda Civic.’

‘Where do you work?’

‘Edmundson’s Farm. It’s a dairy farm.’

John Doe was found at Cawley’s Farm so she waited for Jacob to note Edmundson’s down. ‘Do you have access to any other vehicles through your job?’

He leaned back slightly and looked at her for a moment before answering. ‘Well, we have several tractors, vans, two Land Rovers, but I don’t use them often. I mostly use the tractor.’

‘Do you play chess?’

‘No, that’s an odd question.’

He had hesitated before answering, just for a second, and Gina wondered if he was thinking about what to say next, but he closed his mouth and waited for her to speak again.

‘You say you went over to speak to Ruth yesterday – did you see a chess piece in her house?’

‘No, I went to see her to tell her that her fiancé was cheating. The last thing I was looking for was whether Ruth was having a game of chess.’ He paused and breathed out slowly. ‘Has this got something to do with Elissa? Where is Ruth?’

‘That’s what we’re trying to find out. Can you tell us a bit about Elissa’s disappearance?’

He began to breathe rapidly. ‘I knew it. This is all happening again. You have to find Ruth. Has the psycho who took Elissa now taken Ruth? Is he back?’

‘He?’

‘I just think it must have been a man because Elissa could stick up for herself.’ His hands began to tremble.

Gina knew there were ways and means that didn’t need physical strength. Elissa may have been drugged or manipulated, and one surprise blow with something like a bat would take even the strongest person out.

‘We’re doing everything we can right now, but we need your help.’

He nodded and leaned against the sink again. ‘Whatever it takes, I want her back. I want them both back. Elissa was only a kid. She’d left school for a job in a café and we had so many arguments. I wanted more for her; I didn’t mean to shout at her back then, but she was a typical teen, thought she knew it all. One day, she just never came back. We were worried sick so we called the police. No trace of her was ever found. It made the news, but with no new leads, her story soon vanished. We tried everything we could to keep her disappearance alive and to keep her in the public eye, but nothing came of it. Also, no one tells you how exhausting that is, dealing with all the cranks and the false sightings.’ He exhaled and looked at Gina.



‘Does the name Luna ring a bell?’

He shook his head.

‘Did Elissa have any facial birthmarks?’

‘No. She has a scar on her right hand. She fell over carrying a jar of her nan’s home-made pickled onions from the car. The glass smashed and she put her hand in it. She had to have stitches and the scar never totally faded. I told the police when they interviewed me back then.’

Gina pulled a photo up of the red cupcake scarf on her phone. ‘Do you recognise this scarf?’

He blew out a breath. ‘I don’t know. Not really. Maybe Ruth had one similar.’ He shrugged.

Gina swallowed. ‘We believe Ruth has been taken and that it has something to do with the disappearance of your daughter. If there’s anything at all you can tell us, that might help...’

‘I told the police everything I could think of at the time. I told them about her friends who smoked weed, and about the horrible couple who owned the café. The woman’s husband had made a pass at Elissa, and she’d had a go at her and I told her not to wear skirts to work anymore. Elissa obviously got angry at me telling her what not to wear and looking back, I can see she was right. I don’t know why she blamed my daughter and not her pervert husband. That wouldn’t happen now.’

‘Do you know the couple’s names?’

‘Their surname was Sellers and the name of the café was The Singing Kettle. The

police investigated them at the time, and apart from being arseholes, there was nothing on them.'

Gina watched as Jacob jotted those details down. She wondered if the Sellers were still around. 'Do you know where they are now?'

'There's only Patricia Sellers. I see her crop up on social media sometimes. She attends a lot of community meetings and is always complaining about dog muck. Her husband died about ten years ago and, at a guess, I'd say she was in her seventies, maybe even eighties now.' He pulled his phone out and began to scroll. 'Here she is, on Facebook.'

Gina took it and passed it to Jacob, who wrote down the details for a community meeting she'd RSVP'd to attend the next day. 'That's really helpful, thank you.'

'Do you think you'll find Elissa? We never once gave up hope.' He began to breathe in and out, anger seething through him. 'I want her back. I want to hold her and tell her how much I love her; how I'm sorry that I shouted at her and that all I want is the chance to see her again. I feel her' – he pointed to his chest – 'I feel her here. She's still my baby and I know she's close. This is all happening for a reason, and I have to believe it's because she's out there waiting for you to find her and bring her home.' He let out a roar and hit the draining board. A collection of badly stacked plates and cups bounced.

PC Ahmed knocked. 'Guv, one of Ruth's neighbours wants a word.'

She walked over to him and went outside into the garden. 'Did they say what about?'

'She saw Ruth rushing out yesterday and she looked really agitated. She said hello to Ruth from her drive, but apparently Ruth didn't even see her. She also said Ruth and Gary looked like they were having words yesterday, too. Things got heated and Gary

didn't look happy.'

### THIRTY-SEVEN

The birds sang as morning was breaking. Gina listened to a woodpecker; the tapping sound coming from the small copse behind the row of houses on Ruth's side. PC Ahmed led her and Jacob across the road to the house next door to Ruth's, where a woman with a grey plait trailing over her right shoulder leaned against the frame in her doorway.

Her pyjama top fell right over her jeans. 'You must be the detectives in charge. Come through.'

She led them to a small library snug. A whole wall was floor-to-ceiling full of classic literature. 'Sit.' She grabbed a pile of broadsheets and magazines about crafting, then she threw them onto the floor.

Gina and Jacob sat on the old chesterfield. The woman pulled out a wooden chair and sat on the other side of the coffee table. The Tiffany-style butterfly lamp in the corner was all that was needed to light up the room as the morning glow started to reach through the leaded window. 'You told PC Ahmed that you saw Ruth Pritchard yesterday.'

'That's right, twice. Don't ask me times, I'm useless. I was eating lunch, but I don't have set times for food. Then I saw her again in the evening.'

'Tell me about lunchtime.'

Jacob shuffled a little to get comfortable.

‘I was eating a plate of crackers and waiting for a delivery. I heard something going on outside and thought my wine club package had turned up, so I looked out of this window. That’s when I saw Gary and Ruth having what looked like a heated conversation. He grabbed her at one point, not really aggressively, but it was a grab nonetheless. She looked angry and then they went inside. We share a wall, so I could hear raised voices, but I don’t know what they were saying.’

‘How long was Mr Pritchard inside Mrs Pritchard’s house for?’

She shrugged and bit the end of her nail. ‘I’d say about fifteen minutes, maybe twenty? He stormed out, striding across the road like he was on a mission.’ A rabbit hopped into the room and the woman lifted the white fluffy ball onto her lap. ‘Come here, Charlie, you know you aren’t allowed in the library. You chew up Mummy’s books.’

‘How about the evening, when you saw Mrs Pritchard again?’

‘I was just popping back from the garage convenience store after getting a bottle of milk. It’s only a five-minute drive. Ruth seemed to be staring at Gary’s house while standing on her drive. I said hello as I got out of the car, but she ignored me. She normally says hello when I see her. It was very odd, indeed. She definitely had something on her mind. So, me being me, I rolled my eyes and went back into my house.’

She stroked the rabbit’s long ears and its red eyes began to close. ‘I felt a bit concerned and wondered if she was okay, so I went back out to check on her, but her car was gone.’

‘How much later did you go back out?’

‘I can’t remember, sorry.’

‘How well do you know the man she’s been seeing.’

‘Eric?’

Gina nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘He seems nice enough. Ruth has been through a lot, what with her awful marriage to Gary and, before that, her lovely daughter Elissa going missing. I was so happy to see that she’d found someone, especially such a nice man.’

Gina felt for Ruth, wherever she was. To find out that the man you loved had a wife and family must have hurt.

‘He was the professional-looking type. I think she said he owns his own company. From what Ruth said, he manages the business deals, but he has staff that run it. He classes himself as semi-retired.’

‘Do you know if he plays chess?’

She tilted her head. ‘No, I think he’s more of a golf man because I’ve seen golf clubs in his car.’

‘What does he drive?’

‘Some silver executive thing. I’m not really up on cars. It’s a shiny car. Always clean.’

‘Do you remember Elissa?’

The woman hugged the rabbit closer. ‘She was a lovely girl. She’d come round here and we’d make cakes and she’d sit in my garden. I used to look after her sometimes

during the holidays, when she was too young to be on her own, so Ruth could go to work. Elissa was an absolute delight. When she went missing, I was devastated. She wasn't mine, but I loved that girl to bits. I never did have children. Always wanted them.'

'Did she confide in you much?'

'I remember she liked a boy when she was around thirteen and he dumped her. She was so upset. I think...' – she scrunched her brow – 'when she reached fifteen, I didn't really see her as much. She grew up and didn't want to hang out with me. I used to lend her books, though. She was good at art, too. Her drawings were beautiful. She used to draw animals and people, mostly. Such a talented girl. Why are you asking about her? Do you know something?'

'We don't as yet, but Mrs Pritchard is missing and we have to cover all bases.'

She swallowed. 'Now, I know Gary shouts a lot, and since he and Ruth split up he also drinks too much, but I've always found him quite sweet. He's all bark and no bite. He worshipped the ground that Ruth walked on, but the loss of Elissa destroyed what they had. It was sad to see a good marriage slowly deteriorate over the years. He still struggles with what happened, and I think Ruth moving on has hit him hard, but he would never hurt her.' The rabbit began to fidget and the woman placed him on the floor.

'When you went to get your milk yesterday evening, did you see Mr Pritchard?'

'Oh no, he wasn't even in. He didn't get back home until about midnight. I was just locking up for the night when I saw his car coming up the road.'

Gina felt her heart race. He had told them he was in all night. She stood and ran over to the window.

The neighbour cleared her throat. ‘Oh, and Eric didn’t play chess, but Gary did.’



THIRTY-EIGHT

GIRL

I've never cried like this before. We didn't have a child in our last lives together and now we've lost our baby. The moment I saw blood this morning, I knew. I stare at the camera crying, hoping that he'll see me and come, but he mustn't be in. He must be at work.

He refuses to speak about his work, but he comes here smelling of the outdoors. It's too painful for him to talk about because he loves me and all he wants is to take me to the surface, but he doesn't want to risk anyone finding me because they will tear us apart.

Neither of us wants to lose the other, and I know how hard he worked for us to be together.

I hit my bed over and over again because I want to go out, even though I know I shouldn't desire any more than I have here. He has provided me with everything I need and he has to work really hard to keep us going like this.

My mind goes back to my baby, to the little life within me that has slipped away.

I took the folic acid and I ate all the salad he gave me. Powerless, that is how I feel. Knowing I had no control makes me feel like this, and all I want to do is see the sky again; I want to feel the breeze on my face and smell freshly cut grass.

Suddenly this capsule is closing in on me, and I gasp.

I want to get out.

We love each other. Why am I still here?

Stop it, stop it, I tell myself. He is doing all this for me. Outside is not like I remember. He told me it wouldn't be.

In our previous lives, the air was fresh and the fields were green. The harvests were the best. I think I can remember all the things he can. He's tried to hypnotise me so that I can unlock even more repressed memories. He talks to me soothingly and counts backwards. I feel our connection deeply. And still, we can't have a baby.

Tears stream down my face. I'm lonely in here and if I had our little baby, I'd be happy. We could read books, lots of books, and we could draw because we have lots of drawing paper.

I wanted to cuddle the little human that looked like us. Maybe our baby would have had my eyes or his. I don't mind whose.

I hear clunking at the metal door. He saw my pain and he came because he loves me.

As he walks through, I hug him. He grips me back, still not knowing why I'm so upset. Pulling away, he removes his boots and his damp coat. 'Has something happened?'

I nod and I know I'm about to pull a grotesque crying face, but I can't help it. I feel as though hope has died as all my tears spill. 'I lost our baby.'

Again, he hugs me, and then he leads me to the bed after which he makes me a cup of

tea in the microwave. He can be the sweetest man sometimes, when he isn't stressed. When we first met, I didn't think things would ever be like this, but time has been good for us and now I feel this deep yearning within whenever he leaves me.

He pulls the blankets up to my waist and lies beside me, stroking my hair. Do I see a tear in his eye? I think I do. He wanted this baby as much as me.

I wish Mum was with me. She'd know what to do now. I'd love to hug her. He tells me she's dead and Dad is too, so he is all I have now. She'd want me to be safe and she's always with me here, in my heart.

'Do you need anything?' He breaks my thoughts.

'I don't know. This has never happened to me before. I think my friend's mum miscarried and she needed a procedure at the hospital.' The word miscarriage sticks in my throat.

He pulls back slightly and looks into my eyes. 'You look well. You're going to be okay – we can't risk taking you up there for an operation because I'll lose you. I could never risk losing you. People out there won't understand our love, and it's not nice or safe out there, you know that. Whatever you need, I will get it for you.'

I nod, knowing he's right. Sitting up, I begin to make a list and stop at sanitary towels. Thick ones. The Babygro he brought back one night catches my eye. I lean over him and snatch it from the pull-out table that we used to play chess on. 'Take this away, please.' It's too painful to keep seeing it.

'Are you sure? We are going to try for another baby, aren't we?'

I snatch my cupcake scarf and wrap it around me, dabbing my eyes with the end. 'Yes, but that belonged to our first and I will never forget him or her. Please just take

it for now and keep it somewhere safe.’ I place a hand on my empty belly. ‘It was a boy, I know it was.’

I do all I can to keep the waterworks from starting again. I pause, wondering if I should speak my mind, then I think, what the hell, I have lost my baby. Nothing else can hurt as much as this.

‘Can I go outside, only for a minute? I just want to see the grass and the trees.’

‘Sweetheart, there is no grass up there and there are no trees here. It’s barren up there.’

I sob my heart out at the mention of that word, and I hope with all I have that I’ll get another chance to carry a baby.

‘I don’t mind. Just one minute.’ I still don’t know where we are and I can’t ask. He says it doesn’t matter as long as we’re together.

He shakes his head. ‘I can’t let you. I love you too much.’

‘If you loved me, you’d do this for me.’ I begin to beat his chest with my flimsy fists.

He grabs them. ‘What have I told you about arguing with me?’

I can’t breathe. My vision prickles. ‘I want to go out. Let me out.’ I keep hitting and hitting. He gets away from me, grabs his coat and slips his feet into his boots. ‘Wait, don’t go. I’m sorry, I love you. Stay with me.’

Without another word, he leaves me alone. All the lights go off as I cry over our little boy.

His dreams are my dreams.

A glimmer of our past flashes back and I know what I have to do. It's helped me so far. What I need to do is love him even more, show him he can trust me and then he might let me out. Maybe I haven't loved him enough.

We need a baby. That is the ultimate proof of love. We need a child we can both love. He is all I have. And regardless of how I feel right now, about him turning the lights off on me, I want to live and I am lucky to be here, safe in the capsule from a world that would judge us. I can ride through this punishment, just like I have all the others.

He'll come back to me soon. Maybe he's hurting right now, too. I have been so selfish. The baby wasn't just mine, it was his too.

I can't lose him.

### THIRTY-NINE

Gina ran across the road, alongside Jacob, and started banging at Gary's door. Jacob peered in through the window. 'The lights are off, guv.'

'Damn.' Gina called PC Ahmed over. 'Shaf, have you seen Mr Pritchard leave his house? You and the other officers have been on this road since we left his house.'

'No. His car is still here.'

Gina ran around the back, closely followed by Jacob. The back door was closed and he was nowhere to be seen. Gina banged on the door and stepped back to check the upstairs windows. There was no sign of movement.

A breeze caught her hair and a loud slam startled her. His back gate was bouncing against the frame. PC Ahmed came to meet them around the back.

'Shaf, I want you to call the incident room now. Tell them that Gary Pritchard used to play chess and he lied about being in last night – and tell them he's missing. We have to try to find him. Do either of you know what is beyond this back gate?'

'There's a strip of grass and a few trees. There's a road beyond that. It's a single-track that leads to the industrial estate. I'll make the call to the incident room,' PC Ahmed replied.

'As soon as you've made that call, come and find us or send another officer. We'll be arresting him for obstructing a police officer. Chess is a link to Ruth's disappearance

and the attempted kidnap of Keeley Moore. Actually, we need to arrest him on suspicion of kidnapping Ruth. He had the opportunity; he was seen arguing with her and he's completely lied to us. Would you arrange for a team to search the house? We can't rule out Ruth being in there and there was blood at the scene where she went missing, she could need medical help. Call an ambulance, too.' PC Ahmed nodded and hurried away.

Gina headed to the back of the garden, out the gate and onto the wide strip of overgrown grass and stingers. A woman was near the treeline with a dog. Gina hopped over the molehills with Jacob next to her and called out. 'Police. We need to speak to you.'

The young woman furrowed her brows and pulled her dog towards where Gina and Jacob were. The Dalmatian began to whine as it tried to drag her closer to a hopping crow.

'Have you seen a man back here in the past half an hour?'

'I've only seen my neighbour Gary. That was about twenty minutes ago. We got woken up by all the commotion and the dog was going mad for a walk. I saw you at Ruth's. Is she okay?'

'Which way did he go?'

'Over by the trees, just there.' She pointed to the spindly trees and Gina saw the road through the huge gaps in them. 'He normally says good morning if he sees me, but not today. He seemed in a hurry. He got into a van – I thought maybe someone had picked him up for work.'

'Did you see who picked him up?'

‘No. I couldn’t see inside the van; I could just see it was white.’

‘Did you catch the make, model or registration?’

The woman shook her head.

‘Is there anything else you can tell us about the van?’

‘It was giving off a lot of smoke out of the back and...’ She wrinkled her freckled nose.

‘Is there something else?’ Gina hoped for any clue, anything at all.

‘Gary seemed to be looking back and forth, and he looked a bit nervous, like something was upsetting him. I did call after him to see if he was okay. He stumbled through the trees, completely ignoring me. It looked like he was in a big hurry.’



FORTY

RUTH

Ruth reached up in the darkness, her fingers feeling through her damp scalp, sticky and hot. She tried to call out, but her mouth was covered. Her heart began pounding and her breaths quickened. She'd never been in such a dark room in her life. Her house was in the country and she could see the stars normally, not like when you enter a town or city. She'd never seen a darkness so black, though. Maybe her eyes hadn't adjusted to it. She widened them and blinked a few times, but still she couldn't see even the tiniest fleck of light.

Bringing her hands to her mouth, she tried to pull the rag that was tied around her head, but it was too tight. She flinched as her fingers explored the egg-like lump on her skull. With shaking hands, she felt for a knot to untie and she soon found it. She pulled and prodded until her index finger found a loop.

After a little persistence, she managed to loosen the rag enough to bring the whole thing over her head. She spat the ball of material out and shouted, 'Let me out.'

Not that pleading with her kidnapper would do any good.

She screamed out in rage, but her voice broke into silence as the hoarseness won. She needed water and she needed to clean her bloodied knee. Pain flashed through her head.

Where was she? She had to feel her way around. Maybe there was some water in the

room.

She jiggled a little, her joints creaking on the softness underneath. She must have stiffened up while unconscious, but then again, after being grabbed and hit hard, she thought she'd died.

Reaching out, she couldn't feel anything. She wondered if she'd be able to stand.

What if she was in a box? She began to hyperventilate. Or a coffin? Or a tiny hidden cupboard in a cellar that was hidden by shelves and a pretend wall?

She'd watched a lot of films.

She scrambled out of the bed, warming her muscles a little more and she managed to turn onto her sore knees, with her hands pressed into the softness. She bounced slightly, and a spring that poked through narrowly missed stabbing her in the wrist. It was definitely a mattress.

As she moved more, a musty smell started to waft up: sweat, metallic like blood, a hit of urine – it dawned on her. Her kidnapper had told her they knew where Elissa was. They had seemed distressed and she had so desperately wanted to see her daughter again.

It had all been a lie. She stood on her knees, reaching upward. There was nothing above, at least no box top. She grabbed what felt like a stone wall beside her and used it to steady herself as she stood on the mattress. Another spring popped through, stabbing her bare foot. Letting out a cry, she stepped to the side, feeling the wall as she reached the end of the softness.

That's when she felt the stone wall change to a cold, smooth, surface.

It was a door.

She kneeled back down, letting out a little cry as her open flesh pressed against the rough material, then she went to put a leg over the end of the bed to get off, but there was no bed, it was just a mattress.

Standing, she felt for the door handle, and as soon as she reached it, she pulled it down, but the door was locked. Following the walls with her hands, she kicked something and it clattered along the floor. With exploring fingers, she managed to grab the item by its cold rim and a knot formed in her throat.

It was a bucket.

She carefully navigated around the bucket, and as she started feeling along the next wall, she came across a wide bar sticking out of the wall. Pulling it, she wondered if she could use it as a weapon, but it was firmly fixed to the wall. About a foot above it was another one, and there was another below.

It was a ladder built into the wall.

She gripped the rung above and began climbing until her head almost hit the ceiling. With one hand, she began to feel whatever the ladders led to: it was some sort of hatch that she couldn't push up.

She was underground.

'Help, help,' she began to scream, her whole body now trembling. 'I can't breathe,' she yelled as she struggled to take a breath.

Tears began to form in her eyes and in her mind – she was really high up, even though she'd only climbed about six rungs. She'd also never known how a person

could feel so dizzy in pitch-darkness.

Her loud sobs filled the air. ‘Get me out. I just want to see Elissa. You promised you’d tell me what happened. Please .’

Slipping down the rungs, she fell to the ground, winded by the hard, cold floor. On all fours, she headed back towards the metal door and began pounding until she had no energy – or tears – left.

Was her kidnapper ever coming back?

Panic began to build. Not again.

She took a few deep breaths. The one thing she couldn’t allow to happen was for her to lose her mind, because right now her sanity was all she had. ‘Elissa!’ she called out.

A buzzing sound caught her attention. She tried and failed to hold her breath so she could listen out for whatever was happening. Something was changing or moving. Was the room moving? Disorientation was her enemy in the absence of her kidnapper.

Standing with her feet freezing on the floor and her back cold against the door, all she could hear now was the hammering of her heart. The boom, boom, boom filled her ears and she needed it to stop. No, she didn’t need her heart to stop. That was a bad thought. What if her thoughts mattered and controlled what happened next? Take it back. She didn’t want her heart to stop. Her rambling thoughts were becoming erratic. She couldn’t die from thoughts. Was it the beginning of the end for her sanity?

Who had taken her? It was definitely a man. A blur of a thought hit her: he had taken her in a van and she had been struck on the head. That’s where everything went

blank. Then she woke up in the hellhole she was stuck in now.

She screamed another hoarse scream and banged the door again.

What could she recall? She'd been to Eric's and she'd seen from afar that he had a wife and a beautiful house. Would he even notice that she was missing if she didn't answer his calls? She hated him so much but now she hoped he'd turn up at the house to talk. Then he might realise something was wrong and alert the police.

Would he even call the police? That would mean giving a statement and might risk his wife discovering his cheating. She wondered if she'd ever meant anything to him. Had she been nothing more than a challenge? Now that she thought about it, he proposed when she was having doubts about being with him. It was just a tool to keep her as his other woman. He was never going to marry her. She had to resign herself to the fact that Eric wasn't going to be the one to tell the police she was missing and she wasn't due in work for two days. Her colleagues wouldn't even notice her absence.

She recalled an argument with Gary, something about a chess piece. No, the argument was about Eric and then he mentioned a chess piece on her doorstep. Then there was Gary's house. She went over and his chess set was on the table.

It was his chess piece all along. He did this.

She must be at the farm that Gary worked at. They had an old bunker that had been there since the war. She had to be in that bunker.

Gary had told her in the past that he often went down there to hide when he wanted to shirk off his duties at the farm.

If only they knew.

‘Gary, don’t do this, please!’ she yelled.

Exhaling, she gasped. She didn’t tell anyone that Gary had been a bad husband. She remembered when Elissa was a baby and they rented a holiday cottage in the middle of nowhere. Mobile phones were expensive and neither of them had one and there wasn’t a house phone. He had taken the car and left her for a whole night on her own, locked in that cottage and not saying a word about where he’d gone. He’d been angry as she’d smiled at the man who served them at the petrol station. It was all making sense now. He used Elissa to lure her into his trap. He was so jealous of Eric – Ruth knew he’d locked her up, just like back then in the cottage.

She screamed again, knowing she was nothing more than a pawn in the sick game Gary was playing. As soon as she escaped her situation, she was going to kill Gary with her bare hands. She couldn’t think of another person on earth who she hated as much, not even the lying, cheating scumbag, Eric.

What if Gary had taken their daughter? No, that was stupid.

Or was it?

Her heart began to ramp up again. She had called the police because she recognised the scarf that she saw on the news. They would call her back. They knew who she was and they’d be able to locate her or trace her phone.

Patting her clothes down, she realised she no longer had her phone. Her kidnapper had taken it. She gasped and held a hand to her heart.

That noise again.

She glanced in the direction it came from and a red light came on. It had to be a camera.

The crackling sound made her flinch and the sound of a child's voice filled the air.

‘Don’t be scared, silly. It’s just a game.’

The child's giggles echoed through the room.

### FORTY-ONE

Exhausted, Gina hurried back to Gary's house where the team had come together. A PC ran over and Gina wasted no time in filling him in. 'Get the team updated. We need patrol cars looking for the van.'

The PC headed back to his team.

Gina called over to PC Ahmed. 'Shaf, keep any potential crowds away from the house. I know the neighbours are starting to come out in droves. Jacob and I are going in. Give the incident room a call with updates and get a search team over here. Tell them that Gary Pritchard is wanted for perverting the course of justice.'

Shaf nodded and stepped to one side.

Jacob slipped on a pair of latex gloves and Gina did the same. He pressed the back-door handle and opened it. She reached for the light switch, turning it on, and began to slide a few kitchen drawers open. They were messy, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

She followed Jacob into the living room. A large, framed photo of Elissa playing with a cat in Ruth's garden adorned the wall above the fireplace. A sick feeling formed in her stomach.

Why had Gary lied and then run?

She headed over to the sideboard and opened the large top drawer. 'Jacob, hurry, you



have to see this.'

He abandoned what he was doing, jogged over and began staring at the made-up chessboard. 'I didn't expect to find that here. A chessboard, and the only piece missing is the... um, I don't play chess.'

'The white queen. And we found that exact piece on Ruth Pritchard's kitchen table.' She studied the pieces for a moment. 'The other chess pieces we have in evidence come from a different set. This one is a bit more ornate, but it's still a chess piece, which just happens to be a firm link to our kidnapper and the case. Can you take a photo? I'm heading upstairs to see if I can find a computer or tablet.'

A slight humming sound caught her attention. She turned the hall light on and began her ascent up the creaky steps. A moth began to crash into the wicker light shade. She ignored the creepy shadow it was casting on the bare magnolia stair wall.

The bedrooms were almost bare except for a single bed in the master room, but what did strike her as odd was the loft ladder being down.

She stood in silence for a moment, listening to the humming coming from above. 'Jacob, we need to check out the loft,' she called.

He took the stairs two at a time and furrowed his brows as he met her by the metal ladders. 'What has Gary Pritchard been doing in the loft? It sounds like he has some electrical equipment whirring away up there.'

'I'm going up. Follow me closely.'

She led the way, her boots clunking on the metal rungs. On reaching the top, she could see two large-screened computers whirring away. Grabbing a joist, she pulled herself in and bowed her head to avoid hitting any beams. She used the torch on her

phone to light the way ahead and on reaching the desk, she nudged the mouse.

The screens came to life.

Messages galore in green writing filled the black screens.

She grabbed onto another beam and steadied herself on the uneven loft boards. Jacob came up beside her. She leaned in closer to the one screen and he read the messages popping up on the other. 'He must be GazMan.'

White Knight: All you need to do is to take the bitch, mate. You want her, she's yours.

GazMan: Where do I keep her? Can't exactly keep her in my house.

White Knight: Lock-up, houseboat, hole in the ground, derelict building, cellar, garage, bookshelf hiding a cupboard door, use your imagination!

GazMan: Tell me how you do it. Always up for learning more from the best.

White Knight: I don't give my inside intel away. A gentleman never tells, haha. Scare the bitch. Let's have her details and we'll get the boys onto her. A few messages will have her pissing her pants. Dox her. I love nothing more than the whole world knowing what a slut or bitch she is and telling her exactly that. Breaks the bitch's heart, it does. We do it to those who deserve it. Police, lawyers, shop workers, mothers – whoever. If they deserve it, they get it. It's all a game and it's a laugh. It's about the journey, mate, not the destination.

GazMan: But I want destination. I want to meet you.

White Knight: Without the journey, destination is an anticlimax.

GazMan: I've had the journey, more than once, I want more. I need it faster and more regular now. The addiction is real. Who are you? Let's work together. We'll be a force to be reckoned with. We can make the bitches pay. Come on, man, I need this. Hit me up privately.

Thinking of the messages she'd been receiving, Gina knew that she, too, was a victim of men like White Knight. From her own research, she also knew there were thousands of others just like him. Stephen was out there somewhere, and Pete Bloxwich, well, she hated him. Trusting him had not been her plan until a few hours ago, but she had no choice. She made a mental note to quiz him about White Knight. If he wanted that memory stick, he'd have to work for it.

Gina clicked on the personal messages that Gary had sent from the forum to White Knight.

White Knight. Answer me. I know you're there. I need your help. Come and find me and hurry!!! It's about time we met IRL. I have an imminent problem. I'll pay you anything. Message me on the burner, now.

She tried to scroll back through his previous messages but they'd all gone.

'Damn. They planned to meet in real life – Gary Pritchard was picked up by a white van, and our attempted kidnapper has a white van. It looks like White Knight came to pick him up, all arranged on a burner phone. We have to consider that Gary has Ruth somewhere.'

'Bloody hell, guv.' Jacob kept reading the messages on the other screen. 'This lot are talking about the women they see every day and how easy it would be to take one. They're even talking killing methods. What on earth have we uncovered?'

'Something big. The worst of it is, we already knew this was a problem; we knew

these predators were everywhere. Most of it is talk, but occasionally they spill out into the real world. We know we lack people and funding to constantly monitor all this, and that's the frustrating part. There are millions of forums just like this and they're growing exponentially. As one gets shut down, another starts up.' Her fists had become inadvertently clenched. 'Sorry, it makes me angry.'

She saw silver poking out from between two sheets of paper. 'I've found his phone.'

It didn't need a password, she was in. She scrolled through his messages. There were a few to his colleagues and a couple between him and Ruth, and a missed call from Ruth.

She logged on to the internet, but it was as if he didn't use it. There were no browsers open and no history. She checked the photos and there were only a few of Elissa as a child.

'He obviously conducts all this' – she pointed to the screens – 'on a burner, probably using a VPN.'

An app flashed with an update. A picture of a smiling horse told Gina that it was Gary's move. 'He plays online chess using this phone, though.'

She glanced back at the main screens and took photos quickly just in case they vanished. No doubt Gary Pritchard could easily remote log-in if he wished.

Pressing on the top of the chair, she noticed the denim jacket hung over the back. It had two horses printed onto the back, with a lasso coming into the scene.

'Molly mentioned something about horses. She said that John Doe mentioned Luna liking horses and they lived by them. I might be overthinking this one, but nothing about this case is easy, so we need to bag this jacket and log it into evidence.'

She sent all the photos to the incident room and Briggs, then called O'Connor.

'You okay, guv?' He yawned. Gina heard Mrs O murmur something in the background.

'O'Connor, I know it's early in the morning and you're not due in for another couple of hours, but I need you and Wyre at the incident room now. Can you head in?'

'What is it?'

'A woman has been kidnapped. Her name is Ruth Pritchard and we've opened a huge can of worms over at her ex-husband's house. I've just sent the details to the incident room, along with photos. It's all hot off the press, so I haven't managed to update the system. Jacob is here with me. Can you call Wyre and ask her to come in too, and liaise with Garth? I need a tech whizz on the case.'

'Yes, leave it with me. I'll have a quick wash and I'm all yours. See you soon.' He ended the call.

Jacob moved in closer to the other screen. A message popped up in the corner of his screen. 'Guv, did you see that?'

'See what?'

'It only flashed up for a moment. I don't want to click on the envelope. We need Garth.'

Gina agreed. Clicking anything could erase data and they couldn't afford to lose this information. They needed to dig deeper into Gary Pritchard and his online life. Only Garth, from digital forensics, along with his team, could tackle this.

‘Did you see what the message said?’ Gina asked.

‘It was from a group called Chess Club, from someone called the Bishop. All it said was “Your move.”’

### FORTY-TWO

Gina yawned as she poured a strong black coffee. The briefing had brought everyone up to date. Kapoor walked in, her eyes puffy and dark underneath. She followed suit and poured herself a coffee, too. ‘How did you get on?’ Gina asked.

‘I’m just getting some caffeine down my neck and I’ll be back on it. I must be close to finding Elissa’s file. It was such a long time ago and it wasn’t put in the correct place, as per the digital reference. I don’t know who did the filing back then but...’ She shrugged. ‘Maybe they were as tired as me when they put that file away. It happens. I only wished it hadn’t happened to the file we need.’

‘We all really appreciate your patience, Jhanvi. Did you manage to get a bit of sleep?’

She huffed out a laugh and sipped her coffee. ‘I slept in an empty cell. It’s amazing how comfortable a mattress as thick as a slice of bread is when you’re seeing double because you’re so tired.’

Gina laughed. ‘We’ve all sampled those when needs must.’

‘The drunken guy in the next cell was barfing all night. Oh, the joy. Right, I’m back on it, guv. I’ll shout if I find the file, and I’ll send you all the details I have on businesses that have horses. A fair few have been checked out and eliminated from our enquiries, but it’s still a work in progress. Also, I know you wanted to know more about the couple who owned The Singing Kettle café back then – I’ll ask O’Connor where we are with that.’

Nodding, Gina checked her watch and grabbed her coffee. As she walked down the corridor, she almost bumped into Wyre. 'Guv, Tristan Moore is here for his interview.'

'Great, can you tell Jacob, and take Mr Moore to interview room one?'

'Jacob has fallen asleep in the incident room. Shall I come with you instead, or shall I wake him?'

Gina blew out a breath. He had been with her during all the interviews so far. In an ideal world it would be him, but she also needed him to get some rest. 'Have you caught up with everything about the case so far?'

'Yes. I read your updates on all that was said between you and the Moores last night, and I've gone through everything you sent over from Mr Pritchard's house.'

Nodding, Gina smiled. 'In that case, yes, please, and thank you. Did Keeley bring him in?'

'She did. They're both in the family room at the moment. I'll go and get everything set up while you finish your coffee, and I'll meet you there in five.'

Gina headed to the incident room and saw Jacob slumped in the corner, his head leaning against the back wall and a thin trail of dribble slipping down his chin. He was dead to the world around him. She saw O'Connor leave with a pile of paperwork, obviously giving their colleague some space to nap.

Pulling a bobble from her suit jacket pocket, Gina grabbed her hair and placed it in a ponytail at the back, needing to disguise what a mess she was in, then she entered interview room one.



Wyre sat in the corner next to the recorder. Mr Moore hunched over the other side of the desk, wearing a waxed coat and a roll-neck jumper. The light from above reflected off his shiny bald head, and the fact that his bouncing knees kept hitting the underside of the table told Gina he was nervous. 'Mr Moore, I'm DI Harte. Thank you for coming in this morning.'

He took a few sharp breaths as Wyre introduced them for the tape.

'First, can you tell me how you know Colson Ferguson?'

As soon as Gina had mentioned Keeley Moore to Colson during his interview, he'd refused to say another word. Nothing untoward had been found in Colson's van, which meant he'd be released soon.

'We met in a pub.' He clasped his hands together on the table.

'Which pub?'

'The Angel in Cleevesford.'

'When?'

'I, err, I can't remember. It was July, but I don't know when. My wife had gone back up north to see family and I didn't want to go with her. I had too much to do on the house. I went out and that's when I met him. Colson.'

'And what happened then?'

'We chatted and got on.' He paused. 'My wife doesn't know anything about this. I love her. I don't want us to end, and if she finds out I cheated, we'd be over. I was lonely, that was all.' He took a deep breath and continued. 'We haven't been close for

a long time because of this damn house, but I know it's my fault, too. I haven't given her much attention and...' He placed his head in his hands. 'Please don't tell my son or Moira. I made an error of judgement with Colson and I cheated. I've been such an idiot, risking everything I have for a stupid fling.'

'A fling?' From what Keeley had said, Gina thought it may have just been one night, but she clocked that Tristan said he met Colson back in July. That was two months ago.

'Moira was away for two weeks. I met up with him nearly every night during that period. It started innocently; Colson liked a flutter and I love a game of cards. We had a laugh in the pub so I asked him if he wanted to meet up the next night for a beer and a game. Somehow it ended in him asking if he could come to mine, and I thought great. Get a takeaway, grab a box of beer and a pack of cards. We got talking. He told me that he was a bit lost and I told him that I was feeling a bit lonely, too. We were drunk. I'd raided the wine cellar by now, and I don't know how it happened, but I ended up in bed with him. I've never?—'

'Mr Moore, we're not here to judge.'

'He came over the next night and the night after that.' He let out a long breath. 'I felt awakened, rejuvenated, like a teenager again, if you get what I mean?' He shook his head and closed his eyes for a second. 'It might sound like a cliché, but I haven't been intimate with my wife in over a year. I know it's not an excuse, but I had this younger guy at my house and we were having a laugh and I found him attractive. I was flattered. Keeley popped by to get something one of the kids had left at ours. She thought I'd gone with Moira up north, which is why she'd let herself in. She saw Colson wearing my dressing gown and put two and two together.' He swallowed. 'Do you think he had something to do with Keeley's attempted kidnap? If only I'd known what type of man I'd let into my home, into our home...'

‘That’s what we’re investigating at the moment.’ Gina pushed a little more. ‘What happened after that?’

‘After he left, I noticed that five hundred pounds had gone. He’d asked me to lend him some money only a few hours earlier. Two thousand pounds, to be exact. But I barely knew him, and I know it looks like we have money, but it’s all tied up in the property. Moira would notice if I suddenly took two thousand pounds out of our account. I said no and knew I had to end this silly thing that I’d started with him. Anyway, once he’d left and I noticed the money was missing, I called him to ask him to bring my money back and he said no. Just like that. I said I was calling the police and he said if I did, he’d tell Moira what we did. He said he’d taken a photo of us in bed when I was asleep, and said he’d post it to all my friends and colleagues. I never thought something like this would happen to me.’ He held back a sob.

Although Gina knew he’d cheated on his wife, she felt for Tristan Moore. The threat to expose his sexuality online by leaking intimate photos was horrible. She thought about the awful images of herself online, the one using her eyes. And then there was the one of her blindfolded in the shed. ‘We have Colson’s phone, and so far we haven’t found any images of you on it.’

‘Thank you. I don’t even know if he has any photos, but I’m not happy to call his bluff. There’s a side of me no one knows, but it doesn’t matter. I love my wife. Colson was a fling, nothing more. What’s five hundred pounds to keep a lid on it?’ He paused. ‘I only did it because Moira had an affair and it broke me. I thought you should know that; why I did what I did and why our marriage was in tatters. A part of me felt entitled, like I wanted to get back at her.’ He reached over and nervously scratched the back of his head. ‘I’m going to have to tell her. I don’t think I can keep this in anymore. I want to report Colson for the theft and the threats.’

Gina nodded slowly. ‘It’s very brave of you. I’ll get a colleague to take a full statement after we’ve finished here.’

He was braver than she was, Gina thought. She swallowed, but felt a little optimistic. They were going to be rearresting Colson on new charges and that meant they'd be keeping him in.

Gina's thoughts moved back to the case in hand and John Doe. 'Do you know this man?' She placed the artist's drawing of John Doe down in front of him.

He scrutinised the drawing. 'I don't think so. But there is something familiar about him.' Gina felt her heartbeat pick up as he continued to speak. 'Actually, I think he might have helped on one of my renovations, but I can't remember which one. It was maybe two or three years ago? He could be in the building trade – possibly a roofer or a brickie – but I couldn't swear to it. It will have been my wife who booked him and dealt with his company, but, like I said, it was a long time ago. We might need to dig out the paperwork to get a name or a company.'

'Is your wife at home?'

He shook his head. 'She's at a trade fair in Scotland. I tried to call her earlier and she didn't answer. She can't always get a signal though.'

'When is she due home?'

'Tomorrow. She flies in first thing. She should be home around seven in the morning.'

'Can we send an officer home with you to help you look through the paperwork? We really need to identify this man. We have reason to believe he has been working with another person, and that person was involved in the attempted kidnapping of your daughter-in-law.' Gina now had it in mind that there could be two more accomplices since Colson was in custody at the time Ruth was taken. 'Does Keeley work with you on the renovations at all? Could she have come into any kind of contact with this

man' – she placed her index finger on the drawing of John Doe – 'even if she doesn't remember him?'

He nodded his head. 'She's always around our place with the kids, so it's definitely a possibility. She does sometimes chat to the contractors or makes them a cuppa. I'll go back home and find that paperwork. There's loads and I'm a very untidy record keeper, so if someone could help me we could find the invoice faster.'

'Do you have any other vans than those parked on your drive?'

'No.'

'What outbuildings do you have?' Gina thought of the girl in the photos. It was a long shot and she had no reason to believe Tristan Moore was behind anything, but she had to ask.

'A small barn, a wine cellar that is actually underneath the games room in the garden, the games room itself and a tree house, which is a death trap so we don't go near it.'

'Thank you.' She waited for Wyre to finish noting all that down. 'If it's okay, a police officer will go with you now while we speak with your daughter-in-law again.'

Several minutes later, Tristan Moore had left and Keeley was now sitting in his seat. The recorder was rolling. Gina waited for Wyre to have a sip of water.

'Have you found the man who tried to take me?'

Gina leaned in. 'We have a lead and your father-in-law is helping us.'

Keeley linked her fingers and held her hands under her chin. 'We know him?'

‘It’s just a lead at the moment.’

‘What do you need to know?’

Gina passed the photo of John Doe across the table. The last time they spoke, the children were shouting and calling for Keeley. ‘Can you please look at this picture again?’ Gina hoped that having the cap included in the picture would jog Keeley’s memory but Gina didn’t mention that he wasn’t wearing a cap in the last picture. ‘Do you recognise this man?’

‘You’ve already showed me a picture of him. Is it different?’

‘Only slightly. Would you please take another look? You were understandably a little distracted last time.’

She shrugged. ‘Sorry about that. The kids were really unsettled.’ She stared long and hard. ‘I don’t know... maybe he might bear a slight resemblance to someone who worked on one of the renovations but that man had a beard. I’m not sure.’ She frowned.

‘Can you look once again? Try to imagine him with a beard.’ If needed, she’d ask for another mock-up of the man with a beard after the interview.

‘I remember someone wearing a cap like this, fussing over the kids. His face looked a bit rounder, more filled out, back then. As I said, he did have a beard, quite a full one. He kept saying how cute the boys were. To think of it, he said he had a daughter and that he loved kids.’

‘Do you remember his name?’

She shook her head. ‘Why are you asking me about him?’ She folded her arms and

bit her bottom lip.

‘We have reason to believe he was working with the person who tried to take you.’

‘Was?’

‘Have you been watching the news?’

She nodded. ‘I’ve done nothing but watch the news.’

‘You will have seen a report of a man who was found dead at a local farm. There was an appeal for witnesses.’

‘I’ve seen some updates on Facebook. Suicide apparently. How does that link to me?’

‘This was the man we found dead in the car.’

Keeley began to hyperventilate. ‘No, no way. And what did you say? You said he might have been working with others. I haven’t seen this man in over two years, that’s even if we’re both talking about the same man. Not a sniff of him. If he was watching me, he’s been like a ghost. And why? Why me? What for? I don’t even know him.’

‘Do you know his name?’

‘No, he was just another contractor.’ She began to bite her lip and furrow her brow. Gina gave her a bit of space to think. ‘There is one detail I do remember about the man I spoke to. It was his daughter’s name. I thought it was pretty. I kept thinking, if I ever had a girl I’d like to call her Luna.’

Gina felt her heart banging away. ‘I mentioned the name Luna to you when we spoke

last.'

'You asked something about someone with a birthmark. I said I didn't know anyone with a big birthmark on their face.'

Gina realised with the commotion going on that evening, Keeley hadn't properly heard her. She couldn't blame Keeley. She was a victim, a witness, and stressed out from her ordeal, and with her children calling for her, Gina's words had been drowned out. 'I'm sorry,' Gina said, trying to remain calm on the exterior. 'I should have asked you again. Did you meet Luna, or did he show you a photo?'

She shook her head. 'No. Never.' She paused. 'I haven't even thought about him since you showed me that photograph but sometimes I think about her and how he described her.' She took a deep breath and continued. 'He said she was about ten, I think, and that she'd been in a wheelchair since having an accident when she was younger. It was a sad story. Her agoraphobia meant she never left the house at all.'

Keeley paused and went to speak, but stopped and thought for a moment. 'Where is she? He said that she depended on him for everything, which is why he had to keep coming and going. If she doesn't have him, who does she have?'



### FORTY-THREE

After giving Jacob a nudge back at the station, the time had finally come to attend the public meeting at Cleevesford Village Hall while the team prepped their visit to the farm that Gary worked at. But first, it was time to speak to Mrs Sellers about Elissa Pritchard.

‘I can’t believe we still haven’t found the paperwork relating to Elissa Pritchard’s disappearance,’ Jacob said as he pulled over. Their gaze fixed on the bleak-looking flat-roofed building.

‘I know. We might not have to be here if we had the original Sellers’ interviews. I keep thinking about Luna, that scared-looking girl in the photo. How can a girl just disappear and there be no word about her at all? I feel sick at what Keeley said. We know the photo that John Doe showed Molly Sailsbury wasn’t the real Luna, but there is a girl, we saw the photos that John Doe had. Without him, she is as good as dead, unless we find her, and I don’t know where we go with this next. We know his dangerous accomplice, or accomplices, are still out there.’

‘Okay, so what’s the plan for today?’ Jacob laid his arm against the window and fidgeted in the driver’s seat.

‘After here, it’s straight to the farm where Gary works. We need to check it out. O’Connor and Wyre are researching Edmundson’s Farm, and organising a small team to attend. As far as we could see, it’s a reputable dairy farm with lots of staff. Then there’s Marie Blaine – again, another name that isn’t coming up in our searches, and I believe she’s key to understanding and identifying our perp. Then, there’s Eric, the

man who Ruth was in a relationship with, who has a secret family. Any news on the rental place?’

Jacob unbuckled his seat belt. ‘O’Connor followed up on that while you and Wyre were interviewing Mr Moore. There’s someone else renting it now. Nothing of his was left there, but a couple of PCs were going to follow up on it.’

‘Great, we need to be the ones to go to Eric Hathaway’s house.’

Noon was fast approaching. That’s when the community meeting was going ahead, where Patricia Sellers would be.

‘We have Eric Hathaway’s address. We’ll go straight to his after the farm. I’m so scared for the girl – I just hope we’re not too late.’ She shook her head. ‘I refuse to believe we’re too late to help her. She is out there and she needs us. Maybe we’ll get something back from Gary Pritchard’s computers. I know Garth has them now.’

‘Fingers crossed.’ Jacob glanced back. ‘Someone’s coming.’

A man wearing a flat cap and grey trousers began opening up the community centre. A few other people soon followed. Three women and a man with a collie dog huddled near the door and entered. Gina opened the car door.

‘Excuse me, I’m DI Harte and this is DS Driscoll.’ Jacob tried to brush the crease out of his jacket with his hands. ‘We’re looking for Mrs Sellers.’

A woman in an anorak came from behind and stepped towards the door using a walking frame. ‘That’s me. Last as usual.’

Gina smiled. ‘May we go in and speak somewhere privately? We didn’t have an address on the system for you.’

‘System? I live with my daughter. Just moved in. We haven’t dealt with the paperwork yet.’ She shuffled into the damp-smelling building and led them towards the kitchen. ‘Olga,’ she called back, ‘you all get started with the meeting, I’ll get the urn heated up so we can get some cuppas on the go.’

Once in the large kitchen, the woman pulled up a high stool and allowed herself to flop back into it. ‘So, what does a DI and a DS want with me? I put in a formal complaint about a certain dog and owner over a month ago, but officers of your rank don’t deal with dog fouling, do you?’

Gina leaned against the worktop, the smell of old burnt toast creeping up her nostrils. ‘Sorry, we’re here to talk about an old case – Elissa Pritchard’s disappearance?’

‘That was a long time ago, but I could never forget Elissa. I told the police everything I knew at the time. Our whole lives were turned upside down. It wasn’t us; we had nothing to do with it. You searched our house high and low and I don’t need this back in my life. Do you know how much your investigation caused the community to turn against us? We had horrible words painted on our café window, and we didn’t hurt a hair on that girl’s head. We had stuff-all to do with her vanishing.’

‘Can you tell me anything about the time she went missing?’

Patricia Sellers scrunched her hooded eyes and her thin grey hair fell over her face as she hunched over. ‘I remember telling the girl that she was bringing unwanted attention on herself but, of course, no one these days wants to take responsibility. She tried to tell me my husband had tried it on with her. He didn’t. She was a liar, too. Some men did because she kept bending down in front of everyone in those short skirts. I had a go at her and told her to wear something sensible, and I stand by what I said. Of course, I had a go at my dopey husband, too, as he did ogle her. Because of her, the café was getting to be like a pick-up joint. The boys would all come to chat to her. It wouldn’t be so bad, but they’d only buy one can of pop and sit there all day.’

Mrs Sellers shook her head.

Gina pictured what Mrs Sellers was actually describing: a popular, young girl enjoying fashion, being sexually harassed by her middle-aged boss.

‘I’m not surprised she ended up a victim. Girls like her just do, or they get into trouble, if you know what I mean. So many children pushing babies around. Not like it was in my day. You kept your legs shut until you married.’

Jacob glanced over at Gina. She knew he could see the redness creeping from her chest to her chin as she got angry at the level of judgement and victim-blaming coming from the woman’s mouth. Gina also knew when to shut up, and her best bet was to let Mrs Sellers ramble on, regardless of how angry it was making her.

‘And the boys – some would ask her out, and she always said no, despite being a flirty little bird. She preferred men, though. I remember one particular day: her poor old dad came to pick her up and caught a man staring at her; a grown man. The dad barged in and frogmarched that girl out with a telling off. He was full of rage, he was. Angry as hell itself. I swear he said what I was thinking when he told her off for wearing that skirt before pushing her into the car. Anyway, she came back to work the next day and didn’t seem the slightest bit bothered. She had an even shorter skirt on.’

Gina tried to picture Gary shouting at Elissa, embarrassing and shaming her in front of everyone. It must have been humiliating.

‘That mother of hers thought the sun shone out of her daughter’s arse. She’d come in and have a cuppa some days when Elissa was working, and Elissa would be all sweetness and light in front of her. Lack of motherly control, that was the problem. Dad tried, but Mother never backed him up.’

‘Can we fast-forward to the day she went missing?’

‘You’re like the other detectives at the time. What I’m telling you says it all: she ran off with a man. Daddy was strict and she didn’t want to abide by her curfew and the house rules, so she ran away with a man.’

‘What makes you think that?’ Gina tried to unclench her fists in her pocket, but the tension was giving her a headache.

‘The man. He kept waiting outside for her in his car, and I watched them. He’d stare, and one day she went outside to tell him to – now this isn’t ladylike, but she was playing hard to get – she told him to “eff off”, and I had to have words with her over it. I didn’t think it was good, her outside the café swearing at a potential customer. The little angry outbursts were a regular thing. One minute she was all smiles and flirting, until they got handsy, then she was full of bad language. Hot and cold. I tried to tell her about the skirts again, but’ – she shrugged – ‘they don’t listen at that age. You know, she smoked, too.’

‘Smoked?’

‘Always trying to blag a ciggie off someone. If that isn’t a sign of a girl gone wrong, I don’t know what is. I know she had a bit of a drink sometimes, too, because she came to work with hangovers. That girl was out of control. She ran away with a man her parents wouldn’t have approved of. That was all there was to it. There was no foul play at all. The man who she swore at, I saw her getting into his car after work. It was around the time she vanished. She got in willingly. Add risky behaviour to the list of her problems.’

‘Did you manage to get a look at him?’

‘Not really. Only from the shop. He was in a Ford Escort, so I couldn’t see well, but it

was a man. Nice square jaw and hair that fell like curtains. All the boys and young men had that cut back then, but it did cover his face. I told the police about him.'

'Did he ever come into the café?'

She shook her head. 'Have you even read the file?'

Gina didn't want to discuss the fact that they were having trouble locating the original interviews. 'As we are looking into the case again, we felt it would be better to speak to the original witnesses ourselves.'

'You should stop fussing over that case. Girls like her go wrong and there's nothing you can do for them. I said my bit and all she did was chew gum and roll her eyes. She knew what she was doing when she went off with the man in the silly red cap.'

'Red cap?' Gina knew for definite that the other person involved must be older than John Doe as John Doe would have been a child back then. But they both had a red cap, maybe the same red cap.

'Yes, the man with the silly curtain haircut also put on a red baseball cap with some writing on the front.' She let out a huff of a laugh. 'My stupid husband was putting the rubbish out and he came back in saying that he wished we'd gone to Florida.' She rolled her eyes. 'I asked him what was going through his head. He said nothing, just that the man's cap had the word Florida written on the front. We told the police this at the time. Ford Escort, curtain haircut and red Florida cap.'

FORTY-FOUR

GIRL

As I lie on my back in the cold, I see stars. They twinkle and I wonder if I'm finally free. I place my hand over my empty stomach, knowing that I'd lost my baby boy. It was a boy. A mother knows. I felt our bond from the beginning.

I look up. Darkness envelops me, but the stars; they are so beautiful. Maybe that's where my baby is now, twinkling in the sky and looking down on me.

If we've battled through all of time to be together and have the opportunity to be mother and father, our baby wouldn't just vanish into nothing. He existed and his matter is out there. He is the star and I am the star catcher.

Reaching up, I try to hold the twinkle, but it vanishes and my hand brushes nothing.

I hear his words floating in the breeze, but I can't make out what he's saying. They're warped.

Tears fill my eyes. If I carry on following the darkness, maybe I'll be set free, but my freedom won't be the beginning of another chapter, it will be the end.

Maybe I'm letting go of my life.

This is some kind of purgatory that I need to figure out. Is there any way back to my little bunker? I just want to start again and I want to be close to him and love him. We

can't wait until the universe puts us together again. We might live ten lives before that happens. Ten wasted lives. I want this one. I'm not finished with it yet.

What is death like? This is something I've started to ponder more over the past few days, or is it weeks? My head is like cotton wool. I've tried really hard to remember what the in-between is like; that place between death and rebirth.

He can remember. He tells me that it's beautiful, that all the colours are iridescent and a calming sound makes a person feel safe, like whale noises, but they are angels.

I'm his angel and he needs me.

I begin to hum a tune, one I made up, in the hope that he can hear me as I leave this life, then I feel a thump as my head hits my pillow.

I'm still here.

Water or sweat drips down my face, but I can't see. The darkness was real, it's all real, and the twinkling above is the camera as it watches me.

The raging heat inside me feels as though it's about to escape. Am I cold, am I hot? I don't know. I shiver uncontrollably until I throw up. The in-between is beckoning me, maybe I need to give up. Maybe it's time. This pain is too much.

A flash of my past fills my mind. Meowdon. Mum, Dad. The game of chess we started playing that we never finished. I'd be so much better now. My mum and me lying on a yacht off the South of France where she prepped for a rich person's dinner party. I had a life out there in the real world once. My drawings that filled my bedroom back then, I want it all back. I want my life and my baby back, but that's not how life works.



I can never have these things back.

A murmur filters through my ear. It's not him. It's someone else.

If I had the strength to cover my clammy chest up, I would, but I'm dying. I can't move and now, maybe, just maybe, this other man who whispers something I can't quite make out is the new dreamer. Maybe his dreams are now my dreams.

I feel pressure on my chest and a faint light comes from one corner of the room. I prise my eyes open a little more, but the brightness sends a flash of pain through my head so I close them tightly.

His rough fingers begin prising my lips open, but I do my best to keep them clamped shut.

What does he want with me?

His hands smell like baby lotion, and the taste begins to make its way around my mouth, making me want to throw up again. I heave, but there is nothing left in me. My arms are so weak, I can't even lift them to fight him. Instead, I clasp my teeth together as a warning to him to keep his fingers away from my mouth.

'Stop it or I will break your neck,' this man yells. Where is he, the man who I love? It's not him. His hands are soft and his voice is a little higher. This man speaks almost monotone, even when he shouts.

I recognise this voice from my past.

I can't breathe. He is upon me, pinning me down on the bed, his fingers once again trying to prise my mouth open.

I don't want him to break my neck. I just want the love of my life back, and all I can do is cry.

'Open your mouth or I swear to God I will slice your bony throat open and feed you to the pigs.'

My loud sobs are now filling the capsule, I open my mouth and feel something slightly choke me then the water comes, spilling everywhere, making me cough and splutter.

He lied. He's going to kill me anyway.

All that broke me and built me back up, all that made me feel a love I never felt possible, it will soon be gone. I will be gone and no one will know or miss me.

I am no one, just a star in the sky, twinkling away in the hope that someone will notice me amongst the other million stars.

I am a no one.

Girl – no one.

### FORTY-FIVE

Jacob knocked on Eric Hathaway's front door. Gina checked her messages as they waited.

'Are there any updates, guv?'

She scrunched her eyes to read the writing on her phone. 'The search of Gary Pritchard's house hasn't brought much else up, and there is still no further news on the contents of his computer. Wyre has left Kapoor with the missing persons' files and gone with O'Connor to Gary's place of work. They're at the farm now.'

Jacob shook his head. 'We badly need a break.'

'Oh, Briggs has just called a press release appealing for witnesses at the nature park last night. Someone has to have seen something. Teens sometimes hang around there.' She popped her phone back in her pocket.

The sound of feet thundering down the stairs came from behind the door. A tall, smart, grey-haired man answered. 'Hello.' He sighed and pointed to the tiny sign on his wall beside the door: no sales, junk mail, religion or politics.

'We're not any of those.' Gina held her identification up. 'I'm DI Harte, this is DS Driscoll. May we come in?'

He glanced back. 'Err, what's this about? We're a bit tied up at the moment. Our daughter is in labour and we have to get her to the hospital.' He dropped the large bag

he had looped around his arm onto the carpet.

‘I’ll try not to keep you but it is important. You’re currently in a relationship with Ruth Pritchard?’

He swiftly stepped onto the coconut doormat and closed the door. ‘Okay, you want to talk about Ruth. I don’t have long because our daughter’s waters have already broken, so we need to get her to the hospital.’ He led them towards his double garage and stopped just far enough away from the house where his wife wouldn’t hear them talking.

‘Ruth Pritchard has gone missing and we have reason to believe that she’s been taken against her will.’

He slowly breathed in and paused. ‘What? Someone has taken Ruth? Are you sure?’

‘She’s gone missing under suspicious circumstances and you were in a relationship with her.’

His shoulders dropped. ‘I can’t believe it. Ruth is the nicest person ever. Who would take her?’ His right fist clenched. ‘Her ex-husband is a psycho. He’s damaged my car on more than one occasion. Have you spoken to him? His name is Gary and he lives directly opposite her.’ He shook his head. ‘He moved out of their marital home and bought the house opposite so he could watch her all day like a creep. He stands in the window, staring, and making her uncomfortable.’

Gina was disappointed that they still didn’t have Gary in custody. ‘Do you have a key for her house?’

He nodded. ‘I’ve had one for about a month.’

His daughter opened the front door. 'We need to get going. My contractions are speeding up.' She let out a pained sigh.

'Just another minute.' He nodded and she closed the door. 'Can we talk about this later? We need to get our daughter to the hospital.'

'I'm sorry, but locating Ruth is our primary concern, as you can appreciate. Can your wife take your daughter?'

'She doesn't drive and my daughter isn't in a position to drive herself.'

Gina nodded. 'Of course.'

'You should know, I saw Ruth yesterday. She was parked just there, on the road.' He pointed. 'When I came out to get into my car, I saw her. She drove off looking upset.' He paused. 'I don't know how Ruth found out that I was married. I do love Ruth, but it made me think long and hard about what I really want, and that's my wife. I don't want to lose her, and I know my kids would turn their backs on me if they found out I'd cheated on their mother. I am not that man. I don't know why I did it.' His cheeks began to flush. 'I was flattered that Ruth looked twice at me and we genuinely had a laugh together. So stupid.'

Gina sighed. 'We will need you to come to the station to make a formal statement.'

He slowly nodded. 'Great. I can come tomorrow. Hopefully my daughter will have had her baby by then.'

Gina checked her watch. 'We need you there today. Mrs Pritchard is missing and her safety is our main concern.'

'Of course. I understand. I'll drop them at the hospital and head to the station. There

is something that has been worrying me, and I did tell Ruth of my concerns.'

Jacob began making notes, using the garage wall to write against.

'Some evenings at Ruth's, I'd go out into the back garden to have a cigar... I thought I saw someone lurking around the back, through the slats in her fence, but she dismissed it. It was Gary. I think he's been watching her. She said I was just being paranoid and accused me of being jealous of him, so I dropped it. He still has a key to the house, you know, which I think is absurd considering his obsession with her. Ruth forgets where she leaves things and loses her stuff all the time.'

He paused.

'I don't think it's Ruth, though, I think Gary comes in and moves things around, trying to make her think she's going mad. Once, I found a chess piece on her garden furniture – Ruth doesn't even have a chessboard. I kept asking myself, how did it get there? She told me that Gary used to play for Cleevesford Chess Club, but that was years ago and the club is no longer going. It's just odd, don't you think? Whenever I brought these things up and suggested she get her key back off Gary, she dismissed me and told me she'd do it when the time was right, but she never did. She never wants to upset him and I believe that's because she's scared of him. Do you know about the divorce?'

Gina nodded.

'I bet that has really enraged Gary. He didn't want a divorce. Do you also know that Ruth blames Gary for Elissa's disappearance?'

Furrowing her brows, Gina cleared her throat.

'No, Gary wouldn't tell you that, would he? Gary was horrible to the girl. He used to

shout at her, insult her, get drunk and ground her for next to nothing. He once dragged her out of work calling her all kinds of names because she was dressed in a short skirt. Elissa was mortified, apparently. Ruth blames herself for not intervening more, or sticking up for Elissa. She thinks that Gary's treatment of their daughter made her more vulnerable, or maybe it made her run away.'

He blew out a breath. 'I know what I've done is wrong. My wife doesn't deserve it and I am a bad husband, but Gary is on another level. Do you know the reason Ruth asked him for a divorce in the first place?'

'We didn't get a chance to speak to Mrs Pritchard before she went missing, and we've been unable to locate Gary.'

'She caught him looking at some questionable porn. It was legal, from what she tells me, but the young women were all dressed up like teens and being held in captivity. And worst of all, Ruth said they looked like Elissa.' Eric stood still, his mouth downturned.

Gina felt like the breath had been sucked from her. 'Mr Hathaway, it's routine, but I have to ask: where were you between eight last night and two a.m. this morning?'

'Me and my wife were at my daughter's house putting a cot together with my son-in-law. My wife and I were at their house from around seven until about midnight. We ordered a takeaway. At the end of the evening, my wife and I came home and went to bed.'

His eyes widened and he let out a long breath. 'My wife is going to find out, isn't she? About my affair?' He nodded as if answering his own question. He sighed again and raked his hands through his hair. 'I guess my own divorce will be the next one.'

Jacob spoke. 'We need the details of your daughter and son-in-law to confirm your

alibi.'

'Of course. Oh, and one more thing. When I was at Ruth's a couple of weeks ago, Gary knocked and he was really drunk. Ruth told me to go into the living room and leave her to deal with him. She closed the door, but I managed to hear a bit of what was being said over the sound of the TV. He said that Ruth might be able to divorce him, but a piece of paper was nothing. He said she was his, forever, for better or worse. He said he'd never let her go.'

The front door burst open and Mrs Hathaway emerged, carrying the hospital bag for her daughter, who followed behind her looking a bit clammy. The young woman yelled as a contraction tore through her.

'I'm sorry. I have to take her to the hospital.'

Gina's phone rang and she turned to Jacob. 'Excuse me a moment. Can you please take Mr Hathaway's daughter and son-in-law's details?' She wondered if it would be okay to question the woman in labour but the young woman screamed again and sat in the back seat of the car.

He nodded. Gina stepped towards the end of the drive and spoke into her phone. 'Jhanvi.'

Eric Hathaway's car pulled off his drive, leaving her and Jacob there. She knew they'd have to catch up with the Hathaways later.

Trainee DC Kapoor spoke fast. 'Guv, it's about Edmundson's Farm, where Gary Pritchard works. We have a link to the horses that have cropped up in the case. They rent stable space out. There is a paddock for the horses, too. I've checked out their Facebook page. The Edmundsons post a lot about their organic ice cream and butter. In one video, Mrs Edmundson talks about the farm and the fact that they have loads



of outbuildings, even an Anderson shelter. They also have two white vans registered to them, both with sliding side doors.'

'We're on our way. Tell the team to hold back until Jacob and I get there. We'll approach them first as they may not even be aware of what's going on, but make sure all potential exits are covered. If Gary Pritchard is hiding out on the farm, we're going to get him.'

FORTY-SIX

GIRL

I feel so much better since that horrible night, months ago, when the infection was tearing through me. I mentioned that there was another man but he just told me I was seeing things, that infection causes hallucinations. Either way, I'm thankful to still be here even though my recovery has been slow. I thought I was going to die.

Staring at our chess game, I see now that I can win and I didn't need to castle. I'm three moves away from the end and I know which moves he will make because I will give him no other choice.

I bring my white queen onto the row of his king. It feels so good being on the attack for a change, because, despite him saying that I've let him win before, I haven't. He can only move one forward, then I will bring my bishop across and it will be checkmate.

Who knows when he will come back and make his move, though, but I'll be ready when he does.

We are still mourning the loss of our baby. I made him bring the Babygro back, and I keep it under my pillow. Sometimes I snuggle into it, but it's hollow, just like me.

He's with me most nights now, which is sweet, and he brings me decent food, which he never cooks himself. He buys it and we warm it up in the microwave. It's definitely not a patch on what my mum used to cook, but it's more nutritious than the

ramen and fruit pots. We think that is why we lost the baby. I just wasn't strong enough to carry him.

Last night, he brought us a cooked chicken to share, with a bag of salad. Then he left me this bottle of vitamins. I'm not taking any risks now that we're trying for a baby again. I will take this folic acid religiously and I am going to have a little one to hold in my arms. The blue pinafore that used to hang off me has got a little tighter. I am no longer the waif of a girl I was since I've been eating better.

I imagine my tiny space filled with a gargling cherub smiling at me, loving me and... I want to cry again for the little one I lost. Shaking those sad thoughts away, I take a few deep breaths and think of the future as I pop one of the vitamins into my mouth.

I'm lonely here and my arms feel light.

I flinch as the lights go out. Then they come on again. Then they go out and come on. Off, on. Off, on.

'Hey, is that you?' I call out in the hope that he's watching me through the cameras.

No answer.

I get off the bed and walk through my tiny kitchen area in the hope that the lights stay on. Not that it matters. I've become good at doing everything in the dark. I reach the metal door and bang, then someone bangs from the other side of it.

'Hello?' I call out.

Again, no one answers. The intercom blares out and the piercing sound of a young child's screeching laughter sends me running back to my bed.

Who comes here and how did they get here? The lights abruptly go off.

The laughter continues and the child speaks. 'Hello.' A burst of giggles follows.

I almost want to cry at the sound of this angelic voice. I'm guessing the child is between five and ten years old. 'Hello,' I call back. 'What's your name?'

Whispers and giggles fill the room. There is more than one child.

'It's okay, you can talk to me.' I don't want them to go. I'm so happy to hear their little voices. They're literally bringing joy to my heart.

'Stop it,' the other child says and they both giggle.

'My name is Lissy. What's your name?' I ask.

Then I hear a loud slap and the children begin to wail and scream. The intercom is cut off and my blood runs cold. I run back to my bed, get under the blankets and hide.

The intercom crackles on again and the children are screaming. I pull the blankets over my head and cry into my pillow. 'Don't hurt the children,' I keep saying, over and over again until my throat dries up. 'Don't hurt the children,' I croak one more time.

Then the light goes out.

### FORTY-SEVEN

Jacob and Gina hurried towards the huge wooden front door to the house. Ivy coated the whole frontage, thick like a carpet of dark-green hues. She spotted a collection of industrial buildings behind it. Long buildings and greenhouses of factory-like proportions. 'Everyone's in place, so we're ready to go,' Gina whispered. The area was surrounded, just in case Gary decided to run.

Jacob rapped his knuckles on the door.

A woman in a wax jacket and green wellies opened it and smiled. 'Hello.' She looked them up and down. 'You want to see the stable. Just let me grab my phone and I'll take you across.'

Gina shook her head. 'No, sorry. I'm DI Harte and this is DS Driscoll. We need to talk to you about an employee called Gary Pritchard.'

'Okay. What's this about?'

'We're looking for him regarding a case we're investigating. Has he come into work today?'

'Quite the opposite.' The woman rolled her eyes and her messy bun began to shed a few strands of mousy-coloured hair. 'He didn't turn up, so I'm short-staffed, which is why I'm doing his work as well as my own.'

'May we come in?'

‘Of course.’ She opened the door fully and led them to a farmhouse kitchen where something delicious and brothy simmered in a pot on the Aga.

Gina’s stomach rumbled slightly as she inhaled onion and chicken. ‘Could I take your name, please?’

The woman gestured for them to sit on the long bench seat at the rustic table. ‘Amelie Edmundson.’

‘When did you last see Mr Pritchard?’

‘He came in yesterday, but said he felt ill, so went home around eight in the morning. Actually, his absence is becoming an inconvenience. He’s had numerous warnings for being late, not turning up to work and generally skiving off. We keep finding him hanging around and smoking by the outbuildings, and I’ve even caught him drinking a few times. This is a problem because, as you might guess, we have machinery and vehicles. Should he be in charge of any of those and someone were to get hurt... it doesn’t bear thinking about.’ She paused and shook her head. ‘And, he’s been quite aggressive and angry. His ex-wife has met someone else, and since then, he’s definitely got worse. Has he done something?’

‘That’s what we’re trying to establish, and I’m grateful for your cooperation.’ Gina hoped that would continue when she asked for a look around the outbuildings and vans. It would make their lives much easier if they were granted access.

‘I hate speaking like this about him. Up until this year he’s been an asset to Edmundson’s, and he’s worked here for so long. We know he’s been dealt a bad hand, what with his daughter going missing all those years ago. I can’t begin to imagine how that would feel. We have two grown-up kids and grandchildren now, and if something happened to any of them, I don’t know how I’d carry on.’ Mrs Edmundson bit her bottom lip.

Gina pulled out the drawing of John Doe. 'Do you know this man?'

She shook her head.

'What does Gary do here?'

'He looks after the cows and milking, and general farm duties. He's very handy, so he does maintenance too. We all muck in and do a bit of everything around here.'

'You have two white vans registered to the business. Can we take a look at them?'

'Why?'

'A white van with a side door was used in an attempted kidnapping.' Gina didn't know what vehicle had been used to take Ruth, but she suspected that, too, was a white van.

Mrs Edmundson opened her eyes wide and raised her brows. 'And you think one of our vans was used for that?'

'We just need to rule them out.'

'Of course. Gary uses them all the time. You don't think...?'

'As I said, we just need to rule them out. Mr Pritchard ran from us this morning and got into a white van.'

Grabbing a set of keys, Mrs Edmundson led them back towards the main door. 'Follow me. I'll take you to the vans now. They're both onsite.'

They followed her over the muddy driveway until they reached a churned-up tarmac

car park full of farm vehicles and the two white vans. Damp began to seep through the side of one of Gina's boots. Mrs Edmundson pulled out a key with a purple tab on it and opened the first van up. It was full to the roof with tools and parts. Cobwebs stretched across the opening like they'd been there for days or even weeks. Mrs Edmundson opened the door to the second van and that was in a similar state. She glanced into the cabs of both. There were no chess pieces dangling from the rear-view mirror.

'Do you mind if we call forensics to take a look?' She had to rule them out, but she was almost certain that the vans she was looking at hadn't been used by the kidnapper.

'Do whatever you need to do.'

Gina nodded to Jacob to send the message. Within moments, PC Smith turned up to wait with the vans while they continued looking, and two more PCs came to assist. 'Can you wait for someone in forensics to arrive?'

'Yes, I'll let you know when they do,' PC Smith said as they left him with the vans.

'Can you show me your outbuildings?'

Mrs Edmundson swallowed. 'What are we looking for?'

'We are hoping to find Mr Pritchard.'

'He, err, he's mostly been loitering around by the bunker. That's where I always find him smoking and sitting.'

'Do you use the bunker for anything?'



She shook her head. 'Our kids used to use it as a den when they were little, but we have no reason to use it, really. We use the barn and other outbuildings for storage. We have another barn just for the horse stables and consumables. The factory is self-contained. That's where we make the ice cream and butter. We don't go to the bunker.'

'What I haven't told you is that Mrs Pritchard has also been taken, and we are worried for her safety. I'm going to make sure backup is in place. Could you keep everyone in the factory and stay there until I come back out.'

'Yes, oh my goodness, poor Ruth. That's awful. I'll take you to the bunker.' She pulled out a huge bunch of keys, removed one from the ring and passed it to Gina. 'You'll need this.'

'Does Mr Pritchard have a copy of this key?'

'Yes. He wanted to store some things in there years ago, so I gave him a copy and said he could use the space. It was to be used to store tools that he didn't have room for in his shed, and he didn't want to sell them as they'd be useful in the future.' As they walked across a small field, they reached the treelined edge of the land. 'It's there.' She pointed.

Gina scrunched her brow. She couldn't see anything and neither could Jacob or the three PCs by the looks on their faces.

'Sorry, I forgot, it blends into the landscape. See the slight mound of grass, just before you reach the trees? If you walk around it, there's a muddy dip. It's steep and damp so be careful. Just unlock the metal door and enter.'

'Thank you.'

‘I’ll head back to the factory, then.’

Gina nodded for one of the PCs to go with her.

‘If you need me or my husband, just come there and ring the bell. I best go and let him know what’s going on.’ The woman began clumsily jogging back in her wellies towards the main buildings. Gina glanced to the right and saw the paddock with a single horse running in it.

The two PCs remained poised, hands on truncheons, as one radioed their position back to the others. Gina peered at the road through the treeline and saw a police car. ‘We’re going in.’

The booming of her heart got louder and louder as she popped the key in the lock and opened the bunker, leading the way with her torch.

Was the girl in there, with Ruth?

‘Hello,’ she called out. There was a wall and another door ahead. A bench either side made the tubular structure feel tight as they all piled in, apart from one PC.

‘Ruth? Gary?’ She placed her almost-shaky hand on the door handle and it fought back with a spine-tingling creak.

Gina flashed her torch at bags of rubble stacked up at the far end.

‘Guv, look.’ Jacob flashed his torch at the wall to their left where a garden chair had been folded up and leaned against the wall.

Stepping in further, Gina could see the pile of empty cans of cider stacked up behind the door. She closed the door halfway and on the back was a wall of photos and notes

stuck to it with tape.

There was a photo of Elissa, of Eric and of Ruth. Eric's photo had one word written across his face: bastard . The one of Ruth almost took her breath away: devil horns had been drawn onto her head.

Gina almost felt her breath escape her as she read a name he'd written on the A3 sheet of paper: Marie Paulson. Next to her name, he'd written Fantastic Snacktastic . Marie's surname had changed, if it was the same Marie.

Gina took a photo as Jacob held his torch at the back of the door. 'I think we have what we need to find Marie.'

She sharply inhaled as she saw the pile of rope on the floor next to a metal chain that had been embedded into the concrete.

A knife had been stabbed into a chessboard. The only piece at the scene: the white knight.

### FORTY-EIGHT

The station was humming with activity. Kapoor hurried in as Gina took her coat off. 'We've interviewed Colson again and we've rearrested him for threatening to share an intimate image of someone without their consent so we still have him in custody for now. Without further evidence, he'll probably get bail soon.'

'Thanks for the update.' After seeing the bunker, Colson had slipped to the back of her mind and Gary had taken over, and his absence was really grating on her. If only they hadn't let him escape earlier that morning. They'd left PCs at Edmundson's Farm, collecting names and statements from everyone.

'The briefing is about to start.'

'I'm on my way.' Gina ditched her coat in her office and hurried to the incident room. PC Smith had left forensics and a team behind at Edmundson's Farm.

PC Ahmed was eating a bag of crisps. Jacob, O'Connor and Wyre were sitting at the main table, all ready to start, and Briggs entered. 'Right, no time to waste. Can we hush in here?'

The room silenced.

'Gina, can you lead?'

She nodded and stepped to the end of the table by the boards. The map was now dotted with pins and string connecting the various leads and locations. 'I'll give you a

quick update to get everyone up to speed. Ruth Pritchard was taken last night from the nature centre car park. Her ex-husband, Gary Pritchard, is our main suspect. We've just got back from his place of work and discovered he's been using an old bunker on the farm. Have you all seen the photos?'

A few yesses filled the room.

'Right now, our main concern is finding Ruth and Luna, the girl in the photo. Any luck on locating the Elissa Pritchard case file?'

'Yes, guv. It tells us what we already know, but it does mention more about Gary Pritchard. A few of the neighbours complained about how Gary had seemed with Elissa, one of them saying he slapped her once in public while he was telling her off. And get this, someone mentioned a car with a man on their road and he was wearing a baseball cap. They never said red, but they did say it was in the hours of darkness.'

'Again, huge coincidence,' Gina replied. 'Anything else that stands out?'

Kapoor shook her head. 'I've only quickly gone through it as I found it this morning, but no. I'll have another look after we finish here.'

Gina glanced at O'Connor. 'Anything from Garth yet with regards to Gary Pritchard's devices?'

'No, the digital team are working on it now. Hopefully we'll have something soon.'

'How about the paperwork at Tristan and Moira's house. Did we find out more about the contractor with the baseball cap? It's looking likely that he is John Doe and identifying him might lead us straight to Luna and Ruth.'

'I've been in contact with the team there,' Wyre piped up, 'but nothing so far. There's

just too much to go through and the Moores are not the most organised of people. They're being cooperative, though. I've had word back that Moira Moore knows all about Tristan Moore's fling with Colson. He came clean when he managed to get hold of her. She's coming home from Scotland early. Orla, the FLO, went back this morning despite being asked to leave last night. She is with the family at the moment and she's also helping to search through the paperwork with Tristan Moore. No news from her so far. Keeley Moore is still worried about herself and the children.'

'Have any witnesses come forward?'

O'Connor nodded. 'The team have been inundated, but nothing useful has come out of any of the calls. We've had very little from the appeal for information at the nature park.'

Glancing at the boards, Gina scrunched her brow at the chess clues. 'How about chess clubs?'

Wyre flicked through a few pages of notes. 'There hasn't been a chess club in Cleevesford since the mid noughties, but I've circulated the artists drawing of John Doe to all local board gaming groups, and no one recognises him. Most of the players go to a club in Warwick now, but so far, no one has recognised the person in the drawing and there are a lot of younger players who wouldn't have even been there back then.'

Wyre flicked over to another page. 'There are a lot of businesses and private owners of horses within the area, and a lot have been going a long time. We've started researching them and the areas they cover – I've marked them with brown pins on the map. None of them link to anything else we have. The next step would be to visit each of them, which we know will be time consuming, but we do have some uniformed officers working on that. I have found something else while going through mispers, though, and I think it might link to this case.'

‘Great. What do you have?’

‘An eighteen-year-old went missing back in 1980. Her name was Joanie Callahan. She worked at a pub in Bromsgrove and one night she left, colleagues saw her getting into a car with a man and no one has seen her since. She had no family. She’d left the care system, had no permanent address and literally no one back then tried to look too deeply into it. I’ve done a little research and she hasn’t cropped up anywhere since. Some of the regulars said she was dating a joiner and they just thought she’d gone to live with him. The detail that links her to the case is, she called this man her white knight when she talked about him to colleagues.’

‘Do we know who reported her missing?’

‘A friend. I tried to make contact with the woman, but she’s no longer alive.’

Gina swallowed a thought about the Joanies of the world; the people with no one to care about them. ‘Can we put her name on another board? We have to consider a link here.’

She glanced at the timeline. Joanie vanished in 1980. Elissa vanished in 1994. Ruth was taken yesterday. There were huge gaps in the incidents.

‘Are they dead or are they still out there?’ She felt her stomach clench. ‘John Doe is only in his forties. He couldn’t have taken Joanie and it wouldn’t be likely that, as a child, he took Elissa.’

Chess and the red baseball cap filled her mind. It was as if the perpetrators were passing the baton along, or was it a network of perpetrators who used a chess club as a front.

She thought of the Bishop, the name that popped up on Gary’s screen. It was

frustrating not to have anything back from digital forensics yet.

She bowed her head despairingly as she thought of Luna and Ruth.

Gina continued. 'We have a lead on Marie. Her surname isn't, or is no longer, Blaine. It's Paulson . And she may work for, or have something to do with, a company or business called Fantastic Snacktastic. We can try to search for that. It sounds unique. Maybe she married or changed her name.'

Kapoor dropped her pen. 'I recognise that surname, guv. She's the contact of one of the mispers I've been looking into. Bear with me.' Kapoor began scrolling through all her records and notes on her tablet. 'Mrs Paulson is the contact for missing person, Felicity Vaynor. Felicity would be thirty-four now. She went missing in 2006.'

'Felicity... Lissy . Colson mentioned that Marie had a cousin called Lissy. It could be her.' Gina raised her brows. 'Great find.' She blew out a breath. 'Do we have a contact number and address?'

'We do.'

Gina felt the tension in the air. They needed results and they needed them fast if they were to save Ruth and Luna. Sorrow filled her heart when she thought of Joanie, Elissa and Felicity. No one had heard from them for years. 'Jacob, can you try to call Mrs Paulson? We need to head over there now.'



*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### FORTY-NINE

Gina's personal phone flashed with a message. As Jacob drove them into Droitwich to speak to Marie Paulson, she opened it up. It was from Pete Bloxwich.

Sorry Gina, but more photos have been published on the forum and they're not pretty. They're mock-ups, but this time they have your face on them. Anyone could tell it's you. It's showing you laughing at a dead man with a knife in your hand, and the poster has asked for the brotherhood to track you down and punish you. They've released your address.

She opened the photos attached to the message and came over nauseous. Gasping for breath, she opened the car window.

Jacob quickly pulled over in a lay-by. She opened the door and threw up. He passed her a small packet of tissues. 'Are you okay? Shall I drop you back, guv?'

She shook her head. She wanted nothing more than to go home, close her curtains and never come out again, but the thought of going home filled her with fear.

It was the end of the road for her and her secrets.

Not only that, it might be her end with a bunch of sickos and weirdos all having her address. If this was going to be her last case, she was going out with a win. Sick or not. 'No, I'm okay. I suddenly came over a bit car sick when we went through the lanes. It was probably something I ate.'

‘I haven’t seen you eat much at all.’

She wanted to tell him to shut up and drive. No way was she explaining her predicament to Jacob, however much she trusted him. She’d never put him in the position of having to hide such big secrets for her, not like she’d done to Briggs. ‘That’s probably what it is. Do you have any sweets?’

‘I’ve got some Murray Mints in the glove compartment. Help yourself.’

As he started the car again, she took a sweet out and sucked on it to disguise the horrible taste in her mouth.

‘And here we are.’ He pulled up outside a block of flats. ‘I can go in on my own if you need a break?’

She shook her head. ‘I’m feeling much better now, and I need a drink.’

He led the way and pressed number six on the intercom buzzer.

‘Just buzzing you up,’ came the woman’s voice.

They walked up the stairs to the first floor, and Marie was already standing outside with the door open, holding a little boy who looked to be about four. Her brown hair fell in almost greasy strands over her shoulders, and her eyes looked sunken and weary. ‘Sorry, I haven’t properly got up yet. Have you found Lissy?’

Gina could see the hope on Marie’s face. ‘I’m sorry, no, but we need to speak to you about Felicity’s disappearance in relation to a recent case.’

Marie put her child down. ‘You’ve found a body, haven’t you?’

‘No, but it would be best if we came in so we could speak.’

Marie led the way to the compact lounge with its oversized sofa, and she called the boy over before putting some cartoons on the TV. ‘Can we talk in the kitchen?’

‘Yes, that would be great. Thank you,’ Gina replied, still feeling a little woozy. ‘Would you mind if I had a glass of water?’

‘Of course not. I can put the kettle on if you prefer?’

‘Water’s fine, thank you,’ Gina replied. She crunched the rest of the sweet and swallowed the remnants, her stomach still churning from the shock of seeing that photo.

Gina was grateful to Jacob for leading on this occasion. She nodded at him to continue as she got her notepad out.

The kitchen was tiny so they all stood, cramped in. She caught sight of a row of houses opposite and a queue of cars at the traffic lights outside. Placing the pad on the worktop, she pulled out her pen and headed the page up.

‘Ms Paulson?—’

‘Marie,’ she interrupted.

Jacob continued. ‘Marie, you’re listed as the main contact on Felicity Vaynor’s file.’

‘I am. She doesn’t have anyone else. Her mother, my aunt, died back in 2010, and her father left the country to take a job in Dubai soon after. He worked in construction and was in an accident there. He’s also sadly no longer with us. I put my name down as the contact. Felicity didn’t have any siblings and we were so close growing up.’

‘Can you tell me a bit about her?’ he asked.

‘Her mum used to be a top chef, travelling all over the place and contracting at restaurants. Sometimes, if it was the school holidays, Lissy used to go with her. She mostly worked on posh boats and was a private chef for rich families; special occasion stuff. The main school holidays in 2006, Lissy stayed with me for a week because she didn’t want to go with her mum. I lived in Cleavesford at the time with my family, who are no longer with us. She used to love staying at our house. I had to work in the day, but she came to see me at lunchtimes and met me outside when my shifts ended. That summer was the last time I saw her. She went back home, started back at school and then she disappeared. Of course, she lived in Solihull back then. All I know is she left school one night after the school production and never made it home. No one has seen her since. The police did all they could. We were all looked into as a part of the investigation. Lissy had a bit of a falling out with her mum over something small the night before and police wondered if she’d just holed up with a friend for a while. I think my aunt was getting a bit overprotective and stifling Lissy, so Lissy told her she didn’t want to be picked up after the school play. Something like that. It was something and nothing. Lissy was just being a bit rebellious, but she was a good girl. I was a tearaway. I used to drink on the streets with my mates at thirteen and go home hammered. Lissy was nothing at all like me. On the whole, she was happy. There was one sighting about a month after she vanished, but I don’t think it was Lissy. There was a homeless community living in an abandoned warehouse. I’m sure it wasn’t her, but the police who were dealing with the case seemed to think it was, so her disappearance became less of a priority for them.’

‘Do you know anything about her friends?’

Gina swigged the water, enjoying cleansing her mouth, and continued taking notes as Jacob questioned Marie.

‘She was friends with some of the girls and picked on by a couple of boys. That

particular group were all together at the end of the night, so they gave alibis for each other. She loved her cat, Meowdon. I remember when she had him as a kitten and made that name up.'

Marie smiled warmly and pursed her lips before continuing. 'Why are you here now? Don't get me wrong, I want you to look into Lissy's disappearance. I've never once given up on her. That's why I won't ever change my mobile number because she has it.'

'We've had a recent attempted kidnapping and also a woman has vanished under suspicious circumstances, and your name came up in our enquiries. We've been looking for someone called Marie Blaine in relation to all this.'

'Ah, it changed to Paulson when I married ten years ago.' She blew out a breath. 'So, you think whoever is involved with the case you're investigating now could be responsible for taking Lissy?'

'We believe you might know more than you think and it could go as far back as when you worked at Crastone Foods.'

She scrunched her brow. 'I obviously worked there when Lissy came to stay, but?—'

'You knew a Colson Ferguson?'

'I had a huge crush on him back then and I dated him for a while. Things fizzled out as they do when you're young. I ended up having to cover for him at work because he kept not turning up.' She brushed a hair from her cheek and shook her head. 'Why would Colson take Lissy, or anyone else? He was a bit of an idiot, but he wouldn't do anything like that. I wouldn't trust him with money because I could have sworn he took thirty quid out of my purse, but he's not dangerous.'

‘We’re actually trying to track down someone else. I’m going to show you a picture of the man we’re looking for.’ Gina hoped John Doe would turn out to be City Boy, the boxer or the man that Colson pushed.

Gina took the drawing of John Doe from her bag and passed it to Jacob before picking her pen back up.

Marie gasped. ‘I didn’t like him. He was really rude and I dumped him. I went out with him once before Colson and he was creepy. He brought me this hideous sweater as a gift and insisted I wear it over my crop top. We ended on an argument where he called me a slag because I refused, and then he walked out on me at the restaurant. He worked at Crastone Foods for about a week. At first I thought he was just a bit different. He was quiet, liked chess and seemed to be a real introvert – definitely not my usual type. Colson saw him pestering me once and he pushed him out of my way.’

Gina felt her heart begin to ramp up. Someone finally recognised John Doe. She caught up with the notes.

‘What was his name?’ Jacob asked.

‘Albie.’

‘Albie.’

‘Do you have a surname for Albie?’ Gina asked.

‘No.’

‘When did you date him?’

‘It was just before Lissy came to stay.’

She opened her mouth and worry lines reached across her forehead. ‘No, no, no, no, no.’ She let out a few breaths. ‘I told some of my colleagues that someone had been following me after the late shift. I suspected him, but... he wasn’t following me, was he? He saw Lissy with me and... why ? When I drove her home, I thought I saw someone in a red cap in a car, but I thought I was being silly because I was thinking it could be anyone and everyone. I guessed that my mind was filling in gaps that weren’t there, but he was there. It had to be him, didn’t it?’ Realisation dawned on her. ‘It wasn’t about me, was it? He wanted Lissy and he followed me to get to her.’

Marie looked completely shell-shocked.

‘Have you seen the news?’ Gina asked.

‘No, I don’t watch anything like that with my four-year-old in the house. There are normally kids’ programmes on the telly.’

‘The man in this drawing was found dead in a car in Cleevesford this week.’

‘So where is Felicity?’

‘We don’t know,’ Jacob continued.

Gina passed Jacob the drawing of the girl in the photos. He held it up for Marie to see. ‘Do you recognise this girl?’

‘It’s hard to see because her hair covers her face.’ She tilted her head. ‘Her face shape, lips and chin, even her cute slight upturned nose.’ A tear began to meander down one of her cheeks and her dampening eyes glistened. ‘It looks like Lissy with a scar. That looks like a burn or something.’ She paused. ‘You’re here because he’s

dead and he was keeping Lissy somewhere. She's going to die without him, isn't she? Please save her, don't let her die.'

Jacob interjected as Marie got more upset. 'We believe there is someone else involved, an accomplice.'

'Who tried to kidnap again?' Marie was good at reading between the lines.

He nodded.

'He had no friends,' Marie started. 'I know he got on with an old chap at the pub who he used to play chess with, but no one his own age.'

'Do you know anyone called Luna?'

'Albie had a Rottweiler called Luna and he wore that same cap.'

'Can you tell us anything else about him?'

'He was into prepping.'

'Prepping?' Gina thought she knew what Marie was getting at.

'You know, preparing for the end of the world.'

Gina's phone beeped. Relief flooded her as she saw that O'Connor had texted her work phone.

Garth has come back with some information from Gary's computer. You need to see this.



FIFTY

GIRL

Weeks have passed again, and since I beat him at chess he stopped coming, but last night he finally came back. It was one of my fertile days and he said if I catch, we will be a family. Right now, I feel like I'm being punished for losing our baby, and him not being here much is making me believe even more that it was my fault.

He should trust me and take me up to the surface to live with him. I keep telling him that I'll never leave. He's been abandoned before and I know how much the prospect of it happening again scares him. I guess it's for me to try harder, to make him see that I care for him so much I will never leave him.

I lie on the bed with my legs up, against the curve of this big tin can I'm living in. I remember hearing my mum and her friend talking once, saying that they did that to make sure they conceived. Of course, I never joined in that conversation. I was fourteen when that happened. Embarrassing. I'm more grown up now and I see why a person would go through this when the desire burns so deeply within.

I place my hand on my tummy. 'If you're in there, I want you to know how much Mummy already loves you.' I pull up my blue dress and stroke my curved belly just above the line of my underpants and smile. I have a good feeling about this one.

A moment of panic runs through me. Last time I was pregnant, my biggest worry was childbirth. I try to reassure myself: I'm healthy, I'm young – I can do it, and I can do it on my own.

I'm starting to feel a little light-headed and I realise that the ventilation system isn't gently whirring away. It's time to get up. I can't stay here all day with my legs in the air. Besides, I'm hungry.

Walking through to the kitchenette, I pull out some cheese from the mini fridge and begin making a sandwich. A clunking sound comes from behind the metal door. He must be back. Maybe he can look at the ventilation. It must be broken. It's happened before, but he normally fixes it quickly. It's not like I'm going to keel over and die instantly. Besides, I have the oxygen tank as an emergency backup if that happens.

'Albie,' I call out. He doesn't answer. 'Albie.'

'It's not Albie,' the man replies.

Visions of my post-miscarriage fever dream stab me like a bolt of lightning. There was another man. I know I tried to mention it to him and he dismissed it but I know for sure now. My mind has never felt clearer. I thought he was trying to drown me, but after, I realised he was trying to force me to swallow medication. Maybe he was a doctor. 'Who are you?'

'That is the question. Why did you talk to the children? You shouldn't have talked to the children. Now they know about you, and because they know, I can't let you live.'

It's as if the air had been sucked out of my lungs. I want Albie. Where is he? 'Albie?' I yell. I wave at the cameras hoping that he can see the distress in my face. He will come. He loves me. We've waited for centuries to be together again and now I'm going to be taken from him. It's like fate has decided we can never be properly together. I imagine him going through everything again in another life. He will have to take me again, unless of course we're fortunate to meet and fall in love the easy way, like my mum and dad did. I will remember our children that never made it. I clutch my belly protectively.

The loud clunk makes my throat nervously contract. There's nothing stuck in my windpipe, but I feel like I'm choking. My heart bangs, sending erratic beats pumping through my veins. It's so loud, I can't hear the creaking sound of the door as it's nudged.

'Albie,' I call again, but I know he's not coming, and there can only be one reason for that. He'd come if he saw me like this, in distress and potentially carrying his baby. He can't come because this beast of a man has killed him.

I run into the bedroom compartment and hide under my blanket, shaking. Albie was always scared of him, he told me. The man roars in anger from the other side of the door.

I grip the cupcake scarf. What if no one ever knows I was here?

I think of Mum, Dad and Meowdon. I grab a pen and crawl under the bed where I saw the other names written on the wall.

Joanie.

Elissa.

Underneath her name, I write mine: Felicity (Lissy). I add my shortened name in brackets because that's what my cousin Marie always calls me. I miss her so much, too, and I want her to know that none of this was her fault. I know she introduced him to me, but things worked out like this because of fate, not because of what she did.

The man bursts through the bedroom door and I scramble off the floor and cower on the bed.

Before I know it, he's upon me.

Another set of footsteps thunder into the capsule and I pray that whoever bears the heavy step has come to save me.

### FIFTY-ONE

As they pulled up at the station, Gina sent Pete Bloxwich a message. A ripple of fear passed through her. Tick, tick, tick. How long until all the horrible photos and accusations against her were out in the world.

Have you dealt with it?

She exhaled and pondered over whether to send the next message. The users of Men-R-Takin-It-Back knew she was MikeTheMan, so even going into their forum and looking was dangerous. She only hoped that he was doing all he could to help her. She knew she'd have to part with the precious memory stick, but maybe they could both have a fresh start. She thought of all the horrible things she'd seen on Gary Pritchard's computer and she wondered if there could be a link.

Can you search the site for a user called White Knight?

She hit send. He replied instantly.

What's in it for me?

She almost wanted to sit with her head in her hands. She had nothing else to give him that he might even remotely want.

I erase you from my radar and you get to go home to Devon and live your best new life. It's about doing the right thing, Pete. It's not too late to do something good; something to help someone other than yourself.

It was as if time stood still, waiting for his reply.

I'll have a look when I've finished firefighting your shitstorm! Damn, I think something might have gone out to your contacts but I've stopped more going out. I'm back into the site. I'll let you know when or if I gain full control.

Gina wanted to throw her head in her hands and cry, but she had to keep going for the girl. There was no time to withdraw and hide away from the world.

Jacob pulled up outside the station. Several reporters huddled in the car park, most of them a little unsure about what was happening, but Gina could tell they were hungry for more information on the fuss around the dead unidentified man and recently missing woman, Ruth Pritchard.

She glanced at them. Pete wasn't there, but there was a familiar face. She saw the man, his skin slightly gnarled and no hair from when he was attacked by the woman he abused a few years ago. His frame was slight, making him look ill. The walking stick in his hand led the way.

On reaching the wall at the back of the car park, he winced in pain as he sat. It was her ex-brother-in-law, Stephen. Just there to gloat at all the trouble he was causing her by reigniting that website.

His shoulders bobbed up and down as he laughed at her, half coughing as he puffed on a roll-up. He waved and stood before walking over to a woman. The woman was looking after someone in a wheelchair, and that woman was Hetty.

Gina stared at her ex-mother-in-law and not one expression crossed her face. It was as if she had left her body.

As they entered the station, Briggs met her and led her to the incident room. He

whispered, 'We need to talk. As soon as the briefing is over, in my office.'

She let Jacob walk ahead. 'I just saw Stephen in the car park.'

Briggs raised his brows. 'He's just come in to report a weed farm in a neighbouring house. It's nothing to do with the case.'

Gina knew he'd just come in to remind her that he was present, that he was watching and that he was always there. He was trying to destroy her. 'What do we need to talk about? Is it him?'

'No, it's something else.' He glanced over her shoulder. 'We can't talk here.'

She swallowed, knowing that Briggs was one of the contacts who had received something bad involving her. She stared at the others in turn. Wyre, O'Connor, Kapoor – were they looking at her in a strange way? Garth sat at the back on the PC in the corner of the room, tapping away with a furrowed brow. Maybe her best strategy was to carry on as if nothing had happened in the hope that she was reading the room wrongly.

'What do we have?'

Ponytail dangling down the back of his leather jacket, Garth turned to face her. 'I've managed to get into Gary Pritchard's computer and phone with ease. White Knight remains an enigma, obviously using a VPN to cover his tracks. He seems to be coaching men on how to take control of women in all ways. Whether it's by fear, by manipulation or by sheer brute force if neither of those options work out. I guess you suspected that from what you already read. It looks very much like Gary sought him out. White Knight tells Gary to leave him alone several times, but Gary keeps going at him, asking how to take and keep a woman for years without anyone finding out.'

‘Anything else?’

‘Horses have come up. I know one of the witnesses mentioned horses.’ Garth swivelled around in the chair to address the rest of the room, hands in pockets.

‘In what way?’

‘Gary Pritchard and White Knight have attempted a meet up before, but it looks like White Knight didn’t show up.’

‘Where?’

‘On the land by Temple Cross.’

Gina picked her lip. ‘That’s just by the road where Rona’s daughter, Molly, was taken to and attacked.’

‘It’s also where the Romany travellers pitch up regularly. They’re normally there several times a year and they always have a lot of ponies and horses. That might be the horse link, but then again, the mention of horses might all be a lie, just like the catalogue photo of the girl was.’

Gina began to pace. She hated that they didn’t have a surname for Albie. She glanced at the map. There were several farms, factory units and storage facilities close by, not to mention the many businesses on the rustic business park.

‘We know that our suspect, Albie, works in construction. Can we look into all the construction businesses close by? Or stores that sell materials that would help preppers? Marie Paulson said that Albie was heavily into prepping for the end of the world. That has to be where he’s holding the girl. Marie also said that he had a dog called Luna, the same name as the girl – we think. Let’s get onto it straight away.’



Garth piped up. 'We've managed to find out more about the Bishop, the one from Gary's Chess Club message. The Bishop tells Gary he can trust White Knight and to do what he says. The Bishop says that Elissa wants to see him.'

Gina stared at the board. 'Do you think Gary's been on those sites looking for whoever took Elissa, playing a part to try to get information, and now they have him as well as Ruth?'

Briggs cleared his throat. 'How possible do you think that is?'

'I don't know.' She thought about his little bunker back at Edmundson's Farm with the rope and chain. Was it meant for White Knight or Ruth? The photo of Ruth with the added devil horns made her shiver. 'I just don't know at the minute. I'll be back in five and I want a list of those businesses close to Temple Cross.'

'Guv,' Garth said as he pointed to the computer screen.

'What is it?' She hurried over for a look.

'There is a building supply company called Bishop Fry-Stone and Partners.'

'What area of construction?'

Garth clicked and then scrolled. 'Steel reinforced concrete, metal sheeting, stainless steel...'

'It's like a warehouse for anyone wanting to build a prepper's bunker.'

Garth nodded in agreement. Gina looked at the map of the area he clicked onto. It was less than half a mile from Temple Cross. She thought of poor scared Molly as she ran out of Albie's car in the dark, not able to see the industrial estate that evening.

It was a classic case of the perp happily committing his crimes in a familiar area. 'Get all units ready. We are not going there without backup,' Gina said.

'Shall I make contact with the company?' he asked.

Gina shook her head. 'We can't afford for anyone to get there before we do. Call them as soon as we arrive. Do we have a phone number?'

Garth nodded. 'And an out of hours.'

'Great, as soon as you get the word, make the call, but wait for us to get into position.'

'Do we have the owner's details; a name or a home address?'

'Not at the moment.'

She left the team to the organising and research to follow Briggs to his office. 'What's happening?'

He held his phone out in front of her. The same photo that Pete Bloxwich had forwarded to her was on his phone, sent directly to him by text from a concealed number. 'I can't even go to Garth with this. What's going on? And how many of your other contacts have it?'

She sucked in a few mouthfuls of air. 'I don't know. Pete Bloxwich is trying to get the site shut down and I don't know how long it will take.' She placed a hand flat on her hot head before kneading her temples.

'Pete? What's going on?'

‘He’s helping me.’

Briggs hurried over to his office door, checked to see if anyone was outside and closed the door. ‘What the hell are you playing at? You can’t trust him. We could have handled this problem ourselves.’

She shook her head, lips pressed together. She felt the frosty tension between them, a far cry from the love nest they were tucked up in Scotland not long ago. ‘No, we couldn’t, and there was no way I could involve Garth. We just don’t have the expertise. It was Pete’s site. He closed it down. It was hacked and only he can control it from the inside. He’s back in, but not fully.’ She raised her arms and brought them down with a slap against her sides.

‘I can’t believe you trusted him. Seriously, Gina.’ Briggs shook his head and refused to meet her gaze. ‘What if it’s too late?’

She hiccupped a little sob. ‘I’m over. If it’s my time, it’s my time, and you know I’ll never bring you down with me. I’ve accepted what might come my way and the only thing I can do right now is my job. I am going to head out with the team and I’m going to do everything I can to save Luna before I’m finished.’

‘What if I say you can’t? I could pull you off this case.’

She nodded. ‘You could.’

‘Bloody hell, just go and find her. This conversation isn’t over and I’m not happy at all with how you’ve handled this.’

She stood closer to him, hoping for some form of reassurance and comfort, but he gave her nothing. Hot anger radiated from him. Someone knocked at the door.

‘Come in.’

Jacob pushed the door open. ‘Guv, Tristan Moore has just been on the phone. His wife, Moira, was just returning home and someone driving a white van tried to ram her off the road. She’s currently in hospital with a mild concussion and Kapoor has just left to be with her.’

‘What has Moira got to do with all this?’

‘Tristan Moore was with the family back at his house at the time it happened. He said Moira called him on hands-free where they’d had a long talk about everything. Then Moira said she knew Ruth. Tristan then heard Moira say that a van was pipping its horn. Moira told him that the woman was driving like a lunatic, then all he heard was a crash.’

Gina’s mind flashed back to Ruth Pritchard’s kitchen. She turned to face Briggs. ‘The white queen.’

FIFTY-TWO

GIRL

I didn't think this would ever happen, but Albie saved me from the horrible man that day and for that I owe him my life. I haven't seen the horrible man since, and I wonder if Albie did something to him. I hope he did because I never want to see him again. If it wasn't for Albie, my baby and I would be dead. Albie has changed. He worships me and always says how much he loves me. I'm his queen, so he keeps saying, but as his queen I really would like a castle, or just daylight would be nice.

Another contraction rips through me as my abdomen tightens. 'Albie,' I call, but he isn't coming. I clench my teeth until the wave passes. This has been happening all day and I feel something is wrong. I'm scared.

Sweat soaks through my hair and pools around my neck as I lie on my bed. My bed is soaked where my water's broke ages ago, and the vent isn't working. As I try to inhale, it's as if I don't get a full lungful. I'm greedy for air I can't get, and all I can imagine is my baby being starved of oxygen. 'Albie.' I grab the oxygen tank and place the mask over my mouth. As soon as I turn it on, I can tell it's empty.

The pain is like nothing I've ever experienced. I just want it to be over. Everything looks like it's swaying, but it's me, not the room. If someone told me I was on a ship sailing over choppy waters, I'd believe them. I'm weak. I haven't had any water for ages and it's so hot in here, or maybe it's me. Another contraction. I climb down onto the floor on all fours and try to push, but nothing is happening.

Butterflies, cupcakes, kittens and puppies, my drawings. Mum and me baking. I try to fill my head with lovely things as a distraction, but the next wave of pain tells me that the power of positive thought isn't going to help at all.

'I need a hospital,' I shout, but no one responds. Tears fill my eyes and all I can do is cry, knowing that my best might not be enough. The more I panic and scream, the thinner the air seems to get and the dizzier I become.

I glance over my shoulder and I see the shadow of a figure walking towards me. Scrunching my eyes to try to push out the tears, I look again. 'Mum.'

She crouches down next to me, her hand on my back. 'You have to push, baby girl, or you and the baby will die.'

'I can't.' The tears won't stop coming. I know I have to get my baby out of me, but I just can't do it and it will be my fault again that our baby died. Or will I be dead, too. Will anyone care that I'm gone? Will Albie miss me? 'Mum, I can't do it.'

'You have to. I love you and I can't lose you. Push, you can do it.'

But I can't. My baby isn't coming. My little boy is stuck inside me and I can't do anything about it. I don't know if it's a boy, but I feel it. Sometimes a mother knows.

My mum rubs my back, but I can't breathe. That's why I can't push, I need air. The ventilation has been off for too long.

'I see a head and your baby is beautiful. Come on, baby girl.' She places her arm around me as I push again, but it's not enough. My baby is stuck and I can't do this anymore.

I see black speckles as my vision fades and my mum is gone. Was she ever there? I

see my cat now as I gasp for air. 'My baby,' I manage to say as I fade to nothing.

A last tear escapes and that one is for my baby. Another little one I never got to hold, another baby who couldn't quite make it. It's fate. It was always going to happen. We can't escape our destiny.

'Until the next life, Albie,' I murmur as my vision fades to black and I can barely catch a breath. I don't hear a cry and I can't even hear the beating of my heart now, and the blackness descends.

### FIFTY-THREE

#### RUTH

Ruth hadn't realised before that there was a gentle continuous hum in the room, but she did miss it as soon as it abruptly stopped. That was a short while ago now. She trembled. It was getting a little colder, too.

Don't be scared, silly – those words rang through her head. Who were the children and where were they now? All she wanted was for them to come back and open the hatch. If it was just a game like they said, surely it would be over now.

It was a game to the children and that told her a lot. The children were desensitised to this whole situation and that sickened her. Those poor children. She pitied their father, the man who had brought her here, and she knew she was dealing with someone who only cared about himself. After all, he brought children into it.

At a guess, she thought the children sounded around four or five, maybe the one who spoke was a boy, but it was hard to tell when they were so young. A lump formed in her throat as she thought back to when Elissa was that age, and she longed to pick her up and hold her again.

The pitch-black room felt as though it was getting smaller and she was sure that if she could see, there would be curls of her white breath rising in the chilly air.

The farm where Gary works – their nephews and grandchild came over a lot. She went to see Gary there about a year ago and she asked the little boy about his toy dog



and he said it was a deer and called her silly. In her mind, she saw Gary playing with the children and showing them the bunker.

Rubbing her sore leg, she dislodged the slight scab that had formed over the wound. It began to bleed again. Her head still banged away.

She tried to inhale, but she couldn't breathe well at all. It was as if the air had got a little thinner. Maybe it was her heart or maybe it was because the ventilation was bad.

Hugging herself, she wondered if there was any heating at all in the room. She called out for the children again, but there was no answer.

Stumbling over to the metal door, she began to hammer on it. 'Let me out.'

All shouting did was make it worse.

She grabbed the material of her top at the neck and stretched it, hoping that she could inhale better, but it didn't help one bit. The slight wheeze coming from her throat and chest was concerning.

The thrumming of her heart created a sickening feeling in her gut. She thought of Gary and Eric, and her house. Both of them had treated her badly in their own way. Her heart sank.

She had no one left in the world. First she lost Elissa, then her marriage had broken down, and Eric was a married man. All she had was her job. Just a job and nothing to show for her life. She banged on the door again. Again, nothing.

The loudest click ever made her withdraw from the metal door.

A speaker crackled and a robotic voice filled the room, disorientating her even more.

‘Open the door.’

She had been trying so hard to find a way out, now she wondered if the metal door was the entrance to her death. Didn’t she need to go upwards? ‘But...’ she stammered. ‘No, I err...’ she whimpered. ‘I want to go home.’

‘Open the door,’ the speaker yelled.

She placed her hands out and felt for the door handle while gasping. ‘Where does it lead?’

‘To your future.’

‘Don’t make me do this.’ She couldn’t help but half sob.

The loud booming barks of a dog came through the speaker. ‘Get that fucking thing out of here.’ Seconds later a door slammed, the barks had stopped.

There was someone else involved because her kidnapper was talking to them. They had a dog. Who did she know that had a dog? Only the farmers that Gary worked for. Hand lingering on the handle, she hesitated. ‘Is that your dog?’

‘You don’t get to ask questions.’

She was sick of the game. It was time to confront her captor. ‘Why are you doing this, Gary?’

There was a long pause. Had he gone?’

A slight snigger filled the air and the robotic voice made it sound demonic. ‘Because this is what you need. This is for you, and if you open the door, you’ll see. All this,

Ruth, I did it for you.'

'What I need is to go home,' she said with a quivering voice.

'What you need is for somewhere for all that love to go. All these years, I've seen your sadness, and now I give you what you long for. I am the answer to your prayers. You can thank me later.'

'What?' she rasped. 'Keeping me here in this dark hole isn't the answer to my prayers!'

'Go through the door. She's waiting for you. She needs a mother.'

'No.' He was lying. It was a trap, just like those messages he sent. If he wanted her to go through the door, he'd have to come down those ladders and drag her through it.

A piercing screech filled the air. She held her hands over her ears. It got louder and louder and kept going until she could bear it no more. 'Stop, stop,' she gasped.

'Door, door, door,' he kept yelling as he turned the volume up.

The continuous tinnitus-like torture kept blasting out until she could bear it no more. She pressed the handle and pushed, only to be faced with more darkness. Deeper she stepped into the bowels of the structure, or was it just the beginning?

She imagined a dark maze behind the door, where she'd be trapped forever until she froze to death. It was probably nothing more than a giant tomb.

Had there been others before her? Had he brought Elissa down here and left her to die? The screeching got louder.

‘Stop,’ she croaked as she held her hands over her ears. Light-headedness made her unsteady on her feet. Her chest got even tighter as she inhaled the stench of human misery. ‘Gary, please, you have to stop this.’

‘Close the door.’

She reached out and slammed it closed, then the screeching stopped. The door clicked again. She went to go back, but it was locked. ‘Where am I? I can’t see. Please, Gary. I did what you asked. I need to be able to see and I’m cold.’

No one replied, but a loud sickening thud came from the room she had just been held in.

Knees shaking, she stood stiffly. Hands out in front of her, she began to step on the floor that was soft underneath. She must be on carpet or a rug.

After only two steps, her fingers brushed over what felt like a worktop. There was a kettle, the dip of a sink.

Fingers tickling the tap, she ran it and water came out. Thirstily, she bent over it and drank until she almost choked on the warmish water. The other side contained a rack and lots of plastic-covered items. She tore one open and the smell of sweetness instantly hit her nostrils. It was cake. She took a bite and threw the rest back on the shelf, not hungry but knowing she needed her strength just in case she had to fight her way out of this.

The stench of urine got stronger, roiling her stomach.

She walked a few paces forward and she reached another door. Placing her ear to it, she listened for what might be behind it, and she was overcome by emotion.

It might be Elissa. Maybe all these years he'd been keeping Elissa in the bunker because Elissa was hers.

What she and Gary never told anyone was that Elissa was not his biological daughter. She'd had a one-night stand, just a guy in a bar, and Gary had stood by her.

His mood towards Elissa was hot and cold. One minute, he'd take her to do things – fishing, chess matches, drawing – but other times, he'd get resentful because she wasn't his. His moods were unpredictable and he'd have moments when he abandoned them both for days.

She thought of how they'd tried so hard to have a baby together. It never happened. This was the result of Gary's pent-up frustration, anger and resentment. 'Gary, please let me out so we can talk. I know I could have been a better wife. I am so sorry, Gary.'

It was no good. He'd gone and she was alone in the dark. She listened again, wondering what was behind the door, then she pressed the handle.

It was locked. She didn't even know whether she wanted the truth. If her daughter was nothing more than a corpse behind that door, did she want to know?

But she was a mother and if Elissa was there and she was dead, she wanted to be able to take her home and bury her, have a proper goodbye for her. That's if she ever got out.

The silence was deafening. Head thick with a fog that was getting denser by the second, she leaned against the door and slid down to the rug on the floor where she slowly felt her breaths getting more laboured. The locked metal door was cold against her shivering body.

Was that a sound? She tried to listen over the top of her thudding heart.

It was a hissing noise. Hiss, hiss, hiss. Maybe there was ventilation behind the door.

The door clicked. Ruth had a feeling that all the answers were waiting there for her. She just had to be brave enough to open it.

She fell backwards as someone else took that decision from her and opened the door. Something clasped over her mouth. The more she panicked, the more forceful the hand was.

She fought, but she was too weak. It was over.

Gary lied and she would never know what happened to Elissa. He couldn't have Ruth so he was killing her.

The hand pressed down hard over her mouth as she lay there.

### FIFTY-FOUR

Now dark, Gina waited for Jacob to pull into the industrial estate. A tiny disused gatehouse stood at the entrance, along with a pile of old bin bags. A few rats scurried around where a fox had torn one open. In the distance, several industrial units stood large with billowing trees behind them, dark and spidery as they reached for the midnight-blue sky. The moon lit up the roofs and hints of light glinted off the many skips that adorned every car park.

‘Everyone’s in place, guv,’ O’Connor said down the phone that was pressed to her ear. ‘Two police cars are right behind you, no blue lights as requested. I’m going to head towards you now.’

‘Kill all lights on approach to Bishop Fry-Stone. It’s just behind the large unit we’re trundling past.’ She gave her stab vest a little move to make it more comfortable before reluctantly popping her personal phone in Jacob’s glove compartment.

Jacob clocked her doing it. She wondered if he knew; if he too had received a horrible photo of her with some awful caption. ‘You okay?’

She nodded. Maybe the team hadn’t been looking at her in a funny way back at the station, or maybe everyone was too polite to say anything. She only hoped that Pete Bloxwich was going to shut it all down.

Her personal phone beeped. She snatched it back out of the glove compartment.

It was a message from Pete and she had to read it.

White Knight has an account on my forum. He has slipped up in a communication with someone, if indeed it's the same person you're looking for. He said he had everything needed for this psycho to build his own prepper jail. He said to this guy – who I can't trace – that a company called Bishops was the best place for supplies and that he could get a discount for him. I think this was meant to go into a private message but he accidentally put it up in a conversation chain. It was deleted within a minute but I managed to take a snapshot.

Gina couldn't very well tell the team what Pete had messaged, but it was reassuring that they were on the right path.

Luna and Ruth could be being held there and they had to get them out of the personal hell that they'd been living in, and she hoped that Luna could tell them what had happened to Elissa, Felicity and Joanie.

If her career was to come to an end tonight, then she could at least feel as though she had made one huge final contribution.

Jacob drove in darkness towards the next junction. A derelict-looking block with some sort of corrugated metal stood to the side of the gated yard. Huge trees surrounded most of it, but the unit stood proudly above the many outbuildings.

She stared at the oppressive structure, with its expanse of land behind it. In a bid to save life or limb, they could enter without a warrant.

She cleared her throat. 'No one knows we're coming, but I feel so nervous. As soon as we're in, I know an alarm will be triggered, and if we have it all wrong, we could have just put Ruth and Luna in more danger. We don't know if our perp is already in there with the victims.' She took deep breath after deep breath, her nerves jangling like mad.



Jacob pulled the handbrake on and the police cars pulled up behind them. She called O'Connor again. 'Are we all in place?'

'Yep, all in place. The area is surrounded and there's an ambulance and fire engine on standby. We have a dog team, too, in case we get any runners.'

'We're going in.'

### FIFTY-FIVE

PC Smith stepped forward, and to their surprise there were no locks on the gate. Gina messaged Garth to call the company's out-of-hours number while they took a look around outside.

Smith pushed one of the gates open. Gina led with Jacob and several officers close behind. She spotted a number of CCTV cameras.

'Right, take a look around. If the owner of the business turns up soon, we have easy access. If not, we are going to have to gain entry. Make sure we have everything we need to do that. Jacob, you, me and you three, please,' – she nodded at the PCs to her left – 'will come with us. The rest of you head to the right. As you can see, the buildings go really far back, so I need you to look everywhere. Call out to see if there is any response. Preppers use bunkers. Pay particular attention to anything that could be a bunker.' She glanced back at the officers at the main gate. 'As soon as the owner arrives, radio through. Has everyone got that?'

She heard barking in the distance, but then it stopped.

Everyone said yes and started heading around the main building. Running, Gina reached a huge barn, but it was padlocked.

'Hello,' she called out. She flinched as a rat darted past her feet. Jacob let out a slight screech. They followed the sides of the building, but nothing seemed out of place.

A row of concrete garages led the way towards the back of the land. Each one was

once again padlocked.

They kept going on the uneven pavement. The further away they got from the main building, the darker it became. She pulled her torch out and flashed it ahead of them.

That's when she spotted the creepiest-looking door ever, that led to a small concrete building the size of a tiny mausoleum in a graveyard. The heavy wooden door and gargoyle-guarded concrete surround was half hidden by trees.

Gina grabbed the round metal door handle and tried to turn it, but it wouldn't budge. 'We need to get in here.'

One of the PCs came up behind her after talking on his radio. 'A member of staff is just pulling in. The owner, Mr Bishop, is unavailable. Apparently, he's on holiday.'

'Great, can you get the key to this building from them?' It would be easier than trying to break down a door that heavy, but she prepared herself for an argument with whoever had turned up.

She walked around the mausoleum while she waited, and Jacob stood with the PCs. The dog's distant barking started again. A few minutes later, the PC ran back with a bunch of keys in his hand. He passed them to Gina.

'The employee said she's never been in this building, but one of the keys might work. She said they used to build these before she started working here, but demand fizzled out.'

Gina could tell. It was mossy and dirty and unloved. The perfect place to build a bunker underneath and keep someone without ever getting caught.

She glanced around. The back of the land was surrounded by a tall metal fence that

would be near on impossible to climb with its spiky tops.

She tried the keys in turn until she came across the one that fit perfectly. It made a clicking noise as it unlocked, and her heart began to bang.

Stepping into the darkness, she held her torch out in front of her and shone it ahead. She hit the wall with her free hand. A pile of old rusty tooling leaned against the back wall. Stepping around the small room, she pressed and prodded the walls and checked the floor for any type of hatch, but it was nothing more than a room with some rubbish contained in it.

She stepped out and let out a long breath as she leaned next to the heavy door and stared up at the moon.

An officer ran over towards them. 'The person in charge has opened everything up and there's nothing suspicious here. We're doing a more thorough search now.'

Amongst the commotion, she heard the dog barking again. 'Marie said that Albie had a dog called Luna.'

Her work phone rang. She pulled it out and answered.

'Guv, we've found something amongst the paperwork at the Moores' house. It's the invoice we were looking for.'

'Where is it?'

'It's close by to Bishops. His business is called APH Building Craft Experts and it's unit seventeen.'

'We're at twenty-four.' Gina glanced at Jacob and nodded. 'We're on our way.'

### FIFTY-SIX

#### RUTH

What was happening? Ruth must have fainted. How long had she been out? It felt like ages. She'd had so many weird dreams. She prised an eye open and realised the hell she'd fallen unconscious to hadn't miraculously disappeared.

An emergency red light started to flash on and off as the dark figure pulled Ruth into another room. The door clicked again, locking them both in. Ruth reached up and pulled at the mask that had been pressed to her face and flung it across the room.

'Get off me,' she murmured, as she pushed the frail figure away. Whoever was trying to kill her had backed off.

The emergency light went off again. She listened as the other person in the room began to scrat around on the floor, before retreating back to the far end. Then the hissing noise started again.

Ruth gasped, unable to take in much air. Her head felt clammy and her mouth dry as a bone, despite the bit of water she'd drunk from the tap.

The figure began to scurry close by. Ruth's stomach clenched as she held her breath in the hope that whatever strange creature of a person she'd encountered would back off. The red light flickered again, shining a light on the straggly-haired figure. The pale bruised face stared back, the mask sealing her mouth. It flickered off again.

Screaming, Ruth reached for the door handle and kept pulling and pulling to no avail. She was locked in with whoever that was. When the light flickered red again, she tried to take in her surroundings. The human in front of her had an open sore on the hand that clasped the mask in place.

It went dark again. The girl was upon her, touching her hair, touching her face and her arms. Ruth flinched and shuffled out of the way, tears pricking from her eyes.

It wasn't Elissa. The girl in the room was a child.

Gasping for air that wasn't satiating her lungs was using up the last of Ruth's precious energy.

The hissing sound got closer and, once again, something was pressed around her mouth. Only this time, she knew it was a mask and she knew that the unkempt girl was trying to help her, not scare her. She greedily breathed in several times, taking in all the lovely oxygen.

The light flickered again and Ruth shivered at the sight of a chessboard on the table. The girl placed an arm around Ruth and began to rock her.

Who was she? This girl with the birthmark on her cheek and arms so frail they could be snapped like twigs.

'I'm Ruth,' she said as she pulled the mask aside.

The girl took the mask back and inhaled a few puffs of air.

'Luna,' she replied.

Ruth coughed and inhaled sharply. 'How do we get out of here, Luna.'

‘I live here,’ she replied in a drawn-out way. ‘We never go out. It’s too dangerous because there is nothing out there. The world has died, silly.’

Ruth took another breath through the mask. ‘Sweetheart, there is a whole world out there. The world hasn’t died.’

Her eyes watered up. She knew exactly what she was dealing with now. A young girl who had lived here for so long she believed there was no world out there; a girl who had never seen the light of day, and a girl who had never been hugged tenderly by a parent.

Ruth was sent to be her mummy in their dying moments.

‘No, we are all going to die. We have run out of everything and this is all we have left.’ She placed the mask over Ruth’s mouth again. ‘When this runs out, we will die, too.’ The girl paused. ‘I’m happy not to be dying alone.’ The girl’s cracked lips spread into a smile.

Ruth’s heart rate picked up as she realised she was never getting out.

She held the girl as they took it in turns to use the mask. As time passed, all she kept thinking was, how much oxygen did they have left? She now knew that this had been her daughter’s end, and that thought hurt her the most. Tears rolled down her cheeks.

The light flicked on again and the girl had pressed her head against Ruth’s chest, so Ruth began to stroke her tangled hair. If this girl had been Elissa and someone else had found her like this, Ruth would want that person to offer her comfort and love to the end.

She hugged her even closer and kissed her head. ‘I’ve got you, sweetheart.’ She used to call Elissa sweetheart. ‘Where is your mum?’

‘She died.’

‘What was her name?’

The girl took another breath through the mask. The hissing began to simmer a little. Ruth knew what that meant. The oxygen was running out. Both of them were gasping as they talked now.

‘Her name was Mum.’ She paused. ‘She was good at drawing.’

Elissa had been good at drawing.

She hugged the girl closer. Maybe this frail child was her granddaughter. ‘Does anyone ever come down here?’ She grabbed the oxygen mask and took a little breath. Perspiration began to drench her clothes, yet she was cold.

The girl trembled against her chest. Her voice broke as she tried to force some more words out. ‘He doesn’t come anymore.’

‘Who doesn’t?’

‘Daddy. He died out there. He said if he doesn’t come back, it means he can’t get home because he died. That’s how I know he died. I wrote a note on a sheet that he took with him telling anyone who found him that I was scared he would die but it was silly, because there is no one. I just dreamed there might be.’ The girl pressed the mask against Ruth’s mouth again, and as she breathed in, the light flickered on.

Ruth stared at the oxygen tank and saw that the needle was pointing to red. It was almost empty.

The girl reached around her and hugged her. ‘I’m sc-scared.’



‘Don’t...’ Ruth felt like her chest had a huge band around it, and it was tightening with every passing second. She began to panic as she tried hard to suck in more air, but the panic just made it worse. The light-headedness was beginning to make her dizzy and nauseous. She closed her eyes. ‘Don’t worry...’ she croaked. ‘We have... each other...’

A faint whisper from the girl’s mouth, and what she said sent a final chill through Ruth’s body.

The girl didn’t speak again. She lay still in Ruth’s arms. Ruth didn’t even have the energy to cry another tear. ‘I’m here... sweetheart .’

*Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 1:44 am*

### FIFTY-SEVEN

Gina ran down the industrial estate path. Jacob and the PCs passed her. She tried to run faster to keep up with them. They all turned a corner so she followed. That's when she saw the sign at the entrance of the huge wood warehouse.

APH Building Craft Experts was a huge company.

She bent over and took a few deep breaths. As her heart rate returned to normal, she shifted her attention to the gates. They were locked, and all Gina could hear was a barking dog. The barking was coming from inside the main building.

'Can we get someone to remove this padlock' – she pointed at the gate – 'and someone from the dog team to handle the dog? And make sure we have all the cutting equipment we need.'

The PC next to her nodded. He stood aside and began to radio for the rest of the team to do just that and gather around the unit.

Gina peered through the gaps in the metal gate and gasped.

'What is it, guv?' Jacob walked to her side.

Pointing to the old signage on the back wall, Jacob looked back at her.

They knew exactly who was behind it all.

‘Can you message the incident room? Tell them what we’ve found out and get someone to his house now . Wait.’ She thought for a precious second. ‘If he’s not home, get them to go to the hospital, to the maternity ward, and arrest him and bring his wife in, too.’ She glanced at the old signage and the new signage: she now knew that the A and the H in the company name stood for Albie Hathaway.

‘Ruth is in there; I know she is. And Luna has to be in there, too.’

At the far end of the car park sat the white van.

She waited until everyone was in place. They all quietly radioed in turn to double-check that all exits were covered and all backup was in place.

An officer wearing padded clothing hurried towards them, ready to handle the dog. PC Smith shoved past with a pair of huge bolt cutters, and within a few seconds, the padlock clunked onto the tarmac below.

Gina pointed for half of the officers to go one way while the rest of the team followed her around the building. On passing the van, she could see the chess piece dangling from the mirror and the red cupcake scarf on the passenger seat.

‘We’ve definitely got the right place. It’s the van!’ She kept walking. ‘This looks like a huge company. There must be a lot of employees working here. He wouldn’t be keeping her in the main building. Someone would know and report him.’

She ran around the side of the building and came across another fence; six-foot and wooden that could easily be climbed, and a hardwood multi-locked gate. The sign on the front gave it away.

NO UNAUTHORISED PERSONNEL

She glanced at the PCs. 'We need this gate opened. Can you sort it?' Then one PC nodded and ran back to assist another who was carrying a plethora of cutting tools.

'I'm going over the fence.'

'Guv, it could be dangerous. We don't know if he's there. Once the gate is open, we can all go through.'

'There are lives at risk and this gate could take a while to open.'

Deep down she knew that their perp wouldn't be at the hospital or at his house. He'd be where his captives were, and the fact that she and Jacob had spoken to him earlier put those victims in more danger.

'Every second we lose is a second too much. Ruth and the girl need us now . I'm not waiting.' She adjusted her body cam and took a deep breath.

Stepping up, she grabbed the top of the fence. She shuffled over and dropped with a thud to the other side. Several massive storage sheds led the way, most of them open faced, showing piles upon piles of building materials. After jogging alongside them for what seemed like forever, her gaze fell on the small brick building at the edge of the land that was guarded by a metal fence, but this time the small perimeter was topped with barbed wire.

Jacob threw a couple of items over the wooden fence and clambered over. He grabbed them off the ground and ran after her.

'I thought you weren't coming?' she said.

He held up the cutters and began snipping at the metal cage until the hole was big enough for them to slip through. Two PCs followed and waited for further

instruction. ‘Can you radio through our location? Get the paramedics and firefighters on standby. I don’t know what we’re walking into.’

One PC nodded and began speaking through her radio.

Gina snapped on a pair of latex gloves and climbed through the hole, her hair getting caught on one of the metal prongs. She tore a clump off, releasing the strands of her mane that had come loose from the jaws of the fence before reaching the other side. ‘Can you pass me the cutters through?’

Jacob passed them through the gap.

Gina scrunched her brows as one of the PCs shone a torch at the door. The padlock wasn’t too thick. There was a smear of brownish red just under the lock.

‘We definitely need paramedics here, and tell the team to clear access for them. That gate needs to be opened even if they have to ram it down. We have traces of blood and...’ – she looked down – ‘a hair grip, and a scrunched-up tissue.’

She pictured their perp carrying Ruth, and those items dropping out of her pocket. As Jacob climbed through, Gina placed the cutters over the padlock and pressed.

The metal was too strong. She used them to bash at the padlock instead, until finally, reluctantly, the metal fixing broke away from the door. Gina struggled with the weight of it, but with a bit of muscle the door let out a creak as she opened it.

‘What the...?’ Jacob stood right behind her.

Each wall was covered with shelving. Several floor-to-ceiling racks stood at the far end of the room that was as big as a generous pantry. There were boxes galore, none of them labelled. She glanced around at the dark-grey interior, which only made the

tiny room feel smaller and darker.

Gina slid a box out from the rack and peered inside. It contained several packets of dried soup. She opened another and it contained some blue clothing. She pulled one out and let it unfold. It was a blue dress, just like the girl in the photo was wearing. She fished through the rest and counted ten, all in a petite size. There were so many boxes. She pulled out box after box to reveal yet more supplies: dried food, bottled water, pens, pencils, sketch pads, soap, shampoo, magazines, books for teens.

She leaned on the rack and it moved slightly.

Gina looked down. The whole singular structure was on wheels.

She pulled the rack and it easily came away from the wall, revealing a small, discreet door.

Come to think of it, she could tell from the outside that there was more to the structure than the tiny entrance.

Placing her hand on the delicate handle, she pushed the unlocked door and the stench hit.

As she opened it fully, she gasped and fought her body's urge to heave.

### FIFTY-EIGHT

‘It’s a dead end.’ Literally it was, what with Eric Hathaway leaning forward, kneeling on the floor, a rope around his neck that had been tied to a rail on the wall.

She turned away, not wanting to see his protruding tongue or the blood-specked whites of his eyes. The smell was getting stronger.

Not that he was alive, but instinctively she reached for his neck to see if she could find a pulse. He was still warm, but Eric was dead.

As much as she hated the smell, her need to breathe overruled her reluctance to take another breath. It wasn’t coming from Eric.

She scrunched her brows.

Gina bit her bottom lip and focused her attention on the four walls surrounding the body.

There was no sign of Luna or Ruth, and no clues as to where they might be, but the scent of death told Gina that there was a body close by.

She clenched her fists and roared in frustration. Jacob began pushing the walls, as if he might happen upon some secret passageway. ‘There has to be something else in this box room.’

She agreed. The walls were thick. The thought of a screaming victim not being heard

sent a shiver through her.

Gina spotted Eric's phone on the floor, cradled in the back of his bent knee. She scrunched her nose as she leaned over to retrieve it.

It wasn't password protected.

His screen lit up, showing the last thing he was looking at. It was a CCTV screen showing a kitchen under a wash of red light. The tap gently dripped into the tiny round sink.

Gina flicked to the next camera, its room in darkness. She spotted the time on the screen. Seconds were passing. It was a live feed. A red light flashed, momentarily lighting up the curved walls of the tiny room.

Jacob leaned over her shoulder. 'Did you catch that?'

'Barely.' The red light flickered on again, this time it was for a little while longer. 'It's Ruth and there's someone else on the floor.'

An oxygen tank and mask had been strewn next to a small bed. The table with the chessboard filled the left-hand side of the room. The girl with the birthmark under her eye lay with her head on Ruth's chest and Ruth cradled her, but neither of them moved.

'Guv,' O'Connor shouted from the entrance. 'We've just found something in a room in the main building. What looks like a cupboard door leads to a small room. It looks like some sort of control room and it's called the bunker. There's an intercom system, CCTV, controls for heating, air ventilation system and lighting. The screens are showing Ruth and the girl being held somewhere, and they're not moving.'



Gina glanced back. 'Do you know where they are?'

O'Connor came through and looked away from the body. 'No, guv. It just shows these rooms, like they're in a divided-up bunker of some description, but we can't tell where they are.' He paused. 'One of the monitors is coming up red. The ventilation system isn't working and it's showing low oxygen levels.'

Gina showed O'Connor the screen on Eric's phone. 'We've seen. Is there anything you can do to restore the oxygen levels? Can Garth help?'

'He's trying as we speak. It's as if the systems have some sort of virus, but the team are working on it now.'

'Tell them to keep going.'

She looked at the four walls again. 'They're in a bunker.'

She jumped up and down on the floor and heard the creak. She peered down at the plain sheet of linoleum they were standing on and quickly stepped aside. Jacob nudged Eric's body aside as he grabbed the other end and, between them, they managed to remove the flooring, passing it to the PCs and O'Connor, who were still in the doorway.

'It's a handle,' Gina said.

The handle to the hatch was flush with the floor, so it didn't stick out. Just as Gina reached down and lifted it from the recess, she heard a whirring sound.

'Sounds like the ventilation system has been restored. We need paramedics here, now, with oxygen, and someone from the fire department with hoists.'

She recoiled at the sight of the body below.

Jacob gasped. 'That's Gary Pritchard.'

The man's body lay at the bottom of the metal steps, blood pooled around his chest area, his body contorted after what Gina thought might have been a rough landing. A bloodied knife lay on the floor next to him.

Jacob shone his torch into the room. Gina popped Eric's phone into her pocket as she climbed down, careful to not step on Gary's body as she reached the concrete floor.

That's where the horrendous smell had been coming from.

Gagging as she breathed in the thin air, she grabbed a face mask from her pocket and popped it on, not that it was going to be much help. She heaved a couple more times before finding her composure.

'There's a door here,' she yelled up. The ventilation system rumbled. 'Ruth,' she called out, in the hope that Ruth had just been slipping in and out of consciousness, but there was no answer.

Jacob jumped down beside her and pulled his coat over his nose. 'Jeez,' he said as he sidestepped the body.

Gina went to grab the door, but it was locked. She pulled out Eric's phone again and went back to the CCTV images. A wash of light-headedness came over her, but with the systems back up and running, the room would soon be filled with precious oxygen.

Jacob began banging on the door. 'Ruth,' he called, but the woman on the screen didn't move.

‘We have to get in there.’ The human body could only last so long without oxygen – only a matter of a few minutes at most. She began to flick through everything Eric had been using on his phone, and she spotted an app with a door logo.

She pressed it and hit the ‘unlock bunker’ button. A clunking sound of the door unlocking filled the tiny space. ‘We’re in.’

She swallowed as she pushed the door open.

They’d already found two dead bodies. Were they about to find another two?

### FIFTY-NINE

The light-headedness began to subside as Gina opened the door to the capsule. She placed Eric's phone back in her pocket, no longer needing to see what was right in front of her. Without wasting a single second, she ran to the back of the kitchen area and opened the other door. On the floor, lay Ruth and the girl.

Knees to the floor, she checked the frail-looking girl. 'There's a pulse. Not much, but it's there. She's breathing faintly. Jacob, check Ruth.'

Gina grabbed the girl and dragged her off Ruth and lay her in the recovery position, leaving enough room for Jacob to administer first aid too. 'Get the paramedics in here,' she called. Three paramedics ran in with oxygen tanks and took over. Gina stepped out into the kitchen area and paced the tiny space. Jacob joined her.

Seconds felt like hours as they waited to see how Ruth and Luna were. Gina stared at all the pictures on the wall above the sink. There was the drawing of Luna with the scarf that they'd found, along with many others. A little note was written underneath a drawing of Luna and Albie.

Happy birthday, Daddy.

She turned around and saw the racks of food and supplies. Then she spotted the red baseball cap with the word Florida printed on the front. The edges were frayed and shabby after years of use. A pile of birthday cards sat next to it and the top one had a picture of a teddy bear on it, with the word daughter written at the top.

Jacob pointed to another drawing that had been hung on the wall near the door. It was of an underground bunker leading up some ladders, and above the ladders were dead trees and dead animals strewn across the barren earth above.

Gina heard Ruth coughing from the end room. Two paramedics helped the confused woman through, nudging Gina and Jacob against the rack. A hoist dropped through the hatch and they began strapping her in before Ruth was gently pulled through. O'Connor peered down. 'I'll go with her in the ambulance to the hospital.'

'Thanks.' Gina watched as they helped Luna. As the oxygen circulated, she began to breathe greedily before prising her eyes open. A wash of fear filled the girl's eyes as she stared directly at Gina, and then at the paramedic who was helping her. She let out a hoarse cry and began to hit him and tear the oxygen away. Gasping, she stumbled to the back of the capsule and onto the bed where she sat in the corner, gripping her knees.

'What's your name? I'm Bennie,' the paramedic said, gently.

She reached out and hit his face.

'I'm trying to help you; I need to get you to a hospital. You've been deprived of oxygen. I know all this is confusing.' He smiled. 'I have a daughter your age.'

The girl grabbed one of the chess pieces and threw it at his eye. He withdrew. 'It's okay, I'll wait here.' He stood by outside the small WC that seemed to be dotted with bloodied rags.

Gina then knew that Albie Hathaway was meant to get back to the bunker with his daughter's sanitary products.

Gina stepped forward. 'May I have a minute or two?'

He nodded and stepped into the kitchen area with Jacob.

The girl stumbled off the bed as soon as Gina entered and closed the door. 'We're all going to die. We can't leave. It's safe here,' she said, her voice crackly.

'May I sit?' Gina pointed to the bed.

The girl slowly nodded.

Gina smiled and sat at the other end of the bed, not wanting to panic the girl any more than she already was. 'Is your name Luna?'

Again, the girl nodded.

'Are all these drawings yours?'

'Yes.'

'You are really talented. Do you play chess?'

'I played it with my daddy.'

Gina swallowed. Whatever she thought of Albie Hathaway, this life and that man were all Luna knew. She knew there would be years of therapy ahead for Luna. She wondered if Luna would ever be able to live a normal life. 'Do you have a mum?'

Luna's top lip came over her bottom lip before she spoke. 'I killed my mummy when she had me, but she loved me. Daddy said she loved me and she wanted me so much, but it's my fault she died. He said she'd died many times, but she'd never had a child in her past lives, so I was her miracle.'

Gina felt a lump forming in her throat. She pictured a captive girl giving birth in this hellhole with no medical help. Luna didn't kill her, Albie Hathaway killed her. 'It's not your fault, lovely. I promise you that.' Gina paused. 'Do you know what is outside and up those ladders?'

Nodding, Luna put her legs out in front of her. 'Nothing. Daddy goes out to get things so we can eat and live. He said it's not safe out there; that everyone is dead except lucky people like us, people who have a bunker or a special home with special air, but Daddy hasn't come back so I think he died.' She scrunched her thin brows. 'Do you have a bunker?'

'No, I live in a house. I have a cat and a granddaughter who is a few years younger than you.'

'I... I've never seen a real cat.' She sighed. 'How can you live up there?'

'Because it is beautiful. There are trees, fields, shops, schools, beaches and lots of other lovely things.'

Shaking her head fast, Luna sat back in the corner of the bed against the back of the bunker and pulled her legs close to her chest again. 'No, you're lying. There's nothing up there. Those things only exist in books. My daddy told me and he loves me. Mummy and he built this place together, for me.'

Gina's heart was breaking. 'Did Mummy have another name? A name that Daddy called her?'

'Felicity, or Lissy. I have a picture of her when I was in her tummy.' She reached under her pillow and pulled out a frayed photo of Felicity, Marie's cousin. She, too, was wearing the same blue dress that Luna was wearing now, her stomach slightly protruded as she stood in front of the bed.

Heart banging, Gina shuffled back a little until her back was against the wall of the capsule and Luna seemed okay with her closer proximity. 'I know of Felicity. She has a cousin called Marie. You have an aunt up there.'

'Does she live in a bunker?'

'No, she lives in an apartment.'

Scrunching her brow, Luna continued. 'She must have a special apartment.'

'Do you speak to anyone else, or have any friends?'

'I have a grandad, but Daddy won't let him come here. I talk to the children about the outside and what used to be there. The ones who live in another capsule. They are my cousins but Grandad tells them off for talking to me if he catches them.'

Gina imagined that Luna was talking about Eric's grandchildren. 'Do you know their names?'

'Scottie and Janey, and there's going to be a new baby soon.' She frowned. 'But the world is dying. Why is there going to be a new baby?'

Gina pictured Eric's pregnant daughter. 'Luna, do you trust me?'

Luna looked up, a clump of hair leading all the way to her chapped lips. She nodded.

Gina wanted to hug the sick-looking girl, feed her up and nourish her. 'Will you come outside with me so I can show you what's up there? I promise nothing bad will happen. I live up there and look at me. I'm fine and you will be fine, too.'

She began to tremble. 'I'm scared. Where's the lady who was with me?'



‘She’s been taken to the hospital.’

‘I don’t want to leave.’

‘There’s no need to be scared, I promise.’ Gina stood and held her hand out.

The girl shuffled off the bed and reached out for Gina’s hand. Gina took a deep breath and opened the door. ‘The man there, he works at the hospital. He’s a paramedic.’

She hid behind Gina. Gina nodded for Bennie to leave. ‘Could you turn all the lights off, please?’ she asked as he left. As soon as he’d gone, Gina looked at the girl again. ‘Right. We are going to have to climb a ladder in the dark.’ Gina turned her torch on as the lights went out, and she’d have to do her very best to avoid flashing any light on Eric or Gary’s bodies, despite the fact they would have been covered up by now. The sickness inside her began to swell.

‘The metal steps?’

Gina nodded. ‘I need you to do something for me. Can you just look at me while we go up the steps, and promise to keep looking at me? I won’t leave you alone. I’ll be with you all the way.’

‘I’ve never been up the steps.’

‘We’ll take it slowly.’

Luna swallowed and nodded again. ‘It smells really bad.’

‘I know it does, but we’ll be out of here soon. I’m going to carry you to the steps, okay?’ Gina helped Luna up, her weak legs wobbling with each step. All Gina

wanted to do was sob for the pain and suffering that Luna had gone through, but Luna was none the wiser, thinking that the world above had come to an end and there was nothing for her there.

She held the torch out behind Luna's back, and as she passed Gary's covered-up body, she flashed the torch up. 'I'm going to help you into this hoist, okay. Just pop your legs in here.' She stood with her back to the body and placed Luna down.

'I don't want you to leave me.' Luna began to sob.

'I'm not leaving you. I'm climbing these metal steps behind you.'

Still sobbing, Luna did as she was asked and stepped into the hoist. As she was pulled up, Gina stayed close, keeping the light on her face so that Luna could always see her. Jacob went to help her out of the hoist, which made her scream.

As soon as Gina reached the top, Luna gripped her around the waist. Eric's body was also covered up and panic rose in Gina's chest.

It was all so surreal. Gina knew the nightmares of this case would never leave her for as long as she lived.

Stroking Luna's head, Gina whispered, 'It's okay, lovely. Nearly there.' She lifted Luna up and raced out of the room and into the storage area that they first entered. Placing Luna down, Gina flashed the torch onto her own face. 'Do you want to hold my hand before we go out of the door?'

Tears glistened down Luna's face. 'I can't.'

Gina pressed her lips together and wiped a stray tear away. 'You can. We can do it together.'

Both of them walked with trembling legs. Luna, because she was terrified of what existed on the surface. Gina, because of what the poor girl had been through.

Luna squinted for a few seconds as she stepped out into the caged area and looked up at the stars and the moon.

‘I can breathe.’ She gasped several times. Turning around, she pointed. ‘There are trees. There are lots of trees.’ Luna trembled and collapsed in a crying heap on the ground as realisation hit her.

Everything she’d learned in her whole life had been a lie.

### SIXTY

Gina watched as Luna lay in the hospital bed, attached to a drip. At first, she'd yelled while in the ambulance. Luna had never travelled in any kind of vehicle, but Gina had stayed with her, doing her best to soothe and reassure her. A few minutes earlier, she'd finished her hot chocolate and wolfed a sandwich down so fast, she almost gagged on it, but now she was sleeping soundly. Gina pulled the crisp, white sheet up over Luna's shoulders.

Jacob tapped gently on the door. Gina glanced at him through the little window and headed out. As she left, the nurse who had been looking after Luna swapped places with Gina. A police officer sat outside the side room door, reading a newspaper.

'How is she, guv?' Jacob called her over to one side.

She glanced up and down. They were on a ward filled with side rooms with a main ward at the far end, but she kept her voice hushed, not wanting to wake any of the other sick children. 'Traumatised.' She paused. 'What's happening at the bunker?'

He cleared his throat. 'I've just been talking to the officers there and at Eric Hathaway's house. Bernard and his team have arrived and there are officers searching the bunker and the house. The bodies should be removed soon. One of the CSIs found three names written under the bed on the back wall. It looks like they were all written with different hands, with different pens. As suspected, they are Joanie, Elissa and Felicity.'

'They left a record. They knew they might not make it out.'

Jacob frowned and nodded. 'Mrs Hathaway is at the station. She'd just got home from the hospital. Her daughter is here somewhere after she was admitted earlier. Mrs Hathaway said she'll have to come back to the hospital later. We don't know if she knew anything about the bunker or what had been going on, but a search of their house is underway. Everything is pointing to Eric Hathaway killing Gary Pritchard. There was literally blood on his hands. Bernard's team found something else, at the back of the structure housing the bunker.'

'What was it?'

'Two large flat stones. They look like nothing to be concerned about on their own but when turned over, Bernard saw that they'd been engraved. The first had the name Joanie on it. Mother to Albie and Sammie, RIP. The other stone had the name Felicity engraved on it, followed by RIP and there is another stone further away with nothing written on it.'

Gina took a huge breath and ran her fingers through her now loose hair. 'Poor Joanie, we now know what happened to her, and it looked like she had two children, one of them was Albie Hathaway. As for Felicity – Marie is going to be devastated.' She shuddered. 'I know we'll need to speak to Marie. She's all the family Luna has now.'

Jacob nodded. 'Obviously, we need to confirm that Luna is Felicity's daughter, which won't take too long. We've already spoken to Marie, while you were with Luna. An officer was despatched to her place and has stayed there. If Luna is her niece, she is keen to take her in and look after her. We've asked her to hold fire on visiting right now as it might be too overwhelming for Luna.'

'And is there a social worker assigned to the case?'

Jacob nodded. 'Should be here within the next few minutes.' He pointed to the woman in pumps and black trousers walking up the corridor. 'I think she's just

arrived. I've also heard that Ruth is awake and ready to speak. O'Connor has been sitting with her. She's in a room on ward twelve.'

After filling the social worker in, Gina and Jacob's footsteps echoed along the main corridor in the hospital. She hated having to leave Luna, but she needed to speak to Ruth.

O'Connor was standing outside the room when they got there. Gina peered through the little window in the door. Ruth was sitting up in the bed, having a drink. She had oxygen being pumped through clear tubes that were wedged into her nostrils, and her pale face had a clammy shine to it. Knocking, Gina waited for Ruth to see her before entering.

'Hello, Ruth. I'm DI Harte. How are you feeling?'

Ruth shakily placed the plastic cup on the bedside drawer. 'I can't stop thinking about Luna, and no one seems to know how she is,' she replied with a croaky voice. After barking out a couple of coughs, she continued. 'Please tell me she's okay?'

Jacob stood at the end of the bed. Gina walked over to the bedside chair and sat. 'I've just been with her and she's doing well. She's asleep at the moment.'

'I thought we were both going to die.' Ruth sniffed back her tears. 'You found us.'

'And you are both doing really well right now.' Gina paused. 'Can you remember how you got to the bunker? You called us when you recognised the scarf. Then we couldn't contact you again. We found some of your items and your car by the nature park after tracing your phone.'

She scrunched her brow and grabbed her drink again. While gently holding her cup she began to speak slowly. 'I got these messages. Someone knew things about Elissa

and they were going to tell me what happened to her.’ She looked up, as if trying to remember. ‘They said that I had to meet them there if I wanted to find out the truth, so I dropped everything and headed to the nature park. I actually thought the person who was messaging me was in some sort of trouble and I wanted to help. Anyway, when I arrived, there was a white van parked up. I just remember being attacked and bundled into it. I was hit over the head and I passed out. A while later, I woke up in a tiny room, which I now know was a bunker. At first, I was in an end room that had a mattress and bucket in it, then the door unlocked and I went through to this small kitchen. That’s when I found that poor little girl.’ She began to half sob, her chest heaving.

Just as she was about to spill her drink, Gina took it and placed it back on the bedside drawers.

‘When I was hoisted out, there were two bodies. They were covered up, but I know what they were.’

‘I’m sorry you had to pass those, but we needed to get you out and to the hospital.’

‘He was talking to me in the bunker, through some sort of microphone.’ Her mouth downturned. ‘He wanted me to be with Luna, to be her mummy. She was all alone. I kept wondering if Luna was my granddaughter.’ She sniffed and wiped her eyes. ‘Is she?’

Gina tilted her head. ‘We don’t believe she is.’ She wasn’t ready to share the news about the graves with Ruth, as it would take a lot of explaining. Gina wondered if Keeley had been Albie Hathaway’s choice of mother for Luna. He would have met her at the Moores’ property and he paid attention to her and her children. Gina also wondered if Albie had told Eric that he wanted a mother for Luna and that Eric had just been trying to carry out Albie’s wishes, but after failing to kidnap Keeley, he decided to take Ruth instead. Maybe Ruth was the backup plan. Either way, both

women were being watched or played by Eric and Albie, all as a part of their sick game that Albie could no longer bear to be a part of in the end.

‘I can’t believe Gary could ever do this to me. Did he take Elissa? Was it him?’

Gina exhaled. ‘We are still investigating, but what we can tell you is that Gary was one of the people we found dead at the scene. We believe that Eric Hathaway murdered him.’

‘No, you’ve got this wrong. I haven’t known Eric that long. We were seeing each other and he’s a cheating toerag, but murder? Why?’

‘I’m really sorry.’

‘So, was he the one messaging me?’

‘Once we’ve had a chance to look into everything, we’ll have more answers, but it’s looking likely. I’m so sorry that I don’t have anything more concrete for you. We have officers at the scene now.’

Ruth slumped back. ‘I really thought I was going to find out what happened to Elissa.’ She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

‘Again, I’m sorry.’ Gina hated that she hadn’t found Elissa, and she shivered as she thought about the unmarked stone behind the bunker.

‘Luna said something to me, in the bunker.’

‘What did she say?’

‘She said that her daddy wanted a lady called Keeley to be her new mummy, that he



met her when he was working but Luna was really happy that I came instead.' Ruth paused and let out a little cry. 'I wanted my daughter, she wanted a mum and neither of us got what we wanted...'

Tears began to fall down her face.

### SIXTY-ONE

Jacob had announced Ellie Hathaway for the tape. Since the search of Eric's house and the bunker, Gina had a lot to speak to Mrs Hathaway about, and she was grateful that she'd come in voluntarily. They'd also found out exactly what was on Gary Pritchard's computer.

'What's going on?' she asked. 'My daughter is in labour, I should be with her.' She began to bite her already-bitten nails.

Gina pored over her notes. She'd barely had time to catch up with the team. They were still working the scenes, and one of them was Ellie Hathaway's house.

'Are you still searching the house?'

Gina nodded. 'Mrs Hathaway, I'm sorry to inform you that your husband was found dead this evening. It looks like he died by suicide. We thank you for coming in voluntarily to speak to us about our findings.'

Mrs Hathaway scrunched her nose slightly but her reaction wasn't what Gina expected. 'Dead?'

'Yes. Again, please accept our condolences.' Gina gave Ellie a moment to take the news in. 'Were you aware that your husband and his son, Albie Hathaway, had a bunker at APH Building Craft Experts, the company they co own?'

She swallowed. 'Yes, the emergency bunker.'

‘Do you know someone called Luna?’

‘We have a dog called Luna. One of the managers has adopted her, but sometimes he leaves her at the unit to guard the building. There have been a few burglaries lately and Luna puts them off.’ The woman spoke in an almost robotic manner as if she was closing her emotions off.

‘I don’t know how to put this, Mrs Hathaway, but tonight we found a young girl in the bunker, who claims she has lived her whole life there. She says her name is Luna. We believe Albie Hathaway was her father, and we found two marked gravestones, and another with no name on it. Do you know a woman called Joanie Callahan or a child called Sammie?’

Tears began to drizzle down Ellie’s face. Gina pushed the box of tissues towards her. ‘Squirt, that’s Albie’s nickname, has always been strange, but I don’t know anything about a girl named Luna.’ She frowned. ‘Joanie was Albie’s mother and she lost Sammie at birth. That’s what Eric told me. Joanie was Eric’s ex. She left him with Albie. She had a drug problem and ran off with a man she used to work at a bar with. She isn’t dead... she can’t be. She deserted him, leaving him with Albie to bring up alone.’ She began to hyperventilate slightly, so Gina gave her a moment.

Gina flicked through the notes from the briefing and reread what Bernard had sent over before telling Mrs Hathaway more. ‘The bones of a woman and a baby were found behind the bunker. We believe them to be Joanie and Sammie, but there are further tests to be conducted.’ Gina flicked back to Felicity’s information. ‘Do you know anyone called Felicity Vaynor?’

‘Er, I think Albie mentioned a girlfriend by the name of Felicity once, but that was years ago. I never met her.’ Ellie bit her bottom lip. ‘Are you sure Eric is dead?’

Something wasn’t right about Ellie, but Gina nodded. ‘Yes. There was also another

person at the scene, and had your husband been alive, we'd have arrested him for the man's murder.'

'Murder!'

'Yes, do you know a man called Gary Pritchard?'

She burst into choking sobs and placed a hand on the desk. That's when Gina saw the silver line of a scar on Ellie Hathaway's hand. 'Gary is my dad.'

### SIXTY-TWO

A short break later, the recorder began rolling again. Gina started. 'So, you're Elissa Pritchard?'

She nodded as she blew her nose. 'Yes. I use the name Ellie for short.' She started blubbing. 'Eric said if I ever spoke to anyone my children would hate me forever; that we'd both lose them and I would be sent to some sort of asylum.' She paused. 'Now he's dead, I can talk. I can finally talk.' She slammed her hand on the table. 'He said you'd never understand. You're all closed-minded and... I grew to love him. I don't know how I did but I did. He had become my world and I had to work out how I could live in it, for the sake of being with my children.' She doubled over in the plastic chair and held a hand to her heart as she cried out loudly. 'He was going through so much when he took me. His wife had left him with Albie... but it's not true, none of it was true.'

'Ellie, can you start from the beginning, going back to when you met Eric?'

She placed a hand over her mouth and made a couple of hiccup sounds. 'I worked at a café called The Singing Kettle back in the nineties. The couple were horrible. The man was a perv and kept looking up my skirt. Eric used to loiter around in his car, and he whistled at me one day so I told him where to go. A couple of weeks later, I saw him again, outside, and he said he was sorry and offered me a lift home. I was wearing heels at the time and I'd been on my feet for the lunch rush, so I accepted his apology and got in the car.'

'When was this?'

‘In ’94.’ She shook her head and paused. ‘He took me to where he worked, saying he’d drop me back, but he just needed to grab something and it was on the way. The staff had gone home. It was just him at the unit, then he dragged me into the bunker and left me there for about a month before coming back... he’d come every night and talk to me from the other side of the metal door while I ate the dried food that he’d left on the racks. He told me how he’d noticed me at chess club at the old village hall in Cleevesford, when I’d gone with my dad. I didn’t even remember him from chess club. That’s when he said he’d only been in the audience when there had been matches going on. Albie was keen to learn, so he took him as a young boy to watch. Eric didn’t know my dad.’ Ellie went silent.

Gina felt sadness sweeping through her. How had the spirited young girl with her life ahead of her turned into the woman before her? From kidnap victim to mother and grandmother of her kidnapper’s children, living in Eric Hathaway’s house, pretending to be his wife. ‘How long were you in the bunker?’

‘Four years. I came out when my youngest was one. I had two children in that underground hellhole. My son in ’96 and daughter in ’97.’ Her mouth downturned. ‘I don’t want them to know that I didn’t want them.’ She started to weep again. ‘I didn’t want them, I tried my best to lose them. I didn’t eat. I threw myself into things to try to lose them, but they were strong, and when I held my babies in my arms, I loved them so much and I felt like the most horrible person in the whole world. Eric never let me forget that I tried to kill them.’ She stared into her hands. ‘They were so innocent.’

Gina felt for Elissa. She, too, was a victim in all this.

‘Eric had to put me right. He told it as it was: I was a bad person, I could have killed my unborn children and they were his children, too, and he loved them. He said that’s why I needed him. That’s why he chose me. He was the one who was going to teach me how to be a better person, to be a mother and a wife, and I loathed myself so

much for the way I'd been before I met him. He said it as he saw it and I was so ashamed.' She paused. 'I missed my mum and dad, even though Dad and I always argued and he was always so angry, volatile even, but I know it was for the best that I didn't go back home. Eric reminded me what an embarrassment I was to them. My dad made that clear and Mum just sat in the background saying nothing while he punished me all the time. Things got heated and Dad slapped me once.'

'Ellie, you weren't a bad person. You were held against your will for years and your only way of surviving was to please your captor.'

'But I was alone for so long with my thoughts, then, at times, Eric was there. He became gentler and nicer. He wasn't the monster you think he was. It was complicated. Once I became the person he needed me to be, he was so kind and loving towards me and I guess I needed something, someone, so I begged him to keep staying with me and our babies in the bunker. He said no one would ever understand our relationship, and I believe he was right.'

Gina understood. She knew how Stockholm Syndrome worked.

'During my darkest times, he'd bring me nice meals and little gifts. He could be sweet and a part of me wondered, if I tried to escape Eric and go home, would my dad just have another go at me? Would he blame me?' She linked her fingers in her hair and pulled. 'I moved into his house eventually, and he kept me confined there for years. I concentrated on bringing the children up, but Eric was a good father.' She exhaled. 'Actually, he wasn't always. It upset me that he was stricter with our daughter. She barely had any freedom compared to my son. I did my best to make her feel loved. I had to.' She raised her brows and continued. 'It wasn't all bad, though. He'd take them to work with him sometimes and let them play at working in the office. I remember when they came back and started babbling about their made-up friend who talked to them on a funny phone... there was someone in the bunker, wasn't there?'

Gina nodded. 'It would have been Felicity.'

'I don't know who I am anymore.' She blew out a loud breath. 'And now he's gone... and he killed my dad. Why did he kill my dad?'

Gina pulled out the printout that Garth had given her, showing everything from Gary Pritchard's computer and phone. They had got Gary completely wrong. 'It looks like your dad was close to finding you. He'd tried to infiltrate the type of people who fantasise about kidnapping young women, and he'd come across Eric. Eric was on these sites telling other men how to kidnap and keep a person against their will.'

She shook her head and grimaced. 'Eric wouldn't do that. It was just me and only me, because he loved me.' She went to speak again, but changed her mind. 'Wait, who was in the bunker?'

'We believe it was a girl called Felicity Vaynor, and that she was being held by Albie Hathaway.'

'You mentioned her. Albie's girlfriend.' She looked into her lap for a moment. 'Albie took her, didn't he? He was just like his father and I didn't see it and my children were talking to her.'

'And Joanie never left,' Gina said, reminding Ellie that it was never just her. She waited while everything clicked into place for Ellie before continuing. 'We have the computers from his office and your house, and we can show that your dad was pretending to plan a kidnapping, and Eric was advising him how to do it. Your dad got too close and we think that's what led Eric to kill him.'

It gave Gina no pleasure at all to say that again to Ellie. She pictured Eric manipulating the whole situation. She imagined he was responsible for the white queen being found in Ruth's kitchen, probably to frame Gary. 'We found a phone in



Eric Hathaway's locked home office while searching your house, one with pictures of you and your family on the front screen.'

'You found my phone? Eric never personalised anything.'

Gina thought it was Ellie's phone but was glad of the confirmation. 'You were communicating with your dad, weren't you?'

Ellie swallowed. 'I searched for years to find Dad on a chess club app and, as predicted, Dad eventually turned up, calling himself Gary Pritchard. I called myself the Bishop. We'd play online and all I'd type is "your move" when it was his turn. It made me feel like I was still in his life, even though it was from afar.' She pressed her lips together for a moment and looked away. 'Then Eric found out and he started messaging Dad. I don't know what he typed back because he took it off me. He said it was corrupting me and that he wanted his sweet Ellie back again.'

Gina knew what Eric had then said to Gary. He told him he could trust White Knight. That's when he'd convinced Gary that he could take him to Elissa, but instead Eric had brought him to the bunker and killed him.

'Eric stopped being good to me.'

'In what way?'

'He started going out for long periods and staying out all night, so I followed him. There was this woman, Moira. He'd been sleeping with her. I managed to get hold of her phone number, then I messaged her from an old burner phone I found at the office, pretending to be Eric. I made out that he had changed his number. I sent her a message saying I'd booked a hotel for the night. At this point, I had no idea what to do, so I left her alone in the hotel room. She kept calling and messaging all night. I know she'd told her husband she was in Scotland working, but she wasn't. It was a

lie. By morning, she was threatening to leave the hotel and come to our house.'

Gina knew that Moira had been run off the road. 'What happened after that?'

'Eric was preoccupied, so I sneaked out in the work van and went to the hotel to talk to her. I wanted her to leave my family alone. I'd been through so much with Eric and it hurt that he'd done what he did. Then she said something that upset me more than anything.'

'What?'

'She said she'd only come to the hotel to finish it, and that she'd met him and Albie when their company did some work to her house a couple of years before. She knew that Eric was also seeing someone else because she knew where the woman lived. Apparently, Eric had slipped up, leaving his phone out. She read the message chain between Eric and the other woman and found her address in his contacts. Moira went to the house. She was so angry with Eric; she slashed his tyre. She was upset by this time and was saying how she hung around watching Eric at her house. She also knew where the woman worked because she'd left her work ID badge in his car. Eric didn't even try to hide what he was doing from her. Moira told me she went to the leisure centre to see what the other woman looked like when she was looking after one of her grandsons. I don't really know the details. She said the woman's name was Ruth Pritchard. My mother.'

'What happened then?'

Ellie clenched her fists and scrunched her brow. 'I told her she was lying and making it up. I was so confused. How could Eric have been sleeping with my mum? Moira got into her car and told me never to contact her again. Then I panicked. I thought if she told Eric about me meeting up with her, he'd be livid. I'd spent years earning his trust to have the life I know, and I could be back at square one. I didn't want to lose

the life I'd built for my children. He said I was his queen and that I always would be. He said he saved me from my old life.' She stared ahead as she processed what she was saying. 'I'm so confused. He confused me all the time.'

'So, what did you do?'

'I drove after her. I was trying to get her to pull over so that I could beg her not to say anything to him, but she wouldn't stop the car. I kept beeping my horn.' She paused in thought. 'I drove too close and accidentally bumped into her car and then her car swerved off into a verge. I didn't know what to do so I drove past, clueless. I didn't mean to hurt her and I hope she's okay. I know you'll have to arrest me for dangerous driving or leaving the scene of an accident. It's okay. I did it, but I didn't want to hurt Moira, I just wanted to talk.' She paused. 'I actually pulled over so that I could go back, but someone had already stopped to help her so I decided it would be best if I left. I knew Eric would go ballistic at me for interfering in his life. I thought... I thought...' She began to hyperventilate again. 'I wasn't thinking.'

'It's okay. Eric isn't here anymore.'

'I thought he'd lock me back in the bunker again, and I didn't want to go back in the bunker.' She slammed her hands on the table and lay face down on them as she sobbed, letting it all out. 'I want my mum. I want to speak to my mum. Please, you have to take me to see her.'

### SIXTY-THREE

Thursday, 5 September

One of the team had arrested Ellie, or Elissa, for failing to stop at the scene of the accident and dangerous driving, but given the circumstances, Gina knew it was unlikely that she would be prosecuted, given that she was a victim in all this too. There was so much more to deal with and they were all happy to pick up on that later, when the CPS had the whole story, or when they themselves had unravelled it a little more. They'd officially bailed Elissa, and Gina knew she had to be the one to take her to see Ruth, but first she had to speak to Ruth, tell her what had happened.

Elissa stood against the hospital wall, inhaling on a cigarette while being comforted by the FLO, Orla Cartwright. Jacob was on a quick call to O'Connor, so Gina quickly checked her private phone. A message had been sitting there for over an hour. It was Pete.

I need to speak to you urgently, at your house! P

She swallowed and placed her phone back into her pocket. There was no way she could deal with him now. She had a mother and daughter to reunite. Whatever the future held, she had to face it. She was done worrying about the things she had no power to change. All she wanted was a happy ending to the nightmare case she'd been working on. Her own happy ending no longer mattered.

A wash of sadness hit her. Bernard had called in the early hours to confirm that they had found the bones of a young female and a baby underneath the Joanie and Sammie

gravestone. They had also found the bones of a young female under Felicity's gravestone. There were no bones under the unmarked stone, but Gina suspected that it might have been there for Luna, or even Elissa, had she tried to leave Eric and tell anyone what had happened. A knot formed in Gina's throat.

Orla Cartwright's curly hair was getting swept up in the breeze as they stood outside Cleavesford General. The family liaison officer then led Elissa through and spoke gently to her, trying to ease the anxiety that was causing Elissa to tremble. 'It's okay, Ellie. We're doing this together.'

Jacob, Orla, Elissa and Gina stepped inside and headed towards the small café. Gina turned to Orla. 'Will you be alright here for a short while? I'll call down when we've spoken to Ruth.'

Orla nodded and smiled as she led Elissa towards the large menu fixed to the wall.

Gina took a slow, deep breath and looked at Jacob when they reached the outside of Ruth's door. Her eyes were closed and her chest was gently rising and falling.

Gina tapped the door lightly. She knew that Ruth would want to be woken up to be told that they'd found Elissa. There was also more news, but Gina was going to leave that to Elissa to tell.

'What time is it?' Ruth asked, as she rubbed her shadowed eyes, the creases around them more prominent than before.

'It's just after nine in the morning. May I sit?'

Ruth nodded and sat up in bed. Gina saw that she was no longer using oxygen, but she was still hooked up to a monitor. Her saturation levels were much better than the night before. 'The nurse said I'd be able to leave later if the doctor says it's okay.'

Gina smiled. 'That's good news. I also have some more news for you.'

Ruth scrunched her brow. 'Really, I literally have no one now. I don't know what you could say to make things better.'

'It's Elissa, she wants to see you.'

Gasping for breath, Ruth threw back the white sheet and sat up even straighter.

'You found her?'

'Yes.' Gina could explain everything, but she thought she'd leave that to Elissa to tell in her own way. She'd also leave Elissa to talk about her two grown-up children, her grandchildren and the new baby that had been born only three hours ago. She envisaged Ruth and Elissa walking to the maternity ward after the news had been revealed, but that wasn't going to happen. Elissa needed time to speak to her son and daughter first.

Ruth could barely get her words out. 'W-where is she?'

'She's downstairs in the canteen with a family liaison officer. They're waiting for me to call. Shall I ask her to bring Elissa up now?'

Nodding frantically, Ruth replied, 'Yes.'

Gina nodded to Jacob to make the call. While waiting, Gina quickly explained Gary's role in everything, that it looked like he'd been trying for years to find Elissa and that he had no involvement at all in her or Elissa's kidnappings.

The ten minutes it took for Elissa and Orla to reach them seemed like forever. Ruth couldn't stop biting her nails.

Jacob stepped outside the room and waited for Gina. Orla nodded and smiled as she let Elissa stand in the doorway.

‘Mum,’ she said, her voice quivering. Elissa pushed past Gina and ran straight over to her mother, then hugged her close. They both began to sob as they parted and stared at each other.

‘I’ve missed you so much. I never gave up hope that I’d hear from you again.’ She stroked her daughter’s hair as Elissa sat on the bed next to her. ‘Look at you, all grown up.’

Gina discreetly left the room and closed the door. She and Orla met Jacob by the nurses’ station. He had a tissue in his hand, was dabbing at his eye. ‘I err, think I... allergies. It’s my allergies.’

Wiping her eyes with her sleeve, Gina shook her head. ‘I think my allergies are playing up, too. I guess we should get back and deal with the paperwork.’

Her personal phone vibrated once. She had to deal with Pete.

SIXTY-FOUR

GIRL

I manage to draw in a breath. My baby is crying in my arms. Our baby – Luna. The light has gone out and all I see is the glow of the red light above. I'm too weak to protest as the woman takes my baby from my arms. The agony running through me is too much to bear. My breaths come fast and my heart seems to be pounding like it's trying to burst out of me. I'm so damp underneath and still I keep bleeding.

As I go to stand, I collapse onto the floor next to my bed and reach out, all my energy going on dragging myself forward a couple of centimetres.

'Albie,' I scream, hoping that he will come. I need a hospital. Agony tears through me. I'm hot and burning up. 'My baby, I want my baby.' Maybe the woman has come to help me.

She kneels and I see tears in her eyes, but I don't see my baby.

'Who are you?' I just about manage to ask. 'Are you here to help me?'

The woman nods. 'I'm Elissa. I'm going to help you escape this hell you've been living in. It happened to me, too.'

I'm so confused, but at the same time I'm happy. I need her to get me out of here and take me and Luna to a hospital. Without help, I will lose too much blood and die. She pulls a phone out and she's sending a message. Help is on its way.



I lie back, relief flooding through me while wondering why her tears are bouncing off my cheeks.

Just as I feel secure that I'm about to be saved, a pillow is thrust over my face. Panicking, I try to hit out, but my weak limbs are no match for her strong body. She presses it hard and I fight for what seems like forever, but nothing gets that pillow off me.

It's no good. I want to keep fighting, but I have nothing left. I only hope she doesn't hurt my baby. I feel her hot breath say something in my ear. As the world goes black, those words stay with me.

'You're free from it all now. This life isn't worth it. You don't have to suffer any more. I saved you.'

### SIXTY-FIVE

Gina played the next four messages on her hands-free as she drove home in the darkness, along the country lanes. All Pete kept repeating was for her to come home immediately, but not saying why. A sickness began to radiate from her core as she pulled up.

Her house was in darkness. She wondered if Pete had found a way in again. As she opened the door, she heard her cat darting out of the cat flap, and she knew. 'Pete,' she called.

She carried on walking through her lounge and into the kitchen. That's when she saw him through the glass in her kitchen window, sitting on an old plastic chair amongst her overgrown garden. She unlocked the door and he entered. He placed his laptop on the kitchen table next to his phone. 'What's happening?'

He exhaled sharply. 'I stopped it. I've taken it down. Look.' He opened his laptop. 'Sorry, I took the liberty of logging on to your Wi-Fi. The site is down. It looks like Stephen has been working with someone to get it back up, all with the aim of destroying you somehow.'

'Someone else, who?'

He shrugged. 'It's only a guess, but I don't think Stephen would have the knowledge for all this.'

Gina frowned. 'All the messengers?'

‘I’ve sent a virus to the email addresses of all the users who have an account. They’ll probably just think that’s what it was all about. It’s over, Gina.’

She pulled out her own phone and tried to log in to Men-R-Takin-It-Back, but it was gone. ‘My boss received a phone message.’

He nodded frantically. ‘I stopped them before any more could go out. It was Stephen.’

‘What’s happening with him now?’

‘Like the others, he has one hell of a virus. I don’t think his tech will be good for much.’

Her stomach felt like a stone was lying in it. ‘What if it happens again, with your site?’

‘Like I said, I want a quiet life in Devon. I will do what I can to help.’ He paused and rubbed his stubble. ‘I’ve upheld my end of the bargain, Gina. I need to know I’m safe to leave here and live my life without the threat of you tarnishing my reputation. The woman I live with, I love her. I want a chance to start again. When I go home, I’m going to ask her to marry me and I am going to be the best husband ever. I’m not the man you knew back then. Everyone deserves another chance.’

He’d done as asked. She hurried up the stairs to retrieve the memory stick that she had hidden under the floorboards, then returned downstairs and passed it to him.

‘How can I trust you? You might have copies.’

‘I don’t.’

He snatched it from her and closed his laptop, leaving them both in darkness. Opening the back door, he stepped out into the garden. He stood there, staring.

‘What is it, Pete? You have what you want. You can go now.’

Shaking his head, he roared. ‘I never wanted any of this.’ He let out a nervous laugh.

She paused and watched. His expression changed to relief, but she couldn’t ignore the smirk forming across his face. Her heart sunk. She’d been played by him in the vilest of ways. ‘This was all you, wasn’t it, Pete?’

‘You made me do it. You made me start all that up again, just to get that stick. Don’t you think it was convenient no one ever came to your house, or that only your boss, the one you’re shagging, got a message?’ He began to pace. ‘I’m sorry, I read all your messages. You should change your personal phone number and email and not use passwords that are so obvious a five-year-old could guess them. But, I am sorry for everything.’

She felt her tense fingers reach the chopping board, and on top of that board was a knife. No one knew Pete was at her house. She could plunge it into him and bury him in her garden. She was angry enough to do it.

She gripped the handle and then let go. Terry was a necessity, but Pete was just a disappointment – one she would have to live with. ‘I actually trusted you.’ She let out a nervous laugh. ‘There is no cutesy cottage or girlfriend. You lied again, didn’t you?’

He nodded. ‘Gina, we both survive because we’re really good liars. We’re more alike than you think. All we want is to survive.’

‘I am nothing like you.’

‘Keep telling yourself that. A liar knows a liar. I have to go. Enjoy your life.’ He headed towards the end of her garden where she was sure he was going to leave over the fence. ‘Oh, I do have something for you because I’m not the total bastard you think I am. Like you, self-preservation made me do it.’ He blew out a big breath and walked back to her. ‘I’m a pro at what I do, and at the end of the day, I want to do something good. I heard what you said about doing the right thing when it came to White Knight, and it felt just a little bit good to help. It warmed my ice-cold heart for just a second and it felt right. If you need assistance with any sickos on the dark web, or you need information, you have my number. I owe you, so use me. Here, I got this from Stephen ages ago. He must have had it from Terry. He wanted me to publish it everywhere, but I couldn’t.’ He thrust something into her hand and walked away.

As he scurried over the fence, she let Ebony in and slammed the door. She grabbed the knife and stabbed it through the photo of herself, piercing the chopping board underneath.

Terry was the horrible gift that kept on giving, but she was no longer that scared young, pregnant woman, bound and blindfolded in a shed.

She pulled the knife out of the photo and roared as she tore it up, not wanting to ever see that side of herself again.

Early November

As Gina drove to the candlelit vigil at the church, she couldn't help but think of the case, in fact, she'd thought of not much else over the past few weeks. At some point, the remains would be released and the families would be able to arrange funerals. They'd never managed to find any relatives of Joanie Callahan, so Gina had decided she would attend her funeral.

Bernard had found a note in one of Eric's jacket pockets in the unit. Gina mulled over its contents in her head, trying to make sense of it all. It had been a suicide note from Albie. Albie had been scared of being around Luna, as he was unsure whether he could control his desire as she developed into a woman, despite her being his daughter. He'd done all he could to protect himself and Luna from the outside world by keeping her in the bunker, safe and belonging to him, but she was no longer safe because of him. His only option had been to end his life, to protect her from the monster he knew he was. Albie had also been angry. He'd found out about his mother, Joanie, and insisted that they mark the graves behind the bunker. In the note, Albie wrote about Eric confessing to Albie that Joanie had died of an infection and that he couldn't take her to the hospital as she would have told the police about him. After all those years of believing that Joanie had abandoned him, he then knew the truth. Albie expressed how angry and upset he was with his father in the scrawled letter. Gina turned onto the high street as she then thought about Keeley.

The last thing Albie chose to write about was how much he wanted Keeley to be Luna's mother and protector. He'd met her onsite at the Moores' renovation and saw how much of a good mother she was to her two boys. It was his last wish that Keeley was taken to be Luna's mother. He explained that he was sick of arguing with Eric,

because Eric thought that Ruth needed to be a mother more than anything because he had Elissa.

Gina thought about Calvin Harris and that Calvin's daughter had told them that the man they now knew to be Albie was telling Calvin he had a severely disabled young daughter he always had to be on hand for. Felicity wasn't his daughter but Gina knew that Albie would have done his best to throw people off the scent of missing Felicity. Also having the cover of a disabled daughter who needed him would give him the pass he needed to leave work at any time. The lies were all part of the game, just like they were with Eric; all woven to deflect any suspicion towards either of them.

Replaying her interview with Moira Moore after being run off the road, Moira confirmed Elissa's version of events and she, too, came clean with her husband about continuing the affair she told him she'd ended. She failed to tell them that Elissa had caused the accident as she wasn't ready to confess to them and naming Elissa at the time would have opened up that conversation before she was ready to have it.

Moira had also spoken about some of the conversations she'd had with Eric; that she'd tell Eric how much she loved her daughter-in-law, Keeley, and what a good mother she was.

Eric had honoured Albie's wishes and tried to snatch Keeley first but had failed, so he'd gone with his own plan. After all, he'd been playing games with Gary and Ruth for weeks. It was all about the game for him, whether it be chess or ruining lives.

Gina swallowed the nauseous feelings down. Keeley had a lucky escape but Gary didn't. Gina wondered how Eric knew Gary was getting close to finding Elissa, but being able to frame Gary was part of a bigger game.

She spared another thought for the old dog, Luna, and she was pleased that the workshop manager had confirmed that he'd definitely take her in and give her a forever home. The dog was virtually his anyway.

Then there was Colson. No images of him and Tristan Moore were found on any devices but after Colson later confessed after being questioned again, he was charged with the theft of Tristan's money, and also under the Sexual Offences Act as he threatened to share an intimate image without Tristan's consent. It looked like Colson had been bluffing when it came to having an actual photo. She hoped that no images would ever surface, just like she hoped that no other images of herself would ever appear on the internet again. She hadn't heard any more from Pete Bloxwich and she hoped to never hear from him again.

Candles flickered on the large expanse of grass in front of the church. She parked next to Briggs's car and stepped out. Sally, the vicar, waved at her from afar as she passed the candles around to the many people who'd been rocked by what had happened. Luna was standing with Marie. It was a tough journey for both of them, but Gina had heard that Luna had started helping Marie at her snack van on the weekends, which was huge progress. Gina had visited them on several occasions and there would always be a place in her heart for Luna.

Ruth and Elissa waved at her. Gina waved back. Moira and Tristan weren't there, but Keeley was. Gina had heard they were getting divorced, so they had a lot to deal with.

Briggs got out of his car and ignored Gina as he headed towards the path leading to the vigil.

'Chris, wait.' She jogged to catch up with him. 'Can we please talk? You can't blank me forever.'

'I can. I've got nothing to say to you, Gina.'

Jacob pulled up.

Briggs swiftly led her away from the crowd around the back of the church. He finally



stopped walking when he reached the back end of the graveyard, where no one else could see them or listen in.

‘I’m sorry, okay?’

‘Sorry? I’m sick of hearing it. You gave that man everything you had. You chose to trust him and gave him that memory stick without talking it through with me and, surprise, surprise, he shafted you. How could you not tell me what was going on? I have always been there for you!’

Gina hated that he was angry, but the fact that he was now talking to her was a start. Ever since the case, he’d been ghosting her, and she had missed him more than anything. She’d take angry Briggs over no Briggs any day of the week.

‘I know, and I was an idiot, but he’ll leave me alone, I know he will.’

She wouldn’t ever tell Briggs how much she’d wanted to drive a knife through Pete’s body that night.

‘I miss you, please don’t punish me anymore.’ She reached for his hand and he allowed her to hold it for a moment before snatching it away.

‘I’m done with your drama.’ He blew out a long breath. ‘I am your DCI and you are my DI. DI Harte, we have a vigil to attend and I will see you at work on Monday.’

He walked away, leaving her fighting back her tears while leaning on a mossy old gravestone.

She forced her heavy feet and weary bones back towards the church and stood at the back as Sally talked about the loss of Joanie, Sammie and Felicity. Gina could no longer contain her tears. Jacob came and stood next to her and passed her a candle.

Gina spared her final thought for all the victims that remained silent forever, for those who couldn't tell their stories and those who chose not to tell. She knew how it felt for the living victims; the weight they carried around with them all day. The cost of their silence was crushing and she, too, was suffocating under that weight. The only person that had been by her side through it all had abandoned her, and she understood why.

Jacob placed a friendly arm over her shoulder. 'It's so moving, the community coming together like this.'

She nodded. 'It is.' She glanced across at Briggs and he looked away.

A warm hand held hers. Gina turned to see Luna. 'Don't cry, Gina. Everything will be okay now.' The girl smiled. 'We're all okay now.'

'We're all okay,' she whispered to the girl. She choked on those words. She was not okay. Not at all, but Gina would carry on doing what she did so well: pretending.

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