Beverley Collins came into the kitchen and put the TV on, saying to Kate, ‘Dear Lord, would you hear what’s happened.’

Kate and Patrick looked at the TV. It was on Sky News, and they both listened in morbid fascination as the newscaster filled them in on the gruesome details of a child murder in Grantley.

‘The poor unfortunate! There must be a madman on the loose.’

‘Turn it down, Bev.’

Picking up her mobile, Kate nearly rang Annie Carr, before placing the phone carefully back on the kitchen table. This wasn’t her call any more, and she had to realise that. She had retired, and that was that.

Patrick looked at her for a moment before saying gently, ‘Once a Filth, eh?’

Kate smiled at him wryly. ‘Those poor parents, what must they be going through?’ Then, realising what she had said, she got up and, putting her arms around Patrick’s neck, she hugged him close.

He grabbed her hands and kissed them gently, saying, ‘I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy, darling.’

They stayed holding each other for a long while.
Grantley Comprehensive was a large school with over a thousand pupils. It had been built in the sixties and was basically just a series of concrete blocks; it reminded Annie of pictures you used to see of prison camps in Eastern Europe. As she walked into the main building she was assailed by the smell of schools. Teenage sweat, musty footwear and disinfectant. School was breaking up in a few weeks for the summer holidays and she could already feel the excitement of both pupils and teachers alike.

The head teacher, Mr Yalding, and Kylie Barlow’s head of year, Miss Betterway, were waiting for her patiently in the main offices. She could sense their shock and horror and knew that it was only going to get worse for them, not better. These cases were always the same; it was the violence and the newspapers’ and television’s love of reporting it that stopped people from moving on, or at least forgetting about it for even a short while. The shock often hit people in many different ways. That was the thing about violent crime – the shockwaves should not be underestimated.

Miss Betterway was very pretty, in a prim and proper sort of way, and she smiled tentatively as they settled down with cups of tea.

Mr Yalding, an older man who looked like something from a Roald Dahl book, said uneasily, ‘We are all still in absolute shock.’
Annie nodded and, turning to her colleague DC Ali Karim, she said gently, ‘If you would kindly take the notes.’

He nodded calmly, all business as usual. Annie Carr liked him; he was a solid bloke to have on your team – dedicated, good company and an expert on gin.

‘Why don’t you start, Miss Betterway, by telling me a little about Kylie? Her friends and her life at school?’

The younger woman tucked a stray curl behind her ear as she said quietly, ‘I don’t know what to tell you. Kylie was a typical teenage girl. She was popular and her main friends were Andrea Connor and Destiny Wallace. You never saw one without the other two.’ She smiled sadly. ‘She might not have been the brightest of students but she was well within the mainstream. She was well liked by the other kids in the year. I suppose she could be a bit naughty at times, but then they are all capable of that, as you well know.’

The headmaster nodded his agreement, saying loudly, ‘I have never once had to reprimand her, she wasn’t that kind of girl. Like Miss Betterway says, she was just normal.’

‘So, no fights with other girls, or feuds . . .’

Miss Betterway shrugged. ‘They are teenagers, they argue, but nothing that warrants—’

‘I understand that, but we have to look at every angle. Have any of the staff here mentioned anyone suspicious around or near the school?’

‘We have CCTV and you are in possession of the tapes up and until just after the last time we saw Kylie. But no one had red-flagged anyone or anything. We do keep a lookout but, as you know better than me, it’s almost impossible to pin these children down.’

‘I want to see the names, addresses and phone numbers of
everyone who works in this place and, if possible, their work records. Has anyone come to work here recently?"

Mr Yalding frowned. ‘We have a new PE teacher who started this term, Duncan Watts, but he came highly recommended. I will get you all the relevant information requested. But I must stress we do vigorous background checks on everyone who works here.’

Annie smiled. ‘I’m sure you do.’

Trouble was, she knew from experience that a lot of offenders never got within a cat’s whisker of the registry. Too clever by half, because they had to be.
Patrick was eating dinner on the terrace with Kate when Annie arrived at the house. He greeted her amiably and poured her a glass of white wine.

‘That smells delicious!’

Kate knew that with the murder case Annie was probably living on coffee and cigarettes, so she said quietly, ‘Pull up a chair, Annie, there’s plenty. I’ll go get Bev to make you up a plate.’

Annie sat down gratefully and smiled at Patrick. She’d grown to like him more and more over the years, though she could get flustered in his company at times. There was something about the way he looked at her – as if he was weighing her up – that made her nervous.

Patrick returned her smile and carried on eating his food. Then, when Kate came back, he nodded at her and waited while she laid the plate and cutlery in front of her friend.

Annie’s mouth was watering and she felt bad because she knew that she shouldn’t even want to eat, but she’d had nothing all day, and it had been a long one.

‘Get that down you. I bet you haven’t had time to have a pee, let alone eat.’

Annie nodded and tucked into the food, trying not to wolf it down.
‘So I assume you are here about the girl from Grantley Comp?’

Annie stopped eating and said seriously, ‘What else? I think we’re at the beginning of a nightmare. The news cameras are already setting up outside the police station and school. I don’t think the Chief Super is keen to say too much till we have something concrete to go on. This wasn’t random. Strange thing is, she wasn’t raped. Mutilated but no penetration. Tortured beyond belief—’

Patrick got up from the table and, picking up his plate, he said loudly, ‘I’ll leave you girls to talk shop, I’ll eat in the kitchen.’

Annie was mortified. ‘I am so sorry, Pat.’

He left the terrace, saying brightly, ‘Bit too much information, as the kids say these days!’

Kate laid her hand gently on her friend’s arm. ‘Don’t worry about it, I know what it’s like. You forget the normal social niceties when you are involved with something like this. It eats you from the inside out.’

Annie was near to tears and she hastily blinked them away.

Kate’s heart went out to her, so, smiling gently, she said, ‘Take a deep slug of that wine and start from the beginning.’
Chapter Thirteen

While Annie was filling Kate in on the day’s events, Patrick continued eating alone in his large kitchen, glad to be away from that conversation. He thought of Mandy, how she looked when she was dying, and he didn’t envy that poor girl’s family having to deal with such a violent death. He took the picture of Joseph’s kids out of his back pocket and stared at their faces for long moments. He had never wanted anything more than to be told these kids were his flesh and blood. It must be the Irish in him, that need for blood relatives. Land and relatives, that was the Irish way; he supposed it was because they had lost so much of both over the years, the Irish needed to feel they were making up for all the lost time.

After his initial wariness, he had liked Joseph O’Loughlin a lot. In fact, he had seen himself in him. If he was telling the truth – or more to the point, if Ruby was telling the truth – he had a family once more. Patrick felt a prickle of excitement at the thought, and he did his best to suppress it. He knew that he had to find out the truth definitively – that until the test was done it was all pure speculation – but he had not felt this alive in years.

He stared down at the photo again and looked into the eyes of Ruby O’Loughlin. She looked happy, contented. He remembered
how ashamed he had been of his affair with her and yet it could now be one of the best things that had ever happened to him. Life was strange all right – strange and fickle. They had created a child, and he was sorry in a way that he had never known the boy existed. But what could he do? Ruby, bless her, had not wanted to rock his world. Yet she had brought up his son, and he had never even given her a thought over the years. If anything, he had made himself forget her. He had disappeared from her life quicker than a bad fart. Oh, life was a bastard, always throwing things at you when you least expected or indeed deserved them.

His eyes strayed to the little girl, and he felt a rush of love. Even her name, Amanda, had to be some kind of proof that this was meant to be, surely? He was so desperate for it to be true – he wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

He picked up his mobile and phoned Danny Foster. Danny still did the day-to-day for him, and they had become close friends over the years. He decided he would have a drink with him and see what he had to say about the news. Danny shared Patrick’s mindset, and he would be honest with him.

As he made the arrangements to meet in an hour, he wondered what Kate’s reaction would be if this should turn out to be true. He loved her enough to make sure she would not be hurt by any of it. With Kate’s daughter, Lizzy, and grandkids settled in New Zealand, and happy enough with their life there, Kate barely saw her own family once a year, if that. She could share these children with him – he had it all worked out. Now he found himself praying for it to be true. This was something he needed more than he had ever realised.

Oh, to have a family again. To have his own flesh and blood beside him. The idea was heady stuff.
Chapter Fourteen

Kate asked Annie, ‘What do Kylie’s friends have to say about her?’

Annie shrugged. ‘Nothing untoward, usual schoolgirl crushes, she seems very well liked and popular. Looks much older than her age, but then so many of them do these days.’

She picked up her handbag and brought out the file that had all the relevant details. Even in this day of emails and smartphones Annie liked everything written down and in front of her eyes. It was one of the things Kate had taught her many years before.

Kate stared at the picture that had been all over the news. A beautiful young girl in school uniform, with long dark hair and a cute rosebud mouth. Then she looked at the photographs from the crime scene and had to stifle a low moan. The battered and abused body was very different to the smiling, heavily made-up girl in the previous photo. You could still see the terror on her face, and Kate swallowed down the bile that was building up in her throat. She took a deep gulp of her Montrachet and placed the photos face down on the table. Beverley came out and cleared away in her usual discreet fashion, and Kate was reminded of how lucky she was to have her.

‘I made this copy for you, Kate. I hope you don’t mind, but I would really value your input.’
Kate nodded slowly. She had already guessed that much; she wondered if it was Annie or the Chief Super who wanted her really, but she was too diplomatic to ask. She read through the various statements and Annie watched her as she sipped her wine. She thought the world of Kate, and they had become good friends over the years.

‘Did she have a boyfriend?’

Annie shook her head. ‘Not as far as we know. But her whole life was lived on social media so we would have picked up something. Margaret Dole has been through everything, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, you name it. There’s nothing untoward. Margaret’s had a look on her friends’ accounts too and there’s nothing there either. Nothing more than what you would expect.’

Kate was nodding as she said, ‘That’s what I find so strange. Whoever did this had access to her – and time. She had to have known them, I think. We both know that is the usual scenario. But we can’t rule out that it was a lone man, or men, looking for someone to abduct. Fucking melon scratcher, all right. I know this is a long shot, but what did her bedroom tell you?’

Annie ran her hands through her short bobbed hair. ‘Nothing of any value, definitely no diary or anything that you wouldn’t want your mum and dad to see. That is the thing, Kate, there’s nothing different about this girl that marks her out, except she looks a lot older than she really is. But all her friends look the same. Heavy make-up and selfies are the major content of their social media, and they all say the same thing. She was lovely. Margaret’s checking on the Facebook page that’s been set up as a sort of memorial to her, in case someone posts anything on that.’

Kate sighed heavily. ‘Who would want to be a teenager these days, eh?’
Annie laughed but her voice was sad as she said, ‘Definitely not me, Kate. Definitely not me. The pressure to fit in has been there since time began, I should imagine. But in this day and age there is this need to be validated. From what Margaret Dole says it’s as if they all feel the need to look like they have perfect lives, even if it isn’t true. It’s part and parcel of the world today. All of them love being online and every second of their life is documented.’

Kate smiled but she felt like a dinosaur where devices were concerned. She Skyped her daughter and granddaughters, but that was as far as it went. She wasn’t sure she was that interested in other people’s lives. It was the level of usage these days that amazed her; she knew grown women who spent half their lives looking at their phones and posting updates of the most mundane things, and every move they made. No wonder there was a new generation of criminals out there. Cybercrime was exploding at an incredible rate, and people like Margaret Dole were now coming into their own in police stations all around the country.

‘Look, if I can help in any way you just have to let me know. I will do anything I can. I agree with you that this isn’t going to be a one-off. Looking at these pictures, whoever is capable of inflicting that kind of damage is a sadistic fucker. He will want to do it again.’ Kate sighed then, a deep anger washing over her. It never ceased to amaze her just how low some humans were prepared to go in pursuit of their own needs. Because this had to be a need; the torture of a young girl or boy was something that riled up even the most hardened detectives inside. ‘Just when you thought you had seen it all.’

Annie didn’t answer her, because she didn’t know what to say.