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Blood Atonement  
by  
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*The candle on the ledge guttered as it neared its end, shadows dancing on the wall. Beside her Sarah sensed the rhythmic rise and fall of her sisters' chests. Henrietta's and Emma's ability to fall asleep as soon as their heads lay on the pillow infuriated her, while she tossed and turned seeking sleep that took an age to arrive.*

*Not tonight, though. She lay rigid, pinned down beneath layers of blankets, not wanting to move and so drown out the muffled voices from the adjoining room.*

*Her future, her whole life was being discussed in there.*

*She could hear her mother, softly pleading, occasionally sobbing. Her father's sonorous voice in response, calm and unyielding.*

*'I do not mean to disobey you,' she heard her mother say. 'But he is in his sixty-seventh year. Does that not seem wrong to you?'*

*The low rumble of his words was more difficult to decipher. Sarah eased herself from under the weight of her covers and crept silently to the door, the breath from her nostrils frosting in the crisp night air. She shuddered. The September night was clear and cold but the undergarments beneath her nightclothes warded off the worst of the chill. She eased the door open and slipped into the dark hall. The words were more audible out there.*

*'Sarah is only fourteen!'*

*'You were only fourteen, Annaleah, when your father, or the man who acted as your father, pledged you to me.' Sarah sensed her father's impatience. Her boldness had reaped its harvest many times.*

*Her mother choked back a sob. 'May the Lord forgive me, I must protest —'*

*'Enough!' Silence.*

*Lord, no. Not Hesker? Sarah thought of his enormous stomach, bulging eyes, sagging, bewhiskered jowls and flabby wet lips, habitually moistened with a flicking pink tongue. There was a metallic taste in her mouth now, testament to her rising bile. She felt sick.*

*'The matter is agreed. I will hear of it no more.'*

*'But Orson . . .'*

*'Annaleah!' The voice was resolute, commanding.*

*She knew then that her mother's protest was at an end. A hot tear ran silently and slowly down her cheek. She retreated quickly back to her room before her father left for his. It had been a long time since he had favoured her mother's room as his place of rest.*

*At her bedside, she fell to her knees and buried her salt-wet face in her hands. The Lord was her only chance of reprieve.*

*'Our dear Heavenly Father, I thank thee for the blessings bestowed on my family and me. The food on the table, the bounty in the fields, the health of our livestock. The manner in which Joseph junior was spared when plague-ridden in the summer and it seemed all hope was vanquished. I thank thee for those and many other blessings. I beg here for thy mercy. If it be according to thy will that I be wed to Hesker Pettibone, then I beseech thee to think again. I apologize for my insolence, but I request with all reverence and humility that I not be married to that disgusting fat old hog — I seek thy forgiveness for that ungodly description. Should thou ignore my plea, so help me, Heavenly Father, I will not answer for the actions I henceforth take. Amen.'*

*As Sarah climbed back into bed, her ice-block feet seeking a*

*source of heat, she heard the soft whimpers of her mother in the room next door. Strangely it gave her strength.*

*I would rather be cast into the fiery pit than live a life of quiet desperation and suffering, she thought.*

# I

Detective Chief Inspector Grant Foster emitted a weary sigh as he crouched over the woman's corpse, arc lights in the garden bathing them both in bright light, anticipating the first light of dawn. During his convalescence, human nature had not taken a turn for the better. He rose to standing, wincing slightly at the bolt of pain searing up his leg from the metal plate holding his right shin together, then shuddered as he felt a cold cough of wind on the back of his neck. He'd not worn a coat, assuming when he was called and told of a woman's murder at her house she would be found inside, and not outside on a small, slightly overgrown lawn.

The throat had been cut. The body was framed by a wide slick of blood. He looked around the garden. The fences at all three sides were high, giving a degree of privacy, though the upstairs windows of the properties on both sides would have had a partial view. Young professional couples lived either side and got home after dark. Neither of them had seen the body. Still, to Foster it seemed the killer had taken a strange risk.

He returned to the house. The sitting room was neat and ordered, no signs of a struggle. Foster rubbed his face with his right hand. It was his first week back, early November. He'd insisted on being on call. The call had come that Tuesday morning at 4 a.m., four hours after the

body had been discovered. He climbed into his old suit, realizing only then that he could fit his thumbs into the gap between his gut and the waistband, forcing him to dig out a belt and pull it to the tightest notch. It had been just over six months since he'd been tortured and beaten and saved only seconds from death. The thought of getting back on the job had kept him going during some long dark nights of the soul. During some nights, when the dreams were at their worst, Karl Hogg's hot breath still in his nostrils, the excruciating pain as both tibia and fibula snapped under the weight of Hogg's mallet, he'd thought this moment might never arrive.

But here he was; his first case back.

He had anticipated a gang killing, probably some hapless kid stabbed in the street in Shepherd's Bush or Kensal Rise. Instead he'd got this – a woman lying dead in a garden, in a lavishly furnished Victorian terrace, on a quiet affluent street in Queen's Park, a middle-class ghetto between Kensal Green and Kilburn.

Detective Inspector Heather Jenkins walked into the sitting room with a scene of crime photographer at her shoulder. 'Mind if I . . .' he said, motioning towards the garden nervously.

'Fill your boots,' Foster said.

He turned to Heather. Her hair was scraped and tied back off her face and she looked pale and worn. Bad news, he thought.

'The victim's name is Katie Drake,' she said. 'Thirty-seven years old. An actress. The neighbours two doors down found her. They had a set of keys. They were alerted by a friend of Katie's after she and her daughter failed to

turn up at an ice-skating rink to celebrate the daughter's fourteenth birthday.'

Foster felt a shudder of apprehension. 'And where's the daughter?'

'We don't know. She's missing.'

Everything and everyone was gathered. The Met's murder squad and all its resources out en masse. Dogs, helicopters, hundreds of officers preparing to knock on doors, ready to shake down every paedophile and pervert in West London and beyond. All waiting for the onset of daylight before they got started. A cursory check of Katie Drake's body estimated she had been dead since the previous afternoon, perhaps as early as 2 p.m. Her daughter, Naomi, was last seen leaving school at 3.15 p.m. Her schoolbag was downstairs. She'd made it home. But then what? The signs weren't good. Find them in the first six hours or you're looking for a dead body. That was the mantra when it came to a missing child. Unless . . .

They could not discount the idea she had done this. Killed her own mother and run.

Foster stood in the victim's sitting room, holding and staring at a school photograph of her daughter as if it would yield him a secret. He replaced it on the mantelpiece, her face etched on his mind. The long, straight blonde hair; the pale blue eyes; the hopeful, uncertain smile of a girl on the edge of womanhood. He wondered with a sense of dread about what state she would be in when they eventually found her.

He glanced around the room. It was immaculate, barely a spot of dust anywhere, books and magazines straightened

into neat piles on the coffee table, cushions plumped and cornered neatly at each end of the sofa. Perhaps Katie Drake was one of those people who couldn't abide mess. He wandered through to the kitchen, situated at the back of the sitting room, off what was presumably once a dining room until it was knocked through.

Again, nothing out of place. Two glasses sat on the draining board. They had been washed. The kettle was unplugged and the coffee-maker pristine. Foster pressed the lid of the metal bin with his foot and it swung open. Nothing much to report in there. The fridge was well stocked. Looked like Katie and her daughter liked to eat healthily going by the amount of soups and salad materials.

Foster called a member of the forensic team over to remind them to examine the two glasses beside the sink. He checked the windows and doors all over the house. No sign of forced entry. The killer had been allowed in. The girl? He glanced one more time at the photograph on the mantelpiece. Slit her mother's throat? He doubted it. But he could be wrong.

Foster returned to the garden where Katie Drake's body still lay, housed in a tent. Edward Carlisle, the pathologist, was going about his duty with grim efficiency. The body might not be moved for a while, until the whole scene was processed.

Carlisle spotted Foster enter, the serious frown he adopted for his work lifting briefly.

'Good to see you again, Grant,' he said, his usually rich public school voice ravaged by the effects of a cold. 'On the mend?'

‘Never better,’ Foster replied breezily, not wanting to dwell on it. ‘What have you found?’

He turned his face up. ‘I’ll need to have a closer look in a post mortem. The throat was slit out here, though.’

Heather slipped into the tent beside him. He could tell from her face she had more news.

‘What?’

‘We’ve found Naomi’s father,’ she said. ‘Stephen Buckingham.’

‘Let’s pay him a visit.’

Stephen Buckingham looked like a man standing on the edge of a precipice from which he would soon be pitched. He sat in the blue-upholstered armchair in the living room of his house in Esher, eyes wide. Foster sat across from him, nursing a cup of tea provided by Buckingham’s second wife, a shy, conservatively dressed woman, who padded around them softly, casting nervous, anxious glances at her husband. It was shortly after nine o’clock and the couple’s two children had left for school.

Foster had broken the news about his ex-wife’s death and his daughter’s disappearance. He’d asked whether Buckingham had had any contact with either of them the day before.

‘I was in Leeds on business,’ he said softly, looking down at his fingers, which picked and played with each other. ‘It was Naomi’s birthday so I called her mobile at lunchtime. The call was very quick because she was out getting something to eat with friends and it was difficult to hear over the traffic, the sirens . . .’

Foster nodded, he knew the feeling. The sound of the city.

‘She seemed pretty excited about going skating with her mum and her friends and then a meal. I said I’d see her Saturday . . .’

His voice tailed away. Foster didn’t interrupt.

‘We were going shopping in town. My treat. Her mother wasn’t fond of it, thought I was spoiling her. But there was little I did with Naomi that her mother approved of.’

Foster asked when he had arrived back from Leeds.

‘I flew back. My plane arrived at Heathrow just before ten o’clock at night. I was tired so I got a cab back here. It was shortly after eleven when I got here, isn’t that right, Sheila?’

Sheila bit her lip and nodded. ‘About that time, yes,’ she agreed softly.

‘Sorry, can you excuse me?’ Heather said, standing by the door. ‘I just need to make a call.’ She slipped out.

‘When did you and your first wife separate?’ Foster asked.

‘Eleven years ago, when Naomi was three. It just wasn’t working. It was pretty volatile for a while afterwards, but while Katie was hot-headed, she also loved Naomi with everything she had, and knew she couldn’t keep me away. We soon fell into a routine. My work takes me away, but I always make time to see her and spend time with her. I’ve remarried since, had two more kids, but it never affected my relationship with Naomi.’

Had Katie remarried?

Buckingham shook his head. ‘No. There had been other men, that much I know from Naomi. But she wasn’t a

tittle-tattle and, to be honest, I wasn't really that interested. I don't think she was seeing anyone at the moment. In fact, from what I'd gleaned from Naomi, I sensed Katie had been having a hard time of it.

'In what way?'

'Not entirely sure. She was an actress. When I first met her, she was a real beauty. She got lots of work, some TV, adverts, mainly stage work, which was her real love. In recent years it had all gone a bit quiet. I think that got her down. Naomi made a few oblique references to her mother drinking. She never touched a drop when we first met, which was why it jarred with me a bit. She liked to smoke reefers back then.'

'What about Naomi? Did she have any boyfriends?'

Buckingham smiled for the first time. 'You've seen her picture. What do you reckon? From what she said, she seemed to be beating them off with a stick at school.'

The smile vanished. The vacant stare returned.

Had she mentioned anyone in particular?

Buckingham looked up at Foster, as if noticing him for the first time. 'Sorry,' he muttered. 'Miles away.'

'Did Naomi mention any boy in particular, one that might have been pursuing her perhaps?'

'No. She did mention one boy she fancied who was a bit older. He was in a band. The name escapes me. The reason I remember is that he was quite a bit older, seventeen or something, and I thought that was a bit too old and said so. She said she was at the back of the queue anyway.'

There was another silence as Buckingham scratched at his wrist and Foster wondered whether, if his own life had

taken a different turn, or his personality had, he might have been playing an active part in a fourteen-year-old's life. And, not for the first time, given the pain and suffering this man was experiencing, whether it was all worth it. Was living your life with only one person to worry about the easiest option?

'What do you think has happened to her, detective?' Buckingham's weary voice betrayed his hopeful expression.

Foster shrugged. 'I hope we find out soon,' he said. 'Rest assured we're putting every resource we can muster into finding Naomi.'

He paused before his next question.

'Are you a wealthy man, Mr Buckingham?'

The man's eyes narrowed. Then he realized what Foster was alluding to. 'I'm comfortably off, no more. I publish three magazines, none of them that successful. You think I'll get a ransom demand?'

Foster could see a glint of hope in his manner and expression. That would at least mean Naomi was still alive. He also knew Buckingham was downplaying his wealth. This house, Foster estimated, was worth at least a million. A black Mercedes convertible was parked on the drive. He had spoken about the money he liked to spend on his daughter. They could not rule out a financial motive.

'Keep your phone switched on,' he said. He cleared his throat. 'If we don't find Naomi, you might want to consider making a public appeal.'

'Whatever it takes.'

Heather slipped back into the room, smiled apologetically at Buckingham. She caught Foster's eye and nodded.

She'd made a few calls. Buckingham's story stood up. He'd been on that plane.

'Did you know much about your ex-wife's daily life, her routine?'

Buckingham shook his head. 'Next to nothing. She was quite often at home during the day, I know that. We really had very minimal contact outside the odd conversation about Naomi.'

'Did she have friends?'

'I'm sure she did. Her best friend was always Sally Darlington, another actress. They met in repertory shortly before she met me. They were inseparable back then. I think they were still in touch, but don't quote me on it.'

Foster scribbled the name down. 'One last question, Mr Buckingham. What was the relationship like between your daughter and Katie?'

He gave it some thought. 'OK. I think they were very close. Too close, perhaps.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, her mother was very possessive of her. I got the feeling that as she moved away – grew up, met boys – her mother would feel left out. Naomi was Katie's entire world in many respects. I actually feared for Katie when the time came to cut the apron strings. Naomi was already feeling a bit smothered by her, so she said.'

'Did they fight?'

'I think so. You know how it can be, mothers and daughters.' His face dropped. 'You don't think . . .?'

Foster shrugged. 'We need to look at all eventualities. You mentioned to me that your ex-wife was a good-looking woman. Given the fact she'd been in the public

eye, did she ever receive the attentions of any unwanted admirers?’

‘What? Like a stalker?’

‘Yes, like a stalker.’

He shook his head slowly. ‘Not that I’m aware of. She did get a few letters when I knew her, blokes who’d seen her in a play or on television. She once did a nude scene in a TV play that attracted a slew of cards and letters, some rather ribald in nature. The odd photo, too. I wasn’t particularly enamoured with all that but she brushed it off, made me feel a bit of a prude. But no one physically followed her or pursued her – not that I knew of, anyway.’

Foster nodded. They were already in touch with her agent. She might know more.

‘How about family? Before we take steps like making a television appeal and using the media, we need to track down her next of kin. Make sure they’re all aware of her death. Can you tell us where to start?’

Buckingham rubbed his chin ruefully. ‘I’m afraid I can’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘I knew Katie for more than five years, intimately. She never once mentioned any family, and never spoke about it.’

‘Never?’

‘Never. I asked. I probed. But she closed down any discussion about it. She acted like she had no family. She went to school, came to London and went to drama school, and supported herself by waitressing in her spare time, which is how I met her. That’s all she ever told me.’

He must have noted Foster's incredulity; he sniffed derisively, as if sharing the detective's disbelief. 'I know – madness, isn't it? But I just grew to accept that it was a closed book. I did find out that Drake was a stage name. You'll understand why she changed it when I tell you that her real surname was Pratt.'

'But surely Naomi must have asked, wanted to know who her grandparents were?'

'She did. But her mother always changed the subject. She told me that one day she would do a bit of research into the family history, find out more, but she wouldn't do that behind her mother's back.'

Foster found himself looking at Jenkins.

Her eyes told him she was thinking the same.

## 2

Nigel Barnes stopped walking and brought his hands out from behind his back, holding the skull. He did it too quickly. The skull wobbled in his right hand, which was itself shaking, and almost fell to the floor. He looked at it, silently counted to three, then composed himself and looked forward.

‘He has remained silent too long,’ he said. *One – two – three.* ‘Now it’s time to hear his story.’

The cameraman brought his equipment down from his shoulder. ‘Good,’ he said impatiently. ‘Only problem with that one was I clearly saw you mouthing “one – two – three” before you delivered the last line.’

‘And I nearly dropped the skull.’

‘And you nearly dropped the skull. Also, when you were walking to camera, I could see your eyes glancing down at the mark.’

Nigel cast his eyes to the floor. Three feet in front of him was an ‘X’, scratched into the cemetery path by the cameraman’s trainer. He’d been looking at the shape for most of the twenty paces rather than at the camera, yet had still ended up missing it. He sighed.

‘You also look very ill at ease.’

Because I am, thought Nigel. What sort of person could walk and talk to a camera with a fake plastic skull in his hand and feel comfortable? Probably someone who

had spent their life practising for such a moment in front of a mirror. The only thing Nigel had done in a mirror when he was younger was squeeze spots.

‘Mind if I have a ciggie before we go again?’

The cameraman nodded. ‘I need to make a call or two anyway.’ He looked ruefully around at the graves on either side of them. ‘Think I’ll go and make them on the street,’ he added. ‘Seems a bit disrespectful to do it here.’ He put the camera down at Nigel’s feet and loped off, giving his sagging jeans an upward tug as he left.

Disrespectful, Nigel thought, sitting back on an anonymous gravestone. Unlike smoking a cigarette. He produced his fixings from his pocket and rolled a smoke. He lit it, exhaled loudly and studied the clichéd, stilted script they had given him to memorize.

The call had come in a week ago. In the summer, encouraged by Scotland Yard’s press office, he’d given an interview to a Sunday newspaper about his role in the Karl Hogg case. ‘The Gene Genius’ it had proclaimed. ‘The Family Historian who helped make a savage killer history.’ Nigel had groaned when he read it, embarrassed by the way his role had been exaggerated, worried by what the officers who worked on the case would think of it. Would think of *him*. Then the phone started ringing. Radio, television, the odd magazine; he was too polite to say no. Not when he learned he could make some money from it. He downplayed his role, praised the police. ‘Every bit the modest hero, aren’t we?’ a DJ from Radio Shropshire had told him, winking as if he knew what Nigel was doing. Come to think of it, what was he doing?

One of the calls had come from a TV company. They

were making a pilot for a series investigating burial sites unearthed during building development. The idea was to take the remains and find out who they belonged to, how the people died, dig out their stories. Lysette, the producer, called and said she'd seen the piece and that Nigel seemed ideal. They had met in a coffee shop off Oxford Street and over lattes she ran through the idea and asked if he'd be interested in taking a screen test. Why not? he thought. A chance to get away from rooting around in other people's pasts. Or, at least, doing it for more money and getting recognized in the street. He felt flattered. Particularly when she said they were looking for a photogenic young historian with what she called 'phwoar factor'.

So here he was, in the middle of Kensal Green cemetery on a drab morning in November, performing the televisual equivalent of patting his head and rubbing his stomach, and proving terrible at it. Guy the cameraman, now stepping back through the cemetery, hands plunged deep into a green combat jacket, had been very patient, but Nigel knew that all four attempts had been amateurish at best.

Guy hoisted the camera back on to his shoulder. 'Let's go again,' he said.

Nigel flicked his fag on to the grass and twisted his heel on it, shivering against the cold. He should have worn more than his tweed jacket, but felt it was the 'look' they wanted. He made his way back to the grave of Alfred Rossiter, 1829–1892, which marked the start of his walk. He flexed his shoulders, drew in a breath and turned around. *One – two – three.*

‘The dead are always with us,’ he said, and started to walk. ‘Sometimes closer than . . .’

‘Cut!’ shouted Guy.

‘What now?’ Nigel asked, perplexed.

‘You’ve forgotten the skull.’

Shortly before lunch, Nigel was back in the more familiar surroundings of The National Archives. The Family Records Centre, previous home for birth, marriage and death indexes, was no more: he would not miss it. The indexes were now housed at TNA, which at least put an end to his daily pinball ride between leafy Kew and the urban grime of Islington.

A pile of undone work was growing – a stack of birth, marriage and death certificates to track down and scour for his private clients.

He was skimming the April quarter of birth certificates for 1894 when he heard her voice call his name. He spun round and there she was. Heather Jenkins.

‘Hi, Nigel,’ she said, her smile wary.

‘Detective Sergeant Jenkins,’ he replied, a lurch in his stomach.

‘Detective Inspector now,’ she said.

‘Congratulations.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, smiling. ‘How are things?’

‘OK. And you?’

‘Tired. I’ve been up all night. Murder and abduction in Queen’s Park. Mother killed, fourteen-year-old daughter missing.’

‘God,’ Nigel said. ‘How awful.’

‘Any chance we can get a coffee, somewhere private?’

Nigel checked his watch. Midday had just passed. ‘I’m very busy, but there might be a corner of the canteen we can find.’

They walked down there in silence. Nigel didn’t know what to think. Four months ago she’d broken his heart. They’d had a few dates, when her work allowed, and it seemed to be going well. Then she disappeared. Not a word. Stopped returning phone calls or e-mails. He’d even sent a text message, a first for him. Then he wrote a letter wondering what was going on. Either something had happened or he was simply terrible in bed.

She finally sent him an e-mail. Something had happened. Her mother had died, a sudden heart seizure; she needed time and space etcetera. He understood. Gave her some room.

A few weeks later he heard she was seeing an ex-boyfriend. Confused didn’t even begin to describe how he felt. It was only in the past few weeks he’d managed to stop himself thinking about it. Now here she was to remind him all over again. She seemed to sense his unease.

‘You must be wondering what the hell I’m here for?’ Heather said, sitting down, a fake laugh in her voice.

‘Well, I am actually,’ he said.

‘Foster and I . . .’

‘Foster? How is he?’ he interrupted.

‘Back at work this week. He seems the same as usual; or rather, he’s acting the same as usual. Anyway, we’re trying to find out as much as we can about the murder victim, hope it sheds some light on her murder and where her daughter might be. We also need to track down family and

next of kin so they all know before we get word out to the press. But there's a problem.'

'What?'

'She was very secretive about her past. Even her ex claims to know nothing. We were wondering if you could wave your magic wand and find out a bit more about her, parents, siblings, that sort of thing. Of course we'll pay.'

'I'm on it,' Nigel said, eager to help. Heather gave him Katie Drake's details, her real surname, Pratt, which he scratched into his notebook. 'Shall I phone it through? Are you still, er, on the same number?'

'I was hoping I could stick with you as you do it, and then I'll phone it through. There's a girl missing – it's extremely urgent.' She pulled a face. 'You don't want me around, do you?'

He wasn't sure. 'I don't mind,' he lied.

She leaned forward and put her hand on his arm. 'Nigel, one day I'll explain to you what happened. I just can't do it now. Not at a time like this.'

Nigel sipped his tea. He didn't know what to think.

But one thing he did know. A woman had been killed and a young girl was missing. He would help if he could. This was no time to act wounded. 'We'd better get cracking then,' he said.

It took Nigel an hour scouring the indexes of births, marriages and deaths to discover that Katie Drake née Pratt was born Catherine Mary, the only child of Robert and Vera Pratt of Shoeburyness in Kent. When she was four, her father died of pneumonia. A year later her mother followed him to the grave, claimed by a heart condition.

Heather's face creased. 'Poor thing. Maybe the mother died of a broken heart.'

'Perhaps,' Nigel said. 'Presumably she was adopted.'

'Can we find out who adopted her?'

'As long as you know the adoptive name you can find the child in the adoption index. But unfortunately we don't know it. Let's check anyway, and see if there's anything we can find.'

He flicked through to the year of Katie Drake's birth.

'You're adopted, aren't you?' Heather asked.

He nodded.

'Is Barnes your birth or adoptive name?'

'Adoptive. My birth name is Wilkinson.'

'Why haven't you reverted to that?'

He shrugged. 'I've always been known by my adoptive name. There never seemed any particular reason to change it back.' Nigel felt the first signs of discomfort prickle his neck. The day he found out exactly who his parents were and the reason they abandoned him would be the day he took their name. He wasn't even sure Wilkinson was his real name.

There was no mention of Catherine Pratt or Drake in the adoption index.

'What happened to her then?'

Nigel shrugged. 'She could have been adopted by a relative without any need for paperwork, an aunt or grandparent. If you want, I can trace the other members of the family. Aunts, uncles . . . ?'

Heather thought for a few seconds. 'We need to know if there's any close family we should inform about her death before it becomes public knowledge. I think it's fair

to say that if she didn't speak about her upbringing, then there was nobody close to her so it doesn't really matter. I see no real point for now. Thanks for your help.'

Nigel felt the need to say something. 'I hope you find the missing girl,' was the best he could manage, as Heather shouldered her bag and turned to leave. She smiled back.

'So do I,' she said, but Nigel could sense resignation in her tone. 'Send your invoice . . .'

He held up his hand. 'That was nothing,' he said. 'It's on the house.'

'You sure?'

He nodded

'OK. Very kind of you. I'd better get off,' she said, gesturing with her hand towards the door. 'Thanks again.'

'Good luck with the case. And everything else,' he said.

She smiled, fondly he thought. Then she adjusted her bag on her shoulder, and turned away.

Yet again Nigel watched her walk away from him.