

to
keep
you
safe

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ZAFFRE

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*For my mother, Jenny.
And for my husband, Brad.
Both heroes.*

Prologue

I hang my legs over the cliff edge and look over so I can imagine your broken body lying on the beach below. I never tire of sitting here. I come even in winter, when the storms seethe, forcing me to grip the scant grass, because I feel that I could die here too. I like that. I watch the crashing waves below, beating against the bluff, pushing and pulling the flotsam and jetsam, relentless, relentless, relentless.

Then I do my own falling. I uncork a bottle and for a while feel the raw pain of my loss.

Walkers have approached me in the past; they see my solo picnic of wine and the inches between me and certain death, and they think I'm going to jump. The police have been here too. Twice they've arrested me under section 136 of the Mental Health Act, determined to get me assessed, but my last psychiatrist intervened. He said that I push all of my grief and guilt onto the clifftop, as a coping mechanism. He's wrong.

As I sober up at home, I spend the night staring at my bedroom ceiling while the world sleeps. I think about my choices, questions writhing like worms in my mind. I replay everything: everything I did and didn't do. What it caused; about the people who got hurt. Who died. I remember blue eyes locked on mine,

eyes filled with the pain and the nearness of death. Then the peace, after.

I know I am guilty.

And then when I tire of my self-hatred, I wonder what would've happened if we hadn't come together like a planet spun from its orbit into the path of the other. How different my life would've been. And that's what I can't get over – that's why I cannot know peace.

I turn over what happened to us in my mind, the memories getting no less worn through the constant re-examination. Relentless, relentless, relentless.

I don't need this clifftop to remember you or what happened that Friday afternoon in May, three years ago, when everything that I'd ever loved, would be gone before the sun rose on Saturday.

I think and I think and I think; thoughts of what I'm going to do next beating relentlessly into the shallows of my mind.

Friday
08:55
May, three years earlier

Jenni

‘Quiet! I’m taking the register.’ Fifteen minutes, twenty-six teenagers, one register. A sum I’ve done before, not a sum that should change my life. But change it, it did, because she was there.

I didn’t notice her straight away as I looked out across the kids in my form group. I knew I should know them well by this point, particularly as some were also regulars in my maths class. But a year into teaching and it was clear that I was never going to find it easy. I still struggled with their names – there were so many of them. Finn Taggart stood out with his huge cloud of hair and permanent smile, and right then he was flicking balls of paper at the group of girls at the back. Jordan Shire I did know because at six foot four he was one of the few that stood taller than me and I watched him now threatening to punch his best friend. I still hadn’t forgiven Jordan for last week, when halfway through teaching fractions, he put on a perfect Dalek voice and imitated me, saying: ‘you will be mathinated’, instantly creasing up the class. I threw him out, of course, but the thought of what he meant bothered me more

and more – at night, in particular. I couldn't help wanting to know what he was insinuating. Was it that he had found me out? Could he somehow tell I struggled with certain things? Determined to let it go, I unscrewed the lid from my water bottle and took a swig, scanning the room, looking elsewhere so I wouldn't have to deal with him. I hadn't been sleeping well and I knew I wouldn't be fair on him. As it was, I had woken this morning with a head full of thunder and fresh concern that perhaps something was wrong with me.

Something more than the recent bad dreams.

My sleeplessness was now threatening my ability to train – normally a granite wall wouldn't stop me from a fifteen-mile run before work. Given I'd never seen a doctor in my life – except that spell in hospital prior to my discharge from the army – I wasn't sure what to do. The sleeplessness didn't shift with herbal remedies or any of the other advice I'd seen on the internet. I'd trudged to work this morning and with each footstep I thought *I'm a drum, I'm a drum*, over and over again. The thought didn't make sense but I couldn't shake it; I didn't know what it meant, what I was supposed to feel. I felt nothing and I couldn't stop the relentless beat of my life.

Then a child at the back of my classroom caught my eye.

Destiny Mills sat alone.

Destiny. How I worried about her right from the very start. But then, worrying about her was better than thinking about me.

In a year group where some of the boys were already bigger than me and some girls seemed like adults, there were just as many at fifteen that still looked like young children. Destiny

was one of the younger-looking ones. With wrists so thin a glare could snap them, she tamed dark curls into plaits and stood shorter than average. She had large watchful eyes and a mouth that never smiled. If she didn't have to speak she wouldn't, not to her peers or her teachers. She was rarely in school and when she was, she sat alone at lunch, playing on her phone if she could get away with it or reading obscure novels. Her small, silent demeanour could've meant that she slipped into the sea of unnoticeable kids, but she didn't because she was exceptional.

She was exceptional for two reasons: the first because she was the smartest kid in school. She was in year ten, which meant that she'd be taking her exams in a year. When she'd joined the school three months ago, she'd achieved nines in every subject assessment. Teachers would rather not predict let alone award a nine, particularly a year early, but after her mock exams last month when we'd all assessed her at the same grade, we quietly relaxed, glad to accept that perhaps Destiny Mills was simply a genius.

Destiny was also notable because she was in care. Teachers have to know about vulnerable children and as her form tutor I had to know more than most. But unlike most kids in care, she wasn't tucked up with a foster family. Social services claimed that she was unplaceable. They said they'd moved her halfway down the country because they couldn't find another children's home that would take her – apparently, not only did she constantly lie about being sexually abused in every home she'd been placed, but at the last one she'd set fire to her room. Arson meant she'd failed risk assessment after risk assessment. The

school had never had an arsonist before and we'd all had to be briefed. If George Danvers, the head, was right, if she failed her placement at either this school or at her new care home, then she'd be moved to a secure unit. She wouldn't get nines there.

If she didn't get great results, maybe she'd never climb out of the pit of her life. Since I'd retrained, I clung to the meaningfulness of education – the fact it could change someone's life. It wasn't the army, it wasn't life and death, but it had purpose and I grasped on to that as a reason to stay. I was too new to teach the top sets, so I didn't teach Destiny, but I liked the idea that schools gave kids the opportunity to change their lives. We all wanted good things for this friendless, diminutive, damaged girl.

But a bright future was starting to look impossible. She often truanted, so I didn't expect to see her in registration. She was missing lessons too. The way the exams were now, if she didn't start attending it didn't matter how bright she was – if she didn't know the content of the curriculum, she'd fail her exams.

What a waste.

Glad of the excuse not to have to challenge Jordan and determined to speak to Destiny about her attendance, I started to cross to the back of the room. Her demeanour now in this noisy classroom, the way she held herself so small, made me think of a frightened hermit crab. Is that what she was? Frightened? I couldn't be sure.

As I got closer, I noticed something new – Destiny Mills had a huge black eye. I crossed the classroom, put down my water bottle and sat on the table. 'Are you OK?'

She stared at her twisting hands, her bottom lip quivering as she shrugged.

‘Destiny?’

‘I’m fine.’

I paused, deciding the best way to build a relationship. The topics like black eyes and care and truanting needed time to work into, but there was never any time in teaching. Everything had to be done in a hurry because there were so many things to do. I’m not sure it made my alexithymia worse, but perhaps it didn’t help that I didn’t tell anyone. My dad said it didn’t matter, it just meant I wasn’t ‘a people person’. He said lots of people aren’t able to read what people are thinking, but I shouldn’t let it stop me from being out in the world. I wished I could be bright and chatty like most of the other teachers. But I wasn’t, I had nothing to say. I thought of the drum again; beating, yet empty.

Perhaps *I* was the drum.

Destiny bit her lip, her gaze darting anywhere but at me. The bell sounded for the first period. Everyone bundled out, but I paid no attention – I hadn’t even asked her about her bruise yet. ‘How did you get your black eye?’

Destiny jumped up, bag in hand, banging the table as she tried to get away. I moved quicker, standing in her way to stop her from leaving. Around us were crashes as someone knocked the door against the wall, the cacophony of noise from the corridor, scraping chairs and shouts as the pupils began their brief chaos of getting to their class on time.

I waited until the rest of the tutor group left. ‘Your eye looks like it must hurt,’ I said, taking a closer look: it had the green and yellow of an ageing bruise. I also noticed a cut near her eye.

Whoever had hit Destiny had hit her hard. 'What happened to you? Is this why you've been off school all week?'

She shrugged. Just as she edged again towards the door, a phone rang in Destiny's bag. She jumped. Finding it with shaking hands, she saw the number and gave a strange moan like a keening gull.

I felt a thump of disquiet. 'Destiny? What's the matter?'

'Miss, I've got to go,' she said, her voice a husk as the colour dropped from her face.

My condition meant that I couldn't feel things right and not knowing what the hospital doctor called 'the full spectrum of emotions' made it difficult for me to recognise some emotions in others. But I couldn't pretend that I didn't know what was going on here. I couldn't use my condition as an excuse this time. I'd only been teaching for two of my forty years, but I'd never seen any child before or since look like Destiny did right then, with unadulterated fear. I'd seen grown men look like that under fire, but that's different. War is difficult, adult. But real fear in the classroom? Seeing it made my own heartbeat quicken. 'No taking calls in school.'

I have to, she mouthed before turning away. 'It's me – Candydoll.'

Candydoll? Why was a child answering a phone like that? I sat down hard on the table and crossed my arms, so she knew I wasn't going anywhere. And I wasn't – I had a free period so this could take as long as it needed to.

She turned and looked at me with eyes like she'd been stung, before turning back to the window. I got up to look outside, but

didn't see anything. Then I noticed urine puddled by her feet. Destiny had wet herself. But even worse – she didn't seem to know or care. She said something into the phone that I couldn't catch. She whispered something else, and I realised she was fearful. 'No, please, it's only Miss Wales.' Her voice was the whine of a kicked dog.

Why was she talking about me? The weeing on the floor, the fear in her voice, made my own bladder twitch in response.

I thought: *confiscate the phone*. As I reached for it, she spoke: 'She's nice, leave it!' She turned to me and pointed outside. There was a van outside of the school gates. She covered the phone with her hand and said: 'I'm sorry, Miss.'

Then, turning away again, she added: *Run*.

Friday
09:15

Jenni

I ran.

My brogues hit the empty corridor, *bang, bang, bang*. Everyone was in lessons and the school was quiet.

I covered the long corridor in seconds. I ran through reception, ignoring the receptionist at the front desk. Through the foyer. Pushed through the front double doors. Ran three steps down onto the front drive.

Cold wind smacked my face as I saw it: a large Ford transit. White. Clean. Two men staring right at me from the front seats. They had parked further down the drive, but now as I ran towards them, they revved their engine and sped towards me.

I jumped onto the grass verge. Just in time, as I felt the front wheel throw gravel on my shoes. Shiny hubcaps. It skidded to a turn and then sped out onto the street beyond. A large padlock swung from the rear doors.

As the van left, I only then noticed Aaron Vaughn from year eleven staring after it. The boy's mouth hung open. 'Miss! How bad was that! Are you all right?'

‘Did you see that van’s number plate?’

A shadow crossed his face. He shrugged, his usual insolence returning to his voice. ‘I didn’t see nothing, Miss.’

‘Then get going, you’re late.’

He glanced back over his shoulder as he went, our brief roles as comrades restored back to the status quo.

Friday
09:25

Jenni

Destiny.

I realised that Destiny still stood in her own urine in room 12.

I ran back past the reception, jogged up the now silent corridor.

Destiny was still in my classroom. Using my desk tissues, she was mopping the floor.

‘Let me help.’ I took the wodge of paper off her and finished wiping the floor. ‘We better get you to Mrs Hodges.’

Terri Hodges was the nearest we had to a school nurse now that the school’s welfare team had been cut from six to two. She was in charge of the school reception, but behind reception was a small room with the medical bed where kids went with temperatures, banged heads, bleeding noses. With the room came the responsibility. I didn’t know her, really; I worked in the maths department and barely left it. I’d noticed that other staff who’d joined the school at the same time as me seemed to know everyone by now and were always in the staffroom, laughing and chatting at lunch. I kept to myself; it was better that way. That way I couldn’t make any mistakes about what they meant,

like when Paul Goods, the science teacher, had been sarcastic about the deputy head and I thought he was being serious and everyone had just stared at me like I was from another planet. It hadn't been like that in the army.

I hoped Terri was kind.

I could leave Destiny with Terri, I decided, but I also needed to report the incident. Since we'd lost our protection officer, Mary Nightingale, one of the two assistant heads, had taken over the responsibility for safeguarding student welfare. But she might be teaching. I checked my watch; I still had twenty minutes before my next class.

Destiny had put on her coat. 'Where are you going?' I asked.

'I have to go, Miss. I'm sorry ...' she cast around, as if to express her anguish.

'I'm going to take you to the medical room. Mrs Hodges might have a spare skirt you can wear.'

Destiny fiddled with her coat zip, then looked out of the window. I could see her wondering if she should follow me or make a break for it.

I turned and walked down the corridor, holding my head up with a surety that there could be no debate and her only option was to follow me. I remembered when I was a corporal and my command carried authority: it seemed like a distant memory now. In my chest I felt a pressure: I pushed it away. It needed to stay distant, the more distant the better.

We found Terri Hodges in reception dealing with what seemed like an anxious parent, on the phone. We waited but in the end

I was forced to mouth about Destiny's 'accident', even twitching inverted commas into the air to make my point and speed her up. Terri finished her call and primed up like an engine, large bosom puffing up in response. 'Come now, dear, you're safe with me. We'll let Miss get to class.'

Class. As reluctant as I felt to leave Destiny, I had to go. That was something teaching had in common with the army: you could never be late. 'Just one thing,' I added to Terri with a whisper, 'I'll write a safeguarding report, but I want you to know that I don't think Destiny is safe out of school. Could you keep her in sight? I'm worried that she's really ...' I thought about the padlock on the back of the van. '*Really* vulnerable. Do you think you could do that? It's important that she doesn't make a bolt for it. If we lose her today, we might not get her back.'

'That bad?'

'Look at her eye.'

Terri did before she nodded at me and touched my arm.

I wasn't sure what she meant by that, but I could see her take an interest in Destiny so I decided it meant that she believed me.

Friday
09:54

Jenni

I took the east stairs two at a time; I could hear my class before I'd even reached the top. As I walked past a neighbouring classroom, my colleague Steve Fullers, the head of the maths department and the second assistant head, was at his door. Seeing me, Steve gave me a look that was long enough to mean something before he shut his door, closing the view of his already seated and silently working class. It felt like yet another punching reminder that I wasn't getting teaching – or perhaps at least *he* thought I wasn't.

I wondered if more than one whole class detention would be fair before I checked myself: it wasn't the year nines' fault if I was late.

'If I can't rely on you to behave . . .' I muttered five metres from the classroom door, already mentally in there.

It is *this* moment I remember, this one above the many that happened in the hours after, this one that changed my life and the life of those around me, because this one was a moment of chance. Everything else in this account was a choice; I accept that. Although, for me, it was a Hobson's choice: Destiny had

wet herself in front of me, laid her fear out in front of me as clear as if she'd gripped my hands and begged me for help. Seeing something then deciding not to act might be a choice for the lazy, the dispassionate, the cowardly, but I am none of those things. But as much as I am the sum of my parts, I accept my choices are still choices.

But it wasn't a conscious choice to glance out of the window from the first floor, only ten feet from my classroom. If I hadn't turned my head to glance out of the window, the trajectory of my entire life would have remained unchanged. I would've kept my job, not have had my actions with Destiny been made public by the press and would never have been arrested. And poor Destiny would have continued on her sad journey, like thousands of kids who slip through the system destined for bad things.

I might not have looked out of the top-floor corridor window.
But I did.

Friday
09:58

Jenni

I ran.

Back down the corridor, back down the stairs, three at a time. Down the lower corridor. Past Terri as I sprinted out onto the front drive.

'Destiny!' I shouted. 'Come back.'

Destiny walked towards the front gate. She didn't walk in a straight line, but weaved as if caught in a buffeting wind.

The van was stationary but I saw the exhaust, heard the engine running. They were ready to leave.

Destiny stopped at the sound of my voice and turned. As I got nearer, I thought she seemed upset. I wasn't sure, but her face was screwed up and her hands were balled into fists. She was still wearing the same skirt. And I saw in my mind's eye: Terri leaving to get the replacement and Destiny walking out of the door.

'What are you doing?' I asked her as I grabbed her by the shoulders. I looked up to see the passenger door open. A large tattooed hand gripped the door, then a grey tracksuited leg wearing a black trainer emerged. I didn't wait. I grabbed Destiny – harder than I would like to admit – and ran her,

pulling and pushing, back towards the school. I remember she didn't exactly resist, but she whimpered and protested like I was hurting her by not letting her go.

I heard footsteps behind us, running faster. I learnt in the army to never look back. When I compete in Ironman, I only keep going. So I pulled Destiny harder, my grip clawed her shoulder and propelled her forward with my body weight.

As we got to the front steps, Destiny looked behind again and cried out.

I still didn't risk a glance.

With a heave, I pushed Destiny back into the school.

And then I dragged the big bolts into place, locking the front door.

A man was running towards us and came right up to the half-glazed door. He stood so close that his breath steamed the glass. He was pale-skinned, a big man, broad with the huge shoulders of a weight-trained bouncer. But he wasn't as tall as me, maybe only five ten. He had a large shaved head with small terrier eyes that stared unblinkingly at me. His neck was like an oak tree and there was a flattened bridge to his nose, like it had taken too many blows.

I stood against the door and lifted my chin in defiance. 'Get out of here,' I told him through the glass, staring down at him.

Behind me, Terri called out a question, but I ignored her. Instead I focused on him: our faces were only inches from each other, his face forced to lift up to meet mine. He glared at me and as if I disgusted him his blue eyes burnt into mine, it was as if I could read his thoughts because I knew that if the security

glass hadn't been threaded with wire mesh, he would head butt his way to me. I banged the glass in front of his face – aggression for aggression. *Don't you threaten me, sunshine: I'm no Barbie.* 'Go on, clear off, this is school grounds. I'm going to call the police *right now.*'

His blue eyes continued to stare at me unblinkingly through the glass. Then he pulled up his hoodie and tucked in the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms was a handgun.

As I stared at it, he gently leant in, closing the small gap between us and slowly licked the glass with a thick slug-like tongue, leaving a spittle trail right in front of my face.

Later, after my arrest, as I explained my actions, I insisted I had been scared. This was important. This was my defence.

It was also a lie.

Yes, I had been disconcerted by the man. Revolted by the wink he gave me before walking away.

But scared?

No.

I think, for the first time in a long time, I felt alive.

Friday

10:10

Jenni

After I shouted at Terri, bawling her out in the corridor for letting Destiny go outside after I had been so very specific that she wasn't to let Destiny out of her sight, George Danvers, the head, came rushing out of his office. 'Ms Wales, please step into my office for a moment.'

'I can't. I've got a class waiting for me.'

George looked at Destiny who stood against the wall, head and body bent over; then he looked at Terri, red-faced and near tears, and inhaled deeply before speaking to her. 'Please send up whoever is on call and ask them to supervise Ms Wales's class.' He then turned to me. 'Ms Wales.' He stood to one side, his hand open to show me his office door. 'If you would be so kind?'

Where was I going to leave Destiny? I couldn't let her out of my sight – I could hardly trust Terri – but what I needed to say couldn't be said in front of Destiny.

Then George solved it for me. 'Destiny Mills, what lesson are you supposed to be in?'

'Geography.'

He addressed Terri. 'Mrs Hodges, would you mind . . . ?'

Terri put her hand on her hip, and with an arched eyebrow and a tone of voice I couldn't place, said, 'Ms Wales suggests I should change her skirt first. If I take her, I'll have to close reception and I'm not allowed to close reception.'

George's gaze lowered to Destiny's skirt, but he didn't react, instead he simply thanked Terri for her help.

As I stepped into George's office and started to explain, he held up his hands. 'No, not yet Jenni. I know you're new to teaching and I understand it's not been easy for you, but this really is unacceptable. You cannot – *ever* – leave your class unattended. Do I make myself clear?'

'I've just been threatened with a gun.'

George was well known for his calm handling of all situations. I'd seen a student hold a knife to another pupil, and even then George didn't fluster or panic, he merely talked the student down. Yes, George could take anything in his stride, but even his eyes widened a fraction.

He made a phone call to his secretary. He glanced at me as he said, 'Sylvia, contact Steve Wichard and tell him I've had an emergency come up.' There was silence for a moment, before he said, 'I can't. In fact . . . tell him I'll need to delay until later today. Check his availability for me, will you, and reschedule against my diary.'

Then George turned his soft brown eyes to me and said: 'Tell me what happened, then we'll call the police.'

So I told him, then he pushed the desk phone at me and I rang 999, and the police came within the time it had taken for George to have his secretary to arrange cover for my lessons until lunch

and make us both a sweet tea. I didn't need the sugar in my tea, but because of my height and my six pack, which outclassed any man I knew, it was rare for me to be treated delicately, so I accepted the sentiment as it was meant.

I'd always liked and respected George. Despite the fallout that happened only three days after I sat across the desk from him drinking the milky sweet tea, the fallout that put him in hospital, cost him his job and ended his career, I like to think that he didn't regret taking a chance on me and employing me.

But I don't know. I've learnt that there is often a big difference in what I like to think and what people really think.

As we waited for the police, he sipped his tea. 'Exactly what is it that you think is going on, Jenni?'

'I don't know. Something weird. Destiny is really scared. And she's vulnerable.'

'We haven't rung social services yet, we should do that now.'

And he did.

Friday
10:52

Jenni

Two police officers turned up, a PC Hollinge, a red-haired copper who looked as if he should still be wearing braces on his teeth, accompanied by a woman about my age, PC Glad, with eyes that stared without blinking.

George introduced me and let me tell them my story. At the end, he told them that he was waiting to hear back from social services after ringing Destiny's social worker. We'd also made a safeguarding alert through the MASH call centre hub and properly followed it up with the relevant online form.

Glad had a look at the safeguarding form on George's computer, while Hollinge took my statement. At the end of each laboriously handwritten page, I had to sign to say it was accurate. When I got to the gun, I was already three pages into my statement. 'It was a Glock, probably a nine.'

Hollinge and Glad exchanged a look.

'How do you know that?' asked Glad.

'Well, I can't be sure. It could've been a seventeen, obviously.'

'No, how do you know about guns?'

I explained about my firearms history. 'I was a serving corporal in the British Army for many years; I've completed tours as both a frontline medic and in combat, including Northern Ireland and Iraq. Although I carried a SA80, guns in general have always been an interest of mine.'

George started to say something, then he stopped. I thought he looked as if there was something he wanted to ask. The same question everyone asks.

'You're going to ask me if I have ever killed someone? Yes, I have, but only in the service of my country.'

George blinked and drew air in audibly through his liver-coloured nostrils. 'I was actually going to ask if you wanted another cup of tea. I . . . was worried that you were shocked by seeing the gun, although . . . I realise . . . now . . .'

'No, George, I was not shocked. I've been shot at many, many times. What I did think was that his choice of where to store his weapon wasn't very sensible. The Glock is a heavy piece of machinery; it could've easily fallen down his tracksuit bottoms. I rather thought it showed he wasn't very experienced. Even if,' I thought again of the slug-like tongue, 'he was an enthusiastic adversary.'

They looked at each other and I continued my statement without further question. When I got to the end, I asked them what would happen now.

'We will need to speak to social services ourselves,' said Glad. 'If you get hold of them first, ask them to contact us.' She passed a card to me and George, writing down the incident number for us. 'Obviously, we are concerned. We'll put out an alert on

the van now, but without the number plate, it could be difficult to trace a white transit. We'd like you to pop down to the station today or tomorrow and we'll get you to do a photofit of the person you saw. We can put it through our computer and see if it pulls anything up.'

'But what else? Surely Destiny needs some protection right now?'

'We'll contact social services, as I said.'

'She doesn't need you to contact someone, she needs your protection.'

'If you're thinking we can offer her around-the-clock guard,' she said, 'you'd be wrong. Obviously, we need to interview the girl herself, but her social worker can come down to the station with her or arrange for an appropriate adult. We need to hear her side of it. Right now, that's all we can do.'

Glad stood to leave and Hollinge followed her lead, thanking George for the tea.

'There must be something else?' I pushed. 'Something to help her after school?'

'Destiny probably knows their identity. When we hear from her, we can get an ID, we can pull them in for an interview, maybe even get a search warrant for that gun.'

'But what happens today?'

Glad sounded firm. 'Let's wait to hear from social services.'

Friday 11:50

Jenni

I dismissed my class a few minutes early so I was at George's door as soon as the lesson bell sounded. Before I knocked, I checked that the police car was gone from the driveway. Although I knew they wouldn't linger, I still didn't want risk seeing them again. I didn't like the way Glad looked at me. Maybe being a copper made them suspicious of everyone; maybe it was habit to scowl at people as if they were about to lift your wallet.

He opened his door and sighed. 'Jenni.'

'Is the social worker here yet?'

'Not yet. They won't give me an appointment; they'll turn up when they can.'

'When they arrive, can I see them?'

'You'll be teaching.' He checked his watch. 'I thought you had a lesson now.'

'Can't someone cover my lesson?'

'Jenni, you are here to teach, not run round like you're in charge of crisis management.'

'But if you got cover for fifteen minutes I could—'

'More cover from where? You've had a free this morning and you've got a free period six and that's your lot. Besides, Sal is

already broken by arranging cover today – did you know she ended up covering your period two and three lessons herself? We've got three staff off on long-term leave; two more called in sick today – there is no one else. I've already got two agency teachers in murdering my budget. *You* will teach your lesson and *I* will oversee the social worker. I'll make sure they know everything that has happened.'

He held up a hand. 'In the nicest possible way, I'm going to shut my office door now. I don't know why you're not getting it, but I need you to go. I've got to make a grovelling phone call to my boss, who I cancelled on today, because of this debacle. Now, if you would *please* let me do that, because some of us value the relationships of our managers and will do what we can to keep them sweet.'

He gave me a warm smile and then very slowly, but very firmly, shut the door.