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TWISTER

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JANE WOODHAM

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A mystery

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CHAPTER ONE



The flu epidemic came for the young and the old, the frail and the weak. Rest homes emptied, filled and emptied again and teachers paced in front of vacant desks. Businesses struggled as employees stayed at home, panic buying left supermarket shelves bare, and anyone caught coughing or sneezing quickly found themselves alone. In the unusually muggy heat, windows remained open at night to catch any passing breeze, and the waves at St Clair swelled clean and grey under a cumulus-heavy sky.

The weather finally broke with five days of torrential rain. On the first day, yellowing leaves clogging the gutters caused flash floods and a bus collided with a cyclist on George Street. By the end of the fourth day, stopbanks failed on the Taieri Plains where sheep stood belly-deep in water, and a huge slip closed part of the northern motorway. On Monday the fourth of March, when the rain finally stopped and the mop-up began, hail took everyone by surprise, smashing windows and denting parked cars. Then, after a period of calm, the sky turned a greenish black, causing drivers to switch on their headlights and there came a rumble like a slow freight train.

Lightning forked the sky. The wind picked up and a huge black cloud whirled up the harbour, like a mad dog chasing its tail. From the cloud a funnel formed, churning the sea, snatching up a small fishing launch and smashing it against the rocky sea wall.

Soon the twister turned towards the city, bending road signs and hurling debris high into the air. Pedestrians ran, arms covering their heads. Others cowered in doorways. In the Octagon a woman running to her car screamed as branches from the plane trees crashed to the ground, toppling the Robbie Burns statue and smashing it to pieces in front of her.

Up Stuart Street the twister boomed, snapping chimneys from heritage roofs and pelting the streets with bricks. Mothers clutched children and covered them with their bodies. Cars rocked at traffic lights and overhead power lines wailed and moaned as if the devil himself was riding through.

On the twister thundered, through the back gardens of Maori Hill, destroying sheds and glasshouses, sucking fish from ornamental ponds and hurling terracotta pots through double-glazed windows.

Finally it reached Ross Creek. Alongside the reservoir it scattered litter, uprooting small shrubs and flinging aside dead branches, but sporadically now, as if its job was almost done. At last it stopped and hovered above the water. The dense cloud became opaque, will-o-the-wisp, then as quickly as it had appeared it slunk away.

Dunedin's Detective Senior Sergeant Leo Judd, delayed in Invercargill giving evidence in a money-laundering scam, stood in front of the television in his hotel room, can of beer in one hand and remote control in the other.

In the Octagon, fluorescent orange tape surrounded the smashed statue. Workmen swept glass from where tables and chairs had been tossed through cafe windows. An over-excited youth was jabbering into the camera. 'It was like something from outer space. Like Independence Day. It was awesome, man. Awesome!'

A cafe owner told the reporter about the damage: 'It's just so hard to take in, eh? Look, everyone's helping out, but it's a mess. If the market had been on, people would've been killed.' Behind him a man was nailing boards over the cafe's huge windows. 'Insurance? Don't even wanna think about it, mate.'

A middle-aged woman with mascara-smudged cheeks shoved the reporter out of the way. 'It's global warming,' she shrieked into the camera. 'It's Mother Nature showing us what she's capable of. Blame the

politicians. They need to bloody do something now. Before it's too late.' The camera pulled away. She followed. 'What about our kids' future, eh? What about our kids?'

Judd sighed and flicked over to the news on TV3. Someone had caught the twister on their cell-phone as it came up the harbour. He stood transfixed by a launch being tossed against the harbour wall, just down the hill from where he lived, then an aerial shot showed the twister's path: a swathe of toppled trees and missing roofs.

The weatherman was standing in front of a map explaining wind direction, and updraft, and how tornados were produced by mesocyclones. 'Today's were perfect conditions for a tornado,' he said. 'Perfect. A mix of high pressure and rain moving across from the east. Wind speeds of up to a hundred and eighty kilometres an hour. Now folks, that's what you call a lot of wind.'

Judd took a long swig of beer. Thank God Kate wasn't due back from Whakatane until tomorrow evening; you wouldn't want to land in that. He checked his phone, half expecting to see a message from her, or from Burgess, his boss, ordering him back to Dunedin. The emergency services would be flat-tack.

In the TV studio they were calling the twister the Trail of Terror.

'Over four hundred homes are still without power and, following a lightning strike at the water treatment plant earlier this afternoon, residents are being advised to conserve water.' The announcer turned to his fellow presenter. 'You've gotta feel sorry for the people of Dunedin at the moment, eh Kylie?'

'You're not kidding, Steve. First the influenza epidemic, and now this? How common are these twisters, exactly?'

An old black and white photograph of toppled houses appeared on the screen behind them.

‘Well, they’re saying this one was larger than the Hamilton hurricane of 1948, where three people were killed and over a hundred and fifty houses damaged.’ He put his hand up to his earpiece. After a slight pause he looked straight into the camera. His voice deepened. ‘The first reports of casualties have just arrived. At least two people are known to have died in Dunedin this afternoon, and twenty-three are reported as injured.’ He cleared his throat. ‘I repeat, that’s two killed in Dunedin this afternoon, and twenty-three injured. That figure is expected to rise.’

The camera turned to his colleague. ‘I’m afraid that’s all we have time for right now. The emergency phone numbers are at the bottom of the screen and will be available on our web page, that’s three news dot co dot nz. Join us later tonight when we’ll be back with an update and more information on those casualties. Until then, we’ll leave you with these extraordinary images of Dunedin this afternoon, and what people are starting to call the biggest twister ever recorded in New Zealand history.’

At Ross Creek, where the twister had tailed into nothing, normality returned. Insects reappeared and buzzed the still water. Emergency vehicles wailed in the distance. The earth relaxed and loosened and stunned birds resumed their singing. Finally, long fingers of sunlight pushed their way through the undergrowth and illuminated, just below the surface of the shallow green water, the pale bloated corpse of a teenage girl.

CHAPTER TWO



Tuesday 5th March

Burgess rang the following day, shortly after lunch. The corridor of the Invercargill District Court was noisy with people waiting to be called back in. Judd walked outside, turning his head against traffic noise.

‘We think we’ve found her. At the reservoir.’

‘Her?’ Judd held his breath. For just a minute he’d thought Burgess meant ... He stared into the distance.

‘The missing Wenlock girl. Thompson’s case.’

‘Right. Ross Creek, you said?’

‘Yep. Thompson’s gone down with the flu.’

Judd gripped the phone.

‘Look, I’m sorry but I need you to take over. There’s no-one else. When can you get back?’

‘This evening. If not sooner. They’re finally catching up here.’

‘What’s the delay?’

‘The usual. Lawyers playing games. I’ll get back as soon as I can.’

‘Good. But for God’s sake, drive carefully. The roads are a mess. I’ve already lost one car this morning.’

‘Sure.’

‘Priest is at the reservoir already.’

Judd nodded. Phil Priest had been part of the original team. Priest was good.

‘Once you’re here, do whatever it takes to keep the press away.’

Burgess hung up and Judd stared at his phone. Sweat broke out on his hands and he slid the phone into his pocket before he dropped it. He hurried up the stairs to the courthouse. Burgess had made the right call.

Three hours later, Judd turned off the motorway into Kaikorai Valley Road and headed towards Glenleith, a suburb four kilometres north of the city centre. Five days of heavy rain had flooded the roads and in his rear view mirror the sky whorled the colour of freshly poured Guinness.

He wondered how Thompson was doing. The flu epidemic had arrived with the Southern Odyssey, a cruise ship filled almost to capacity with 1885 passengers, way back at the beginning of December. The afternoon it arrived, nine buses transported over four hundred dollar-heavy tourists straight into the city of Dunedin. The passengers, most of whom had left Singapore only forty-eight hours earlier and were tired of shopping, stopped to mingle with the crowds of children lining the streets for the annual Santa Parade.

That evening, many of the passengers, after swapping around their possum-lined gloves and merino jerseys, assumed their tiredness was no more than usual after a long day, and took themselves to bed early. The following morning, one look at the empty breakfast tables told the captain something was amiss and a gastric-type flu was soon diagnosed.

The severity of this new strain of H1N1 took everyone by surprise. By the time the ship docked in Christchurch, ambulances were waiting for the first of the victims. Where possible, the rest of the passengers and crew were kept on board to arrest contamination, but for Dunedin, where the children were the first to fall, it was already too late.

Judd drove slowly. Reports of the mayhem caused by the twister had not been exaggerated. Although most of the damage had occurred directly under the centre of the vortex, the surrounding winds had been strong enough to rip the roof from the pasta factory and crash a tree into a used car lot. The back streets of Wakari were teeming with builders' vans, the windows at Wok On Fire and Liquor King were smashed, and the

campsite was closed due to flooding. From the fat drops slapping the windscreen, it looked as if more rain was on the way.

At the end of the winding Burma Road, he slewed the car onto the grass verge outside one of Ross Creek's many entrances. A lone policeman stood in front of a line of blue and white ticker tape. Recognising Judd, he walked over and ducked his head level with the window.

'They're down by the reservoir. SOCO's there already.'

Judd retrieved his umbrella from the boot of the car and made his way down to the cold zone, where he slipped on gloves and booties. Towards the water, a man he assumed to be the Scene Of Crime Officer knelt in front of a small orange digger, its mechanical arm frozen mid pluck.

Detective Rob Randall caught Judd's eye and made his way over, his young face creased with responsibility.

'How's it going, Rob. Everything under control?'

'Yep, no trouble.'

'Good. Who found the body?'

'One of the council workers. They were inspecting the area after the twister. A couple of trees had been upended. They found her in shallow water, hidden by undergrowth. Reckon she's been here a while.'

The reservoir was a large, man-made lake split in two by a long raised dam, upon which Judd stood. At the far end, where concrete sides sloped sharply into the water, a long pier-like structure led to what he believed was called a valve tower. Built during the gold rush in the 1860s, it had a quaint Victorian air, reminiscent of the old timber piers at Clacton, or Southend-on-Sea where he went on childhood holidays. He knew from experience that a long channel, hidden by trees, ran the length of the left bank, making access from that side virtually impossible. The right bank was almost as inaccessible: a steep tree-lined drop from the pathway, with thick undergrowth creeping towards the water's edge. That made this narrow strip of land the most accessible to the water. He looked down.

Directly below him was a raised concrete channel, probably used to control overflow. Where the channel disappeared below water level tall weeds and shrubs fringed the lake and the shore looked flat and swampy.

‘Any sign of the press?’

‘No. Not yet.’

‘Good. Keep an eye out. You’ve got the place totally sealed off?’

‘Yep, and I’ve got uniform questioning anyone who comes along.’

‘Good. Tyre tracks, footprints ... you know the score.’

Randall nodded, eyes scanning. He rubbed at his right eyebrow. ‘The warm zone’s filling up nicely. Enough bloody tyre tracks here to keep us busy for a month, I’d say.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Cigarette butts, rubbish, the odd footprint.’

‘Good. Is that Helen Cole over there?’

‘We caught her just in time. She was on her way to Central.’

Judd walked carefully along one edge of the raised concrete channel towards where a tarpaulin screen had been erected. At one section he had to jump down a couple of feet. Water flowed along the channel and the concrete was slippery with moss. He took his time. He found Cole crouching over the body. Detective Phil Priest, towering over her, looked as if he could keel over at any moment. She shot Judd a sideways look.

‘You know, Judd, there are times when you could never be mistaken for anything but English.’

Judd raised his umbrella in acknowledgement.

‘But, now that you’ve finally graced us with your presence ...’

Judd jammed his umbrella under his left armpit, and reached instinctively into his jacket pocket for the small jar of Vicks VapoRub. He twisted off the lid and smeared a generous dollop under his nose. ‘I was in Invercargill.’

‘I’ve done you a favour, then.’

He smiled. ‘Something like that.’

Judd concentrated on the girl’s clothes, Priest, not so savvy, looked grey under his summer tan. The girl lay on her back in a beige and orange blouse and light-coloured shorts. Cole was pulling lengths of weed from her face, a face that had once been pretty but was now bloated beyond recognition.

Judd gestured at Priest. ‘Getting everything down?’ Or should that have been ‘keeping’?

Priest nodded.

Judd turned back to Cole. ‘Lucky for us you could get here so soon.’ With only two pathologists in New Zealand it was possible to wait more than twenty-four hours. Helen Cole was based in Christchurch – only a half hour flight away – but she covered a huge and largely rural area.

‘I’d just got back from the Coast and was on my way to an accident in Lawrence. It makes sense to deal with this one while I’m here.

‘Busy times. What have we got?’

Cole sighed. ‘Young girl. Sixteen, seventeen ... blunt force trauma to the rear of the head.’

‘How long has she been in the water?’

‘The way the skin looks and moves, I’d say at least one week, possibly two. I’ll tell you more tomorrow. By the way, there’s a piece of jewellery ...’

He leaned forward. The girl’s skin was grey, like putty. A string of large, coloured heart-shaped beads hung from her left wrist. He glanced up at Priest who, as part of the original investigating team, should recognise this from the notice board.

Priest nodded. ‘Looks like it’s her.

Burgess had been right: the search for young Tracey Wenlock was finally over. Judd straightened, breathing out heavily. He needed to

arrange for an undertaker to take the body to the mortuary, and then apply to the coroner for a postmortem, but first he wanted to examine the area himself. Leaving Priest with the body, he walked along the water's edge, pleased to see stepping plates on the boggy ground. After a few minutes, he could go no further and turned towards the bushes that lined the base of the incline. A flash of something shiny in the undergrowth caught his eye. A high-energy drink can, crushed and thrown away. He looked around: a couple of cigarette butts, the wrapper from a Moro bar.

He called out to DC Robbie Randall.

'The weeds and rushes have been flattened,' said Judd.

'Kids probably. Or a love-nest.'

'Possibly.'

'I'll get it all bagged, and the area sealed.'

Rain splattered on Judd's open umbrella. It was relatively private here at the base of the incline, but anyone walking up there along the raised path would be able to see down onto the water's edge. Had Tracey been down in the bushes with someone? Had she run from here towards the path, scrambled up onto the concrete channel, leapt over the water in the middle, slipped, hit her head and tumbled into the water? Or had she been chased? Had she run, terrified, her pursuer catching up with her at the channel and smashing her on the back of the head? Had this been an accident, or something more sinister? Who had she been with, and who or what had brought her here to Ross Creek, when she should have been heading for home? Tomorrow's postmortem should answer some of those questions. He hoped so, for the family's sake.

Tracey's father, Brian, opened the door to Judd and Family Liaison Officer Veronica Byrne. Judd took out his badge and introduced himself. Byrne they already knew. Brian Wenlock beckoned them inside.

‘Veronica explained that the other bloke Thompson’s gone down with the flu.’

‘That’s right. I’m taking over.’

Judd shook June Wenlock’s hand. They stood looking at him. His mouth was suddenly dry.

‘Perhaps you’d both like to sit down.’

June Wenlock sank onto the sofa.

Sweat pricked Judd’s back. ‘I’m afraid we’ve found the body of a teenage girl at Ross Creek reservoir. It’s too early for us to positively identify the body, but we found this,’ — he held up the piece of jewellery — ‘which leads us to believe it may be Tracey.’

At the sight of her daughter’s bracelet June Wenlock went rigid and grabbed at her husband.

Judd waited a moment, catching Veronica’s eye and nodding towards the kitchen. ‘I’m so sorry. We will do all we can to get to the bottom of this,’ he said.

Brian Wenlock cleared his throat. ‘W-when will you know for certain?’

‘The post-mortem’s tomorrow. We’ll need someone to identify the body.’

Brian put his arm around his wife’s shoulders and pulled her close. He glanced up at Judd and nodded.

‘If it’s okay with you, I’d like to take a look at Tracey’s room, being new to the case. Fresh pair of eyes ...’

Brian waved him away. Judd breathed out heavily, left Veronica making the tea, and made his way down the long hallway.

There was one door closed, which he pushed open. From the middle of the floor he stared around a typical teenage girl’s room. How long would it be before Tracey’s parents removed the posters from the wall, the face-wash and deodorants from the shelves, and the soft toys from the bed? A month, a year, a lifetime? Or would they too fall into the trap of letting the

room become a shrine to be dusted every Sunday? He picked up a photograph of Tracey and her mother, taken at a wedding, June Wenlock's face shadowed by a large floppy hat, Tracey awkward at her side, squinting into the sun. An average family, whatever that meant. The first point of suspicion always centred on the family or, to be specific, on the male members of the family. Evil things happened in families.

Traditionally, teenage girls had kept diaries. Inevitably discovered stuffed into the narrow space below the wardrobe, or underneath the mattress, needing only the sacrifice of a fingernail to prise the padlock open and read their innermost thoughts; an action that never failed to swamp him in guilt. Especially when it had been his own daughter's.

Despite the earlier search he could not help himself, dropped to his knees, took out his pocket torch and ran his hands under the bed. Nothing but furballs and dead spiders. But who kept a diary these days when every teenage dream, every heartfelt crush, every pound gained and pimple burst could be shared electronically with a thousand close friends and followers? The IT geeks would have spent hours examining Tracey's laptop, examining her Facebook page and Instagram account, tracking every email, every like, every last tweet or whatever they called it these days. He was wasting time.

Tom Burgess, Judd's immediate superior, managed to look like a man who spent a lot of time on the golf course. Four years younger than Judd, he was a solid career man. If it took three rounds of golf a week to schmooze his way up the backside of the Area Commander then three rounds a week is what he had played, yet for all that he knew the job and, more importantly, knew when to trust his men to get on with that job.

When Judd entered his office, he came straight to the point. 'It's definitely the Wenlock girl?'

Judd nodded. 'We're ninety-nine percent sure at this stage.'

‘When’s the autopsy?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘Okay. Look, Judd, let’s not beat about the bush. How do you feel about taking this on? This is your first missing girl since Beth?’

Judd nodded. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s what I feared.’

‘It’s been nine years. It’s really not a problem.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Positive.’

Burgess’s cell-phone sprang into life, vibrating and skidding around his desk. He checked the screen and swore. He glanced up. ‘If you change your mind ...’

‘I won’t.’

Burgess held up his hand and answered the phone. ‘Wilson? Hold on a minute would you?’ He looked back at Judd. ‘Arrange a statement for the media, then a conference. But I’ll head the conference. Okay?’

‘Sure.’

‘I’ll expect you to keep me in the loop at every stage of the enquiry.’

‘Of course.’

‘What I’m saying is, there’s no room for conflict of interest. Understand?’

Judd was making for the door. ‘Don’t worry, sir. No conflict. No interest.’

The nor’wester they’d been promising all day was in full blow by the time Judd arrived home, just before nine. He checked his watch. Funny, Kate should be home by now, but perhaps her flight had been delayed by the wind. He checked his phone for messages but, remembering the battery was flat, attached it to the charger before opening the top fanlights to air

the stale-smelling house. Finally he unlocked the back door and stepped out onto the deck. He and Kate may have missed the twister, but the twister had not missed them.

The storm clouds had shot through, wiping the sky clean. The moon was up, a slick tick above the harbour. He ambled around in the half-light. The damage was not too bad: a few smashed pots, and the wicker garden furniture was down on the lawn. He righted his tomato plants, inspecting the underside of the leaves for aphids, playing the hose over the little buggers, willing them to drown. Many of the tomatoes had split with the rain; he'd pick those tomorrow. The fence between him and the Pearces was down, bringing with it the Dublin Bay climber Kate was so fond of. His beans and brussels sprouts were flat on the ground; he'd have to rip those out, but everything else looked relatively untouched. They'd got off lightly.

He walked up the brick path to the far end of the garden, sheltered from the wind by a high macrocarpa hedge, collecting out of habit an empty ice-cream container on the way. Untying the green nylon netting from the blackberry bushes, he breathed in the scent, sharp and bright like sherbet, from the disturbed leaves. He had once played hide and seek among these very bushes with his daughter, back in the day when the worst thing to fear was scarlet fever or mumps, and tears were reserved for watching the All Blacks lose the World Cup.

The recent rain had done its job. Fat clusters of shiny black berries hung inches from his face. This being his second pick, it took no time to strip the ripest fruit from the top of the bush before dragging over an upturned plastic bucket on which to sit. He tugged on the berries with clumsy fingers, giving thanks, not for the first time, for his decision to plant thornless bushes.

For no reason he could think of he had a sudden vision of Stan Cox, his former boss, standing at the police bar and explaining why gardening was a good pastime for a budding detective. 'A good detective needs three

qualities, Judd.’ He ticked them off on his fingers. ‘One, the tenacity of a Jack Russell, two, the patience of the Virgin Mary and three,’ and here he tapped the side of his nose with his forefinger, ‘the optimism of a gardener. You mark my words. Keep on at that garden of yours and you’ll not go far wrong.’ Judd brushed a spider from his hair and disentangled himself from the bush. He couldn’t imagine giving out advice like that to today’s graduate recruits. The ice-cream container was heavy. More fruit was ready for picking, but it could wait another day.

Tracey’s body had already been identified from jewellery and clothing, although dental records would be used for final confirmation. So far, all Helen Cole had verified was that Tracey appeared to have received a blow to the back of the head. Whether the blow had killed her, or whether she had drowned, would have to wait for the postmortem.

He struggled upright, hand to the middle of his back, eyes drawn to the small bedroom window at the rear of the house. It was easy enough to picture the Wenlocks in their daughter’s room, sitting quietly on her bed in the dying light of the day, searching for the scent of her, from one of her soft toys perhaps, or from her pyjamas still folded neatly under her pillow – listening to the sounds of everyday life: the bark of the neighbour’s dog, the coo of the wood pigeon stripping berries from the rowan tree, the hum of traffic from State Highway One, and all the time wondering, why us, why us?

Bile rose, stinging his throat. He stepped back, lost his balance on a loose brick, and knocked over the container, strewing fruit all over the ground. He should leave them. Let them rot on the damp soil. But the moment passed and he sat back down and picked them up. One by one.

CHAPTER THREE



Tuesday 5th March

Kate Judd's flight left Christchurch at 5.40 p.m., on time for once. The woman seated next to her was soon asleep, her head making dangerous moves towards Kate's shoulder; far too close and personal with the flu epidemic still rampant. Kate squeezed closer to the window. When the woman's head dropped, waking her with a start, Kate pretended not to notice.

'Sorry.'

Former work colleague, Rhiana Jones, trotted up the aisle avoiding eye contact with Kate. That still happened. To the general public, parents of missing children were pitiful at best, untrustworthy at worst. A dull ache started in Kate's right temple. She leaned down and rifled through her bag, taking out an almost empty pack of paracetamol. According to the pilot, turbulence was expected and refreshments would not be served. Preparing to swallow the tablets dry, she felt a tap on her leg.

'Wait a minute.' Her neighbour rummaged around in her bag. 'I thought so. Here, have this.' She handed Kate a plastic container of water. 'I got it on my last flight. I always take whatever they give out. Never drink it. Silly. I go home with all sorts of stuff in my bag. Look at this: soap, shower cap, muesli bar; that was from the hotel ... habit, I suppose.'

Kate shuddered at the disorder in the woman's bag. 'Fantastic. Thanks.' Christ, a babbler; that was all she needed.

'I'm Marie, by the way.'

‘Kate.’ Kate quickly turned her face toward the window. Below them Timaru, bathed in a coral glow from the setting sun, looked eerily Venetian. She and Leo had spent their European honeymoon in Venice. She closed her eyes, remembering the approach by waterbus, how they had stood in silence as the city shimmered and rippled around them: layers of gold in egg-shell blue, peachy pinks and piratical silver, winding canals and neo-Gothic architecture unfolding, glowing and seductive.

She stopped herself. Growing sentimental just before leaving a relationship was probably a cliché. She popped the tablets into her mouth, tipped back the water and swallowed. At that moment the plane jerked and water dripped down her chin.

Marie’s eyes were on her. ‘They do say the flu sometimes starts with a headache.’

Great. Kate grimaced and shrugged.

‘I hope it doesn’t get too bumpy, I’m not a good traveller.’

Marie wanted to chat; there was no getting away from it. ‘At least we weren’t flying yesterday.’ Kate sighed and rubbed her temple.

‘Dear God. I would not have wished that on my worst enemy!’

The passengers were unusually quiet. Most days it was a struggle to hear the engines over the babble of voices.

‘I was in Wellington. Training,’ Marie continued. ‘God only knows what I’m returning to. I saw it on the news, I couldn’t believe it. I live up in Opoho. Apparently we missed the worst. Were you there?’

The plane hit a bump. A baby at the front set up a wail, not unlike the siren for the rural fire service.

Kate shook her head, immediately wishing she hadn’t. ‘No. I’ve been away, visiting my sister. Then a friend. In Christchurch.’ She’d said friend, but what she meant was lover. But it sounded so ... Mills and Boon. Partner. Girlfriend. She still struggled with the vocabulary. Husband was so much easier.

The magazine pocket in front of her was a mess. She rearranged the publications in order of size, emergency procedures at the back, then the in-flight magazine and the slightly thinner duty-free magazine in front of that, and then the sick bag. Someone had been shoving in lolly wrappers. She took them out, smoothed them flat, refolding six times before popping them into her bag to throw away later.

Initially it had been a relief to escape Dunedin. The mood of the city, still at the mercy of the flu epidemic and subject to an unusually warm and humid summer, had changed. Someone had been lighting fires along Kaikorai Valley. Tortured cats in Brockville had been nailed to their owners' front doors and a spate of gay bashings had claimed front-page headlines. Leo said it was as if something evil were stalking the city.

The plane suddenly dropped. 'Whooh!'

Marie clutched her armrest. 'Far out. I think we're in for it.'

Rhiana Jones blundered past on her way back from the toilet. The seatbelt light was back on.

Blowing air down the front of her blouse, Kate glanced over to Marie. 'Just a bit of turbulence,' she said. 'Nothing to worry about.'

There was a smear of sweat above Marie's top lip. Marie closed her eyes. Every cloud ...

The engine noise grew louder as the plane continued to drop and buck its way to Dunedin. Kate, listening to the plastic interior creak and groan, reminded herself this was just another strong nor'wester, not a twister. She closed her eyes against unbidden images: rivets pinging loose, the window next to her head shattering and her being sucked out, spiralling down, down ...

It was hardly surprising she had a headache after her days with Janice's family. Why her sister had left having children so late was beyond her. She'd done her best to be supportive, but knowing Rea was waiting for her

in Christchurch, eager to hear that she'd finally told Leo she was leaving, had made her edgy.

Picking her up from the airport, Rea had made it her first question.

'What do you mean, you still haven't told him? What the hell are you waiting for?' She had slapped the steering wheel, setting off the horn and making them both jump. No-one would ever accuse Rea of having a damp fuse.

'She's not well? Short of breath? For God's sake, she's over eighty, of course she's short of breath. What do you expect her to be doing? Running half marathons?'

'There's no need to exaggerate. The fact is ...'

'The fact is? The fact is I'm moving down to Dunedin in less than two weeks and you still haven't told him we're together. What the hell are you waiting for? The ... the carpet to go down in the new house? The first crop of potatoes to come up in the bloody garden?'

Kate had tried to explain how she hadn't wanted to put Leo under too much stress, what with his mum's health fading, the huge drug bust he had only just wound up, to say nothing of being so short-staffed at work. But even to her own ears, her excuses sounded lame. The truth was she'd been treading the thin line between inertia and cowardice, one feeding the other, for months. The idea that there might be more to her reluctance to tell Leo than she was acknowledging was never far away.

Her head slammed back into her headrest. Jesus, that was a big one. The baby at the front screamed. Kate opened her eyes. The sole air hostess, strapped firmly into her seat, gave her seatbelt a quick tug. The ATR72 was long and narrow, with two rows of hard and slippery seats on either side of the aisle. Fortunately, Kate was seated near the middle of the plane.

‘It could be worse,’ she told Marie, feeling unexpectedly sorry for the woman scrambling about in the magazine pouch. ‘We could be on a Dash 8!’

Marie rolled her eyes and pulled out the paper sick bag, leaned forward and vomited vigorously. Kate averted her head. Now she felt nauseous. Sweat pooled in her shoes and behind her knees; her blouse stuck to her. Just as she raised her hand to direct the flow of ventilation onto her face, the plane dropped and her teeth snapped down, through her lip. Blood spurting down the front of her blouse. She held her hand to her mouth, eyes streaming. Would somebody shut up that bloody baby!

Again, the plane plummeted. Kate swallowed a mouthful of blood and counted. When she got to eight, someone in the row in front of her started to whimper. Kate’s body left her seat then crashed down again as the plane finally levelled out. Shit! More blood.

The sick bag slid from Marie’s hand and spilled across the floor. Marie was groaning and reaching blindly towards her. Kate, reading Marie accurately, snatched out her own bag and thrust it at her. The plane rocked violently from side to side, lurching like a crazy thing. Kate clung to the armrest, hearing Marie fill the second bag.

‘I’m so sorry,’ Marie sobbed. ‘I’m so sorry.’

Kate found a tissue in her pocket and held it to her mouth, watching out of the corner of her eye as Marie reached into her blouse and retrieved a crucifix. At that moment the plane tilted forward into a dive.

Kate thrust her feet hard against the floor. When Marie threw the second bag of vomit into the aisle and assumed the crash position, Kate instinctively copied, curling over, arms wrapped around her head. Her blood pounded. She was going to die. She wanted Leo. Why wasn’t he here? She pictured him on the deck, his face turned into the hot wind, looking forward to the rain that would follow. Were they near Dunedin? Could he hear the plane? Would he see her fall from the sky? If only she

had his arm to cling to. She remembered the comforting bulk of his bicep under her hand on their first date, as they raced across the road towards the Brixton Academy, the rough texture of his jacket ... The whine of the engine grew louder. The Smiths; that had been it! Two encores and Morrissey, in the middle of 'The Queen Is Dead', holding up a placard requesting 'Two Light Ales Please' — Leo's favourite story ... their prime time ... where had it gone? Where had it all gone?

The plane started to shudder.

Oh God, please don't let me die. Let me see Rea again. Our future, our house, our friends, our lives; don't take it all away. Rea was right to be angry: Kate should have told Leo months ago. Why hadn't she told him? Why? She clung to her knees. What if he found out about her and Rea from someone else? What would he think? And how could she possibly leave Leo without first telling him the truth about the day Beth disappeared? If she died now, he'd never know. Never. She was shaking, her whole body trembling, juddering like the plane. If they didn't crash she'd tell him, and then she'd tell him about her and Rea, and it would be done. It was all so simple. The engine was screaming now, or it could have been her; with death bellowing in her ear it was impossible to tell.

CHAPTER FOUR



Wednesday 6th March

At eight thirty sharp, Judd pushed open the door of the Serious Incident Room and stopped in front of a large whiteboard on which circular magnets held an A4-sized photograph of a teenage girl. It was a typical school photograph: a pretty teen, blonde hair, pale skin, looking shyly into the camera, nothing like the corpse they pulled from the water the previous day. He stared at it for a moment before turning back to address the room.

‘As some of you know, the body of a young girl has been found at Ross Creek Reservoir. We believe it to be that of Tracey Wenlock.’ He turned and tapped the board. ‘Today’s postmortem will confirm, but early indications are that we have found our girl. As you are already aware, Tracey disappeared just over a week ago on her way home from her job at Sails Cafe at the St Clair Pool. Some of you were involved in the initial search. Well, now you’re involved in the investigation.’

‘Is it murder?’

‘We’ll treat it as homicide until we know different. Veronica Byrne is currently with Tracey’s family. I’m warning you,’ he spread his hands, ‘we are it. Uniform may be able to lend us a few more people, but with DC Weaver’s team tied up with Operation Swallowtail, and with Senior Detective Sergeant Thompson reporting in sick yesterday morning ...’

He didn’t have to say more. They understood. Every family, business, corporate entity and government department had been hit by the epidemic. If the flu had not struck the criminals equally hard they would have had to call in the army. And now there was the aftermath of the twister. To say

things were tight was an understatement. ‘Phil Priest was part of the original search; he’ll bring us up to date.’

While Priest filled them in on the result of their enquiries so far, Judd studied his team. He had worked with Phil Priest often over the years. Priest, nicknamed Columbo for his bumbling manner and sartorial inelegance, was good; Judd had no qualms there. DCs Randall and Greene he also knew. Rob Randall, standing with his arms crossed in front of his chest, the sleeves of his jacket tight across his biceps, was thorough to the point of fastidious. As the only out gay man in the CBI he had a lot to prove. There were plenty who wished to see him fail and Judd was watching his career with interest. He had known Eve for years; a feisty, impulsive individual with hair the colour of a Penguin paperback and a temper to match, she and her mother Rea had been his and Kate’s neighbours. He had watched Eve playing with Beth in the garden, climbing his garden fence to retrieve a tennis ball, flattening his radishes with her jandals. He had a soft spot for the young woman, which he tried hard not to show.

His thoughts momentarily strayed to Kate, the sight of her standing on the doorstep last night, white in the moonlight, with a cut lip and blood down the front of her blouse. Her flight had been diverted to Invercargill and she’d caught the bus back up to Dunedin, not arriving home until almost ten. After muttering something about having to talk, she’d knocked back a brandy and taken herself off to bed. He’d poked his head around her bedroom door a short time later, but she was already asleep.

A phone rang, bringing him back to the room. Priest was summing up. ‘The usual suspects — friends, ex-boyfriend, neighbours, teachers — were canvassed at the time of her disappearance. Her cell-phone has been monitored. She’s not made or replied to any calls or texts since leaving her job that afternoon.’

‘GPS? Polling?’

‘Nothing. There’s no record of any signal being picked up after she disappeared.’

‘Bank account?’

‘No movement. Nothing new on Facebook, no emails. Nothing. Zilch. Silence.’

‘Well, now we know why,’ said a heavy middle-aged man from the rear of the room.

Judd glanced towards Detective Little. He was less happy with Detectives Little and Reid. They were experienced officers, and he had recently worked with Little on a Category A drugs bust out at Green Island but, approaching retirement, they seemed more than happy to coast these last couple of years. Reid, commonly referred to as Rain-man due to his obsession with the weather, was still recovering from the fact that, holed up with his work in the basement on Monday afternoon, he’d completely missed the twister.

‘CCTV footage for the Saturday night Tracey disappeared has been examined. What little there is around the St Clair area focuses on businesses rather than the street, and nothing’s shown up there.’

Judd stepped forward, clapping his hands to gain their attention. ‘Now we’ve got a body we’re going to have to go over everything again. From the beginning. I want to know exactly what we’ve learned and where the gaps are. We can’t re-interview everyone, we don’t have the manpower, but I want the main contenders back in. Leave the parents alone for a few days; their alibis are watertight for the night Tracey disappeared and I’ll personally talk to them later. The results of the house-to-house canvas in the St Clair area?’ He turned towards Reid. ‘On my desk by the end of today, and new enquiries to start at Ross Creek immediately. Uniform’s been up there, Rob took details yesterday, but I want you two,’ he pointed to Little and Reid, ‘to take over.’

‘More bloody pooper-scoopers,’ groaned Reid.

Judd ignored him. ‘Phil will be finished with the body today. Once he’s prepped the file for the inquest he’ll handle the suspects.’

Priest butted in. ‘The ex-boyfriend’s downstairs.’

‘How’s that?’

‘Drunk and disorderly. He was picked up last night.’

‘Good. You and I will start there. Eve, you can handle the press release. I’ll give you a hand if necessary. And I want a photo-board in place. We’ll need a reconstruction. Get hold of similar clothing, more photos, you know the drill. Rob, once you’ve finished with the scene, get onto the prison, probation, psych services. Is there anyone we should know about?’ He turned to Priest. ‘What’s happened with her Facebook page?’

‘They’ve promised us a report today. The parents have set up their own, called the Tracey Wenlock Facebook Group. Veronica gave them a hand.’

Judd nodded. Good. ‘Many hits?’

‘Over a hundred. But nothing useful yet.’

‘Eve, Rob, I want you back here tonight, the rest of you tomorrow morning. In the meantime, if you come across anything new, you know how to reach me.’

The air in Interview Room Two was nothing if not atmospheric. Judd took the seat opposite Harry Finkel, Tracey’s former boyfriend. A youth in his late teens, he looked every inch the lab rat with his red eyes and pale skin. Judd pushed back his seat. The boy hadn’t used a toothbrush for a while.

‘So, you managed to find the one bar in Dunedin still open. Make a night of it, did you?’

Finkel shrugged.

‘How did you get in this state?’

Finkel rubbed his left eye. ‘The best part of a slab, a couple of shots ... I dunno. Can’t remember.’ He looked up. ‘Any chance of a smoke?’

‘No, sorry. Regulations.’

Judd tapped his fingers on the Formica desk. They had kept the boy waiting a good hour before interviewing him. Nothing at this point suggested he had had anything to do with Tracey’s disappearance, but no harm ever came from putting the fear of God into a teenage boy. Finkel had the sorry look of a beagle about him. Judd couldn’t blame him for being nervous. He didn’t have a criminal record and by all accounts he was a decent kid. But both of them knew why they needed to talk.

‘You know we’ve found a body, then?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How did you find out? It’s not official yet.’

‘Tracey’s aunty lives next door to us. She told Mum.’

It didn’t take long for news to pass around Dunedin. If New Zealand was a village then Dunedin was the village pub. ‘And you decided to go out and get blathered.’

Another shrug. He was twisting a ring round and round his finger. ‘She was stellar. She didn’t deserve it.’

‘How long were you guys together?’

‘About six months.’

‘And you broke up, when?’

‘About a month ago, a bit more?’

‘So what, three weeks before she disappeared?’

‘About that.’

‘You had a row?’

‘No. Not really.’

‘You broke up ... without having a row?’ Judd folded his arms. ‘Just got bored did you and called the whole thing off. All friendly like?’

Finkel pulled a face.

‘What did you row over?’

‘We didn’t row. It just happens. You go out with some chick ... then you drop her.’

‘Or she drops you?’

He smirked. ‘Whatever.’

‘So when did she give you the flick, exactly?’

Finkel glared at the floor. ‘Like I said, three weeks before. On the Saturday. I went to the match, with my mates. It’s old news.’

‘The Highlanders’ game?’ from Priest.

Finkel nodded.

Priest turned to Judd. ‘That’ll be the tenth, then.’ To Finkel he said, ‘Tracey didn’t appreciate being stood up for a game? Women, they’ve no idea, eh?’

Finkel blew out his cheeks. ‘That wasn’t it.’

‘So what was it? Was she two-timing you?’

‘No!’

‘Well, what then?’

‘Look. She’s ... was, a nice girl. Okay?’

‘And?’

‘And she was young. Younger than me.’ Finkel scratched his head.

‘Water?’ Judd cut in. Finkel nodded and picked up the proffered paper cup, draining it in noisy gulps. That was some hangover. ‘So, she was young. What does that mean — too young?’

Finkel raised a shoulder. ‘You know. Her parents were strict. She couldn’t do stuff.’

‘And you are, how old?’

‘Twenty.’

Judd nodded. ‘Any contact since?’

‘Not really. The odd text. But she was proud. None of that ... begging. Like I said, she was alright.’

Judd poured him more water. They had checked his alibi. Finkel lived with his parents in Antrim Street, North East Valley. According to Finkel, on the night Tracey disappeared he had been at home alone until about a quarter to six, when he had taken the dog for his usual walk around Chingford Park. On his return, at about six twenty, he had got changed and gone to The Poolstation for a game of pool. His neighbours had observed him walking the dog although they were vague about the time, and his friends confirmed he had been playing pool with them that evening. There was a tournament that night that started at seven thirty.

‘The night Tracey went missing. You walked the dog. What time did you get back?’

‘Look, I told you before. About quarter ... twenty past six.’

‘Did anyone see you?’

Finkel shrugged. ‘Dunno. Probably.’

‘You weren’t the only one in the park?’

‘I can’t remember, I mean, I walk the dog every night ... there might have been other ... Sometimes there’s another guy. He’s got a boxer. Mad bastard. But I don’t know his name or anything.’

‘You don’t talk.’

‘You’re joking. His dog would eat ours.’

Priest snorted.

‘After the park, then what?’

‘I went home and got changed. Went down to play pool. Played a game with some guy from Mosgiel, then two games with Jono and Minty.’

‘Your mates?’

‘Yes.’

‘This guy from Mosgiel. Does he have a name?’

‘Bazza.’

‘Original. How well do you know him?’

‘I don’t. Just seen him around once or twice. Anyways, then we got kicked off the tables, ’cos of the tournament.’

‘You weren’t in the tournament yourselves, then?’

‘No. We just play for fun, eh? Look, like I said ... I walked the dog, I played pool. That’s all there is.’

‘And after you got kicked off?’

‘We went down to Big Break. Then on to The Cook.’

There was nowhere else to go right now. Priest saw him up to reception and Judd returned to his desk. Priest came in, carrying two flat whites.

‘Nice one, Phil. Just here will do.’ Judd leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands behind his head. ‘I wonder what they really split up about. We’ll check with her friends. Girls tell each other everything, don’t they?’

Priest nodded. ‘True, true. The neighbours can’t confirm what time they saw him with the dog, but his alibi looks tight, doesn’t it? It takes fifteen minutes to drive to Ross Creek from St Clair. If he’d picked up Tracey at six fifteen, he wouldn’t have got to Ross Creek until six thirty, alright six twenty-five at a push, which would leave him an hour to kill her, drag her into the water, drive ten minutes to the pool house, and play three games of pool, all before seven thirty. And that’s assuming he didn’t go home and change, like he said he did, in between times.’

Judd grunted. Rosie Christie, the cafe owner, had confirmed Tracey had left work about six fifteen. They had been late leaving. It had been a busy day; some kid had walked in with tar on his shoe and trodden it all over the floor. ‘Has anyone found the guy who walks the boxer? That’d help.’

‘No. He didn’t mention that before. I’ll get onto it.’

Judd rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. He was tired. He needed a swim, needed to plunge his body into cold water, to wake himself, feel the air on his skin, the sun on his face, to feel human again. How long did it take to kill someone? To lead her into the bushes. To strike her, and drag her through the undergrowth into the water. And then to hide the body. It might not have been accidental that she was entangled in branches.

‘What? Yes, would you? I don’t think Finkel’s our guy, but if we could find the boxer walker it might nail his alibi.’ He checked his watch. ‘What time’s the postmortem?’

‘Not until five. Helen should be back from Lawrence by then.’

‘Fair enough. I’ll catch you there later.’

Judd spent the next few hours going over the case so far. When Tracey Wenlock had not returned straight home from work, her parents assumed she’d gone to a friend’s house and forgotten to tell them. They tried ringing her just after nine, to check she had money for a taxi home. When she didn’t answer they kept trying, then, assuming her phone had gone flat, they rang her friends. When, just before midnight, they still had not heard from her, they called the police. Like most people, they had assumed a person would have to be missing for twenty-four hours before anything would be done. Each year over 8,000 people were reported missing in New Zealand. More than fifty percent of those returned home within forty-eight hours and ninety-five percent were found within two weeks of going missing. Tracey had been one of the ninety-five percent, only by the time they found her, she was dead.

The local papers had been proactive, giving Tracey’s disappearance as much publicity as possible, but now there was a body things would change. The Wenlocks would need to be protected from the worst of the tabloid press. With their daughter’s body found, Tracey’s parents should be left alone to start the process of grieving. He would go and see them

directly after the postmortem. He checked his watch again. It was time. He stood up and, despite the heat in the day, slipped on his jacket.

Almost a fortnight in the water had left its mark on the body and Helen Cole's knife had done the rest. Judd, no fan of mortuaries, was not ashamed to keep his distance, but he thought he owed it to the girl to be diligent, and to be aware of the damage that had been inflicted on such a young life.

Helen Cole stated that Tracey had drowned.

'What makes you so sure?' asked Priest. 'In layman's terms.'

'There is haemorrhaging in the middle ear, which could be caused by either drowning or head injury, but there is also foam in the airways. The lungs are voluminous and the pleural surface is marbled.' Cole was checking off each point with her fingers. 'There was a flow of watery material on sectioning. The liquid in the stomach could suggest either rapid death by drowning or death prior to submersion, but it is almost certain she died after entering the water.'

Despite this, Tracey had received a blow to the back of the head, but whether that was a deliberate blow, or accidental, through a fall for example, she could not say.

'My best guess is that, while unconscious, she fell or was pushed into the water. The blow was from a flat object. She may have been struck, or she may have simply fallen backwards and knocked herself out.'

The wound was clean, the water having washed away any debris that might help identify the source of the blow. There were marks on her skin, but they were all but indecipherable. She was probably not a virgin, but it was impossible to say if it was a sexual attack for the same reason as before: all traces had been washed away.

Cole grimaced. 'Sorry. Doesn't help much, does it?'

While they had been inside, a sea fog had come in, leaching the surroundings of colour. The air felt clammy; dull and flat. Priest lit a cigarette. ‘So, where does that leave us?’

Judd looked up at the blank sky and rubbed the back of his neck. ‘Tracey was supposed to go straight home from work. Instead she turns up at Ross Creek. What was she doing there? If she’d decided to go there for a jog, she’d have gone home first for her gear. She wasn’t even wearing trainers. She came out of work, met someone, or bumped into them perhaps, and went, apparently without force because of the lack of bruising, to Ross Creek.’ He paused. That wasn’t strictly right. ‘No, she ended up at Ross Creek. For all we know, she may have received the blow to the head, and then been taken there.’

‘You mean unconscious before she even got there?’

‘Possibly.’

‘And she might not have gone there that night, either.’

‘That’s right, she could have been somewhere else for a while.’

‘But not for long. Helen said she’d been in the water for over a week.’

‘Nine days, ten ... either way, she wouldn’t have made her way there alone. She didn’t drive. She wasn’t running away. She wasn’t depressed. She wasn’t, to our knowledge, in any sort of trouble. By all accounts she was happy and it was just a normal day. She was expected at home straight from work.’ Judd checked his mobile, vibrating in his pocket. ‘No, something happened. Something unexpected.’

Priest ground out his cigarette. ‘So someone either meets her or bumps into her at St Clair, whacks her over the head, then drives all the way to Ross Creek, the other side of town, to dump the body?’

‘It’s as good a place as any. Nice and quiet.’ Judd grunted. ‘The report on Tracey’s Facebook account has finally arrived. Get Randall onto it. He understands that stuff.’

‘Sure. But back to Ross Creek; it’s not nice and quiet is it? Everyone uses it. And why not dump her in the bush? Why the water?’

Judd nodded. ‘That’s what I thought. It’s more likely that she, or I should say they, were already at Ross Creek. She receives the blow and gets dragged into the water. There’s a lot of dogs walked through there, and the place is crawling with joggers. A dog is less likely to find a body if it’s submerged.’

Priest jiggled the loose change in his pockets. ‘She wasn’t jogging, and she wasn’t walking her dog ... in my book that only leaves two possible reasons for being there ... sex or drugs.’

‘Or just a walk with a mate.’

‘All the way to Ross Creek, for a walk? When you’ve got beaches and parks right next to the pool?’

Judd gave an imperceptible nod. ‘Well, if she wasn’t there with her ex-boyfriend, who apparently has an alibi, who was she there with? Start on her friends again. Was there anybody new on the scene? By the way, any luck with the vehicle tracks?’

Priest shook his head. ‘I’m waiting to hear from Randall.’

Judd unlocked his car and slipped out of his jacket, throwing it onto the back seat where it landed next to his swimming bag. He checked his watch: no time for a swim. Randall and Greene would be waiting.

Back at the second floor he found Randall inside the incident room, scrolling through scene-of-crime photographs while Eve Greene rummaged through a stack of Farmers carrier bags.

‘Not shopping for the wedding on company time, I hope?’ teased Judd.

Eve flushed. ‘No, of course not. It’s clothing for the recon— Oh.’

Judd winked.

‘I’ve also been working on a photo-board, and posters for the reconstruction.’

‘Good.’

‘And I’ve completed the press release. Do you want to ... ?’

‘Yep, let’s take a butcher’s.’

She handed him a sheet of paper, which he read through quickly. She had done well.

‘What about you, Rob? Did you take any casts in the end?’

Randall swung around in his chair. ‘We’ve got partials of three separate treads,’ he said. ‘The council truck didn’t help, going back and forth like that for a couple of days ... but, you know, it’s a popular spot. They reckon up to four thousand people a month use the walking tracks.’

‘What about footprints. Anything down by the water?’

‘We’ve got a couple. We’re checking them against those of the council workers.’

‘Right. Someone should have seen something.’

Ross Creek would have been teeming with joggers and walkers. Tracey’s parents had littered St Clair with posters the day after she went missing and yesterday Priest had organised for similar posters to go up around Ross Creek. Someone would come forward sooner or later. It was a case of wait and see.

‘So, you’ve finished up there?’

‘Most of the area is open again to the public. Little and Rain-man are still there.’

‘And you’ve given them the statements you took yesterday?’

‘Sure.’

‘They’re so loving it, eh?’ Eve rolled her eyes and Randall grinned.

Judd looked at his two youngest officers. They were a good match: Randall reigned in Eve’s impulsiveness; Eve kicked Randall up the butt when his behaviour verged on obsessive. He perpetually worried about giving new officers too much responsibility, but as long as he and Phil

kept a close eye on these two they should be alright. Eve stifled a yawn. There had been too many twelve-hour days recently. He'd get them back to working regular shifts. Tired officers made mistakes.

Once they had left, he texted Kate to tell her he'd be late home, then sat at his desk going over statements, trying to build a picture of the night Tracey disappeared. When he next checked his watch it was past midnight.

Kate was already in bed. There was an uncharacteristic jumble of boarding passes and parking stubs on the hall table, where she'd evidently emptied her handbag while searching for something, which reminded him of the state she'd been in the previous night. He cursed. He'd left the house before she was up and should have returned home earlier.

He poured himself a drink before plodding up the stairs, rueing, as he often did at the end of a long day, his propensity for buying double-storied houses. He should have bought a bungalow like everyone else, but this house, with its eaves, square bays and leadlight windows, reminded him of the middle-class houses he had walked by on the way to school, houses where normal, happy people lived, or so he had assumed.

As usual, the small rear bedroom smelled of furniture polish, lemon this time, which made a change from the vanilla Kate usually favoured. The walls were still painted in the hideous metallic grey Beth had insisted upon. Fat Freddy's Drop, Elemeno P and Metallica glared down at him from the posters on the walls, and the curtains had started to fade. Pulled close, they looked almost candy-striped and a faded patch of carpet shimmered like a pool of perpetual sunlight.

A fly buzzed on the windowsill. He crossed the room, leaning over the narrow single bed to open the sash and let it out. Lined up were a dozen or so Smurfs, horrible ugly things. How on earth could they have become popular a second time? He sat on the bed, holding one under his nose for a moment before replacing it, and finishing his drink. As he went to stand, something on the floor caught his eye. He bent to pick it up. A business

card. New Age and Gothic. Sabrina Fairhurst — Clairvoyant and Psychic.
Christ, not again.

CHAPTER FIVE



Thursday 7th March

When Judd woke the next morning, mist was dwindling from the harbour like the tail end of a receding dream. Standing on the deck with a mug of tea, he remembered the business card from the previous night. Kate usually came back from her trips so buoyed he had trouble keeping up with her, but this week her OCD had flared up, and with it the long hours in Beth's room, mood swings, and her fixation with mystics and clairvoyants.

Would moving house help? He thought so. They would lose the view but also, he hoped, the shrine. Below him, a rower glided silently by. The water was so still he fancied a skimmed stone would send ripples beyond the heads and out to sea. They would never leave Dunedin, not before Beth was found, but there were other ways of moving on. When he shifted to New Zealand his life had changed in ways he could never have imagined. If it had been possible once, might it not be again?

Despite the ungodly hour, he felt, somewhere in the left of his ribcage, the unfamiliar tug of hope. He returned inside to dress. He'd be working late on Saturday with the reconstruction, so perhaps tomorrow he'd finish work early and suggest to Kate a film, followed by dinner at Custom House. They'd park by the wharf and amble between the warehouses to the cinema. He'd prefer the cosiness of the Metro, but at a push the Rialto would do. After the film, something feel-good if not actually romantic: still glowing from other people's joy, they'd stop on the railway bridge, as they did in their early days, and try to spot their house across the water.

At the restaurant the reflected lights on the harbour would remind them how beautiful their city was, and they'd talk of anything but the broken bones and gnarled-up lives that constituted their working lives. For an evening, at least, they'd look and act like any other couple. He picked up his swim bag and threw it into the car. He had missed Kate when she was away, but if he made the effort, if they spent more time together, perhaps they'd remember how to be a couple again, and have a reason to move on.

His optimism held all the way to the pool, where he slid from the abrasive concrete edge and lingered for a moment, enjoying the sensation of total submersion. The water was surprisingly warm. Although it was supposed to be kept at twenty-eight degrees, you could never be sure. He surfaced and slipped on his goggles. Having a lane to himself at seven in the morning felt fortuitous.

'Beaut morning.'

Judd looked over. 'Kev. Long time no see.'

'The bloody flu. It wasn't pretty. Wasn't sure this place would still be here, after the other day.'

Judd nodded. The sailcloths over the paddling pool had been ripped to shreds, and the layer of sand under his feet made the water unusually murky, but Kev was right, they'd got off lightly.

'Might take it slow this morning. First day back ...'

'Catch you later.' Judd adjusted his goggles, raising his eyebrows and dropping his jaw for a snug fit, and pushed off.

After Beth disappeared, almost nine years ago, he had got into the habit of walking her old jogging route, from their house in Doon Street to the end of the gravel track above Second Beach, on the far side of the pool. From there he would often stop and look down, observing the difference in swimmers: the languid, the thrashers, the slick and the fast.

Back then, rocks had been piled against the concrete outer walls, but at high tide the far, slow lane was still often sprayed with seawater. At the

time it seemed the sea wall had been under reconstruction forever, but eventually the muddle of plywood sheets and Keep Out signs were replaced with new paving, modern benches and balustrades. Eight months after Beth went missing, he had walked toward the pool with a towel under his arm and the cash in his pocket for a season ticket.

Beth's jogging had resulted from teasing at school. He and Kate, on hearing weeping from her bedroom, had found their daughter sobbing. He remembered how useless he'd felt standing in the doorway as Kate sat on the bed and reached for their daughter. 'Beth? What's on earth's the ...'

Beth twisted her body away, shoving at Kate. 'Go away. This is all your fault.'

'What's my fault?'

'That I'm fat.' With her back to the bedroom wall, Beth started kicking at Kate. 'Get out. Both of you. Leave me alone.'

'That you're ... Stop it. Stop kicking your mother. Now calm down and tell us, what's up?'

Beth staggered upright and stood on the bed, towering above them. 'I'm fat. I'm fat. I'm sooo fat. Look at me! Mrs Collins, stupid tart, said I could be Hippolyta. Gemma Kingsman said, "More like hippopotamus, Mrs Collins." And they all cracked up.'

'Well, I hope Mrs Collins ...'

'Yeah. But it's true? Hello? Look at me? I am a fucking hippo!'

'Beth, what Gemma said was stupid and unkind ...'

'It's you. It's your fault. You should be buying cottage cheese, and fruit, and ... and those small boxes of raisins,' Beth yelled, pointing at Kate. 'Instead of chippies and lamingtons and bloody shit like that. It's your fault that I'm fucking fat!'

'Beth!'

‘I’m going running. Every day. I’ll show them!’ She flung herself from the bed and stomped out of the room, stopping in the doorway to yell, ‘And I’ll need a water bottle.’

‘Wow.’ His daughter’s temper never ceased to surprise him.

‘Those bloody bitches.’ Kate was straightening the quilt cover. ‘Still, my fault as usual, never yours.’

Memories of his own fat childhood decided him. That evening, once Beth calmed enough to talk rationally, he mapped her route. It had never been his intention to run with her, but he recognised the pain she was experiencing and some days it was the only way to get her off the sofa. Two pairs of trainers were lined up by the back door and a monster can of foot deodorant.

Had he pushed her too hard?

Completing his thirtieth length, Judd caught a flash of green from the next lane. He slowed to check. Yes, it was her. The woman with the green costume. Women were such neat swimmers: lifting their arms clear of the water and sliding them back with none of the crash and furore created by men. He swam on, suddenly conscious of his swimming style and making an effort with his stroke. He’d seen her a few times. They tended to swim at the same pace.

For a length or two they kept abreast until it felt too awkward and he stopped, feigning an adjustment to his goggles. She too stopped, at the opposite end of the pool. He squatted so the water came halfway up his chest and glanced down the lane. Between them, hexagonal honeycomb shimmered and wavered on the water’s surface like a dream-catcher. What was he doing? One minute he was drawing up plans to bring a spark back into his marriage, the next making eyes at another woman.

A gull swooped over the pool and he followed its path, his eyes coming to rest on the house perched on top of the sandy cliff that overshadowed the pool. The view from up there would be magnificent: right up the coast,

past Lawyers Head, past the towering outcrops at Karitane to ... who knew where? Shag Point? Further? He sometimes imagined himself spending his final days in such a house, sitting in an armchair with a rug over his lap, perhaps, and a thermos at his side, watching a storm roll in, or a pod of whales blow their way south; staying up at night to catch a glimpse of the Aurora Australis. For the past two years he'd been trying to persuade Kate to sell up, pointing out interesting houses in this area in particular, but she remained indifferent, as though she still expected Beth to walk in through the front door at any moment. He was ready for change.

The woman in green was swimming back towards him. He pushed away from the side. The best part of the day was over. Time for work.

The team was waiting for him when he arrived at the second floor. Reid handed him a summary of the unfinished enquiries from the initial search around the esplanade area, where they had concentrated on line of sight. An Australian family staying at the new hotel, Pier 24, had yet to be contacted, and two local families remained away on holiday. A local businessman, Scott McDowell, who had been overseas at a conference since Tracey disappeared, had returned and was now available for interview, and an empty house had been discovered on the esplanade itself. 'Good. Leave that to me. You two continue up at Ross Creek.' He'd start with McDowell, then check out the empty house. His spine tingled. He liked empty houses.

The car crawled past the pool and up Cliffs Road, Priest checking the numbers on the mailboxes as he drove. Towards the top of the street, he pulled over. 'Here we are. Down a dog leg, by the look of it.'

They swerved down the short drive and stopped. Judd whistled. It was the very house he had noted that morning from the pool. He flipped off his seat belt. ‘Come on, get moving.’

Leaving Priest to turn the car, Judd walked towards the house. Up close it looked much like any other modernised bungalow: roughcast, painted off-white. Since being built, probably in the 1950s, new aluminium windows had been installed, but the dozing Mexican sandblasted into the large glass panel beside the timber door was original. He tried the doorbell. No answer. Impatient to check out the view, he made for the rear garden surrounded by a high metal fence. About to try the gate, he heard a low growl. A huge tan bull-mastiff was staring at him, drooling from its open mouth, hackles up.

Judd backed away. Jesus, he hated those dogs. He turned at the sound of a car. A 1973 Triumph Stag entered the driveway. Judd nodded appreciatively. The driver turned off the engine and got out. He looked to be in his late forties. Ginger hair cropped close to his head and sideburns that ended in a crisp point in the middle of his cheeks gave him an almost military presence. He stood looking at them, his t-shirt pure white, jeans immaculately pressed. Priest appeared at the same time. The difference in the two men’s appearance was shocking.

‘Scott McDowell?’ Judd fished his badge out of his trouser pocket. ‘Detective Senior Sergeant Judd, and this is Detective Priest.’

‘Yep. I was expecting you.’ McDowell stuck out his hand. He had one of those grips that made surgeons rich. ‘Come on through, guys. I’ll just see to the dog.’

He stepped in front of Judd and unlocked the front door. Judd and Priest followed. At some point in the house’s modernization, dividing walls had been removed and the narrow hallway opened into a large open-plan area. McDowell threw his bag onto the leather couch. From an oversized stainless-steel fridge he poured himself a glass of water.

‘Can I get you ... ?’

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

McDowell drained the glass, then took a key from a hook beside the ranch slider and slid the doors to the stuffy room wide open.

‘Whoa, Butkus!’ He braced as the dog rushed him. ‘Down! Good dog. Good boy.’ He grabbed the dog by its collar before turning to Judd and Priest. ‘Nothing to worry about. He’s well trained.’

Judd stayed where he was, the back of his shirt sticking to his skin. While owner and dog spent a few moments appreciating one another, he studied the room. Apart from a generously proportioned black leather lounge suite and a large timber-framed mirror, the room was sparsely furnished. If not for the artwork on the walls the room would have been bleak and cold, although the art was organised, one large piece every so many feet, as if in a gallery. He recognised a Nigel Brown on the far wall next to a Graham Sydney, and a Martin Thompson opposite the large window, where surely it would fade. He could almost hear their former neighbour, Rea, sniff. New money, she’d say. Art purchased for investment, rather than for appreciation of the work itself.

‘You must have quite a view from up here.’

McDowell gave his dog a few good slaps and pushed him into the garden. Mount Cargill dominated the view north. South, the coast faded into mist. A heavy old white-painted telescope on the patio reminded Judd of the old-fashioned ‘penny a peep’ telescopes from his childhood.

McDowell stretched out his arms. ‘There’s not much you can’t see from up here. The best view in Dunedin, I reckon.’

‘Does the telescope work?’

‘Sure. Have a go.’

Behind it, Judd stood on tip-toe to check out the view. After a few moments he swung it up and around so it pointed south. ‘If you told me you could see Stewart Island from here I’d probably believe you.’

‘Unfortunately the topography does not allow that.’

‘I use the pool,’ Judd explained. ‘I’ve often looked up at this house and wondered about the view.’ He let go of the telescope with some reluctance and turned back to McDowell. ‘We’re making enquiries about the night the young girl went missing.’

‘The one that worked at the cafe? Young Tracey?’

‘You knew her?’

‘Nice girl. Good service. Respectful. I read about it in the paper. Terrible business.’

‘We’re checking to see if anyone in the vicinity saw anything, and given that your house literally overlooks the pool ... what I mean is, I understand you weren’t here the last few times we called.’

‘That’s right. I’m away a lot. Auckland, Melbourne, mainly. The day you’re talking about I was in Auckland, got back about ...’ He patted his pockets, then walked back inside where he picked up his iPad and started scrolling.

Priest walked over to a shelf of sporting trophies and selected one.

‘Body building?’

McDowell glanced up. ‘Regional finalist, last year. Unfortunately my work doesn’t leave me as much time as I’d like.’

‘I’ve done a bit myself. For rowing.’

‘Really?’ McDowell raised an eyebrow.

Judd followed his look. There was a coffee stain on the front of Priest’s shirt and he had seen better ties on the bargain rack at the op shop.

‘I’d never have guessed.’ McDowell crossed the room and straightened the trophy. ‘Here we are. Saturday the twenty-third. My flight got in at four forty-five.’

Judd looked over to Priest, who took out his notebook.

‘Then I’d have picked up Butkus from the kennel.’

‘The one by the airport?’

‘That’s right. Great people. They love him. Absolutely love him. Then what, dropped him here, picked up my gear and went down the gym? Probably grabbed a takeaway on the way home. Sushi, mind you.’ He tapped his six-pack. ‘None of that high-fat crap.’

Priest looked up from his notebook. ‘Is that probably went to the gym, or definitely? We’re talking less than a fortnight ago.’

McDowell looked Priest up and down and nodded. ‘Definitely. When I’m home, I go every day. Ask them.’

‘And what time would you have got to the gym?’

‘Back here with the dog by six. Dropped bag, changed ... about seven?’

‘And which gym would that be, exactly?’

‘Gold’s. Exactly.’

‘Gold’s?’

‘In Consultancy House. Private. Members only.’ He scratched his chin. ‘I doubt you’ve heard of it.’

‘And you’d have stayed there until ...?’

‘Eight thirty, maybe nine.’

‘And people will be able to verify that?’

‘Well, given that you swipe in and out, Detective.’

‘You live alone?’ from Judd, attempting to diffuse the situation.

‘At present.’ McDowell returned to the fridge and refilled his glass.

Judd scanned the room. No photos, just an old-fashioned calendar hanging from a plastic hook on a cupboard door, completely out of place. On his way back, McDowell stopped in front of the mirror, leaning towards it and checking his hair, his sideburns, turning sideways, running a hand over his stomach.

Priest persisted. 'You didn't see anything on your drive to the gym? Nothing out of the ordinary?'

'If I had, I would have called the police,' McDowell snapped. 'I know my civic duty, Detective.' He turned to Judd. 'As I told you. She was a good kid. Had manners. Rare these days.' He glanced pointedly at Priest. 'Now, if there's nothing else I can help you with, I really need to give this young buck a walk.'

Back at the car, Priest stood patting his pockets, looking for the keys. He finally located them halfway down his thigh in what was obviously the remains of a trouser pocket.

Judd sighed. 'Ever considered a needle and thread?'

Priest grunted and unlocked the car. The air inside it was hot enough to kill a dog. Judd kept the door ajar, waiting for Priest to start the engine and let down the windows.

Priest inserted the key and turned it just enough to operate the windows. 'Well, that didn't get us far. Bit of a smart-arse, eh?'

'Perhaps. Great house though.'

'Bit bleak. Not exactly homely.'

Judd hid a smile.

'So what, you're thinking of moving?'

'If I can persuade Kate.'

'She's not keen?'

Judd said nothing and waited for Priest to pull away. Instead, Priest sat back with his foot holding open the door, scratching at what appeared to be dog drool on his trouser leg. 'Before we shoot off ...'

Judd looked over.

Priest hesitated. 'The thing is ...'

'What?'

Priest leaned forward and rubbed his hand over the steering wheel. ‘Look, you might think I’m out of order, saying this, but well ... we’ve worked together before, you and me. It’s just ...’

Judd waited.

‘The clowns back at the second floor. Everybody’s talking. About you, about this case. And especially about ... Beth.’ Priest’s fingers tapped the steering wheel. ‘You can imagine what they’re saying, but bugger them, what I’m saying is, how’s this gonna work? I wasn’t in Dunedin when your daughter disappeared. People out there know more than I do, and I don’t listen to gossip. All I’m saying is, things’ll overlap. Things’ll get triggered: memories, emotions. There’s no way around it. Hey, if Burgess says you’re the man for the job, that’s good enough for me, but if things start — and I’m talking as a father here, not just as a detective — but if things start getting a bit hairy, just let me know, eh?’ He nodded. ‘What I mean is, we all need someone on our side. You don’t have to do it all. If there’s anything you feel uncomfortable with ...’ He spread his hands in front of him. ‘Sorry, I’m not expressing myself very well.’

Judd held his hand palm up. ‘Go on.’

Priest resumed picking at his trouser leg. ‘The thing is, I was thinking last night about my kids. My girls. It brings it home.’ He looked over to Judd. ‘I’d like to know a bit more, about Beth. I’d like to know, for example, where exactly she was last seen. How similar is this to ... I could go and read it up in the file, but ...’

‘But you’d rather hear it from me.’ Judd pushed back into his seat and tugged at his trousers, sticking to him in the heat. He cleared his throat.

‘Andy Bay Inlet,’ he said. ‘A woman, Irene Donovan, reported seeing someone matching Beth’s description jogging around the inlet. Donovan died last year. Stroke. I spoke to her myself, once the official investigation was over. On the day in question it had been too cold for much more than a quick trot, she said, but she went out anyway, and remembered seeing a

young woman, jogging anticlockwise, around the inlet.’ He pulled on his top lip. ‘She was a hard case, Irene. She ran without her teeth in, in case she collapsed and they were lost. She reckoned it would be too undignified to be buried without her teeth. She was well into her seventies back then and ran every day. Put me to shame.’

‘So, what was Beth’s route? I take it she had a set route?’

‘Sure, with a couple of variations. From our house in Doon Street, to Second Beach. Twelve k in total. That was her aim, but we started small. To the bottom of Doon Street and back the first week. Then to the boat sheds along Portobello Road, and back.’

‘We?’

‘I thought I’d jog with her. I say jog, but when we started we walked as much as anything. Walk between one set of street lights, then jog to the next; walk, jog, walk, jog. Finally we made it all the way. Along Portobello Road, over the causeway, left alongside Anderson’s Bay Inlet towards Musselburgh, along the back streets of St Kilda onto Victoria Road, down onto the beach, along the wet sand to St Clair. Finally, up the steps to the esplanade, past the pool, to the end of the gravel path above Second Beach. Then back again.’ He sniffed. ‘It almost killed me.’

‘You must have been fit.’

‘Dunno about that. It bloody hurt, I can tell you. The idea was for Beth to lose weight. Puppy fat. The truth is, after four months I realised I was slowing her down. She carried on running, three or four times a week. Not at night. I stopped that. But by the time she disappeared she’d lost all that weight and turned into a slim young woman.’

‘Did she vary her route?’

‘Sure. Sometimes she lapped the inlet. Other times she’d shoot along John Wilson Drive, just for the hell of it.’

‘And were there many witnesses, apart from this Donovan?’

‘No, it had rained steadily the night before. A cricket tournament had been scheduled, but cancelled at the last minute. Only half a dozen people came forward. Three separate dog walkers, a couple with a young baby in a buggy, desperate to get the nipper off to sleep, and two boys fishing for leatherjackets from the causeway. Calculating Beth would have been on her homeward run, the official search concentrated from around the inlet, back along Portobello Drive, towards Doon St. Obviously, I wasn’t allowed anywhere near the investigation, but they couldn’t stop me from walking her route.’

‘That would have been a massive area to cover.’

Judd raised an eyebrow. ‘It was. But anyway. Now you know. From what I can see there’s not much in common between the two cases. It was a long time ago.’

‘Sure, but if you’d rather I spoke to the family ...’

‘Thanks for the offer, Phil, but sometimes it’s ... useful, having that insight.’ He gazed down to where the waves were breaking. ‘You know, I always felt she had an accident and that she’s not far from here at all.’ He checked his watch. ‘Come on, I’ve got to catch up with Little and Large.’

‘Who?’

‘Rain-man and Little. Before your time. You’re going to check out Finkel’s alibi. Right?’

‘True. What about McDowell? You want me to check him out?’

‘No. He seems kosher enough.’

‘He knew exactly what date Tracey went missing. Did you notice?’

‘Perhaps. But that doesn’t mean ...’

‘I don’t trust him.’

‘Well, leave that to me. Let’s get moving, and get some air into this car, eh?’

In the end, he didn't catch up with Detectives Reid and Little until towards the end of the day. Their enquiries at the reservoir had yet to turn up anything unexpected, but that could wait. He needed from them a closer analysis of the time Tracey disappeared at St Clair. The list of those they had been unable to interview was growing smaller, which was good. Nobody had reported witnessing anything out of the ordinary, but had they yet established exactly what was ordinary for that particular patch of the Esplanade, at that time of day?

Reid and Little looked blankly at him.

'Just tell me what you've got.'

'Four locals that we know of were walking their dogs between six fifteen and seven.'

'Whereabouts?'

'On the path above Second Beach, dogs being banned on the beach itself.'

Judd nodded. 'Go on.'

'Evelyn Frobisher was out with Mitzy, a cocker spaniel. Jack Daniels, no true, it's his name, was out with Willet, a three-year-old Doberman cross. Quite a nice dog, actually, for a Doberman.'

Judd sighed. He'd forgotten Reid was a dog enthusiast. 'Was anyone not out walking their dog? Someone that should have been?'

Reid looked blank.

'People tend to walk their dogs at the same time every night. Same time, same route.'

'Uh, nobody mentioned anything.'

Little cut in. 'There were at least three regulars out jogging. But as for parked cars, well, there's always parked cars, what with the swimmers, and with the surfing champs the place was crawling. Apparently you couldn't move for Combi vans.'

Reid nodded toward the whiteboard. 'I could do a sort of flow-chart of who was where at what time.'

Judd lifted his chin.

Reid went and drew two intersecting lines, splitting the board into four squares. In the first he wrote, '17.45 – 18.00 hours', drew two stick figures and named them. 'Jennifer and Allan Bains, from Bedford St, just up the hill there, out for a walk.' He did the same for the second box which he labelled '18.00 – 18.15', adding two figures and two dogs: 'Mitzy and Willet and their owners', then two figures running, and a figure on a bench with a dog beside him. In the third box '18.15 – 18.30', he drew two more figures and another dog, 'Tog the dog, from Ravenswood Road, and its owners, Bob and Gabby Thompson. They don't miss much. Must do crosswords or something.'

'Eh?'

'You know, keep the old grey matter exercised.'

Judd pointed to the runners in the second box. 'Who are they?'

'Oh, Sam and Liz, brother and sister. They live in ...' he checked his notes, 'Victoria Road. This guy here, on the bench, he's called McDowell. Lives on Cliffs Road ...'

'The person Priest and I spoke to this morning?' cut in Judd.

'Possibly. Seems Mr and Mrs Bains remember seeing him there with his dog.'

'Why didn't you tell me this earlier?'

'Ah.'

'And what about that empty apartment, where was that?'

'Second Beach Road. Number 2B. We've only managed to talk to the owner of 2A. He was at Cromwell at the time. Seems 2B is up for sale.'

Judd frowned. 'I haven't noticed a For Sale sign.'

'No, seems they don't want the world to know it's empty.'

‘Who’s it listed with?’

‘Ambit. I’ve asked them for the keys.’

‘What do you mean asked them?’

‘Seems they’ve gone missing.’

‘Missing? Bugger missing. I want them on my desk first thing tomorrow morning, okay?’

When they’d left, Judd gazed at the seated figure on the whiteboard. McDowell had mentioned nothing about going down to the beach that night. It was possible he had forgotten. A dog like his probably needed a lot of exercise, and if you walked a dog every day it must become automatic, but to be on the safe side he’d get Rob to check out the gym, even if it was just to appease Priest.

CHAPTER SIX



Thursday 7th March

When Kate returned home late from work, Leo was already in the shower. Good. She kicked off her shoes and cleared the messages on the phone. They had missed the meter reader again and the rest home had left a date for her dad's three-month review. She took out her cell-phone and keyed in the appointment. There was no need to return their call; they knew she would attend.

In the kitchen, she unpacked the groceries bought on the way home from work, tossing the two chicken breasts onto the worktop. She reached for a knife, but immediately put it down. Her hands were shaking. She held them under her armpits, breathing in ... and out, in ... and out, slowing everything down.

It was finally time to bite the bullet. By the time she'd got home on Tuesday night she was too exhausted to do anything but go to bed. She'd spent Wednesday feeling grateful just to be alive, yet anxious at the same time to sort things with Leo once and for all. Last night she'd paced the lounge waiting for him to come home, totally frustrated when she finally checked her phone to find his text saying he'd be late. Tonight it was, then.

She washed her hands, cut the chicken into cubes and made a quick marinade of lime, coriander and chilli, wincing as the lime found a paper cut. When Leo, still damp from his shower, entered the kitchen, her heart flipped and for a moment she thought she was going to be sick. He was wearing the god-awful Smith's t-shirt he'd found on the internet. If he

thought she'd be seen walking down the road with him in that ... then again, soon it would no longer be her problem.

'Good day?' she asked automatically, half turning towards him while rubbing fly dirt from tomatoes.

'So-so.'

He reached past her, filled a glass with water and gulped it down. Shaking water from her hands, she nudged past him and walked over to the open lounge window. The evening was humid again, but the wind was coming up, a southerly by the feel of it. A sparrow fluttered above a crust of bread on the bird table watched by next door's cat. She took a deep breath.

His hands on her shoulders made her jump. 'I'm sorry about last night. Time just ...'

She shrugged out of his embrace and stepped back into the kitchen.

'Sit down and tell me about the other day,' he said, following her. 'It must have been terrible.'

'Over dinner,' she said. 'I feel I haven't eaten properly for days.' Jesus, what was she saying? At this rate she'd be lucky to keep anything down.

Leo was studying his figure in the mirror, turning sideways and patting his stomach. God, he was vain. She didn't know why he worried; for a man in his late forties he was in pretty good shape. He caught her watching, stopped and edged past her. 'In that case I'll just ...'

'Sure.'

He filled the watering can and climbed the five steps to the upper garden. The greenhouse door always stuck after rain. She watched him give it a yank. The greenhouse, built long before they moved in, was constructed out of windows from an old butcher shop. How it had survived the twister was anyone's guess. One day Leo would pull on that door and the whole thing would come down. It only needed a few swipes with a plane. Now her dad was in the rest home his carpentry tools were

Leo's, but they remained, cluttering up the workbench, in the boxes they had arrived in. Not only the greenhouse needed attention; there was a bird's nest under the eaves outside Beth's room and the front gate was jammed open where it had fallen off one hinge. She caught herself. Let it go.

Leo hooked back the greenhouse door and disappeared inside. Some men vanished for days on end, fishing, hunting, or golf, but not Leo. She checked her phone, her lifeline to Rea, for messages. Nothing. Rea was being patient for once. The salad drawer of the fridge was full. Leo must have cut fresh greens in her absence. From the garden tap near the back door came the sound of him filling the watering can. Adrenalin was making her sweat. She threw leaves into a bowl, diced a few cubes of watermelon and tossed in a handful of shredded mint. She was going to do this, and do it properly, and that meant feeling in control.

Leo returned from the greenhouse with a plait of dried garlic. She took a bowl of tomato salsa and another of corn chips onto the deck, where she had already placed two wine glasses and a half-full bottle of Pinot Gris. Seeing her, Leo came over and took a seat.

'You've changed your hair,' he said, filling her glass.

He had noticed, finally. 'What do you think?' She shook her head, enjoying the air against her neck. 'It was so hot up north, I couldn't stand it.'

'It makes you look younger.'

'Does it?'

Rea had liked it too. In fact Rea had run her fingers through her hair and said it reminded her of the first time she had ever seen Kate. 'You were in the back garden, hanging out the washing and fighting with a sheet in a wicked nor'easter. I watched you from my bedroom window. I could see your mouth moving. I knew you were swearing.'

But that had been a long time ago, when they were neighbours. Another life entirely.

Leo shoved a corn chip into his mouth and crunched noisily. ‘Did they tell you what caused the plane to dive?’

Kate shook her head. ‘No. Nothing. And I wasn’t in a fit state to ask. We were just relieved to be in one piece. They apologised and said it was too windy to land at Dunedin, but I don’t know. The bus was waiting for us at Invercargill. I just wanted to get home, really.’

‘How’s the lip?’

‘Sore.’

‘How did it go? The trip? You stopped at Christchurch on the way back, is that right? To catch up with Rea?’

Kate nodded. ‘It was such a relief to have adult time after Janice’s mad house.’

‘I can imagine. I assume Rea will be coming down before the wedding?’

‘Yes. Next Tuesday. Eve’s got everything organised, but Rea will be able to give her a hand with the last few things. I’ve booked some time off work as well.’ Kate picked up a chip and broke it in two. ‘Rea’s planning on moving here. Permanently.’

Leo reached for more chips. ‘To Dunedin. Really?’

‘Well, you can’t blame her. Two years after the ’quake they’ve re-named the cordoned area the Rebuild Zone but, according to Rea, demolition teams still outnumber builders.’

‘True. But that’s great. It’ll be ...’

She glanced up. He’d stopped himself just in time. No, it could never be like old times. She found herself launching into the latest inane gossip from the private practice where she worked as an occupational therapist, screwing up her face for a wickedly cruel imitation of one of the physios who, despite having lived in New Zealand for over twenty years, still

sounded as if he had walked straight in from the Welsh valleys. What was she doing? This was no time for diversions. Leo laughed, choking on a mouthful of wine. She could still make him laugh, at least.

Rea wanted her to move out before the wedding, only ten days away. She wanted the wedding to signal change. Out with the old; in with the new. Kate was seriously running out of time.

‘Did you get your suit dry-cleaned? I meant it when I said you don’t have to come to the wedding. I know how much you hate them. Rea understands.’

‘Actually, I’d really like to be at this one. After all, we’ve known Eve all her life. It’s a milestone.’ He shrugged, reached for a handful of corn chips, and changed his mind, emptying his wineglass instead. ‘I’ll sort the suit soon. Work’s been, you know ...’

‘What?’

When they were first married he had kept everything to himself, which had left them little to talk about in the evening. Now, if she asked, he relented, although she knew that what he offered was heavily censored.

‘I went into an interesting house today, up the top of St Clair. You could see for miles. And it overlooked the pool. I quite fancied it myself. I was thinking, it’s about time we had a change.’

‘But, but you love this view, the harbour, the boats, the ...’

‘I know, but we’ve been here how long now? Over twenty years. I think a change would do us good.’

She looked at him in his Smith’s t-shirt — as if they were still in their twenties. Did he really believe moving house would end their problems? While she was on the verge of telling him she was leaving for good, he thought the answer lay in a change of scenery. Rea had no idea of all this, no idea at all. Kate flinched at the tentative hope in his eyes. He had always been an optimist, despite his job. She’d do anything to see him happy again. Well, almost anything. But moving house? That was scraping

the barrel. He couldn't really believe it would make the difference, could he?

'It's owned by a Scott McDowell,' he said. 'Have you heard of him?'

'Sorry, I was distracted.'

'The house. At St Clair?'

'Oh, right. Scott ... I have, actually. If we're talking about the same guy. Ginger? Bit of a big-head?'

'That's him.'

'We were in the same year at school.'

'What ... friends?'

Kate rubbed an old lipstick stain from the rim of her glass. 'Hardly.'

'What do you mean?'

'He was too full of himself.' She sighed. She didn't give a stuff about Scott McDowell and needed to return the conversation to her, to Rea. But first she needed to tell him about Beth.

'Explain?'

'What? Oh, he was a show-off, and a bully. He got into a fight, once. Some kid got the better of him; next day Scott's Dad went to the school and insisted the two boys fought again, only this time he stood over them until Scott got his own back. I can't imagine he's changed.' She drained her glass. Her brother, Pete, came to mind. 'Tight, too. I think Pete built something for him last summer. Deck? Patio? Something like that. It took him months to get the money. I remember him going on about it.'

'What did Pete make of him?'

'Not much, as I recall. Apparently he's in IT, runs one of those maintenance companies. Worth a mint.' She raised her glass for a refill. From the next-door garden came the rattle and sigh of a hand mower. It used to be Rea pushing that mower. Was it really only nine years ago?

'Anything else?'

‘Huh? Oh, I dunno. I think, yes, we arranged for a ramp to be put in ... at his mum’s house.’

‘Oh?’

‘It was a couple of years back, when I worked for the health board. She’d have been experiencing mobility problems.’

‘Where was that?’

‘What?’

‘Where did his mum live?’

‘Christ, Leo. I can’t remember. Do you have any idea how many ramps —’

‘Alright, alright. That reminds me.’ He got up and went inside.

Kate rested her head in her hands. How had they strayed so far from the subject?

‘That’s what I thought,’ he said, returning. ‘She must be in the same home as your dad. Look. He’s got the same calendar as ours.’

She took the calendar. ‘Oh yeah. Sunnyview. Well, that’s Dunedin for you. Bloody village.’

‘True.’ He tapped the calendar against his leg. ‘You should have seen his house though.’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘Flash?’

‘Sort of. Spotless, but austere. Everything in it, the appliances, whiteware, television, top of the range, no expense spared.’ He stared into the distance, his eyes unfocused. She had lost him for a moment. ‘He had this huge telescope.’

‘Well, you would, if the view’s as good as you said.’

‘But it was focused on the pool, not the view.’

‘Eew!’

‘Probably nothing.’ He picked up the bottle of wine, glanced over to her full glass and put it down again. ‘He seemed pleasant enough.’

‘What were you doing there?’

He pushed himself up out of his chair and went over to the half barrel of pansies. ‘What’s wrong with these? From back there ...’

He was up and down like a yo-yo. Perhaps he was picking up on her tension. She glanced over. ‘They’re full of aphids. I was right when I said you needed glasses.’

He frowned, picked up the wine bottle and held it close, squinting at the label. He held it further away. Further still.

‘You’d better get down to the opticians.’ He was ignoring her. She knew the signs. ‘Leo, what were you doing at McDowell’s house?’

‘What? Oh, the missing girl. Tracey Wenlock. We found her body.’ He glanced over at her.

‘I saw that in the paper. Murder?’

A low flying woodpigeon whooshed by, causing him to duck. They followed its path as it swooped up, bared its breast to the setting sun and plummeted towards the harbour.

‘We’re not sure. The autopsy was inconclusive. We’re just treating it as a homicide. You know the drill: start high, whittle it down.’

She studied him. He was tanned from all his gardening and with the usual high colour on his cheeks looked healthy enough, but the way he was picking at the wine label with his thumb, avoiding her eye, worried her. ‘We? I thought Thompson was heading the enquiry.’

‘He was. But he’s come down with the flu. They’ve passed the case to me.’ He reached for the bottle, went to pour another glass, held the bottle up to the light and shook it.

‘How do you feel about that?’

He raised his eyebrows. For a moment he didn’t answer. ‘I had to inform her parents. Nice couple.’

Like us hung in the air between them. He went inside for another bottle and when he returned he changed the subject.

The dishes done, Kate stood in the lounge, looking out through the narrow panes of the timber bi-fold windows at Leo watering the garden. Her phone vibrated in her pocket. She pulled it out. Rea. She hesitated then put it back. Rea would go mad, but the next week or so would be hell for Leo. Kate had refused more wine but he had gone ahead. He was a master at hiding his feelings, but she had been married to him for twenty-eight years and knew the signs. If he were to survive the next few weeks he would need to stay focused and in control. She straightened the candle holders on the windowsill. Rea would just have to wait. And anyway, how much difference could a week or two make, in the end?

CHAPTER SEVEN



Thursday 7th March

Judd listened to water trickle down the pipe from the upstairs bathroom, where Kate was brushing her teeth, and fought his urge to finish the second bottle of wine. She had seemed tense tonight, despite the week away. He wasn't surprised to discover she knew of McDowell. In Dunedin, where some of the families had arrived as first settlers, anonymity was a rare thing. Priest obviously didn't like the man, and unfortunately Kate's description of McDowell, as a show-off and a bully, reminded Judd of his father. But that wasn't enough to make the man a suspect.

He refilled his wine glass, then poured half of it back into the bottle. The thought of ending up like his old man terrified him. As a kid he'd regularly wake to the sound of raised voices and crashing china.

'Will you just shut up? Jesus Christ! I've only had a couple of pints.'

'And the rest. And the bloody rest!'

'Leave off, won't you. Just leave it out.'

'I wouldn't mind if you'd told me, Here, here's your tea. Here's your sodding tea.' Smash! 'Now look what you've done. My mother bought us those.'

It was the threat of violence, rather than violence itself, that had kept him alert. Like an opera, the voices rose and fell, cupboard doors slammed, glass shattered, but in-between there were long periods of stillness. Some nights he dared to uncover his ears before sleep arrived and there would be a silence in the house, like someone waiting. Then,

finally, it would come: the creak of the middle two stairs, a fumble at the door handle and his mum's silhouette. She'd enter, holding a mug in one hand and a plate in the other, nudging the door shut with her foot.

'Move over.'

With her arm across his shoulders they'd take it in turns to sip at the super-sweet drink. She'd wave the plate of Swiss roll under his nose.

'He can't help it,' she'd start. 'It's just the way he is. He works hard, he gets so tired ...'

Change the record. Everyone got tired. Why didn't his dad just pack up and leave instead of taking it out on them? In fact, why didn't she leave him, get a job. Anyone could do shop work, couldn't they?

She'd tear two inches from the end of the cake and bite into it, holding the plate under his nose.

'I've told you. I don't want it.'

'Not even a little bite? Not even for me?'

Creamed cocoa oozed from the chocolate sponge. He could smell the vanilla, already taste it on his lips. He'd take one bite. For her. His dad called him Lardy Boy. His mum told him to ignore it. He was just chunky, he'd grow out of it. But still the cake came.

Despite his best intentions, Judd refilled his glass.

His salvation had come in the form of Budgie, a kid with the cocky charm of a milkman. Despite skin like bubbling porridge, Budgie was never short of girls, and Leo, helping himself to his dad's ten-shilling notes stashed inside the electric organ, was never short of money. Life was sweet. At school he faked asthma to avoid swimming, but with Budgie's encouragement and wearing a black t-shirt, he finally relented. He and Budgie started to swim regularly and Leo soon found himself knocking off twenty, thirty, even forty lengths, with ease. Budgie's face started to look more like flesh than pizza and Leo started to shed the pounds. By fifteen

they were, as Budgie so eloquently put it, turning into right handsome devils.

They both worked at the local supermarket, Thursday and Friday nights and all day Saturday. For Budgie it was all about money, and getting to see Stella Anastasie out of school. For Leo it was about getting out of the house. Stella's family were Greek and her old man kept a keen eye on her. Budgie, unperturbed, played by their rules, getting her home by half past ten and spending hours in front of the television with the rest of the family. He dedicated himself a hundred percent to her. He wasn't even trying to get into her knickers, which made him a hero among the girls. Sometimes the other boys hated his guts.

Judd wondered where Budgie was now. Occasionally he'd been tempted to check him out, on Facebook, or Friends Reunited.

Budgie's family moved away to Chadwell Heath as final exams loomed. Budgie rode with his dad to school, and after work on Thursdays cadged a lift home with Mr McKiver, the manager of the supermarket. On Friday nights, Budgie stayed over at Leo's, where they'd squeeze into his single bed, topping and tailing like kids.

The work at the supermarket was boring and when they were short-staffed the boys were made to cover the tills while the girls took their tea breaks. The sticky price tickets were notorious for falling off. It was okay for Budgie who could remember the price of every item, but for Leo it was humiliating and he spent most of the fifteen minutes holding grocery items above his head and calling for price checks.

The bathroom light clicked off and the deck was in darkness. Judd leaned back in the chair, looking at the sky. The lights on the wharf usually put paid to any stargazing but tonight the wharf was in relative darkness and he thought that might be Jupiter just above Mount Cargill. It would be nice to have someone to sit out here with. Budgie had been his first, and probably his last, good mate. He smiled at a sudden memory of

lying in the dark with Budgie's stinking feet inches from his nose as Budgie tested him.

'A quarter pound of frozen peas – Birds Eye.'

'37 p.'

'Arctic Roll.'

'85 p.'

'Pair of Pretty Polly women's tights, medium, American Tan.'

'47 p'

'47 p! 47 p for a pair of tights? You're off your rocker.'

'How much are they, then?'

'79 p usually, but this week they were on special. Two pairs for a quid.'

'You're making it up!'

'No, I'm not. Packet of Dr White's Sanitary Towels, size one.'

'Oh, fuck off ...'

'No, go on. Packet of Dr Whites ...'

His father had always disliked Budgie. It was possible, of course, that he had seen something Leo hadn't.

Judd's glass was empty, as was the bottle. He got up and padded over to the recycling bin, placing the bottle as quietly as he could. He wondered what had made him think of Budgie after all these years and followed his train of thought back ... Kate calling McDowell a bully and putting him in mind of his father. He stood up straight and looked back up at the sky. There were too many personal links to this case as it was, without dragging up ghosts. He wasn't surprised Priest was nervous; he was a little nervous himself.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Friday 8th March

The overnight drop in temperature meant the pool remained spookily quiet; no-one wanted to risk catching a chill these days. By the time Judd had completed his first dozen laps the wind had picked up, lifting foam from the high tide and flipping it into the lane closest to the sea wall. At least once a season the pool was flooded by seawater and had to be cleaned right out. Today, there was the usual tidal evidence in the pool; an anemone, a few shells, the smattering of sand at each end, and the ubiquitous sticking plaster, which he dodged at each turn. Swimming pools were strange places. Where else did people strip down to what was, in effect, underwear in front of complete strangers? The women in the next lane were walking up and down. Exercising their jaws if not their bodies.

‘I’m going to have a trim hot chocolate afterwards. What about you?’

‘Not for me.’

‘You’re not going to have a trim hot chocolate?’

‘No, but you can.’

‘But you’re allowed one.’

‘But I wouldn’t usually have one would I, so why would I have one now?’

‘Oh.’

‘You go ahead. You have one if you’d like one.’

‘I might. When do we see Steph next, is it Thursday?’

‘Yes.’

‘I haven’t dared go near the scales.’

‘I’ve done okay. Lost another three.’

‘Oh ... that’s good. I’ll just get a take-away, shall I?’

‘What?’

‘The trim hot chocolate.’

‘Stop and have one. I don’t mind staying with you.’

‘But if you’re staying you might as well have one too.’

‘But I don’t want one.’

‘But if you’re allowed one ...’

Judd ducked under, pushed off and completed another twelve laps. He breathed steadily between strokes while reflecting on the case. They were still at the elimination stage, but soon it would be time to build a picture from the exhibits and any remaining suspects.

It was a frustrating way of making a living. Highs and lows. He often thought that if he could choose his career again he might opt for archaeology, piecing together the jigsaw without the human interaction. Priest was usually good with punters, which was why Judd had put him in charge of the suspects. With Priest handling the interview, he was free to sit back and watch for reactions. Being interviewed was like wearing swimming togs; there was only so much the average person could hide. He remembered Priest’s questions the previous day. He didn’t blame Priest for checking his objectivity. He’d have done the same himself.

He glanced up at the house above the pool. Who had Tracey been with that night? What people didn’t see was just as important as what they did. No-one reported seeing her bundled or forced into a car, which meant that whoever took her to Ross Creek was probably known to her. Recent statistics showed that fewer than one percent of all abductions were by strangers. It might not have been the ex- boyfriend, Finkel, or any of her close friends, but whoever it was, was likely to be known to her. So who was it?

In the cafe, the two women he'd overheard earlier were ordering a hot chocolate, trim, and a glass of water. The woman serving must be the owner, Rosie. She'd be in her mid-thirties, nice looking in a harried sort of way. He imagined she put a smile on with her lipstick every morning; running your own business was tough, especially these days. He took out his badge and introduced himself,

She flashed him a measured smile. 'I had no idea you were a policeman. You swim here all the time.'

'That's right.'

'But you never stop for coffee. You must have a home to go to. Or a job.'

He nodded. 'You're observant.'

'You have to be. Every customer has a different order, and they expect you to remember it.'

'Mine's a long black.'

She picked up a cup.

'You've heard we've found Tracey?'

'Yes. They told me.'

'Right. Well, I'm leading the enquiry into her death.'

'Oh, I see.'

'I have a few questions, while you're quiet?'

'But I've already told the police everything I know.'

'Won't take a minute.'

'Alright, but I'm by myself, if someone comes in ...'

He watched her make his coffee, and paid her. It was surprisingly good. The door swung open and a woman walked in, rushing past him for the pool.

'Could we?'

He walked away from the entrance to the end of the counter where he placed his cup on the glass top and lowered his voice. 'As I understand, that Saturday, Tracey left a bit later than usual, is that right?'

'The cafe was a mess. Tar on the floor. It took us ages to get it off.'

'And Tracey didn't mind staying late? She wasn't in a hurry to get off?'

'No, didn't mind at all. She was a good kid.' Her eyes teared up.

He gave her a moment.

'Was she going out that night? Meeting anyone?'

'I don't know. She didn't mention anything.'

'Not seeing her boyfriend? Saturday night, and all that?'

'No. She'd broken up with Harry. I don't think she was seeing anyone else.'

'Was she still upset over the break-up?'

Rosie waggled her head. 'So-so. He'd started going out with someone she knew. Someone she didn't like. That upset her. Seems she'd been set up.'

'How was that?'

'She reckoned this girl had encouraged her to split with Harry, then gone out with him herself. It's a minefield at that age, eh? Not sure I could be bothered with all that all over again.' She smiled. 'She had an admirer, though. A secret one.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah. She got a valentine card. That cheered her up a bit.' She frowned. 'Well, it should have.'

'What do you mean?'

'This card. Anyone else would have been delighted.'

'But she wasn't?'

'Not really. She was embarrassed. She reckoned it was spooky.'

‘I don’t understand. What was spooky about it?’

‘He’d left it here. At the cafe. I found it on one of the chairs when I was tidying up at the end of the day.’

‘And this was on Valentine’s Day itself?’

‘It must have been a Thursday. Yes it was. Dominik popped in during the day with some flowers. After work we went for a meal. Tracey works ... worked here after school for two hours on Thursdays, while I sorted out my orders for the next week. Then all day Saturday.’

‘Go on. What was it like, this card?’

‘Just a plain envelope with her name on it. I handed it to her. You could tell it was a card, it was that shape.’ She picked up a cloth and started rubbing a coffee stain on the counter. ‘She opened it. It was just a normal shop-bought thing. Quite traditional. Flowers and a silly verse.’

‘Signed?’

‘Of course not. Wouldn’t have been secret then, would it?’

He nodded. ‘And it spooked Tracey?’

‘She said she didn’t like the idea of someone sitting there watching her while she was working. Funny girl. I tried to go through the customers, work out who it might be, but she wasn’t interested. She didn’t want to talk about it.’ Her brow creased. ‘You don’t think it’s got anything to do with ...’

‘Who knows? Probably not. I don’t suppose you know what happened to the card?’

‘She put it in her bag and that was the last I saw of it. Like I said, she didn’t want to talk about it.’

‘And when you went through the customers. Did you come up with any likely admirers?’

‘No-one specific. We were just being silly. She chatted with lots of customers, but no-one in particular.’

He checked his watch. He had a meeting with Burgess in ten minutes. ‘Think about that, though, and if you think of anyone who might have sent Tracey the card, give me a ring, okay? It might be important.’

Judd scanned the room for Priest. It had been an uncomfortable meeting with Burgess, telling him all they didn’t know. Spotting Priest sipping a sports drink by an open window, he beckoned him over and led him from the building, across the road and down a narrow street to Strictly Coffee, whose front window had also fallen foul of the twister. Despite the black and red décor and toothsome staff, it sold the best coffee in town. He left Priest to order and walked through to the paved courtyard where he pulled out a seat in the far corner, noting how instinctive it had become to keep as much distance as possible between himself and the next person.

Judd poured sugar into his long black, watching Priest bent over his double-shot flat white and rubbing his eyes. Someone pulled a metal chair across the pavers. Priest winced.

‘Late night?’ Was there not something fraudulent about turning up for work too hung over to be of use to anyone?

Priest nodded. ‘The match?’

‘Oh.’ Judd wasn’t a rugby fan. He passed Priest a tube of sugar, which Priest immediately ripped apart and spilled over the table. Judd sighed. ‘How did you get on with the boyfriend’s alibi?’

Priest stirred the remaining sugar into his cup. ‘Finkel? So far it matches previous enquiries. The night Tracey disappeared, he and his mates were playing pool at The Poolstation. His mates, Jono and Minty, reckon they got there about six thirty. They had no idea there was a tournament on and were surprised to get turfed off the tables.’

‘And Finkel?’

‘They played one game each with him. I haven’t caught up with the other guy, Bazza. Not part of their group but a regular at The Poolstation.’

I've jacked up a meeting with him this morning. He works at Smaill's garage, in Mosgiel.'

'What time did the tournament start?'

Priest fished around in his pocket and pulled out a slim notebook. 'I interviewed the barman, Neil Nevin, as part of the original enquiry. He said it all kicked off at seven thirty.'

'What did they do after that?'

'They hung around in the bar for a while then, pissed off they couldn't play, shot over to Big Break. Ended up in The Cook.'

While Priest wiped froth from his top lip, Judd momentarily slipped back thirty years to his youth in Walthamstow. The crack and thud of a well-hit ball had been as familiar to him then as the sound of a tui singing from the top of the Southern Rata at the bottom of his garden was today. When he had emerged from his puppy fat built like the proverbial Vick's cough drop, his dad announced it was time to teach him the manly art of snooker. As snooker was responsible for the quiet nights, when his dad returned home sober, Leo quickly agreed.

You were supposed to be eighteen, but his dad signed them in as guests. There were four rules in snooker. Rule number one was that drink ruins your game. 'One beer, two at most. Remember that, once you're old enough to drink.' As if he could forget. 'Rule number two,' his dad said, chalking his cue away from the green. 'No drinking or smoking over the table, no tossing a coin or chalking your cue over the cloth. See? The cloth is god.'

Rule number three was to keep still. 'What do you think you're doing, bobbing apples? Keep your head still and push the cue through smoothly. Aim down your cue, as if it's a rifle. That's more like it.' It took hours and hours of practice before he could take on his dad, but one rule, number four, came easy. 'Think. Take your time. No need to take on every pot.'

Give your opponent the opportunity to make the mistake.’ It had been an ideal sport for a budding detective.

‘The manager at The Cook remembers them.’ Priest was looking at him closely.

‘Sorry? Right. Any luck tracing the dog walker?’

‘The guy with the mad boxer?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Is it worth it? Finkel’s alibi looks pretty tight.’

Judd shrugged. ‘It wouldn’t hurt. Do you think Finkel’s the sort of guy who would send a valentine card?’

‘Huh? Why do you ask?’

‘Someone left a card for Tracey in the cafe.’

‘Unsigned?’

‘Yep.’

Priest stirred the dregs of his coffee and emptied the cup. ‘Do young people still send cards? It seems, you know, a bit dated. Wouldn’t they send a text, or just a message on Facebook or Myspace or whatever kids are into these days.’

Judd nodded. ‘That’s what I thought. We’ll check the till. Find out who was in there. You never know.’

‘What time of day was it left?’

‘Not sure. Rosie found it, at the end of the day.’

‘But that’s a massive job.’

‘I know.’

‘Most people use cash for a coffee, anyhow.’

‘Not young people. They use Eftpos for everything.’

‘Yeah, but ...’

‘Phil, it’s all we’ve got. Just get on the blower and sort it, will you? I don’t care how long it takes. It’s better than nothing.’

With Priest back in the land of the living and occupied checking Finkel's alibi, Judd made his way back to the second floor. The scent of raspberry fondant blasting from the Cadbury's factory lent the air a chewy quality, sending his gastric juices into overdrive. He popped his head around the squad room door. Randall was alone, muttering in front of his PC screen. He looked up at Judd's approach.

'Nice shirt,' said Judd. 'Not exactly regulation.'

Randal sat back in his chair, ran his hands down his green and gold striped front and grinned. 'Ben Sherman.'

'Really? Where do you find a Ben Sherman in Dunedin?'

'Arthur Barnett sells a few, but I bought this in Melbourne.'

That'd explain it. Randall didn't keep being gay a secret, but neither did he go on about it. He had trialled for the local rugby team, the Hurricanes, and it showed. No-one was going to kick sand in this guy's face. Judd looked at the shine on Randall's shoes, and rubbed his right foot on the back of his left trouser leg.

'By the way, did you get anywhere with those gay-bashings?'

'We picked up some DNA. No matches yet.'

'How's the last victim? Kettle Park, wasn't it?'

'Yeah, although it's not necessarily a gay-bashing. Could be mistaken identity, you know, in the wrong public toilet at the wrong time? He was found by his seven-year-old son. Daddy went into the public toilets and didn't come out.'

'Poor little bugger.'

'Yeah. Until we know otherwise, we're lumping it with the others.' Randall leaned towards the PC screen and jiggled his mouse. 'For a while we thought the attacks might be linked to chat rooms, but ...' He shook his head. 'Nah, there's no pattern. All pretty random, really.'

Judd tugged on his ear. 'We haven't had any of these for a while. I was starting to think ... Never mind. By the way, ever heard of a man called McDowell? Scott McDowell?'

Randal frowned and shook his head. 'Should I have?'

'Not necessarily. He's a bodybuilder, like you. Says he was at the Gold's gym the night Tracey disappeared. I need you to check the time he got there and the time he left.'

Randal nodded. 'Sure.'

Judd scratched his cheek. 'And maybe ask around, see what else you can find out about him. But listen, this man, he's ... well-connected. So watch yourself, eh?'

The door slammed open and Reid and Little entered. Randall nodded. 'Don't worry. Discretion is my middle name.'

CHAPTER NINE



Friday 8th March

Judd was waiting at the pedestrian crossing outside the Law Courts Hotel, having spent the afternoon in the District Court, when Burgess caught up with him.

‘How did it go?’ he asked, impatiently tapping the button.

‘Fine. All sorted.’

‘Hang’em, was it?’

Judd nodded. Judge Higham wasn’t nicknamed Hang’em for nothing. They’d spent nine months targeting drug-dealing in Dunedin and surrounding areas. Mainly class C and B controlled drugs, drug utensils and ammunition; the sentencing of six men and two women, for selling and supply, was a good result.

‘Good. Frees you up a bit. What’s happening with the Wenlock case?’

The lights changed and they crossed, Judd sidestepping a young woman pushing a stroller.

‘There’s an empty property down by the pool,’ he said. ‘I’m waiting for the keys. The real estate agent manager is out of town, and the office claim they don’t know where they are.’

‘I’d have thought an empty property, metres from where the girl was last seen, would have been searched before now,’ Burgess barked.

‘Exactly, sir. I’ll arrange for a search warrant and force my way in if I have to.’

‘Do it. I want this tidied up. There’s enough doom and gloom about the city at the moment without an unexplained death on our hands.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Burgess shot off towards the Octagon. Judd stormed back to the second floor. That was the trouble with taking over a case halfway through an investigation: anything overlooked ended up on your plate. Luckily for everyone around, Little was waiting for him, holding a bunch of keys.

‘Is that them?’

‘Yeah. Some guy called Kenny had them. He went down with the flu last week and had taken them home in his pocket. They had to go round to his house. By all accounts his mum wasn’t too pleased with two uniforms turning up on her doorstep.’ He tossed the keys towards Judd.

‘I’ll take my own car. Meet you down there.’ Judd shook the keys. Funny, he’d never imagined real estate agents had mothers.

Flat 2B was a semi-detached two-storey apartment, right alongside the pool. The door from the street opened directly into a hallway from which stairs led up to the living areas. On the downstairs floor were two bedrooms and a bathroom. Judd made for the upper floor where walls, painted a deep red in the fashion of the late nineties, glowed in the afternoon sun.

The air was stale, with a faint tang of old dog from a cupboard in the hallway and something spicier, like onions, from the kitchen. He checked the windows and unlocked the sliding doors that led onto a small balcony. Great view of the bay, but noisy with cars searching for parks and constant foot traffic. He jangled the keys in his hand and returned downstairs.

The master bedroom also overlooked the bay. He stopped just inside the doorway: going by the smell of aftershave, the room had recently been used. The carpet was bare. He crossed to the wardrobe and slid open a door. Pillows, and a cheap yellow microfleece blanket. He pulled his hand inside his shirtsleeve, picked up the blanket and shook it open. No sign of blood. He held it close. Was that hair on the blanket? He lifted a strand and

held it to the light, then against his skin. Red. Not strawberry blonde, a proper ginger.

He let the blanket drop. He needed to know how long this house had been empty, who had access, and why there had been a delay in obtaining the keys. He would instruct Little to arrange a warrant to uplift the blanket. Could this be a breakthrough, at last?

It had been a long day. Judd stepped out of the apartment, crossed the road and grabbed his swim bag from the rear of his car. He assumed the pool would be packed, but when the automatic glass doors slid open and he saw there was still one lane free he almost cheered.

It was unusual to get two swims into one day, but it helped him think. He pulled on wet togs, grimacing, and ran for the pool. He completed his first ten lengths with one eye shut; he should have replaced his goggles a week ago. A splash told him someone had dropped into the far end of his lane. He turned. A woman in green swam towards him. The woman. He pushed off and there she was, only inches away, looking at him through the water. Then she was gone. He swam on, his irritation with the goggles instantly forgotten.

They continued at the same pace, passing mid length. After a dozen laps or so, a man joined them, an older, slower swimmer who caused them to bunch. Judd slowed. Ahead, the woman had stopped at the end with her long legs stretched towards him.

‘We’ve got us a slow-coach.’

‘Sorry?’ Judd removed his earplugs and shook his head.

The woman nodded at the third swimmer, still paddling with his undeveloped stroke towards the far end.

‘Traffic jam.’

‘Ah! Evening rush hour.’

Some women, who came to exercise and not to swim, wore full make-up and kept their heads strictly above the water, but not this one. The pool had been open since October and her face and upper body were tanned. Down shimmered on her arms. From her faintly lined décolletage, he put her age as similar to his, a few years younger perhaps. She kept her shoulder-length blonde hair away from her face with a scrunchie. There were light freckles across her nose and her front teeth were clean and crooked. It was the first time he'd seen her this close.

'Judd. Leo Judd.' he said, stopping just in time from holding out his hand. But she noticed and laughed. 'Fiona Marshall.'

The swimmer in the next lane, a huge walrus of a man, turned, splashing them both. Fiona glared at him. 'I don't like him at all,' she whispered. 'He's a pig.'

Judd grinned and said loudly, 'Some people have no manners at all.'

The cause of the traffic jam approached. Fiona pushed off and Judd followed, slowing his strokes to swim in her wake, the disturbed water from her kicking feet constantly in his face. On their second lap they caught up with the slower swimmer, and stopped again.

'How long have you been coming?' Judd felt himself blush. Had he just asked her if she came here often?

'This is my first season. I've only just moved down from Auckland.'

'Auckland to Dunedin? It's usually the other way round.'

'I was brought up here. I moved to Auckland almost ten years ago. Gave it a go, but ...'

He waited. She looked down, then away.

'It must seem small, after Auckland.'

'Actually, it's fine. Nothing's more than a five-minute drive away. The roads in Auckland are horrendous. It's got too big. I'm, as they say, over it.'

They chatted for a while about cities, the pros and cons. He told her he'd been brought up in London, and only too happy to immigrate to Dunedin.

'How old were you then?'

'Twenty-three.'

'Really? At twenty-three you chose New Zealand over London?'

Judd shrugged. 'I've always been a bit of a geek.'

She laughed. Judd glanced up at the clock. Ten to seven. He might as well get out.

'That's me done,' she said, as if reading his thoughts. 'See you again.' She shot him a smile and ducked under the lane dividers towards the steps. Judd completed a few more laps. He didn't want to look like a stalker.

The manager was leaning over the counter reading her newspaper as Judd nodded good night and made his way to his parked car. The tide was in retreat and a handful of surfers sat on their boards beyond the breakers. He stopped to watch the next set form. One surfer caught a wave and carved out a great ride, zipping up and down the face of the water, punching the air before dropping over the back. Judd slapped the warm metal railing beside him.

'You looked as though you were on that wave yourself.'

He turned to see Fiona. 'I wish I was. Have you ever ...?' He indicated the sea.

'No. I've got a bit of a thing about open water.'

'Oh? A near miss?'

'Caught in a rip when I was a kid. I've never forgotten that feeling of complete helplessness.'

He nodded. 'Rather like me and skiing,' he said.

She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow.

Judd shook his head. 'You really don't want to know.'

They stood watching the surfers. The wind had picked up and was blowing Fiona's drying hair across her face. She pulled it aside. 'I don't always want to rush home after a swim,' she said. 'It's nice sometimes just to stop and enjoy the view, don't you think?'

She took out her keys and turned from the railing. 'No doubt I'll see you again.'

'Bound to,' said Judd. 'The pool will be closed soon enough. We have to make the most of it.'

She wrinkled her nose in a smile and walked over to a red Toyota.

As Judd got into his car, his phone rang. It was Randall. According to the gym, on the Saturday night Tracey disappeared McDowell had arrived at 7.40 and left at 8.55.

Judd hung up. McDowell's claim that he was at the gym by seven was false, but given that he'd been spotted on the Esplanade walking his dog that evening, it was hardly surprising. He prayed the reconstruction would throw something up, because all he had so far was a bunch of dog walkers and a valentine card, and they wouldn't keep Burgess off his back for long.

'Grab one of these, would you?'

He took the carrier bags from Kate's hands. 'That's a lot of shopping for a Friday night.'

'I'm going to be busy tomorrow,' she said. 'I thought I'd get it out of the way.'

He placed the carrier bags on the kitchen counter.

'Is pizza okay for tea?' she asked. 'I'm too tired to cook.'

'I thought we might go out.'

'Go out?'

'Yes. First a film, then dinner.'

‘Tonight?’

‘Why not?’

She stood blinking at him. ‘I’m too tired. Nice idea and that but ...’

‘All you have to do is take a shower and change. We’ll drive to the wharf, and walk into town. There’s time. It’s a shame to waste the evening.’

She was staring at him.

‘There’s that film, with Judy Dench. I thought you wanted to see it.’

‘I do but ...’

‘But what?’

She shrugged. ‘Well, if you want to.’

‘Yes, I do. Don’t you? Come on. It’s Friday night. Can’t your old man take you out to dinner, now and then?’

When they emerged from the cinema it was still light and the plane trees in the Octagon were loud with birds.

‘It looks so bare without the statue,’ she said.

On the railway bridge he took her hand. ‘What is it?’ she asked, as he stopped to peer across the harbour.

‘Just checking to see if I can see the house.’

‘Doubt it. Those gums are huge now.’

‘I think you’re right.’

She slipped her hand from his and walked on.

In the restaurant he ordered steak, she a salad.

‘It’s not like you to have salad.’

‘My outfit’s a bit tight.’

‘Outfit?’

‘For the wedding?’

‘I hadn’t thought of that. When was the last time I wore my best suit?’

‘Perhaps you should have ordered salad as well.’

‘It’s too late now. I’ve been thinking, do you think I should join a gym?’

‘Don’t you have access to a gym at work?’

‘Sure, but it’s not the same.’

‘What made you think of that?’

‘Your old schoolmate. McDowell. He’s a body builder. Built like a whippet.’

‘At his age?’

‘No, I don’t mean a whippet. More like a ... Rottweiler. And not an ounce of fat on him.’

‘It’s all down to genes.’

‘I’m not sure about that.’

‘Anyway, you’ve got your swimming.’

‘True. You know, I was thinking, if we moved to St Clair I’d be able to walk down to the pool in my dressing gown. I’d be one of the elite.’

Their meal arrived.

‘Your steak looks good. Did I tell you Pete’s back from the UK? He said you can fly from Gatwick to Amsterdam for twenty quid. It used to cost a fortune.’

He noticed she’d changed the subject.

He watched her unwrap the Ferrero Rocher she’d ordered with her coffee.

‘Twenty quid to Amsterdam,’ she said. ‘What about that bar we went to? Remember? Must have been what, eighty-five, eighty-six?’

He smiled. ‘I remember you being terrified I’d lose my job.’

‘We did get a bit ...’

‘A bit? When we got back to the hotel you scoffed all the chocolate, remember? “Here, hang on,” I said, “leave some for me.” It was like you were possessed. Shoving it into your mouth. I had to go out later and buy some more.’

She laughed. ‘Jaffa Cakes. I wanted Jaffa Cakes.’

‘Demanded! And you can’t buy Jaffa Cakes in Amsterdam.’

‘Nothing else would do.’

‘I searched high and low, and when I finally made it back to the hotel you were fast asleep, and when we woke in the morning there was chocolate smeared all over the pillow and a huge lump stuck ...’ he laughed, finger pointed at his temple.

‘Stuck to the side of my face!’

They were quiet for a while, both lost in memories.

‘Will you come with me to see Dad on Sunday? He’s been asking after you.’

‘Of course. I’ll be working late tomorrow, but Sunday’s free.’

‘What’s happening on Saturday?’

‘The reconstruction.’

‘Right. Do you think it’ll throw anything up? Do you have any suspects yet? Anyone in mind?’

‘No-one in particular. Reconstructions are seldom a waste of time.’

‘And it definitely is murder?’

‘We’re not sure.’

‘So, there may not even be a suspect to find.’

‘Something happened. Someone knows something. She didn’t walk to Ross Creek by herself.’

‘Do you think it’s going to drag on, this case?’

‘I hope not. Look, forget about work. There’s an open home along Ravenswood Road on Sunday. Maybe we could go, after seeing your dad?’

She didn’t answer.

‘We needn’t buy anything huge. There are still a few older properties on the hill. We could do one up. You’d like that. You should be an expert now, after watching all those home renovation programmes.’

‘Can we change the subject?’

‘Why?’

‘I just ...’

‘Why can’t we even discuss the idea?’

‘This is ridiculous.’

‘Why? What’s ridiculous? I don’t get you. What’s the problem?’ He’d raised his voice. People were looking at them. He leaned forward. ‘I’m viewing the house on Sunday,’ he hissed, ‘whether you come with me, or not.’

‘I refuse to be bullied into this,’ she replied, folding the gold wrapper from the chocolate, over and over.

She knew all his weak spots.

CHAPTER TEN



Saturday 9th March

The Wenlocks lived in a modest villa in Hargest Crescent, a wide, litter-free street a ten-minute walk from the Salt Water Pool. In general, the street showed signs of upward mobility: many of the houses had been rendered smooth and painted grey, their fences stylized and paths heavily gravelled. The Wenlock house, although well maintained, was dated in comparison, with its gleaming white picket fence and climbing red roses.

Inside the lounge, the solid and chintzy furniture, Dick Francis novels and Country and Western CD's confirmed his impression, and the dried flower arrangements and gold-framed silhouettes certainly put paid to any chance of minimalism. He studied a photograph of the Wenlocks on holiday at the lakes, calculating that they must have had Tracey late in life. He wondered if that was by choice, or just the way things had panned out.

When June Wenlock returned with the tray of tea, he sank into one of the well-worn armchairs, and forced down the too-milky liquid while it was still hot and tasteless. Mrs Wenlock stood looking out of the window. Despite the warm weather, all the windows were closed and the smell of last night's fish and chip supper lingered. Judd leaned and put the empty cup onto the coffee table where a local parish newsletter lay beside a book of sudoku puzzles.

'Another cup, Mr Judd?'

'No, thank you. That was lovely, Mrs Wenlock ...'

'June.'

'June.'

Her green eyes were huge in her pinched, pale face. She wore a long, pink floral tunic over white linen trousers, neither of which had seen an iron, and her hair had been washed and swept back carelessly. She unconsciously scratched at her palm with her ring finger, something he'd seen Kate do when stressed.

'You understand we're carrying out the reconstruction this evening, don't you?' he asked.

'Sure. Veronica's been over it with us.'

'Veronica Byrne?'

'She's been marvellous.'

She kept glancing out of the window that overlooked the rear garden. He wondered what was out there. He needed her full attention.

He raised his voice. 'Good. Now, I know it sounds like a bit of a palaver, some might say bad taste, but it's interesting what these reconstructions can throw up.'

She nodded. 'I understand. But Brian and I, we won't be going.'

'No. I don't think that would be a good idea. Look, June, I know this is a difficult time, but as I was not involved in the case when Tracey first went missing ... I wondered, what was Tracey like? What sort of girl? Can you tell me? Take your time. There's no rush.'

Finally she left the window to come and sit opposite him. 'I'll try.'

'I do have an idea of what you and your husband are ...'

'I know you do, Mr Judd. I remember.'

'Thank you.' Judd ignored the phone vibrating in his pocket. 'It's a difficult age, sixteen. You still see them as children.'

'But they know everything. Want to do everything themselves.'

'My wife used to say I was overprotective.'

She nodded. 'Well, I expect you see a lot, in your job.'

Judd blinked. ‘And yet, you have to let them stand on their own two feet. Allow them their independence.’

‘But they still come to you, don’t they? One minute you’re too old, and they say ... they say you don’t have a clue, but then, when they’re worried ...’ June took a tissue from her sleeve and held it to her eyes. ‘I’m so sorry, it’s just ...’

‘No, I’m sorry, look if you’d rather ...’

‘No.’ She waved her hand at him. ‘It’s okay. Now, where was I? Oh yes. They come to you, but ... the drama! Over nothing. Sometimes it’s hard to know ...’

Drama? Raised voices, doors slamming. Beth and Kate at one another’s throats, Beth calling her mother a stupid cow, Kate telling Beth she was spoilt, he seeking the sanctuary of the greenhouse.

‘Biscuit?’ June asked, pointing with a shaking hand to the packet on the coffee table.

‘What? No. No thanks. Yes, you try and protect them, but at the same time you have to let them fight their own battles.’

‘And the tears! Tracey, she’ll ...’ She stopped for a moment. ‘She’d get so upset. A photograph. Someone had taken a photograph and put it on Facebook. A silly photograph? I said, is that what this is all about? They’re so vain, so worried about their appearance. She wouldn’t go to school if she had a spot. She’d try all sorts. Sick notes. Fake her perio— Well, you know.’

‘Beth was the same. Worried about her figure. Puppy fat.’

‘I wouldn’t let Tracey diet. Didn’t want her ending up anorexic.’

‘I was a fat kid. I didn’t want that for Beth.’

‘They’re obsessed with image. I don’t remember ever being so worried, do you? It’s not so bad for boys.’

He cleared his throat. ‘For a while, I took Beth jogging.’

‘We thought Tracey’s friend, Nicki, was getting fat. Seems she was pregnant. That’s the other worry, isn’t it? When you’ve got girls.’

‘Nicki? She’s at the same school as Tracey?’

‘No. They shifted to Oamaru at the end of last term. Nicki’s mum, Anna, said it was because of John’s job, but I think it was as much to get Nicki away from Gary, her boyfriend. Not that she saw much of him once her family found out she was pregnant.’ June helped herself to a biscuit. ‘It makes them grow up quickly, something like that. Nicki decided not to have the baby in the end.’ She snapped the biscuit in half, before putting it back. ‘I didn’t find out until later, but Tracey was a good friend to her through all that worry, hiding it from her parents. Until she decided.’

‘To have an abortion?’

‘Yes.’

‘She was a good girl, Tracey. I wish she’d confided in us. We could have helped. But that was Tracey. Thoughtful. Well, most of the time. She wouldn’t have put us through that.’

Judd thought for a moment. ‘Most of the time?’

‘Well, it wasn’t the first time she hadn’t come home when she was supposed to, but that had been before, when she was seeing Harry. Now and then she’d ... take off without telling us where. She’d forget. She wasn’t perfect, Mr Judd. I’m not claiming she was perfect.’

Out in the hall, the phone rang. She jumped. ‘Excuse me.’

Judd watched her leave the room. An old-fashioned clock on the side table ticked loudly. It was unusual, these days, to hear a clock tick.

Children. We were all children, Judd thought as he stood to stretch his legs. Most of us made it to adulthood, but how many of us remember the trauma of our teenage years? He and Kate naturally veered towards being overprotective as parents, thanks to his job. They had done their best to let go, to give Beth space to make her own decisions. But had they given her too much slack? Had she lost her bearings?

In the years between their dropping six-year-old Beth at tap lessons and waiting up past midnight for the teenage Beth to return from parties, she had taken many small steps towards independence. Had they responded with the right level of concern, or had they downplayed danger in order to let her test her own capacities?

He picked up a tennis shield from the mantelpiece. *Doubles*, 2013. Tracey's name. He checked his phone. Nothing important.

Beth had revelled in competitive sports. She was good at them. Kate reckoned Beth enjoyed them too much. 'I feel happier when she's competing against herself,' she'd said, dabbing iodine on Beth's grazed knees for the hundredth time. She had approved of the running.

But Beth was a conundrum. Kate said she was murder to go shopping with, taking an hour to choose between two very similar t-shirts, say. Not confident then, or at least not as confident as she made out. Kate claimed Beth was aggressive, rather than assertive. It had been a sore point between them. She was always going back to it. To what she called Beth's road-rage incident.

He'd been at the front of the house water-blasting the path when Beth tore into the driveway that day. In his car. His MG. She flung open the driver's door and raced inside. He turned off the water-blaster and followed, stopping for a moment to shut the car door, running a quick check over his car. What had she been doing driving his MG?

In the kitchen Beth was pacing, face flushed. 'Stupid wanker, thinking he could scare me.'

Kate was standing with her arms crossed. 'She's had a run-in with someone. In the car.'

'A run-in?'

'I didn't run into him. I hardly touched the stupid bastard.'

'Okay, okay, now calm down. And watch your language. Tell us what happened.'

She had been at the lights at the bottom of Stuart Street, on her way to Kimberley's. Beth's own car was in the garage, getting its brakes fixed. He remembered now, it had failed its WoF. But she was supposed to be using Kate's car.

'Mum was out. She forgot to leave it for me.'

'Oh, and I suppose that makes it my fault, does it?'

'I didn't say that!'

'You didn't have to!'

'Hey, everyone calm down. Kate, she's not blaming you. Beth, go on.'

'I had to catch up with Kimberley, didn't I? I was running late and I just thought ...'

She had fluffed her hill start. Judd wasn't surprised. He'd taught her how to drive manual as well as automatic, but the MG had a tricky clutch.

'And I just kept rolling backwards. Every time I tried to go forward. Just a bit at a time. I pulled on the hand brake. I only nudged the car behind, but the crazy bastard went ballistic!'

Her eyes were bright. She was upset as well as angry.

'Luckily I saw him. In the rear-view mirror. He flung open the car door and was racing towards me. What a tosser! I revved the engine and vroom, I was gone.' She laughed. 'Left him standing. Stupid sod. He chased me up the hill, beeping his horn, flashing his bloody lights. I wound down my window and gave him the finger. No way was there any damage.'

Judd suppressed a smile. Woe betide any man who tried to intimidate his daughter. 'But Beth, you know you're supposed to ...'

'He was mental, Dad. Bloody mental!'

'Okay. Well, in that case you did the right thing. Like I told you before, you can always drive to the police station ...'

‘I didn’t have to. I got to the end of Kaikorai Valley Road, and he turned off. Must have been going to the airport.’ She chucked him his keys. ‘Hope he missed his f— ... bloody plane.’

‘This isn’t a laughing matter, Beth. You took your dad’s car, without his permission. Possibly damaged it.’

‘She didn’t. I had a look.’

‘It doesn’t matter. She took your car. She can’t drive it. Then she potentially damages another car and drives off!’

‘I didn’t damage his car!’

‘You don’t know that. You’re only guessing.’

‘But he was mad!’

‘I’d be mad too if some kid rolled back onto my car, gave me the finger and drove away as if it was—’

‘Come on now, you don’t want her getting into arguments ...’

‘No. You come on. She should have pulled over and swapped ins—’

‘Mum! He was fucking mad!’

‘And stop using that language. It makes you sound common.’

‘Oh, Jesus Christ ... Dad?’

‘And she gets it from you,’ Kate snapped. ‘You’re no example to your daughter.’

Beth stamped her foot. ‘Why am I getting the blame for this? You were supposed to lend me your car.’ She pointed at Kate. ‘You forgot!’

‘Yes, I forgot. But you could have asked Kimberly to come over here. Or you could have caught the bloody bus!’

‘Ooh! Bad language, Mother!’ Beth stormed out of the kitchen.

No wonder he spent so much time in the greenhouse. On one hand, he had wanted to find the guy and smash his face in for trying to scare his daughter, on the other he didn’t want to make too big a deal of it. She said he’d been driving a red American-style car, with white wheels. Really?

He'd keep an eye out for that. Later, he re-checked his rear bumper. Not a scratch. The other driver had been over-reacting.

In the other room, June was still talking. Judd checked his reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. Beth had inherited his height, eye colour and ruddy complexion, but temperamentally she was Kate to a tee. Sometimes he wondered if Kate was right. Instead of creating an assertive young woman, capable of standing her own ground, had they in fact created a scrapper, someone who revelled in a good fight?

June re-entered the room. 'That was Nicki on the phone, talk of the devil. She was telling me that Tracey's on Twitter, but I'm not sure what that means. I don't even have a mobile phone. I know I should. Perhaps if I'd had one she could have rung or texted us?'

Judd recognised the self-blame. He did his best to explain how the missing person's network used Twitter to distribute information. 'She'll have a hashtag, which means people will text messages that end with hashtag-tracey-wenlock, and those messages get linked to her profile. Some messages might be about the case, for example when we carry out the reconstruction later today, then people might blog it. It might trend; the local media might pick up on it. It's hard to explain, I know. But it all helps. It's all communication.'

'They told me they haven't been able to trace her phone. Is that unusual?'

'Sort of. You're sure Tracey did have her phone with her that day?'

'Of course. You should have seen her when she first split with Harry — she couldn't keep her eyes off it. Nice boy but a bit old for her. I wasn't sorry they split up.'

'Did they keep in contact?'

'She got the odd text from him, nothing much. She lit up when she did. I think he was stringing her along, in case his new relationship didn't work out. I didn't tell her that, though.'

‘Maybe he was just fond of her.’

‘Maybe.’

‘By the way, did Tracey mention anything to you about receiving a valentine card?’

June’s eyebrows shot up. ‘A card? No. Why?’

‘Apparently someone left her one, at the cafe.’

‘Oh. She never told me.’ She picked up their cups. ‘She used to tell me everything.’

The doorbell rang and June started. She put the cups back down and looked through the net curtains. ‘It’s Mum. It’s alright, she’s got a key. I’m in here, Mum.’

A small wiry woman, puffing slightly and leaning on a walking stick, entered the room.

‘This is the detective in charge of Tracey’s investigation, Mum.’

Tracey’s grandmother held out a dry and warm hand, which he gently shook. ‘I recognise you from the paper,’ she said. ‘You broke up that gang. Money laundering, wasn’t it? It was like something out of the mafia, June. Did you read it?’

June shook her head.

‘You’ll catch him for us, won’t you, whoever went for Tracey?’

‘We’re not sure at this stage exactly what happened ...’

‘But you’ll catch him, won’t you.’

It wasn’t a question. The old girl had spirit. Back in his car he made a mental note to check that Nicki had been interviewed. Before driving away he looked back; June Wenlock was standing at the front door, watching. It was like seeing himself.

The car park was full when he returned to work, unusual for a Saturday, then he remembered it was Open Day at the Police Station, a fundraiser for the Blue Light Charity.

‘More than a thousand have been through,’ Sergeant Watkins told him, on his way up. ‘Watch out for the boss; he’s over it.’

Judd groaned. Burgess wasn’t the only one; his head was thumping and they had the reconstruction tonight. ‘Got any paracetamol?’

He found Burgess in the conference room winding up the last speech of the day. He checked his watch; in another ten minutes it would all be over.

‘We hope you have all enjoyed today’s events,’ Burgess was saying. ‘Forensics, the dive squad, the dog team, the armed offenders’ squad.’

A big cheer went up. The armed offenders’ squad was always popular.

‘But the main thanks today go to you, the public, for coming in and supporting our charity, Blue Light. Thank you again.’

Burgess stepped down and made straight for Judd. ‘Come on, let’s get ...’

‘Burgess!’ They looked around.

‘Scott!’ Burgess replied. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Just having a look around. I wanted a quick word.’ McDowell shook Burgess’s hand, gripping his arm above the elbow.

‘Great.’ Burgess turned to Judd, surreptitiously flexing his right hand. ‘Er, have you met Detective Senior Sergeant Judd?’

‘As a matter of fact, I have.’

‘Oh?’

‘Mr McDowell’s been kindly helping us with our enquiries,’ said Judd.

‘Which would those ...?’

‘The girl from the pool cafe.’ McDowell interrupted. ‘I knew her. Slightly. I live above the pool, use the cafe quite frequently.’

‘Good. Oh well, then.’

‘Like I told Judd the other day: only too happy to help the police.’

‘Right.’ Burgess turned to Judd. ‘Scott’s company has put in a tender for our IT maintenance. One of several tenders, I’m sure.’

‘That’s right,’ said McDowell. ‘By issuing your officers with iPad and iPhone the way you have, you’ve made the New Zealand police force one of the most mobile in the world. Awa-phone’s role would be to keep you up to date, keep everything working and help you get the best from new technology.’

He sounded like a bloody sales brochure.

‘Tenders should all be settled within a few weeks,’ Burgess said. ‘Still, we’ll leave that to the finance bods, eh? You’ve been having a look around?’

‘I have. It’s been bloody interesting to see behind the scenes. Makes a change from the half-truths and rumour usually fed to us, eh?’

Burgess twitched a smile. Judd looked away.

‘Hey, talking of which, what’s all this I heard about residents of Brockville setting up a posse and catching the weirdo who was torturing cats. Is it true?’

Burgess nodded. ‘If you’re referring to the vigilante group, yes it is.’

‘Well, good on them.’

Burgess frowned. ‘I don’t agree. A vigilante group spells trouble, every time.’

‘You think so? Hard not to sympathise, though. Keeping mental health patients in the community makes us all vulnerable.’

Burgess caught Judd’s eye. ‘We live in interesting times, that’s for sure. Judd and I have an urgent meeting, so if you’ll excuse us?’

‘Sure. I know you guys are busy. Good to see you and, like I said, a great day. And Detective Senior Sergeant Judd, if I can be of any more help, just ask. Okay?’

Inside the lift, Burgess slumped against the side. ‘God. What a day. Still, a success, don’t you think?’

‘It certainly looked busy.’

‘Hmm. Still, those bloody vigilantes, we’ll need to keep an eye on them. I haven’t forgotten what happened in Balclutha that time.’

The lift pinged and Judd quickly got out, grateful that Burgess’s mind was temporarily on other matters.

The weather was as it was the night Tracey disappeared: calm, still warm, with low, bullish clouds darkening the horizon. In the long wig, beige and orange blouse and tan shorts, Detective Eve Greene looked like any other young woman taking a stroll along the esplanade. She left the pool cafe at 6.10 p.m. and walked the length of the street, right up to Salt, on the corner of Victoria Road, before retracing her footsteps back. Posters in the vicinity informed the public this was a reconstruction, and officers were on hand to field any enquiries. A reporter and the photographer from the Otago Daily Times had turned up, doing their bit to keep the item in front of the public. Judd had been shocked to learn that Thompson hadn’t carried out a reconstruction a week ago. It was usual practice to hold one as soon as possible, same day of the week, same time of day, to catch people in their usual routine. He chewed his bottom lip, regretting the oversight all over again; there was only so much you could put down to staff shortages.

He scanned the crowd for familiar faces, and for those that shouldn’t be there. The public thought it was a myth that offenders showed up at reconstructions and funerals, and volunteered information to the police, but experience proved otherwise.

Eve had walked through the area four times and they were about to call it a day. It was getting late; the idea was to reconstruct Tracey’s walk at the exact time she had left work, not — he checked his watch — almost an

hour later. Eve, scratching under the wig, looked all in. Walking in the footsteps of the dead was never easy.

There was Fiona, her hair wet from the pool. She got straight into her car and drove off, seemingly unaware of the tension around her. Her tail-light was out; he'd mention it next time he caught up with her.

Rob Randall leaped up the steps towards him. Judd raised an eyebrow.

'Got a possible witness. Maureen Collins. She and her husband were here on the night. She thinks she saw Tracey get into a car.'

Judd followed Randall back onto the esplanade, where a middle-aged couple stood talking to Eve. The woman chewed at her fingernail. The man beside her caught Judd's eye, nodded and looked away.

Judd introduced himself. 'Would you mind repeating to me what you told Detective Constable Randall, Maureen,' he said. 'No rush.' He inclined his head. Randall and Eve moved back, giving him space.

Maureen Collins blushed, waving a hand in front of her face. 'I feel a bit weird, actually. I hadn't expected this. I didn't even realise you were doing a reconstruction. We were just sitting here in the car when we saw her walk by. Weren't we?'

Her question was directed to her companion, who nodded and studied his feet.

'Steve said to me, that's the girl that went missing. I didn't know what he meant at first, then I realised. Anyway, I saw her. That night. I recognise the blouse.' Her eyes were bright and she continued to fan herself. Judd placed a hand on her shoulder.

'It's okay.'

She sniffed. 'I bought one for my daughter. Just like it. At Farmers. I got it on the Thursday. They're always having those sales. On Thursdays. I look out for them.'

'Jesus Christ, Maureen, he doesn't wanna hear about your bloody ...'

Judd held up a hand. ‘Quiet. Please.’ He took Maureen by the elbow and led her a few feet away, turning their backs on her moronic husband. ‘Go on. You’d bought one that Thursday. Is that it?’

‘Yes. And when I saw her, on the Saturday, I thought, oh, that’s the same blouse I bought Gemma. But I didn’t know ...’ She stopped and covered her mouth. She hiccupped. ‘I didn’t realise it was her ... the girl. I didn’t realise it was her that I’d seen.’

Judd glanced up. Randall was keeping the husband busy, asking questions, taking notes. ‘So where were you, exactly, when you saw her? Can you remember?’

She sniffed again, and nodded, reaching up her sleeve and pulling out a tissue. Judd looked away while she blew her nose and dabbed her eyes.

‘Oh, I do feel stupid,’

‘Not at all. Take your time.’

She returned the tissue to her sleeve and took a deep breath. ‘We’d been sitting a bit further along from here, in the car, watching the surfers. It was really busy. We don’t normally come down here, but the weather was so nice. Like tonight, eh?’

Judd nodded.

‘Steve, he likes to watch when there’s a competition on. Anyway, we’d been sitting here and I suddenly remembered Mum and Dad had said they might pop round and I looked at my watch and it was just gone six, maybe a quarter past, and I said to Steve, we’d better get back. He wasn’t very happy, because the surfing hadn’t finished. But it was hot in the car, and I’d had enough.’

Judd nodded. ‘Go on.’

‘So, he started to reverse and there was a line of traffic behind us. “Careful,” I said, because he can be impatient like that. Especially when he’s fed up. Then a car stopped and someone let us in. They probably wanted our park.’ She stopped a minute, as if she’d lost her train of

thought. ‘Oh, and anyway, we reversed out and then the car in front suddenly stopped. Josh swore, because we nearly went into them. Then this girl ran straight in front us. And that’s when I noticed the blouse.’

Judd waited.

‘She opened the door of the car in front, and got in.’ She looked up at him and shrugged. ‘Then they drove away. That’s it, really.’

‘And you were following?’

‘Yes.’

‘You drove to the roundabout?’

‘Yes.’

‘And then what? Which way did you turn?’

‘We turned left, because we live in Mornington and we always cut through, take the scenic drive.’

‘And what did they do?’

She screwed up her face. ‘I think they drove straight ahead. Yes, they must have because ... when we turned left there was no-one in front of us because there was a car coming the other way on the hill and we had to give way ... yes. They must have.’

‘Tell me what else you remember. For example, did you see who was driving?’

She shook her head. ‘No, I only saw the back of his head.’

‘His?’

‘Well, I suppose it was a bloke. Actually ... no, it was because before she got in the car, he leaned over to open the door. Maybe to hurry her up. They were holding up the traffic. It was a man, I’m sure it was. Pakeha, but don’t ask me what he looked like. It’s her blouse I remember. I don’t even remember what she looked like.’

Judd took a deep breath. ‘You’re doing really well. Now tell me, can you remember anything about the car she got into?’

She shook her head. ‘Nothing.’

Judd took her arm and led her towards the railings. ‘You saw them drive off in front of you. Can you recall the colour of the car? Try and picture it again.’

She stared out to sea a minute before closing her eyes. ‘Oh God, it’s so hard. I think ... it was dark. Yes, dark. And it could have been a ... station wagon. Yeah, it was long. Not a shorty.’

‘Good. Anything else?’

‘No. Just that. Dark. Blue or black, maybe?’

He turned her to face the line of parked cars. ‘Is there a car here that looks similar?’ He was trying his luck, but you never knew. She scanned the cars, shaking her head.

‘I’m sorry. The car was dark-coloured, I couldn’t say any more than that.’

He led her back towards her companion who was still looking at her as if she were demented, and told Randall to arrange for Maureen to call into the station and make a statement. He told Eve to call it a day, then he returned to the raised car park and his own car. He looked around. Station wagons were about as popular in New Zealand as ... sheep, and just about every car was silver, white or dark blue. But it was something.

He played the scene over in his head. Tracey had left work and was starting to walk home to Hargest Crescent, when someone she knew spotted her, called her over and told her to get in. It did not sound prearranged. It sounded like a chance meeting. They’d need a list of those who owned dark-coloured station wagons. Not only Tracey’s friends and acquaintances, but whoever was in the vicinity that night: pool users, surfers, residents, the lot.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Sunday 10th March

In one of those coincidences that never failed to surprise him, the following morning Judd found an article on McDowell in the local paper. According to the article, McDowell had been educated in Dunedin, studying late in life Software Engineering and Multi-media networking at Otago University. After that, Mr McDowell formed MCC Technology. As well as offering the usual consultation, network support and repair services, in 2005 he had set up Awa-phone, a company specialising in voice mail software development.

Judd grunted. A clever bugger, then.

Awa-phone operated out of Auckland, developing voice mail software for communication centres throughout the Pacific and in the UK.

McDowell split his working time between Melbourne, Auckland and Dunedin. Apparently the Awa-phone system used voice-identification instead of numerical menus that traditionally drove everybody mad, saving both customer and call centre time and money. McDowell had donated a new switchboard to the rest home in which his mother was living. Kate's father was in the same home, only he was in the dementia unit, so trying to ring him was pointless. The upgrade meant that the residents could now enjoy their own phone lines, free of charge.

Accompanying the article was a photograph of McDowell and the manager of the rest home standing under a promotional banner: the firm's logo in gold lettering on black.

Judd drained his coffee and stood up, folding the newspaper in two with a flick of the wrist. Tomorrow was going to be busy. He was due to

catch up with Burgess again and it was the day of Tracey's funeral. Following that, they were to interview the staff at the real estate agency, and with any luck the lab would have results from the blanket found in the house.

Later that afternoon, he and Kate walked through the sliding glass doors into the reception area of the rest home, first sterilising their hands with the gel wash then taking a face mask each. Despite the mask, the smell of stewed cauliflower hit Judd in the back of his throat like a hammer finding a thumbnail. Kate stopped to have a word with the Clinical Manager, as her badge named her. Judd studied the directory of residents' names. Normally there were only one or two gaps — empty beds cost money — but the flu epidemic had the Grim Reaper working overtime. Over half the names were still printed on paper and taped to the board, which meant the residents were new, and there were over a dozen vacant spaces. No wonder the staff were looking frazzled. There was nothing like a dead body to create paperwork.

He scanned the names. Good. Kate's father, Jim, was still in the dementia unit. When they were moved from there to a hospital unit, you knew their days were numbered. He checked himself. That was no longer strictly true. With this flu, you only had to be old, or very young, to be at risk. He searched the board for another name. There she was, Mrs D. McDowell, in Rata, the same hospital unit as his former boss Stan, whom he usually visited while Kate was with her father. He couldn't recall seeing Mrs McDowell's name there before, but then, until recently it would have meant nothing to him. He followed Kate to the double glass doors and pressed the door-release button on the wall.

Jim might have lost his marbles but he'd kept his sense of humour and was known for leading the carers a merry dance. According to his nurse, Jim and crony Ron had taken it upon themselves to make a break for it.

'Perhaps we've screened The Great Escape once too often, eh?' she laughed. 'They've spent most of the past fortnight down near the doors,

shuffling closer when they think no-one's looking. You should see them, running their fingers along the underside of the glass panels, looking for a secret lever. Lucky for us, the keypad on the wall doesn't mean a thing to them.'

Judd made a mental note to keep up with technology, although by the time he got into one of these places they'd be using eye scanners or voice recognition or some such thing.

They re-introduced themselves to Jim, who eyed them as if they were Jehovah's Witnesses. An old work colleague of Kate's waved hello, her own mother pacing in front of the nurse's station, waiting for the phantom taxi to take her to the Savoy tea rooms. Welcome to the twilight zone.

Leaving Kate with her dad, Judd let himself out of the dementia unit and made his way to the hospital unit in search of Stan Cox. Activity hour was in full flow and he found Stan seated in the far corner of the room and being encouraged by a carer to throw plastic rings around four bright yellow plastic skittles placed a metre from his feet.

'How are you doing, Stan?'

'What?'

'How are you doing?'

Judd lowered his mask so Stan could read his lips. 'How are you?'

'Not so bad. Not so bad.' He held a ring out to Judd. 'Slippery buggers these. Here, you have a go.'

'No, you're all right. Looks like you're winning.'

Drool slid from Stan's open mouth as he closed one eye and took aim, missing the skittle by a mile. 'Not as easy as it looks.'

It was hard to believe that this wizened old gnome had once been the New Zealand and Australasian welterweight boxing champion. While Stan took another ring from his lap and took aim, Judd looked around. Two children from the local school, unfazed by the decrepitude around them, were visiting old Mrs Waugh, a former teacher at their school.

Someone clapped. ‘Happy hour! Who’s for potato chips?’

When Judd looked back at Stan, his head was on his chest and the plastic rings all on the ground. Judd left him sleeping and went in search of the nurse.

A passing carer stopped, a large woman, with an interesting overbite and, according to her badge, named Pitta. ‘He’s doing okay, aren’t you, Stan? His spirits are high. That’s the main thing, eh?’

‘Of course. Good. Look Pitta, a former neighbour of mine, Mrs McDowell, is in here, but I haven’t seen her in years. I’ve had a look around but I don’t recognise her. Would you ... be able to point her out?’

‘Doris McDowell? Over there in the wheelchair, dear.’ She pointed to three women who sat, grey heads close, obviously enjoying a natter.

‘The lady in the pink dress?’

‘Yeah, that’s Doris.’

‘Right, I thought so. Has she been here long?’

‘About a year.’

‘Any chance she’ll remember me?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine. She’s a bit confused. But not too bad. Speak nice and loud. It’s her birthday. Her son will be in later to take her out. We’ve got her all ready. He’s ever so good.’

‘That would be Scott, would it?’

‘Yes. He’s lovely.’

‘I read he’s donated a new switchboard to the rest home.’

‘That’s right. The girls on the front desk are over the moon. Halves their job, eh.’

Judd glanced over at Doris McDowell. Vera Lynn’s distinctive voice came from the wall speakers and the RN, sitting with a resident on either side, took one hand from each and sang along. It was all very homely.

There was commotion at the entrance door. McDowell stood just inside holding a large bouquet of flowers. Despite the heat, he was all buttoned up in a shirt and tie. 'Where is she? Where's my birthday girl?'

Doris McDowell was evidently delighted to see her son, holding her face up for a kiss.

'Here you go, Mum. Some gladdies. Your favourite. Now look at this orange. It reminded me of the ones you used to have growing under the washing line, do you remember?'

One of the carers returned with a vase. 'I'll pop them in here, shall I, Doris?'

'No, I'll do them.' McDowell removed the flowers from the cellophane and arranged them in the vase, taking his time. 'I thought the white ones broke them up nicely. What do you think? The girl gave me some powder to add, so they should last a few days, even in this heat.'

'Is it time for tea?' Stan was awake again.

'Tea?' said Pitta. 'You've already had your tea, Stan. It's Happy Hour. Would you like a beer, or a lemonade? What about you, dear?'

Judd indicated no.

'What's your name again?' from Stan.

'Judd.'

Stan nodded. 'Judd? Judd. I used to know a Judd. Years ago. Nice young man. He had a wife. They lived down St Kilda way. On the flat. You'll go far, I said, if you keep that up.'

'Keep what up?'

'Eh?'

'If he kept what up? This Judd character?'

'Well, whatever it was he was doing, I suppose.'

'Right.'

‘I visited once. We scrubbed down the greenhouse. Showed him how to do it. He’d lost all his tomatoes, you see, to the blight. Jeyes, I said, that’s what you need, son. Plenty of Jeyes.’ Stan fiddled with his shirtsleeve. ‘No problem with blight after that. He was thorough, I’ll give him that.’

A dew drop hung from the end of Stan’s nose. Judd passed him a tissue. ‘This Judd character,’ said Judd. ‘Do you see much of him?’

‘What? No, they moved away. Haven’t seen him in ... ooh, years.’

The carer returned with one of those tipper cups you give to toddlers. Watching Stan drink, Judd recalled the man’s hair-raising farewell in the police bar. Stan had been like a father to him. Now, with the usual shock, he caught his own reflection in the glass screen at the nurse’s station. The nice young man with a young wife in St Kilda had gone forever. They would be next, he, Kate and McDowell. They would be the next to fill these wards. Stan was simply warming his chair.

McDowell was back in the lounge with his mum’s cardigan.

‘Where are you taking her, Scott?’ asked the nurse. ‘Anywhere nice?’

‘Pier 24. Only the best for Mum.’

‘You won’t forget she needs a soft diet, will you?’

‘Of course not. Now Mum, I don’t think you need your rain-jacket, but there might be a breeze off the sea, so we’ll take it anyway, shall we?’

While McDowell fussed with his mother’s cardigan, Judd slipped outside. He was in the reception area, checking out the board again, when Kate appeared beside him.

‘Looking for a room?’

He shrugged. There were worse places a person could end up.

Kate sat beside him in silence in his MG, her arms crossed.

‘It’s either a dysfunctional starter motor or just something stupid like a loose connection.’

Kate sighed. He turned the key again. Nothing.

‘I’ll give it another minute.’

‘Why, what difference will it make? It’s not even trying to start.’ Kate wound down the window. ‘How did the reconstruction go, anyway? I meant to ask earlier.’

‘Oh, so-so.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘She was seen getting into a car.’

She turned to face him. ‘That’s good!’

‘It’s something.’

‘What sort of car?’

‘A dark-coloured station wagon.’

‘Oh.’

‘Exactly. Still, we’ll get there in the end.’

‘Sure, but how long will that take? A station wagon. Why couldn’t it have been a ... purple mini or something!’

He tried the car again, surprised at her frustration. Nothing.

‘Are you going to call the AA, or do I have to?’

Judd ignored her. One more try.

‘Christ, Leo. How many years have I wasted waiting for your bloody car to start?’

He turned the key again: nothing but a fizzing sound. He almost made a quip about old girls needing longer to warm up but a quick glance in Kate’s direction kept him quiet.

‘I’ll wait a few minutes more. She’ll start eventually.’

‘Anyone else would have got rid of this heap of shit years ago. But not you. One more go. One more chance. On and on it goes.’

‘For God’s sake, don’t start.’

‘It’s your stupid car that’s not starting. I’m tired of it. I really am.’

‘Bloody well get out and walk then.’

‘I will!’

Kate threw open the passenger door, and slammed it shut behind her. Judd winced and watched her storm off.

At a rap on the driver window, Judd wound it down. McDowell.

‘It’s probably the starter motor. I had one of these once. How long have you had her?’

‘About, I dunno ... ten years? A bit longer?’

‘Seventy-two?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much?’

‘Fifteen grand, but I’ve paid out that much again on her since.’ Judd drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. ‘Sometimes I think I was done.’

‘Nah. And anyway, where’s the fun in driving a Mazda, eh? Here, I’ll give her a rock, then you give it another go.’ McDowell placed both hands on the MG’s roof and rocked the car from side to side. ‘Now try.’

Judd turned the key and the engine sprang to life.

‘Thanks, mate. Brilliant.’

‘No problem. My Stag does the same.’ He nodded towards Kate’s disappearing back. ‘You’d better get after the wife.’

Kate was almost out onto the main road. Judd gunned the engine and put his car into reverse, slowing only to watch McDowell manoeuvre his mother from her wheelchair to the car, lifting her as if she weighed no more than a lace handkerchief.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Sunday 10th March

Perched at the bottom of the garden, Kate shoved her mobile phone into her pocket. Here, where the land was too steep to tend and they threw their garden rubbish, pumpkins, fennel and potatoes grew unchecked. She eyed up a particularly lush-looking bush pumpkin. If she kept close to the ground and slid on her bum she could probably just reach it, but it was impossible to see where the bank gave way and it would be embarrassing to end up in A&E for the sake of a pumpkin. Not that anyone would care.

She took her phone out and checked it again. Rea was still sulking over her decision to delay telling Leo. One text all weekend. Well, bugger her. Tears pricked and she blinked them away.

She scrolled through recent texts, messages that until a few days ago had been excited and loving. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her behaviour in the car that afternoon had been dreadful. Why was she taking it out on Leo when it was Rea who had upset her? It wasn't Leo's fault she no longer loved him. It was hers. It was her mid-life crisis. This was all her fault.

Rea had no idea how hard this was. To Rea's way of thinking, there were things to end and things to begin and the sooner they all got on with it the better. Not that she said as much, but Kate could tell. At first she'd wondered if Rea wasn't treating this as just another notch on her gnarled bedpost; a thought she'd had to push firmly aside.

'Coo-ee. Kate?'

Bugger. Tom Pearce was hanging over the fence, waving something at her. 'A little something for you.'

Christ. Not more bloody jam. She clambered up the path. He wore his usual canvas overalls that looked older than he did, and a soft tweed cap. ‘You alright, dear?’

‘Fine. Just a cold.’ He pulled back. Good. ‘Blackberry?’ she asked. He’d been making the same jam every year since buying the house from Rea.

‘And apple. For a change.’

‘Thanks.’

‘You missed all the excitement, the other day ...’

She listened half-heartedly as he droned on. Voices came from below; two men in kayaks slid into view and disappeared just as quickly behind the trees overhanging the shore. Once, on a whim, she, Leo and Rea had purchased a kayak between them; they’d talked of getting up before dawn to watch the sun rise from the middle of the harbour, or gliding through the water at dusk, winding down from the day. They’d hardly ever used it.

‘We’ve put in an insurance claim. For the fence. Would you tell Leo?’ Tom rocked the fence to and fro. The very fence Leo and Rea had built.

It had been amusing, the way they’d tossed numbers about as they flicked tape measures this way and that. They worked well together, at times each magnanimously handing authority to the other; other times arguing furiously, but only over things that didn’t matter.

Rea had dragged her outside from the kitchen. ‘Now Kate,’ she said, tucking the pencil behind her ear. ‘Straight cuts across the top of the palings or slanted?’ That was usually the extent of her involvement. The aesthetics. At times she’d felt jealous. Not sexually jealous — Rea had made clear the first time they met her sexual orientation — but envious of the ease between the two of them.

She thanked Tom for the jam and made her way back to the house, completely forgetting about the pumpkin. Now she’d have to bake the Pearces a bloody cake. It was the same ritual each year. A jar of their jam

in exchange for a cake. But this would be the last time. Out of habit she poured herself a drink and picked up the latest copy of Cuisine. She didn't know why she still bought it; she'd lost her passion for baking years ago.

Back then, Rea had called her New Zealand's answer to Nigella Lawson. 'I so admire your stamina,' she said. 'Playing netball, up at sparrow's fart for the gym, baking all weekend.'

But she had to keep fit; how could she work otherwise? The only area where she felt she could meet Rea on common ground was music. They both had a passion for sixties Northern Soul and more than once had ended up dancing around Kate's kitchen to Patti Austin or The Tams, Rea using an egg whisk as a microphone, shuffling sideways across the polished floor in her merino socks.

As a mere OT, manipulating limbs for a living, she felt dull compared to Rea's usual hangers-on: academics, artists, poets, Buddhist nuns. One of her girlfriends had been a trapeze artist. But Rea was comfortable in her and Leo's company, popping over on Sunday nights wearing a bleach-stained sweatshirt over her pyjamas, with a bottle of Roaring Meg in one hand and a bag of pistachios in the other, stretching out on the sofa to join them in watching the TV drama.

'Come on, Leo, get the glasses out before I drink it straight from the bottle.'

Rea's house was always full of people. Often she'd come over just to get away from her house guests.

'How did that fireman from Gore get on?' Leo would ask. 'The one with the dog. What was it again?'

'Stop taking the piss,' Rea drawled. 'You remember.'

'Ah yes. The Great Dane.'

There had been the German paper conservator unable to take up rented accommodation until the end of the month, who insisted on cooking Rea

gut-bloating slabs of beef every night, and in between these strangers the usual array of women, doting, smitten, or just plain curious.

From the safety of her house, Kate had watched the coming and goings, a little curious herself. Rea seemed to have no thought for her own safety, let alone Eve's. Watching a new house guest peg out unfamiliar washing, she'd pray that Rea's unstinting trust in human nature would continue to protect her.

She put the magazine down, unread. It was busy on the wharf tonight, the air full of the grinding and clanging of metal. A small boat headed out to sea between the red and green channel lights. The stadium was floodlit. Kate poured another glass of Pinot Gris. She had been drinking too much lately, which was dangerous around Rea.

What was Rea up to? She spent for too much time thinking of Rea. It wasn't as if Rea were perfect. In fact, at times she could be a complete bitch. She was quick and clever, and now and then, if tired or frustrated, she could be mean. Sometimes Rea caught herself and retreated. Other times she did not.

One evening they had been drinking, like this, on Rea's deck. Beth and Eve were playing at the bottom of the garden. It was summer, still light. Leo was out, probably working. She'd had a trying week. Her father had just been diagnosed with early-onset dementia and she'd just realised that she and Beth had a good chance of developing it themselves. She was trying not to dwell on it, and was not yet ready to tell Rea. Instead she complained about her new boss.

'New broom syndrome' she said. 'We're going around in circles. Every five years they re-invent the bloody wheel. I've seen it all before.'

'U-huh.'

'And I'm the only one who speaks out. They think I'm being negative, but I'm just so ...' She looked over at Rea, sitting with her head back and eyes shut. 'Sorry. Am I boring you?'

‘Sort of.’

Rea opened her eyes and looked down her long nose at Kate. She was pissed. She went to put her glass on the table and almost missed. Kate had only seen Rea this drunk a few times and had had the sense to get away. Tonight she’d missed the signs.

‘You know, some people would say you’ve got bugger-all to be miserable about.’

‘Really?’ Kate glanced down the garden. She should call Beth in.

‘Loving husband, child, a job you usually enjoy ... But nothing is quite good enough for you, is it?’

Kate stood up, looking for Beth.

‘No, don’t do that. Don’t run away. You always run.’

‘I’m not running anywhere,’ said Kate. ‘It’s getting late and I think we’ve both had a bit much to drink.’

‘Coward.’ Rea spat the word. She grabbed her glass. ‘Come on. Stay. Stay and moan a bit more.’

‘Piss off.’

‘Ooh! Gander up!’

‘Fuck off, Rea. I’m not one of your students. You can’t talk to me like that.’

She had avoided Rea for weeks. When they next met, Rea acted as if nothing had happened. She probably couldn’t even remember. But Rea was fiercely protective of Eve or of anyone she loved, and people were protective of her in return. That was largely how she survived.

Kate picked up her phone. Still nothing. She scrolled through old messages. Almost a hundred. She really should delete some.

Eventually, as Leo’s work became more consuming, she and Rea had spent more time together, parking a car at each end and walking the Pineapple Track, or sneaking into the cinema on wet and cold Sunday

afternoons to watch a chick-flick. Getting to know Rea's friends, Kate realised that, trapeze artist notwithstanding, there was usually common ground to be found.

One wet, midwinter weekend, nine of them had driven to the Catlins. The usual friend of a friend owned a large crib, with several smaller huts, on a parcel of land just inland from Papatowai. It was to be time away from all phones and computers, time for long walks followed by excessive eating and drinking. Arriving late Friday night, they went in pairs to investigate the accommodation. Although Kate shivered at the dank cabin with its one-bar electric heater and mouldy walls, she braced herself and threw her all-weather sleeping bag onto the nearest bed.

‘Maggots! There are maggots!’

In the next room, Rea was staring aghast at the handful of maggots wriggling lethargically over the bare mattress. Kate glanced up at the vent directly above the bed. Something had crawled into the roof space and died.

‘I’m not sleeping here: its filthy, maggoty and freezing bloody cold!’

Kate silently agreed.

‘The main crib has a heat pump. We’ll sleep there.’

The others had the same idea, and they ended up sharing the crib. There were plenty of bunks but they hadn’t planned to sleep four or five to a room. Between snoring, possums on the roof, and the heat pump flaring up every few minutes, little sleep was had.

‘Bashful, Sneezzy, Dopey, Sleepy, Happy, Doc, and Grumpy,’ Rea counted around the breakfast table the following morning,

‘That’s only seven,’ said Grumpy. ‘There are nine of us.’

‘Sorry, forgot Fractious and Picky.’

It had the makings of a long weekend.

By mid-afternoon the puddles along the path were still frozen.

‘Come on, who’s for a walk?’ said Rea.

‘I’ll stay here and prepare splints for the broken bones,’ said Kate, happy to sit under the heat pump and finish her book.

Unfortunately Grumpy, Fractious and Picky had the same idea and Kate’s quiet afternoon reading was marred by squabbling, as a discussion about climate change became a heated argument about intensive farming and culminated in Grumpy reciting a large chunk of The Animal Welfare Act of 1999.

‘If you’re so keen on wildlife,’ Picky told Grumpy, ‘why aren’t you next door, sleeping with the maggots?’

‘You’re the only person I know who sleeps with maggots,’ quipped Grumpy. ‘Or is it true Lawrence has finally gone back to his wife?’

Kate sighed and threw down her book. They reminded her of Beth, and how impossible she was when illness or bad weather confined her to the house.

‘Give it a rest, you two.’ Fractious was peering through the window. ‘Look, they’ve turned around; they’ll be back soon.’

‘Why don’t we give them a laugh?’ Kate had spied a pile of magazines under the coffee table. She picked up a flaccid copy of Women’s Own. ‘Find yourself a face, the bigger the better. Like this.’ She tore from the magazine a large colour image of Dustin Hoffman. ‘Then rip out the eyes.’

‘Do you think you should be defacing the magazines like that?’ asked Picky.

Kate turned the magazine over. ‘August 2003. I think they’re done with it.’

‘But why are we doing this?’ asked Fractious

‘Wait and see. Come on, it’ll be funny.’

Kate made them hold the images to their faces, like masks. They looked at one another through torn-out eye-holes.

‘Ooh, Robert Mugabe,’ said Picky to Grumpy. ‘Suits you.’

‘Angelina Jolie?’ answered Grumpy. ‘That’s wishful thinking.’

Fractious pointed at Kate. ‘Is that Doris Day I see before me?’

Kate swayed from side to side. ‘Que sera, sera ...’

To her surprise Picky and Grumpy joined in.

A door slammed.

‘They’re back. Quick!’

They sat, hardly daring to breath, staring through their masks at the door.

Rea was first in. ‘Oh my God! You bloody idiots, you almost gave me a heart attack. Everyone, come look at this!’

The remainder of the weekend was spent playing Mousetrap, Scrabble and Life! While giving others permission to enjoy themselves, Kate had rediscovered a part of herself she thought she’d lost forever. The fool. The entertainer.

With Rea she felt like a whole person again. Young, even. Yet when she returned home Sunday nights to an empty house, or to Leo morose and distracted, checking his phone, she could almost feel her skin sag, her bones soften, her hair turn grey, as she slid back into middle age.

Then it had all changed.

For once, Rea was out of her depth. The members of the local women’s committee were arriving that afternoon to discuss an exhibition, a joint venture between two local groups, the Peninsula Potters’ Co-operative and the Taieri Woodturning group, neither of whom Rea had much to do with, but Women’s Refuge, which would benefit from the proceeds, was close to her heart.

Even over the phone, there was anxiety in Rea’s voice. ‘I didn’t give it much thought when I invited them here. But then someone mentioned afternoon tea and ...’

It was typical of Rea to leave it until the last minute. With Kate's closest friend, Martha, tied up with her son's school play, Kate had made tentative arrangements to play badminton with a work colleague, but the thought of listening to Rachel babble on all afternoon about increased workloads and contracted hours filled her with dread. Besides, there were few things at which she felt more accomplished than Rea, and the thought of bossing her about for the afternoon was not without its appeal.

She took an apron with her, the candy-pink gingham one her Auntie Joy had sent for Christmas, years ago. She slipped it over Rea's head, standing behind her to tie the strings, grinning at Rea's discomfort. 'You,' she said, 'can cream the butter and sugar. I'll finish my tea and supervise.'

'Cream ... beat? Really? You don't have a, you know, mixer thingy?'

'I do but I'm not lugging it over here, and anyway,' Kate flashed Rea a knowing smile, 'I like to see you sweat.'

Rea raised an eyebrow, fixing Kate with a long hard look and picking up the wooden spoon. 'This is all Miriam McKay's fault.' She beat the butter savagely. 'You know Miriam?'

Kate blew on her tea and nodded. Miriam McKay, wife of Barry McKay of McKay Real Estate, was a patron of the arts. She was always batting her eyelashes at Rea but from what Kate could tell Rea had yet to take up the challenge.

'She said baking is the sign of a professional fundraiser, and she couldn't wait to try my sponge fingers.'

Kate snorted, tea exploding from her mouth. Choking, she took the tissue Rea offered and mopped the front of her t-shirt. 'Oh no, look at me. Shit, it'll stain.'

'No it won't. Give it here, quick, and I'll rinse it.'

Kate hesitated.

'Come on. Take it off. I'll find you something else.'

Kate slipped out of her t-shirt, shivering in the cool air. Rea reappeared at once with a jersey. Kate, standing in her bra and holding her t-shirt to her stomach, grabbed the jersey and pulled it on quickly. Rather too quickly. She felt Rea's eyes flick over her before she turned away to rinse the t-shirt under the tap.

'Soon get this out,' Rea muttered. She spun back to Kate. 'You know, sometimes it's hard to believe there's only five years between us. You're still trim. I've gone to pot. It's not fair.'

'Nonsense!' Kate thought Rea's extra curves suited her.

'No. It's true. Everything starts falling away once you hit forty-five. You'll see. It's like the button on the microwave. Ping. Time's up.' She shrugged and shook soap powder into the sink. 'I'll let it soak.' She rinsed her hands and dried them. 'Now, where were we?'

Kate smiled, sitting back down and picking up her tea. 'Miriam and your sponge fingers?'

Rea picked up the wooden spoon again and shook her head. 'You know, sometimes I think your sense of humour stopped developing in the playground, Kate Judd.'

Kate nodded. 'True.'

'You silly chook. Miriam McKay?' Now it was Rea's turn to laugh. 'You know my rule about married women.'

Kate glanced at Rea and said nothing.

Rea smirked. 'Well. I see your point. As for this cake, they all assume I'm going to fail. We'll have to create something quite rustic looking. If it's too perfect they'll accuse me of buying in.'

'Which, of course, you wouldn't dream of doing?'

'Of course I would. But there's so little choice here, I'd be found out.' She held the bowl towards Kate. 'And anyway I left ordering one too late. Is this enough?'

'No. I'll tell you when.'

Rea snorted. ‘You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?’

Kate smiled. She was rather. She glanced out of the window. Grey clouds shot past, scattering rain against the window in sudden noisy bursts. Now the oven was on, the kitchen was starting to warm. She felt snug in the jersey, which bore faint traces of Rea’s perfume. Rea’s involvement with Women’s Refuge had been so consuming of late she had barely seen her. Sometimes when she woke in the night feeling restless and anxious all at the same time, she worried that Rea had been avoiding her.

Rea reached up to let a wasp out of the top fanlight window, lightly resting her hand on Kate’s shoulder. Kate separated yolks from whites, over-conscious of Rea’s attention.

‘They’re big. Where did you buy those?’ Rea asked.

‘Huh? Oh. The market.’ Kate cracked another egg. ‘No, I lie. At Taste Nature ... I think. Either way, they’re organic.’

‘Lovely.’

They worked in silence for a few minutes, Rea humming softly under her breath. ‘Have you decided whether you’ll come to Purakaunui? Jenny will need to know soon.’

Rea’s invitation to join her and others at the Forest and Bird lodge had been on Kate’s mind for some time. It was what she needed: bush walks, barbeques, lively conversations deep into the night. ‘You know I’d love to. It’s just ...’

Leo was working, and leaving a teenage daughter alone for the weekend seemed risky. Not that Beth was any trouble, but she was hardly eight anymore; she wanted to go off with her friends and Kate had heard terrible things about parties getting out of hand, and Leo wasn’t short of anecdotes about casual violence dished out in the Octagon at night.

Kate frowned. Lately she had felt more and more compromised. So often she found herself thwarted because of Leo and his job, but also

because of Beth. Sometimes she envied Rea's freedom, with no husband and her daughter already away from home.

Rea reached in front of her for a cloth.

Kate pulled back. 'Am I in your way?'

'No. Stay there.'

Rea grabbed the cloth from the container in front of Kate's, her breast brushing Kate's arm.

Kate cracked the last egg, missing the basin entirely. 'Shit!'

Rea passed her the cloth.

'Sorry. I don't know what's up with me today.' Kate mopped up the spilt egg, horrified to find herself close to tears. She sniffed, keeping her head low.

'Kate? It's just an egg, darling.' Rea turned to her. 'Katie, are you alright?'

Kate's lip was trembling. She threw the cloth onto the worktop, burying her face in her hands, horrified at her lack of control.

'Kate?'

Rea's arms enfolded her and Kate found herself clinging onto Rea, far too tightly.

'Kate, Kate, Kate.' Rea was smoothing her hair.

'I do want to come away,' Kate hiccuped. 'I want to more than anything. I just ... can't. I can't. It's impossible. I can't do what I want to do.' Sobs shook her body. 'Ever.'

Rea rocked her, ever so gently, to and fro. 'I know. I know.'

'No, you don't. You don't know half of it. No-one knows.'

Rea's mouth was close to Kate's ear. 'Tell me.'

Kate shook her head, her face pressed to Rea's neck, already damp with her tears. It felt so good, being held. She ran her thumb over Rea's neck, to wipe away her tears. How could she explain? She didn't have the

words. She didn't even know what the matter was herself. She turned her head, wiping her cheek on Rea's shoulder.

'It's so ... All I want. I just, what I want is ...' Unable to continue, or make any sense at all, she allowed herself to be held by Rea, huffing out great salty breaths. Her fingers found Rea's hair, and stayed there while Rea rocked her, back and forth. Eventually she quietened, and the tears stopped. Without thinking she turned towards Rea's neck and kissed the so-soft skin there. 'Thank you.'

'Kate?'

Kate pulled back quickly. 'Sorry.'

Rea pulled her close again and held her tight. They stood there for a while, just breathing, then she felt Rea's lips against her own neck. She exhaled and pressed her body to Rea's. Rea was tugging on the jersey, stretching its neck as she ran her mouth along her bare shoulder. Kate shivered. Rea kissed her ear, biting gently at the lobe. Heat flooded Kate. Oh my god, what had she started? What was she doing? She turned her head and ran her lips along Rea's cheek, down her jaw. Rea tilted her head, her lips nudging Kate's. Slight pressure from Rea, then their mouths joined.

'Mum? Mum, where are ...'

Kate leaped back, pushing Rea away.

'Beth? Beth!' She spun round. The kitchen door was wide open.

'Beth!' She ran outside into the garden.

'Beth!'

But she'd gone.

Gone forever, as it turned out.

Kate's phone beeped. At last, a text from Rea: 'Take your time. Do whatever you have to do. I can wait as long as it takes. Rxxx'

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Monday 11th March

A week was a long time to wait for a funeral in Dunedin, and Judd was pleased for the Wenlocks' sake that forensics had agreed to release the body. He and Priest slid onto end-of-row seats at the rear of the Hope and Sons funeral home to the tune of 'Bridge Over Troubled Waters', a song Judd had once liked. He scanned the congregation. Tracey's immediate family took up the first few rows; he recognised June, and Tracey's gran. The remainder were girls in school uniforms and the odd adult. Teachers, perhaps. A tragic death usually brought hundreds out of the woodwork; perhaps the relatively low attendance was down to the flu.

A slideshow of Tracey's short life flickered on the screen at one side as the chaplain read the service. Tracey at kindergarten, fingers and face covered in paint; Tracey at gymnastics, hair scooped off her face in a ponytail; a gummy grin straight into the camera; Tracey pulling a trout out of what looked like Lake Wakatipu, the picture over-exposed but her pride obvious. Lastly, snaps of Tracey as a young adult, self-conscious in a bikini, hiding her face under a long fringe. He and Kate had similar snaps at home.

The music changed to 'Amazing Grace', and Tracey's coffin was carried in. He recognised Brian Wenlock among the pallbearers. Once the coffin was in place, Brian took his seat in the front row, next to his wife. Judd scanned the congregation, interested, as always, to see exactly who turned up. Finkel, he noticed, was sitting on the far side of the hall.

The phone in his pocket buzzed and he slipped it out. The manager of the real estate agency was back in town.

‘If you would all please stand for the prayer “Now Thank We All Our God”...’

Judd nudged Priest and the two men made their escape.

Ambit Real Estate was a newish outfit in a modern, low-built glass box less than a hundred metres uphill from the Octagon. Priest parked the car in the only patch of shade behind the building. He nodded at a BMW with the plates MAX 1E.

‘That’s where our twelve thousand goes.’

Priest, having moved house a few months ago, was still reeling from the cut taken by the real estate agent.

Judd nodded. ‘These offices so close to the town centre won’t come cheap either.’ He rolled up the sleeves to his shirt. ‘Let’s hope they’re air-conditioned.’

Max Park was exactly what Judd expected: shiny-faced and loud, in ill-fitting suit that did nothing to hide the bulk of a former fullback going to seed. Judd coughed at the man’s over-enthusiastic application of aftershave and took the chair furthest from the chrome and black glass desk, on which were enough fingerprints to keep SOCO busy for a year.

They quickly established that the house in question had been empty for the past month, which obviously included the night Tracey disappeared.

‘Is this usual for such a prime piece of real estate?’

Park looked at Judd and shrugged. ‘It’s not as prime as you might imagine. The truth is, those two apartments, down by the pool there, lack privacy. And they’re noisy. The restaurants and bars, the new hotel, they’ve changed the vibe. Suddenly the area’s busy, not just all day, but late at night too. And there’s all that passing foot traffic: surfers, pool users, dog walkers. On a fine day half Dunedin’s down there.’

Judd nodded.

‘Not everyone wants to live in a goldfish bowl. Not people with that sort of money, anyway.’

‘So, not much interest?’

Park shook his head. ‘Not much. Plus the flu has killed the market. No-one much fancies traipsing through strangers’ houses at the moment.’

That made sense.

‘So, it’s quiet, generally then? Is the house assigned to one particular agent?’

Park nodded. ‘Technically it’s listed with Kenny, but if someone came in off the street wanting a look around and Kenny was busy, any one of us would show the property.’

‘So everyone has access to the keys?’

‘They all have access, yes, but all keys are locked in the key safe overnight, and when they’re in use they get signed in and out so we always know where they are.’

‘Except for the other day.’

‘Sorry?’

‘The other day. We wanted to inspect the property but no-one could find the keys.’

‘Oh, yes ... seems young Kenny had taken them home, by accident. He went off ill, with them in his jacket pocket.’

Judd took out his notebook. ‘Kenny ... ?’

‘Whitfield.’

‘This Kenny. We’d like a word with him. I understand he’s back at work today?’

‘That’s right. I haven’t caught up with him yet; he’s showing someone through a townhouse at Waverley.’ He crossed the room to open the door. A young woman stood a few feet away flicking through a folder. ‘Julie, if you see Kenny come back, tell him we want him, okay?’ She nodded, her

face flushed. Park returned to his desk. ‘Before we go on, can you tell me why you’re interested in this property?’

Judd cleared his throat. ‘Tracey Wenlock, the girl who was murdered. She was last seen at the pool. This property was empty at the time.’

‘Right. But you don’t think ...’

‘We don’t think anything at the moment, Mr Park.’

‘Max. Please.’

‘Max. But an empty property so near to where a girl disappears has to be checked out. Now, about viewings: how do they get recorded?’

‘We have a central register. I can show you.’ He tapped on his keyboard, swivelling the PC screen to show them a database. ‘If I enter the address of the property here...’ He stopped talking for a moment to concentrate. Judd and Priest leaned forward to study the screen. ‘Then we get a list of names and addresses. We have to keep a record, you see. If a property is taken off the market and sells within six months to someone we showed around ...’

‘You expect your cut.’

Judd glanced over at Priest before turning his attention back to Max. ‘Can you search by a particular date? Can you tell me if anyone was taken around on the twenty-third of February, for example?’

‘Is that the date the girl disappeared?’

Judd didn’t answer. Max tapped on a date and the screen flickered a few times. ‘Here we go. No. No-one viewed the property that day, or since. Like I said, it’s not proving easy to shift.’

‘So why did Kenny have the keys in his pocket when he went home sick last week then?’

Park looked blankly at Judd. ‘I don’t know. You’ll have to ask him that.’

Right on cue, a head poked around the door. ‘Someone looking for me?’

Kenny Whitfield was as slight as Park was bulked-out, with a shock of red hair and a freckled complexion to match. Whereas Park's suit looked as though it had argued with its owner and lost, many years ago, Whitfield's suit hugged his lean frame. He had matched a paisley print tie with a turquoise striped shirt, the way young men did these days, and looked modern and cool. It was unusual to come across a New Zealand man who knew how to wear a suit. Kenny would be popular with the ladies.

Max slapped Kenny across the back. 'You're back. Good man. Detectives, er ...'

Judd stood. 'Detective Senior Sergeant Judd. And Detective Priest. We'd like to ask you a few questions about one of the properties on your books, Kenny. It won't take long. If you wouldn't mind giving us a few minutes, Max?'

Max left and Judd directed Kenny to his seat, before deliberately sitting back on the edge of the desk, only a foot from Kenny and towering above him. Although Kenny sat back in the chair and tried to look composed his flushed face betrayed his discomfort.

'Now Kenny,' said Judd. 'Tell me about 2B Second Beach Rd.'

'Huh?'

'The property only you had the keys for the other day. The keys that were in your pocket when you went home sick at the beginning of last week.'

'Yeah, yeah. Sure. What do you wanna know?'

'I want to know what the keys were doing in your pocket.'

'Oh, sweet. I'd been showing someone around, eh? Forgot I had them. When I came down with the flu, they were like, the last thing on my mind?'

'So, you showed someone around at the beginning of last week? When was that, on the Monday?'

‘Yeah. That’d be right, the Monday.’

‘That’s strange, because we’ve had a look in the database. The last time anyone went through was on the nineteenth.’

‘Right. Really? Guess I must have forgotten to load the details, eh.’

‘So, you could put them in now?’

‘Uh, sure.’

‘Go on then.’

‘Huh?’

Judd got up and walked around behind Kenny. He tapped the top of Max’s PC. ‘Type them in, then me and Detective Priest here can go and interview them. I take it you did show them through yourself?’

‘Uh, yeah.’

‘You didn’t hand them the keys and let them look around in their own time?’

‘No way.’

‘So you didn’t, then?’

‘Of course not.’

Judd took out his notebook and nodded at the screen. ‘If you’ll just complete their details ...’

Kenny pulled on his tie. He patted the pockets of his suit. ‘Can’t remember their names off the top of my head ...’

Judd waited.

‘It’ll be on my desk. If you’ll just hang on a minute.’

Judd peered around the door and watched as Kenny went to his desk and opened and shut drawers. Julie, so interested in their conversation earlier, quickly made her way over to him. They exchanged a few words before Kenny waved her aside. After a glance at Max’s office she rushed back to her computer. Judd returned to sitting on Max’s desk and waited. When Kenny re-entered, he indicated for him to sit.

‘Found it?’

‘Must have left the details at home.’

‘Really? Well never mind about that for now.’

Kenny’s face registered relief.

‘Tell me what you know about the blanket and pillow in the wardrobe.’

‘What?’ Kenny flushed and looked rapidly from Judd to Priest. ‘I ... I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Come on, son. The blanket and the pillow in the wardrobe of the master bedroom. The red hairs on the blanket? The blanket was covered in them. It doesn’t take a genius to work it out.’

‘I just told you, I ...’

Judd leaned forward and poked his finger into Kenny’s chest. ‘Look sunshine, I don’t give a toss about you and Julie using the house as your private love nest, and I won’t say a word to your boss about it. All I want to know is, is that your blanket and pillow in 2B?’

Kenny glanced across at Priest. He scratched the back of his neck.

Judd leaned over him, resting his hands on the chair arms, encapsulating Kenny so the young man pulled back. ‘I’m investigating a possible murder, Kenny. I can take you down the station and do this officially, if you prefer.’

Kenny nodded, glancing at the closed door. ‘Yeah, okay, it’s mine, alright? It’s just somewhere to meet. She’s married. You know.’

‘Julie?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And that’s why you had the keys?’

He nodded. ‘If Max finds out ...’

‘He won’t. You meet there often?’

Kenny shrugged. ‘Once or twice a week. Usually at weekends. She says she’s got to pop into work, something’s come up. It’s easy enough; we’re open seven days a week. Goes with the job, eh?’

Judd supposed it did. He glanced at Priest. There was little more to be learned here. The blanket was still away at the lab. He should have saved the taxpayer money and come here sooner.

‘Do you remember the night Tracey Wenlock disappeared?’

‘The girl whose body they found?’

‘Yes.’

He shrugged. ‘Nah.’

‘It was February twenty-third. A Saturday. She was last seen at the cafe in the pool’

‘So?’

‘She’d have walked right past you. Were you there that night, at the house?’

Kenny shook his head. ‘No idea, mate.’

‘You’d have had trouble parking. The surf champs were on. About sixish.’

Kenny shook his head. ‘Doubt it. All open homes are finished by then. It’s not so easy for Jules to get away that late in the day.’

Judd took out his card. ‘It’s likely someone picked Tracey up, gave her a lift. You’ve seen her photo.’

Kenny nodded.

‘Give me a ring if you recall anything. Anything at all.’

Another false lead. The lab results would turn up none of Tracey’s DNA on the pillow or blanket. The hope he’d been harbouring, that he’d find Tracey’s DNA in that house, had been blown out of the water. Back at base he found Little in the middle of the ops room, juggling snooker balls.

Randall was standing well to one side, watching. ‘You’ll take your eye out, you drop-kick.’

‘Nah, nah. It’s all coming back. I used to ...’ A ball crashed to the floor. ‘I used to keep five going.’ Little picked up the ball, ‘Three’s easy. Hand to eye coordination, it’s all coming back.’

‘Ten bucks says you lose a tooth.’

Little caught sight of Judd, and stopped, dropping another ball. Judd stopped it with his foot and held out his hand.

‘They, er ... some nob’s been chucking them through windows again.’ Little handed over the two in his hand, bending with a grunt to pick up the third.

‘Which windows?’

‘The usual. Probation, WINZ ...’

‘Where are they from?’

‘Dunno yet. Uniform are flat-out ...’

‘And you thought you’d help?’ Judd walked into his office, calling back over his shoulder, ‘Got anything new for me from Ross Creek?’ But when he turned, Little had gone. Slippery bastard.

Judd sat at his desk, spinning one of the balls on his palm. Randall was right, you could easily lose a tooth with one of these; he’d once seen a man lose a whole mouthful.

It had been a quiet evening: a big meet at the dog track had left half the tables empty. His dad had been there, playing on the next table with his Uncle Travis. As he concentrated on a long pot to the far left pocket, he heard a shout and glanced up to see two figures squaring up over on the corner table. Play froze. The hum from the neon Budweiser sign turned suddenly loud.

The shorter of the two, Wesley Shaw, known as Weasel, was bent backwards to avoid Bernie Cartwright’s eloquently prodding finger.

Bernie Cartwright, owner of the local wholesale warehouse, was a mate of his dad. If you needed anything duty-free, Bernie was your man. Big party? See Bernie. New German washing machine? No problem. Rumour had it Weasel was selling duty-free tobacco at local boot sales. As long as you knew the password, 'Black Magic', you could get enough Golden Virginia to take six years off your life, and all for less than a tenner. It wasn't hard to see how toes got trodden on.

Weasel took a few steps back, holding his hands out front of him. Nobody messed with Bernie. Bernie leaned in close and muttered into Weasel's face. Weasel tried to make a run for it, but Bernie was quick: brought up his cue handle and caught Weasel on the cheek. Crack! Weasel yelled, clutching his face. Blood seeped through his fingers.

Fire swept up Leo's legs and into his belly. Bernie continued his attack, twirling his cue. Jab! Straight into Weasel's gut. Leo looked around. Why was no-one stopping them? Uncle Travis? Dad? Leo's legs were shaking, but the men just stood there, watching. Another crack, sharper this time, and a yell, and Weasel was pinned back over the table. Bernie brought down a snooker ball and rammed it into Weasel's mouth.

Leo's own cue slipped from his hand, clattering to the floor. Everyone looked around. The room spun. He was going to chuck. He grabbed the table in front of him. A hand settled on his shoulder, making him jump. Just his dad. Over the roar of blood inside his head, he caught the odd word ... 'Thursday' ... 'no nonsense' ... 'snivelling little cunt' ... Weasel gurgled and made small choking sounds.

'No blood on the green, Bernie,' Uncle Travis called, resting his own cue against the table and walking over.

Bernie straightened and held out his cue to Travis. After a few quiet words the two men shook hands. Bernie lifted his jacket from the wall and left. Uncle Travis clicked his fingers and someone threw him Weasel's coat. He walked over to the choking figure, still prone on the table, grabbed Weasel by the front of his shirt and pulled him to his feet. The

ball shot from Weasel's mouth and crashed to the floor. Travis pushed Weasel out of the door, wiped the ball on his trousers and replaced it in the rack. Play resumed.

'Did you see that?' Budgie was at Leo's side, twirling his cue through the air like Bruce Lee. 'Whoo! Wouldn't wanna mess with him, eh? Fucking whoo!'

Leo's dad clipped Budgie around the back of his head. 'Get on with your game, stupid boy.'

Leo ran for the toilets. In the cool tiled room, he hurled himself at the sink and chucked his dinner onto the stained porcelain. As he rinsed his mouth, he worried at how different his reaction had been to those around him. Budgie had been lit up, Uncle Travis and Dad had taken it in their stride. But he'd been Lardy Boy: a big fat blubbing wreck.

It had taken him years to understand. He'd spent his whole life until that point joining forces with his mum, making sure his dad was happy, appeasing the bastard, doing anything to keep peace in the house. It was hardly surprising that violence, when it finally erupted, would be overwhelming.

Judd caught himself staring into space. He opened his desk drawer and put the snooker balls inside. In the morning he had another meeting with Burgess. Once again he'd have to admit to being no further along. But the meeting with Tracey's friends tomorrow could be interesting. They'd already been interviewed once, but he needed to get to the bottom of the photograph that had so upset Tracey. June Wenlock obviously had no idea how photoshop could be a cyber-bully's best friend.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Monday 11th March

Sabrina Fairhurst wore kohl smudged in the general vicinity of her unremarkable eyes, and a large opal on a silver chain about her puffy neck. In the way of most psychics, sans pentagram, inverted or otherwise, she looked like anyone else. From the front step, Kate eyed the stone suspiciously.

‘It’s like, a crystal ball,’ Sabrina explained, beckoning Kate inside.

The stench of cat food in the narrow hallway was almost overpowering. Kate followed Sabrina through the lounge towards the rear of the house. Sabrina’s windows were streaked with dirt and as they walked past the coffee table a pile of magazines slid to the floor, reminding Kate of her first flatmate, who believed dust didn’t accumulate after the first inch. Kate was grateful when, after handing her a grimy glass of juice, Sabrina led her into a small old-fashioned garden. Bees buzzed among overgrown borders of hydrangea and roses. A gang of waxeyes squabbled noisily at the bird table. The lawn cried out for a good cut. Sabrina pointed to the two Cape Cod chairs on the cluttered deck.

‘Sit yourself down, Kate.’

The day was hot, too hot for Dunedin. Kate placed her drink, untouched, beside her chair and pulled her sunglasses down from the top of her head. Sabrina bent to pick up a pen and notepad, causing the stone at her neck to sway vigorously.

‘So Sabrina,’ Kate asked, ‘do you really think you can help me?’

Sabrina leaned forward, trying to look past Kate's glasses and into her eyes. 'As long as you're open with me, then there is no reason on earth why I can't channel my gift for you. You see, after reading the article in the newspaper the other day, I had a dream...' She stopped and tilted her head to one side. 'Have you seen a psychic before, Kate?'

Frankly, that was like asking a hypochondriac if they'd ever seen a doctor. As soon as a child went missing psychics sought out the mother. It was always her, never Leo. Psychic mediums and clairvoyants, 'connecting' and 'channelling', they came in search of her and she put herself through it, time after time. Although she didn't believe a word they said, she was unable to resist.

'One or two.' She forced a smile and sat back. Let the circus begin.

Sabrina explained that her dream had been brought on by the recent media coverage of the Tracey Wenlock case. 'Had Beth been upset before she disappeared?' she asked, 'because I definitely picked up that vibe.' Could Kate think of anything that may have upset Beth that day?

She'd run out of Rea's house, vaulted the low fence, and sped indoors. 'Beth?' 'Beth!' No sign of her anywhere. She ran up and down the stairs, calling her daughter's name. The house was empty. She tried to picture Beth standing at the kitchen door. What had she been wearing? Outdoor clothes? Tracksuit? Hoodie? Had she been going for a run? She checked the rack of shoes inside the front door. Beth had at least four pairs of runners but her red pair was missing. Kate ran out of the house, onto the road. They lived near a bend; there was nothing to see. Should she get in her car and go after her? But what would she say? Would that be making more of it than necessary? Perhaps she could laugh it off. Bluff her way out of it. Don't be silly, darling, of course I wasn't kissing Rea. I was upset. Crying. That was all.

Bugger. What a stupid situation to get herself into.

Rea was beside the fence, arms crossed, wincing at the wind. ‘No sign?’

Kate shook her head, avoiding Rea’s eye. ‘No, she’s gone. Probably just coming to tell me she was going out for a jog. Shit!’

‘Unfortunate timing, but nothing to worry about.’

‘Unfortunate?’ She stood in the garden, her hand in her hair. Beth. What must she think?

‘Come on, Kate. She’s a big girl.’

‘She’s not a big girl. She’s seventeen!’

‘Which is big enough.’

‘Don’t you start telling me ...’

‘I’m not telling you anything. Oh, this is silly.’

Kate pushed past Rea, back into the kitchen. ‘Let’s get this bloody cake finished, shall we?’

‘Kate ...’

Kate picked up the wooden spoon and beat the hell out of the mixture, aware of Rea watching her in silence. She spooned it into the lined tin, opened the oven door and slid the cake inside. ‘There. Done.’

Rea went to switch on the jug.

‘Don’t bother.’ Kate headed for the door.

‘Kate, stop being silly. Let’s talk about this. Kate?’

Their concern when Beth had not returned home by six that evening turned to alarm when Leo tried Beth’s mobile and they heard it ring in the pocket of her rain jacket, hanging in the hallway. After that, they tried her friends.

‘Don’t forget Heather.’

‘I won’t.’

‘What about the twins?’

‘Leo, I’m not stupid. I’ll ring them all!’

‘What about that girl from Mac Bay?’

‘Lynda? They moved to Hamilton, almost six months ago.’

‘Eve?’

‘Eve’s in Christchurch. You know that.’

‘Well ... ring her anyway.’

It hadn’t made sense. Beth’s phone lay on the coffee table. ‘Go through her contacts.’

‘But ...’

‘I know what I’m talking about. Trust me, won’t you?’

They split the list between them. There were a few names they didn’t recognise, but no-one had anything useful to tell them. Where the hell was she?

The events of the afternoon replayed through her head. Beth at the kitchen door, calling her name. Breaking apart from Rea. Calling after Beth. The sound of Beth running off. Beth would come home, even if she were upset. She was sensible. She’d think about it, chew it over, then come home and have it out.

Should she tell Leo? Would it make any difference? She wasn’t even sure Beth had seen anything. She might have simply been in a hurry. It was possible she hadn’t even looked into the kitchen, just stood at the door and called then, anxious to go before the weather worsened, shot off. Anyway, what would she say to Leo, exactly? Was it worth upsetting him, right now, when he was already at his wits’ end?

She rang her friend Martha, and left a message on her mobile. One hour later, the street outside was dark and empty. There was a burst of noise as Rea’s guests left.

‘I’ll tell Rea.’

He was over there before she could stop him. Rea appeared immediately, holding her arms out to Kate who pretended not to notice;

she sidestepped and bolted for the kitchen. 'Putting the jug on!' As if any of them needed more bloody tea.

'Right, I'm going out.' Leo had his torch in one hand, phone in the other. 'You stay by the phone. She's probably had an accident, Rea. Fallen down a gully or hurt her ankle or ... she could be lying anywhere, injured.'

'I know.'

'Kate. Keep your mobile phone charged.'

'It is.'

'Keep it on you at all times.'

Martha showed up shortly after nine. 'I'm so sorry. The rehearsals dragged on and on. Came as soon as I heard your message. Now, the important thing is not to panic. Remember how Perry had us at our wits' end after wandering off after soccer practice that time?'

'Hardly the same,' said Rea. 'Beth's seventeen.'

'Yes, a teenager. Even more unpredictable than a twelve-year-old.'

'I doubt it.'

Kate sighed. Her two best friends had never got along. 'Would you check with the boys?' she asked Martha, whose oldest, Jamie, was the same age as Beth.

'Already have. First thing I thought of, but as I suspected, they really have very little to do with one another these days.'

'Eve couldn't help either,' said Rea. 'But she said she'd ring if she thought of anything.'

In the small hours, Kate sent Martha home. 'You've got work tomorrow, and the boys to get to school. Go on. I'll ring if there's any news.'

'But I don't want to leave you here on your own.'

'She's not on her own,' snapped Rea, 'She's with me.'

When Rea fell asleep on the sofa, Kate stepped into the garden and looked up at the sky. First she pleaded. Send her home, God. I don't mind if she's injured, if she's got a broken leg or a twisted ankle. Let Leo find her and bring her home. Don't punish her for this afternoon. It's my fault. Punish me. She hugged herself, shivering at the cold. How could this be happening? It was like something you saw on TV.

Leo returned at daylight, having walked Beth's route over and over again. He looked terrible. His beard was coming through grey; she'd never noticed before. At first light police-led search parties arrived, joined by friends and neighbours. Soon a woman reported spotting Beth jogging around Anderson's Bay Inlet, heading towards home the previous afternoon, no more than a fleeting glimpse, but enough to focus the search from the inlet to the house.

'It is such a large area, when you look,' Leo said. 'When you really look.' There was the park, the school, the empty buildings; the Dance School, the Scout Hut, the bushes and trees at the base of the cliff; the cliff itself, with its paths and footways, the caves under the cliff, and that was before you started on the inlet: all that water, all those rocks, the causeway, the boat huts and the yacht club. The Fire Service, LandSAR, volunteers from the New Zealand Air Force and the community all did their utmost to find Beth. No possible scenario for her disappearance could be discounted. Abduction, homicide and any other possibility had to be considered, investigated and, hopefully, eliminated.

At some point they were both interviewed, together and separately, by the police. Kate began to dread the evenings, the approaching darkness that flagged another day without Beth. Over fifty percent of missing people were found within the first two days, after which the chances of their being found rapidly decreased. Leo's colleagues turned up at the end of each shift to bring him up to date with all that had been eliminated. He sat on the sofa, still in his muddy outdoor gear, exhausted from tramping the streets, a ball of fury and pain clutching a mug of tea. Who had they

pulled in? Why weren't they widening the search? If she wasn't between Doon Street and the inlet, they needed to comb the entire length of her run.

One morning, after a sparse and fitful sleep, Kate woke in panic and shot next door. Rea looked shocked to find her at her kitchen door so early. 'What? What is it?'

'Can I come in?' She stepped into the familiar space. Was it less than a week since she was last here? It was already hard to recall such a time, of peace, warmth, normality. Rea was waiting.

'I was wondering, did they ask you about the afternoon Beth ... called in?'

Rea nodded. 'Of course. They asked if I'd been with you, and I said yes. What else would I say?'

Kate twisted her wedding ring round and round her finger. She rubbed her hands together. 'I said we were in the garage when we heard Beth call out from the back door. I didn't know how to, what to ... Did you mention she came round?'

Rea nodded. 'I said I didn't see her, I only heard her call out. I confirmed you'd been here. They wanted to know what time you came over and what time you left.'

'Fine. Good. But if they do ask, we were in the garage and we heard her and by the time we returned to the kitchen she'd gone. Okay? It's not as if it's going to change anything.'

'Sure. But I've been thinking, perhaps we need to ...'

'What? You think I'm going to tell Leo's colleagues I was ... You think he'd want that? Everyone sniggering?'

They both looked around as the greenhouse door clanged open. 'Anyway, it's too late now.' She made for the door. 'Leo's up. I have to go.'

'Kate, wait a moment!'

Sabrina picked a stray hair from her skirt. She was a vivid dreamer, Kate gave her that. Kate sighed. Why on earth did she keep putting herself through this? Why couldn't she just say no? What was it she hoped to hear?

Sabrina had described a young woman on a white horse, galloping along a beach. 'Such a happy young woman, Kate,' she said, leaning forward. 'So happy.'

The horse had morphed into a dragon, flying high into the air. The sky turned dark, suddenly full of dragons. 'You should have seen the air, aflame with smoke and ... well, flames. And there were stars and this huge moon, and then there was this sound, a siren, like when they call the volunteer fire fighters, and then everything just, poof, disappeared and suddenly it was just Beth, only this time she was running along the beach, and there was another young woman, a young woman with red hair.'

Three pots of succulents sat along the edge of the deck. Kate stood and nudged them straight with her foot. She sighed.

The day the police arrived to turn over the garden, Rea wandered over and the three of them stood on the deck watching.

'If I'd had my wits about me,' Leo said, 'I would have raked over that heavy clay patch down by the compost bin. I've got a whole ton of gypsum to go in there.' God, he was furious.

Kate unable to watch, went indoors. Rea followed and sat down beside her.

'It's procedure, you know that.' She rubbed Kate's arm. 'I feel so helpless. What can I do?'

Kate pulled her arm away.

'Don't shut me out like this, Kate. Please. I need to do something. I'm no good at just sitting around. Should I put up more posters?'

Kate kept her eyes glued to the television. The corner of her mouth twitched as the smile she was aiming for came out a sneer. ‘Don’t you think you’ve done enough already?’

‘Huh?’

‘The other day. You know.’

‘What? Oh, come on, if you are referring to what I think you are ...’

Kate shot to her feet, grabbed Rea’s arm and dragged her into the hallway. ‘Of course I am,’ she hissed. ‘What the hell else would I be referring to?’

Rea backed off, raising her hands in front of her. ‘Okay. Okay. That’s ... fine. Kate, this really has nothing to do with ... with what Beth saw. You can’t possibly believe that. Can you?’

‘How would you know what I believe? You ...’ Kate struggled for breath. ‘If you. If we hadn’t ...’ She glanced back through the doorway to where Leo and Family Liaison Officer Jenny West stood side by side watching the garden receive an instant makeover.

‘Oh, for God’s sake! You can’t possibly believe a sensible girl like Beth would run off over something as silly as that. Kate! She’s grown up with me around, with seeing women ... together. She’s not some simple, homegrown ...’

Kate spun to face her. ‘You don’t see it, do you? You know, for once Rea, this really isn’t about you. They keep asking me, Leo’s lot. Was Beth upset? Was there anything she was worried about?’ Kate heard her voice break. She waved her hands in front of her face, pushing the image aside. ‘Jesus Christ. I can’t very well tell them, can I? I can’t tell my husband’s bloody work colleagues, yeah, well yeah, actually, she was a bit upset, because she’d just caught me snogging the dyke next door!’ Kate fought to regain control, to lower her voice. ‘I can’t fucking well say that, can I?’ Rea moved forward, as if to grab her and pull her into a hug but Kate shot backwards. ‘I want you to go. Go on. Go.’

Rea stood her ground. ‘I love you, Kate. And I love Beth. You know that. Don’t shut me out.’

Kate covered her ears with her hands.

‘Let me help. Kate?’

She put her hands out and pushed at Rea’s chest. ‘Go. Just, fuck off, will you?’

Sabrina looked as if she was waiting for Kate to speak. Kate stared back.

‘I don’t want to give you false hope, Kate. But I truly believe that Beth is okay. She’s somewhere near. My dream, it wasn’t a message from the other side. Nothing like that. But it was a message, all the same. Beth wants you to know that she’s safe.’

Kate wriggled upright in her chair. ‘Is that so?’

Sabrina twirled her opal between her fingers. ‘I have helped the police before with missing people,’ she said.

Kate raised an eyebrow. ‘Exactly how does this ... dream of yours help us find Beth?’

Sabrina smiled. ‘I was wondering about this girl with red hair. Could she be a friend, perhaps? An older sister?’

The first two years had been hell. The anti-depressants allowed her to function, but that was all. Initially Leo was there, right beside her, but eventually he sought sanctuary in his work, leaving at daybreak, returning after dark. The few daylight hours he was at home he made himself busy in the garden. She’d see his lips moving as he dug over the vegetable patch and knew he’d be chatting to Beth, the way he had when she was young and squatting next to him as they sowed peas.

‘No, don’t eat them, Beth. They’ve been sprayed. See how they’re pink? That’s right. To keep the mice away.’

But to Kate, he said little. He became insubstantial: a noise in the night, a dirty cup left by the sink, an odd sock in the wash. Kate avoided Rea to such an extent it came as a shock to see, within six months of Beth's disappearance, the For Sale sign outside Rea's house, and to learn that she'd accepted a position at Christchurch.

It angered Kate, over the years, to think how much better she could have weathered the isolation from her friends, her colleagues and finally, from Leo, had Rea still lived next door, and that anger made her even harder on herself. Without the support of Martha, and Nuala, her counsellor, she might have gone mad.

Seven years after Beth disappeared, Rea's daughter, Eve, returned to Dunedin. Fresh-faced Eve, a new Detective Constable. Kate had heard from Leo that she was back in town, but not until she ran into her outside Arthur Barnett did she realise how much she had missed her. And, of course, Rea. Missing Rea had become part of missing Beth and vice versa. As time went on her initial anger against Rea was replaced by regret. Rea had been an easy target. It was unlikely that their embrace contributed to Beth's disappearance that day.

But here was Eve. With her colouring and freckles and pit-pony legs, she had never much resembled Rea, but sitting with her over lunch in Tokyo Garden, Kate found the way Eve's forehead furrowed as she listened, and the way she leaned back in her chair to laugh, brought Rea immediately, and painfully, to mind. Although Kate was braced for the moment when the conversation would turn to Rea, when it did, she was unprepared for the intensity of her reaction. Her sushi remained untouched on her plate as Eve filled Kate in on Rea's progress up the academic ladder since her move to Christchurch all those years ago.

'She's thrown herself into her work. I mean, she was always driven, but these past few years ...' Eve shook her head. 'She's fallen out with the Dean. Don't ask me what over. I don't understand all this academic stuff. Something about research grants ... funding. But it's not as if she's got

anything to prove. I don't think so, anyway.' She picked up thin slices of preserved ginger and laid them precisely over her sushi. 'Work is pretty much an obsession with her. And with Emmy gone ...'

Kate looked at Eve blankly. 'Emmy?'

'Mum's latest. Actually, she was okay, Emmy. They'd been together almost three years. I guess I should have known it was on its last legs. You know Mum.'

Kate inclined her head, saying nothing.

'The usual story, working too hard, not paying enough attention to her relationships. She's got shingles, you know?'

Kate had just shoved a large piece of sushi into her mouth. She chewed, swallowing painfully. 'Shingles? Rea?'

Eve nodded. 'I tell you, Kate, she's going to kill herself if she doesn't slow down. She's fresh out of hospital after having a gall stone removed.' She dabbed her sushi into wasabi and took a bite. Tears sprang into her eyes. She took out a tissue and blew her nose. 'I think I underestimated how much it hurt, losing her house in the earthquake like that. She's renting, out by the airport. Soulless, she calls it.' She glanced up at Kate. 'You guys were such good friends. What happened?'

Kate wiped her fingers on her napkin, avoiding eye contact. She smoothed out the napkin, then folded it in half, then half again. She kept folding until it was a tight wad. She looked up. Eve was watching.

Eve got the hint. 'Not that it's any of my business of course, it's just, she needs someone, someone like you, someone sensible to talk to.'

'She'll have friends; she doesn't need me.'

'No, you're wrong, she does. Ever since we moved to Christchurch ... I don't know, maybe I just see her differently these days, but she seems to have changed. Look, Mum's coming down in two weeks, for some big hoo-ha at varsity. It would be awesome if you guys caught up. Would you?'

I know she'd love to see you.' Eve pushed a business card across the table. 'There's her cell. Ring her, Auntie Kate? For me?'

Kate was torn. What would it be like to see Rea again? She had only recently started to get a handle on her guilt. Then again, seeing Rea might put things into perspective.

She imagined making that call numerous times over the next two weeks, but as soon as she pictured Rea answering the phone, she'd choke. Twelve days went by and she didn't ring. Neither did she ring her in the hours between Rea's plane landing and the start of the symposium. She turned off her phone between the end of the first day of the symposium and the start of the second; long, long hours when her limbs felt as if they were wired to the national grid and her natural empathic mood became short and brittle, her driving erratic.

Finally, a few hours before the symposium ended, and minutes after narrowly avoiding the rear end of a Honda Civic being driven at thirty kph by a particularly anal driver with no idea how to use an indicator let alone a bloody roundabout ... Kate pulled off the road, took out her phone and texted Rea.

Rea waited for her in the foyer of the City Hotel. They hugged; it was a polite hug, a straight-woman hug, bottoms out, shoulders touching, the type of hug Rea hated. At first glance, Rea looked just the same, but when they'd sat on the cold and overstuffed leather chairs and Kate looked at her properly, the signs were obvious. Rea could still turn heads, but her skin was blotchy, her eyes rimmed with red, fingernails bitten to the quick, and the flowing jade Merino cape moved far too freely on what had been a rudely robust frame.

Rea's hand shot up to smooth back her hair, which had always been foxy and burnished and was now streaked with grey and dull. She smiled rather too brightly. 'You don't look too hot yourself, either.'

Kate tried not to flinch. 'Neither of us is getting any younger.'

‘Ain’t that the truth?’

They both smiled.

‘Eve says you’ve been through the wars.’

Rea raised one eyebrow. ‘Did she indeed! It’s nothing. Work, life, age. All the usual.’

Kat quickly calculated. Rea would be fifty-seven, no, her birthday was in August, fifty-six. ‘I thought you were going to retire at fifty-five.’

‘Really? Did I say that?’ Rea snorted. ‘Be written off, more like it.’

‘I hear there have been problems. Something about not getting on with the Dean?’

‘The Acting Dean is an asshole. Believe me, he’s the least of my worries.’ She sat back and folded her arms behind her head. ‘I need a change. Need to get away, that’s all. I don’t know. Write a book, buy a parcel of land, grow macadamias or chestnuts.’

‘A donkey and an olive tree?’

Rea laughed. ‘That’s right. Spend winter in Greece, and return for our summer. We’ve had this conversation before, haven’t we?’

They stared at one another.

Rea leant forward. ‘It’s good to see you, Kate. Really good.’

Kate’s eyes filled. She found herself mimicking Rea’s gesture, running her fingers over her own scalp and loosening her hair.

‘It suits you.’

‘What does?’

‘The colour.’

‘You make it sound like it’s out of a bottle.’

‘Some people would pay a lot of money for salt and pepper.’

‘Hmmm.’

‘Coffee, ladies?’ A waiter hovered, flooding the foyer with Lynx.

‘Not for me. You?’

‘Nothing. Thank you.’

Kate watched him walk away, suddenly tongue-tied. ‘I hear you’ve had shingles,’ she blurted.

‘Got, actually. Eve told you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Of course, when she passed you my phone number. She mentioned you two had hooked up.’

Kate nodded. ‘She’s grown up. She looks like you. Finally.’

‘I know, although the whole police thing came as a surprise. I blame Leo.’

Kate smiled.

‘No, but the shingles is a bore. Painful, but a bore.’ She folded her arms and tilted her head. ‘So how are you doing, Katie?’

Kate swallowed. She hadn’t been called Katie in years. She shrugged. ‘Fine. You know ...’

Rea nodded. ‘And Leo?’

‘Same as ever.’

‘How’s his greenhouse? Still standing?’

‘Just. Dad’s gone into care.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry!’

‘No, he’s okay. Actually he’s really happy. He’s just unable to live by himself any more. They kept finding him on the street ...’

‘His Alzheimer’s?’

Kate nodded. The waiter was back to say Rea’s taxi had arrived.

Rea shoed him away. ‘Will you come up and see me, Kate? Will you?’

Kate’s eyes finally met Rea’s. ‘Do you want me to?’

‘Yes.’ Rea clutched Kate’s hand, ‘I do.’

The waiter came back into view. Rea got to her feet. ‘Email me. Book a flight. Come up soon, eh?’

Kate nodded, finally trusting her legs to stand.

‘Promise?’

They stood and hugged once more, only this time it was a proper hug, that ran the length of their bodies.

‘Okay, I’ll try.’ A kiss on her cheek, and then Rea was gone and Kate was left standing in the foyer, bright-eyed and sniffing but feeling lighter and warmer than she had in years.

Sabrina’s cell-phone rang, jerking Kate back to the present.

‘Excuse me.’ Sabrina fumbled about in her bag, checked the screen and turned her cell-phone off.

If she’d been a proper psychic wouldn’t she have known who was calling?

‘Sorry. Now, did Beth ride horses?’ Sabrina asked.

‘What?’

‘In dreams the horse symbolises strength. Power, endurance. Did Beth have a boyfriend? And stars, they symbolise hope.’

‘Oh, right. And dragons?’

‘A person of authority.’

‘Sure.’ Kate had had enough. She mimed checking her watch, even though she was not wearing one. ‘Is that the time? I’m due at the dentist in ten minutes ...’

It took a full five minutes to escape. She didn’t know why she put herself through this. Sabrina walked her out, past the aging Corolla in the driveway. Business not that good then.

Kate stopped. ‘Sabrina? Which article was it you read recently that mentioned Beth?’

‘The free paper, the new one. Haven’t you seen it?’

Kate shook her head.

‘Hold on.’ Sabrina raced back inside, and returned with a copy, which she thrust through Kate’s open car window. Kate waited until Sabrina had walked away before unfolding the paper. She held her breath. Leo’s photograph was on the front page, under the headline: ‘Missing Girl — Right Man for the Job?’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Tuesday 12th March

School still smelled the same. A mixture of sweaty trainers, grape-flavoured bubblegum and floor polish. According to June Wenlock, at the start of the year a photograph of Tracey had been posted on Facebook, upsetting Tracey and causing her to skip school. June had imagined something unflattering. Judd suspected differently. Cyber bullying was the bane of any school. Anyone proficient at Photoshop could create havoc; a pornographic image could be uploaded in minutes and taken down as quickly, leaving no evidence except a depressed and isolated victim.

So far their enquiries among Tracey's peer group as to who had posted the photo had elicited only denial and outrage. Judd stood patiently, his back to the blackboard, waiting for Tania Jacobs, the unofficial ringleader, to reply. She tossed her hair and smiled, flashing small shark-like teeth that did nothing to soften her appearance. Her make-up caked her skin like a mask. A death mask.

'I dunno what she was going on about. It was just a bit of fun, eh? She was gonna chuck him. We all knew that.'

'Harry Finkel?'

'Yeah, Harry.'

'Why was that?'

She smirked. 'The usual.'

'Yeah, she said he wouldn't give up,' from the small mousey one at her side.

'Oh?'

‘Yeah, he kept on at her, didn’t he?’

‘For?’

‘What?’

‘Why did he keep pestering her? What for?’

‘Well, what d’you think, he’s a bloke, eh?’

They sniggered. Judd sighed. He should have sent Eve. He looked to Priest for help.

‘So Tracey felt pressured by Finkel for sex,’ Priest intervened.

More giggling.

‘When was this?’

Tania shrugged. ‘Dunno. Couple of months ago.’

The mousey one corrected her: ‘No, longer than that, it was after Gemma’s party, remember?’

‘Gemma’s party. When was that?’

‘Beginning of January.’

Priest did a quick calculation. ‘So, about two months ago then?’

‘About that.’

Judd groaned. Priest was no better than he. ‘Then what happened?’

Tania shrugged. ‘Nothing. Nothing happened. She kept whining on about him.’

‘Is that when the photo appeared?’

No-one spoke. The girls looked towards Tania. Judd knew a closed shop when he saw one.

‘Who was responsible for the photograph?’

Silence.

He raised his voice. ‘Come on. This is a police enquiry, not a playground game. Who sent the photo?’

The only person capable of looking Judd in the eye was Tania. He had his answer.

‘Charming,’ said Priest, backing the car out of the school grounds. ‘How did Tracey get involved with that lot?’

‘After her best friend moved out of the area at the end of last term. June Wenlock informed me that Nicki, Tracey’s friend, got pregnant, underwent an abortion and the parents wanted to put some distance between her and the boyfriend.’

‘A bit late for that.’

Judd checked his watch. Although the local police had interviewed Nicki when Tracey first went missing, he had thought it prudent to send one of his own officers along. It only took an hour to drive to Oamaru; Eve should be back by now.

Eve had made the most of her trip; the squad room lolly jar was brimming with airplanes and jelly beans. Judd skimmed some off the top before calling her into his office. Eve sat in the chair in front of his desk. She folded her arms and tilted her head, an action that reminded him of Rea.

‘Nicki reckons Tania was behind the photo.’

Judd nodded. ‘What’s this Nicki like?’

‘A good kid. Nice. Nothing like that Tania chick. She sounds like poison.’

‘Go on.’

‘Apparently Tania pretended to make friends with Tracey, telling her Harry was rubbish, calling him a loser, saying he was only after one thing. She told Tracey Harry had tried it on with her, and that Tracey should chuck him. All because Tania fancied Harry herself, and when Tracey dragged her heels finishing it with him, Tania gave her a hand.’

‘And concocted the photo?’

‘That’s what Nicki thought. Said it was revolting. Real porn. It looked as though the photo originated from Harry, that he’d posted it, but Nicki reckons it was Tania. She planned on Tracey being upset and giving Harry the shove.’

‘And was she right?’

‘Yep. The photo appeared just after the party on the fifth of Jan. Tracey dumped Harry soon after. Straight away, Tania made a beeline for him. Nicki said he held out for a week but, annoyed with Tracey for dumping him, soon gave in. It didn’t last. A fortnight, tops.’

Judd tossed the remains of a jelly airplane into his mouth. ‘Maybe he realized Tania was behind the break-up?’

‘Maybe. Nicki said she’s a dog and couldn’t imagine many boys putting up with her for long.’

‘So when exactly did Harry finish it with Tania?’

‘Early February. About three weeks before Tracey went missing.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I asked Nicki how upset Tracey was. She said Tracey wasn’t that worried at first; it was a bit of a relief. Seems she had a crush on someone else.’

‘Anyone we should know about?’

‘One of the relief teachers. Dominik Voss. I looked him up.’

‘And?’

‘He’s Rosie’s boyfriend.’

‘Rosie?’

‘The owner of the cafe, where Tracey worked.’

‘Right. Gotcha.’

‘He relieves at Tracey’s school. Most of the girls had a thing about him. Nicki says he was a total hottie. But not Tania. She hated him. It seems he had her all worked out.’

Judd worked a piece of jelly from around his molar. He'd seen Rosie with a guy. Tall, good-looking, he was often there at the end of the day.

'Voss has already been interviewed, right?'

'Sure, he made a statement when Tracey first went missing, along with Rosie.'

Judd nodded. 'He must have a decent alibi or he'd be flagged. Still, interesting. Did you ask Nicki about the valentine card?'

'I did. Tracey never mentioned it.'

'Unusual, wouldn't you say? Anything else?'

'Umm, nothing work-related.'

'What is it?'

Eve stubbed the toe of her shoe onto the carpet and wiggled her foot.

'It's about the wedding.'

'Look Eve, I know it's bad timing, but I really can't give you any more time off. We're ...'

'It isn't about time off. I appreciate the situation. It's ...'

'Yes?'

'Well, you know James was going to give me away?'

James was an old family friend. Rumour had it he might have been Eve's biological father, but no-one was brave enough to ask Rea outright.

'Yes.'

'Well, he's gone down with the flu.' She was blushing now. 'And I was wondering ...'

Judd waited.

Eve cleared her throat. 'I was wondering if you'd consider, you know, giving me away.'

It took Judd a moment to reply. 'Yes, of course. Are you sure?'

'Well, we do go back a way.'

'We do. I'd be delighted to, Eve. Honest.'

‘Great. I’ll tell Mum.’

Out in the squad room, everyone except Randall was present.

‘Where’s Randall?’

Reid looked up. ‘Ken? Next door.’

‘Fetch him, would you?’

Eve’s eyes followed Reid as he left the room. ‘Why did Rain-man call Robbie “Ken”?’

Priest got busy arranging whiteboard markers, Judd picked up his phone.

‘Little, why did he?’

Little smirked. ‘Barbie and Ken, eh? You and action man there.’

‘Barbie? Me!’

‘Well, one of you’s gotta be Barbie. It’s up to youse which one.’

Judd held his breath and waited.

‘Well, if I’m Barbie, that makes you Fred Flintstone, you bloody Neanderthal.’

Priest’s shoulders were shaking. Just in time, Reid returned with Randall.

Judd cleared his throat. ‘Okay everyone. Let’s get settled. Eve, would you like to recap on what happened at the reconstruction?’

Eve, still flushed, told them that Tracey had been seen getting into a dark-coloured station wagon, which had headed up Beach Street. ‘So we’ll assume they turned into Forbury Road. From there it’s anyone’s guess, but if you’re heading towards Ross Creek, it’s simply a case of straight up the motorway and right into Kaikorai Valley Road.’

‘Priest’s drawing up a list of dark-coloured station wagon owners in the vicinity that night,’ Judd interrupted. ‘Especially any known to Tracey. Phil, how’s that going?’

‘Slowly.’

‘Okay. Soon as you can.’ Judd looked around the room. ‘We’ve just got back from Tracey’s school.’ He told them about the photograph and Tania’s plot to end the relationship between Tracey and Finkel.

‘The female,’ grunted Reid. ‘Deadlier than the male.’

Eve glared at him. ‘Just you remember that.’

‘Which reminds me, Priest, did you ever manage to trace the man Harry Finkel mentioned, walking his boxer that night at the park?’

Priest, perched on Little’s desk, smoothed down his trouser leg. A complete waste of time in Judd’s view. ‘I found him one night at Chigwell Park. Recognised him by his dog. Mad is putting it kindly, but it’s not much help. He said he could have been there any time between five thirty and six thirty and couldn’t swear he saw Finkel there that night, one dog walk being very much like another.’

‘Well that’s a dead end, then. But let’s forget about Finkel for now. What we did discover is that Dominik Voss, boyfriend of café owner Rosie, sometimes relieves at Tracey’s school.’

‘Handy.’

‘Exactly. A connection missed during the original enquiries.’ Judd paused to glare at Little, who took a sudden interest in the pattern on his shoe. ‘Priest is looking into Voss’s background. Rain-man and Little have tracked down the last of the hotel guests; nothing new there, and not much news from Ross Creek either, am I right?’

Reid crossed his arms. ‘Apparently there’s been a gang of kids hanging around all summer: swimming in the lake, leaving beer cans and rubbish outside the valve tower. Might have been Tracey’s gang, but no-one’s gonna own up to it.’

‘It would be useful to know if it was. Eve, you can check that out. Ask Tracey’s other school friends. Find out if she was hanging out up there.’ He looked back to Reid. ‘Anything else?’

‘Yeah, two things. One, take your raincoats, boys and girls, barometer’s dropping.’

Everyone groaned.

‘And the other thing is.’ He crossed to his desk, opened the bottom drawer and took out two pink-wrapped parcels, which he handed to Eve. ‘We thought we’d better give you these now, while we’re all together.’

Eve went scarlet. ‘Gee guys, you shouldn’t have.’

‘We didn’t,’ he said, ‘Randall did.’

‘Thank God! Might be worth opening.’ She ripped the paper from the largest of the parcels.

‘You’re not heavily into recycling, then?’ quipped Little, viewing the mess on the floor.

‘Cool!’

‘What is it?’

‘A coffee pot.’

‘A coffee pot? That’s it?’

‘No, it is a Masa Fujii coffee pot. Orange, to match—’

‘Your hair?’

‘My retro kitchen! Thanks, Robbie, that’s perfect. Thanks guys.’

‘Aren’t you going to open the other one?’

Rob held up his hand. ‘Might be better saving that one for later, like your wedding night?’

Eve glanced at him, then around the room. ‘Hmm, maybe I should.’

‘God, you’re an old woman, Randall.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Alright, alright. Let’s leave it there, shall we?’ Judd pointed around the room. ‘Little, Rain-man, back to Ross Creek. Rob, you know what you need to do. Eve, back in touch with Nicki, if not the school. Priest, get a list of those cars to me asap.’

He checked his watch. Time for a swim. Kate wouldn't be in for dinner and there was a pile of paperwork on his desk. He'd have a swim, grab a bite to eat and come back later.

At the sign on the glass door, his heart plummeted. 'Pool closed due to staff shortages. Re-opening Wednesday 13th.' Tomorrow. Opening hours for the rest of the season were listed. They were trying to please everybody, closing early on days they opened early, closing late on days they opened late. He took out his phone and noted the times. The cafe was open. He'd had two coffees already today and wasn't going to chance a third but catching sight of a familiar red hair at the far corner table he changed his mind.

Rosie gave Judd a tight smile.

'Long black, please, to take out.'

'It's been a long day, I need one myself. Have table three got their coffees yet?' Rosie snapped to the girl beside her, Tracey's replacement, perhaps.

The girl pouted, picked up a tray of coffees and flounced off.

Judd raised his eyebrows. Rosie shook her head. Apart from McDowell, and three American tourists, the cafe was quiet.

'Can't be good for business, having the pool shut like that.'

Rosie shook her head. 'This flu epidemic's going to close a lot of businesses.'

McDowell got up to leave, nodding at Judd on his way past and making a show of holding the glass door open for two women coming in. Judd watched him untie his dog from the railing and walk off.

'That guy there. Is he a regular?'

Rosie, busy tamping coffee, frowned, raising her elbow to apply force to the coffee before glancing up.

‘Scott? He usually pops in about this time of day. When he’s in town, that is. He used to bring his mum, but not so much these days.’

‘Did Tracey know him?’

‘Well, like me, she didn’t know him. He’s just a regular. Like you.’ She placed a cup under the tamping head and slotted the filter handle into place.

‘He’s a bit of a flirt. Did he flirt with Tracey?’

Rosie shrugged. ‘Yes. And no. I mean, he did, but then, as you said, he’s a bit of a flirt.’ She poured his coffee into a takeaway cup.

‘Did Tracey find him ... attractive, do you think?’

While he dug around in his pocket for change, Rosie started on her own coffee, wiping the steam wand with a cloth and picking up a stainless steel jug. ‘It’s hard to say. She had the odd crush. All girls do, at that age. Well, at any age!’

‘But she liked older men, didn’t she? I mean, her boyfriend, he was a good few years older than her.’

‘He was twenty. Still a kid.’

‘Yes, but if you like older men ...’

‘Look. Like I told you before, she was young, and attractive enough. She had a nice way about her. Boys flirted, Scott flirted. It was nothing.’ She poured cold milk into the jug and held the jug under the steam wand.

He took his coffee and placed the money on the counter. ‘Explain what you mean by “had a nice way about her”.’

Rosie held her head to one side and sighed. ‘She was pleasant, okay? Approachable. I never worried about her being rude to the customers. She didn’t have attitude, you know?’ She glanced at the young waitress. ‘Unlike so many these days.’

‘Would you say she had any serious admirers?’

‘How would I know? I’m her employer, not her mother.’ She yanked the handle to one side. Hiss and steam from the boiling milk put paid to further conversation. Judd nodded his thanks and took his coffee outside. Rosie hadn’t been comfortable talking about Tracey and older men. Had she been aware of Tracey’s crush on Dominik? She knew he had been at the cafe that day. Could she have made the connection and been suspicious? But then, she’d hardly mention that to Judd, not if it implicated her own boyfriend. He recalled the photograph of Tracey in her parents’ lounge. In her school uniform, with her hair in a ponytail, she had looked like a typical schoolgirl, but the photos and selfies on her Facebook page presented a more fetching picture.

Out on the esplanade, there was an empty bench with an uninterrupted view of the bay. If he’d had a wetsuit with him he’d have been tempted to take a dip in the sea. At high tide, with the sea crashing into and sometimes over the sea wall, it was impossible to swim. Back in 2004, when the fiasco of rebuilding began, massive boulders had been placed at the foot of the wall to deflect the sea’s energy. Since then it seemed every spring tide wreaked more damage, handrails were thrashed, railings twisted, whole ramps picked up and dragged out to sea.

He closed his eyes against the sun. It had been a shit of a day. Shortly before his meeting with Burgess, the results from the lab had arrived, confirming absolutely no evidence of Tracey’s DNA on the blanket or pillow. Furthermore, the air conditioning in his office had finally packed up and parts would take at least four days to arrive, and when he’d shot home at lunchtime to change his shirt he’d spotted the clairvoyant’s business card ripped in half on the kitchen counter. He had no idea why someone as eminently practical and sensible as Kate would continue to consult those people but, as with her OCD flare-ups, he had never said anything. At times he despised himself for that, but — as the familiar inner voice argued — who was he to take away somebody’s hope?

At least his team was in good spirits. Barbie and Ken. He smiled, sat upright and stretched. As if the whiteboard in the incident room was coming to life, a man and a woman were being dragged towards him by a Cocker Spaniel and a Doberman. Mitzy and Willet. It wouldn't do any harm to stay here and watch the early evening routines unfold.

Below him, a surfer stepped into the sea, using the rip to get out. Judd was jealous; he swore his shoulders dropped two inches each time he came away after a swim. At a child's cry, he glanced up. A small crowd had gathered a few yards away, Fiona among them, looking pretty stunning in a flowing floral print dress. Restless, he walked over and peered over the railings. Hmm, the distinctive aroma of seal. It was a common enough sight, a seal sunning itself on the rocks below, safely out of human reach. A man held a small girl so that her legs dangled over the rails. An Asian couple, tourists by the look of them, were taking photographs and someone was acting as an unofficial tourist guide.

'That's a Hooker Sea Lion,' a man said, talking loudly and slowly. 'Very rare.'

Judd recognised the voice. He looked along to see McDowell on a bench, one leg crossed over the other, like he owned the place. Not a good colour actually, that shirt with that hair. Judd glanced over to Fiona, then back over the rail. 'For your information, it's not a sea lion,' he said. 'It's just a seal.' The Asian couple looked at one another, confused. 'The sea lion is bigger,' Judd continued, 'with a blunt head and short whiskers.' He used his hands to get his message across. 'It would be unusual to find a sea lion resting on rock. But, then again, not impossible.'

'Seal?'

'That's right. Fur seal.'

'Fur seal. Ah! Thank you, thank you.'

The tourists nodded, pointing to the seal and repeating its name. After a few more snaps they moved on.

The man lifted the child from the rails. 'It's not a sea lion, Chantelle. Only a seal. Come along.'

That left Judd, Fiona and McDowell.

'Didn't have you down for a nature lover, Judd.' McDowell walked over and stopped mere inches away. 'Not a Londoner, like you.'

He was pissed off, but trying to hide it. Judd raised an eyebrow. 'What makes you so sure I'm from London? Been checking up?'

McDowell laughed. 'You've only got to open your mouth. East End is it?'

'North-East, actually.'

A meaty growl erupted from McDowell's dog. Judd sensed, rather than saw, Fiona back away.

'Don't growl at the police Butkus, they'll lock you up.'

'Butkus?'

'Stallone's dog in Rocky Two. He had one of these.'

'Rocky? That's a blast from the past. How often do you have to walk a beast like that? Twice a day?'

McDowell dropped to his knees and slapped the dog on his side. 'Depends on the weather. They overheat quickly when it's hot or humid. Yet they don't like to be bored, either. They get destructive. Don't you, mate?' He grabbed the dog's head with both hands and shook it about, oblivious to the strings of drool splattering onto his trousers.

Judd glanced over to where Fiona was watching them, a wry smile on her face.

'They start to chase things, and chew them. Living things. Like next door's cat. Don't you, you little bastard.'

'Can be a handful, then?'

‘Oh yes, make no mistake.’ He rose and faced Judd. ‘They’re intelligent, you see. Independent thinkers. Not easy to train. You have to show them who’s boss.’

‘You must have to keep him in the kennels a lot, being away so often.’

McDowell flushed; he’d obviously hit a nerve ‘You’re right. It’s a constant worry. It’s not good for him.’

Two Asian men walked past, one with his hand on the other’s shoulder, their heads close together, laughing. McDowell’s eyes followed them.

Judd turned his back to Fiona and kept his voice low. ‘The reason I’m asking about exercise is because you told us that on the Saturday Tracey disappeared you went straight to the gym, yet witnesses say they saw you down here, with ... Butkus.’

Butkus suddenly barked and jumped up, paws on Judd’s shoulders, head millimetres from his face. Judd shot backwards, jarring his spine on the railing, almost losing balance.

‘Down, you stupid mutt!’ McDowell grabbed Judd’s arm. ‘Careful, now. Don’t want you disappearing over the edge, do we?’

Judd, embarrassed, shook away McDowell’s hand.

McDowell scowled. ‘I hope you’re not calling me a liar.’

‘No-one’s calling you anything, McDowell. I just wanted to clear the matter up.’

‘Course you do. No hard feelings.’ McDowell was all smiles again, patting Judd’s arm as if they were old buddies. ‘Wouldn’t expect anything less, Sergeant.’

Judd pushed past him and walked in Fiona’s direction. ‘Pool’s closed,’ he muttered, nodding toward the hotel. ‘Fancy a drink?’

They walked in silence towards Neptuno, one of the glass-fronted cafes overlooking the bay, Judd still recovering from the rapid mood swing in McDowell. The man had hidden it well, but he had a quick temper, that

was for sure. The cafe was almost empty. He ordered a coffee for Fiona and a soft drink for himself before joining her at a table in the window.

‘Who’s your friend?’ she asked.

Judd took out his badge.

‘It’s okay,’ she said. ‘I already knew.’

‘Oh?’

‘You looked familiar, then I saw your photo in the paper the other day. The drugs bust.’

Judd nodded, sliding the leather badge-holder back into his trouser pocket. She apparently hadn’t read the local rag yet.

‘Who is that man?’

‘Just someone who ... look, can we not talk about work? What do you do, by the way?’

Fiona laughed. ‘Are we talking about work, or not?’

Judd wiped his hand over his face. ‘Sorry.’

Across the table, Fiona toyed with the froth on her coffee. He sipped his coke.

‘I’m surprised you don’t want something stronger, after that,’ Fiona said, mirroring his thoughts.

He pushed his glass away. ‘You’re right. It’s been a stink of a day. Will you join me?’

‘Why not? Sav blanc, please.’

To save time, he went to the counter and ordered a bottle of Stella for himself and a glass of Astrolabe for her, which he brought back with him. Fiona was gazing out to sea.

‘I love looking at water. It always calms me.’ She stared out with her chin resting on her cupped hand.

He placed the glass in front of her. ‘Yes,’ he said, not looking at the sea at all.

She turned and caught him. ‘By the way, I’m a psychotherapist.’ She smiled.

He felt himself flush. ‘That’s handy.’ He took a sip of beer then cleared his throat. ‘So, Fiona, what do you know about narcissistic personalities?’

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘Our friend from earlier?’

Judd shrugged. ‘Perhaps. What do you think?’

‘Hard to tell, but ...’ She closed her eyes and paused. ‘Not impossible. He had that air, and he was impeccably dressed. And the way he reacted to your correction ...’

‘You heard all that?’

‘Oh yes.’

‘Sorry. Not very professional, rowing in public with the punters.’

‘You’re not the first person I’ve seen him rowing with and I doubt if you’ll be the last.’

‘Oh?’

‘I see him around a lot. There was one argument ... years back. Before I went to Auckland. He was having it out with a kid in a hoodie right out there on the esplanade. He lifted the kid off his feet and threw him backwards, I can still see his trainers dangling in the air ...’ She shook her head. ‘I had a bit of a downer about Dunedin at the time. I was tired of reading about the violence in the Octagon on the front page every Monday morning. Seeing it here, on my own doorstep ... it was a memory I carried to Auckland.’

‘And Auckland was any better?’

‘Ah, well.’

‘Tell me more about narcissists.’

Fiona took a drink before resting her glass back on the table and twirling it in her fingers. ‘They’re the world’s best manipulators.’

Conniving. Great schemers. If ever you find you've been had, how would you put it, done up like a kipper?' She smiled and he raised his glass.

'Very good.'

'Then you can bet your life someone like him is behind it.' She frowned. 'They're destructive too. They need constant reassurance of their superiority. A narcissist will lie to his back teeth if it serves his purpose and he won't feel guilty for doing it. If you accuse one of lying, you're telling him he's less than perfect, and he'll react aggressively. His ego can't take it.' The way McDowell had invaded his space was in Fiona's view typical, the narcissistic personality having no regard for boundaries, physical or psychological. 'They can be dangerous. By challenging them you're revealing that you don't see yourself as inferior to them. Inevitably, they'll seek revenge.'

After his beer, the last thing Judd felt like was going back to the second floor. When he returned home, Kate was catching up on Coronation Street, curled into her favourite corner of the sofa surrounded by her cell-phone, a Whittaker's peanut slab and a glass of red wine.

'There's lasagne and salad in the fridge,' she called, not taking her eyes from the screen.'

After eating he wandered into the garden. There were a few runner beans left to pick before he pulled the plants out. Using both hands, he stripped the vine. He looked over towards the Pearces' garden. Their beans were almost over, as well.

The gold of his wedding ring caught the glow of the setting sun. Funny, most of the time he wasn't even aware of wearing it, but Fiona had noticed. Then she would, being a psychotherapist. Or maybe all women noticed things like that. What would he know? He wasn't the sort of man to ask a woman out for a drink. He had been married for nearly twenty-

eight years and although the last nine had been up and down it had never occurred to him to even flirt with another woman.

They said a marriage was like an iceberg, with the bulk of it hidden from view. If that was the case, perhaps he and Kate had only the top left, the public element. Their dinner the other night could hardly be described as a success. Some days he woke with an overwhelming urge to move on. The problem was how, and in what direction? Life was like a game of Scrabble; you didn't know if the tiles you returned to the bag would prove more important than those you took out.

He heard footsteps on the gravel path. Kate walking towards him.

'How was work?' she asked.

'So-so. Pool's shut. Short-staffed. The usual. You?'

'I took most of the day off. I picked up Rea from the airport. Remember?'

'Of course. How is she? Excited?'

'Yep.'

'Where's she staying?'

'Broad Bay. Near to the reception.'

'She could have stayed here.'

'Well, Eve's up that way, too, so ... anyway, it's lucky work's so quiet, usually we'd be hard pressed to keep up, what with Marama at home looking after her kids and everything.'

'How are they?'

'Getting better, thank goodness.' She scuffed her shoe over the gravel path. 'Things are so quiet at work, we're on the verge of cold-calling.'

'You're not alone. Just this afternoon the café owner from Sails was moaning about trade, or lack of.'

She looked at him blankly. 'Sails?'

'The café at the pool.'

‘Right. How’s all that going?’

‘Okay. Slowly. Bit of cyber-bullying. One of Tracey’s teachers is ... of interest.’

‘It could lead to something?’

‘Possibly.’

‘Anyone else?’

‘Not really.’

‘What about Scott?’

‘McDowell? What about him?’

‘Is he still a suspect?’

‘Suspect’s a bit strong. He just came forward to help us. That’s all.’

‘Oh. Tea?’

‘Thanks.’

When she returned, he told her about Eve asking him to give her away. She looked thoughtful for a moment.

‘When did she ask you?’

‘Today.’

She shrugged. ‘That’s nice. I don’t think she’s told Rea, yet.’ They stood for a few minutes in the twilight. A breeze came up and rattled the leaves on the cabbage tree. ‘By the way, did I tell you Scott’s asked for workstation assessments for his staff?’

‘No. I didn’t even realise he had an office in Dunedin.’

‘Filleul Street, apparently. He’s got two women working for him, part-time. One’s been complaining of headaches, stiff neck, that sort of thing.’

‘So ... why did he contact your team?’

‘I don’t know. Found us on the net, I expect.’

‘You didn’t speak to him?’

‘He left a message. Paula on reception made the appointment.’

‘Has he used your services before?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Bit of a coincidence, isn’t it? Did he ask for you by name?’

‘I’ve no idea. I doubt it. What’s with all the questions?’

‘And it’ll be you doing the assessments, not Marama?’

‘She’s at home with the children, I told you. Honestly, Leo, it’s no big deal. I wish I hadn’t said anything now.’

‘It’s just ... McDowell. Suddenly.’

‘Yeah, well ...’ She swirled the dregs of her tea around her cup and tipped it onto the garden. ‘It’s his staff I’m assessing, not him.’

‘When?’

Her phone rang. She turned to walk back to the house. ‘Friday. Look, I doubt if I’ll even see him, and anyway, as you said, he’s not actually a proper suspect.’

He remained where he was, anxiety prickling his skin. It was probably no more than coincidence. But McDowell would have seen the two of them arguing at the rest home and it wouldn’t take a genius to Google Kate Judd, and find out she was an occupational therapist. He jiggled the runner beans in the bucket. Kate frequently accused him of being paranoid; super vigilant. Was he? He hoped so.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Tuesday 12th March

Earlier that morning, in the short-stay car park at the Dunedin airport, Kate found row B, her favourite, and manoeuvred her car until it was parked perfectly parallel to the white lines. Before getting out she checked herself in the mirror: there was a wariness about her eyes that shouldn't be there: fear rather than radiance, tension rather than exuberance. All week she had told herself, be patient, one step after the other. Rea couldn't get here soon enough.

The article in the local paper had complicated matters further. The last thing they needed at the moment was the media delving into their personal lives. If the press had their knives out for Leo already, God only knew what they would print if they got wind of her relationship with Rea.

The previous evening, she and Leo had discussed the article. Surprisingly, he hadn't seemed worried. Annoyed at the intrusion perhaps, but not startled by the inference of his unfitness for the Wenlock job; after all, he said, wouldn't that be the first thing to go through anyone's mind?

'That was Burgess' initial reaction.'

'And how are you finding it?'

Leo shrugged. 'I won't pretend it's not throwing up stuff. Memories. Watching the Wenlocks going through it all ...'

After he'd finished reading the piece he walked out of the kitchen to make a call. When he returned he seemed calm enough.

'How did Burgess take it?'

'A statement is being prepared for the media.'

‘Is that it?’

‘Apparently.’

Over the years they’d had their run-ins with the press. It was a tightrope, preventing media intrusion on one hand, while keeping the community mindful of Beth, still lost, on the other. Cat and dog. Tweetie Pie and Sylvester. But this latest feature, this felt different. Personal. Vindictive almost. In the middle of the article was a photograph of Leo emerging from the Al Bar, face turned from the camera, shirt out, the slant being that Leo heading Tracey’s enquiry was like letting local swindler Michael Vesta head the fraud squad.

‘Who is this journalist?’ he asked.

She picked up the paper. ‘Neville Mertens. Probably just some young buck trying to make his break.’

‘Young? Unlikely. Not with a name like Neville.’

She took his stab at humour as a good sign.

The truth was, after the initial search had wound down, and then stalled, he had turned to the bottle. They both had, but she had pulled herself up quickly. He had been more intent, lacing his coffee in the morning before leaving for work and slipping an eighth of Cognac into the inside pocket of his heavy woollen overcoat. At first he got away with it but as his need grew he became careless.

Burgess had referred him to the Employees’ Assistance Programme, and forced him to take leave. They’d hired a crib near Muddy Creek, in Central Otago, where under a tarpaulin in the woodshed they found two old bikes. They spent two months peddling up and down the rail trail, with fresh snow on the Dunstan Ranges and sweat chilling their legs. With no television, garden or alcohol for distraction they were forced to talk. The owners of the neighbouring property were rebuilding an old dry-stone wall and Leo gave them a hand, learning to tell the difference between a

capstone, a riser and a tie stone and taking obvious pleasure in acquiring a new skill.

Back in Dunedin, Burgess had plied him with work. Burgess had witnessed Leo fight through it. If he thought Leo was the best man for the job, there was nothing more to be said.

In the cafe on the upper floor of the airport Kate ordered a double shot long black, resisting until the last moment a dark chocolate bar; she needed the oomph, the pizzazz.

She sipped at her coffee, unwrapping the foil from the hard, shiny stick of chocolate heaven and folded the wrapper in half, then half again, and again, until it was impossible to fold further. Life was all about change, and chance. If Eve had not returned to Dunedin, if they had not bumped into one another outside the department store that day ... Then again, choice came into it as well. No-one had forced her to fly up to Christchurch after catching up with Rea that first time, or to return so regularly.

She had drained her coffee and popped the last chunk of chocolate into her mouth when they announced a thirty-minute delay for flight 742 from Christchurch. She left her seat, threw the chocolate wrapper into the bin, and made for the bank of windows at the end of the building where she paced up and down, searching the moody sky in the direction where Rea's plane would appear.

As Leo might say, reclaiming their friendship had been like picking gooseberries, easy enough to pull the fruit from the outside of the bush but impossible to gather the innermost and more succulent berries without drawing blood. She and Rea had learned to be patient, allowing time to craft hide gloves from trust and understanding. As before, Kate became aware of a forgotten self re-emerging. Each flight from Dunedin felt like an escape and each return closer to exile than homecoming.

Prising Rea away from Christchurch wasn't easy. Occasionally Kate managed to plan escapes for them both; she instructed Rea to collect her from the Christchurch airport with an overnight bag in the boot of the car, then Kate drove them to Kaikoura, or over to the Coast, but most of the time Rea's focus remained on her work.

It was not until Labour weekend, the following spring, when they planned a week together in the mountains, that Kate felt she had Rea's undivided attention. Leo, as always, was busy with work and happy she was not haranguing him to take leave. Rea left her car outside the basilica at Timaru and they drove inland, heading for Tekapo, where they had arranged to stay with Ella, an old flame of Rea's, now happily married with two children. Rea was philosophical: sometimes that was the way it went.

As soon as they arrived Kate realised they had made a mistake. Ella's boys were boisterous, unruly and very, very vocal, thwarting any attempt at conversation until they were safely in bed. Ella's husband, who might have taken the children away and left the women with space to talk, instead spent most of the weekend at the rear of the section tinkering with his boat.

'Don't they ever go for bike rides or something?' Rea hissed, early Sunday afternoon. 'My head's pounding.'

Unfortunately for Rea, Hector thought she was marvellous. 'Come and play croquet, Rea!'

'I don't know how to, darling. Ask Kate, I bet she's very good.'

But it wasn't Kate he wanted. 'Oh well,' said Rea, allowing him to pull her out of her chair. 'How rowdy can croquet get?'

'Be careful with that mallet, Hector,' Ella called. 'You know what happened last time.'

'Last time?' Rea called back. 'What do you mean?'

‘Four stitches in William’s head.’ Ella laughed, held up a glass pitcher and turned to Kate. ‘They’re right. Revenge is best served cold. Now, another? Sorry it’s only squash. We don’t get much in the way of adult company.’ She rolled her eyes.

Kate laughed. Ella was funny; she liked her.

‘I’ve been thinking, haven’t we met before?’ Ella said. ‘Didn’t you two used to be neighbours?’

‘Yep. But a long time ago, in Dunedin.’

‘That’s right. She’s looking better.’ Ella nodded towards Rea. ‘Last time I saw her she looked like something the cat had dragged in.’

‘It’s hard to get her away from Christchurch. I do the best I can.’

Ella put her head to one side and gave Kate a long look. ‘You see her quite a lot then?’

‘Whenever I can.’ Kate picked up her squash and swirled the drink, setting the ice cubes clinking. ‘I don’t think Christchurch suits her.’

‘No. Too urban. Far too sprawling for her; she’s far better suited to somewhere bohemian.’

‘With her network of friends she could be away most weekends, but you know Rea: it’s like forcing a pipi from a shell.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Ella. ‘You’re obviously good for her.’

Kate felt herself blush. Thankfully, at that minute Hector, not a natural team player, kicked William’s ball out of the way and William went for Hector’s ankles with his mallet. ‘Trouble!’ called Rea, walking away and leaving Ella to jump up and sort them out.

‘We may have to invent an excuse to head off a day early,’ said Rea, puffing out her cheeks. ‘Just about done my dash here.’

Within an hour Rea’s patience had thinned to the point of reducing both boys to tears. Ella seemed as relieved as they were when they admitted they were ready to move on to Lake Ohau, where they had borrowed a log cabin in the Alpine Village.

The dry hot air buffeting in through the open car window made Kate's eyes smart and she fought the temptation to use the hated air conditioning. Rea, impervious in the passenger seat, regaled her with tall tales from childhood holidays in Clyde. Kate eased off the gas. No need to hurry. Alone with Rea at last, she could relax. She eyed dusty side roads with the longing to follow some potholed track into the inscrutable hills, light a fire, sleep under the stars, spend an entire summer with no direction, no master plan.

The driving was easy. Long stretches of straight road, sweeping bends, the occasional chugging ute, but mainly just the two of them, as if the whole world, like the sheep in the paddocks crowding the shade of remnant trees, was taking siesta.

Rea sat slumped into the seat, eyes half shut, hair blowing about her face. Each time she raised her hand to push back the hair her bangles jangled like wind chimes. Her dress, gathered under her breasts, fell loosely to just below her knees. She was not wearing a bra. Kate wished she hadn't bothered either; it was too hot, the journey too long. She looked over to her old friend and smiled. That afternoon everything about Rea was soft: her hair, her posture. Her face, free for once from tension, was starting to sag, jowls beginning where her head rested against her shoulder. Rea gathered her dress up and let it drape between her splayed thighs. Her tanned thighs. It was hard not to keep glancing over. Kate whistled tunelessly under her breath, trying to concentrate on the road. Rea unconsciously fanned the front of her dress to cool herself. Kate squirmed in her seat. Rea yawned, stretching and lifting her arms behind her head, thrusting her belly forward and causing the leg muscles to flex. Kate, overheated, sodden, fought an impulse to pull the car over, release her seat belt, and dive headfirst into Rea's lap.

A car horn blared.

'What are you doing?' Rea grabbed the wheel, pulling the car back into the lane. 'Are you trying to kill us?'

‘Sorry.’

‘Do we need to pull over?’

‘No!’

‘Give you a rest?’

‘No. I’m fine, honest.’

‘I don’t think you are. Look at you, you’re melting. Come. Let me drive for a while.’

‘I’m fine. Leave it.’ Kate’s words came out shorter than she intended.

Rea gave her a long look, then reached for the Air Con. As the temperature lowered, Rea pulled her dress back over her lap and crossed her legs.

‘Are you sure you’re okay to drive?’

‘I’m fine. Much better. Thanks.’

Kate spent the remainder of the two-hour drive concentrating on following the road between the snow-capped mountains. But some fires were immune to even the coolest of mountain breezes.

‘Excuse me?’

Kate started. She dodged to one side. ‘Sorry.’

The woman barged past. Rea’s plane was on the tarmac. She was here. At last.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Wednesday 13th March

Judd woke early. Finding it impossible to get back to sleep he slipped on his dressing gown, made himself coffee and, from his favourite green leather armchair in the corner of the lounge, scanned the previous day's paper.

The Otago Daily Times claimed the flu epidemic was waning. He hoped it was true. Last night, Kate had told him about picking Rea up from the airport and how Eve was fretting over who exactly would turn up for the wedding, which she had already postponed once. People were still giving Dunedin a wide berth; numbers were down.

With the wedding only three days away he wouldn't see much of Kate. He had been worried the wedding might upset her, but he hadn't seen her this happy for a long time. He checked his watch. He was meeting Priest for coffee at nine: time for a shave.

At Priest's approach, Judd kicked the seat opposite away from the table and cleared a space for the coffees. 'Is this one mine?'

'Yes.'

Judd lifted the cup from the saucer and poured the coffee back into the cup before blowing and taking a sip. God, Priest was a klutz.

'Tell me what we know about this Dominik Voss.'

Priest got out his notebook and flicked through a couple of pages. 'Thirty-six, born in Motueka, left school at seventeen and worked for WINZ for ten years before going to university and studying English. After

that, a few years of travelling, then teachers' college. He had a permanent teaching position in Invercargill at,' he turned a page, 'St Olafs, but since moving here to be with Rosie he's been relieving.'

'Why's that?'

'Dunno. Shortage of permanent positions maybe?'

'Have you contacted the head teacher at St Olafs yet?'

'I'm expecting his call.'

'Good. And get onto his current school. See what you can find out.'

'Sure. I did notice one thing.'

'What's that?'

'He left a message on Tracey's Facebook page.'

'When?'

'Early January, after the photo got circulated.'

'What did it say?'

'He told her not to give in to bullies; that they were cowards and anyone with half a brain knew the photo was a fake.'

'Seems a stupid thing to do, doesn't it, contact a pupil via Facebook?'

'Most schools have a social network policy. I'll check it out, see if he's in breach.'

Judd loosened his tie. 'Do that. Sounds like our Mr Voss has loose boundaries, wouldn't you say?'

'True, true. Fairly naïve, anyway.'

'No-one that good looking is naïve.'

'You think he might enjoy the attention?'

'I'm not sure. Double check his alibi. I want to know exactly where he was that Saturday night. Plus, he's a bit of a romantic.'

'How's that?'

'He took Rosie out to dinner on Valentine's Day.'

‘Meaning?’

‘Before that, he popped in to the cafe to give her a bunch of flowers.’

‘You think he might have been responsible for Tracey’s card?’

‘He could have left it there, where it was sure to be found. And it would explain Tracey’s reaction. If she thought it was from him ...’

‘And she’s standing there opening it in front of Rosie. But just because she had a crush on him doesn’t mean anything was going on.’

‘True.’

‘And anyway, it’s a bit psycho, isn’t it, leaving a card for another girl in your girlfriend’s cafe?’

‘You know what they say: all’s fair ... By the way, how did you get on with the station wagons?’

‘I didn’t turn up anything startling, but the report’s on your desk.’

Judd walked back to his office. One of the cafes was roasting coffee, which, for no apparent reason, sweetened his mood. He was alone in the squad room staring at the notice board — the usual jumble of daily sitreps, org charts, rosters, notices and conference times — when Burgess appeared at his side.

‘A quick word.’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Scott McDowell’s been in. Says you embarrassed him, down on the esplanade. Accused him of lying, in front of people.’

‘What? I ...’

‘He’s a touchy individual.’

‘Tell me something I don’t know already.’

‘Perhaps, but unless you want an official complaint against you, my advice is to go easy.’

‘For Christ’s sake, all I did was mention that he’d been seen walking his dog when he had told us he’d gone straight to the gym.’

‘But you’re not seriously saying he’s a suspect?’

‘No, I was just tying up loose ends.’

Burgess shoved his hands into his pockets. ‘Well, if you have to talk to him again, make sure it’s in private, alright? Not in the middle of the bloody esplanade. I’ve got enough to do without fending off potential complaints about my senior officers.’

Judd’s earlier good humour slipped away. He returned to his desk, popped a peppermint into his mouth and slapped open the file prepared by Priest. Priest had been thorough, checking not only friends and acquaintances of Tracey, but also the season ticket holders at the pool, and anyone known to have been in the vicinity that night. Tracey’s father, Rosie from the cafe, Kenny from the real estate agents all owned dark-coloured station wagons, as did two regulars at the pool, Susan Frost and a Greg Lamarr. At the bottom of the list was McDowell’s name. Priest’s dislike of the man hadn’t diminished.

He gave a low whistle at the list of McDowell’s cars. There must be one hell of a garage under his house. A 1965 Mini Cooper, a 1973 Triumph Stag, BMW Z4 Roadster, 1978 Chrysler Valiant Charger, Audi A4 Sedan, and finally, there it was: a dark grey Toyota Prius Station wagon. Reid was passing his door; Judd called him in. ‘Hey Rain-man, you’re a petrol head. How much are these worth?’

Reid took the sheet of paper. ‘Obviously it’ll depend on what sort of condition they’re in...’

‘Spare me the lecture. A ballpark figure will do.’

Reid shrugged. A pained expression appeared on his face as he attempted calculation. ‘You wouldn’t get much change from, I dunno, two big ones? That’s if they’re all top notch.’

Which no doubt they were. Judd couldn’t imagine McDowell owning anything but perfection. He’d leave McDowell’s station wagon until last, if he checked it out at all. It wouldn’t do to ‘embarrass’ him more than he

had to, not with the mood Burgess was in. Reid went to leave but Judd called him back. ‘What’s happening at Ross Creek?’

According to Reid’s curling note-book, no-one had seen anything out of the ordinary that Saturday night. People had walked, jogged, and exercised their dogs as usual. ‘We did find Dick and Willie up there. Apparently it’s a favourite haunt of his these days. You can guess why.’

Dick Bates, or Master Bates as the crew liked to call him, was the local flasher. Willie was his dog. ‘I thought he hung out on the beach, at St. Clair?’ said Judd. As soon as the sun came out a row of scruffy middle-aged men would appear, sitting just above the high tide line. Most people took them for benign old granddads. Judd knew better.

‘Nah, the council got him a unit down the hill from the Creek.’

‘Was he there that night?’

‘He says not. His mate, Tricky Trev, gave him an alibi. Not that murder is his style ...’

‘No.’

‘Any dark-coloured station wagons spotted?’

Reid consulted his book again. ‘Nah. There was a red mini parked up, and a white Combi van, but that’s all anyone remembers.’

‘Alright. Keep at it. Any more on that gang of kids?’

‘No. Maybe Eve’s turned something up by now.’

‘Maybe. Is that it?’

‘Yes. Oh, rain by the weekend.’

Judd returned to studying the list. There was a note next to Lamarr’s name. He had history. A couple of EBAs and a sexual assault charge.

At just after midday Priest put his head around the door.

‘I’ve got that info on the teacher, Voss.’

Judd beckoned him in. Priest leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms behind his head. Something like egg mayonnaise was smeared down his tie. Thank God he was more meticulous about his work.

‘I had to sweat the information from Braithwaite, the headmaster. All he wanted to talk about was what steps they’ve taken to create a safe environment for their pupils. I had to convince him the school wasn’t subject to any investigation before he’d relax.’

‘Did he come up with the goods?’

‘Yeah. There’d been rumours about Voss.’

‘What sort of rumours?’ asked Judd.

‘Several of the girls developed crushes on him. They say one crush went a bit far.’

‘Schoolgirls always develop crushes on their teachers. There’s nothing new there.’

‘Well, exactly. That’s why Braithwaite was reluctant to say much. Anyway, it appears she became a nuisance, kept ringing him, sending him emails, you know the thing.’

‘And?’

‘It came to a head when the parents found out. When they questioned their daughter, eh ... Natasha, she claimed he had promised to leave his girlfriend for her.’

‘Oh, really ... ?’

Priest dropped his arms and leaned forward. ‘I don’t think the parents believed that for a moment, but they reported it to Braithwaite, who investigated the matter. He didn’t think Voss had actually done anything wrong, but he was surprised at how badly he’d handled it. Normally, staff are advised to tell the headmaster, or the head of their year. Seek collegial support, you know.’

‘Keep everything above board? No surprises.’

‘Exactly. Seems half the school knew about this situation before the headmaster even got a whiff of it.’

‘Well, Voss might be thirty-six, but he hadn’t been teaching long.’

‘That’s what the headmaster said. Told him to wise up, especially in a mixed or girls’ school.’

‘And since then?’

‘Nothing. Weaver, Voss’s current headmaster, has only good things to say about him.’

‘Nothing until he contacted Tracey on her Facebook page you mean?’

‘Well, yes.’

‘And is it a breach of the school’s social media policy?’

‘It’s a grey area. They’re not supposed to ‘friend’ students. But you don’t have to friend someone to leave a message on their page.’

‘This should have been picked up when he was first checked out. Tell me more about his alibi.’

Priest picked up a file from the floor and pulled out a sheet of paper. ‘According to this report, he spent most of the day at home, decorating the bathroom. He says he stopped between coats to clean the windows. He claims he didn’t leave the house until five-ish when he walked down to the supermarket in Mornington and picked up a carton of beer. He couldn’t get the car out as the neighbours two doors down were moving out and a large furniture van was blocking the drive. His house is one of four in a leg-in, just off Kenmure Road, theirs being the third in. He returned from the shops about half an hour later and stayed in and watched the match. He left home again at two a.m. to pick up Rosie.’

‘Where was she?’

‘At Crazy Larry’s, on a hen night. She went there straight from work. Voss picked Rosie and her sister up from the Octagon.’

‘Was this verified?’

‘Er ...’ Priest scanned the sheet of paper. ‘Yep. His immediate neighbour, Mrs Harris, remembers him being around all day. She said he cleaned her windows in the early afternoon, which he does as she can’t reach them herself. She said he was playing music all day, the windows were open, it was hot, she could hear it quite clearly ... and she had to turn up the volume on the TV to hear the evening news because he was still at it.’

‘He could have gone out and left the radio on.’

‘True. He could have if he was deliberately creating an alibi for himself.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Mr Oakley, from the first house in the leg-in, remembers Voss being about. He confirmed the furniture van turned up at about two and was loading up until at least eight, and there was no way Voss could have got his car out.’

‘Did anyone see him come back from the supermarket?’

‘No.’

‘You said there were four houses in the leg-in.’

‘That’s right’.

‘So what did the other neighbour say?’

‘Er, there’s nothing here for them ... they were moving out, so I guess they’ve moved on.’

‘That’s no reason not to trace them down and interview them.’

‘It’d be easy enough to trace them through the realtor.’

A knock at the door. Priest got up and opened it. Eve Greene stood outside, rocking from foot to foot.

Judd felt sweat break out on his back. ‘What? What is it?’

‘It’s Robbie.’ She swallowed. ‘He’s in hospital. He didn’t come in this morning. I noticed he was rostered but I wasn’t going to ...’

‘Sure, but what do you mean he’s in hospital?’

Her voice wobbled. ‘He’s in a coma. He was found in an alleyway this morning. Beaten up.’

‘Has anyone told his partner?’

‘Wiri? He’s on his way.’

‘Good.’ Judd turned to Priest. ‘Look, Phil. Chase up the former occupants, and see if they have anything to add ... then find out what you can about this Lemarr bloke.’

‘The one with the station wagon?’

‘Yeah, and the sexual assault charge. I’ll be down the hospital if anyone needs me.’

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Wednesday 13th March

Kate collected her keys from the hall table and her rain jacket from the hook beside the door. Outside, Rea sounded the car horn. Kate made to open the front door, but hesitated, bothered by the now-empty hook. On the adjacent hook were two jackets. She placed one on the empty hook and stood back. Still not right. Blue, red, blue, then Leo's long black trench coat. She swapped the blue jacket for the red, but that was worse: two blues and one red. If she couldn't do much about the colours ... she went for size: trench coat on the first hook, then the two medium-length blue jackets, ending with the short red. Rea sounded the horn. It was a shame the two blues were together. If she— The horn again. Kate caught herself. OCD, her annoying little brother, had crept up on her again. Fighting every impulse, she turned her back on the coats and opened the front door.

Outside, low cloud made the afternoon humid. Rain threatened. In the car, Rea's perfume, usually so provocative, was almost too much.

Rea was staring at her. 'Okay?'

'Yep.'

Rea turned off the radio. 'Everything's going to be alright. You know that, don't you?'

Kate nodded. 'This car's a bit much isn't it?' She pointed at the yellow paintwork. 'I mean, it's not exactly discreet. Who'd want to own a canary car?'

Rea pursed her lips. ‘No-one, which I expect is why the rental companies end up with them. Now ...’ She reached behind for the property pages and shook them open. ‘I did originally consider Waverley, but I wasn’t sure it had any villas.’

Kate sighed. ‘Doubt it.’

‘That’s what I thought.’ Rea turned a page. ‘I meant to flick through this last night and mark the ones we’re going to see, but with one thing and another ...’

Kate gazed out of the window and said nothing

‘Then again,’ Rea continued, ‘we shouldn’t get too fixated on views or areas. You know what Dunedin’s like; you never know what you’ll find hidden away.’

‘Hmm.’

‘So I told Trish we’d meet her at the Opoho house first, then go on to St Leonards, and end up in Roslyn. It’s only three.’

Kate nodded.

Rea threw the newspaper onto the back seat and reached over, squeezing Kate’s thigh. ‘We don’t have to do this today, you know, if you’re not in the mood. There are plenty of other things to be getting on with.’

Kate forced a small smile. She was spoiling Rea’s fun. ‘No, come on. Get this car moving. I’m dying in here.’

They followed the one-way towards Opoho, and cut up the back of the Botanical Gardens. Kate slumped in her seat. Trust Rea to have a real estate agent in her pocket. Not for Rea the mad rush of the open home, wandering from room to room listening to banal comments from would-be buyers and nosey neighbours. She caught herself again. She was being bitchy, but she’d spent weeks desperate to see Rea and now the whole situation felt fundamentally wrong. All that should be in the open remained hidden. What was she doing looking for houses with her lover

before she'd even left her husband? Dunedin was too small a city for secrets.

'I feel a bit sorry for Trish,' Rea said, easing the car into a tight space. 'Because of the epidemic, hardly anyone's turning up to open homes. The market's stagnant and she's losing money hand over fist. I had no idea things had got so bad.'

Although the villa was more North East Valley than Opoho, the 'rural views' of empty paddocks and meandering sheep tracks did not disappoint. Weak sunlight infiltrated the rooms, yet the space under the house smelled damp. The recently updated kitchen was eerily clinical, its hard surfaces out of place in a house where the skill of the original craftsmen was evident in the panelled hallways and plaster ceilings. Kate shook her head and Rea agreed.

They waited for Trish on the veranda of the house at St Leonards, catching the odd flash of lime-green reflector vests from the cycle path below. The house, a few streets back from the main road, boasted views of the peninsula opposite; Harbour Cone looked close enough to touch. The garden, like the veranda, wrapped itself around the house. Kate found herself thinking how Leo would enjoy the garden, with its hidden niches and undulations.

Trish arrived, waving keys. 'It's been rented for a while,' she explained pushing open the front door, 'but that's reflected in the price.'

Kate put her hand to her nose. 'Dog. Disgusting!'

Rea stepped inside. 'We can rip up the carpets, and once it's had a good airing ... Look at that cornicing, and the fireplace!'

Kate glared at Rea and inclined her head towards Trish. 'Less of the "we", please!' she hissed.

'What?'

'We're not a couple yet. Not officially. Remember?'

Rea rolled her eyes.

‘I don’t like it. The kitchen’s too dark.’

Trish threw open the back door. ‘It just needs new windows. And glass doors. I could show you a house like this not far from here. It was renovated six months ago. You wouldn’t believe the difference.’

‘So much character,’ said Rea. ‘Look at the old Aga.’

‘Look at the borer.’ Kate rapped her knuckles against the architrave and pointed to the frass.

In the garden Kate stood, hands on hips, screwing up her face at the towering macrocarpa hedge. ‘It’s an awful lot of work.’

Rea shrugged. ‘Alright. Let’s go and see the one up the hill, shall we?’

In silence, they followed Trish’s car back into the city and up Stuart Street.

‘You haven’t told Trish we’re together, have you?’ asked Kate as Rea, craning her neck, expertly parked the car.

‘What? No. Of course not.’

‘Well, if you keep saying “we” she’ll soon guess.’

‘You’re going to have to get used to it one day.’

‘Sure, but after my husband knows. Not before. Okay?’

‘And when is that going to be?’

‘Will you stop this? It’s not my fault. I didn’t arrange for this girl to go missing.’

‘I know.’

‘And anyway, it’s your daughter who’s asked him to give her away.’

‘I know, it’s just ...’

‘Well, stop blaming me, then. It’s out of my hands. I’m sick of getting blamed for everything around here.’

‘Okay, okay, I hear you. Jesus, you’re grumpy today.’

On a clear day the villa in Hart St would have both harbour and sea views. Two standard roses framed the scarlet front door and the white weatherboards gleamed. They walked through a bay arch; the front garden was packed with herbs.

‘Whoever lives here must be a keen cook,’ said Kate. ‘Or a witch.’

‘I was hoping we might enjoy this experience,’ said Rea, grabbing a handful of greenery and holding it to her nose. ‘Oregano. Thought so.’ Worry creased Rea’s brow. ‘You know, Kate. If you don’t want to go ahead with this, I’d rather you told me. I realise we’re in different circumstances. I understand how difficult this is for you. I’ve committed to us spending the remainder of our lives together, but if you aren’t able to join me in that, then I need to know now.’ Rea’s eyes were bright, but her jaw was set. She tossed away the oregano and stared down to the sea.

Kate put a hand on Rea’s arm. ‘Sorry. Ignore me. I’m ... having a bad day.’

Trish arrived. Rea cleared her throat, jammed her hands into her trouser pockets and nodded to the gleaming weatherboards. ‘New paint job. Dressed to impress.’

While Rea remained outside with Trish, discussing the roof, Kate went in. A glance confirmed the usual layout: wide hallway, three bedrooms at the front of the house, plus a smaller room, currently used as a study. Nothing new there. She pushed open the door to her left.

The bathroom of her dreams: a walk-in shower, walls and floor finished in tiles the colour of wet sand, a low bath and chunky timber cabinetry; none of the mass-produced High Street flat-pack furniture she hated so much.

‘Everything you want?’ asked Rea from behind her.

Kate nodded. ‘And two sinks.’

‘Two bathrooms, actually. There’s an ensuite off the master bedroom.’ Rea grabbed Kate’s hand, then quickly dropped it. ‘Trish says we’ll ... I’ll love the view. Come on.’

At the end of the hallway the living area spanned the width of the house. The original rear timber wall had been ripped out and replaced with floor-to-ceiling glass.

‘The two end panels are fixed.’ Trish crossed to the windows. ‘But these slide open ...’ she pushed a glazed panel with one finger, ‘as easy as that.’

Over a jumble of corrugated roofs and treetops, Dunedin spread her skirts and showed what she was made of.

Kate sighed. ‘It looks like a completely different city.’

‘Come over here,’ Rea called from the depths of a well-worn leather sofa. ‘Look. All you can see is the top of the hills and the sky. You’d have no idea you were in a city, at all.’

Kate shook her head. ‘It’s not what I was expecting, the front being so ... traditional.’ The kitchen, at right angles to the living space, was a warm and happy jumble of appliances and timber surfaces. Shelves made from old mantelpieces bore an assortment of teapots, with handmade cups hanging underneath. ‘Eclectic, but not untidy.’

Rea pointed out three different coffee pots. ‘A woman after my own heart.’

Sited on a sloping section, the house had ample storage underneath for all their hobbies. The rear garden complemented the front, with beds of traditional cottage flowers.

‘It’s only just on the market. There’s an open home on Saturday. If you’re interested you need to get in quick and put forward an early completion date.’ Trish named the price. ‘The owners are moving overseas.’

Promising to get back to Trish by the end of the day, they headed toward Rhubarb, for coffee and a raspberry friand.

‘What do you think?’ asked Rea, selecting a window table. ‘Sun, light, view, three beds and a study, and room underneath. That’s if you’re still keen?’

‘I am.’

‘Sure?’

‘The house is perfect.’

‘It is. Tidy kitchen. Two bathrooms.’

‘New roof. Fantastic garden.’

‘Didn’t smell of dog and no ten-metre macrocarpa hedge.’

‘Neighbouring gardens were tidy.’

‘You checked?’

‘Of course.’

‘And it’s within walking distance of all this,’ Rea held out her arms. ‘One café, two restaurants, a bar, one, no, two supermarkets ... What do you think? Shall we?’

Kate’s heart was racing. This was it. Rea was holding up her phone, waiting. ‘I don’t think we’ll find anything better. ‘I’ll offer just below asking price. I’d happily pay the full amount, but you know. We can move in a.s.a.p. They won’t say no. What do you think?’

Kate found herself nodding. ‘Let’s do it.’

Before she could change her mind, Rea punched in Trish’s number and leaned forward to speak over the din. ‘Hello, is that you Trish? If you wait one moment, I’m going outside so I can hear you.’ She stood holding the phone away. ‘We just need to get your little problem out of the way,’ she said, winking at Kate, ‘then we’re home and dry.’

Kate stared after Rea’s retreating back. Had she heard that properly? Had Rea just referred to her marriage as her little problem? She picked up

a tube of sugar and ripped off one end, then replaced it on the table, suddenly nauseous. A ‘problem’ was a blocked drain, or next door’s cat spraying on your outdoor furniture. Ending a relationship of twenty-eight years was more than a bloody problem. She blinked back tears, feeling suddenly and unequivocally alone. Fuck Rea.

Kate snatched her rain jacket from the back of the chair and raced outside. What would Rea know about commitment? What was the longest one of her flings had lasted? She must be mad. Off her rocker, as Leo would say. Oh, fuck Leo, too.

‘Kate?’

She stormed past Rea.

‘Kate! One moment, Trish, I’ll call you back.’

Kate had reached the chip shop over the road before Rea caught up. ‘What’s going on? What’s the matter? What have I said?’

Rea grabbed her arm, but Kate pulled away. ‘Leave me alone! I’m walking home. Just leave me.’

Rea was beside her, matching her stride. Heading down City Road, the hill was steep, their progress swift. Rea was panting. ‘Come on, Kate. What is it? What have I said?’ She grabbed Kate’s arm and swung her round. ‘Kate, stop this. Talk to me!’ Kate snatched her arm from Rea’s grasp. Rea grabbed it back. ‘You’re not going anywhere until you tell me what the problem is. Come on, stop behaving like a child.’

Kate wrenched her arm away again. ‘I am not a child. I’m a grown woman contemplating leaving her husband. And it is not a little problem, okay? There is nothing little about it!’

Rea stood, blinking. ‘Of course not. I didn’t mean ... what do you mean contemplating? Contemplating! What do you mean by that?’

‘Oh, stop it. You know what I mean.’

‘Do I? I thought I knew what you meant, but now I wonder. You and I we’ve just been ... what, an hour ago? We’ve just been viewing houses. We’ve just bloody well bought ...’

‘I didn’t buy the house. You did!’

Rea grabbed Kate by the shoulders. ‘For us both. I bought the house for us both to live in. And now you’re telling me you’re only contemplating leaving your husband.’ She stepped back. ‘Well bugger me for not falling over with excitement.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake, you have no idea what I’m going through. What’s the longest you’ve ever been with someone, eh? Two years, three at the most? And why is that, eh? Why exactly is that?’

Kate hurled herself down the road. Fuck this. Fuck it. This was all she needed. Her foot skidded on a patch of wet leaves and she nearly went over. Shit! She raced on, glancing behind only when she reached the bend. Rea stood in the same spot, watching. Sod her. She gained momentum as the hill grew steeper. Jesus! What the hell had she been thinking of, moving in with Rea? They had been together for less than six months. What was she doing? Her life was ... out of control.

She held her hand to her mouth, smothering a sob. Traffic swept past and she averted her head. Shit! She wasn’t some twenty-year-old, ditching her latest boyfriend; she’d been with Leo for three decades. Jesus, didn’t you get a medal for that, these days? The first two years you were still on honeymoon; it was getting-to-know-you time, still finding the other fascinating, still ... fucking five times a week. She wiped away tears. Rain fell, fat heavy drops. She pulled her hood up, adjusting the ties until it hugged her face. Rain crashed onto it. She didn’t need a new romance. Right now, what she needed was a rule book. Everyone told you how to trap your man, how to lure him, win him, reel him in and keep him, but no-one told you how to — she stopped and took a few deep breaths — break his heart.

She marched down the hill, her hands jammed into her pockets. Her fingers closed on something hard. A shell. How had that got there? She stared at it, puzzled then remembering. Their tramp in the Abel Tasman National Park, what, three years ago? Showed how often she wore this coat.

She continued walking, swilling in memories. Three years ago it had rained, just like this. Although she and Leo hated the very idea of tramping, they had been persuaded by Gavin and Paula, who claimed it was a walk for softies: bags picked up each morning and taken to the next hut, only a day pack to carry. The track was well marked, with swimming and fishing and comfortable huts along the way. It had sounded so civilized.

April. The weather had been settled and the track reasonably firm. Leo crept out from the tent early each morning with binoculars around his neck, leaving her to gripe and groan and stretch out her back. But Gavin and Paula were right, the track was easy, and when they got hot they shucked off their clothes and threw themselves into the sea. It had rained for weeks beforehand and the one road into the park was closed; they virtually had the place to themselves.

On their third night they decided to forego packet soup and rehydrated beans and walk to the luxury lodge, on the edge of the park. The thirty-five minute walk along the beach and over a small estuary was easy enough, the lodge expensive and their expectations high. They ignored the forecast for rain.

Halfway through their Indonesian Chicken Curry with Pilau Rice in Saffron, the sky, as Gavin so eloquently put it, spilled its guts.

‘Whoa!’ he shouted over the thrum of rain on the glass roof, ‘Monsoon! You don’t see rain like this down south.’

Kate watched the rain with growing alarm. If it had just been her and Leo she could have persuaded him to book a room in the half-empty lodge, but Gavin wasn't called Squeaky for nothing.

They got wet. So wet that the word itself became abstract. While the others walked in front, heads down against the driving rain, Kate lagged behind, seeking shelter in the lee of Leo's broad back. The estuary had filled and rather than stop and remove their boots they splashed through. Water squelched between her toes. Great. Wet boots tomorrow. Rain ran down her back and arms, leaching any residual heat. Close to tears, she stopped. The other walked on, oblivious. The peak of her hood protruded exactly the right distance to send the collected rainwater cascading onto her thighs. Beneath the lightweight fabric of her trousers everything chaffed.

What was the point in wearing any of this? Ripping at the ties, she threw back her hood. The rattle of rain on nylon immediately ceased. The rain was easing. A breeze cooled her sweaty neck. In the near silence she turned, looking back the way they'd come. A shard of light from behind the hills lit the clouds from beneath, reducing the sea to a strip of turquoise fringed with dazzling white foam. Stars wavered overhead. The air smelled of rusting metal, small creatures scurried along the tideline, and the water inside her socks felt strangely warm.

They would spend the coming night in the hut, sheltered under a steel roof, but this would remain. All night the sea would heave and suck and break, the sand dry to a crumbling crust, crabs scuttle into deep holes, and stars shimmer and sparkle like paparazzi on Oscar night. Only her footprints would fade.

Each entity had a time line. The stars under which she walked were over a billion years old, the carpet of quartz, feldspar and mica beneath her shoes, a million. She stooped to pick up a shell and ran her fingernail along its ridges. A dozen years old, at the most. Everything was relative. Three score years and ten for an adult, seventeen for a child.

She remembered looking at the stars as a child and thinking for the first time about death and time, and how when she died she'd be dead forever. How hollow and small she had felt then, and how scared. She felt small again, but now her fear was replaced by awe. Tonight her smallness was reassuring. There had to be a limit, didn't there, to the damage someone so insignificant could do to the world?

Something inside her lifted.

At the traffic lights in Queen's Gardens she stopped, turning her head left and right inside her hood.

Back at the hut, shrugging off dripping raincoats, Leo had squeezed her shoulder. 'Well done, kiddo.' If anyone recognised how she hated being wet, cold, hungry, tired, or out of control — it was a long list — Leo did. He knew, and he accepted. It was a privilege, wasn't it, to be accepted?

She waited and crossed with the green man.

And you couldn't ignore what they had been through since losing Beth. He was the only one who understood her anger, who listened and didn't judge when something seemingly trivial tripped her. Like the time, about a year after she'd returned to work, a colleague turned up in distress: bloodshot eyes, weeping in the toilet. Everyone rallied. The manager even made her tea. 'Poor Whitney, did you hear?' they sighed. 'Poor Whitney.'

Kate exploded. 'She's lost her cat? Weeping and wailing over a bloody cat? For Christ's sake!'

'But Kate ...'

'But nothing. Jesus, a bloody cat! A dumb animal!'

'Oh come on, you know how—'

'Jesus! She needs something real to cry over. A bloody cat!'

They had been horrified, but what she'd meant, of course, was that when a cat that was lost, endearments, compassion, came easily. When you lost a child, you walked into a shop and conversation petered out until

someone came and laid a hand on your arm and told you they knew exactly how you felt. Had the art of grieving been lost? She'd read that in Greece whole families mourned for forty days, and women could wear black, should they wish, for the rest of their lives. Mourning clothes were a sign that said, leave me alone. Let me be. In the early twentieth century it was considered normal for a widow to grieve her husband's death for three years. Today, for a family member, they gave you a fortnight off work, if you were lucky. Anger was probably the hardest thing to let go.

Only Leo had understood.

But then, perhaps that was the problem. Perhaps she and Leo knew one another too well. No more surprises. Until Rea, in recent years the only thing to quicken her heart had been an unexpected phone call: an accident? Something to do with her dad? Having met in relative youth, were she and Leo destined to witness one another's demise? Their slowing down, their slackening, their eventual flattening out; was that all they had left? Some days she could already feel it happening.

Kate turned right onto Anzac Avenue, slowing out of habit as she passed the second-hand dealers. Heavy traffic roared past, ammonia from a cattle truck, diesel; a lolly wrapper attached itself to the sole of her shoe. Two gulls squabbling over a discarded burger carton brought to mind her parents before her mum died, arguing over the washing up. Too many years spent in one another's company, too little to do in old age. Boredom, animosity, the sheer tediousness of being old turning them against one another.

Is that what she was avoiding? Or could it be that she was simply punishing herself? She stood to lose her husband, her home, some of her friends, all of their friends ... and Martha? She dodged a puddle, blinking away fresh tears. Martha and Rea had never got along. Sometimes best friends didn't, and she'd accepted the situation, quite happy to spend time with them individually. But now she realised that Martha, unable to cope with the change, would blame Rea ... and side with Leo.

She sniffed, suddenly angry. Poor Leo. Leo, the victim. All those women, single and married, who'd flirted with him in the past, like Mel Townsley, always the first to make a beeline for Leo at New Year. And Leo loving it of course.

She took a deep breath. She wasn't being fair. Who wouldn't love the attention? Everyone needed to feel wanted and, the truth was, she and Leo had not wanted one another for years.

He wouldn't be lonely for long. Let them have him. With Rea she was starting again. A new life. At fifty she didn't have to be reduced to a ghost of who she'd been at twenty. Let fifty be her jump-off point. Her new start. On her own terms.

By the time she reached Mitre 10 her legs were aching, her feet burning, and a blister was forming on her little toe. She had no idea what would happen between her and Rea. Their romance might be new, but their friendship stretched back years. In some ways the relationships had reversed; she and Leo from lovers to friends, she and Rea from friends to lovers. Six of one, some would say. Half a dozen of the other.

In the lay-by at the end of Andersons Bay Road a bright yellow car flashed its hazard lights. Rea.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Wednesday 13th March, p.m.

He gazed at the Lindsay Crooks painting outside the intensive care unit. He couldn't recall other hospitals having real art on the walls.

He strained to see through the wired glass to where Randall's body, smashed like peanut brittle, was being monitored by an anaesthesiologist. An early morning cleaner had found Robbie Randall between two bins in the alley at the back of Pequeno, a local bar. At the hospital, one of the nurses recognised him as a policeman from a serious assault case they'd both worked with a few months back, and rang the police station.

Randall was in a stable relationship, had been for years. So what the hell was he doing in the back alley of a nightclub?

The same nurse was with Randall when Judd arrived at the door. 'Someone used him as a punch bag,' she said when she came out. 'Someone skilled with his fists. He must have been taken by surprise because he's no lightweight himself.'

Hearing hurried footsteps, Judd turned. Rob's partner Wiri marched towards him, his face taut with worry. 'Judd! What the ...?' Wiri grabbed the nurse's arm. 'What happened? How is he? Can I see him? I'm his partner, next of kin.'

The nurse led Wiri inside Rob's room. From the open doorway, Judd watched as Wiri bent over Rob's prostrate body. When Judd returned from the vending machine with two cups of coffee, Wiri was back outside and the nurse was explaining that Rob was in a coma. His injuries included three broken ribs, a fracture to the nose, swelling around the temple,

possible subdural haematoma, four broken fingers consistent with their having been stamped on ...’ It was oh-so-familiar.

‘But while he’s in a coma his brain can rest,’ she explained. ‘Rest helps the swelling diminish and hopefully reduces the chance of long-term damage.’

Hopefully? Judd held out the coffee to Wiri, who spun round to glare at him.

‘What happened?’

Judd continued to hold out the coffee. Wiri ignored it and Judd placed both cups on a windowsill. He addressed the nurse. ‘Would you mind?’

‘I’ll be just up here if you need me.’

They watched her walk away.

‘They found him in the alley behind Pequeno,’ said Judd.

‘Pequeno?’

‘Yes. You’re familiar with —’

‘Of course. But ...’

‘But what?’

‘He was supposed to be working.’

‘What do you mean, working?’

‘For you lot. He went out last night. Late. When he hadn’t come home by the morning I didn’t think anything of it.’

‘Did he mention what sort of work?’

Wiri shook his head. His shoulders slumped and he kicked his trainer against the skirting board. ‘You mean, he wasn’t?’

Judd took a deep breath. ‘Not to my knowledge.’

‘Oh.’

A phone rang, and rang. Footsteps clattered along the vinyl floor. The phone stopped.

‘We don’t talk about work. Not if we can help it.’

Judd shivered. Wiri was a mortician. Conversation could quickly become grim. Wiri turned away, running his fingers through his hair. He started to pace.

‘He could be in a coma for days. Have you got anyone who can wait with you?’ said Judd.

Wiri nodded. ‘I can ring my sister.’

‘Okay. I’ll call back here later. Try not to worry too much. He’s young and fit and, for what it’s worth, the doctors know what they’re doing.’

Instead of driving straight back to the second floor, Judd found himself at the wharf. He got out of the car. His last words to Wiri: Try not to worry. They know what they’re doing. Cliché, bloody cliché.

The problem with policing was that the job sucked you in, destroying your home life, wrecking your marriage, even your relationship with your kids. How easy it had been to throw himself into his work in order to cope with the gap Beth’s disappearance had left. He and Kate had become almost strangers at one point; it was only in the last year he’d started to pull back and spend more time at home.

There were a couple of Asian men fishing, one using a hand line. The pleasure cruiser, the Monarch, was moored up, ready for the day’s intake of tourists. He couldn’t think of a single reason why Randall would be working late at night; he must have been playing away. Not that it was any of Judd’s business. But a gay man, beaten and left unconscious in an alley ... Not for the first time, he wondered if there was a link between the gay bashings, Tracey’s death and the tortured animals. What was it Gandhi had said? ‘An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.’ He wasn’t sure if the saying was apt but sometimes it seemed that violence and senseless retribution were escalating. He stood for a moment watching the filtered sun flicker and sparkle on the water, his mind inevitably turning to his seventeenth birthday at the snooker hall, and a violent beating that had left Budgie for dead.

His Uncle Travis had poured him a pint, slapped him on the arm and told him, if anyone asked, he was eighteen. Got it?

‘Sure. Thanks, Uncle Travis.’

Leo watched his pint being poured. He was lucky to be here at all. His mum and Aunty Ivy had been hell-bent on a surprise party for him, in the back room of Ivy’s pub, but all he’d wanted this year was to play a couple of games at the snooker hall. He’d grown to love the rhythm of the game. The stepping into and backing out of the light, the murmurs of conversation absorbed into pockets of smoky blue darkness, the crack of ball against ball, the grunt of approval and the muttered curse of a second-rate shot.

‘Just a coke for Shirley Temple,’ said Travis. ‘I’m not risking losing my licence for him, and anyway, he don’t need no encouragement.’

He meant Budgie, a head shorter than Leo and still with the look of the Artful Dodger about him. He rarely got served in a pub. As a consequence, he had started to sport a hip flask of vodka, or Bacardi, or whatever he could siphon from his mum’s cocktail cabinet. Leo took the glass and handed it to his mate, who immediately downed half its contents before topping it up with whatever was in his flask.

‘Shirley Temple’ was a dig at Budgie’s new hair cut: a wedge that ended in a long asymmetric fringe over one eye. He had also taken to wearing a black waistcoat over a red pirate-style shirt with puffy sleeves. He might have been a cross between Adam Ant and Jimmy White. In typical White fashion, Budgie darted around the snooker table, playing fast and furious, leaving Leo the cool, long game — which meant that, like Steve Davis, Leo usually won.

Leo didn’t play brilliantly, but alcohol took its usual toll on Budgie’s game, and he ended the night two games up. Budgie, having downed three ‘cokes’ to every one of Leo’s pints, began to stagger. Leo said no to his

dad's offer of a lift home; Budgie was demanding a kebab and Leo was worried he might throw up in the car.

Ravi, Dave, Sid and Stu, fellow workers from the supermarket, were in the queue at Costa's Kebab House, looking surprisingly hard with their number-two haircuts, stonewashed denim and donkey jackets. Leo nodded at them and ordered two doner kebabs with extra chilli.

'And change for pinball. Cheers, mate.'

Budgie was slumped against the pinball machine, attempting to light the wrong end of a cigarette. Leo shook his head. Sometimes, with his long hair and flowing sleeves, his best mate looked more like Joan Collins than Jimmy White. Sid must have shared the sentiment because the next moment he was leering across the room, blowing kisses at Budgie. 'Hey Budge,' he called, inclining his head towards Stu. 'My mate fancies you. Gonna give 'im a kiss?'

Budgie, swearing and ripping the burned filter from his cigarette, seemed oblivious. Stu joined in, adding wolf whistles to the taunts. Cigarette finally lit, Budgie looked up. He took a drag and made a face.

'Fuck off, tossers.' He pulled a length of tobacco from his lip and pushed himself upright.

Two girls walked in, all ozone and cheap eyeliner.

Budgie squinted over. 'Alright, Shazza? Alright Shirl?'

'Alright, Budgie.'

On their way past, Shazza tousled Budgie's hair. Budgie pulled back sharply. 'Oy, watch the barnet. You don't mess with perfection, know what I mean?' He flicked his hair back, giving the girl a wink. Shazza blushed. She and Shirl joined the queue, giggling and glancing over at Budgie.

'You can play with my hair if you want,' called Sid. The girls ignored him. Sid marched over and yanked Budgie's hair. 'Gotta be a syrup, innit?' He tugged harder. 'Shit, look at that, it don't even move!'

Budgie pushed Sid's hand away. 'Fuck off, baldy.' He aimed a slap at Sid's bristling scalp. 'At least I've got hair. What's with you, Big Ears? Lost little Noddy, or something?'

Looking at Sid's Prince Charles ears, Leo snorted.

Sid turned to him. 'Fuck off, nancy boy.' He glanced over at the girls. 'Hey Budge,' he said, loud enough for them to hear. 'Is it true what they say about you and Mr McKiver?'

McKiver was the manager from the supermarket. A friend of Budgie's parents, he gave Budgie a lift home on Saturday nights.

Budgie was frowning. 'What's that, then?'

'You and McKiver. Is it true?'

Budgie flushed. 'Don't know what you're on about, mate.'

'Nah?' Sid turned to the girls. 'You know what, girls? They say McKiver fucks him. On the way home from the supermarket. What d'ya think, girls? Reckon it's true?'

Leo stared at Sid. This was mad, stupid. McKiver was a friend of the family. It wasn't even funny.

Budgie tried to push Sid away. 'Piss off!'

Sid bounced on his heels, standing his ground. 'So what, it's not true then?'

Leo blinked. Sid sounded like his dad, just before he threw a wobbly.

Budgie's face was beetroot. 'Fuck off. What do you think?'

Sid stayed up close, his face inches from Budgie's. 'What do I think? I'll tell you what I think, Budgie, you little faggot. I think you're not a budgie at all, I think you're a little canary. We've seen you parked up, opposite the cemetery on a Saturday night. I think you give McKiver a blow job. I think you drop your pretty little panties and let him fuck you.'

Sweat broke out on Leo's back. His heart pounded. Budgie grabbed the front of Sid's jacket and slammed him hard against the pinball machine. The girls screamed.

Costas, behind the counter, was having none of it. 'Hey, you boys. Shut the fuck up, you hear? You fight, I call police.'

Sid straightened up, pulling Budgie forward and head-butting him. Blood gushed from Budgie's nose. Budgie bent over, his hand to his face. 'Fuck! You cunt!' Doubled over, he staggered out onto the street.

Leo couldn't believe it. What the ...? His legs were jelly. If he didn't move he'd fall over. He stumbled towards Sid. 'You wanker! What you do that for? You fucking wanker!'

Sid pushed Leo toward the door. 'Go kiss your boyfriend, Leonora, looks like he's crying.'

Leo stumbled out of the shop, holding a protective arm towards Budgie. Sid and the others were still inside, laughing. He should break the fucker's nose. They came outside and circled them, the girls following. Sid turned his back and wriggled his arse. 'Hey bum-boys. You wanna fuck me too?'

Budgie straightened up. 'Fuck your arse? Fuck your arse!' He spat blood onto the pavement. 'There's more spots on your arse than on Spot the fucking dog. I wouldn't fuck your arse if you fucking paid me.'

Stu, Ravi and Dave cracked up. Shazza called out: 'You tell 'em Budgie!'

Leo's head whirred. Why couldn't Budgie shut up? What was he doing? His breath was coming fast, nothing was making sense.

Sid walked up, hoiked, and spat into Budgie's face. 'So Budgie, tell me. What's it like to suck cock?'

Leo weighed up the odds. Fight. There was definitely going to be a fight. Four against two? They were fucked.

Budgie must have made the same calculation because all at once his attitude changed. He shunted Sid backwards, wiped the snot from his face and flicked it down the front of Sid's jacket. 'You should know, Sidney darling,' he drawled, sounding like Lucille Ball on speed. 'Let's face it, you've sucked mine often enough.'

Sid's fist shot out, but Budgie ducked and it merely glanced the side of his head. Budgie skipped backwards, pulling himself to his full height, flicking his hair like a girl. 'For your information,' he continued in the poncy voice, 'not only has Mr McKiver got a very big knob, but he also gives excellent head. Remember that next time you're trying to get your hand down Michelle Fox's sweaty knickers, Sid, you tosser.'

'Woohoo!' from the girls.

Sid's attempts to shag Michelle Fox were legendary. Ravi and Stu doubled up. As if from a distance, Leo heard himself join in. Pathetic. The only ones not laughing were Sid and Budgie.

Sid was back in Budgie's face. 'You're a faggot, Budgie, admit it. You've never shagged Stella Anastasie and you don't intend to.' He cupped his balls. 'Maybe I'd better put her out of her misery and give her one myself, eh?'

Leo waited for Budgie to deny the accusation. Instead, Budgie took a swing. A wide swing, a lousy swing. Sid ducked and came up, slamming his fist into Budgie's stomach, following through with his elbow, smash, straight into Budgie's face. It was like watching a film. It couldn't be real. Then Budgie was on the ground, and Sid's Doc Martens steamed in. The kicks landed as if in slow motion, boot, chest, boot, groin. Budgie curled in on himself, arms wrapped around his head. Leo watched, barely able to stand. Someone do something. Quick! But there was no-one. Just him. Just Lardy Boy.

One of the girls screamed, and looking up, Leo saw Costas in the illuminated doorway, phone in hand. A blow landed on the side of Leo's

head. He staggered backwards, crashing into railings. Stu and Dave grabbed him and pulled him to the ground. Down at eye level, Sid's foot continued its attack on Budgie, back and forth, in and out. 'Fucking little faggot.' Kick. 'Fucking little queer.' Kick. Then Ravi joined in.

Leo tried to stand but his legs wouldn't work. 'Stop it! Stop it you bastards. You fucking cowards.' Stu kicked him and the pain made everything terribly real. Finding the strength to stand, he charged at Sid, his hands going for his throat, but just as he got Sid in a headlock, Stu and Dave pulled him off. Sid ran over, hesitated a split second, then punched him right in the middle of his face. Aarf! Blood in his mouth. Piss in his pants. He was back on the pavement. Boots connecting in quick succession; boot, shin, boot, thigh. Boot in the small of his back. No air. Panting. He lashed out. Grabbed a leg. Refused to let go. A kick to his stomach, then his balls, and the last thing he remembered was the sound of someone screaming. When he came around, the others had gone. All he could see was the yellow and red glow of Costa's Kebab House and Budgie a few feet away, lying in a pool of blood.

On the wharf, Judd shivered at a slight breeze from the water and pulled his jacket closer. Someone who knew how to use his fists, that's what the doctor had said. Was it possible that Randall had fallen victim to the very same crime he was investigating?

CHAPTER TWENTY



Thursday 14th March

Late the following morning, Judd swirled the dregs of a plastic cup of instant coffee. Across the room, Priest was threatening to throw his PC out of the window.

‘There’s no evidence that banging your mouse on the desk makes your computer go faster.’

Priest threw the mouse down. ‘I give up.’

‘How did you get on with the guy with the station wagon and the assault charge, what’s his name?’

‘Greg Lamarr?’

‘Yeah. Anything there?’

Priest stood and stretched. ‘Bits and pieces. He’s a student. A barista. Works part-time at Nova. Got a previous for assault.’

‘Working now?’

‘Should be.’

‘Good.’ Judd threw the cup into the nearest bin. ‘Sounds like an excuse for a proper cup of coffee.’

During the short walk to the Octagon, Priest filled him in on Lamarr’s assault charge. ‘About six months ago he and a dozen mates went to Queenstown for the weekend. Lamarr became friendly with a girl at one of the bars; they were together most of the night. The next day there’s photos of them both plastered all over Facebook. They’re not very flattering and it’s obvious they were having more than just a good time together. Two

days later she accuses Lamarr of assaulting her. Lamarr denies everything, but her mates back her up. He gets done for sexual assault.'

Priest sidestepped a small black and white dog being led by a woman with blue hair. 'I thought dogs weren't allowed in the city centre?'

'They're not.'

She disappeared into a doorway.

'What's up there?'

'Some jeweller. Expensive.'

'Oh.'

'Anyway, I don't know if it's relevant, but the complainant got married a few weeks later.'

'You mean it's possible the fiancé got the hump with the photos?'

'It wouldn't be the first time.'

'Anything else?'

'Drunk driving; a couple of EBAs, but that was years ago.'

Thursday lunchtime had been busy at Cafe Nova; the tables were crowded with aioli-smeared plates, and the air stank of perfume and garlic. They were guided to a clear table in the far corner, and shortly the manager brought their coffees. They showed her their IDs and asked to speak to Lamarr.

She bit her lip. 'Don't tell me he's in trouble again. He's one of my best workers.'

Judd indicated for her to sit down. 'It's nothing to worry about. Has he been here long?'

'A couple of years, on and off.'

'From your response I take it you know about the previous business?'

'Yes. Poor kid. He was so upset. A bit of fun that got out of hand by the sound of it.'

'U-huh. So, good bloke you'd say?'

‘Sure. Punctual. Honest. Reliable. So what’s it about this time?’

‘Just routine questions. Like I said, nothing to worry about.’

‘I hope so.’

Greg Lamarr’s jet hair and blue eyes would melt many a young heart. He hadn’t shaved that morning, or then again, perhaps he had; either way, he was a true bluebeard. Hair poked from the top of his buttoned-up white shirt and coated the back of his hands. He was slight, all muscle and sinew.

He stood, hands in his jeans pockets. ‘Guys.’ His eyes shifted from Priest to Judd and back again.

‘Take a pew,’ said Judd, ‘Lamarr; French, isn’t it?’

‘My father’s French, my mum’s Kiwi.’

‘You were born here?’

‘Sure.’

‘Look, we’ve just got some routine questions. This won’t take long.’

Lamarr pulled out a chair and leaned, elbows on knees. The manager reappeared and placed a coffee in front of him. ‘There you go.’

‘Thanks, Sal.’ He tore open a stick of sugar and stirred his coffee.

‘The girl found at Ross Creek,’ said Priest. ‘You heard about that?’

‘Sure, it was in the paper.’

‘She worked at the salt-water pool. You’ve got a season ticket.’

‘Yeah. So?’

‘We’re checking the whereabouts of everyone who might have been at the pool that day. It was a Saturday. Twenty-third of February.’

Lamarr sat upright and threw his teaspoon down on the table. ‘You’re kidding me, right?’

They waited.

‘I get some trumped-up charge against me for something I didn’t do, and what, now I’m gonna be questioned every time a girl gets bashed or something? Fucking awesome!’ He pushed back his chair and stood up.

‘Calm down! You’re jumping the gun. We’re interviewing anyone who’s a regular pool user who owns a dark-coloured station wagon. Everyone. You just happen to fall into that category.’

‘Oh, right. Sure.’

‘You don’t have to believe me, but I’m telling you the truth. You’re just one of many.’

Lamarr slowly sat back down. He folded his arms and his foot jerked up and down.

‘Now, think back. Were you at the pool that Saturday?’

Lamarr blew air from between his lips. ‘Doubt it.’

‘We need to know for sure.’

‘Come on, that’s almost a month ago.’

‘There was a surfing competition on. The place would have been crawling. Difficult to park. You know how it gets down there.’

Lamarr chewed at his bottom lip. ‘I don’t usually go at the weekend. And if I’d known about the surf champs I’d’ve avoided the place, eh?’

‘When do you swim?’

‘Before work. I start here at midday. I get to the pool about eleven. I can’t exercise for long, but it’s quiet then, before the lunchtime rush. I’ve got a knee injury; my physio told me to walk up and down the pool. Strengthens the leg muscles while I’m unable to run.’

‘How often do you use the pool?’

‘About three times a week, but only when it’s quiet. People get pissed off otherwise, ‘cause you get in their way.’

Judd nodded. True.

‘Doubt I’d be there on a Saturday. What time of day are you talking about?’

‘Sixish.’

‘Nah, no way, it’d be too busy. That’s when all those real serious guys go, eh?’

‘So where were you?’

Lamarr leaned forward, rapping his knuckles on the table. ‘That wouldn’t be the weekend the fringe festival was on?’

‘Yes, it was,’ said Priest.

Judd looked at Priest, impressed.

‘No worries, then. I was at a gig at Ombrellos. There’s this geeza, Jimi Samoa. It’s not his real name, but he does this Samoan-Welshman thing. I was at that.’ Lamarr was all smiles now.

‘Alone?’

‘Nah, me and my mates. It was only ten bucks. It was cool.’

‘What time was that?’

‘About eight? Eight thirty? Before that, we had pizza and a few beers.’

‘When was that?’

‘I dunno. About sevenish, I guess?’

‘And where did you eat?’

‘At Ronnie’s.’

‘That’s a mate?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Got his number?’

‘Sure.’ Lamarr pulled out his phone.

‘And before pizza?’

‘I’d’ve been at home. Here you are.’ He read out the number.

‘And where’s he live?’

‘Just around the corner from me. In Patmos Ave.’

‘Can anyone vouch you were at home?’

Lamarr’s face fell. ‘Nah, not really. Nelson, my flattie, was away. His sister was getting married. But you check with Ronnie. I was definitely with him for a good hour beforehand.’

‘Not with your girlfriend, then?’

‘Nah. Sort of resting at the moment.’ He grinned. As if.

‘Do you remember Tracey. From the cafe?’

Lamarr scratched his chin. ‘I don’t think so. I saw her photo in the paper but it didn’t mean anything. I don’t stop for coffee in there or anything. I come straight here.’

‘I don’t suppose you sent any valentine cards this year?’

‘You what?’

‘You know, roses are red, violets are blue.’

He laughed. ‘Nah. Not my style, mate.’

Priest cut in. ‘You said earlier you do a bit of running. Where would that be?’

Lamarr turned down the corners of his mouth. ‘Anywhere. I haven’t been running properly for months, but, you know, around the Gardens, down the Leith.’

‘Ross Creek?’

He hesitated. ‘Yeah. Ross Creek. When I’m up to it. But with my knee injury, I haven’t been there in ages.’

‘How long, exactly?’

‘Dunno. Since my knee injury. A couple of months?’

The manager appeared. ‘Finished?’

Judd nodded and pushed their cups across the table. ‘Thanks. We’re done here. For now.’

Judd spent the remainder of the afternoon in a meeting with Burgess. When he returned to his office, Priest was waiting for him. The air conditioning had packed up completely and the room was stuffier than Sunnyview Rest Home. He left the door open.

‘How did you get on with Rosie’s boyfriend, Dominik Voss?’

Priest took the seat opposite, explaining how he had traced the former occupants of the empty house. ‘As you said, it wasn’t difficult. A Mr and Mrs Pickering. They’ve moved to Opoho. They obviously like the sun.’

Judd raised his eyebrows. Priest still hadn’t got over his own recent move.

‘Sorry. Right, well the thing is, they agreed, Voss didn’t take his car out; couldn’t have because of the furniture truck. They don’t remember him leaving for the supermarket but they do recall him coming back, because they had finally finished packing and were waiting for a pizza. They only had to wait another five minutes and the pizza would have been free, but as it was, the delivery boy turned up at the same time as Voss. They were gutted, apparently.’

Judd nodded. Dunedin had a lot of Scottish blood. ‘And what time was this?’

‘Ah, this is the interesting part. According to Fred Pickering, not until eight twenty-eight.’

‘Eight twenty-eight? How long does it take to buy a few beers? What time did Voss say he left home?’

‘Five thirty. His neighbour, Mrs Harris, said he was still there when the news came on. But which news? The five thirty on Sky or the six o’clock? So I went back and asked her.’

‘And?’

‘The five thirty. She always watches the five thirty on Sky, with a glass of sherry. Then she makes her tea.’

‘So, he could have been out of the house by six ...’

‘Yep. And not back until eight twenty-six.’

‘That’s almost two and a half hours.’

‘Exactly.’

‘But he couldn’t get his car out.’

‘True, true. So it doesn’t get us anywhere. Or at least that’s what I thought at first.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, the leg-in is long and narrow and there’s only space to park one car outside each house. So, although Voss’ car was blocked in, Rosie’s wasn’t. Rosie’s car, a dark station-wagon, was out on the road.’

‘Not at work with her?’

‘No. She was going out after work, remember? I checked her movements. She was planning to walk to her sister’s in Ravenswood Road, just around the corner from the cafe, and they were going out from there. So Voss gave her a lift into work that morning. Save picking the car up later.’

‘So there was nothing stopping Voss from walking out of the house at just before six, driving to St Clair ...’

‘Picking up Tracey ...’

Judd nodded. ‘Get him in. He’s been selective with the truth and I want to know why.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Friday 15th March

The next morning, Judd was staring at Priest's list of station wagon owners when Priest walked into his room. 'Any news on Randall?'

'No, I've just rung.' Judd motioned for Priest to sit down. Priest looked tired, and needed a haircut. 'Everything all right at home?'

'Ah, yeah, yeah. Up most of the night with Pippa.'

'Oh?'

'Birthday party. Too many Cheerios.'

'Right. So, Voss is in Christchurch. When's he due back?'

'About midday. We're collecting him from the airport. Is that my list?'

'Yes. I need to get onto the warrants.'

'Who're we going for?'

'At this stage I'm only considering Rosie's car, and possibly Lammar's.'

'What about McDowell's?'

'Not sure.'

'You're not serious?' Priest shot to his feet and leaned over Judd's desk. 'Look, he lied to us about being on the esplanade that night, he—'

'He didn't lie. He forgot. He walked his dog. It makes total sense.'

'So he walked his dog ...'

'Just because he rubs you up the ...'

Priest stood back. 'It's not about that.'

'Come on ...'

‘No! This isn’t personal. Don’t insult my intelligence.’

He’d raised his voice, which wasn’t like Phil. The guy needed a holiday. In fact they all did.

Judd leaned back in his chair. ‘Well, however you want to play it. Look, he happened to be on the esplanade, along with dozens of other people, walking his dog after picking it up from the kennels. That’s all.’

‘And he’s got a station wagon.’

‘He’s got a station wagon, I give you that.’

‘And he knew Tracey.’

‘As did dozens of people in the area.’

‘And he was seen walking the dog at six fifteen. He got to the gym at seven forty; that’s almost an hour and a half later, and forty minutes later than he first claimed.’

Judd wiped his hand over his face. ‘You know, if he’d been here when the initial enquiries were made we wouldn’t even be having this conversation.’

‘True. It’s probably just one of those things. But how can we not follow it up?’

Judd looked down at the scant list of names. ‘Burgess won’t like it.’

Priest stood looking at Judd with his arms folded across his chest. ‘Never had you down for a career man.’

Judd glanced up. Priest’s smirk showed he wasn’t serious. He ran over the conversation with Fiona, and her description of narcissists. What was it she’d said? ‘He’ll lie through his back teeth.’ So what was new there? Everyone had something to hide. McDowell might be a strange one, but Judd’s gut instinct told him he had nothing to do with Tracey’s death. However, Priest was right, they couldn’t not follow this up.

‘Okay, but we do it by the book. No cock-ups. No personal vendettas. Okay?’

He went to find out which judge was hearing court that afternoon. Learning it was Judge Frank Aberhart, he sucked on his teeth. Obtaining a search warrant was never simply a formality. They'd have to convince Aberhart that they had reasonable cause to believe they'd find something to link either of the two cars to Tracey. The sighting of a dark station wagon alone wouldn't wash. Luckily, Voss's messages on Tracey's Facebook page would allow them to get hold of his PC and iPhone, and a search warrant for Rosie's car. But what about McDowell? It was pushing it to claim he'd lied to them about his whereabouts, but the truth was, he'd been seen at St Clair at the time Tracey went missing and he had no decent alibi. He was a frequent user of the cafe, but the same could be said for many people living nearby. Trying to link McDowell with any of her Facebook friends was a long shot. There was no space on an affidavit for hunches, for phrases like 'psycho narcissist with behaviour management problems'. Lammar's previous conviction would help them secure a warrant for his car, should they need it. For all they knew, his alibi might yet come up trumps. Hopefully the crims hadn't pissed Aberhart off too much that morning.

With Eve on leave until Tuesday, he sent Reid to prepare the affidavit. He checked his watch. Sentencing was at two. Hopefully there would be a break in proceedings at some point in the afternoon, when they could intercept the judge. Burgess didn't look too happy a little later when Judd warned him he'd be searching McDowell's car, but he didn't stop him either.

It was slightly cooler in the interview room. The rain that had been threatening for the past few days had finally arrived and drummed against the windows. Dominik Voss, the relief teacher at Tracey's school, was indeed the guy he remembered from the cafe. Fresh-faced with a crooked smile, he reminded him of that young actor on 'Torchwood'. Not that his smile was cutting much ice right now. He confirmed his earlier statement:

he'd been at home the night Tracey went missing. Rosie had gone out straight from work — that they already knew — and he'd picked her up from the Octagon just after 2 a.m.

'I don't like her queuing for a cab in the middle of town. Too many fights, too many young guns with too much booze inside and not enough brains to know what to do with it.'

The man was positively garrulous. Or liked the sound of his own voice. Then again, he was a teacher.

'You didn't leave the house at all that evening?'

'Like I said before, I went down to the supermarket at about five thirty, grabbed a few beers and walked home. I cooked my tea, did some marking, then watched the footy.'

Judd coughed, took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. Bloody hay fever. 'How much contact would you have had with Tracey?'

'None, not really.'

'But you knew her from the cafe.'

'Oh, for sure. But just a quick hi, how are you, when I picked up Rosie. Over the year she has any number of girls working for her. I didn't know her any more than I knew the others.'

'Even though you taught her at school.'

'Yes.'

'And you took her class.'

'Sure. But that's a class of almost thirty.'

Judd leaned back in his chair, his cue for Priest to take over.

Priest slid off his jacket, throwing it over the chair beside him. 'So, exactly how long have you and Rosie been an item?'

'What? What's that got to do with anything?'

'How long?'

'Two years, why?'

Priest rolled up both his shirtsleeves before continuing. ‘Two years? You know what it’s like, things are getting a bit stale, so when a young girl, attractive, starts giving you the come on—’

‘Here we go!’

‘You’re no longer in school, she’s wearing make-up, she’s fit.’ Priest leaned forward, invading Voss’s space and raising his voice. ‘How did it start? Did you offer her a lift home now and then, when it was raining, give her a kiss goodnight, flatter her, tell her how grown-up she was looking?’

‘For God’s sake. I can’t believe this!’

‘Good-looking young bloke like you. I bet you get all the girls after you.’

Voss glared at Priest. ‘For God’s sake! I was not having an affair with her. I did not kill her. For your information, Rosie and I have just got engaged. Okay?’ He sat there, looking from one to the other for a moment. Outside, a door crashed shut. Footsteps in the corridor.

‘Let’s leave that for a moment. Tell me,’ Judd said, his voice level and quiet after Priest’s outburst. ‘How would you describe Tracey, as a student?’

Voss breathed out heavily. He sat back in his chair, trying to compose himself. ‘Oh, you know, average. Bright enough. Interested. A good kid.’ He forced a weak smile. ‘No trouble, if that’s what you mean.’

Judd leaned back in his chair. ‘They said she had a soft spot for you.’

‘Who said that?’ Back on the defensive.

‘Her friends.’

Voss shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t know.’

Judd waited.

‘Look, it happens. Young girls, male teachers. It’s the oldest thing in the book. But if she fancied me, had a crush on me, whatever you want to call it, I knew nothing about it. Okay?’

‘Because it wouldn’t be the first time, would it?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘When you were at ...’ Judd flicked open a file. ‘St Olaf’s.’

Voss shook his head. ‘Christ, not that again.’ His right knee started to jiggle. ‘Look,’ he said, his eyes not leaving the file. ‘It was something and nothing. I didn’t do anything that time, and I didn’t do anything this time either. I’d learned my lesson. I don’t give them an inch. I stay away. I’m careful. Exceedingly careful.’ He spread his hands before him to emphasize the point.

Judd picked up a sheet of A4 paper from the file, turned it over and laid it face down on the desk. ‘But not careful enough not to leave a message on Tracey’s Facebook page?’

Voss was quiet for a moment.

‘Well?’

‘What, you mean ...’ He raised his eyebrows, his shoulders. ‘Hey, sure, sure I did. But that was nothing. She was being bullied, she needed support. What that girl circulated around the school was pure filth.’

‘Tania?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you think it made Tracey feel better. Knowing you’d seen the photo?’

Voss flushed. ‘I was trying to be a good teacher. Trying to show support.’

Judd looked over to Priest before closing Voss’s file. ‘You do believe it was Tania who was responsible for that photograph, then?’

‘I do. That girl’s evil.’

‘I heard you didn’t have much time for her.’

Judd sat looking at the man opposite him. Voss was known to the victim, had no alibi, had a history, be it only innuendo, of attracting the

attention of young girls, and he'd had access to a dark-coloured station wagon the evening Tracey disappeared. 'You said you left the house at five thirty and went for some beers.'

'That's right.'

'And then you watched the match.'

'Yep.'

Judd scratched his ear. 'Then how come your neighbour, Fred ...' He snapped his fingers.

'Pickering,' from Priest.

'Fred Pickering, says you didn't return until eight twenty-six?'

'I dunno. I came back from the supermarket, dropped the beers into the fridge ... Ah! Got it! Fred's wrong. I popped out again. Later. To post a letter.' He nodded, happier now. 'Yes, that's it. There's a box at the end of the road.'

Priest laughed. 'You popped out to post a letter. In the middle of the evening? It couldn't wait until the following day?'

'I was hot. I fancied a walk.'

Priest cocked his head. 'In the middle of the first half of the match, you fancied a walk?'

The rain was getting heavier.

'It was a shit game.'

'Really?'

'And when you fancied a walk, in the middle of the shit game,' said Judd, 'did you happen to pass Rosie's car?'

'What?'

Priest cut in. 'Rosie's car was parked up in the street, wasn't it?'

'Was it?'

Judd gave Voss a long hard look.

'Yeah. I guess it was.'

‘So all this bullshit about your car being boxed in, it’s just a smokescreen. You left the house before six and did not return until almost eight thirty.’

‘That’s two and a half hours unaccounted for,’ said Priest.

‘Where were you, Mr Voss?’

Voss seemed to shrink in front of them, arms crossed, hunkered low in the chair.

‘I walked to the post box and posted a letter. I came back and watched the rest of the match.’

‘The shit match?’ Judd checked his watch and cleared his throat. ‘I haven’t got time for games. If you don’t tell us the truth about where you were between five thirty and eight twenty-six on the evening of the twenty-third of February, you will leave me no option but to charge you with the abduction and possibly even the murder of Tracey Wenlock. The choice is yours.’

Voss’s eyes darted from Judd to Priest and back again.

‘What’s it going to be?’

Voss chewed at his thumb. Thunder rumbled overhead and the lights flickered. Voss leaned forward. ‘Look. Okay, I lied. I did leave the house, but if Rosie finds out she’ll kill me. It’ll be all over. You’ve no idea what she’s like.’

Judd nodded. ‘If your whereabouts has nothing to do with Tracey then there’s no reason why anyone outside of these four walls should know anything.’

Voss sighed and rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hand. Judd waited, conscious of Priest breathing to his right and the low hum of white noise from the computer terminal.

‘Mya Bellamy.’

‘Who is Mya Bellamy?’

‘The woman I was with that evening.’

‘Address?’

‘Two Marcus Street, Waverley. She’s a friend of Rosie’s. A good friend.’

Judd looked at Priest. Some friend.

‘Look, I haven’t seen her since. It was a one-off. It was ...’

‘I really don’t care what you do or with whom, Mr Voss. I just need to know if this Mya can verify you were with her that evening. Where does she work?’

Voss checked his watch. ‘She’s a croupier; she’ll be home now.’

‘Husband, boyfriend? Anyone we ought to know about?’

‘No. She lives alone.’

‘Okay. If she verifies your story you’ll be free to go. If she doesn’t, prepare yourself for a long stay.’

When he and Priest walked out of the interview room, Reid was hovering, clutching the warrants. Judd sent him out to check Voss’s new alibi and grabbed his own rain jacket. It was time to pay McDowell another visit.

It would have taken all of McDowell’s willpower to remain calm with Judd’s officers swarming through his property. While McDowell hovered over the DSIR team as they vacuumed the station wagon, Judd sloped off upstairs. Butkus was out the back, running up and down, barking and adding to the tension. The rain was coming in at right angles from the south, hitting the windows like marbles against skirting so there was no view today. He walked around the room, trying to get a feel for the man. As before, there was something cold about the place, as if it was a hotel room rather than a home. One of the trophies was out of line, which he walked over and straightened, noticing one for kick-boxing.

When he returned to the garage McDowell stood, arms crossed, working on an air of bemused entertainment, but the tic on his left temple gave him away. Judd joined Priest, keeping an eye on McDowell.

‘Is that a Stag I see under there?’ Judd asked, pointing to a low-slung tarpaulin.

‘That’s right. Not that you didn’t already know it, I’m sure.’

Judd ignored the man’s antagonism. ‘My uncle had one. A kind of soupy green colour. He took me out and we did a ton down the A2. I still remember the way my bones rattled.’

McDowell couldn’t help himself. He slid the expensive silky tarpaulin from the car and the glowing paintwork immediately warmed the chilly garage. His whole demeanour changed. ‘What you’re looking at, gentlemen, is a work of art. A real beaut. When I got her, she had a Rover 3.5-litre V8, so we took it out and replaced it with the original Triumph V8. Then we added an Edelbrock four-barrel twin-choke carburettor.’

‘Electronic ignition?’

McDowell patted the bonnet. ‘That’s right. It makes sense. More reliable, especially with our winters.’

‘The bodywork, that can’t be original?’ from Priest.

‘No. We rebuilt most of it. The floor was shot; the doors ... had to import the sills and valances.’ He was walking around the car, running his hands over the bodywork. ‘She was such a mess. See this interior? All original. Right down to the carpet.’

Judd whistled. Butkus was still barking. McDowell walked outside.

‘Will you shut up? Butkus. Quiet!’

He came back in, all smiles. ‘You can’t blame him; they were bred to guard the old estates, you know.’

Priest’s cell phone rang. He stuck one finger in his ear, trying to hear over the sound of the vacuum. As he bent over his phone and turned away, the zip on his rain jacket snapped against the paintwork.

‘For fuck’s sake!’

Before Judd knew what was happening, McDowell had flown past him and shoved Priest away from the car. Priest dropped his phone, which skidded across the concrete floor and under a neighbouring car.

‘Watch the paintwork, you moron!’

Priest charged, grabbing the lapels on McDowell’s jacket.

Judd stepped smartly in between and prised the two men apart.

‘Enough. Enough, I said!’

Priest backed off and stood glaring at McDowell.

‘You fucking touch me again ...’ McDowell stepped forward, his face millimetres from Priest’s. ‘The paintwork! The fucking paintwork!’

‘Christ. It was a tap, a fucking tap.’

‘A tap?’ McDowell was tapping the side of his head. ‘I’ll give you a fucking tap.’

‘Hey,’ called Judd. ‘It was an accident. No harm done. Everybody calm down.’

Priest and McDowell glowered at one another, Priest’s right fist bunched, and Judd knew exactly where he wanted to smash it.

He turned to McDowell. ‘Touch one of my officers again and I’ll do you for assault. Do you hear?’

To Priest he said, ‘Phil. Get outside. I’ll bring your phone.’

Priest stood his ground for a moment, eyeballing McDowell.

‘Go!’

Once Priest was out of harm’s way, Judd knelt and fished under the tarpaulin for Priest’s phone. McDowell circled the Stag, rubbing his hands over the body. ‘That paint job cost me over three grand. Three fucking grand!’

Judd tried to block him out. He caught a flash of red paint and white tyre before his fingers brushed Priest’s phone. He grunted and got to his

feet. What McDowell thought about the average driver in many ways matched his own view, especially about giving way and roundabouts, and let's not get started on parallel parking. At any other time he might have found the whole tirade quite amusing, but the venom with which McDowell spoke unnerved him. McDowell was checking for the tiniest scrape from Priest's coat. His inspection finally finished, he stood a few feet from Judd, muttering about stupid kids not knowing one end of a car from another, and as for girls driving around in their daddies' cars, checking their lipstick in the mirror, never bloody indicating ...

He visibly caught himself and ran his hand over his hair, calming himself as he'd calm his dog. His manner slowly changed. 'That Priest, he's a bugger, eh? No manners. No respect for other people's property. Look at the way he dresses. Can't even do his buttons up.' He smiled, suddenly Mr Helpful again. 'Now you and me, Judd, we're different. We know how to look after ourselves.' He was pointing at Judd's shirt and tie. 'I know quality when I see it. That monkey, he needs a bloody haircut. You should tell him. Keep him in line. Set a good example.'

Judd turned his back and walked outside. Priest was at the far end of the garden, smoking a cigarette. He handed him his phone.

'Don't let him get to you. He's a sardine short of a tin can, that one, know what I mean?'

Priest laughed and coughed, smoke caught in his throat. His eyes teared. 'Shit, he's got you riled.'

'What makes you think that?'

'You always revert to type when you're pissed.'

'To type?'

'Yeah. Back to being a cockney.' He screwed up his face. 'Know wot a mean?'

Judd smiled. 'Well, anyway, we're almost done here, so ...'

He'd spoken too soon. Even from this distance they could hear the yelling inside the garage. They ran across the lawn. McDowell was over by the Triumph with his hands around the senior technician's throat. 'It's not a fucking park bench, you moron. You wanna sit down? Get yourself a fucking chair, all right?'

Priest shot forward and pulled McDowell into a stranglehold. Judd went for the cuffs.

Judd, in no hurry to interview McDowell, returned to his desk. Let McDowell cool his heels for a few minutes. He was in the middle of checking his emails when Sergeant Watkins rang, telling him there was a young woman at the front desk looking for Judd. Something to do with a phone.

Judd didn't wait for the lift. He found Rosie pacing the foyer, looking flushed. She caught sight of him and held up a cell-phone.

'Is that Tracey's?'

'Yes. I found it. I'm sorry. I do feel stupid.'

He looked around. There was only one other person in the foyer. He beckoned her into the far corner. 'Tell me.'

'I take them off the girls, you see, when they're working. They're too distracted, otherwise. I pop them in the drawer under the till, where we keep the lost property, and they collect them when they leave. Today ...' She sniffed, fanning her face, close to tears.

'It's okay. Take your time.'

'Today a customer came in and asked if we'd come across his phone. I checked the drawer. There's always three or four in there. People are forever leaving them behind. Anyway, none of them belonged to the customer, but as soon as he'd gone I looked at them properly and realised one of them was Tracey's.' She stopped and hiccupped. 'It's got this little

sticker, see?’ She handed it to him. ‘I’m really sorry. I should have looked before, but it just went out of my head.’

After reassuring her it was not important, he raced back upstairs, found a charger and plugged it in. A few minutes later he was in front of Priest’s desk, rubbing his hands together. ‘Right. I’m feeling lucky. Let’s go and sort out McDowell.’

Judd entered Interview Room One. Priest followed, closing the door behind him. McDowell had assumed a relaxed position, which wasn’t easy in such uncomfortable chairs. He looked up as the two men sat down opposite.

‘You’ll be relieved to know the technician does not intend to press charges, although he could easily be persuaded to do so.’

McDowell folded his arms across his chest. ‘He was sitting ...’ He cleared his throat. ‘He was sitting on the Triumph’s bonnet.’

‘That’s still no reason to—’

McDowell held up his hand. ‘Look, I admit I may have overreacted.’ He let out a long breath. ‘The thing is ... it’s Mum. She’s ... they took her into hospital last night and ...’

‘I’m sorry to hear that.’

‘Yeah, well. She’s back at the home now, but its heart failure. I’d just got back from there when you guys arrived and, well, she’s ... not a well lady.’

He wiped his hand over his face and his beard rasped. It was the first time Judd had seen him unshaven.

‘We’re at that age,’ he said.

McDowell nodded. ‘Yeah. You lot, you’re just another wind-up I don’t have time for right now.’

Judd glanced sideways at Priest. ‘Well, you’re obviously under a lot of pressure at the moment. Let’s not make more of this than we have to.’

Answer some questions and we can all move on. Now, tell us what you made of Tracey.’

‘God, you’re not still ...’

‘Look, I’ve got an unsolved death on my hands. Everyone seems to have a different view of her: her parents, her school friends. You’re obviously an acute judge of people.’

McDowell’s chin lifted an inch.

‘So help us out here. What was your take on her? You described her as a good kid.’

McDowell scratched at an eyebrow, sat back in his chair and relaxed.

‘That’s right. A good kid. Polite, like I said. Minded her p’s and q’s.’

‘Bright?’

‘Not stupid, that’s for sure.’

‘How?’

‘Said she was going to uni. Nursing. I told her she’d make a good nurse. It suited her. She was that sort of girl. Traditional.’

‘What do you mean by traditional?’

McDowell relaxed more, pulling on his shirtsleeves, checking everything was just so. ‘You know, old-fashioned. Not the sort of girl you’d catch wearing mechanic’s overalls, pissing about with cars, pretending she knew the difference between a carburettor and a ciabatta.’

Judd raised an eyebrow. There was a story there.

‘No, she’d been brought up properly. You know the problem with today’s society?’ He was warming to the subject. ‘Too much of this nanny state, political correctness, that’s what. No backbone, no dignity. Young kids today. Look at the way they walk around, trousers hanging off their arses.’

Judd inclined his head in acknowledgement.

‘You understand. You’re old school, Judd. Like me. Military Service. That’d do them the world of good.’

‘You’d be ... too young for military service yourself?’

‘That’s right. Missed out. Did five years in the reserves, though.’

‘That’s why you go to the gym every day? Keep fit?’

McDowell slapped his midriff. ‘Sweat like a pig, look like a wolf, that’s what they say.’

Judd grinned. God, this guy loved himself. He sat back and folded his hands on his lap. He’d massaged the man’s ego enough. Time for Priest to take over.

‘The night you returned from Auckland. The Saturday Tracey went missing,’ said Priest. ‘You told us you went to the gym.’

McDowell glanced at Priest. ‘That’s correct.’

‘The thing is, according to that fancy little machine at the gym you told us about, the one that swipes your card and records exactly when you go in and out, you didn’t get there until seven forty. That’s forty minutes later than when you claimed you did.’

‘Jesus Christ, we’ve been over this already.’

‘If you’d just tell us where you really were,’ said Judd. ‘You’d be free to go.’

‘I’m free to go at any time, actually.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Judd met his eye. It was enough to keep him in his place.

McDowell took a moment before replying. ‘Look, it’s like I told you: I got in, dropped my bag and walked the dog.’

‘We know you walked the dog,’ said Priest. ‘You were spotted sitting on a bench just yards from the pool.’

McDowell raised his eyebrows. ‘Well then, I think you’ve just answered your own question. Guys, come on! I walked the dog before I went to the gym.’

‘You landed at four forty-five,’ said Judd. ‘You collected your bag, picked up your dog, and drove home. That’s six at the latest. Between six and seven forty you walked the dog. That’s almost two hours. That’s a very long walk.’

‘Big dog, big walk.’

‘But not that big. You wouldn’t want him to overheat, isn’t that what you told me?’

He pointed his finger at Judd. ‘That’s right. Well remembered. But I’d just picked him up from the kennels.’ He held his hands out, palms up. ‘They love him there. Love him. They’ve had a couple of their own over the years, see. But they can’t walk him with the other dogs. He doesn’t mix well. Top dog, you see. Likes people, likes attention, but not other dogs. A bit of a loner.’

For a moment Judd wasn’t sure if they were talking about the dog or the owner. ‘The thing is,’ he said, ‘you were spotted down on the esplanade at six fifteen. Exactly the time Tracey left work.’

‘And you didn’t get to the gym until seven forty,’ said Priest.

‘Did you drive down to the esplanade that night?’

‘Or did you walk down?’

‘Walk. I always walk!’

‘You said you hardly knew Tracey,’ said Judd.

‘But you seem to know a lot about her.’

‘Uni. Nursing.’

‘We’ve been told you flirted with her.’

‘Like them young, do you?’

McDowell flushed. ‘What is this, good cop, bad cop? You been watching too much TV, Judd.’ He leaned in until his face was inches from Judd’s. ‘Got home, unpacked. Walked dog. Went to the gym. I’ve warned you before, don’t call me a fucking liar! I’m over this.’ He jumped out of his seat, turned and headed for the door.

‘SIT DOWN!’

He spun around.

‘We need your DNA,’ Judd said, in a quieter voice. He nodded to Priest. ‘It won’t take a minute.’

‘What do you want that for?’

‘You want to be eliminated from our enquiries?’

McDowell slowly sank back onto his chair, the vein in his temple throbbing. Priest crossed to the DNA kit and pulled on the disposable gloves. McDowell’s eyes followed. Priest removed a long swab from a pack and stood in front of McDowell.

‘If you’d just open your mouth.’

For a moment Judd thought McDowell was going to refuse. Priest bent forward, and rolled the bud firmly against the inside of McDowell’s cheeks. The tick from the clock on the wall brought to mind a detonator.

After escorting McDowell from the building, Judd and Priest made their way up to the second floor. ‘Give that to Read and get it processed, then run a match. Can you imagine McDowell sending a valentine card?’

‘Only if it was to himself.’

Judd smirked. ‘Fair enough.’

‘So, what do we reckon?’

Judd paused, his hand on the door. ‘I’d say he was up to something that night, but I don’t believe he’s our killer.’

Judd ran the iron down the sleeve of his shirt, pushing the point into the shoulder seam, applying steady pressure, pulling the iron towards him and creating one perfect crease down the length of the sleeve. He flipped the shirt over and repeated the process.

An investigation was similar to ironing a shirt: the same pattern, the same set of movements unconsciously repeated, although the lack of forensic evidence in this enquiry made it like ironing a shirt without knowing the fabric. Murder, or accident? Set the iron too high and who knew what damage could be done, set it too cool and nothing would be achieved. So far they had searched for and eliminated most inconsistencies. He'd been surprised they hadn't been able to pick up any record of Tracey's phone between St Clair and Ross Creek and now he knew why. He'd read the texts between Tracey and Harry, all two hundred and thirteen of them. June Wenlock had been right, Tracey and Harry had exchanged texts since their split, but only three, the most recent being a 'Big Up' from Harry to Tracey, responding to her win at the tennis tournament, and Tracey's emoji response. He ironed the collar, pressing hard. Dominik Voss would prove another dead end, he had no doubt about that. He didn't believe McDowell was their man, which only left the barista, Greg Lamarr.

Kate's phone, beside him on the breakfast bar, rang for the umpteenth time that night. She must have forgotten to take it that morning. It might be the rest home, but they had his number as well as Kate's. Surely they would ring him if it was urgent? Unless they had lost his number, of course, or had his old one. What if Kate's father had taken a turn for the worse? Or there had been an accident. Who else would keep calling like this?

He ironed the cuffs last, slid the shirt over a wooden hanger and unplugged the iron. He really should check, just in case. As soon as he picked up the phone, it stopped. He pressed the missed calls button. Rea.

And the call before that, and the one before. What could be so urgent? The wedding was tomorrow. Kate had said everything was under control.

Another text arrived. ‘Where r u?’

He dialled Rea’s number.

‘Darling?’

‘Er, no. It’s Leo.’

‘Leo!’

‘Yes. Kate’s phone kept ringing. I thought it might be urgent.’

‘Oh.’

‘She must have left it behind, charging. So, how are you?’

‘Great! How are you? Kate says you’re busy ...’

‘Yes. Yes we are.’

‘U-huh.’

‘You’ll be looking forward to tomorrow’

‘Well, you know, still a few bits to do. That’s why I was calling, I forgot to mention something to Kate this afternoon, before she rushed off.’

‘Rushed off?’

‘Some work thing.’

‘Right. I was thinking it’s about time you and I caught up. I don’t think I’ve seen you since, when, Eve’s graduation?’

‘That’ll be about right.’

‘A while ago now. Three years?’

‘More? I know, I know. Its madness, isn’t it? But look, we’ll definitely catch up at the wedding. Eve’s thrilled you’re giving her away.’

‘Is she? Good, good. Well, I’ll let you go. I’ll get Kate to call you as soon as she gets in. Unless it’s something I can help with?’

‘What?’

‘The wedding ... thing.’

‘Oh, that. No, no, don’t worry. It’ll be nothing. I’m panicking over nothing. Don’t worry.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes. No. Fine.’

They said goodbye. After hanging up, he stood for a moment looking at the phone. There were five previous missed calls. He checked them. All from Rea. There were 91 texts in Kate’s inbox. The five on the initial screen were also from Rea. Kate was supposed to be on leave now, so why was she rushing off to a work appointment? ... He froze. Wasn’t it today she was carrying out the workplace assessments at McDowell’s office? He tried to remember their conversation. Yes, he was sure she’d said Friday. But that would have been during work hours and it was now ... he checked his watch. Seven thirty. She should have been home hours ago. The skin on the back of his neck prickled. Of all the days to leave her phone at home. Perhaps he should drive past McDowell’s office and check her car wasn’t still outside.

His own phone rang, making him start. It was Burgess.

‘I’ve got another girl for you.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Another girl.’

‘What other girl?’

‘From the ... are you there?’

‘Sure, sure.’

‘Larayne Smaill. Eighteen. It’s been a couple of weeks. No direct link to Tracey, but she worked at Sunnyview Rest Home. The same one Mrs McDowell’s in. Thought you’d be interested. I’ve left the file on your desk.’

Judd hung up, slowly replaced Kate’s phone onto the breakfast bar and grabbed his jacket.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Friday 15th March

Earlier that afternoon, Kate had opened her eyes to find Rea lying with her back to her, snuffling softly. Kate propped herself up on one elbow and leaned over, tracing her finger along Rea's profile. She wasn't sure which part of Rea she loved best, her brow, her perfectly straight nose or the elegant inch of skin between her nose and upper lip. She ran her finger over Rea's lips. Lips that could flick in a satellite's blink from a smile to a snarl, from a kiss to a bite, lips from which words emerged like, I love you, I want you. Hold me. Words Kate once feared she would never hear again.

After searching the bedside table for her phone, Kate remembered she had left it charging at home that morning. She shivered and pulled the sheet up over them both before settling back down, nose pressed to Rea's back. With Leo giving Eve away it was just as well she hadn't told him yet about her and Rea. But when she did ... when she did ...

The skin along her arms tingled. She sighed and rolled onto her back. Was there ever a right time to leave someone? She had tried to convince herself that, once over the shock, Leo would be relieved to see her go. Even before getting together with Rea at Lake Ohau, the previous October, she had been moody and withdrawn. Like when fog sneaked up the harbour and reduced the world to no more than a garden's length in any direction, her life had felt foreshortened; with no 'over there' and no tomorrow, here and now had become a drudge. But since October, any time apart from Rea seemed intolerable. At night she reminded herself that although she was totally and irrefutably in love with Rea, what was new

territory for her was commonplace for Rea. It was as if she were standing in the middle of a field, her warm and pulsating heart cupped in her outstretched hands, waiting for Rea, the hawk, to dive. Easy prey, in other words. Yet once it had begun, she'd been unable, and unwilling, to do anything but go with it.

After the noisy and cramped stay with Ella, the cabin at Lake Ohau had been perfect. 'Enough bedrooms to sleep an army,' shouted Rea, rushing up and down the stairs, flinging open doors and windows. 'This room's mine, here at the top.'

Three steps led down from the kitchen into the lounge, a rectangular room with open log fire in one corner, well-stocked bookcase, frayed sofa and a couple of mid-century styled chairs. 'Come down here and see the view,' called Kate, ducking to look through one of the three narrow windows framing views of the lake. Snow glinted on the mountain slopes, and the water changed from aquamarine to a deep bruised blue whenever a breeze ruffled its surface. The cabin had the faded elegance of a refuge well loved: on one wall hung old wooden skis, on another watercolours and a faded Persian carpet.

'This is heaven,' said Rea. 'Peace at last. I'm treating myself to a bath.'

'I brought along a bottle of gin,' said Kate. 'I'll make us up a pitcher.'

'Great idea! Join you outside later.'

Kate pulled a blanket from the back of the sofa, mixed a lot of gin with a modest amount of tonic, and took it out to the tussocked slope between cabin and lake. She found a flat space, threw down the blanket and poured herself a drink. They were lucky with the weather; in Dunedin it had still felt like mid-winter. Now the heat was dispelling her earlier tension. She lay and closed her eyes. A car rumbled past on the gravel road, the wind stirred the grasses, fantails fluttered in the manuka bushes ...

Kate shot up, her hand to her chest. Something had struck her. A falling magazine.

‘For God’s sake, Rea!’

‘Sorry, had you dozed off? I thought we could look through these.’ Rea looked pure 50s Hollywood in her turban and long flowing kaftan. ‘Henna.’ She pointed at the turban. ‘Don’t worry, I brought my own towels.’ She poured herself a gin and topped up Kate’s glass. ‘If it’s good enough for Peta Mathias ...’

Kate rubbed her eyes and picked up a magazine. ‘Bride?’

‘Eve asked me to help her chose a dress. I know absolutely nothing about weddings; you’re going to have to help me.’

‘Oh. How about a meringue?’ She held up a two-page frenzy of chiffon and white silk.

Rea snorted. ‘There’s no way Eve would choose that.’

‘Just as well. If the wedding’s in March, you’re cutting it fine. Most weddings take years to plan.’

‘I suppose. But they’re keeping it simple. The church is booked, and the reception. But I admit, I’m a bit lost. As a rule, my friends don’t get married.’ Rea picked up a tube of sunscreen and smeared it over her arms, then the back of her neck.

‘I take it Eve’s father will be giving her away. It’ll be nice to finally meet him.’

Rea narrowed her eyes.

‘Come on, you’ve never said who he is. Why the big secret?’

‘There is no secret. I know, and Eve knows, and we are the only people who need to know.’

‘But we’re all going to find out, come March.’

Rea refilled her glass and slipped her sunglasses to the top of her head. ‘Honestly, the fuss people make.’

Kate stared at her. ‘Tell me, or I shan’t come.’

Rea raised her eyebrows.

‘Tell me, or no more gin.’

‘Blackmail! Well, if you really must know ... come closer then, I don’t want the whole of Lake Ohau to hear.’

Kate wriggled across the blanket, the clink of ice loud in the still afternoon. Rea took a deep draught of gin and cleared her throat. ‘As I said, there’s no great secret or mystery about Eve’s father. Well, not technically.’ She flicked back her head and laughed, a huge whooping laugh that came from the pit of her stomach, the laugh Kate had recognised in Eve.

‘What do you mean? Stop teasing. Tell me!’

‘You know, I had always wanted children; people are surprised at that, I don’t know why.’

Half the battle, or more, had been in finding a donor, preferably a man she knew and trusted, who — and this was important — did not want anything to do with raising the child. The rest was purely technical. Unfortunately, soon after finding an appropriate donor, a gay man called James she had known since undergraduate days, he and his partner changed jobs and moved to Tirau.’

‘Tirau? James!’

‘You’ve met James?’

‘Yes, once or twice. I can’t imagine him living in Tirau.’

‘I know. He’s such a Sydney boy these days, but back then he had a position with the hospital in Hamilton. I was not pleased, I can tell you, losing my donor so quickly. But, to cut a long story short, almost a year later Cora and I found ourselves in Rotorua and decided to catch up with the boys. You met Cora?’

‘No. Before my time.’

‘Oh. Fiend with a chainsaw. Anyway, accommodation was tight and Cora had booked us into some grotty 1970s motel. The place stank, of

those nasty little air freshener blocks they put in toilets. And the carpet! Shiny in places. And sticky.’ She shuddered.

Kate smiled. Rea paused to top up her glass. She held out the pitcher. Kate shook her head. ‘Don’t stop now.’

Rea took a sip of gin, her cheeks flushed. ‘Where was I? Oh, right, well, we kept an eye on my temperature and lo and behold, there I was, ovulating like crazy. Cora immediately rang James told him to grab a copy of Bronco or whatever gay men read in those days, do the business, jump on his motorbike and bring it over. It was a close run thing; he and Tom were flying to Europe the following day ... Shit, my hair!’

Rea jumped to her feet and shot indoors. Kate yawned, feeling sleepy and calm. She yawned again and when she opened her eyes Rea was back, hair dry and swept back from her face.

‘How does it look?’

‘Oxblood.’

‘Not too dark?’

Kate smiled. ‘It’s certainly got rid of the grey.’

‘Good. Now, where was I?’

‘In the motel unit, waiting for the ... donation.’

‘That’s right. It was cold. I have to admit, I didn’t feel much like conceiving. While we waited, Cora ran me a hot bath. She found some classical music on the radio, dimmed the lights. Don’t laugh; this was serious stuff. Cora was keeping an eye on the time. Huffing and puffing, striding up and down. Not exactly relaxing for me. But, finally, a knock on the door. She flew to answer it; sperm’s only got a shelf life of an hour you know, max. There was James, looking all excited. I called out to him and waved, but old Cora pushes him away, almost slamming the door in his face, poor thing, and turns to me, brandishing this wee pottle.’

Rea was enjoying herself again, gesticulating wildly, her eyes like diamonds. God, she was beautiful.

‘Got it!’ she cried, unscrewing the lid. Big mistake. Yuk, she said, there’s not much, is that it? I told her, just bring it here, and be quick, we have to keep it warm. So she turned, rushed over and next thing she’s flying through the air and whoa! There it went, all over the carpet!’

‘No!’

‘Yes! Well, I could have screamed. In fact we did. Both of us. There was Cora, running around like a mad chook. Fuck! Fuck! Stop swearing, I shouted, swearing won’t do any good. Scoop it up! Just scoop it up. Quick! So there she was, on her hands and knees, trying to scrape what she could off the carpet and back into the jar. It was the funniest thing ever!’

‘That’s gross!’

‘I know, I know. It was worse than gross; you didn’t see that carpet. Anyhow, she finally retrieved enough and we gave it a go. Well, I don’t have to tell you the rest.’

‘And it worked?’

‘Yes! Of course it worked. And that’s what’s so funny, you see. Whenever somebody asks who Eve’s father is, I always think, well, technically it was James, but to be honest,’ Rea chuckled helplessly, ‘to be honest, Eve’s father could be any lonely sales rep between Putaruru and Taupo.’

Tears coursed down Rea’s cheeks. Good tears. Happy tears. Kate tried to laugh along with her but she could only see poor Rea, marooned in that disgusting motel room, desperate to conceive.

Kate went inside for more ice. When she returned Rea was staring into the distance. ‘You know, it has to be said, I was dismal as a mother.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘It’s true. I was so certain I wanted a child, but when I finally had one ... I never experienced that bond, you see. At first I put it down to the difficult birth, but ...’

Kate dropped the ice into the pitcher, before rubbing sunscreen onto her ears, neck, legs. She took her time. This was new territory for them. She glanced over at Rea. ‘But?’

Rea sighed. ‘Eve fascinated me. She was her own little person. Independent, right from the start. Or perhaps she became that way, through a lack on my part. You know, she watched you from the window. I’d walk into the lounge and there she’d be, peeking out at you and Beth. We’d stand there, side by side, watching.’ She picked up her glass, which she swilled and emptied. ‘You always looked so happy, you and Beth. You could spend hours outside in one another’s company. Eve and I, well ...’ She glanced over to Kate. ‘The three of you were so bloody ... normal. Eve was drawn to you. We both were.’

Kate replaced the sunscreen on the small table and picked up her glass. What did Rea mean by that? She met Rea’s eyes and blushed.

Rea smiled. ‘Bad manners though, making eyes at the neighbour’s wife. Even I drew the line at that.’

A bellbird called and a second bird answered. Bellbirds, song birds, love birds. Was Rea implying ... did she mean ... The gin had taken effect; Kate felt muddled, slowed. She had always imagined that afternoon in Rea’s kitchen had been a moment of madness. Had Rea been attracted to her all along?

‘What’s with you? Stop being so serious.’ Rea picked up a magazine and flicked it towards Kate. ‘Come on. Pick out something Eve might like. She’ll trust your judgement. She always has done. Look at the number of times she ran away to your house when she was growing up.’

Kate smiled. ‘Perhaps, but Beth ran over to yours on more than one occasion.’

‘Three times. Once when you refused to buy her red shoes for school and the second time when, what was it ... oh yes, when Leo told her off

for breaking a pane of glass in his greenhouse.’ Rea reached for the lotion. ‘Then the third time was when ...’

They looked at one another.

‘The third time was when you kissed me,’ said Kate. She took the sunscreen from Rea’s hand and threw it onto the grass. ‘Isn’t it time you did it again?’

Kate yawned. What was the time? She should get up, she was due at McDowell’s office in less than an hour. She gazed at a cobweb on the ceiling. Would he remember her? They hadn’t seen one another since leaving school, yet he’d been hovering around her orbit for a few years, what with the ramp at his mum’s house, and then Pete building his patio. Was he still the obnoxious kid she remembered, or had success changed him? She’d soon find out.

Under the sheet she traced her finger down Rea’s back, circling each vertebra, smoothing her palm past the birthmark on the small of Rea’s back. Sometimes she woke at night and worried over why her desire for Rea had resurfaced after so many years. Was she in love with Rea, or with what Rea had to offer? Rea meant a new start. And ending. Or, if not an ending — because her grief and guilt over Beth would never end — then a putting away. She had Rea to think of now. Rea made her feel strong again, and needed. With Rea she felt in control. Things happened around Rea, not to her.

Rea opened her eyes and blinked. ‘You know, I think I fainted.’

‘No you didn’t.’

She rolled over to face Kate. ‘What makes you so sure?’

‘People don’t snore when they faint.’

Rea propped herself onto her elbow and pulled a face. ‘You’re getting far too lippy for my liking, Kate Judd.’

‘Stone.’

‘What?’

‘Stone.’

Rea smiled. ‘You’re reverting to your maiden name?’

‘Why not?’ Kate threw back the sheet and made to get out of bed. Rea grabbed her arm. ‘Whoa! Where are you going?’

‘I need a shower. I’ve got work to do.’

‘But you said you’d take time off!’

‘I couldn’t, what with Marama off looking after her sick kids. But we’re so quiet at the moment, it hardly matters.’

‘So why are you rushing off, then?’

‘It’s just one last appointment before the weekend. After that, I’m all yours. Promise.’

‘Five minutes more. I insist.’

‘Rea!’

‘Humour me.’

Kate sighed and slid back into bed.

‘Good. Now, Kate Stone? Sounds like a detective.’

Kate rolled her eyes.

‘A private investigator, then. One of those hard-nosed American broads, packing a 22 Magnum and a mean left hook.’

‘That’s your fantasy, is it?’ Kate smiled.

‘Perhaps. One of them, anyway.’ Rea leaned over her, leering.

‘And how many more of those do you have?’

‘Come here and I’ll show you.’ She grabbed Kate and flipped her onto her stomach.

‘What the ...!’

‘Shush, shush. Relax.’ Rea laughed next to Kate’s ear. ‘You know what they say, darling. Never leave a stone unturned.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Saturday 16th March

His tie was like a length of hose with the tap on full, writhing and sliding, the knot by turns too tight or too large. By his seventh attempt the piece of cornflower blue silk looked like something Priest might wear. All he needed now was to spill egg down his front.

In some ways he'd been looking forward to today, not that weddings usually excited him but lately everything had been so grim he was in the mood for a party. Two days ago Bill Collins, having buried both his parents in the space of three weeks, had returned to work looking twenty years older. Death hung around like a nosey neighbour, waiting for any excuse to pop its head around the back door and invite itself in.

His worry about Kate the previous night had been unnecessary. He'd managed to contact her from work just after nine, safe and sound at home after a late appointment at the hairdressers. He was becoming paranoid. A day away from work would do him good, help him relax. Kate had left the house early that morning to decorate the church with Rea, who seemed to have delegated most of the tasks. Delegation. She was good at that. He had donated a case of Champagne, or what passed as Champagne in these parts. Bubbly, anyway. And for the honeymooners, who were not taking a break until things were back to normal, he had secured a voucher for three nights' accommodation at a luxury lodge on Lake Hawea.

Hearing a key in the door, he turned from the mirror. Kate must have sat up all night to keep her hair curling around her head that way. The greens and oranges of the Indonesian print dress she had bought in Wellington, a simple shift gathered under her bust, complimented her

natural colouring. These days there was a glow about her that had been missing for years.

‘You look stunning.’

She frowned but looked pleased at the same time.

‘How did it go at the church? All done?’

‘It looks great. Unlike you. Here, let me.’ She stood in front of him and re-tied the knot. ‘Blue of course, to match your eyes.’ She stepped back and looked at him. ‘How did I ever get to marry such a vain man?’

‘You never told me how it went yesterday, at McDowell’s office.’

‘Fine. No trouble. I checked their workstation, suggested different lighting. All the usual.’

‘Didn’t you say his staff only worked part-time? I’m surprised he bothered getting assessments for them.’

‘Employers realise that being proactive saves them money in the long run.’ She nudged him out of the way and examined her make-up in the mirror.

‘So, was he there?’

‘He turned up towards the end. Just to check how everything was going. What do you think of this lipstick? Too bright?’

‘What? No. It’s fine. Did he remember you?’

‘From school? Yes. He looked surprised.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, he wasn’t expecting to see me, whereas I knew exactly who he was.’

‘Hmmm ... What did you make of him?’

‘He’s brushed up well. Friendly enough.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Nothing memorable. Seemed genuinely concerned about his staff. Asked how I was. He’s a lot more charming than I remember.’

Charming? McDowell?

The car wound along Highcliff Road towards Pukehiki Church. Sunlight darted along the harbour like a skimming stone, glancing off the hills and bleaching the top of Harbour Cone. On their right, way out to sea, a fishing trawler, Lego-like with its red, white and blue livery, winked back at them.

On the back seat of the limousine, he could sense a tremble in Eve. Was this how all brides felt? The car braked suddenly to avoid an old Labrador sniffing along the road and a memory of Eve and Beth on the trampoline in their back garden flashed through his mind; Eve's old dog, Sita, bouncing off the trampoline and jumping back on again, off and on, off and on, and Eve and Beth laughing so hard, the pair of them doubled over, and Beth holding her stomach: 'Make Sita stop, Daddy, it hurts.'

As the church came into view, Eve turned and spoke so quietly he had to lean over to hear. 'I wish Beth was here, Uncle Leo.'

The Art Gallery at Portobello was the perfect space for a small wedding party: two rooms, not too cavernous, with uneven floors, a tiny kitchen and art for sale on the walls. The bubbly flowed fast; weddings were thirsty work. Despite the happy couple having asked for no presents, a trestle table bowed under the weight of slippery silver-wrapped boxes, away from which small children had to be prised. Leo slipped his iPod into the docking station. He had created two playlists, one suitable for now, one for dancing to later. He needn't have bothered; the half hour of enforced silence in the church had left the guests babbling.

'Leo!'

Rea was radiant as mothers of the bride should be: her auburn hair bright, sleek and bobbed, her long legs shown to advantage by aquamarine trousers and a bolero-type jacket.

‘You’re looking well. As handsome as ever.’

She gave him a hug. It was great to see her.

‘Thank you so much for giving Kate, er ... Eve, away. Kate! Listen to me. Too much fizz already.’ She must have started early, she was definitely flustered. ‘Have you got a drink? Let me get you one.’ She was gone.

The crowd was varied. Many of the numerous women, Rea’s old crowd, lived locally. Having purchased properties years before, when the road was slow and winding and prices cheap, they were the reason Broad Bay was often given an additional ‘s’. He was not sure how, later, when the alcohol took its toll, they would mix with Eve’s work colleagues and Paul’s family, but for now the three groups appeared uninterested in one another.

Paul, the youngest son of Southland dairy farmers came over and shook his hand. He seemed a good bloke, and was obviously smitten with Eve. Judd was pleased. That was how it should be and, with Rea for a mother-in-law, long may it last.

He was never comfortable giving speeches, although he’d got used to it over the years, mainly for work, but his went well enough. Nobody dropped off and he raised a few laughs. Despite this, by the end of it he found himself in a raging sweat, which caused him to tear off his carefully arranged tie and reach for water. Rea must have swapped wine for water at some stage because her speech was perfect and brought tears to everyone’s eyes, including his own, after which the best man’s ribald jokes and innuendos came as a relief.

Kate was quiet. She’d be thinking about Beth, too. Under the table he slipped his hand into hers and gave it a squeeze. She gripped his hand tightly for a moment before pushing it away and picking up her wine. He let out a deep breath. She’d been doing that a lot lately, pushing him away.

In the lull between the speeches and the cutting of the cake, he slipped outside for air. A bench had been conveniently placed under the veranda, out of the sun. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees, a position that helped the slight breeze to dry the back of his shirt. The furore from inside faded away.

From across the road came the scent of wild lupins. A child walked out of the dairy and dropped his ice-cream on the pavement.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Tyler!’

The joys of parenthood. The family returned to the shop and the gulls muscled in. He sat back, aware of his heartbeat, his steady breathing, the heat of the wooden seat against his back and the area on his big toe where his shoes rubbed. Eve’s remark in the car returned to him. Today was the nearest he would ever get to giving his own daughter away. He dropped his head, his mouth thick with grief.

When his phone rang, it was Priest. Mya Bellamy had confirmed Voss’s new alibi, so Voss was out of the picture. His mind turned to Larayne Smail, the new missing girl. Her boyfriend had reported her missing after he returned from a tangi in Kawhia, where he’d been with his whanau since the beginning of the month. Cell phone coverage hadn’t been great, and he said she was always running out of money on her phone, but he’d become worried when he hadn’t been able to contact her at all. When he returned home it was obvious she hadn’t been there for a while. Her car was missing, but none of her clothes, and her make-up was still in the bathroom.

Priest was talking to her family today, but Judd would personally interview staff at the rest home where she worked tomorrow, figuring staff already knew him and might talk more freely to him than to a stranger. He checked the time on his phone. It wasn’t yet four; if he slipped away now — He looked up. Eve was rapping on the window, beckoning him back in. Maybe later.

Inside, Eve's 'aunties' were hogging the dessert table. 'I can't decide,' one woman was saying, a plate in one hand and cake slice in the other, 'whether to go for the pav, the chocolate mousse or the Tiramisu.'

'Just pretend it's Christmas and have all three,' a roundish woman in lavender advised, 'I would.'

Well, that was apparent. On his way back to his seat his thirst propelled him towards the kitchen. The door was ajar. He pushed it but there was resistance. Someone was standing just inside. He caught a flash of green and orange. It was Kate, with her back to him. He cleared his throat to announce his presence then realised someone had their arms around Kate and was kissing her. Someone with auburn hair, wearing aquamarine. Before he could react, Rea opened her eyes, looked straight at him and pushed the door shut.

Judd cadged a lift back from the wedding and went straight into work. Priest, slouched in front of his computer screen, looked up, puzzled. 'I thought you were at the wedding?'

Judd shrugged. 'All done. How did you get on with Larayne's family?'

'The mother's an old lush. Couldn't get much sense out of her. She doesn't know what month it is, let alone when she last saw her daughter.'

'What about the boyfriend?'

'I was about to go and see him. He'll be home,' he checked his watch. 'Just about now.'

'Come on then. I'll go with you.'

Larayne and Tamati, had a flat in Malvern St, down the hill from Ross Creek, and near the university. The paint on the outside was curling away from the timber like badly burned skin, the roof had a sag in it and there was more vegetation in the guttering than in the neglected front garden.

Tamati showed them into a clean if spartan living room. He offered them tea, which they refused, and poured himself a coke. He had already been into the station and given a full statement.

‘And you’re sure she hasn’t taken anything with her?’ Priest was asking. ‘No clothes missing, toiletries, money?’

‘Nah. It’s like she just popped out, eh?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘She’d get someone to look after Dexter. There’s no food or anything. Last time we went away, one of the neighbours came in and fed him.’

‘Dexter?’

‘The cat.’

‘Right. He wasn’t locked in?’

‘Shit no. Had enough funerals for one year, bro.’

‘We’ve been in contact with Larayne’s sister in Wellington,’ Priest said. ‘We managed to get her details off her mum.’

Tamati sucked his teeth.

‘She hasn’t heard anything from Larayne either. Did you find her friend’s address, or phone number?’

‘Sure, I forgot.’ He rushed from the room and returned a few moments later. ‘There you go. It was on the fridge, I knew it was somewhere.’

A car was revving up outside the house opposite, filling the street with blue smoke.

‘What are your neighbours like?’ Judd asked, peering out of the window.

‘Okay. Busy. Students mostly.’

Judd caught a fleeting glance of a second guy getting into the passenger seat. ‘Those two opposite,’ he said, ‘do you know them?’

Tamati went to stand next to him. ‘Sure, they’re cool. They look after Dexter now and then.’

The car drew away. ‘Have you asked them if they saw Larayne?’

‘Sure. Greg saw her on the Saturday. Says he helped her get the car started. It’s munted, eh?’

‘Greg?’ said Priest, coming over.

‘Our little French mate from Nova,’ said Judd, catching Priest’s eye. ‘Lives opposite.’

Outside the house Judd checked his watch. Almost six. The sun was still strong, despite the lateness of the hour. ‘I doubt he’s going to work this time of night. He works afternoons, isn’t that what you said?’

‘Yeah. Noon till five.’

‘Coincidence, him living right opposite Larayne. How did you get on with his alibi?’

‘Nothing concrete. He was at Ronnie’s. No-one can swear to the time, but they reckon he’d have got there between seven and seven thirty. They left at eight fifteen for the gig.’

‘So he hasn’t got an alibi for the Saturday Tracey went missing.’

‘We’ll get him in, shall we?’

‘I don’t see why not.’ He checked his watch. ‘Technically I’m not even on duty. Can you give me a lift home? I grabbed a lift back from the wedding.’

‘Sure. Kate staying on?’

‘Yeah. There’s some party afterwards. I’m not expecting her back.’

After his shower and a change into more comfortable clothes, he finally allowed his mind to return to what he’d witnessed at the reception that afternoon. He poured himself a cognac. A large one. It was possible it had been a one off, a giddy mix of too much alcohol and romance ... but no, he was kidding himself. All those weekends away, all that training in Christchurch. He must have been blind.

The way she'd been recently: on edge, yet buoyant at the same time. Short with him, exasperated over little things, as she was when under pressure, yet happy as well, singing about the house. And the phone, the bloody phone and all those texts. They must have been laughing at him.

And for how long had this been going on? The other night, when he had rung Rea, and she had answered, 'Darling!' Fuck Rea. And him saying they must catch up, and Kate mentioning Rea moving back to Dunedin, and him thinking it would be like old times. Had he known then, and chosen to ignore it? What else had he ignored over the years?

He walked into Kate's room. How neat it was. The books on her shelves arranged strictly in order of size. He opened a drawer. Underwear, each pair of knickers folded just so and running from light to dark, from white to black and every hue in between, like a colour chart.

When they first met he had never heard of OCD. When she was happy, as she had been then, there was nothing neurotic or compulsive about her behaviour. He thought of her as a neat freak. Not until she was under stress did the extent of her condition reveal itself. The hand-cleaning started after Beth disappeared. Even now, the smell of a baby wipe could turn his stomach.

He left the room, closing the door behind him. Had he been fooling himself? Had their relationship ended the day Beth went missing? From the start, they'd coped differently: him seeking release, drinking until he passed out; Kate wandering through the house at night, hypervigilant. On their return from Central Otago their roles had reversed: he'd hurled himself back into work, grateful for any distraction from the dread that filled his non-working hours, while Kate, so strong at first, had withdrawn into a haze; driving through red lights; walking out of meetings to go and search Beth's old haunts. He'd returned from work one evening to find her walking up and down their street, searching for her car. One glance along the narrow curved road told him she was wasting her time.

‘But you’d never park it on the street; you always park outside the house.’

Yet the carport and garage were empty. The day after reporting it missing they received a phone call from the panel beaters, saying the car was ready for collection. The anti-depressants she had resorted to had made her numb, aimless and forgetful, while he remained grounded, tirelessly focussed on sorting out other people’s problems. They had been unable to deal with it then as a couple, and nothing had changed.

He refilled his empty glass. On the dining table was the letter to his mother he had started the previous evening. He scanned it, added something banal about popping over soon and signed off. From his wallet he took half a dozen stamps and a strip of Airmail stickers. It would be quicker to phone, but writing had become a habit over the years, and anyway, a phone call was seldom more than a time check and a discussion about the weather. It occurred to him as he tore the stamp from the strip, that first he’d lost his daughter, and now he was about to lose his wife. Maybe he shouldn’t be quite so cavalier about his mother.

His vision blurred. He pressed the stamp onto the envelope where it stuck, slightly crooked. They used to say that a crooked stamp signified a kiss. It had been a day of kisses. Well, that connotation would soon be lost. Hadn’t he read in the paper just a few days ago that they were about to reduce postal deliveries to three days a week, which seemed fundamentally wrong? A concerned resident had claimed in a letter to the editor, a letter written on paper, that it amounted to an infringement of human rights. Did they not understand that small communities in the UK had been devastated by the closure of rural post offices? Once again, New Zealand blindly followed.

His glass was empty. He poured a good measure. Sláinte.

The very idea of a person delivering a series of envelopes to a small metal box at the end of every driveway would one day seem ludicrous. Look at telegrams. A piece of paper ordered at great cost to arrive at a

specific time and place, on a specific day. A waiter, solemnly passing the small blue envelope to the head of the table. Knives and forks returned to the tablecloth, conversation ceasing as the envelope was torn open and a flimsy rectangle of buff paper removed. ‘Congratulations Leo on your Twenty First Birthday STOP Love Gran’.

Now, where was the drama in a text?

Priest had arrived at work last week telling everyone how his son, returning from a shopping trip with his mother, had raced over to show off his new cool gadget. ‘Look Dad, you strap it to your wrist. I won’t have to charge up my phone so often. And it only cost ten dollars. Cool eh?’ It had been a watch, of course.

A portion of the white border from the strip of stamps had stuck to his fingernail. He waggled his left forefinger up and down. Fly away Peter. When Beth was little ... He tore another small piece from the border and stuck it to his right forefinger. Fly away Paul.

He picked up his glass of brandy, held it under his nose. Sweet, yet musty at the same time, reminding him of his gran’s sherry cupboard. He took a mouthful, relishing the burn.

When Beth was little, Kate would save these borders for her. Beth sought him out. ‘Fly Daddy, Fly!’

He sat her on his lap, facing him, and made a meal out of tearing two small pieces from the border, which he gravely stuck to the nails on his two middle fingers. She giggled, anticipating what was to come.

‘Two little dickie birds,’ he started, watching her eyes glow.

‘Fly! Fly!’

‘You remember. Good girl! Two little dickie birds sitting on the wall, one called Peter,’ and there he waggled his right middle finger, ‘one called Paul,’ and waggled his left.

She giggled again, baring small white teeth, waiting.

‘Fly away Peter!’ He swept his left hand behind his head, switching fingers before bringing his hand back down. ‘Fly away Paul!’ He repeated the move, with his other hand. He stopped, wiggling his two fore-fingers. ‘Where are they? Where are the birdies, Beth?’

She stared at his clean fingernails.

‘Where have they gone? Can you find them?’

She started with his hands, turning them over, and he had to keep his fingers curled so she couldn’t see the paper stuck to his nails. She looked up his sleeve. They were close, she knew they were. She smiled, unsure.

‘Found them?’

She looked at him, thinking. She leaned forward, pulling at his nose, grabbing his hair, drawing his head forward to check behind his ears and down the back of his shirt. The sweet smell of talcum powder. Her blonde curls tickling his face. Her hot sticky fingers on his skin, her breath in his ear.

‘Are they there?’

‘No!’

‘Where are they?’

‘Fly! Fly!’

‘What do we say?’

‘Back!’ Jogging up and down on his knees. ‘Back!’

‘That’s right! Come back Peter.’ He swept one hand behind his head, then the other, extending the papered middle fingers. ‘Come back Paul!’

Clapping. Squeals of delight. ‘More! More!’

‘Again?’

Try doing that by email.

The brandy seared his throat. He poured another, and drained the glass. Fly away Peter ... He tapped his fingers on the table, two white dots

dancing in the darkening room like the white rims on Beth's red trainers when she ran ahead in the early morning. 'Come on, Dad. Keep up.'

She'd left him behind, left him struggling, panting, and watching her white rims recede. Red, white. Red, white. One day, bent double and wheezing, with his t-shirt stuck to his back and his breakfast on its way back up, he'd stopped, admitted defeat, and waved her on. Watched her pound the road ahead of him. Sixteen and full of life.

But what if Lardy Boy hadn't given up? What if, instead of going home and standing in the shower, massaging his shins, worrying about pulled tendons and deciding she was old enough to jog alone, he had decided to commit. What then?

He poured another glass.

It's all very well swimming now, you fat fuck. It's all a bit late, your new-found physicality, your pathetic blood sugar and cholesterol tests, your demands for regular ECG checks, all because you're too lazy to run and can't resist a curry late at night. Isn't the health service under enough pressure without overweight middle-aged men clogging it up?

These thoughts could keep a man awake at night. Wake him at two, or two seventeen to be really precise, and then again at five. Wake him, sweating, cold sheets clinging as if he were a corpse. The only escape was to think very hard and very quickly about something else. Something consuming, like work, like whether any link existed between the person breaking into flats down Albany Street and the attempted rape in the Botanical Gardens. Or whether to pull out the agapanthus in the lower garden and plant hydrangeas in their place, picturing the border, deciding on a blue, rather than pink, with perhaps a few white plants in between, working out the optimum pH level; alkaline for pink, acid for blue. Yes, it was possible to punch out those thoughts, but if you failed, they flayed you.

He stumbled down the small step between the double-glazed doors and the deck, taking the bottle with him. Below, way, way below, the tide was receding. Everything was receding, growing older. Except for those that were lost. He propped himself against the rail, scanning the hills, the amber lights, the dark patches in between. How much had they paid for those red trainers? They had been good, but not that good. But they had been cool. Very cool. His glass was empty again. He filled and raised it. God bless you, Beth. God bless you, love. Wherever you are.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Sunday 17th March

Judd scrambled around in the dim light looking for the ringing phone. Randall was conscious and up for visitors. Thank God. Here at least was something he knew how to deal with. He threw back two aspirin and a pint of water. Then another. Jesus, he was too old for this.

On his way to the hospital he picked up a couple of bodybuilding magazines and the latest copy of NZ Home and Garden. In the family room an old Dirk Bogarde film was playing. Randall was in a room of his own. Wiri was there, leafing through a copy of the latest Sky magazine. He looked up as Judd entered, met Judd's eyes for an instant, and returned to his magazine. What the hell was that about?

Randall's eyes followed him as he walked around the bed. He looked a mess: one of his eyes wore a patch, which was worrying. His face was distorted with bruising the hue of month-old cabbage. Judd sat on the seat near the bed and leaned in close. Realising he wouldn't be allowed much time, he got straight to the point. 'What happened?'

'I dunno. I walked out of the bar; that's the last thing I remember.'

Judd glanced at his bandaged head. 'He hit you from behind?'

'I reckon.'

Judd glanced towards Wiri. 'What were you ... I mean, Wiri thought you were working.'

'I was. I'd arranged to meet McDowell, or someone I suspected was McDowell.'

'Huh?'

‘I checked him out, at the gym. You know what they say, it takes one to know one.’

‘McDowell? Gay?’

‘I reckon. Possibly.’

‘Go on.’

‘I’ve lived here all my life. I know just about everyone, eh? But I’d never seen him on the scene. So where does a guy like him go for a bit of fun?’

‘Like him?’

‘Professional. Discreet.’

Judd nodded.

‘I got onto the chat rooms. I was familiar with them through searching for a link with the gay bashings. Anyway, I had a look around and in Jocksroom I struck it lucky. He calls himself Skyros. Wiri can show you.’

Wiri took a notebook from the bedside cabinet, entered the password and passed it to Judd. Judd squinted at the white writing on the navy blue screen, gave up and took out his glasses.

‘Absfab, that’s you?’

‘Yep. It’s all there. Keep scrolling.’

From what Judd could make out, the conversation had been fast and furious. Randall had wasted no time.

‘His dog’s a bull-mastiff.’

Judd nodded.

‘And he works out. Doesn’t say which gym, but ...’

Judd continued to read. He was relieved to see that most of the chat was about bench presses, but coming upon a few lines of a different nature he went to hand the notebook back.

‘The latest page, read that.’

Judd scrolled back to the top. They had originally planned to meet at Pequeno on Monday the eleventh, but Skyros had been called out of town at the last moment. On his return he had resumed contact and they arranged to meet on Wednesday instead.

‘Why Pequeno. It’s a straight bar, isn’t it?’

‘Like I said. He’s discreet.’

Wiri held a beaker with a straw to Rob’s mouth. Rob drank and nodded for Wiri to take it away.

‘McDowell flew up to Auckland Sunday night and returned mid-afternoon Tuesday. I checked. Didn’t book his flight until the last moment. It’s him. I’m sure it is.’

‘So what happened that night?’

‘I got there early. I wasn’t going to actually meet him. I just wanted to know if he was Skyros. You said to find out more, and it would be relevant, him and Tracey, eh?’

Judd sighed.

‘I’d told him I’d be wearing a red t-shirt. I wasn’t. I got there early and sat at the back, in one of the booths. I was going to slip out the back as soon as I saw him. All the bars and restaurants there share the same toilets. I could exit from the Japanese restaurant upstairs, straight onto Princes St.’

‘So what happened?’

‘He didn’t show. I waited for almost an hour. Then I left.’

‘Through the front door, that goes into the alley?’

‘Sure. No reason not to.’

The nurse stuck her head around the door. ‘You’ve got two minutes more.’

‘I won’t be long.’ Judd turned back to Randall. ‘And that’s when he attacked you.’

‘Must have.’

‘I don’t understand. Why would he beat you up? And anyway, he didn’t know what you looked like.’

Randall stuck out his bottom lip. ‘I’ve been thinking about that. He’d seen me at the gym. He was looking out for a gay man to leave a straight bar. Who knows?’

‘Unless it’s got nothing to do with him and you were the latest gay bashing victim.’

‘Yeah. It’s possible.’

Judd tapped his fingers on the notebook. ‘Okay. I’ll give the IT guys this, but what we really need is McDowell’s. The trouble is, the bloke owns a communication company: he’s got access to tons of this gear and if he’s as neurotic as we think he is he’s not going to leave an easy trail.’ He rose.

‘What’s happening with the case?’

The nurse was back. ‘Guys?’

Judd held up his hand. ‘A second girl’s gone missing. She works at Sunnyview, the same rest home McDowell’s mother’s in.’

Randall tried to push himself up. ‘So that means ...’

Judd put a hand on Randall’s chest to stop him. ‘Take it easy. If it is him, we’ll get him. One way or another.’

‘Five minutes, that’s all I can give you, I’m afraid. I’ve got six staff off sick, one missing, my clinical manager’s just handed in her notice ...’

Judd raised an eyebrow and followed Noeline Driver, the rest home manager, into her office. She was short and dark; a powerhouse of energy.

‘Take a seat.’ Bossy. A typical nurse.

‘The first thing we did was ring her home number, then her mobile – no answer. We rang her mother, her next of kin according to our records, and she was no help at all. No help.’ She leaned forward. ‘Drinking

problem. I don't know. It's just what I've been told. So, whether she saw Larayne on the Saturday or the Thursday, well, who would know? She's gone.' She tapped her temple. 'Wet brain.'

Priest had come to the same conclusion.

'Tell me about ...'

'Larayne? Good girl. Did her job. Got on with the residents too.'

'Reliable?'

'Not exactly. Very few of them are. Not at her age.'

'So when she didn't show up?'

'I just thought, here we go. She'd done it before. But not for a while. I thought she'd settled down.'

'And what time did her shift start on the ...'

'Tuesday? Seven a.m. Seven till three. Four days on, two off. The morning shift. Preps the residents' breakfasts, gets them up. Showered and dressed.'

Judd tapped his biro against his teeth. Sometimes you had to let people tell it their way. 'And before that, she'd been working on the Saturday. Is that right?'

'Correct. Like I said. Four on, two off. But was she happy? Did she have any problems? No idea. You'll have to ask the girls.' She picked up a sheaf of paper and knocked it against her desk, then reached for a paper clip. 'Caroline or Amy, they'd know. She never came to me with anything, put it that way.' She pointed the paper at him. 'And they do! Believe me, they do!'

'She worked in which unit?'

'Rata.'

'I know it.'

'Of course you do.' She stood. His five minutes were up. 'Let yourself in. Talk to the girls. They'll be able to help you.'

Ruth, the RN, saw him walk in and ambled over with her sailor's swagger. Yet another person waiting for a new hip. 'How're you doing? Come into the office.'

The nurses' station was tiny, just room for one desk, two chairs, and a shelf of lever-arch files. Minutes of meetings hung from the notice board. There was a half-finished box of Cadbury's chocolates on the desk, which she pushed towards him. 'Go on. Save my waistline.'

He went straight for the nougat, his favourite. 'You must get a lot of this.'

She widened her eyes. 'I used to be a size fourteen. Hard to believe now, eh?' She slapped her midriff, laughed and leaned forward. 'Is it true no-one's seen her?'

Judd nodded.

'Don't like the sound of that.'

'Her last shift here was on the Saturday, right?'

'Yeah. The morning shift.'

'How did she seem that day. Any different to usual?'

'No.'

'What was she like?'

Ruth put her head to one side and looked at her shoes. 'She was patient. Didn't ... flap like some do.' She looked up at him again. 'And we've got a few challenging residents. Just because they're old, don't think they're too ill to give us the run around, oh no'. She smiled. 'They're not all as easy as Stan.'

He smiled. 'I can imagine. So the old folk liked her?'

'Yes, she was popular.' Her hand shot to her mouth. 'Listen to me, talking as if ...'

'Let's not jump to any conclusions. Was she worried at all? In any trouble?'

‘No, I don’t think so. But Amy’s working today, you should check with her. I’m not sure where she is right now.’ She stood. ‘Come on, we’ll try and find her.’

God, these places were warm. Judd took out a handkerchief and wiped his brow.

‘I hope you’re not coming down with anything,’ Ruth said.

Nurses, they didn’t miss a trick. He followed Ruth back into the lounge and through the corridors, where she stuck her head around various doors.

‘Who specifically did she care for?’ he asked. ‘Which residents? They do have set residents, don’t they?’

‘Sure. She’d be looking after ...’ she stopped to tick them off on her fingers. ‘Barry Norris, Mrs Oakwood, Daphne Pitt, Doris McDowell and old Mrs Dittrich.’

‘I suppose the carers get to know the families well?’

‘Sometimes. Depends on the family. Some don’t visit that much.’

‘She’d have known Mrs McDowell’s son, though?’

‘Scott? Sure.’ She turned and looked at him. ‘Why do you ask?’

Judd scratched his right eyebrow, remembering McDowell with his mother, the last time he was here. ‘I’ve seen him around. The girls seem to like him.’

She snorted. ‘Not half as much as he likes himself.’

‘Larayne. Did she ... like him?’

She gave him a long look. ‘Like I said, she was a good girl. And sensible. Here’s Amy now.’

Amy would have been in her early twenties. She was at a PC with a woman Judd assumed was a resident. ‘Amy’s helping Rena to Skype her daughter in Ireland.’ Ruth stood, hands on hips. ‘I’ll leave you here. Amy, are you going to be long? Mr Judd here ...’ She turned to him and

grimaced. ‘Sorry, Senior Sergeant Judd, wants a word with you. About Larayne.’

Amy glanced up. ‘I can talk now, if you like. Rena’s alright by herself for a minute, aren’t you, Rena?’

Judd stood to one side, watching. Considering her age, Rena seemed quite at home in front of the screen. He hadn’t Skyped anyone himself yet. He squinted at the PC, noting the logo stuck onto the monitor: gold letters on a black background ... MCC Technology, the name of McDowell’s communication company.

He pointed to two seats in front of a window a few metres away. ‘Can we go over there?’

He ran his hand over the stained seat before sitting down.

‘It’s alright. They’re dry. But I don’t blame you for checking, eh?’

Amy didn’t miss a trick. It was a good sign. ‘Now, as you know, Amy, we’re trying to find Larayne. Seems no-one’s seen her since the Sunday after her last shift. Do you have any idea where she might be? Was she in any trouble? Worried about anything? Money? Boyfriend?’

Amy’s brow creased. ‘Not really. She’d been a bit upset with Tamati being away. She hates being by herself at night. But they have those long family funerals and all that, don’t they, Maori? Tangis. He couldn’t help it.’

That reminded him: he made a mental note to check whether Priest had got hold of Greg Lamarr yet.

‘But Larayne and Tamati, they were ... tight?’

‘Yeah. Sweet.’

‘No money worries?’

‘Well, everyone has money worries. Especially working here! But nothing, you know, nothing different from usual.’

‘What about outside of work. Does she have any close friends?’

Amy shrugged. 'She has a mate in Waimate. She goes up there a bit.'

'We're trying to contact her. Anyone else?'

'A couple of schoolmates ... Ask Tamati, he'll know.'

'Has she been happy working here?'

Amy started picking at her thumb.

'What was it?'

Amy screwed up her face. 'Her and Tamati want to move closer to work, over this way, but they have a long lease on the house. Her car's shit, which is a worry. She's had to get a taxi a few times, which is a joke considering how much we get paid.'

'Anything else?'

'Look, the work here, it's okay. The residents can make or break it. You need your mates. You need to work together. On Saturday we were working one short. Seems every shift there's more jobs to do, or someone not turned up. Last Saturday the manager came in and was rounding people up to go to training, on Monday. What was it, caring for the dying, or something? The trouble is, they lay on all this training, but they don't pay you to go. Can you believe it? Normally Larayne can take it, but on Saturday she was pissed off.' She sucked on the side of her thumb. 'They were talking about going to Oz, her and Tamati. Reckoned she could earn twice as much there.'

'So, when she didn't turn up on Tuesday?'

'I thought she'd chucked it in. Had enough.'

'Amy?' It looked as though the old lady had finished. They stood up.

'So you weren't that worried?'

'Well, I thought she might've told me, but, you know ... people come and go in these jobs.'

He nodded. 'By the way, that's a nice bit of equipment.' He pointed to the PC.

‘Yeah. They’re cool. Much quicker than our old ones, eh?’

‘That logo, on the front. Did it come from Scott McDowell?’

‘Yeah. He gave us three. One for each unit.’

‘I only heard about the switchboard. Did he give you anything else?’

‘Dunno. You’ll have to ask the manager. He might’ve given us a camera, or something.’

‘Must have saved you a lot of money.’

‘I guess. Not sure they’re exactly new, though. One broke the other week and he fixed it. He was here most of Saturday.’

‘Yesterday?’

‘No, Saturday before.’

‘Wouldn’t your IT people do that?’

‘You’re joking! We’ve only got one guy. Never see him. The manager says it’s quicker to buy a new one!’

‘When you say he was here most of the day ...’

‘He was. He came and went a bit. His mum’s not been well. But he got it fixed. He’s here some nights. Waits till everyone’s in bed and checks the ... you know, the firewalls and stuff. Makes sure they’re up to date.’ She turned to the old lady. ‘All finished, Rena? Better get her back.’

‘Sure.’

‘Hey, you don’t think anything bad has happened to Larayne, do you?’

Judd jingled the change in his trouser pockets. ‘Not sure, Amy. It could be something or nothing. We’ll have to wait and see.’

He waited until Amy had settled Rena in her walker frame and was leading her down the corridor before he leaned over the PC and reopened Firefox. He typed the letter J in the search bar and checked the history. He took out his phone.

‘Rain-man? We need another warrant.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Monday 18th March

He caught his boss, Burgess, between meetings the following morning and told him about the PCs at the rest home.

‘I couldn’t read the screen. Password protected.’

The two men looked at one another.

‘When will we get the results?’

‘By the end of tomorrow, with any luck.’

‘And Randall’s doing well? That’s something. A bit awkward though, all this.’ He puffed out his cheeks. ‘Are you sure ...?’

‘Not sure of anything yet.’

‘Well, make sure you are before you pull him in. The whole thing could explode in our face.’ Burgess stepped back and stared at him. ‘Are you alright? You look flushed.’

‘No, I’m fine. It’s the heat.’

‘Hmm. Make sure that’s all it is.’

Back at his desk, Judd leaned over Tracey’s phone, rubbing his eyes and re-examining the list of all calls received by Tracey in the weeks around her disappearance. It didn’t take long to sift through. The numbers that featured most heavily belonged to her mother, father, Nicki and Rosie. Just the three texts from Finkel to Tracey, but numerous calls from other friends, and no numbers unidentified. He tapped his fingers on the desk. As always, it was what was missing that told the story.

Priest caught up with him mid-afternoon. The results were in from the check on the till at Sails cafe. ‘It was a bit of a mission, but worth it. At

eleven thirty-seven on Valentine's Day, Lamarr used his eftpos card to buy a bottle of water.'

'Oh, he did, eh?'

'Yep. And at two twenty-three, guess who paid for a flat white and a bran muffin?'

Judd raised an eyebrow. 'Go on.'

'McDowell.'

Judd jingled the change in his trouser pocket. 'Anything else?'

'Ah, Tracey's gran was in just after four. I didn't recognise any other names.'

'So either Lamarr or McDowell could have left the valentine card for Tracey.'

'What do you reckon?'

'We'll see.'

After Priest left, Judd paced his office. He wondered what time The Poolstation opened, or whether it was one of those places that stayed open all day. And most of the night. He reached into his drawer, took out the pool balls Little had been juggling the other day and slipped them into his jacket pocket.

The pool hall wasn't bad, although he could imagine it getting lively later. The music was muted and bearable, the decor suitably calm, plain brick walls and timber, and the tables clean and solid. He recognized the man behind the bar as Sean Lewis, the manager who had helped them out a few years back, when a spate of burglaries in the area had linked back to one of his long-term guests. Like him, Lewis had married a Kiwi. He'd been in New Zealand about ten years.

Lewis was trying to place him, too, so he took out his badge to put him out of his misery.

‘I was hoping to catch up with your barman.’

‘And which one would that be?’

Judd hesitated. ‘Neil?’

‘Neil Nevin?’

‘Yes. One of my detectives interviewed him a couple of weeks back.’

‘What about?’

‘Is he here?’

‘I sacked the lazy sod. I’ve got myself another. A girl. Better workers all round.’ Lewis picked up a glass and poured a half pint from the Bookbinder tap. It looked good. Lewis must have seen him looking. ‘Can I fix you a pint?’

Judd shook his head. ‘Just a lemonade, thanks.’ He took the three balls out of his jacket pocket. ‘Lost any of these?’

‘Don’t think so. Where did you find them?’

‘On the wrong side of certain windows.’

‘Nope. Not mine.’ Lewis held an empty pint glass to the light. ‘That business over our light-fingered friend, upstairs. That’ll be a while ago now?’

‘About two years.’

‘That long?’ He filled the glass with lemonade, handed it over and raised his own. ‘Sláinte.’

Judd drank thirstily.

‘Now, what was it you wanted Neil for again, or is that none of my business?’

A large truck drew up outside. Lewis took Judd’s money, flicked on the lights over a table in the far corner and pointed to the rack of cues. ‘Help yourself to a cue if you want. I won’t be long.’

At the lit table Judd drained his glass, belched and placed the empty glass on the high wooden shelf that ran the length of the room. He’d

forgotten how small these tables were. If he stretched he could almost touch the far pocket. He lifted the triangle from the balls and hung it under the table before leaning over and taking the break. One striped ball flew into the side pocket, one into the far right. He cracked off another few shots. The balls were so big in comparison to the size of the table it was child's play. After a while Lewis reappeared and stood with his arms crossed, watching.

‘Would you consider entering one of our tournaments, now?’

Judd potted the number five. ‘Nah, my show days are over.’ He leaned back over the table and nudged the number seven into the middle pocket. ‘You get many taking part?’

Lewis squinted through one eye. ‘Just about every table's full.’

‘Can't be bad for business. How often do you hold them?’

‘About every six weeks.’

Judd nodded. He chalked his cue. ‘You had one about three weeks ago, so Neil was telling us.’

‘We did indeed.’

‘It was the same night the young girl disappeared, down at St Clair.’

‘Now that was a terrible business.’

Judd rested his cue against the table and picked up his glass. ‘He was working that night. I wanted to check a few details with him.’

‘Well, perhaps I can help you there. Being here myself.’

‘You were?’

‘Sure. In fact I was here longer than Neil. The little gob-shite, trying to ring in sick and all. I knew he was down the surf champs. I told him, you get your sorry arse down here pronto or don't come back.’

Judd nodded. ‘You'd have been busy, what with the tournament.’ He returned to the game, Lewis watching as he cleaned the table. Three balls remained.

‘You’ll be wanting to go for the nine next?’

Judd ignored him and smacked the number eight into the far pocket, the nine into the middle, before finishing with a beautifully controlled tap on the black. He stood away and picked up his empty glass.

‘Shall I get you another?’

‘Yeah, go on.’

By the time Lewis returned Judd had placed six balls slightly off centre of the table, in the shape of a butterfly. He took the glass. ‘Thanks.’ He couldn’t make out why he was so thirsty. ‘So, although Neil came in that night, you still sacked him? Why was that?’

‘I tell you, nine o’clock he shows up. Strolling in like he’s the manager and I’m the barman, do you know? I tell you, that night was a complete cock-up. Didn’t we run out of Emersons? It was his job to check. He’s a lazy little shite. That’s why I let him go.’

Judd placed the white just above the line of six balls. He glanced up at Lewis. ‘Running out of beer; that’s what I’d call an expensive mistake?’

‘Potentially. Luckily most of the kids like the bottled stuff.’

Judd stood over the white, and gave it a good crack. Each ball dropped into a different pocket. He still had it.

‘You’re showing off, now.’

‘True.’

‘Beer or no beer though, the takings could have been better.’

Judd placed ten balls in a line towards the upper half of the table. He stood for a minute at the lower end and looked at them before squatting and peering down the table. ‘How’s that? There’s more profit on bottled beer, surely?’

‘Oh there is, but the night started late, so I lost out there. A double whammy as they say.’

Placing the white ball onto the green, Judd froze. ‘When you say the night started late, you mean things didn’t pick up until later, or ...?’

‘No, no, the tournament started late. It was a nightmare. First I’m stranded here on my own. Then the beer runs out. Then, to cap it all, the bus from Invercargill breaks down and they have to wait for another to arrive from Dunedin to pick them up.’

Judd chalked his cue three times before blowing the dust off, away from the table. ‘So, how late exactly did the tournament start?’

‘Oh, about an hour. It was up and running by eight thirty, but only just.’ A shout came from the bar. Lewis held up his hand in acknowledgement. ‘Still, we got there in the end. It was a one-off. It’s not likely to happen again, thank God.’

Lewis walked back to the bar. Judd stood for a moment studying the ten balls on the table. Finally, he took a deep breath and tapped the white. Before it reached the far right pocket it had cracked each of the ten balls into the same pocket, one after the other. Just after the last ball went in, the white followed.

He still had it.

Judd left work just after six and headed for a swim. The weather had turned overcast again and the pool was quiet, which usually meant he could power up and down the lane and get his brain going, but today his arms and legs felt as cumbersome as tree trunks. He chose breaststroke for a change and swam low in the water, with just his head protruding, like an alligator.

Fiona was nowhere to be seen. It shouldn’t matter. It didn’t. Not really. It was just a spark missing, one that helped him get through the day.

Rosie avoided eye contact with him as he walked through the cafe. He pushed open the glass doors onto the street. It was high tide and the sea slapped listlessly against the rocks. The scent of seaweed was strong.

Fewer than a dozen cars were parked along the front, and the day had a feeling of having ended already, although it was not yet seven. Kate hadn't been home since the wedding. Rea must have told her. She'd rung to say said she'd pop over tonight for a chat. It was the last thing he felt like.

Approaching his car, his phone rang. He took the call, turning his back to the road and leaning against the railing. It was Reid. They had found Tracey's handbag.

'Where?'

'In some bushes in the green belt. Lachlan Avenue. Looks like it may have been thrown from a car.'

Judd drew a mental picture. Lachlan Avenue wasn't the most direct route back to the city, unless you were heading towards the north end of town. But some driver had looked over, seen Tracey's handbag still on the passenger seat, and thrown it out of the window. Someone heading north.

'Fingerprints? DNA?'

'It's with the team now.'

'Was the bag intact?'

'Appears to be. Purse, credit cards, the usual.'

'How long will they be?'

'They said we'd have it tomorrow morning.'

'Good.' Not that it would make much difference now. He knew all he needed to know. He rang off. Time to get home and face the music.

'Been swimming? Not on company time, surely?' Startled, Judd turned. McDowell. Jesus, he couldn't get away from the man. Butkus strained at the leash. McDowell yanked him back, hard. The man looked as though he had lost a penny and found a pound.

'Good to see our police keeping themselves fit. We don't want a bunch of pretty boys keeping us safe at night, eh Butkus?'

With that McDowell turned and walked away, springing on the balls of his feet like Jack the bloody lad.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Tuesday 19th March

Judd stood in the middle of St Kilda beach, and shivered in the sharp sea breeze. His head felt like an oversized pumpkin and every step he took, hurt. He forced himself in the direction of Lawyer's Head, driving his feet into the soft sand trying to work up a sweat. There was a lot to be done.

Before long the crash and hiss of the sea was overtaken by the rasp of his own breath. The paracetamol had yet to kick in, if it ever would. He stopped and finished his bottle of water. He felt like shit. It was a bad day to do business. He pulled out his phone and rang the squad room. Reid was to pick up the ex-boyfriend, Harry Finkel, and bring him in. He told Priest where he was. By the time he reached the road, Priest was waiting.

'No car?'

Judd opened the glove compartment and searched for more paracetamol. 'I fancied a walk. Got any water?'

Priest handed over his bottle. 'You look like crap.'

'Thanks.' Judd washed two tablets down and pulled a face. He held the water bottle up to the light and passed it back. He had needed the walk, but the truth was he was probably still over the limit. After Kate's visit last night, he'd consoled himself with alcohol. It was starting to become a habit. Again.

'Coffee first. By then Rain-man should have brought in Finkel.'

'Talking of coffee, our barista, Lamarr, is back at home. You still want me to bring him in?'

He shook his head. 'No need.'

‘It would have saved everyone a lot of time and money if you had told us the truth from the start.’

Finkel was staring down at his lap. ‘I dunno what you mean.’

‘Yes, you do.’

Judd waited. Finkel tried a laugh. It didn’t work. He took a deep breath, and placed his hands on the table, palms up. He looked from Judd to Priest, and back again. ‘Hey guys, c’mon. I really don’t know what you’re on about.’

Judd kept his voice low. ‘It’s okay. We know you didn’t mean to kill her.’

‘What? I didn’t. I didn’t kill her. I keep telling you. You’re crazy, man.’

‘The pool competition. It started late,’ said Priest. ‘Your alibi is blown.’

Finkel sat in silence. ‘Nah. I ... I don’t know what you’re going on about. What’s that got to do with anything?’

‘The only reason you had an alibi at all is that we were told the tournament started at seven thirty.’ Priest continued. ‘It didn’t. The coach broke down.’

Finkel was shaking his head. ‘So? Like I said, I played pool. Got witnesses, the lot.’

Judd leaned towards Finkel. ‘Why don’t I tell you what I think happened? Make it easier for you?’

Finkel shrugged. His face was pink.

‘You did walk your dog that night, but earlier than when you said. You were meeting the lads at The Poolstation, but you wanted to catch the surf champs, so you walked the dog early, which is why nobody could remember seeing you at the dog park.’

Finkel wouldn’t look at him.

‘You’d split from Tania the week before. You realised she was behind the photo, and what a piece of poison she was, so when you saw Tracey leaving the cafe that evening you called out to her, and she got into your car. Am I right?’

Finkel shook his head. ‘You’re crazy.’

‘She got into your car and you drove up to Ross Creek, where you’d been hanging about most of the summer. We’ve seen your initials on the valve tower. We know you’ve been there.’

Finkel shrugged. ‘So? It’s not a crime.’

‘When one or two of your lot need a bit of privacy you go down to the camp, near the water’s edge, right? That’s where you took her that night, isn’t it?’

Still nothing from Finkel.

‘Okay, let me tell you how I think it happened. You’d broken up with Tania, and you wanted Tracey back. But she’d been winding you up. She wouldn’t have sex with you. She’d witnessed her best mate get pregnant and she was worried she’d end up that way herself. Am I right? So, here’s the thing. You stop and call her over. She’s pleased. She thinks you’ve missed her and want her back. She thinks you now respect the fact she doesn’t want to go all the way, and gets in the car quite happily. You, on the other hand, seeing how happy she is to see you, thinks she’s decided it’s better to have sex with you than to lose you to someone else. You think it’s all on. So you take her to the camp at the water’s edge. You start making out. Then Tracey tries to stop you. You fight. She gets up and runs; you run after her and in your anger you pull her backwards and she falls down and smashes her head on the rocks.’

‘Or did you pick up a rock and hit her with it?’ said Priest. ‘She was just a tease. Having you on. She deserved it. Little tart. Is that what you thought?’

‘You’d been shagging Tania for weeks,’ Judd added.

‘Tania let you do it.’

‘Why wouldn’t Tracey?’

‘What a prick-tease.’

‘A little slut.’

‘She had it coming.’

‘So you smashed her over the head and threw her into the water.’

‘That’d teach her a lesson.’

They stopped and looked at him. ‘She was still alive, you know,’ said Judd, quietly. ‘When she went into the water.’

Finkel’s head shot up. He looked from Judd to Priest and back again. ‘No she wasn’t. She wasn’t. She was dead.’

Judd raised an eyebrow.

‘She was dead, I tell you.’ Finkel jumped to his feet. ‘Don’t you try and lay this on me. It was an accident. No way was she still alive. No fucking way!’

‘Sit down. SIT!’

Finkel lowered himself back onto his chair.

‘There was water in her lungs,’ Judd said. ‘She was unconscious when she entered the water. She drowned.’ They waited. ‘Why don’t you tell us what happened. From the start.’

Finkel crossed his arms, holding them tight against his body. He looked to the right, staring into the far corner of the room. He was breathing heavily, trying hard not to cry.

‘No rush,’ said Judd. ‘Just tell us what happened.’

‘I went down for the champs,’ Finkel said, softly. Judd leaned forward to hear. ‘I saw Tracey. She got in the car and we went to Ross Creek.’

‘That was your mum’s car you were driving that night?’

He nodded. ‘Mine had failed its warrant. She said she’d kill me if she found me driving it.’

‘Go on.’

‘So, when we got there, we just sat and talked. You know.’

‘Where was this exactly?’

‘On a bench, near the tower. There were some other kids on the pier, so we just sat on the bench, talking.’

‘Okay. And then?’

‘Then, after a while, we walked for a bit, and we ended up in the den. It’s private, you know?’ He took a deep breath, dug around in his pocket and pulled out a tissue. ‘And we started ... making up. And then one thing led to another ...’ He blew his nose. He glanced from Judd to Priest and back again. He was starting to cry. ‘Look, she wanted to. I didn’t force her! She wanted to. I wasn’t going to argue, was I?’ He rubbed the tissue over his eyes.

Judd nodded. ‘So, you started to make out.’

‘Yeah. And like, we’re doing it, you know. And it’s all okay, it’s cool, but then she starts to push me off. Tells me to stop. She’d changed her mind, like ... only ...’ Tears welled again. He was panicking. ‘But then, it’s not easy, okay? But I do, I stop. And she gets up and starts running off. I’m calling after her. By the time I, you know, get my keks back on ... she’s gone. Disappeared.’ He wiped his eyes. ‘At first I didn’t care. I just sat there, stewing. I was going to drive home, leave her there. Stupid bitch. Then I calmed down. I liked her, I really did. So I got up and went to find her.’ He started ripping the tissue into tiny pieces.

‘It took me ages. I thought she was hiding. Sulking. I thought I’d upset her. I walk all the way back to the car, but she’s not there. I think maybe she’s gone home without me, but it’s a long way, too far to walk. So I trace my footsteps back, and I’m standing on the walkway between the two lakes and I ... and I see something, a bit of orange down by the water.’ His face crumbled, suddenly he was blubbing. ‘Man, she’s just lying there. On her back. Near the channel, not far from where we’d been. She’s ... she’s

on her back, not moving. I go over, I grab her and pull her head up ... there's ...' He held his finger to his ear. His breath was coming fast. He was in danger of hyperventilating.

'Okay, take your time. There's no rush. In and out slowly. Take it easy, son.'

Finkel took a couple of shaky breaths. They waited.

'There was b ... blood ... coming out of her ear. The back of her head, it's ... I felt for a pulse. There was nothing. Nothing I could do. She was dead.'

Judd pushed the box of tissues towards him. Finkel took a handful and blew his nose.

'I didn't kill her! She was dead. Right?'

'And then?'

'She was dead. I dropped her. I let her go. She sort of rolled, went right under the water. I ran. I mean, I panicked. You would, wouldn't you?'

'Explain?'

'Think about it ... We'd just, you know, and ... then she's ... I can't prove it, can I? You'll all think I raped her. But I didn't. I didn't kill her and I didn't rape her, either. It was an accident.' He was looking from Judd to Priest and back again, pleading. 'It was an accident. It was. Please. You've got to believe me!'

By the time Judd returned from telling the Wenlocks the truth about Tracey's death, the results were back on the PCs from the rest home. Someone had been in the chat room with Randall on and off throughout Saturday, and into the night. Judd got on the phone to the manager. Any number of people could testify that McDowell was the only one with access to that PC on Saturday, and they had footage of him re-entering the building at eight that evening, should they need it.

'And you think he's our guy?' Burgess asked.

‘I’m sure of it.’

‘Throw the book at him.’

‘Don’t worry. It’ll be a pleasure.’

To begin with McDowell simply sat there, listening to the results of their search of the rest home PC. They recommended he contacted his lawyer, but he shrugged off their advice.

‘I don’t need a lawyer. I’m not the one they should be locking up.’

‘Why’s that then?’

He blew down his nose, shaking his head. ‘I’m the victim in this, not that little ponce.’

Judd tapped his biro against the desk. ‘For the record, you’re referring to DC Randall?’

‘Didn’t know he was a one of you, did I?’

‘So, why did you do it?’

‘To teach him a lesson, of course.’

Judd sat back and watched, again making the comparison between dog and owner. Bull-mastiffs, once aroused, seldom back down.

‘Trolling around the chat rooms, trying to trick me. Wanted a cheap thrill, did he? I gave him a thrill all right.’

Priest went to speak but Judd kicked his ankle.

‘I slipped in. Saw him sitting there, hiding at the back. Checking his watch, looking at the door. I’d spotted him around the gyms, and there he was. Waiting for me.’ He leaned forward over the table. ‘You think I wouldn’t recognise a poofter sitting there, in the pub, waiting?’

‘You responded to DC Randall’s ... ad, in the Jockroom chat room, is that correct?’

‘I did.’

‘And you arranged to meet him. Is that also correct?’

‘Correct again.’

‘So, why is that? Why bother going to the trouble of arranging to meet someone? What’s in it for you?’

‘What’s in it for me?’ He sat back in the chair. ‘What’s in it for me? It’s about keeping the streets safe for normal, honest, hard-working guys like us. I’ve told you before. I don’t know ... the world’s gone crazy. Rights for this, rights for that. Gay bloody marriage. I mean, whatever happened to morals, to old-fashioned values, eh? Come on, Judd. You’re like me. Back in the day, blokes like us knew where we stood. Not any more. I don’t know how you do your job. Take Auckland. Look what immigration’s done to house prices there. You’re telling me there’s nothing wrong when the average Kiwi can’t afford to buy a house in his own country? The Asian communities are growing by three percent a year; our European culture’s being diluted. Stripped away. Everything’s got ...’

‘What?’

He frowned. ‘Twisted. Distorted. It’s like, you and me, we don’t count any more. Suddenly, we’re the problem. What a joke!’

Judd sighed. ‘Getting back to the matter in hand. You saw DC Randall waiting for you in Pequeno, and then what?’

‘Hmm? Oh, I went outside and I waited.’

‘How long?’

‘Long enough.’

‘And when Randall walked out?’

‘Yeah, I rearranged his pretty little face.’ He winked at Judd. ‘Showed him what happens to scum who try and trap an innocent man.’ He frowned, looking down. ‘Took me ages to clean my boots.’

Judd blinked, remembering the trophy he’d seen in McDowell’s lounge, for kick-boxing. ‘But you were in the chat room. How was DC Randall trapping you? He had every right to assume you were homosexual.’

‘No, no Judd. That’s where you’re wrong. Scum like him? They’ve got no rights.’

Judd crossed his arms and put his head to one side. ‘You know, you still haven’t told us where you were the Saturday Tracey disappeared. Where were you really? That was a long walk you took. Where did you go? It only takes ten minutes to get to the end of Second Beach and back.’

Now McDowell was looking at him as if he were the mad one.

‘Butkus had just come back from the kennels. Maybe you went along the beach to St Kilda, to give him a longer walk than usual? Come up in Kettle Park, did you?’

McDowell smoothed his hand through his hair. ‘Keep to the subject, Judd. Keep to the subject. Are we talking about nancy boy here, or what?’

Judd ignored him. ‘You see, the same evening Tracey went missing and you took your dog on a two-hour hike, a man was badly beaten in a public toilet in Kettle Park.’

‘So?’

‘We know you were at Kettle Park that Saturday. The man you bashed ended up in hospital where they recovered traces of saliva. When we took your DNA the other day, we got a match.’ Now it was time for Judd to lean forward in his seat. ‘We’re running your DNA past all the recent gay bashings in Dunedin, then we’re going to start checking out Auckland and Melbourne. By the time you go in front of the judge, McDowell, you’re going to have a list of convictions as long as my arm.’ The vein at McDowell’s temple was dancing the can-can. ‘They’ll put you away so long, sunshine, we’ll probably have to put your dog down.’

McDowell jumped to his feet and made to rush Judd. ‘You tell the judge what you like, Judd, I’m not worried. If he’s a decent bloke, he’ll understand.’

Priest, between them, pushed McDowell against the wall.

‘I should get a medal for what I did,’ McDowell yelled, to Judd’s turned back. ‘You hear me? A bloody medal!’

It had been another long day. Judd got Priest to drive him home. Despite having cleared two cases in one day, he felt strangely unsatisfied. The wind had picked up. He unwound the passenger window, flooding the car with fresh air.

‘Finkel must have thought it was his lucky day when his alibi checked out,’ said Priest, ‘Sorry about that. I should have checked with the manager.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘He was off with the flu.’

Judd inclined his head. ‘Well the upside is, if we’d nailed Finkel at the start we’d never have questioned McDowell and linked him to the gay bashings.’

An overloaded trailer bumped down Portsmouth Drive in front of them, various pieces of furniture tied together with frayed rope. Priest put on his brakes and kept his distance.

‘Anyway, we’d’ve got there in the end. There were other signs.’

‘Like?’

‘He was the only one not to contact Tracey after she disappeared. A few texts in the weeks before, but afterwards, no email, no texts. Everyone else was texting like crazy, but from Finkel, nothing.’

‘True. And when we interviewed Finkel the morning after his night in the cells, and he claimed he was at the park that night, the dog walker couldn’t remember him.’

‘Exactly. Because he walked the dog much earlier than he said. He was at St Clair by six fifteen, picking up Tracey.’

‘True, true.’ Priest pulled down the visor.

Judd fished about in his pocket. Not finding sunglasses, he pulled down his visor and squinted. They crossed the causeway onto the peninsula in silence. There were two boys fishing, a yellow bucket on the ground between them. The walk and cycleway was busy with early evening joggers.

Priest indicated right and turned up Doon St, carried out a swift three-point turn and pulled in outside Judd's house. Kate's car was parked. Not more bloody talk.

'Are we going to charge him?'

'Sorry?'

'Finkel?'

'That's Burgess's call.' Judd looked straight ahead.

'So Finkel sent the valentine card?'

'Funny you should ask that. No, it was Tracey's gran.'

'What?'

'Yeah. I asked her this afternoon, when I went to tell to June and Brian about Tracey. Seems she thought an anonymous card might cheer Tracey up.'

'You're kidding me?'

'She was in the cafe with her mates and left it on the seat for Tracey to find.'

Priest pulled at a cotton thread on his jacket and a button rolled to the floor. 'It never occurred to her that Tracey might find it, what'd she call it, spooky?'

'Different generation. More innocent times.'

'Fair enough.' Priest fished around by his feet for the errant button. 'Thinking about McDowell.'

'Yes?'

'What makes someone like him ... well, so extreme?'

‘Dunno. Repressed homosexual? Probably had it beaten out of him by his father. You know what they say: if you can’t join them, beat them. The way things are going ...’ Judd turned his head and sneezed. ‘Oh, sorry. The way things are going, one day, wanting to beat it out of your son might seem as antiquated as sending a valentine card.’

‘Maybe.’ Priest opened the driver window. ‘You’d better get inside. I reckon you’re getting the flu.’

Judd was crossing the road when Priest called out. ‘So how does someone as twisted as McDowell get to run such a successful business, then? I don’t get it.’

Judd stopped and shook his head, ‘You know, Priest? For a detective, you’ve led a very sheltered life.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Sunday 1 April

Outside in the still air, a low dense cloud hung over the harbour, blocking out all but the very top of the hills. From the comfort of his green leather armchair, Judd took in the view. If he ignored the pines over there, he could almost be seeing the area as it was before the settlers arrived. He was going to miss this house.

His phone was blinking. He checked the message: just Burgess bringing him up to date. They had matched McDowell's DNA to four other attacks on gay men in Dunedin and Auckland. He had been charged with grievous bodily harm on five counts and was presently at Milton prison awaiting trial.

A thump from above, and another, then Kate's footsteps on the stairs. When finally succumbed to the flu, Kate had temporarily moved back in to fetch hot drinks, cold drinks, tissues, more blankets, to dispense pills and force homemade soup down him. She was still packing. He'd been too ill for them to talk any further, but perhaps it had all been said.

On her way to the laundry she paused in the doorway and stood looking at him, her arms full of his dirty sheets. There were dark circles under her eyes. This hadn't been easy for either of them. 'What?' he asked. 'What is it?'

'Do you hate me?'

'Oh, Kate.'

He held out his arms and she dropped the sheets and rushed to him, kneeling in front of his chair with her head against his chest. 'I'm so

sorry,' she sobbed. 'I'm so sorry. I didn't want to hurt you.' He pulled her up onto his lap and let her cry. They sat, holding one another and looking out over the harbour, over their view.

'Are you happy?' he asked, once she had calmed down.

'Yes,' she whispered. She cleared her throat. 'Well, you know.'

He nodded. She'd changed her perfume. He hadn't noticed.

She sniffed and took a tissue from up her sleeve. 'I keep remembering that camping trip we took. To the Lake District. Do you remember?' Her voice was starting to shake.

He shook his head. 'Vaguely.'

'You got chased over a field by a b-bull.' She sat upright and blew her nose. She tried a laugh. 'Only it wasn't a bull, it was a cow, but you were s-such a city b-boy you couldn't tell the difference. I remember thinking I'd have to toughen you up if I was going to br-bring you back to New Zealand.'

She had started to shiver. He stroked her hair, trying to calm her. 'I'm a lot tougher now. You did well.'

'Did I? Did I do the right thing, bringing you here?'

'What makes you ask?'

Fresh tears. She pressed her eyes into her palms, her whole body shaking. 'If you'd stayed in England,' she howled from behind her hands, 'none of this would have happened. You'd have a p-proper family and k-kids ...'

He pulled her close again. 'Hey, hey.' He rocked her. This was old ground. They'd been over this so many times. 'Shush now. We wouldn't have had Beth, would we? Eh? We wouldn't wish that away, would we? Not for anything.' He didn't know what else to say. He squeezed her tighter. If anything, she was crying harder. 'Kate? Come on, girl, you're alright. It's okay ...'

‘No, it isn’t! It isn’t!’ She pushed away, shoving his chest with her hands. He tried to grab her but she slid from his lap to stand and face him. Her face was a mess. Tears and snot streaked her cheeks.

‘Kate?’

‘It’s not okay,’ she wailed. ‘It’s not! You don’t understand! There’s something I have to tell you. Something I should’ve told you years ago.’

The back of his neck felt cold and he swallowed, sensing that whatever she told him next would change everything. It was like being at work. Part of him wanted to stop her; but from habit he said nothing. She turned and made for the tissues, ripping three in quick succession from the box, blowing hard, scrunching the wet tissues together and tossing them towards the bin. Then she ripped out more and again squeezed them into a wad. She glanced over.

‘The thing is,’ she said, starting to pace. ‘The thing I didn’t tell you was. The day Beth ... left, I was next door with Rea. We were baking a cake, remember?’

Yes, he knew that. He remained silent.

‘Well, I’d been upset.’ She wiped the wad of tissue against her eye. ‘Rea had asked if I was going to Purakanui.’ She flapped her hand in front of her face. ‘I wanted to go with her, with the group, but between your work and ... Beth ...’ She took a deep breath. ‘I guess I was feeling trapped. Oh, it sounds so silly now, but back then ... Well, she asked me and I started crying and Rea, she held me and then,’ she shrugged ‘we just, she just ... kissed me.’ Kate stuck her right thumb to her mouth and chewed on its side. ‘Next thing I know, Beth’s calling my name. It took me a second to realise, then I spun around and rushed to the door but she’d gone. I ran straight after her, into our house, right through, I ran, calling her name. Then I realised she must have gone straight out. Her trainers were missing from the back door, so she’d have been going for her run ...’

She stopped pacing and glanced over at him. ‘She was probably just popping over to tell me she was off out. I ran to the front of the house, looked down the road, but she’d gone.’

She started to pace again, arms folded in front of her. ‘What I’m telling you is, she was upset. Because of what she’d seen. Not that I think she did anything silly or anything like that, it’s just that I ... I didn’t tell you.’ She stood across the room, facing him. ‘So, now you know. I should have told you at the time, I was so ... shocked. I just couldn’t think straight.’

He was on his feet. He turned and faced the window where he stood squeezing his hands under his armpits. He was shaking. He had to keep a lid on things. He had to, otherwise ... ‘You were shocked?’ he croaked. He cleared his throat. ‘You couldn’t think straight? Jesus!’ He spun around. ‘You didn’t tell me. All this time?’

‘I didn’t want to upset you.’

‘Didn’t want to upset me? Didn’t want to upset me! You withhold vital information about our daughter and you didn’t want to upset me!’

She was standing on the far side of the dining table. He crossed the room and leaned over. ‘You told me you were in the back of the house. You said nothing about her seeing you with Rea. You said nothing!’ He smashed his fist onto the table. ‘About her being upset.’

‘Look, I’m sorry. It was awkward.’

‘Awkward?’

‘What could I say? Who could I tell? The police are your friends. I couldn’t have them ... whispering about us in the squad room.’

‘Fine. But you could have told me!’

‘I know. But once I hadn’t told you, it got harder ...’

‘Jesus. It’s like talking to someone in the cells!’

‘Look, I was confused. I wasn’t sure what Beth had seen, or even if she had seen anything, I mean.’

‘Why, what else was there to see?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? The poor kid. The poor fucking kid.’ He shook his head. ‘And anyway, what do you mean you were kissing Rea in the fucking kitchen? That was nine years ago. Nine years! How long has this nonsense been going on, eh? How long?’

‘Six months, if that, and it’s not nonsense.’

‘Six months ... Bollocks! Don’t take me for a fucking mug! Don’t fucking lie to me.’

‘I’m not lying to you.’ She blinked. ‘Look, what happened that afternoon ... I was upset, that was all. Afterwards I felt so bad I couldn’t stand to be in the same room as Rea. I made her leave. Why else do you think she moved to Christchurch?’

He shook his head, his voice lowered to a growl. ‘If you’ve been lying to me, all these years. The two of you, laughing behind my fucking back.’

‘Jesus! That’s your one big worry, is it?’ She raised her voice. ‘I tell you our daughter was upset and ran from the house and all you worry about is ... that’s pathetic.’ She crossed back to the tissue box and ripped out another handful. He followed.

‘Don’t you call me pathetic! How do you think I felt at the wedding, eh? Seeing you both together, in the kitchen. And Rea, that cow, looking me straight in the eye and shutting the door in my face?’

‘I didn’t know about that until afterward.’ She wiped her hand over her forehead. ‘Look, I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say.’

‘I’m not surprised! You say nothing nine years ago when our daughter goes missing, because you don’t want people whispering, but you’re happy to snog Rea in the middle of a wedding where half the fucking squad room could have seen you!’ He was right in front of her now. Towering over her. ‘Our daughter goes missing on the same afternoon she sees her mother with another woman and you’re sorry? You knew all this time why Beth ran off and you didn’t tell me once.’

‘For God’ sake. I couldn’t bring it up, even if I had wanted to,’ she yelled back. ‘We barely even mention Beth’s name any more.’

‘That’s not true.’

‘Yes it is. We stopped talking about Beth ages ...’

‘I didn’t,’ he said, prodding her in the chest with his finger. ‘You did.’

‘What?’

‘You stopped.’

‘Me?’ Her face was flushed. She stepped back, pushing his hand away. ‘Me! Every time I tried to mention her name, you’d clam up. Run outside to your ... bloody greenhouse.’

‘I did not.’

‘You did. I never saw you.’ She was on the attack now. ‘You were either at work or in the bloody garden. Do you have any idea how lonely I was? Eh?’

‘Well, at least I wasn’t hanging around a bunch of weirdos and kooks, paying out good money to hear them get out their ... their fucking crystal balls and wang on about God-only-knows what ...’

‘Ah! I should have known it would come down to money.’ She grabbed her bag from the coffee table. ‘Here, I’ll write you a cheque, shall I? Reimburse you for all those readings.’

‘Stop being stupid.’

‘I’m not the one being stupid!’ She was fishing about in her bag, her movements growing more and more frantic. She tipped her bag up, shook its contents onto the table and grabbed her chequebook. ‘Here it is. How much do you want? One hundred? Two? Or how about a thousand? Just to make sure?’

‘Stop it. This’ll get us nowhere.’

‘What’s the date today, the thirtieth?’

‘Kate, shut it.’

‘Don’t tell me to fucking shut it!’

He grabbed the chequebook from her hands and chucked it across the room ‘Why didn’t you talk to me?’ he yelled. ‘I’m your husband. You should have talked to me, instead of to those charlatans. Why didn’t you talk to me?’

‘Because you were never here! How many more times? You were at work. From seven in the morning until ten at night. And when you did come home you slept in your own room. Some fucking husband!’

‘For Christ’s sake. I had to do something. I had to have something to take my mind off ...’ He picked up a vase and threw it against the wall, where it smashed satisfyingly. ‘You don’t get it, do you? If you hadn’t been next door, fucking about with Rea, our daughter might still be here.’

‘You think you’re telling me something new?’ Kate screamed. ‘You think you’re telling me something that hasn’t gone through my head a thousand million times? I admit it. Our daughter’s dead, okay? Our daughter’s dead and it’s all my fault!’

She was hysterical, hurling herself at him, punching and kicking. He grabbed her by the arms, took her weight and lowered her onto the sofa. She was struggling to breathe; he’d seen her like this once before, but she hadn’t used her inhaler in years. ‘Kate, breathe. Breathe. It doesn’t matter. Big breath in, come on, you can do it.’ He held her as firmly as possible. Like a child, she made herself rigid so he couldn’t comfort her. ‘It’s done now. Come on. It’s all over. Come on, love.’ He held her at arms’ length to give her space. She was scaring him. ‘Come on, Kate. It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.’ A jagged breath tore from her lungs, she turned her face away and gulped in air, another breath out. Finally. ‘That’s it. Easy now.’ Thank God.

Gradually she became still. She was trembling. He continued to hold her until he felt her relax. Tom Pearce was mowing his lawn. They must have heard everything. Next door’s cat was meowing to be let in. He

couldn't remember the last time he'd held her so long. Held her at all. He rubbed his palm up and down her arms. 'I'll make us a cup of tea, shall I? A nice cup of tea?'

He leaned against the kitchen counter, waiting for the tea to brew, rubbing his hands up and down his own arms, suddenly cold. It was like he was in a film, as if this were happening to someone else. Kate stood at the lounge window, the blanket from the back of the sofa around her shoulders. How slight she looked, and old. When had they become middle-aged?

He opened the fridge, bent down for the milk and almost lost his balance. He gripped the door and rested his forehead against the cold metal of the freezer door. Whoa! Easy does it. He straightened, and took a deep breath.

'Biscuit?' She shook her head. He handed her the mug and crossed the room to flick on the heat pump. Waiting for the tea had given him time to think. 'It wouldn't have made any difference, Beth being upset. She went for a jog, Kate. She didn't run away. She didn't go home, pack a bag, and empty her bank account. She went for a run, same as any other day.'

Kate shrugged.

'It wouldn't be the first time she'd run from the house in a state, eh? Let's face it. She was upset quite a lot.'

'You mean, like the road rage thing?'

'Yeah. Like, how many times did she go over that, eh?'

'I know.'

'She was a teenager.'

'I know,' Kate put her tea down on the mantelpiece. 'It makes sense when you say it. It's ... it's just ...' She let out a long shuddering breath. 'You've got no idea how many times I've replayed that afternoon. How many times I've heard her calling out my name. Turning, the door closing, hearing her footsteps run away. But, what if, eh?' She was gazing out of

the window, as if she'd forgotten he was in the room. 'What if I hadn't spilled tea down my t-shirt, what if the kitchen had been cold instead of warm, what if ...'

Her phone rang. She ignored it. He fetched the dustpan and picked up broken china from the carpet.

'You look terrible,' she said, watching him.

He crossed to the drinks cabinet, took out a bottle of brandy and tipped some into his tea.

'Good for shock,' he said, noticing her look. 'Join me?'

She nodded. 'Go on, then.'

He poured her drink, screwed the lid on the bottle and returned it to the cabinet. 'Sláinte.'

'You go easy. You're still not well.'

'I will.'

They both knew that was a lie. The alcohol burned his throat but did nothing to warm him. She sat on the sofa, leaning forwards, her elbows on her knees, all fight gone. He joined her.

'You haven't worn those in years,' she said, pointing to his old corduroys.

'I've lost weight.'

'Are you still angry with me?'

He drained his teacup. 'Hurt, rather than angry.'

'Sorry.'

He cleared his throat. 'When I didn't come home. It wasn't because of you.'

'Tell me.'

He took a jagged breath. 'I ... it was her room. At the top of the stairs. Beth's room ... I just couldn't stand it.'

'Why didn't you say?'

‘Because I’d hear you in there, chattering away. I couldn’t take it from you.’

‘But ...’

‘Yeah. I know. If I’d been here, maybe you wouldn’t have had to ...’ He rubbed her shoulders and pulled her towards him. ‘You know, it might have made a difference, you telling me.’ She went to pull away, but he held on to her. ‘Not to Beth. I mean a difference to us.’

She drank her tea, and nodded.

‘Those months in Central,’ he said. ‘Riding the bikes. Why didn’t you tell me then?’

‘I think I was too angry to talk.’

‘You mean shocked.’

‘No, angry. All those people, when Beth first went. Do you remember?’ Her teeth had started to chatter again. He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. ‘All those p-people saying she’d be alright.’

He nodded.

‘So many people, so sure. So much f-false hope.’ She twisted away. ‘Where were they when she didn’t come home, eh? W-where were they then? And, and why take Beth? That’s what I used to ask. Why take Beth?’ She glared at the carpet. ‘Why didn’t he take one of the ugly kids? Those kids outside the Warehouse. You know the ones. You hear their parents. Get over here, Myron, before I break your fucking neck. People like that, why should they get to keep their kids, eh? Why us? Why not them?’ She let out a huge breath. ‘I hated them.’

He grabbed her hand and held it. ‘My job was to protect her,’ he said. ‘That was my role. Her and you. Keep you both safe. I was a crap husband and a useless father.’

She squeezed his hand. ‘Mine was to be there,’ she said. ‘Mum’s always there, isn’t she? To advise. Share confidences. When I think of the talks we never had: boyfriends, contraception, piercings. Childbirth.’ She

reached down and picked her mug up from the floor. ‘Carol came into work last week, did I tell you? Her first grandchild is due in September. They can call me Gran. Get it over and done with. None of this mucking about, pretending I’m not a grandmother business. I was so jealous.’ She drained her tea. Her face was wet again. He tore a tissue from the box and handed it to her. ‘She’d be twenty-six now, Beth. I could be shopping with her: stretch and grows, blankets, little booties. I was going to learn how to knit. And when she was tired, fed up with not being able to sleep, fed up with stinking of baby sick, when her back still hurt weeks and weeks after the birth, I was going to take the baby from her and let her go shopping, or ... or to the hairdressers, or for a coffee with friends.’ She blew her nose. ‘And you’d, you’d have helped too, wouldn’t you? You’d’ve been good, like you were with Beth, walking her around the garden when she wouldn’t sleep. You’d strap her into the front seat of the car and drive around the block at three in the morning, remember? Only with grandchildren we’d have been so much better. This time we’d have known all the answers, wouldn’t we?’

He nodded. ‘Yeah. We’d have had it off pat.’

‘When she first went, I kept going over and over little things, you know? In her past. I know she was seventeen but to me she’ll always be four. That’s how I remember her. I don’t know why.’ She dabbed her eyes and smiled at him. ‘Do you remember how she’d help me make pastry? Standing next to me on the stool, her grubby little fingers. How the flour went grey. It was the only way to get her nails clean. One day she sneezed into the bowl. You should have seen her face, all covered in flour!’

He cleared his throat. ‘I can still see her sitting on the back step, pulling on her boots. Thomas the Tank Engine, remember? We left them on the porch that summer and they faded and she bawled the house down.’

‘Yeah, and trying to find another pair the same! Didn’t we end up driving to Christchurch or something?’

He laughed. ‘Invercargill. And then we bought two pairs, one a bit bigger, so we’d never have to go through that again ...

‘And then a week later she came home from Eve’s and said she was too old for Thomas the Tank and wanted Scooby Doo.’

He snorted. ‘Oh shit. Don’t remind me of Scooby bloody Doo.’ He slumped forward into her lap, burying his face into his big fists. ‘Where is she, Kate? Where is she? Where’s our girl?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Monday 13th May

Judd nudged the toe of his shoe against the swollen bottom rung of the timber gate and pushed it open. In the early dusk, regular groupings of alyssum and lobelia lined the narrow paved path leading to the front door of the brick bungalow. He retrieved the key from under the middle of the three concrete toadstools and slid it into the lock.

He had been back at work for a couple of months when his phone rang and his Auntie Ivy's gravelly voice told him his mum had died. Joy, his mum's neighbour, noticing the curtains still drawn at ten on a Tuesday morning, had found her collapsed in the hallway. A massive heart attack; she'd died before the ambulance arrived. Alone. The funeral wasn't for another ten days, but there was plenty to be done in the meantime.

The door jammed against a small pile of junk mail, which he bent to retrieve. The house felt cold. He dropped his bag onto the floor and hunted around until he found the central heating control. As the boiler flared into life he went to the lounge and opened all the windows, his mum having been of the generation that saw smoking as a right, rather than an addiction.

Crocheted toilet roll covers and fluffy blue rugs cluttered the bathroom. He checked out the small bedroom at the end of the hallway; two single beds with pink nylon bedspreads over an assortment of quilts and blankets. A dusty Spanish doll and three soft toys lined the windowsill. The freshest room in the house, it was where he would sleep that night.

The door to his mum's bedroom was ajar. He was relieved to see the bed had been stripped. The sheepskin rug he had sent over the previous

Christmas lay like an oasis of calm on the swirling pink carpet. At some point in the last few years his parent's old dark timber wardrobes had been replaced by built-ins. He closed the cupboard door quickly at the unmistakable scents of talcum powder and cigarette smoke.

After the long flight, he was desperate for a shower but the hot water cylinder had been turned off and it would take a while for the water to warm. He put on his coat and walked to the pub where he spent an hour reading the newspaper before dragging his heels back to the house. The lounge smelled fresher and he closed the windows. Jet-lag caught up with him. He finally got his shower and squeezed himself into one of the narrow single beds where he immediately fell asleep.

He woke in the night with a start, sweat pouring from him. What was that noise? Where was he? He lay still, getting his bearings. He had forgotten to turn off the central heating; had it been the sound of the boiler that woke him, or something else? He flung off the duvet, lay still and waited: only the ticking of the radiators and the rumble of traffic from the A2. He relaxed and was about to go and turn off the heating when in the orange glow of the streetlight he noticed the bedroom door slowly opening towards him.

'Who's there?'

Something heavy landed smack in the middle of his chest. He yelled and shot upright, jumping out of bed and fumbling for the bedside lamp. When light flooded the room he found himself eyeballing his mum's cat.

'Ah, you bloody mutt!'

He poured milk into a cereal bowl. The cat raised its tail in acknowledgement and brushed against his legs. Judd grunted, switched off the central heating and returned to bed where he lay awake for the remainder of the night worrying about the cat. After six he fell asleep, the cat curled up behind him.

In the following days he collected the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death from his mum's doctor and registered her death. Luckily, a postmortem was not required. He was about to panic over whom to contact about the funeral when his Aunty Ivy rang. He left it all to her. He barely knew which of his aunts and uncles were still alive, let alone their phone numbers.

The evening before the funeral he settled down with a beer and a plate of pasta to sort through the biscuit tin in which the family photographs were stored. On top was one of Beth, sixteen years old, in her runners and hoodie, almost as tall as her mum, waving into the camera. Under that, a school photograph: Beth aged eight trying to smile without her front teeth, looking every part the goon. He caught his breath. Funny what you forgot. He bundled the photographs back into the tin, deciding to take them all home. Kate would enjoy these.

'Good weather for a funeral.' Aunty Ivy nodded at the undertaker walking ahead of the hearse, a raised umbrella protecting his mourning dress of top hat and tails. Judd looked out at the drizzle and remembered being told as a child that rain at funerals meant angels were weeping for the death of a good person. Maori held a similar belief. They could have held a funeral for Beth once she had been missing for seven years, but Kate wouldn't hear of it. It might have been better if they had. The funeral lasted no more than half an hour. As their cars left the crematorium the next funeral party arrived right behind.

At the Spotted Duck, and with a pint of Spitfire in his hand, Judd could finally relax. The older generation sat around the edges of the room, supping on their halves of stout, and gins, while he and his cousins, an eclectic mix of prison officers, social workers and school teachers, occupied the centre, their genes humming. Over his second pint it occurred to Judd he'd never see these people again; this would be his last visit home. It was as if he was standing amongst ghosts.

The following day he drove to visit his Uncle Travis, housebound with pneumonia. London looked alien to him, the once familiar Victorian red-brick buildings of his childhood replaced with glass and chrome office blocks and malls; even the old High Street had been pedestrianised. Eventually he became lost in the one-way systems and bus lanes. Passing his old school for the second time, he pulled the car over to consult a map.

When he'd returned to school after the fight, Budgie was nowhere to be seen. Later, Leo had been sitting in his usual spot outside the Wimpy Bar, picking at a bag of cold chips when Stella came along. He hadn't seen her without make-up for years. She looked younger, more like the goofy kid he half remembered from primary school.

'Alright?'

'Yeah. Wanna chip?'

She shook her head and sat down beside him. Not knowing what to say, Leo said nothing. At some point since Saturday, between nursing his bruised body and fending off his parents' questions, he had accepted that Budgie really was gay. As soon as the words formed inside his head, he'd known he was right. Stella would have heard the rumours; had she come to the same conclusion?

'Have you talked to ...?'

'No. Have you?'

Leo shook his head. Every time he shut his eyes he saw Budgie's motionless body lying next to him on the pavement. Costas had kept his word and called the police, then an ambulance, that took them to A & E. They'd taken Budgie in on a stretcher. Leo's parents had come and, once he'd been patched up, had taken him home. When they asked what had happened he said he didn't remember. Just some thugs, he'd said. They laid into us. For nothing.

Stella scuffed her shoe against the pavement. 'Is it true?'

'I dunno. You tell me.'

‘I don’t know! I don’t know any queers. Do you?’

‘No.’

She reached over and took a chip. ‘He’s made me look a right fool. You should hear them.’

‘I know. Me too.’

She threw the chip onto the pavement. A pigeon swooped down and grabbed it. ‘If I see him, I’ll kill him. I will, I’ll kill him.’ She started to cry. Leo took her hand but she wrenched it away. ‘If I find out you knew and you didn’t tell me ...’

‘I didn’t. I promise. How would I know? He tricked us both. You and me. He was my best mate. Everyone thinks ... you know.’ Leo screwed up the chip paper and twisted it tight.

‘I’m not ringing him. Everyone’s laughing at me. Everyone.’ She wiped her face against her sleeve. ‘No wonder he never wanted to ...’

Sheena McKenzie’s gang approached. Their conversation petered out as they came near. Leo glared at them. They passed in silence but once clear burst into laughter.

‘Ignore them,’ he said. ‘They’re just silly cows.’

Stella invited him to a party on the Warner estate. Some kid’s parents had gone on holiday, leaving their teenage son behind alone. Well, more fool them. They heard the music before they saw the house. A few kids were out the front, smoking, fooling around, and the net curtains in the house opposite were already twitching. Leo made his way to the kitchen; someone had made garlic bread and he was starving. Looking up he saw Stu and his mates walk in. Leo ripped open a can and chucked it down his throat. Then another.

Back in the lounge he found Stella and sat down next to her. Stu walked into the room, then out again, ignoring Leo completely. Leo put his arm around Stella’s shoulder. She didn’t move away. Judd’s hands were wet with sweat. He prayed she couldn’t feel it through her shirt. A

girl tripped over Leo's outstretched legs, almost knocking herself out on the fireplace.

Leo had finished his beers and needed a piss. On the way back from the toilet Stu passed him on the stairs and ruffled his hair, smirking. Leo wanted to go home, but Stella was up now and dancing. She grabbed him, throwing her arms around him. She'd been swigging on the cider all night and was unsteady on her feet. 'Maybe we should go,' he said.

She pressed her body against his. 'Why don't we go somewhere quiet?'

He led up the stairs and into one of the bedrooms. An old-fashioned eiderdown covered the bed. Stella kicked off her shoes and slid under. 'Come on, keep me company.'

Leo slid off his shoes, then regretted it. Stella didn't appear to notice. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. 'Kiss.'

The eiderdown was cool and slippery. Just as he got her bra off the bedroom door banged open. 'Whoa!' Stella smiled. They both had something to prove. Her skin was so hot. He was on fire. Unlike other girls, she didn't push him away or tell him to slow down, but even as she took him and guided him in, he felt like a thief. She cried out and tried to push him off, but it was too late. He couldn't stop. He would never be able to stop. But instantly he did, she was up and rushing from the room. For a moment he lay there, cold and alone. Stella hated him, Budgie hated him. As if their friendship had never happened, Lardy Boy was back in town.

He went downstairs and found her in the middle of the crowd in the hallway.

'What's up?'

'There's a bunch of skinheads on the corner. Everyone's too scared to leave.'

'Where's Stu and his gang?'

'They've already gone.'

'Oh, great.'

Some of the blokes were geeing themselves up. ‘This is bollocks. We go together, right? They can’t touch us. Not if we outnumber ‘em.’

In the end about twenty of them left in a group. Leo grabbed Stella’s arm. ‘Come on. I’ll walk you home.’ At the bottom of the path, he put his arm around her shoulders. She didn’t push him away.

There were about eight skinheads, standing in silence, watching. Conversation dried up as they drew near. The hair on Leo’s neck bristled. They had almost passed when one of the skins stepped forward and blocked their path.

‘Alright, Stell?’

It was Budgie. His shaved head glowed in the amber streetlight. There was a livid ink scar down one cheek. He wore the uniform: checked Ben Sherman, rolled up jeans and Doc Martens. He looked hard. Well hard.

Stella’s fingers dug into Leo’s waist. ‘Alright, Budgie.’

They stood looking at one another for what seemed like ages. Something passed between them, something Leo would never be a part of. Then Budgie looked up at him, turned his head and spat on the pavement.

Judd wound down the window to the rental car. A few months ago he’d stood in the middle of his lounge in New Zealand watching parliament pass the law to legalise gay marriage, smiling at Maurice Williamson’s speech, and absurdly moved by the waiata that followed. Times were changing, in the western world at least, but nothing would make up for the damage that had already been inflicted.

Further down the road two youths were having an argument, the taller one slapping his hands against the chest of the other, pushing him backwards into the path of the traffic. Judd couldn’t hear them, but from the looks they were getting from passersby they were going for it. The second youth shoved back and struck out wildly, then his hoodie fell back

and Leo saw that he was in fact a she. He sat for a long time watching the pair make their way up the road.

At Dunedin Airport, queuing for a taxi with the other uncollected, Judd breathed in deeply the sweet silage-saturated air. Jetlagged, he made the mistake of getting into the front seat and was soon busy blocking out the driver's questionable politics, his opinion on foreign travel, immigration, and the abolition of the death penalty. Asked for his occupation, Judd said he was a psychiatrist. That usually shut them up.

The paddocks looked dry. He switched on his phone.

'You'd not of heard about the latest fiasco with the sea wall, then?'

Judd shook his head. Five missed calls, three from Burgess, two from Kate.

'The problem is, they don't know what they're doing. They never have. It's all very well blaming the construction company, or the architects, but they were warned, if you don't build a groyne out to sea, the sand will get washed out. Same as before. It's a joke really, only, as usual, the joke's on you and me, the ratepayers.'

There were no texts. He had no idea what the guy was on about.

'I mean, anyone could have been killed. One minute you're sitting there eating your Dagwood, or whatever, next — boom, down you go.'

Judd blinked hard. 'I'm sorry, what are you talking about?'

'The sinkholes. At St Clair. Outside the Life Saving Club. Could have killed someone.'

Right on cue, Judd's phone rang.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Wednesday 29th May

High tides had pummelled St Clair beach, exposing the bottom of the sea wall. Further incoming tides had sucked sand and soil from the space between the new and old sea walls, and holes large enough to swallow street furniture had appeared on the pavement along the esplanade.

The surf club ramp down to the ocean was a particularly weak spot and they were having to add sheet-steel piles to patch a gap letting in the water. There the sea water had exposed a body, twisted and wedged between the two walls. Sheets of blue tarpaulin protected the area and the street had been cordoned off.

A car passed, slowed, and took the one remaining parking space. Judd recognised the profile.

‘Cole’s arrived,’ said Burgess, needlessly. ‘She was in Invercargill last night. Must have been up early’.

Helen Cole got out of her car. A cigarette butt arced through the air. She opened the boot of her car and shrugged on overalls and footwear and retrieved her bag. The boot closed with a thump and, without looking in their direction, she disappeared behind the tarpaulin.

There was a shift out to sea; now-visible streaks of white from uncurling waves marked the move from night to day. Gulls screeched overhead and lights glowed from the houses along Cliffs Road. Priest appeared and handed Judd a coffee. A car’s headlights illuminated the space in front of the pool and cafe, probably Rosie opening up. Judd checked his watch. 7.35. Almost sunrise.

‘There are fragments of clothing: synthetic, and trainers,’ Burgess had told him. ‘That’s all we know. But she must have been there since they rebuilt the wall in 2004. We got hold of Kate. She’s on her way back from Vanuatu. She’ll be back sometime tomorrow.’

Judd had finished his coffee. Burgess took his empty cup from him and walked over to the bin, scattering gulls on his way. The wind blew and Priest pulled his jacket tight but, as if his body had been injected with novocaine, Judd felt nothing. It was all he could do to stand and wait. He’d imagined this scene so many times, and now it was happening he felt he were watching it on a screen. At any moment a shout would go up and the credits would start to roll.

A dog barked from behind the cordon of blue and white ticker tape, where a subdued crowd had formed. He spotted Fiona, and walked over.

‘Has there been an accident?’ she asked. ‘Or can’t you say?’

He looked at her blankly.

‘Sorry. I shouldn’t even be asking.’

‘No, no, come ...’ He lifted the tape, beckoning her through. It felt years since they’d shared a drink. She looked out of place among the gawkers. He led her away from the throng.

‘Are you okay?’ She placed her hand on his arm and although it was impossible he felt the warmth of her touch penetrate his jacket. It almost undid him. He pressed his bunched fists deep into his pockets and cleared his throat.

‘Sure. Jet-lag. Just returned from ...’ He inclined his head.

‘London?’

‘Yes. Mum’s funeral.’

‘Oh. That’s hard.’

He looked out to sea. ‘They found a body.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Down the hole. Been there some years.’

‘How horrible. Did someone fall in?’

‘Hard to say. From when the wall was rebuilt. Possibly.’

‘But that’s terrible. Down there all that time. Do you have any idea ...?’

Not knowing what to say, he said nothing. His silence evidently flummoxed her.

‘Look, I wouldn’t normally stand and stare. I was on my way to Salt and ... I should be going. Let you get on.’

‘Sure, there’s nothing to do here but to wait.’ He looked towards the tarpaulin. ‘God knows, I’ve had enough practice.’

‘Leo?’

‘Time and Patience, that’s what they say, isn’t it, the strongest of all warriors?’

‘You’re not making sense.’

‘Aren’t I?’

She followed his gaze to the tarpaulin. ‘What exactly’s going on here?’

He looked at her upturned face. There was still a hint of summer in the freckles dancing over her nose. She was not part of this. This was no place for her. He put his hand on her shoulder and guided her back to the tape, holding it up so she could duck under. From the other side she handed him her business card.

‘I want you to ring me.’

‘In what capacity?’

‘That’s up to you.’

He nodded and slipped the card into his wallet. He went to walk away, then turned. ‘Actually, there is something I meant to ask.’ He lowered his voice.

She replied and disappeared into the crowd, and then he heard his name being called. Cole had emerged from behind the tarpaulin and was walking in his direction.

Judd and Priest drove to Milton in silence. At reception, they removed their belts and shoes and placed them in the plastic tray.

‘No pierced belly buttons, I hope, boys.’

Judd ignored the comment. He wasn’t in the mood for wisecracks. Not today.

The sickly sweet smell of the polish used on the shiny floors in the holding cells briefly reminded him of interviewing Tracey’s gang at the school. Hard to believe that that only been a few months ago; so much had happened since.

‘I’ll ask the questions, shall I?’

Judd nodded. Priest was fiddling with his PDA, checking it was working in case they needed to call for assistance. He didn’t blame him. They took the seats nearest the door. They didn’t have long to wait before a prison officer led in McDowell. McDowell looked as though he’d bulked out even more, if such a thing was possible, snugly filling his uniform grey track pants and sweatshirt. His hair and sideburns were as immaculately cropped as ever. He sat down in the chair opposite them, arms crossed.

For a while after the prison officer left, no-one said anything. McDowell gave in first. He looked from Judd to Priest, then back again. ‘You’ve got a bit of a tan there, Judd. Been on holiday?’

‘Shut up, McDowell. We’re the only ones asking the questions today.’

Priest sat back in his chair and cleared his throat. ‘We’re looking into an incident that happened back in 2004,’ he said. ‘Thought you might be able to help us.’

‘Oh yeah? And why should I?’

‘Got anything better to do?’

McDowell shrugged, his eyes flickering from one to the other. ‘2004? Are you serious? That’s nine years ago.’

‘That’s right,’ said Priest. ‘The year the sea wall was rebuilt. Remember?’

McDowell shrugged.

‘A girl went missing. She’d been out jogging. We’ve got a witness who can testify that you were seen having an argument with her, down on the esplanade. Tell us what happened and don’t waste our time.’

McDowell looked straight at Judd. Judd stared back, his hands gripping the underside of his chair. McDowell wiped his hand across the back of his neck. ‘Oh, her. You mean the silly cow who pranged my car? The one who rolled backwards, at the lights, straight onto my fender? Is that who you mean?’

‘When was that?’ Priest asked.

‘A couple of months before, possibly.’

‘Go on.’

Judd concentrated on breathing.

‘Someone,’ and here McDowell looked over Judd’s head, ‘someone should have taught his daughter how to carry out a proper hill start. I’d spent a fortune getting the front re-chromed from an earlier accident, what, three months before that? I couldn’t believe it. First time I take it out and some stupid bitch goes and dents my fender all over again. It’s not worth owning a decent car. Not in Dunedin.’

A worrying roar started in Judd’s ears. He took deep breaths in and forced deep breaths out. In out, in out, like swimming.

‘And it’s not as if she was sorry, either. Gave me the finger. Shot off up the hill. I was on the way to the airport, so I couldn’t hang about, but I memorised the rego, and as soon as I got back from Melbourne I checked

it out. Not listed. Interesting.’ He smirked. ‘I should have guessed that meant it belonged to one of your lot.’

Actually, many individuals chose to withhold their licence plates from the public register: GPs, Probation Officers, not only police personnel. It must have really pissed McDowell off to come up against a blank wall like that. Judd remained mute.

‘Young kids. They’ve got no respect. Think they’re invincible. Think it’s all about whizz-bangs and sound systems. Over a thou’ that original repair cost me.’

‘Tell me how it started. On that Saturday.’ Priest was cool. It was all Judd could do to remain seated.

‘I was down on the esplanade, walking the dog. It was a filthy day, hardly anyone about. I was hurrying along, and bang, there she was, running towards me. The same chick.’

McDowell was far too old to call women chicks. Judd let go of the chair and flexed his hands, which had become stiff, as if he had arthritis.

‘It’s a bit of a mystery. She obviously recognised me because she stopped.’ He shook his head. ‘The look on her face.’ His smile turned to a scowl. ‘The street was a mess. Half the railings were missing. Sheets of ply everywhere. Keep Out signs. It had been windy the night before. Some of the ply had come loose, lying on the pavement, in the road ...’

He made a gesture of bewilderment, hands out, palms up. ‘She came at me, screaming and shouting, pointing her finger.’

‘You argued?’

‘To put it mildly. Cheeky bitch, reading me the riot act!’

‘Then what?’

‘Then she flew at me.’

‘I doubt it.’

McDowell shrugged. ‘Anyway, I gave her a good push. Got her out of my face. But then Butkus somehow got off his lead, started running off,

barking at something. I turned away and called him, and when I turned back she'd disappeared. One minute she was there, the next — phet — thin air. Jumped over the sea wall for all I know. Shit, I kept walking. Went home. I'd just got back from Melbourne. Twenty-eight degrees it had been there. Twenty-eight. Makes you wonder why we live in Dunedin sometimes, doesn't it?

‘Why didn't you report it?’

‘I was back in Auckland the next day. I didn't take much notice.’ McDowell kept his eyes straight ahead. ‘It had more or less blown over by the time I came home. And anyway, what could I say? I don't know where she went. Like I said, she just disappeared. It wasn't until I saw his car the other month,’ he said, pointing to Judd, ‘his MG, that I made the connection.

‘What would you say if I told you we've found her body?’

‘Her ...’ McDowell looked at Priest. Then at Judd. ‘Hey, come on now.’

‘Just metres from where you were seen arguing with her.’

‘I pushed her!’

‘Our witness says you picked her up and threw her backwards.’

McDowell shook his head. ‘Whatever.’

‘No! Not whatever! You picked up my daughter and threw her. You killed her, you fucking bastard!’ In a rush and a roar, Judd was on his feet and dragging McDowell over the desk and onto the floor, his fists laying into him, slamming his ugly, arrogant, evil fucking head against the floor, time after time after time.

Someone was grabbing his arm, trying to pull him off.

‘Judd! Let him go. Judd!’

McDowell was flailing out, his legs kicking, trying to make contact.

‘For fuck's sake! He's not worth it.’

Two of them were pulling him off, dragging him out of the cell. He fought, twisting and kicking. He hadn't finished. He hadn't fucking finished. They unlocked the next cell and threw him onto the floor where he landed heavily, his head smashing against the leg of the table. He scrambled to his feet, but they'd locked him in. He pounded on the door.

'Priest! Get me out of here. Priest?'

Blood was spilling from his split knuckles. He was shaking and his shirt was stuck to him. He folded over and vomited. Afterwards, he sat on the bench, wrapped his right fist in a handkerchief, and waited. The air around him cooled. He shivered. Priest was still next door with McDowell. He heard raised voices, then Priest shout.

'Stand up!'

A chair scraped along the floor. He didn't need to be in the cell to know that Priest had just charged McDowell with manslaughter.

EPILOGUE



Judd raised his umbrella, Kate took his arm and he led her over the grass to a long rectangular flowerbed that had been freshly dug over. ‘It shouldn’t be long until her plaque is ready. I thought a Margaret Merrill,’ he said. ‘She loved white roses, and it’s got a wonderful scent.’

They stood for a moment, Kate’s head resting against his shoulder. The tall glass and brick crematorium protected the area from the worst of the wind. The narrow strip of golf course between them and the sea was empty, a lone yellow flag hanging limp. Beyond the golf course waves broke onto Tomahawk Beach. To the east, where the twister had come from, farmland ran down towards the lagoon.

‘It’s a good spot. She’ll be protected from the southerly here.’ He could smell Kate’s shampoo. ‘Are you going to be alright?’

Kate nodded.

‘Come on, I’ll walk you back.’

Rea was waiting at the car. Kate let go of his arm, and kissed him on the cheek. He waited for them to drive off before making his way back to Beth’s plot.

That morning at St Clair, waiting for Helen Cole to confirm it was Beth in the sinkhole, he realised that the girl seen running around Anderson’s Bay Inlet could never have been Beth. Despite having lost a lot of weight, Beth had continued to run in her original hoodie and pants and, with the hood up, was as likely to be taken for a boy as a girl, a realisation that had flashed through his mind watching the two youths argue in Walthamstow. Spotting Fiona in the crowd, he’d had only one question: those trainers she remembered so vividly dangling in the air, what colour had they been?

McDowell would be found guilty of manslaughter. It wasn't much, but it was something.

He stepped forward and snapped a wilted head from a flowering camellia. Over the past few weeks winter had arrived, bringing crisp mornings and heavy frosts and finally killing off the flu epidemic. It was hard to believe that in three months the pool would re-open and summer would be here again.

Nearby, Tracey Wenlock had been laid to rest, as had the third girl, Larayne Smaill, whose car had been pushed off the road and down a gully and covered by the massive slip on the northern motorway, making her the twister's third victim, albeit two weeks after the event.

He picked one of Kate's hairs from his shoulder. He had always known she would leave him, yet the longer she'd taken, the harder he'd clung to the idea that they would make it through. In recent weeks he'd briefly considered returning to the UK, envisioning a long and lonely life walking on slippery, stony beaches, with only the keening of seagulls and the roar and suck of a cold grey sea for company. But he could never leave Dunedin, not now that they'd finally found Beth.

At a continuous thrumming, he looked up. The rescue helicopter was passing overhead; another witness to the clash of life and death. At that moment the sun peeped out from behind a cloud causing a rainbow to form over the sea. He raised his umbrella in acknowledgement, then letting it drop, tilted his head to the sky, and allowed the rain to wash over his face.



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Disclaimer: While the city of Dunedin is a true place in New Zealand and some events in this book did occur, the characters are entirely fictional.



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