



ALL THAT
IS BURIED

ROBERT SCRAGG

Allison & Busby Limited
11 Wardour Mews
London W1F 8AN
allisonandbusby.com

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CHAPTER ONE

He can't remember exactly when he lost his children, only that he has. Lost? No, she took them. Cut them from his life, and he from theirs. How long has it been? Even now, the memories are hazy, painful to touch, a wound that won't ever scab over.

Around him, the ebb and flow of people is a chaotic palette of colour. Sounds swirl, overlap, conversations impossible to separate from the cloud of white noise as he picks his way between rides. Oversized teacups spin in lazy circles. Squeak of socks on rubber as children launch themselves skywards on a bouncy castle. Seems like the entire village has been lured out by the promise of fun in the sun.

How long since he's seen them? Too long. Months? Longer? Today will be the day though. Today he gets to take them home. He looks around, smiling at the wide-eyed wonder of the children that pass, nibbling at clouds of flamingo-pink candyfloss larger than their own heads. Rows of stalls plug the gaps between rides. Hook-a-duck, Tin-Can Alley, and a dozen more like them, all promising prizes for those willing to part with

pocket money. Behind these, the woods, pressed up against the back of the stalls and tents, stretching back half a mile, maybe more.

Up ahead, he sees her. Breath catches in his throat. Could that be . . . ? Is it . . . ? The blonde ponytail is a carbon copy of the one in his memories. She's peering over a counter, watching tiny plastic horses race towards a finish line, calling for number four to hurry up. No sign of her brother or their mum. What to do? Wait and greet them together? He's more nervous than he thought he'd be. Stands for a full minute, frozen by indecision as the next race runs. This time, she doesn't hand over any more money. Instead she spins away, looking left and right. Maybe she has lost them?

There's a bounce to her step that seems to keep time with his heart. He'll follow her to them. They'll turn and see him. Smile at him. Both kids will run towards him, clamping to him like barnacles to a rock. She'll see how much they love him. Might still have feelings for him herself. Maybe enough to paper over the cracks. He can't even remember what they argued about, only that it was his fault. His mistakes to make right.

Her head is down now, bowed over a phone as she walks. He doesn't remember her owning one. Since when has she been allowed that? He'll speak to her mother about it when the time is right. Not today though. No disagreements today. He frowns as she pauses to take a picture, a selfie judging by the way she's angling it, half a smile visible as she turns her head. She repeats this twice more, in front of another stall, and one of those image-warping fairground mirrors. After that, some furious tapping on her screen. Sending a picture to a friend, maybe. She angles left, around a corner and out of view, behind the tent flaps of a sweet stall. He picks up his pace so as not to lose her.

He hustles around the corner, but she's nowhere to be seen. Maybe she's gone behind, and he turns left again, almost bumping into her where she stands, phone held at arm's length, like she's about to take

another selfie, but there's some sort of game on-screen now. It's as if she's using the camera, but with strange creatures superimposed in shot. A grunt of surprise pops out of his mouth and she turns to look at him, the spell of the screen broken.

Eyes blue as sapphires stare up at him, and a lump forms in his throat, corners of his eyes prickling. His baby girl. His little princess. He goes to speak, lips parting, but it's as if he's slipped into neutral and nothing comes out. Struck dumb by happiness. It's her who breaks the spell.

'Are you OK?' she asks.

Her voice is like a splash of cold water, snapping him out of his trance.

'I am now.' He nods.

'Are you lost?'

He shakes his head, feeling the beginnings of a smile tug at his mouth.

'No, no. I was just looking for you and your brother.'

'Why?' she asks, a concertina of tiny creases on her forehead.

'What do you mean why?' he says. 'I've come to take you home.'

'I can't go home with you. Mum always says I shouldn't talk to strangers.'

'I'm not a stranger, though, Marie, am I? I'm your dad.'

'My name's not Marie, and you're not my dad.'

CHAPTER TWO

Jake Porter traced a lazy swirl across the back of Evie Simmons's hand with his index finger. Three months in, and he still felt whispers of guilt in moments like this. Stupid, pointless even. Almost three years since he lost Holly. She of all people would have wanted him to be happy, to find someone else. Might be different if they'd drifted apart, broken up after a fiery run of arguments. Anything that might have given him a better sense of closure. As it was, whoever had been driving the car that mowed her down was still out there. Breathing, laughing, living.

'Penny for them,' Evie said, cocking her head to one side.

He blinked his way back into the room, forcing a smile. 'Not even worth that,' he said. 'Sorry, just a bit tired.'

He felt about as convincing as a kid standing next to a smashed lamp pleading ignorance, but she mirrored his smile, covering his hand with hers and squeezed. Their waiter appeared at his shoulder like a genie, popped the cork from a bottle of red and poured half an inch into Porter's glass.

‘I’m sure it’ll be fine,’ he said, looking up, seeing disapproval in the waiter’s face. He’d never been one to do a swirl and sniff. To him it was red wine, nothing more. No base notes of blackberry, no hints of plum. Wine came in three types: red, white and rosé.

Across from him, Evie’s eyes twinkled as the disgruntled waiter poured, sensing Porter’s discomfort. He looked around the restaurant as her glass was filled, a lazy sweep of the room. No familiar faces, but then again why would there be? They were nowhere near the station, closer to her place than his. What would it matter even if there were?

It wasn’t as if they worked together. She was part of the drugs squad, while he was on Homicide and Serious Crime Command. No rules broken. More of a force of habit. Only a handful of people knew they were an item yet. Of those, only one was on the force: Porter’s partner, Detective Sergeant Nick Styles.

Evie raised her glass, holding it out towards him. ‘To a quiet weekend,’ she toasted.

‘I’ll drink to that,’ he said, his glass singing a clear note as it clinked against hers.

A waitress ghosted past them, plates stacked high, defying gravity as they balanced along a slender arm. Porter caught a glimpse of a juicy-looking steak and a mini haystack of skinny fries that only served to remind him of how little he’d eaten today. A plate like that would do him just fine.

Two large mouthfuls saw off half of his wine, and he’d barely had time for his glass to hit the table when he felt a vibration from his pocket. Whether Evie heard it or noticed him stiffen, he saw a tiny crease between her eyebrows. Disappointment, maybe, but she knew he had to take it.

‘DI Porter,’ he said, looking longingly at his glass, wondering if he’d get the chance to finish it.

‘Sorry to disturb you, sir,’ said the voice on the other end of the line.

'It's DC Benayoun. I tried to get DS Styles first, but he wasn't answering.'

'It's OK,' Porter said, wondering what his partner was up to, wishing he'd taken a leaf out of his book and not answered. 'Everything alright?'

'Not really, sir,' she said. 'Missing child, seven years old.'

CHAPTER THREE

Voicemail. Again. Where the bloody hell was Styles?

‘Call me when you get this.’

Short, brusque, to the point. Porter clicked to end the call, and got out of his car. The block of flats loomed high above him, each floor a slice of pale green and dirty cream, layers on a cake. Named after a former councillor, John Walsh Tower and its neighbour, Fred Wigg Tower, dominated the skyline. Both looked in sore need of TLC. Porter had even heard talk of demolition and rebuilding. Two patrol cars bookended the path leading up to a set of steps. Seventeen storeys, and they just had to live at the top. Porter’s silent prayer to the lift gods was answered, and he waited patiently as the gears groaned their way upwards.

He worked his way along the corridor, knocked on the door and was greeted by a young female officer he recognised from a previous case. PC Dee Williams nodded and stepped aside to let him in. First thing that hit him was stale cigarettes, the kind of ingrained odour that

takes years of dedication to seep in. A sweeter base note too, though, suggesting it wasn't just tobacco that had been smoked.

This was a part of the job that never got easier. Different from the death knock, delivering the news that a loved one was never coming home. Missing persons meant hope. A chance, no matter how slim. When it was a kid, that hope was all that kept some parents from sliding over the edge.

A young woman sat hunched forwards on the sofa, elbows on knees, paper hankie scrunched like a loosely packed snowball in one hand. Mid-thirties he guessed, no make-up, hair in a tight ponytail, and a pink tinge around nose and eyes. No mistaking her for anyone else but the child's mum, Ally Hallforth. A second officer perched next to her – family liaison officer, most likely.

By the window, a man paced back and forth, stopping when he realised somebody had joined them in the room. Presumably Simon Hallforth. He had a lived-in face, deep lines scored across his forehead. Fingers twitching by his sides as if playing a keyboard. Eyes that wouldn't look out of place on a rat: small, close-set, dark.

'Mr and Mrs Hallforth,' Porter said, making no attempt to sit. 'My name is Detective Inspector Jake Porter—'

'Have you found her then?' Simon Hallforth cut in before Porter could say anything else.

'Not yet, sir, but it'd really help if we can have a chat, help us get to know a bit about Libby, any friends she might have wandered off with. The majority of these situations end up being along those lines, but it goes without saying we'll pull out all the stops to find her and bring her home safe.'

'Yeah, that'd be just like her,' Simon sneered. 'Wandering off without a care in the world. She's done it before a few times at the supermarket. She knows it winds me up. Probably done it for a laugh this time. I tell you, if she's done this on purpose . . .'

He stopped short of finishing the sentence, and Ally's head snapped up, glaring at him.

'You'll what, Simon?' She stared him out until he dropped his eyes and turned back to look out of the window. 'She's a good kid, Detective,' she said, dabbing at her nose with the hankie. 'Ignore him. He'd already got out of bed on the wrong side before any of this.'

Porter looked over at Simon Hallforth. Watched him clench and unclench his fists. Anger wasn't the norm in these circumstances. Fear, yes. The anger usually came after any search failed to find the missing person. He used the lull now to introduce himself to the FLO, DC Moira Kelly, then took a seat in the chair opposite Ally Hallforth.

'I know you've already been through this with one of my colleagues, Mrs Hallforth, but if you could walk me through Libby's day, when you last saw her, what she was wearing, whether you saw anybody acting suspicious.'

She nodded, took a deep breath and puffed it out loudly, steeling herself to go over it again.

'There's a fair at Epping Forest, near the visitor's centre. Libby's been harping on about it all week.'

'You can barely call that thing a fair,' Simon cut in. 'I said we shouldn't have gone. I told you.'

'Enough, Simon,' Ally snapped. Porter looked at her, then back to her husband. Something in both faces, a subtext they weren't sharing with him. Her anger gave way quickly to uncertainty, like a line had been crossed. His expression was more one of surprise, possibly not used to his wife snapping at him. Either way, Porter doubted they'd played happy families even before today.

'She's a good girl, Detective. She doesn't wander off. Does as she's told.'

'When it suits her,' Simon muttered, but this one went unchecked.

'And what do you remember leading up to Libby disappearing?' Porter asked. 'Take your time.'

Ally Hallforth had a thousand-yard stare now, unfocused, playing back loops in her head.

‘She hadn’t even been on many of the rides,’ she said in a faraway tone. ‘Just stuffed her face with candyfloss and watched other kids, mainly. Said she wanted to watch all the rides before she made her mind up. I only took my eye off her for a second. Just wanted to grab a coffee, told her I’d only be a minute, and then . . .’

The rest of the sentence disappeared behind a veil of sniffles. This would be the perfect time for Simon Hallforth to swoop in, curl an arm around her, tell her their baby girl was safe, that she’d be home soon. Instead, he huffed out a loud breath, pulled an e-cigarette from his pocket and started puffing away. Clouds of fruity-scented vapour shrouded his face. Porter couldn’t stand those things, and kept his focus on Ally.

‘She was watching that horse race one, you know where you back a colour and the little metal horses race along a track. You win a prize if yours finishes first. One minute she was there next to me, then she was just gone. Do you think someone took her?’

She came back alive for that last sentence, eyes snapping into focus, voice trembling at the very real possibility.

‘We can’t rule anything out, Mrs Hallforth,’ Porter said with a shrug. ‘Statistically most missing children have just wandered off. Either that or run away. Can you think of any reason why she’d want to run away?’

‘And what the bloody hell do you mean by that?’ Simon barked between angry puffs. ‘You’re saying we had something to do with this?’

‘I’m not saying that at all, sir,’ Porter said, keeping his tone level. In reality, though, he couldn’t rule that out at this stage. Tia Sharp, a high-profile case back in 2012, had proved that families are capable of doing awful things, even to ones they’re supposed to protect. Something about the dynamic between Simon and Ally was off. Not necessarily enough to have caused Libby to go missing, but definitely something Porter would have to follow up on.

‘What about friends?’ he asked. ‘Were there any other kids she knew at the fair? Friends, or friends’ parents? Anyone she might feel comfortable wandering off with.’

‘She doesn’t have many. Just a couple of other girls from school really, but I don’t think any of them were there today,’ said Ally.

‘It’d be helpful if we can get their names to follow up just in case,’ he said, and waited as she scribbled on a Post-it note, idly looking around the room. A picture behind the sofa caught his eye.

‘Libby’s brother and sister?’ he asked, gesturing towards it.

Ally nodded. ‘I was only nineteen when I had Marcus, same age as he is now. Chloe turned four last month.’

‘Are they here?’ Porter asked.

She shook her head. ‘Marcus moved out last year. Got a flat in the block next door. My mum came around and took Chloe for a walk. Didn’t want her seeing me upset.’

Porter’s phone purred in his pocket before he could ask anything else about the other children.

‘Excuse me just one second,’ he said, sliding it out and seeing Styles’s name blinking at him. Nick would have to wait. Disrupting the flow of a sensitive debrief like this could mean facts were missed, misremembered, even embellished. He rejected the call and fixed his attention on Ally again.

‘And what did you do when you realised you couldn’t see her any more?’

His phone buzzed again: same caller. Porter felt his hackles rising. Styles should know if he didn’t take the call there would be a damn good reason. Seemed lately that his partner’s judgement was just a fraction off on the little things. Understandable to a degree, baby on the way and all, but little mistakes could easily add up, make life difficult, cases harder to solve.

‘I really am sorry about this. Let me get rid of the call,’ he said, pressing to answer.

‘DS Styles, I really can’t talk right now. I’m interviewing the parents.’
Formal title in place of a Christian name intended to send a message.

‘I know, boss, and I’m sorry to be a pain, but it’s about the girl.
We’ve found something.’