

You had a secret.
Alice found out.

Alice Teale is Missing

H. A. Linskey



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HOWARD LINSKEY



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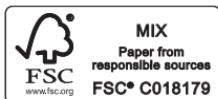
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This one is for my wonderful daughter, Erin,
who makes everything worthwhile

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You had to wear gloves, always, otherwise they would catch you. The sender knew that. It made the whole exercise more difficult, though, because it deadened the sensation in the fingertips and it was harder to turn the individual pages of the journal, so it was a slow and frustrating process.

The surgical gloves had been a better idea. They were thinner and it was much easier to turn each page then read the words written there.

The sender devoured them.

Some of them were truly shocking. How did the girl know all this? She was like a spy.

There were words on the pages that frightened the sender and others that exhilarated or teased with their promise of forbidden knowledge. There were passages of text filled with love for others and writing so cruel and mean-spirited it was hard to imagine they were written by the same person, let alone a teenage girl.

Parts of the journal were true, the sender knew this, but there were other sections that were impossible to verify and some that had to be little more than wild speculation.

What was needed here was a passage that could be sent to the right person, a page or two that would have sufficient impact, like striking a match. Something that would burn this whole town down.

It took some considerable time to find the right words, but worthwhile things took effort. You only got out of life what you were prepared to put into it.

Eventually, the solution was obvious.

Begin at the end.

The final entry.

The sender made a decision then and pressed a hand against one side of the opened journal, trapping it against the table so that the pages couldn't move. Taking hold of the opposite page firmly, they tore it free. The page gave way surprisingly easily and came out cleanly. Heart thumping, the sender re-read it once more and experienced the excitement of knowing it was about to trigger a series of events no one could ignore. There would be further pages from the journal that could follow after, but the first one was the most important. Time could be taken, then, to read through it all again and tease out the right extracts to share.

All the sender had to do now was put this first extract in an envelope and help it on its way.

Then the game could start.

The Journal of Alice Teale

Every word I have written here is true, but I've changed the names to protect the guilty. There are a lot of guilty people. It's a town full of secrets. I can't *out* everybody.

I'm guilty, too. I've done some very bad things. I've hurt people, I've been immoral, by most people's standards, but mostly I am guilty of not seeing what was right in front of me. It should have been so obvious because it was there all the time. I have been entirely blind.

Until now.

Everything has changed. Now I can see it all clearly, view things exactly as they really are, with no secrets, lies or pretence. It's all been stripped away, and nothing will ever be the same again. The old Alice Teale is dead. She is gone for ever, along with her stupid doubts and fears and all the secrets she has carried around with her for so long. What remains of her is not going to take it any more. I want everything out in the open.

Not yet, though. There's something I need first.

Keep your sharp tongue in check, Alice, for once in your stupid bloody life, and carry on for just a little while longer, acting out all the parts, like you've always done.

Daughter, sister, girlfriend, friend.

But you've not been very good at any of those lately.

Worker, pupil . . . Little Miss Perfect.

But it's all unravelling now.

Virgin, good girl, ice queen, geek.

Hot babe, slut, disgusting freak!

Who cares what they think of you, Alice? None of that matters now.

It's all over.

At least, it will be.

Soon.

I

Six days ago

The girl left the school by the main entrance, which was why Miss Pearce saw her leave. Her vantage point was the first-floor staff-room window. Normally, this would have been a busy and noisy spot, with younger pupils shoving and shoulder-charging each other as they bottlenecked through the doors and were finally forced out by sheer weight of numbers, but school had been over for hours now. Only a handful of kids remained, finishing off the numerous sporting activities and after-school clubs Collembay Comprehensive School had become known for under its strict but progressive headteacher, who believed that education was not confined to regular school hours or mere academic qualifications. ‘We are not only training young people to pass exams,’ he would remind his staff earnestly, ‘we are preparing them for life.’

Was it still a bit late for a kid to be leaving, even if she was a sixth-former? It was quite light, with the summer almost here; a little more than a month to go before they broke up for six glorious weeks of holiday. The PE teacher glanced at her watch. Almost nine o’clock; the activities she’d presided over had finished half an hour ago. She had only stayed behind herself because she knew she’d never make it to the bus stop in time and couldn’t

face standing there for an hour waiting for the next one. She had gone up to the empty staff room, flicked on the kettle and phoned Rob, her fiancé, to ask if he could come and pick her up. He hadn't sounded too happy about that. 'I'm tired, too, Jessica,' he'd told her, 'it's been a long day,' but he'd eventually agreed to drive out and get her, albeit with bad grace.

He must have taken his time leaving their flat because there was still no sign of him and she had drunk most of her tea. Jessica Pearce watched the road from the big window to make sure she didn't miss him. As she waited, she remembered the promise he had made when they first got together. 'I would do anything for you,' he'd assured her. *'Anything'* Now, seven years on, it seemed a fifteen-minute drive was too much trouble. She wondered if this was how everyone ended up once they'd got beyond the dating stage and moved in together?

She looked back at the girl. You could tell it was Alice Teale, even from the back and this vantage point. The sixth-former was a distinctive figure with her trademark hooded Oasis-style green parka and floppy red shoulder-bag.

Alice Teale was a girl you would notice, even when you were a straight woman like Jessica. The boys certainly noticed Alice. They were queueing up for her. The girl's face was ridiculously pretty and she had an almost equine grace about her when she walked, though, just as she thought that, Jessica noticed the teenager stumble slightly, possibly under the weight of the bag.

Further thoughts on Alice Teale were broken by the sight of two cars that passed each other. One of them was

driven by Simon Nash, the young drama teacher. Simon had squeezed his frame into his car and pulled out of the car park then driven away towards the town, just as Rob suddenly appeared, heading in the opposite direction, towards the school, in his silver Fiat, which he slowed almost to a halt before guiding it across the road and in through the entrance to the school car park.

Jessica Pearce bent to grab her bag.

She turned back to the window in time to see Rob walking on to the long, straight path that led to the school, just as Alice Teale reached the far end of it. They might have collided with each other if he hadn't stepped out of her way. Silly girl had her head down and probably wasn't looking where she was going.

Jessica Pearce waved then and Rob looked up, caught her eye, but did not return the wave. Instead, he stopped in his tracks, so she knew he had no intention of wasting any more time by walking into the building.

In her haste to meet him she forgot all about Alice, who must have passed between the retirement cottages that lay just beyond the school's boundary, as she could no longer be seen.

No one knew it at the time but that glimpse Miss Pearce had of the sixth-former would be the last recorded sighting of the girl, before the word went out the next day.

Alice Teale was missing.

Alice Teale was gone.

DC Beth Winter tried to leave quietly and discreetly without anyone noticing, but it was a forlorn hope. Anne Hudson spotted her as she finished clearing the last items from her desk, dropping them without ceremony into a plastic bag. If only Beth had been a bit quicker, she could have been out of there, avoiding the inquisition that was heading her way.

Anne was a fellow fast-tracker from the direct-entry scheme, which meant that she, like Beth, had never walked the beat or spent a working day in uniform. Instead, they had both joined the Northumbria police force as detectives – trainee ones, at any rate – and had endured a two-year training programme before finally passing the National Investigator's exam. On the face of it, they had something in common. They were female, of roughly the same age and background and both yet to prove themselves on a major case. That's how it worked on direct entry: you had to earn your place investigating minor crimes as part of your probation. That time was coming to an end and they were both eager to get out and join a squad working on something bigger than burglaries on the industrial estate. There had been three of them to begin with, but Peter Kennedy had already been nabbed by an undermanned DI. He was a good candidate and a nice bloke, but Beth knew she was every bit as good as

him and was disappointed, though not surprised, that the only male in their intake had been the first to be snapped up.

‘I heard your news,’ said Anne. ‘Transferred to DCI Everleigh’s squad. Well done you!’ That last bit was a little too loud and the smile forced.

‘Thanks . . . erm . . . they must be desperate.’ If Beth thought self-deprecation was going to get her off the hook, she was mistaken.

‘I suppose it’s only a missing person,’ Anne said slyly.

‘It could be a murder’ – Beth couldn’t help but rise to it – ‘they think.’

‘Who does?’

‘Everleigh and his people, apparently.’

‘They haven’t found a body.’

‘Not yet,’ said Beth. ‘You seem to know a lot about it?’ she added, meaning that Anne obviously wanted to be the one added to DCI Everleigh’s squad.

Anne ignored this. ‘Still, it’s good news for you, a chance to shine. You’ll be great . . .’

‘Thank you.’

‘. . . if you can cope with you-know-who.’

The bombshell. There was always going to be one from Anne. This must be it.

‘Sorry?’

‘His DS?’ She said that as if a) it was obvious and b) Beth must have forgotten who this mysterious DS was.

Beth thought for a second. How could she answer this in a way that would completely ruin Anne’s fun? Pretend she knew who the other girl was referring to and laugh off the man’s foibles? If she did, she might run the risk of

belatedly learning she was about to work with a serial groper. Alternatively, Beth could ask Anne outright what she was talking about, which would make her seem less than clued up – never a good look for a detective, especially a new one. Anne would love that. Instead, she went for the middle ground.

‘Which one?’ she asked.

‘You mean you don’t know?’ replied Anne. She was obviously loving this. Well, let her enjoy her tiny victory. Anne wasn’t the one being transferred to a real case. Soon Beth might be on the trail of a murderer while her mean-spirited colleague would be back investigating the industrial-estate burglaries.

‘I’ve only just heard I’m going to be working for Everleigh,’ Beth said, as sweetly as possible. ‘I haven’t had time to find out who else is working for him.’

‘Call yourself a detective,’ trilled Anne, and Beth wanted to thump her, right there and then, in headquarters, and in the face, but she told herself not to react. ‘You’ll be seeing a lot more of his DS than you will of DCI Everleigh,’ she added. ‘You do know that’s how it works, right?’

Beth lost patience then. ‘I know how it works, Anne. If you know the DS I’ll be paired with, then why don’t you just tell me? I know you’re dying to.’

‘All right, Grumpy’ – that smile again, the one that allowed Anne to pretend she was only teasing and not being bitchy because she was jealous – ‘but brace yourself.’ She took a breath. ‘You’ve got DS Black.’ And when Beth didn’t react, because she didn’t know the man at all, Anne added, ‘DS *Lucas* Black,’ and she tilted her head to one

side then surveyed her colleague, looking for some sort of recognition, as if Beth had accidentally slept with the bloke at the last Christmas party then completely forgotten about him.

‘I don’t really know him,’ conceded Beth. There were dozens of detective sergeants in the Northumbria police force, for God’s sake.

‘Well, he’s a nightmare.’

‘In what way?’ She wanted to add, *Spit it out, woman!*

‘Can’t believe you haven’t heard . . .’

‘Look, Anne, whatever it is, it can’t be that bad or he wouldn’t still be employed here. If he’s a bit handsy, I’ll deal with it – I’ll report him or break one of his fingers. Whatever else it could be, I’ll manage. So, you know, don’t worry about me.’

When Anne replied this time, her tone was mock-casual. ‘Oh, okay, whatever you say, Beth. I’m sure it’ll all be fine. It’s just, you know, Lucas Black has . . .’ She exhaled then, delaying the pleasure of her answer. ‘How can I put this? . . . Actually killed someone, that’s all.’

3

‘What do you mean, he’s killed someone?’ asked Beth, but she didn’t get an answer.

Instead, their boss shouted across the room at her colleague, ‘DC Hudson, stop gassing and get back on those burglaries! They won’t solve themselves.’ DI Curran was a man who seemed to resent the very presence of direct entrants in his squad, almost as much as the low-level crimes he was tasked to investigate these days, now that his career had seemingly plateaued. Only a few days ago, Beth had personally witnessed him getting very drunk at a fellow DI’s retirement do. He had stood in the beer garden loudly telling everyone that DI Monaghan was ‘a lucky bastard because he wouldn’t have to put up with any more shit’. Not that he was bitter, of course.

He turned to Beth then. ‘And DC Winter?’

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Why are you still here?’ he asked wearily. ‘I mean, if you don’t want to go and do this missing-persons case, we can always keep you . . .’

‘On my way now, sir.’ And she was, but when she glanced back at Anne, who was busying herself with a phone call, it was her words that stayed with Beth.

‘Come in, DC Winter,’ ordered DCI Everleigh. He’d seen her approach his open office door and was, thankfully,

expecting her. He was young for a detective chief inspector and Beth had heard he was both ambitious and on the rise. This was her first actual interaction with the man, though, and she was keen not to blow it.

‘Welcome to the team.’ He smiled at her.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Have you met DS Black?’ He gestured towards a tall, stocky man with dark hair who was standing in front of him. He was in his late thirties or perhaps early forties, and he stared back at Beth without making any effort to welcome her. So, this was the apparently infamous DS Black. Beth confirmed they hadn’t met before but that she was pleased to be working with him now. Oddly, he still said nothing, as if he either couldn’t be bothered with pleasantries or didn’t see any value in them; instead, he dipped his head for the merest second to acknowledge her presence then turned back to the DCI. In the briefest of pauses, she couldn’t help but think again about what Anne had said.

‘You and DS Black will be taking over a case in Collembay,’ Everleigh told her. Beth had heard of the Northumbrian town, but she had been brought up south of Newcastle, on the other side of the river, and had no memory of even having driven through the place before. ‘DI Fraser has elected to take early retirement.’

‘Why?’ asked Black. ‘What has he done?’

Everleigh shot him an angry look. ‘He hasn’t done anything. For God’s sake, Black, not everyone here is bent, you know.’

Black didn’t react to this telling-off. ‘The girl hasn’t been missing all that long,’ he explained. ‘You wouldn’t

have given Fraser the case if you knew he was planning to take early retirement, so it's sudden.' Even Beth knew that detectives who abruptly elected to take early retirement were often escaping investigations into their misconduct, which would cease if they were no longer serving police officers. It was an unwritten rule that, if you went early and quietly, no further action would be taken against you, unless you'd done something very serious indeed.

Though Everleigh didn't contradict the logic of DS Black's argument, he didn't appear impressed by it either. 'He wasn't planning to leave,' said the DCI, 'he was offered a package. Our new chief constable has been tasked with major cost savings and that includes manpower, as always.'

Was there no end to these cuts? There seemed to be a leaving do every week and it was always seasoned detectives who were going, because the force wanted them and their more generous salaries off the books. No one seemed to be replacing them, though.

'We're encouraging voluntary redundancy. They're trying to get people out ASAP, so they get an offer and either go straight away or it's immediately withdrawn. The package is a generous one, if you are the right age and have served enough time. Fraser is a family man with a grand-kid. It makes perfect sense for him, but that leaves us with a gap on the Alice Teale case.'

'You want me to take over from DI Fraser?' asked DS Black.

'Until your own DI gets back, yes.'

'And do we know when that will be, sir?'

'No,' admitted the DCI. 'That's . . . open-ended.'

‘So, it’s me and DC Winter here.’ He sounded unimpressed. ‘Anyone else?’

‘Fraser had a couple of DCs. I’ll keep them on it, but you are on point on this one, as it were.’

‘Four of us, including a complete novice?’ He didn’t look at Beth, but he didn’t have to. He didn’t seem to give a damn that she was standing there in the room when he said it. ‘This could be a murder,’ Black reminded the DCI.

‘And it could just as easily be a runaway. There is no body. She may very well be shacked up with a new boyfriend somewhere.’

‘Still –’

Black was interrupted by the DCI’s raised palm before he could object further. ‘Frankly, there’s no one else’ – he made it sound as if Black and Winter were the last two kids picked for games at school – ‘but I know you’ll get a result.’

‘Your faith is touching, sir.’ Black’s tone was unchallengeingly neutral but his words were still scathing.

Everleigh chose to ignore this and turned to Beth. ‘Thoughts, DC Winter?’

‘Er . . . just that I’m looking forward to proving myself, sir, and . . . er . . .’

‘And er . . . what?’ The DCI didn’t appear to appreciate her hesitation.

‘What do we know about this girl, Alice . . .?’

‘Teale.’ He really did look irritated now. He obviously expected her to remember the name he had mentioned. Everleigh made a point of slowly spelling it for her, as if she were a slow learner. Beth nodded when he had

finished, as if she were grateful for his time, while secretly deciding that her new boss was a bit of a twat.

He continued, unabated: 'Alice Teale is seventeen and has been gone for several days now. She was last seen leaving her after-school club on Friday evening, but she failed to reach her home. DI Fraser has been unable to uncover any obvious reason or motive for her disappearance, aside from a somewhat tangled private and home life.'

It seemed that was all they were going to get from the DCI.

'Do we get a briefing from Fraser before he goes?' asked Black.

'If you don't hang about. He has one day left. Get down to Collembay. Fraser's set up a major-incident room in the town hall there. You'll need to notify the parents that you and DC Winter are now heading up the investigation. Their details are in here.'

He handed Black a slim file on the case.

'And DS Black . . .' Was that a supportive half-smile on the DCI's face or a grimace? 'Be aware that I've already vouched for you to those on high, so don't let me down.'

The big man took large strides and Beth struggled to keep up. She was almost jogging as they reached the lift together. Black didn't seem inclined to say anything, so she thought she'd better break the ice, but what could she say to him?

So, is it true you killed someone?

Possibly not the best opening gambit, so instead she settled on, 'I just wanted to say, I know you'd prefer

someone with more experience but I'm really grateful for the opportunity to join the team.'

'I'm not the one giving you the opportunity. DCI Everleigh is.'

'Still . . .' And she couldn't think of anything else to say, until she recalled the mention of his detective inspector. 'Your DI is away at the moment?' she asked, hoping that might draw some sort of response from him.

'He won't be back in a hurry.'

'Why? What happened?'

Black sighed, then: 'He had a breakdown.' He gave her a withering look. 'Do you want all the details?'

They rode in excruciating silence after that until finally there was a ping and the lift doors opened.

The Journal of Alice Teale

I love this journal. Love, love, LOVE it! Best gift ever!

There, I finally wrote something inside it, and a little part of me is already regretting defacing its pristine pages. What could I write in here that's significant enough to justify its inclusion? Even so, I still feel like a character in a Jane Austen novel. It's so much cooler than all those electronic diaries online. You can actually pick this up, touch and hold it. It feels real.

And it has a lock. A small but sturdy little clasp with a key only I get to keep, which is just as well, because I don't intend to waste any of these precious pages on bullshit. This journal will hold the real and honest thoughts of Alice Teale or it will contain nothing at all, so you'd better not piss me off or you'll end up in here. Hah! This is my sacred place, to be filled with secrets but no lies.

I'll put my story ideas down in here, too, then I can work on them so they don't just swirl endlessly round and round in my head, going nowhere. I WILL be an author one day, and I am going to look back and say this was where it all began. They say that truth is stranger than fiction, and I won't have to look far for inspiration around here.

I love the cover! It's leather, I think, and I should

probably care that some animal has died for me, but I don't because it smells amazing.

And it has my name written through it, printed on every page. Love it!

Thanks for this, bro.

I love you, too.

4

Black drove an inexpensive Japanese car. Beth was expecting something bigger and flashier, like most of the other male detectives drove. She respected him a tiny bit more for not caring about it, or perhaps she was clutching at straws, desperately searching for a reason to like her gruff new partner.

‘Where are we –?’

‘Where do you think?’ he interrupted.

‘I was going to say, going *first*. I know we are going to Collembay, but to see DI Fraser or the parents?’

‘I’d better prioritize DI Fraser before he leaves. When you’re gone, you’re gone. I don’t think he’ll appreciate it if I keep popping round with questions. Mentally, he’s probably already on the golf course.’

‘Okay,’ she said, and waited.

‘What?’

‘You said *I*, not *we*,’ Beth reminded him, ‘so I’m waiting to hear what I’ll be doing while you’re being briefed by Fraser.’

‘It’s quicker this way,’ he said. ‘He briefs me then I brief you. I want you to go and see the parents.’

Great, thought Beth, so I get to explain that the man leading the investigation into the disappearance of their daughter has gone and we are starting all over again. At least he hadn’t tried to convince her it was the cushier job.

‘Read the case file now,’ he continued. ‘The quicker you grasp that nettle, the faster we can get on with it, and see what you can learn about Alice from the family while you’re there. Meet me when you’re done.’

He didn’t say another word for at least three miles. She used that gap to read the flimsy file on Alice and her family, but the silence in the car was getting to her.

‘What did Everleigh mean when he said you were on point?’ she asked when she could take no more.

‘It’s an army phrase,’ he said. ‘It means the first man in a patrol, the one who leads it through hostile territory and is the most exposed so more likely to be shot. Sometimes the DCI likes to use military jargon.’

‘Why?’

‘Maybe it makes him sound more macho. Perhaps he thinks I’ll respect him for it because I used to be in the army.’ Was that what Anne Hudson had meant when she said Lucas Black had killed someone? He had been a soldier, so perhaps he’d shot somebody in Iraq or Afghanistan. Beth felt a little silly, now there was such an obvious explanation. ‘Maybe he just likes the sound of his own voice.’ He shrugged, as if it was of no consequence whatsoever.

‘Don’t like him much, do you?’

‘Whether I like him or not is irrelevant. He’s the DCI.’

‘He must have done something right to reach that rank.’

‘He has a degree in criminology, which he likes to refer to – a lot. One of the newspapers christened him “the thinking man’s copper”, which he pretends to be embarrassed about, but I reckon he secretly loves it. He’s very aware of his public image and will be disproportionately

aggrieved by anyone who undermines it. He wants to be chief constable one day, so God help anybody who gets in his way, including us.'

'Meaning we do what we are told?' It was a genuine query. She was finding his answers hard to interpret.

'Meaning we listen to what he has to say then use our discretion and initiative in the real world to solve the case. Look, we're not going to get any advice from Everleigh at ground level. He hasn't arrested anyone in years. Think of him as a politician, and try very hard not to piss him off, because he has the power to move us to some godforsaken corner of Northumbria Police from which we are unlikely ever to re-emerge. Got it?'

'Yeah,' she said.

'Good.'

'So, do you know this town, then?' she asked, deliberately changing the subject.

'Collembay? Of course.'

'I don't,' she admitted, and when it appeared this wasn't a strong enough hint: 'Could you tell me a bit about it, please? If you don't mind.'

'Not much to tell,' he said, and for a second she thought that was all she was getting. 'It's a typical, small Northumbrian town, around ten thousand people living there. It used to be known for its pit.' Then he said, 'Its coal mine.'

'I know what a pit is.'

'It also has an old railway station, but the railway is long gone.' His tone was brusque. 'There are some pubs, a few shops and a library. They have a market on Fridays. That's about it. It's not a tourist place like Seahouses or Tynemouth. You don't go to Collembay unless you have to.'

He flicked the indicator and started to turn off. ‘And we are here.’ He swung the car into a left turn and up a steep, winding hill that brought them into Collembay town centre. Beth took in a number of buildings, including a town hall with a large, white-stone war memorial and a market-place that doubled as a car park when, like today, there was no market. There was a tiny local library that had somehow survived the latest round of cuts, a working men’s club, several pubs and a row of shops.

One pub in particular, which was almost opposite the town hall, caught her eye as he parked the car and they got out, because its ancient, rusty sign was swinging in the wind, making a jarring, squeaking sound.

‘The Black Stallion?’ she said.

‘There used to be another pub here called the White Horse,’ he said. ‘Years ago, someone opened a new pub opposite and called it the Black Stallion.’

‘Why?’

‘Dunno – maybe to wind up the owner of the White Horse. Anyway, the two pubs were in direct competition for half a century or more, until the White Horse closed down and shut for good.’

‘Leaving the Black Stallion as the clear winner.’

‘Yes, except no one from Collembay ever calls it that.’

‘What do they call it, then?’

‘The Dirty Donkey.’

He pointed to a side street that led away from the market square. ‘Head down there and make a right turn at the bottom of Neale Street, follow the road along for a bit until you see Neville Street on your left. The Teales live at number seven. Meet me back here when you’re done.’

Yes, sir. She almost snapped to attention but thought better of mocking him.

She watched as Lucas Black started towards the town hall then went her own way along Neale Street.

DS Black could see that DI Fraser was still hard at work when he walked into the makeshift major-incident room at the town hall – hard at work entertaining his team, on his last day on the job, with stories of the old days. Fraser was halfway through an anecdote as Black entered the room, his voice animated – ‘He’s wearing these black shoes that have got – no word of a lie – a mirror shine on them. They were spotless . . .’ – and there was laughter from his audience of two detective constables. They hadn’t noticed Black yet. He crossed the room towards his table. DC Rodgers was the only one who could have seen him from this angle, but he either didn’t notice Black or chose not to. Black knew him of old, so perhaps it was a calculated snub. Fraser continued: ‘. . . so the chief constable finally steps out of the building, thinking he’s the absolute doggy’s little bollocks, chin up, head held high, not a care in the bloody world’ – he paused before the punchline – ‘then he treads right in the middle of a steaming pile of horse shit.’ The two DCs collapsed laughing at the image of the chief constable’s spotless shoes tarnished with manure. ‘But we’ve all got to stand there at attention, without reacting. He’s trying to scrape it off on a clump of grass but that shit is clinging to his shoe like a jealous girlfriend and the smell . . .’ DI Fraser stopped suddenly, noticed that Rodgers was looking at something, turned, evidently displeased that the

merriment had been cut short. He realized DS Black was standing right behind him.

‘So,’ he said, ‘Everleigh gave it to *you*?’

‘You sound surprised.’

‘I am,’ he said, ‘I’d have thought he’d put another DI on it, in case this turns out to be a biggie.’ He meant a murder case and smiled a humourless smile. ‘But then, your DI is still off, isn’t he?’

‘He is.’

‘Any idea when he’s due back? It’s been a while.’

‘No,’ said Black, and the single word tersely communicated that he did not wish to discuss it further.

‘Bit of a poisoned chalice. We’ve not been able to come up with anything much.’

‘It’s been a few days, right?’ This was Black’s way of pointing out that they’d had enough time to come up with something.

‘We’ve not been idle,’ flared Fraser. ‘This is just a tea break.’

Black surveyed the number of dirty cups on the table and, since there were two for each man, it looked like the tea break had been going on for a while.

‘The boys will be back out again afterwards,’ he added.

‘But not you?’

‘It’s my last day, DS Black. I’ve got paperwork to finish, then I am offski.’

‘Congratulations.’

‘I’m surprised you weren’t interested in the package. You must have put in a few years by now?’

Black didn’t answer.

‘I thought, after what happened, you might be keen to

ride off into the sunset. No offence.’ He was the kind of man who thought adding the words ‘no offence’ to his sentences made them less offensive. He was wrong about that.

‘Can we talk about the case,’ asked Black, ‘since you’re so keen to be off?’

‘Sure. It’s all in the file, though.’ He handed over a larger file than the one the DCI had given Black earlier.

‘It’s never *all* in the file, Gavin, you know that.’

‘Gavin?’ he sniffed. ‘You can call me that tomorrow, DS Black, but I’m still entitled to a “sir” until then. Rank has its privileges.’

Was this really what they were going to fall out over on Fraser’s last day? A slip of the tongue from their earlier days, when they were both detective sergeants on a different team? Fraser’s face was serious and Black was sorely tempted to tell him to fuck off. He knew the man would be too lazy to make a formal complaint with just a few hours to go. That wouldn’t bring Alice Teale back, though, and he owed it to the girl to do this by the book.

‘Apologies, Detective Inspector Fraser, old habits die hard. Now, if you would be good enough to spare me some of your valuable time to go through the case, I would be very grateful, sir.’

Fraser narrowed his eyes, as if carefully scrutinizing Black for any sign of mockery in his tone or demeanour, but he found none. Detective Constable Ferguson was smirking behind the DI now.

‘Of course, lad. I’d be glad to. Now why don’t you sit yourself down’ – he patted the chair next to him, as if Black were a nine-year-old – ‘and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Black took the seat.

‘What do you want to know?’ asked Fraser.

‘Everything.’

‘Sure,’ said Fraser. ‘Put the kettle on again, will you, Rodgers? There’s a good lad. Oh, and see if you can find Lucas here a biscuit.’ He turned back to Black. ‘Because *everything* is going to take a while.’

There were a couple of long residential streets full of two-up two-downs between Collembay Town Hall and the Teale family home. Beth decided to use the time productively while she walked, by taking out her mobile phone and doing a quick Web search on her new partner. On reflection, she was pretty sure Anne Hudson had been exaggerating to make Beth feel apprehensive. If Lucas Black really had killed someone, surely it must have been in combat with the army, not while serving in the police force, which was a wholly different proposition. In other words, Anne had been stirring it, her obvious motive jealousy because she had been passed over by DCI Everleigh in favour of Beth.

The Google search took a few moments and, at first, it didn’t help. There was an American actor who shared the same name, so she amended her search by keying in the words ‘police officer UK’ after ‘Lucas Black’.

The number of results that came up then stopped Beth in her tracks. There were dozens of newspaper articles about Black and they all appeared to be about the same incident, which had occurred seven years earlier. These weren’t just local newspapers either. They were the big, heavy-hitting national tabloids. The first headline screamed at her.

UNARMED MAN GUNNED DOWN BY DETECTIVE.

The second read: SHOT DEAD BY POLICE.

Oh Christ. Anne Hudson hadn't been exaggerating. Lucas Black really had killed a man. He had shot someone, and that someone hadn't even had a weapon. How the hell had that happened, and why was he still a detective? How come he wasn't out of the force or even languishing in a jail somewhere, serving life for murder?

Beth took a moment to look around her. The street was empty of people, so she stopped on the corner. She scrolled down until she found an article that covered the outcome of the case and began to read.

No action will be taken against a police officer who killed an unarmed man. The Crown Prosecution Service is refusing to prosecute Lucas Black, 31, who shot Rory Jordan, 44, in his garden, despite the victim being unarmed at the time. The Independent Police Complaints Commission investigated the shooting and criticized Detective Sergeant Black for acting rashly and inadvisedly, and for using excessive force. They concluded that he may have a case to answer for manslaughter. However, the CPS has ruled out prosecution, on the grounds that a jury would be unlikely to convict Black, due to a 'perceived threat' to the officer in question, even though the detective was some way from Mr Jordan and armed with a 9mm semi-automatic pistol, and that a prosecution would not be in the public interest.

Black, an authorized firearms officer, was called to Mr Jordan's home in Ashington, Northumbria, in November, to assist colleagues during a stand-off. It followed a report from a neighbour of a domestic disturbance involving an alleged assault

on Jordan's wife and threats made against her and their nine-year-old daughter. Police surrounded the building and, when Rory Jordan left his house via its rear door, Black shot him in the chest. He died on the way to hospital.

In a statement from her solicitor, Jordan's widow, Carol, 38, said the killing of her husband was both unlawful and completely unnecessary. 'This policeman should be in prison for life for what he did to my husband. Nothing will bring Rory back, but it chills me to think that Detective Sergeant Black has got off scot-free when he is a clear and obvious danger to the public. He has ruined my life and my daughter's life but will go unpunished. Where is the justice in that?'

'Jesus Christ,' said Beth, closing the Web page on her phone abruptly, as if banishing the news. As she walked the final yards to Alice Teale's home, she tried to imagine any scenario where a detective could legally and morally justify gunning down an unarmed man outside his own home. She couldn't think of one.

Beth Winter experienced the full brunt of Alice Teale's father's frustration. 'He stood in front of me, right there' – and he pointed to the floor – 'where you are standing, and he told me' – he shook his head in disbelief – 'DI Fraser said, "Mr Teale, I shall not rest until we find your daughter," and now you're saying he's given up already?' He took a deep breath and went to his armchair then sat down heavily in it. Ronnie Teale was a big man who seemed to dwarf his wife, a slight woman who occupied a small corner of a floral-patterned sofa. Abigail Teale watched her husband carefully, as if she wasn't sure what he would do next. Their nineteen-year-old son, Daniel, stared down at the carpet.

They were all seated, while Beth stood there, feeling like an intruder.

'I thought at the time what a daft thing to say,' said Ronnie. '"I shall not rest" – of course you will. You have to sleep, you have to stop and eat. Bloody ridiculous. But I didn't think he'd just bail out like this.'

'I understand your frustration, Mr Teale . . .'

'Do you? I doubt it!'

' . . . but the force chose to offer DI Fraser early retirement, which he wasn't expecting when he agreed to the case. He had limited time to accept the offer.' Beth wasn't sure why she was defending DI Fraser, a man she had

never met, then she realized she was doing it to spare the Teales' feelings. She wanted the family to believe they were committed to finding their daughter. 'I can assure you that the detective taking over is the best there is.' She desperately hoped they wouldn't do a Web search on him once they learned his name.

'You're just going to start again, is that it?'

That *was* it, but Beth didn't feel she could admit this. 'The work that has already been done will be invaluable, and we won't have to duplicate it,' she said. 'The most important thing is to make sure we are all fully focused on the search for Alice.'

'She's been missing for days, and not a trace of her,' said her father. 'Not since she left school that evening.' He frowned. 'Who leaves school at nine o'clock at night?' he asked. 'Bloody stupid!'

He got up out of his chair and walked to the window. He was like some big, wild animal trapped in a cage. Then he turned back to Beth.

'This is all my fault,' he said abruptly.

She waited for him to explain.

'This is all my fault,' he repeated. 'My fault.' But his reproachful look fell on Alice's mother.

'How is this your fault, Mr Teale?' she asked him.

'I should have kept a closer eye on her, instead of letting a teenage girl go out every night like that.'

His wife pursed her lips, as if she had been indirectly accused of permitting this while his back was turned. In a low voice that sounded full of meaning, Abigail Teale said, 'You kept a very close eye on her.'

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

But Alice’s mother said nothing. She just stared towards the back window, as if the answer she needed were written on the glass. Ronnie seemed to suddenly remember that Beth was there. ‘Alice is always out, never at home.’

‘And whose fault is that?’ hissed her mother.

‘Not mine!’ He was angry again. ‘I barely bloody saw her. If she wasn’t doing after-school clubs, she was down that working men’s club . . .’

‘You told her to get a job,’ Abigail reminded him, ‘because money was tight.’

‘And so it is, but does she have to work *there*?’

‘Where else is she going to get a job round here?’

Beth got the impression that Abigail Teale rarely stood up to her husband, because the man seemed rattled by her defiance. This was not what Beth had been expecting. Why were they acting this way, particularly Alice’s father? Instead of focusing on finding their missing daughter, they were arguing. It was bewildering.

‘And even when she is at home, she’s always up in her room, studying.’

‘I thought you’d be glad of that,’ Abigail said, and her husband shot her a look. ‘At least she isn’t lazy, at least she’s trying to better herself.’ And even though the comments were aimed at Alice’s father, it was her brother’s turn to shift uneasily in his seat, as if personally wounded by his mother’s words. ‘She can never do anything right.’

Ronnie seemed to get exasperated then, and turned back to Beth. ‘I don’t know what you want from us,’ he

told her. ‘We’ve made statements, we’ve told you everything we know about that night – which is next to nothing, by the way. We’ve let your colleagues look all round our house and in Alice’s room, we’ve given you the names of her friends, her work mates, her teachers. What else is there?’

‘What do you think has happened to her, Mr Teale?’ Beth asked him.

‘How should I know?’ he shouted at her. ‘She’s gone off somewhere, done something bloody stupid.’

‘What kind of something?’

‘Find her and you can fucking ask her!’

‘Calm down, Ronnie,’ his wife urged him quietly.

‘Don’t tell me what to do,’ he snarled at his wife. ‘Not anywhere’ – he jabbed a finger – ‘and never in my own house.’ And he gave her a look of such venom Beth found it quite alarming.

‘But what makes you think she’s been stupid?’ she asked.

‘Because she’s always doing daft things!’

‘Please try and stay calm, Mr Teale. We need your help to find your daughter.’

‘I don’t know where she’s gone.’ He was wild-eyed, as if he had taken that comment personally. ‘This has got nothing to do with me.’

‘No one is saying that it has,’ said Beth, wondering why he might have interpreted what she had said that way. ‘In your statement, you said you were out at the pub when Alice went missing. Which one?’

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. ‘I was . . .’ he began, but then stopped.

‘It was around nine o’clock,’ she reminded him.

‘I know what time it was,’ he snapped. ‘Just let me . . . I’d have probably been in the Dirty Donkey around about then.’

‘The Black Stallion pub?’ she clarified, noting that he had made his location and the timing of it a little vague.

‘Yeah.’

‘All night?’

He shook his head then realized she wanted more than that for an answer. ‘It was Friday night,’ he said. ‘I called into a few places around town.’

‘But you were definitely in the Black Stallion at nine o’clock?’

‘Why are you asking me that?’ He turned to his wife. ‘Why is she asking me that?’

This wasn’t going well, and Beth started to worry that her first attempt at securing an alibi might lead to the victim’s father lodging an official complaint against her. She could imagine how Black would take that. Ronnie Teale’s anger was blinding him. Beth needed the man to see that they were both on the same side, while at the same time trying to eliminate him from their inquiries. ‘I’m just trying to place you on the night, Mr Teale. We’ll be doing that with everyone.’

‘I’m her bloody father, woman!’ he shouted, jabbing a finger into his chest to make his point.

When Beth spoke she was deliberately calm. ‘Then you’ll understand that everything we do is designed to bring your daughter safely back to you.’ She took a breath and turned to the man’s son.

‘What about you, Daniel?’