

Prologue

What's your earliest memory? I don't mean something you've been told so many times it feels like a memory. I'm talking about the first thing you remember through your child's eyes. A knee-high memory, a don't-understand-the-words memory, an honest-to-god slice of emotion that can still feel you like a tree. The recalled moment that is the key to what shapes you for ever.

Mine has narrow wooden bars running vertically through it. A cot or a playpen, at a guess. I can't picture what I'm standing on. I can see my hands clutching the bars tightly, small fingers still chubby like toddlers' are supposed to be. My nails are crusted with dirt and there's a very particular smell. Over the years, I've worked out that it's a mixture of stale urine, marijuana, alcohol and unwashed bodies. Even now, when I walk among the homeless who inhabit the invisible hinterland of the world's great cities, I feel comforted by the smell

that repels most people. The homeless smell like home to me.

I'm stalling. Can you tell I'm stalling? Because the heart of the memory still makes me shiver to my soul.

In front of me is a movie cut into slices by the bars. My mother is wearing a bright tangerine blouse and the man has the front of it bunched in his fist. He's shaking my mother like one of the dogs would shake a rat or a rabbit. He's shouting at her too. I don't know what he's shouting, it's just a jagged cascade of violent sound. She's sobbing, my mother. Every time she tries to speak, he slaps her hard with his other hand. Her head jerks like it's on a spring. There's a thread of blood trickling from one nostril. Her hands try to push him away, but he doesn't even notice, he's so much stronger than her.

Then one of her hands slips down and presses against the front of his trousers, stroking him through the stiff dirty denim. She lets herself fall against him, close so it's harder for him to hit her. He stops shouting but he doesn't let go of her shirt. He pulls up her skirt and pushes her down on the floor and carries on making her cry. Only in a different way.

That's my first memory. I wish it was the worst one.

Part One

1

Tuesday

Under normal circumstances, Charlie Flint would have consumed all the media coverage of the trial of Philip Carling's killers. It wasn't quite the sort of murder that was right up her street, but there were good reasons why this particular case would have interested her. But nothing was normal right now. Her professional life was in shreds. The destruction of reputation, the prohibition against doing the one thing she'd ever been any good at and the continued threat of legal sanction alone would have been enough to distract Charlie from the news stories. But there was more.

The headline news in Charlie Flint's world was that she was in love and hating every minute of it. And that was the real reason she was oblivious to all sorts of things that normally would have fascinated her.

The needles of the power shower on her shoulders and back felt like deserved punishment. She tried to change the subject, but neither mind nor heart would play along. This morning, like every morning for the past six weeks, Lisa Kent was the only item on Charlie's mental bulletin. As the day wore on, Charlie could generally drag her attention back to the things that actually mattered. But first thing, before she'd hammered her defences into shape again, top of the dial was Lisa bloody Kent. And here are the bullet points, she thought bitterly. Bad timing, nothing in common, wrong bloody woman.

Seven years she'd been with Maria. Now, as if it wasn't enough to be wracked by guilt, Charlie had the additional mortification of living a cliché. The seven-year itch. She hadn't even known it needed scratching until Lisa had glided into her life. But this had gone far beyond an itch. It was a ferocious irritation, an obsessional derangement that had invaded her life indiscriminately. No apparently innocuous event or remark was immune from a sudden takeover by the image of Lisa's assessing eyes or the echo of her languid laughter.

'Fuck it,' Charlie said, savagely pushing her silver and black hair back from her face. She jerked the shower switch to the 'off' position and stepped out of the cubicle.

Maria caught her eye in the mirror of the bathroom cabinet. The sound of the shower had masked her entrance. 'Bad day ahead?' she asked sympathetically, pausing in the act of applying mascara to emphasise eyes the colour of horse chestnuts.

'Probably,' Charlie said, trying to hide her dismay. 'I can't remember the last time I had a good one.' What had

she actually said out loud in the shower? How long had Maria been standing there?

Maria's mouth twisted in wry sympathy as she worked moulding paste through her wavy brown hair, a critical look on her face. 'I need a haircut,' she said absently before returning her focus to her partner. 'I'm sorry, Charlie. I wish there was something I could do.'

'So do I.' A churlish response, but it was all Charlie could manage. She forced herself to deal with reality as she rubbed the towel over her hair. The trouble with falling in love – no, one of the *many* troubles with falling in love when you were already in a loving relationship you didn't actually want to end – was that it turned you into a drama queen. It had to be all about you. But the truth was Maria had heard nothing more than the complaint of a disgraced forensic psychiatrist staring an uncertain future in the face. A talented professional who'd been shunted into a dead-end siding for all the wrong reasons. Maria suspected nothing.

Swamped by a fresh wave of guilt, Charlie leaned forward and kissed the nape of Maria's neck, obscurely glad of the shiver she could see running through her lover. 'Pay no attention to me,' she said. 'You know how much I *love* invigilating exams.'

'I know. I'm sorry. You're worth better than that.'

Charlie thought she heard a trace of pity in Maria's voice and hated it. Whether it was real or her paranoia, it didn't much matter. She hated being in a place where pity was possible. 'What's worst about it is that it's so undemanding. It leaves too many brain cells free to fret about all the things I would rather – no, damn it, *should* – be

doing.’ She finished drying herself and neatly folded her towel over the rail. ‘See you downstairs.’

Five minutes later, dressed in crisp white cotton shirt and black jeans, she sat down at the breakfast table she’d laid earlier while Maria was showering, their morning routine still a reassuringly fixed point in Charlie’s emotional chaos. Even on the days when she didn’t have work, she still made herself get up at the regular time and go through the rituals of the employed life. As usual, Maria was spreading Marmite on granary toast. She gestured with her knife towards a large padded envelope by the bowl where Charlie’s two Weetabix sat. ‘Postman’s been. Still don’t know why you gave up cornflakes for those,’ she added, pointing at the cereal bars with her knife. ‘They look like panty shields for masochists.’

Charlie snorted with surprised laughter. Then guilt kicked in. If Maria could still make her laugh like that, how could she be in love with Lisa? She picked up the envelope. The computer-printed address label revealed nothing, but the Oxford postmark made her stomach lurch. Surely Lisa wouldn’t . . .? She was a therapist, for God’s sake, she wouldn’t drop a grenade on the breakfast table. Would she? How well did Charlie really know her? Panicked, she froze momentarily.

‘Anything interesting?’ Maria asked, breaking the spell.

‘I’m not expecting anything.’

‘Better open it, then. Given you don’t have X-ray vision.’

‘Yeah. My Supergirl days are long behind me.’ Charlie contrived to free the flap of the envelope without giving Maria any chance to see the contents. Puzzled, she stared down at a bundle of photocopied sheets. She inched them

carefully out of the envelope. They appeared to offer no threat, only bewilderment. 'How bizarre,' Charlie said.

'What is it?'

Charlie thumbed through the pile of papers and frowned. 'Press cuttings. A murder at the Old Bailey.'

'An old case?'

'Still going on, I think. I vaguely noticed a couple of reports already. Those two city slickers who murdered their business partner on his wedding day. At St Scholastika's. That's the only reason it stuck in my mind.'

'You mentioned it. I remember. They drowned him down by the punts or something, didn't they?'

'That's right. Not the done thing in my day.' Charlie spoke absently, her attention on the clippings.

'So who's sent you this? What's it all about?'

Charlie shrugged, her interest pricked. 'Don't know. Not a clue.' She fanned through the papers to see if there was anything to identify the sender.

'Is there no covering letter?'

Charlie checked inside the envelope again. 'Nope. Just the photocopies.' If this was Lisa, it was completely incomprehensible. It didn't fit any notion of therapy or love token that Charlie understood.

'A mystery, then,' Maria said, finishing her toast and standing up to put her dirty crockery in the dishwasher. 'Not exactly worthy of you, but a chance at least to put your investigative skills into practice.'

Charlie made a small dismissive sound. 'Something to mull over while I'm invigilating, anyway.'

Maria leaned over and kissed the top of Charlie's head. 'I'll give it some thought while I'm torturing the patients.'

Charlie winced. 'Don't say that. Not if you ever want to treat me again.'

'What? "Torturing the patients"?'

'No, suggesting that your mind is on something other than drilling teeth. It's too terrifying to contemplate.'

Maria grinned, revealing an appropriately perfect smile. 'Big girl's blouse,' she teased, wiggling her fingers and wagging her hips in farewell as she headed out of the kitchen. Charlie stared bleakly after her until she heard the front door close. Then, with a deep sigh, she put the two Weetabix back in the packet and her bowl into the dishwasher.

'Fuck you, Lisa,' she muttered as she scooped the papers back into the envelope and stalked out of the room.