

Prologue

She made her skittering, sliding way down the riverbank. Her trainers hit the flat ground at the lip of the water, and she wobbled but recovered.

‘Jessie!’

She heard her name, and felt an answering buzz of adrenalin. She paused, then kicked her way on again. Just her brother, not Dad. Away up the slope. Her brother wasn’t going to yell at her for wandering off.

It was quiet. Much quieter than up by the camping stove where Dad’s commands were unrelenting. Her ears were full of leaves rustling, and rushes of birdsong.

She left the shadow of the trees, the sun making fierce patterns on skin already hot from scrambling. She put a hand up over her eyes to block the glare from the water. She should have brought sunglasses, and thought about going back for them. But she didn’t want to risk being seen. Not when being seen meant being inspected for dirt and told to clean herself, lay the table, and put things away.

She moved into the shadows under the bank, her eyes dazzled. There were blue patterns everywhere she looked. A spreading beech tree was above her, and roots arced out of the soil like flattened croquet hoops. Her foot caught on one. She stumbled, her heart jolting as she thought she might fall into the water. The river was dirty in the shadows under the tree, ominous. But she wasn’t really close enough to fall in, and she regained her balance.

In front of her was a scooped-out section of earth the shape of a hammock that made her want to nestle in it.

‘Jessie!’

Great. It was her dad this time, and closer by. He was using the kind of voice that wanted an answer. But in front of her was the cool earth, and a hiding place.

She stretched one foot down into the hollow, and then the other. She felt immediately cooler, and took a seat on the slightly crumbly earth. She imagined herself as an early villager, sheltering in the woods while Vikings raided her home.

But it wasn’t as soft as she’d expected. Ridges of root pressed against her pelvis and back. She squirmed left and right, trying to find a comfortable spot.

Her shorts snagged, and she felt a jab in her leg.

She pushed a hand down to disentangle the cloth, and then felt the root crumble in her hand. She lifted it and saw not old wood, but flakes of brown, and the bleach-white shapes of freshly exposed bone.

She didn’t need her GP father to tell her she was holding a human finger.

I

Jonah was halfway up Blissford Hill when he felt the buzz of his phone in the zip pocket on the back of his Lycra. He was standing up on the pedals and slogging upwards. He considered ignoring it, and then had a vivid image of his mum in hospital. And following that, he had a slightly stomach-turning thought that it might be Michelle. Which was just as irrational as every other time he'd believed it in the last eight months, but he thought it anyway.

He braked with gritted teeth and stopped his grinding climb. He caught his shin on one of the pedals as he jumped down, and was savage by the time he'd rooted his phone out and seen DS Lightman's extension flashing on the screen.

'Ben?' he said, and then moved the phone away from his mouth to mask his heavy breathing.

'Sorry, chief.' Lightman didn't sound it. Never really sounded anything. Michelle had liked to call him Barbie. Exquisitely pretty and emotionless. A lot smarter than Barbie, though, Jonah knew. 'Call from DCS Wilkinson. He wants you to postpone your days off to investigate a possible homicide.'

Jonah let the DS wait in silence. He looked up at the tree-shadowed top of the hill. It was a slog away, but he wanted the slog. His legs were crying out for it. He squeezed the drop handles of his bike with his free hand and felt the sweat on his palm. He hadn't spent enough time doing this recently.

'Sir?'

'Where?' he asked, not bothering to hide his irritation.

‘Brinken Wood.’

There was another silence, but this one wasn’t deliberate. He felt knocked off balance.

‘Recent remains?’ he asked in the end, though he thought he knew the answer.

‘No. DCS says not,’ said the sergeant, who was too young to understand.

His day of cycling was over, but Jonah suddenly felt too old for it anyway. He couldn’t remember ever feeling old before.

‘Send a car to pick me up in Godshill. Bring the kitbag from behind my desk. And find someone to lend me a deodorant.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Lightman answered, his voice as level as ever.

Jonah slotted his phone back into the pocket of the technical top. There was sweat already cooling on him and leaving him chilled. He ought to get cycling again. It was a few more miles to Godshill.

He stayed there, unmoving, for a full minute, then swung his leg off the Cannondale and started to walk it slowly up the hill.

Hanson was in such a hurry to climb out of the car that she caught the sleeve of her expensive new suit on a protruding piece in the door and pulled a thread. It gave her a slightly sick feeling. She hadn’t really been able to afford it in the first place. She’d bought three others in her first two weeks as a DC, having previously owned only jeans, tank tops and sweaters, and a few dresses for going out. Suits were bloody expensive, and she resented the money she could have been spending on her unreliable car. Or maybe on an actual social life, which she seemed to have forgotten about somewhere along the way.

She tried to smooth the plucked sleeve down while she made her way inside. She wondered if she could get her mum

to take a look at it, if she managed to make it to her mum's any time soon. A potential homicide might mean working through the weekend. Late nights and living off caffeine while they caught the killer. The thought made her smile.

She let herself into CID and saw Lightman's head bent over his screen. She wondered how long he'd been here, and whether he did anything else with his life. Whether there was a Lightman wife and kids that he hadn't yet mentioned. He somehow had the look of an unfaithful husband about him. Too pretty, and too closed off. Unless that was more her own recent experience warping her expectations.

Lightman caught sight of her and gave a small smile. 'I got hold of the chief. He's going to need picking up and taking to the crime scene.'

'On it,' Hanson answered immediately. 'Where is he?'

'Godshell,' he said. 'He's on his bike.'

Hanson nodded. She pretended she knew the place well, and that she wasn't about to punch it into her satnav. Two weeks into the job and she basically knew the route from home to the station and the supermarket, and from there to the dockside, where they'd been looking at some potential fraud. She missed the certainty of zooming around Birmingham, where she'd grown up, and then worked as a constable for two years. Though she had to admit that the New Forest was a lot prettier.

'You'll need this,' Lightman said, and lifted a dark-grey kitbag from the floor. 'And despite the time constraints, I'd take him a coffee. He's not going to be that happy at having his day off interrupted.'

'OK. Just . . . a filter coffee? Not a latte or something?'

Lightman laughed. 'God no. Have you not had one of his rants on coffee menus yet?'

‘No, but I’m sure it’ll be great.’ She put the kitbag on to her shoulder. ‘OK. Anything else? Do you know what it’s about yet?’

Lightman shook his head. ‘Local sergeant will hand over to the chief at the scene. You’ll both get a run-down, though if it’s not recent, there won’t be much so far.’

Hanson nodded, and tried not to smile. You shouldn’t smile at news of a murder, even if it had been ages ago. But the truth was, she was delighted.

Hanson was wound up like it was exam results day. She gabbled at Jonah about the kitbag and coffee, and then without pausing for breath asked about the remains. Jonah found it somewhere between sweet and irritating.

‘Ben said they might not be recent,’ she said.

‘I’d wait until forensics give an opinion,’ he replied, taking a long gulp of coffee. ‘Most people – including me – don’t have a scooby what age bones are.’

Having sweated and chilled, he was cold even in the suit he had tugged on in the public toilets at Godshill. Cold, and drifting around his own thoughts of thirty years ago. He had to interrupt her to ask her to turn the heater on. The Fiat veered while she turned the dial, and then steadied.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

‘I’m just grateful you’re driving,’ he said, with a slight smile. ‘The coffee was a good call, by the way. You’ve given me at least a couple of hours of not being in a really bad mood.’

‘Hmm. A couple of hours. So I’ve either got to find you a Starbucks before then, or get out of the way?’

‘Pretty much,’ Jonah agreed.

Brinken Wood was suddenly on them. There was a cluster of squad cars and uniforms in the shingle car park. He found

it impossible not to remember this place as it had been back then. The car park had all been bark and mud, but it had been just as overrun by police. The haircuts different; the faces somehow the same.

Jonah levered himself out of the car once they'd pulled up, taking the coffee cup with him. He felt like he'd gone back in time. So many months had been spent here, searching endlessly.

He approached the sergeant. 'DCI Sheens. This is DC Hanson.'

Hanson had been the same rank as the sergeant two weeks ago. But to train as a detective, you had to take what amounted to a demotion, and become a detective constable. Jonah remembered not being sure who was more important when it had happened to him, and wondered if Hanson felt the same.

There was sweat along the sergeant's hairline. His eyes were over-wide and his smile brief and agitated. His police constable, a stocky twenty-something, seemed calmer.

Jonah addressed his question somewhere between the two of them: 'Who found the remains?'

The sergeant answered. 'A GP out camping with his family. Well, his daughter, but he called it in.'

'How old's the daughter?'

'Nine,' the constable said. 'Seems fine, though. It's the father who's taking it hard.'

'They're still here?'

'We've kept them at their campsite. It's not within view of the remains.'

Jonah nodded, and let the sergeant lead the way, though he knew where he was going. It was where seven kids had bedded down thirty years ago, but only six of them had got up in the morning.

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Dr Martin Miller was sitting apart from his family. The doctor's wife was watching the boy play on an iPad. The girl was kicking up dust around the edge of the camp.

It was the mother Jonah approached.

'DCI Sheens.' He smiled at her. He'd had to learn how to smile when his mind was full of complicated, dark thoughts like crazed glass between him and the world. 'Would you mind if I talk to your daughter for a few minutes?'

'Jessie!' It was a call from the father. His voice was high-pitched and irritable. 'Stop kicking like that. You're making a mess.'

The girl was halfway upset and halfway rebellious. She scuffed over to her mother and Jonah, sat down quickly, and looked up at him, her knees up near her chin.

The mother slid an arm round her in a brief hug. 'You don't mind talking to the police, do you, Jessie?' she asked her daughter.

Jessie shook her head.

'We don't need to ask much,' Jonah said, steadily. 'Just a few details about what you found.'

'Sure.'

'She doesn't know anything,' her slightly older brother interrupted scathingly. The disdain of older siblings had always seemed uniquely intense to Jonah.

He glanced over at the boy, who was now watching them both a little sullenly. He thought about asking him to move away, but decided to let him be.

He crouched close to Jessie. 'So, a few questions for you.'

The girl gave him another wary look, and then her gaze wandered away and she picked up a pebble, threw it off to the side, repeated it with another.

'Jessie, for goodness' sake!' The father again. Much closer.

‘Stop throwing things, and look at the policeman when he’s talking to you. This is important.’

Jonah tried to smile up at the doctor. ‘It’s OK, don’t worry.’

‘Jessie!’

Jonah might as well not have spoken.

The girl gave her father a truculent look, and then did her best to look up at Jonah through her straight brown fringe. Jonah tried not to become irritated at the father’s interruptions, which had nothing to do with helping the police, he thought, and everything to do with control.

‘Are you an inspector?’ Jessie asked quietly.

Jonah grinned. ‘I am. Detective chief inspector, in fact.’

Jessie’s eyes were still a little wary. ‘So you’re in charge?’

‘Yes.’ She seemed happy enough with that, so he went on. ‘Could you tell me what you were doing when you found the bones?’

Jessie glanced at her father, and then said quietly, ‘Hiding.’

Jonah saw the mother grimace, but she didn’t try to deny it.

‘Hiding can be fun,’ he said. ‘That hollow under the tree. That was already there? You didn’t have to dig it?’

Jessie shook her head. ‘I just got in and sat down. There was something poking me, so I pulled it out.’

Jonah nodded. ‘Naturally. And it came out easily?’

‘Yes. I thought – I thought it was a root, and then maybe a plant because I grabbed a handful. But then I realized it was a finger.’

‘Well done,’ he said, nodding. ‘Not everybody would have realized.’

Jessie nodded, gave a small smile, and stood up. Her mother pulled her into a brief hug.

‘I’d like them not to talk to their school friends about this

for a few days,' Jonah said to Mrs Miller, once she'd let go of her daughter.

'It's OK, they're not seeing any for a few weeks. We thought we'd carry on the holiday, but somewhere else.'

Privately educated kids, he realized. They were already on holiday, a good month before the state schools broke up.

'Good. It would be better if this wasn't talked about just yet.'

'Of course.'

He heard Dr Miller's footsteps.

'Are we done? It's a beautiful day and I don't think we have much to add.'

'Yes, we're all done. Thanks for your patience.'

As Jonah stood, the doctor was already giving his children orders to get packed up.

He hurried them over to the tent, and Jonah found himself watching until Mrs Miller rose and began to pick up a few half-eaten packs of raisins and a cup.

'I'm sorry your holiday got interrupted,' he said.

'It's fine,' she said, with a brief wave of her hand, and glanced at her husband. 'Martin's just . . . It's not great for him.' This in a low voice. 'This was supposed to be a holiday where he could forget . . . He's been very unwell. They only gave him a fifty per cent chance of living past Christmas.'

Jonah nodded, wondering whether she was used to apologizing for her husband. But he understood that she meant cancer; that those bones had been a little handful of mortality. He felt a trace of sympathy.

An hour and a half of excavation. Dozens of photographs. A tent set up and eight bags of carefully labelled bone fragments.

Everyone was getting hot and irritable. Jonah's mouth was beginning to taste like bitter, hours-old coffee. His feet were fractious, impossible to keep still. And he had the kind of energy-sapping hunger that made it hard to focus.

'Anything yet?' Hanson asked, after wandering up to the car park and back a few times.

Excitement had turned into boredom, the one reliable constant in the emotional range of every detective.

'I think it'll be a while,' Jonah said. 'It's an old corpse . . . time-consuming job.'

'Is there anything we can be . . .?'

'We can be here when they want to talk to us,' he said with a half-smile.

Some twenty minutes later, Linda McCullough, the scene of crime officer, stepped carefully up out of the dip and approached him. He was glad it was McCullough. You needed someone obsessively careful on a site that would have only the barest traces of data left.

'How goes it, Linda?'

'We're going to be bagging this up for some time.' She lifted her mask and let it sit on the top of her white hood. Her weathered face was wet with sweat, as anyone's would have been if they'd been wearing overalls in that weather. But McCullough seemed not to notice it. 'But as initial feedback, it's a pubescent female, in an advanced state of decay.'

'How advanced?'

'Rough estimate only, but more than ten years. Fewer than fifty.'

Thirty years, he thought. *Thirty.*

He found it hard, momentarily, to believe that so much time had passed. A feeling that he must be Rip van Winkle, and have slept through much of his life, ran through him.

Rip van Winkle must have felt this strange mixture of anger and guilt, too.

‘Linda!’

McCullough turned, shielding her eyes from the sun. Another white bio-suit was leaning out of the tent to call to her.

‘I’m uncovering other materials. Can I get your opinion?’

‘Sure.’

She replaced her mask and climbed carefully back to the site, disappearing into the tent.

‘So if it’s murder, it’s an old one,’ Hanson said, and Jonah was half blinded by the white of the paper as she flipped her notebook to write in it. She sounded disappointed. Unaware of the huge implications behind those numbers. ‘And a teenage girl.’

‘It’s thirty years old,’ he said. ‘And it’s Aurora Jackson.’

2. Aurora

Friday, 22 July 1983, 5:30 p.m.

Light, dark, light, dark.

Every tree was a shadowy pulse as they flashed past it. It was a soothing rhythm. She rested her head on the car door and watched her hair flicking and snapping out. She thought about drifting on the hot wind, away from here, to somewhere the light was golden-orange all day.

‘Where were you last night? I tried calling your house a few times.’ It was Topaz, sunglasses pushed up into her dark hair as she leaned forward from the back seat. She wasn’t talking to Aurora, of course.

Aurora wished Brett hadn’t been kind to her and let her ride shotgun. She could tell that Topaz wanted to be there. Her sister was angry that she’d been relegated; angry with Aurora. Connor had been angry, too. He didn’t like that Brett had offered to drive the three of them while he’d been left to cycle with the others.

‘Huh? Oh. I went to a film.’ Brett shifted gears as he spoke. His hand brushed Aurora’s flimsy skirt. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered.

Aurora moved a little, shrugging. ‘My fault. I’m in the way.’

‘What film? Something scary?’ Topaz asked, almost over the top of her.

‘Blue Thunder.’

‘Again?’ Topaz laughed, and pushed his shoulder lightly. ‘You must have seen that twenty times.’

‘Just three,’ Brett replied. ‘It’s a great film. It knocks a lot of the stuff this year out of the water.’ A brief pause to overtake a caravan. ‘What kind of films do you like, Aurora?’

‘Huh?’

It was a knee-jerk response. The pretence of being elsewhere. It happened so often that even though she’d been listening, she couldn’t help it. She heard Topaz mutter, ‘Airhead.’

She looked at Brett, who was smiling warmly enough.

‘What kind of films do you like watching?’

‘I don’t know. Anything . . . where I get to see another world, I suppose. Things set in strange countries, or space, or fantastical places. I like romance, too.’

She heard Coralie snort, and wondered if she should have lied and told him she liked action movies. Topaz always pretended to be into them, and rolled her eyes at ‘girly girls’ who only liked soppy films. Aurora had always let her do it, even though she knew Topaz’s favourite films were all period dramas or romantic comedies.

‘So you must like *Star Wars*, then?’ Brett asked. ‘That’s got all of that. Have you seen *Return of the Jedi* yet?’

Aurora shook her head. ‘I was going to wait till it was out on video. My parents didn’t like the last one . . .’

‘Ah, you have to see it in the cinema,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘All the effects, the Star Destroyers, the rumbling that comes from the speakers – and it’s going to be ages till the video. We should sort that out, Topaz.’ He glanced in the rear-view mirror. ‘Go as a group.’

‘Sounds good,’ Topaz said, and Aurora could tell from the set of her mouth that she wasn’t happy.

I shouldn’t have mentioned our parents. She told me not to talk about them.

Aurora felt a knot of tension in her stomach. She never knew what to say in front of Topaz's friends. Whatever she came out with was always the wrong thing. And getting it wrong in front of Brett was worse. He was the older one everyone crushed on. The star sportsman who could draw a dozen girls as an audience just by turning up to train in the school pool.

Her feelings about being here were such a mixture of gratitude and anxiety. Everyone in her year – everyone in the school really – would have killed to be sitting here. Brett Parker was right next to her, close enough to touch. And more than that, she was with *the group*. With Benner's gang of strange, anarchic, brilliant and beautiful friends.

It was a group she didn't fit into at all; one she had only been invited into because of her sister. And, in one of those ironies, Topaz didn't want her there at all.

She looked back at the trees and the sunshine, imagining that she could be lifted by that breeze and placed gently in a pair of strong arms. She gave the arms an owner and a head of dark hair.

She imagined him speaking to her. *I've never met anyone like you before. You're all the world to me.*

'Hey.' Coralie was leaning forward to point. 'That's where you pull in.'

She added a strange little laugh on to the end of it. It was a habit of hers. It made her seem even more childlike. Another thing to add to the pink clothes and the wide eyes and the cultivated confusion at the world.

The car slowed and Aurora watched, regretfully, as the flickering subsided into a slower rhythm and then became just the shadow of overhanging trees. She tried to hold on to that feeling of being cradled and lulled, but Coralie was

opening her door, and Brett pulling the keys out of the ignition.

Reluctantly, she climbed out of the car and watched Topaz get out and walk round towards Brett, who was unloading a few sleeping bags and backpacks. Topaz stretched upwards, her crop top riding up to show her tanned stomach, and then turned round to face away from him. She leaned forward to touch her toes.

Aurora saw Brett's eyes drop to Topaz's backside, where some of her buttocks and the very bottom of her lace underwear were visible.

'I'm soooooo stiff,' Topaz said. She straightened up slowly, and looked at Brett over her shoulder. 'Coming?'

'Uhhh . . . Sure.'

Coralie hurried round the car and took Topaz's hand. The two of them swayed ahead down the forest path.

Jonah took Hanson with him to the Jackson house outside Lyndhurst. He could have left informing next of kin to a couple of community support officers, but he felt a powerful need to be there. Perhaps to comfort; perhaps because he'd waited thirty years for a conclusion.

The Jacksons had never left the New Forest. It was the more common outcome in disappearance cases. Where a murder often drove a family away, an unresolved missing person bound them to the place where the missing one had been. There was always that dwindling hope that they would one day arrive back home again.

The half-mile driveway was almost impassable now. The sand-and-hardcore surface had disintegrated into a mine-field of potholes. Hanson swore when the front-left tyre dipped deeply enough into a pothole that the bottom of the car scraped the hard-baked mud. She pulled the wheel sharply to avoid another, and Jonah steadied himself against the dashboard.

'Doesn't the council resurface this?' she asked.

'Private road,' Jonah replied. 'The Jacksons have never believed in tarmac. They're a bit alternative. Though I'm not sure if it's about a love of nature or just laziness, to be honest.'

'I don't mind nature when it keeps its hands off my car,' Hanson muttered.

She pulled up in a half-cleared area in front of a single-storey house. Jonah opened his door over a dried-mud crater.

Stepping into it, he felt corners of stone press into his foot through the sole of his shoe.

He had half emerged from the car when the battered front door opened. A round, uncertain figure in a thick-knit cardigan and home-dyed dress stood in the doorway, blinking into the sun.

‘Good morning, Mrs Jackson. Sorry for bothering you, but is it all right if we come in?’ he said, as neutrally as he could.

‘I – Yes. Yes, I suppose so.’ She emerged further from under the shadow of a scorched-looking wisteria. Then she stopped. ‘It’s not Topaz, is it?’

Jonah shook his head, but Hanson answered for him.

‘Your daughter’s just fine, Mrs Jackson.’ She said it with a warm smile, and Jonah was glad he’d brought her along.

‘We just wondered if we might chat about some developments in Aurora’s disappearance,’ he added.

Joy Jackson’s head turned back towards the house briefly, and her hands reached for her cardigan pockets.

‘Yes. Yes, of course. Why don’t you –’

She stood shifting as Jonah and Hanson navigated the overgrown stones of the path. Two of them tipped under Jonah’s feet.

Up close, Joy was ruddier and more lined than he’d remembered her. Round cheeks underscored by webs of red; eyes that constantly shifted in creased sockets.

Lavender came off her clothes as she turned. ‘Come in. I’ll find Tom. Tom!’ Her voice was shrill as she dipped into the shadow of the hall. ‘Tom!’

The hallway floor was barely possible to walk along. Most of it was covered with assorted coats, shoes, boxes and eclectic outdoor items. Joy picked her way past without looking at her feet, long practised at this arrangement.

‘Come into the kitchen. I’ll put some tea on. Tom!’

The kitchen was no less cluttered. There were two or three spare feet of clear space at one end of the huge oak table, and a mountain of newspaper, letters and shrapnel on the remainder.

‘Don’t trouble yourself over tea unless you want one,’ Jonah said, as Joy opened three cupboards in turn before finding a box of tea. She turned round with it, and came to a stop again.

He moved around the edge of the table and let his eyes scan the kitchen. The work surfaces were under a layer of visible grime, with dirty crockery spread out like ornaments. Larger objects interspersed them at intervals. An old piece of plumbing. A table-tennis racquet. A hammer.

The stooped figure that emerged from a doorway brought Jonah up short. If it hadn’t been for the wild grey beard and hair, he would never have known him for Tom Jackson, the arrogant, well-bred, decidedly Aspergic oddball. He could barely see any traces of the argumentative man who had clattered in and out of Lyndhurst in his battered Volvo, and who had engaged in periodic feuds with the council or post office. This was no more than a fragment of him. A poor sketch.

‘Police, is it?’

The voice was lifeless too. Jonah remembered the fury of him after Aurora had gone. The aggressive finger-stabbing as he told them what they were doing wrong, and why they couldn’t find her. Perhaps thirty years of fury could burn the life out of a man.

‘Yes, Tom.’ Joy had begun moving again, filling an ancient stovetop kettle from the sink. ‘Will you . . .? I’ll make a pot.’

Tom pulled a wooden carver out. He sat heavily in it and looked first at Hanson, then at Jonah. He seemed to lose interest in both, and began to gaze at a dim painting of the sea on the uneven wall.

The silence as the kettle boiled stretched into awkwardness. Jonah's patience wore through before it had finished.

'We wanted to speak to you first. There's been a development this morning.'

There was a flurry of activity from Joy. She shoved cups down and turned, reaching into her pockets for something, her hands coming up empty.

'They've got some news on Aurora, Tom,' Joy said.

'Yes. I assumed so.'

Jonah met a gaze from Tom that was full of profound disinterest. He found himself looking away.

'Although formal identification is to follow,' Jonah said, 'we've discovered remains not far from the campsite where Aurora disappeared. The age and gender are right, and they look to be thirty years old.' He waited for a response. Tom only flicked a strand of hair out of his eyes, while Joy waited with her gaze on Hanson for some reason.

'We believe it's your daughter,' Jonah finished as gently as he could.

Joy stared with her mouth hanging slack for a moment, and then reached to put a cup down, clumsily.

'She – Oh, Tom.' She drew in a noisy breath, and then sobbed. She turned away, hiding her face. 'Tom. Oh, Tom. She's –'

Hanson moved immediately to put a comforting arm round her. Tom Jackson remained motionless, that empty gaze on his wife now.

'Well, she wasn't going to be alive, was she?' he said, his

voice harsh. ‘Thirty years of not a blasted word. Of course she’s dead.’

Eight forty on a Sunday. Connor Dooley should be taking his weekend, but he’d still had to come in early for marking, and to prepare for their inter-departmental meeting. It happened increasingly: holidays and weekends being gradually absorbed into meetings and paperwork and conflict resolution. And his rooms were being absorbed, too. Once pristine mahogany was now hidden beneath folders and envelopes, its occasionally revealed corners dusty and dull.

Today, he was preparing himself to fight. It was a frustrating, unnecessary fight based on the intractable tightness of the bursar. A new post had been created a year ago out of need. The history fellows had long been overloaded; the college taking on ever more PhD and MPhil students. Even with the extra support of that new post, they were eight per cent below target contact time with their students. However, he’d thought this fight at least partially won until Lopez had taken a professorship at Glasgow, and the bursar had announced no plans to reappoint. He’d told Connor point-blank that the extra fellow had been a luxury they could no longer afford. That the existing three history fellows could cover the extra work between them.

So Connor was here, on Sunday morning, before the coffee shops along West Nicholson Street were even open, ready to print out tables and charts of the time commitments of his faculty. Ready to beat the bursar down with facts. If that tactic failed, he might just invite the man home for dinner. Fighting was sometimes rendered unnecessary when his wife moved towards a colleague wearing a little black dress.

The buzz of his phone was halfway welcome. It was an

excuse to postpone the data-trawling. A reason to put off thinking about grabbing the bursar by his jowly neck.

Topaz. Was she calling to tell him she couldn't come for lunch with him? He half remembered being in bed this morning at fuck-knew what time, and her kissing him good-bye with her hair scraped back and her sports kit on.

He tried to remember what she'd been doing. Training earlier than usual, obviously. She'd been going to a coffee or something afterwards. One of those meet-ups that was half-way between a business meeting and a social chat.

'Hey, T,' he said. 'All OK?'

'They found her.'

It was an odd moment. He heard emotion in her voice, but couldn't pinpoint it. He knew who she meant without needing to be told. He imagined, with a lurch, that Topaz was about to tell him she'd been alive all this time and in hiding.

'She's —'

'She never left the campsite.' He could hear the edge to her voice then. 'They found remains near the river. It's her. She's —'

The pause was long and awful. No chance for him to comfort her in any meaningful way. But he tried anyway.

'Oh, Topaz,' he said. And then: 'I'll come and pick you up.'

A watery breath.

'Sorry . . . yes. Please. We should go down there. There will be flights . . .'

Connor hesitated, thinking of the bursar and the fight he would inevitably lose if he left now. Then, cutting through that thought, there was a memory of a hot, hazy summer and a girl with a halo of blonde hair.

'Sure. I'll cancel tomorrow's meetings. We should go.'

He hung up, and stood unmoving for a while.

So she was by the river . . .

He thought about what that meant. Then he closed his laptop and started gathering his belongings together again.

4. Aurora

Friday, 22 July 1983, 6:15 p.m.

‘We found it last summer, when we were out here for Ben-ners’ birthday.’ Topaz was picking her way down the crumbling riverbank. Coralie was in her automatic place just behind her, tripping along on her skinny legs like a foal, always on the verge of falling but never quite doing it. Ben-ners and Connor and Jojo hadn’t arrived yet, but Topaz couldn’t seem to wait to show Brett around.

Brett seemed happy enough to be given the tour. He was close enough on their heels to reach out and touch them both if he’d wanted to. Aurora thought he probably did want to. They all did.

Aurora trailed further back, drunk on heat and sunshine. She was following for the sake of following. She tripped on something on the lip of the bank and stumbled.

Brett turned, remembering her. ‘You been here before?’

‘No.’

‘Aurora –’ She heard the sharpness of her sister.

Coralie looked at her, and whispered, ‘Great, the love child’s here . . .’

Topaz had turned to face them all, her body blocking the way uncertainly. Behind her was a huge spreading beech tree, its roots plunging into the glittering river.

‘You don’t say a word about this to Mum and Dad, all right?’ Topaz said.

‘Why would I tell them anything?’ Aurora looked up at the tree, and smiled at it. ‘It’s pretty.’

‘I mean it.’

She looked at her sister’s hard blue eyes. She had the quality of sharpened rock just then. Like something carved out of unforgiving stone. Chiselled and sculpted and weathered.

‘Of course I won’t tell them anything.’

‘Come on, then.’ Brett stepped forward and put a hand on Topaz’s dark-bronze shoulder. She yielded, and turned again.

‘This way.’

She ducked her head under a spray of glossy leaves, vanishing into the gloom. Aurora let Coralie and Brett go ahead, and reached out to touch the slick green foliage.

‘It’s hot here.’ She leaned in to whisper to the tree. ‘Are you thirsty?’

She ducked under, too. In the tree’s shade, the soil was bare and loose and pale brown. There was just the earth, and the smooth roots, and a single shrub-like offshoot of the tree at its base.

‘Here.’

Topaz pulled two branches of the sapling aside. There was a dim space behind it, where the bank beneath the roots had been hollowed out.

‘Nice!’ Brett said, stepping forward.

‘Take a look,’ Topaz said. ‘There’s only room for one at a time.’

Aurora watched Brett’s broad shoulders tilt sideways as he squeezed his way into the opening.

‘What’s in there?’ Aurora asked. It looked like the work of animals. Badgers or rabbits. Maybe an otter.

‘Private things,’ Topaz said immediately. ‘Things you need to keep quiet. All right?’

Aurora shrugged. ‘All right.’

And then Brett was re-emerging, his face alight and smudged with mud.

‘Jesus. That’s some stash. Where did it come from?’

Topaz grinned at him.

‘Friend of Jojo’s brother. He had a deal that didn’t come off, and he owed his supplier. Benners bought it all for, you know, cost price.’

‘With what money?’

‘He asked his parents for it. They didn’t have a clue.’

‘He said it was for a new car,’ Coralie chipped in. ‘So he bought a heap of junk for fifty quid and the rest went on this.’

‘Fuck me.’ Brett laughed, and rubbed at his face. ‘That’s a lot of partying.’ His eyes fell on Aurora. ‘You need to have a look.’

‘No, she doesn’t,’ Topaz answered. Her arms were folded across her body, her gaze on her sister.

‘Come on. She’s not going to tell your parents. She’d be in as much shit as you. She’s here with us, isn’t she?’

Aurora looked between them, and then saw Topaz wave her hand.

She dropped to her knees on the earth and crawled in, her skirt picking up soil. There was the tiniest bit of moisture in the air as she entered the darkness. The earth was soft under her hands, feeling fresh-turned, grave-like.

It was a small space. There was just enough room for her to sit, or to kneel. Ahead of her, there was something that gleamed in the dimness. She squinted at it, held out a hand and ran it over the wall of dull silver. She realized that these were piles and piles of carefully folded foil packets held in dozens of clear plastic bags.

She didn't need to know what was in them. Drugs of some kind, she thought. Nothing she wanted to know about.

It was a shame they'd filled so much of this space up. There was a slight animal smell here, and Aurora guessed that whatever had made the hole had been frightened away. She could imagine being a creature and living here. Sleeping here for the winter. Looking after young, safe from predators.

Slowly, she backed out, and stood up, dusting her skirt down. Some of the mud still clung to the gauze, ground in by her knees.

'What did you think?' Brett asked her.

She gave him a small smile.

'It's nice in there.'

She heard Topaz's noise of disgust, even under Brett's booming laugh.

McCullough angled the jaw towards him.

‘Here.’

They were in the forensic department, in the bowels of the station. McCullough had rung him an hour after he’d returned from the Jacksons’ house. It was a much faster turnaround than he’d been expecting. ID’ing a body could take days.

He leaned in, thankful for the age of the body and the mask. McCullough used a finger to hover over the jaw.

‘That’s the filling there. Look at the inside of the second premolar.’

‘And . . .’

‘And the chipped second incisor. Definite ID. No question about it.’

Jonah nodded. He hadn’t needed confirmation, but it was official now. It was Aurora.

‘Her records show she was fourteen when she died,’ Linda added.

‘Any cause of death?’

‘Nothing solid yet.’ She rested the jawbone back on the cloth covering the trolley. ‘Initial visual examination of the skeleton hasn’t come up with knife wounds, or evidence of bullet travel, but that might come down to digital analysis from forensic anthropology. We’ll have that in the next few days.’ She gave a frustrated sound. ‘I’d dearly like to have enough material for a tox analysis, but decomposition is pretty complete.’

‘Why a tox analysis? Any particular reason?’

‘Yes, significant traces of a reason.’

She moved over to a covered workbench and pulled the tarp away. There was a dusting of soil, and within it the outlines of foil-wrapped shapes.

‘Dexedrine.’ Her gloved hands opened a plastic-wrapped package. She removed one of the foil packets, which had been opened. Off-white powder within. Spongy-looking, like crumbling plaster. ‘It was in several foil-wrapped packets with sheeting around it, close by the body. The chemist’s taken samples, but he says it looks medical-grade. There are traces of more in the soil, and it looks like some of the ground has been excavated close by. Possibly some of it’s been removed, though whether by animals or not, it’s hard to tell.’

Jonah dipped his latex-sheathed forefinger into the powder, trying to remember those amphetamine-touched years of the eighties. Had it been Dexedrine behind those many expensive deaths in penthouses? Or speed? Or crystal meth? Hard to distinguish between the older ones and the more recent. So many bodies; so much powder and crystal and muck.

‘Can you try and find some tissue to test for traces? If she was buried with all this stuff, it’s more than possible it’s connected.’

‘Thank you,’ McCullough said drily. ‘That hadn’t occurred to me.’

Jonah gave her a slight smile. ‘Anything else on the body?’

‘Well . . .’

He dusted his finger on the plastic overalls and then followed her to the table again.

‘Nothing indicative. The body’s been submerged at some point. But I’d say well after death.’

Jonah thought about the flooding that the sergeant at the site had talked about. ‘So she didn’t drown,’ he said.

McCullough gave him a level look. ‘She might have drowned.’
‘All right.’ He gave her a small smile. ‘But she was also, separately, submerged. And you haven’t found evidence of drowning.’

‘No, but don’t rule it out until I’m sure.’

‘Noted. Anything else at the scene?’

‘Assorted buried items that we’re searching through. There’s likely to have been some previous contamination of the site, and there are items that might have been carried in by floodwater. So far, nothing exciting. Crisp packets, a crushed beer can, a rubber ball, some unidentified plastic remnants. No weapons. So nothing for you to get hopelessly excited about. Sorry.’

Jonah shook his head, thanked her, and let himself out of the morgue. He felt a mixture of relief at the natural light outside and discomfort at the sudden arrival of sticky heat. He met Hanson on the stairs, files held to her chest a little self-consciously. It looked like she was still working on the docks investigation, which was pretty committed when there was a murder to excite them all.

She turned to walk up the stairs with him. ‘Chief’d like an update.’

‘I’m on my way.’

Hanson nodded, waited a few steps, and then said, ‘Is it definitely a murder?’

‘It looks likely.’

‘Was she shot?’

Jonah glanced at her, slightly startled by the question. ‘Possibly. No sign of it so far. But more significantly, she was found alongside the remains of a stash of Dexedrine. So it’s possible that she overdosed, but it’s also possible that she found something she shouldn’t have done.’

He saw Hanson's small smile. The dilated pupils.

'So it might have been the other kids, either killing her or hiding her death.'

'Definitely a strong possibility.'

'Fucking hell.'

This in a complaining tone from DS O'Malley, oldest member of Jonah's team, as the two Intelligence officers deposited four boxes of case files on to the table at the front of the briefing room. His slightly florid face was slack with surprise.

'Don't use up all the swear words just yet,' Jonah said drily. 'This is just the locally stored stuff.'

'No, this is the first load of the locally stored stuff,' Amir, one of the slightly awkward Intelligence staff, said, pulling at his tie. 'These are from 1983. Then there are another five covering the years from eighty-four to ninety-eight, when it was officially declared a cold case. The more recent stuff – which from what's logged on the system looks like it's mostly disproved sightings and phone calls from the parents – is on the database.'

Lightman lifted a hand. 'Sorry, but . . . eighty-three? That's –'

'Aurora Jackson, Ben. Missing person. Domnall's probably the only one old enough to have heard of her.'

Amir excused himself, and Jonah glanced at his team. Lightman with his total calm in the face of this, as everything; Hanson and the eagerness that made her shift in her seat; and O'Malley, whose face was thoughtful.

Jonah pulled the plastic folder off the top of one of the boxes and opened it. The glossy-printed photo on the top looked strangely new. Aurora, smiling slightly crookedly at

the camera in a school photograph. Blazingly beautiful in this picture, though Jonah could still remember her before she'd emerged from the chrysalis of childhood. He remembered the slightly chubby, frizzy-haired girl whose clothes were always a mess. The ugly younger sister of the girl everybody wanted.

He tacked the photo to the whiteboard.

'Seriously?' O'Malley glanced around at Lightman and Hanson. Hanson was wearing a slightly smug expression. She'd known the punchline. 'That's . . . it's the biggest missing persons case I can remember.'

'It's no longer a missing persons.'

Jonah tacked a photo of the remains McCullough had dug up alongside the school photo.

'Aurora's body was found buried under a tree next to the river less than a quarter of a mile from the campsite. Buried with her are some foil packets of Dexedrine, and it looks like there might have been more.'

He saw Lightman taking notes on an A4 pad. He might as well be writing a Christmas card for all the emotional reaction. O'Malley was sitting back, looking between him and the images, his lined forehead creased up further. Jonah recognized the expression. It was the struggle to match up snatches of memory with the reality of the find. A legend come to life. Except that she was in no way alive.

'I want us to acquaint ourselves with the original investigation in full. I want notes and a summary of interviews, along with anyone and anything you feel has been missed. If you think there's some evidence that's not been followed up, note it. If you think they've done a piss-poor job, note that too.'

Only Lightman managed to conceal his dislike of this

plan. Or perhaps he didn't dislike it. He was fond of facts and figures.

'Alongside that,' Jonah went on, 'we're going to be doing a full investigation from scratch. Redoing every single interview, focusing this time on those drugs, and who moved them, and how she ended up overlooked despite being a few hundred yards from the camp.'

He could see O'Malley's smile. This was more his cup of tea. He liked to interview, did former Captain O'Malley.

'For today, Juliette gets to come on interviews. I want to see the group who were out camping. Juliette, you can compile a list of addresses while I look at the Intelligence overview. I'd like Domnall and Ben to start going through the original case notes.'

O'Malley gave an audible sigh. 'Thanks for this, chief. I'd been feeling like my life's lacking paperwork.'

Jonah smiled in response, but didn't apologize.

'Were you part of the original investigation?' Hanson asked, glancing between Jonah and the board.

'Only just,' Jonah answered. 'I was a fresh-faced constable back then. But I wanted to be involved. She was at school with me, even if I didn't really know her.'

He glanced at her photo. Looking at Aurora's glowing beauty brought back to him an uncomfortable feeling. She was a reminder of a particular night; of a confused series of actions that he'd been desperate to forget for thirty years.

He looked away from the photo. Remembering that now wouldn't help him, or any of them.

Lightman put his pen away in his pocket and started to rise. 'So this has priority over the docks investigation.'

'For the next forty-eight it has,' Jonah answered. 'I'll keep you posted after that. Look for mentions of substance abuse,

or anything related,' he added to Lightman. 'If any of them knew about that drugs stash, I want to know. And then I want to grill them again on everything they saw and heard. Because if she died three hundred feet from them, all those public appeals they made and all the searching for her look like a thirty-year charade.'