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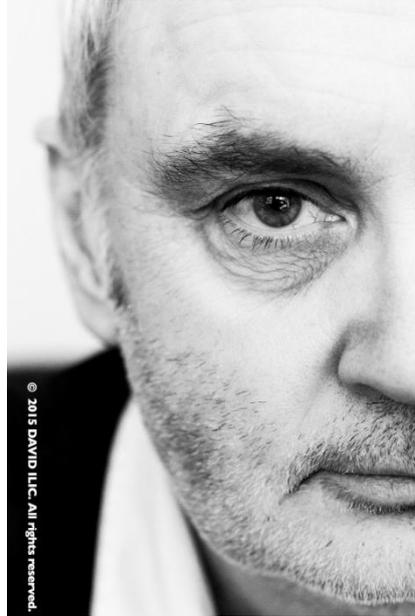
THE DCI JONES CASEBOOK:

ELLIS FLYNN

BY

KERRY J DONOVAN

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Published by Human Vertex Publications, France.
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Dedication

To my darling wife, Jan, my children, Nikola (the teacher), Matthew (the scientist), and Kyall (the musician), and my wonderful grandchildren, Lewis, Elliott, Isla, and the very latest addition to the clan, Jude.

Love you all.

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PART ONE

*“Gone. Our baby’s gone.
Find her, Chief Inspector.
Please find her.”*

Chapter 1

Young Love

Early afternoon, Birmingham.

Harsh light from an early summer sun bounced off the pavement and dirty shop fronts. Ellis Flynn leaned against the railings outside Joe's Piercing Salon with a hand raised to shield his eyes and scanned the street for his latest target, Hollie Jardine. She had long, strawberry-blonde hair, blue eyes, and the innocent, open smile of a new teenager. She fitted the requirement to perfection.

The time on his Rolex knock-off showed her as fifteen minutes late.

He kept the pleasant smile—the one he practised in the bathroom mirror—pasted in position.

Two long weeks he'd spent working this one. It hadn't been difficult. He'd been charming, attentive, drawing her to the where she accepted the belly button piercing. It was yet another way to bind her to him. A couple more trinkets and she'd be ready, hooked.

Hollie, the one Flynn thought of only as 'The Hottie', had hesitated at first when he suggested a belly piercing would look wonderful on her softly rounded stomach.

"All the women are wearing them these days," he told her.

"I can't have a piercing," she whispered, but he could tell by the glint in her eyes the idea excited her. "Dad would have a fit."

"When's your father gonna see your stomach?" he asked as they strolled hand-in-hand in the park on the other side of town, well away from her home. "You walk round the house half naked, do you?"

She blushed, eyes wide, hand covering her mouth. "I'd never be allowed to show my tummy like that ... not in my house. Dad's too ... old, stuffy."

"Well that's all right then. It'll be our little secret. Meet me after school tomorrow and I'll buy you a silver bar. Deal?"

She hesitated for a moment, daft bitch, but then smiled. "Deal."

"Don't be late. You know how I hate waiting."

Sixteen minutes. She'd fucking pay, slowly.

There she was. Finally.

The Hottie tottered around the corner twenty-five metres away, on black four-inch heels, looking awkward—a newborn lamb taking its first steps toward the slaughterhouse.

She wore the top he'd bought her last week, yellow to match her hair, and short enough to expose a belly with enough puppy fat to raise the blood pressure. Another of his presents showed through the semi-transparent top, the silk bra—34C—barely holding the girl's assets in place.

He widened the smile and strode towards her, soon drawing close enough to catch sight of the make-up—mascara, grey eye shadow, blusher, and plum lipstick. Subtle it wasn't.

The Hottie drew the attention of a beggar camped in the doorway of a derelict off-licence. The tramp mumbled something as she passed and tried looking up her short skirt. She skittered sideways and rushed towards him, towards her man, her protector.

One of her heels caught in a broken paving slab. She stumbled. He raced forward, caught her, and pulled her close. Her breasts mashed against his chest. She looked up and smiled through the travesty of makeup applied with a ladle.

"Hi, babe," he said. "You look fantastic." He smoothed the wavy blonde hair. "Did that bloke say something to upset you?" He pointed at the derelict in the doorway.

The Hottie sniffed and buried her face in his chest. He prayed she didn't fuck up his shirt with that god-awful paintjob. He placed an index finger under her chin and raised her head with the gentlest pressure.

"It was horrible, Eddie," she sniffled, dabbing her eyes with his offered handkerchief. "Said he'd ... he'd give me a fiver for a ... *blow job*." She mouthed the last two words.

"Did he now?"

Eddie gritted his teeth, dropped the smile, and affected an expression of quiet concern.

"That's terrible, but we mustn't blame him. Probably the drink talking. I'm sure he's a good man under the grime. Let's forget about him. Right ... you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine now I'm with you, babe." She smiled and grabbed his upper arm.

Eddie bunched his bicep. Girls loved ripped muscles and he worked the weights hard to keep in shape. He took the handkerchief back and dabbed her eyes some more, removing another three coats of lacquer.

“Ready for your present?”

“Are you sure they’ll do it? I ... I mean don’t you have to be over sixteen for a piercing?”

“What? Are you kidding? Nobody’s going to ask your age. You look twenty if you’re a day.”

The Hottie lifted her chin higher and beamed. “Do I really?” Her eyes widened. “You’re not just saying that?”

“Hollie, babe,” he whispered, and kissed her smooth forehead—the only place clear of war paint. “Trust me. I’d never lie to you. Now, c’mon, you’ll miss your appointment. I’ve already chosen the perfect little silver barbell. You’re gonna love it.”

He took her hand and escorted her into the shop.

The piercer and tattooist, Joe, a fifty-something biker and former ‘associate’ of Ellis’s late unlamented father, winked at him before turning to the girl. “Hello, Ms Jardine. Please take a seat. This won’t take but a minute. Lift your blouse a little please ... and lower the skirt ... yep, that’s perfect. Now, I’m going to clean the area with an alcohol wipe, it might feel a little cold at first.”

The Hottie gave Ellis a nervous smile and gripped the arms of the chair. She looked like a child at the dentist’s, preparing for a filling. He nodded encouragement and stepped forward to hold her hand.

#

Evening, Hollie’s House.

Hollie Jardine peeled back the dressing protecting the livid puncture wound at her navel—her adult badge of honour. Five days, and it still hadn’t healed properly. She didn’t expect it to take so long, but she could put up with the irritation. It was no worse than the curse. She’d put up with anything for her Eddie. Wonderful man. So big, strong, and handsome—and that six-pack made he go weak. Caring too, the way he looked after her and never asked for anything in return. And as for those smouldering eyes with the power to stop her heart?

The clothes he bought were revealing, like the magazines she hid in the closet, grown-up. They were lovely, soft against her skin. So much nicer than the cheap cotton rubbish mum made her wear.

She remembered the fight the day they went to buy new underwear. The old-maid things Mum wanted to buy were hideous. Hollie had to make a stand. Growing up with ancient parents was such a cross. They didn’t understand what it was like growing up in the twenty-first century.

“I can’t change for games wearing those, Mum. I don’t go to a convent school,” she whispered, to keep the discussion from the snooty shop assistant. “The girls will call me, ‘Sister Hollie’. I won’t be able to concentrate during lessons. And you know how hard I work to keep my grades up.” She picked up a modest matching set in pink lace.

“But, those are too ... old for you, baby.”

“Oh, please, Mum. You wouldn’t the girls to bully me, would you?”

Mum had wrinkled her nose and held the garments up to the light between finger and thumb as though she’d catch something from them “You don’t want to look like Amy, do you?” she’d said. “She’s become a little tart with her make-up, short skirts, and the smoking. Yes, your father and I have seen her light up the moment she’s out of sight of her house. That girl’s a bad influence.”

“Amy’s my best friend. Don’t talk about her like that.”

“And I don’t like the way her older brother looks at you, either. Like you’re a piece of meat. Evil, that one. All boys that age are the same.”

“Was Dad the same?”

That stopped her dead. “You father is a good man, darling.”

“I know, Mum. Can I have them? Please?”

Her mother relented eventually, and after the first time, the rest was easy. Over the following few months, Hollie built a nice little wardrobe of underwear and short skirts. Dad didn’t approve, but he never argued with Mum, not ever. He was a good man. Ha!

Not long after that, she met her Eddie, with his long hair, and his muscles, and his car. He treated her with respect, and as though she was a grown-up. Walking home from school one day, there he was. So different from all those boys in school who stared at her, and tried to brush against her in the halls. Even the Deputy Head, kept looking at her with the same expression Mum warned her about. Grey eyes, they were. Looked right into her. Made her feel naked and exposed. He suggested things too when no one else could hear. Animal. Hideous man.

She couldn’t say anything though—no one would believe her. After all, he was the Deputy Head. Above reproach.

“Hollie, dear. Breakfast is ready,” Mum called from the kitchen. “Hurry, or you’ll be late for school.”

School, school, bloody school. What’s the point in school when she’d already found her man?

Mum and Dad had nagged her forever:

“Work hard, baby. Keep your grades high.”

“Yes, Mum.”

“We’ve never had a doctor in the family, Hollie love. Now wouldn’t that be a fine thing.”

“Yes, Dad. I’ll work hard, make you proud.”

“That’s my girl.”

But she wasn’t Daddy’s little girl any more. She was Eddie’s woman.

Hollie closed the bedroom door behind her, and padded down the stairs, schoolbag slung over her shoulder.
“Coming, Mum.”

#

Afternoon, Birmingham City Centre.

A light shower drove a giggling Ellis Flynn and the Hottie into the cover of a glitzy shopping arcade. Her eyes shone as she stared through the window of a cut-price jeweller’s. She cooed at the shiny baubles. Ellis, patience itself, indulged her whims.

“See those?” He pointed to a tray of silver bracelets on the bottom shelf. “Choose one and it’s yours.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t—they’re far too expensive,” she said, eyes big as hubcaps and just as intelligent.

“Hollie. You’ll upset me if you refuse.”

“They’re all so beautiful. I can’t choose.”

The cool of the arcade made the Hottie’s breath fog the glass.

“See that one? The one with the teardrops?” Eddie pointed at a mid-priced bracelet, silver with glass beads inserted between the links. “Matches the colour of your eyes. What d’you reckon?”

“It’s gorgeous, but the price ...”

“Not a problem. You’re worth it.”

Ellis bent forward and tapped a finger to his cheek. When she moved in for the kiss, he turned his head and their lips met. The Hottie giggled and pressed hard—too hard. He darted out an exploratory tongue and met little resistance. She responded and their spit mingled.

He broke the embrace. “Oh my gosh, I ... I’m so sorry, Hollie,” he whispered. “Don’t know what came over me. I’m never that pushy. It’s ... just that you’re so ... sweet.”

The Hottie’s face creased into a pout. “Please don’t be upset. That was lovely. I don’t mind, really I don’t. In fact”—she lowered her eyes to his chest—“we could go to the next level. If you like.”

Gotcha.

“Are you sure? You’re so young.”

The Hottie’s chin dimpled, and her eyes watered. “The other day you told me I looked like a twenty year-old.”

“Well, yes ... but you’re only thirteen.”

“No. I’m fourteen,” she shouted, loud enough for a passing elderly couple to hear. The wrinklies shook their heads before scurrying deeper into the mall.

Fuck’s sake Ellis. Way to keep a low profile, dumbass.

“Kidding, babe. I know exactly how old you are. Counting the days ‘til your sixteenth birthday, when we can be together, forever.”

He dragged out the winning smile once more. His cheeks were starting to tire.

The Hottie sniffled. “Why do we have to wait so long? I’m ready now.”

Double gotcha.

“No, it wouldn’t be right. I couldn’t. Now c’mon. Let’s go get that bracelet.”

Hottie kept playing with the shiny trinket. Couldn’t stop thanking him. Ninety fucking quid it cost, but the shop offered a cash-back arrangement. They held hands again and Hollie skipped.

The stupid kid was actually skipping for fuck’s sake.

“Look,” she said, and yanked on his hand. “A photo booth. Can we, please?”

Shit. Not a good idea.

“Sorry, Angel. I’m all out of change and we don’t have the time.”

“Oh please, I’ll pay.” She fumbled in her handbag and yanked out a little pink purse. “Please, it won’t take long.”

“So long as I get to keep the film so I’ll have something to look at when we’re apart.”

“Oh, Eddie. You’re so sweet.”

“I know.”

#

Late afternoon, Edgbaston.

Arthur always made Ellis nervous, deliciously nervous. Older and wiser than Ellis, Arthur expected obedience and reverence. In return, he gave Ellis a sense of belonging and hope—and safety. And of course, love. Ellis would do anything for Arthur, anything.

He messed the gear change and crunched when dropping into second as the pulling the old camper van to a halt at a T-junction. The big old diesel idled at high revs.

“Why the disguise?” Ellis asked.

“Why not? And the name’s Jenkins this trip, right?”

“Jenkins?”

“Right. Don’t forget.”

“I won’t, but the blond wig and those green contacts. Scary. The real Jenkins must be one ugly mother.”

“He was.”

“Was? He’s dead now?”

“Yes. Kept askin’ too many questions.”

“Sorry, Arth... er, Jenkins.” Ellis swallowed hard, and pointed out the window on his side. “There she is. Told you she wouldn’t let me down. On time too, for once.”

In the front passenger seat, Jenkins scrunched lower and followed the line of Ellis’s finger. Hollie Jardine, still wearing her school uniform, walked along the path and came to a halt at an empty bus stop. A small white suitcase, gripped tight in both hands, rested against her thighs.

“Damn it, boy. You didn’t tell me we’re picking her up outside a school. This camper’s too bloody conspicuous.”

“Please don’t be angry with me,” Ellis said, rushing his words. “I had to. She thinks we’re going on holiday. Could hardly make her walk too far, could I.”

The older man rested a hand on Ellis’ thigh, his skin tingled under the touch. “Easy, pet, I’m no’ mad. I could never be mad at you. You should have given her the money for a cab, but we’re here now, and the ferry’s waiting. Let’s go. Mustn’t keep the wee tart waiting.”

The traffic cleared, Ellis engaged first gear, and made a right. Hollie started waving the moment the van completed the turn.

“Don’t forget, she calls me Eddie.”

“Eddie? That’s a bit Freudian.”

“Huh?” Ellis frowned as he pulled the vehicle to a stop alongside their prey. “Oh, see what you mean. You think it’s about my dad, right?”

“Ne’ mind, boy, just get on wi’ it.”

Ellis unbuckled his seatbelt, scrambled into the back, and slid open the side door. “Hi, darling. Toss me the case and c’mon inside.”

The Hottie took half a step forward but hesitated when she caught sight of Jenkins.

“Who’s he?”

Ellis saw doubt in her eyes for the first time since he’d raised the subject of their trip. She hugged the case to her chest and twisted her head toward the school entrance.

“Don’t worry, babe,” Ellis said, using his soothing voice. It usually worked. “He’s a friend of mine. Needs a lift to the station is all. It’s only a couple of miles out of our way. Won’t take long. We’ll drop him off, and have the van to ourselves.”

He offered his hand but she refused it.

“I ... I don’t know. Maybe we should wait ... like you said?” She made a half turn.

“Grab her,” Jenkins barked.

Ellis obeyed.

Chapter 2

Thursday evening - Edgbaston, Birmingham

Time since abduction: six hours

Detective Chief Inspector David Jones eased out of his venerable Rover 400 saloon and leaned against the door. It closed with a meaty clunk. He removed his dark glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose, but it did nothing to ease the tension headache brought on by the drive through heavy evening traffic. He hated missing child cases, hated the initial interview with the parents most of all. He couldn't take the emotional stuff the tears, the anguish, the self-recrimination. Give him a blood-spattered corpse and a gory crime scene any day. That he could handle, but yet another missing teenager?

Parents could never come to terms with what happened. They'd say and do anything to deny the truth.

"Our girl's good as gold, a perfect little angel."

"She's never been in any trouble."

"Oh no, Chief Inspector, she's far too young to have a boyfriend."

He'd heard it all before. Ordinarily, he'd leave this particular interview to Phil Cryer, his trusted sergeant, but Phil was on extended sick leave. Everyone else in his unit was either too junior, or too damned lazy to do a good job. Besides, Jones needed to see the family home for himself. He needed to gauge the parents' reactions and search the girl's bedroom. Delve into their lives.

The next couple of hours would be difficult enough for him, but nothing compared with the ongoing torture faced by the parents. He tasted the cool evening air and took a moment to take in the scene. Delaying the meeting as long as he could.

Net curtains twitched. Concerned neighbours peeked from doorways, or huddled together in groups along the pavement for mutual comfort. They knew why the police were here. They'd sympathise with the Jardines and keep their own children close for the next few days. After that, life would return to normal for them, but not for Mr and Mrs Jardine.

The street had money. Not much, but enough to pay the bills with a little left over for renovations and improvements. Manicured front gardens, clipped hedges, carefully weeded flower borders, and freshly painted doors and windows showed evidence of care. These were neither the wealthy, leafy suburbs of the rich and powerful, nor a forest of high-rise tower blocks riddled with crime where you could buy or sell a life for the price of your next fix. An average, middle-class, comfortable street—no more, no less.

Jones reached the Jardine house and paused at the garden gate unable to make the next move. He needed time to focus.

He knew exactly what Siân would have said to his delaying tactics. "Pull your finger out, Davey-boy," she'd say. "There's a girl out there who needs you. Man up and find her. It's what you do, isn't it?"

Siân, the only person he'd ever allow call him Davey. Hell, how he missed her guidance and her support. Her love. Thirty-six years, and a day never passed when he didn't think of her, or their son.

Well? What you waiting for, Jones? Get on with it.

The Jardines' bay-fronted 1930s semi-detached blended in well with its neighbours. A plum-coloured front door stood ajar in mocking welcome. The house would ever feel secure and welcoming again, not to the Jardines.

Kids. Why would anyone want them? Decades of heartache then they leave, if they survived at all. So many things could happen to a child on the road to adulthood. Some, like his and Siân's baby, Paul, only lived a short while—a whole lifetime in thirteen minutes.

The gate opened on well-oiled, silent hinges. Ten paces short of the Jardines' front door, his mobile buzzed. A reprieve.

"Jones speaking."

"Control here, sir."

He recognised the clipped, efficient tone of the evening shift's Comms Officer. "What do you have for me, Alan?"

"We have CCTV pictures, sir. A campervan circled the park behind Hollie Jardine's school this afternoon. Twice. First time ... fifteen-thirty-one, and again twelve minutes later. Second time, it stopped for twenty-three seconds, and then drove off, heading south towards the motorway. The camera was a long way off and the pictures are grainy. The techies don't hold out much hope of extracting a licence number."

"Any sign of the girl?"

“Possible. There was someone on the pavement before the van stopped, and they’d gone when the van left. We assume it was the girl and she got into the van.”

“Voluntarily?”

Jones hoped the girl had gone somewhere with a friend without telling her parents, but an image forced its way into his head—the image of a blonde girl battling an abductor, arms flailing, scratching, screaming.

“The camper blocked the picture. It’s impossible to tell, sir.”

“You’ve released details of the camper?” Jones rubbed his eyelids. The tension-headache moved from the back of his head to stab behind his left eye.

“The bulletin’s gone out and we’re treating this as a Priority One Alert. Every patrol car in the county is on the lookout. I’ve allocated my best team in traffic surveillance to go through the CCTV recordings along the projected routes.”

“You said the camper headed south?”

“Way ahead of you, sir. I’ve notified the motorway traffic boys and they’re on full alert. Not expecting much though. The driver’s had an six-hour head start. The camper could be anywhere in the country by now.”

“Yes, I know.” Jones sighed. “Good work so far. I’m at the parents’ house. Call me the second you have anything more.”

He rang off, searched the phone’s the directory, hit the number, and waited for Pelham to pick up. A chill easterly wind ruffled his hair. He dragged the straggly tufts into place behind his ear, and then scratched his chin. The electric razor in the Rover’s cubbyhole would have a workout later—when he found the time.

Detective Sergeant Charlie Pelham, the Serious Crime Unit’s entry for Sloth-of-the-Year, and its interim second-in-command in Phil Cryer’s absence, answered on the eighth ring.

“Hello, boss.” Pelham yawned.

“Evening, Charlie. Keeping you up are we?” Jones hated the idea of Pelham running anything more important than a bath, but needed to put up with things the way they were, at least for the moment.

Pelham cleared his throat. “Sorry, boss. Been a long day.”

“Status report please, Charlie.”

“So far we’ve contacted the girl’s form teacher and ten of her classmates. We’re having trouble getting hold of the others. Mobiles either engaged or go straight to voicemail.”

“Anything interesting?”

Pelham sniffed. “A couple of the girls fought with the Jardine girl in the last couple of weeks. They said she’d become a little uppity recently. According to her so-called schoolmates, Hollie Jardine’s become, and I quote, ‘a bit of a tart’. Whacha reckon? Possible runaway?”

“Hell, Charlie, ‘tart’? She’s a child for God’s sake.”

“Weren’t my description, boss.”

“Perhaps not, but she’s fourteen, go easy on repeating it. We treat this as an abduction until we know different. Have you made arrangements to search her school locker yet?”

“The headmaster’s unavailable so we can’t get his permission. The Deputy head’s gone AWOL too.”

“For God’s sake Charlie, sort out an emergency warrant. Break into the damn school if you have to. What’ve you been doing for the past two hours?”

“Hang on, boss, that’s a bit harsh. Phone’s been ringing off the hook. We’ve already been fielding phone calls from the press, and there’s only the two of us.”

“For God’s sake. Tell the switchboard to route the calls through to the media officer. That’s her job, isn’t it?” Jones paused. It wasn’t like him to shout at his team, even Pelham, and he knew it didn’t help. “Sorry, Charlie. I’m on a short fuse today. Draft in some uniforms to help with the grunt work. Tell the Duty Officer, I sanctioned it. Get Ryan to contact the other schoolmates while you sort out the locker. And have one of the uniforms, check the Missing Person’s database for similar cases. Use Ben Adeoye if he’s on shift. Remember that girl in Nottingham, Amanda Barton? Went missing on her way home from the shops? She was a blonde, too. And there was that lass from Derby the other month.”

“You think there’s a paedo gang targeting a specific type? I wondered why you was so quick off the mark on this case, boss. Hollie Jardine’s only been missing ten minutes.”

“Just get on with it, Charlie. And let me know the second you have anything.”

“Yeah, right. Will do, boss.”

Jones broke the connection. He took another breath and stepped through the threshold into a narrow hallway. Magnolia paint on the walls, two panelled doors on the right, and a stairway on the left. The first door, like the front, stood wide open. It led into a lounge-dining room with beige carpet, mid-value furniture, a leather lounge suite, and a modest flat-screen television. Nothing too flashy or expensive. As expected from the outside, here was a well-maintained, comfortable middle-income home.

A man and woman he took to be Mr and Mrs Jardine sat close to each other on a couch.

The Family Liaison Officer, a small policewoman Jones had met before but couldn't name, sat beside the distraught woman. She'd offer as much support as she could, which, given the circumstances, would be precious little.

Detective Constable Alexandra Olganski, the Serious Crime Unit's female officer, sat in a chair opposite the Jardines. She stood as Jones entered, introduced him to the parents, and handed him a photograph of their missing child.

"Taken three weeks ago, boss," Alex said.

As Jones studied the photo, his blood chilled. No way he'd be able to keep this case at arm's length. The missing girl, had flowing blonde hair, sapphire eyes, dimpled cheeks, clear skin, and a pale complexion—a child with the innocent girl-next-door look.

Oh, God.

Phil Cryer's daughter, Jamie, would be the dead spit of Hollie Jardine in four or five years.

He cleared a chalk-dry throat and asked the questions he already knew would give no real answers. "Has Hollie ever been late home before?"

Mr Jardine answered. "She always tells us where she is and never stays out unless she has permission. Our Hollie's a good girl."

He had the look and demeanour of a town clerk, dark suit, shirt, and tie still tight to the collar, metal-rimmed spectacles, bald with a Donald Trump comb-over. His lower lip trembled, but he wouldn't let the tears fall. Like Jones, he belonged to the 'men don't cry', generation.

No. We don't cry. Not in public.

Mrs Jardine, a small woman in her late forties or early fifties, mature for a woman with a teenage daughter, kept her eyes fixed on the tissue crumpled in her hand. She dabbed at puffy, bloodshot eyes and clung to her husband's arm as though frightened he would disappear, too.

Jones studied Hollie's photo again. He'd seen similar images a hundred times before. Here was a fourteen-year-old girl on the cusp of adulthood. A little make-up, a few pieces of jewellery, and an evening dress would allow her to pass as a twenty-something woman.

He needed to dig deep but knew his questions would add to the parents' pain. It would hurt them, sure, but he couldn't let sympathy for the parents interfere with finding their daughter.

"How has Hollie been lately? Any abnormal changes in personality? Fights, tantrums, boyfriend trouble?"

Mrs Jardine found her voice, though it was weak. "Hollie's good as gold. Always has been. Studying hard for her exams made her a little more temperamental than usual, but nothing out of the ordinary for our baby."

A teenage girl without tantrums? Yeah, right.

She shot a furtive glance at her husband, who didn't appear to notice.

The warning mechanism in Jones' head, honed by thirty-nine years as a police officer, thirty-three of them a detective, tingled. They were hiding something.

Change the subject. Try something easier.

"How did she get to and from school?"

Mr Jardine extricated his arm from his wife's death grip and stood. "If it's dry she walks with her friend, Amy. It's only a mile or so if you cut through the park and take the footbridge over the dual carriageway. On rainy days, either Emma drives them, or Hollie takes the bus."

"A sunny day like today she'd have walked?"

The father nodded. "I drove her normal route three times and there's no sign. I phoned all the hospitals but there's nothing. That's when I called the police."

He crossed to the window overlooking a well-tended rear garden, his back stooped in defeat. Mrs Jardine remained on the couch and stared at the carpet. For all the good it did, the FLO rested a hand on Mrs Jardine's forearm.

"And the friend she walks with, Amy. Have you spoken to her?"

"Amy's been off sick since Monday. Says she hasn't seen Hollie for days." Mrs Jardine's timid voice barely carried across the six-foot gap separating her from Jones.

"Can I have Amy's full name and address? DC Olganski can go and have a word."

Jones jotted the information into his notebook, stood, and signalled for Alex to join him in the hallway. He closed the door behind them. "Did you get a description of the clothes she left home in? Jewellery she wore?"

"Yes, boss. School uniform, no jewellery. I have circulated the full description."

"Great. Call me when you've spoken to this Amy girl. Push her hard. We need to know what Hollie's been up to recently. According to her schoolmates, there is a boyfriend involved. I'll be here for a little while."

Alex pointed to Hollie's photo and shook her head. "*Fan också*. She looks like Jamie Cryer, *ja*?" Her Swedish accent always thickened at times of stress.

"Really? Hadn't noticed."

She offered a knowing smile and hurried from the house.

Jones returned to the lounge. Mrs Jardine hadn't moved from the couch. Mr Jardine remained at the window, head lowered and eyes closed.

Jones cleared his throat. "I'd like to take a look at Hollie's room now, if I may, Mrs Jardine."

She stiffened and looked at him for the first time. "Why?"

There it was, the defensiveness he expected.

"The more I know about Hollie," he said evenly, "the better chance I have of finding her."

"Steady, Emma, old girl." Mr Jardine turned and spoke quietly, his voice firm. "If it helps find our girl you can search the whole damned house, Chief Inspector."

They might well have to do that, but first things first.

"This way."

Jones followed him up the stairs to a room overlooking the back garden, Hollie's holy-of-holies. It offered few surprises. A poster of the latest boy-band flavour-of-the-month and a still from a vampire movie with a pale, emaciated-looking leading man adorned the faded pink walls. A dressing table buckled under the weight of cosmetics, mirrors, and inexpensive jewellery—silver and plastic, much of it pink. A queen-sized bed, complete with a dozen stuffed toys, occupied the wall adjacent to a wide picture window, pink curtains.

Jardine crossed to the bed and picked up a one-eared, no-eyed teddy bear. He stared at it as though it would tell him where they could find his daughter. Jones' breath caught. He'd given Jamie Cryer a bear exactly like it for her first birthday. Even after eight years, the thing held pride of place on her toy-shelf. He'd given Paul Cryer, the latest addition to his sergeant's family, a stuffed giraffe, and the toddler cuddled it every night.

Along the left-hand wall, a floor-to-ceiling wardrobe opened to reveal an assortment of clothes, school uniforms, skirts, blouses, tops, and the occasional dress. None was frivolous, or inappropriate, but gaps in the rail and empty hangers told a tale. A few of the skirts seemed closer to 'micro' than 'mini', but fashions change and Jones didn't have a clue what passed muster for respectable fourteen-year-old girls these days. He knew what disreputable fourteen-year-olds wore—his work told him that.

"How tall is Hollie?"

"As tall as you, Chief Inspector. She outgrew Emma and me last year."

Definitely 'micro' then.

"Are any of her things missing?" he asked.

Jardine's lower lip trembled again, and his eyes glistened. A response Jones expected, given the empty spaces in the wardrobe.

"We checked before calling you. A suitcase and some clothes are gone." He hesitated before adding in a whisper, "She's taken her passport too."

Jones knew it.

"Why didn't you tell us this before, Mr Jardine?" He kept his voice level and controlled.

The desperate father lowered his head. "We didn't think you'd try as hard to find her."

Jones hesitated until Jardine looked up and they locked eyes.

"Sir," he said, "Hollie's a minor. We'll try our very best to find her, believe me."

Jardine broke eye contact, stared down at the stuffed toy again, and nodded. Jones knew how it felt to lose a child, and felt Jardine's pain.

"Our miracle baby," Jardine said, almost to himself.

"Excuse me, sir?"

"We'd been trying for years without luck. Just about given up hope. And then ... IVF. Emma fell pregnant in her thirty-eighth year. I was nearly forty. Most people think we're too old to have a teenage daughter. Sometimes get mistaken for her grandparents. Old fuddy-duddies. We probably smothered her." His voice broke and he looked up.

Jones spoke quietly. "You've tried her mobile?"

"Goes straight to voicemail."

"We'll put a trace on it. As soon as she makes a call, we'll know where she is."

Jones tried to bury the thought that Hollie couldn't answer the phone because she was already dead, but it kept digging its way to the surface and haunting at him.

"Does Hollie have her own computer?"

Jardine took a deep breath. "No, she uses the family PC downstairs in the office."

Unfortunate. Jones doubted they'd find anything useful on it.

“If you don’t mind, I’ll have one of our technicians take a look at it. She may have been talking online to someone she shouldn’t.”

“Oh no, I’ve put full parental controls on the internet usage. I’m a software engineer, and know about computers. We didn’t allow Hollie to use social media. But please feel free. If it helps, take the bloody thing away.”

“Thank you, sir. We will.”

Jones hated the next step, but couldn’t avoid it. He didn’t want Hollie’s father to see him rifling through his daughter’s private life.

“If you don’t mind, sir.” He waved a hand towards the door. “I won’t be long, and I won’t make a mess. Promise.”

Jones never made a mess. It was one of his things, a matter of pride.

Mr Jardine hesitated, stole another look at the room, and turned away. He took the ragged bear with him.

Once alone, Jones dragged open the top drawer of the dressing table, already knowing what he’d find. Underwear: silk, sheer, neatly folded, bras with a cup size revealing the shape of a woman, not a child. Spaces showed some of the items were missing.

The other drawers held nothing of particular interest.

He searched the rest of the room and his gaze alighted on a large bowl of potpourri on the windowsill. He shuffled the dry leaves, but found no hidden baggies. The textbooks on the single shelf over the bed gave up nothing, no hidden papers, no jottings in the margins, no photos.

The wardrobe proved more informative. In a battered shoebox, he found the thing he hoped for, an old-fashioned, pen and paper diary with a feeble lock. He didn’t have to worry about operating systems, passwords, or something equally difficult—like finding the on-switch.

He flipped to the most recent entry, dated the previous day:

“We kissed! Finally. Oh God, it was lovely. Tongues too. I think E’s going to ask me today, and I’m going to say yes. Says he can’t wait to see me naked at last. He’s so hot. I want him to touch me, play with”

Jones thumbed backwards through the entries. Numerous references to ‘E’ stretched back eighteen days. The timeline matched the information given by her school friends. She met ‘E’, an older man, judging by the references to his having a car, she kept his identity secret, and her personality changed almost immediately. A classic sign of grooming.

Jones dropped one of Hollie’s hairbrushes into an evidence bag in case they needed it later, for identification, and hurried back to the front room.

“Mrs Jardine.” She turned towards him and his heart stalled at the torment in her eyes. He’d seen the same look of desperation and fear so many times before. “Has Hollie ever mentioned a boy with the initial ‘E’?”

Her eyes flicked towards her husband, and her chin quivered. “No, we told you. Hollie’s a good girl ... doesn’t have a boyfriend. She’s too young and concentrates on her exams. She doesn’t waste her time on ... boys.”

A flickering shadow of recognition passed behind Frank Jardine’s eyes.

“Mr Jardine, might I have a word, please? In private?”

Mrs Jardine blew her nose and turned away as Jones escorted the father back into the hall. He closed the door behind them and showed Mr Jardine the bag with the brush and the diary. “I’ll need to take these with me. Is that okay?”

Mr Jardine nodded.

“I read the most recent entries. There’s a chance Hollie may have run away with this ‘E’ person. What do you think?”

The father turned his head away. “I’ve never met him. Whenever I asked Hollie, she’d tell me to mind my own business. What could I do?”

Ground her? Or don’t parents do that anymore?

Mr Jardine fixed Jones with tear-filled, pale brown eyes, and grabbed his arm. “Please find our little girl. She’s everything.”

The hidden steel behind Frank Jardine’s meek exterior showed as the fierce grip on Jones’ forearm increased. He felt the man’s desperation, and couldn’t ignore his own empathy for a distraught father.

Somehow, Hollie’s photo appeared in his hand. He stared down at it, and Jamie Cryer’s smiling face stared back at him.

Siân’s voice in his head said, *‘Don’t do it, Davey-boy. Don’t you dare’*. He normally followed her advice, but not this time.

“I’ll find her, Mr Jardine. I promise.”

Chapter 3

Thursday evening - Investigations

Time since abduction: nine hours, thirty minutes

Jones yelled down the phone at the technician. “What about ongoing police work? Isn’t there a, what-do-you-call it, backup system?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Chief Inspector, but we’ve been the target of a series of security attacks over the past few weeks. We need to close the system to initiate an upgrade or we’ll be wide open to hackers.”

The woman didn’t sound at all sorry. Her voice held a note of boredom. “You’re the third senior police officer I’ve talked to tonight. Every force in the country has had adequate warning. You should have failsafe duplicate systems in place. It’s part of the national standards.” She paused. “And by the way, we chose this time because only seventeen percent of PNC searches are run overnight.” Another pause. “I can give you ten more minutes before we pull the plug but that’s all. If it’s any help, the system should be back online by eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

“What’s the point in having a Police National Computer system we can’t access? A young girl’s life is at stake.”

Jones slammed the phone into its cradle and punched the desk with the side of his fist. A sharp pain jarred through his wrist and stung his fingers. He shook the hand.

Wonderful Jones, that’ll help.

As the tingling in his fingertips diminished, he turned to face the room.

Alex Olganski sat at the computer station, her head bowed, eyes focused on the monitor. Ryan Washington, a hook-nosed, stoop-shouldered Detective Constable, and the fleshy DS Charlie Pelham, sat hunched over telephone handsets. Each spoke quietly. Papers and yellow telephone notes littered the desks. Jones wanted to jump across the room and tidy them into neat piles, but that would only help him, not the case. Ryan and Pelham worked hard, but the information they had gathered over the past couple of hours was background colour and contained nothing to help locate Hollie Jardine.

Pelham’s attempt at searching her school locker ended when the deputy head stated the school didn’t have any. The children were ‘encouraged to travel light’ and, ‘with the advance of new technology, heavy textbooks are no longer required’.

Ryan had accessed the school’s IT system, but found nothing in Hollie’s file relevant to the search. Jones despaired at the loss of real honest-to-goodness paper.

“Who’s responsible for overseeing the backup PNC system?” Jones asked the group.

Pelham lowered his head and studied an incident report. Ryan answered for him. “Superintendent Peyton refused to release the funds to expand the local network, boss. Said it wasn’t worth it for the time we’d need the thing. Phil tried to talk to him about it last spring when you were in High Court on the Skelman trial, but the Super wouldn’t listen.”

“You mean there’s nothing backed up locally?”

Pelham coughed and shuffled in his seat.

Ryan lowered his gaze. “We have some files on the local servers, but the system’s a pig. Nobody’s spent any money on it for years. Our in-house system keeps crashing. Bloody thing’s useless.”

Jones couldn’t believe it. No one could ever accuse him of being a high-tech advocate, but even he could see the value of uninterrupted access to data files.

Superintendent Douglas Peyton was a bean counter of the worst kind. If Hollie Jardine died because of Peyton’s penny-pinching Jones would cheerfully castrate the bastard.

Jones tried to relax his aching jaw muscles and turned to the only working VDU in the office. “You’ve got ten, no ... eight minutes, Alex. How’s it coming?”

She rattled the keyboard. “I need to know what search parameters to use. I have entered adult males in this region. What age range? Centre of operation? Modus operandi?”

Jones tugged at his earlobe. All he knew for certain was that Hollie called her boyfriend ‘E’. He didn’t even know whether it referred to a surname or a given name. Hell, it might even be a pet name.

“Pull out every male with a history of molesting or grooming underage girls. He was old enough to drive, right? So he’s at least seventeen. Upper age? Oh, I don’t know, fifty-five? He was probably a Caucasian, judging by what Hollie’s school friends said. Get me every name you can and we’ll go through it later.”

He checked the time—seven minutes left.

Alex bowed her head and concentrated on the screen showing the soon-to-be-locked blue search template.

Come on, Alex. Down to you now, lass.

She cursed in Swedish, glanced at Jones, and shook her head in apology. He stood over her and tried to read the screen. Her fingers fluttered over the keys, but her eyes remained glued to the screen. Jones wondered when she'd learned to touch-type. He also wondered why it mattered.

Alex stopped typing and looked up. Smudged mascara, where she rubbed her eye, drew Jones' attention.

"Boss, please?"

Jones raised an open hand. "Sorry," he said.

He turned to leave the room, but paused long enough to straighten some of the papers on Ryan's desk. He couldn't help himself.

Jones could think of nothing better to do than pace the corridor outside the SCU briefing room and monitor the time rushing past with the speed of Usain Bolt on a world record breaking day. He considered entering his office to organise the papers the admin officer would have thrown on his desk, but couldn't stomach the thought.

No matter how many times he told the woman to put new files in the in-tray, and not on his blotter, she refused to listen. He began to wonder whether someone on the team egged her on, to annoy him. Well it bloody worked. Jones hated mess in his personal space, and anywhere else come to that.

He wiped a coating of dust from a windowsill in the hall with his handkerchief and shook the cloth out before folding it into a neat square and replacing it in his inside jacket pocket. He wondered, not for the first time, what the cleaners did to earn their minimum wage.

He called the control room again. All twenty-seven local patrol cars reported no success. Officers had stopped and searched one campervan fitting the description, but cleared the owners, an elderly Welsh couple, to go. Apart from that, they had nothing.

Jones ended the call and popped his head around the SCU office door. Alex still attacked the keyboard with controlled fury. Pelham and Ryan hadn't moved.

Jones' spirits sank. She needed to come up with a list of suspects before the deadline. If not, they'd be stymied until morning and Hollie's chances were ... He refused to complete the thought and paced the hall for five more interminable minutes.

"Boss, I have it!"

Jones burst into the room to find Alex smiling in triumph.

"Excellent." He touched her shoulder. "Now, print off four copies."

The laser printer hummed, and Jones signalled for Ryan to distribute the output.

"There are fifteen men who fit the profile," Alex announced. "That is, fifteen with a particular interest in older children."

With a magnetised strip, Jones stuck his copy to the wall-sized whiteboard and finger-walked through the names. Searching first for anyone he recognised before skipping to the first 'E' he found.

Method, Jones. Miss nothing. Go through each name in turn.

He scratched off two men. One had died a couple of weeks earlier, and the other was tucked away downstairs in the holding cells, charged with exposing himself near a school playground.

"Doesn't anybody update the PNC? I thought the whole point of a computerised system was to have *accurate* records. Anybody else have anything?" Jones found himself shouting, despite struggling for control.

Pelham pulled at his lower lip before pointing to his list. "You can remove Ewan Priestly; he's too ugly. Wouldn't turn the head of a young girl."

Damn, that's one 'E' gone.

"And bin Ivan Zylic," Pelham continued. "Extradited to Serbia. I sat in on his extradition case last month."

"Ryan?"

"Sorry, boss. Don't recognise any of the others."

"Alex?"

"Someone attacked the paedophile, Glen Evans yesterday. He is in hospital, I think." Alex picked up the desk phone. "I will check." The handset disappeared under her long blonde hair.

Jones didn't miss the initial letter of Evans' name. His heart sank a little more as they struck a second 'E' from the reduced list. He turned to Pelham and Ryan. "Take three names each. Report in the minute you clear anyone. Alex and I will take the remaining four. I want every one of these sick buggers interviewed, checked, and crossed off. I don't care how many uniforms you allocate to help with the search. Off you go."

Pelham's shoulders sagged. "What's the point of running around after her? The kid's a runaway. She packed her bags and took her passport, didn't she? Waste of bloody time."

Jones turned on Pelham and stepped close. "What did you say?" The stink of sweat mixed with stale tobacco forced him to breathe through his mouth. Jones backed away one pace. "What the hell's wrong with you, man? What would you do if your Greg disappeared? Do I have to remind you Hollie Jardine's a child? She should be home with her parents. I want her found. Understand?"

“Yes, boss. Sorry.” Pelham raised a placatory hand and rushed to follow Ryan through the door.

Jones didn’t believe the apology. Pelham’s laziness had worsened in recent months and he constantly stretched Jones’ patience beyond its limits. He wanted to kick the lazy bugger off the team, but the crafty old sod had protection from on high in the emaciated shape of Superintendent Duggie Peyton. Jones needed to tread carefully.

Alex finished her call and crossed off Evan’s name. “Broken arm and concussion. Definitely, he is not our man.”

Jones checked his Seiko. “Hollie’s been missing over ten hours. We’re running out of time, if the poor child isn’t already dead.”

“Our four suspects.” Alex pointed to each name in turn. “Aaron Smollett, Jackson Perry, Nigel Simms, and Edward Flynn. Who do you want to look at first?”

“Edward Flynn. I know the name from somewhere.”

The final ‘E’. Was he clutching?

Alex shrugged. “It is unfamiliar to me. Born in 1961. He has fifty years, *ja*?”

“Would a man in his fifties turn the head of a teenage girl?”

“Excuse me?”

“Her diary.” Jones handed her the pink journal. “The entries read like a young girl with a crush on a slightly older boy, not a middle aged man. She uses the initial ‘E’.”

Jones spun on his heel and headed for the door. “I’ve an idea. Send patrol cars to pick up Perry, Simms,” he called over his shoulder, “and follow me to the archives. We have some old-fashioned police work to do.”

#

The archives, across the road from the smart new police headquarters, had missed the latest round of renovations. The under-used, dusty vault hadn’t changed much in the eleven months since Jones last searched through the paper records, but the smell of damp and decay had worsened by a country mile. Cobwebs hung like shrouds, dust clung to every flat surface, and flecks hung in the still air as large as confetti in a wedding photo. Jones sneezed twice and pulled on a pair of latex gloves. He shuddered at the grime and wished he had a dust mask handy.

According to the Sex Offender’s Registry, Edward Flynn’s most recent court appearances dated back to 1995. It took Jones half an hour to find the case file. Something told him they were getting close to an answer. The familiar burst of adrenaline accompanying a potential break in the case made his heart rate jump. This was the buzz he lived for, the parmesan on his pizza.

Alex arrived as he dropped the thick manila folder on the reception desk. The file hit the surface with a clap and stirred up a thick cloud of dust. He sneezed again and regretted being so aggressive with the file. He waited for the dust to settle before flipping open the front cover. The excitement melted away the instant he read the first page.

“Damn it!”

“Doss?” Alex’s eyebrows knitted together.

“Look.” Jones pointed to the big red letters stamped diagonally across the top page: DECEASED. “So much for my bright idea.”

He stepped back to let Alex take a closer look and allowed his shoulders to slump. Now they had nothing but the other names on the SO list.

Alex read the entry aloud. “Died in prison. Isle of Wight, March 2007. He served twelve of a twenty-five-year sentence for the grooming, kidnap, rape, and murder of a twelve-year-old girl. An inmate stabbed him to death in the prison chapel two days before his release for good behaviour. It would appear the other prisoners were not too happy about Mr Flynn being released, *ja*?”

“So it would appear.” Jones rubbed his face with his hands. “Flynn’s MO matches Hollie Jardine’s abduction. Hell, I thought we were on to something. I don’t suppose he has a brother, does he?”

Alex flipped a page and continued reading. Jones closed his eyes, and tried hard to think of something they’d missed, another line of enquiry, but came up empty. All they could do was hope one of the other men on the list became a hot candidate, or someone spotted the campervan. But the holiday season had already started, and the mass exodus of campers making the trip to all-ports-south made the odds of finding a specific vehicle bloody long. They didn’t even have a registration number.

“I have something.” Alex turned her head up from the file, her eyes shone. She pointed to an entry in the file under ‘Next-of-Kin’. “Edward Flynn had a son, Ellis.”

Jones slapped a palm on the desk. “Ellis Edward Flynn, more Es. Is there anything in the file on this Ellis?”

“There is a reference number here. It means he has a case file, *ja*?”

Jones rummaged behind the serving counter for the index list. “Call out that number for me.”

“2-3-6-8-9-8-6.”

It took him a couple of frustrating minutes to find the number in the index and its designated shelving area. They hurried to the correct section to find an unholy mess of misfiled case folders. Hundreds of them, all stacked in haphazard fashion on sagging metal shelving units unsuitable for the task. Jones nearly screamed.

“This is what happens when we rely too heavily on IT and outsource the hard copy filing to the lowest bidder. Nobody’s sorted these files in months. Damn it. Heads are gonna roll for this.”

“If we take the files and place them on the floor in regular stacks, we can perform a binary split. It will be much faster, yes?”

Jones ground his teeth. “What the hell’s a binary split? Yet another piece of technology I’ll have to learn?”

Red spots coloured Alex’s high cheekbones. She lowered her head and picked up the first file. “Sorry, boss. It is a mathematical process.”

Jones coughed and followed her lead. He clamped down hard on his frustrations and studied Alex’s methodical approach. When she finally came up with the file, it had taken fifteen minutes. It would have taken a damned sight longer without her system. Alex tossed the file onto the table in front of him with a self-satisfied grin.

“So that’s a binary split, eh?” He smiled. “Thanks, Alex. Sorry for being so short with you back there.”

“It is okay. I also want to find Hollie Jardine.”

Jones pointed to the notes. Ellis’ folder was considerably thinner than that of his father. “Do you mind reading the file? Your eyes are sharper than mine.” He paced behind her while she scanned the papers.

“Not much here, boss. He has never been in trouble as an adult, but there is a sealed juvenile record.” She checked the time on her mobile. “We will not be able to access that file for six hours.”

“Does it give a current address?”

She pointed to a box on the top page. “Tile Hill. You know the place?”

Jones nodded and allowed himself a grin. Perhaps his fears of a motorway trip for the campervan had been premature. “A small town a few miles south east of here. There was nothing on the SO register about Ellis Flynn so he may be an innocent. On the other hand, he might have taken Hollie to his home.”

The information fitted, it felt right, and his internal mechanism agreed. Jones made the decision.

“Call Ryan and Charlie. Get them to meet us at Tile Hill. I’ll organise a couple of uniforms for added backup.”

Alex rushed from the room but Jones paused a moment and eyed the desk. Although he would have put any other officer on a charge for doing the same thing, Jones picked up both folders and took them along.

What the filing clerk doesn’t know ...

#

Jones, Pelham, Alex, and Ryan, together with two uniformed constables, pitched up at Ellis Flynn’s 1930s, Art Deco house in two police cars and Jones’ Rover. Jones ordered a silent approach and they turned off the flashing lights and the sirens a mile from the house.

Half past three in the morning. Hollie had been missing nearly twelve hours. The odds against her survival lengthened with each passing minute and everyone in the team understood that.

The first ominous thing Jones noticed was the *For Sale* sign in the postage-stamp front garden.

As the most senior officer on duty, Jones didn’t need a warrant under the exigent circumstances rule, and they smashed their way through the flimsy front door. Ellis Flynn wasn’t home, as Jones knew in his heart he wouldn’t be.

“Ryan, make sure you call the Estate Agent in the morning. See whether they have Flynn’s contact number, although I’ll bet he’s referred everything through a solicitor.”

Ryan made a note on his computer tablet.

“Charlie, go talk to the neighbours. See whether anyone knows where Flynn’s gone. Actually, canvass the whole damned street and take the uniforms with you.”

Pelham sighed, shook his head, and wandered off. Jones frowned at his back and turned to Ryan, the SCU’s keen petrol head. “Take the garage. See if you can find out whether Flynn owned a campervan.”

Jones sent Alex to search upstairs, while he took the ground floor.

The house, although tired and in need of modernisation, had been thoroughly cleaned. If the *For Sale* sign didn’t make it clear enough, the bare bones furniture covered in dustsheets confirmed Ellis Flynn’s intention to leave the house he’d lived in since his birth. Jones found no registration documents, no official papers, passports, birth certificates, or school qualifications. He found no deeds to other buildings and no utility bills for any property other than this one.

In short, he found nothing to tell them where Flynn might have taken Hollie. Nor did they find anything concrete to link Flynn with the girl. It didn’t make sense, but somehow Jones knew Ellis Flynn was their man. He felt it. There was a smell to the place. An aura of decay, of evil.

Alex returned to the front room and shook her head. “Nothing upstairs. No clothes in the wardrobes. The linen and bedclothes are also gone. Nothing in the bathroom either. How do you say? Ellis Flynn has gone on a runner, *ja?*”

“Done a runner, Alex,” Jones said, adding a slight smile. Alex could never get her head around English colloquialisms but she was such an integral member of the SCU her Scandinavian accent and formal speech patterns barely registered anymore. “Same down here. Nothing personal left in the place, only that photo over there.” He pointed to a simple glass-fronted picture frame on the mantelpiece above the fire.

The picture showed a thirty-something woman dressed in clothes from the 1980s—the decade taste ignored. Flynn’s mother he presumed. The woman in the frame didn’t figure in Ellis Flynn’s current life or he’d have a more up-to-date picture, and he wouldn’t have left this one behind.

Why did he leave it here?

He took a second look, and crossed the room in four quick strides. “Do you see this?”

Alex stepped beside him and studied the picture. The woman in the frame wore her blonde hair long and loose. She had blue eyes, and a toothy, dimpled smile. “*Jävla helvete!* She looks like Hollie, yes?”

Before either of them had time to speak, Ryan burst through the door, breathing heavily.

“Found something, boss,” he said and smiled as he held up two evidence bags. “There’s an incinerator in the garden, still warm. But Flynn doesn’t know diddly about setting fires. He let it go out. Look.”

Ryan handed over the first of his treasure trove—the lower third of a photo booth film strip. A scorched edge showed the fire damage, but the bottom picture remained relatively intact. It showed Hollie Jardine and a handsome man in his early twenties. Hollie smiled and gazed into the man’s eyes. Ellis Flynn, and it had to be him, wore his thick dark hair long. He bore a passing similarity to a young film actor, but Jones couldn’t put a name to the celebrity. Flynn stared back at Jones through cold, lifeless eyes, as though he knew Jones had trespassed in his domain.

A cold shiver rushed up from Jones’ shiny black shoes. Ryan’s voice broke through his thoughts.

“...garage is definitely large enough to hold a campervan, boss. There are discarded oil and air filter boxes in the bin, along with used diesel glow plugs. It looks like he might have prepared the camper for a long drive. But that’s not all.” With a smile and the flourish of a stage magician pulling a card out of his sleeve, he held up a second evidence bag. It contained a sheet of paper covered in oily fingerprints. “I found this on the floor under the workbench. It’s a till receipt for a new shower pump to fit a caravan ... or a camper.”

Jones clenched his fist. “Okay, that’s confirmation enough for me. Any sign of a registration document?”

Ryan shook his head. “Sorry, boss. I’d check the online driver’s listings for a registration number, but the PNC ... The DVLA won’t be open until eight o’clock tomorrow morning.”

Bloody computers—bloody DVLA.

Jones’ mobile buzzed and he answered before checking the caller id.

“Chief Inspector Jones?” Mr Jardine’s high-pitched, pleading voice hit him like a blow to the gut. Jones regretted giving out his personal number, then immediately reprimanded himself for being so callous.

“Mr Jardine, I’m sorry, but there’s no news ye—”

“We’ve just had a reporter knock on our door.”

Already?

“Really?”

“He was from the local paper. A man called Wilson. Said he was in close liaison with the police and asked me to comment on research showing most abductees are killed within the first six hours!”

‘Old’ Luke Wilson. Wait ‘til I get my hands around his pencil neck.

“Mr Jardine, we have no reason to think the worst.” Jones tried to sound calm and comforting but knew it wasn’t working. “You mustn’t give up hope. In fact, we’re looking into a lead. Tell me, has Hollie ever mentioned an Ellis Flynn?”

“Oh God! Is that who took her?” Jardine’s voice cracked.

“We’re not certain, but do you recognise the name?”

“Ellis Flynn? No, Hollie never mentioned him, but I never knew the name of her friends. I can’t ask Emma, the doctor gave her a strong sedative and she’s asleep. She’s taken this so badly.”

Jones let Mr Jardine ramble on for a few moments, offered him some platitudes, and rang off as Pelham strolled in with a smirk on his flaccid, stubble-blurred face. “Looks like I were right after all.”

“About?”

“Hollie Jardine’s gone and run off wi’ this Ellis-bloody-Flynn.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Spoke to the neighbour. The old biddy weren’t too happy to be woke in the middle of the night, but she were helpful.”

“In what way?”

“Turns out Hollie Jardine’s been visiting Ellis Flynn a couple of afternoons a week.” Pelham consulted his notepad. “Mrs Tomlinson, her next door, said she were shocked ‘cause the girl looked so young. Arrived in her school uniform one day.”

“Did she give you a description of the camper?” Jones asked, trying to ignore Pelham’s look of smug satisfaction.

“Yes, boss. And I quote, *‘It’s a big, white monstrosity. Takes up two car parking spaces and blocks out all my light’*. Mrs Tomlinson’s in her eighties, boss. Wouldn’t know the difference between a camper and a truck.”

“She’s certain it was Hollie?”

Pelham sucked his teeth and twisted his thin lips into a wry grin. “Yep. She recognised the photo. Nobody’s abducted the silly fool. She ran away with Flynn. This is a bloody waste of time. We could be tucked up in our nice warm pits fast asleep instead of chasing around town after a bloody stupid runaway.”

Jones stepped closer. “By all means go home to your bed, Sergeant Pelham,” Jones said, quietly. “But if you do, you can empty your desk and resign yourself to writing parking tickets for the rest of your useless career.”

Pelham’s jaw dropped.

Jones locked angry eyes with his sergeant and counted off the points on his fingers. “A fourteen-year-old girl is swept off her feet. She packs a bag, and takes her passport. A man grooming her for weeks fuels up his camper and whisks her away to who-the-hell-knows-where. Now, I don’t care that she apparently went willingly, and I don’t care about your bloody warm bed. If Flynn touches one hair on her head, it makes him a paedophile, and I’m going to have the bugger strung up by his scrotum. Understand?”

“Er, sorry, boss. Just kidding,” Pelham offered. His cheeks flushed, and he averted his eyes from Jones’ steel glare.

“This isn’t a joking matter. Even if Hollie did go voluntarily, she’s still a minor and we need to find her.”

Pelham swallowed hard. “Yes, boss. What do you want me to do?”

“Go back to the station and phone all the ports in the country. Flynn’s taken a campervan so he isn’t going to use an airport. Check whether he’s booked on an overnight ferry to the continent. Check the Channel Tunnel too, and don’t forget sailings to Ireland. With a name like Flynn, he might have relatives over there. And if you find a booking, remember to get a vehicle description and registration.”

Pelham hesitated.

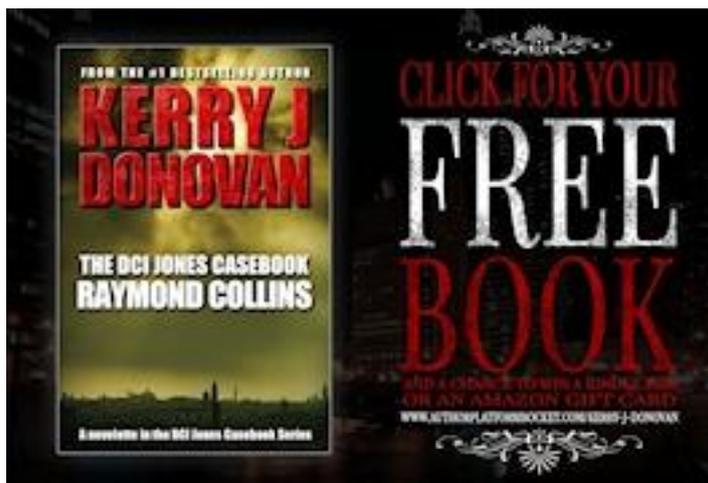
“Well get a move on, man!” Jones shouted. “Alex, Ryan, you go help him. Melt some telephone wires.”

“What are you going to do, boss?” Alex asked from the doorway. The other two clearly didn’t have the nerve.

“Me?” he said, adding a grim smile. “I’m going to wake my favourite memory man.”

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Biography

Kerry J Donovan was born in Dublin. He spent most of his life in the UK, and now lives in the heart of rural Brittany with his wonderful and patient wife, Jan. They have three children and four grandchildren (so far), all of whom live in England. An absentee granddad, Kerry is hugely thankful for the advent of video calling.

The cottage is a pet free zone (apart from the field mice, moles, and red squirrels).

Kerry earned a first class honours degree in Human Biology, and has a PhD in Sport and Exercise Sciences. A former scientific advisor to The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, he helped UK emergency first-responders prepare for chemical attacks in the wake of 9/11. This background adds a scientific edge to his writing. He is also a former furniture designer/maker.

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Other Works

CRIME THRILLERS

[*The DCI Jones Casebook: Sean Freeman*](#)

Veteran cop, DCI David Jones, is tough and uncompromising. His Serious Crime Unit has the best arrest record the Midlands Police Service has ever seen and Jones wants to keep it that way.

Locksmith turned jewel thief, Sean Freeman, is the best cracksmith in the UK. He's never been caught—the police have never even come close. When Freeman's boss forces him to break into the Stafford Museum, the UK's most secure premises outside of the Bank of England he's in trouble—the Stafford is in the heart of David Jones' jurisdiction.

Someone's record is going to suffer.

[*The DCI Jones Casebook: Raymond Collins*](#)

A 70-page novelette to introduce Detective Chief Inspector David Jones: Birmingham, England, a sunny day in the city park. Children play, adults walk—and a man lies dead in a pool of blood. His terrified fiancé screams for help. The assailant smiles, waves goodbye, and strolls away into the city.

DCI David Jones and his protégé, Detective Sergeant Phil Cryer, are called to investigate the most difficult of crimes—an apparently motiveless and random attack. Hampered by a lack of resources, Jones and Cryer have to act quickly to prevent a murder spree.

[*The DCI Jones Casebook: Ellis Flynn*](#)

When fourteen-year-old Hollie Jardine fails to return home from school, her terrified parents call the police.

It doesn't take DCI David Jones, head of the Midlands Police Serious Crime Unit, long to discover a link between Hollie and convicted sex-offender, Ellis Flynn.

With Hollie's chances of survival fading, Jones and his colleague Alex Olganski risk their careers when they ignore protocol to follow Flynn's trail across the Channel into France.

What they discover in an idyllic backwater will stretch Jones' detection skills to the limit, and Alex's loyalty to heartbreak.

ACTION ADVENTURE

On Lucky Shores

In an action-packed tale of secrets and lies in small town America, Chet Walker is a man forced to make decisions that will affect his future and the life of the woman he loves.

Witness to a car crash and in receipt of a cryptic message from a dying man, traveling musician, Chet Walker, reaches the picturesque lakeside town of Lucky Shores. He faces hostility and suspicion from the locals and learns that the information he carries could unlock an eight-year-old mystery—it could also get him killed.

Josephine Dolan, owner of the Lucky Shores diner, wants to bury her past. When Walker arrives with a message from her father, she doesn't want to hear it. She cuts him cold.

When his life is threatened, Chet Walker learns the truth behind the saying, “no good deed goes unpunished.”

FANTASY THRILLER

The Transition of Johnny Swift

Before the accident ...

Frank Brazier has the perfect life. A contract to drive for a Formula 1 team. A supportive family. A stunning girlfriend.

On the surface, everything is great, but Frank keeps a secret. On race days, Shadow-man visits. He sits on the nose cone of Frank's racing car, or floats above the grandstand, waving, taunting, distracting, eating away at his concentration. An accident in the making.

After the accident ...

Frank starts hearing voices. Strange voices. Impossible voices. He's losing his grip on reality and Paula, his sister, is dying. Doctors say she is brain dead. They want to pull the plug, but Frank knows she's still in there, fighting. He can hear her calls.

One day later...

Shadow-man speaks. He says Frank can save Paula, but can Frank pay the price?

SHORT STORIES

The Collection

The Collection includes over two dozen stories ranging in length from fifty word micro shorts to a full-blown novelette. Comedy, drama, crime thrillers, romance, true-life tales, gory horror, historical epic—you'll find samples of each.

The hauntingly evocative semi-autobiographical tale, *Sweet William*, and the poignant, *The Phone Call*, are stories to tug the heart and bring tears to the eye.

In *The Long Wait*, Ryan Chisholm has spent seventeen years waiting to avenge the death of his father.

A Father's Tale is a heart-warming story of family life told in short vignettes.

At over 7,000 words, *The Chamber* is the longest in the book, and perhaps Kerry's most gruesome tale. Psychopath Porter Robinson holds Robert Forbes captive in a cellar and tells him a tale from Porter's childhood. Will Forbes survive, or will he go the way of countless other victims? This is definitely not for the people of a timid disposition.

If you enjoy your fiction in short bites and read across many genres, *The Collection* is certain to delight.