

SATURDAY

Four

Pip tried to fight them off, her sinking eyelids. She felt fuzzy around the edges, ill-defined, like sleep had already taken her, but no . . . she really should get up off the sofa and do some revision. *Really.*

She was lying on the red sofa in the living room, in *Josh's Place* apparently, as he kept intermittently reminding her. He was on the rug, rearranging Lego while *Toy Story* played in the background. Her parents must *still* be out in the garden; her dad had enthusiastically told her this morning that they were painting the new garden shed today. Well, there wasn't much her dad *wasn't* enthusiastic about. But the only thing Pip could think of was the stalk of the solitary sunflower planted near there, over their dead dog's grave. It hadn't yet bloomed.

Pip checked her phone. It was 5:11 p.m. and there was a text waiting on the screen from Cara, and two missed calls from Connor twenty minutes ago; she must have actually fallen asleep for a bit. She swiped to open Cara's message: *Urgh, been throwing up literally all day and Grandma keeps tutting. NEVER AGAIN. Thank you so much for coming to get me xx*

Cara's previous text, when you scrolled up, had been sent

at 00:04 last night: *Polpp whertf ui i I traifng finds anfulpw ggind hekp me safd.* Pip had called her immediately, whispering from her bed, but Cara was so drunk she couldn't speak in full sentences, not even half sentences or quarter, broken up by cries or hiccups. It took some time to understand where she was: a calamity party. She must have gone there after the memorial. It took even longer to coax out whose house the party was at: 'Stephen-Thompson's-I-think.' And where that was: 'Hi-Highmoor somewhere . . .'

Pip knew Ant and Lauren were at that party too; they should have been looking out for Cara. But, of course, Ant and Lauren were probably too preoccupied with each other. And that wasn't even what worried Pip most. 'Did you pour your own drinks?' she'd asked. 'You didn't accept a drink from someone, did you?' So Pip had climbed out of bed and into her car, to 'Highmoor somewhere' to find Cara and take her home. She didn't get back into bed until gone half one.

And today hadn't even been quiet to make up for it. She'd taken Josh to football this morning, standing in a cold field to watch the game, then Ravi came over at lunch to record another update on the Max Hastings trial. Afterwards, Pip had edited and uploaded the mini episode, updated her website and replied to emails. So she'd sat down on the sofa for two minutes, in *Josh's Place*, just to rest her eyes. But two had somehow become twenty-two, sneaking up on her.

She stretched out her neck and reached for her phone to text Connor, when the doorbell went.

‘For goodness sake,’ Pip said, getting up. One of her legs was still asleep and she stumbled over it, into the hallway. ‘How many bloody Amazon deliveries does one man need?’ Her dad had a serious next-day delivery addiction.

She undid the chain – a new rule in their house – and pulled open the door.

‘Pip!’

It wasn’t the Amazon delivery guy.

‘Oh, Connor, hey,’ she said, fully opening the door. ‘I was literally just texting you back. What’s up?’

It was only then that she noticed his eyes: the way they somehow looked both far-off yet urgent, too much white showing above and below the blue. And though Connor had a pink-cheeked, freckle-faced complexion, his face was flushed red, a line of sweat trickling down his temple.

‘Are you OK?’

He took a deep breath. ‘No, I’m not.’ His words cracked at the edges.

‘What’s wrong . . . do you want to come in?’ Pip stepped back to clear the threshold.

‘Th-thank you,’ Connor said, stepping past as Pip shut and locked the door. His T-shirt was sticking to his back, damp and bunched up.

‘Here.’ Pip led him into the kitchen and pointed him into one of the stools, her trainers discarded beneath it. ‘Do you want some water?’ She didn’t wait for him to answer, filling up one of the clean glasses on the draining board and placing

it in front of him with a thud that made him flinch. ‘Did you run here?’

‘Yeah.’ Connor picked up the glass with two hands and took a large gulp that spilled over his chin. ‘Sorry. I tried to call you and you didn’t answer and I didn’t know what to do other than just come here. And then I thought you might be at Ravi’s instead.’

‘That’s OK. I’m right here,’ Pip said, sliding up into the seat opposite him. His eyes still looked strange and Pip’s heart reacted, kicking around her chest. ‘What is it? What do you need to speak to me about?’ She gripped the edges of her stool. ‘Has . . . has something happened?’

‘Yes,’ Connor said, wiping his chin on his wrist. He parted his lips and his jaw hung open and close, chewing the air like he was practising the words before he said them.

‘Connor, what?’

‘It’s my brother,’ he said. ‘He . . . he’s missing.’

Five

Pip watched Connor's fingers as they slipped down the glass.

'Jamie's missing?' she said.

'Yes.' Connor stared at her.

'When?' she asked. 'When did you last see him?'

'At the memorial.' Connor paused to take another sip of water. 'I last saw him at the memorial, just before it started. He never came home.'

Pip's breath caught. 'I saw him there after that. Maybe around eight, eight fifteen. He was walking through the crowd.' She pulled up the memory, unpicked it from everything else last night. Jamie knocking into her as he made his way to the other side, his hurried apology, the way his jaw was set, determined. She'd thought it was strange at the time, hadn't she? And the look in his eyes, not unlike Connor's were now: somehow both distant and sharp. They looked very similar, even for brothers. They hadn't as kids, but Pip had watched it happen over the years, the gap closing. Jamie's hair was just a couple of shades darker, closer to brown than blonde. And Connor was all angles where Jamie was heavier, softer. But even a stranger could tell they were brothers. 'You've tried calling him?'

'Yes, hundreds of times,' said Connor. 'It goes straight to voicemail like it's off or . . . or it's dead.' He stumbled over

that last word, his head hanging from his shoulders. 'Me and Mum spent hours calling anyone who might know where he is: friends, family. No one has seen him or heard from him. No one.'

Pip felt something stirring, right in that pit in her stomach that never quite left her any more. 'Have you called around all the local hospitals to see if –'

'Yes, we called them all. Nothing.'

Pip awakened her phone to check the time. It was half five now, and if Jamie hadn't been seen since around eight last night, seen by *her*, that meant he'd been missing for over twenty-one hours already.

'OK,' she said firmly, bringing Connor's eyes back to hers, 'your parents need to go to the police station and file a missing persons report. You'll need –'

'We already did,' Connor said, a hint of impatience creeping into his voice. 'Me and Mum went down to the station a few hours ago, filed the report, gave them a recent photograph, all that. It was Nat da Silva's brother, Daniel, the officer who took the report.'

'OK, good, so officers should be –'

Connor cut her off again. 'No,' he said. 'No officers are doing anything. Daniel said that because Jamie is twenty-four, an adult, and has a history of leaving home without communicating with his family, that there is very little the police can do.'

'What?'

‘Yeah, he gave us a reference number and just told us to keep calling Jamie’s phone and anyone he’s been known to stay with before. Said that almost all missing people return within forty-eight hours, so we just have to wait.’

The stool creaked as Pip shifted. ‘They must think he’s low risk. When a missing persons report is filed,’ she explained, ‘the police determine a risk assessment based on factors like age, any medical issues, if the behaviour is out of character, things like that. Then the police response depends on whether they think the case is low, medium or high risk.’

‘I know how it might look to them,’ Connor said, his eyes a little less far-away now, ‘that Jamie’s disappeared a couple times before and he always comes back –’

‘The first time was after he dropped out of uni, wasn’t it?’ Pip said, scratching at the memory, how the air had been thick with tension in the Reynoldses’ house for weeks after.

Connor nodded. ‘Yeah, after he and my dad had a huge argument about it, he stayed with a friend for a week and wouldn’t answer any calls or texts. And it was two years ago when Mum actually filed a report because Jamie never returned from a night out in London. He’d lost his phone and wallet and couldn’t get home so just stayed on someone’s sofa for a couple of days. But . . .’ He sniffed, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. ‘But something feels different this time. I think he’s in trouble, Pip, I really do.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

‘He’s been acting strange the last few weeks. Distant, kind

of jumpy. Short-tempered. And, you know Jamie, he’s normally really chilled out. Well, lazy, if you ask my dad. But recently, he’s seemed, at times, a little off.’

And wasn’t that how he seemed last night when he knocked into her? That strange focus, like he could see nothing else, not even her. And why was he moving through the crowd right then, anyway? Wasn’t that a little off?

‘And,’ Connor continued, ‘I don’t think he’d run off again, not after how upset Mum got last time. Jamie wouldn’t do that to her again.’

‘I . . .’ Pip began. But she didn’t really know what to say to him.

‘So me and Mum were talking,’ Connor said, shoulders contracting like he was shrinking in on himself. ‘If the police won’t investigate, won’t contact the media or anything, then what can we do ourselves, to find Jamie? That’s what I wanted to talk to you about, Pip.’

She knew what was coming but Connor didn’t pause long enough for her to cut in.

‘You know how to do this; everything you did last year where the police failed. You solved a murder. Two of them. And your podcast,’ he swallowed, ‘hundreds of thousands of followers; that’s probably more effective than any media connections the police have. If we want to find Jamie, spread the word that he’s missing so people can come forward with any information they have, or sightings, you are our best hope of that.’

‘Connor –’

‘If you investigate and release it on your show, I know we’ll find him. We’ll find him in time. We have to.’

Connor tailed off. The silence that followed was teeming; Pip could feel it crawling around her. She knew what he’d been going to ask. How could it have been anything else? She breathed out, and that thing that lived inside her twisted in her gut. But her answer was inevitable.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said quietly. ‘I can’t do it, Connor.’

Connor’s eyes widened, and he grew back out of his shoulders. ‘I know it’s a lot to ask but –’

‘It’s too much to ask,’ she said, glancing at the window, checking her parents were still busy in the garden. ‘I don’t do that any more.’

‘I know, but –’

‘Last time I almost lost everything: ended up in the hospital, got my dog killed, put my family in danger, blew up my best friend’s life. It’s too much to ask. I promised myself. I . . . I can’t do it any more.’ The pit in her stomach ripped wider still; soon it might even outgrow her. ‘I can’t do it. It’s not who I am.’

‘Pip, please . . .’ He was pleading now, words catching on their way up his throat. ‘Last time you didn’t even really know them, they were already gone. This is Jamie, Pip. *Jamie*. What if he’s hurt? What if he doesn’t make it? I don’t know what to do.’ His voice finally cracked as the tears broke the surface of his eyes.

‘I’m sorry, Connor, I am,’ Pip said, though the words hurt her to say. ‘But I have to say no.’

‘You aren’t going to help?’ He sniffed. ‘At all?’

She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t.

‘I didn’t say that.’ Pip jumped down from her stool to hand Connor a tissue. ‘As you can probably guess, I have a certain relationship with the local police now. I mean, I don’t think I’m their favourite person, but I probably have more sway in matters like this.’ She scooped up her car keys from the side by the microwave. ‘I’ll go talk to DI Hawkins right now, tell him about Jamie and why you’re worried, see if I can get them to rethink their risk assessment so they actually investigate.’

Connor slid from his stool. ‘Really? You’ll do that?’

‘Of course,’ she said. ‘I can’t promise anything, but Hawkins is a good guy really. Hopefully he sees sense.’

‘Thank you,’ Connor said, wrapping his awkward and angular arms around her quickly. His voice lowered. ‘I’m scared, Pip.’

‘It’s going to be OK.’ She attempted a smile. ‘I’ll give you a lift home on my way. Come on.’

Stepping out into the early evening, the front door got caught in a cross-breeze and slammed loudly behind them. Pip carried the sound with her, inside her, echoing around that hollow growing in her gut.

Six

The russet-brick building was just starting to lose its edges to the grey evening sky as Pip climbed out of her squat car. The white sign on the wall read: *Thames Valley Police, Amersham Police Station*. The policing team for Little Kilton was stationed here, at a larger town ten minutes away.

Pip walked through the main door into the blue-painted reception. There was just one man waiting inside, asleep on one of the hard metal chairs against the back wall. Pip strode up to the help desk and knocked on the glass, to get someone's attention from the attached office. The sleeping man snorted and shuffled into a new position.

'Hello?' The voice emerged before its owner: the detention officer Pip had met a couple of times. The officer strolled out, slapping some papers down and then finally looking at Pip. 'Oh, you're not who I was expecting.'

'Sorry,' Pip smiled. 'How are you, Eliza?'

'I'm OK, love.' Her kindly face crinkled into a smile, grey hair bunching at the collar of her uniform. 'What brings you here this time?'

Pip liked Eliza, liked that neither of them had to pretend or dance around small talk.

'I need to talk to DI Hawkins,' she said. 'Is he here?'

'He is right now.' Eliza chewed her pen. 'He's very busy

though, looking to be a long night.'

'Can you tell him it's urgent? Please,' Pip added.

'Fine, see what I can do,' Eliza sighed. 'Take a seat, sweetheart,' she added as she disappeared back into the office.

But Pip didn't take a seat. Her body was humming and didn't know how to be still right now. So she paced the width of the front desk, six steps, turn, six steps back, daring the squeak of her trainers to wake the sleeping man.

The keypad-locked door leading to the offices and interview rooms buzzed open, but it wasn't Eliza or Richard Hawkins. It was two uniformed officers. Out first was Daniel da Silva, holding the door for another constable, Soraya Bouzidi, who was tying her tightly curled hair into a bun beneath her black peaked hat. Pip had first met them both at the police meeting in Kilton library last October, back when Daniel da Silva was a person of interest in Andie's case. Judging by the strained, toothless smile he gave her now as he passed, he clearly hadn't forgotten that.

But Soraya acknowledged her, throwing her a nod and a bright, 'Hello,' before following Daniel outside to one of the patrol cars. Pip wondered where they were going, what had called them out. Whatever it was, they must think it more important than Jamie Reynolds.

The door buzzed again, but only opened a few inches. A hand was all that appeared through it, holding up two fingers towards Pip.

'You've got two minutes,' Hawkins called, beckoning her

to follow him down the corridor. She hurried over, trainers shrieking as she did, the sleeping man snorting awake behind her.

Hawkins didn't wait to say hello, striding down the hall in front of her. He was dressed in black jeans and a new jacket, padded and dark green. Maybe he'd finally thrown out that long wool coat he'd always worn when he was lead investigator on Andie Bell's disappearance.

'I'm on my way out,' he said suddenly, opening the door to Interview Room 1 and gesturing her inside. 'So I mean it when I say two minutes. What is it?' He closed the door behind them, leaning against it with one leg up.

Pip straightened and crossed her arms. 'Missing person,' she said. 'Jamie Reynolds from Little Kilton. Case number four nine zero zero -'

'Yeah I saw the report,' he interrupted. 'What about it?'

'Why aren't you doing anything about it?'

That caught him off guard. Hawkins made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a throat-clear, rubbing his hand across his stubbled chin. 'I'm sure you know how it works, Pip. I won't patronize you by explaining.'

'He shouldn't be filed as low risk,' she said. 'His family believe he's in serious trouble.'

'Well, family hunches aren't one of the criteria we trust in serious police work.'

'And what about my hunches?' Pip said, refusing to let go of his eyes. 'Do you trust those? I've known Jamie since I was

nine. I saw him at Andie and Sal's memorial before he disappeared, and something definitely felt off.'

'I was there,' Hawkins said. 'It was very emotionally charged. I'm not surprised if people weren't acting quite themselves.'

'That's not what I mean.'

'Look, Pip,' he sighed, dropping his leg and peeling away from the door. 'Do you know how many missing persons reports we get every single day? Sometimes as many as twelve. We quite literally don't have the time or resources to chase up every single one. Especially not with all these budget cuts. Most people return on their own within forty-eight hours. We have to prioritize.'

'So prioritize Jamie,' she said. 'Trust me. Something's wrong.'

'I can't do that.' Hawkins shook his head. 'Jamie is an adult and even his own mother admitted this isn't out of character. Adults have a legal right to disappear if they want to. Jamie Reynolds isn't missing; he's just absent. He'll be fine. And if he chooses to, he'll be back in a few days.'

'What if you're wrong?' she asked, knowing she was losing him. She couldn't lose him. 'What if you're missing something, like with Sal? What if you're wrong again?'

Hawkins winced. 'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I wish I could help but I really have to go. We've got an actual high-risk case: an eight-year-old who's been abducted from her back garden. There's just nothing I can do for Jamie. It's the way it is,

unfortunately.’ He reached down for the door handle.

‘Please,’ Pip said, the desperation in her voice surprising them both. ‘Please, I’m begging you.’

His fingers stalled. ‘I’m –’

‘Please.’ Her throat clenched like it did before she cried, breaking her voice into a million little pieces. ‘Don’t make me do this again. Please. I can’t do this again.’

Hawkins wouldn’t look at her, tightening his grip around the handle. ‘I’m sorry, Pip. My hands are tied. There’s nothing I can do.’

Outside, she stopped in the middle of the car park and looked up into the sky, clouds hiding the stars from her, hoarding them for themselves. It had just started to rain, cold droplets that stung as they fell into her open eyes. She stood there a while, watching the endless nothing of the sky, trying to listen to what her gut was telling her. She closed her eyes to hear it better. *What do I do? Tell me what to do.*

She started to shiver and climbed into her car, wringing the rain from her hair. The sky had given her no answers. But there was someone who might; someone who knew her better than she knew herself. She pulled out her phone and dialled.

‘Ravi?’

‘Hello, trouble.’ The smile was obvious in his voice. ‘Have you been sleeping? You sound strange.’

She told him; told him everything. Asked for help because he was the only one she knew how to ask.

‘I can’t tell you what decision to make,’ he said.

‘But, could you?’

‘No, I can’t make that decision for you. Only you know, only you can know,’ he said. ‘But what I do know is that whatever you decide will be the right thing. That’s just how you are. And whatever you choose, you know I’ll be here, right behind you. Always. OK?’

‘OK.’

And as she said goodbye, she realized the decision was already made. Maybe it had always been made, maybe she’d never really had a choice, and she’d just been waiting for someone to tell her that that was OK.

It was OK.

She searched for Connor’s name and clicked the green button, her heart dragging its way to her throat.

He picked up on the second ring.

‘I’ll do it,’ she said.