

Found, Near Water

by

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Chapter 1

I set out the chairs in a circle. In my head I counted off each person as I placed their seat. Terry, dead daughter; Ilene, missing daughter; Kendra, missing daughter; Joanne, sick daughter; Christine, dead daughter. That last one is me, by the way.

There used to be a need for more chairs. I had quite the group running at one stage. Not now. We've dwindled and whittled our way to a close knit bunch. Like a knitting circle with barbed tongues driving all the young and optimistic members away.

I remember when I was talked into setting up this group. I was whining away to an old colleague one day and she mentioned that I may be helped by a support group. A fucking support group! I "reminded" her that I was a fully qualified psychiatrist who had once had a roaring career until I realised how futile the entire field was. I wasn't someone who attended a support group. I was the one to run it.

Famous last words.

There was a crunch of gravel outside and I walked to the window to have a nosey. Not one of mine. An elderly gent made slow progress towards the temporary library. He swayed so deeply from foot to foot he looked like a Weeble in full wobble.

I hadn't gotten home until late last night. Usually I'd pull together something for us few to snack on, but I couldn't be bothered by the time I got in. Gary woke me on his way out, but I was too tired and too grumpy to be bothered this morning either.

I laid out a half packet of stale gingernuts which had mysteriously survived in our pantry and hoped that no one was feeling too hungry.

There was still another five minutes before anyone was due, and it would probably be longer before they all showed up. I sat down heavily in a chair and dragged my fingers through my hair. I felt rough, ragged. All I really wanted to do was go back home and cook something solid for tea. Something with vegetables instead of vegetable oil. Sit down with Gary and catch up with him. It seemed like it had been weeks since we'd done more than nod at each other in the hallway. Seemed like? No, it had been.

I pulled out my phone and sent him a quick text. *Fancy a nite out?* My battery was getting low. I'd forgotten to charge it up yesterday.

'Cheerio love. Got the coffee on yet?'

Kendra went straight to the machine and started it up. I don't know why she bothered to ask – I preferred instant and had never got the hang of machines no matter how simple others kept explaining they were.

'How's your week been?' she asked as she leant back against the counter.

'Nothing much. I seem to recall getting a good night's sleep over a week ago, and that's about it.'

'Any new clients?'

I shrugged. There'd been some, but no one needing more than a few hours support so below the unspoken criteria.

There was a snort from the doorway as Terry made her way into the room. 'Clients,

huh? Thought they were victims?’

‘Not very PC love.’

‘Whatever. You’ll never guess what I found out today.’

I looked at her closely. The tone of her voice was off from the usual. Cynicism was her chief reaction to life, but now she had a measure of excitement. Excitement tinged with something else that I couldn’t put my finger on. Terry’s usually dull complexion was flushed with red as though she’d been sitting in front of a heater for too long.

‘What’s that?’

‘They’ve released him.’

Kendra dropped a teaspoon into the sink, swore, and flinched against the noise. ‘Released who?’ she asked idly as she fished down into the disposal unit to try to retrieve her cutlery.

I stared at her as reality dawned.

Kendra was still fiddling about at the sink. ‘Released who?’ she repeated, and then turned around as the silence lengthened.

‘Oh shit.’

Terry nodded.

‘But it’s only been six years, hasn’t it?’

Terry nodded. Her colour may have been high already, but she still managed to grow more flushed by the second.

‘Six years, five months and twenty three days,’ she whispered.

‘Shit,’ Kendra repeated, and then moved across the room to pull Terry to her in a hug. A hug that was not in any way reciprocated.

‘God’s sake Kendra, let her go. You’ll strain yourself.’

Kendra released Terry, but kept a hand on her arm until Terry shook it off with irritation. She’d never been one for physical contact. At least, not with her own gender.

‘How did you find out?’ I asked.

‘Hey, have you started without me again,’ Ilene said as she walked in. Her smile dropped away as she looked at each of us in turn. ‘What’s happened?’

Terry opened her mouth to speak, but Joanne appeared at the doorway as well, and her jaw slammed shut again.

‘Am I late?’ she asked as she tip-toed across the room. Joanne held her arms folded over in front of her stomach. Her shoulders hunched in.

‘No, you’re right on time. How are you feeling?’

Joanne sat on the edge of a chair, and then placed her hands underneath her thighs. She breathed out and there was a tremor that shook her tiny frame.

‘Not good.’

Joanne tried to move her mouth to say more but all that emerged was a whimper. She angrily wiped tears away from her eyes, but she was fighting a losing battle.

‘The treatment’s not taking,’ she managed finally. ‘She isn’t coming back like she has the other times. She’s just getting sicker and sicker.’

She paused and there was another struggle for control.

‘Take your time,’ I said into the silence. It sounds awful but I was bored with this. I’d watched so many parents struggle to deal with their sick children, their dying children. My empathy was used up.

I wanted to hear what Terry had to say.

‘The doctors want to pull her treatment altogether. They said that it’s no longer going to work and it would just make her sicker during the time that she has left.’

I nodded. It sounded about right.

Ilene stepped in with some sympathy thank God. ‘That must be such a hard decision to make,’ she offered. ‘I don’t think any one of us would be able to make it lightly.’

Joanne nodded and pulled her hands from under her thighs to cross them over her stomach again. ‘I keep thinking that they must be wrong. If I just give her another day, another week, it’ll begin to work. She’ll have more time.’

Ilene put her hand out on Joanne’s arm. ‘Do you think that’s possible?’

Joanne sniffed loudly and tilted her head back so that gravity helped to stop everything flowing.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know. What do you think?’

Her head was still tilted back. The question went out to everyone in the room, but fell to the floor unclaimed.

Ilene sat back in her chair, her hand no longer offered. ‘It’s not our place to say.’

‘Well what would you do?’

‘I wouldn’t have her in the hospital in the first place. Those bloody doctors. You can’t trust them for a second.’

Kendra closed her eyes and shook her head theatrically. Joanne just looked nonplussed. She hadn’t been around for long enough to strike Ilene’s adverse opinion of the medical sciences before.

The rest of us; water off a duck’s back. Even me, and I used to be a member of the hated group.

‘Christine? What do you think?’

Poor Joanne. Her daughter is spending her days with last-chance poison dripping into her veins, and we barely acknowledge her and her pain. Too used to being caught up in our own.

I looked at her straight in the eyes. There would be few enough people making eye contact with her in the weeks and months to come. No one likes to look into the face of grief.

‘I think that your daughter’s doctors are acting in her best interests. You don’t need to follow their advice, but I don’t think they’re wrong. There’s a small chance you might extend your daughter’s life with treatment, but there’s a big chance you’ll just hurt her and it won’t make any difference.’

Joanne looked back at me for long seconds. She then turned and looked at each member of the group in turn.

‘None of you really care, do you?’

Kendra opened her mouth to say yes, but her head was already shaking no.

Terry looked like she hadn’t even heard, and Ilene just looked like she was considering extolling some more on the evils of modern medicine.

‘We feel for you, we really do,’ I supplied. I forgot to inject any emotion in my voice, but I went through the motions.

Joanne looked down at the ground for a moment, then stood and walked out without saying another word.

Ilene shrugged as the door closed behind her. ‘She didn’t last long.’

‘Yeah, well you might have tried a bit harder,’ Kendra bit back at her.

‘Me? You practically pushed her out.’

‘Oh shut up both of you. I don’t know why you keep trying to introduce new people into our group anyway,’ Terry said, her accusing gaze falling on me. ‘They’re always so self-obsessed. It’s not as though they’re adding anything.’

Kendra gave a short laugh. ‘And now you have the stage, my dear...?’

‘Well about time. They’ve released Martin.’

‘How did you find that out?’ I asked, and received a narrowed look in response.

‘I found it out when the probation service contacted me as a courtesy to let me know of their decision. As I’d attended his hearing and made it quite clear that he should never be released into the general population ever in his life they thought I’d like to know they’d completely ignored everything I had to say and were letting him loose.’

‘Shit,’ Ilene contributed. ‘I thought they had ways of keeping them locked up longer these days.’

‘They do,’ I said. ‘But I imagine the fact he was a teenager at the time swayed them.’

‘Yeah, because it’s fine to murder and rape when you’re nineteen, but at twenty you should be locked away forever.’

‘Where’s he going?’

Terry shook her head. ‘They won’t tell me that. Apparently he has to stay well away from me, not that there’s anything left for him to harm anyhow.’

‘Probably to protect him more than anything,’ Kendra threw in.

‘Yeah, well he fucking better stay away from me. Otherwise he’ll be sorry.’

‘Have they already released him?’ I asked. ‘Or were they just letting you know it’s about to happen.’

‘They let him go Wednesday. Last Wednesday. Just set him free.’

There was silence for a few minutes. The mid-morning sun had started to come through the grimy windows. It felt hot on my back and reminded me that summer was on its way.

‘You could ask someone where he was staying, couldn’t you?’ Terry asked me. ‘You work with the police after all.’

‘I work in the same office. I don’t work with them. And they won’t know anything more than the probation officers have told you. Separate services. You’d need to get to know someone in corrections.’

‘Sleep with a jailer, you mean.’

‘Give your CO a seeing to,’ Ilene chimed in and I started to laugh.

‘Screw a screw,’ Kendra said, and then wrinkled up her nose.

I laughed harder and then couldn’t stop. It must’ve been infectious because soon the whole circle was in hysterics. Even Terry.

There was a slam as the door opened again and Joanne walked back into the room. She glared at us all, and stomped over to her chair. She pulled a light scarf from the back which I hadn’t even noticed she’d left behind, and then walked quickly back out. I couldn’t help myself. It was so ridiculous I started to laugh again, my stomach aching, my chest heaving for air, tears running down my cheeks.

When I walked into the police station at 12.30 pm there was a buzz in the air. I ignored it, and took my seat at my desk. If I pretended to care, the bastards I worked beside day in and day out would make a point of torturing me by never letting me know what was going on. If I

kept schtum and showed no interest I could eavesdrop and find out what was what in the matter of a few minutes.

Except this time I didn't have to wait.

'Christine,' Erik Smith called out just as I sat down. 'Come over here.'

I didn't work for the police. I was a victim support counsellor and co-ordinator for the North Christchurch region. Apart from sharing their office space and occasionally a recommendation for help I had nothing to do with the police really.

It didn't matter. Detective Senior Sergeant Erik Smith acted like a bit of a prick; but at heart that was because he was a bit of a prick. If someone was within summoning distance of him then he felt comfortable doing so. Even if that someone had explained over and over the process and procedures for recommendations. How they weren't his lackey. How he didn't have hierarchy over them because they weren't part of his club.

Deaf ears. Extremely large and unflattering deaf ears.

I sat mulishly behind my desk for a minute more, and then responded to him. It was just easier. And I was curious.

'What?' I may have followed his orders, but I didn't need to be pleasant.

'Got a case for you. Needs a bit of a delicate touch. Feely-feely all that.'

I held out my hand for the details. He should've had them written out on the referral card, but of course that was hoping for too much.

He snorted in mockery.

'It's the one on the news at the moment. Mrs Sutherland.'

I shrugged my shoulders and raised my eyebrows. I had no idea.

'Thought the extent of your social life was watching the telly Christine?'

I shrugged again. The teeth biting back my sarcasm drew blood from the side of my cheek. Bright, metallic blood. I wished it belonged to someone else.

'What about the papers? You read the papers?'

'God's sake Erik. Just tell me what it is.'

He creased his forehead and looked over my shoulder with his mouth pursed. 'Detective. Senior. Sergeant,' he said with slow emphasis. 'Now you try it.'

'For god's sake Detective Senior Sergeant, just tell me what you want.'

He smiled and made eye contact with me again. Joy.

'There's this crazy woman. In the hospital. Got hit by a car. She reckons her kid's missing.'

I nodded, and then frowned. I had read about this one actually. 'She's the one who's been missing for a lot longer? Is that right?'

Erik nodded and passed over a name and ward number from the hospital.

'Thing is, we don't actually know if she's telling us the truth or not.'

I looked at the information for a moment, then frowned up at him as his words registered. 'And..?'

'Well. You know how you used to be a shrink?'

'Detective Senior Sergeant, I am not an employee of the police. If you want to work out if she's telling the truth or not then pay someone on your staff to do it.'

'We've tried. There's no one available until tomorrow who's even remotely qualified.'

'So wait until tomorrow.'

'If this child is actually missing then we need to allocate a lot more resource than we've got available. If I am to request that I need to be certain that there's actually a missing child

somewhere in the mix otherwise I'm going to get my bollocks chewed off.'

I couldn't really see the downside.

'What is the alternative? You think she's made a child up out of thin air?'

He shook his head. 'No, but her ex-husbands over in Australia. Travels there quite a lot. Her mother's off on a cruise. Apparently she spends a lot of time overseas as well. We can't find anyone who's close to her or her ex-husband to confirm what the status is with regard to custody, and there's been a case in the courts saying that she's a nutter and she shouldn't have any custody.'

'Well, if it's been through the courts...'

'Her husband didn't mention any daughter when the hospital rang him as next of kin to say his wife's been brought in unconscious. Officers have gone through her home and say it looks like no one lives there, let alone a small child. If she is genuinely missing then we need to get onto it full-force straight away because the odds are already stacked against us, but for the time being we don't know if we're chasing a ghost or what.'

'If I go in there I'm there as her support. It's confidential. I can't pass information onto you just because it makes your job easier.'

'I'm not asking for a full run-down on the conversation. I just want some sort of indication that she's telling the truth and at the moment I can't get it. There's something off and until I feel more confident I'm not happy about pulling officers out of genuine crime cases in order to pursue this.'

I stared at the details for another long moment.

'Please Christine. You're going there anyway. All I want is your professional opinion as to whether she's genuine. After all, if she's not you're not going back either are you?'

'Fine, but I don't expect to hear about this in the future okay?'

'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'Can I get a lift to the hospital then? My car's on its last legs.'

He laughed, and walked away shaking his head.

So glad I could do him a favour.

Ugh. Hospitals. The smell of illness and antiseptic. The pale green walls. The weird conglomeration of signs that lead you around the maze of corridors and lifts and then abandon you just as you seem to be getting close. All the sick people who look up with hope and expectation in their faces as you pass by. Ugh. Sick people.

I checked in with reception, and was directed to ICU. After wandering for a while, then following a red line on the lino, I found the correct section.

'Excuse me,' a nurse called as I came through into the adjoining room. 'Are you here for Rena Sutherland?'

I nodded.

'Would you mind waiting in the friends and whanau room for a moment. There's just a few things we need to prepare before she can see you.'

Prepare what? It didn't bear thinking about it, so I didn't. Instead I turned back and entered the room to the left. There were soft cushions on sofas, and a variety of magazines the hospital seemed to have gotten second hand from a dentist's waiting room. I sat and picked up a reader's digest. August 2006. How relevant.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket and registered the blinking blue light with dismay. I hadn't even heard it ring. There was a poster on the wall with a cross through a picture of a cell phone, but I ignored it for the time being. It seemed years since anyone had taken much trouble to enforce the ban.

Not tonight. Working late.

Great. Another day where I wouldn't get to see the man I'd sworn in front of family and God that I would love forever. It was starting to seem more like we were flatmates than married.

I thought about texting him back, but I was too tired to think of anything witty, and I felt too disgruntled to say anything caring. What on earth did he mean he was working late anyway? Gary didn't spend much time working even when he was meant to. Thanks to the Christchurch housing market, commissions just fell into his lap. Was he being sarcastic? Stuff him then. I'd have a nice meal by myself. And maybe a bottle of wine.

I stood up and paced the small room. My usual place of work was in people's homes, in their lounges, in their conservatories, meeting them at their local whether that was a coffee shop or a bar. It had been a long time since I'd been in a hospital, and my memories of the places weren't great.

Hopefully she'd be mad and this would be a one-stop shop. Or she'd be perfectly sane, and well on the mend, and the next visit would be at her nice little three bedroom summerhill stone house. Or whatever she passed off as her home.

A doctor knocked on the door and I opened it cautiously.

'Hi,' she said walking forward so that I fell back automatically. 'I just wanted to have a quick chat before you see Ms Sutherland.'

'I'm not family,' I interjected. There were privacy laws that I didn't want accidentally bowled over in a case of mistaken identity.

The doctor nodded her head. 'Nevertheless if you want to see Ms Sutherland you'll need to be aware of a few things. She'll tire easily – she's just been through an enormous trauma and her body still has a long way to go before recovering – so if she asks you to leave I need you to respect that.'

I nodded. 'I'm here from victim support so I'm not going to stay unless Rena wants me to stay. I won't do anything that violates that arrangement.'

I should've had my fingers crossed behind my back on that one, although Erik was right. If Rena was "mistaken" about the whole thing then I wasn't going to be supporting her through her imaginary ordeal, just as the police wouldn't be following up on an imaginary missing person.

'She also has a support nurse beside her at all times. That's for her own safety to monitor her condition. If her nurse feels that you're aggravating her situation then she'll ask you to leave. I need you to follow that request also.'

'I used to be a doctor myself,' I replied. 'I'm not going to do anything that puts her health in jeopardy.'

'I said that I need you to follow that request also.'

Fine. If she was just going to ignore the sisterhood then I wouldn't bother either.

'Of course. I'll follow any of your directions unless Rena asks me otherwise.'

'Ms Emmett. Ms Sutherland is a seriously ill woman and I'm sure we all only want what is best for her wellbeing. Even if she thinks it's in her best interests for you to stay I need to have your agreement that you'll follow the hospital staff instructions.'

Well that was me told. I nodded wearily. This all seemed like too much trouble all of a sudden. I thought of Joanne and how I'd treated her this morning. There wasn't much use in me continuing to offer support if I couldn't provide it. Maybe it was time for me to seek another line of work.

'Come on through then.'

I walked through into the room before ICU again. There were large signs on the walls and the doors announcing that I should wash my hands before entering. As I coated my hands with soap I felt a pang of homesickness to the days of my residency. Back then the world had seemed so full of wonder and promise. Wide open with all of the choices that I could make. Every year since it had shrunk a little smaller. I scrubbed up in the sink and pulled a couple of paper towels to wipe my hands dry again. The connecting door was on a sensor so that I didn't have to place my newly angelic flesh on anything before I was in the ICU proper.

There were six beds in the room, every single one of them full. With the attending nurse positioned at each bedside, and a small room with another head nurse stationed, it felt claustrophobically overcrowded. Machines were hooked up to every bedside with muted sounds marking progress or regress at low volume in deference to the unconscious or sleeping patients.

Rena made eye contact with me as soon as I walked through the door. As well as looking to be the only awake patient in the room, she was also half-propped up in bed but not due to her own mobility. Someone had raised the head of the bed so she was almost in a sitting position.

Bruises leaked colour out from their originating point to the corners of her face. Some overlapped on her cheeks. Bright purple. Grey-green. A line of blood red.

The side of her head was shaved, and a line of stitches marked the territory of a head injury. Beautiful long blond hair was pulled back from the opposite side. Rena may not even be aware of it at the moment, but I bet that would be heart-breaking to get used to. A sling held her left arm close to her chest, and the sheet lay in perfect outline for a metal cage that marked the full length of her left leg.

My information showed Rena's age to be forty-one, but lying back against the pillows, even with worry lines biting into the soft curves of her skin, she didn't look out of her twenties.

There didn't look to be an inch of her that wouldn't be screaming with pain, but the on-call morphine pump to her side showed that she had pain relief to spare. That, and the quick way her eyes tracked my movement, were good signs for her cognitive abilities. The choice to endure pain over comfort for the sake of remaining sharp was a hard call. And not one that anyone would make voluntarily without reason.

'Hi Rena? I'm Christine. I'm from Victim Support and I'm here to help you in any way you feel comfortable.'

I looked to shake her hand or touch her arm, make some sort of initial contact, but every part of her that my eyes fell on seemed to have some form of injury. I waved a greeting instead.

'Are you happy for me to take a seat here with you?'

Rena started to nod, but then winced and held her head still. Vice-like still. 'Yes,' she replied instead.

There was a plastic chair that I dragged into position beside her bed. It was odd to sit to one side, my attention on her, while on her other side her dedicated nurse did the same. Not the place I could expect to get a full list of confessions, but privacy was only for the able bodied after all. It doesn't take long in a hospital to work that one out.

‘How are you coping?’

‘Have you talked to the police? Do you know what they’re doing?’

I shook my head, and then realised that Rena wouldn’t be able to see me from her angle.

‘No, I haven’t really spoken with them. They’re investigating. That’s all I know.’

‘She’s been gone for so long. I can’t believe that Ash didn’t tell anyone.’

‘Is that your husband?’

‘Ex-husband. Yes.’

Rena’s fingers tapped out a quick pattern on the bedspread. A complicated manoeuvre that involved all four fingers and thumb in rotation, and then in some more complex routine. I couldn’t follow the motions, but I knew that they were forming a repeated pattern the same way you can watch a performer on screen and know if they’re playing the piano or just pretending to while music is overlaid on the soundtrack.

‘How do you feel about your daughter’s disappearance?’

Rena snorted and winced again with the movement it involved.

‘I don’t feel very good Christine. I’m trapped in a bed and I can barely move and my daughter is missing and has been for days and I don’t feel good at all.’

‘Is it possible that Ash didn’t realise she was missing?’

Rena pushed her head further back into the pillows. ‘I don’t know where else he thought Chloe would be. I don’t really know anything. I’m just taking the hospital’s word for it that they even called him.’

Rena’s nurse frowned at the affront to her organisation’s truthfulness, but she visibly bit back a retort.

‘I’m sure that they’re telling the truth to the police. They’ll be able to check.’

Rena’s fingers tapped out the pattern once more. There was a pause for a few minutes, and then the pattern came again.

I looked at her closely, and then took a punt on my own assessment.

‘Rena, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, and I’m not ascribing any judgement, but have you ever been diagnosed with a mental illness?’

Her fingers tapped out the pattern again, twice in quick succession, and then twice again after a short pause.

‘It depends what you mean by a mental illness.’

‘I mean something that may result in you keeping your house unusually clean. Something that might mean you have compulsions that you need to carry out otherwise you feel you’re placing people around you in danger.’

I thought of what Erik had said about the officers going through her home. Looking at a room built for a child, but which it didn’t appear any child lived in. Too clean. Too neat. Too tidy.

‘I’ve been treated for depression before. Is that what you’re after?’

‘I’m not really after anything Rena. I’m sorry if I’ve made you feel uncomfortable. Please don’t answer me if you don’t feel it’s appropriate.’

The tension that had been building in the lay of Rena’s body started to leave again.

‘I don’t really know what help you people offer,’ she said. ‘I’ve never been in any sort of situation like this before.’

‘I can help you with anything that springs to mind. If you want me to sit with you and let you talk, then I’ll do that. If you want me to help you take care of some practical matters I can do that too.’

‘And if I’ve been mentally ill then what?’

I sat back in the chair. ‘If you’ve been mentally ill then I’ll watch out for you, and I’ll sit here and listen if you need to talk, and if you want me to help you take care of some practical matters I can help with that.’

There was silence for a long time. At least there was silence from Rena. The rest of the room quietly hummed with low activity as before.

‘I don’t really remember what happened before today. I remember that I was next to the car. I think I remember some sounds. But I can really only think of waking up here early this morning.’

‘That must be very frightening for you.’

‘It is. And then I couldn’t speak for ages. There was a tube down my throat. I thought I was choking.’

‘Was that for your breathing?’

‘Yes. For my breathing,’ she paused. ‘The first thing I asked when they took the tube out was where Chloe was. They didn’t know anything about her. That scared me more than anything ever has before.’

I stretched out and took the pattern tapping hand in mine, and stroked it gently. It was as bruised and misshapen as the rest of Rena, but if she could stand the pain of it tapping out a calming rhythm on the spread, then I figured it could stand up to being held. Her fingers jerked in surprise, and then relaxed.

‘I’ve been diagnosed with OCD. It gets pretty bad at times. It’s the main reason why Ash fought me for custody. At least I think it is. He doesn’t discuss anything with me anymore. He stopped well before he decided he wanted a divorce.’

I thought back to my text from Gary. I knew how that went.

‘I know I’ve been hit on the head. It hurts like hell. I know that I’ve got a mental illness and that both of these things make what I say suspect in the eyes of people around me. But I’m not lying about my daughter Christine,’ she stated as she met my eyes. Her hand squeezed mine. ‘Chloe was with me that day. She was in the back seat of the car. And if she wasn’t involved in the accident, and she wasn’t picked up by the ambulance or police staff, then she’s been missing for four days.’

She swallowed and I could see her throat working against itself. She pulled her hand free from mine and started to tap again.

‘Four days. I’m not stupid Christine. I know that if my daughter has been missing for that long then she’s in deep trouble. Deep, deep, trouble.’

A monitor to Rena’s side started to beep a warning sound. I turned to it as the nurse leaned forward and reset it. The sound came again after a minute.

I knew what was coming before the hand landed on my shoulder.

‘I think it’s time for you to leave.’

“Please leave a message...”

‘Erik, it’s Christine here. I’ve spoken with Rena. She’s clear, competent and her recall is on track.’ I paused for a moment as I tried to think how to convey the message in the right way. ‘You need to start throwing resources into this. That girl’s really missing.’

Chapter 2

Terry's Story

I had Jacob early, before I was ready maybe. I don't mean I didn't want him, and once I found out I was pregnant I didn't even think of terminating the pregnancy. Not even once. But I was young, and I was stupid, and I did not know how to be a mother. Not at all.

When he was little I was stressed all the time. I was stressed about whether I was doing everything wrong or not. I was stressed about having to think of my son all of the time whether I wanted to or not. I was stressed about how I was ever going to afford everything everyone seemed to think I needed to raise Jacob without him turning into a serial killer rapist monkey boy.

I took so much time and energy worrying about what I was doing wrong that I never really took the time to enjoy him. I didn't enjoy him growing bigger and stronger. I didn't enjoy any of his milestones. He was just there all the time, the source of all my worry and regret and the life I thought I was going to lead until he arrived. I don't think I wrecked him, but I'm pretty sure I didn't structure his life in the way a good parent is meant to.

Emma was my second chance. I planned her birth and worried when I didn't conceive right away. I had money put aside so that I never had to worry about whether or not I should buy one thing over another; I could just buy both. I put her room together the way I had imagined my perfect room would be when I was a girl myself.

When she was born she was a good baby. Not fussy the way Jacob had been. She woke in the night, of course she did, but only once or twice and once I gave her a feed and a cuddle she would fall straight back to sleep.

Even Jacob loved her. I'd been worried that with the age difference he might resent her. I'd been worried that after fourteen years of being an only child he would be out of sorts with the new arrival. But that didn't happen. Jacob fell in love with his little sister as quickly as I did, and he was a wonder when it came to helping her out. He still wouldn't lift a finger to help me, he was a teenager after all, but he would do anything I asked him if it helped out Emma.

He changed her, he comforted her, he fed her bottles that had been cautiously warmed to just the right temperature.

That was why I felt okay about going back to work part time. I would handover when Jacob got home from school, and he would take care of Emma for three nights each week while I acclimated back into the adult world.

Our little family functioned on in this manner for the next couple of years. Jacob grew facial hair and at least a foot taller. He started to attend university with immense enthusiasm, and Emma started school with immense trepidation, but otherwise we just potted along.

And then on the fifteenth of March 2007 I came home after a short day's work, and Emma wasn't there. Jacob was, but he was unconscious on the bed and from the smell of him he hadn't got to that state accidentally.

There were the police asking endless questions. There was the media attention and my daughter's photo pasted across the front page of a lot of newspapers. She didn't look anything like those photos. She was living, breathing, full of motion and life and energy. She would snuggle in next to me on a weekend morning and run a length of my hair through her pudgy wee hands and exclaim in admiration 'Mummy. You're so pretty.'

I thought that not knowing was the worst thing I could ever endure. Not knowing if she was in trouble or needing my help or in pain. I worried that she'd been taken by someone that would hurt her, then I worried that she'd been taken by someone who would love her and care for her and in a year or two she'd have forgotten I ever existed. Not knowing was killing me.

But it turned out that knowing was far worse. When I went to the hospital to identify my beautiful girl's broken body - that was worse than not knowing. When I buried her in the cemetery and compared the size of the gravesite to the other freshly buried bodies - that was worse than not knowing. When I drank myself to sleep on a anniversary of her sixth birthday, and realised that I would likely be doing that until my life ended - that was worse than not knowing.

The police had found her body stuffed into an old recycling bin out the back of a sleep-out. My beautiful girl had been bent to fit as though she was just a piece of rubbish, something to be disposed of. The sleep-out belonged to a friend of Jacob. They'd been in the same class at school together since intermediate. They hung out often. Maybe not every week, but certainly every month. I'd said hello to him more times than I could remember. I'd come out to ask if they wanted a snack, or to ask if it was alright with his mother if he stayed for tea, or to check that they were okay in their sleeping bags when he stayed over and they wanted to pretend they were camping.

I'd done all those things, and he'd fed my son a small shot of bourbon that he'd stolen out of his dad's stash of alcohol. A small shot laced with four zopiclone tablets that had knocked my poor boy out like a light. The same tablets had been used to subdue my precious baby girl. He'd stolen them from his parent's medicine cabinet because they were too stupid or preoccupied or just fucking uncaring to even notice if someone was taking drugs out of their cabinet. And why did they even have a prescription for them if they weren't taking them? What kind of stupid were they?

He used them to subdue her while he carried out the sick fantasies that filled his head where good common decency should've been. And he'd used too many on one occasion and she died and he still kept her in the sleep-out that he lived in like some kind of hobo while her body stiffened with rigor mortis, and then softened again. While her stomach started to protrude with gasses as the bacteria inside her started to feed unchallenged by any of her living functions. While her eyeballs deflated and her tongue turned black and her sweet girl smell turned into a stench of decay. And when he didn't have any further use for her he put her body into a plastic green recycling bin and knowing all of that was worse than not-knowing.

Martin Hinks. That was the name of the shitty sub-human pervert that stole Emma away from me. Stole Jacob too because it grew too hard to look at him after a few weeks. After all he'd brought that man into our lives and he'd let him take away my baby girl when he was meant to be looking after her. And yes - I know that's not fair, but knowing something's unfair doesn't stop it from happening. My psychologist keeps repeating how important it is to make Jacob know that it wasn't his fault; that deviants can hide in any community group undetected because they're not monsters it's just the things that they do are monstrous. I should direct my anger and sorrow at the target who's actually responsible for the pain that I feel. But there's so much to go around. So much.

And no one thinks Mummy's beautiful anymore.