



# Dead of Winter

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## PROLOGUE

The young girl ran through the woods as if the devil himself were behind her. The afternoon sun was obscured behind black clouds, bringing with them the weight of rain in air already heavy with the smell of decay. It seemed a lifetime ago that she had slipped away from her friends into a private game that was exciting at first, then became a lonely adventure and had now deteriorated into threatening isolation. In the crawling fear between her shoulder blades the girl knew she was no longer alone; he was coming.

A crashing to her left forced a yelp of panic that she tried to swallow into silence. She veered right and ran even faster, her backpack slapping heavily onto her spine. The stitch in her side made her wince and she held a hand tight against her ribs, trying to ignore its sharp pain. She was a good runner, the fastest sprinter in her school, but he was even faster.

The girl whimpered as she darted through a narrow gap in some brambles, raising an arm to protect her eyes from whipping tendrils that snatched at her as she pushed deeper into the thicket. She was soon scratched and bleeding; a lurking stinging nettle lashed her bare elbow unnoticed. Her trousers weren't thick enough to stop thorns stabbing deep into her thighs as she forced through vicious old stems

that protested her intrusion. The stitch was agony and she had to stop and bend over to ease it. This was no good.

Behind her the heavy footsteps came nearer. She limped forward looking for somewhere to hide. The brambles cleared into a patch of bracken surrounded by trees. A country girl, she knew without being aware that they were ancient oaks and beeches, mixed with hazel and rowans wherever light penetrated to the woodland floor. She stopped and looked around; where to go? There was a storm-blasted tree ahead of her, its roots standing skeletal in the dimming light. She would be small enough to slip into the hollow beneath, now overgrown with bracken and the seed-spikes of wild foxgloves. She ran forward but stopped almost at once; it was too obvious, the first place he would look, but it had given her an idea.

For long minutes there was silence except for the wind in the trees. The sounds of pursuit ceased; the birds were dumb, alarmed by her intrusion into their world. The girl muffled her rapid breaths in the crook of her arm and squeezed her eyes shut. Had he given up? A flicker of hope stuttered in her chest as her breathing eased from panicked hyperventilation to the panting of exertion. She waited unmoving in her improvised shelter. Her hiding place was in the raised root system of a giant beech. At most there was a foot and a half of space between the roots and the earth, too tiny for anybody but a slim, determined eleven-year-old tomboy who didn't care about insects and rodents as she had pushed her pack far inside and then wriggled in after it.

Her calf muscles were cramping but there wasn't enough room to straighten her legs. She held still, her face screened by leaves of a broken branch with which she had hurriedly swept the forest floor of her tracks, before dragging it in above her head.

Her stillness encouraged tiny creatures to stir in the soil beneath her. Something wriggled past her cheek and she stopped breathing as it explored the outer folds of her ear before moving into her hair. She started to count out the time: *one-crocodile, two-crocodile, three . . .*

Where was he? It would be dark soon but would he simply give

up? He might still be out there waiting. To escape him she would have to hide overnight and hope that she could find her way home in the morning, by when he would surely have abandoned the hunt. In her small backpack she had food, water, a torch and other essential supplies for the adventure she had planned so carefully the day before.

Her parents would not start to worry until morning. They knew she was on her big adventure, the last trip before the start of the school year. They had approved her outing, knowing she would be with responsible company and that their tomboy daughter had too much unresolved thirst for adventure to go easily into her first year of senior boarding school without one last flash of freedom.

She had overheard them rationalising their decision to allow her to camp overnight with friends; her mother nervous but realistic, her father laughingly proud. As they had reassured themselves, sipping red wine and listening to a new blues CD, she had crept upstairs to her bedroom and pulled out her survival kit. It was in two parts: the larger one she would show her parents in the morning, to comfort them that she was well prepared. The smaller kit, packed into a square, waterproof survival pouch, was her secret.

On the floor by the bed furthest from the door she had laid out the contents to check them one last time, aligning each item with rehearsed precision that suggested an obsession with planning and control, young as she was. She opened the treasure box that not even her mother would look inside and extracted a battered book that she had ‘borrowed’ from her grandfather, meaning to return it but never quite managing to do so. Pappy had been in the army and his dog-eared copy of an SAS survival handbook was her most valued possession.

She emptied first a reused two-ounce tin of pipe tobacco, again borrowed from Pappy; the contents were all in order so she started to repack them, double-checking against the book as she did so: ten safety matches, their heads dipped in melted candle wax to make them waterproof; a small square of candle, as much for lighting fires as for light; a magnifying glass that she had bought second-hand from a

stamp collector's shop, to the delight of her mum who had hoped that maybe her wild child was starting to calm down; needles, thread, fish hooks and line (thank you, Pappy – he has so many he wouldn't notice they were missing); a compass; and a sewing kit from a hotel her dad had stayed in once and brought back as a memento. Then there was her most prized possession: a proper fire flint from a specialist camping supply store on Buckingham Palace Road.

There had been a bubble of excitement in her stomach because this time she wouldn't just be using them in a game but in a real adventure. There were some recommended kit items that she didn't have of course, like snare wire (she had a pet rabbit and couldn't imagine killing one of Snuffle's cousins). The flexible saw had been impossible to find, though there was a small hand hacksaw in her 'official' pack. Her medical kit wasn't really good enough; it comprised a few plasters, antiseptic wipes, a small tube of Savlon and a strip of painkillers.

She did have a condom though, still in its mysterious foil wrapper, stolen from her father's bedside drawer. Even looking at it had made her cheeks burn and she didn't really like to touch it but the book had insisted that it would make a good water bag, enough to carry almost two pints. She pushed it quickly beneath the plasters and snapped the lid closed, making sure that the seal was tight. The tin went into the zipped pocket of her combat trousers so that she would never be without it.

The sharp edge of the tin dug into her thigh as she lay still, listening and waiting; nothing. Maybe when she had slipped through the brambles she had lost him? Thinking of her survival tin made her feel better. She was a good planner, even her exasperated mother admitted so, and she was clever – everyone said that from the head teacher at her old school to her new form mistress. Not that the girl cared about being clever; if anything she considered it a curse because so much more was expected of her when all she wanted to do was go with her father on his next trip to Africa or, failing that, paint alongside her mother until the daylight faded and they would sit together by the fire, reading and telling ghost stories to each other. She would miss that at boarding school, a lot.

Beyond her refuge the sound of evening birdsong returned and the girl closed her eyes, exhausted but no longer terrified. She reached down and patted her rucksack in comfort. It contained her ‘official’ survival kit, the one she had shared with her parents before leaving home that morning. They had tried not to laugh, knowing it would infuriate her, but she had seen the amusement in their faces as she displayed the contents on the kitchen table.

‘Firelighters?’ her dad had asked, the corners of his mouth twisting in an effort not to smile.

‘Well where was I supposed to find hexamine fuel tablets in their own stove container, for heaven’s sake? You wouldn’t buy them for my birthday and no shop will sell them to me because I’m too young.’

‘Right,’ her mother was biting her lip and avoiding her husband’s eyes, ‘but we did get you a nice compass and the electrolyte sachets you asked for.’

‘Yes, they’re good.’ The girl didn’t mention that the compass had been a silly girl’s thing that she had exchanged for a waterproof, shockproof one three times the price, spending most of her pocket money on it.

‘And what’s in here, Issie-pop?’ Her dad was using his special name for her because he could see she was becoming annoyed.

‘My map, emergency rations: instant soup sachets’ – Pappy’s book said *a good brew raised spirits* but she hated tea and coffee – ‘apple juice, chocolate, Kendal mint cake. And that’s my spare socks and a jumper in a waterproof bag.’

‘And your penknife?’ Mum asked.

‘Here.’ It wasn’t an impressive knife, not like a Parang – the Malay knife that was supposed to be invaluable for forest survival – which is why she also had a Stanley knife in her jacket pocket, borrowed from her dad’s toolbox that morning.

‘And this, Issie – it looks like a couple of black plastic bags, or are they a special survival secret?’ Her dad was grinning in that really irritating way that he did when he thought he’d made a joke, usually at her expense. He was the best dad in the world, but really!

‘No, Dad, they’re bin liners from the roll in the drawer but that doesn’t make them any less useful to keep me or my equipment dry.’

‘I see.’

Thinking of her parents and the home she had left only that morning relaxed Issie. She wondered if it would be possible to reach the last squares of chocolate in her rucksack, but even as her fingers moved towards the clasp of her pack there was a noise in the wood outside and she froze.

Was it the wind or maybe an animal coming out to feed at twilight? Silence. Nothing. A slow sad sighing of the wind through the branches and then stillness. The girl released her breath slowly.

‘WHERE ARE YOU?’

The voice was a bellow immediately above her head, making her jump and bringing her face into sharp contact with a jutting piece of root, just missing an eye.

‘I KNOW YOU’RE HERE SOMEWHERE! SHOW YOURSELF.’

He sounded furious, angry enough to do anything, and he was so close. If he stepped back he could almost kick her.

‘Come out, come out wherever you are.’ The knowing sing-song was worse than his shouting. ‘You know I’m going to find you . . . come on, little Issie. Let’s get this over with. Come out . . . NOW!’

Issie shivered. His use of her name made it worse. No way was she going to show herself – even though it was somehow tempting to give in and get it over with. Perhaps he wouldn’t be so bad. Maybe her terror was teenage hysteria that her mum warned her about. Had she imagined his hand lingering on her thigh every time he thought no one was looking; and that leering smile so inappropriate for a responsible adult? She shivered and fought back tears.

Something trickled across her forehead and onto her eyelids, warm and sticky, but she didn’t dare move to wipe it away. He was kicking at the leaves now. Her eyelids glowed red as he turned the beam of a torch at the tree. Issie froze. Was her face visible? She’d smeared it with mud at the start of her adventure. Was the

camouflage still intact or had sweat and her tears wiped it away? She held her breath, frozen still.

‘For heaven’s sake, this is stupid. You know I’m going to find you. Come out now and make it easy on yourself.’

Issie drew her head in tight against her shoulders as if she could disappear. He was right there above her. All he had to do was bend down and kick the branch away and he would be sure to see her. She heard him sniffing, like the Nazgûl in *The Lord of the Rings*. Issie’s imagination furnished him with red burning eyes and cruel fingers. She bit her tongue to stop herself sobbing out loud. She heard him swear, using a word that was never allowed at home, and the silent tears came harder.

*Go away, go away, go away. Please God, make him go away. If you do I promise to go to church every Sunday and join the school choir like Mum wants me to. Please.* She screwed her eyes tighter shut.

Long minutes later her prayer was answered. She heard him walking away, hesitantly at first, then more purposefully, breaking into a jog that retreated until his footsteps were indistinguishable from the noises of the stirring wood. Issie stopped crying and opened her eyes but otherwise remained immobile. She didn’t trust him, not one bit, never had from the moment he had joined their party that morning, inviting himself along as an additional helper. He could still be waiting somewhere, maybe he was hiding behind a tree close by. She decided to stay where she was for at least an hour, counting to eight thousand slowly. *One-crocodile, two-crocodile, three . . .*

Her head ached and the stickiness in her eyes was blood; she had tasted it to be sure. Her stomach rumbled and her legs cramped. She became aware of the scratches on her arms and face and the deep thorn pricks on her thighs that hurt most. They might already be infected but that didn’t matter. As soon as she reached eight thousand she would move, set up a night shelter and clean herself up. She’d love to light a fire but that would be stupid, so it would be cold grub, like it said in her Pappy’s book. *One thousand,*

*one hundred and three crocodiles, one thousand one hundred and four . . .*

Her mouth twisted into a smile, and then she snorted softly like a little animal as a chuckle escaped. A laugh tried to break free and she suppressed it in the crook of her arm, burrowing down, her face squished up against her chest. Soon she was giggling helplessly, almost hysterical in relief. It lasted a dangerously long minute but he didn't come back. Night animals began to forage, dismissing her as a harmless creature, as hunted as they were.

Issie eased her body away from the ground, ignoring the agony of pins and needles, and rolled uncomfortably onto her back. Staring up into the pitch dark of the root system inches from her face, she smiled.

'I won,' she murmured. At that moment it was all that mattered.

By the following morning she was cold, wet, starving hungry and in quite a lot of discomfort from her various injuries, the cut on her eyebrow being the worst, but the memory of victory over her own fear and compulsion to give in was strong. She realised now, of course, that she would have been missed. Her parents would be worried sick. The thought made her guilty but not enough to outweigh the enormous sense of achievement for having survived the chase and the night alone. As Issie stowed everything neatly in her backpack, she knew that she was a different person from the girl who had turned a simple game of hide-and-seek into a life-threatening chase. She hoped her parents would have the sense to realise this; she was not returning as a child.

# CHAPTER ONE

Late November

Nightingale stretched her toes towards the flames of the wood-burning stove in her top-floor flat, an Edwardian conversion that she had bought for a knock-down price with a mortgage at such a low rate she still couldn't believe it. Her brother thought she was mad to trade in her previous flat, modern and efficient, for something where she had already had to replace half the sash windows and fix leaky bathroom plumbing.

His aversion to 'old with character' was understandable since he had inherited their parents' house, which she knew he secretly wanted to sell but didn't dare because it had been in the family since 1879. It had never been maintained properly and now consumed so much money in upkeep that her brother said he might as well dedicate his whole salary to it. Hence his warning: buy new, avoid a money pit, enjoy life without the unnecessary delights of poisonous lead pipes, quaint imperial measures and the impossibility of ever keeping the place clean or warm. Every time she tried in vain to stop the draughts Nightingale recalled his warnings, but with a smile.

The warmth of real fire on the soles of her feet, the moulding of vine leaves and clusters of improbable grapes in the light rose above her and the original parquet floor all argued against his logic. Nightingale

grinned again and took a sip of good Bordeaux, another indulgence when she should be sensible, but ahead of her were the first days off she had enjoyed in weeks. Outside the weather was miserable, with sleet driven by gale-force winds. She sighed deeply with contentment.

The night deserved a good bottle of wine and going out for a meal did not appeal. So she had decided to slice a fresh, crusty granary loaf, defrost some of her home-made chicken soup and open one of the wines she kept for special occasions, rationalising that it would still cost less than dinner in her local restaurant. The soup was simmering gently as wind gusted around the chimneys, rattling slates that she knew were loose but tonight she didn't care; she was in her own world. Nightingale picked up her book and found the page where she had paused to enjoy the moment.

When the phone rang she let it go through to the machine.

*'Ma'am, Inspector Nightingale, if you're home could you pick up, please? This is Sergeant Wicklow in Operations. We need you here urgently. There's been an incident that requires your attention.'* The tone of voice changed and became personal. Wicklow had looked out for her since she had joined the force as a graduate trainee. *'Sorry, Louise, I know it's the first day you've had off in a month but this one needs you. If you're not here soon they'll call in Blite and I don't think . . .'* There was a pause as he remembered all calls were taped. *'If you could come in, ma'am?'*

'I'm here, George, what is it?'

'Another rape; a nasty one – I know they're all nasty,' he rushed on, perhaps remembering Nightingale's suspicion that half the blokes on the force considered rape a minor crime, that it was only sex after all.

Wicklow was right; it was better she dealt with this than that Neanderthal Blite. Since the cutbacks, more and more sex crimes were being passed to regular CID instead of to the overwhelmed specialist Sexual Assault Investigation Unit. At least she had been trained, whereas he . . . Nightingale suppressed a shudder and turned the heat off under her soup.

'OK, George, but can you send a car? I don't want to risk driving

in this.’ She didn’t mention the wine; if anything she did tonight led them to catch a rapist the fact that she had had a drink would inevitably be used by the defence, however irrelevant. Sussex Constabulary was trying to put a line under drinking while working, an uphill struggle in her opinion – which she kept to herself – but while the effort lasted she needed to treat it with respect.

‘It’ll be about fifteen minutes, given the weather.’

‘No problem.’

In fact quite the opposite; just enough time to enjoy her supper and finish her glass of wine.

Nightingale knew that she had not been asked for by name. The new superintendent, Alison Whitby, had replaced Quinlan four months previously. She was in her early forties, ran marathons and had won the Sussex women’s pistol competition four years in a row. What’s more she was married with eight-year-old twins. To say that Nightingale found her intimidating would be to miss the point. Her frame of reference now included a more senior woman who combined professional and family life with demanding sports that she mastered to county level. And now approaching thirty, Nightingale was no longer the wunderkind.

Whitby wouldn’t expect her to interrupt her time off. It was George Wicklow who was looking out for her. His dislike of Blite was unshakeable, not just because the man was an arrogant bigot who would climb on anybody’s back on his way to the top, but because he had virtually forced one of their colleagues into retirement on shaky medical grounds. Wicklow missed Bob Cooper almost as much as Nightingale did. Harlden CID wasn’t the same without his rotund, dependable presence.

Nightingale stopped off at the station to pick up the incident report and find out who was on the team. The CID room was full despite the hour. Monday night was sometimes busy, particularly in the run-up to Christmas as people relaxed their inhibitions and softened the slow drag of work or unemployment in the manner of their choosing. As December neared, an increasing number of otherwise upright citizens would indulge in serious drinking and

opportune sex. The human cost of inebriated abandon kept police forces across the country busier than any other single cause.

Nightingale had a small cubicle in the corner of the CID room that she could call her own. When she had first become an inspector she had moved into a tiny office, but Whitby didn't believe in offices. She liked open-plan, glass walls and free-flowing communication. So most offices had been replaced by cubicles. The careful use of computer screens, files and reference books meant some privacy despite the attempt at transparency. Nightingale suspected that Whitby saw how the old ways lingered but so far had chosen to ignore the problem. A step at a time appeared to be her motto.

Nightingale wasn't the worst offender. One side panel was clear of visual impediments, though two others were conveniently covered. She hated the idea of people being able to stare at her back and look over her shoulder.

'Nightingale! What you doing here?' Jimmy MacDonald, inevitably Big Mac to his mates because of his American football physique, waved a lazy greeting from his desk.

'Called in for this rape, Mac.'

'But you've worked a straight twenty; you won't impress Miss Whiplash by collapsing from exhaustion.'

'Well I don't have your pin-up looks to help me, do I?' Nightingale smiled the sharpness out of her words. 'You know anything about this one; where the assault happened and who was attending officer?'

'It's your lucky day! The Milky Bar Kid was first on scene. I think he even managed to avoid puking this time, though the poor girl's a bit of a mess.'

Constable Roy Rogers (yes, really; some parents can be cruel) had only just made it through the recruitment medical and had lost weight since. He was a pale, acne-cursed scarecrow of a lad who had wanted to be a policeman since childhood, which he appeared not long to have left behind. There was a running bet that he didn't yet shave. To the old hands in the station house he was a gift. Nightingale had come across him before when he had attended an attempted murder. She

found him a decent, thorough boy with a lot of compassion for the victim – probably more than would be good for him.

‘Good,’ she said, ignoring Big Mac’s raised eyebrows, ‘he’ll have preserved the scene until SOCO arrived and will have been gentle with the victim. Where is she?’

‘West Sussex General, still in A&E last we heard. Milky’s with her. You going over yourself or would you like me to do it?’

Nightingale looked at his two hundred and ten pound, six foot three frame, walnut skin and permanent sarcastic smile and decided he might not be the best officer, even though he was technically as qualified as she was.

‘I’ll do this one.’

‘Can I come along?’ He saw her look of surprise. ‘I might learn something.’

What was he up to?

‘You’re on call.’

‘I’ve got my mobile and anyway, you need a good driver.’

Nightingale opened her mouth to protest but he pre-empted her, adding in a whisper, ‘Mouthwash is a dead giveaway.’

Thirty minutes later Nightingale tried to control her anger as she waited in the corridor for the forensic technician to finish. The girl in the room behind her was little more than a child and knowledge of how she must have suffered filled her with hatred towards the attacker, mixing with the dread that this might be the latest in a series of increasingly vicious attacks.

The incidents had started in May, always taking place between Guildford and Harlden. The first crimes had been sufficiently different for the police not to connect them: an aggressive flasher; someone trying to molest teenage girls in a shopping centre; an assault outside a nightclub; so it went on. Then an enterprising trainee detective had gathered and compared descriptions of the attackers and remarked to their mentor, who happened to be Nightingale, on the physical similarity of the perpetrators.

When a heavily built, thirty-ish, dark-haired, blue-eyed man between five-ten and six foot had leapt out on a girl walking

through Harlden Park from a youth club to her home, alarm bells had rung. CID nicknamed the attacker Flash Harry after his first attack. Nightingale avoided the term.

As the incidents escalated she had taken a personal interest and was given the lead to investigate. The assaults continued, one roughly every month, with the perpetrator evading capture. Her small team had been through every file, re-interviewed victims and witnesses and organised reconstructions but they had learnt little. It appeared that the attacker wasn't so much clever as lucky. He wore gloves and a baseball cap that concealed most of his face.

Nightingale had feared the escalation meant that they would soon be dealing with something very serious. To her bitter regret, she had just been proved right.

The unnamed girl had been found at the bottom of a short flight of steps behind Bedford Row to the east side of Harlden at seven-thirty. She was unconscious and had been raped. In A&E she had been X-rayed, the registrar refusing to let the police forensic specialist near her until they could be sure there was no brain injury.

'All yours, ma'am.' The forensic technician grimaced.

'Thanks, Sally. How seriously did he hurt her?'

'It was non-consensual for sure; there's bruising and tearing to the vaginal wall and scratches and bruises on her thighs. The doctor said the concussion is due to a blow to the back of her head consistent with her having fallen. She was lying at the bottom of a flight of steps when she was discovered and I found cement fragments in her hair so perhaps he didn't hit her.'

Nightingale looked at the unconscious girl and tried to guess her age; fifteen, sixteen at most. She looked underfed and her hair and fingernails were filthy. Maybe she was a runaway. There weren't many street children in Harlden, partly because since Superintendent Whitby's arrival, police patrols had teamed up with social services and some local charities to deal with every minor they found living rough in order to find them temporary accommodation and, when necessary, counselling. Unfortunately Harlden's position halfway between London and Brighton where

homelessness was endemic meant that they were dealing with the spill-over from a chronic problem.

She knew what running away from home felt like; she had slept rough many times before a WPC had talked sense into her on a night that had changed her life. Would she be able to do the same for this girl? She doubted it. Counselling wasn't her strong point. The only remotely personal side she allowed herself to show at work these days was a protective sarcasm that was starting to persuade her male colleagues to drop the teasing and give her some room. It had earned her the reputation of being tough but remote; an ice queen. She told herself she didn't care.

'When do you expect her to regain consciousness?' Nightingale asked a nurse who came to check on the girl, and then dropped her voice in response to the critical finger he raised to his lips. 'It's important.'

'She's badly concussed. It could take up to twenty-four hours.'

'She didn't say anything when she was brought in?'

'She was out cold.'

She said goodnight to Milky, who was stationed by the girl's bed, before heading into the freezing night, collecting Big Mac on the way. He had done little but chat up one of the nurses since arriving. At least that explained his interest. Outside the air misted with a thick, chilling drizzle that seemed to freeze the stale fumes in the air. Jimmy drove her home before heading back to the station. He didn't mention the nurse so neither did she.

Nightingale ran a bath, added lavender oil and soaked while enjoying another glass of the Saint-Estèphe. It was midnight when she slipped into bed, hearing the wind attack the slates around the chimney with increasing fury as the weather deteriorated. She expected the sound of it would keep her awake but was asleep within minutes.