

Prologue

It was far warmer than a September afternoon had any right to be. At four p.m., it must have been almost thirty degrees in the garden of the Spreading Oak. Jonah checked on Milly as one of the waiters deposited a pint of lager on the picnic table. She was soundly asleep under the pram's parasol, soothed by the heat and background chatter.

Jonah lifted the glass of lager, intensely aware of the condensation under his hand and of the very slight breeze that slid across his arms. It was such a rare moment of peace and normality that he felt drunk on it, even before he'd started to sink the four per cent.

Six weeks of Milly had been life-changing. He'd worried, before the event, that the change would be too much for him. That, at fifty, he was too set in his ways to cope with the arrival of a baby, and too old to deal with the lack of sleep.

He'd surprised himself by relishing it. He'd even enjoyed the first two weeks, when there had been no apparent end to his daughter's needs, and no real guidance about how to satisfy them. He had still caught himself watching her with wonder, or grinning stupidly as she looked up at him, slightly cross-eyed.

That wasn't to say that it was easy. Sharing a child with someone months after a messy break-up had built-in baggage, and the added serious sleep deprivation and sudden loss of freedom hadn't helped. There had been moments of complete misunderstanding, and moments where it had all seemed impossible.

He had questioned whether he could really do it. Could he honestly make a life with the mother of his child? A child who had come about through one stupid night of drunken nostalgia. Could he really do it, long after he'd fallen out of love with Michelle? When his heart was so firmly elsewhere?

He'd had to try. That was what he'd realised. Because he couldn't leave Michelle alone to raise a child. Not when she was asking him to try again.

It hadn't been easy, building a new life with his ex-fiancée. The love that he'd felt had been slow to trickle back, but as Michelle's due date had approached, he'd almost felt as close to her as he once had. Perhaps his feelings for her were less intense than they had been, but he hoped that they would continue to grow as they raised their child together.

That wasn't to say that there weren't some genuinely awful moments. Moments when he suddenly snapped out of deep thought with a pounding heart and a feeling as if he'd stumbled into the wrong life. Others when Michelle seemed to be looking at him with total coldness.

But those moments came less often as the months passed. And to be out here, today, with a child who was actually asleep, drinking like a normal human being, felt like a huge privilege. A blessing.

He was two-thirds of the way down the glass before he knew it. The alcohol added its slightly fuzzy halo to everything, and he found himself smiling at a couple with two young toddlers as they walked over to the climbing frame.

His phone buzzed, and he lifted it to read Michelle's message:

Umm, I'm running about 20 mins behind. Fell asleep!! Sorry. Xx

It was a shame. He'd been looking forward to spending some proper time together, unencumbered by bottle washing, laundry and discussions of Milly's sleep schedule. It so rarely happened in this new life of theirs.

But even that couldn't dent his good mood. He messaged back a quick 'No rush!' and then turned to watch the children charging around on the climbing frame. Their parents were right there with them, diving in to tickle them or to help them down the slide.

He felt optimistic, for the first time in a while, that everything would work out all right. That he'd be messing around with Milly like that in a few years, side by side with his partner.

He was still watching them when a figure emerged through the trellised archway from the road. He glimpsed her at the edges of his vision, registering long hair of a brilliant red. Part of him picked up something else – that she looked grubby, maybe – and he turned to look.

Jonah realised that the grubbiness was blood. That her T-shirt was daubed in it; her hands covered in a coating of rust-red almost up to her elbows. For a moment, he wondered whether this was what sleep deprivation did to you. Whether it was blurring the boundaries between the innocence of his family life, and the terrible violence of his work. Whether this might be no more than a hallucination.

But then other diners started to turn, and a quiet began to wash over the garden. After a few instants, there was only the light buzz of music from inside the pub, and noises of effort from the two children as they kept climbing, oblivious.

The blood was real, he thought. And having understood, he tried to work out where it had come from.

There was no evidence that the blood was hers. No

bloom of it to show a source. Just a great river of red-brown down her T-shirt, and daubs of it over her hands. Jonah tried, swiftly, to work out whether she was in trouble. Whether she'd just witnessed a terrible accident.

She was young, he thought. A teenager. And she came to a complete stop a few paces into the garden, as if she'd run out of the momentum needed to keep going.

There was no question in Jonah's mind that he should be the one to step forwards. The moment this young woman had entered the garden, she had become his responsibility. Before that, really. From the moment the blood had been shed on her.

She gazed around at the drinkers with a strangely unconcerned expression. There was no shame. No anxiety. But also none of the signs Jonah had come to expect from a girl who had experienced trauma. None of the usual ones, at least. She looked, if anything, slightly amused.

He got to his feet, and took a step forwards, his hand going to the handle of the pram to keep it near to him.

'Are you all right?' he asked her.

There were hurrying footsteps from the pub. In the periphery of his vision, he saw a waitress emerge from the door with a pair of plates, and then falter as she saw the scene in front of her.

The girl smiled at him, though it wasn't a warm smile. It was almost as if she'd been expecting him to ask, and found it funny.

'I could do with a drink,' she said.

Jonah nodded. 'All right. Come to the bar and I'll get you one.'

He felt very much aware, as he escorted her into the pub, that everyone was now watching both of them. That they

were now imagining that he knew her. Assuming that this was somehow his fault.

It was lucky that Jonah had never cared that much about what most people thought.

The young woman moved ahead of him into the pub, and he lifted the pram over the threshold and followed her. He became momentarily blind in the dimness before he shoved his sunglasses up onto his head. The girl was already walking towards the bar.

There was, as ever, no real sense of a queue. Just a mass of people near the bar, all immersed in their menus and shooting each other occasional side-eyed glances in case they lost their place. But they made way for him. Or, actually, for her.

‘Lemonade?’ Jonah asked, his eyes on the nearest barman. He could see that the guy had understood. That he was going to serve this blood-smearred girl next, no matter who was waiting.

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘A pint with ice.’

Jonah watched her as the barman began to move. He studied the pale eyes as she looked around again. Her tall frame. The lean, strong look of her.

‘I’m Jonah,’ he said. And then, after a moment, he added, ‘I’m a detective. I work with the police.’

She looked back at him, her gaze showing no curiosity. ‘Keely.’

‘Do you need our help?’

He could hear the lemonade hissing into the glass now. There was nothing else to listen to. The whole room full of people were watching the two of them.

Keely narrowed her eyes at him, briefly, and said, ‘I don’t. But maybe Nina does.’

‘Nina?’ Jonah asked.

‘My sister,’ Keely said, her voice light. Almost merry.
Jonah’s eyes moved to the blood coating her arms, and
he asked, ‘Where is Nina?’
Keely’s amusement turned into a brilliant, knowing smile.
‘Oh, I’m not going to tell you yet, detective,’ she said.
‘That would be too easy.’

I

Juliette Hanson was already in the station when the DCI called. She felt caught out, being found there late on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The chief knew perfectly well that there were no pressing cases on their books. Nothing that required overtime.

‘Oh, that’s useful,’ was all he said, but she thought she could hear the slight surprise. The unspoken question about her personal life.

‘I need you on something.’ There was the brief sound of a passing car, and Hanson wondered where he was. ‘I want to know if there’s a missing persons report on a Keely Lennox, and her sister Nina. Lennox with two Ns.’ Hanson scribbled it down on the big pad on her desk. ‘I’ll be there in about half an hour, once the uniforms come to assist.’

Hanson paused, her pen in the air. ‘Assist with what?’

‘With the older sister,’ he said, quietly. ‘I’m bringing her to the station. I’ll explain once I’m on my own in the car.’

Hanson felt a fizz of keen curiosity as she rang off. The DCI rarely came in on Sundays, and it hadn’t happened at all since his daughter had been born.

She opened the database and typed in the name ‘Keely Lennox’. She was immediately rewarded with a missing persons report, filed on Wednesday morning. Clicking on it showed her two red-headed teenagers, one smiling at the camera, her green-blue eyes warm, and the other, older-looking one, giving it an ice-blue, dead-eyed stare.

There were a couple of brief paragraphs of information

below, stating that sixteen-year-old Keely Lennox had absconded from a children's home with her younger sister, fourteen-year-old Nina. They'd last been seen at bedtime on Tuesday night. Almost five days ago.

There was little else beyond that information and a description. No particular concerns were registered over either of the sisters. Which, she thought glumly, was probably because they were in care.

So the chief has Keely, Hanson thought. *What about the little sister?*

As they lived in Southampton, the misper investigation was being handled by one of Yvonne Heerden's uniformed constables. Hanson decided to put a call through to Heerden's team on the second floor. There should be someone around who could tell her what they'd found out so far. After fourteen months as a detective constable, Hanson knew the drill well enough to get moving without the chief.

As she waited for someone to pick up, she dragged her holdall out from under the desk. She was wearing sports kit, her blonde hair tied back in a sweat-flattened ponytail. If she ended up interviewing anyone, she was going to need her backup gear, which she kept stashed under here for emergency use.

'Alan Jones,' said a voice on the other end. Hanson managed to drag a shirt and jacket out of her bag while straightening up. They were both a little crumpled, but they were clean.

'This is DC Hanson,' she told him. 'My DCI needs some info on a missing persons from last week. Keely and Nina Lennox, on Wednesday the third. The report was filed by a Constable Alsana Meek.'

'OK, hold on,' he said, and she could hear him typing in the background. 'I've got the investigation itself here. I'll

send it over, but if you want a quick summary, I can give it to you.'

'Great,' Hanson said. 'I'd like to check what's been done. Were their phones tracked?'

'Yes, on Thursday the fourth of September,' Alan told her, after a pause. 'They'd most recently pinged a mast not far from the children's home in Southampton, on the Tuesday night, but nothing since.'

'Did they check again later?' she asked.

'No, that was the one check.'

Hanson wrote that down with a feeling of slight frustration. It was an unfortunate and inescapable fact that, with stretched resources, a lot of cases simply didn't get the time spent on them that they should. It was a situation that was only worsening, as cuts to mental health and social care services left officers dealing with people who really needed other forms of help but couldn't get it.

But even allowing for that, she was disappointed to learn that two probably vulnerable missing girls hadn't been more thoroughly searched for. Particularly when their phones being switched off might be evidence of something more sinister than a desire not to be found.

'Anything useful from the children's home staff?'

Another pause, and Alan said, 'They interviewed the manager there, who didn't have any ideas.' There was a momentary silence, and then he said, 'She expressed concern for their safety, particularly for the younger sister, Nina.'

'Did she say why?' Hanson asked.

'Er . . . she said Nina is very impressionable, and would do anything Keely suggested,' the officer said, his tone flat.

She thanked him and rang off, curiosity mingling with a slight feeling of unease. The chief was worried enough

about Nina to bring her sister in, which implied that the children's home manager might have been right.

She wondered whether she should message Ben and Domnall. The DCI hadn't given her any instructions about that. Presumably because it wasn't clear to him yet whether the whole team would need to come in.

There was no point disturbing either of the team's sergeants on a Sunday afternoon without any real cause. It would be needlessly disruptive, particularly as Ben would inevitably come in the moment she told him about it. The effect of being naturally conscientious.

But she was also in the habit of messaging Ben fairly frequently. It seemed strange not to let him know that something was going on. And sometimes, she thought, it was better to have a heads-up about situations. If she phrased it in the right way, she'd keep him in the loop without making him feel his presence was required.

After a little thought, she sent him a brief text.

How goes? I'm still in CID and the chief's on his way, too.
Interviewing a teenager with a missing sister. Could be interesting. I'll keep you posted.

Ben's reply arrived ten seconds later.

I'll be there in twenty. I've got flapjack.

Hanson was grinning as she dialled the number for Keely Lennox's children's home. Clearly that hadn't quite been the right phrasing.

Michelle had arrived at the Spreading Oak not long after the two uniformed constables. And just for a moment, as she had climbed out of the car, Jonah felt a drop of disappointment that it wasn't Jojo coming to find him. That it was Michelle,

the smart, capable mother of his child, and not strong, irreverent, outdoorsy Jojo Magos who he was now with.

The reaction had made him feel wretched. *You shouldn't be thinking about Jojo. It's not fair. You love Michelle.*

Which was true. He loved her, and he loved Milly. And he'd done the right thing. Of course he had. Jonah had taken a deep, steady breath, and then had waved to Michelle, gesturing at her to stay put while he helped the girl into the car.

He'd seen the expression on Michelle's face at the sight of the squad car. She had known, immediately, that their weekend together was over.

Jonah had expected her to look irritated. Pissed off that their family time was being bulldozed. But she had looked, instead, slightly panicked. He had seen her glance at the sleeping Milly and away, as though this was too much, and it had both worried him and made his thoughts of Jojo seem inexcusable.

He was still thinking of that expression as he looked in on Keely from the observation room half an hour later. The constables had shown her into one of the regular interview suites, where she was now waiting for the arrival of the on-call social worker to be her appropriate adult.

The impression he'd gathered from Keely was that she wasn't quite normal. While they stood waiting at the pub, he'd tried to get her to talk to him further. He'd asked her about what had happened, and about where she'd come from. About whether she'd eaten, and whether there were parents he could call. She had been totally unmoved by these questions, and had returned them with either a flat stare or one with a trace of amusement. In the end, she'd given a slight sigh and said, 'I'll talk to you at the station. There's no point asking anything now.'

It had been said with incredible coolness. He found it

hard to believe, now it was confirmed, that she was only sixteen. He didn't, in fairness, find it particularly easy to guess the ages of teenagers in general. He had no points of reference as yet. But even allowing for that, it was unsettling to learn that she was so young.

It was her lack of self-consciousness, he thought. There had been no trace of anxiety at the arrival of uniformed officers. No breaking of her silence with mutinous answers. And he couldn't help the discomfoting feeling that she'd been weighing him up. Deciding whether he was worthy of being talked to.

He had half expected her to be different once they were at the station. It was inevitably intimidating, walking through CID and then waiting to be interviewed. But now that they were here, he could see no signs of anxiety. Her intent blue-eyed stare was directed straight through the observation window, and Jonah had the rare and uncomfortable feeling that she knew he was there.

Hanson let herself in and shut the door. 'The social worker's just signing in,' she said. 'I've called the children's home and asked the manager to ring me as soon as she's free.'

'Thanks,' Jonah said.

'Ben's just arrived,' Hanson commented. 'He's got flapjack.'

Jonah shook his head. He should have predicted that Ben would appear.

'Good news on the flapjack. Can you ask him to get up to speed? Tell him to look at what was done during the missing persons investigation, and check to see if Keely has any history of anti-social or violent behaviour. He can field the reply from the children's home manager too.'

'I checked for any criminal record, and she's clean,' Hanson said. 'But she has actually been here before. She was a witness in two possible abuse investigations that were

dropped. I've requested more information from the Child Abuse Investigations Team.'

That statement made Jonah's unease step up. If Keely had been abused in any way, it greatly increased the chance of her being violent towards her sister.

'Thanks, that's a good move. And it wouldn't be a bad idea for Ben to find out about any friends the sisters might have confided in. He can do the nuts and bolts.'

'Got it,' Hanson said, scribbling that down.

'And tell him to stop being so keen,' Jonah added, with a smile.

Hanson grinned. 'With pleasure.' And then her smile faded. 'Do you think it's looking urgent, though? It's a reasonable amount of blood, isn't it? I mean, she's not absolutely covered in it, but . . .'

'I've put it through to the kidnap team,' he said, quietly. 'They'll be in to brief us soon. From our side of things, the key thing is talking to Keely and trying to get her to cooperate.'

Hanson nodded, her face sombre. She'd been here long enough to know that he thought this was serious.

Keely's unflinching ice-blue gaze was on Jonah from the moment he entered. As he and Hanson sat themselves down, he found himself reminded disconcertingly of the way his father had so often watched him. It was to do with that sense of being tried and found guilty, and it was strange how it produced an answering kick of anxiety, even when the person looking at him was a teenage girl.

He was glad, for the first time in the last three months, that their interview suite had now been furnished with digital cameras. The old tape machines had finally been removed and replaced with a closed-circuit set in the corner. He'd felt strangely resistant to the idea, after decades spent deferring

to incorruptible tape. But tonight, he wanted a record of the interview. He wanted to capture Keely's flat stare. Her composure. The full effect of the blood.

The on-call social worker gave him a brief smile, and then looked down at the table. It was a fairly clear way of broadcasting that she didn't want to get actively involved in this. He wasn't entirely surprised. Keely had barely spoken to her when she had first arrived, and had certainly done nothing to endear herself to her.

He completed the formal introductions for the benefit of the camera, and then said to Keely, 'Are you all right? Do you need anything? Food, drink, painkillers . . .?'

Keely shook her head. Nothing in her expression changed.

'All right. Please tell us if you need anything.' He sat back slightly, a visible cue that this was not going to be a formal interview. 'Are you happy to talk to me now?'

Keely watched him for a moment, and then said, 'That depends on what you want to talk about.'

Jonah nodded. 'I'd like to know what's been happening to you since Tuesday evening.'

Keely gave him a very small smile. 'Why would you be interested in that?'

'It looks like you've been through tough times since then,' Jonah said, quietly. 'I want to know if there's anything we can do to help.'

Keely's smile grew a fraction broader, but she said nothing.

'You left your children's home on Cedar Avenue at some time on Tuesday night,' he continued. 'The staff realised you were gone in the morning. What time did you leave the home?'

Keely did nothing more than blink slowly.

'Were you running from something in particular?' Hanson chipped in. 'Was there something at Cedar Avenue making you unhappy?'

Keely glanced at Hanson. Jonah, watching for a reaction, thought he saw a flicker of something. Interest, maybe. Unease. Though it was almost impossible to be sure.

‘People don’t generally run from happy situations,’ Hanson went on. ‘Did the staff treat you well?’

Another silence. And another infuriatingly difficult-to-read expression.

‘Is the blood yours?’ Jonah asked, nodding towards her hands. They would swab them after this interview and send a sample straight over to the lab, but that was a slow way of finding out the answer. If Keely or – more likely – her sister had been wounded, they needed to know tonight, not tomorrow morning.

‘No,’ Keely said, lightly. She stretched her arms out in front of her, briefly, and her expression looked satisfied. ‘I’m fine.’

Her accent was a lot more middle-class than most of the kids who went through care, Jonah thought. He wondered how long she’d been in the system, and how she and her sister had ended up within it. But those questions weren’t pressing right now.

‘Is it Nina’s blood?’ he asked, deciding it was time to bring Keely’s sister into proceedings.

He saw her infinitesimal reaction. A dilation of the pupils. A very slight tension in her body. ‘So you’re actually only interested in Nina.’

Jonah waited for her to look at him again, and then said, firmly, ‘We’re interested in both of you. In whether you’re injured, in whether you’ve suffered, and in where your sister is and whether she needs our help, too.’

Keely breathed out, slowly, her gaze distant. Jonah assumed she was going to say nothing again, but in the end, she asked, ‘Why would you want to help Nina?’

‘I believe she left Cedar Avenue Children’s Home with

you on Tuesday,' Jonah said. 'Is that right? Were you together?'

Keely's very straight stare flicked back to him. 'You seem to know the answer to that already.'

Jonah watched her for a moment, and then said, 'We know only what other people have guessed. We'd like to hear what actually happened. From you.'

For a full minute, Keely did nothing but look back at him. At the end of it, Jonah nodded, and reached for the camera remote.

'We'll take a break, and let you chat to Kath here,' he said. The social worker grimaced slightly. 'Though we can try and get hold of your regular social worker, if that would help you,' Jonah offered.

Keely shrugged, and Jonah took that to mean that she didn't care either way. It seemed as though Keely cared about very little, except perhaps being the sole focus of their attention.

He stood to let himself out of the interview room. It was only once he'd opened the door that Keely said, 'I'll tell you what happened when you come back. From the beginning.'

Jonah wasn't sure, once again, how to read her expression. There was something more than coldness in it. He thought it might be amusement, or possibly disdain.

In the end, he nodded, and said, 'I'd appreciate that.'

Ben Lightman was waiting for them when Hanson emerged from the interview suite with the chief. He was, of course, impeccably dressed and model-handsome in a shirt and deep blue jacket. Hanson had only ever seen him look less than perfectly groomed when he'd been on his way to a tennis game. But even then, he'd managed to look effortlessly stylish in his Federer shirt and shorts.

‘Ben. Just the man I wanted to see,’ the chief said, deadpan. ‘Juliette says you brought flapjack . . .’

Ben gave one of his micro-grins and picked up a battered Quality Street tin.

‘Home-made by my sister,’ he said, easing the lid off and holding the tin out. ‘With more calories per square than you’re supposed to eat in a month.’

‘Let me at them,’ Hanson said, reaching in and then realising she could have done with a napkin. They were seriously sticky.

‘Have you heard from the children’s home yet?’ the chief asked. He took two flapjacks at once, with no apparent shame.

The team’s phone line rang before Ben could reply. He picked up and switched it to speakerphone before saying, ‘This is DS Ben Lightman.’

‘I’m Magda Becker.’ It was a woman’s voice, buzzing slightly over the speaker. ‘I manage the children’s home that – Keely and Nina’s home. Sorry, I’ve only just been told you called. Derek says you have some questions for me.’ Magda Becker’s voice was tight and slightly unsteady. She sounded, to Hanson, like she was barely holding it together.

‘Thanks so much for calling,’ Ben said. ‘We’d be very grateful for any help you can give us.’

‘Has she said anything?’ Magda asked, quickly. ‘About Nina?’

‘I don’t have any information about that yet,’ Lightman said, looking towards the DCI. Hanson abandoned the flapjack on her desk and started scribbling on her notepad. ‘But my colleagues have been speaking to her.’

‘Nina shouldn’t have gone with her,’ Magda said. ‘I’ve tried so hard to – to warn her about just following her sister’s lead.’

The DCI took a seat on the edge of a nearby desk.

Hanson held up her piece of paper, on which she'd scrawled the words:

RESENTMENT TOWARDS NINA??

Lightman nodded, and said, 'Were there difficulties between them?'

'Yes,' Magda said. And then she amended, 'They didn't argue or anything. Nina just does everything Keely says. She's so sweet-natured, and Keely's just – she's a strong personality.'

'You think she might have persuaded Nina to do things against her best interest?' Lightman tried. He managed to say it so lightly that it didn't seem like an accusation, a real talent of Ben's.

'Yes, that's exactly it,' Magda said. 'Nina has the chance to be adopted by a wonderful family. They fostered her in the past and she'd been happy there, until Keely messed things up for both of them. We've known for some weeks that it wasn't what Keely wanted, her sister going. I'm sure that's why they disappeared.'

'She didn't want to be separated from her sister?' Ben said.

'Yes,' Magda said, with a touch of hesitation. 'Probably.'

The DCI waved a hand at him, telling him to keep pressing. Lightman nodded and asked, 'Was there any other reason she might not have wanted Nina to go?'

'Well, it's hard to be sure,' Magda said, with a trace of reluctance. 'But I've sometimes thought that Keely resented her sister. Nina is – people warm to her easily. Whereas Keely is . . .' There was a long pause, and Lightman said nothing, letting her go on to fill the silence. 'She's quite difficult to like, sometimes.'

'Does Nina like her?' Lightman tried.

‘Oh, Nina idolises her,’ Magda told him. ‘She thinks she can do no wrong. I’m sure it’s partly because Keely is the only family she has.’

‘Are they orphans?’

‘No, well . . . they might as well be.’ She sighed, her breath sounding like a strong breeze over the speaker. ‘Their mother died, when they were nine and seven. None of the services has been able to find their father. He walked out on them when Nina was a newborn.’

Lightman glanced at the DCI, who looked thoughtful, but suggested nothing else.

Ben said, ‘We may need to talk to you in person. Will you be able to come into the station this evening?’

‘This evening?’ Magda asked. ‘I can’t. I have five other youngsters to see to, and two staff members on holiday.’

‘We can come to you, if that helps,’ Ben offered.

‘Thank you. That would be helpful.’

Hanson, deciding which of her various questions was the most pressing, began to scribble again. She could see Ben twisting his head to read it.

Lightman nodded to Hanson: he’d got it. And then he asked, ‘Just one last question. Would you trust Keely to look after Nina?’

There was a pause of several seconds, and Magda said, ‘I don’t think I would. No.’

The kidnap squad arrived a few minutes after the phone call. At least, two of their number arrived. The rest of them were, presumably, engaged in the practicalities of kicking off an urgent abduction enquiry.

The DI in charge was Murray Quick, a man with the air of a military sergeant. In all Jonah’s interactions with him, he’d never cracked a smile, but there was something

undeniably consoling in his manner. Quick had spent the last fifteen years working with the Red Team on time-critical or danger-to-life situations, and had a near-perfect record of success. Jonah would want him to be involved if anyone he cared about ended up in danger.

Quick had brought with him one of the Red Team's DCs, and the two of them converged near Hanson's desk.

'We need a briefing,' Quick said, with no niceties. 'I'm assuming you're all on board, in which case we can do it here.'

Jonah nodded. 'Here's fine, as long as you don't need a data projector.'

Quick didn't even answer. He just began, 'We've set up checks on Keely and Nina Lennox's phone numbers. Neither pinged any masts between Tuesday night and this afternoon, when Keely's was picked up by a tower in the rough vicinity of the pub. That was at four ten p.m. Nothing from Nina's so far.'

'Sounds like it pinged as she arrived there,' Jonah said. 'Though that doesn't discount her having been in the vicinity earlier, with it turned off.'

'We've already got two constables searching in the immediate vicinity of the pub,' Quick agreed. 'If Nina is within spitting distance, we'll find her. But we're also moving on the assumption that Keely Lennox travelled there from another site. We're looking for other location data now and the superintendent's signed off on a Grade 1 UVA.'

This, Jonah knew from past experience, was an Urgent Verbal Authorisation. It was a rarely used demand that a communications company provided full and complete data on an individual or individuals.

Jonah and his team were not supposed to know the full details of what a UVA could allow access to. The fewer people

who knew the force's last-ditch ways of tracing criminals, the less chance there was that criminals would grow wise to them.

But Jonah had been curious when working alongside the Red Desk in the past. And so he had asked an associate of Domnall O'Malley's, a young man named Ziggy, about it. Ziggy, who Jonah strongly suspected was into illegal hacking as well as occasionally helping the police to avert it, had told him that a UVA was probably a demand sent to the manufacturer of the phone.

'There's an awful lot more data stored by a manufacturer than a simple list of mobile phone masts,' Ziggy had said. 'If you want to freak yourself out about exactly what they know about you, just look up how low-energy Bluetooth works.'

Having done so, Jonah had decided to focus on the positives, and hope he never needed to hide from his colleagues.

'I've had a discussion with the DCS,' Quick went on. 'We both think our starting position should be for you to talk to the girl. You've got an initial relationship with her and she's agreed to disclose information. You're negotiation-trained, aren't you, sir?'

Jonah nodded, but felt like protesting. He had spent two years on twenty-four-hour call-out as a negotiator when he had reached the rank of DI, but had ultimately stood down from the role. He had admitted to his then DCI that he was better at breaking people down than at soothing them.

'That's good. But we've got our on-call negotiator on standby in case he's needed.' He gave Jonah an assessing look. 'I'd suggest we check in after an hour and see what the situation is.'

'Agreed,' Jonah said.

He found the dynamics of crisis situations fascinating. Quick might occasionally remember to call Jonah 'sir,' but

this was essentially a joint operation. That meant the two of them were, in reality, uneasy equals in the search for Nina Lennox.

‘To give my team some idea of where they’ll fit in this,’ Jonah went on, ‘while discussions with Keely take place, I’ll need you all to look into her life – and her sister’s – in detail. Find the places they’re most likely to have bolted to. Work out close contacts to feed to the kidnap squad.’ He paused for a moment, and then added, ‘And establish, as much as possible, what Keely Lennox’s motive behind all this is. Whether she’s harmed her sister badly or is doing this for show.’

Hanson moved slightly in her chair and looked thoughtful. ‘Do we have phone records from before they disappeared? Messages, in particular?’

‘Already requested from Vodafone,’ Quick said immediately. ‘We’ll be looking at them for persons of interest, but we can share that information.’

‘Thank you.’ Hanson smiled at DI Quick and got only a nod in return.

‘What information has Keely given you so far?’ Quick asked Jonah, instead.

‘Essentially nothing,’ Jonah replied. ‘She’s said she’ll tell us everything once I go back in, but given what I’ve seen of her so far, I’m not sure it’s going to be quite that simple. I think we should still make an effort to listen to what she has to say, though.’

Quick nodded to them and left without any courtesies. Jonah saw the Red Team DC’s amused expression as she excused herself and followed him. Jonah was relieved that one of the kidnap squad, at least, had a sense of humour.

Jonah returned to the interview room with little idea of what to expect. Part of him was braced for bad news. He

had to be ready to hear that Keely had done something awful to her sister.

The other part of him, though, clung to optimism. There was a reasonable chance that Keely had just been playing for time, for reasons of control. The presence of blood wasn't enough to conclude there had been a fatal injury. It always, he had learned, looked like there was more than there really was.

Though a quiet, dark voice in the back of his mind told him that even a little bleeding could be enough to kill someone if it carried on unchecked, or involved internal wounding. He took a breath before he opened the interview-room door, nodded to himself, and entered.

Keely gave him a very small smile as he sat in front of her. He got the impression that she'd already made some kind of decision about him, and that it amused her, whatever it was. It was strangely belittling.

She seemed far less interested in Hanson. Her gaze wandered over her briefly, and then returned to Jonah.

'If you're ready to continue,' Jonah told her, 'we'd really like to hear what happened to you.'

Keely studied him for a moment, and then said, 'All right. And in the true spirit of the law, I'm going to tell you the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Every single thing that happened to us since we entered the care system.'

Jonah leaned forwards very slightly, without letting his expression change. 'We'd like to hear all of that. Can you tell us about the last five days first, though? What brought you here?'

Keely's expression hardened. 'No,' she told him, 'I can't. You're going to listen to all of it, or you get nothing. And, believe me, you won't find Nina without me.' That very small smile returned. 'I've made sure of that.'

2

You don't get to choose your story. That's the thing I've really learned. You can warp it a bit, if you're lucky. Twist a few events around and make things better – or not. You can even dress it up in a different way. Like I could tell this as a comedy, if I did it right. Or maybe as gritty YA where everyone matures and learns and gets stronger.

What you can never, ever do is change the genre. You're stuck with that for life. So my story is what it is. A story defined by three men, and the way their desires took our lives and moulded them. Mutilated them.

If you want to find Nina, I have some starting advice for you. It's about understanding that those men are no worse than you are. Not really. We all have the same savage possibility in us. I know I do. Mine got stripped pretty bare by everything.

So, to find my sister, you have to look in the mirror, and actually see what's there. Have a good delve into all the dark places. At all the times you've chosen your own interests over someone else's. All the petty or selfish things you've done.

Isn't it weird how, with all those things, you can still hold it all together and tell yourself you're a good person? That's because you didn't have the same pressure I did.

You know, I'd probably be a lot like you if all the bad stuff had happened later. It wasn't really child-appropriate, any of it.

The trouble is, nobody's overseeing this stuff, and life just does its thing. It has basically no respect for ratings.

When everything went dark for us, for my sister and me, we were nine and seven. Two young girls who thought the world revolved around cake and paint sets and birthday presents. We defined ourselves by things we wanted, actually. In the front of every diary I started and then abandoned would be my name, my age, and what I most wanted in the world at the time (usually some kind of animal but occasionally a book).

We were lucky back then. Our mum would generally get us the things we wanted. She loved to treat us. And back then, I had no idea that the money might run out.

Our dad had only ever been a vague, almost mythical figure to me. Someone who had once been part of our lives, and who'd then just vanished. He existed only as a bearded, glasses-wearing face in two posed photographs, and nowhere else.

My sister, whose memory has always been weirdly complete, remembered more, despite having been only three when he left us. She drew pictures of him, sometimes, or wrote stories where he'd be strict and tough, or where he'd shower the two of us with presents like Mummy did. None of that seemed real, to me.

As far as I was concerned, it was all about Mummy. She was my everything. From the way she spoke and laughed with us, to the cut flowers she brought into our idyllic little single-storey cottage. From the games she played with us to the things she taught us. From the time she woke us gently in the morning until the time when she tucked us into our beds, letting us fall asleep to the sound of her piano playing in the living room next door.

So it was a real kicker when she died, horribly and completely unnecessarily.

In one of those unfair inversions, my sister remembers nothing about that day, where I remember it with total grim clarity.

I really envy her for that. I'd love to forget that spray of blood, and our mum's mangled form.

One of the counsellors we saw told us it isn't always healthy to forget. She said it's better for the mind to remember everything, even the really hard things. Which is great. I'm sure it's really healthy being a small child and having those pictures in your mind every time you go to sleep.

Anyway, I was the one who found our fiercely loved mummy, at just before eight in the morning on a freezing day in late January. I crept downstairs, shivering in the cold air flooding in through the open French windows. I didn't know enough yet to realise that those open windows meant something was wrong. I just thought she'd be out there, gardening, despite the dim dawn light.

I went out there, hoping we'd get a bit of uninterrupted time together before Ninny invaded. Instead I found years of nightmares.

To be clear: what I found on the patio wasn't really Mummy. It was the tangled remains of her, all jumbled up with broken garden furniture.

I saw a sticky, dark red spray across the flagstones, too. And I ran inside to call an ambulance.

With, like, *perfect* timing, my darling sister woke up and stumbled downstairs while I was trying to talk to the operator.

'Mummy just needs a doctor, Ninny,' I whispered to her. 'Stay at the top of the stairs.'

She nodded, obedient with sleepiness, and sat nicely on the top step until the paramedics came.

I thought someone had murdered her. Our mummy. It's what I eventually told my sister, too, a few weeks afterwards. It was only much later that an excruciatingly awkward staff member at the children's home put me right.

'I hear you've been telling people that your mummy was murdered, Keely,' she said, looking like she'd rather be anywhere else. Anywhere but the cramped little manager's office with two red-headed children staring at her.

'It's not true,' the woman said. I feel like her name might have been Tina, but in my memory, all the staff members seem to be called Tina, which is unlikely by the laws of probability.

Anyway, the woman who probably wasn't Tina paused. It was one of those dramatic, unnecessary kinds of pauses people do when they're trying to Let That Sink In.

We both stared back at her until she said, 'It was just an accident. She went out late at night and tripped over. The glass-topped table fell down with her, and the glass cut her in a particularly important part of her leg. It wouldn't have hurt.'

I remember holding her gaze. I knew a bit about pain by then. Not as much as later, but a bit. Like how much it had hurt when I'd put my hand down on some broken glass once. And the rage-inducing hurt of a paper cut. So I knew this woman was a liar. Of course it had hurt.

She could probably tell what I was thinking, too, because she blushed a really deep red and pretended she had to go and do something else.

Anyway. Regardless of the specifics, our mum died. Violently. That's all you really need to know.

Her death hit us differently. Ninny went to pieces at first,

and stayed in pieces for several days. But I stayed strong. I felt this weird sense of responsibility. Like I had to be the grown-up, now, because fragile little Ninny needed protecting. Isn't that hilarious? When you think about where we've both ended up?

Some of it probably came, unconsciously, from Mummy. She'd somehow always made it clear that Ninny was breakable in ways that I wasn't. That she needed care and indulgence.

It wasn't just that she told me not to pull her hair or play too roughly. It was also about what we both said to her. The way she was our 'little Ninny', a nickname that was full of affection and indulgence of her slightly dippy ways.

We were also supposed to be really considerate of her feelings. And we weren't supposed to leave her alone. Mummy reminded me of all this with boring regularity. Though I sometimes wonder if that was less to do with Ninny than to do with what she saw in me. I think, sometimes, that Mummy saw the shadow at my centre even back then. I've always understood that it was close to the surface. Stamped down by love and affection, but still there.

I don't think she ever saw it in Ninny. It was buried a long way down in my soft-hearted sister. Which wasn't because she's *better*. It's because everyone looked at her, all skinny and delicate, and they smiled at her. They patted her head, and dried her tears, and let her go on wearing her soft feelings like some kind of friable clothing. She had layers and layers of softness to hide that dark little core.

And then there was me. Built like I was made to last. Strong, and stocky, and incapable of creating those tender feelings in people. I never had a nickname, though I have vivid memories of being called a 'lump' whenever I climbed onto Mummy's lap.

I was the one who was always told to be a brave girl, and to stop crying and get on with it. And not just by our beloved mummy. By all of them. The women in shops. The delivery men. The playgroup leaders and teachers. The parents of our friends.

What they didn't realise, as they gradually moulded us from the outside in, was that I'm also the clever one. A lot cleverer than Ninny. A lot cleverer than everyone, really.

I mean, some of them occasionally seemed to be aware of it. Sometimes I'd start talking in front of them, and they'd look sideways at my mum. She would laugh and say I'd always been very old for my years. And perhaps, mixed in with her pride, was a little bit of what the others felt. That I was unnatural. Old before my time. Wizened, like a kobold. A child-spirit.

I think that's how the staff saw me, too, when we landed heavily in that first children's home. It was a skanky, bleach-smelling place in Southampton with a cat-turd-covered garden and no plants except a large, flowerless rhododendron. Ninny and I were appalled.

It probably didn't help that we were so obviously middle-class. From our floral dresses and prim haircuts to our accents and manners.

I'd never even stopped to think about whether we were rich or poor. Our mummy must have had money, surely. Except that, once she was gone, that money turned out to be imaginary. She'd been living off her inheritance, and then off what seemed to be loans. The title deeds to the house had, at some point, been transferred over to a man who'd lent her fifty thousand pounds. The house was no longer hers, which presumably meant that our mum had never managed to pay him back.

So there we were, two little middle-class girls, suddenly

thrust into a care system that had been designed around children steeped in poverty. Two posh little girls who didn't fit.

And it was probably worse that I took it upon myself to defend my sister's rights. I was my sister's constant champion. I stood up for her in every way.

I also encouraged her to eat the tasteless food they made us, sometimes by playing games with it, and sometimes by talking so much that she ate without noticing. She'd always been a fussy eater, but it threatened to become pathological in that place. Misery made her nauseous. Unfortunately it also made me perpetually hungry, comforted only when I was stuffing my face.

It turned out the one thing I couldn't protect either of us from was the attitude of the other kids there. Having only attended a small village primary school with a head who was zealous about kindness, I wasn't ready for any of it. Not for the way they would gang up and chant 'ginger' at us, or for one of the older girls pretending to find 'one of our pubes' on the couch. Not that I knew what pubes were back then.

By the end of the first week, we were never called anything except 'Ginger One' and 'Ginger Two' by the other kids. Ninny cried over it most days.

I was hanging on for us to move on somewhere, but it turned out Ninny was afraid of that, too.

'Tina says we'll probably go to a new family,' she said to me, about a month in. (I mean, like I said, it might not have been Tina, the name. But that's definitely the way I've remembered it.)

Ninny was hunched up on the undersized bed, the pale skin under her eyes an angry red from crying. 'I don't want to go to a different family. I want Mummy.'

I sat down next to her, and the plastic sheet they'd put over the mattress made a crunching noise. I have stark memories of the rubbery smell of those things. How it would leech through the sheet on top, and how on warm nights the plastic would create a gradual build-up of sweat that would start to soak into my pyjamas. Multi-sensory misery.

'It's all right,' I told her. 'We'll find a new mummy. Maybe a new daddy, too. Wouldn't that be nice, Ninny?'

I put my arm round her and rested my head against hers.

'What if it's as horrible as here?' she sobbed.

'It won't be horrible,' I promised. 'Mary said she'd find somewhere nice.' Mary, by the way, was our social worker. Social workers evidently aren't all called Tina. 'They might have a big garden with a swing. And a dog. And a ginormous fridge with loads of ice cream.'

I carried on for a while, and Ninny started joining in with the imaginings, and then eventually fell asleep. I moved back to my bed. For hours, I lay there and tried to think about a perfect new home, and not about my mum's blood sprayed across half the garden. In the end, it was thoughts of my sister being cuddled up to a new mummy and looking as though she might be happy again that soothed me enough to sleep.

I know these are the thoughts I had that night. I can remember, clearly, having them, if not how they tailed off into dreams. But that naive girl seems like another person entirely. I don't recognise myself in her at all.

Jonah waited for a moment for Keely to continue, and when she didn't, he said, quietly, 'That must have been more than tough. Losing your mum like that. Losing your home.'

Keely looked back at him flatly, and he thought he detected a flicker of derision in her expression.

'Oh, I moved on, detective chief inspector,' she said. 'Don't you worry. That's what you learn to do. Keep looking forwards, away from the torture that's behind you and into the torture that's ahead.'

It interested Jonah that she called him by his full title. Most of his interviewees forgot it, no matter how many times he repeated it for the camera. He was often called detective, or chief inspector, or sometimes just inspector. Some of them probably got it wrong deliberately, as a mark of disrespect. Keely, on the other hand, somehow managed to make the full rank sound like an insult.

He matched her look, and said, 'But moving on from this stuff doesn't mean it doesn't leave marks.'

Keely leaned back in her seat, and stretched, her arms up behind her head.

'I'd like a break now, I think.' She yawned widely. 'I could use a Starbucks, if you're going.'

Jonah felt like telling her she could have instant coffee and get on with it. But he guessed that a show of power would have no effect on Keely. She didn't seem to be intimidated by him, or by anyone else. And despite the clear urgency of the situation, he had to go gently. To work out the lay of the land.

‘Sure.’ He rose and gave her as warm a smile as he could. ‘Just tell us what you’d like.’

Despite it now being seven p.m. on a Sunday – and a Sunday that she had mostly spent at work – Hanson felt full of energy. The urgency of a missing fourteen-year-old had pushed everything else aside.

It was an unmistakable relief. Not to have to think about the twice-postponed court hearing involving her abusive ex, or about the countless messages he still sent her through anonymous accounts, was something of a lifeline.

She’d hoped to be free of all this by now. After catching Damian on camera throwing a Molotov cocktail through her kitchen window, she’d been able to act at long last. And in acting she had felt in control for the first time in months. In control, and strong.

But things had become a great deal more tense once she had. Her initial assumption that Damian would be charged with vandalism and stalking offences had been, when she thought about it, a little stupid. After assessment within the uniformed division, the case had been passed over to her own colleagues in CID, and had been investigated as Arson with Intent. It was this much more serious crime that Damian was now awaiting trial for, with a few stalking charges thrown in for good measure. There was a chance that, if the prosecution proved he’d intended to kill her in the blaze, he would face life in prison.

It was little wonder, given this, that Damian had decided to continue his campaign of harassment. With the stalking charges of so little weight in comparison, it was worth the risk to get some sort of revenge while he could.

But his incessant disruption to her life bothered her a lot less than it had, and one very strong factor in that had been

having Ben Lightman on her side. It had been humiliating to break down in front of him when everything had been at its peak, but it had both unburdened her and given her an ally. She was still profoundly grateful that Ben had taken her side without question.

Unlike her then-boyfriend, in fact. Jason Walker was another DI and worked in the same big, open-plan office. He had been fed a pack of lies about her by Damian and had believed it all without question. It had been hard for Hanson to forgive it, even when Jason had asked her to consider exactly how manipulative her ex was.

While the database was loading, she found herself glancing at where Jason usually sat. It was fortunately a lot further away than it had originally been. Dealing with a break-up with someone on the next desk over would have been agonising.

She hoped that his chair would remain empty until the morning. His constant helpfulness and civility in the aftermath of it all filled her with guilt. She knew he wanted her to try again, even though she'd realised it was impossible. She guessed that Jason thought it was all about trust, when, in fact, it had turned out to be more about what was left when trust was taken away. Jason didn't fascinate her. He didn't even make her laugh all that often. He'd always been more reliable than he was interesting, and that meant there wasn't much left when the reliable side evaporated.

Her screen finished loading, and she opened up Keely's previous police interactions with a bubble of the odd happiness that this job still brought her. It was just her and the evidence for now. Which was just as it should be, she thought.

Keely's children's home was in many ways less depressing than Lightman had been expecting. Before today, he had