

Prologue

The night is so warm she has her window open; the net curtain lifts lazily in the bare breath of late-summer heat. There's a light on inside the flat, but only in the living room: that's how he knows she's alone. There's music playing, too. Not loud, but he's close enough to hear it. He used to worry about that, at the beginning – about getting too near and giving himself away. But he knows better now; even in daylight vans like this are everywhere. People don't even see them any more. Not even observant people. Like her.

He winds down the window a little further. She must be going out, because the music is fast, energetic, upbeat; not the lazy jazzy stuff she usually prefers. He closes his eyes a moment and tries to visualize what she's going to wear, what she's pulling over her skin right now – skin still damp from the shower he just heard her take. Not the black dress with the beading that fits so tightly he can map her body in his mind: if it was dinner with her tosser of a boyfriend she wouldn't be listening to crap music like that. It's not her parents either: if they were in Oxford he'd have seen the car. No, it must be a night out with the girls. Which means she'll go for something less suggestive – something understated that signals polite inaccessibility. The blue one, perhaps, with the wide sleeves. Tiffany blue, they call it. He never knew that before. It's a nice dress. Neutral. And it's one of her favourites.

She didn't tell him any of this. He found it out. It wasn't even that hard. All you have to do is watch. Watch and wait and deduce. Sometimes all it takes is a few days; but those are rarely the most satisfying. This one has already cost him more than three weeks, but he likes taking his time. And something tells him she's going to be worth it. Like the ads for that shampoo she buys keep on telling her. And in any case, he's learnt to his cost that these things can't be rushed. That's when you make mistakes. That's when it all goes wrong.

There's someone coming now. He can hear the clack of shoes against the pavement. High heels. Giggling. He shifts slightly to get a better look, the plastic of the seat sticking and crackling under him. Across the road, two girls come into view. Nothing understated about that pair, that's for sure. Sequins, red gash mouths, tottering about on their tarty shoes; the silly bitches are already half-cut. He hasn't seen either of these two before but they must be friends of hers because they stop outside the flat and start rummaging in their handbags. One of them pulls something free with a flourish and a loud 'Ta-da!' A shiny pink sash, with something written on it in glitter he can't quite read. But he doesn't need to. His eyes narrow; he's seen shit like that before. It's a hen party. A fucking *hen party*. Since when did she bother with crap like that? The two girls have their heads together now and something about the way they're laughing and whispering sends a trickle of unease inching up his spine. It can't be *her* party, surely. She can't have – not without him knowing – she's not wearing a ring – he'd have seen –

He leans forward, trying to get a better look. One of the girls is ringing the doorbell to the flat, leaning on the entryphone until the window upstairs shoots up.

‘Do you really have to make *quite* so much noise?’

She’s trying to sound disapproving but there’s laughter in her voice. She leans out and a twist of long dark hair slips over her shoulder. It’s still wet from the shower. His throat tightens.

One of the girls looks up and lifts her arms, triumphant. She has a plastic coronet in one hand and the pink sash in the other. ‘Hey! Look what we got!’

The girl in the window shakes her head. ‘You promised, Chlo – absolutely *no* tat and *no* tiaras.’

The two below burst out laughing. ‘This *extremely* tasteful piece of decorative headwear happens to be mine, not yours,’ says the second girl, her words slurring slightly. ‘We got *this* little number for *you* . . .’

She digs into her handbag and holds something up, and as it catches the light of the street lamp he can see it clearly: a bright-pink hairslide, with the word TAKEN spelt out in diamanté.

The girl in the window shakes her head again. ‘What did I do to deserve you two, eh?’

She ducks back inside and a moment later there’s the sound of the entryphone buzzing, and the two girls stumble over the step into the house, still giggling.

The man opens the glovebox. That bitch is lucky he isn’t going to do her right here and now; that’d put paid to their trashy little tart fest. But he won’t. He wants the exhilaration of waiting – still wants it, even now. The exquisite anticipation, the detail by detail: how she’ll smell, how she’ll

taste, the feel of her hair. Just knowing he could have that whenever he chooses – that the only thing preventing him is his own restraint –

He sits a while, clenching and unclenching his fists, allowing his heart rate to slow. Then he puts the key in the ignition and starts the engine.

The alarm goes at seven but Faith Appleford has already been up for an hour. Hair, clothes, shoes, make-up, it all takes time. She's sitting at her dressing table now, putting the finishing touches to her mascara, hearing her mother calling up the stairs from the kitchen.

'Nadine – are you out of bed yet? If you want that lift you need to be down here in ten minutes.'

There's a groan from next door and Faith imagines her sister turning over and pulling the pillow over her head. It's always the same; Nadine is hopeless in the mornings. Unlike Faith. Faith is always ready in plenty of time. Always perfectly turned out. She turns back to the mirror and moves her head right and left, checking the angles, tweaking a lock of hair, straightening the neckline of her sweater. Beautiful. And it's not just showing off. She really is. Quite beautiful.

She gets to her feet and selects a handbag from the cluster hanging on the back of the door. It's suede. Well, not real suede but you have to get up really close to realize. The colour is just right though, especially with this jacket. The perfect shade of blue.

* * *

‘Is that OK – not too cold?’

I felt Alex flinch as the probe touched her skin but she shakes her head quickly and smiles. ‘No, it’s fine.’

The nurse turns back to her monitor and taps her keyboard. Everything in the room is muted. The lights dimmed, the sound muffled, as if we’re underwater. Around us, the hospital is brisk with activity, but in here, right now, time has slowed to a heartbeat.

‘Here you are,’ says the nurse at last, swinging the monitor round and smiling at us. The image on the screen blooms into life. A head, a nose, a tiny fist, raised as if in celebration. Movement. *Life*. Alex’s hand gropes for mine but her eyes never leave her child.

‘This is the first time for you, isn’t it, Mr Fawley?’ continues the nurse. ‘I don’t think you were here for the first scan?’ She keeps her tone light but there’s judgement in there all the same.

‘It was complicated,’ says Alex quickly. ‘I was so terrified something would go wrong – I didn’t want to jinx it –’

I tighten my grip on her hand. We’ve been through this. Why she didn’t tell me, why she couldn’t even live with me until she knew for certain. Until she was sure.

‘It’s fine,’ I say. ‘All that matters is that I’m here now. And that the baby is OK.’

‘Well, the heartbeat is good and strong,’ the nurse says, tapping at her keyboard again. ‘And the baby is growing normally, exactly as it should be at twenty-two weeks. There’s nothing here that gives me any cause for concern.’

I feel myself exhale – I didn't even realize I'd stopped breathing. We're older parents, we've read all the leaflets, had all the tests, but still –

'You're absolutely sure?' says Alex. 'Because I really don't want to have an amnio –'

The nurse smiles again, a deeper, warmer smile. 'It's all absolutely fine, Mrs Fawley. You have nothing at all to worry about.'

Alex turns to me, tears in her eyes. 'It's all right,' she whispers. 'It really is going to be all right.'

On the screen the baby somersaults suddenly, a tiny dolphin in the silvery darkness.

'So,' says the nurse, adjusting the probe again, 'do you want to know the sex?'

* * *

Fiona Blake puts a bowl of cereal down in front of her daughter, but Sasha doesn't appear to notice. She's been staring at her phone ever since she came downstairs, and Fiona is fighting the urge to say something. They don't have phones at meals in their house. Not because Fiona laid down the law about it but because they agreed, the two of them, that it wasn't how they wanted to do things. She turns away to fill the teapot but when she gets back to the table Sasha is still staring at the damn screen.

'Problem?' she says, trying not to sound irritated.

Sasha looks up and shakes her head. 'Sorry – it's just Pats saying she won't be at school today. She's been throwing up all night.'

Fiona makes a face. 'That winter vomiting thing?'

Sasha nods, then pushes the phone away. ‘Sounds like it. She sounds really rough.’

Fiona scrutinizes her daughter; her eyes are bright and her cheeks look a little flushed. Come to think of it, she’s been rather like that all week. ‘You feeling all right, Sash? You look like you might be a bit feverish yourself.’

Sasha’s eyes widen. ‘Me? I’m fine. Seriously, Mum, I’m absolutely OK. And completely starving.’

She grins at her mother and reaches across the table for a spoon.

* * *

At St Aldate’s police station, DC Anthony Asante is trying to smile. Though the look on DS Gislingham’s face suggests he isn’t doing a very good job of it. It’s not that Asante doesn’t have a sense of humour, it’s just not the custard pie and banana skin variety. Which is why he’s struggling to find the upside-down glass of water on his desk very amusing. That and the fact that he’s furious with himself for forgetting what day it is and not being more bloody careful. He should have seen this coming a mile off: newest member of the team, graduate entry, fresh from the Met. He might as well have had ‘Fair Game’ tattooed across his forehead. And now they’re all standing there, watching him, waiting to see if he’s a ‘good sport’ or just ‘well up himself’ (which judging from the smirk DC Quinn isn’t bothering to hide is clearly *his* opinion – though Asante’s tempted to ask if Quinn’s playing the role of pot or kettle on that one). He takes a deep breath and cranks the smile up a notch. After all, it could have been

worse. One of the shits at Brixton nick left a bunch of bananas on his desk the day he first started.

‘OK, guys,’ he says, looking round at the room, in what he hopes is the right combination of heavy irony and seen-it-all-before, ‘very funny.’

Gislingham grins at him, as much relieved as anything. After all, a joke’s a joke and in this job you have to be able to take it as well as dish it out, but he’s still a bit new to the whole sergeantship thing and he doesn’t want to be seen as picking on anyone. Least of all the only non-white member of the team. He cuffs Asante lightly on the arm, saying, ‘Nice one, Tone,’ then decides he’s probably best off leaving it at that and makes for the coffee machine.

* * *

Adam Fawley
1 April 2018
10.25

‘So how’s this going to work then?’

Alex settles herself slowly into the sofa and swings her feet up. I hand her the mug and she curls her hands around it. ‘How’s what going to work?’ she says, though she’s already looking mischievous.

‘You know exactly what I mean – the small fact that I don’t know the sex, but you do.’

She blows on the tea and then looks up at me, all innocence. ‘Why should it be a problem?’

I shunt a cushion aside and sit down. ‘How are you going to keep a secret like that? You’re bound to let it slip eventually.’

She grins. ‘Well, as long as you don’t employ that infamous interviewing technique of yours, I think I’ll just about manage to keep it to myself.’ She laughs now, seeing my face. ‘Look, I promise to keep thinking of two lists of names –’

‘OK, but –’

‘And not buy everything in blue.’

Before I can even open my mouth she grins again and prods me with her foot. ‘*Or pink.*’

I shake my head, all faux-disapproval. ‘I give up.’

‘No, you don’t,’ she says, serious now. ‘You never give up. Not on anything.’

And we both know she’s not just talking about my job.

I get to my feet. ‘Take it easy the rest of the day, all right? No heavy lifting or anything insane like that.’

She raises an eyebrow. ‘So that afternoon of lumberjacking I had planned is off, is it? Darn it.’

‘And email me if you need anything from the shops.’

She gives a joke salute then prods me again. ‘Go. You’re late already. And I have done all this before, remember. I wallpapered Jake’s nursery when I was twice the size I am now.’

As she smiles up at me, I realize I can’t even remember the last time she talked like this. All those months after Jake died, she saw motherhood only in terms of loss. Absence. Not just the want of him but the despair of having any other child. All this time, she could only speak of our son in pain. But now, perhaps, she can reclaim the joy of him too. This baby could never be a replacement, even if we wanted it to be, but perhaps he – or she – can still be a redemption.

It's only when I get to the door that I turn round. 'What infamous interviewing technique?'

Her laughter follows me all the way down the drive.

* * *

At 10.45 Somer is still stuck in a queue on the A33. She'd meant to come back from Hampshire last night but somehow the walk along the coast had turned into dinner, and dinner had turned into just one glass too many, and at half ten they'd agreed it definitely wasn't a good idea for her to drive. So the new plan was to get up at 5.00 to beat the Monday-morning rush, only somehow that didn't happen either and it was gone 9.00 by the time she left. Not that she's complaining. She smiles to herself; her skin is still tingling despite the hot shower and the cold car. Even though it means she has no change of clothes for the office and no time to go home and get any. Her phone pings and she glances down. It's a text from Giles. She smiles again as she reads it, itching to reply with some arch remark about what his superintendent would say if he got sent *that* by mistake, but the car ahead of her is finally moving; Giles – for once – is going to have to wait.

* * *

When the minicab driver first spotted the girl, he thought she was drunk. Yet another bloody student, he thought, getting pissed on cheap cider and staggering home at all hours. She was a good hundred yards ahead of him, but he could see she was lurching unsteadily from side to side.

It wasn't till the car got closer that he realized she was actually limping. One strappy shoe was still on but the other had lost its heel. That's what made him slow down. That and where she was. Out on the Marston Ferry Road, miles from anywhere. Or as close to it as Oxford ever gets. Though as he signalled and pulled over alongside her, he still thought she must just be drunk.

But that was before he saw her face.

* * *

The office is all but empty when the call comes through. Quinn's AWOL somewhere, Fawley's not due in till lunchtime and Gislingham's off on a training course. Something to do with people management, Baxter tells Ev. Before smiling wryly and observing that he can't see why the Sarge is bothering: there's nothing about that particular subject Gis couldn't learn from his own wife.

Somer has just got back with a salad and a round of coffees when the phone rings. She watches Everett pick it up and wedge the handset against her shoulder while she answers an email.

'Sorry?' she says suddenly, gripping the phone now, the email forgotten. 'Can you say that again? You're sure? And when did this happen?' She grabs a pen and scribbles something down. 'Tell them we'll be there in twenty minutes.'

Somer looks up; something tells her the salad is going to have to wait. Again. She doesn't even bother buying hot lunches any more.

Everett puts the phone down. 'A girl's been found on the Marston Ferry Road.'

‘Found? What do you mean “found”?’

‘In a state of extreme distress, and with marks on her wrists where her hands were tied.’

‘*Tied?* She’d been *tied up?*’

Everett’s face is grim. ‘I’m afraid it sounds a lot worse than that.’

* * *

Adam Fawley
1 April 2018
12.35

I’m still on the ring road when I get the call from Everett.

‘Sir? I’m with Somer on our way to the Lakes. We had a call about ten minutes ago – a girl’s been found in a distraught state on the Marston Ferry Road. It looks like she may have been attacked.’

I signal to pull over into a lay-by and pick up the phone. ‘Sexual assault?’

‘We don’t actually know that. But to be honest, right now, we don’t know much at all.’

I can tell something’s off, just from her voice. And if there’s one thing I know about Ev, it’s that she has good antennae. Good antennae, and not enough confidence in them. Or herself. Something for Gislingham to pick up when he gets back from that HR course of his.

‘There’s something bothering you, isn’t there?’

‘She was found with her clothes torn and muddy and evidence that her hands had been tied –’

‘Jesus –’

‘I know. She was apparently in a terrible state but the point is she refused to go to either the police or the

doctor. She made the minicab driver who found her take her straight home and told him she didn't want it reported. Which, thankfully, he ignored.'

I poke about in the glovebox for some paper and ask her to repeat the address in the Lakes. And if you're wondering how you missed all that standing water when you did the Oxford tourist tour, there isn't anything larger than a pond for miles. The Lakes is a 1930s housing development in Marston. People call it that because there are so many roads there named after them: Derwent, Coniston, Grasmere, Rydal. I like to think some long-ago town planner was homesick for the fells, but Alex tells me I'm just being Romantic.

'Do we know the girl's name?'

'We think it could be Faith. The cab driver said she was wearing a necklace with that on it. Though it might just be one of those "*Live Love Life*" sort of things. You must have seen them.'

I have. But not on Ev, that's for sure. As for the cabbie, it seems he wasn't just public-spirited but observant too. Wonders will never cease.

'According to the electoral roll there's a woman called Diane Appleford resident at the address,' she continues. 'She moved there about a year ago, and there's no criminal record, nothing flagging anywhere. But there's no Mr Appleford – or not one living with her, at any rate.'

'OK, I'm only about ten minutes away.'

'We're just turning into Rydal Way now, but we'll hold off going in till you get here.'

The Appleford home is a neat bow-fronted semi, with a paved front garden and a low wall made of those square

white bricks that look like stencils. Our next-door neighbours had exactly the same when I was a kid. What with that and the frilly nets in the window the house looks landlocked in 1976.

I see Somer and Everett get out of their car and come down the road towards me. Everett is in her standard combo of white shirt, dark skirt and sensible mac, though the bright-red scarf is definitely her little rebellion. Somer, by contrast, is in black jeans, a leather jacket and high-heeled ankle boots with fringing bits around the back. She doesn't usually dress like that at work, so I'm guessing she was at the boyfriend's this weekend and hasn't been home. She flushes slightly when she sees me, which makes me even more convinced I'm right. She met him when we were working on the Michael Esmond case. The boyfriend, I mean. Giles Saumarez. He's in the job too. I can never quite decide if that's a good thing.

'Afternoon, sir,' says Everett, hoisting her bag a bit higher on her shoulder.

I reach into my pocket for a mint. I carry handfuls of the bloody things now. Stopping smoking is a bastard, but it's non-negotiable. And by that, I mean between me and myself; I didn't wait for Alex to ask.

'Is that a good idea?' says Somer, eyeing the sweet. 'With the teeth, I mean.'

I frown for a moment and then remember that's where I told them I was this morning. The dentist's. The universal white lie of choice. It's not that the baby is a secret – people will have to know eventually. It's just – you know – not right now.

'It was OK,' I say. 'I didn't need anything doing.'

I turn to Ev. ‘So anything more before we go crashing in?’
She shakes her head. ‘You know as much as we do.’

The woman who opens the door has dried-out blonde hair, white sweatpants and a white sweatshirt with *Slummy Mummy* written on it. She must be mid-forties. She looks tired. Tired and immediately defensive.

‘Mrs Appleford?’

She eyes me and then the women. ‘Yes. Who are you?’

‘I’m Detective Inspector Adam Fawley. This is DC Everett and DC Somer.’

She grips the door a little tighter. ‘Faith was quite clear – she doesn’t want the police involved. You have no business –’
‘Faith is your daughter?’

She hesitates a moment, as if divulging even so bare a fact is some sort of betrayal. ‘Yes. Faith is my daughter.’

‘The passer-by who found her was extremely concerned for her well-being. As, of course, are we.’

Somer touches my shoulder and gestures back behind her. I don’t even need to turn round. I can almost hear the sound of curtains twitching.

‘Could we come in, Mrs Appleford? Just for a moment? We can talk more easily inside.’

The woman glances across the road; she’s spotted the nosy neighbours, too.

‘OK. But only for a couple of minutes, all right?’

The sitting room is painted pale mauve, with a sofa and armchairs which are obviously supposed to match but the colour’s just far enough off to mess with your head. And they’re much too big for the space. It never ceases to

baffle me why people don't measure their rooms before they buy their furniture. There's a strong smell of artificial air freshener. Lavender. As if you had to ask.

She doesn't invite us to sit down, so we stand awkwardly on the narrow strip of carpet between the seats and the glass-topped coffee table.

'Was your daughter here last night, Mrs Appleford?'

She nods.

'All night?'

'Yes. She didn't go out.'

'So you saw her at breakfast?'

Another nod.

'What time was that?' asks Somer, slipping her notebook discreetly from her jacket.

The woman wraps her arms about herself. I'm trying not to draw conclusions from her body language, but she's not making it easy. 'About 7.45, I think. I left with Nadine just before 8.00, but Faith had a later start today. She'd have left around 9.00 to get the bus.'

So she doesn't actually *know* what her daughter did this morning. Just because something always happens, doesn't mean it always will.

'Nadine's your daughter too?' asks Somer.

The woman nods. 'I drop her off at school on my way to work. I'm a receptionist at the doctor's in Summertown.'

'And Faith?'

'She goes to the FE college in Headington. That's why she gets the bus. It's in the opposite direction.'

'Did you have any contact with Faith during the day today?'

'I texted her about tennish but she didn't reply. It was

just a link to an article about Meghan Markle. You know, the wedding. The dress. Faith's interested in all that. She's doing Fashion. She has real talent.'

'And that was unusual – that she didn't reply, I mean?'

The woman considers then shrugs. 'I suppose so, yes.'

My turn again. 'Does she have a boyfriend?'

Her eyes narrow a little. 'No. Not at the moment.'

'But she would tell you – if she did?'

She gives me a sharp look. 'She doesn't keep secrets from me, if that's what you're getting at.'

'I'm sure she doesn't,' says Somer, placatory. 'We're just trying to work out who might have done this – if it could have been someone she knew –'

'She doesn't have a boyfriend. She doesn't *want* a boyfriend.'

There's a silence.

Somer glances across at Ev. *Why don't you have a try.*

'Were you here,' Ev says, 'when the cabbie brought her back?'

The woman looks at her then nods. 'I wouldn't be, normally. But I'd forgotten my reading glasses so I popped back.'

Ev and Somer exchange another glance. I suspect I know what they're thinking: if Mrs Appleford hadn't chanced to be at home the girl might well have tried to hide what happened from her as well. As for me, I'm more and more convinced Ev is right: there's definitely something off here.

I take a step closer. 'Do you know why Faith has decided not to talk to us, Mrs Appleford?'

She bridles. 'She doesn't want to. That should be enough, shouldn't it?'

'But if she was raped –'

‘She *wasn’t* raped.’ Her tone is unequivocal. Absolute.

‘How can you be so sure?’

Her face hardens. ‘She told me. Faith told me. And my *daughter* is not a *liar*.’

‘I’m not saying that. Not at all.’ She’s not looking at me now. ‘Look, I know rape investigations can be traumatic – I wouldn’t blame anyone for being daunted by that prospect – but it’s not like it used to be. We have properly trained officers – DC Everett –’

‘It wasn’t rape.’

‘I’m very glad to hear it – but we may still be looking at a serious crime. Assault, Actual Bodily Harm –’

‘How many more times? There was *no* crime and she is *not* going to press charges. So please, will you people just leave us alone?’

She looks round at us, one after the other. She wants us to start leaving, to say Faith can contact us if she changes her mind. But we don’t. *I* don’t.

‘Your daughter was missing for over two hours,’ says Ev gently. ‘From 9.00 to just after 11.00, when Mr Mullins saw her wandering along the Marston Ferry Road in a terrible state – crying, her clothes all muddy, her shoe broken. *Something* must have happened.’

Mrs Appleford flushes. ‘I gather it was an April Fool. Just a silly joke that got a bit out of hand.’

But no one in the room believes that. Not even her.

‘If it really was just a prank,’ I say eventually, ‘then I would like Faith herself to confirm that, please. But if it *wasn’t*, the person who did this to Faith may do it again. Another girl could suffer the same trauma your daughter has just been through. I can’t believe you’d want that. Either of you.’

Mrs Appleford holds my gaze. It's not exactly checkmate, but I want to make it damn hard for her to refuse.

'Faith is here at the moment, I assume?'

'Yes,' she says at last. 'She's out in the garden.' For fresh air? For a smoke? Just to get away from all this damn purple? Frankly, I'm with her on all three.

Mrs Appleford takes a deep breath. 'Look, I'll go and ask if she wants to talk to you, but I'm not going to force it. If she says no, then that's her decision.'

It's better than nothing.

'Fair enough. We'll wait here.'

When the door's closed behind her I start to wander around the room. The pictures are Impressionists'. Monet mostly. Ponds, water lilies, that sort of thing. Call me a cynic, but I suspect they were probably the only ones on offer in the right shade of mauve.

'I'd love to go to that place,' says Ev, gesturing towards one of the bridge at Giverny. 'It's on the bucket list if I win the lottery. And can find someone to go with.' She makes a face. 'Along with the Taj Mahal and Bora Bora, of course.'

Somer looks up and smiles; she's by the mantelpiece, scrutinizing the family photos. 'Mine too. The Bora Bora bit, anyway.'

I see Ev give Somer a meaningful look that leaves her smiling again and glancing away when she sees I've noticed.

Ev turns to me. 'I think it might be a good idea if I went looking for the loo. If you catch my drift.'

I nod and she slips quickly out of the room, and almost at once there's the sound of footsteps in the hall and Diane Appleford reappears.

'She's prepared to talk –'

‘Thank you.’

‘But only to a woman,’ she continues. ‘Not to *you*.’

I look towards Somer, who nods. ‘It’s fine with me, sir.’

I return to the woman and adopt my most charming ‘only here to serve’ smile. ‘I quite understand, Mrs Appleford. I’ll wait for my colleagues in the car.’

* * *

Ev pauses at the top of the stairs. To her left, the bathroom door is open. White tiles, a heavy plastic shower curtain and a strong smell of bleach. The towels, she notices (neatly folded, unlike the ones in her own flat), are the same colour as the mauve downstairs. It’s starting to become a Thing.

Facing her are three more doors, two of them open. A master bedroom with a satin bedspread (no prizes for guessing the colour), and what Ev decides must be the younger daughter’s. A jumble of clothes and trainers left where they fell. A duvet carelessly dragged across, a scatter of soft toys, a make-up bag. She crosses as quietly as possible to the closed third door, giving silent thanks for the thickness of the carpet. She could never have anything like that in her flat – the cat would have it for breakfast. He loves ‘shreddies’.

The room that opens before her is the polar opposite of the other sister’s. Cupboards neatly closed, nothing escaping from the chests of drawers. Even the pile of *Grazias* is neatly stacked. But that’s not what Ev is looking at; it’s not what anyone in this room would look at. The whole space is dominated by a pinboard stretching across the full length of the far wall, festooned from top to bottom with pictures cut from glossy magazines, little plastic

bags of brightly coloured beads and buttons, hanks of yarn, swatches of material, bits of lace and fake fur, notes written in thick red pen on Post-its and, in among it all, a scatter of sketches which must be by Faith herself. Everett's hardly the one to ask about clothes but even she can see the flair in some of these. How Faith has taken a small detail and made a whole outfit turn on it – the shape of a heel, the hang of a fabric, the fall of a sleeve.

'Her mother's right about one thing,' she says softly, 'she really does have talent.'

'Who the hell,' says a voice behind her, 'are *you*?'

* * *

'This is Faith.'

The girl moves forward past her mother, into the light. She is very lovely, Somer can see that at once. Even the tangled ponytail and the smeared mascara can't hide how exquisite her features are. She's as skinny as a rake too – the huge jumper she's wrapped round herself like a security blanket only emphasizes how thin she is. She must have had the jumper for years: there are holes in the wool and the cuffs are fraying.

Somer takes a step towards her. 'Why don't you sit down? Is there anything you'd like – tea? Water?'

The girl hesitates a moment, then shakes her head. She moves slowly towards the sofa, feeling her way with one hand like an old woman.

Somer frowns. 'Are you in pain?'

The girl shakes her head again. She still hasn't spoken. Her mother sits down next to her and grasps her hand.

‘My name is Erica,’ says Somer, taking the armchair opposite. ‘I know this is difficult, but we really are just trying to help.’

The girl looks up briefly. There are tears still clinging to the clumps of her eyelashes.

‘Can you tell us what happened to you?’ says Somer gently. ‘The man who found you – Mr Mullins – he says you were very upset.’

Faith takes a deep shuddering breath. The tears start to fall and she doesn’t bother to wipe them away. Her mother grips her hand. ‘It’s OK, darling. Take your time.’

The girl glances at her and then drops her head again, pulling her hands into her sleeves. But not before Somer sees the grazes on her knuckles and the marks about her wrists. And though her nails are beautifully manicured, one of them is broken; a ragged spike that would draw blood if it caught her skin. She’s been home for hours and she still hasn’t filed it smooth. And that, more than anything else, with a girl as self-conscious as this, tells Somer something is badly wrong.

‘Your mum said you’re studying Fashion,’ she continues. ‘Is that what you want to do? Design clothes?’

The girl looks up at her. ‘Shoes,’ she says, her voice cracking a little. ‘I want to do shoes.’

Somer grins. ‘They’re my weakness too.’ She gestures at her boots. ‘As if you couldn’t guess.’

The girl doesn’t exactly smile, but there’s a sense of the tension easing. Even if only a little. And then she shivers suddenly. Even though the room is warm – too warm.

‘I think,’ says Somer, turning to Mrs Appleford, ‘that a cup of tea would actually be a good idea.’

The woman frowns. ‘She said she didn’t want any –’
‘I’ve had a lot of experience in dealing with people in shock, Mrs Appleford. Whatever it was that happened to your daughter, right now what she needs is hot tea with lots of sugar.’

Diane Appleford hesitates, then turns to the girl. ‘Will you be OK here for five minutes?’ she asks softly. ‘You can tell her to go whenever you want.’

Faith nods quickly. ‘It’s OK, Mum. Tea would be nice.’

Somer waits until the woman is safely out of the room before speaking again. Faith sits rigidly on the edge of the seat, her hands clenched between her knees.

‘You’re lucky to have a mum who looks out for you like that,’ says Somer. ‘I wish mine had.’

The girl looks up at her with a wan smile. ‘She worries about me, that’s all.’

‘That’s what mums are for.’

Faith shrugs. ‘I guess.’

‘But sometimes that makes it harder to talk about things. Especially difficult things. Because the more our family love us, the harder it is to say something we know will upset them.’

There’s colour in the girl’s face now, two red spots in her pale cheeks.

‘So, Faith,’ says Somer, leaning forward a little, ‘while there’s just the two of us, would you be able to tell me what happened to you?’

* * *

Ev turns sharply to find herself face to face with a girl with greasy dark hair and jeans with rips at the knees. A little

shorter than Ev, a little heavier too. And without even thinking, the phrase that lodges in her mind is ‘no oil painting’. Everett’s own mother once said that about her, when she thought her daughter was out of earshot. Ev couldn’t have been more than ten at the time. She’d never even thought about her looks before, but once the damage was done it was impossible to go back. She started to notice how people reacted to girls she knew were prettier than her. She started to worry about what she wore, to feel she mattered less because she looked worse. And here she is now, thinking the same about someone else. She feels herself start to go red, as if she said the thought out loud. Did she judge Faith the same way, without even realizing she was doing it?

The girl is still staring at her, her face surly.

‘I’m sorry,’ Everett says quickly. ‘You’re Nadine, right?’

The girl doesn’t bother replying. ‘Did Faith say you could come in here? Don’t you need a warrant or something to poke about in people’s stuff?’

‘I wasn’t poking about – I came up for the loo and the door was open and –’

‘No, it wasn’t. She *never* leaves her room open. And I do mean *never*.’

There’s no answering that.

Nadine stands to one side and Everett makes her way past her, doubly embarrassed now. She’s never been a very good liar.

* * *

Downstairs in the sitting room, Somer is on her feet, putting her notebook back inside her jacket. When she sees

Ev she gives a minute shake of the head. It seems the interview is over too.

Diane Appleford has her arm round her older daughter. 'I only left her alone with you for five minutes and you start giving her the third degree.'

'I wasn't,' says Somer, 'really, I wasn't –'

'I told you already,' she continues, cutting across her, 'Faith said she was not assaulted. And that's what she told you too, right?'

'Yes, but –'

Faith's cheeks are red and she's staring at the floor.

'In which case I'd like you to leave. All of you. I'm sure you have much more pressing things you should be doing. Like investigating some actual *crime*.'

Nadine appears in the doorway.

'Darling, could you show the policewomen out?' says Diane. 'They're leaving now.'

As she passes Faith, Somer makes sure they make eye contact. 'You know where I am. If you want to talk.'

The girl bites her lip, then gives a tiny nod.

* * *

Out on the street Fawley is waiting by his car, looking at a piece of paper the size of a photograph. But when he sees them approaching, he hurriedly puts it away.

'I'm guessing from your faces that we're not much further forward.'

Somer shakes her head. 'Sorry, sir. I was just starting to get somewhere when the mother came back with the tea and decided I was being too "intrusive". Not sure how I

could have questioned her without being at least *mildly* intrusive, but there you are.’ She shrugs.

‘But there was something, sir,’ says Everett. ‘Something Somer spotted.’

Fawley raises an eyebrow and turns to Somer. ‘Oh yes?’

‘It was as we were leaving,’ she says. ‘The girl’s hair. She’s in such a state I hadn’t noticed before, but when we were on our own, I noticed she kept pulling at it. On the right-hand side. I can’t be a hundred per cent sure but I think some of it is missing.’

* * *

Adam Fawley
1 April 2018
14.15

‘So what do you want us to do?’ says Baxter.

It’s just gone two and Everett is briefing the rest of the team on the Appleford case. Or rather the Appleford incident, which is all it’s ever going to be, unless and until we get a good deal more to go on. Which is pretty much what I say.

‘There’s not much we *can* do. Faith is claiming that it was all a misunderstanding. An April Fool’s joke that got “a bit out of hand”.’

‘Pretty nasty April Fool,’ says Quinn darkly, folding his arms. ‘And doesn’t yanking out someone’s hair without their consent count as ABH these days?’

‘It could have been cut,’ says Somer. ‘I couldn’t really see.’

I intervene. ‘Either way, Quinn is right: that’s ABH. But we’re still just guessing. Faith hasn’t actually *said* that’s what happened. And given she’s also refusing to say which of her friends was responsible —’

‘Pretty nasty friends too, if you ask me. To do something

like that.’ It’s Quinn again. And I can’t be the only one who’s slightly wrong-footed by this sudden access of empathy on his part. I see Ev raise her eyebrows but thankfully no one actually says anything. I don’t want this promising new development strangled at birth.

‘Though it had to *be* a friend, didn’t it?’ says one of the other DCs. ‘I mean, you don’t get an April Fool’s played on you by a complete stranger, do you?’

‘But you can be raped by one,’ says Asante quietly.

There’s a silence, then Baxter repeats his question. Stolid first, last and in the middle. ‘So what do you want us to actually *do*?’

He’s frowning, and to be honest, I sympathize. This could well end up being a colossal waste of time. On the other hand, what if it happens again –

‘If a big case lands on us tomorrow, all bets are off, but in the meantime, I think it would be worth doing a bit of digging. *Discreet* digging. Let me be clear, Faith has done nothing wrong, and I don’t want it to look like we’re investigating the victim, but it’s possible a crime’s been committed and I don’t want someone getting away with that just because Faith is too frightened to talk to us, OK? So let’s start by talking to that minicab driver again – Mullins. Has he given a formal statement?’

‘No, sir,’ says Somer. ‘But we have his details. We can give him a call.’

‘Good. And check the speed cameras along the Marston Ferry Road – see if we can work out where she came from and whether there was anyone with her before Mullins picked her up. And ask that petrol station on the roundabout for their CCTV.’

‘Someone may have dropped her off,’ observes Somer. ‘Mullins said the heel had come off one of her shoes. She can’t have walked very far like that. Or very fast.’

One of the DCs points at Somer’s boots. ‘Been there, done that, eh, Somer?’ he says, grinning.

I wait a moment for the laughter to subside. ‘And let’s have a word with the FE college. See if we can identify any of Faith’s friends. Or if she’s been having problems with anyone.’

‘Girls that pretty aren’t always popular,’ observes Ev.

‘There could be a bloke in the mix,’ agrees Quinn. ‘Even if she really doesn’t have a boyfriend, someone else’s could have been showing too much interest. I mean, if she’s as gorgeous as you lot say.’ He runs one hand through his hair. He probably doesn’t even realize he’s doing it, though needless to say it doesn’t go unnoticed. Quinn always has put the ‘I’ into ‘eye candy’. Ev opens her mouth to say something, then with truly superhuman effort manages at the last minute not to. But I can see Somer grinning.

Baxter, meanwhile, still has his mind firmly on the job. ‘I can have a look at her online stuff too. Shouldn’t be hard to track down who she hangs out with.’

‘Good – do that. Asante, can you talk to Mullins, and Somer, I want you and Quinn to pick up on the college end.’

Somer looks concerned. ‘We’ll have to be careful though – you know what those places are like. The way gossip gets round.’

‘I’m sure you’ll think of something. Safety on the streets, if all else fails. And Somer – don’t change before you go.’

Her eyes widen. ‘OK, if you think it’ll help.’

I smile drily. ‘What I *think* is that it’s a fair bet Faith’s friends are studying Fashion too.’

And if that doesn’t work, there’s always the not-so-subtle charms of Detective Constable Gareth Quinn.

* * *

The FE college reminds Somer of the school she taught at for a few months before joining the police. The same slab of concrete and glass, the same scuffed grass and plasticky shrubs, the same tired old cars that make Quinn’s gleaming Audi look like a thoroughbred at a donkey derby. When they were still an item, Somer teased him once by playing that Shania Twain track about the guy who kisses his car goodnight, but wasn’t at all surprised when he completely failed to see the joke. Right now, he’s making a big show of parking next to a battered old Saab, and then takes an inordinate time locking up afterwards. Somer can see the looks they’re getting from the students, about evenly divided between the car (boys), and the driver (mostly girls, but not entirely). And that’s no surprise either. Quinn is tall, athletic and very good-looking, and he exudes confidence and self-belief. Even now, and despite what a shit he was to her after they broke up, Somer can still see the attraction. Though to be fair, he did eventually manage something as close to an apology as he ever probably gets. She’s heard rumours of a new girlfriend lately too.

Quinn finally finishes fiddling about with his car keys and walks round to join her.

‘So how do you want to play this?’

‘I was thinking about that. How about we start with

the principal to get the background, and if she's OK with it we can tell the students that we're here to talk about taking proper care on the streets. Like Fawley suggested.'

Quinn makes a face. He likes Fawley, she knows that, and the DI's had his back more than once, but Quinn's nothing if not competitive and he'd much prefer to come up with an idea of his own. A better one. As if that needed saying.

'How about we ask her?' he says. 'See if there's anything that's happened here recently that might justify CID turning up out of the blue. Drugs or something.'

And she has to admit, that *is* actually a rather better idea.

She looks around for a sign to the offices, but Quinn forestalls her.

'Don't worry,' he says. 'I'll ask someone.'

Five minutes later she's following Quinn and a student up the stairs towards the principal's office. They're taking the stairs because that will take longer and the student Quinn asked for directions just happens to have long blonde hair, a very short skirt and an apparently limitless readiness to be immensely impressed with anything Quinn says. He's already talked her through two murder cases Somer knows for a fact he barely worked on, but she's not about to rain on his charade. She just hopes the new girlfriend knows what she's letting herself in for.

* * *

Interview with Neil Mullins, conducted at

St Aldate's Police Station, Oxford

1 April 2018, 4.15 p.m.

In attendance, DC A. Asante

AA: Thank you for coming in, Mr Mullins.
Hopefully this shouldn't take too long.

NM: It's OK. It's on my way home anyway. How is she - the girl?

AA: She's very shaken up. We're still trying to find out exactly what happened. That's why we wanted to talk to you again. See if you remember anything else. Something you might not have mentioned before.

NM: Not as far as I know. It was like I said on the phone: I saw her walking ahead of me on the side of the road. Well, not so much walking - staggering really. That's why I thought she was drunk.

AA: She had her back to you?

NM: Right. I was heading towards Marston and she was near the turn for that pub - the Victoria Arms.

AA: That's a long way from any houses, isn't it? Didn't that seem odd to you?

NM: Yeah. I suppose it did. That's why I slowed down. That's when I noticed.

AA: Noticed what?

NM: The state she was in. Crying - make-up all over her face, clothes all torn. I thought she was bleeding to start with but I realized after that it was just mud. It was all over the bloody car.

AA: What was she wearing?

NM: Don't you collect people's clothes after something like this? They always do that on the telly.

AA: It's just for the records, Mr Mullins. You know what it's like.

NM: Tell me about it. I used to spend half my life on bloody paperwork - that's why I switched to the cabs -

AA: The clothes, Mr Mullins?

NM: Yeah, right. Sorry. Some sort of blue jacket. Denim, I think. A white top underneath but I couldn't really see much of that. Those sandal things, like I said. And a short black skirt.

AA: Did she have a handbag - any sort of bag?

NM: No. Definitely no bag.

AA: What happened when you stopped?

NM: I leant across and asked her if she was OK - if she needed any help. Pretty bloody stupid question - I mean, of course she wasn't OK -

AA: What did she say?

NM: She sort of staggered towards me and asked if I could take her home.

AA: But she didn't mind getting into your car? She wasn't frightened of you?

NM: I suppose it being a cab and all that, she thought it was OK. And to be honest I think she was more concerned about getting the hell out of there. Though she wouldn't get in the front with me - she'd only sit in the back. And she had the window wound all the way down even though it was bloody freezing.

AA: So she could call for help if she needed to?

NM: I suppose so. I hadn't really thought about it.

AA: Did she say anything at all about what happened?

NM: No. I mean, I didn't like to - you know - be too pushy. I said I was taking her straight to the cop shop and she started panicking and saying no, she didn't want anything to do with the police, and then I said the JR then, but she didn't want the hospital either. So I just took her where she said she wanted to go.

AA: Rydal Way?

NM: Right. I thought afterwards that it must have been why she was walking that way. She was trying to get home.

AA: And was there anyone there when you got there? Anyone in the house?

NM: Dunno. She went round the back.

AA: You didn't mention that before.

NM: Sorry. I didn't think it was important.

AA: You said before that she didn't have a bag with her. Could she have had her keys in her pocket?

NM: I suppose so, I didn't really think about it.

AA: But you definitely think she was able to get in?

NM: Oh yeah. She said she could go and get me some money if I waited but I said it was fine. She didn't need to pay. She was crying, when she got out. Poor little cow.

* * *

Sasha Blake puts down her pen and closes her notebook. She's sitting cross-legged on her bed, music on low in the background. The pen has a feather on the end and the notebook is pale blue, with a scatter of white flowers across the front. She likes the sheen of the pages, the feel of the book in her hand, but the real reason she chose it was because it's small enough to fit in her bag. She knows better than to leave it lying about anywhere, that's for sure. She loves her mum, she really does, and she knows she wouldn't snoop deliberately, but no mother has the sort of willpower you would need to stumble across a book like this and not read what's inside. Isabel gets round it by using code, and Patsie sticks everything on her phone, but Sasha likes being able to write things down. It makes it easier to demuddle her thoughts – helps her work through what to do. But her mum wouldn't get that. She'd think everything in the book was true. And it is, in a way. Just not the way her mum would understand.

There's a noise from downstairs now and Sasha quickly leans over and slides the notebook into the pocket of her pink satchel, then sits back against the headboard and picks up her copy of Keats.

'You OK, Sash?' asks her mum, pushing the door open, her arms full of ironing.

Sasha looks up. 'I'm fine, just chillin' with my homeboy.'

Fiona Blake smiles. 'Don't work too hard. You're allowed to enjoy yourself as well, you know.'

She shunts the laundry on to the top of the chest of drawers and pulls the door to behind her as she leaves. Sasha opens the book again. *Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,*

Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath.' She sighs. Imagine having someone talk to you like that.

* * *

'So, you can see why we're concerned.'

Somer sits back in her chair. The principal of the college hasn't said a word throughout Somer's entire account. She's just sat there, frowning, fidgeting with an elastic band, staring out of the window. Outside, the sky is darkening. It looks like rain and Somer curses to herself. She has no coat, no umbrella and entirely the wrong footwear.

The principal still hasn't said anything. Somer glances at Quinn, who shrugs.

'Mrs McKenna?' she says, raising her voice slightly. 'Is there anything we ought to be aware of? Do you know if Faith has been having problems with any of her fellow students recently?'

The woman turns to face her. 'No. Nothing I know of. Faith is very popular with her peer group.'

'Do you know who might have played this April Fool joke on her? Do any names come to mind?'

Another, deeper frown. 'I hope you're not suggesting that one of our students might be responsible for this -'

'Not at all. But we do know Faith's family only moved here last summer, so she may not have that many friends outside her college circle.'

McKenna starts fiddling with the elastic band again. Somer's a hair's-breadth from leaning over and grabbing it out of her hand.

'Mrs McKenna? It's quite urgent -'

The principal turns to her suddenly and leans forward. It's like a switch has flicked. She's sharp, attentive, brisk.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about Faith's personal life or what she does outside the college gates. I *can* tell you that she is a talented and hard-working student, and I fully expect she will make a great success of her career.'

'But she does have mates, right?' Quinn now. 'You must have *some* idea who they are.' His tone is short of sarcasm, but only just.

'You want to interrogate my students?' The frown is back.

'Not *interrogate*, no,' says Somer quickly. 'We were hoping to make it much more informal. Just circulate with the group and get a sense of whether there might be undercurrents – any sense of animosity –'

McKenna raises her eyebrows. 'In that case, I dare say I can't stop you. But I would ask you to exercise more discretion than the police are habitually famed for.'

'Have there been any incidents lately that might make our presence here rather more plausible? Any problems with alcohol?'

'No.'

'Or drugs?'

'Absolutely not.'

Somer senses Quinn's reaction but doesn't dare to look at him.

'OK,' she says evenly. 'In that case we'll just make it something general about personal safety.'

'Good idea,' says McKenna crisply. 'I've had two of my female students in here this week already because they thought they were being followed on the Iffley Road. It's a sad reflection on your constabulary that you see these

issues only as a useful smokescreen for something else you evidently consider *far* more important.’

‘Who the fuck does she think she is?’ mutters Quinn, none too quietly, as they make their way down the stairs five minutes later. ‘Talk about bloody chippy – she’s just the head of a poxy FE college and you’d think she was the sodding Master of Balliol.’

Who is, in fact, a woman. But Somer isn’t about to point that out.

* * *

‘You should change those,’ says Baxter. ‘It’s not a good idea to sit around with wet feet.’

Somer looks down. If her boots aren’t completely ruined after the monsoon that hit just as she and Quinn were crossing the FE college car park, it will be a minor miracle. Her jeans are wet through up to the knees and she’s given up on her hair.

‘Seriously,’ continues Baxter. ‘If you’re harbouring any sort of latent cold virus –’

‘It’s OK,’ she says quickly. ‘Really. I’m more interested in what you’ve found.’

He gives her a look heavy with ‘well don’t come crying to me’, then turns back to his screen.

‘Well, for starters, Faith Appleford does a fashion vlog every couple of weeks or so. *You Gotta Have*, she calls it.’

Somer smiles. ‘Clever.’

Baxter frowns. ‘Come again?’

‘You know – “You gotta have faith”. Like the George Michael song.’

Baxter is still looking blank.

‘Forget it. Go on.’

‘Right. OK. So she started it last autumn, presumably when her course began. It’s pretty damn professional, actually. Technically, I mean. Here,’ he says, turning to the screen, ‘have a look.’

yougottahave

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F A I T H Fashion | Beauty | Style

Sharing the passion, learning to love myself

Posted 18.46 06 February 2018

Headshot, interior, direct to cam

Hi, everyone, welcome to my channel about fashion, beauty and style. Lots of people have been asking me about how I create my own look. Basically how I choose what things to put together. Not just the clothes but bags and shoes and all the rest of it, because we all know the details can really make the difference between looking good and looking great. So that’s what I’m going to be talking about today.

Everyone always tells me they can’t believe that most of the things I wear are just from mainstream stores, but I always tell them it’s not about how much you spend, it’s about being really smart about what you pick.

Full-length view, by clothes rail

I always start with what I call the ‘key piece’. What do I mean by that? Well, it’s easy: the key piece is the thing you build your