

THE BOX

THE BOX

DAN MALAKIN



First published in Great Britain in 2022 by
VIPER, part of Serpent's Tail,
an imprint of Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.serpentstail.com

Copyright © Dan Malakin, 2022

Text design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 8427
eISBN 978 1 78283 8715



For Amelie

PROLOGUE

At first, she liked it in the box.

There were toys to play with, paper and coloured pens. Sometimes cartoons came on the screen, and when she was thirsty, she bent the straw into her mouth to drink sweet apple juice. She felt warm in there. Safe.

Outside the box was the silent maze of unwelcoming rooms, full of things she wasn't allowed to touch. Outside the box was the large cold man, who pointed at the chalkboard and made her repeat the same things, over and over, staring her down when she made a mistake.

Then one day, it changed.

It changed with her waking up to see the large cold man standing over her bed. He lifted a strange and bulky set of clothes, a tail of cables streaming from the back.

'You're ready,' he said, his face in shadow. 'Put these on.'

The clothes were stiff around the elbows and knees. Metal sewn into the fabric pressed cold to her skin. As she dressed, her heart beat harder and she wished more than anything to stay in her soft pyjamas.

When they got to the box the toys and coloured pens were gone. Climbing inside, she no longer felt safe.

Images appeared on the screen. She'd played this game before and knew how it worked. When a car appeared, she said 'car'. When a ball appeared, she said 'ball'. But this time was different.

Sometimes when she said the word her clothes grew pleasantly warm, other times they seemed to spark for a moment, making her whole body jolt.

She couldn't understand this new game – the rules made no sense. Soon the jolts became stronger, lasted longer, leaving her shaking and desperate for breath. She wanted it to stop, wanted the man to let her out, but no matter how much she pleaded he didn't respond.

The images came faster. Hot desperate tears ran down her cheeks. Sobbing and heaving, she put the straw between her lips but instead of sweet apple juice what came out was liquid fire.

Once she started screaming, it seemed as though she would scream for ever.

1

6.20 P.M., FRIDAY

I peeked around the dining-room curtain to look at the men at the top of our driveway. There were four of them, the same ones that had been outside my office all day. One holding leaflets, another shouldering a camera big enough to make him look as though he was from the nightly news, two more waving placards with my face in a red circle, a diagonal line through it, like I was some kind of menace. A danger to society.

Behind me, Gabrielle said, 'Please, Ed. Just call the police.'

'And say what?'

'They're filming us. It's harassment.'

'Borderline. It's a public road.'

'They've got signs with your face on them!'

'I'm perfectly aware of what's on their signs.'

They'd been following me around all day, ever since the courts granted the injunction to take down the Men's Learning Centre website – first outside my legal practice, picketing clients as they came through the door, and now here, at home. I'd tried reasoning with them, threatening them with the police, but they'd laughed and filmed my frustration. It would be hard to prove they were breaking any law, and they knew it. The last thing I wanted was to take them to court to explain why I *wasn't* a danger to society.

I dropped the curtain and faced my wife. She was standing

behind a dining chair in her long puffy coat, not even attempting to hide the fact that she'd been out back for a cigarette. Neither of us had slept well since Ally went up against that website, and we were both slipping into bad habits, doing things we shouldn't.

'I told you not to carry on with this,' Gabrielle said. Her grey eyes were murky from exhaustion, and a tight pink line had replaced the smile that usually came so readily to her lips.

'Protecting our daughter is not *carrying on*.'

'Ahhh, right. So protecting her means making it ten times worse. I get it now.'

'This *isn't* my fault. Try calling her again.'

'Her phone's still off. I've already left her three messages.' Gabrielle sighed. 'Oh, I don't know. She's probably fine.'

'No call. No text.'

'She's sixteen!'

'It's *Friday night*!'

We weren't religious – bacon sandwich Jews, that's what I called us – but both Gabrielle and I were brought up in Orthodox houses that stayed in on *Shabbat*. We hadn't raised Ally and Mitchell that way, and we didn't partake in all the holy stuff, like lighting the candles and saying the prayers, but we still set the table nicely, placemats and everything, and ate a family meal. It was the one time of the week everyone came together. As the children grew older, the further I felt them slipping away from me, and the more important those couple of hours had become.

Ally was out most of the time these days – she was a teenager with an active social life – but on Fridays she always came straight home from school. *Always*.

I pointed to Gabrielle's phone. 'Anything from her friends?'

'Jasmine said they had lunch together.'

'That's it?'

'That's it.'

‘You called all her friends?’

‘The ones I know.’

I grabbed a couple of wine glasses from the sideboard, poured myself a drink from an open bottle of red, and nodded to Gabrielle.

She shook her head. ‘Go easy. It’s still early.’

I sipped the wine and peered round the curtain again. My chest seized as I saw a man handing a leaflet to one of our neighbours, who accepted it with a bemused expression. They were trying to intimidate me into withdrawing the injunction, that much was clear, but I’d told Ally I wouldn’t.

Promise me, Dad, she’d said. No matter what they try.

She didn’t come to me for help much these days – it’s our kids who outgrow us, never the other way round – so I’d promised. I didn’t want to break that. But what if those men were the reason she wasn’t home? What if they had her in the back of a van, and their next move was to start sending us pieces of our daughter in the post?

Gabrielle moved round the table and took my hands. Her fingers were cold, so I lifted them to my mouth and warmed them with my breath.

‘Alison’s got her own life,’ she said. ‘We don’t know half the things she gets up to.’

I stopped warming and looked my wife in the eye. ‘Something’s wrong. I know it is.’

Fear is infectious, especially when it’s paired with conviction. Gabrielle’s reassuring air slipped, and I saw that her bravado had been an act, to convince herself as much as me that our daughter was safe.

Her chin trembled. ‘So go out there. Speak to them.’

‘I’ve tried speaking to them.’

She fixed me with a stare that could break rocks. ‘If you think those *men* have anything to do with Alison not being here then

you go out there right now and ... and *demand* they tell you where she is.'

Cold sweat ran down my neck. What if that was their plan? To force a confrontation? To saying I wasn't much of a fighter would be putting it mildly. Even if those blokes were blind and turned the wrong way, they'd mash me into the pavement before I worked out what to do with my fists. The court was my boxing ring. Tomes of law reviews were my gloves.

Gabrielle started for the front door. 'If you won't—'

'I'll go,' I said, pulling her back. I took a reckless swig of wine, which turned into the whole glass, and was about to say something brave and funny so she wouldn't see the frayed nerves holding my smile in place, but instead I spluttered Merlot over the dining table.

'You can do it,' she said, nodding harder than necessary, as though trying to convince us both that this was true.

I headed to the door. As I pulled it open, a muffled ping came from the kitchen, the oven telling us the chicken was done. Any other week that was my cue to put the roast potatoes back in to crisp, while Gabrielle did some magic to make her always perfect gravy. I can't explain it, but as I stepped out of the house, I knew our carefree Friday nights were gone. Maybe for ever.

2

6.25 P.M., FRIDAY

The sun was low as I approached the four men, the light grainy. An autumn chill to the air. When I got to the top of the driveway, they booed like I was a pantomime villain. The closest one to me, a ridiculously handsome guy, leaned his placard of my face against the front wall and lifted his arms, as if we were old pals readying to hug.

‘Edgar!’ he cried. ‘So pleased you could join us.’

I bristled at my full name. I hated it, I’d always hated it, and to this day wondered what was going through my parents’ heads when they named me. Did they think I was going to grow up to be a Victorian gentleman? No one called me Edgar now, not since my mum passed away – except for Gabrielle, on very rare occasions, usually in shock at some catastrophic act of stupidity. To everyone else, I was Ed.

One of my stock-in-trade tricks was to go hard on the first question, try to catch someone out. That initial reaction often said everything.

I stopped in front of Handsome. ‘Have you hurt my daughter?’

We were about the same age and height, but that was where the similarities ended. He had more hair, enough to blow-dry into a silky brown side-parting, hollows where a normal person’s cheeks would be, and the air of someone who got everything he wanted

in life simply by flashing a charming smile. Definitely not the case for me. I hated him on the spot.

He dropped his arms, snorted and glanced to the side. *Who, me?*

Inconclusive.

‘Murph,’ he said, leaning round to look at the shaven-headed slab behind him, the sort of thug you wouldn’t just cross the road to avoid, but leave town, change your identity, and spend the rest of your life in hiding to avoid. ‘His daughter ... didn’t you bang her last night?’

‘Fucked her inside out,’ Murph intoned. The other two idiots snickered.

Handsome smiled back at me. ‘Answer your question?’

As expected, I had nowhere to go with this. I wasn’t Liam Neeson, able to whip a Glock from my waistband, jam it under his chin, and demand to know where he’d taken her. I wasn’t Liam anything. I was nothing to them. They could say whatever they wanted to me, and I couldn’t do a thing.

‘All this is meaningless,’ I said, waving at the leaflets, the camera. ‘If you’ve kidnapped my daughter, you’re facing *twenty years* in prison. Is it worth it for a bloody website?’

‘Listen, Edgar,’ said the suave shitbag intent on ruining my reputation. ‘We’re just members of the community informing other members of the community about an *unsavoury* character in our midst.’

‘What community? You don’t live here!’

He gestured for his mates to look at me, as though by losing my temper I’d proved his point.

I glanced down the street. We’d been on Oakfield Road for fifteen years, moving here from our poky Clerkenwell flat soon after Ally was born. It was pleasant enough, quiet and tree-lined, only five minutes’ walk to Finchley Central Tube, the kind of street

where hedgerows were trimmed into geometric shapes and almost every car was German.

Thankfully, it was quiet now, the kids and commuters home. Even so I could sense the twitching curtains, the peering eyes. Without a doubt we'd be the main discussion over dinner. I'd never given much thought to my 'good name' before, but you don't, do you? Not until someone takes a dump on it, then passes the photos round your neighbours. What was on those leaflets? What were they saying about me? I wasn't perfect. I'd done things that made me ashamed. Things not even Gabrielle knew about, let alone the whole neighbourhood.

'Look,' I said, forcing my voice to be calm, 'imagine if it was your daughter being harassed by a website. I couldn't just do nothing. Wouldn't you want to protect your family?'

'But you're a dangerous person, Edgar.' Handsome's smile went sly. 'You want to shut down free speech. Just like the Nazis, eh? Kind of ironic, don't you think.'

He made a sound through his teeth like escaping gas.

He was trying to trigger me – and it was working. The throb in my temple had intensified so much it felt like my whole face was pulsing. I was clenching my jaw so tight an ache had spread down my neck. I glanced at the house and saw Gabrielle by the window.

'Not bad,' he said, giving her a little wave. 'May be worth a ride, after all.'

'If you touch her—'

'Then again, there's four of us here. We'll probably just wait for your daughter to get home and have a party.'

I stepped towards Handsome, finger out, ready to say he'd gone too far, but the giant fucker behind him shot out an arm and gave me a sharp slap to the face with a hand that I'm pretty sure was hewn from granite. I staggered sideways, disorientated, clutching my eye, pain vibrating down my spine. Someone stuck out a leg,

tripping me. I dropped to my knees on the pavement.

‘That’s a warning,’ he said. ‘Next time, I’ll cave your fucking head in.’

My vision swung to the dining-room window, Gabrielle standing there, her hand over her mouth. I forced myself to stand.

The big bloke’s face soured. ‘Did I tell you to get up?’

I shook my head quickly and dropped back down.

‘Good boy,’ he said.

They started chatting about the Arsenal game, like they were down the pub instead of outside my house. I stayed on the ground for a few minutes, staring at the moss growing between the paving slabs, too scared to move, too ashamed to lift my head. Too weak to fight for my family.

Soon the shame became too much and I darted for the house. They laughed as I ran, but didn’t come after me. I stormed back into the dining room, straight to my whisky decanter, poured myself a triple, maybe more, and drank it with a shaking hand.

Gabrielle put a hand on my back. ‘Oh my God, Ed. Are you okay? Do you want some frozen peas?’

The pain from the blow had faded after the initial shock. I tried to count myself lucky not to be speeding to A&E with a broken nose, but it failed to calm me down.

‘Did they say anything about Alison?’ she asked.

I finished my drink, wincing at the burn. ‘Yes ... no ... I don’t know.’

‘That’s *it* now, Ed. This is too much. I’ve tried to be supportive, but it’s stupid what you’ve done. You don’t know these people—’

‘I promised Ally—’

‘She’s a child!’

I spun, suddenly giddy, wanting to lash out. ‘I thought she was old enough to *disappear* on Friday night without telling her parents.’

‘For someone so smart,’ Gabrielle said, ‘you can be a real idiot.’

‘I don’t know what to do.’ I slumped against the sideboard.

‘You *know* what to do.’

‘Ally made me promise not—’

‘One of them just punched you!’

‘Actually, it was a slap.’

‘I can’t *do* this, Ed.’

By ‘this,’ she meant our little dance, our particular pattern of bickering, Gabrielle getting increasingly irritated with my nippy lawyer comments until she stormed off. Every couple has their routine for having a row, and this was ours. Most of the time we were great together – we laughed a lot, we supported each other, and even after twenty years we remained affectionate – but ever since Ally got on the wrong side of that website, practically every conversation ended up in the same death spiral.

‘Come on, Gab,’ I said. ‘It was meant to be a joke.’

‘Oh yes. Violent men outside our house. How *very* droll.’

Her phone buzzed on the table as a text came through. She grabbed it and unlocked the screen. ‘Alison!’

And just like that, the tension keeping me rigid dissolved, leaving my legs so weak I had to grip the sideboard to stay standing. I’d been picturing her bound and gagged in some grimy basement, or being found dead in a park by someone out walking their dog.

‘She’s gone to Brighton with friends,’ Gabrielle said. ‘Back Sunday.’

‘She’s gone *where*?’ It was one thing to stay out late without texting, another to disappear for the weekend, only telling your frantic parents while hurtling down the motorway in a campervan.

Gabrielle sighed. ‘At least she’s safe.’

‘Does it even say who she’s with?’ I was furious with Ally – I couldn’t believe she’d do something so selfish.

‘It doesn’t say much.’

I took the phone and read the message. Gabrielle saw my look of horror.

'What?' she asked. 'What's wrong?'

'This text,' I said. 'Ally didn't write it.'

3

TWO DAYS LATER 7.20 A.M., SUNDAY

Hampstead Heath, near the bottom of Parliament Hill, on the edge of the tree line. Forensic officers in crinkling paper suits snapping on purple latex gloves. The tech team setting up sodium lights to capture decent stills in the dawn gloom. Constables barricading the area with blue tape, or looking for evidence in the nearby bushes, or speaking to curious members of the public taking an early walk through the park.

DCI Jackie Rose crouched by the murdered girl – mid- to late teens, pale and supine in the centre of all this industry – and felt that sickening crunch inside her stomach, the same one she always got when she thought about the parents, how they'd react to the news of their child's death. She knew only too well the prayers they'd say to turn back time, to hold their baby once more. But there was no going back. Only the chance to stop it happening again.

'Ma'am?'

Jackie straightened and took in the woman who'd addressed her. Five-ten, mid-twenties, brown hair, brown eyes. Nervous air, like someone who wasn't sure if they were in the right room. White blouse open at the top button to reveal a small silver crucifix.

'And you are?' asked Jackie.

'Detective Sergeant Charlotte Keyes.'

Clearly this was another of Superintendent Drum's new recruits to the Rapid and Serious Unit: a twenty-four/seven operation, set up to investigate rapes and homicides in the capital within minutes of them being reported. Shame this detective sergeant looked barely experienced enough to run a bath, let alone a crime scene. Since when did RAS become a fucking training ground for newbies? Their 'crime solved' stats were ten points higher than the Met Police average for a reason.

Jackie shook her hand. 'DS Haggerty around?'

'Sorry, ma'am. I've not met—'

'Doesn't matter. Looks like we're working together. So, what we got, Sergeant?'

'I just want to say what a privilege it is to work with you. I'd asked three times for a transfer into Rapid and Serious, and—'

'Let's do the pleasantries later, eh? For now, just fill me in on what's going on.'

'Sorry, ma'am.' The sergeant went to the start of her notepad. 'Just after six o'clock this morning we received a call—'

'Keep it simple. We got a name?'

'No ID.'

'Who reported it?'

Keyes nodded to where a dapper old man with a couple of poodles on a double lead was chatting to a constable. 'Says he does this same route every morning.'

Jackie crouched by the girl again. Her face was on its side, her brown curls loose in the dirt, her eyes staring into the grey sky. If it weren't for the way her neck kinked – you didn't need a post-mortem to know it was broken – she could have been mistaken for daydreaming at the clouds. Such a waste. *All those lives now ruined for ever.*

The girl was dressed in navy Tommy Hilfiger tracksuit bottoms and a loose pink sports vest, but something about the style said

loungewear rather than jogging. Straightening, Jackie said, 'Time of death?'

'No rigor mortis yet, but it was cold last night. Anywhere between midnight and three. Pathologist should get a better idea.'

'She's not dressed to be out.'

'Could've had a coat.'

'What if she was dumped here?'

Keyes looked confused. 'You mean killed somewhere else, and brought to the park afterwards? But why...?'

'Exactly. Why *here* as well?' They were near the Parliament Hill entrance, close to the path. The body was bound to be seen within minutes of sunrise. 'If you're going to the trouble of hiding a body in the park, why not stick it in the trees? Even better, bury it.'

'They got disturbed?'

Jackie looked into the murdered girl's unblinking eyes, and saw Verity again. That last look from the front step. Seven years ago almost to the day, but never more than a few seconds from her mind. 'Or maybe they wanted the body to be found.'

*

Jackie hurried back to HQ to give the briefing. When they first started RAS, her and DCI Aleksy and Superintendent Drum, they'd worked out of a basement in Croydon Police Station, a fusty, mouse-shit-scented hole with Thatcher-era office furniture and carpet squares that shifted when you walked over them. Due to their success they'd been upgraded to a set of swanky rooms on the sixth floor of the new CID building in Victoria.

The open-plan office was busy with detectives, over thirty now in the unit, scanning CCTV footage at their desks, or poring over burgeoning case folders. Jackie passed through, nodding and saying hi, heading to Incident Room 1. On the way, she grabbed

DS Milou Ramya, and DS Weston 'Trav' Travis, who headed up the tech team. Some senior investigating officers filled their incident room with every constable and their dog for the briefing, but Jackie preferred to have just the detective sergeants, whom she trusted to control the flow of information.

DS Haggerty was already there, on his knees by the A/V suite, a disconnected cable in each hand, staring at the ends as though he were holding them back from a fight. Thirty-two, smart and serious, he was keen to rise up the ranks. They'd been running cases for three years, and she liked how he worked.

'Missed you this morning, Nick,' Jackie said.

'I take it the super didn't tell you about my promotion,' Haggerty replied. 'Inside sergeant.'

Jackie pulled a corkboard from the corner and placed it in front of the blank screen. 'Bit young for a desk job, aren't you?'

Haggerty smiled. 'Bit old to be chasing down criminals, aren't you?'

'Your humour is duly noted, Sergeant.' She gestured to the chairs, where Ramya and Travis were already sitting.

Jackie pinned three stills of the girl to the board. One close-up and two from wide angles, to show the surrounds. 'Found this morning.'

'No attempts to hide her,' Ramya said, his mouth set in the usual amused smirk that most people took for belligerence. They were right, too. Without a doubt, his attitude had contributed to him being 'stuck' at the rank of detective sergeant for much of his career, although the higher ranks' loss was her gain. He was tough and to the point; no one messed with Ramya. Perfect for the uncompromising atmosphere at Rapid and Serious.

'Clean clothes,' Haggerty said. 'It was raining yesterday afternoon. Any kind of struggle, there'd be grass stains on her knees, her elbows.'

‘I’m certain she was taken to the park *after* being killed,’ Jackie said. ‘And left there to be found.’

‘SOCO get any forensics?’ asked Haggerty.

‘She was clutching some strands of hair.’

‘Winner, winner,’ said Ramya.

‘We’ll see,’ Jackie replied. It wasn’t like on TV – a strand of hair meant nothing if none of the follicle was attached. Even if they got the follicle, if they didn’t have the killer’s DNA on file it was as much use as a boot print in the mud. ‘It’s all gone to Grace Street for analysis, so we should have the results soon.’

She nodded at Travis. ‘There’s CCTV on every entrance at the Heath, so get busy.’

‘On it, boss,’ he replied, giving her a little salute.

‘Let’s get her onto the mispers list,’ she said, addressing all of them. ‘She’s young enough to be a runaway. I want to know who she is, what she was doing last night, and who she was doing it with.’ She tapped the close-up of the girl’s face. ‘This is someone’s daughter. There’s a family who loved this girl more than anything in the world, and she’s been taken from them. Understood?’

The sergeants left the room, and Jackie studied the pictures again. It sickened her that the life had been stolen from someone so young all because some pervert in the park took a shine to her. Or maybe she chose the wrong psycho boyfriend and he dumped her body there after a row. Either way, they wouldn’t rest until they found out.

Superintendent Drum’s PA stuck her head round the door. ‘There you are,’ she said. ‘Andrew would like a word.’

‘Tell him I’ll be in soon.’

‘He said it was important...’

In other words, get your arse over here *now*.

4

8.45 A.M., SUNDAY

Jackie had worked with Superintendent Andrew Drum for eight years in the Met's Major Crime Unit before Rapid and Serious, following him up the ladder, always one rung behind. Always wondering whether she'd beat her way into the old boys' clubs of the senior ranks – less than thirty per cent of superintendents were women. But looking at how Drum spent his time now, on the phone all day, stressed to bursting trying to placate some irate chief, she was fine to stay on the front line.

'Have a seat, Jack,' he said.

'You know we've got a live—'

'Just five minutes, please?'

She sat down. 'What's up, boss?'

Drum leaned back in his chair, shirt buttons straining against his chest, and steepled his fingers under his chin. He was still a big man, with a rugby prop forward build – quite the player, apparently, before a busted knee ended all that – although his muscles were less defined now. At least, that was the polite way of saying it.

He took a long slow breath and regarded her. She knew from his sombre expression, his tentative air, what this was about. 'How you doing today, Jack?'

'Busy.'

'You know Aleksy can take this one if—'

‘I’m taking it, boss.’

‘I know what day it is tomorrow.’

‘I *said*, I’m taking it.’

Drum’s eyes drifted to the framed photo on his desk. His family on a skiing trip, the white peak of Mont Blanc rising in this background. He had three girls; the youngest was eleven. *The same age Verity should—*

Jackie leaned forward, clearing her throat. ‘Listen, Andy, stop worrying. I’m fine. It’s *okay*. Whoever killed that girl last night, I’m going to hunt them down.’

He sighed, like he had more to say but understood it would be pointless saying it. ‘I know you will.’

‘I need to get back.’ She started to rise.

‘Just another minute,’ Drum said, motioning her to sit. ‘RAS is expanding, so you might have noticed a few new faces round here.’

‘I noticed I was babysitting the newbie.’

‘DS Keyes comes highly recommended. She was a rising star at MCU.’

‘Seemed a bit slow off the ground to me.’

‘There’s additional scrutiny on us now,’ Drum said, giving her a hard stare. ‘You know what I’m saying. Keep the investigation ... conventional, okay? The higher echelons are watching. They love our stats, and they want to know how they can replicate them.’

Jackie prickled. Rapid and Serious was a success because it was built around a focused, hard-working, *selected* group of detectives, not because there was some secret recipe that could be passed around to other units. This wasn’t a fucking KFC franchise.

‘Noted, boss,’ she said, and made to stand again. ‘Anything else?’

‘Carry on.’ As she got to the door he called after her, ‘And be nice!’

In the main office, Keyes was at her desk, leaning in close to her screen.

And be nice!

Jackie girded herself and went over. 'The Super tells me you were hot stuff in MCU.'

'Well, I wouldn't like to say,' Keyes replied, cheeks flushing. Her hand went to her crucifix. A nervous tic. 'But I did receive a commendation for bravery at the Commissioner's ceremony last year.'

'You must have been very proud.'

'Just doing my job, ma'am.'

'I may come across as a bit tough, but if you work hard we'll get on fine.'

'Thank you, ma'am. I intend to.'

Keyes seemed keen now, but Jackie had her doubts about whether the sergeant had the stomach for RAS. The scum they chased down, the sadists and rapists and child abductors, you needed a certain way about you, and Keyes simply didn't have that air about her. It was nothing personal.

Still, she was here now, and they had to work together.

'How was the post-mortem?' asked Jackie. 'Anything interesting?'

Keyes pulled the report from the case file, and handed it up. 'Cause of death was an upper cervical spinal injury—'

'Broken neck,' Jackie said, scanning the document. 'Any evidence of sexual assault?'

'None.'

'Heard back from Grace Street about those hairs?'

'Not yet.'

The way the girl had held onto them, the three strands curled in her fist even as she died, Jackie had no doubt she'd pulled them from the attacker's head so he could be identified later. Smart kid. Hopefully, it wouldn't be in vain.

Jackie took the case file to her office and shut the door, pleased to mute the chatter of the main bullpen. She read through the scene log and incident report and witness statements. Studied the stills again. Was the killer a commuter, coming from far away to commit the crime, or a marauder, someone local to the girl? Was he a stranger or someone she knew? It had the feel of a botched sexual assault – she’s accosted in the park, starts screaming, he tries to shut her up. That was how it *felt*. But like Haggerty said, no grass stains. Could the assault have happened indoors? So why take her to the park? And after taking the risk to get her there, why just dump her where she was going to be found? Was it a cry for help? Was the killer taunting them?

Next time Jackie checked the time, it was after midday. News of the murder was already on the internet, so they had the press lined up at half past. She stopped by the tech team on her way to the media room, but DS Travis had nothing to report from the park’s CCTV. Haggerty had the opposite problem; the Crimestoppers hotline had taken over two hundred calls already.

As Jackie was getting to the lifts, Keyes ran up behind her. ‘Ma’am! Ma’am! The lab results.’

Grinning, she handed over her phone. Jackie took it and, reading the email, her smile quickly matched the sergeant’s.

From: SusanJiangCSI@met.police.uk

To: DCBelindaKeyes@met.police.uk

Subject: Hair strands

Hi Charlotte, wanted to get this to you asap. Full details to follow but just to tell you we got a DNA match for the hair strands recovered from the scene this morning. Name is Edgar Truman.