

I CHOOSE YOU

BY

GAYLE CURTIS

PROLOGUE

Holding a gun to a child's head isn't something I will ever forget. The small boy was just as startled to find me in his home as I was at discovering he was there. Shortly after the gun had fired, I heard a quiet, gentle sob and discovered him on the stairs. Fear had rendered him frozen and there was a dark stain seeping into his blue pyjamas, his anxiety taking control. We stared at one another for quite some time, his eyes eventually wandering slowly down to the gun in my hand. I had no idea how long he'd been sitting there, what he'd witnessed, what images would stay with him. Would he be able to understand any of it, in his innocence?

His position on the staircase gave him full view of the kitchen. I turned to look at what he'd seen. The man I assumed to be his father was sitting at the table, a bullet through the side of his head, an obituary that would be taken for a suicide note tucked under his left hand, the debris from the exit wound sprayed across the cupboards. I had been sitting opposite,

observing the silence, the shift that death always leaves behind, a brief pause in time, when the sound of the young child had pierced the atmosphere.

I often wonder how I could have explained everything in a better way. I guess at such a young age, it was incomprehensible to him, way out of his reach, or so I assumed.

I can still remember the touch of his soft hair on my fingers as I guided him up the stairs, the muzzle of the gun pressed into his back with my other hand. He was silent the entire time, startled into a shocked kind of muteness – not one word came out of his mouth as he allowed me to guide him to his bedroom at the top of the stairs. The glow of his bedside lamp shone on the hall floor.

Having told the young boy to get back into bed and not move, I spent the next hour or so downstairs thinking.

It was over, the game had come to an end. I'd known it would one day. If nothing else, the similarities of each case would soon lead to suspicion.

Disappointment flooded me. I'd always anticipated my last participant would be a survivor, but John was none of the things he'd blustered about when I'd first met him. After we'd become friends, we spent many an evening discussing philosophy and the meaning of our existence. John said he knew the importance of life, how vital it was to evolve and embrace change, but when I asked him to show me, he failed to deliver. My game, even though we had talked about it before, shocked him, and I could see he hadn't been expecting it. This is nothing new – most of my participants are startled by it.

'Shoot yourself or be shot. Are you going to do it, or will I?' I said, placing one revolver on the table in front of me, and keeping the other in my hand. 'What's your answer going to be?'

'What?' John attempted to stand up, tipping his chair and almost losing his balance.

'Sit down, John. Otherwise, I won't give you the opportunity to save yourself.' He sat down, they always do. 'You have sixty seconds to answer me. Plenty of time to think about it.'

'You're fucking crazy. I'm not playing this game.' John laughed and took a large swig of his whiskey.

'The clock is ticking, John.' I'd already started the timer on the watch I carried with me. *'What's it going to be?'*

'I think that whiskey has gone to your head.'

I pointed the gun at him.

John put his hands up, as if I were a police officer about to arrest him. Most of them do this. It's a strange movement, but all sense of reason is lost when you're fearing for your life.

'You can't be serious!'

'Deadly.'

Let's just freeze this frame right here. It astounds me that, when you give people a proposition regarding their survival, they don't use the sixty seconds they have left wisely. They don't listen. Instead, they allow their emotions to override their ability to problem-solve. Such was the situation with John. So, it was a disappointing end to everything, but life is about change, and everything must evolve, eventually.

When I returned upstairs, the young boy was gone. His instinct to survive had kicked in and he'd fled. I searched the property, including the grounds, and eventually found him hiding in one of the barns behind a silo. I can sense a presence, and children, especially when they are fearful, don't have the ability to stay completely still. I could hear his heart beating like a skittish hare's, and when I caught him, he screamed like a young rabbit.

I led him back towards the house. The boy had seen me. He was a witness. I had no choice.

CHAPTER ONE

NOW

The pavement hit Elise on her right hip, elbow and shoulder, and the wall smacked her head, reminding her how much she hated herself, along with the rest of the world. Pins prickled the inside back of her nose, warm blood moved like a snake from her nostrils and into her mouth.

‘Hey!’ someone shouted at Mark Paton, the man who’d hit her in the face with the heel of his hand.

Having been snatched so sharply from Elise’s arms, Louis was now in the full throes of a scream.

A few people shouted for someone to call an ambulance, the police, was anyone a doctor?

Mark ignored the crowd gathering and walked back into the shop where Elise had removed Louis from his pram. He emerged a moment later with the pushchair, angrily manoeuvring it one-handed, like it was an awkward supermarket trolley.

Louis was still screaming; the sound gave Elise goosebumps across her arms and neck. She tried to stand up but was firmly held down by a well-meaning bystander.

‘You’re a crazy bitch!’ Mark shouted at Elise, violently shrugging off the man trying to restrain him. ‘Get some fucking help and leave us alone.’

Elise pulled herself up to a sitting position. Leaning against the wall of the shop, she watched Mark shove his way through the people who had gathered at a distance. No one

stopped him, and all she could manage to whisper was ‘He has my son,’ but no one could understand what she was saying – her lips were puffy and numb.

Jane and Mark Paton. Mark and Jane Paton. Paton as in ‘Capon’. That’s how she’d remembered it when she’d first learned their names. They were both consultants at the hospital where Elise worked as a coordinator for the delivery suite – Jane was a surgeon and Mark specialised in paediatrics. They lived two streets away from where Elise and her husband Nathaniel used to live. They had her son, the child she’d given birth to twenty months ago.

Elise had visited them weeks ago, not long after she’d spotted them with Louis – their choice of name, not hers – in the Maryon Wilson Park, where she would often walk. Elise felt she was on a bad footing from the get-go because they recognised her from the papers. Everyone knew Elise and Nathaniel Munroe. Any sympathy the public had for them had died long ago, when people learned all about their private lives and started to become suspicious. Now people frowned or smirked because they had reliable facts they’d retrieved from the tabloids that contradicted anything that Elise and Nathaniel might say publicly.

‘Try and stand up, love.’ Someone gently tugged at her arm. Another person told them to leave her and covered her up with a jacket, handing her a tissue for her bloody nose. That was when she realised the cold air she’d been feeling was because her skirt had risen over her thighs and stomach in the fall, leaving her exposed to everyone.

Elise threw the jacket from her legs as she heard someone say, ‘That’s Ida Munroe’s mother.’ She manoeuvred herself on to all fours and, pressing her right hand on to the wall of the shop, managed to stand up, staggering backwards slightly as she swiped at the hands that were trying to steady her. The helpers wanting to help, just so they could tell a good story at work or down the pub. She’d done it herself hundreds of times – told a good story. Elise knew how to tell a cracking good yarn.

She tried to walk, the opportunity to rescue her son fast slipping away now that Mark was out of sight. ‘Stop that man!’ she shouted, and then screamed, the force of her voice making her double over, and she staggered again. People were backing away now, and she heard someone say, ‘Don’t get involved.’ All except one woman, who claimed to be a medical professional and tried to sit her on the bench a little way down the road.

‘Fuck off.’ Elise pushed the woman away, her words long and drawn out.

‘I’ll wait with you until the ambulance arrives.’

‘I said, fuck off.’ Elise tried to focus on the woman’s face, but she was beginning to see double, visions sliding into her peripheral, reminding her of the kaleidoscopes she used to play with when she was a child.

‘I’ve seen you before, haven’t I?’

‘Everyone’s seen me before . . . Just piss off and leave me alone.’ Elise crouched down and steadied herself by placing her hands on the pavement.

‘At the hospital. You used to work there?’

Elise stared up at the woman, momentarily stunned that someone should recognise her in a different capacity.

‘I’m one of the nurses on A & E. You used to be on the maternity unit. I know you, you’re Elise Munroe.’

‘That’s right. What of it?’

‘Nothing of it. We used to chat when we saw each other in the canteen. I’m Trish.’

Elise tried to focus on the small woman with the soft face. She was familiar. She wasn’t familiar. She couldn’t be sure.

‘Listen to me, Trish. I don’t remember who you are. I’m sure I did know you before I got into this state, but there you go. Do yourself a favour and go home.’

‘Let’s go and sit down and have a proper chat.’ The woman gently pulled Elise to her feet and guided her towards the bench, where they waited for the emergency services. The crowds had dispersed, apart from the odd person glued to the spot, forgetting they weren’t at home watching the soaps but an actual human being in the street. A couple of them raised their iPhones and took pictures of her.

Elise turned to look at Trish, squinting to see if she recognised her at all. There was a faint glimmer from another life that didn’t belong to her anymore, when she hadn’t been dosed up on prescription drugs.

‘I’m sorry about your daughter,’ Trish said.

‘I need to go home.’ Elise pushed herself up from the bench, throwing the tissue someone had given her to the ground.

‘The ambulance will be here in a minute. I can hear the sirens. Let them check you over.’

‘The police will nick me.’

‘Look, I’ll tell them I know you. You’ve had a bad day, you’re going through a nasty divorce and you’re a bit worse for wear. It’ll be fine.’

‘I’m not getting divorced.’ Elise laughed. ‘What gave you that idea?’

‘Oh . . . I just thought – the man?’ Trish gestured to where Mark had walked away.

‘Those bastards have my son. They stole him from the hospital and he’s mine, he belongs to me.’ Elise stabbed at her bony chest and sat back down next to Trish. ‘And I’ll tell you something else, I’m going to get him back. Whatever it takes, I’ll have him back. Even if it means killing Mark and Jane fucking Paton. That is a given.’

The two women stared at one another for a few moments, until Trish stood up, said she had to get home and walked away.

Unfazed, Elise pushed herself to her feet, pointed her finger as she always did when she was trying to get her bearings, and headed in the direction of their new home. The place where

Nathaniel thought they'd be able to start again, away from the house they had shared with Ida, their daughter. Who, on her sixteenth birthday, had found herself in a situation so awful it resulted in a terrible turn of events.

Elise and Nathaniel hadn't been around the day Ida needed them. They were absent when they should have been saving her. Ever since, Elise had spent a lot of time thinking about the sequence of what happened that day, and how, if she'd altered things, even slightly, she might have been able to step in front of the fate that lay before her daughter. She hated fate, with all its surprises, and death with its unrelenting determination – they were fuckers. If she hadn't been so eager to return to work after the birth of their third child, and had taken the full amount of maternity leave she was entitled to, she would have been at home. There'd have been no late shifts, and they'd have had dinner on time, as a family. Wouldn't they, she often thought to herself. Ida would still be alive, and no one would know who they were. They would be anonymous.

CHAPTER TWO

NOW

Begging was an undignified practice that Nathaniel had become all too familiar with over the last twelve months. He pressed the bell to the Patons' house and a long ring ensued, making sure they heard. Nathaniel was hoping Jane would answer the door, she was the easier one out of the two – calmer, more considered in her responses. Mark was hot-headed and tended to

speaking freely without thinking first.

Mark answered and immediately shut the door once he realised who was standing there. Nathaniel caught the door with his hand and foot before it closed fully.

‘Please, listen to what I have to say. Just give me five minutes.’

‘You’ve got to be joking, right? Get your foot out of the door or I’ll call the police.’

Nathaniel pressed against the door harder. ‘Look, just give me five minutes and then I’ll leave you alone, I promise.’

‘Let him in, Mark.’ Jane appeared in the hallway. She was much taller than her husband, elegant and model-like, with fair hair and kind features. Against Mark’s stocky figure and dark roughness, they looked odd together as a couple.

‘Thank you. I promise not to take up too much of your time.’

‘You won’t, trust me.’ Mark walked purposefully into the sitting room, a place Nathaniel had been before, when he’d asked them not to pursue their complaint about Elise stalking them. After quite a lot of persuasion they’d agreed to withdraw it on the condition Elise left them alone. Shamelessly, Mark had used Ida as an excuse, and had eventually guilt-tripped them into understanding that Elise was suffering mentally and needed help. Nathaniel had naively believed Elise had learnt something from the degrading and very public arrest, and would promptly accept some help and move forward with her life. Now, here he was again with the trickier issue of overcoming attempted child abduction, and he had nothing left to tell them about Elise, having used every possible excuse already.

‘Say what you need to and please leave.’ Mark sat down in one of the armchairs on the far side of the room. Nathaniel waited for Jane to choose a seat and then perched on the edge of the sofa, so he could address them both.

‘I don’t want to make this any worse than it is. I don’t want to excuse what Elise has done. I simply want to apologise. If you decide to press charges against her, I’ll understand. I know

what she's done, how terrible it is . . . Let me finish.' Nathaniel stopped Mark from interrupting him. 'I can assure you I'll get Elise all the help and support she needs and she won't bother you again.'

'Your wife won't be bothering us anymore because we've applied for a restraining order.'

Nathaniel nodded, surprised they hadn't decided to do this before.

Jane leant forward. 'Have you taken advice from anyone? Has she been diagnosed with any kind of mental health issues? Post-natal depression or anything like that?'

'Everything changed after Ida, obviously. I'm not using it as an excuse – something changed between her and our son Buddy too. He's the same age as your little boy . . . Sorry, of course you know that.' Nathaniel had forgotten about the letters Elise had written to the Paton's telling them she had their son, and they had hers, and all the visits, the harassment.

'But why our son? I don't understand.' Jane leant back in her seat and crossed her legs.

'Elise thinks you were in the same delivery suite as her. She thinks she remembers you.'

Jane focused on the glass coffee table and Nathaniel could see she was trying to recall the people who had been there twenty months ago.

'I don't know why any of this is relevant.' Mark folded his arms.

'Mark,' Jane said, 'why don't you go and make us all some coffee while I have a chat with Nathaniel?' She turned to Nathaniel. 'Would you like some coffee?'

'Not for me thanks, I'm really not stopping.'

To Nathaniel's surprise, Mark stood up and silently went into the kitchen without any argument.

'I'm sorry, Nathaniel, I don't remember your wife. But then, I had a difficult birth. Has she been to see anyone to be assessed since we last spoke? I'm wondering, with everything that's happened, if she's suffering from post-partum stress?'

‘It could be, but she has been assessed . . . it’s slightly more complicated than that.’ Nathaniel wasn’t sure if he should reveal the last piece of information about his wife, which he’d so carefully managed to conceal from everyone, even the media, with some help from a few close colleagues. These days, people thought she was a bit of a drunk. They pitied her, felt sorry for her. But that wasn’t the problem at all, not really. Elise had battled with prescription drugs, in Nathaniel’s opinion, for a few years, all magnified since Ida’s attack.

‘Okay,’ Jane said, ‘I don’t want to pry into your private business, but I do know people who might be able to help – colleagues in the medical profession.’

‘That’s really kind of you but we have a great therapist and doctor. We’re just going through a particularly bad patch.’ Nathaniel stood up and walked into the hall. Jane followed. He could see Mark through the open kitchen doorway, out in the garden smoking a cigarette, which again surprised him. He imagined them both being so controlled and tense, measured in everything they encountered, that smoking seemed an odd habit for either of them to have. Both medical professionals, and Mark and Jane seemed so clean-cut and stiff.

‘I understand about addiction,’ Jane said. She glanced behind her, and Nathaniel didn’t know if she was nodding to Mark or checking he couldn’t overhear. ‘Get her into a rehabilitation centre. It’ll make all the difference, trust me.’

‘It’s not alcohol – I know everyone thinks she’s a drunk.’

‘I know.’ Jane squeezed his arm, and then he realised – of course they knew. How easy it was to find these things out when you worked in the medical profession. Elise had been a well-respected coordinator for the delivery suite. She’d been monitored a few years ago for codeine dependency – not an uncommon problem. She’d relapsed when their lives turned upside down and her GP had prescribed zopiclone, a sleeping tablet.

‘I’m so sorry about everything, and Elise is too. Since the children . . . you know, it’s been difficult, and I probably haven’t been supporting her as much as I should. Buried my head in work.’

‘It must be really difficult for you all.’ Jane unhooked her bag from the banister and pulled out a business card. ‘Here’s my number. Give me a call if you want any contacts. I know people who could help.’

Nathaniel took the card. ‘I know you need to take this injunction out. I get it and, actually, I think it’s the right thing for Elise . . . she needs to realise how serious this is. What she’s done.’

‘We have to, Nathaniel. We have our family to think about.’

‘I know I’m not in any position to be asking for favours, but would you be able to put a good word in, tell the police we’ve spoken?’

‘It’s out of our control, unfortunately. The Crown Prosecution Service will decide if it’s in the public interest to prosecute. You know that.’

Nathaniel nodded. ‘I understand. Thanks for your time, anyway.’

‘You still haven’t answered my question about why your wife believes our son is hers.’

He sighed heavily. ‘Elise says that when Buddy was born, he had an unusual birthmark on his right calf. The morning after he’d been born, and she’d managed to get some sleep, she said he didn’t smell like hers, he seemed like a stranger – “an unfamiliar animal” were her actual words – and she felt something was wrong. That’s when she noticed he didn’t have the birthmark on his leg anymore. It’s common. I spoke to one of the midwives about it and she said women can often be so overwhelmed and tired, they find it difficult to bond. For a while she totally believed he’d been swapped in the hospital until I managed to persuade her she was mistaken, but then it became an issue again a few weeks after Ida . . . I guess she felt like she was losing control – she’d lost one child, and it cast more doubt on Buddy. She saw you at the

hospital one day and recognised you from the maternity ward – said you’d spoken to one another quite a bit.’

‘I’m sorry, I just don’t remember. Thanks for calling round, Nathaniel. We appreciate your apology.’ Jane opened the front door for him and he could tell by the change in her demeanour, the altered look in her eyes, that their son, Louis, had a birthmark on his right calf.

CHAPTER THREE

THEN

When Elise finally made it to the top of the stairs, with Buddy, her two-month-old son, asleep in his car seat hanging from one arm and her work bag under the other, she was alarmed to see the apartment door open. Her initial thought was that Nathaniel was home early from work, or perhaps it was Ida or Miles, their other children, already back from school. But then she remembered, they were going straight to their grandfather’s because it was Ida’s birthday, and they were all going out for dinner.

Elise placed Buddy gently on to the floor and peered around the door frame. There was something wrong with the entire picture before her eyes, she could feel it. She pulled the door towards her and checked the Yale, which appeared to be intact until she touched it and the metal block moved away from the frame, the screws jutting out of their holes. Just as she decided the door had been forced and warned herself not to overreact, as she was so often

accused of doing, Elise's phone began to ring, startling her and causing Buddy to stir from his warm slumber. It was Nathaniel calling.

'Where are you?' she whispered into the phone.

'I'm at work. I wondered if you wanted me to pick anything up on my way home. I'm leaving soon.'

'I thought you were in the apartment,' Elise said quietly, desperate not to wake Buddy or alert a possible intruder.

'No, I'm still at work. What's wrong?'

'Our front door is open. I'm not sure what to do.'

Nathaniel was silent for a moment. 'I bet it was Ida, she was the last one out this morning. I'm always telling her to give the door a good slam. Is there no one at home?'

'I haven't been inside to check. Ida and Miles are going straight to Dad's after school. It's her birthday, remember?'

'Of course, we're going out. I'm sure she just forgot to close it.'

'The Yale lock is loose, it's been forced.'

'Oh? Give me half an hour and I'll see if I can get away.'

'Don't worry, I'll call Dad,' Elise snapped. Maybe she was being ridiculous, but it didn't seem irrational not to want to enter a situation where she could possibly be faced with a burglar.

'Don't do that – it's fine, I'll come home. Just wait until I get there.'

Elise almost dropped the phone when she heard the door opposite open, then Tolek, their neighbour, peered out, startling her again.

'You made me jump.' Elise raised her hand to her chest, her voice made louder as it bounced off the walls in the small hallway.

'Everything okay?'

‘No. I’ve just come home and found our front door open. There’s no one home. I don’t think there is, anyway.’

‘I did notice and thought it was odd, but I didn’t want to interfere in case you’d deliberately left it open for the caretaker or someone.’

‘No, we wouldn’t do that.’

‘What’s going on?’ Nathaniel was still on the line, but Elise had moved the phone away from her ear.

‘Tolek is here now.’ And she hung up the phone, feeling easier now that there was someone more pragmatic to deal with everything.

Elise called the police while Tolek crept inside the apartment to see if anyone was there. While she waited for him to come out, she rang Ray, her father, and asked him if he wouldn’t mind coming over once he’d finished with his patients.

‘Are Ida and Miles there yet?’ she asked. ‘It looks like we’ve had a break-in and the children aren’t home.’

‘A break-in? The children aren’t here yet, but I’ll let you know as soon as they arrive. Are you okay?’

‘Yes, kind of. I found the front door open, and the lock is broken.’

‘As soon as they get here, I’ll come over. Try not to worry, Elise, there’s probably a perfectly good explanation. You’re just being a bit irrational. I’m with a patient, I must go.’

Elise was glad he’d hung up; she didn’t want to hear the psychiatric observations he always felt it necessary to impart. She probably was being irrational, but it wasn’t the first time they’d been burgled.

One particular intrusion had occurred when they’d decided to have a brief spell living in the countryside, when the noise of the city had all been too much for her. That burglar had made their way in through the back of the house, smashing through two sets of uPVC doors. It

hadn't been until the evening, when she was putting the children to bed, that she noticed the mess and the vandalism in Nathaniel's office. *Being so remote, you're more of a target*, the police had said. *Your husband being a journalist increases your chances*, they had added. Elise hadn't thought 'chances' was the right word to use, given the circumstances. Chances conjured up thoughts of being lucky and favoured. It seemed to her that, wherever they lived, they were targets for intruders.

'I'm not sure if anyone has been in.' Tolek appeared in the hallway again. 'Come, I'll make you some tea while you wait.'

Elise smiled, picked up Buddy in his car seat and followed Tolek into his apartment, so starkly different to theirs with its white walls and wooden floors. It was clean, sharp, and yet it always felt warm. He had moved into the apartment nine years ago and had lived there far longer than Elise and her family. Ida had been intrigued by him when they'd moved in four years ago; she was just twelve years old at the time and would ask him all sorts of questions about his home country of Poland. After he helped her with a school project, they became great friends. Elise hadn't approved at first and was suspicious of a man in his thirties who spent far too much time alone. He owned a deli on the next street and over time they got to know him, realising he missed his own children, having become estranged from his wife and family.

While she waited for Tolek to make some tea, she called Ida's phone, but there was no answer.

'Someone might have been in there, might not, I cannot tell.' Tolek shrugged.

'It's okay, I'll have a look when the police get here.' They weren't the tidiest of families and Elise knew anyone would find it hard to see if anything was amiss.

Nathaniel arrived at the same time as the police and showed them around the apartment while Elise waited in Tolek's sitting room.

Nathaniel appeared. 'Have you managed to get hold of Ida?'

‘I tried to call her a little while ago but there was no answer. Dad said he’d come over as soon as they got back from school. What’s wrong?’

Before the words left Nathaniel’s mouth, Elise could feel the goosepimples rising, hurting her as though someone were peeling back her skin.

‘Ida’s room has been completely ransacked. Nowhere else has been touched.’

‘Let me see.’ Elise pushed past Nathaniel, who was blocking the doorway, and bumped straight into Ray, who had just come up the stairs.

‘Hey, what’s going on?’ her dad said.

‘I’m not sure. Nathaniel says Ida’s room has been ransacked.’

‘Let’s not jump to conclusions, this is a teenager we’re talking about.’

‘Ida’s tidier than we are.’ Elise shoved her way past all the people who seemed to be accumulating in the hallway and went straight into the apartment, followed closely by two police officers.

‘Have you spoken to your daughter today, Mrs Munroe?’ one of the PCs enquired.

‘Not since this morning,’ Elise muttered as she began to take in the carnage before her. ‘It’s her birthday, we’re all having dinner out and we’re meeting at my father’s.’

‘Lucky girl to be born on February the twenty-ninth,’ the other PC commented. She was a short, thickset woman whose male colleague was so tall they looked comical.

Elise had been expecting a few drawers pulled open, the duvet strewn on the floor, possibly an overturned lamp, but the scene before her was far more dramatic. The drawers had indeed been pulled open but were lying on the floor, the contents scattered everywhere. Ida’s mattress appeared to have been thrown across to the other side of the room and was leaning awkwardly against the wall, reminding her of the drunks she saw in shop doorways on her way to work. The posters, all political statements, had been ripped from the walls, the remnants hanging there, like scraps on old billboards. Elise entered the room and noticed the wooden slats to

Ida's bed had been smashed, as though someone had jumped across them, and the mirror above her dressing table was cracked right down the centre. It was definitely not how Ida kept her room, which was always neat and perfect.

There were two things that hadn't been touched. One was a large pinboard Ida was using for a family history project she was doing. It seemed to glow from the wall, in all its complicated and magnificent glory; Ida had gone beyond the space inside the frame and spread the project out like the sprouting branches of a tree. The second item was a box that was set on its side, containing a scene, not dissimilar to a set in a theatre, like a snapshot from a stage play.

'Ida's laptop is missing,' Elise said absent-mindedly, as she examined the strange scene on the dressing table. The female police officer followed her gaze.

'That's interesting. What is it?'

'I haven't seen it before.' Elise peered inside the box, which looked like it had been turned into a room from a doll's house. 'What I mean is, she's made these before, at my dad's, but I haven't seen this one until now.'

'Is it some kind of school project?' asked the male officer. Both of them were now interested in the miniature scene before them. It was a kitchen, complete with stove, fridge and units. In the middle of the room, a doll was sitting on a chair at a table, two tiny handguns in front of her, one placed under her hand. On closer inspection, you could see a messy blood wound on the side of her head. 'That's a bit macabre.'

'Did you have an argument with your daughter this morning?' the female officer asked.

'Just the usual teenage strop we have to endure on a daily basis,' Elise said, as Buddy's crying pierced the atmosphere. She pushed anxiously past the two officers and walked into the hall, where she found Nathaniel releasing Buddy from his car seat.

'Don't keep picking him up, you'll make him needy,' Elise snapped at Nathaniel. 'Where's Dad?'

‘He’s gone back to his to get Ida and Miles. He doesn’t want them walking here to the apartment.’

‘Has he seen them?’ Elise was beginning to panic.

‘Yes, stop worrying. Miles went back to school for basketball practice. He says Ida was in a terrible mood because she’d quarrelled with Alistair.’

‘I told Miles he wasn’t allowed to stay behind tonight. Why didn’t Ida remind him?’

Nathaniel shrugged.

‘Is Alistair a school friend?’ the female police officer enquired.

‘Yes,’ Elise snapped. ‘What are you going to do about all this?’

The police officers were now examining the extent of the damage to the front door.

‘As long as you’re sure you’ve been burgled,’ the woman said, ‘we’ll call Scenes of Crime out to look. We’ll need a statement from you, and then I’d suggest you carry on with your evening as planned.’

Neither Elise nor Nathaniel could believe what they were hearing.

‘I should say we’ve been burgled, wouldn’t you?’ Nathaniel shouted above the sound of his crying son.

The two police officers looked at one another.

‘We’ll also need a statement from your daughter. It could just be an innocent misunderstanding.’

‘A misunderstanding?!’ said Nathaniel. ‘It’s her birthday, she was in fairly good spirits this morning when I left. She might be moody at times, but she certainly wouldn’t do anything like this.’

‘I’ll call Dad and tell him we’ll be over as soon as we’ve collected Buddy’s things.’ Elise ignored the two officers and turned to Nathaniel. ‘We’ll stay there tonight.’

‘Can we have your father’s name and address please?’ the male officer asked. For the first time since they’d arrived, one of them had begun to take everything more seriously.

Elise sighed heavily as she tried to appease Buddy, who was whimpering in Nathaniel’s arms. ‘He needs a bottle.’

‘I’ll go and feed him.’ Nathaniel picked up the nappy bag and walked across the hall to Tolek’s apartment.

‘It’s Dr Ray Coe, Walnut Villa, Canterbury Avenue—’

‘Dr Ray Coe?’ the officer interrupted.

‘Yes. That’s my father.’

‘I’ve read some of his books.’ He looked up and studied her face, searching for the resemblance. ‘Very interesting man.’

‘Everyone says that, when what they mean to say is he’s a nutcase.’

The officer’s face coloured. ‘Some of his theories are . . . well, a bit, well, unusual.’

‘It’s okay. You don’t have to be polite, I know a lot of people think he’s an arsehole. You shouldn’t believe everything you read in the papers. Being in the police, I should imagine you know that.’

The officer nodded, and Elise could see he was eager for them to leave so he could tell his unaware colleague about the social experiment Ray became infamous for. In 1986, he’d organised a *Big Brother*-style television game on a remote island – the first of its kind. One of the participants was removed and the others led to believe that she’d been murdered, prompting research into trust and paranoia. Unfortunately, one of the other participants actually died from positional asphyxia and Ray was investigated and charged with manslaughter, but he was found not guilty in court. Several of the contestants were so traumatised by the whole experience, they sued him.

Later, making their way out of the apartment block and across the forecourt to their car, having finally managed to settle Buddy, both Elise and Nathaniel paused as they heard an all-too-familiar sound coming from the flower bed by the main entrance. It stopped, and then a few seconds later, it started again.

Nathaniel wandered over to the location of the sound; rain was beginning to pelt down. In the dark, he could see a lit-up screen, across it the name 'Alistair' distorted by droplets of water.

Ida's phone, vibrating amidst the shrubs.

CHAPTER FOUR

That was the game. Shoot yourself or be shot. What would you do? There was a way out, a solution – isn't there always?

Sometime during the late seventies, when I was commuting to work on the train, I met Sidney Mitford, the man who gave me the idea for the suicide game. We often had strange but interesting conversations, but this one made a mark on who I was to become.

'If you had to choose whether to shoot yourself or be shot, what would you do? What would your answer be?' Sidney leant forward and stared at me, his elbows resting on the table between us.

'I don't quite understand what you're asking.'

'Someone has handed you a gun and the question is, will you shoot yourself or would you rather your assailant did the deed?'

It was a few moments before I gave him my answer. Sidney was a barrister, and he normally travelled with his clerk Frank, but on this particular day he was alone. In fact, there was no one else in the single carriage, unusual for a Monday morning.

Sidney would often throw random questions across the table, designed to surprise and shake whoever was listening from their mundane thinking.

My response was that I would opt to shoot myself, but then turn the gun on my assailant.

‘That’s not how the game works,’ Sidney said.

‘I didn’t realise we were discussing a game. Is this one of your cases?’ I enquired in a slightly mocking tone.

‘I wouldn’t tell you if it was.’ Sidney leant back, resting his hands on his lap.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Answer my question. Shoot yourself or be shot – you have sixty seconds to answer and it’s not possible to turn the gun on your assailant.’

‘I think I would choose to be shot. Possibly. Who wants to shoot themselves? I would say that, to the very last second, I would be hopeful they might change their mind, or I would be rescued. If I had already shot myself, I would be giving in. Fight or flight, I guess.’

Sidney pondered on what I’d said and almost looked disappointed. I returned to my newspaper, unable to stop thinking about his question. Eventually, he spoke again.

‘That says a lot about who you are. How much you value your life. Is that the kind of person you want to be?’

‘Which person?’

‘The one who opts to be submissive. Where is the fight or flight in that? Did you think there might be a solution to your survival if you thought about it?’

‘But surely, with only sixty seconds to decide, how can I work out the solution?’

He didn’t answer me, just raised his eyebrows.

It was the last time I saw Sidney on that train journey – or ever, for that matter. Two weeks later, when I saw Frank again, he told me Sidney had shot himself. Frank didn't mention anything about the game, but it hung in the air between us as we rocked to the vibration of the train.

'Does anyone know why?'

It was a while before Frank answered. 'He left two letters to his wife. One was a statement of the facts of his life – an itinerary, if you like, of the significant events. It was quite sad in places but in the main, happy.'

'And the second?' I leant forward, eager to know what was in the other letter – and so, it seemed, did the couple sitting next to me. Both were pretending to be absorbed in their reading materials.

'It was an obituary, of sorts. It was how Sidney wanted to be remembered, but also what he would have liked to do with his life had he taken a different path – his thoughts and aspirations.'

We sat in silence for a few moments as I thought about what he had said. The couple next to me had forgotten about being impolite and were openly eavesdropping, having lowered their newspapers.

'Can I ask where Sidney did it? Who found him?'

Frank shook his head at the sadness of it all and glanced at the couple, who quickly looked away.

'Sidney lived in a beautiful old house with a lake in the grounds,' he said. 'Just on the edge of the water was a large summer house he'd had built years ago. It was a Saturday, mid-afternoon, and, according to his wife, he poured himself a brandy and walked down to the lake – not an unusual thing for him to do on a weekend. Some moments later she heard a gunshot and Sidney's dog was barking and scraping at the door to be let out. He would never go down

to the lake house without the dog. She knew exactly what she was going to find. Terrible business.'

'But I still don't understand why.' I was pushing a sensitive subject, but for some reason I needed an answer. I didn't want to leave the train never knowing.

'Sidney had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. All those dreams and aspirations would never unfold, and he'd written them down, so he would always have a record of who he used to be, so he wouldn't forget, and neither would the people around him. They were things he could have done but never quite got around to. He used to be exasperated at how people arrogantly assumed they had all the time in the world, when in fact he was just the same as them. I think that's what he was trying to say, in the hope his loved ones would conduct their lives in a better way.'

'So, it wasn't necessarily a suicide note?'

'Sidney's wife believes he wrote those letters some weeks before and just happened to read them again before he died. He left them for his family, so they could remember the person he was and not the one he would have become.'

We all sat back in our seats and there was silence for the rest of the journey.

That story stayed with me. Sidney didn't want to lead a life that, in his eyes, was diluted or poorly conducted, so he bravely ended it. This got me thinking about all the healthy people who waste their lives. What made them like that – and, given a choice, would they change their lives if they knew they might only have months left?

That's when the game started, when I began introducing people to death.

There are only a few people who have survived the game; Magda King – as she is known now, under her married name – is one participant I remember well. She played the game in 1986, when I knew her as Magda Bradshaw. We stay in touch, partly because I'm fascinated by her but also because she isn't dissimilar to me. She unexpectedly surprised me, and we share

a lifelong secret like we're on a perfectly balanced see-saw – one will not disclose the other, so we remain suspended in mid-air, in perfect balance.

CHAPTER FIVE

THEN

The floodlight on the front of Ray's imposing Victorian villa lit up the driveway as he pulled on to the gravel. Behind the electric lantern, the house stood in complete darkness, not one window was projecting a warm glow, which Ray thought peculiar, seeing as when he'd left, Ida had turned on almost every one of them. She'd been antsy earlier, wanting food, wanting to know what was going on, it was her birthday, why didn't anyone ever tell her anything? Ray had told her to wait there so she could let Miles in when he got back and, being a defiant teenager, he guessed she and Alistair had gone to the van in the park for chips, purposefully turning all the lights out because it was another thing he nagged her about.

As he pushed the key into the front door and switched on the hall light, Ray picked up the phone and called Ida's mobile. No answer, so he dialled Elise. He put his hand on the banister and peered up the dark staircase as he waited for her to answer.

'Dad?' she said when she picked up. 'We're still at the apartment. Please tell me Ida is there at the house.'

‘It’s pitch black here, not a soul. I’ve tried calling her phone but she’s not answering. I’m going over to the chip van in the park, which is probably where I’ll find the little scamps. It’s like the bloody *Mary Celeste* here.’

‘Dad . . .’

‘Or maybe she’s gone to meet Miles at school – basketball practice finishes soon. I think she’s in a huff because it’s her birthday and no one is here yet.’

‘Dad . . .’

‘I’ll try her again, search the park and ring you back.’

‘We’ve found Ida’s phone. Out the front of ours, on the forecourt.’

Ray fell silent for a few seconds, not quite understanding what Elise was implying. ‘Well then, she’ll be in the building somewhere, gone to one of the neighbours I should expect.’

‘We’d have seen her, Dad. She’d have come up to the apartment. I need you to check around and call me straight back. Isn’t Sonny there yet?’

‘No, he’s still at work, said he’d meet us at the restaurant if he was going to be late. I’ll call him. Try not to worry, I saw her before I popped over to yours, she was with Alistair, and they were both absolutely fine. Call Alistair, he’ll have his phone. Ring me if you hear anything.’ Ray hung up and dialled his son Sonny’s number. There was no answer, so he left a message on his voicemail for him to call. Sonny lived with him and worked as a barrister in the city. It was rare he ever came home early, or even on time.

The house was deathly silent, and Ray began walking through, switching lights on and peering briefly into rooms, calling for Ida as he went. It was a waste of time. Why would she have been sitting there in the dark? He made his way to the back door and out into the garden. Ida and Miles liked to work on projects in the old summer house and, as eerie as it was on a dark winter’s evening, it would be just the sort of place she might be, especially as she’d been in a strange mood that day. He would often find her in there when she was feeling tetchy or

had something on her mind, scarf wrapped around her face, thick woolly mittens curled around a mug of hot chocolate. But Ray could see from halfway down the garden there were no lights illuminating the summer house. He walked straight to the back gate, reassured that it was unlocked and open, which gave him the thought that Ida and Miles were out in the park that ran along the back of Ray's property. The children insisted on using it as a shortcut, but Ray liked to keep the gate locked, especially with some of the psychiatric patients who visited his house.

Ray took wide strides across the usually green but now quite muddy park, the rain causing him to squint. He stopped so he could visually sweep the area, illuminated by the streetlights, but there was no chip van. And then he remembered it was Monday. The chip van was never there on a Monday.

Ray went back into his garden, peering through the windows of the summer house on the way, just to make sure Ida wasn't in there. But making sure she was absent was quickly turning into needing to find her, as the places she could be began to diminish like sand in an hourglass, his heart rate starting to rise. Elise and Nathaniel had been burgled and Ida's phone had been found, her bedroom vandalised.

Then, as he went inside and walked through the kitchen on his way to check upstairs, he saw Ida lying on the floor in the orangery. He paused, wondering why he hadn't noticed her before. He rushed to where she was lying on her side, her back to him. Ray knelt on the stone floor and carefully gripped her shoulder, pulling Ida on to her back. Blood had seeped from her head, mouth and nose, but he couldn't tell if she was alive or not. Ray gently lifted her small frame towards him, handling her like a newborn. A rasping gasp came from her mouth as he folded her into his arms. She was alive. She was still alive. He knew he needed to call an ambulance, but he was frozen to the spot. Ida stared at him, her lids drooping over her big brown eyes, fading and barely conscious.

Ray grabbed a cushion from one of the chairs and put it under Ida's head, carefully placing her in the recovery position, before he went into the kitchen to use his mobile. Somehow, he made the call for an ambulance, stuttering over whether they needed the police as well. He hesitated when the operator asked for his address, which he simply couldn't remember for a few seconds, his mind filled entirely with visions of his granddaughter. He opened the front door as instructed and rushed back into the orangery, rested the phone on the table, and knelt down on the floor in front of Ida so he could hold her hand. He could hear the operator talking, asking him questions, but he didn't answer. Ray stared at Ida, she at him, as he felt the life ease its way from her grip on his fingers, the light gradually fading from her eyes like she could see a dark spectre standing next to them, overshadowing the scene.

Ray was barely aware of the click of a door, although later he would remember hearing it close, or open, he couldn't be sure.

Hearing the sirens in the distance, Ray left Ida's side and ran out the front to guide the ambulance to the correct address. To his dismay, it drove past and had to turn around. As soon as Ray was confident they'd seen him in the entrance to the driveway, he ran back inside to be with Ida.

The paramedics eventually found Ray in the orangery, where they all stared at the bloodstained floor, as though Ida had never been there.

CHAPTER SIX

THEN

The scene Nathaniel returned to was very different to the one he'd left. Ray's drive was now filled with two Scenes of Crime vans, three police cars and two ambulances. After the discovery of Ida's phone, they'd received a call from Ray telling them to come straight over, there'd been an incident, and when they'd arrived, the police had ushered them straight into the drawing room, which was the first room on the left by the front door. Nathaniel had explained they needed to collect their son from school, and he'd been permitted to go with a police escort. He hadn't wanted Miles to be dropped off by friends' parents, who would see everything and want to know what was happening. It also gave him a chance to talk to Miles on the way back, although he wasn't sure Miles was listening as he kept interrupting him to tell him about what had happened during basketball practice, in between exclaiming how cool it was to travel in a police car.

'What's going on, Dad?' Miles was more excited than alarmed by all the vehicles with flashing lights, and hadn't linked what Nathaniel had told him about his sister to the scene before him.

'I don't know at the moment, lovey.'

What alarmed Nathaniel more when he arrived back at Ray's were the people in white overalls he could see at the end of the hall. One of them looked up and then quietly spoke to their colleague. The enormity of the situation tightened his throat and chest.

Nathaniel found Elise sat on the sofa, ashen faced, her blonde hair dishevelled. She stood up when he walked in. Nathaniel went to embrace her, but she put her hands out to stop him.

‘Don’t.’

‘What’s happening? Where’s Ida?’

‘I don’t know. Dad said he found her on the floor, he went outside to guide the paramedics in and when he got back, she’d disappeared. They searched the house and garden but couldn’t find her anywhere. He says she was in a state.’

‘In what way?’

‘Badly injured . . . she was unconscious when he found her.’

Nathaniel nodded, shock rendering him momentarily speechless.

‘We have to wait in here until someone comes to speak to us.’ Elise reached out for Miles’s hand and pulled him towards her; Buddy was sitting in the crook of her other arm. ‘Have you explained what’s going on?’

Nathaniel looked at Miles and nodded. ‘I’m not sure how much of it has been understood, though.’

‘I think we all feel like that.’

‘Where’s Ray?’ he asked.

‘I’m not sure. The police wanted to ask him a few questions at the station. Why would anyone do this to her?’ Elise pulled a tissue from her sleeve and wiped her nose.

‘I don’t know. Let’s just wait and see what the police say. Have they said anything at all?’

‘No. They won’t tell me what happened to Ida or Dad. I heard someone say Sonny was there as well, but I haven’t seen him.’

‘You’ve been in here the whole time?’ Nathaniel asked, pacing the room, hands shoved into his pockets, trying to control himself and not be hysterical. He wondered if Elise was aware of the Scenes of Crime vans – what it all meant.

‘I know as much as you.’

‘I saw Uncle Sonny in the park earlier, but he ignored me,’ Miles blurted as he wandered over to the television in the corner and picked up the control.

‘We’re probably going to have to book into a hotel tonight. We won’t be allowed to stay at ours or Ray’s.’ Nathaniel was trying to ease the news for Elise, preparing her for what they were about to be told. Being a journalist, he’d seen these kinds of situations before. They weren’t expecting Ida to survive, and once it turned into a murder enquiry, everything would change very quickly.

Elise stared up at Nathaniel and then turned to Miles, who’d found some satisfactory trash to watch on TV. ‘What did you just say, love?’

‘I shouted to Uncle Sonny on my way back to school, but he just looked at me and carried on walking.’

‘You couldn’t have seen Uncle Sonny. He was at work earlier.’

Miles frowned. ‘No, he wasn’t. Me and Ida saw him after school.’

‘Hang on a minute. Why did you come back here? I thought you stayed for basketball practice after lessons, after I told you not to,’ Elise said, letting him know he shouldn’t have gone against her instructions.

Miles looked up, trying to think through the day’s events, gauge if he was in a lot of trouble or not. ‘I wasn’t going to basketball practice and then I changed my mind because Ida met up with Alistair on the way home and I was bored, so Granddad said I could go back to school if I wanted.’

‘And Granddad walked you back?’ Nathaniel was always telling Ray he didn’t want the children walking anywhere on their own, especially through the park.

‘No, by myself. Granddad had a strange man here. He said he couldn’t leave him.’

‘A strange man?’ Nathaniel looked at Elise, who was gently rocking Buddy. She hadn’t seen the chaos outside the house.

‘He came out of Granddad’s office and said he was me, myself and I. He had an eye patch, like a pirate.’

‘Okay. One of Dad’s patients,’ Elise whispered to Nathaniel.

‘I thought you told him not to have patients here when the children are over?’

Elise sighed, as she always did when he questioned her father’s actions, but he didn’t care, especially when it came to his children. ‘Come on,’ she said. ‘He can’t help it if there’s a bit of a crossover. And that’s all it would have been, he promised me.’

‘Bloody hell, Elise, you don’t know what sort of nutcases he has on his books. And Miles isn’t old enough to walk through the park by himself.’

‘If they were that bad, they’d be locked up.’

‘Look at the situation we’re in now.’ Nathaniel raised his hands.

Elise ignored him. ‘Try Alistair again, will you? See if he knows anything.’

‘I called already, he’s not answering.’

Elise turned her attention back to Miles, who was now absorbed in the TV programme.

‘So, Ida stayed at Granddad’s with Alistair when you walked back to school?’

‘I think so.’ Miles shrugged. ‘Granddad and Ida were arguing about something just before I left.’

‘What were they arguing about, love?’

‘Where’s Ida?’ Miles appeared to suddenly realise his sister wasn’t there.

‘She’s with the doctors because she’s poorly, they’re trying to make her better.’ Nathaniel dialled Alistair’s number but there was still no answer.

‘Are we staying at Granddad’s tonight?’ Miles switched the channel.

‘Shush a minute, your dad’s talking on the phone.’

Nathaniel left a message on Alistair's voicemail, telling him to call them urgently.

'Still no answer?'

Nathaniel shook his head. He was beginning to wonder if both kids had got themselves into trouble.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sudden arrival of a couple of detectives.

'Where's my daughter?' Elise demanded of them. 'What's happened to my dad?'

The detectives introduced themselves as DI David Davis and DC Alex Chilvers, the latter a woman, despite her name.

'Mrs Munroe,' DC Chilvers said, 'we don't know where your daughter is at the moment, but our officers are out searching for her and we're doing everything we can. We just need to ask you a few questions.'

Nathaniel and Elise looked at one another.

'What do you mean, you don't know where our daughter is?' Nathaniel asked.

'We believe your daughter was attacked sometime this afternoon. Dr Coe and Sonny Travers found her, but since then she's disappeared.' DC Chilvers allowed the words to settle.

Nathaniel and Elise stared at the officers, trying to take in everything they were saying.

Elise said, 'We were only told she'd been attacked . . .'

'I'm sorry no one has been in to explain everything to you, Mrs Munroe. As you can imagine, the first few hours in any investigation are crucial. Our priority is finding your daughter.'

'So she ran off? Her injuries couldn't have been that bad then?' Elise stood up and propped Buddy up on some cushions. 'I need to find her. I can't sit around here doing nothing.'

'Mrs Munroe, you need to stay calm, and we'll explain everything to you, as soon as we have the facts. It doesn't help anyone if we speculate. Sit down, please.'

Elise reached for Nathaniel's hand and they both sat down.

‘Firstly, I need to ask who lives here with your father. All of you?’ DC Chilvers opened her pocketbook.

Elise and Nathaniel exchanged puzzled looks.

‘No. Just my brother-in-law Sonny,’ said Nathaniel, quickly becoming irritated. ‘We live a few streets away from here. Our apartment was burgled earlier today.’

‘Did you report it?’

‘That’s not quite right, Nathaniel,’ said Elise. ‘Our flat was broken into, and Ida’s room was trashed. We think her laptop was stolen.’

DC Chilvers looked up from her notetaking. ‘You reported it?’

‘Yes, for fuck’s sake,’ Nathaniel snapped. ‘We reported it before all this happened. Before we knew someone had attacked our daughter. Do any of you talk to one another?’

‘Nathaniel, little ears,’ Elise hissed, nodding towards Miles, who was standing in front of the television, transfixed by his programme.

‘Mr Munroe, you’ll appreciate that when we’re sent out to different jobs, it takes a while for information to be collated and compared. We’re relying on all of you to tell us as much as you can remember. Can you confirm who lives in your father-in-law’s house and who lives in your apartment with you?’ DI Davis addressed them both.

‘When are we having dinner?’ Miles wandered over to Elise and leant against her legs.

‘Just go and sit quietly for a few minutes and we’ll sort something out.’ Elise stroked the back of Miles’s head and turned her attention to the police officers. ‘My father lives in the house with my brother, Sonny. Sonny John Travers. Nathaniel and I live in our apartment with our children, Ida, Miles and Buddy.’

‘And how old is your brother?’ DC Chilvers continued to note everything down in her pocketbook.

‘Thirty-six, thirty-seven, I’m not sure.’ Elise was beginning to feel uncomfortable. She didn’t like people prying into their private lives.

‘You don’t know how old your brother is?’ DC Chilvers stopped writing. ‘Is he a half-sibling?’

‘No. Why do you ask?’

‘He has a different name to your father.’

‘My mother had him adopted just after he was born. Sonny employed an agency to find us. About three years ago, I think.’ Elise lifted Buddy on to her lap; he was beginning to fidget. ‘He’s a barrister.’

‘Yes, I know Mr Travers. I’ve met him in a professional capacity.’ DC Chilvers showed no emotion, neither a smile nor an offer to elaborate any further. She just carried on writing. ‘And your mother’s name?’

‘Ingrid Coe. She’s deceased.’ Elise glanced across at Miles, wondering how much he could hear, but he seemed totally absorbed in *Deal or No Deal*.

‘Recent?’

‘No, she died when I was eleven. Suicide. Well, we think it was.’

DC Chilvers frowned. ‘You think it was?’

‘Have you heard of the Suicide Watcher cases?’ Nathaniel reached his arms out to Elise, so she could hand Buddy over.

‘Yes.’

‘Both our mothers were victims.’

‘That’s not quite right, Nathaniel.’ It was a subject they had always disagreed on. Elise had attended a support group, set up for anyone dealing with the aftermath of suicide. It had been founded by a woman called Donna Levisham, but she’d moved away, and it was eventually

taken over by Magda King, Alistair's mother, and that's how they'd met. The group had quickly become known as a place for the Suicide Watcher's alleged victims.

It irritated Nathaniel when she contradicted him.

'It doesn't matter,' DC Chilvers said. 'It's not important at this stage. We just really need to know who is presently in Ida's life. People she spends time with on a regular basis. We also need to know if there's anyone you might be worried about. Anyone who might have upset Ida recently?'

'I can't think of anyone. Is my father hurt?'

'No.' DC Chilvers frowned. 'Mr Travers found your daughter and may have chased her assailant from the property. As far as we know, neither he nor your father was involved in the attack.'

'Sonny found Ida?' Nathaniel stood up. 'You need to tell us exactly what's going on. We didn't know that.'

'Where are my father and brother?' Elise got up from the sofa.

'They're at the station answering some questions. The most important thing is that you tell us everything you can remember. Is there anyone you can think of who might have been bullying Ida?'

'No, I just told you.' Elise gripped her face and began to cry. 'Why aren't you out looking for her?'

'We have officers out there right now. At this stage, we don't know what's happened to her. Your father says he found her lying on the floor with what he thinks was a head injury. He called an ambulance, and sometime between your father going outside to get the paramedics and coming back into the room, your daughter disappeared.'

'But you just said Sonny found her. Which is it?' Nathaniel was increasingly irate.

‘It appears that Mr Travers found your daughter first, but believes he saw an intruder in the garden, so he pursued them.’

‘Why didn’t Sonny call an ambulance?’ Nathaniel frowned, trying to make sense of what was being said to him.

DC Chilvers paused and observed them both. ‘Mr Travers believed your daughter was dead when he found her.’

‘Does he know who it was? In the garden, I mean?’ Nathaniel leant against the wall, wanting to fall through it like he was in a dream.

‘Unfortunately, we don’t know any more.’ DC Chilvers stood up and left the room. They could hear her talking to someone outside the door.

‘I’m sorry no one has been in to explain things to you in more detail.’ DI David Davis took over from DC Chilvers. ‘As you can appreciate, trying to locate someone in the dark and wet weather is increasingly difficult the later it gets, so we’re working as quickly as possible to find your daughter and her attacker.’

‘So ,you think Ida has run off and her attacker is somewhere else?’ Nathaniel felt strangely relieved that *a* someone had been spotted, that this person might be close by and easy to locate.

‘It’s a little more serious than that, Mr Munroe. Your brother-in-law was chasing someone he’d seen in the garden. At the moment, no one knows if this is the person who attacked her or an innocent member of the public. Our officers are currently searching the area and conducting house-to-house enquiries.’

‘No one told us any of that.’ Elise’s words were full of tears and Nathaniel went over to comfort her.

‘So, you could be looking for more than one person?’ Nathaniel said desperately.

‘Possibly. We’re keeping an open mind.’

Elise took Buddy from Nathaniel and placed him in his car seat. 'I need to see Sonny and my father. I need to know what happened.'

'You can't do that, Mrs Munroe. Your father has been taken to the police station, along with Sonny. We'd like you to stay in here while we explain what we need you to do. Save your energy for your daughter, that's the most important thing to do right now.'

'What are you doing with my father?'

Nathaniel could see Elise was becoming dangerously angry; her quiet voice and creased brow were always a sign she was going to erupt. 'My daughter's been abducted and now you're expecting me to sit here while you manhandle my father?'

'Sit down, Mrs Munroe, please. We haven't finished.' DC Chilvers had returned and was blocking Elise's way. 'No one is manhandling your father. His clothes have been taken for forensic analysis, along with your brother's, and they've both agreed to visit the station to answer some questions, purely for us to get as much information from them as we can, while it's still fresh in their minds. We would like you to do the same. You will also need to find alternative accommodation. Can you stay with relatives or friends?'

'I'm not going anywhere. I'll be staying here and waiting for my daughter to return.'

'Your other two children will need somewhere secure to stay. Do you have any other family they can go to?'

'I want my boys with me,' Elise snapped.

'I'll book us into a hotel and ask my dad and stepmum to come and collect Miles and Buddy – they don't live far away.' Nathaniel looked across at Elise, pleading with her not to make things more complicated than they had to be. 'They'll be better off at my dad's. They need to be settled.'

'Okay, just leave the details with one of us as soon as you know.' DI Davis turned to his DC. 'Can you arrange for an officer to drive the family there?'

Just as Nathaniel's phone pinged, alerting him to an email, another officer knocked on the door and entered.

'Can I have a word, boss?' It was a Scenes of Crime officer. Nathaniel couldn't help noticing all the protective clothing and surgical gloves everyone was wearing.

DC Chilvers followed DI Davis out of the room, passing Nathaniel, who was rooted to the spot and staring at his phone.

'Wait.' Nathaniel handed his phone to the officers, who took it and peered at the screen. 'I've just received an email from Ida.'

Elise moved towards Nathaniel, confused by what he was saying. She snatched the phone and looked at the screen. In big capital letters it read: *WHO AM I?*

CHAPTER SEVEN

THEN

Alistair had been Ida's best friend since they were six years old, and he'd arrived at the school as a newcomer. When he was born, his father had wanted to bring him up in his home country of Scotland, but after six years he had decided to move back to London. Alistair's mother, Magda, had grown up there and she missed her family. Her brother Gordon had committed suicide many years ago and she was eager to set up a support group for other people affected by a similar event. That was how she'd met Ida's parents, and the connection was soon made, so their children played together at school.

As soon as Ida had decided Alistair was going to be her new friend, all the children who'd ridiculed his Scottish accent decided he was a bit of a novelty. But ten years of solid, loyal friendship had begun to change in more recent months – the inevitable between teenagers of the opposite sex. Alistair had decided he might feel differently about her now. He recalled the temper she'd been in earlier, one of many in the past few days.

Alistair pulled his hood up and made his way home. After they'd had an argument at her grandfather's house and she'd told him to get out, he'd texted and asked her to meet him in the cricket pavilion situated in the park at the back of Ray's house. He wanted to give her the birthday present he'd bought her – a double-coin gold chain. It had cost him all his wages from working at the golf club, but he knew she wanted one and it was her sixteenth birthday.

Alistair had waited for twenty minutes but Ida hadn't turned up, so he'd gone to Ray's house so he could talk to her and explain things. He hadn't been expecting to be chased across the park by her uncle, and he was wondering if Ida had told him what happened between them.

Once Alistair had ditched Sonny, he returned to the cricket pavilion and waited. He dialled her number again and left a message telling her she was being silly. Looking at his phone, he'd had another call from the number he didn't recognise. Whoever it was had been calling for the last hour but not leaving a message, and he hadn't called them back in case it was a scam. But as the signal on his phone improved, it pinged, letting him know he had a message. He dialled his voicemail and listened. It was Nathaniel, asking him if he knew where Ida was, and could he call him back. His phone started ringing, and a brief spark of hope it was Ida lit in his chest, but he was disappointed to see it was the unknown number. He answered it this time, realising who it was.

'Alistair? It's Nathaniel. Where are you?'

'On my way home. What's going on? Where's Ida? She was supposed to meet me in the cricket pavilion.'

‘Alistair, did you and Ida have some sort of argument earlier?’

‘No . . .’ Alistair hesitated, and then decided not to tell him about the harsh words they’d exchanged after school – Ida had been in such a foul mood. ‘What’s going on?’

‘It looks like she’s . . . we don’t know what’s happened to her. She’s disappeared. The police need to ask you some questions. I’ve tried to call your mum and dad, but I can’t get hold of them either.’

‘Disappeared? I’ve only just seen her.’

‘When? You can’t have.’

‘Well, it was a couple of hours or so ago now, but I left her at Ray’s.’ Alistair heard Nathaniel swallow hard. ‘Why do the police need to speak to me? I haven’t done anything wrong.’

‘You need to go to the police station and make a statement. The police will need to talk to you, Alistair. Why didn’t you answer the phone earlier? Don’t you listen to your voicemail?’

‘I didn’t recognise the number. I—’

Before Alistair could finish, Nathaniel had hung up. ‘Prick,’ he muttered under his breath. Checking his phone for any messages, Alistair decided that if it was that serious, the police would have called him by now. He noticed two emails. One was a delivery notice about a book he’d ordered, and the other was from Ida. He smiled, she was fine and there was nothing to worry about, but when he opened it, he stared at the message in capitals that had also been sent to Nathaniel, Elise, Sonny and his mother: *WHO AM I?*

Unable to understand what the message meant; Alistair logged into his Facebook page to see if Ida was online. He couldn’t see anything, so he clicked on Ida’s name and the screen loaded with some photographs that someone had taken of her. She was smiling and laughing in a few of them, but he couldn’t figure out when they had been taken and he knew they weren’t ones he’d snapped. They’d been posted that day, just after he left her at Ray’s. He stumbled

home, not sure what to do or who to speak to. He found the number for the local police station and phoned them but only ended up rambling, unsure what he was calling for, so he hung up. Then he tried to ring Nathaniel back, but a woman answered so he aborted the call. Before he reached home, his phone had pinged with several Facebook notifications, tagging him along with Nathaniel, Elise, Sonny and Magda. The pictures of Ida were all over Facebook, seemingly sent by her.

Alistair tried Ida's phone again and had just put the key in the front door as a police car pulled into the driveway.

CHAPTER EIGHT

At some point in your life, you will realise you can't buck against the magnetic force that surrounds us. I found this out very early on in my life.

It was many years ago, when I was still at school. One particularly cold winter, a teacher of ours allowed us to skate on the pond which was situated in the school grounds. The ice was thick and solid, or so she thought. But there was a small patch that was darker, more transparent than the rest; it went unnoticed by her at the time. One boy in the class gravitated towards this area – he couldn't seem to stay away from it, pulled by the curiosity of how close he could get to the middle without falling through the ice. Everything began to slow down as we all stopped to see what was happening. Why did we stop? Have you ever noticed that? There is always a silent pause amongst everyone before anything traumatic occurs.

The crack in the ice caused children to grab on to each other as we all slowed in our frost-filled waltz. Then he was gone, disappearing into the icy water.

The usual panic ensued, as it always does when there is any sort of crisis. Then it was still and oh-so-quiet as we watched the teacher lie down on the ice and slide herself across the precarious slab; the only frantic movement was her arm waving around in the water when she reached the hole, as she tried desperately to find him. Then she went in, but still couldn't find him. She got out quickly, the water being too unbearably cold for her to be of any use in his rescue. Having screamed at us to get help, she went in again, only to reappear moments later.

Anyone with any sense would have known that a couple of minutes in that kind of temperature would disable an adult, never mind a thirteen-year-old boy.

He was dead, gone, absent from this world – he had slipped into the next, and I was fascinated and infatuated by it. I couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't stop playing it in my head: his blue face, his dark lips forever emblazoned in my mind as we watched the caretaker pull him from the icy tendrils of his liquid killer.

My obsession with him continued for years. I hero-worshipped him, admiring his phenomenal bravery in leaving his body, choosing to step out of it and into the unknown. The rest of the school was devastated, swathed in the melancholia of tragedy. I wasn't. I wanted answers. Had he felt death creeping up behind him when he got up that morning? Had he known he'd eaten his last breakfast, taken his final walk to school, uttered words during a conversation that he'd never speak again? Where was he now? Could he see himself dead? Was death there, in the physical sense, talking to him through the door? This became my focus for weeks – months, even. And then I realised I wasn't going to get any of the answers because they weren't for me to know. Not yet. They were his answers and for him alone to know. What had I learnt from it? Death is very private and belongs to each one of us in its own way. I wanted to be Death. I wanted to become the one that is there on that special day. I suppose the

curiosity was to see if Death is real. He's most definitely there. You can't always see him; he's the black shadow in the corner, the watchman you'll never get rid of, the spirit that never leaves. You waited up to see Saint Nick when you were a child – I began my quest to see Death.

The teacher – Vivian was her name – committed suicide. Even before the incident, she wasn't like the other members of staff. There was something of the misfit about her, as though she couldn't seem to keep it together like the rest of her colleagues. Always late, always disorganised, always making the wrong choices. And her narcissism allowed her to believe the death of her pupil was down to her.

I found her, hanging from the tree in the caretaker's garden, early one morning; body bloated and eyes opaque. Most days I arrived at school well before everyone else, with the excuse, should anyone enquire, that I helped the caretaker in the garden before school started. The truth was, it was so I could buy cigarettes from him. We had a small enterprise going – I bought the fags and sold them to my classmates.

Vivian knew I'd be the first to find her. She wanted it to be me; a final gift from her to yours truly. We were close. I understood her desperate need to fit in and she understood why I didn't want to. I expressed things to her that I didn't feel able to broach with anyone else. You should feel a connection with someone to want to talk to them, and there seemed to be a rare few connections throughout my childhood. They passed through my life like dark angels, sprinkling their wisdom around me.

We smoked, we talked, she said I was mature beyond my years. I know many people would think it strange for an adult to have such an affinity with a child, but we were the same really. Age didn't come into it when we were sitting on our hidden bench amongst the greenery. We were just two souls, two beings, two minds sharing our thoughts. Her soul was lost but I learnt so much from her and she became one of my main markers on how not to conduct one's life.

When I found her hanging there, she was stunning, the most beautiful she'd probably ever been, all the marks and strains of conformity having lifted from her face and body. It was as though she'd finally discovered the answers to all her turmoil; I knew she'd had that conversation with Death that I was so intrigued to know about. This is what fascinates me still, and I wait in anticipation of my own private conversation with Death. Ever since then, I have always leant in close to see if I could hear Death whispering.

As it turned out, Vivian had broken her neck, and she'd been dead for quite some time. By the time I found her, I could feel death's absence; it was cold and still. She sparkled in the early-morning light, tiny flecks of sweat encrusted her body, her hair. She had no clothes on; she'd always told me she wanted to die naked. I want to go out the way I came in, she had said – a beautiful, enigmatic pose between life and death. I spent a while with her before anyone else found her, wanting to keep the vision close in my mind. I had no comprehension of Death at the time, that she was more alive than she'd ever been, her spirit still present; I thought she was merely pushing her face through the dimension of another world.

It was the stillness I couldn't comprehend, the silence of the atmosphere; a dark area of the garden which always held the anticipation of something deeper. The trees hung in shadowy coves, encasing their inhabitants in a majestic pattern, and I was caught in her magnificent beauty. Not in a sexual way, you understand. We didn't have that kind of relationship; she wasn't one of those. But a teacher being friends with a thirteen-year-old is inappropriate within the confines of the school gates, no matter what.

No, it was seeing the glamour, the stunning beauty that death had somehow breathed into her, for at that moment, she was more alive to me than she'd ever been. Transfixed in my teenage hypnosis, I was eventually taken away by the caretaker, who assumed I was in terrible shock.

It was almost like Vivian had died and been resurrected, and from then on, I found myself obsessed with death. I have been blessed with many moments such as that, and I have been allowed a glimpse of the true essence of what it means to extinguish your physical form and step into a new realm.