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The Missing

Jane Casey

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Extract

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Those houses, that are haunted, are most still
Till the devil be up.

Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*

Some of it, I remember very well. Other parts aren't so clear. Over the years, I've shaded in the bits I can't quite recall until I'm not sure which details are real and which I've made up. But this is how I think it started.

I think this is what happened.

This is the best I can do.

1992

I am lying on a scratchy tartan picnic rug in the garden, pretending to read. It's mid-afternoon and the sun is hot on the top of my head and my back, scorching the soles of my feet. My school is closed today for teacher training and I have been outside for hours. The rug is covered with bits of grass that I have ripped up from the lawn; they tickle where they touch my bare skin. My head is heavy, my eyelids drooping. The words on the page march around like ants, no matter how hard I try to keep them in neat lines, and I give in, pushing the book to one side and burying my head in my arms.

Parched grass crackles under the rug, brown and dying from weeks of hot weather. Bees hum in the summer roses, and not far away a lawn-mower drones. The radio is on in the kitchen, a woman's voice rising and falling in measured cadences, interrupted occasionally by a burst of music. The words are indistinct, blurring into one another. A regular thunk-thud-thud is my brother playing tennis against the side of the

house. Racket, wall, ground. Thunk-thud-thud. I have already asked if I can play with him. He'd rather play alone than with me; that's how it goes when you're four years younger and a girl.

I peek through my arms at a ladybird climbing up a blade of grass. I like ladybirds; I have just done a project on them in school. I hold my finger out so the ladybird can walk onto it, but it lifts up its wings and flies away. A tickle on my calf is a fat black fly; they seem to be everywhere this year, and they have been landing on me all afternoon. I bury my head deeper in the cradle of my arms, shutting my eyes. The rug smells of warm wool and sweet summer days. The sun is hot and the bees are murmuring a lullaby.

Minutes or hours later, I hear feet crossing the lawn, crushing the dry, brittle grass at every step. Charlie.

'Tell Mum I'll be back soon.'

The feet move away again.

I don't look up. I don't ask where he's going. I'm more asleep than awake. I might even be dreaming already.

When I open my eyes, I know that something has happened, but not what. I don't know how long I have slept. The sun is still high in the sky, the lawnmower still thrums, the radio burbles, but something is missing. It takes me a moment to realise that the ball isn't bouncing any more. The racket is on the ground, and my brother is gone.

Chapter 1

I didn't go out looking for her; I just couldn't stand to stay at home. I'd left school as soon as the last class ended, avoiding the staffroom and going straight to the car park, where my tired little Renault started at the first time of asking. It was the first thing that had gone right all day.

I usually didn't leave straight after school. I had got into the habit of staying behind in my quiet classroom. Sometimes I worked on lesson plans or marked homework. Often I would just sit and gaze out of the window. The silence would press against my ears as if I was fathoms below sea level. There was nothing to make me resurface; I had no children to rush home to, no husband to see. All that was waiting for me at home was grief, in every sense of the word.

But today was different. Today I had had enough. It was a warm day in early May and the afternoon sun heated the air inside my car beyond comfort. I rolled my window down, but in nose-to-tail rush-hour traffic I barely got up enough speed to ruffle my hair. I wasn't used to fighting through the school traffic and my arms ached from gripping the steering wheel too hard. I put the radio on and snapped it off again after a few seconds. It wasn't far from the school to my house; the journey usually took fifteen minutes. That afternoon, I sat in the car and fumed for almost fifty.

The house was quiet when I got back. Too quiet. I stood in the cool, dim hall and listened, feeling the hairs on my arms lift from the drop in temperature. My top was clammy under the arms and along my spine and I shivered a little, chilled. The sitting-room door was open, exactly as I had left it that morning. The only sound from the kitchen was the two-note drip from the kitchen tap, falling into the cereal bowl I had left in the sink after breakfast. I would have laid money that no one had been in there since I went to work. Which meant . . .

With little enthusiasm, I started up the stairs, slinging my bag on the newel post as I passed it. 'I'm back.'

That got a response of sorts – a scuffling sound from the bedroom at the end of the hall. Charlie's room. The door was closed and I hesitated on the landing, unsure whether to knock or not. At the precise second I'd decided to make my escape, the handle turned. It was too late to reach my bedroom before the door opened, so I stood and waited with resignation. The first words would tell me everything I needed to know about how her day had been.

'What do you want?'

Belligerence, barely contained.

Pretty much normal.

'Hi, Mum,' I said. 'Everything OK?'

The door, which had only opened a crack, swung back further. I could see Charlie's bed, the bed sheets ruffled slightly from where Mum had been sitting. She was still in her dressing gown and slippers, clinging on to the handle and swaying slightly, like a cobra. She frowned deeply, trying to focus.

'What are you doing?'

'Nothing.' I suddenly felt very tired. 'I've just come home from work, that's all. I was just saying hello.'

'I didn't think you'd be back for a while.' She looked puzzled and faintly suspicious. 'What time is it?'

As if that mattered to her. 'I'm a bit earlier than usual,' I said, without explaining why. There was no point. She wouldn't care. She didn't care about much.

Except Charlie. Charlie boy. Charlie was her darling, all right. His room was pristine. Not a thing had changed in sixteen years. Not a toy soldier had moved, not a poster had been allowed to peel off the walls. A stack of folded clothes waited to be put away in the chest of drawers. The clock on the bedside table was still ticking. His books were arranged neatly on shelves above the bed: schoolbooks, comics, thick hardback guides to planes of the Second World War. Boy books. It was all just as it had been when he disappeared, as if he could walk back in and pick up where he left off. I missed him – every day I missed him – but I hated that room.

Mum was fidgeting now, running the belt of her dressing gown through her fingers. 'I was just tidying up,' she said. I refrained from asking what exactly had needed tidying in the room that never changed. The air in there was stale, stagnant. I caught an acrid waft of unwashed flesh and partially metabolised alcohol and felt a spasm of revulsion. All I wanted was to get away, get out of the house and go as far away as possible.

'Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you.' I backed down the hall towards my room. 'I'm just going to go out for a run.'

'A run,' Mum repeated, her eyes narrowing. 'Well, don't let me keep you.'

I was wrong-footed by her change of tone. 'I – I thought I was disturbing you.'

'Oh no, please yourself. You always do.'

I shouldn't have responded. I shouldn't have let myself get drawn in. Usually, I knew better than to think I could win.

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I think you know.' With the help of the door handle, she pulled herself up to her full height, half an inch shorter than me – in other words, not tall. 'You come and go as you please. It's always whatever suits you, isn't it, Sarah?'

I would have had to count to a million to keep my temper. Nonetheless, I bit back what I really wanted to say, which was: *shut up, you selfish bitch. I'm only here because of my misguided sense of loyalty. I'm only here because Dad wouldn't want you to be left alone, and for no other reason, because you burned through whatever love I had for you a long time ago, you ungrateful, self-pitying cow.*

What I actually said was: 'I didn't think you'd mind.'

'Think? You didn't think at all. You never do.'

Her hauteur was spoiled slightly by a stumble as she stalked past me, heading for her bedroom. In the doorway she paused. 'When you come back, don't disturb me. I'm going to bed early.'

As if I wanted to go near her in the first place. But I nodded as if I understood, turning the movement into a slow, sarcastic shake of my head once the door had slammed behind her. I shut myself in my own room with a sense

of release. She was unbelievable, as I informed the picture of my father that stood on my bedside table. 'You owe me,' I muttered. 'Really, properly owe me.'

He smiled on, unmoved, and after a second or two I stirred myself into action, digging under the bed for my trainers.

It was the greatest of pleasures to strip off my creased, damp clothes and pull on running shorts and vest, to tie my thick curls out of the way and feel the cool air on my neck. After a moment's hesitation I put on a lightweight jacket, conscious of the evening chill, even though the day had been warm. I grabbed my water bottle and my phone and headed out, sniffing the air appreciatively as I stood on the front doorstep, shaking the stiffness out of my legs. It had just gone five and the sun was still bright, the light warm and golden. The blackbirds were calling to one another across the gardens as I set off down the road, not too fast at first, feeling my breathing quicken before it settled into a rhythm that matched my stride. I lived in a small cul-de-sac on the Wilmington Estate, a development built to accommodate Londoners pursuing the suburban dream in the 1930s. Curzon Close was a neglected little backwater of twenty houses, inhabited by those residents who'd lived there for years, like me and Mum, and the newcomers, refugees from London house prices. One of the new arrivals was out in her front garden and I smiled at her shyly as I jogged by. No response. I shouldn't have been surprised. We didn't, on the whole, have much to do with the neighbours, even the ones who'd been there as long as we had, or even longer. Especially the ones who'd

been there as long as we had, maybe. The ones who might remember. The ones who might know.

I picked up speed as I reached the main road, trying to outrun my own thoughts. I had been sideswiped all day by long-suppressed memories that rose to the surface of my mind, greasy bubbles in a stagnant pond. It was strange; I hadn't felt the least twinge of foreboding when there was a knock on my classroom door at five minutes to twelve. I had been alone, getting myself organised for my Year 8 class, and opened the door to find Elaine Pennington, the fierce and intensely frightening head teacher of Edgeworth School for Girls, and, behind her, tall and glowering, a man. A parent, in fact. Jenny Shepherd's father, I realised after a second. He had looked grim, desolate, and straightaway I had known that there was a problem.

I couldn't help replaying the scene in my head, as I had been all day. Elaine hadn't wasted any time on introductions.

'Do you have your Year 8 group next lesson?'

After working for her for nearly a year, I was still thoroughly intimidated by Elaine. Her presence was enough to glue my tongue to the roof of my mouth with fear. 'Er – yes,' I'd managed eventually. 'Who were you looking for?'

'All of them.' It was Mr Shepherd who had spoken, cutting across whatever Elaine was starting to say. 'I need to ask them if they know where my daughter is.'

They had come in then, both of them, Mr Shepherd pacing back and forth restlessly. I had met him in November at my first round of parent-teacher meetings, when he had

been loudly cheerful, cracking jokes that made his pretty, glamorous wife roll her eyes good-naturedly. Jenny had Mrs Shepherd's fine-boned build and long-lashed eyes, but she'd inherited her father's smile. Today that smile had not been in evidence in my classroom, his anxiety vibrating in the air around him, lines scoring his forehead above dark, intense eyes. He towered over me, but his physical strength was undermined by his evident distress. He fetched up by one of the windows and leaned against the sill as if his legs wouldn't support him any longer, looking at us hopelessly, hands dangling by his sides, waiting.

'I suppose I should fill you in, Sarah, so you know what's going on. Mr Shepherd came to see me this morning to ask for our help in finding his daughter, Jennifer. She went out over the weekend – on Saturday, wasn't it?'

Shepherd nodded. 'Saturday evening. Around six.'

I tallied it up and bit my lip. Saturday evening, and it was now nearly midday on Monday. Almost two days. Not long – or a lifetime too long, depending on your perspective.

'He and Mrs Shepherd waited, but there was no sign of her by nightfall, and no answer from her mobile phone. They went out looking for her along the route they thought she had taken, but didn't find any sign of her. On their return, Mrs Shepherd called the police, but they weren't particularly helpful.'

'They said she'd come back in her own time.' His voice was low, gravelly, filled with pain. 'They said that girls that age don't have any idea of time. They told us to keep calling her mobile, and if she didn't pick up, to call all of her

friends and ask their parents if they'd seen her. They said that she'd have to be missing for longer before they would do anything. They said a kid goes missing in the UK every five minutes – can you believe that? – and they can't commit resources until they're concerned the child is at risk. They said a twelve-year-old wasn't particularly vulnerable, that she'd probably turn up and say sorry for worrying us. As if she'd go out and not come back and not tell us where she was if everything was OK. They didn't know my daughter.' He looked at me. 'You know her, don't you? You know she'd never just go off without telling us.'

'I can't imagine that she'd do that,' I said carefully, thinking of what I knew of Jenny Shepherd. Twelve years old, pretty, academically diligent, always ready with a smile. There was no hint of rebellion in her, none of the anger that I saw in some of the older girls, who seemed to take vindictive pleasure in worrying their parents. My throat had closed up with worry for her, with the dreadful familiarity of what he was saying – *two days missing* – and I had to clear it to speak. 'Did you manage to convince them to take it seriously?'

He laughed, without humour. 'Oh yes. They took me seriously once the dog turned up.'

'The dog?'

'She was out walking the dog on Saturday evening. She has a little Westie – a West Highland terrier – and it's one of her jobs to walk him twice a day, unless there's a very good reason why she can't. That was one of the conditions she had to agree to before we got the dog. She had to take responsibility for it.' He sagged against the windowsill,

suddenly stricken. 'And she did. She's so good with that animal. She never minds going out in bad weather or early in the morning. Totally devoted. So I knew, as soon as I saw the bloody dog, I knew that something had happened to her.' He choked a little, blinking away tears. 'I should never have let her go out on her own, but I thought she was safe . . .'

He buried his face in his hands and Elaine and I waited for him to recover his composure, not wanting to intrude on his private grief. I didn't know what Elaine was thinking, but I found it pretty unbearable. After a moment, the bell for the end of class cut through the silent room and he jumped, brought back to himself.

'So the dog just turned up at your house?' I prompted once the bell had vibrated itself to silence.

He looked baffled for a second. 'Oh – yes. It was around eleven o'clock. We opened the door and there he was.'

'Did he still have his lead on?' I could tell that both of them thought I had taken leave of my senses, but I wanted to know if Jenny had let the dog off the lead and then lost sight of it. She might have stayed out late looking for it, and could have had an accident. On the other hand, she might have lost hold of the lead – perhaps if someone had made her let go of it. No dog lover would choose to let a dog run around unsupervised with a trailing lead; it would be too easy for it to get tangled up in something and hurt itself.

'I don't remember,' he said eventually, rubbing his forehead in bewilderment.

Elaine took over the story. 'Michael – Mr Shepherd

– went to the police station in person and asked them to investigate, and they finally got started on filling out the correct forms around midnight.'

'By which time she'd been gone for six hours,' Shepherd interjected.

'That's ridiculous. Don't they know how important it is to find missing children quickly?' I couldn't believe they had been so slow; I couldn't believe they had waited to take his statement. 'The first twenty-four hours are critical, absolutely key, and they threw away a quarter of them.'

'I didn't realise you were so knowledgeable, Sarah,' Elaine said, smiling thinly, and I read the expression on her face all too easily. *Shut up and listen, you stupid girl.*

'The police helicopter went up around two,' Michael Shepherd went on. 'They used their infrared camera to search the woods where she usually walked Archie. They said she'd glow, even in undergrowth, from her body heat, and they'd see her. But they didn't find anything.'

So either she wasn't there or her body was no longer emitting heat. You didn't have to be an expert to work out where this was going.

'They keep saying it takes time to trace a runaway. I told them, she's not a runaway. When they didn't find her in the woods, they started looking at CCTV from the stations around here, to see if she went to London. She wouldn't do that; she found it scary, any time we went there with her. She wouldn't let go of my hand the whole time when we went Christmas shopping last year. The crowds were so dense, and she was afraid she'd get lost.'

He looked from me to Elaine and back again, helplessly. 'She's out there somewhere and they haven't found her, and she's all alone.'

My heart twisted with sympathy for him and his wife and for what they were going through, but my mind was still turning over what he had said and there was a question I had to ask. 'Why hasn't there been an appeal? Shouldn't they be asking people if they've seen her?'

'They wanted to wait. They told us that it was best to have a look themselves first, before they had to deal with false sightings and members of the public starting their own search, getting in the way. We wanted to go out looking ourselves, but they told us to wait at home in case she came back. At this stage, I just don't think she's going to walk through the door under her own steam.' He ran his hands through his hair, digging his fingers into his scalp. 'Yesterday, they searched along the river, by the railway line near our house, the reservoir up near the A3 and the woods, and they still haven't found her.'

I wondered if he could miss the awful significance of the places they were focusing on. Whatever her parents thought, the police seemed to have made up their minds that what they were searching for was a body.

Without noticing, I'd reached the edge of the woods. I put on a turn of speed and slipped in between two oaks, following a sketchy path that forked almost immediately. On the right side, I saw a chocolate-brown Labrador barrelling towards me, towing a slender, elderly woman in pristine slacks and full make-up. It didn't look like the

kind of dog that spooked easily, but even so, I turned to the left path, running away from where people might be. The path I took looked more challenging. It led towards the middle of the woods, where the tracks were narrow and steep and tended to peter out unexpectedly in a welter of brambles and unkempt bushes. The paths nearer the road were the dog walkers' favourites, well worn and wide. A wide, even path wouldn't distract me from the dark beat of tension that had been thudding monotonously in my head all day with heavy, unforgiving force. I headed uphill, thinking about Jenny's father.

The quiet of the classroom was disturbed again, this time by scuffling outside the door, footsteps clattering up the corridor, and voices. Jenny's classmates, 8A. There was a ripple of laughter and Michael Shepherd flinched.

I let them in, telling them to hurry to their seats. Their eyes were round with curiosity at the sight of the head teacher and a parent; this was far better than discussing *Jane Eyre*. Michael Shepherd squared his shoulders as if preparing for a round in the boxing ring and faced his daughter's contemporaries. The role of victim didn't suit him. The desire to do something had driven him to the school. He wouldn't wait around for the police; he would do what he thought was right and deal with the consequences later.

Once they were all waiting in their places, silently attentive, Elaine began to speak.

'Some of you will know Mr Shepherd, I'm sure, but for those of you who don't, this is Jennifer's father. I want you

all to listen very carefully to what he has to say. If you can help him in any way, I am sure you will do so.'

Rows of heads nodded obediently. Michael Shepherd moved to stand beside Elaine at her invitation. He looked around the room, seeming slightly confused.

'You all look so different in your uniforms,' he said eventually. 'I know I've met some of you before, but I can't quite . . .'

A ripple of amusement went through the class, and I hid a smile. I'd had the same experience myself in reverse, seeing some of my students in town at the weekend. They looked so much older and more sophisticated out of uniform. It was unsettling.

He had spotted a couple of girls he recognised. 'Hi, Anna. Rachel.'

They blushed and mumbled hello, simultaneously delighted and appalled to be singled out.

'I know this is going to sound silly,' he began, trying to smile, 'but we've lost our daughter. We haven't seen her for a couple of days now, and I was wondering if any of you had heard from her or if you had any idea where she is.' He waited for a beat, but no one said anything. 'I know it's a lot to ask – I do understand that Jenny may have her own reasons for not coming home. But her mother is very worried, as am I, and we just want to know that she's OK. If you haven't seen her, I'd like to know whether anyone has spoken to her or had any contact with her since Saturday evening – a text or an email or whatever.'

There was a muted chorus of 'no' from around the room.

'OK, well, I'd like to ask you to check when you last

heard from Jenny, and what she said. Does anyone know if she had any plans to go somewhere over the weekend? She won't get in trouble – we just need to know that she's safe.'

The girls stared at him in silence. He had earned their sympathy, but no useful response. Elaine stepped in.

'I want you all to think very carefully about what Mr Shepherd has asked you, and if you remember anything – anything at all – that you think we should know, I'd like you to tell us. You can talk to me in complete confidence, or Miss Finch, or you can ask your parents to call me if you feel more comfortable talking to them.' Her face darkened. 'I know you are all too sensible to keep quiet because of some misplaced sense of loyalty to Jennifer.' She turned to me. 'Miss Finch, we'll leave you to get on with your class.'

I could tell that Michael Shepherd was unhappy about leaving the classroom without finding out anything from his daughter's classmates, though he had little choice but to follow Elaine as she swept out. He nodded to me as he went, and I smiled, trying to think of something to say, but he was gone before anything remotely suitable occurred to me. He walked with his head down, like a bull being led into an abattoir, all that power and determination draining away, leaving only despair.

In the woods, the traffic noise fell away as if a soundproof curtain had dropped behind me. The birds sang and a breeze sighed through the treetops with a sound like rushing water. The rhythmic thud of my feet on the dark, firm

ground punctuated the rasping of my breath and every now and then a singing note was the whiplash of a thin, reaching branch that had snagged on my sleeve for an instant. Tall, ancient trees with knotted trunks spread a canopy of bitingly green new leaves overhead. The sunlight slid through their shade in slanting beams and pinpricks of light, dizzying brilliance that glanced off a surface and was gone the next instant. I felt, briefly, almost happy.

I kicked myself up a long, steep hill, toes digging for purchase in the leaf mould, my heart thumping as my muscles burned. The ground was as dark and rich as chocolate cake; it had just enough give in it. I had run on iron-hard, ankle-killing parched earth the previous summer, and slithered through slick mud on icy days midwinter, black splashes streaking up the backs of my legs like tar. These conditions were perfect. No excuses. I fought all the way to the top, to the pay-off downhill slope on the other side, and it felt as if I was flying.

After a while, of course, the euphoria wore off. My legs started to complain at the exertion, my thigh muscles aching. I could run through that sort of niggling discomfort, but my knees were also protesting and that was more serious. I winced as a careless step on the uneven surface jarred my left knee, sending a jolt of pain up the outside of my thigh. Checking my watch, I was surprised to see that half an hour had slid by since I left the house; I had done about three and a half miles. It was far enough to count as a decent run by the time I got home.

I made a wide loop and doubled back on myself, running parallel to the route I'd taken on the way out. There was

something disheartening about running over the same ground on the way back; I hated to do it. The new route took me along a spine of higher ground that ran between two steep-sided depressions. The surface here was crumbly and knotted with roots. I slowed right down, wary of twisting an ankle, eyes glued to the ground in front of me. Even so, I came to grief, skidding on a smooth root that angled sharply downwards. With a muffled squawk I pitched forward, hands outstretched, and ended up sprawling in the dirt. I stayed in that position for a second, my breath rasping, the woods around me suddenly hushed. Slowly, painfully, I peeled my hands off the ground and sat back on my heels to inspect the damage. No broken bones, no blood. *Good*. I brushed the worst of the dirt off my hands and knees. Bruises, maybe a slight graze on the heel of my right hand. Nothing too remarkable. I stood up, holding on to a convenient tree trunk for support, grimacing as I stretched out my legs, glad that no one had seen me fall. I bent forward and stretched out my hamstrings, then walked around in a tight circle, gathering the motivation to carry on. I was about to set off again when I stopped, frowning. Something nagged at me, something strange that I'd half seen out of the corner of my eye, something out of context. Even then, it didn't occur to me to worry, even though I'd been thinking of the missing girl all day.

I stood on tiptoe and looked properly, peering through the gathering shadows. Down in the hollow to my left there was a gap in the leaf canopy where an old tree had fallen, and a shaft of sunlight illuminated that patch of

undergrowth like a stage set. The hollow was entirely filled with bluebells that crowded around the fallen tree. The flowers' hazy bluish purple mirrored the clear evening sky above. All around, silvery-white birches lined the clearing, their bark streaked with definite black lines, their leaves the sour-apple green of new growth. The sunlight picked out the tiny bodies of flies and gnats, turning them to gold as they whirled in endless circles above the petals.

That wasn't what had caught my attention, though. I frowned, hands on hips, scanning the clearing. Something was off. What was it? Trees, flowers, sunshine, so pretty – so what?

There. Something white among the bluebells. Something pale behind the tree trunk. I edged down the bank carefully, trying to get closer, straining to see. Bluebell stems crunched under my trainers, the glossy leaves squeaking as I inched forward, closer now, able to see . . .

A hand.

The breath rushed out of my lungs as if I had been punched. I think I knew right away what I was looking at, I knew what I had found, but something made me keep moving forward, something made me creep around the old tree trunk, stepping carefully over the splintered end that was brittle and hollow with rot. Along with the shock came a feeling of inevitability, a feeling that I had been moving towards this moment since I'd heard that Jenny was missing. As I crouched down beside the trunk, my heart was pounding faster than it had when I had run up the steepest hill earlier.

Jenny was lying in the lee of the fallen tree, almost

underneath it, one hand placed carefully on the middle of her narrow chest, legs decorously together. She wore jeans, black Converse shoes and a fleece that had been pale pink, but was grey around the cuffs. The hand that I had seen was the left hand, flung out at an angle. It lay among the flowers as if it had been dropped there.

Up close, the pallor of her skin had a bluish tinge and the nails were the grey-purple of an old bruise. I didn't have to touch her to know that she was far beyond help, but I reached out and ran the back of one finger along her cheek and the chill of her lifeless flesh made me shudder. I made myself look at her face, at her features, wanting to confirm what I knew to be true, knowing I would never forget what I saw. An ashy face, framed with tangled dirty blonde hair, matted and lank. Her eyes were closed, her lashes a dark fan on colourless cheeks. Her mouth was grey and bloodless; it had fallen open, pulled down by her slack jaw. Her lips stretched thinly over teeth that seemed more prominent than they had in life. Unmistakably, there were signs of violence on her face and neck: faint shadows of bruises that dappled her cheek and smudged across her fragile collarbones. A thin dark line showed on her lower lip where a narrow smear of blood had dried to black.

She lay where she had been dumped, where someone had arranged her body once they were finished with her as they had wanted her to be found. The pose was a grotesque parody of how an undertaker might display a corpse, a travesty of dignity. It couldn't take away from the reality of what had been done to her. Abused, injured, abandoned, dead. Just twelve years old. All of that

limitless potential brought to nothing, just an empty husk in a quiet wood.

I had been looking at Jenny's body with a detachment that bordered on the clinical, examining every detail without really taking in what I was seeing. Now it was as if a dam burst in my brain and the full horror broke over me like a wave. Everything I had feared for Jenny had come to pass, and it was worse than I could ever have imagined. The blood roared in my ears and the ground tilted under my feet. I squeezed my water bottle tightly with both hands, the cool ridged plastic reassuringly familiar. I was drenched in sweat, but ice-cold and shivering. Waves of nausea swept over me and I shuddered, pushing my head between my knees. It was hard to think, I couldn't move and the forest spun out of control around me. For a moment, I looked and saw myself at that age – the same hair, the same shape of face, but I hadn't died, I was the one who had lived . . .

I don't know how long it would have taken for me to recover if I hadn't been brought back to myself abruptly. Somewhere behind me, not close, a dog whined once, urgently, then stopped dead as if cut off, and awareness roared back to me like an express train.

What if I wasn't alone?

I stood up and looked around the little clearing, eyes wide, alert to any sudden movements near me. I was standing beside a body that had been left there by someone – presumably whoever had murdered her. And murderers sometimes went back to a body, I had read. I swallowed nervously, a knot of fear tight in my throat. The breeze swept through the trees again, drowning out all other

sounds, and I jumped as a bird whirred out of its hiding place somewhere on my right and rocketed through the branches to the open air. What had disturbed it? Should I call for help? Who would hear me in the middle of the woods, where I had gone to be alone? Stupid, stupid Sarah . . .

Before I panicked completely, cold common sense clamped down on the rising hysteria. Stupid Sarah indeed, with her mobile phone in her pocket, just waiting to be used. I dragged it out, almost sobbing with relief, then panicked again when the screen lit up to show only one bar of reception. Not enough. I scrambled back up the steep bank, holding the phone tightly. It was hard to climb up the sharp gradient and I scrabbled to get purchase with my free hand as grass and roots pulled away from the soft earth, *please please please* running through my head. Two more bars appeared as soon as I reached the top of the ridge. I stood with my back to a solid, sturdy old tree and stabbed 999 into the phone, feeling slightly unreal as I did so, my heart beating so hard that the thin material of my vest top was shaking.

'Emergency, which service?' asked a slightly nasal female voice.

'Police,' I gasped, still out of breath from the clamber up the bank and the shock I was feeling. It was as if a tight band was wrapped around my chest, constricting my ribs. Somehow, I didn't seem to be able to get a deep enough breath.

'Putting you through, thank you.' She sounded bored; it almost made me laugh.

There was a click. A different voice. 'Hello, you're through to the police.'

I swallowed. 'Yes, I – I've found a body.'

The operator sounded completely unsurprised. 'A body. Right. Whereabouts are you at the moment?'

I did my best to describe the location, getting flustered as the operator pushed me for more details. It wasn't exactly easy to pinpoint where I was without convenient road signs or buildings to act as points of reference, and I got completely confused when she asked if I was to the east of the main road, first saying yes, then contradicting myself. My head felt fuzzy, as if there was static interfering with my thoughts. The woman on the other end of the line was patient with me, warm even, which made me feel even worse about how useless I was being.

'It's all right, you're doing fine. Can you tell me your name, please?'

'Sarah Finch.'

'And you're still with the body,' the operator checked.

'I'm nearby,' I said, wanting to be accurate. 'I – I know her. Her name is Jenny Shepherd. She's been reported missing – I saw her father this morning. She—' I broke off, struggling not to cry.

'Is there any sign of life? Can you check if the person is breathing for me?'

'She's cold to the touch – I'm sure she's dead.' *Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle. She died young.*

The woods spiralled around me again, and as my eyes filled with tears I reached back to touch the tree trunk behind me. It was solidly real and reassuring.

The operator was talking. 'OK, Sarah, the police will be with you shortly. Just stay put and keep your mobile phone switched on. They may ring you to get further directions.'

'I can go nearer to the road,' I offered, suddenly oppressed by the stillness, horribly aware of what was hidden behind the tree down in the gully.

'Just stay where you are,' the operator said firmly. 'They'll find you.'

When she had hung up, I sagged to the ground, still clutching my phone, my lifeline. The breeze had picked up and I was cold in spite of my jacket, chilled to the bone, and utterly exhausted. But it was all right. They were coming. They would be there soon. All I had to do was wait.