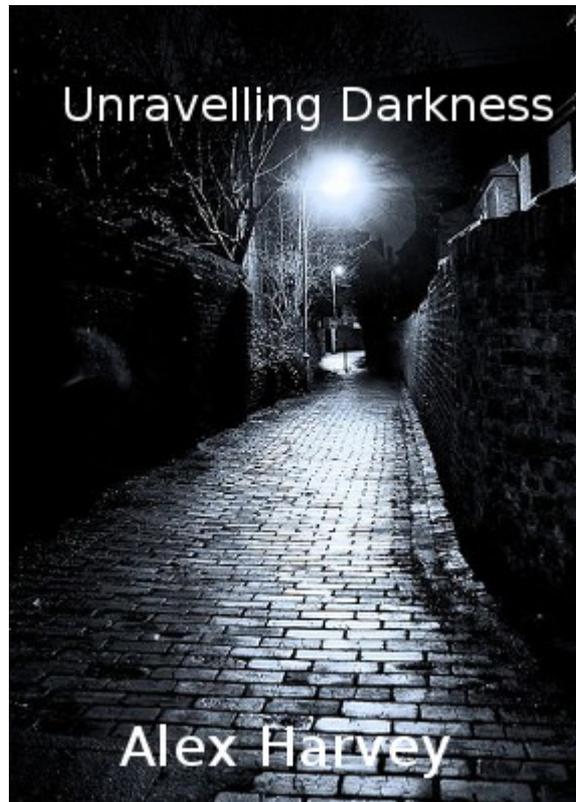


# Unravelling Darkness

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# Chapter 1

Victoria Lowry sat in Dr. Wallace's office, in the hospital wing of the maximum security prison. She felt cold, tired and drained and it wasn't completely due to the miserable winter weather. Victoria had been coming to this hospital wing for two years, and before that it had been the prison's F wing. This was all because of one man. Dennis Hilton was now dying. Victoria knew that even his death wouldn't remove his thorn from her side. Hilton was, without a doubt, the most twisted, evil monster that Victoria had ever met, heard or read about. Seven years ago, Hilton had been given two life sentences for the rape and murder of two eleven year old girls. At the time, Victoria had been one of the many officers on the task force that were handling the case. Despite her lack of rank, Hilton had decided in his own twisted mind to speak to Victoria, and only Victoria. The evidence had been overwhelmingly damning and Hilton offered no input at all, nor did they need it for a conviction. Victoria learned that complete closure depended on so many things, a conviction being only one of them. The discovery of the bodies of the little girls provided another part. It took Victoria eighteen months to provide another key piece for the families when she obtained two confessions of the crimes from Hilton. Her dealings with Hilton didn't end. Eight years ago, before Hilton's capture and conviction, ten year old Emily Jones had vanished in the area that was now known as Hilton's prowling ground. Emily was never found and there was nothing to connect Hilton to her disappearance. Nothing except every ounce of instinct and common sense possessed by every police officer in the district.

"DI Lowry. I'm so sorry to keep you waiting." Dr. Wallace entered his office and shook Victoria's hand. "Crisis on B wing."

"No worries. How long has he got?" Victoria asked.

"Days or weeks rather than months." Dr. Wallace told her and Victoria felt disgusted. Two life sentences and Hilton was going to escape. "He refused a sedative until he'd seen you. He's handcuffed and Officer Burk is there with him. Not that he can move far. Weak as a kitten." Dr. Wallace lead the way down the familiar corridor and a prison guard unlocked a familiar door. Victoria could remember this man when he was twice the size he was now. Cancer had eaten away half of his body and almost all of his strength. He lay on a bed, cuffed to the safety side of it, and he was surrounded by tubes and monitors. His eyelids fluttered open as Victoria entered the room.

"DI Lowry." Hilton's voice was a cracking whisper. "I'm on shutdown."

"So I believe." Victoria sat on a chair by the barred window.

"Your hair's grown so long. You're thirty five now, aren't you?" Hilton tried to lift his hand to his face, but couldn't. "I'd like my brow dampened please."

"I'll tell the nurse on the way out." Victoria said flatly.

"I've always liked you Lowry. You're genuine, not like those other bastards you work with. Are you a natural blonde?" Hilton asked weakly. Victoria was too tired to tolerate Hilton's ramblings but she had no choice. This could be the last time she saw him. She looked at Hilton with his lifeless grey tufts of hair.

"Yes I am. You?"

"What are you telling the Jones family these days? I suppose there's not a lot you want to say to a family that slated you to the Press. There again, I do admire your response to that. I'd have hated you forever if you'd spouted the 'lack of resources' shit."

"I told them the truth. The case will never be closed as long as I'm on the force." Her voice was automatically toneless, as it always was when speaking to Hilton. In fact, she wanted to spit at the man. The Jones' had lashed out in sheer frustration when the information seemed like it was drying up. Victoria had been right in the firing line. "This kick you get from maximising their pain will be a none issue soon. You won't be here to feel it."

"Oh low blow DI Lowry." Hilton's voice was laboured and weak. "Your dedication isn't just professional, is it? You care about people even though they don't care about you." Victoria kept quiet and didn't retaliate to that sting. "Emily Jones was one of mine." Hilton said quietly. Victoria looked at Officer Burk who nodded his affirmation that he'd heard that. "You'd better send in the underlings for a statement before they drug me up."

"Where is she?" Victoria leant closer to Hilton.

"I'm not dead yet." He closed his eyes, ending the conversation. Dragging it out to the last.

Victoria drove straight to the Jones family home to tell them about Dennis Hilton's confession. Mrs. Jones broke down completely and huge sobs ripped through her body. Mr. Jones clung onto his wife, tears of his own flowing down his face. He called Victoria back as she walked down the path towards her car.

"Thank you." Mr. Jones said in a trembling voice. "You know, all that stuff in the papers was never meant to be levelled at you personally. In fact, you were the only one that had time for us after a while. I'm deeply sorry about that."

"No need for apologies, Mr. Jones. God knows, you had a lot of pain to deal with. Your wife will need you." Victoria smiled and walked to her car. The first piece of closure for the Jones' but still others were missing. Emily Jones was still missing. Victoria's phone postponed her decent into depression. DCI Bill Woods asked her how it had gone with the Jones' and Victoria told him it was as good as they could hope for under the circumstances.

"That's a relief." the DCI said and Victoria felt very irritated. To Woods, it was a relief that the Jones' had enough to keep them going for now, and not to have another go at the police. Victoria knew he hadn't even thought about the relief to the family. "Are you still in the area?"

"Yes sir. I was just about to set off back."

"Take a detour just to the town south of there. There's a bit of a situation at Franks' Construction. You know it?" Woods asked.

"I'll find it. What sort of situation? Don't they have coppers there?" Victoria asked irritably.

"The owner of the place, Jonathan Franks, called in Sergeant Stan Mitchell. There's a nut-job carrying on in his yard and refusing to leave. It's all got a bit farcical, Lowry, that's all. Franks and this nuisance are both demanding to see someone in charge. It's just got a bit out of hand for

Mitchell."

"I'll go and take a look. Does this nut-job have a name?"

"Phillip Moore. Two Ls, Moore with an E. Mitchell says he's making alot of noise but he's not fighting. Just go and listen for a bit then send the buggers home." DCI Woods told her.

"On my way." Victoria hung up. "Yes I'll go, boss. I have no life and no plans." She muttered, then sighed when she realised that was true.

Jonathan Franks had shut himself in his office. Stan Mitchell and his constables were in a yard in front of the office and Phillip Moore was shouting and pleading for Franks to listen to him. Moore obviously wasn't just a random hooligan. He was dressed smartly, but casually, in jeans, a shirt and an expensive looking leather blazer. Victoria introduced herself and looked at Moore's eyes for signs of alcohol or drugs. She caught no odours of the latter. Victoria's first impression was that Phillip Moore was desperately agitated, even terrified. Jonathan Franks saw Victoria and came racing out of his office. Mitchell had to restrain him while he introduced her as a DI.

"Jonathan!" Moore screeched. "You know it's him! You have to do something, please!"

"DI Lowry, would you please remove this arsehole from my premises!" Franks snapped. "It's obviously too big a job for Mitchell and his idiots."

"OK stop the shouting!" Victoria shouted. "Anymore screaming and I'll run the lot of you in."

"It's that nutter you want to run in!" Franks pointed at Moore.

"Me? I'm the one being terrorised and I'm not the only one!" Moore sobbed. Definitely terrified.

"I said settle down." Victoria repeated. "What's the problem, Mr. Moore?"

"Ask him! Go on!" Moore yelled.

"I'm asking you. You asked to see someone in charge so get on with it. You said you were being terrorised. By Mr. Franks?"

"Look Jonathan, just promise me you'll sort this out and I'll be gone." Moore begged, completely ignoring Victoria.

"Get him off my property!" Franks snarled.

"I've had enough of this crap." Victoria said flatly. "Sergeant Mitchell, take Mr. Moore to the station where I can speak to him properly. You aren't under arrest, but it's clear that you and Mr. Franks are antagonising each other." Stan strode towards Moore who seemed to have worn himself out. He went calmly and quietly with Mitchell and two constables, much to Victoria's relief. Two more constables stayed with Victoria.

"I've had enough of him." Jonathan Franks said angrily. "Just make sure he stays out of my business. OK?"

"I could do that very effectively if I knew what the problem was." Victoria followed Jonathan into his office. He was quite an intimidating man in his mid forties. Victoria's height had ground to a halt

at the five foot three mark and Jonathan towered over her at six feet minimum. He had cropped, greying hair that looked like steel, and hard grey eyes to match. He certainly looked like he could handle and trouble thown his way. "Mr. Franks, you asked to speak to someone in charge and here I am." Victoria said patiently.

"I suppose Moore will only blubber it all out anyway." Jonathan took his position behind his desk. "He's under the impression that my brother is stalking him and making death threats. He sees it as my job to stop this."

"Death threats? Has he any basis for thinking that?" Victoria asked.

"None. He's bloody mental. He began pestering me a few months ago and I've had enough, DI Lowry. My brother doesn't even live here anymore and hasn't done for years. If he was back, I'd know, and so would the whole town. It's a very small place." Jonathan stated.

"So why would Moore say that? I'm sure he didn't just pick a name from the phonebook." Victoria reasoned.

"I have no idea. He's nuts. Look, DI Lowry, I do know a scared man when I see one and Moore is scared. I'm not saying he isn't being harassed, I'm saying he isn't being harassed by Gavin and I'm absolutely certain of that. Go and sort him out, Inspector. Tell him to stay away from my property or I'll insist that charges are brought against him." Jonathan said.

"I'll go and speak to him at the station." Victoria made a note of the name 'Gavin' on her hand, in biro. "Good night, Mr. Franks."

Phillip Moore was pacing the floor in sheer agitation. Victoria was pleased to see that Stan had put him in an interview room, rather than a cell.

"What did he say?" Phillip asked immediately when Victoria entered the room.

"I'm here to see what you have to say." Victoria sat down.

"Plenty. I'm going to die." Phillip said heavily.

"Mr. Moore excuse me asking, it's routine, have you been drinking at all? It could have a bearing on any statements you make. Drugs?" Victoria raised her eyebrows at Phillip.

"No!" Phillip said desperately. "I know how insane I sound! I know I sound like a madman! Inspector, I'm being stalked, spied on and threatened and I'm terrified!" He sobbed. "Gavin Franks has told me he's enjoying the torture and that he will kill me!"

"He's told you this in person?"

"Phonecalls, emails, letters. He can see me in my own home, Inspector Lowry." Phillip blew his nose and tried to calm himself down.

"Jonathan Franks told me Gavin hasn't lived in the area for years." Victoria pointed out.

"He's getting to me somehow and I'm not the first. It is him!" Phillip said with conviction.

"I need to speak to Sergeant Mitchell." Victoria got to her feet. "I'm an outsider so I'm not familiar

with the locals. Try and calm down. OK?"

"Yes. I'm sorry." Phillip said weakly and Victoria went outside. Stan Mitchell was in his fifties and had lived in the town for decades.

"Gavin Franks is long gone from here." He told Victoria. "Moore says he's not on drugs but I found a packet of Rizlas in his pocket with the card torn off so I wouldn't take that as gospel."

"So where's Gavin Franks now?" Victoria asked.

"No idea. He left in tragic circumstances, him and his mother. He was only a teenager and he was acquitted of a nasty murder. Fully acquitted, DI Lowry, without a shadow of a doubt. It's a wonder it got as far as a trial. The scandal still stuck though and they moved. Jonathan would have been seventeen or eighteen. Old enough to stay here and hold his own anyway. As you can imagine, he received quite a bit of hostility at first. It's a very close town." Stan told her.

"So do you think this is a revival of that resentment? Jonathan seems to be quite successful. A Scandal, even a false one, would hurt him." Victoria theorised.

"That's what it looks like to me. Businessmen draw attention and it's not always good attention."

"So that would mean Phillips accusations are purely for the purpose of harming Jonathan and his business." Victoria reasoned.

"Unfortunately, there are still a few who think Jonathan should have cleared off with his brother and mother. If he's been on the wacky then it wouldn't take much to set him off." Stan nodded towards the interview room.

"So you aren't overly concerned about these alleged threats?" Victoria tried to hide her relief.

"Purely because I know Gavin isn't here. Trust me, I'd know if he was. Moore needs to calm down so I can talk to him. I'm thinking that once the pot wears off, then so will the paranoia."

"You're in a better position than I am in all this." Victoria nodded. "I'll get this in a report and hand it to DCI Woods. I'm sure he'll contact you. I don't think we'll be meeting again on this one, Sergeant Mitchell." She smiled at Stan.

"No, I don't think it's CID stuff either." Stan smiled back. "I was surprised when you showed up."

"I was in the area and it needed attention before it got nasty. Hey they wanted in charge so they got it!" Victoria laughed. "Nice meeting you, Sergeant Mitchell. Good luck to you." She left the station and headed quickly towards a car. The phone reception was a bit weak so Victoria sent the DCI a text message, promising a full report in the morning.

# Chapter 2

Victoria parked outside of her two bedroom flat and looked at it through the rain streaked car window. The neighbouring flats had warmly lit windows and that made Victoria's flat look cold and sad in the darkness. Had it always looked so gloomy? She unlocked the door and switched on a few lights, then the radio. Victoria caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror as she was going to the kitchen. She stopped for a closer look. Straight blond hair, pale blue eyes and incredibly plain. Had she always looked so nondescript? Victoria looked at a photograph by her phone. It was her and a friend and colleague, both still in uniform. She looked at her reflection again and it seemed so flat and washed out in comparison, as though she was fading. Dennis Hilton had sapped the life from her and he was still doing it. He had stretched every nerve to breaking point and selfishly demanded every last scrap of her attention. Victoria had no friends and no acquaintances. Hilton had seized her, isolated her and would continue to torment her even after his death. Victoria left the lights on, and went to bed.

A memorial service was held for Emily Jones, four days later. Victoria stayed well back, behind the bushes, away from the close family. She knew this service was symbolic. She also knew that eventually, it wouldn't be enough for Mr. and Mrs. Jones. Victoria grabbed her phone when it rang loudly.

"Lowry." She turned away from the service.

"Woods."

"Give me a minute to get in my car, sir. I'm at Emily Jones' memorial service." She unlocked her car and climbed in. "I left my report."

"I have it here. Listen Lowry. Just after eleven thirty this morning, Phillip Moore jumped in front of a car. Killed outright." The DCI said and Victoria was stunned.

"Mitchell said he was keeping him until he'd calmed down." She said in disbelief.

"I contacted Stan Mitchell and he says he was a different bloke after a night's sleep. Moore seemed a bit embarrassed about his performance. Mitchell suspected cannabis but let it slide for now. We aren't sure if it's accidental or suicide." Woods told her. "The car hit him outside the supermarket on the main road."

"So it won't be ours, as in CID?" Victoria asked.

"You spoke to the man, Lowry. Do you think anything dodgy's going on?"

"Stan Mitchell would know better. I can say that Moore was terrified. Even the man he was bothering agreed with that. Do you want me to go and take a look?" Victoria offered.

"Just to see that it's in order. I don't think there's enough to get it to us but it's best to check." Woods said.

Victoria left the service and drove to the supermarket. The road had been reopened and she noticed that the traffic moved quite fast, seeing it was a straight stretch of road with no turnoffs. The carpark was in front, and down one side of the supermarket and the entrance to it was to the rear of the building. There was no need for traffic to change speed on the main road. A young assistant called Scott had sold Phillip his cigarettes.

"He looked fine." He told Victoria. "He bought twenty John Players and a can of 7Up."

"He didn't seem anxious at all? Nervous?" Victoria asked.

"No, not at all. I wouldn't have remembered him at all if you lot hadn't asked. He was just normal." Scott shrugged his shoulders.

"Did you see him leave?"

"No, I was serving someone else by then. I heard the crash, the tyres and brakes screeching and I saw the traffic swerving. I told the other policeman all this too." Scott said.

"Thank you, Mr. Meeks." Victoria gave him a friendly smile and went to find the store manager. She found Mr. Derek Prat in the back store room and luckily he was with two eye witnesses. Mrs. Florence Pattinson and her daughter, Marie, had seen the whole thing from the carpark. Marie was very heavily pregnant and they were now waiting for a doctor to check her over. Mr. Prat was past himself.

"May I go and use the phone, DI Lowry?" He asked after Victoria had introduced herself.

"Yes of course. I'll chat to you later if you're free?" Victoria told him rather than asked him. Mr. Prat nodded and dashed for the door.

"I'm getting on to that hospital." He hissed at Victoria. "Do I look like a midwife? Ugh!" Victoria smiled and held the door open for him.

"Are you OK?" Victoria nodded towards Marie's baby-bump. "Apart from shocked out of your wits, I mean."

"Yes I'm fine. The police called the doctor. They insisted." Marie nodded.

"Wise precaution." Victoria sat on a crate of low-fat milk. "So you saw Phillip Moore coming out of the supermarket?"

"He came out at the same time as us." Florence said. "He lit a cigarette right in front of us and Marie tutted at him because it blew back in our faces."

"Mum pushed the trolley while I went to open the boot. We walked right past him. I took it his car was over by the metre and the bottle banks because that's where he was headed." Marie continued. "He got as far as the metre then he just sprinted off behind it. I saw him jumping over the fence and straight into the road." Marie took a few deep breaths and her mother put her arm round her.

"The car dragged him along and we saw it." Florence said shakily.

"So was there anything strange about him before he got to the metre?" Victoria asked. "Did he seem agitated or nervous?"

"No." Florence shook her head. "He was just striding along, smoking his cigarette. The only reason we noticed him at all was because he blew smoke everywhere in the doorway."

"Thank you ladies." Victoria stood up. "Horrible shock for you both so I appreciate you helping me. Good luck with the baby." She passed two paramedics at the door, and noticed Derek Prat hiding behind the Fruit and Veg.

"Is she OK in there?" He peeped over the oranges.

"She's fine." Victoria reassured him. "I noticed the cameras out front. Did the other officers ask about the CCTV footage?"

"Yes they're taking it to the station. Those two there, I think." Derek pointed to two officers who were leaving the supermarket.

"Damn. I've missed them. I could have had a quick look before they took it. Oh well." Victoria sighed. Now she'd have to come up with a reason to butt into the Uniforms' viewing.

"Important announcement! Derek Prat speaking! Could the two officers at the door please wait a minute! Important announcement!" The tannoy boomed all over the supermarket. Victoria turned round to see Derek grinning and waving a microphone at her. The two officers were looking in all directions in confusion.

"Thank you Mr. Prat." Victoria tried to keep a straight face.

"My pleasure."

Sergeant Chris Green and Constable David Proctor were a bit confused, and a bit irritated at Victoria's intrusion. They sat in the supermarket's security office while a technician started the footage. It showed Phillip, Florence and Marie leaving the store, and Phillip lighting a cigarette. Marie could be seen waving smoke out of her face, just as Florence had said. The women headed for their car and Phillip looked perfectly fine as he walked away. He had one hand holding his cigarette and the other in his jeans pocket. A normal, casual, manner. He stopped abruptly in front of the metre and Victoria told the technician to freeze the footage.

The metre stood in front of a row of hedges and behind the hedges was a low barrier, a narrow pavement, then the road. Next to the metre was a row of recycling bins. At this point the metre and the bins were to Phillip's right, the bins being about six feet from him. Victoria commented on how shadowy the area behind the bins was. The technician told her that the supermarket were planning on either lighting that area or getting another camera there because people tended to dump rubbish there illegally. The footage continued and it showed Phillip drop his cigarette and run full tilt to his right, straight into the road.

"The driver had no chance of stopping ma'am. I have his statement." Chris Green said.

"I'd believe it." Victoria nodded. "Did anyone notice if there someone lurking about behind those bins?" Victoria asked the obvious.

"We asked. No one saw anything out of the ordinary." Chris told her. "Pardon my asking ma'am, but why have they sent CID?"

"Sergeant, does that look right to you?" Victoria frowned and pointed to the video screen. "He didn't stumble or fall into the road so it's hardly accidental."

"No, he ran into it. He jumped straight in front of that car." Chris said.

"Well if he decided to commit suicide then he only did so five seconds before he did it. It doesn't look right." Victoria repeated.

"A bit unusual, I admit." Chris conceded. "So do you take these tapes or do we?"

"You do." Victoria smiled. "I'm pleased I caught you before you left. Thank you." Victoria left the security office. Outside, she took a look behind the bins. Two heavy black bags had been dumped there and the ground back there was flattened and littered with broken twigs and general refuse. They'd find no forensics there even if a dozen people had used it as a hiding place. Victoria needed to see the DCI. She needed him to let her connect these events surrounding Phillip Moore.

DCI Bill Woods listened to DI Lowry, his big, stony face expressionless. Actually, he was cursing himself ten times over. His reasons for sending Victoria to Franks' Construction was genuine enough, she was only five minutes from the place. If he'd known one of the men involved was going to end up dead, he'd never have sent her. Bill knew that his DI had been seriously worn down by Dennis Hilton and he didn't want to hand her anything that would lead to a burn-out. Bill knew full well that when Victoria found out about Moore's death, she'd be curious. He decided to send her in straight away to establish it as either a suicide, or an accident, for herself. He should have known it wouldn't have been so cut and dried. Nothing ever was.

"His previous behaviour has to be taken into account, sir. I saw for myself how terrified he was and Jonathan Franks verified that he was a scared man. The night he spent in Stan Mitchell's cell may have been the first full night's sleep he'd had in ages. He was calm when he left Sergeant Mitchell and he was calm when he bought his cigarettes. Two eye witnesses and the CCTV saw him change in a split second. Something, or someone, terrified the life out of him, sir. He saw something out in the carpark that scared him so badly that he fled away from it in a blind panic." Victoria indicated her very extensive report that was spread out on the DCI's desk. Woods pursed his lips and looked at the papers. He didn't want this dragging on. If it was to be brought to CID then he needed officers who were used to grafting and used with getting the job done.

"Kennedy's men aren't on anything right now. I'll get DS McKenzie to sort out the paperwork." Woods said at length.

"Thank you, sir." Victoria said in relief.

DI Tony Kennedy had retired a few months ago and he'd been an excellent detective, as well as very popular man. His men seemed to be a bit unfocused just now and Victoria wasn't convinced that she was what they needed. The men had worked with Kennedy for a long time and still felt his absence on a personal level.

Victoria was introduced to DS Alex McKenzie first, in the DCI's office. He was a tall, sandy haired man with keen, green eyes and a lively disposition. Alex was thirty and Victoria felt ancient next to such a colourful person, even though she was only five years older.

The DCI outlined the situation to Alex, and Alex looked rather doubtful.

"It seems a bit thin, sir."

"Both events together raise enough doubt as to the straightforwardness of it." Woods said. "If it turns out to be a cut and dried suicide or accident then there's no harm done. You'd better introduce the DI to Kennedy's lot."

"This should be fun." Alex held the door open for Victoria.

Kennedy's men had taken personal occupation of an incident room they'd used a few years ago. It was an enclosed area containing desks, computers and filing cabinets. A windowed wall marked off a separate office at one end. The office still had 'DI T Kennedy' on its door plaque. The whole area was a mess. Bins were overflowing with rubbish, food containers were stacked on the desks and piles of paper cluttered every flat surface. Apart from DS McKenzie there were three other men, all DCs. The DS was the most smartly dressed because he wore a polo shirt instead of a T-shirt. All three men looked at Victoria in surprise, then at Alex with suspicion.

"We have a case lads." Alex announced. "I'll go over it with you shortly. This is DI Lowry." The men just looked from Alex to Victoria. "Fantastic. OK! This is DC Brian Tucker and he's the baby of the group." DC Tucker was five feet five but three feet wide. His cropped hair gave him the appearance and air of a bare knuckle boxer. "This is DC Charlie Thompson and he knows the place inside out." Charlie was a hard looking man in his mid forties and he looked the least impressed with Victoria. "And over there is DC Don Morgan." Don was around Victoria's age. He was as tall as Alex but only half his weight. "Your enthusiasm is overwhelming." Alex heaved. "Your office is up here, DI Lowry. I'll give the lads the rundown."

"Thank you." Victoria picked her way through the clutter and went into the end office. It wasn't quite as atrocious as the rest of the area but it was stale and stuffy. Victoria pushed open a window to let in the damp, outside air. The men outside were raising some noisy objections and Victoria exhaled loudly.

"How is that CID?" Don exclaimed. "My granny could work out that he topped himself."

"Yeah and we don't need Little Miss Muffet in there pulling rank." Charlie snorted. "Hasn't she got some typing or something to do?" That got a round of loud laughter.

"OK, knock it off." Alex was laughing too. "I know she's not quite Tony but she is a DI."

"You lot must be blind." Brian contributed. "The DCI has obviously given her this as a go easy. Any fool can see that. He's given her a soft option after that paedo crap and the hammering she got off the press."

"So we have to play along like a bunch of faries?" Charlie snapped. "It's not our fault she can't take the heat. She shouldn't be where she is if she's going to buckle." They all fell silent when Victoria came out of the office. She walked past the men and opened the outer door.

"Excuse me!" She got the attention of someone out in the corridor. "Thank you. Can you take a message to Sergeant Chris Green, please? Ask him if he can spare me Constable Proctor for a few hours. He can phone me if he needs to." Victoria nodded and came back into the room.

"Uniform?" Brian asked.

"Yes, uniform." Victoria looked over the men. "From now on you'll turn out here suitably dressed. I don't mean a three piece tuxedo suit but at least make an effort. Shirts and ties. No jeans and no

trainers."

"W ... what?" Charlie said in disbelief and got to his feet. "We aren't a bloody fashion show!"

"Also, get this dump cleaned up. If you can't dispose of your food containers and cups after yourselves then I'll prohibit food in this area and you can use the canteen." Victoria stood her ground.

"Hey! You can't ..." Brian began.

"Yes I can. Try me." Victoria looked evenly at Brian, who soon looked at his desk. "How can you expect people to respond to you when you look like you've no pride in yourselves? If you don't respect yourselves, how do you expect others to?" Constable David Proctor tapped on the door. "Who would you take seriously? Someone who looked like this?" Victoria indicated David's uniform. "Or someone dressed in jeans and a faded T-Shirt? Come on, Constable Proctor, I'll explain on the way." She left with the baffled Constable and Kennedy's lads were stunned.

"She can't do that!" Charlie exploded eventually.

"Actually, she can." Alex shrugged.

"And you're going to stand there and let her?" Charlie demanded.

"She doesn't need my permission." Alex said in annoyance. "I'll talk to her when she gets back. OK?"

"You'd better." Charlie grumbled. "Stuck up bitch."

"Hey! Now no, Charlie." Alex said flatly. "Less of that talk and I mean it. The bottom line is she's the boss just now. I'm sure we can find some middle ground but talking like that isn't going to cut it. Come on, get this place tidied up a bit." He pulled a face as he peeled a hotdog box off the window sill.

# Chapter 3

Victoria explained what was going on as she drove herself and David Proctor to Phillip Moore's home address. He didn't actually live in the town but closer to the city outskirts. That interested Victoria. It seemed to weaken the idea of local harassment towards Jonathan Franks.

"I'm pleased you asked me to help you ma'am but what's wrong with your own lot?" David asked.

"I didn't want to cut you and Sergeant Green out completely. You were there first afterall." Victoria said half-truthfully.

"Thanks, boss." David said, rather impressed. "Havershaw Avenue. Second right after the roundabout."

"Quite an affluent area. According to those notes, Moore made his money in computers. He made enough to retire on." Victoria nodded to the notes on David's lap.

"Retired at forty. We wish eh?" David rolled his eyes.

"Oh we'd only get bored. Number fifteen." Victoria pulled up in front of a cube of flats. The area was made up of these cubes and the flats were quite pricey. She couldn't see the attraction. The cubes reminded Victoria of prison blocks and the estate even had it's own Warden. Evan French was the caretaker and odd job man and he was just emerging from cube 13/14/15/16.

"I'm DI Lowry and this is Constable Proctor. Number fifteen?" Victoria spoke to Evan.

"Got any ID?" He asked and the officers obliged. Evan nodded and lead them up a flight of stairs to fifteen, then used three separate keys to unlock three separate locks. After that, he deactivated an alarm.

"Secure place." David observed.

"Especially this one." Evan told him. "All of the blocks have external locks and alarms but Mr. Moore was a bit obsessed. All the windows are triple locked too, I hired the workmen for him. I'll leave you to it. I'm in the office out front when you've finished." Evan bobbed his head and left the flat.

Phillip Moore certainly liked his computers. Victoria pointed at the two laptops and the desktop computer.

"We'll need those. It looks like he used this place as one big office." There were folders and papers stacked neatly on four big desks in the lounge.

"Ma'am? Look at this." David pulled two large boxes from under one of the desks. "Looks like he was a bit of a crime buff." The boxes contained notes, pictures and newspaper cuttings of different crimes. Some of them were quite old, going by the newspaper dates.

"Lift the lot of it. We'll plough through it at the station." Victoria said.

"Well I won't." David shrugged his shoulders and looked rather disappointed.

"More's the pity. I'll do my best to keep you informed. It's good to see you have an interest straight away. I'm much the same." Victoria smiled.

"Thank you." David returned her smile and took the heavy boxes down to the car, then returned for the desktop computer. Victoria lifted the laptops. Evan was waiting for them outside. He'd need to resecure the flat.

"What was Mr. Moore like?" Victoria asked him.

"Quiet." Evan answered. "A bit of a loner. I barely spoke two words to him. He's what you'd call an eccentric, but we get a few of those here."

"Did he have many visitors?"

"No, not Mr. Moore." Evan shook his head. "He only left his flat through necessity. It's a bit ironic that something as ... oh I don't know ... messy ... killed him. You know? He was a careful bloke."

"Ironic." Victoria agreed. "Thank you Mr. French. I'll take up no more of your time." She got in the car with David.

"Do you need me to stay late, ma'am?" David asked. "It's not a problem but I just like to let the wife know."

"No it's fine, Constable Proctor. I've probably kept you way over your shift time. I'm sorry." Victoria apologised.

"That's OK, you can't think of everything. It probably isn't an issue for you, being on your own and all." David nodded. Victoria had to concede a nod too.

The incident room was deserted by the time David left Victoria with her evidence. She smiled as she looked round the place and saw how tidy it was. It was clear that the lads resented her, and doubted her ability when compared to Tony Kennedy. There wasn't a lot she could do to force people to like her but she certainly wasn't going to stand for abuse and undeserved rudeness. Victoria decided that the computers could wait, and dragged the two big boxes into her office. She soon found that the bulk of Phillip's notes were on five cases. He'd researched them and documented them in a very organised manner, which seemed typical of the type of man he was.

Number One almost made her put the lot down and go home. A child murder was something she really did not need. This case, however, was thirty years old. Ten year old Alison Bell had been found in woodlands on the outskirts of the town, just south of the prison. Stan Mitchell had referred to Gavin's acquittal of a nasty murder. Victoria read on. Phillip had made references to Gavin too. Gavin had been thirteen when Alison was killed, and sixteen when he and his mother had moved away. Jonathan had stayed, obviously. Victoria turned to her own computer and pulled up the case files. She had to use her security pass because the case was so old and so cold. Alison's killer was never found. Gavin had an alibi provided by his mother and his brother but the thing that sealed the acquittal was Gavin himself. It seemed that he had a handicap in the form of a deformed foot and lower leg that impaired his movement quite significantly. It was decided that Gavin would have been physically incapable of the crime and his family emphasised that and had doctors to back them

up. Victoria decided on another visit to Stan Mitchell.

Phillip's Case Two was a bit of an anticlimax after the events of the first one. A twenty one year old man, named Brian Fox, had overdosed on prescribed sleeping tablets. That had been nineteen years ago and was a straightforward suicide. Victoria flipped through Case Two's folder for more information but that was it.

Case Three was slightly more impactful, but only just. Twenty three year old Carol Nixon had been killed outright when her car suffered brake failure and skidded on ice. The car ploughed into a garage wall. That had been seventeen years ago.

Case Four was another accident, ten years ago. Thirty year old Denise Porter had suffered a freak accident when the sail-arm of her brother's boat struck her on the head. She fell, unconscious, into the sea and had drowned.

Case Five was the most recent and had happened only two years ago. Thirty eight year old Eric Summers had jumped from a bridge onto a railway track, straight into the path of an express train.

Victoria re-read Phillip's notes. Four of them weren't technically crimes, so why had he been so interested in them? The only definite crime was the first case, and Victoria reasoned that that was the thing that set off the chain to the other four. She really did need to speak to Stan Mitchell. Victoria glanced at the clock. 10:30 at night. Not many would still be slogging away at that time of night and she wouldn't expect Sergeant Mitchell to be either. Victoria decided to leave the other cardboard box, and switched off the office light.

The following morning, Victoria walked into the incident room, then paused. Alex looked the least uncomfortable in his red tie and black shirt. Brian tugged at the collar of his blue short sleeved shirt and loosened off his brown polkadot tie. Don's white shirt wouldn't even fasten round his thick neck and his maroon and grey tie had a two inch wide knot and a three inch tail. Charlie had obviously worn the gear at one time because his grey tie was knotted in a smart windsor over his lavender coloured shirt. All in all, they made for a very colourful spectacle.

"Much better." Victoria nodded and walked quickly to her office. The men grumbled and tutted, except for Alex who was smirking childishly. After a few minutes, Alex walked through the open door of the office, and left it open.

"All poned up and ready to go." He announced loudly. Victoria looked at him, then at the men outside who were all looking at him too. She had it weighed up immediately. The men had made a noise to Alex, so now Alex was going to pass it on, loudly, and in full view of the rest of Kennedy's lads.

"Good." Victoria said simply.

"We always got results before, without the collar and tie stuff. I don't think I ever saw Tony Kennedy with a shirt on, let alone a tie. What difference does it make?" Alex spread his hands.

"I explained all that yesterday." Victoria said quietly, keeping her eyes on the computer and not on Alex and the men.

"Look, Tony ..."

"No, you look, Detective Sergeant. You can all sit around moaning and crying all day long if you

like, it won't make any difference. While I'm here, you can either get over it or you can request a transfer. I'm sure the DCI will consider having to wear a shirt and tie a valid reason. Anything else?" Victoria asked casually.

"No ma'am." Alex sighed.

"Good." Victoria typed Gavin Franks into the computer and it drew a complete blank. There wasn't so much as a parking ticket in there. She tutted irritably when the phone rang. DCI Woods wanted to see her. "Alex, can you come with me please?" She said, leaving the office. "Brian I need you to run Gavin Franks through every system we have. Charlie, Don, there are two boxes and three computers in there for you to get stuck into. You'll find notes on five cases. I only looked at them briefly, so put them through the systems too. It's worth a try, even though four of them aren't technically crimes."

"Huh? If they aren't crimes why are they here?" Charlie asked.

"They were taken from Phillip Moore's flat. Evidence?" Victoria explained.

"I know what evidence is!" Charlie snapped.

"Your shirt for a start, Charlie. Evidence of godawful bad taste!" Don guffawed and the rest started laughing. Victoria smiled too.

"Oh har-di-har." Charlie drawled. "Go and get that box."

DCI Woods wanted an update. Victoria told him about the notes from Phillip's flat, and the list of five cases.

"I'm not sure about that, Lowry." The DCI said sternly. "The Bell case is the only one that is a case and it's not ours. You said yourself that Franks was cleared because he was an invalid. If this is the only connection you have to Phillip Moore then it's a weak one. Stick to Moore, Lowry and leave Bell with Stan Mitchell."

"Understood." Victoria said in exasperation.

"Oh by the way, McKenzie, is Charlie Thompson going to a wedding or something? Someone ought to tell him he looks like something out of the 70s."

"Er ... yes sir, I'll tell him." Alex had to bite his lip to stop himself laughing. Victoria left the DCI's office then headed in the opposite direction to the incident room. "Where are we going?" Alex caught her up.

"Not 'we'." Victoria stopped to speak to Alex. "I'm going to see Stan Mitchell."

"You sure that's wise? Woods just told you not to." Alex tried to hide his surprise.

"Don't worry about that. That's why I'm going by myself. If he wants me, I'm out interviewing witnesses or something." Victoria said.

"Hang on! What about the lads? Maybe their shirts aren't as smart as Proctor's uniform but the have tried." Alex said in annoyance.

"I know." Victoria sighed. "Their appearance is fine, Alex. You heard the DCI. I'm not about to get anyone else in trouble with the boss and I'm sure the lads wouldn't thank me if I did."

"Yes, OK." Alex conceded. "So what do I tell them?"

"The same as you tell Woods, I suppose." Victoria shrugged.

"Can I make a suggestion?" Alex said impatiently. "How about telling them you're following your gut instincts, despite what the DCI says?"

"You want to tell them I'm ignoring orders?" Victoria said in surprise.

"What do you think they'd do? Run to Woods and tell him? If nothing else, it shows you're human." Alex shrugged his shoulders. That stung Victoria more than she liked. She knew she was gradually becoming de-sensitised and refused to admit it. "They aren't like that, I promise you. You don't have to worry." Alex mistook the expression on her face for worry.

"Fair enough, if you think that would be better." Victoria smiled. "They have tried, I know it and appreciate it. It can't be easy for them having me instead of Tony Kennedy."

"Well in all fairness, that shouldn't matter. I'll go and tell them you're bunking off." Alex smirked. Victoria smiled and shook her head as she headed for the doors.

Stan Mitchell was surprised to see Victoria again and she could tell he wasn't too comfortable with CID on his patch, especially asking about a thirty year old murder.

"It really was a tragic case, DI Lowry. Gavin was arrested more due to pressure on the police to find someone. It was unfair from the start. His mother and brother gave him strong alibis though. They both swore he was home with them, which is likely right. Gavin was lame, you know. His leg below the knee was all twisted and his foot was deformed. He wore one of those heavy shoes. His arm was bent up too so he carried it awkwardly. Even though young Alison was only ten she could have certainly outran him, maybe even physically fend him off." Stan shook his head sadly. "Mind you, he really was a weird kid. There was something ... sinister ... about him. I've had words with him a few times, and with his mother. She actually allowed him an air rifle. Can you believe that? He was shooting birds in the woods then dissecting the buggers on his mother's step right where everyone could see! The little ghoul." Stan shuddered. "It was Jonathan who put him straight, as always. Gavin was a bit scared of Jonathan. There again so were many other kids. He's always had a bit of a temper on him."

"Do you know where they moved to?" Victoria asked.

"No idea. They left pretty quickly once the court stuff was over. You have to remember, this is a small town and dirt sticks, despite the acquittal. They'd hardly leave a forwarding address." Stan shrugged his shoulders.

"No I suppose not." Victoria agreed. "About Phillip Moore. You said he was fine when he left here. Right?"

"Absolutely otherwise I'd not have let him out. Pardon my saying, but CID don't usually deal with folk wandering into the road. What's going on, DI Lowry? Stan asked suspiciously.

"Just tying up loose ends." Victoria replied. "Gavin Franks was mentioned quite a few times, so I'm

just verifying his situation completely."

"Can't say I blame you. You don't want the press collecting any ammunition, not after that other crap you had." Stan sympathised.

"Well I'll let you get on with your day, Sergeant. Thanks." Victoria shook Stan's hand and left the station.

Jonathan Franks was out in his yard talking to his men when Victoria arrived. He didn't look exactly pleased to see her as he excused himself from the discussion.

"You'll have read about Phillip Moore's death." She said, rather than asked.

"I did, yes and I'm not too surprised to see you back. Look you saw for yourself he was already on top notch here. He was like that when he first came charging in here too. I'm not in any way, shape, or form, responsible for winding him up." Jonathan sounded fed up with the whole thing.

"And Gavin would be incapable. Right?"

"What?" Jonathan glared at Victoria and looked very intimidating. "I thought I told you, Moore had no basis at all for all that crap!"

"Because of Gavin's disability?" Victoria pressed.

"No because Phillip Moore was a nut job!" Jonathan raised his voice. "Look DI Lowry, I haven't seen my half-brother in two decades. Yes he's handicapped, he was born like that. I don't even know where he is, but I do know he isn't here."

"Half-brother? Sorry, I didn't realise. So he's still living with your mother?" Victoria tucked the information away in her memory.

"I presume so." Jonathan shrugged. "The last I heard from her was by telephone, five years ago. She asked me for money for some home adaptations for Gavin. Apparently he's got worse as he's got older."

"You don't visit them?" Victoria asked.

"No." Jonathan looked evenly at her. "Family closeness doesn't come into it. Disability aside, Gavin was not a nice kid. He was a spoiled brat and he was a vicious little bastard. I'll give you an example. My mother gave me a box of toy cars for my seventh birthday. Predictably, Gavin wanted them so I was told to share them. Not good enough for Gavin, he wanted all of them. When I told him no, he had a tantrum from hell, shut himself in the bathroom and hacked all his hair off with a pair of scissors. He was five. Guess who my mother gave the cars to. It's was more than sibling jealousy. Later on, the cars were tidied away and my mother put them under my bed, not Gavin's. He stabbed her four times in the back with the scissors. He was forgiven in spectacular fashion. She had to go to the doctors for stitches and she told him I'd left the scissors on the sofa and she'd fallen on them. Vicious little bastard, as I said, and she was a waste of space. DI Lowry, I was pleased to see the back of the pair of them." Jonathan finished decisively.

"There was just the three of you. Is that right? Can't have been easy." Victoria said tactfully.

"I never knew my dad, he cleared off when I was born. I think he died before my mother left here

but I'm not a hundred percent on that one. I never saw Gavin's dad either, but I was only two. I doubt he was a big, or committed part in my mother's life." Jonathan said dryly. "So now you have it, warts and all. I have a business to run and I don't need this crap."

"Thank you. I hope you understand why I had to ask. Moore was very agitated, and he had mentioned your half-brother."

"He was nuts, I told you. While you're here, you can keep that other idiot out of my face. It's obvious the two of them have blethering about me." Jonathan snapped. "Bloody ridiculous is what it is!"

"Who would that be, Mr. Franks?" Victoria asked.

"Just give her a warning or something, she's a bit of an alcho. Helen Walby and she'd jump on any bandwagon passing to have a go at me. No, I'm not paranoid, I know what her problem is." Jonathan folded his arms.

"If you want me speak to her, it would be an idea to tell me what her problem is too." Victoria was getting the impression that Jonathan Franks had quite a few local enemies.

"Right after Gavin's court case she announced that Gavin had ... bothered her. You know? As though we weren't catching enough shit! Attention seeking little bitch. Gavin was in hospital at the time she said this happened so that was her exposed for what she is. She's never gotten over it. Totally her own doing. She's had a few goes at me in the past when she's full of gin. I just want to be left alone to run my business and my own life. Too much to ask?"

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Franks. You've been exceptionally helpful. Is there a guesthouse or somewhere I could stay the night?" Victoria asked. She intended hiding from Woods for as long as possible.

"Boatman's Arms in the main street lets rooms." Jonathan pointed to the town in general. Victoria thanked him again and left the yard.

# Chapter 4

The Boatman's Arms was a pretty little pub and quite quiet. Victoria had no trouble getting one of the four rooms that were available for let. Mrs. Margaret Ward seemed to run the place single handed as receptionist, porter, barmaid and cook. Victoria had missed dinner but Margaret offered to 'knock her something up'. Victoria thanked her and went to use the phone on the corner of the bar.

"Alex? Everything OK?"

"Yep! All under control. The lads are quite impressed that you're playing hookie." Alex laughed.

"I bet they are." Victoria smiled. "I have a name for you to check out. She may be an acquaintance of Phillip Moore. Helen, with an H, Walby. W.A.L.B.Y."

"Got it. I'll pass it on to Brian in the morning. There's just me and Charlie here now." Alex told her. "There's not alot to those cases, except the Bell Case, of course. Brian noticed they were all the same age but apart from ..."

"What? What did you say?" Victoria interrupted.

"Same age. If they were alive, they'd all be forty." Alex clarified.

"So was Phillip Moore." Victoria observed. "Give me the names again, Alex."

"Alison Bell, Brian Fox, Carol Nixon, Denise Porter, Eric Summers. Do you want me to look into local connections?"

"I could do that from here more effectively." Victoria wrote down the names and added Phillip Moore then, in brackets, Helen Walby.

"Anything urgent for tonight? I think Charlie's wanting away. His daughter is due to give birth any time." Alex asked.

"No, I think we've enough to be going on with." Victoria replied.

"OK. I'll pass on your best wishes to Charlie, boss." Alex said and Victoria cringed at her own lack of compassion.

"Yes, please do. I'll be in touch." Victoria hung up and went to sit down. She came eye to crust with the hugest sandwich she'd ever seen. The bread was like two doorsteps and the filling spilled all over the plate. It looked delicious.

"You'll be here about Phillip Moore then." Margaret said conversationally. "I heard he'd been carrying on up at Franks' Yard. What a sad thing to happen to him. Poor bugger."

"You knew him?" Victoria tackled her sandwich.

"Not well. He was a local lad but he moved away to go to college." Margaret leant on the bar.

"Did he stay in touch with anyone? Mr. Franks thinks he may have been in touch with Helen Walby. Does that sound right to you?" Victoria dropped half the filling down her chin.

"Not right, exactly, but possible I suppose. She's a funny one is Helen. Between me and you, she has a problem with the drink." Margaret said quietly. "I won't serve her in here. She's getting treatment from the hospital so it would do no good for me to supply her booze, would it?"

"Very responsible of you, Mrs. Ward." Victoria nodded. "What about Jonathan Franks? What's he like?"

"As straight as they come. He takes no nonsense from anyone, especially if it's drink fueled. He's fair though, I'll give him that. He could have had Helen locked up many a time, but hasn't. His business has kept alot of jobs in town, DI Lowry. He didn't deserve all the rubbish with his brother the first time, let alone after thirty years." Margaret shook her head.

"I suppose Helen's accusations didn't help." Victoria said.

"No, it didn't. She was after attention, that's all. She was only a kid so she didn't realise how serious that sort of talk was. I don't know if she was trying to help Alison Bell or if she was a bit jealous of the attention she was getting, even after the poor little mite was gone."

"It could have been shock too." Victoria observed. "Where they friends?"

"Well they were of an age. So was Phillip come to think of it. You had enough to eat? I can soon throw you another one together." Margaret offered.

"It was delicious, Mrs. Ward. I couldn't eat another thing. Thank you." Victoria smiled.

"No wonder you're such a scrap." Margaret tutted. "You high fliers don't know how to eat properly. What you need is a good tatie-pot down you. I'll have it on the menu tomorrow."

"I'll look forward to it. Good night, Mrs. Ward." Victoria headed for her room on the first floor of the Boatman's Arms.

Victoria slept well, given that it was an unfamiliar environment. Margaret served up a predictably hefty breakfast and Victoria was struggling with it.

"Mrs. Ward, you mentioned last night that Alison and Helen were of an age. Would they have been classmates?" Victoria asked, pushing down the last of her bacon.

"Quite possibly. Phyllis Stone could tell you better. She was headmistress at the school for decades. She only retired a few years ago." Margaret began clearing the table. "She lives just along from the school on Craddock Street. Her house is right next to the bus stop. She'll probably appreciate the company and talk your head off." She laughed. "Is Helen in any trouble? I know her and Jonathan don't get on."

"No she's not in trouble. I just want to ask her a few questions about Phillip Moore." Victoria stood up and felt bloated. "I can't remember the last time I ate breakfast. That was splendid."

"You don't eat breakfast? Not good, DI Lowry, especially for a busy working woman." Margaret

scolded. "Craddock Street. Straight down the main road here."

Mrs. Phyllis Stone was a sprightly sixty six year old. She was just getting off her bicycle as Victoria was knocking on her door.

"Mrs. Stone? I'm DI Victoria Lowry. Could you spare me a few minutes, please?" Victoria showed the retired headmistress her ID.

"Police? Well ... yes of course. Please come in." Mrs. Stone unlocked the door and lead the way into a clean and tidy cottage. "Phillip Moore, I take it? What a shame."

"Absolutely." Victoria agreed. "I need to verify something, Mrs. Stone. I found a list of names in Phillip's flat and I think they all may have been classmates. The first name on the list was Alison Bell."

"Oh my." Mrs. Stone sat down and sighed sadly. "That brings back some very sad memories. Yes, her and Phillip were in the same class."

"What about Brian Fox?"

"Brian? Yes I remember Brian. His family moved away, closer to the city, because of Mr. Fox's job. He'd have been twelve or thirteen. What's Brian got to do with it?" Mrs. Stone asked in confusion.

"He died nineteen years ago, Mrs. Stone. Carol Nixon, Denise Porter and Eric Summers are also dead." Victoria told her and saw the shock register on her face.

"Good grief! I read about Eric in the papers and Denise was still living here when she died so I knew about them. I didn't know about Brian and Carol. Oh my Lord!"

"And now Phillip, all from the same class." Victoria said.

"I'd never have made the connection." Mrs. Stone shook her head.

"Gavin Franks' name keeps cropping up. Phillip caused quite a scene up at the yard."

"So I believe. News travels fast around here. Gavin was older. I taught him too to some extent but he spent a lot of time in hospital." Mrs. Stone nodded.

"Can you think why Phillip would say that Gavin was harassing him only last week?" Victoria asked.

"Is that what he said? I've no idea why he'd say such an odd thing. No one's heard from Gavin for years. I'm not even sure if Jonathan has any contact with him either. It was an awful time, DI Lowry, an absolute nightmare." Mrs. Stone said sadly.

"Was Helen Walby in the same class?"

"I see why you asked. It's common knowledge that Helen has aggravated Jonathan on quite a few occasions." Mrs. Stone sighed and shook her head. "Yes she was."

"I know about the accusation she made against Gavin."

"Nasty thing to do but she was only a child. Having said that, so was Gavin. Helen has a lot of issues, Inspector. She's an alcoholic for a start. I think that's why Jonathan's been patient with her in the past." Mrs. Stone shrugged her shoulders.

"Are there anymore classmates still in town?"

"They tend to leave town when they go into further education and they don't come back, unfortunately. Apart from Franks' Construction and tourism, there's not much in the way of jobs here. We do have a precious exception." Mrs. Stone smiled. "Dr. Mark Fielding works up at the hospital. He did well for himself and came back. We're all quite proud of him."

"I'll call up there and talk to him, if he has time. Thank you, Mrs. Stone. I appreciate you talking to me." Victoria stood up.

"Just a minute. I don't know if these will help." Mrs. Stone opened a drawer in a dresser. "I don't have class lists anymore but I have these." She handed Victoria a file containing childrens' pictures. "The school photographer was due in school so the class painted their own class 'photographs' as a project. We cancelled the photographer because of Alison's death so the paintings are quite meaningful to me. If you can use them for names then you can borrow them."

"Thank you. These could be very useful. Did the photographer come every year?" Victoria thought she'd seen a photograph in the box from Phillip's flat.

"Yes, except that year. I hope you don't need his name because I've no idea."

"No I won't need his name." Victoria stood at the front door. "How did the other kids treat Gavin?"

"Children can be very cruel, unfortunately. Jonathan usually put them in their places, often physically." Mrs. Stone told her.

"So he stood up for his brother?" Victoria asked.

"To be honest, I think he saw it as an obligation. I'm sure Jenny reinforced that too. She was extremely protective over Gavin which is understandable, the lad was handicapped. She was abnormally overbearing though and she'd let Gavin do anything he liked, right or wrong. She couldn't see any wrong in him at all." Mrs. Stone said.

"And was there wrong in him?"

"I don't know if wrong is the correct word. He could be very difficult. He'd often take out his frustrations on the little ones, the new starters. Handicapped or not, he's dished out a few kicks and punches to the younger kids. Jonathan was left with the repercussions." Mrs. Stone shook her head sadly. "Quite a tragic little family."

"So it seems. Thank you Mrs. Stone. I'll get these pictures back to you safely." Victoria walked to her car and Mrs. Stone waved her off.

The hospital was a decent size and more up to date than Victoria had assumed. She showed her ID to a pretty receptionist then took a seat in a blue and white waiting room while Dr. Mark Fielding was located. Victoria was feeling quite drowsy, courtesy of Mrs. Ward's breakfast. After twenty minutes, she had to stand up to stop herself from nodding off to sleep. A man in a white coat appeared through a set of double doors and hurried towards her, obviously Mark Fielding. Victoria's

professional appraisal of detail soon overlapped into a personal appreciation and Mark Fielding was certainly worth appreciating. He was around six feet tall, maybe an inch or two more, and he had collar length, dark hair and healthy tanned skin. When he got a bit closer, Victoria noticed attractive, light brown eyes behind silver rimmed glasses. Mark smiled and Victoria prayed she wasn't grinning like an idiot.

"DI Lowry. Please forgive me for keeping you waiting. Emergency on maternity. I'm Mark Fielding. My office is just down here." He shook Victoria's hand and lead her round a corner and into a tidy and spotless office. He sat on the edge of his desk and indicated a chair for Victoria. "What can I do for you?"

"I believe you were a classmate of Phillip Moore's?" Victoria began.

"I was, yes. Poor Phillip." Mark said sadly.

"He was quite agitated up at Jonathan Franks' yard. Mr. Franks told me he's received similar attention from Helen Walby. Do you know if Phillip and Helen were in contact?" Victoria asked.

"Helen? Hell I wouldn't know." Mark said in surprise. "A bit of an odd friendship, if they were. Phillip was always an academic. It wasn't a surprise when he did well at university then went into computers. Helen has a few problems. She doesn't form friendships easily."

"She has an alcohol addiction." Victoria prompted.

"Yes. Obviously I can't discuss that with you, I'm sure you understand. It does make her quite irrational at times, though, I can tell you that." Mark told her.

"Well this particular irrationality was shared by Phillip Moore." Victoria pointed out.

"I honestly wouldn't know." Mark shook his head. "He didn't live here so I wouldn't know about any medical problems. I haven't seen him for years."

"What about Gavin Franks?"

"Jonathan, you mean?"

"No. Gavin, Jonathan's brother." Victoria clarified.

"Well for a kick off, they aren't full brothers. Different fathers. He hasn't been here for years. I presume you know about all that, seeing as you brought his name up?" Mark asked and Victoria nodded. "I can't see why that has to be raked over. That family suffered enough at the time. Gavin was acquitted, and quite rightly too. He was a cripple. Inspector. He was marked out as different and persecuted for it. I know the type of things Helen Walby says. It's impossible. Gavin was physically impaired at thirteen and he'll be worse now. I could give you a ton of texts on his condition if you like. It's degenerative."

"You seem to have quite a bit of sympathy for him." Victoria smiled.

"I'm not saying he was a paragon of virtue. He was never that. Think of the frustration he's had to deal with all his life. In my personal, not professional, opinion, Gavin, and his family should have been given far more support and counselling than they did. Support for Jonathan too, and for Jenny Harrison." Mark said sympathetically.

"Harrison?"

"Their mother. None of them had it easy. Both fathers left her to it. If I'm not mistaken, Gavin's dad left Jenny when she was pregnant. I suppose she did her best raising two boys on her own, especially as one had a handicap. They were all treated very unfairly." Mark said.

"Do you think it's possible that Phillip and Helen could be dragging all this up to harm Jonathan? He's the only family member left here." Victoria asked.

"Helen, possibly. Like I said, I haven't seen Phillip for years so I've no idea what he was like." Mark's pager began beeping in his pocket. "You caught me at a bad time, Inspector."

"Victoria, please." Victoria smiled and hoped she didn't sound as awkward as she felt. "Thanks for your time. I know you're busy."

"Well I'm not always busy. Maybe we could talk properly over a drink, or something?" Mark smiled.

"C ... can I contact you?" Victoria stuttered for the first time in her life. "I have a few things to do." Mark took a card off his desk with the hospital number on it and added his own number in biro.

"Do all city detectives look like you?" He laughed and Victoria felt herself blushing!

"We'd have a force full of runts if they did." She smiled. "I'll be in touch." Victoria left the hospital feeling very giddy and a bit light headed. "Emotions, Lowry. Remember them?" She muttered to herself as she got in the car. She had a text from Alex, telling her that the DCI was looking for her. Victoria swore under her breath and looked at the feeble signal on her phone. She drove to the end of the road to the phonebox.

"Alex? Victoria. What does he want?" She sighed.

"You." Alex answered. "I told him you were talking to witnesses but he'll only have that for so long. You'd better show up at the station."

"Pain in the bloody arse." Victoria heaved. That would mean her missing her date with Mark. "OK, Alex, thanks. I'll call him now and get him off your back." She hung up and called the hospital first. She left an urgent message with the receptionist to give to Mark regarding her return to the city. Victoria chewed her lip and looked at the phone in her hand. Woods would probably have worked out where she was. He wasn't a stupid man. She grit her teeth and phoned the station.

"Lowry! Where the hell have you been?" The DCI barked.

"I'm stuck in traffic, sir." Victoria lied.

"Well get unstuck. Dennis Hilton has sent for you." Woods said and Victoria's temper rocketed.

"With respect, sir, I'm not retained, or paid by Dennis blasted Hilton. He doesn't send for me."

"Asked for you then. Save the pedantic crap Lowry! Get over to that prison." Woods snapped.

"On my way." Victoria threw the phone back onto its hook and swore horribly.

# Chapter 5

Victoria was more than surprised to find Alex at the prison.

"DCI Woods told me. He wasn't sure if Hilton was on his way out so I thought I'd better get out here incase you didn 't make it."

"Well I did make it. Is he still alive?" Victoria said irritably.

"Only just. He wouldn't even speak to me." Alex shrugged. Victoria turned to look at him and she was close to apoplexy. "Er ... what?"

"You shouldn't have even tried!" Victoria erupted. "He asked for me! He always asks for me! Understand?"

"Hey, OK. Keep you badge on." Alex said in surprise. "I told him who I was. I told him you were on your way ..."

"I don' care!" Victoria shouted. "Seven years I've been in his head. I know how it works. Anything he wanted to tell me could be gone now because he didn't get 'the real deal'. Yes he really is like that. Damn and blast it!" She pushed past Alex and the guard opened the door.

"Shame on you, DI Lowry." Hilton's voice was little more than a croaking whisper. He hadn't even the strength to open his eyes. "You know I only deal with the organ grinder, not the monkey."

"I wasn't in the area and I got here as soon as I could. DS McKenzie was here to tell you that I was coming." Victoria tried to keep the anger out of her voice.

"Horse shit. You lose Lowry. I'll be dead and you lose. Emily Jones stays with me. What will you tell her parents?"

"Nothing. I don't need to. Was it an achievement keeping Emily to yourself for five years?" Victoria saw a sick smile witch across Hilton's lips. "You're a piss poor amature, Hilton. I have one now who's been off the hook for thirty years." Hilton dragged his eyelids open to look at Victoria. "Thirty years, Hilton. Imagine how that feels. Now that's control. You're just a weak old man, shackled to a bed, and riddled with cancer. You fail because the Jones' don't need you. You're nothing." Victoria left the cell and took a few deep breaths. She had to support herself against the wall to stop herself from shaking. "Bastard."

"The Jones family has you, boss." Alex said gently. "You're right, they don't need him. Let the bastard die knowing he's worthless."

"You know much about the case?" Victoria sat down and Alex noticed how pale she looked.

"Some. I know that arsehole has made sure you've done nothing else for seven years. He's of no value, boss, not anymore. Sod him." Alex said. "I'm sorry for going in there. I was out of order and all this is way out of my depth. I'm sorry."

"I doubt he'd have told me where Emily is. He just wanted me to know that he wasn't going to tell me. I'd better go and show face at the station." Victoria rubbed her eyes and stood up.

"Leave your car and I'll drive. You look knackered and he hasn't helped. Seriously, boss, you need to slow down a bit." Alex said in concern.

"Thanks." Victoria managed a weak smile.

Victoria told Alex what she'd found out and Alex confirmed that Phillip Moore did have a class photograph in his box of belongings.

"It's quite an old picture so the lab lads are trying to clean it up a bit. It has markings on it and we're thinking it's the ones who are dead."

"I'd like to get a look at it." Victoria said.

"Well there's a copy of it on the computer. There's one on Moore's laptop too. I wonder if I could clean it up a bit on the computer?" Alex mused.

"Could you?" Victoria was quite impressed.

"Well I've done it with my own snapshots. Want me to try?"

"I certainly do. The labs could have that one for ages." Victoria nodded.

"OK. I'll have to call in at my flat for the editing software. It's on disc. Is that OK?" Alex asked.

"Absolutely. I could do with a bathroom break, if you wouldn't mind?"

"Of course not." Alex turned the car into the street where he lived.

"Nice area. Have you lived here long?"

"About six years. I bought the place with my ex. Well she wasn't an ex then, obviously. She's been out of the picture for two years." Alex explained.

"Oh I see. I'm sorry." Victoria apologised.

"I'm not." Alex laughed. "It all got a bit sour towards the end. Here we are." They pulled up in front of a ground floor flat and got out of the car.

"Doesn't it look better with the lights on? I'm always going home to a dark house and it's miserable." Victoria sighed.

"I have those automatic random switches." Alex opened the door. "Straight down the hall, second left."

"Thank you." Victoria turned round and bumped into a woman coming out of, presumably, a bedroom, seeing as the sitting room door was open.

"Mum!" Alex yelped. "Oh no. What are you doing here?"

"Just a bit of Hoovering." Mrs. Sally McKenzie smiled and her eyes smiled too. She was only the same height as Victoria but she was almost round. Her greying hair was tied up in a bun, and had clearly been the same colour as Alex's at one time. She looked at Victoria. "Hello sweetie."

"S ... sweetie! Mum this is DI Lowry. Feel free to use the bathroom, boss." Alex stammered in embarrassment. Victoria smiled in amusement and set off down the hall.

"That's a boss? Bosses didn't look like that in my day!" Sally's lovely Irish accent extended to her happy laugh.

"Keep your voice down mum! She's only in there!" Alex said desperately. "I called in for some computer stuff. I didn't expect you here."

"Aw! Am I in the way?" Sally chuckled and waddled into the sitting room. Alex cringed and hoped Victoria had developed spontaneous deafness. Victoria found all this very funny indeed. Poor Alex was embarrassed into a crimson hue. She'd never stopped to think about what her colleagues were like at home, probably because she was the same in both environments. This reminded her that most people had two separate lives.

"Here you go sweetie!" Sally deposited a tea tray on the coffee table and Alex looked round from the drawer he was rifling. He was absolutely mortified. "What's up with you? It's only tea."

"Mum we're actually work ..."

"Thank you, Mrs. McKenzie. I'd love one." Victoria came to the rescue.

Outside in the car, Alex was still cringing.

"I had no idea she was there." He said and Victoria smiled and nodded. "She doesn't always go around doing my housework and such." Victoria nodded again. "In fact, she hardly ever goes to my flat." Another nod. "OK but please don't mention this to the lads, I beg you." Victoria started to laugh, so did Alex. "Ah she's great is my mum and I love her to bits. She crops up in the most inconvenient places, though, and presumes everyone's up for a tea party."

"She's very nice. You look like her." Victoria complimented.

"Except I'm a foot and a half taller. She thinks I'm socially retarded and she also thinks I'm ten." Alex said flatly and Victoria laughed even more. "Not a word of this to this lot in here." He parked the car in the station carpark.

In the incident room, Victoria asked Brian to put Gavin Harrison through the computer. It returned a blank.

"We have this." Charlie handed her a letter. It was purposely badly written, possibly using the opposite hand.

*'I have you fucker. I know you fucker. Watch your back. Your back. - G.F.'*

"Get it down to the labs Charlie, see if they can lift any prints." Victoria said. "Anything else mentioning G.F?"

"Not as such. There's this though." Don handed her another letter. The writing was so bad that it was almost illegible. The lines were jittering and the words were jumping off the lines on the paper.

*'Phillip. I got one too. He's on to us and has been for months. We're going to die. We're going to be killed off like the others and that bastard up at the yard doesn't care. He threatened to set the dogs on me. He's close. I hear him and I know he's here. Who will he go for first? Me or You? Tell me what to do! ! ! - Helen.'*

"It's a solid link between the two of them." Alex pointed out.

"Just what I need for the DCI." Victoria nodded.

"He has pages and pages of notes he'd written himself and they were similar to that letter." Brian told her. "He was shit scared and as paranoid as hell."

"Helen Walby still will be." Victoria said bluntly. "Put Jenny Harrison in the computer, Brian. We need to know where the hell Gavin is. We'll plough through the boxes while Alex works on that photo."

"It's been ploughed through." Charlie said flatly. "We do know how to check evidence."

"I didn't say differently." Victoria looked at Charlie. "I'd like to go through it with you."

"So you couldn't do that when we went through it the first time? Some of us do have homes to go to." Charlie stuck his hands in his pockets.

"Charlie, enough man." Alex spoke up. "We're working a case, remember?"

"Chasing ghosts and looking for non existent links!" Charlie snapped. "You look through it if you like. I'm going to see my granddaughter." He headed for the door.

"Oi!" Alex got to his feet. "Just you hang on a ..."

"It's fine, Alex." Victoria said. Charlie turned round and looked challengingly at her. "Congratulations, Charlie."

"You being funny?" Charlie asked suspiciously.

"Do I strike you as having a sense of humour? Go and see your granddaughter." Victoria turned her attention to the box of evidence. Charlie looked at Alex who just shrugged his shoulders. Charlie left and closed the door.

Four hours later and the team had dwindled to Victoria and Alex. Alex had done his best with the photograph and it did look alot more defined. There were five dots over the heads of five pupils, one of which was Alison Bell. Presumably the other four were Phillip's dead classmates. It wasn't much use for identification, they were all children, obviously, but it could be enough for Woods to see that it did need further investigaion.

"There's information galore here but no clear patterns." Victoria was on the floor among the piles of papers and statements. "We have six dead classmates. Gavin Franks is associated with at least two of them, Phillip and Alison. Phillip and Helen were troubled by the same thing so Gavin Franks is probably associated with Helen too. I really do need to talk to her."

"I can't see Woods arguing with that. You have a link to Phillip Moore. I wouldn't mention Alison Bell and Gavin's trial though." Alex advised.

"Not yet, at least." Victoria agreed. "It's going in all directions. I need to speak with Jenny Harrison and re-question Jonathan Franks. I'll need to do that quickly before the DCI hauls my arse over the spikes."

"Well you can't do it at 10 at night." Alex picked up a pile of papers.

"Want to bet?" Victoria smiled.

"I'll rephrase that. It's home time, I have the car, and if you don't go and get in it I'll dob you in to Woods." Alex laughed and helped Victoria tidy up the office.

"I forgot about Charlie's daughter." She said ruefully.

"He was out of order." Alex said. "Yes I know he was eager to see the baby and all that but he's a DC and we're working. Apart from all that he wants to watch his mouth. He's not in a position to give you lip."

"He's a family man, Alex. His new granddaughter is the most important thing in the world to him just now. He felt a bit slighted when I wasn't sharing the enthusiasm. I bet you lot all congratulated him with gusto. I had to be reminded." Victoria rubbed her eyes.

"Look, boss, that isn't the point. He has no need to snap like that and certainly no right. A few manners wouldn't go amiss." Alex said firmly. "Come on. I've had enough of this place for today."

Victoria took a phonecall at 3am. Dennis Hilton was dead. Victoria replaced the receiver and stared at the shadows on her bedroom ceiling. He'd taken Emily with him. How could anyone be so evil? "Screw you, Hilton." Victoria said out loud. "Emily has me. You haven't taken her, you failure. I'll find her. I'll never stop until I find her. I'll find her and return her to her parents and I'll do it quietly and unnoticed. You won't even get a mention, you bastard." She gave up on sleep and headed for the shower.

Victoria took advantage of her 5am start at the station and made a few phonecalls. The task force for Emily Jones had been cropped to a bare minimum but it was still there. Victoria asked for the evidence to be re-examined and she also requested another set of searches. Woods would agree to that. He'd have to be seen doing something once the news of Hilton's death got out.

"I'll gladly see to it, ma'am. It's Sergeant Chris Green here, ma'am. The supermarket CCTV?"

"Sergeant Green! I thought the voice sounded familiar. We're still plodding along with the Phillip Moore thing. David Proctor was a great help to me. Thanks for sparing him." Victoria was actually quite pleased at this opportunity to stay in touch, as she's promised Constable Proctor.

"He's a good copper. He's on the Jones team too, with me."

"You don't know how pleased I am to hear that. At least I know you two will give it the attention it deserves." Victoria said truthfully.

"Of course we will. Thank you ma'am. Can I do anything else for you?" Sergeant Green asked.

"Finding that little girl would be nice."

"I'll see what I can do. Afternoon ma'am." Sergeant Green said affably and Victoria smiled and hung up.

Charlie was the first in, at 8am. Victoria was in the incident room with Phillip Moore's laptops.

"How are they both?" She asked.

"Who?" Charlie said gruffly.

"Your daughter and the baby." Victoria replied patiently.

"OK." Charlie shrugged. "I'd talk more if I thought you were really interested." He took off his jacket and picked up one of the boxes of notes. Victoria kept quiet. "Vikki."

"Er ... well Victoria if you like." Victoria said in surprise.

"Not you! The baby! Victoria Louise. Vikki." Charlie said in exasperation.

"Oh I see!" Victoria nodded. "Named after anyone? Double names sometimes are."

"Well not you." Charlie said rudely and Victoria bristled.

"No, I wouldn't have thought so seeing as I wouldn't know your daughter if I fell over her." She said testily. "Nevermind. I hope they're both doing well."

"The wife and his mother. The wife's called Victoria." Charlie muttered. Victoria persevered. This was like extracting teeth, slow and painful.

"I was named after two Queens. Victoria Elizabeth."

"I think I was named after the milkman. I never knew my dad." Charlie shrugged his shoulders. "Difference in folk, you see. I wasn't brought up, I was dragged up. Oldest of four and no bloke in sight. What were you? Only child? One of two? Two professional parents? Loads of money?"

"I was an only child, yes. I had a nanny ..."

"Nanny! Jesus wept!" Charlie snorted. "I'll never understand why rich folk have kids. Why have a kid to hand over to a bloody nanny? Pretentious shit."

"I had a nanny because my mother hung herself when I was seven." Victoria said bluntly. Charlie visibly flinched.

"Oh. Well I didn't mean that sort of nanny. That's different."

"I know." Victoria heaved a sigh. "Well I seem to have dragged that conversation into the pits of despair. I'll be in my office. Tell Alex to come in when he gets here." She took the laptop with her and closed the door.

Alex put in an appearance just before 9am. He tapped on the office door and peeped warily around

it.

"Alex. Dennis Hilton died last night. I was going to drive into the town today but I'll have to postpone that. I'm going to the Jones'"

"Do you want me to send a couple of the lads for your car, or do you want me to drive you?" Alex asked.

"If you can drive me to the Jones', we'll pick it up after that." Victoria said.

"Fine by me. Boss? Have you and Charlie had words?" Alex asked carefully.

"Nothing monumental. Don't worry about it." Victoria took her jacket off the back of the chair and put it on.

Alex waited in the car while Victoria went into the Jones' house. Alex could tell that her and Charlie had had words. Charlie had been ominously quiet and had a face like thunder. The DI was so difficult to read that Alex couldn't tell if she was annoyed with Charlie or not. He saw the door open, and Victoria came out. Mr. and Mrs. Jones stood on the step and held onto each other. One thing that wasn't hard to read was exhaustion. DI Lowry was drained both physically and mentally. She was far too pale and had telltale smudges under her eyes from lack of sleep.

"How did it go?" Alex asked as Victoria got in the car.

"Pretty abysmally. They only had two hopes and I'm the only one left now." Victoria said wearily.

"Don't describe him as a hope, he never was. You're the hope boss." Alex told her.

"Thank you." Victoria smiled.

"I've got something to ask you. God I feel like a prat. Just say no if you want to. I'll understand completely." Alex babbled.

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to ask me the question first?" Victoria laughed and noticed Alex's ears had gone red. "Alex?"

"It's my mother." Alex grimaced. "I tried and better tried to tell her you were my boss, and a very busy lady. Er ... well she wants you to come round for supper. It's fine though, really it is."

Victoria just looked at Alex in surprise. "I promised her I'd ask you. I told you, she thinks I'm socially inept. Tonight."

"Well I really am socially inept." Victoria said seriously and Alex snorted a laugh. "I'd like that, Alex. Thank you." Alex almost stalled the car.

"Yeah? That's great! I've no idea what she's cooking but she's overran my kitchen. She put me out." Alex laughed in relief.

"Did you think I wouldn't go because I'm the DI?" Victoria began grappling with her professional success versus social failure.

"Partly, yes. I didn't know your views on socialising with colleagues, for a start. My mum's a bit ...

old school ... boss. She has rather a flowery imagination. I did set her straight. I told her for all I know, you could have a six foot five hairy arsed bloke in the wings. That put it in perspective for her." Alex rolled his eyes. "Sorry." He smiled.

"Well it was very nice of her to ask me. I'm looking forward to it." Victoria smiled as Alex pulled into the prison carpark, next to Victoria's car. "I need to buy a few bits and pieces, then I'm going home for a nap. I didn't sleep well last night."

"I'd say not. There's nothing at the station that the lads can't handle. Go have a sleep and do not eat anything. Sally's used to catering for a full tribe." Alex said. Victoria laughed and went to her own car.

# Chapter 6

Victoria came close to cancelling her supper date, on quite a few occasions. She should have been in the town, or at the station, or ... something. She caught sight of her reflection, scowling at the phone.

"You look haggard, Lowry. You look like an old woman." She muttered. "Make-up. I know I have some somewhere." Victoria eventually found some years old make-up and the only dress she owned. It was a red summer dress with a purple stripe at the neck and she was quite surprised at how different it made her look. All she ever wore was professional style clothes. Her wardrobe consisted of trouser suits and smart blouses. Victoria picked up a bouquet of flowers and a bottle of wine, then left her house before she changed her mind.

"Hiya boss." Alex opened the door. "Come ... hell you look different."

"Yes, I have legs." Victoria handed the wine to Alex.

"Hello sweety!" Sally came bustling though from the kitchen. "Carnations! Oh you shouldn't have! I'll go and put them in water. Alex get the girl a drink, for goodness sake!"

"Yes mother." Alex rolled his eyes and made Victoria laugh. "My house!" He added quietly as his mother went into the kitchen. "She's made enough food to feed the entire station." He handed Victoria a glass of wine. "Come and sit up at the table. I'll go and see if she needs a hand." Soon they were all enjoying a huge roast beef dinner. The last full dinner Victoria had eaten was at a christmas party about eight years ago. Dinners for one seemed a bit pointless to Victoria.

"Alex you're useless." Sally said casually.

"For any reason in particular?" Alex asked in bewilderment.

"Well I can't call her Boss, can I? Neither should you out of hours." Sally pointed her fork at her son.

"OK. Detective Inspector Lowry, then." Alex smirked at Victoria.

"Victoria." Victoria smiled.

"Oo! I have a sister called Victoria. Your Aunt Victoria, Alex."

"Yes mum, I know she's my aunt Victoria. I'm sure the bo ... Victoria ... doesn't want to know about all ninety million members of our family." Alex shook his head.

"Charlie's granddaughter is called Victoria too. Vikki." Victoria said.

"Is she? He didn't tell me." Alex said in surprise.

"Why would he? You're a man." Sally observed.

"Huh? Well so is Charlie." Alex said in confusion.

"Yes but he's her granddad. It's different."

"Er ... yes OK." Alex gave it up as a bad job. "I'll chuck these through the dishwasher. You go and put your feet up, mother." Alex began clearing the table.

"Dishwasher." Sally snorted. "When you lot were growing up I was the dishwasher." Sally and Victoria went to sit on the couch with their drinks.

"That was beautiful, Mrs. McKenzie. Thank you."

"Sally and you're welcome. I know you police officers often forget to function outside of work. Look at Alex, he's a hermit." Sally laughed.

"It isn't the most sociable of jobs." Victoria agreed.

"Takes its toll on friendships." Sally said wisely. "There again, that harpy he was shackled up with is no big miss."

"I suppose it takes a patient partner." Victoria said awkwardly.

"You haven't found anyone either?" Sally asked and Victoria shook her head. "That's a shame."

"Mum, stop interrogating the guests." Alex glanced uncomfortably at Victoria.

"I'm not." Sally protested. "It's wrong for people of your age to be lonely and police work is a lonely job."

"I'm not lonely." He said awkwardly. One thing he did know about Victoria was that she liked her privacy.

"No because you're a voluntary hermit, Alex. You have friends but you choose to ignore them." Sally preached.

"Yes OK, mum." Alex grimaced. "Hey can you remember dad ignoring your sisters at that barbecue?" He steered the conversation away from lonely Victoria and onto a subject that his mother was certain to be distracted by. Victoria's estimation of her DS went up a few more points.

"He did." Sally laughed. "That was our Margie's fault. Oh she's the oldest." She nodded at Victoria who nodded back dumbly. "She organised a huge barbecue and didn't invite our Greg."

"Greg's my brother." Alex explained.

"Oh I see. I didn't know you had a brother." Victoria said, trying to keep up.

"One brother and four sisters." Alex smiled at the astonished look on Victoria's face. "All invited to Aunt Margie's do, except brother Greg. He was in disgrace for messing about with a married woman."

"Alex, you're telling it all wrong." Sally tutted. "She had a husband in the Isle Of Man and didn't tell

anybody, Greg included. Our Liz was going to slap her silly."

"Liz is the youngest sister." Alex laughed. "You still up to date?"

"Just." Victoria blinked a few times. "So are you the oldest?"

"No. Me and Greg are stuck in the middle. In descending order, Margaret, Jane, Greg, me, Kerry, Liz."

"Good grief." Victoria was in shock. "Here's my list. Me. End of list. I lost my mum when I was young and my dad was a DI. How dull."

"Your dad was a copper?" Alex said in surprise.

"He was shot during a drug's raid." Victoria explained.

"Ah that's a shame." Sally said sympathetically.

"Yes it is. Sorry boss." Alex agreed.

"My John passed in his sleep and I'm grateful for that." Sally said. "So you joined the force to follow in his shoes?"

"It seems so, yes." Victoria smiled.

"Well he would have been proud of you sweetie." Sally said sagely. "Alex will drive you if you want some more wine."

"No, I'm fine. I'm not the world's biggest drinker." Victoria declined. "Anyway, I'm sure Alex doesn't want to just sit there while we get sloshed."

"Taxis are easily ordered." Alex shrugged. "You're welcome to more wine, boss."

"I've had plenty, thanks. I should be getting going." Victoria said.

"Must you? We don't mind having you here." Sally offered.

"What's this 'we' mother? You don't live here remember?" Alex rolled his eyes.

"Thanks for the meal, Sally. It was fantastic." Victoria followed Alex to the door. "Thanks Alex."

"She didn't bombard you while I was in the kitchen, did she? She sees everyone as a waif and stray and she means no harm." Alex said.

"No of course she didn't." Victoria assured him. "See you tomorrow." She got into her car then started beating herself up. She hadn't realised she was so transparent. Sally McKenzie had her weighed up in no time. Victoria the loner with no friends. "Pity Party Lowry. You big drip." She cursed herself and drove home.

Victoria slept well, courtesy of the two glasses of wine. She really had enjoyed her evening but she knew she should have enjoyed it more and that was completely down to herself. Work was far easier to handle.

"I'll be going into the town as soon as I get the nod from the DCI." She told the men. "Alex, collect anything we might need. You're coming with me." She picked up her files and headed off to see Woods.

"We'll be at this forever." Brian grumbled, staring at his computer.

"Bloody desk work." Charlie snapped. "How come you get the day out and we're stuck in here?" He asked Alex. "Or need we ask. You must be getting something out of it."

"Hand me that folder please, Charlie." Victoria obviously hadn't gone as far out of the office as they presumed. Judging by her face, she'd heard what Charlie said. "Thank you." She took the file and walked away.

"I've had enough of this." Alex opened the door and looked up the corridor to make sure Victoria was on her way to the DCI's office. "You, mate, just watch your trap!" He pointed at Charlie.

"Hey! Who are you talking to?" Charlie said defensively.

"One of my Detective Constables and that was a Detective Inspector!" Alex snapped.

"She's a snotty kid playing cops and robbers!" Charlie shouted.

"For a DC, you can be really stupid, Charlie. Do you know what got her promoted? Any smart comments and you are out of here. No joke." Alex shouted back.

"Well she wasn't in our department." Charlie deflected.

"I'll take that as a no. Seven years sitting six feet from the vilest, sickest bastard this area has ever know. She was twenty eight years old when she was flung in at the deep end, and a very close range, on the Dennis Hilton case. You know that Charlie! The press were all over her because of 'lack of results'. Bull bloody shit! Hours, weeks, months, years listening to that twisted bastard until she got two confessions from him. Could you have done that? Could you have gone through not only the sickening hard evidence, but also Hilton's warped and perverted recollections of what he'd done? Could you, Charlie?"

"The evidence was enough without the confessions." Charlie said stubbornly.

"Try telling that to the families who'd lost everything." Alex had never felt so pissed off with anyone in his whole life. "Just as recently as last week, she got a third confession out of him. He killed Emily Jones. Do you know what he did a few days ago? I do, I was there. He summoned her just so he could tell her he'd take the kid's whereabouts to the grave with him. And he did. She also had to tell that family that their dead daughter is still rotting in the wilds somewhere. Could any of us have done that? She's a bloody good detective and she has more balls than the rest of us put together! She does not need your shit, Charlie! You think about it. You have a daughter too." Alex was quite out of breath.

"OK I catch your drift." Charlie said moodily. "Don't drag my family into it."

"Not nice is it? Make good of your desk work and think yourself lucky you aren't out there looking for dead children. You'll have to text our phones, the reception's shit down there." Alex left and banged the door behind him.

DCI Woods reluctantly accepted the link between Phillip Moore and Helen Walby.

"I had hoped this was going to be straightforward." He said.

"Police work never is." Victoria retrieved her notes from the DCI's desk.

"How are you getting on with Kennedy's lads?" Woods asked.

"Fine, sir. They're good workers." Victoria replied.

"You also have a uniform sergeant and a constable on the Jones case." Woods shuffled his notes.

"As part of a task force, yes." Victoria said, slightly defensively.

"Hilton's gone, Lowry. There's only so much you can take on. It's no good clinging to dead wood."

"I don't see it as dead wood, sir. I see it as hope and so do the Jones family. May I go?" Victoria stated rather than asked. Woods nodded her dismissal.

Alex and Victoria took Alex's car and set off for the town.

"You'll like the pub we're staying in. The Boatman's Arms. The proprietor cooks on the same scale as your mum." Victoria smiled. "You can book the rooms, if you would?"

"OK. What about you?"

"I'm going to see Mark. Mark Fielding, that is. Local doctor." Victoria watched the landscape as it sped by.

"Oh?" Alex thought he detected an overly casual tone. "Well it'll only take a few minutes to book rooms. I could come with you."

"No there's no need." Victoria shrugged.

"Fair enough. I'll stay at hotel, you take the car." Alex headed for the Boatman's Arms. Victoria shuffled over to the driver's seat and left Alex to see to the rooms. She was rather relieved to be by herself for a while. Why had that felt a bit awkward? She drove to the hospital and was eager to see Mark again.

"Victoria!" Mark spotted her as soon as she entered the building. "Great to see you back. You look fantastic." He said happily.

"Why thank you." Victoria smiled. "I'm sorry about cutting out the last time. An emergency cropped up."

"Oh don't worry about it. I know exactly how that is." Mark pushed open the office door. "I hope this visit isn't purely professional?"

"Just partially." Victoria felt very flattered at this attention. "I need to go and see Helen Walby. I know you can't discuss her as a patient, but I'd like to know how approachable she is."

"Well she's not dangerous, if that's what you mean." Mark said. "She's very highly strung and she flits from one subject to another, making it hard to keep up."

"So she won't feel intimidated by me? I don't want to panic her."

"I wouldn't have thought so, no. Just remember that she's somewhat paranoid and obviously the drink amplifies that." Mark said. "She lives in a bedsit over on Newark Street. It's the big corner house that's been converted into bedsits." Victoria made a note of it. "Now I think that dinner date has been postponed for long enough."

"I completely agree." Victoria smiled.

"My favourite restaurant is a little Italian place about half a mile out of town." Mark said and Victoria nodded eagerly. "I'll pick you up at the Boatman's." He rested his hands on Victoria's arms. "I'm not usually this spontaneous, you know. I've honestly missed you."

"You have?" Victoria was very pleased indeed. People often wondered where she was, or what she was up to, but no one ever missed her. Was that because Mark had linked to Victoria, and not DI Lowry? "Well it's great to see you too, Mark. I'm looking forward to dinner." Victoria left the hospital feeling the happiest she felt in a long time.

Victoria picked up Alex from the Boatman's Arms and they set off for Helen Walby's bedsit.

"So were Phillip Moore and the doctor mates?" Alex asked.

"Not quite that close, no, but they knew each other." Victoria answered.

"So what's he like?"

"Mark? Well he's a doctor." Victoria shrugged. "He's very nice, actually. He made good for himself then returned to his own town. He's a very popular man."

"Local hero." Alex commented.

"I suppose so. Just over here, I think. Briery House." Victoria pointed to rather sad looking building that badly needed a coat of paint. The house had a communal front door which was open, and inside there was a door to the left and the right marked as numbers 1 and 2. Victoria and Alex walked up a flight of stairs and found bedsit 3, and up another flight of stairs to get to Helen's bedsit, number 4. Alex rang the bell three times before any movement was heard.

"I hope she hasn't been on the bottle." Alex said.

"Me too." Victoria nodded as the door opened a few inches. "Miss Walby? I'm Detective Inspector Lowry and this is Detective Sergeant McKenzie. May we come in a moment, please?" Both Detectives showed Helen their badges and she pushed the door shut to take off the safety lock. The flat was like a bomb site. Overflowing ashtrays were balanced on every flat surface and empty cans and bottles were shoved into corners. Magazines and newspapers littered the floor and clothes were strewn over the backs of furniture. Helen was a mess. She was dressed in an oversized shirt and pyjama pants and her hair was tattered and unbrushed. Her red rimmed eyes darted from Victoria to Alex, and her hands shook as she lit a cigarette.

"Phillip, right?" Helen perched on the edge of a battered couch.

"You wrote to him before he died." Victoria said.

"It was either him or me. He's gone. I'm next." Helen muttered.

"What do you think is going to happen to you, Helen?" Victoria asked and Helen started to cry.

"Not think. I know. I'm going to die. I'm going to be killed. He's told me he's close and he is. He can see me."

"Who?" Victoria asked. "Helen, who is he?"

"Franks!" Helen sobbed. "Gavin Franks! Phonecalls, letters, and he's even been here among my things!"

"Have you seen him? We were told he'd be physically incapable of following anyone around unnoticed." Alex said.

"I don't need to see him! I've heard him and he's been here!" Helen clambered over to a scratched set of drawers. "See? See this?" She flung a letter at Alex. It was almost identical to the one received by Phillip, signed G.F.

"Can I keep this?" Victoria asked, and Helen nodded absently. "Helen why would Gavin Franks want to harm you and Phillip?"

"Oh god." Helen crumpled to the floor and sobbed heavily. Alex went to help her but Victoria stayed him with her hand.

"I saw the letter you sent to Phillip. You said there were others. Why would Gavin Franks be after you?"

"No! I can't tell. I can't tell you!" Helen wailed.

"You have to Helen! I need that reason. Was it Alison Bell?" Victoria asked and Helen went white, then nodded. Alex looked at Victoria in surprise. "Tell me, Helen."

"Gavin did kill Alison. He was acquitted but he did kill her." Helen said, fumbling under the sofa for a can of strong lager. "We were a gang, you see? We were kids. Gavin was older but he was a bit slow in the head. He wanted to be in the gang. He wanted us to accept him so he killed Alison and told us. He thought we'd be impressed. He told us about it. He said he hit her with a rock then buried her with branches."

"This is your class photo isn't it?" Victoria nodded at Alex who produced the photograph he'd cleaned up. Helen just nodded. "Can you tell me who's who?" Helen nodded again and blew her nose.

"That's Alison at the front there. This one here is Brian Fox. Carol Nixon is behind Alison and Denise Porter is beside her. Eric Summers is behind Brian and there's Phillip on the back row because he was so tall. That's me on the end next to Brenda Cobbs and Andrea Collins is the little one in front of Brenda."

"That's great, Helen. Just to clarify this, Gavin Franks told nine children that he'd killed Alison

Bell? You and eight others. Is that right?" Victoria asked carefully.

"Nine, yes. Six of them are dead. I'm next." Helen swallowed hard.

"And you think Jonathan Franks is covering for Gavin?"

"Of course he is. He always has done." Helen said in dejection.

"Helen, I'm leaving you my mobile number. The reception's awful round here but texting works."  
Victoria put her card in a gap on the coffee table.

"It won't do any good but thank you." Helen watched Victoria and Alex leave.

# Chapter 7

"This is surreal." Alex said in shock as they drove back to the Boatman's Arms. "Just how disabled is Gavin Franks?"

"According to most people, disabled enough. Jonathan isn't though." Victoria said.

"What? So you think Jonathan's doing this to protect Gavin?" Alex asked.

"He's done it all his life, Alex, including giving him an alibi for Alison's murder. We need to check on the whereabouts of Brenda Cobb and Andrea Collins." Victoria exhaled loudly.

"Be careful boss. The others were closed as accidents or suicides. Woods will haul you over." Alex reminded her.

"They said about Phillip Moore too. I know Helen Walby isn't the most rational of witnesses but come on! She gave us a list of ten and only three are still alive. You don't have to be a cynic to dismiss the idea of a coincidence." They parked the car outside the Boatman's and got out.

"Are we going to talk to Jonathan Franks?" Alex asked.

"We've got nothing to go with just now. He's a hard, shrewd man, Alex. If I go at him and I can't follow it through, we'll lose him" Victoria headed for the stairs.

"I'll grab a table for dinner." Alex said.

"I'm not eating here. I'm having dinner with Mark." Victoria called over her shoulder. "Grab a few pints, Alex, you've earned them."

"Do you want a table?" Margaret Ward was standing behind Alex with a menu.

"Yes please. Table for one." Alex shrugged.

Victoria realised why Mark had suggested driving himself. The road that lead out of the town was little more than a thin, winding dirt track and it was unlit. The beautiful restaurant seemed to shimmer into view from nowhere and it was as beautiful inside too.

"I love this place." Mark pulled Victoria's chair out for her. "I wouldn't know what to recommend because it's all good."

"I'll leave that up to you." Victoria smiled.

"I'll do my best." Mark picked up the menu. "How did you get on with Helen?"

"She's a wreck." Victoria said. Mark nodded and ordered for them both. "Gavin Franks crops up in everything. Is he as restricted as people are making out?"

"Almost certainly, as I told you. I'll have to get a couple of bottles of this wine. It's very good."  
Mark refilled the glasses.

"So he'll be dependent on someone, probably Jenny. He'd have to either live with her, or very close to her." Victoria reasoned.

"Well I've no idea about him in particular, I haven't seen him for years. I should think he could need a lot of help though." Mark nodded. "Food OK?"

"Yes it's fantastic. People keep feeding me lately. I'm going to be like a balloon." Victoria laughed.

"I doubt that. You look wonderful." Mark told her.

"Thank you." She smiled. "Mark would Gavin's disability affect his voice or his handwriting?"

"Victoria, he isn't here. You've seen for yourself how well known he is. He'd be recognised straight away by a hundred people." Mark assured her.

"That's why I asked about speech and handwriting."

"Handwriting, possibly. Speech would depend on his personal condition and I've no way of knowing that." Mark repeated.

"Do you think Jonathan would write letters on his behalf? I can't quite figure out that relationship." Victoria noticed that Mark was just looking at her so she automatically wiped her chin. "What?"

"Victoria, switch off." Mark smiled and refilled the glasses. "Seriously, give your brain a rest and enjoy your dinner."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bore you to death." Victoria sighed.

"You could never do that." Mark reached over and stroked her hand. "You do need to unwind though."

"I know. Sorry. No more cop talk. In fact, I don't know why I'm rattling on about it. I really do want to get to know you better." Victoria smiled.

"I can't believe my luck, actually. Women like you are almost certainly not single." Mark said.

"They are if they're in the police force." Victoria nodded. "I'm probably in the same boat as you. We're both single but with very demanding careers."

"So we'll both know what to expect." Mark raised his glass and Victoria joined him. "So have you delegated all your duties to your Sergeant? I heard he was here with you."

"Alex. No he's having a few pints in the Boatman's. We don't work all the time, you know. Um well they don't work all the time." Victoria rolled her eyes and made Mark laugh. "See why I'm a social failure? You've no idea."

"Well I'm quite a hermit too. Demanding job, like you say. Also it's different for me round here. All the girls I know here used to nick my dinner money and use my shoelaces for hair ribbons." Mark said grimly.

"I never thought of that." Victoria conceded. "What made you come back here to work?"

"I've always classed this as my home. I've never considered living anywhere else, even when I was away studying. I own the house too, so that's a big factor. All this property ladder stuff seems completely horrendous to me." Mark told her.

"You own it outright?" Victoria asked.

"Yes. It was left to me by my parents."

"Forgive me. I take it they're no longer here."

"Nothing to forgive. Mum went ten years ago and dad followed a year later. It was a long time ago, so talking about it doesn't upset me." Mark shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I have no parents either. We do have a lot in common, Dr. Fielding." Victoria commented.

"And I hope we find much, much more, DI Lowry."

Alex was closing the curtains in his room when he saw the car headlights. He saw a very good looking man get out of a Jaguar, then open the door for Victoria. He saw the talk, and the laugh, then the awkward stance. Alex closed the curtains.

"Shit happens, Alex." He sighed.

Victoria had a wino headache the following morning and eyed her huge breakfast with some trepidation. Alex got stuck into his with gusto.

"Nice night?" He asked conversationally.

"Fantastic. It's a lovely restaurant." Victoria decided on lots of tea instead. "We need to get the lads to track down Brenda Cobbs and Andrea Collins."

"Already done. I called in last night and got Charlie."

"Charlie? Why was he in late?"

"I think all the baby talk at home is getting to him." Alex laughed. "Actually he told me not to let you flog yourself to death over all this."

"Right. I bet he did." Victoria smiled.

"Seriously. Yes he did. He's not a bad bloke under all that male bluster." Alex said.

"I'll take your word for it."

"DI Lowry? Phonecall in the lobby for you. It's Dr. Fielding." Margaret waved from the door.

"Damn. My phone's upstairs." Victoria got to her feet. "Help yourself to my breakfast Alex." She hurried to the public phone in the lobby.

"Crappy reception." She heard Mark swearing. "Victoria!"

"Mark, are you OK?"

"I'm fine. Victoria, Helen Walby's here. She was ran down in the street this morning." Mark sounded very upset and Victoria was horrified.

"Run down? Accidentally?"

"Someone mowed her down and drove off." Mark said.

"Shit! OK, Mark I'm on my way. Thanks." Victoria threw the phone onto its hook and ran to the dining room for Alex.

Mark met them in the hospital foyer.

"She's all patched up and awake." He said, leading the way to Helen's room. "It could have been alot worse, Victoria. The car knocked her over the railings by the school. The fence probably saved her life."

"What time was this, Dr. Fielding?" Alex asked.

"Around six this morning. She'll tell you the details herself. She has a double fracture on her left arm and a broken collar bone. She's got a few stitches too and a host of bruises and smaller cuts. As I said, it could have been alot worse." Mark opened the door and Victoria winced. Poor Helen was black and blue and a mess.

"Didn't I tell you?" She said weakly when she saw Victoria. "Didn't I? Now do you believe me?"

"I'll be in my office. Helen, it's OK. You're safe." Mark squeezed Victoria's shoulder and left quietly.

"Shit. Helen what happened?" Victoria dragged her chair to the bedside.

"He tried to kill me! Jesus! I keep telling you this!" Helen cried.

"Are you telling me that Gavin Franks was driving the car that hit you?"

"Who else would it be?" Helen said in despair.

"Helen, listen to me. This is vitally important. Did you see Gavin Franks driving the car that hit you?" Victoria spoke very clearly.

"No." Helen whispered miserably. "I didn't see anyone. The car hit me from behind while I was on the pavement. I was taking bottles to the recycle bin. I decided to give myself a shake and clean up my flat! Now see what's happened!"

"It's OK Helen, you're safe here and Mark's right outside." Victoria tried to reassure the poor woman.

"I've known Mark since we were kids. He likes you, Inspector. He's mentioned you a few times." Helen managed a smile.

"Well he's a good man, you already know that. You've no need to be frightened here." Victoria held

Helen's hand. "What can you remember about it?"

"Not alot. I'm useless. It was still quite dark and like I said, the bastard hit me from behind. I think the car was purple or red. I'm sorry. I've tried really hard to remember more." Helen looked at Victoria.

"It's fine. You should rest. If you do want to talk a bit more, just tell Mark to send for me." Victoria smiled at Helen, then left the room with Alex. "And that has sorely pissed me off." She said angrily.

"I'll go down to the school and take a look." Alex said.

"Take the car. I'll catch you up." Victoria said and watched Alex leave before going to Mark's office.

"Here get this down you." Mark gave Victoria a cup of hot tea. "Poor Helen."

"I should never have left her alone in that state." Victoria snapped. "OK reassure me here, Mark. Gavin Franks would not be able to drive a standard car. Am I right?"

"Absolutely right. Even if his condition hadn't worsened from the last time I saw him, he wouldn't be physically capable of driving a car and he'd never have obtained a license. It wasn't him, Victoria. It just isn't possible." Mark confirmed.

"How far would Jonathan go to protect Gavin?"

"I honestly don't know." Mark shook his head. "Jonathan's a hard man, Victoria. My opinion is that he'd be more inclined to protect his name and business than Gavin. That's just my opinion though, I've no way of backing that up."

"I know." Victoria nodded. "I need to talk to him again."

"Victoria, Jonathan is a hard man and he has a vile temper." Mark was very worried about Victoria, and it showed.

"I'll take Alex with me." Victoria smiled. "Are we still on for dinner tonight?"

"I'm looking forward to it." Mark kissed the top of Victoria's head and opened the door for her. Alex got out of the car when he saw Victoria walking down the road.

"Red paint flakes." He nodded towards the twisted metal railings. "You can even see the paint from here."

"It hit that with a hefty bang, didn't it?" Victoria observed.

"Like the doc said, she was bloody lucky." Alex and Victoria got in the car. "Jonathan Franks' yard, or paint samples to Sergeant Mitchell?"

"Jonathan Franks." Victoria told him. "I'm getting nowhere fast here and it's frustrating me."

"So what are we working on. Gavin is up to something, even if it is only verbal and written. The people are starting to make noises so Jonathan comes to the rescue. Is that about right?" Alex said.

"Not necessarily but it's possible." Victoria nodded.

"Do you think Gavin did have something to do with Alison's murder afterall?" Alex asked.

"Well I don't know how far I'd get with that one. It's a thirty year old closed case. He was acquitted and backed up by his family and the medical profession." Victoria shrugged her shoulders.

"Why would he confess to that?"

"Like Helen said, he wanted to be accepted. He was an outcast. Even the reminder of a false confession could be enough to cause embarrassment to Jonathan." Victoria and Alex got out of the car outside Franks' yard. One end of the site was fenced off and held quite a number of vehicles.

"You see that?" Alex said as they walked past the compound.

"Yes I do. One dented red Vauxhall Astra." Victoria marched into Jonathan Franks' office.

"What the hell is this?" He demanded, getting to his feet.

"Where were you at six o'clock this morning Mr. Franks?" Victoria asked.

"Why? I've had enough of this shit." Jonathan shouted.

"Why? Because Helen Walby was mowed down in the street by a red car and you have a dented and scratched red Astra in your yard. I'll ask you again. Where were you at six o'clock this morning?" Victoria repeated.

"It's a bloody construction yard!" Jonathan roared. "Cars get dented and scratched all the bloody time! That's why they're old second hand jobs and not new ones."

"So you're sure that the paint sample DS McKenzie took from the school railings won't match that Astra in your yard?" Victoria pointed out of the window.

"Look, DI Lowry. Those are company cars, pool cars. They're used by all my workers all of the time. At six this morning I was in bed. I started here at eight. Satisfied?" Jonathan snarled.

"Not by a long way." Victoria snarled back. "Where was that car at six and who was in it?"

"How the hell should I know? I don't follow them around!" Jonathan bellowed.

"So an organised businessman like yourself, doesn't keep records on who takes out company cars? Time sheets? Milage? Petrol?"

"No I don't." Jonathan sat down and folded his arms. "I make the business rules here because it's my business. That isn't one of them. You obviously aren't here to arrest me, so excuse me DI Lowry. I'm a very busy man."

"You haven't asked Helen's condition." Victoria said and Jonathan looked sharply at her. "It was a hit and run, Mr. Franks, and you haven't even asked if she's alive or not."

"Is there a reason why I should? The woman is of no direct interest to me. If I was to adopt a burning compassion for the welfare of everyone in the town, I'd have to swap careers and go into counselling. Good day, Detective Inspector Lowry!"

"Thank you, Mr. Franks." Victoria left the office and Alex followed. "Bullshit! He's lying his arse off. You mention a hit and run to anyone and they automatically ask about the victim. It's human nature." She yanked open the car door and flung herself into it.

"We need these paint samples away. I'll split the sample between Mitchell and our lads." Alex said and Victoria nodded. "Are we staying down here or returning to the station?"

"I want to be here. I've annoyed Jonathan Franks and annoyed people do rash things. Go and give Mitchell his samples." Victoria looked at her phone when it beeped. It was a text from Mark saying 'call mobile if you can, if not we'll have to miss dinner'. She heaved a sigh of sheer annoyance and followed Alex into Mitchell's station to use the phone.

"Victoria I'm stuck at work." Mark told her. "I'll be here until around eight o'clock."

"You're at work now? The reception's pretty good." Victoria had never been able to get a signal anywhere at all in the town.

"I am yes. I'm hanging out of a fourth floor window in the female nurses quarter. Don't laugh." Mark laughed. "It's the only place for miles where you can get a signal. Anyway! About dinner? I'll order a takeaway and we'll eat up at my house. Yes?"

"It sounds great. Are you sure? Won't you be tired?"

"No. The time factor is what I was thinking of. See you up at the house at eight thirty?" Mark suggested.

"Fantastic, yes. Oh and get out of the nurses quarters or I'll come up there and arrest them all." Victoria laughed and hung up. Alex met her in the foyer.

"He says it could take a while, whatever that means. He was grumbling about it getting in the way of real police work." He smiled.

"Good job we kept some then." Victoria rolled her eyes. "Right! Boatman's via that clothes shop in town."

"Dinner again?"

"Yes and I need clothes. I always look like a copper no matter what I wear." Victoria grumbled.

"Nah. You didn't look like a copper when you had dinner at my flat." Alex reminded her.

"Would you believe that's the only dress I own?"

"Drop me off at the road end." Alex laughed. "You're not getting me in any clothes shops."

# Chapter 8

Despite Mark's extended work day, he'd still managed to set the scene in his house. The house itself was quite beautiful. It was a three story stone building with ivy covered walls and was surrounded by small gardens. The dining room was candlelit and the table was laid out perfectly. Victoria's idea of a takeaway was sitting on the couch with the foil containers. The meal itself was like no takeaway Victoria had ever had, it was more like something from a top class menu.

"You shouldn't have gone to all this trouble, especially after a long day at work." Victoria finished her meal and felt fit to burst.

"I don't mind. It's just a few candles." Mark smiled. "Go through into the lounge and open a bottle of wine. I'll get rid of this lot." He began clearing the table and Victoria went into another beautiful room. It was decorated in dark, soft colours and had an open coal fire.

"Long time since I saw one of those." She said as Mark came in.

"Ah now that was hard work. I was as black as a crow." Mark sat next to Victoria.

"This is a lovely house, Mark."

"It is. I'd never leave it. You're going to patronise me now and ask how I keep it like this all myself, aren't you?" Mark smiled.

"No! Well yes." Victoria laughed.

"Well there's only me in it. Simple eh?" Mark shrugged.

"I still don't understand that. You're attractive, you're well mannered, you're professional, comfortably off, own house and car. So why is there only you in it? I know the job's demanding, but even so." Victoria looked around the lounge.

"Did I mention the local girls?" Mark reminded her.

"You did. All this and you is enough to reel them in from afar." Victoria complimented.

"I don't know." Mark shrugged. "I'm not a total monk but I've never actively sought out a partner. I take it as it comes. Or at least I did. I'm pretty taken up with you, Victoria." He stroked her hair.

"I don't see why. I'm hardly the most approachable of people." Victoria said.

"You value your privacy, it's different. I don't mind that at all." Mark told her.

"You make it sound like I have things to hide."

"That isn't what I meant."

"I know." Victoria smiled and put her arms round Mark. "I'm actually a pretty open book. It's just

not a very interesting book."

"I'm sure we could fill in a few pages." Mark suggested and Victoria felt her pulse rate increase. "In my medical opinion, you've had too much to drink to drive back to the Boatman's."

"In my legal opinion, I agree with you."

Victoria was almost in tears as she curled up next to Mark among the pillows and bed sheets. She was only thirty five, yet she'd started to forget what this should feel like. How could she have frozen her feelings like that for all those years? How could she have forgotten that she was a woman? Mark Fielding had probably saved her from herself.

Victoria's copper body clock still woke her at the crack of dawn. She watched Mark as he slept next to her. She couldn't ever remember feeling as happy as this in her whole life. Victoria smiled and slipped out of bed to shower. Twenty minutes later and Mark was still sleeping. The previous night, she'd felt a hefty scar on Mark's back and now she could also see it. It was a sizeable dent and actually hollowed up under his shoulder blade.

"Hello gorgeous." Mark smiled and rolled onto his side.

"I borrowed your shampoo." Victoria said.

"Accident when I was nine. I ended up impaled on the church railings." He said and Victoria felt embarrassed for being caught staring.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been studying you."

"No need to apologise." Mark sat up. "It's a scar, that's all. Does it upset you?"

"What? No of course it doesn't." Victoria sat on the edge of the bed. "It must have been a nasty injury."

"It was, yes. The railing punctured my lung and it collapsed." Mark told her.

"That could have killed you!" Victoria said in horror.

"It tried." Mark grinned and started to get dressed. "I don't remember alot about it, really. I remember us all climbing along the wall, then the pain, then the panic because I was being left behind."

"They left you behind?" Victoria said in shock.

"We weren't supposed to be there. Private property. I believe the vicar's cleaning lady found me and called the ambulance. Oh don't look so distressed! It'll take more than an old railing to see me off." Mark caught Victoria by the waist. "Should we both call in sick?"

"Oh I wish. The boss will have half the CID down here looking for me." Victoria laughed. "Actually, I have to drive back to the city today."

"Do you have to?" Mark kissed her neck.

"I wish I didn't, but yes." Victoria smiled. "What time do you start?"

"Right now if you like." Mark grinned.

Alex was on the phone in the lobby when Victoria got back to the Boatman's Arms. She gave him a little wave and went to sit in the bar, which was closed at that hour.

"Nice evening?" Alex asked, when he'd finished on the phone.

"Lovely, thanks. Maybe I should have phoned to tell you I wasn't returning. I'm sorry." Victoria apologised.

"No need. You're entitled to time off and I'm not your mother." Alex shrugged his shoulders. "I had a few pints and a game of darts with the bloke from the post office. Nice chap. Anyway, the lads dug up an address for Brenda Cobbs. If we're driving back today, I'll go and see her myself."

"Yes we are. Go and get your stuff together and we'll set off straight away."

Victoria let Alex drive and blamed the wine for her drowsiness. She doubted she'd ever build up a tolerance to alcohol.

"Doc Fielding seems like a decent bloke." Alex said conversationally. "His name cropped up in the pub last night. Not a bad word to be said about him from anyone."

"I'm pleased. What was that about not being my mother?" Victoria smiled.

"Eh? No! No I wasn't checking up! I said you were having dinner with the Doc and it went from there." Alex said defensively. Victoria smiled again. "Seriously, boss, you do look a hell of a lot better lately. You can't spend every minute of your life working, especially not after the last case you had for so long."

"Thanks Alex. You're concerned aren't you? The effect the Hilton case had on me worries you?" Victoria was slightly confused at this.

"I've seen cases crack officers up big style and they were officers older and more battlescarred than you. The welfare of my friends is always a concern to me." Alex told her and didn't realise how impactful that was to Victoria. He'd just reminded her that real friends still existed.

"You're a good man, Alex. I'm pleased you class me as a friend." Victoria said awkwardly.

"Friend enough to care. Get over it." Alex smiled sideways at Victoria.

Victoria had to look twice at the incident room, and at the lads. They'd obviously cleaned and tidied the place regularly, even in her absence. It seemed like they'd decided to make the best of a bad job and invest in shirts and ties that were a bit less '70s reject'.

"Can you sign these please boss?" Brian handed her some paperwork.

"Yes of course." Victoria sat at a desk. "Don, Alex has some paint samples. Can you get them down to the labs and tell them to push them through, please?" Don nodded. "Oh and take this too." She gave him Helen's G.F letter. "Here you go Brian."

"Er ... boss?" Brian looked at the papers. "You've signed these 'Gavin Franks'."

"I've what? For crying out loud!" Victoria rubbed her eyes. "I'm sorry Brian. Give them to me and I'll re-type them for you."

"No need. I can easily do it." Brian shrugged. "You OK?"

"Tired." Victoria said.

"Well you should go to sleep at night eh?" Alex piped up. "Go on home for a few hours. I'll go and see Brenda Cobbs and call you later."

"No. I don't need to go ..."

"Typical bloody woman." Charlie heaved. "Stop arguing! Hell I wish he'd let me go home."

"No chance Charlie. Drive carefully." Alex handed Victoria the car keys. Victoria accepted them and decided that a few hours rest was probably a good idea after all. Alex watched her leave the office. "Nice one lads! I'm impressed. You aren't up to anything, are you?"

"Nah." Charlie sniffed. "Like you said, the kid's had some pretty crappy stuff to deal with."

"Yes she has." Alex looked suspiciously at Charlie. "This isn't a wind up, is it? Seriously, it wouldn't be a good idea."

"Listen to you!" Charlie snorted. "No wind up. OK? She's getting results here from bugger all and she's getting them by grafting. That's OK in my book."

"Fair enough." Alex laughed. "How's the baby?"

"Noisy." Charlie grumbled. "Actually, the wife's organising the christening and she's invited you lot."

"That's very nice of her Charlie. Tell her I'd like to go." Alex told him.

"No! Well yes, yes I'll tell her. What about the DI?" Charlie said in concern.

"Is she not invited?" Alex asked stupidly.

"I don't know if to ask her, really. Will she want to go? I don't want her, and you lot, to think I'm arse-kissing. I'm not."

"Charlie no one will think that for buggery's sake. You'd have asked Tony if he was still here." Alex said.

"Well yes, he was one of the lads." Charlie nodded.

"It's no different, Charlie. We just haven't known her as long, that's all. You wouldn't really just leave her out, would you?" Alex smiled.

"No, I suppose it would look a bit bad. I'll tell the wife and she can get on with it. I can't bloody do all this stuff." Charlie grumbled and turned his attention back to his paperwork.

Victoria looked at the letter in her hands. It had been hand delivered and only had DI Lowry written on the envelope.

*'Stay away bitch. Stay out of it. It has nothing to do with you so back off bitch. G.F.'*

"So much for sleep." Victoria put the letter in a plastic bag and set off back to the station.

Charlie blinked at Victoria in surprise when she walked back into the incident room.

"Now that's what I call a power nap." He said. "You just missed Alex. He's gone to see the Cobbs woman."

"Yes I know. I need this down the labs Charlie." Victoria handed him the letter and he read it.

"You just got this?"

"Well it was on my floor and hand delivered so I don't know." Victoria shrugged.

"You want to be careful, boss. I'll get it to the labs." Charlie nodded.

"Boss? DCI Woods wants you." Brian had the phone in his hand.

"You going to tell him about this?" Charlie held up the letter.

"He'll find out in time." Victoria answered vaguely and responded to the summons.

"It's all a bit circumstantial." DCI Woods said, pressing his fingertips together.

"I have the paint samples." Victoria nodded. The DCI looked unimpressed. "Sir I have an avalanche of information and it all relates to that town and its events. All I need is one thing to click into place and the rest will follow." Victoria tried and DCI Woods was looking evenly at her. "Oh come on sir! Something is obviously wrong there and all I need is something to solidify and I'll find out what."

"I don't have much here to keep it CID. We don't have the resources to ... excuse me please." The DCI paused to answer the phone. He listened, then looked at Victoria. "Yes, I see. Thank you Charlie." He hung up and frowned. "Alex called in. He found Brenda Cobbs half gassed to death in her home. She's in hospital. Suicide attempt?"

"Another one? How odd." Victoria's sarcasm was dulled by her feeling of shock.

"You have days rather than weeks, Lowry. Turn something up or it goes to Uniform." DCI Woods nodded and Victoria hurried out of the office.

Charlie was waiting in the corridor with Brenda Cobbs' details.

"Alex said to meet him at the hospital, boss. You need anyone with you?"

"I'll drive straight there. I'll be fine. Thanks Charlie." Victoria smiled and headed for the doors. Alex was in the City Hospital waiting room with a cup of coffee when Victoria arrived.

"What happened?"

"I got no answer when I knocked a few times so I looked through the window and saw the television was on. I went round the back of the house to see if she was there. She wasn't but her washing on the line was drenched. I looked through the back kitchen window and saw her lying on the floor, oven door open. I put the door window in with my elbow and unlocked it from the inside. There were rolled up towels across the bottoms of the two doors in the kitchen. She has a cut on her head and there was a blood smear on the table, so it looks like she hit it as she fell." Alex exhaled loudly. "I was as sick as a dog and I was only in there ten minutes. Here's the Doc." Alex stood up and introduced Victoria to Dr. Hilary Paige.

"She's still unconscious. I'm keeping her in Intensive care due to her asthma."

"She has asthma?" Victoria grimaced.

"Indeed. It could have been much worse for her. I'm waiting for her test results but even the dose she had could be fatal if it aggravates her asthma." Dr. Paige explained.

"Had she been lying in there long?" Victoria asked.

"Half an hour to an hour. It's hard to be accurate due to the asthma."

"And the bang on the head?" Victoria said.

"Contributed to her condition, obviously." Dr. Paige nodded. "I'll let you know when she pulls round, but I can't let you go in. There wouldn't be any point anyway. She's still unconscious."

"Here's the station number." Victoria handed the doctor a card. Dr. Paige took it then excused herself.

"I'd say she was in there over an hour, maybe closer to two." Alex said and Victoria looked at him for an explanation. "It started raining half an hour before I got here. I noticed the time because I was thinking about my mother who had a hair appointment at that time. I told her I'd give her a lift if I could so I'm in for an earbashing." Alex shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "Brenda Cobbs was obviously unconscious before that time otherwise she'd have brought her washing in."

"Nice work Detective Sergeant." Victoria smiled. "I was thinking of the washing too, but for a different reason. If you're contemplating suicide, you don't do your laundry first, do you? Nor do you block the doors with towels, turn on the gas, then just stand there waiting to collapse and hit your head on the way down. You said there was blood on the table so she did hit her head on the way down but the towels and the oven came later, after she was knocked out." Victoria frowned for a few seconds then took out her mobile phone to call the station. "We need something solid, Alex, otherwise the DCI is going to take it off me. Charlie? Did you get an address for Jenny Harrison? Yes I'll wait." She took out her car keys and Alex walked towards his own car. "Oh I got a G.F letter. Charlie? Yep, got that. Thanks." Victoria hung up and opened the car door.

"Hey!" Alex barred her way. "He sent you a letter?"

"Basically telling me to back off. The lab lads have it."

"So he knows where you live?" Alex said in annoyed disbelief. "Did you get a couple of uniforms to watch your house?"

"No. I drove straight back to the station, then straight here." Victoria sighed heavily.

"Yes well you can drive straight back there and get them on to it. I'll follow you. Then we take my car and go and see Jenny Harrison." Alex said flatly.

"Is that an order?" Victoria smiled.

"Oh don't you pull rank with me, DI Lowry." Alex sniffed. "See you at the station."

# Chapter 9

It was quite a long drive to the home of Jenny Harrison, and it was in the opposite direction to the town. It took Alex an hour and a half to get there. Jenny lived on an estate made up from small houses at one end, and blocks of flats at the other, she lived in a second floor flat in the middle of the estate.

Jenny Harrison was not what Victoria had expected. She was precisely dressed in bright colours and wore a few items of heavy gold jewellery. Her hair was permed and set and her make up was in place too. Victoria had expected a more demure individual.

"Are you lot ever going to leave us alone?" Jenny said angrily, as they stood in the tidy flat. "Why the hell do you think we moved up here? Just leave us alone."

"I have to know where Gavin was earlier today, Mrs. Harrison." Victoria said and Jenny started to laugh. "Does he live with you? Maybe I could ask him myself."

"No he doesn't and even if he did I wouldn't let you lot pester him!" Jenny snapped. "Whatever it is you're investigating, you're wrong. Save yourself an embarrassment darling, and don't bark up this tree."

"I have seven deaths and two suspect accidents. Gavin has cropped up time after time and I have two claims of him terrorising victims." Victoria said evenly. "Apparently Gavin told a gang of kids that he'd killed Alison Bell with a rock and these people are now being pursued."

"Bullshit!" Jenny shouted. "Pure bullshit! You don't have anything on Gavin, not one single scrap! You don't even know what the hell you're talking about! Rock? You little fool. Alison Bell was strangled!" Victoria grit her teeth and felt her blood pressure soaring. "Go on! Get the hell out!" Jenny Harrison pointed at the door and Victoria left, Alex following.

"How the hell was that overlooked. Shit." Victoria leant against the stair railings.

"Quite an oversight." Alex agreed. "We'll ask around. The locals should know where Gavin is."

"I know too." Victoria nodded down the stair well. A ground floor flat had its door just in front of the main doors. They'd already passed it once. Strong iron rails were bolted to the wall on either side of it and the door threshold was elongated to form a gradual ramp. Victoria was just about to knock on the door when Jenny came rushing down the stairs in a frenzy.

"No!" She screeched, pushing in front of Alex. The door moved open a few inches. "For the love of god, leave him be. You're wrong about him! Can't you just leave him alone?"

"Excuse me, please." Victoria pushed the door open further and Jenny started to cry and stood aside. Gavin Franks was strapped into a customised wheelchair that was facing a television set. He blinked and grinned occasionally at the cartoon show, but he didn't even realise anyone was in the room with him. Victoria noticed his deformed arm and leg, and also a dead droop to the left side of his face.

"Are you satisfied?" Jenny sobbed from the door. "He's been here for years. Ask his warden. This block of flats is under a sheltered housing scheme. Get out! You've done enough."

Victoria sat in the car and felt like screaming, a frustration shared completely by Alex. "Well everyone did tell us it couldn't be Gavin." Victoria sighed heavily. "I want my hands on Jonathan."

"We don't have anything on him, boss." Alex reminded her. "We don't have enough to lift him and we don't have time to start from scratch from a different angle."

"Umm time." Victoria squinted out of the window. "You up for a trip to town?"

"Where the DCI can't contact you?" Alex smirked.

"Not my fault the phone reception's rubbish." Victoria shrugged. "We're looking for a straw to clutch, Alex. Let's hope Stan Mitchell has something from those paint samples."

"You're not seriously pinning it all on that are you?" Alex looked at Victoria and she frowned at her knees. "Doc Fielding?" She nodded.

"If I get taken off the case I'll have to stay clear of the place for a while. I'd just like to explain. Sorry Alex, I shouldn't expect you babysitting me while I sort out my personal life."

"Not totally accurate. Even though Gavin is disabled and immobile, someone sent you that letter. Professional security, boss." Alex nodded. Victoria appreciated it and felt very relieved.

It was approaching evening by the time Alex and Victoria arrived at the police station in the town. Stan Mitchell was about to lock up and go home when Victoria interrupted him.

"Nothing yet." Stan shrugged his shoulders. "Things like that take time around here."

"You have sent them?" Victoria asked testily.

"Like I said, these things take time. Anything else?" Stan obviously resented Victoria's manner. Victoria gave him a withering glare and returned to the car. "He hasn't sent them." She snapped at Alex.

"Do you want me to go and play hell with him?" Alex suggested.

"What's the point." Victoria stated gloomily. "Drop me off at Mark's, if you would, Alex. Will you book the rooms at the Boatman's?"

"No problems. I'll harass Charlie about the samples we have, discretely of course." Alex smiled.

"Well only if you can be bothered. I couldn't be bothered, I know that, and if I can't be bothered, I wouldn't expect you to be either." Victoria was getting very depressed indeed.

"Just get in there and see the Doc." Alex ordered, pulling up outside Mark's house. Victoria managed a smile at Alex and got out of the car. Mark must have heard the engine, because the curtains moved, then the door opened.

"Hey!" Mark beamed and came walking down the path. "How did you know I'd be home?"

"I didn't." Victoria hugged Mark.

"Well I am and I'm glad. Come in." Mark steered Victoria into the house. He'd been doing paperwork and it was scattered all over the sitting room floor. Mark quickly collected it up and excused himself while it took it upstairs out of the way. Victoria took off her jacket and sat on the couch, watching the shifting flames in the fire. "You OK?" Mark was back.

"Not really. The case has hit a brick wall, Mark. I'm not sure how long I'll be able to keep hold of it. If I get taken off it, I'll be professionally obliged to stay away from the place."

"Oh no." Mark said in dread. "That's a bit rough, isn't it? So will you get some sort of black mark against you, or something?"

"No, nothing like that." Victoria smiled weakly. "I was thinking more along the lines of not being able to see you as often as I want."

"What?" Mark said in alarm. "So you won't be able to come here at all? That can't be right, surely?"

"No. No I won't be banned from the place. Nothing like that. I'll have to keep a distance to allow the other officers to do their jobs. That's all." Victoria tried to sound reassuring.

"But we're OK? Me and you? The city isn't at the other end of the world, Victoria. I'm sure I can find my way there if I use a map." Mark said urgently.

"You'd better." Victoria smiled. "Be warned though, I'll have heap of reports to hand over. I didn't want to just vanish on you."

"I'll still be here after your reports, and after the case." Mark kissed her nose. "I'll sit here forever waiting for you."

"Forever? I'll retake the bloody case by brute force if they take that long." Victoria laughed. "Can we make the most of it while we're still here?"

"Every single second of it."

Mark gave Victoria a lift to the Boatman's the following morning and gave her the best news she'd heard for a while. Helen was being released from hospital with an array of outpatients appointments, and a nurse to visit her every other day. Despite that good news, Victoria felt a big wrench when Mark drove off in his car.

"All sorted?" Alex was standing behind her.

"Yes." Victoria smiled and wandered into the Boatman's. "Helen's out of hospital today."

"That's good news. Do we need to see her again?" Alex asked.

"No, I don't think so." Victoria sighed. "We need to start winding down. Paint samples? Or couldn't you be bothered." She smiled.

"Well it matches a red Astra. Actually it matches about five hundred red Astras, according to the paint batch." Alex said apologetically.

"Bloody wonderful." Victoria heaved. "Come on, we'll go and tell Mitchell about Helen. Maybe he can keep an eye on her."

Stan Mitchell was very offhand with Victoria.

"I don't have dozens of men, DI Lowry. I can't post a watch outside of Helen Walby's flat."

"I wasn't suggesting you did. She was ran down, Sergeant Mitchell. She's entitled to a little bit of interest and attention from you." Victoria said patiently.

"So it's still CID?" Stan asked uncertainly.

"Have you been told differently?" Victoria watched Stan carefully.

"Just hearsay." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Look, Sergeant Mitchell, I understand that could possibly be utterly fed up with me marauding all over your patch, but yes, it's still CID and will be until you and me are told otherwise." Victoria said flatly.

"I'll see a constable keeps an eye on the place." Stan conceded. "I didn't mean to come off as stropy but if more effort went into keeping me and my men informed, then we wouldn't have to speculate based on chat. Paint samples. Between five and six hundred Vauxhall Astras."

"Thank you. I'll let you know if anything else comes up."

A coach full of tourists had descended on the Boatman's Arms by the time Victoria and Alex got back.

"You need a lift anywhere later?" Alex offered.

"You aren't the chauffeur. Take advantage of the expenses paid board and lodge and relax Alex." Victoria smiled and headed for her room. Alex shrugged and decided to take his boss' advice.

"Off duty?" Margaret Ward smiled and pulled Alex a pint. "I expect the Inspector's out with Dr. Fielding?"

"I think that's her plan, yes." Mark paid for his drink.

"He's a nice lad. He'll look after her." Margaret assured him.

"I'm sure he will." Alex pocketed his change and Margaret went to see to her other customers. Nice lad? Alex was a nice lad too, everyone said so. Why was one nice different to another nice?

"You not get me one?" Victoria piped up from behind Alex.

"Hello!" Alex said in surprise. "No but I will. I thought you were off out." He got Margaret's attention.

"No. Mark's working late tonight." Victoria accepted her pint and they found a table.

"So he was OK about you leaving the case?" Alex asked.

"He was fine. It's me who's moping about like a wet weekend." Victoria said bleakly.

"Yes, you've got quite attached to him." Mark said conversationally.

"Yes I have. I don't do that often and never easily. I don't know what it is with him." She smiled and shrugged.

"I do. He hasn't known you long and doesn't know your record. He sees you, not the outstanding workaholic copper." Alex reasoned.

"I think you're right, Sigmund Freud." Victoria raised her glass.

"You should let the real you out more often, boss. This job sucks everything out of you if you let it, moreso with you because of that Hilton shit. Ah excuse the language." Alex grimaced at his beer.

"Well I'm not sure there was much there to begin with, Alex." Victoria smiled sadly. "I was raised by a police officer to be a police officer. I don't know anything else."

"I remember you saying you dad was a DCI. So he always wanted you to follow him?"

"I'm not sure, really. For as long as I can remember I had it drilled into me how evil and sick the world was. He'd seen it. Most kids got Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty at bed time, I got the headlines from all the newspapers. He was obsessed, Alex, probably paranoid." Victoria said reflectively.

"You think? You know as well as I do some of the horrors out here in the world. I'd probably be the same with my kids." Alex said.

"Probably. He was a very overbearing man, though. I know now it was out of concern for his family but it was so hugely out of proportion. He showed me police photographs of accidents. I asked for a bike when I was seven and he showed me an eight year old girl with a crushed skull from being knocked off her bike. Lesson? Wearing a helmet is important. Paranoid, as I said." Victoria saw Alex wince.

"A bit excessive, yes. He must have loved you a great deal to be so fearful about you all the time."

"Yes I'm sure he did. I know he did. I loved him too." Victoria smiled.

"Was your mum in the force too?"

"No. She'd never have made a copper even if she'd wanted to. She didn't do anything." Victoria frowned at the table.

"Eh? She must have done something." Alex prompted.

"She was just there. My dad was so ... big ... that he overshadowed her completely. I can't even remember them having a conversation. They must have done though." Victoria tried to remember.

"Of course they did. As kids, we don't notice anything if it doesn't involve us directly. I can't remember my mum ever changing my bed sheets, but obviously she did." Alex shrugged, then waved his hand to get Margaret's attention. "You see much of her?"

"Who?"

"Who? Your mum of course."

"She died when I was nine." Victoria said and Alex almost dropped the pints on her.

"Sorry boss. I didn't know. Well obviously I didn't." Alex grimaced.

"You don't have to apologise, Alex."

"No but I will. Was she ill?" Alex asked tactfully.

"Look, you obviously know nothing about it so I'll just tell you to save awkwardness. It's fine, Alex, honestly. She committed suicide. No! No apologies! Long time ago." Victoria pointed at Alex and cut off his planned, very extended apology. "She almost certainly was ill, yes, although I can't remember. I was only a little girl and my dad wasn't the type of man to discuss things like that with anyone."

"You don't have to explain, Victoria. It's personal."

"I know but it saves situations in the future. Can you remember the day you asked if me and Charlie had had words? He stumbled on the same subject in complete innocence, then felt bad for doing so. There's no need." Victoria explained. "I think he's getting used to me?" She grinned, and decided to end that particular subject.

"Pfft! Charlie? He couldn't get used to himself." Alex snorted. "Old school and set in his ways and sometimes out of order."

"And you've been having a go at him." Victoria added and Alex shrugged. "I owe you thanks for that and thanks for calling me Victoria."

"Ah now I do have a reason for that." Alex leant forward. "See that big bloke over there by the dartboard? Red T shirt? Yes well I was playing darts with him the other night and I kept referring to you as the boss. He told me that's what he calls his girlfriend when she gets out the handcuffs, which didn't really help the situation, given your profession." Victoria erupted into laughter. "I tried to tell him for over an hour that you really were my boss. He just wouldn't have it. Victoria it is incase he hears me." Victoria laughed even more. "Ah it's a shame the case is going nowhere. We're getting along OK down here."

"Well you and the lads were only loaned to me. They'll probably put it down to novelty and wave me off." Victoria shrugged.

"I wouldn't be so sure. They miss having a DI around." Alex told her.

"They miss having DI Kennedy around and I don't blame them. He was a good copper and I'm no substitute." Victoria conceded.

Alex's darts parter started waving for her attention and made a 'phone' sign. Victoria went into the lobby to answer it. "DI Lowry."

"He's here! I told you! Oh my god he's here!" The screech almost deafened Victoria.

"Helen!" Victoria got to her feet. "Helen who is there? Helen?"

"Leave me alone! I can hear you. Leave me alone." Helen sobbed. "He's here! I heard him come in. He's downstairs! I told you!"

"Helen listen to me."

"What do you want? I've said nothing to anyone. Just leave me alone!" Helen screamed.

"Shit!" Victoria hung up and shouted for Alex. "It's Helen. Get Mitchell round there straight away. If there isn't a taxi out there, jump in the closest car!"

# Chapter 10

Victoria jumped out of the taxi while it was still moving and ran towards the flashing lights of two police cars.

"She's ... she's dead." Stan Mitchell stammered in utter shock.

"Dead?" Victoria could hardly believe her ears.

"She flung herself from the back window and landed in the stone yard." Stan explained.

"Struggle? Break in?" Victoria demanded, marching to the side of the house that lead to the yard.

"None. She opened the window from the inside. The outer door was closed but unlocked. That's not unusual though, it was a communal door. Her own door on her bedsit was a Yale snib lock and locks when the door closes." Stan explained. They looked down at the crushed and crumpled body of Helen Walby lying in a pool of blood. "Ambulance on its way, so is Scene Of Crime lot.

"What happened to you keeping an eye on her?" Victoria snapped angrily at Stan.

"My constable waved at her less than an hour ago from that very window, then finished his patrol. I told you before, I don't have dozens of men and this is not my fault." Stan snapped back.

"I doubt she cares who's damn fault is is!" Victoria shouted, pointing at Helen's body.

"With all respect, DI Lowry, this is still CID, as you so emphatically keep pointing out. Where were you and DS McKenzie? I'm pleased this wasn't handed over. The press will have a field day." Stan walked towards his car but Victoria overtook him and rammed him up against the wall.

"Listen to me Mitchell. I couldn't give a rat's arse who has the damned case. I couldn't give a rat's arse if the press hold a National Lynching day. What I do give a rat's arse about is people ending up dead. Moore received a letter, he's dead. Helen received a letter, she's dead. I received a letter and I've no intention of wasting my time bickering with you!" Victoria snarled in Stan's face.

"You got a letter?" Stan repeated in shock.

"I want Jonathan Franks lifted and I need a reason. Find one. Parking tickets will do, dodgy books, tax, anything at all. Understand?" Victoria let go of Stan.

"I have to go and lift him?" Stan asked in despair.

"Yes you do so get something convincing." Victoria stamped her way to the front of the house and tried to compose herself. She noticed Alex talking to Stan too, then Stan jumped in his car and drove off out of Victoria's way.

"I think we have something." Alex watched Stan's car disappear round the corner. "You cooled off?"

"No. Get on with it, Alex." Victoria said flatly.

"The day Helen was ran over, a Mrs Towers went to the station. She works in a garage about half a mile out of town. Jonathan Franks filled up a red Astra at 7 am. Mrs Towers even noticed the scratches. Franks told her he'd just bought the car second hand." Alex subconsciously moved away from Victoria. Victoria was absolutely furious.

"And Mitchell has proof of this?" She pointed to the corner in general, indicating Stan's vanishing car.

"Paid by credit card. Dated and stamped, recorded transaction." Alex sighed in frustration. "The bloody idiot."

"The little shit!" Victoria leapt into a police car and glared at the officer in it.

"We need the car, constable Blake." Alex explained. Blake nodded and scrambled out.

"Why didn't he say? Why? He's a bloody Sergeant!" Victoria bellowed. "I'll have him making tea for the rest of his shitty career!"

"He was under the correct impression that we'd be moving on soon." Alex explained.

"So he withheld evidence just so he could produce it later as a feather in his fat cap?" Victoria roared and Alex nodded. "I'll rip him a new arsehole. I'm going to rip Jonathan Franks one first."

Victoria completely ignored Stan at the station, more for his own safety. Stan glanced at Victoria's thunderous face and decided to hand Mrs Towers information to Alex. Victoria was in Interview Room One first. Jonathan looked extremely annoyed and very pissed off and Victoria felt pleased that he did. Mr Trevors, his solicitor, was also there.

"This better be good Lowry." Jonathan growled.

"Spectacular." Victoria sat down. "Helen Walby is dead."

"I see." Jonathan sat back in his chair. "I don't wish to sound cold, but what has that to do with me?"

"You tried to kill her before. You ran her down in your red astra." Victoria stated.

"I believe Mr Franks has already explained that. It was a company ..."

"Company car. Yes I know, Mr Trevors. It was used to run down Helen Walby at 6am and Mr Franks filled it with petrol at 7am." Victoria put the garage transactions on the table and Jonathan visibly deflated. "The car will be impounded and tested further."

"Look I didn't try to kill her. OK?" Jonathan exhaled loudly. "I didn't! That was never my intention. I wanted to scare her, that's all. Christ I didn't even mean to hit the lunatic! She was carrying two big bags and she lurched sideways with the weight of one of them. The car hit her."

"Cars don't hit people on their own. You mounted the pavement and drove into her." Victoria pressed.

"Yes!" Jonathan yelled. "I meant to rev the engine a bit to frighten the damned woman into leaving me alone!"

"She died from multiple injuries after falling from a third floor window a few hours ago. You are in deep shit Mr Franks." Victoria narrowed her eyes at Jonathan.

"W ... what? And you're saying I had something to do with that? Are you mad?" Jonathan said in disbelief.

"Helen claimed to have been terrorised for months by your brother. She claimed that the reason for this was a confession Gavin had made to her regarding the murder of Alison Bell. We know it can't have been possible for Gavin to have been harassing Helen recently, but someone was. G.F was. Your mother will also be questioned." Victoria looked evenly at Jonathan, who's mouth was working noiselessly.

"Gavin told me he'd hit Alison Bell with a rock." He said at last. He took me out into the yard and showed me the rock he'd put in the dustbin. There wasn't a mark on it, DI Lowry. No blood or anything. Gavin insisted that Alison was dead and I panicked. I was fifteen years old. I ran out there to see for myself. The girl was dead but there was no mess at all. I dragged her further into the woods and hid her under the bushes." Jonathan said in a daze.

"Do you think Gavin strangled Alison?" Victoria asked quietly. Jonathan nodded and held his head in his hands. "And the rock?"

"I don't know. Honestly I don't. Gavin was making very little sense when I tried to talk to him. From what I can gather, Gavin had the rock and would have used it if Alison had moved again. That's just what I interpreted. I honestly don't know and neither did Gavin."

"It was believed that Gavin wouldn't have been physically able to kill her." Victoria pointed out.

"Yes he would. At that time he would. Just about all of his care fell on my mother. She exaggerated his disabilities and I backed her. No one had any reason to disbelieve her. Gavin was disabled." Jonathan looked exhausted.

"Why would Helen's aggravation anger you so much now? You've spent thirty years lying about it quite calmly. She had no real proof of anything." Victoria said.

"I've done impossibly well for myself here. The whole family was shunned and Gavin's acquittal only lessened that slightly. Many people in the town admired me for staying here and standing my ground, especially at such a young age. Yes it was a horrible secret but Gavin's acquittal meant I'd got away with my part in it. I'd never get away with it again if it was looked into now." Jonathan glanced at Victoria and picked at his fingernails.

"Go on."

"I can't see the point. I've told you enough."

"Excuse me, boss." Alex leant forward. "Mrs Harrison is being driven down here."

"Thank you DS McKenzie." Victoria stood up.

"Wait!" Jonathan said in alarm. "This will kill her. I'll talk to you. Leave her alone, please."

"OK." Victoria resumed her seat.

"What made up my mind that Gavin had killed Alison Bell was when he served a four year jail sentence for indecency on a minor. Oh god." Jonathan buried his face in his hands again. "Gavin and my mother moved away, as you know. About a year after his acquittal, he was convicted of pushing a girl down a flight of steps, then assaulting her while she was unconscious." He looked at Victoria again and he'd crumbled completely. "Four years in prison, four years in hospital after he suffered a massive stroke. He was released into my mother's care in the state he is now. I didn't want all that looked into, DI Lowry. I protected myself, my family and my business."

"Helen Walby's death?"

"I swear I knew nothing about it. I'm finished here now. I'm completely ruined. I'd have nothing to lose by telling you any different. I was in the shower when Stan Mitchell lifted me. Before that I was watching TV and I can tell you every program and what they were about. If you check my work computer, you'll find three emails that I sent myself during the course of the evening. I can't remember the exact times. It wasn't me, Detective Inspector, and it certainly wasn't Gavin, or my mother."

"I'm sure Sergeant Mitchell will look into that." Victoria said and Stan nodded. "Just one more thing. We ran Gavin's name through the systems and returned blanks on both Franks and Harrison."

"We were half brothers. Harrison is my mother's maiden name and we were given our fathers' names. Gavin was called Fielding."

"Fielding?" Victoria just stared at Jonathan.

"Yes. Mine was called Franks, obviously." Jonathan hung his head in utter dejection.

"Thank you." Victoria almost sprinted out of the room.

"Boss!." Alex caught up with her. "It's just a name, OK? Where are you going?"

"I ... I ... back to the station. I have to go and ... and ... I don't know." Victoria looked at Alex. "How many coincidences can you fit into one case, Alex?"

"Come on, back to the Boatman's. We can't do anything tonight and you've had enough." Alex opened the station door.

"But ..."

"Don't make me do this through medical grounds Victoria. You're exhausted." He held open the car door and Victoria just nodded and stumbled into it.

The journey to the city the following day, was made in complete silence. Victoria was desperately trying to grab all the pieces and make them stay still so she could study them. They just wouldn't stop spinning. There were probably dozens of Fieldings in the phone book, that was true, but in a small town? Was there a tie? If so, what was it?

"Oh I was just going to put you two on the missing persons list." Charlie said as they walked into the office. "DCI is looking for you."

"Great. He'll either want me to lean on Franks, or take me off the case. Alex can you bring the lads

up to date please?" Victoria ignored her summons and went to her own office and her computer. She found Gavin Fielding without much trouble.

Gavin had been sixteen and his young victim had been eight. Victoria ignored the case notes completely and went straight for the background reports. Gavin's father was named as David Fielding but his whereabouts were unknown. He'd never been a part of Gavin's life. The only other family members documented were Jenny and Jonathan.

"You OK?" Alex interrupted her with a cup of coffee.

"Not alot here." She said.

"Do you want there to be?" Alex sat on another chair.

"Something's not fitting in Alex. You can feel it as well as I do. I want Mark out of this particular picture. Surely you can see this?" Victoria sighed wearily.

"Victoria that's an official Social Services report used in a trial. It shows no connections. Jenny, Jonathan and Gavin. The only reason Gavin's dad is mentioned is because Jenny had him on the birth certificate. She probably did the same with Jonathan." Alex reasoned.

"Alex!" Victoria squealed. "Shit! Hell I am so bloody stupid! Why would Jenny Harrison register someone else's baby?! Gavin's dad cleared off while she was pregnant and Jonathan's dad was just before him!" Victoria waved her arms around.

"I'm not with you. Sorry." Alex shook his head.

"The connection could be via the father, Alex. One father, two mothers!" Victoria explained. "It's bloody obvious."

"No it's not. You're torturing yourself boss. Don't you think Mark would have mentioned this? Even if he had no memory of that time, he seemed to know Gavin pretty well and he'd have picked up on the name." Alex pointed out.

"I know." Victoria rubbed her temples. "I don't know. Damn it! I need to think." Alex nodded and left her to it.

Who could she ask about Mark's family without Mark knowing about it? This could all come to nothing and he'd surely want to know why he'd been investigated. Victoria didn't trust her own temper enough to approach Stan Mitchell.

Victoria picked up a painting from the school folder Mrs Stone had given her. The painting was Alison Bell's. She'd have done this just before she died. Mrs Stone told her they were class portraits 'photographer' style. She wondered which one was Mark. She picked up another and it was by Andrew Collins. The next one in the pile was Mark's. Victoria felt the tears pricking in her eyes. These were from a time when everyone was young and innocent without any notion of the tragedies that would later tie them together. How could it have gone so wrong? Victoria put the pictures in the box and something caught her eye. She took them back out and tried to see what had got her subconscious attention. It took her a full ten minutes of studying all twenty eight pictures before she noticed what it was. Twenty seven pictures contained twenty eight people and one contained twenty nine. Mark's had an extra pupil in the middle row. Had he included the teacher? Surely a teacher would be bigger and dressed differently. Maybe Mark just miscounted or got carried away with the

painting. Mrs Stone.

Alex was just putting down the phone when Victoria hurried by. "Boss DCI wants ..." Alex grit his teeth as Victoria waved her hand at him and left the room. Alex got to his feet and marched into the DI's office.

"Hey! Are you supposed to go in there?" Charlie asked. Alex copied Victoria's hand wave at Charlie. "Good when everyone goes by the book, isn't it." Charlie sat down and resumed his report writing.

Mrs Stone welcomed Victoria into her house and set about making some tea.

"Awful thing with Helen, just awful." Mrs Stone shook her head. "Jonathan Franks involved in it too! The town has never seen so much chaos."

"How many people were in the class Mrs Stone." Victoria accepted her tea.

"Good grief it was thirty years ago. I can't remember. You'll know anyway, DI Lowry. You have the class paintings." Mrs Stone replied.

"It was the paintings that got me thinking. They all had twenty eight pupils except one, that had twenty nine." Victoria said casually.

"Did it? How odd."

"There was nothing to suggest that an teacher had been painted. Wouldn't a pupil draw a teacher bigger? Dressed differently?" Victoria asked.

"Almost certainly, yes. How strange. Who's was it?" Mrs Stone asked.

"Actually it was Mark's. Dr Fielding's." Victoria tried to keep her voice light.

"Oh I see. Yes I'm very annoyed with myself now for not seeing that at the time." Mrs Stone said grimly.

"There's a reason for the extra pupil?" Victoria asked in surprise. She hadn't expected that reaction at all. She expected the teacher to brush it off lightly. The kids had only been ten afterall.

"I thought he was managing. Poor lad. He seemed to have got through the bullies and everything." Mrs Stone said sadly.

"I'm sorry Mrs Stone you've completely lost me. Mark was bullied in school?" Victoria asked in confusion.

"Children can be very cruel, especially if they see something different. Just look at Gavin." Mrs Stone said.

"Mrs Stone, Gavin was physically disabled. Mark isn't. Why was Mark different?"

"Oh my lord. He hasn't told you? I thought with you two getting so close ... I'm sorry." Mrs Stone was genuinely upset. "Mark was a twin. His brother died of leukaemia when they were four. Mark took it very badly at the time, poor little thing."

"Twin?" Victoria's heart hammered in her chest and her brain struggled to take this in. "Identical. Gary was sickly from birth but ... DI Lowry! Are you OK? Dear girl you've gone white. I've given you an awful shock. DI Lowry?" Victoria was close to blacking out and her chest wouldn't let her breathe. Gary Fielding. G.F.

Victoria stumbled outside and took several gulps of fresh air. She dropped her phone three times as she fumbled to send Mark a text. She told him she was finishing details and asked if he wanted to do lunch at the Boatman's Arms. She was close to hysterics as she waited for him to reply. He told her he was delighted she was here and that he'd meet her in his lunch break. Victoria sat in the car and just stared into space.

Victoria sat at one of the tables outside of the Boatman's, in the forecourt.

"I can't do this." She whispered to herself. "I can't." She took out her phone to text Alex, just as Mark pulled up in his car. "Shit."

"Gorgeous girl sitting on her own!" Mark smiled as he headed towards her. Once he was closer, he saw her face. "Hey, what's wrong? Victoria?" He sat down opposite her.

"Mark is Gavin Franks your brother?" Victoria asked shakily.

"Ah I see." Mark exhaled loudly. "I knew I should have explained all this. Technically, half brother. Gavin, not Jonathan. We had different mothers, obviously, and were raised seperately. I never knew our dad, Victoria. He left when I was weeks old. I always considered him dead and I still do."

"Do Jonathan and Jenny know?" Victoria asked.

"I doubt it. There's no reason why they should really. He'd cleared off from their family a few years before that. Maybe if he'd been a local man then they'd associate the name, but he wasn't. We'd all know if he was." Mark shrugged his shoulders. "I only found out after my mother died. I'm so sorry. It was stupid of me not to tell you." He said miserably.

"You didn't want the association and the disgrace. Much like Jonathan." Victoria said and Mark nodded. "Tell me about Gary." Mark jerked back so violently, he almost stumbled off the seat.

"I ... I'm not sure where you're going with that, but I'd rather you didn't. Gary has nothing to do with anything." He blinked at Victoria in shock.

"The note I received wasn't from Gavin, was it Mark? Franks or Fielding, it wasn't from him, was it?" Victoria felt close to collapse. "It was a death threat. Why?"

"No!" Mark shook his head. "Just ... no."

"You used me Mark. You used me and the relationship to throw me off track. You had something to do with Alison Bell's death all those years ago and when a vulnerable outcast stumbled upon the body, you persuaded him to confess to it. You got Gavin to incriminate himself in front of witnesses, a gang of kids. It was you who terrorised them over the years, Mark, wasn't it? Was it incase they worked it out once they were adults? Was it because they gave you hell in school after Gary died?" Victoria asked desperately.

"Gary ... Gary ... don't you talk about Gary!" Mark sobbed loudly.

"Were the initials some sort of dramatic, theatrical twist? Did you sign Gary's initials, then realise you could make a scapegoat of Gavin a second time? What was it Mark! Tell me!" Victoria demanded.

"Stop it! Stop it Victoria!" Mark cried. "I never used you, you have to believe that. I love you." He got to his feet when Margaret came out of the pub. "You shouldn't have got that note, it shouldn't have been sent. I've sorted that out now."

"Is everything OK?" Margaret picked up a few glasses.

"It'll all be OK Victoria." Mark nodded. "I swear it's all fine. It's OK." He ran across the forecourt and sped off in the car.

"I heard shouting." Margaret wandered over. "Aw you're upset! I'm sure it's only a tiff. Where's he gone?"

"Home. Thanks Mrs Ward. I need to phone Alex." Victoria trailed into the lobby.

"Victoria!" Alex shouted down the phone as soon as Victoria had dialed his number.

"I need you down here Alex." She said in complete dejection.

"I gathered that. I'm on my way. What's going on?" Alex asked.

"It's Mark, Alex. He's ... not who I thought he was. I think he's ill. Very ill." Victoria fought with the tears.

"Oh shit. You at the hospital?"

"Meet me at Mark's house. That's where he is." Victoria hung up before Alex could ask any more questions.

Mark's front door was wide open and Victoria approached it cautiously.

"Mark?" She called softly and her voice seemed to echo through the house. The sitting room was empty, as was the kitchen. A door at the end of the hallway was open. Mark's office. Victoria crept towards it, and pushed it open further with her foot.

Mark was sitting on the floor among piles of photographs, some in bags, some in albums, some in boxes. Victoria could tell even from the door that they were family snaps. They were pictures of the twins as babies and of their mother.

"Hello gorgeous." Mark looked up with damp eyes and smiled weakly at her.

"Hello Mark." Tears streamed down Victoria's face.

"You're upset about that note. You shouldn't have got it." Mark hung his head.

"Where did it come from, Mark?" Victoria sat on a chair by the door.

"Gary sent it." Mark said miserably. "He shouldn't have and I told him so. It won't happen again, I

swear. I told him you'd love us both and he hadn't to hurt you." Victoria squeezed her eyes closed and wished this nightmare away. It was still there when she opened them again.

"Did Gary hurt the others Mark?"

"It wasn't his fault Victoria. Please believe that. He's twelve minutes older than me." Mark smiled sadly and Victoria just wanted to hold him forever and ignore the rest of the world. "It wasn't his fault. He was looking after me. He always has."

"Why did Gary hurt the others?" Victoria asked and Mark's face creased in anguish. He shuffled across the floor and put his arms round Victoria's legs. "It's OK, Mark. There's no need to hurt anyone else."

"He won't stop." Mark mumbled into Victoria's knees. "He told me he'd get them all. They deserve it. You saw what they did to me. You've seen it. They pushed me onto those railings and left me to die. They ran away and they were laughing. They were laughing at me! Alison Bell always was a little bitch. She was the one who got them all rallied round and all worked up. She just had to be the ringleader with the big fat horrible mouth. She turned round and pointed at me and laughed and I couldn't even move. Gary stayed with me. Gary always stayed with me. Always."

"I know Mark. It's over." Victoria cradled Mark's head in her lap and stroked his hair. Alex moved quietly into the room. He'd heard all of that and the shock was threatening to make him keel over.

"Police and ambulance are here boss. I kept them out of the house. Come on, it's finished." Alex put his hand on her shoulder. Mark looked up and smiled and Victoria felt her heart split in two completely.

# Epilogue

Two days later, Victoria returned to the station. Maybe it was too soon, maybe it wasn't. Victoria knew she was geared to handling stress and the stress from that case had been enormous. She forced herself to look and behave as normal as possible before entering the office.

"Hey boss!" Alex darted over. "You OK to be here?" He asked quietly and Victoria nodded.

"I'd like to thank all of you for wrapping this up. The amount of evidence and paperwork you've ploughed through is phenomenal. It shows what a fantastic bunch of coppers you all are. It's been a pleasure working with you." Victoria flicked a smile, then headed quickly for her office. She stopped at the door and looked at the name plaque. DI Kennedy's plaque had been replaced by another one. DI Victoria Lowry.

"Brian put it on cockeyed. Blame him." Don laughed and Brian stuck two fingers up at him.

"It's ... fine." Victoria turned round. "The case is over lads. You'll be appointed a permanent DI in time."

"Seems stupid to me. We already have a DI." Charlie stated and the lads nodded in agreement.

"Unless you don't want to ask the DCI for us lot. I see how it is." Charlie sniffed and Victoria started to laugh.

"Boss." Alex was standing at the door. "Constable Proctor to see you."

"A body's been found ma'am and it's almost certainly Emily Jones. We're just waiting for lab results." Victoria sat down heavily on the closest chair. A thousand emotions flooded through her already emotional body and that final thorn was removed from her side.

"I'll go and tell the DCI you're sticking around." Alex smiled. "My mother will be delighted." He wandered out amid jeers of laughter.