

**CUT
TO
THE
BONE**

Alex Caan was born in Manchester, has spent over a decade working in information systems security for a number of government organisations, and is currently specialising in terrorism studies. A lifetime passion for writing was sparked by the encouraging words of an English teacher in school, and eventually led to Alex successfully completing an MA in Creative Writing and writing *Cut to the Bone*.

CUT TO THE BONE

ALEX CAAN

twenty7



First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Twenty7 Books

This paperback edition published in 2016 by

Twenty7 Books
80–81 Wimpole St, London W1G 9RE
www.twenty7books.co.uk

Copyright © Alex Caan, 2016
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored or transmitted in any form by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Alex Caan to be identified as Author of this
work has been asserted by him in accordance with
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, events and
incidents are either the products of the author's
imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance
to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is
purely coincidental.

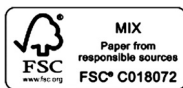
A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Export trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-7857-7050-0
Paperback ISBN: 978-1-7857-7049-4
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-7857-7048-7

Typeset by IDSUK (Data Connection) Ltd

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives Plc



Twenty7 Books is an imprint of Bonnier Zaffre,
a Bonnier Publishing company
www.bonnierzaffre.co.uk
www.bonnierpublishing.co.uk



To MKAZURHZZI, because they asked.



PART ONE

THE AMERICAN





Chapter One

Ruby is running. Her eyes pop, bright like a cat's. She is looking over her shoulder as she moves, which causes her to stumble. Her breathing is heavy; when she falls she moans, she cries out. There is blood on her face, there are cuts on her body. Her clothes are gone. She wears a sack, tied at the waist. Each time her bare feet step on sharp objects she whimpers. The scene is holding those watching it in thrall. The trees around her are black, dense. She falls again, to her knees.

Help me.

Who is she speaking to? Does she call on God? Or is someone there with her? Or is she simply pleading, hoping someone will hear, come to her rescue? Does she know they will be watching her?

Loud screams as someone grabs her. Ruby struggles and is dragged backwards, kicking out with her damaged heels. Ruby is gone. Only her screaming remains.

Ruby is seated in a chair. Her arms are strapped, her legs are bound. She looks straight ahead. Her mouth is taped.

Her eyes squeeze out tears that crawl down her cheeks.

Then there is darkness.

Ruby thinks she will die. She hopes she will die. Death seems like an end, like peace. Cessation of pain, no more fear.

The walls are coming in. The darkness has icy fingers. Her skin is on fire.

She wants her mother.

She can't breathe.





She is drowning.

She opens her eyes. Her body has slumped forward, her face is half buried under putrid sludge. The tape on her mouth has been removed; she tastes foul liquid, and spits. She pulls herself out of the mire, and she screams. She knows no one will come. Because no one can hear her now.

Something grabs her ankle, tugs at her, pulls her into the darkness.

She tries to escape, tries to break free. She can't; it has clamped its jaws on her soft flesh, gripping her bones, which it can crush.

She wants to die.

And then the rats come.





Chapter Two

Blood-red, rust-orange, liver-brown. A riot of colour pricking at her senses, unlocking her memories. Kate Riley was sprinting through a New England forest. It was fall. The world around her beginning to mulch and rot. She was alone, and then he was there. Out of nowhere he appeared, and she knew what would happen next.

Kate opened her eyes, stared into the darkness. Head against her pillow, her senses alert, her heart hammering. Familiar aftershock, from a familiar nightmare. She checked the baby monitor. It was silent. She checked her phone. Three missed calls. It was 2.38 a.m. She checked the caller ID. Unknown.

The phone rang again in her hand.

'Riley,' she said.

'Detective Chief Inspector, it's Justin Hope. Apologies for disturbing you at this hour.'

This wasn't going to be good.

'What's the emergency?' said Kate.

'Missing girl. It's sensitive,' said Hope.

'Message me the details. I'll head out now,' she said, pushing her sheets back.

'No, send Harris,' he said, quickly. 'He can open for us. He needs to get his fingers burnt.'

The garden was shadowy, dim and obscure. Kate kept her kitchen lights off, didn't like the idea of being visible to anything out there.

Pitch black. Watched, but not seeing. That old paranoia.



She rubbed the backs of her legs with her bare feet, trying to soften the goosed skin, warm herself up. There was a draught. Or maybe it was just her imagination, conjured up by the situation she was in.

The display on her phone showed 2.46 a.m. Her body, shivering and slow, still held on to its stolen sleep. But her mind was alert. She rubbed her face, gulped back freshly made black coffee, scalding her throat. Then dialled.

There was no answer. She let it ring. It was 2.51, her fifth attempt, when he finally picked up.

‘Harris,’ he said.

‘It’s DCI Riley,’ she said. ‘I’m texting you an address. Missing girl, name of Ruby Day. I need you to speak to the parents, get some background, open the investigation for me.’

She heard herself talking. It was the same clipped voice she put on for all work calls. Holding back the American teenager she had been, and forcing herself to speak with a British accent. It was an old trick, a politician’s trick. Speech alignment; copy someone’s way of speaking and they are immediately drawn to you.

‘How old is the girl?’ Harris asked.

‘Early twenties,’ she said.

‘Missing since when?’

‘Seven-thirty, or thereabouts,’ she said.

Silence. She knew what he was thinking. She had thought the same.

‘Are you serious?’ he said. ‘Why have we been called in? That’s, what, under eight hours?’

‘It came from Justin Hope. The call. He wants us there.’

‘I’ll head over. Text me the address now,’ he said.

‘And, Harris, I have no idea why Hope is involved, but he is. So let’s not give him a reason to screw us over, OK?’

‘No worries.’



Harris would hate it, of course. He thought being part of her team beneath him. This would irritate him further. Called out for a missing persons case. Not even a child, but an adult. Kate didn't like Justin Hope being involved. Things were always murky when he was around. He spoke in riddles and myths. He spoke as though he was on a pulpit, as though they had been chosen to serve him. He liked to boast about his 'team', about relying on them. Conferring status on them, because they were his.

Kate imagined a small child squeezing a soft toy too hard to its chest. The toy inanimate but silently screaming.

DS Harris was new, only two weeks on Kate's team, but he would learn the power dynamics quickly. And if he didn't, Justin Hope would simply get rid of him.





Chapter Three

There had been demons in his brain, tearing at his throat, clawing at his skin. Blood was soaking him and his bed. His eyes had stung, and in his mouth was the taste of iron.

The spasm that had woken Detective Sergeant Zain Harris from his nightmare had caused a cramp he was massaging and walking off, so at first he didn't hear Riley's calls. When he was done speaking to her, he wished he hadn't picked up.

He had showered after Krav Maga the night before, so made do with washing his face, applying deodorant and brushing his teeth. He pulled on jeans, a V-necked khaki T-shirt, and finished with a black jacket. Riley encouraged her team not to dress like accountants. He didn't know if this look had the desired effect; this was the first time she had called him to be part of an investigation.

Investigation. It seemed like a loaded word, inappropriate. Woman in her twenties goes missing for eight hours. What was that about? Why was there a panic? She was probably at a party, or hooked up with someone at a party, or asleep from drinking too much at a party.

Is this what he had become? Some top brass lackey?

A quarter of a million people went missing every year. Ninety-one per cent turned up within forty-eight hours, ninety-nine per cent within a year. He didn't get the urgency, or Justin Hope's involvement.

Zain pulled open the drawer in the bureau behind his front door. He let his fingers rummage through the brown and white envelopes, containing bills mainly, until they grazed the metallic sachet.

Green pills in plastic bubbles on one side, smooth foil with Chinese writing on the back. It could be alligator testicles or snake venom for



all he knew. The Tor site had simply told him what the pills did, not what the ingredients were.

He popped a tablet through the foil, the green pill falling into his hand. He placed it on his tongue, and swallowed. He felt it kick in as he slammed his front door behind him and headed to his car.

Driving through sparse traffic, turning off from Lower Marsh, he hit a block of buses at the top end of Waterloo Bridge. Traffic bottlenecked around Aldwych on the other side. It was late, or early, depending on your point of view. Why were so many people out? Maybe the missing girl was on one of these night buses. Or folded up in the back of a taxi.

His satnav was taking him down the official route, the big roads. Up Kingsway, towards Euston, through Bloomsbury. Then on to the A501, Euston Road followed by Marylebone Road. It was like a tourist trail, heading past Madame Tussauds, the green syllabub of the Planetarium, Baker Street, Regent's Park. He should have navigated the smaller roads, cut straight through London's heart.

He felt humiliation needle him again. Seriously, this is what they were making him do? With his background, his skills, his experience? And why the hell was Justin Hope involved? What was so special about this girl? Was she the daughter of a friend? Was this Hope pissing over his patch, showing how much clout he had?

If it turned out to be a favour for one of Hope's golfing buddies . . . Then again, Zain was in no position to argue. Not with his past. However he felt personally, this stint with Riley and Hope, it was a favour. Another loaded word that. It implied a debt would be called in to repay it.

Zain turned onto the A5, heading up the Edgware Road. The restaurants were mainly closed, but the shisha cafés and shawarma

outlets were still open. He felt hungry, but decided he'd get something on his way back. This wouldn't take long. He wouldn't let it.

At least the car was running smoothly. Audi A6. Sleek, black. A gift from Hope for the newest member of his team. Being someone's bitch had perks, then.

Eventually, beyond the flyover, he arrived at his destination. Windsor Court, a late-Victorian mansion block, red brick, white-framed windows. It sprawled across two buildings, with two entrances. There were metal posts blocking the driveways, no parking allowed. Zain drove his Audi onto the pavement at the front, got as close as he could.

He saw a sign for flat numbers 1–26 painted over one of the entrances that was lit up from the inside, so he headed for that door. There was a security panel listing flat numbers. He pushed at the button next to 1A.

A man's voice, urgent, panicky. Was he expecting it to be his daughter?

'This is Detective Sergeant Harris,' said Zain. 'I've a report of a missing –'

The door was buzzed open before he could finish.



Chapter Four

Kate watched the sleeping form. Still, dreamless. Vulnerable.

Ryan would be here in a few hours. Ryan – a stranger, to look after something so precious, so irreplaceable. Officially he was her housekeeper/sitter. Unofficially . . . what was the term for someone who guarded the thing you cared about most in the world?

Kate closed the door softly, padded back to her own bedroom. She slept with the door open, always. Just in case. Who needed the guilt if something went wrong? The baby monitor was top of the range, discreet, metallic. It looked like a digital radio. Kate turned it up; listening to the stillness she had just seen for herself.

She pulled back her bed sheets, crisp, smelling of pine and fresh air. One of Ryan's jobs. Laundry, cleaning . . . minding. That was the term; it hardly seemed big enough. As for the smaller tasks, Kate used work pressure, erratic hours, as justification for shirking them.

It had been true once. But since Justin Hope, things didn't fit into that cliché anymore.

Hope was a trial run, an idea dreamed up by the prime minister and home secretary. The police crime commissioners, PCCs, had been successful nationally. Well, that was the spin, so they wanted to give London a taste. Westminster was created as the first PCC set-up, powers taken from the Met's commissioner and given to Justin Hope. He had been an MP in a previous existence, a somebody at the Foreign Office, followed by the Ministry of Defence, then the Home Office and finally the Ministry of Justice.

On his appointment, lines were drawn hastily across London. The existing boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth had their prime landmarks taken. Hope was allegedly keen on jurisdiction over



Thames House and Vauxhall Cross. Most of the existing City of Westminster being swallowed whole, he had an area of nearly thirty square miles to govern. Drawn up in seven days, again allegedly.

Unofficially, he had jurisdiction over all 609 square miles of London.

When Kate had been offered her role, she'd thought it would be a promotion. Not just in title terms – she was already a detective inspector, now bumped up to detective chief inspector – but in terms of casework. She'd imagined the PCC would want the biggest, most complex crimes himself. She in turn would be given the opportunity to really make a difference, utilise her skills.

Skills gained in the past, before she'd had to leave.

Who was she kidding? She didn't leave.

Run away. Hide. Search for a new beginning. That was more like it. They said they'd find her a new state to live in, on the other side of the country from Massachusetts, somewhere she could start again. And she had tried it, for a year. A year that meant obscurity, nothingness: her career, her passion, all of it deadened.

She'd watched as they made plans for her, around her. Then she'd taken the initiative, taken control over her own life, and decided she would change country. She needed to get back to what she did best. Be a cop.

So London happened. And in London, she'd found she could start again. They'd snapped her up, dazzled by her Criminal Justice Ph.D. from Brown, her time with the United States Capitol Police, the Department of Homeland Security. Her fabricated references.

And things had been fine. For a while.

Until Justin Hope and his Special Operations Executive 3, unit without portfolio.

She felt as though she was holding her breath under water, waiting to let her lungs fill – or rise to the surface. She had been in this post for three months, and she was still waiting.

It was approaching 4 a.m. Kate closed her eyes, turned off the bedside light, counted the fifty states, their capitals. Sleep evaded her. She dialled Harris's number.

'Update?' she said when he answered.

'I'm with the parents now, just looking round Ruby's bedroom.'

'Call me when you leave.'

In the silence, she thought she heard the baby monitor buzz. Kate raised herself on her elbow and stared at it. No light, no sounds. She let it go, closed her eyes. Even if she couldn't sleep, she could rest them, and rest her limbs.

She tried to picture where the girl might be. Was she alive? The parameters of probability said yes. Had she been in an accident? Or just in need of some alone time? People often were.

Missing people were like a knife edge. Most came home, unharmed: blunt. Some didn't, which cut to the bone. What was this going to be?

Ruby Day. Who are you? Where are you? Why have you gone? And why is the commissioner looking for you?



Chapter Five

Detective Sergeant Zain Harris stood in Ruby Day's bedroom, taking in her life.

Her father – 'Call me Mike' – was in the doorway. The mother – 'This is Laura' – was sitting on the bed, brushing her daughter's duvet cover, smoothing creases that weren't there. Zain saw Mike's eyes dart around, checking, looking. For what?

Laura Day was dressed in a camel cardigan, white trousers. She had white-blond hair, pale-blue eyes. Mike Day had thick brown hair, gold-rimmed glasses. He was barefoot, wearing long shorts, a striped blue shirt over a white T-shirt. Zain thought they looked like a couple of people playing at being 'the Days'. It was as though they had plucked images from a catalogue instructing what they should wear, how they should behave.

Laura had a soft voice; she sounded tired. Her eyes were red, her skin blotchy. She kept swallowing when Zain was speaking to her, refusing a drink Mike offered her. Nerves? Fear?

They had given him a short list of friends, including a boyfriend, Dan. Ruby was an only child, so not much family to mention. They said she didn't have any medical conditions – nothing that required medication, anyway – that might put her in danger.

'She has a lot of computers,' Zain said, looking at Ruby's desk.

There was a desktop, a PC from HP, a netbook from Acer and a MacBook Air. He also saw a Kindle and an iPad.

'Is she a developer?' said Zain, eyeing stacked textbooks on HTML, XML and web design. The parents had said she worked from home, an online business.



The Days exchanged looks. Mike took his phone from his pocket; it was a red Nokia Lumia. Zain watched him slide his finger over the screen, tap away. Music started, followed by the voice of a girl. She was welcoming people.

Mike handed the phone to Zain. 'That's Ruby,' he said.

Hi guys, so welcome to my regular update. Can't believe it's been a week since I did this, but it has. And this time it's a Ruby special, as in something a bit more personal. I got a message from someone and, yes, you shall remain nameless. I won't go into the details, oh, hang on . . .

Ruby picks up a piece of paper and waves it at the camera, before scrunching it up and throwing it over her shoulder.

Anyway, the basic gist was, why do I bang on about having a positive attitude, and all that crap. Yes, people, that's a kinder version of the word actually used. So why do I go on about this? Because you know, it's still important. If everyday I log on and I say you can do anything, it's not enough. Because there are still too many people that are living half-lives, and there are still too many of you that think they're not good enough.

And I know how that feels. I remember back in the day, when stuff was happening to me, how low someone can make you feel. Worthless. As if you are a waste of the air you breathe. And into that, if someone had said to me, everyday, that actually that's not true. That I can do anything I want to, I would have loved it.

So that's what I'm doing now. Any of you feeling crushed by negativity, let me tell you this. You are strong enough to get beyond that state, and in your head, you can stay positive.

And I'll be that voice for you that I never had. So look at me, look right into my eyes now.

Ruby zooms in closer, so her face fills the screen.

And let me tell you this. You are not on your own, and you can do anything you absolutely want to. All of you watching this, take this message away. From me to you.

Ruby had thick brown hair, glossy. She was attractive, but not beautiful; no model but definitely loved by the camera. Maybe it was the angle but she seemed to dominate the screen. It was her eyes, Zain thought: they were green, saucer-like, drew you in.

'She vlogs?' he said, handing the phone back. Mike nodded. 'What else does she do?'

'Vine, Snapchat, Instagram. But mainly YouTube proper,' said Mike. 'That's her job. Lifestyle tips, make-up tutorials, fashion advice.'

'That explains this,' said Zain, pointing at Ruby's dressing table.

It was covered with make-up. Rows of polish, eye shadow, mascara, eye pencils. Bottles, pots, boxes, all sorts of items Zain had no clue about. The array of colours put him in mind of the counters he walked past in Boots, the overall smell like wax, mixed with cheap air freshener.

Zain saw a webcam had been set up on top of the dressing-table mirror, connected to nothing, its wire hanging loosely.

He looked over the bedroom walls, studied the posters.

The closets had floor-to-ceiling mirrors for doors. In their reflection, he saw Mike subtly shake his head at Laura. In the lounge they had been fraught parents. In the bedroom they seemed on edge.

He chided himself; he was doing it again. Making assumptions. He had to remember he was a regular cop now. He could

ask questions; he didn't have to fill in gaps, work through opaque lenses.

Zain slid open the mirrored doors, revealing Ruby's closet. It looked like backstage at a fashion shoot. It was a mess. He eyed some designer labels. Ruby must have a healthy allowance, he thought.

'She gets given a lot. Because of her videos,' said Laura. She sounded defensive. Was she seeing Zain's judgement in his eyes?

Zain smiled thinly, taking in designer clothes, accessories, shoes. It would be a teenage girl's fantasy, he imagined. He closed the doors, hiding away the chaos.

There were bookcases against another wall. Zain studied the spines. The titles gave away their content.

The flat itself was in the basement of Windsor Court. Ruby's bedroom had two windows. Zain shifted the blinds to look out onto a square courtyard, with a door leading off it. He looked up at the flats on higher floors. They were all in darkness.

Along the windowsill were Disney figurines. There was a heart, squashed, made from rubber or Plasticine. It had sad eyes and a turned-down mouth. Next to it he saw several occult pentagrams. The same symbol appeared as pictures on the wall, patterned into a cushion cover.

He turned back for another glance around the room. The posters, the books, the figurines, especially the make-up . . . they were all lined up, neat. OCD levels of neatness. Yet the closet . . . it was like rage, an artist experimenting in free fall.

And something was missing. Paper. There was none. No bills, Post-its, notepads.

'Is her passport here?' he said. 'Do you know where she keeps it?'

Laura opened one of the closet doors. She moved aside bunched-up clothes, revealing a safe.

'Do you know the combination?' Zain said.



‘No,’ said Laura. ‘Everything is in here, though. Passport, bank documents, cards she’s not using. I think there is some jewellery she inherited from my mother, too.’

‘No clue what the code might be?’ said Zain.

‘She went for a walk, she didn’t abscond,’ said Mike.

Zain suggested they go back to the lounge, letting the Days leave first. He bent down, on the pretence of tying his shoelaces, so he could scan the room from a lower level. Nothing.

But then he caught sight of something, under Ruby’s desk. Left alone in the room, some instinct kicking in, along with a perverse drive to ignore protocol, he reached underneath.

Pushed away from sight was a wastepaper basket. Made out of black metal wire, it was empty except for a shredded document. Zain reached in and pulled the shreds out, hiding them in his jacket pocket before joining the Days in the lounge.



Chapter Six

‘Do you have any idea where she might have gone?’

‘No. It’s not like Ruby to disappear. I think . . . I don’t even want to voice my thoughts,’ said Laura.

‘We started calling the hospitals,’ said Mike. ‘If she’s had an accident –’

‘I can put an alert out for you,’ said Zain. ‘Save you having to go through red tape and petty bureaucrats.’

‘Thank you,’ said Laura.

‘What were her precise words before she left?’ said Zain.

‘Just what we said earlier. She said she was going out,’ said Mike.

‘Out? Or for a walk?’

‘Yes, a walk. She said she was going out for a walk, that’s all,’ said Mike.

‘What was she wearing? When she left?’

‘We didn’t see her. We were watching a soap on TV, and she left without coming into the lounge,’ said Mike.

‘What was she wearing when you last saw her?’

Mike looked to Laura.

‘Jeans and a black top. It had white stars on it. She also has a ring. It’s her birthstone, tourmaline,’ she said.

‘Was she wearing a jacket or coat? It’s freezing out there.’

‘She has a patchwork red and grey coat. And a black woollen hat,’ she said. ‘I presume she put them on before she –’

‘I understand she’s been missing since about seven-thirty.’

‘That’s right,’ Laura confirmed.

‘It would have been dark already by that time,’ Zain said. ‘Is it usual for her to take walks in the evening?’

‘Sometimes she does,’ said Mike. ‘Not often, but occasionally she takes the walk through St John’s Wood down to Regent’s Park and



the back of London Zoo. It's a nice walk, a safe walk; it's a nice neighbourhood. That walk takes you past Lord's Cricket Ground, too. Laura and I also do it, when it's warmer.'

Zain watched Mike's mouth move, the words tumbling out. He was thinking how out of touch and deluded people became, believing that their Georgian houses, their cream and red mansions, their tree-lined streets and their proximity to affluence, could protect them. No one was immune from risk, ever. The only way to get through life was to not think about it.

'How long is that walk?' he said.

'Maybe an hour. Sometimes it takes less, sometimes more.'

'And she didn't say she was going for a walk and then going out?'
Hesitation.

'No, she just said out for a walk. I think. Laura?'

'Yes, I remember her voice. Only . . . is that just what we thought we heard, because that's what she normally says? No, she would have told us if she was going anywhere else. If she's back late from dinner, going to the cinema, any delay. She tells us. We know. And if we don't, she has a tracker on her phone.'

'An app,' said Mike. 'It feeds back her location. If you're registered, you give people access, so they can see where you are.'

'Why did she get that?'

'It's just an app; she's into them. She thought this one was nifty.'

Nifty? Zain was sure Ruby didn't use words like that.

'And she gave you access?' he said.

'Yes,' said Mike.

'Voluntarily?'

They exchanged those muted glances again. Were they prompting each other for answers? He had that sense again that they were playing a part, that their responses were scripted. He had to switch it off, this paranoia.

'I can't remember. Why is this an issue?' said Mike.

'Is the app still working? Have you checked?'

'It says she's at home. It hasn't changed since she left.'



The battery may have died, thought Zain. Or the phone was purposely switched off.

‘Have you been worried about Ruby?’

‘Of course. We are her parents. Do you have kids?’ said Mike.

‘I mean specifically,’ Zain said, ignoring the question. ‘Any over-zealous fans from her vlogging? Has she had any trouble with any individuals online?’

Again the subtle, quick looks.

‘No,’ said Laura. ‘Nothing specific. Not that we know of, anyway.’

‘And if she decided to go clubbing with her friends for the night, or just wanted to take off, she would let you know? Or the app would let you know? What if she just wanted some alone time?’

‘She isn’t that sort of girl,’ said Mike.

‘I’m always surprised by how little parents know their children,’ Zain said.

‘Not us. Not Ruby. Why do I feel like we are on trial?’ Mike said, frowning. ‘Our daughter is missing – why aren’t you out looking for her? She could be lying injured somewhere.’

Most people turn up, usually within hours. Ruby will, too. I’m trying to take this seriously. The response ran through Zain’s mind. He kept it to himself, though.

‘Knowing her movements, what she gets up to, who her friends are . . . all this helps us do exactly that.’

Laura raised her eyes to her husband. He sighed, backed away.

‘So this walk . . . does she ever deviate from her usual route? Any cafés or places she might have stopped off?’

‘I don’t know. Not usually, no. She normally goes out and comes straight back. That’s why we were worried.’

‘What time did you start worrying?’

‘Maybe half nine? It’s unusual for her not to be back by then. We tried calling her about ten, just after the news had started. It kept going straight to voicemail. Then I went out to look for her.’

‘What time did you get back?’

'Around midnight. Laura was contacting Ruby's friends, people she knew.'

'Mainly on Facebook,' Laura said. 'I don't have their phone numbers. I sent messages to friends on her page.'

'Her friends list isn't private? From you, I mean?' Zain asked.

'She added me as a friend a while back, but with limited access. I can see her friends, but not her posts.'

Even with limited profile view, Zain wouldn't add his parents to his Facebook. If he had one.

'What time did you call the police?'

'Maybe half one? A few of her friends had replied by then. None of them had heard from her,' said Laura.

'You called the commissioner?' Zain said.

They didn't register his words.

'Justin Hope?' he prompted.

Again, nothing.

'We called 999,' said Mike. 'And then you turned up.'

And did sod all, was the end of that sentence, thought Zain. His mind was reeling, though. Why had an emergency call operative escalated this to the commissioner?

'Has Ruby been depressed at all?'

The bluntness of the question as it fell into the room, as the Days picked up on it . . . the way they reacted. They denied it, but Zain knew then that there was something. They were hiding something.

Zain's phone rang when he was back inside his car, warming his engine up.

'Harris,' he said.

'Detective, I need you to do something for me,' said the voice.

Zain felt his insides tighten.