Chapter 1

Mid-September. To me, always a melancholy time of year. Summer clinging on in bursts, the sun still trying to keep the air warm – but undermined by the chill creep of autumn once it sets, increasingly bullying its way into its rightful place.

I try to like autumn, what with the spectacular colours and all those lovely piles of crispy leaves. But it's not my favourite. In fact it's my least favourite season; sandwiched as it is between summer and Christmas, which isn't a season but, to my mind, ought to be. It always seems to take much too long to arrive and, once it does arrive, is always over much too quickly.

Still, autumn has a plus point, and that's the telly. And amid a slew of programmes that had returned from their summer break was the Saturday night ritual of *The Jonathan Ross Show*, a family favourite since way back when. Which was why, when my mobile buzzed, given the day and the timing, I thought it must be Riley who was calling.

Mike laughed. 'She knows you *so* well,' he said, chuckling, as I got off the sofa to go and fetch it. 'Heaven forbid you miss lover-boy.'

He was referring to the actor James McAvoy, who was one of the guests that night, and of course he was absolutely right.

'Cheek,' I called back to him as I disappeared into the kitchen. 'I just happen to think he's a particularly fine actor.'

'Course you do,' he answered as I reappeared in the doorway. 'Just like I admire Fiona Bruce for her brilliant journalism.'

But by this time I already knew that it wasn't Riley calling. The display on the phone said no number ID. Perhaps it was James McAvoy declaring his undying devotion.

It wasn't.

'Hello, is that Mrs Watson?' asked a female voice. 'Casey Watson?' I told her yes. 'Ah, good,' she said. 'Helena Curry here. EDT. Very glad to have managed to get hold of you. Am I right in thinking you might be available and free at the moment?'

I gestured with my hand that Mike should pause the TV. 'Yes,' I told her. 'We don't have anyone else in at the moment. Well, apart from our long-term foster son, of course.'

'Tyler,' she supplied, before I could. She'd done her homework.

Not that we thought of Tyler in that way any more. He was our permanent foster child these days, and just as he

called us mum and dad, so the 'foster' tag had long since disappeared from the 'son' bit, at least in our heads.

With football training in the morning, Tyler was already up in his bedroom, having just gone up to catch up with one of his favourite crime programmes on his new laptop – the surprise sixteenth birthday present we'd presented him a couple of weeks back. To say he was pleased would be the understatement of the year. If not the century.

But it looked like our own viewing plans were about to be scuppered, EDT being short for emergency duty team, the go-to people for any child who was placed into local authority care out of office hours.

Not that this child – or rather teenager – had just come into care. Helena Curry went on to explain that the girl, whose name was Keeley and who was fifteen years old, had actually been in care since she was ten. 'She's run away from her foster family, basically,' she said. Her voice sounded tired. 'Was picked up by the police a couple of hours ago.'

'Oh dear,' I said, imagining this most complicated of scenarios. It was dispiriting enough when a child entered the system in the first place, but there was an added sadness when a child was already in the system – particularly if they'd been in care long term. You tried to stay optimistic but experience had long since shown me that a downward spiral could so easily happen.

'I know,' Helena agreed. 'She refused point blank to return, and when they tried to insist she made quite a serious allegation against the male carer. So here we are. In need of alternative accommodation – and with specialist carers, which you and your husband, of course, are.'

'Ah,' I said, trying to work out what this might mean for us. 'So it wasn't just a case of fetching up at W for Watson, then?'

She laughed. 'Not in this case, no. No, given the circumstances, and the length of time the girl has been in care …' There was a pause. It felt a pregnant one. 'And from what's on her file …'

I was impressed. This was what should always happen, obviously, when emergency carers were sought, but, in my experience, often wasn't the case. 'So, just temporarily?' I asked.

'In the first instance, yes. Just for the weekend. Though you don't need me to tell you, assuming she's *not* going back, that specialist carers such as yourselves will be sought. So …'

'So she could be our next long-term placement,' I finished for her.

'Exactly,' she said. 'So, are you happy to take her?'

'Yes, of course,' I said, looking at Mike for a confirmatory nod. Which he gave. We'd been talking about our next placement only the other day; as in who, and most importantly, *when* it might be. With the school summer holidays done with, I was getting itchy fostering feet. 'I'll call my link worker and leave a voicemail for him to ring me in the morning. What time were you thinking of?' I added, glancing at the clock on the mantelpiece. It was already nearly a quarter to eleven.

Helena explained that Keeley was still with the police, but they were ready and waiting to take her anywhere it

was decided she was going to go. 'Certainly within the hour, I'd say,' she finished.

'And do you have any more you can tell me now?' I asked, thinking about the file she'd already alluded to.

'Lots, I imagine, but not right now,' she said. 'Can I call you back once I've been back to the police and told them what's happening? Give me a chance to have a skim through and see what might be useful.'

I told her I'd appreciate it – information is power, after all – and she promised she'd call back as soon as she could and, if that proved impossible, that she'd call again first thing in the morning. 'Sorry to interrupt your evening,' she finished. 'Hope you weren't in the middle of anything important.'

Mike had un-paused the telly while we'd been talking, in favour of recording it for later, so I was able to watch James McAvoy smile disarmingly as he took his seat on the famous sofa. Smiling – I swear – right at me. No, not important at all, I thought, as I said goodbye and pushed my mobile into my pocket, before briefing Mike on the few details he hadn't already picked up.

'So come on then, kiddo,' I said to him, pulling on his arm. 'We have work to do upstairs before she gets here. If you can drag yourself away from this, that is.'

Mike groaned. '*Work*? What kind of work? It's nearly eleven o'clock at night, love. You can't seriously be considering a spring bloody clean. It's pink, so as far as I'm concerned it's fine as it is.'

Which it was, more or less. And this being a girl was handy. Our third long-term girl placement in a row, as it happened. Well, bar a couple of short stays, of course. And

yes, perhaps a bit *too* pink – it was as pink as it was plastered in butterflies and flowers – but no, it didn't really need anything doing to it. Bar the usual.

'I *obviously* don't mean the whole change-the-décor thing,' I told him. 'But I'll still have to have a dust and freshen up in there. It'll be stuffy. Come on! James'll have to wait.'

'And what about her?' Mike asked as he got to his feet. 'Any inklings of what we might expect?'

'Not as yet,' I said. 'Like I said, the woman's going to call me back.'

'But what's your gut instinct?' he said, as he followed me into the kitchen.

'I'm not sure,' I said, as I rooted in the cleaning cupboard. 'We'll see soon enough.'

I handed Mike the air freshener and polish.

Trouble. The word sprang to mind then. I expected trouble. She was fifteen and had made a serious allegation against a male carer. However that panned out, whether it was substantiated or otherwise, there would be trouble aplenty, and for all concerned.

I handed Mike a duster. And kept my thoughts to myself.

Within half an hour the spare room was suitably freshened and, with the addition of the fairy lights Mike had wound through the headboard of the bed, looked positively cheerful.

I sent him off to update Tyler – assuming he wasn't already asleep – and tell him we could do all the meet-and-greet stuff in the morning.

'Lovely!' I said to myself, feeling my usual prickle of anticipation. A quick whizz round downstairs and we'd be ready to receive our visitor.

'And put the kettle on!' Mike whispered, following me from the landing as I headed down the stairs. 'It's probably going to be a long night and I'm going to need coffee.'

'Not necessarily,' I said, as we regrouped in the kitchen. 'The poor girl is probably exhausted and just wants her bed.'

'So say you,' Mike said. 'She might not even want to be brought here. Out of the frying pan and all that …'

I sprayed some air freshener on the kitchen counter. 'And into our delightfully fragrant and lovely home.'

By the police. Which was a second thought that struck me, and wasn't wonderful. As foster carers we had to be ever sensitive to the fact that we weren't necessarily the most popular of neighbours. Indeed, in our former home, if not exactly hounded out, we had been at one point the subject of a petition urging us to move, after a child in our care went on a neighbourhood nicking spree. And the sight of police cars outside this house never went down terribly well either. Much less the armoured security van that had famously delivered one boy a while back.

But, with any luck, our latest charge would be delivered more discreetly and not give cause for any tongues to start wagging.

But it wasn't our night for that kind of luck. Within the hour, as Helena had promised (though, sadly, before the promised phone call), there was an enormous squad car

pulling up outside the house. It was definitely a proper, full-blown police car.

No sirens, thank goodness, but, under the glow of the streetlamps – not to mention our neighbour's carriage lamps – it was about as inconspicuous as a polar bear.

'Trouble,' Mike said, coming up behind me at the window. 'Seriously. I can feel it in my bones.'

Chapter 2

The car stopped and I let go of the living-room curtain. So once again we were going in cold. Which was a far cry from the way it had been when we started. And, from what I heard from other foster carers, that seemed to be increasingly the case.

With our first foster child, Justin, the placement had been a staged process. First an initial meeting, then another, to make sure the match was right, then, finally, after some thinking time on both sides, he moved in. Sight-unseen placements were then something of a rarity. But ever since then, it seemed, the balance had been shifting, as more and more children were coming into care in emergency situations, leaving no time for any of the normal preliminaries. Instead, like tonight, it was more often than not a case of 'will you take them?' And if the answer was yes, there they were.

Not that it was quite like that with Keeley. She had a file; I'd just yet to see it. But I wondered if, actually, it really mattered anyway. It might to some, I supposed, but

since our whole speciality was to try and successfully foster the unfosterable, it wasn't like we were going to say no, was it? Whatever horrors lurked in their files. And if we took a child *in extremis*, even if it was supposed to be temporary, how could we then send them on their way? Come one, come all. That was us.

Hmm, I thought, perhaps that was why we got called …

'Squad car no less,' I said to Mike.

'See?' he said. 'Trouble.'

'Love, I don't think it being a squad car has any of those kinds of implications. It was probably just the first car they had to hand. Anyway, come on, let's get the door open, shall we?'

By the time we were on the doorstep, they'd emerged from the car. An older male constable, a younger female PC and Keeley herself, who appeared to be laughing at something the latter had just said. So that was something. At least she wasn't too traumatised.

The female officer stuck a hand out as they reached us. 'Hi,' she said brightly. 'I have one Keeley McAlister for you. I gather you're expecting her?'

The girl had stopped laughing now, returning my smile with her best sullen expression – the kind I'd seen many times before. Just as teachers were always instructed not to smile before Christmas, so some kids in care, particularly if they've been in care a while, adopt a 'whatever' look as a shield.

I ignored it. 'Hello, love,' I said, as brightly as the policewoman. 'I'm Casey, and this is Mike.' Mike smiled too.

'Come on through,' I went on. 'It's getting a bit nippy out there, isn't it?'

'Not according to young Keeley here,' the male officer told us as they trooped one by one into the living room. 'She doesn't feel the cold, do you, love? Not even after walking twenty-five miles.' He grinned. 'It *was* twenty-five miles, you walked, wasn't it, love?'

I followed the policeman's smiling gaze, taking Keeley in properly. She was a good-looking girl, with thick, glossy hair, which was conker-coloured and tied back in a neat ponytail. And she was clearly well looked after, at least in all the practical ways; wearing very expensive trainers – clean, just like the rest of her – below a pair of high-end labelled tracksuit bottoms and zip-up hoody.

Taking my cue from the officer, who was clearly gently ribbing her, I widened my eyes. 'Twenty-five miles!' I gasped. 'My God, you must be exhausted! Did you get lost?'

Keeley turned to me, now adopting an impressive look of condescension. 'I didn't get *lost*,' she drawled. 'I knew exactly what I was doing. I was just trying to put a bit of distance between me and "home".' She raised her hands and did the quote marks with her fingers. Her nails were perfectly manicured and painted in blood-red polish. 'It's not my fault that these lot are a bit slow in locating missing kids, is it? Thought I was gonna have to walk around all night.'

'Um, excuse me, young lady,' the female officer said, stepping forward. 'I think you'll find you were located half

an hour after you were reported missing. Your foster carers had no idea you *were* missing at first, did they?'

'Pft!' Keeley hissed, swinging her ponytail for effect. 'By foster carers you mean Zoe and her paedo husband, I guess? I'm surprised they didn't just leave me to rot.'

Mike and I exchanged a glance, then we both looked at the police officers. Since they'd liaised with all parties concerned, I presumed they'd have something to add.

The female PC duly flipped open her notebook. 'As I think you've been told, Mr and Mrs Watson, Keeley has made an allegation about her foster dad, and that will have to be investigated, of course. But in the meantime she doesn't want to go back, and the carers have said they are happy with that.' She looked at Keeley. 'They also, understandably, feel the placement is at its end. No going back. Anyway, that's obviously for social services to discuss with you after the weekend. In the meantime, as I say, we'll be looking into the allegations.'

I looked at Keeley too, wondering exactly what had happened. If, indeed, anything had. She was busy stifling a yawn. But then perhaps she was exhausted. Whatever else was true, it had probably been a very long day for her. The dark smudges under her eyes weren't just make-up. She was also shifting from hip to hip and I could tell from her posture that the oversized handbag hanging from her shoulder was probably very heavy.

I pointed towards it. 'Is that all you have with you, love?' I asked.

Children usually came with a suitcase or something similar. Even the most neglected kids we'd ever seen had

come accompanied by a bag of rags. But Keeley obviously hadn't packed. She presumably had only what she'd gone out with. Had this been an impulsive decision?

Keeley yawned now, and as she was doing so she nodded. 'Got my toothbrush and PJs,' she said, 'and my phone and my charger. Would it be okay if I go to bed now? I'm knackered.'

I nodded. 'Yes, course you can, love,' I said. 'You must be very *tired*,' I then added, considering and deciding against pulling her up on her own choice of word. 'Come on, I'll show you to your room and leave you to get ready for bed, then I'll bring you up a drink and some biscuits, if you like. I imagine you're hungry. Actually, would you prefer a sandwich?'

Keeley shook her head. 'A drink and biscuits will be fine, thanks.' She then followed me out of the room, without another word to anyone, much less a thank you for the police officers who'd been her taxi for the evening. They shrugged at her departing back. They'd dealt with worse.

'Any other kids live here?' she asked, as I followed her up the stairs.

I nodded as she turned on the landing. 'Here you go, love,' I said, pushing the door to the spare room open. 'And yes, we have a boy. He's called Tyler. He's sixteen – but only just. So maybe the same school year as you? Anyway, you'll meet him in the morning. He's asleep now, I think.' Which made something else occur to me. 'Were there other children at your last placement, love?'

I'd registered Keeley's sour expression when I mentioned the word 'school', but now it changed again.

She looked emotional suddenly. She nodded. 'Yes, my foster sister, Jade. She's fourteen.'

'And they foster her too?' I asked, my mind chugging. An allegation against their foster father might well change that.

But Keeley shook her head. 'No. She's adopted. They adopted her when she was little.' Her face fell, and she suddenly looked younger than before. 'I'm going to miss her. Not them two, but I'm going to miss Jade, big time.' She met my eye then. 'She was like my real sister, you know?'

I smiled sympathetically, and told her I did know. 'And I'm sure you'll see her again,' I said, reaching out to squeeze her shoulder. She was a good three or four inches taller than me. Which, admittedly, wasn't hard. 'Now, you get yourself settled.' I pointed across the landing. 'There's the bathroom, obviously. I'll just go downstairs and finish up with the police then I'll be back with your drink, sweetie, okay?'

'I wouldn't count on it,' Keeley said.

I was confused. 'Count on what?'

'On me being able to see her. I've got four *actual* brothers and sisters. Did they tell you that? I bet they didn't. I've never seen any of them since the day I went into care. Not even once. Social services are all bastards.'

Four. Never seen again. My heart wept for her. But now I had to speak. Start as you mean to go on and all that. Especially with a kid that's been in the system a long time. 'Sweetheart, I know you're angry, and you've every reason to be,' I said gently. 'And we will sit down and talk about all this, I promise. But we don't allow that kind of language

here, okay? Me and Mike have young grandkids, so it's just one of our rules. One of our *few* rules. So can you try to think of other words you can use?'

She had the grace to look embarrassed, which surprised me. From her initial demeanour, I'd been expecting more attitude. I wouldn't have been surprised if she'd answered with 'whatever'. Or told me to sod off and leave her alone. So though it was only a small thing it was an important one; it built a bridge between us. 'Sorry,' she said, looking downcast. 'I'll try not to.'

'Thank you,' I said. 'I know you will.'

The consensus wasn't quite so positive when I returned to the living room. 'Yes,' the female officer was saying, presumably in answer to something Mike had asked her, 'we do think the accusation against Mr Burke is probably false. It just came out of nowhere, for one thing, and was quite a time coming. We were asking her why she didn't want to go back there, obviously, and she was coming up with all kinds of reasons for running away. They were too strict, too fussy, too stupid and so on. The usual teenage things you'd expect. And, of course, at that point there was no question that we wouldn't be taking her home again. Of course we would be. But when we explained that – that we had no choice but to do that – out the accusation suddenly came. With a smirk, even, like she knew exactly what she was doing. "Steve's been touching me up," she goes. "There! You can't take me back now, can you?"' The policewoman flipped the cover of her pad back. 'And she's right, of course. We have to act on the allegation. But we aren't convinced there's any truth in it. Not as yet.'

Even though I'd had my own suspicions about the veracity of Keeley's allegation, I was still a bit stunned. Would a fifteen-year-old really be so bad that she would make up something so horrible, and even *smirk* about it? I knew the answer, of course, because I wasn't born yesterday. And as foster carers, Mike and I heard about things like this all the time. Well, if not all the time, at least often enough to scare us, because it was a situation we could potentially find ourselves in. It didn't bear thinking about.

I shook my head, said my farewells and, while Mike showed them out, went into the kitchen to pour a glass of milk and find some Jaffa Cakes.

Then I went back upstairs with them (Mike was still on the doorstep, talking about the engines in squad cars – at this time?) and pushed the slightly ajar bedroom door open with my foot.

'Here you go, love,' I said as I entered.

Keeley, already in bed, yanked the duvet up to her chest. 'Don't we have rules about knocking?' she asked. She also blushed, instantly and furiously.

I could have kicked myself. And now I felt my cheeks flush as well. 'I'm sorry, love,' I said, placing the drinks and snack down on the bedside table. 'Of course we do. I should have knocked. I'm just tired as well, I suppose. And I didn't think you'd be so quick getting yourself into bed.' I smiled apologetically. 'Next time, I will knock. I promise.'

'It's okay,' Keeley said. She raised a hand holding a smartphone. 'I just wondered. Could I have your wifi password, please? I just want to drop a message to my foster

sister. You know, to let her know I'm okay and that. I won't phone her,' she added meekly. 'I know it's late.'

I could hardly say no. It was a reasonable enough request. The girl was fifteen and how many of those *didn't* have a smartphone? And it made perfect sense that she'd want to tell the one person she obviously felt close to that she was okay. I recited the password – long since memorised from having to constantly give it to the grandkids and other guests – and once she'd typed it in and got connected I went back downstairs.

'She's online,' I told Mike once we were back on the sofa. It was very late but, despite what I'd told Keeley, I now felt wide awake.

'So all's well with the world,' he said, rolling his eyes. 'Spot of James McAvoy, then?'

I was just opening my mouth to share my joy at that prospect, when my own smartphone buzzed, with no caller ID, which I knew meant the lady from EDT again.

Mike put down the remote he had only just picked up. Yes, it was late, but if there *was* trouble ahead, we might as well know where it was coming from.