Loneliness (in F Flat Minor)

by TreacleA

Summary

A famous pianist is found in a burned-out car at a local beauty spot, an apparent victim of suicide. Assigned to work the case together, Hardy and Miller must make sense of her death while working through (and around) the tangle of their own changing relationship.

An 8 episode (16 part) Broadchurch S4 case-fic, that follows a standalone Ellie-centric prologue.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
The call comes in on Monday evening, when everyone but Ellie and Hardy and the younger of the two seconded Bournemouth DCs have gone home for the night.

It comes in through dispatch, relayed from a PC’s radio, and is directed straight to Hardy’s desk. Ellie can hear the change in his voice immediately, going from his standard weary end-of-day tone as he answers to sharp-edged high-alert as he fires off a stream of rapid-fire questions. She’s on her feet and putting her coat on even as he slams the receiver back into the cradle and heads across the room.

“How we going?”

“Seatown.”

“What’s happened?”
“Pub owner reported a car-fire up on the hill and called the fire brigade. That was Owens attending. Says there was someone in it.”

“Oh christ.”

Hardy drives. They normally take it in turns these days, but as she has to make a call to her dad to say she’ll be late now, it make sense that he takes the wheel.

“You have any idea when you’ll be back?”

Her dad sounds a bit annoyed and she's immediately defensive, pissy.

“No idea, sorry Dad. Could be just an hour or two, could be late. I’ll text you.”

“I might not hear it though if I’m in the bath.”

“Well, just assume I’ll be late then.”

“How late do you think?”

“No idea Dad. Sorry.”

“Well text me if it’s going to be after ten. I suppose I'll have to put Fred…”

“Yes, if you could. Thanks.”

She stabs ‘end call’ with a little more ferocity than she means to, and Hardy gives her a quick sideways look.

“Everything ok?”

“Oh bloody marvellous, thanks.”

“You’ve no need to come Miller, I could always…”

“Oh shut up will you. Since when have you ever let me off the hook on a late callout?”

It’s a question with an obvious barb in it. Since the kiss they’d shared in Hardy’s car just over a week ago, they’ve both become acutely aware of the impact that their fledgling relationship might have on their work dynamic. In the intervening ten days there’s been nothing else between them but some very low-key flirting by text and an after-work Netflix date, the promise of which had been cut short by the arrival home of a tearful, freshly-dumped Daisy.

They’d said goodbye on his porch, feet shuffling and fingertips brushing and Hardy’s face a mask of apologetic frustration. Her phone had beeped as she’d made her way down the hill.

‘I AM SO SORRY.’

She’d stopped to return the message, leaning on the fence at the bottom while he looked down the track at her from the house.

‘ME TOO. WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO THE CHILL PART.’

‘??’
OF NETFLIX AND CHILL?

??????

She’d shaken her head and laughed as she’d dashed off the last text,

‘UR SUCH A DINOSAUR. ASK DAISY.’

Now three days later they’re alone again together for the first time, but the boundaries couldn’t be more clearly and distinctly drawn. They haven’t discussed it out loud, but she knows they’re both on the same page with this part. No-one can know, and no-one can be able to tell. They both understand that if there’s any suggestion of impropriety between them while they’re on the job, the likelihood of one or both of them being reassigned is more than just a possibility. And Ellie Miller has fought too long and too hard to achieve her position to fuck it up over a man.

They pull into the car park at Seatown at just after seven, having barely spoken a word during the drive. Clouds of black smoke are billowing over from the east, where - from the top of the nearby beauty spot - they can both see the skeletal shape of a fire-blackened vehicle surrounded by emergency services. It’s a steep walk up an uneven sandy little path under a still-high sun, and by the time they reach the top they’re both a bit hotter and sweatier than either generally feels comfortable with.

Approaching the smoking wreck, Ellie catches an unmistakable whiff of charred flesh and has to cover her mouth to stop herself from gagging. She can’t see much of anything inside, but the figure in the driver seat looks small, most likely a woman. Her head is bowed to her chest and there are remnants of long straight hair. Forcing herself to look harder, she notes the few details that jump out at her.

A gold band on her wedding finger, stark against the blackened skin.

Gold hoop earrings in both ears.

And there’s something on the seat next to her that’s melted to a puddle of dark green goo, probably plastic.

She steps a bit closer, trying to make out what it might be, but the smell is suddenly overwhelming and she has to move back and turn her face away.

Stepping in between her and Hardy, Bill Owens gives her a sympathetic look and then hands her a wrapped Fisherman’s Friend.

“Pub landlord spotted the flames from out front about four-thirty. Figured some kids were having a bonfire at first, then when the petrol tank went off he called us and legged it up here. Burned his hands pretty bad trying to get the door open.”

Owens jerks his head towards the open bay of the nearby ambulance,

“He’s over there. Jason Taylor. Pretty upset. Seems like the sensitive type.”
Hardy frowns and shoots him a look that - to Ellie - clearly cables his annoyance at the remark.

“And what time did you get here?”

“About five-fifteen.”

“Anyone around that you saw?”

Owens jerks his head in the other direction, where a group of three older teenagers are stood awkwardly smoking by the side of a tree.

“Just that lot. Said they didn’t see anything. And there were two walkers as well, a couple. They’re down at the pub. The woman was bit upset, so I told them they could wait there for you. Away from the smell.”

Hardy nods,

“Very sensitive of you, Owens.”

Bill Owen’s eyes narrow slightly, but before he can make any kind of retort Ellie steps in front of him to block his view of the other detective.

“Brilliant, thanks Bill. Good work. We can take it from here.”

“Ellie. DI Hardy.”

Giving her a small terse nod, the older PC turns away and walks back to his squad car, muttering something into his radio as he goes. He’s clearly irked, and when she looks at Hardy’s face she can tell that he’s just a tiny bit pleased about that.

The paramedic is one Ellie knows well: Claire Pickering. She used to partner with Joe sometimes, and when she looks up from dressing Jason Taylor’s hands her smile falters for a moment when she sees who it is. It’s a look Miller’s used to, and one she always meets with the same tight smile.

“Hey, hi! Ellie,” she nods uncertainly at Hardy, “And uh…Detective. Almost done here.”

Jason Taylor’s eyes are red-rimmed, whether from the smoke or from crying Miller can’t be sure. When Claire is finished talking to him about aftercare she rests a hand on his shoulder for a moment and he looks up at her gratefully. Taking her cue, Ellie smiles warmly,

“Sounds like you’ve been very brave, Mr. Taylor.”

The man hesitates and then shakes his head, and when he speaks his voice quavers,

“There was…really nothing I could do. By the time I got up here the flames were just too much. I couldn't get to her.”

“D’you see anyone else around? On the way up I mean?”

Hardy is straight to business, his voice not unfriendly exactly but demanding of answers, and it seems to have the desired effect on Taylor who straightens up a bit, pinching his nose with his fingertips.

“Not on the hill, no. But there was another car parked in the car park. As I started running up the path I was shouting for help, but it just pulled away.”
Hardy has his notebook out,

“Remember the make? Colour?”

Taylor shakes his head,

“Dark blue or black maybe? Something big."

“An estate? Van maybe?”

“Not sure, maybe…a people carrier?”

“See the driver?”

“No. Sorry.”

“Anyone else who might have seen it? There CCTV at the pub?”

“It doesn’t cover that end of the car park.”

He looks dazed suddenly, staring off into the distance, and Ellie steps in a bit closer to lay her hand where Claire’s had been before.

“You ok, Jason? Shall we walk you back down to the pub? You got someone there who can sit with you?”

Taylor nods stiffly, and then his eyes are brimming over with tears again. He looks up, but not at her, he looks straight at Hardy.

“You think she was already dead? Before I got up here I mean?”

Hardy’s face is impassive,

“Most likely. Looks like a melted hose taped to the exhaust. Maybe rigged something to set the car alight to be sure she didn’t wake up. Bit elaborate, but I’ve seen stranger ways to do it. Either way, seems obvious what she wanted to do.”

He looks down at the other man as he’s speaking, and Ellie feels a little flare of something warm in her chest as she recognises what he’s doing. What he always does. In his own bleak, no-bullshit kind of way, Hardy’s soothing him. Letting him know he’s not to blame. He’s being kind in the only way he knows how to be.

They go and talk to the kids, take some personal details, then walk back down the hill to the pub and talk to both of the walkers. It takes a while and by the time they’re ready to go it’s nearly nine thirty.

“You driving back?” she asks, and Hardy gives her an odd questioning look.

“Why, you want to?”

“Since when do you ask?”

He shrugs awkwardly,

“I’m more than happy to.”
“Well, so am I!”

She stares at him and he looks back exasperated,

“Bloody hell Miller, then you drive!”

“Alright! You don’t have to be an arse about it!”

It’s a weird little exchange that seems to set both their teeth on edge with its strangeness, and again they don’t speak for most of the drive back. Hardy leafs through his notebook, ostensibly reading over what he’s written down, but she’s pretty sure he can’t have forgotten it already.

“Think it’s just your standard suicide then?”

He wrinkles his nose at her question, and taps his fingers on the window.

“Not that bloody standard though, was it? I mean, the hose would have done it nicely. Why bother with setting the fire? Bit showy.”

“Maybe like you said to Taylor, wanting to make sure she didn’t survive?”

Hardy grunts,

“So why not take pills, or slash her wrists? No, she took herself off to a quiet spot, to use a nice quiet, peaceful method, sat alone in her car. Why risk drawing attention to herself, or harming someone else with a fire?”

Ellie nods and then sucks on her lower lip, thinking. Even in her very darkest moments she’s never contemplated suicide as an option, and she’ll happily admit she sometimes finds it hard to imagine the thought process that’s involved, put herself in their heads. Hardy however doesn’t seem to have that problem.

Risking a glance sideways at him, she’s surprised to find that he’s watching her intently, his eyes seemingly resting on her lips.

“What?” she says, flustered.

“Nothing.”

“What!!?”

“Nothing. Nothing important.”

He looks away, out the window, and then - like he suddenly thinks better of it - back at her.

“Was just going to ask you to pull over for a minute is all.”

When she thinks about it, Ellie realises that she hasn’t sat in a car in a lay-by necking with a bloke since she was about twenty-one. Not that she wants to think about that right now, or who it was she was with at the time, or who they turned out to be later on. Right now all she wants to think about is good it feels to kiss someone again and have them really kiss back - with real passion and genuine emotion - and feel their warm breath in her mouth, and see their eyes half-close like they’re in a little heaven all of their own making.
Her head is spinning a bit, and the gearstick jammed into her thigh muscle hurts with a kind of dull distant ache, but she honestly doesn’t give a shit. As Hardy bends his head to her neck she sucks in a breath and pushes her fingertips through his dark hair, and suddenly she can’t stop herself from laughing.

His breath stutters against her throat and then his eyes come up, wide and brown and a little dazed-looking.

“Why yer laughin’?”

“Sorry, I just..”

She tries not to giggle at his expression,

“I was just thinking about something.”

“Bout what?”

“Nothing just… I was just imagining you still calling me ‘Miller’ while we’re…”

His eyes widen a bit more when he realises what she’s talking about, and then he cracks a shy grin. And lord, but when he smiles Alec Hardy is a thing of beauty.

“Sounds like you’ve given this some thought, Miller.”

He dusts a hand along her jaw, and then slowly and deliberately presses a soft kiss to one side of her mouth.

“An’ I can do, if that’s what you want. On one condition though.”

“Which is what?”

“You have to call me ‘sir’.”

She not at all sure how they manage to pull themselves together after that, or how they make it back to Broadchurch without pulling over a second time. There’s a brief moment of indecision when Hardy draws up to the kerb outside her house, but it’s ten already and they both know there’s no way she can invite him in with her dad home.

“OK, well…” Ellie hesitates with one hand on the door handle, “See you tomorrow I suppose? See if we can get an ID on our victim.”

Hardy blinks at her in the semi-dark. He still looks a bit shell-shocked, and without thinking she reaches out a hand to smooth the back of his hair where she’s messed it up.

“Can’t have Daisy getting any ideas about what you’ve been up to.”

“No,” he ghosts a smile, “Can’t have that.”

She breathes out softly then, and he does the same.

“ ‘night Hardy.”

And she kisses him - soft and light - and watches his eyes flicker closed again for a second, then gets
out of the car and goes inside.
Fred wakes her at five-thirty the next morning by throwing himself bodily across her chest. She’d be annoyed with him but he just started Reception last week, and his excitement about school is still a bit adorable. Reminding him to keep the volume down, she follows him downstairs and puts the kettle on for tea while he busies himself taking everything out of his schoolbag and spreading it out around him on the living room carpet. By six he’s chilled out a bit and is laid on his tummy on the carpet watching CBeebies, and she can at least relax and enjoy her tea and toast in peace, having made up both his packed lunch and her own.

She checks through her emails and does her usual quick scroll of her Facebook newsfeed, laughing at a couple of memes that her mates have posted, and then opens another tab for local news. The car-fire is the third article down. Not much information available on it yet of course, but she knows she’ll probably be fielding calls from the Dorset Echo and the other two local papers as soon as she gets into the office. An unworthy thought pops into her head - that she hopes the victim isn’t a pretty young thing with a front-page face - and she tamps it down with a trace of shame. Whoever she was, she’d get the same level of dedication directed at her case as anyone, and with any luck the whole thing would be quickly and quietly resolved within a day or two.

Any hope of that is dashed of course as soon as she walks into work.

It’s obvious immediately that something is up. Everyone looks tense and there’s no-one hanging out in the break room chatting, they’re all sat at their desks trying their best to look industrious. Dropping her handbag onto her seat, Ellie looks over at Hardy’s office and sees that both the door and all the blinds are closed. Voices are coming from inside, one of which she recognises immediately as CS Jenkinson, but the other is male. Tapping on the glass, she doesn’t wait for Hardy to answer before she pushes her way inside.

Elaine Jenkinson turns towards her as she enters, as does the bloke in the expensive-looking suit at her side.

“DS Miller.”

“Chief.”

Her smile is tight and forced and Ellie knows immediately that, whoever the man beside her is, he ranks a damned sight higher than anyone else in the room.

“Ellie, this is DAC Atherton. He’s come down from The Met to oversee the investigation into your suspected suicide yesterday.”

A bit stunned, Ellie darts a look over at Hardy, but his expression is shuttered and impossible to read. She thinks he’s probably annoyed though, which seems like a safe bet given the circumstances.

“Sorry, oversee? How do you mean?”

She looks from Jenkinson’s face to the Commissioner’s but neither are giving much away.

“And sorry, how is The Met involved with this now? Do we have an ID already?”

Atherton smiles, and there’s not even the tiniest trace of warmth in it,
“Nothing’s official yet, but the car is registered to a woman who went missing from her Kensington address two days ago. We’re fairly sure the body is her’s.”

“And she’s who exactly? Royalty?”

“Miller…”
Hardy’s voice has a note of warning in it, but she barrels on regardless,

“Well I’m assuming she’s something bloody special to warrant a DAC from The Met coming all the way down here.”

“DS Miller…”
But Atherton cuts Atkinson off before she can begin any kind of serious bollocking,

“We believe the woman in the car is Tao Tanaka.”
Theres a long tense pause in which Ellie looks blankly from his face to Jenkinson’s, and then back over to Hardy, who - infuriatingly - is still giving absolutely nothing away.

“Sorry, am I supposed to know who that is? She an actress or something?”

“A famous composer and pianist.”
Atherton frowns slightly, and it’s the first time he’s looked remotely human,

“She’s also the wife of George Waterford, MP.”

“Oh bloody hell!”
She thinks she sees Hardy’s lips twitch into a smile then for a moment, before he quickly rubs it away with the palm of his hand and clears his throat.

“So will he be the one making the ID? Waterford?”

“No, it’s most likely we’ll have to use dental records. If this is Ms Tanaka, the body’s too badly damaged to made a positive ID any other way,” he inclines his head, “And quite frankly, I’d rather not put George through that if I don’t absolutely have to.”

George. Ellie doesn’t say anything aloud of course, but the casual use of Waterford’s first name speaks volumes. It seems obvious to her now that Atherton isn’t here in any kind of worryingly official capacity, he’s just someone who Waterford knows personally and has asked to get involved. And although she’s not happy to have the scrutiny of a Met DAC directed at her work, she softens a bit as she considers that maybe he’s not that happy about being sent down here either.

“Any idea what happened? She leave a note?”
Hardy speaks up again, and she’s relieved to notice that he sounds less annoyed than he does weary,

“Waterford’s searched the house but nothing’s been found yet.”

“Think she was staying somewhere nearby? Seems like a long way to drive just to kill yourself.”

“Possibly. She doesn’t know anyone local that we know of. We’re checking with hotels and BnBs. She’s been staying somewhere since Saturday evening and yesterday.”
“What about credit and debit card statements?”

“Husband’s checking the joint ones now. We’ll need to make a positive ID before we can access her private accounts though.”

Her usual back and forth with Hardy is so effortless that - until Jenkinson clears her throat pointedly - she almost forgets there are two other highly-qualified officers in the room.

“Well, we’ll leave you to it for now. DAC Atherton will be taking a desk in my office for the duration, so be sure to keep us both up to speed with anything you find out.”

They leave, closing the door behind them, and she and Hardy turn to look at each other with the same slightly guarded expression.

“What d’you make of that then?”

Alec leans back in his chair, before standing to stretch himself,

“Not a lot. Waterford’s asked his errand boy to come down here and make sure the locals don’t screw it up is all. My guess is to keep a firm lid on the story too.”

“Hmm. Speaking of which, Echo called yet?”

“Not that I know of. Your nephew not phoned you?”

Ellie shakes her head,

“He’s on the entertainment desk now isn’t he? Besides, not sure we’re even on his radar any more now he’s up in London.”

Hardy gives a small nod, and they stand in silence for a moment.

“Hey, I was thinking about that stuff on the seat next to her.”

“Hmm?”

“On the passenger seat? There was like a puddle of like…greenish goo. I had a thought this morning - think it was a petrol can? I’ve got one in my boot that’s the same colour.”

Hardy raises his eyebrows at her, and then frowns.

“Why would she have a petrol can next to her as well? If she already rigged up the tank to blow?”

Ellie shrugs,

“Belt and braces?”

“Nah, I mean…there’s ‘making sure’ and then there’s overkill.”

Hardy taps his pen on the desk, thinking, then,

“SOCO bring the car in yet or they still out there?”

“No idea.”
“Give yer mate Brian a ring.”

“Bugger off, you call him.”

“C’mon Miller, he’ll just shine me on. He’ll talk to you.”

“Not if he’s not even started on it yet.”

“Tell him you need results stat.”

Ellie rolls her eyes. There’s an unmistakable lightness to Hardy’s usual gruff tone though, and she can’t help wondering if he spent as much time after they parted last night thinking about her as she did him.

“About yesterday…”

She starts to speak, but the look on his face stops her dead. His eyes move past her towards the door and out into the office beyond at the room full of their co-workers.

“Can we not talk about this in work Miller.”

He’s not abrupt exactly, but she can’t help thinking it feels a bit like a rebuke and opens her mouth to snap something back before thinking better of it.

“Alright. How about later, in the car?”

“Not in the car either. No talking about it at all during work hours.”

“Bloody hell Hardy, so not a word on the subject till we clock off at night??”

His lips are a thin firm line now, and she knows that expression well. It’s the one that clearly says ‘don’t push me’. She glares at him and after a moment his eyes soften a bit,

“Last night was…”

He rubs his palm over this face,

“We can’t do anything like that again, not while we’re on the job,” he sighs, “I’m sorry. It was my fault…”

“You fault!”

Ellie almost splutters in indignation, and Hardy grimaces as the volume of her voice increases,

“I was hardly a bloody passive participant you know!!”

“Miller…”

“And I was the one driving if you remember?? I was the one who pulled over, just so we could…”

“Ellie!”

The unfamiliar use of her first name snaps her back to attention, and she realises with a start what she’s doing. She’s standing arguing with her boss at top volume over who snogged who first, yards away from the very people they’re both supposed to be keeping it a secret from.
“Oh shit. Shit. Sorry.”

Her cheeks flush red with embarrassment, and taking a step backwards towards the door she gives Hardy a suitably apologetic look.

“I’ll phone Brian now, see what they’ve turned up.”

“Yeah, you do that.”

“I’ll give you a buzz if he’s got anything.”

She hesitates in the doorway, lowers her voice to an almost whisper,

“Sorry again,” she wrinkles her nose, “Not really used to this.”

Hardy looks back at her steadily for a moment, and if she didn’t know better she’d say he looked just the tiniest bit petrified.

"Me neither,” he says.

Brian and his team have only just gotten the car back to their workspace, but when she tells him about Atherton and the fact that all eyes are going to be on them, he promises to try and have something for her by lunch.

She has her sandwiches at her desk as usual and then she and Hardy drive over to the unit the SOCO team work out of. The car is spread out on a huge sheet of plastic, the various elements from the interior having been removed and set methodically to one side. The melted goo Ellie saw is still evident on the passenger seat, although Brian confirms they removed enough to know it’s exactly what she suspected.

“Standard five litre petrol canister, probably full to the brim. Sat beside the victim on the seat and went up when the tank did.”

“And do we know how that happened?”

Brian points to the back of the car,

“Super basic stuff. Jute rope there - about 3 metres long - soaked in lamp oil, leading into the tank. Just light one end, get in and it’ll take about thirty minutes for the flame to get there.”

“Thirty minutes? That’s not long,” Hardy squints at the back of the car, the burned fragments of rope, “No way exhaust fumes are laying you out in thirty minutes. Not these days.”

“These days?”

Ellie looks at them both blankly, and Brian nods,

“With most modern cars the CO emissions are too low now to be anything near effective quickly. Some models are a bit higher than others, and this one’s one of them. Still be surprised if the fumes killed her though. The seal on the window wouldn’t have been perfect, and by my reckoning the main tank was still almost full when it went up.”

Hardy frowns deeply, and pushes his hands into his pockets.
“So we’ve got a woman sat in the driver seat of her car, in broad daylight near a popular walking spot, alive and conscious, waiting patiently for thirty whole minutes to be burned alive?”

Ellie cocks her head, looks at him,

“Drunk maybe? Perhaps she was passed out?”

Hardy continues to frown,

“Lot of steps involved for someone pissed. I don’t buy it.”

“I don’t know, I’m amazed sometimes what I manage to do after a big night out. Did two loads of washing one time, and made all the lunches for the next day.”

“Hardly the same thing, Miller.”

“Still though. I separated the whites and everything. I was pretty impressed.”

“You would be.”

“Rude.”

Stepping away from them both, Brian looks amused at their bickering,

“I’ll type it all up anyway, I’m sure there’ll be more before we’re done. Email it over later, El.”

She looks sideways at Hardy as Brian walks away and sees him raise his eyebrows, mouth the ‘El’ back at her with a look that plainly says ‘told you so’. She isn’t sure if the other man has caught it as he turns back to add something, but he gives Hardy a bit of an odd look before he speaks.

“Forgot one thing. There was a steel weight sat on the accelerator. Little 6kg dumbbell. Like from a set.”

“Hm. Bit weird.”

She looks at her partner and he looks back, not agreeing or disagreeing with her,

“Alright, well…thanks Brian. Wait to hear from you then.”

They get on with other stuff for the rest of the afternoon. The dental results are unlikely to be back within the day, so there’s no progress on a definite ID that could move forward looking at Tao’s accounts. A request for witnesses on the morning news brings a little flurry of calls, most of which turn out to be useless, but one older lady claims to have seen the car being driven up the hill to the spot at the top while she was walking her dog earlier in the afternoon. There’s not much else to go on yet, so Hardy suggests they pop round and see her in person.

Anne makes them both tea and insists that Alec eat at least one scone, because ‘he looks like he needs the calories’.

“So what time was this, Anne? When you were coming down the hill?”

Ellie has to prompt her to remember why they’re here, and the old lady seems to falter for a moment as she hands Alec a teaspoon, as if she’d forgotten too.
“Oh it would have been just before four? Half three at the earliest, because I was home by four ten. I was parked at the bottom, we’d walked up The Cap and then done a circuit and were just on our way back to the car.”

“You and Dotty?”

The old Springer shuffles her bottom forward at the mention of her name, and Anne pets her neck affectionately.

“That’s right. It’s our usual walk, at least twice a week. We used to go every day, but I had this hip replaced in February and now I can’t do as much as…”

Hardy breaks into her sentence as gently as she imagines he knows how to,

“And you saw the car driving up? Did you see the driver?”

Anne nods eagerly,

“Oh yes, I waved to her. Pretty girl, Chinese I think. She smiled and waved back.”

Hardy frowns,

“That unusual? Someone driving up to the top like that? Bit of a rough track.”

“Well yes, most people walk up there from the car park or the bus stop. But some people just drive up for the view.”

“You’d never seen her there before though?”

“Oh no,” Anne smiles, and without asking she butters him another scone, “She was such a pretty girl. I’d definitely have remembered her.”

As she and Hardy make their way down her garden path, they both seem lost for a moment in their own thoughts. It’s a comfortable contemplative quiet though, that carries them all the way back to the station and their usual parking spot. In the end it’s him that breaks it.

“Why would she smile and wave?”

“Mmm. I was thinking the same thing. At half three? Doesn’t seem right does it?”

Leaning back in her seat, Ellie picks at the hem of her jacket,

“We done for the day you think?”

“Mmm. Guess so.”

She chances a sideways look at him, but his face tells her nothing as usual.

“Off the clock then?”

“Pretty much.”

Hardy’s fingers flex on the wheel,

“You got plans this evening?”
“Dad’s out at the Legion and Tom’s at football till late. Thought maybe I’d put a five year old to bed and then stare at the telly for a few hours till I pass out.”

“Want some company?”

“What, staring at the telly you mean? Didn’t think you liked Emmerdale.”

She doesn’t mean to tease him, but it’s a habit she can’t break herself of just yet. And looking at the half-smile he gives her she’s not sure he wants her to either.

“Shall I come round about 8?”

“OK. You eating tea first?”

“I’ll just grab something at home. Daisy’s round at her mates for the night.”

“Sure? I can save you something? We could eat together.”

“No, honestly Miller, it’s fine.”

He looks a bit torn for a second, like he’s trying hard to remember something, then,

“Actually, no. What am I saying. Thanks. That’d be great.”

She smiles at him, surprised, pleased.

“OK. See you at mine at 8 then?”

“See you then.”

It’s still so awkward between them, but nice. Definitely nice. She doesn’t kiss him as she gets out of the car, but she knows she wants to. ‘Later though’, she finds herself thinking with a little shiver of expectation, later for definite.

She feels stupid blushing at the thought, but she can’t help it.
Hardy brings wine with him. She doesn’t know much about wine, but she knows enough to know it’s not rubbish, a tenner’s worth at least.

“Oooh this looks nice!”

“Wasn’t sure what you liked.”

“I like red,” she grins, “Don’t honestly give a toss though to be honest, long as it’s wet and alcoholic!”

It’s a bit of a weird thing to say and it seems like they both think so, but if she starts apologising for every stupid thing she says now they’ll never get through the evening. Smiling at him brightly she takes in the slightly more casual-than-usual attire - the dark green jumper and jeans, the fresh-from-a-shower-slightly-damp hair - and thinks about telling him how good he looks, but reconsiders at the last moment. It’s the sort of thing a bloke usually says to a woman anyway, isn’t it? And she imagines they’ve already had enough of that kind of confusion for today.

“Fred in bed already?”

“Yeah, out like a light. School’s a bit knackering for them at first, isn’t it? I remember Tom was just the same.”

“Daisy too. They get used to it quick enough though.”

Hardy still looks a bit awkward stood in the hallway, like he’s not sure whether he’s allowed to come further into the house or not, and standing aside she nods towards the sitting room.

“Why don’t you go in and sit down? I’ll go and get us a couple of glasses for this.”

When she comes back Hardy has parked himself at the end of the sofa nearest the telly, and is staring fixedly at her bookshelves as if he’s desperately trying to will himself somewhere else. As she takes a seat beside him, Ellie feels a surge of sympathetic affection for her partner of four years, and for his total inability to ever just relax.

“Hardy.”

“Mm?”

He turns to her and the harried look on his face would almost make her grin, if it wasn’t so deeply familiar.

“We can just sit you know? Have a glass of wine. Watch some bollocks on TV. We don’t have to talk if you don’t want to.”

The lines around his eyes soften a bit, and unthinkingly she reaches out to stroke them. When he turns his face into her palm, she wonders how long it’s been since anyone showed him genuine affection. A long time she thinks. Maybe even longer than her.

She leans back against the sofa cushions and draws her socked-feet up under her, and after a minute or two she feels the tension in the body beside her start to uncoil. His left hand rests loosely on his thigh next to her, but after a minute or two of sitting quietly together, sipping their wine, he reaches
over and takes her’s. It’s such a simple eloquent gesture that Ellie finds herself a bit emotional suddenly, and she leans her head against his shoulder to hide the fact.

It takes him at least forty-five minutes to get around to kissing her, by which time she’s well into her second glass of wine and more than ready for it.

Ellie will happily admit to herself she’s still a bit surprised at just how good a kisser Hardy is. Most blokes that she’s kissed (and she’s including her initially-perfect-ex-husband in that reasonably long list) have needed more than a bit of guidance from her before they were really up to scratch. A few of them had needed actual step-by step instructions. Alec Hardy, on the other hand, appears to be quite naturally gifted. Once he gets started he’s the perfect combination of tenderness, attentiveness and simmering, barely controlled reserve and quite honestly - if her dad and Tom weren’t due back within an hour or so - she’d be dragging him upstairs to the bedroom right now and bollocks to any of the work-related consequences.

She knows she really can’t do that though, so eventually she just settles for throwing one leg over him and settling herself in his lap instead. The low groan he makes in the back of his throat as she does so almost makes her reconsider the bedroom.

“Ellie…”

She kisses the underside of his jaw,

“Miller remember? You promised.”

“Miller…”

He grins a bit against her cheek and pushes his fingers into the curls at the nape of her neck,

“Enjoyable as this is…” he shifts a bit under her weight to make his point, “It’s getting late. Don’t you think this is maybe a bit too compromising a position to risk young Tom coming home to?” he raises his eyebrows, “Or yer dad?”

“Bugger my dad.”

She kisses him again, but there’s a little edge of desperation to it now, because he’s right of course. Her dad walking in on them now wouldn’t be the best way to break the news - to him or everyone she knows would be told by him within the week - and she’s been working up the nerve to say something (anything) to Tom for the last week. She knows that he doesn’t harbour any hope of ever seeing his dad again, but seeing her move on with someone new is likely to open some scars for him. Not to mention (her brain can’t help but helpfully add) who the man she’s ‘moving on with’ actually is.

She sighs and, leaning forward, Hardy rests his forehead against her own, as if he’s heard every thought she’s just had.

“Not saying we don’t tell them. Everyone. Soon. Just not like this, eh?”

He cocks his head, looking for her agreement, and when she nods he reaches up to gently cup her face in his hands.

“And I…this isn’t something…” he starts, and then stops again, frowning.

“Isn’t what?”
“This isn’t something I want to risk fucking up.”

His brown eyes are so deeply sincere as they look at her, Ellie can’t help but feel a bit overwhelmed. It’s a good feeling though. Like getting a birthday present that’s better than you’d realised, and way more expensive than you thought you deserved.

“OK,” she says, because that’s all she can trust herself with right now.

“Ok, we wait?”

“Ok, I don’t want to fuck this up either.”

“OK. Good.”

He looks relieved, although the small frown he’d been wearing for the last few minutes is still there, a deep crease between his eyebrows. When she touches it with a fingertip though, he gives a little self-conscious laugh.

“Sorry. I’m just…” the slightly dazed look is back again, “This is all just a bit new to me. Going to take a bit of getting used to it all.”

She looks at him, curious, smiling,

“You and me, you mean?”

He shakes his head,

“No, just…feeling hopeful,” he says softly.

Ellie dreams of a funfair.

*It’s like the one that set up behind Hardy’s little cabin that time; an open field, carousels and dodgems. The air is soft and warm, and she and Hardy are walking hand in hand through it. Fred runs ahead of them laughing, and beside her - smiling wide and warm as he watches him - Hardy pushes a pram. She doesn’t look, but in the dream she somehow knows the baby in it is theirs. That it’s a girl. The little girl she’s always dreamed of.*

*Fred calls to them, pointing at the dodgems, but when she starts forward he shakes his head,*

“Not you, Uncle Alec!”

*She laughs and, giving her a wry, amused look, Hardy steps away from the pushchair.*

“Sorry darlin’, boys only!” he says, and drops a soft kiss to her lips.

*She watches them as they take their seats, and then - as the music starts - they whiz away. The lights and colours seem to blur, and suddenly she can’t see them at all any more, only hear their laughter over the sounds of the fair. She crouches down, next to the pram,*

“Wow! Look at Fred and Daddy go!”

*But when she turns to look at her baby girl, there’s nothing in the pushchair but a blackened, burned plastic doll.*
She doesn’t remember the dream until later that day, when she’s looking at the pictures SOCO has sent up, and then the image comes back to her vividly with a shudder of realisation. Tao Tanaka’s face is strangely beautiful, even burned as it is, her head bowed to her chest as if she’s silently praying, her small hands laid in her lap. She looks almost peaceful, a thought Ellie can’t help but rebel against.

“Was she drunk? Drugged?”

“Nothing in her system the coroner could find. Cause of death: asphyxiation by carbon monoxide.”

“So she was in there long enough for it to kill her?”

Hardy shrugs,

“Apparently. They’re taking a look at the car, trying to see if she did anything to the convertor maybe. Even running for the full thirty, forty minutes, it’d have to have been producing way more CO than’s normal.”

Ellie frowns. There’s a portrait picture in the file too, and as she clicks on it the face of a beautiful Japanese woman fills the screen. At first glance Tanaka looks hopelessly young, but when Miller looks closer she sees the subtle lines around her eyes and mouth, the few silver hairs.

“Dental ID’s back though? We’re definitely sure it’s her?”

She doesn’t look back at him, but she knows Hardy is studying her face too. Trying to find some answer, just like she is.

“Yeah. Husband’s been told. Still no sign of a note though, so my guess is Atherton will still be on us for answers.”

“Any other family?”

“Parents are both dead. She has a sister - Aki - who’s a permanent resident in a private mental health facility. Waterford says they’re only in touch by email as far as he knows, although apparently Tao had been paying for her treatment ever since he’s known her.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Didn’t say. Only that it’s chronic.”

They stand silent for a moment, both looking at her.

“Is it down here do you know?”

She glances at Hardy’s face and sees immediately that he’s had the same thought as her. She follows him back through to his office, and waits as he scrolls back through the email he’s been sent.

“Just outside Shaftesbury.”

“That’s maybe 45 miles, just over an hour’s drive.”

“You think maybe she visited her first?”
Ellie shrugs,

“Worth checking out? Hospital would have a record of any visitors.”

No-one at The Font is willing to talk about patients or visitors over the phone, so they drive out there. It’s the kind of self-consciously elegant and deliberately mysterious-looking building at the end of a long drive that annoys Ellie even before she’s gotten inside. She’s not sure why exactly, only that it might have something to do with people with lots of money and how they seem to hide their mentally ill away in places like this instead of living with them.

The manager does nothing to alleviate her feelings of animosity. Dr. Anita Hillier is a dead-ringer for a young Meryl Streep and wears the sort of high heels that by all rights should give you a nosebleed, and when Miller and Hardy walk into her office the disapproval in the slow once-over she gives Ellie’s blouse and cheap pantsuit is more than obvious.

“As I told you on the phone, we cannot give out any information about patients or their families. Residents here pay a great deal of money for their privacy and for the security of knowing that no-one - not even the police - can be made aware of their location.”

“And what if they’ve committed a crime?”

Ellie knows her voice betrays every bit of her irritation, but she’s thankful that Hardy seems every bit as pissed off as her at the doctor’s answer, and doesn’t attempt to rein her in.

“I’m sorry, is that what you’re suggesting has happened? What kind of crime?”

“We’re not at liberty to say, madam,” Hardy’s voice is clipped but perfectly polite, “What we’re trying to establish is if a woman found asphyxiated and then burned in her own car on Monday visited a patient in this facility in the days before her death.”

Hillier’s expression remains completely unchanged at his words, but there’s a subtle shift in her position that - were Ellie a less observant human being - she might mistake for impatience. Luckily for her though, she recognises a tell when she sees it.

“That seems to bother you, Ms. Hillier?”

The doctor’s pale blue eyes snap to her face in angry surprise,

“It doesn’t bother me. I’d seen the report on the news this morning, and was just surprised to realise that that’s who you’re here about.”

“Who? You mean you know Tao Tanaka?”

“I know of her, I don’t know her personally of course.”

“You’ve never met her?”

Hillier’s voice was icy,

“No, as I said.”

Hardy looks away, out of the window, and across the beautiful grounds. It’s a sunny day but there’s no-one out there, the place could be completely deserted for all they’d seen so far.
“So you never spoken to her by phone? She never visited her sister here?”

“No.”

“But her sister is a resident here?”

Anita Hillier’s eyes narrow and her lips thin to a hard line,

“No, Mr. Hardy, she is not.”

There’s a long pause, during which Miller likes to imagine that both she and Hardy are silently exerting their will as they continue to stare pointedly at the woman sat behind her desk in front of them. It seems like a minute passes, but in actual fact it’s probably only about twenty seconds.

“She was here, on and off - before and after I came - for about seven years, until about six months ago. Never for longer that 2 months, always self-referred and always discharging herself. She never received any visitors, and her bills were paid by her sister Ms Tanaka promptly in advance every time. That’s all I know I’m afraid.”

There’s a subtle look of triumph on her face, although it could be anger, Ellie isn’t entirely sure. What she is sure of though is that she isn’t telling the truth.

“So the last time you saw Aki was when she discharged herself from here six months ago? In February?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve heard nothing from her since? No reason to think she’s coming back?”

“No.”

She shifts in her seat again, and this time she knows Hardy sees it too.

“Is there something you’re not telling us, Ms Hillier?”

“It’s Doctor Hillier, detective, and I think I’ve said more than enough.”

“Doctor Hillier, need I remind you that this facility is part of an active investigation into a mysterious death? Or just who Ms Tanaka’s brother-in-law is? I’m guessing you know how easy it would be for me to go away, get a warrant for your records, come back here and effectively shut this place down completely while I’m doing so?” he raises an eyebrow pointedly, “Not to mention what’ll happen if any journalists were get wind of it.”

Hardy hasn’t moved towards her, but when he’s angry he effectively radiates a powerful don’t-fuck-with-me vibe that Ellie has always secretly admired, and watching her she clearly sees Hillier’s reserve falter under it.

“I haven’t heard from her, but one of our permanent resident, Kara - a woman she was close with I believe - recently received some mail from her.”

“What kind of mail?”

Ellie’s voice, she hopes, brooks as little bullshit as Hardy’s does. Hillier’s eyes move to her, and when she sighs it’s with a trace of impatience.

“It was a sheaf of sheet music.”
“From Aki Tanaka?”

“I assume so. The return address on the back was her’s,” she smiles acidly, “And before you ask me, that information I really cannot give you without a warrant, as I’m sure you understand. GDPR alone strictly forbids it.”

“How about the resident herself? Can we speak to her?”

“That particular resident would not be of much help to you, detective.”

“Maybe we should be the judge of that don’t you think?”

Anita Hillier’s smile as she tilts her head back and looks up at them both is thin, but - Ellie can’t help but notice - quite infuriatingly and obviously smug.

“No, detective I don’t think. I know.”

And off their look her smug smile widens even further, so much so Miller feels an almost irrepressible desire to punch her.

“Kara is alogic, detective. She has no language.”
It’s fairly typical of Hardy, she thinks, that he still demands to see Kara anyway. He’s like her in that way, someone tells him ‘you can’t’ or ‘it’s no use’ it only makes him dig in his heels deeper. It therefore annoys her endlessly - and by extension him too - that Dr. Hillier is right.

Kara Austin is conscious, upright and breathing, but that’s pretty much the only external indication that she’s alive at all. When they enter her room, she’s sitting silently in a chair staring out of the big bay window across the lawn, her face devoid of any expression, and fifteen minutes later she’s still hasn’t moved an inch.

“She been like this long?”

Ellie keeps her voice soft, even though there doesn’t really seem any reason too. It’s obvious the young woman is completely unmoved by their presence or anything they’ve said since they entered. The male nurse, Jay, who’s been asked to accompany them answers her in a professional but not unkind tone.

“She’s been non-verbal her whole life. Lived at home with her mother until she died about four years ago, after that she came here. Until pretty recently she was always quite active though. This…” he looks over at her, frowns, “This is fairly new.”

“Active how?”

Hardy sounds odd, scratchy and almost emotional, and she looks at him searchingly before realising it probably has something to do with the girl’s age. Kara is roughly the same age as Daisy, the same long straight hair, pretty face. It’s hard to imagine how very different the two girl’s lives are, but she knows that’s what he must be doing.

“She’s always loved to use her hands, she loves painting, weaving. We have dance and movement classes and she’s always loved those too,” he smiles, “Put some music on and she’d always be the first up on the floor. It was guaranteed to get her smiling.”

“What about other residents? How’s she with them? Any particular attachments?”

Dr. Hillier hadn’t said anything to the nurse before she’d left them, except to instruct him where they were and were not to be taken, and she knows Hardy is angling for any information at all he can get about Tanaka’s sister.

“She spent a lot of time with a female resident who is here on and off, although I could never figure out why exactly. They just seemed to click. When Kara first came here she’d spend a lot of time in the dayroom, and there’s a piano there. The first time Aki was there when she was, her face just lit up when she started to play. It was lovely to see.”

He smiles again, obviously moved by the memory,

“After that, she’d go there whenever she played. Or she’d go to Aki’s room and fetch her. It was fantastic really. For both of them. To see them helping each other.”

“So they were close. She ever try and say anything to her, that you heard?”

“Who Kara??”
Jay frowns,

“No, like I said. Her speech centre is damaged, they think as a result of oxygen starvation at birth. That's not something you recover from.”

Ellie nods, carefully framing her next question,

“And the other resident, Aki Tanaka. Dr. Hillier said she left in February?”

“That’s right. Although that wasn’t unusual. Kara is fairly used to her coming and going now I think. And the tapes help of course.”

“She sent her tapes?”

She knows Hardy’s voice well enough to know he’s trying to hide his sudden interest, but she can hear it in every syllable, as well as in the sudden narrowing of his brown eyes as he looks at the nurse.

“Yes, and sheet music. Pretty much every month. I’m guessing that it’s her playing, I mean, I don’t know much about it but they’re obviously not professional recordings. And sometimes she says something at the start.”

“She talks on them?”

“Yes, just a few words usually. The name of the piece, and she signs off at the end usually. It’s really sweet.”

Ellie’s eyes are moving around the room now, and after a moment she sees them. Over on the desk there’s an old fashioned tape-player - what they used to call ‘a ghetto-blaster’ when she was at school - and next to it is a shelf lined with a neat row of cassette tapes. Stepping over as casually she can, she reaches down and picks up an open case.

“Blimey, this takes me back! Look Hardy, C90s! Remember these!”

With his hands in his pockets, Hardy walks over to join her. It’s a smooth enough bit of acting that she’s pretty certain Jay doesn’t notice a thing.

“Didn’t think they even made these any more,” he turns his head to one side, “And you say she sends them every month?”

“Pretty much,” the young nurse nods, “That one came this morning in fact. We were just listening to it before you came in.”

“It came today?”

The sharp interest of Hardy’s voice is unmistakable now, and she can see in his expression that Jay notices it too. Crossing his arms across his chest, he frowns,

“Sorry, but Dr. Hillier didn’t say before why it is you’re here. Can I ask what it is you’re after exactly?”

Hardy turns over the tape in his hands, but doesn’t look at him.

“I’m afraid we can’t discuss details of an ongoing investigation.”

“An investigation into what exactly?”
“As I said…”

“Yeah, I heard what you said. What has any of this got to do with Kara?”

There’s a tense silence, in which Ellie’s casts her eyes quickly around the desk area. She spots what she’s looking for almost at the exact moment their young nurse friend finally loses his patience with them.

“OK, I think I’m going to have to ask you to leave now.”

She sees Hardy open his mouth to speak, winding himself up to get pissy with him, but before he can start she digs him sharply in the ribs with her elbow.

“OK well that’s fine, we’re all done here anyway aren’t we Hardy?”

And herding her partner as subtly she can towards the door, she gives the nurse her biggest brightest and friendliest of smiles as she hands him her card.

“We’d really appreciate it though if you’d give us a call if another tape turns up. And thank you again so much. You’ve been ever so helpful.”

They make their way swiftly along the corridor to the main lobby without saying a word, although Ellie can feel Alec’s curious irritation the whole way. It’s not until they get safely to their car though that she slides the padded envelope she’d taken from the waste bin out from under her jacket to show him.

“Miller, you little genius,” he says breathily, and she grins.

“Return address on the back is in Balham. Want to risk the drive?”

His eyes on her face are bright and - she likes to imagine - full of admiration.

“What about wee Fred? Yer dad be ok to mind him? Chances are we wouldn’t make it back before tonight.”

Ellie grimaces,

“He hates putting him to bed and he’s done it twice this week.”

“Lucy then?”

“I can call and ask her,” she hesitates, “Maybe we’d be better staying the night though? Find a cheap hotel and start back in the morning?”

Hardy’s eyes soften a little more, and a trace of a smile pulls at his lips.

“Doesn’t have to be that cheap,” he says.

“Well, y’know what I mean.”

She can’t help smirking a bit as well,

“I mean, we could say we’re saving money and get a twin I suppose? No-one’d question that.”

Pausing with one hand on the car, Alec frowns,
“Probably not the best idea. If we’d learned anything from experience that is.”

“No. No, I suppose not.”

She tries to keep the note of disappointment out of her voice as she opens the car door and gets inside. Letting Hardy take the driver’s side, she gets out her phone to call Lucy.

“Suppose adjoining rooms isn’t out of the question though,” he says lightly, as he turns the ignition. “Might need to work on some stuff later. Be easier if we’re next door.”

She glances at him and there’s a tight little warmth in her chest as she nods,

“That’s true.”

“Maybe get some dinner somewhere first?”

“Or we could just order room service? That way we wouldn’t have to…y’know…leave the room once we got there?” Ellie risks, her cheeks flushing a little.

Giving her a sideways look, Hardy smiles as he pulls away.

“That might be the best idea you’ve had all day Miller,” he says.

It’s almost a three hour drive to Balham, during which she spends most of her time on the phone. Finding out the name of the owner and landlord of the address on Aki’s parcel is one thing, getting him to agree to meet them there that evening is quite another. In the end, Ellie calls DAC Atherton and explains the situation, and - give him his due - the bloke certainly doesn’t muck about. She’s no idea what strings he pulls, but within twenty minutes he calls her back with his assurance that Mr. Gilroy will be there on the doorstep to meet them when they arrive.

“Also, it seems that the flat is rented in Tao’s name, so you won’t need a warrant if the sister’s not home. Although she’s on the tenancy agreement, it’s actually listed on Tao’s tax forms as a second residence, so you’ll be legally safe to enter. Any problems though, just give me a bell.”

“Brilliant, thank you sir.”

His voice is steady and reassuring, and Ellie can’t help feeling she definitely misjudged him before. Not such a useless stuffed shirt after all.

“I’ve brought George up to speed with what you’ve found so far. He was surprised to hear the sister wasn’t a permanent resident at The Font. He’s never met her in the seven years they’ve been married, says Tao led him to believe she was pretty much catatonic.”

“Ask him if there’s any chance we can see Waterford tomorrow.”

Hardy’s weaving his way through London rush hour traffic, but she knows he’s been listening to every word spoken. She relays his message and Atherton makes a noncommittal sound.

“I can ask, but as you can imagine his calendar’s pretty full at the moment.”

“We’d really appreciate it sir. Depending on what we find at the flat, it’d be useful to get hold of any information he has about the sister.”
Atherton makes another sound, but this time it sounds like agreement,

“You really think she went to see her before she did it?”

Ellie shakes her head,

“I honestly don’t know sir, but we still have almost 2 days unaccounted for and no other leads so far.”

“OK, I’ll see what I can do. Keep in touch, DS Miller.”

They get to the flat around 4.30 and, true to his word, Sandy Gilroy is stood out front. He’s a tall balding man with a defiantly sour expression, which Ellie can’t help but think DAC Atherton put there when he ensured his compliance.

“I live in Wimbledon,” he says as if to make it very clear just how inconvenient the whole thing is for him, “I have key agents who deal with my properties. I’ve never even met this woman.”

“Thank you Mr. Gilroy. We really appreciate you coming all this way.”

Ellie smiles at him as warmly as she knows how, but as Hardy’s glower most likely negates any goodwill she trying to exude, it ultimately seems a bit pointless.

“We going up then?”

Hardy steps aside to let Gilroy pass, giving her a look as he does so. When she glares at him in disapproval, he just rolls his eyes.

The flat is behind one of a row of dinghy looking front doors, all an identical red in colour. Broken plant pots sit outside some of them, garden ornaments and full cat litter trays. It’s not the most up-market of places, and when they reach Aki’s front door it’s no exception. Her’s is the last of the row, and outside it sits an old disused rusty BBQ set and an old sun chair.

“That shouldn’t be there,” Gilroy mutters irritably as he pushes at it with his foot, “They’re not allowed to have barbecues out on the walkway.”

He rings the bell and they wait. There’s no sound from inside and after a minute or two, Hardy nods towards the lock.

“If you don’t mind?”

Sighing audibly, the older man pulls a bunch of keys out of his pocket and sorts through them till he finds the right one. When he opens the front door, he takes a step backwards towards the railing, and Ellie looks at him in surprise.

“You’re not coming in?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Any particular reason for that?”

Gilroy shifts uncomfortably,
“The policeman who called me before said you were investigating a suicide.”

“Down in Dorset, yes.”

“Well,” he lifts his chin, “I’d just prefer you went in alone. If anyone’s lying dead in there, I’ve have no desire to see it thank you.”

Her partner makes an short derisive sound like a snort, and Gilroy glares at him,

“You may be used to seeing awful things detective, but I can assure you that I am not. And as long as they don’t damage my property, I have no interest whatsoever in what my tenants choose to do - or not do - in their private lives.”

“Happy enough to collect the rent every month though eh?” Hardy says archly, and shooting Ellie another look, he steps inside. After a moment, she follows.

It’s a simply furnished place. Cleaner and tidier on the inside than the out, and by the looks of it, well cared for.

“Ms Tanaka? Aki?”

Ellie’s the one to call out first, but she knows even before she does so that the flat is empty. She can hear a fridge humming in the kitchen, and the special stillness that a home always seems to have when no-one in it is breathing. The carpets and kitchen surfaces are clean though, and on the windowsill in the living room a row of lush-looking potted plants that look healthy and recently watered.

They walk back along the hallway to the two open doors there. The first - a box-room - is completely empty save for an old sofa-bed and side-table, but in the second the bed is neatly made up with fresh linen, a row of well-worn stuffed animals lined up on the coverlet. It’s very tidy, but unlike the other room it looks lived in. On the dressing table a hairbrush and some make-up are thrown down casually as if someone has just used them, and beside that is a small pile of mail.

Sorting through it, Hardy purses his lips.

“S’all just bank statements. Utilities.”

“None of it opened though.”

“No.”

Miller frowns,

“Bit odd.”

Stepping away from him, she walks across the room to the closet. Inside is just what you’d expect of a thirty-plus woman who lives in outer London. A row of fairly nondescript dresses and trousers, a few pairs of mid-range shoes. There’s no obvious gaps in the rail, or in the drawers full of underwear beside her bed when she checks. On top of the wardrobe there’s a pair of suitcases covered with a thin layer of dust.

“If she’s gone away, she hasn’t taken any luggage with her.”

“Mm.”
Hardy’s still standing at the desk looking round the room, but now his hands are on his hips. Miller’s seen that look before, and she waits patiently for a minute to see if he’ll volunteer what he’s thinking or if she’ll have to ask.

“Why are there no pictures?”

“Of what?”

He looks pointedly at the bed, the stuffed toys,

“Those are old, she’s had them since she was a kid. So she’s sentimental, rose-tints her childhood even. So why no pictures of family? Friends?”

He turns around again, as if searching for something,

“And why no music?”

Ellie shrugs,

“Perhaps she’s got an iPod?”

Hardy gives her a look,

“She sends Kara Austin C90 cassette tapes Miller. Pretty sure she’s not an iPod kind of a girl.”

“OK, yeah, I’d agree with you there. But maybe she records them somewhere else,” she has a sudden thought and looks at him triumphantly, “She’d have to anyway wouldn’t she? No piano here.”

“No.”

He nods as if he agrees with her, but it’s obvious from his expression he’d already had the exact same thought.

They walk back through to the living room, then through to the kitchen. In the fridge, there’s a pint of milk that’s still fresh and when Ellie pulls out a pack of bacon the sell-by date is still a week off.

“She’s been back here in the last twenty-four hours at least. This bacon’s new and there was no mail on the mat when we came in. There’d be junk mail every day here.”

She pushes open the swing bin and reaches inside, before holding up what she’s found with another grin of triumph.

“See! Today’s free paper. She’s been back here this morning.”

Hardy’s eyes move from the paper to settle on her face, and she recognises the exact same curious, excited intensity in them that she’s feeling now herself.

As Gilroy locks up the flat after them, Hardy walks next door and knocks. After a moment or two, a woman answers. Behind her the TV is blaring with some kid’s show and from the living room there’s a sound of young children playing.

“DI Alec Hardy and DS Ellie Miller.”
Hardy shows her his ID and indicates Ellie with his head,

“Just wondered if you’d seen your neighbour Ms Tanaka today?”

The woman shakes her head definitively, she’s distracted but - Ellie can tell - more than a bit curious.

“No, but then I was out all morning. Got back after the school run about 4.”

Craning her neck forward she looks along the walkway to Aki’s door,

“She alright is she? Didn’t know if there’d been a problem?”

“Why’d you say that?”

The woman shrugs,

“Just a lot of shouting at the weekend, her and another woman yelling at each other. I was just going to call someone when they packed it in. Heard the door slam about half an hour after, and then nothing.”

Looking at Ellie sideways, Hardy opens his notebook,

“And what time was this?”

“About seven thirty, maybe eight on Saturday evening. I was putting the little one down, and we could hear them through the wall. Something about her being ungrateful,” she wrinkles her nose, “After everything I’ve done for you! Something like that.”

“And then you heard one of them leave, at what? About eight thirty?”

“About that, yeah.”

There’s a sound and a toddler comes up behind her, tugging at her skirt. Reaching down she hoists him up onto her hip, and flashing the kid a smile, her partner nods.

“Well, I can see you’ve got yer hands full here. If you don’t mind though, DS Miller here will leave you a card, and if you hear her come home you can give us a call.”

As Ellie hands her the card the toddler reaches for it with sticky hands, and they both laugh as they carefully extricate it from his grasp.

“He’s a poppet. How old is he?” Ellie says, and sees Hardy’s eyes move to her like he’s working out if she’s trying to get more information or just being her usual slightly soppy self.

“Just coming up 2.”

“Well, he’s gorgeous. Wish mine were still so cuddly!”

The other woman smiles at her warmly, and as they turn to walk away, she calls out.

“So I’ll call you if she comes back tonight? Even if it’s late?”

Ellie nods,

“Yes please. Only…maybe don’t say anything to her, just let us know she’s back.”

“And what about the other one?”
“The other one?”

“The other Chinese woman?”

She sees Hardy blink at the woman’s mistake, but wisely - for him at least - he doesn’t correct her.

“The other woman was also Asian?”

“Yeah, I mean…I assumed they’re related or something? I mean, they look really alike…not being racist or anything,” she flushes, "Anyway she comes round every few weeks or so to collect the mail."

“When Aki’s away you mean?”

The woman shakes her head,

“No, I mean she’s never really away. I see her virtually every day. She’s not that friendly, but she always says hi at least. Helps me upstairs with the pushchair sometimes.”

Ellie frowns at Hardy, and then turns back to look at the neighbour.

“And you’ve been here how long?”

“Three years next month.”

After Gilroy has gone, they sit in the car together in silence for a while. The sound of rush hour traffic dims to a constant low rumble when the windows are up, but it’s still there. Reminding her of where they are, so far from her home where all she can ever hear is birds and the distant sound of waves.

“Think she’s talking out of her arse?”

Hardy gives his head a tiny shake,

“Don’t know why she would be.”

“Maybe to sound important? Like she knows what’s going on? Could be she missed her being away.”

“She’s lived there three years, Miller.”

Ellie taps the dash,

“So how do we explain it then? If Aki isn’t ever away, then what? It’s Tao going to The Font, not Aki? Would explain the piano playing of course, but bugger all else. And what about the tape Kara got today? Postmark on it says yesterday.”

Alec half-shrugs as he starts the car,

“Maybe Aki posts it off for her? After she finds out that Tao’s dead?”

“Bloody hell. Is it just me, or is this making less and less sense as we go on?”

Hardy looks at her as he pulls away from the kerb, but his expression is as lacking in certainty as she
knows her’s is.

“No. It’s not just you, Miller,” he says.
The hotel room is damned sight nicer than the last one they shared, and a fair bit bigger too. Or at least the bed is, Ellie doesn’t really care much about the rest of it. As Hardy heads into the bathroom, she kicks off her shoes and throws herself down on the coverlet, stretching her arms above her head and wriggling luxuriously. After a moment or two she hears the shower start up, and a warm prickle of something akin to nervous excitement shivers its way down her spine.

Reaching over to the nightstand, she grabs the room service menu,

“Shall I order us some food?”

There’s no answer, so after a second she slides off the bed and pads over to the bathroom door,

“Hardy?”

“Wha?”

“I said, shall I order us some food?”

“I can’t hear you.”

She cracks the door and steam pours out. Part of her feels like it’s taking things a bit too briskly considering the speed they’ve been moving at so far, but she can’t resist opening it a bit wider. Hardy’s face as glances over at her in surprise from behind the fogged shower screen is an absolute picture.

“Oh right! It’s like that now is it?”

He looks a bit uncomfortable, despite her more than obvious appreciation of his naked backside, but after a moment or two seems to relax. Pushing his wet hair off his face, he raises an eyebrow at her questioningly.

“You seen enough yet?”

Her cheeks are a bit pink, but she manages a grin at that.

“Never thought of you as having a nice arse to be honest. Happy to be surprised.”

Hardy screws up his face,

“Oh you’d be amazed the things I can hide underneath a well-cut suit.

“Like a sense of humour you mean?”

“Oh aye, that’s it. Pick on a man when he’s naked.”

He shuts off the water, and reaches back for a towel to wrap around his hips. As he steps out of the cubicle, she can feel her entire body flush with heat from head to foot. So far all they’ve ever done is kiss fully clothed, and suddenly here he is - her partner and direct superior - half-naked and dripping wet, clad only a bath-towel, standing just inches away from of her. They stand looking at each other for a moment, and she sees something like anxiety flit briefly across his face.

“I should probably brush my teeth.”
“What for?”

“Well… I mean… I’ve been drinking nothing but tea all day an’ I…”

He hesitates, but before he can think of something else equally as stupid to say, she closes the gap between them and kisses him. It’s the first time she’s done it entirely off her own bat, and she can feel her cheeks burning a bit at her own shamelessness. For a moment, her arms hang uncertainly by her side as he leans back against the sink, clearly enjoying the fact she’s the one taking the initiative for a change. Then his hands come up to sit lightly at her waist, before sliding behind her to the small of her back. What started out as something hesitant and full of sweetness, changes suddenly as Hardy shifts his feet apart on the tile and pulls her in towards him.

His skin tastes of soap, and the stubble on his chin rasps against her cheek as he moves his lips to a spot just under her ear.

“So… d’you want to wait a bit to order food?”

“Mm, was just thinking that.”

She can feel her heart hammering in her chest. She’d like to imagine his is too, but thinking about that only reminds her of sitting beside him that day in the hospital. His face pale and wan, his freckles standing out stark against his skin. Luckily for her the image is quickly dispelled, when Hardy reaches up to undo the top two buttons of her blouse and slides a hand inside to rest his palm - flat and warm - on her breastbone.

“You’re shaking,” he says, and she nods before reaching up to lay her own hand to his chest.

“So are you.”

His eyes are on her - clear but so so serious - and seem a far deeper brown than usual. The hand at his side moves forward, twining fingers with her own.

“You’re sure about this?”

He leans back fractionally against the sink, so she’s forced to look right at him,

“This’ll change things you know.”

She frowns,

“Think I don’t know that? They’ve already changed.”

“This’ll change them more.”

“I know.”

“Do you?”

His eyebrows draw together, and there’s a plaintive quality in his expression as the hand resting on her collarbone comes up to caress her cheek.

“We’ve both been lonely a long time, Ellie. I just don’t want this to be something you end up regretting.”

She knows what he’s doing of course, because it’s the same thing he always does. He’s the smart one after all, the sober one. The one who uses his head instead of his heart like her, always balancing
them out, and she loves that about him. Loves it because she knows what it costs him, what he puts aside in order to always make sure she’s ok, that she’s kept steady on course.

“It won’t be,” she says firmly, and hearing the resolve in her voice he nods.

“You’re sure?”

“I am,” she says, “I am very very sure.”

And pressing forward she kisses him softly again, and then again and again, until he’s sighing and smiling against her lips.

“Now for fuck’s sake Hardy, please just stop talking will you, and take me to bed.”

Much like their first kiss, the sex isn’t at all (not one tiny bit) what she was expecting either. Ellie can’t remember the last time she made love with the lights on, or felt so utterly unselfconscious about it, or so completely safe.

Hardy undresses her like he’s opening a gift; slowly and attentively, with small touches of fingertips and lips to skin, like he’s afraid she’ll disappear at any moment. And Ellie kisses him in much the same way, like she’s reassuring herself, and every time she does so he breathes into her, like he’s being reminded of something wonderful.

They take their sweet time about it, because they can do now. No kids are going to knock down the door or come home crying needing comfort, and no-one’s going to call because they’ve both - in silent accord - turned off their bloody mobiles for the night and chucked them aside on the floor. They don’t talk much, because the time for talking is definitely done. For four years they’ve done nothing but talk - argue, bitch, snipe and tease - and suddenly it all seems like such a ridiculous waste.

Tangled up in each other, with eyes locked until the intensity of feeling is almost too much, Ellie knows with absolute certainty that Hardy is right. Everything between them is going to change. Not because they’ve done this - finally gotten naked and screwed - but because when he finally comes, pressed deep inside her and looking into her face, she knows that he’s in love with her. Completely and utterly. And that letting her see that makes him more vulnerable than he’s probably ever been in his entire life.

When they eventually do order room service, it’s well after 9. She’s in the shower when Hardy calls down, so is a bit taken aback when the tray arrives at the door.

“Bloody hell, are you seriously going to eat that!”?

Wrapped snugly in a hotel robe, Hardy is balancing a plate containing a pile of fries on his lap, and a vast burger is already halfway to his mouth.

“I’m hungry! What?”

“Nothing, just never seen you eat anything more substantial than a round of toast and some crisps. Bit of a shock is all.”

He narrows his eyes at her as he bites into the bun, but there’s a sparkle in them,
“The fries are to share,” he says with his mouth full.

“I should bloody well hope so.”

They eat the food with the TV on, sat shoulder to shoulder against the banked pillows. His bare feet are crossed at the ankle, but after a minute or two he hooks one of them over her’s and when she looks over at him his eyes are warm and soft.

“You ok?” he asks quietly, and she knows there’s many layers to the question but she nods anyway. Because right now she is, in every way that matters.

It’s not until they’ve put the plates outside the door, that she thinks to finally check her phone and curses out loud when she sees the five missed calls, all from the same mobile number.

“Oh bollocks, I think the neighbour’s been ringing me.”

She presses voicemail and puts it on speaker, looking round on the floor for her discarded clothes as she does so.

“Message…left at…7:35 PM…”

“Bollocks!!”

“DS Miller, it’s Natalie Dalton? You left me your card earlier? You said I should call if I heard my neighbour come back…”

They’re dressed and in the car within twenty minutes. The drive back over to the Balham flats takes longer than it did earlier, but they’re there within another fifteen at most. Taking the stairs two at a time, Hardy makes it to the top before she does and is at Aki’s front door before she’s even had time to get her breath back. As he alternates between ringing the bell and knocking, the door next to them opens and Natalie Dalton puts her head out.

“You took your time, I called you three hours ago.”

Hardy shoots her one of his blackest looks, which she seems somehow immune to, and then knocks again, harder.

“Pointless knocking, she’s already gone.”

“What?”

“Heard footsteps past the front about 7:30 and her door go, then about 9:30 door slammed again,” she looks from one of them to the other, “I came out to say something, maybe get her to hang around till you got here, but she was already going down in the lift.”

“Bloody hell!”

“Sorry, nothing I could do.”

The neighbour shrugs, and Miller can’t help feeling she looks a bit smug. There’s a definite possibility though that she’s just seeing it because she’s so bloody angry at herself, and looking at Hardy she knows he feels the same.

“Don’t suppose she’ll be back again tonight,” he says to her sourly, and Natalie pipes up again.
“Doubt she’s coming back at all. Had two suitcases with her.”

“I thought you said you didn’t see her go?”

Ellie frowns, and the neighbour motions towards the railing,

“She was parked out back. Saw her wheeling them over to a car.”

“D’you notice the make, model?” Hardy says with a touch of impatience.

“It was a Peugeot Estate, newish, dark blue. Never seen it before.”

“You never saw her with a car before?”

Natalie shakes her head,

“Never, she always took the bus.”

When they walk down to the car park, there’s a CCTV camera covering the area and after a few minutes wrangling with Sandy Gilroy again on the phone, they get a number to call for the local security firm who monitors it. Gilroy is none too pleased when they ask him if he wouldn’t mind driving back over from Wimbledon again - “Yes sir, this evening if you wouldn’t mind” - but he’s there with the keys anyway within the hour.

Inside Aki Tanaka’s flat the closets have all been emptied, the fridge cleaned and the rubbish bagged up for recycling. Together, she and Hardy stand side by side in the bedroom staring at the open drawers, and the sense of guilty angry frustration she knows they’re both feeling is almost palpable.

“What d’you make of that?”

Alec points to the bed where the row of stuffed animals sit - just as before - only now on a stripped mattress. Ellie shakes her head,

“Not so sentimental after all maybe?”

He frowns and then, as if struck with a sudden thought, turns and walks quickly through from the bedroom to the living room. Approaching the pot plants on the windowsill, he presses his fingers into the dirt of each one.

“She hasn’t watered them.”

“Oh?”

“So she leaves behind toys she’s had since she was a kid, all the plants to die, but she cleans the fridge and empties all the closets?”

“You think she’s coming back?”

“No, I think whoever cleared out this flat, it wasn’t someone who cared about plants and teddy bears.”

Miller shakes her head again, and it’s a second before she catches up with what her partner’s thinking,
They’re stood side by side again at Natalie Dalton’s door when she answers it, but this time it’s Ellie that gets her question off first.

“Hi again! Sorry! This might sound a bit odd, but when you said you looked over the railing and saw Ms Tanaka walking over to her car, are you absolutely sure that it was her?”

The neighbour looks baffled for a minute, even a bit annoyed, but then she frowns.

“Actually, it’s weird you say that, because she had on heels. I could hear them on the tarmac. The other girl wore flats. Made a joke once when we were waiting for the bus about being short, but not being able to wear them. The one who comes to take the mail away, she always has heels on.”

“And they look similar from a distance? You said before they were both Asian?”

“Yeah, I mean…” she shifts uncomfortable, “Not that I’m saying they all look the same. But she was the same height, same hair, y’know?”

“So it could have been the other woman you saw, taking the suitcases over to the Peugeot?”

“Like I said, they looked similar. It could have been.”

She shrugs and Ellie thinks she looks tired suddenly, maybe even a bit embarrassed,

“Look, can I go? I need to get to bed. Littlest one’s usually up at five.”

“Oh course, sorry to keep you Natalie. We’ll be in touch.”

Miller gives her a warm smile, which she shuts off immediately the second the door closes. Hardy looks at her,

“What are you thinking, Miller?”

“Bloody hell, I don’t know. Like you I thought it was Tao collecting the mail, picking up her bills, now I’ve got no bloody idea.”

“Some other woman Tao was paying to keep an eye on her?”

“Maybe.”

Ellie chews on her bottom lip, thinking, but when Hardy doesn’t offer anything else she looks over at him,

“So what now?”

“Might be the CCTV shows reg plate for the car? We track our mystery woman down with that, and then hopefully Aki.”

“Won’t be able to do that tonight though. Security place is only manned till midnight.”

Hardy sighs, and she can see the tension in the lines of his face and his shoulders. It’s hard to believe looking at him that it’s the same man she’d been laid in bed with just over an hour ago, eating chips and laughing at Graham Norton. Reaching over, she takes hold of his hand and squeezes,
“Hey. It’ll be ok. Tomorrow’s a new day and all that?”

He offers her a grim smile, and it’s just a pale shadow of the one from earlier but it’s something at least.

“Shall we head back then, get some sleep?”

He grunts and when he doesn’t look at her for a moment, she touches his hand again.

“Hardy?”

“I’m just thinking…maybe it’d be better if we slept in our own rooms when we get back. Get a good night’s sleep so our heads are straight for tomorrow.”

His eyes come up and rest on her and they’re serious again, like before, and yet again she’s reminded of their difference. He’s ‘head over heart’ always, and she knows that he’d never forgive himself if they’re being together means making more mistakes like this one. It makes perfect sense of course, so she’s not sure why it bothers her, or why - instead of saying so - she nods instead and says:

“Oh ok, yes. You’re right. Probably best.”

They drive back to the hotel in silence, and when they say goodnight at their adjoining door and she closes it behind her, Ellie feels the tight little ball of tension she’d had before in her chest return. Only this time it doesn’t feel warm or nice or exciting in the slightest.
Episode 3.2

Although she’s set the alarm on her phone before she falls asleep, Ellie is woken instead by a soft but insistent tapping on the connecting door between her room and Hardy’s. Rolling onto her back, she picks up her mobile and squints at the display - 06:45 - before she remembers where she is. Anxiety squeezes her throat shut for a moment when she recalls everything that happened the previous night, and she has to take a steadying breath before she speaks.

“It’s unlocked.”

The door cracks open and Hardy leans awkwardly into the room. He’s shaved and partly dressed already in the suit he wore yesterday, his hair damp from a shower, and Ellie feels suddenly self-conscious of her sweaty, washed-out pyjamas.

“You were up early.”

Hardy shrugs,

“Not sure I slept to be honest.”

The trademark shadows under his eyes that have been absent for a while now are making a comeback, and she’s not all happy to see them. He looks anxious and tired, and she’s fairly sure that she’s to blame for one if not both of those emotional states.

“How about you? You sleep ok?”

“Out like a light as soon as my head hit the pillow,” Ellie gives him a faint smile, “Hardly surprising though, bit of an active day all round…”

There’s a beat and she thinks sees a fleeting trace of something that might be embarrassment on his face, but as they continue to look at each other his expression softens. Opening the door wider, he walks over to the bed and lowers himself to sit beside her on the mattress. As he holds her gaze, his eyes are the same intense dark brown they were the night before, and her skin prickles with warmth at the memory.

“Ellie…” he begins softly, and her heart lurches in her chest.

“Oh god Hardy. Please don’t tell me that you regret last night, because I’m not sure I could han…”

She doesn’t get to finish her sentence though because he leans in and kisses her, one hand moving to cover hers on the bed while the other cups the base of her skull. It’s dizzying, but as she breathes him in - soap and the faint tang of shaving cream - she feels her heart-rate slow. Reassured by everything she knows he’s doing his best to transmit without words. When they break apart, he keeps his hand on the back of her neck,

“Y’know, for someone so smart you can be so…”

He frowns at her but there’s no heat in it, only the same open fondness she sees in his face every day now.

“I don’t regret anything. At all. To be honest this…”
He indicates the space between them,

“This is maybe the best thing that’s happened to me in…I dunno…” he shakes his head, “In a long time anyways. And no, no I don’t regret any of it. Last night, or before that, or anything else that happens from now on.”

He looks so utterly sincere that Ellie can’t help but smile at him. Wrapping her fingers a little more firmly around his, she looks down at their hands on the bed.

“You’re worried though, I can tell. About how it’s going to affect working together.”

“Yeah, of course. Of course I am.”

Hardy sits back, pushing a hand through his damp hair with a look of frustration.

“Last night we dropped the ball, Miller. We can’t do that again, not if we want this, any of this, to work.”

He sighs, and the hand holding hers squeezes before he lets go.

“If we screw this case up - any case - because we let what’s going on with us take priority, I’m not sure either of us will be able to forgive themselves.”

They don’t stop for breakfast, despite Ellie’s protestations that it’s included in the room rate and ‘bloody hell she’s hungry even if he isn’t’. As penance she makes Hardy drive, while she gulps mouthfuls of boiling coffee from a takeaway cup and bolts down the croissants she managed to nick from the buffet table as they went past.

As soon as her mouth is empty, she calls DAC Atherton again to see if he’s made any progress getting them in to see George Waterford. He’s cagey but positive, telling her Waterford has made a gap in his schedule if they can get to his offices between nine and ten. Checking her watch, Ellie groans inwardly. It’s almost 08:00 already, and their plan to try and see the CCTV footage before making their way back into central London through rush hour traffic is looking more and more unfeasible.

In the end they made a joint decision. Seeing Waterford seems like it might yield the most and who knows if they’ll get the chance to see him face to face again, so they bag the security firm and head towards Whitehall instead.

As they’re given their ID badges by security, there’s a scuffle in the foyer behind them and several people from the crowd of protesters who’ve shouldered their way in are forcibly ejected. As they turn to watch, a cheery voice pipes up from behind them,

“Good morning! You must be DI Hardy and DS Miller! Alan Jameson. Sorry about all that.”

Waterford’s PA is a polished-looking young man in his 20s, with a suit that looks like it probably cost as much as Ellie’s car.

“Anti-slavery and human trafficking rally. A cause Mr. Waterford is extremely passionate about
of course, but there’s obviously a lot of frustration at how slowly the wheels of Westminster turn.”

His smile is little too white and wide for Ellie’s taste, and judging by the look on Hardy’s face he’s making the same judgement. They shake his hand just the same though, and thankfully it’s nowhere near as clammy as it looked to be.

“I’m afraid George has been delayed in the House, but he should be with you in a short while. If you’d like to come this way though, he’s said you’re very welcome to wait in his chambers.”

They’re left in an impressive-looking wood-panelled office, while another dazzling-looking young person - Amelia - goes off to fetch them both a cup of tea. Watching the girl through the glass of the double-doors as she walks away, Alec gives a nod towards her retreating back to indicate Ellie should keep watch, before quietly stepping behind Waterford’s desk.

“Hardy!!”

She hisses at him in a kind of anxious annoyance. He’s only looking at the pictures there though, picking up each one and examining it carefully. He makes a disapproving face,

“On holiday a lot.”

“Well yes, I’m sure they can afford it!”

“Not exactly environmentally conscious though is it? I mean, the way he’s always bleating on about the PM’s carbon footprint all the time, you’d think the bloke rode everywhere on a pushbike.”

He picks up another picture and squints at it, before turning it towards her,

“How d’you think she looks there?”

Ellie blinks, confused,


“No, I mean - d’you think she looks happy?”

“Oh bloody hell Hardy, I don’t know. She looks…like she’s hates having her picture taken. Besides, you know as well as I do whether someone looks happy or not on the outside means bugger all about what’s actually going on in their head.”

Her partner makes a small grunt of agreement in the back of his throat, and after a moment carefully replaces the frame. There’s a sudden rattle of a door-handle, and he just has time to step out from behind George Waterford’s chair before the wooden door at the back of the room opens, and the man himself steps through.

“Good afternoon detectives, DS Miller and…DI Hardy wasn’t it? You’ll be happy to know my friend Clive Atherton speaks very highly of both of you.”

Waterford is a tall, slightly-build man with sandy hair and the kind of wind-chafed pink complexion that looks like he spends plenty of time outdoors, but rarely enjoys it. Giving them a thin smile, he offers first her and then Alec his hand, before taking a seat behind his desk. He seems jittery, Ellie thinks, but then considers that it may just be grief sitting below the surface.

“We were surprised to find you back at work so soon, Mr. Waterford.”

Hardy’s comment doesn’t lack empathy, but it’s pretty bald nevertheless and she gives him a
warning look. Waterford seems unperturbed by it though,

“Yes, to be honest I’m not sure what I’m doing. Here or at home. I feel as if I’ve been in a daze for the last 3 days, but one has to continue to function doesn’t one?”

Ellie nods sympathetically, watching him. His eyes seem glassy and a little unfocused, and she can’t help wondering if he’s been prescribed something that’s keeping his emotions in check.

“I hope you don’t mind us coming in. I know you’ve already told DAC Atherton everything you can remember about the evening your wife disappeared.”

“Yes, although there wasn’t much to say to be honest. Tao has…had pilates class every Saturday afternoon at 1pm, and often she’ll go for a drink afterwards. By the time I’d realised she hadn’t come back it was nearly 6, and her phone was going straight to voicemail.”

“And did you check if she’d gone to class as usual?”

“Yes…well the police did. She hadn’t, and actually her instructor said she’d not been coming for months,” he frowns, “It’s all very confusing.”

She and Hardy exchange a look, and she knows instantly that they’re both thinking the same thing, it’s the sort of lie that usually indicates an affair. Clearing his throat, her partner takes out his notebook.

“So when exactly was the last time you saw her? Before she left for her class?”

“Yes, around 12. I was in my study and she brought me a cup of tea.”

“And did she say or do anything unusual?”

Waterford sighs, and for the first time Ellie sees the strain around his eyes.

“No, no she didn’t. I keep going over and over it in my head, but no. She brought me my tea, and kissed my head…just here…” he touches the side of his scalp gingerly, as if it hurts to do so, “Like she always did. And then she left.”

His voice trembles, and without thinking Miller puts out a hand and rests it gently on his shoulder.

“I’m so sorry sir. This must be a terrible shock.”

“Yes.”

He hesitates, looking up at her,

“This will probably seems a truly terrible thing to say, but I’m almost sorry you found her. Or more, I’m sorry that she…wanted to be found like that,” and his eyes spill over with tears, “I would have preferred to go on believing she’d just left me. I’d always imagined she would, you see? It never made sense to me that someone like her would want to be with someone like me.”

Waterford has next to nothing else to offer them, having - as he’d previously told Atherton - little to no knowledge of Tao’s sister. Looking lost, he admits that not only has he never met Aki, but until recently had never even seen a picture of her.
“Tao told me when we first met that both her parents were dead, her mother when she was too small to remember and her father in an accident when she was 16. She and Aki were separated for many years after that, in fact they only got back in touch the year after we married - in 2009.”

“And how did Aki then come to be resident here, in the UK?”

Waterford colours a little at that question, and looks as if he’s considering his answer.

“I…ah…well as you can imagine, I have a number of connections that were useful in that respect. Tao asked me if I could obtain a student visa for her sister, and the other necessary…uh…documents that meant she could be cared for in a private hospital here, and I was happy to oblige.”

“But she wasn’t a student?”

Hardy’s brown eyes are steady on the other man’s face, studying his expression.

“Ah well, not exactly, no. Tao had hoped that maybe she would be I think, or at least consider returning to music. She said that she’d always believed her to be a prestigious talent, despite her illness.”

Waterford smiles wanly,

“Apparently they were both considered prodigies as children. Or at least, that’s what I remember. Tao always hated to talk about her childhood and it obviously distressed her when she did, so I never pushed.”

His eyes drift over the surface of his desk, and after moment he reaches out to pick up the framed photograph of himself and his wife on vacation.

“From what I could tell though, I think she and Aki had a fairly nightmarish childhood. And I’m fairly sure there was abuse involved. I think that was one of the reasons she was so invested in our work.”

“In politics, you mean?”

“She was a passionate advocate for anti-trafficking legislation. She used every bit of spare time she had supporting victims, helping them get legal counsel or - if they’d been given leave to stay - find places to live, employment, even taking them to doctor’s appointments. She never stopped.”

Hardy closes his notebook, and gives her a questioning look. He knows this is Ellie’s forte of course, empathising and winking out the useful details, and he’s looks as if he’s fresh out of other ideas.

“Mr. Waterford, we’re very keen to find Aki, as I’m sure you realise. It seems as if your wife may have visited her in Balham on the Saturday evening, and she’s most likely the last person to have seen her alive. Aside from the flat and the facility in Shaftesbury, can you think of any other place she might stay? Any friends of theirs maybe?”

The man shakes his head,

“No, as I said before, Tao really didn’t allow anyone near her sister. She was fiercely protective of her, and of her own privacy. We had a journalist approach us a few years ago about writing a biography, and Tao became very upset about the whole thing. She knew all about Aki and was quite persistent. In the end, I had to intervene to shut the whole thing down.”

“And do you remember her name at all? The journalist?”
“It was a…Hannah Mendelsohn I believe,” Waterford looks lost and weary now, “She works for…The Times I think.”

Ellie doesn’t have a notebook, she always thinks people seem less likely to talk when they see you writing things down, but she makes a careful mental note just in case Hardy - who looks more than ready to go now - is no longer paying close attention. She watches Waterford move the papers on his desk aimlessly from one side to the other, and reaching out her hand again, touches his arm. The effect is a little like waking someone who is sleepwalking.

“Thank you for all your help sir,” she says, and after a moment the man nods, his eyes wide and blue as he looks up at her face.

“Please. I just need to understand what happened,” he says quietly.

The drive to the security company in Clapham takes just over thirty minutes, during which time Ellie manages to get a mobile and landline number for Hannah Mendelsohn at The Times, and calls and leaves voicemails on both of them. Hardy watches her from the corner of his eye as he drives.

“So what’s your thinking? That she might have tracked down Aki before?”

“Waterford said she was persistent, maybe she dug up something bad. Perhaps her getting upset was less about Aki than someone knowing about her own past.”

She shrugs,

“Worth a punt anyway.”

They park up outside the security firm’s building, and are shown inside to a room where banks of screens are monitoring local car parks and public areas. Seeming eager to help the police, the manager himself sits with them and brings up the timestamp they’re looking for outside the Balham flats. At 19:32 precisely a dark Peugeot estate draws up outside the building, and a slim medium-height figure in dark clothing steps out and walks across the tarmac. The license plate is too dimly lit to be identifiable, and the woman’s long straight hair hangs in a fringe over her forehead, creating deep shadow over her eyes and obscuring her features.

Squinting at the blurry picture, Hardy glares at the screen,

“Spool forward to 9:30 when she leaves, maybe there’s a better angle.”

There isn’t, and Ellie can feel her partner’s simmering frustration bleeding out of him and into the room around them. As they watch the dark car pull out of its even darker space, she points to a blurred white square on a nearby wall.

“Ooh. What about the feed for this camera up here? You got that one?”

The manager nods, and after a minute of two of clicking, brings up the other feed. It’s even blurrier than the first, but as the car passes under a streetlamp both she and Hardy give a little yelp of triumph.
It’s less than fifteen minutes before they have an ID. It’s a hire-car rented the previous Saturday in central London to a 30 year old Chinese national - Chen Xie - and is due to be returned the following day. As they climb back into their own car, Hardy hands her his phone so she can wait for the picture to come through from the DVLA. When it does, she holds it out for him to see, wrinkling her nose.

“Think she looks a bit like her?”

Hardy frowns, controlling the car as it moves back into traffic,

“Like Tanaka? I suppose, If you weren’t looking that hard.”

“Or if you didn’t want to seem racist?”

He gives her a baffled look, before he understands what it is she’s suggesting.

“Send it to her,” he says.

Bringing up Natalie Dalton’s number on her phone, Ellie forwards and then attaches the picture, taps a quick message and sends it off. There’s a momentary pause as she watches the two blue ticks appear, and then Dalton sends a reply.

‘YEAH THAT’S AKI.’

‘DID YOU MANAGE TO FIND HER YET??’
They find a greasy spoon café near Clapham Junction and park up, because driving around south London in a state of utter confusion doesn’t seem like it will be a productive use of the rest of the morning. Ellie orders two teas and two bacon butties without asking Hardy if he wants anything. She’ll either eat his as well or watch him pick chunks off it for the next thirty minutes, either way she figures it’s worth the four quid.

When she gets back to their table, Alec has his glasses on and is staring at an email on his laptop, with his mobile pressed to his ear. Watching his changing expression, Ellie sips her tea and tries to be patient, even though she desperately wants to hear everything being said by whoever he’s managed to track down at the Home Office. Finally, after what seems like an age without talking, he thanks them tersely and hangs up.

“So??”

Hardy leans back in his seat, reaches for his tea,

“Chen Xie entered the UK from the United Arab Emirates with her employers in July 2012 on a domestic workers visa. Her driving license is registered to their address, here in Kensington. Just under a year later she was reported missing by her employer and hasn’t been seen since.”

“So they had no idea where she might have gone?”

Hardy shakes his head,

“Doesn’t sound like they cared. And reading between the lines, it sounds like it was less a disappearance than it was an escape. Seems her employer’s now under official investigation for trafficking.”

“Well, that can’t be a coincidence surely?”

“ Doesn’t seem likely.”

Taking a gulp from his mug Alec grimaces and adds two sugars,

“Guy at the HO said her employer was still holding her passport when she left, and apparently another one hasn’t been reissued to her under that name. So I asked him if he could cross-reference her details and current passport image with Aki Tanaka’s.”

“And?”

Alec reaches for his laptop and swivels it so it faces her. On the screen the same image from Chen Xie’s driving license stares back at her.

“And I assume that’s the passport Waterford helped Tao to get?”

“April 2013. He’s down on the form as having personally endorsed her identity.”

“Bloody hell! Even though he’d never even met her?”

Alec gives her a knowing look,

“Guess the man really trusted his wife.”
They both sit back in their seats, and - trying to make sense of it all - Ellie wraps her hands around her mug and stares at the steam as it rises up from the rim. After a moment or two their bacon sandwiches arrive, and she watches Alec stare blankly at his as if breakfast were an entirely alien concept.

“Did you order this?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Oh just bloody eat it will you. Chances are we’re up here for another whole day, and all you’ve had today is tea and two Mentos.”

She watches as he peels back the bread, and with a look of resignation squirts ketchup on the contents before replacing it. It’s halfway to his mouth when he pauses,

“So just to be clear, we’re both thinking the same thing?”

He raises his eyebrows in a question mark,

“That Tao somehow met Chen - probably via her work with the anti-trafficking lot - and for some unknown reason decided to set her up in the flat in Balham as her sister?”

Taking a generous bite out of her own butty, Ellie wipes her mouth with the back of her hand and shrugs,

“Well, Natalie Dalton says Chen is Aki, so yeah. But then who’s the other Asian woman? The one driving around in the Peugeot?”

Hardy’s eyebrows draw together, and he lowers the sandwich to the plate again. She’s starting to wonder if he’s ever going to actually bite into the thing.

“I’m guessing whoever she is, she’s also the person who sent Kara her tape on Tuesday.”

“And so this is the same woman booking into The Font as Aki? Because if Natalie’s right, that wasn’t Chen. She said she was hardly ever away.”

“No. No…”

Hardy stares at a point on the wall above her head for a minute,

“No, I’m pretty sure that we were right about that one before.”

“What, you still think that was Tao? Covering up who she was out of what? Shame?”

“Why not? Tells Waterford she’s off abroad doing her anti-trafficking work, whatever. All she’d need to do is call in occasionally, tell him the signal’s bad?”

Ellie looks incredulous,

“What, for two bloody months?? Hillier said she was there for two months once!”

Hardy inclines his head, and looks at her meaningfully,

“Man’s convinced his wife’s going to leave him, he’ll swallow any old bollocks.”
They sit across the table, looking at each other. She can see by his face that Alec knows all of this is a stretch, but then it wouldn’t be the first time he’s come up with some outlandish theory and she’s been forced to accept it as truth. This one though has far too many characters involved, too many variables for it to make any sense, and Ellie can’t help feeling they’re missing something very obvious that would simplify the whole damned mess. Hitting on a sudden idea, she gives a little yelp of excitement,

“Oh! I know! OK, so what if he was partly right?”

“Who, Waterford?”

“Yes, what if she was about to leave him?”

Inspired, she puts down her butty again,

“How about this. Tao and Chen are having an affair. Explains why she’d go to such lengths to get her an identity, right? Keep her hidden? Waterford finds out, Tao panics, decides to make a run for it with her girlfriend. Chen refuses - that’s the argument Natalie Dalton heard on Saturday night - and Tao decides… I dunno… that she can’t live a lie any longer. So she drives down to Dorset, maybe she’s thinking of checking herself back into The Font again, but she decides that enough is enough, and instead she goes to The Cap.”

Her monologue finished, Ellie stares into Hardy’s face with a look of triumph and watches as he considers everything she’s said. After a moment - and to her great delight - he finally takes a bite of the bacon butty and chews it thoughtfully.

“OK. Yeah. I’ll buy all of that. The affair. The argument being the last straw,” he looks at her over the top of his glasses, “Except for two things.”

She can feel her face fall a bit, but she tries to stay positive as he takes a deep swig of his tea to wash down his sandwich.

“Number one, we still have no idea who this woman in the heels is. Whoever she is, she knows everyone involved. She knows that Chen has been living as Aki, she cared enough to send the music and tape to Kara Austin after Tao was dead and to take responsibility for clearing out the flat. Seems to me she’s a major player in all this, so someone has to know who she is.”

Ellie crosses her arms,

“OK, yes. I agree with that. Maybe she’s someone we haven’t seen yet though. A relative of Chen’s? A friend who’s trying to help her?”

She tries not to glare at him, but it’s a struggle when he’s looking at her that way, like she should have answers she doesn’t have. Regarding her evenly, Alec continues to chew. He seems to be waiting for her to speak and - despite fancying the pants off him now - she realises he still has the ability to annoy the shit out of her with just his face.

“Come on then smart arse, you said two things.”

Hardy grunts, and finishing his sandwich off, he licks his fingertips.

“If Tao Tanaka was pretending to be Aki to check herself into The Font for the last seven years, and Chen Xie was living as Aki in Balham for the last three, who was it Hannah Mendelsohn found when she was researching her book?”
Any hope they might have of meeting Mendelsohn are dashed when, on a call to The Times’ front
desk, they’re told that Hannah is currently out of the country on longterm assignment. The likelihood
of them being able to speak to her seems pretty low, as - according to her editor - ‘she’s in a fucking
war zone’ and mobile coverage is spotty at best in that part of Syria. Even so, it’s suggested that they
may be able to contact her later that afternoon as she’s due back at her base at 2pm GMT, and will
have a stable satellite connection there for at least an hour or so to upload her latest report. In a
surprisingly cooperative move, her sub-editor even offers to let them use one of their media suites for
the attempt.

They kill the two hours beforehand nearby, looking at ‘The Golden Hinde’. It’s not Ellie’s first
choice, but her amusement at finding out that her dour Scots partner takes an almost boyish delight in
tall-ships means that she’s more than happy to spend an hour there. Watching him wander around,
she has to stifle a giggle as the actors in period costume try to engage him, and one by one are shut
down with the patented Alec Hardy death-stare. In the gift shop she buys him a little replica of The
Hind in a bottle when he isn’t looking, and then has to suffer through his telling her ‘what a bloody
waste of money all this tat is’ before she gives it to him.

At least, she thinks, he has the grace to look a tiny bit embarrassed when he thanks her.

When they make their way over to the Times’ office, Mendelsohn’s sub-editor greets them at the
front desk with a smile. He’s apologetic that they can’t do more to help, but leads them to one of the
media suites to talk to Hannah on their uplink. As the screen flickers into life, Miller is surprised to
see the face of a relatively young woman looking back at them, instead of the seasoned reporter
she’d imagined. Mendelsohn’s face looks drawn and dusty, and there’s a look of such obvious strain
around her eyes that she can’t help but be concerned for her.

Hardy however seems to notice nothing awry,

“Ms Mendelsohn. Thanks for taking a few minutes to talk to us.”

Hannah nods, but the look of confusion is already evident on her face,

“Sorry, Rob said the police had some questions about something I’d been writing? I’m not sure I
understand what this is about though.”

Hoping to put her at her ease, Ellie smiles at her brightly,

“Hi Hannah. I’m DS Ellie Miller and this is DI Alec Hardy from Wessex Police. We’ve been told
you’d been researching a biography about Tao Tanaka, is that correct?”

The change in Mendelsohn’s expression is both obvious and instant, even over a crappy Skype
connection, and Ellie knows immediately that - whatever the story is here - it’s more complex than
Waterford has let on. On the other end of the line there’s a long pause, and she sees Hannah look
down at the floor, seeming to compose herself for a moment before she speaks.

“I was, yes, up until about 2 years ago. I’m not sure how much I can say about that now though,”
she frowns, “Legally speaking I mean.”

Beside her, Hardy straightens a little in his seat,

“You’ve been threatened with legal action? By Ms Tanaka?”

Mendelsohn gives a small bitter laugh,
“Threatened? No, that would imply I was given some kind of warning. No, I was told, in no uncertain terms to abandon all my work and never speak of it to anyone again. When I didn’t immediately comply, I was made subject to a legal gagging order.”

Her face fills the screen and the lines of strain are more obvious now, so obvious that Ellie knows even Hardy must see them.

“Hannah, can I ask what it was specifically Ms Tanaka was upset about? Mr. Waterford said she was upset you’d found out about her sister,” softening her voice, Miller leans into the camera, “But we were wondering if it was the fact Ms Tanaka herself was mentally ill?”

Mendelsohn’s brow furrows,

“You know about that? I didn’t for sure, but I thought it. After the last time I met her I mean. Frankly, she scared me a little.”

“You met with her more than once? With Tao?”

Hardy’s voice is sharply curious, and the young reporter nods,

“Several times over the years. I was passionate about the book and… well frankly I revered her. She was an idol of mine. The biography was really a labour of love for me, which is why it was so hard when it ended the day it did.”

Her voice shakes and when she brushes her eyes with the back of her hand, Ellie feels a stab of concern for this young woman who suddenly seems so vulnerable. Laying a hand on Hardy’s arm to indicate he needs to let her lead, she moves in to talk directly to the camera.

“Hannah, can you tell us was it was that happened?”

Sat in her rooms, thousands of miles away, Mendelsohn looks up at the ceiling and they see a tear roll through the dust on her cheek.

“I mean…it wasn’t something I planned. I was in Japan anyway on holiday and it seemed such an opportunity to do more research. I took a friend to the archives in Nagoya to see if I could find some more information on Tao’s family. I was thinking just background for the introduction, maybe I could find the house she grew up in, take some pictures. But when I found the article about her father’s accident, I didn’t know what to do with it.”

She looks down at the floor again, and in the end Ellie has to prompt her,

“Hannah, what did you find?”

“The reports said it wasn’t an accident. That Tao’s sister Aki had killed him and then set the house on fire. That was what the police pieced together anyway, from neighbours and people who knew the family. When they’d found the house, Aki had already disappeared and there was only Tao left, and she couldn’t tell anyone what happened.”

“She was too traumatised you mean?”

Mendelsohn frowns and shakes her head,

“No, no, I mean she couldn’t speak back then. She didn’t really begin to speak until she was in her late teens. I’d have thought you’d know about that? It’s part of the whole Tao Tanaka mythos.”
“No,” and now it’s Hardy’s turn to look confused, “No-one’s mentioned that to us before.”

“Oh,” Hannah half shrugs, “Well the story was that she and her sister were both talented pianists, but that she - Tao - was considered especially miraculous because she couldn’t speak. I found a few articles about her scholarship while I was Japan, and - reading between the lines - it seems as if a big part of her being offered all the opportunities she was had to do with her being mute.”

She sighs wearily, and rubs a hand through her hair,

“Beautiful and silent. It’s considered quite the potent combo in Japan.”

“And she started to speak…when?”

“A year or so after she left home for college. And by the time she was really well-known in Japan, she was talking like anyone else.”

The connection stutters and cuts out for a moment before reasserting itself, but in the background at Mendelsohn’s end they can hear a lot of noise now. Distant rumbling and what sounds like gunfire. Looking anxious, Hannah glances over her shoulder,

“I’ll probably have to go in a minute. They make us go down into the bunker when the shelling gets too close,” she sighs, “I’m not sure there’s much more I can tell you anyway. When I heard she’d died the way she did, I was…well it was shocking. And I couldn’t help feeling guilty, like my bringing all this stuff up again had been…something to do with it.”

The line stutters again, and she hears Hardy make a sound of frustration. Ellie’s frustrated too of course, but now she’s also curious.

“Hannah, what do you mean ‘again’? Waterford told us you dropped the book idea a couple of years ago?”

“Yes, I told Tao at the time I had no intention of including all the stuff about Aki, especially when I found out they’d managed to get her residency in the UK somehow. Even so, Waterford made damned sure the whole thing was shelved. Spoke to my editor, threatened my job. The gagging order wasn’t really even necessary by then, so it was the ultimate kick in the teeth this year when they accused me of breaking it, and sent me out here.”

“Bloody hell!”

Outraged, Ellie’s mouth drops open and she turns to look at Hardy in amazement. Instead of echoing her surprise though, his eyes are narrowed, focused on Hannah’s face.

“Why did they believe you’d broken the gagging order?”

“Some woman had rung the Society desk and tried to sell them the whole story. Everything I’d dug up and then some more, wanted a shitload of money for it,” she shrugs again, “They were convinced I was behind it. I denied it, even tried to speak to Tao and get her on side again, but it was no good. She wouldn’t believe I didn’t know her, because whoever she was she knew all ab…”

The line cuts out a third time, and this time it takes so long to reconnect Ellie’s sure that’s it. Beside her Hardy has his glasses on and is writing in his notebook, but his notes are just scribbles to her eyes so she has no idea what he’s gleaned from their conversation with the reporter. When the picture finally reasserts itself, her dusty tear-stained face looks impossibly young, and Ellie can’t help but feel a stab of maternal concern.
“Hannah, sorry. You cut out before. You said Tao didn’t believe you, because the other woman knew something?”

Mendelsohn nods, and there’s a distinct rattle of gunfire in the background before she speaks again.

“She knew all about Tao and Aki, about their birth. It wasn’t something that was common knowledge, and I’d only found out myself through the local papers over there. Those kind of things aren’t something they like to shout about publicly in Japan.”

Ellie blinks, confused, because she isn’t quite sure what she just heard.

“Sorry did you say ‘birth’? What? Are you saying that Tao and Aki…were twins?”

The young reporter smiles grimly at the camera, and her last words are only just audible as the feed cuts out.

“Not only twins DS Miller, they were born conjoined…”
When they ask her to, Hannah Mendelsohn is happy to email them all her research. The file she sends through contains almost five hundred documents, and after a short discussion - in which Ellie points out that it’d be far easier going through it all back home rather than in yet another hotel room - they start the drive back to Dorset.

It’s almost four hours, and even though they switch halfway they’re both utterly exhausted by the time they get in. Drawing up outside her house, Hardy lets the engine idle while she gathers her stuff and then gives her a questioning look,

“I was going to pop home. Maybe have a shower and get changed…”

“Right. Yeah. I’ve got to sort Fred anyway. Probably make something nice for tea, smooth things over with Dad.”

She stands on the kerb, clutching her overnight bag and moving uncertainly from foot to foot. Hands on the wheel, he looks steadily back at her.

“I can come back later. I mean…if you want to work on this tonight.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But you want to.”

Ellie bridles, snaps,

“Bollocks! You do too!”

He sighs and, leaning back in his seat, he rubs a hand over his face.

“Right now Miller, all I want is a long hot shower and a cup of tea.”

She teeters on the verge of saying something outrageous then, like ‘well you could get all that right here’, but she knows damned well what that would sound like. It’ll sound like she’s already thinking about how it would be to have him here in her home all the time, sprawled out on the sofa beside her, watching TV while Fred plays with Lego on the carpet. And she’s really not ready to tell him that yet. She trusts Alec Hardy with her life, has since the first year they worked together, but she’s not so sure she trusts him with her heart just yet. Despite being pretty certain how he feels about her, the man’s track record for making choices for his own happiness is a truly awful one.

They part without any show of the affection that hasn’t had a chance to become casual yet, and Ellie heads inside to the warm familiar-smelling comfort of her house. Her dad is reading the paper at the kitchen table while Fred colours, and up in his room Tom is on his X-Box playing something shooty, but they all reply when she calls out. Fred’s arms wrapped around her legs make her feel strangely tearful, and hoiking him up to face-height she gives him a tight squeeze and a kiss before he has time to object.

“Shall I make a lasagne?” she says, and even her dad looks cheerful at that.

They don’t ask her about London, but her littlest isn’t too little he doesn’t appreciate the Paddington Bear she picked up for him in the gift shop. Tom’s a bit old for souvenirs now of course, but he still
grunts a ‘thanks’ when she gives him all her posh hotel toiletries - “Good for after football!” - and drops a kiss to the top of his head even though he barely notices that part.

She clears the table and loads the dishwasher, all the time half-glancing at the clock. When it gets to nine she checks her phone to see a message from Alec, and only just has time to hustle Fred into his PJs and into bed, before there’s a soft knock at the front door and she’s hurrying down the stairs to open it.

*And when exactly did that happen?*

*Ellie Miller all aflutter at her grumpy boss calling round late to do casework?*

She’s still scowling at herself a bit when she opens the door, and finds Hardy stood on the step wearing the soft green jumper she likes. Seeing her face his brows come together in a frown,

“Did you not get my text before?” he looks past her shoulder a little anxiously, “Do you want to leave it for tonight?”

She’s instantly annoyed with him, and yet so pleased to see him at the same time that her brain seems to drop into a weird fuzzy kind of neutral. Unsure what to do with the feeling, she just stares for a moment and then lunges in and kisses him. And it feels every bit as nice and every bit as strange as seeing him here again, stood on her doorstep in his civvies at nine-thirty at night does, so that actually kind of works.

When they break apart, he sighs and closes his eyes for a moment,

“Ellie…we can’t do this if you’re going to…”

And she has to reach out and jerk him in through the door by his jumper before he reconsiders the whole thing,

“Oh for god’s sake it was just a kiss. Shut up and come inside will you.”

They set up their laptops on kitchen table, and side by side begin to trawl through the treasure trove of documents Hannah has sent them. In one sub-folder Hardy finds a collection of scanned Japanese newspaper articles, one showing a picture of Tao and Aki as young girls - maybe ten or eleven years old - standing side by side at what looks like a school concert. Although they are startlingly alike, the girl on the left - Tao - is noticeably slighter in stature than her sister, and her face seems somehow stiffer. Other articles follow, each one showing a different accolade, and in every picture the two sisters stand side by side, the slimmer Tao always on the left and Aki on the right.

“Where’s the one about the accident?” Hardy asks, and Ellie sorts the folders by date before opening the one labelled 1996.

Unlike the other articles, Mendelsohn has translated this one into English alongside, and - although the translation is a bit basic - the facts are easy enough to understand.

“It says the girls’ mother died giving birth to them,” Ellie frowns, “I thought Waterford said Tao told him she’d died when they were young?”

“Seems like she told him a few things that weren’t entirely true. She must have known her father’s death wasn’t an accident, that Aki was to blame.”

“It also says that Aki had a history of mental illness, but ‘both girls suffered problems caused by
“oxygen starvation during the operation to separate them!,” she grimaces, “God that’s a bit grim.”

Alec is scrolling through the earlier folders now. There’s a gap between the the first one and the early 90s, but inside one labelled 1980-81 there are two scanned images. The first is a photograph of the two babies at only a day or so old. An elderly doctor in a white coat stands to one side, as a nurse holds the girls up for the camera. They’re dressed in matching two-pieces, but the fact that they are joined together at the curve of their hip is more than obvious.

Behind the nursing staff, a stone-faced Japanese man in rumpled clothing stands in shadow, looking directly at the lens.

“What d’you bet that’s dad right there?”

Alec points at the screen and - looking at his face - Ellie shivers. She knows that the man in the picture has just lost his wife, but something about his blank-eyed stare bothers him.

“Creepy looking bloke,” she says, and is gratified when Hardy makes a noise of agreement.

The last article in the folder is one about the ‘miracle operation’ that divided them at 18 months. Alongside the headline is a colour picture of the two babies, now separated and in matching plastic incubators. The thick livid scars on both their hips are obvious even in such a small image, and Ellie can’t help but bite her lip in anguish. Looking sideways at Hardy, she sees a similarly complex look on his face.

“What are you thinking?” she says, and he gives his head a small shake.

“Just can’t imagine it is all. All that happening to a wee baby,” he takes off his glasses, “I imagine you’d carry the scars for life. In more ways than one.”

Ellie nods and her eyes rest on the picture again, the matching booties, the tiny hands outstretched, reaching out towards each other.

“I wonder how she found her again, after all that time.”

“Who, Aki? I guess with all her money she could have hired a detective out there,” Alec shrugs, “Or maybe they never really lost touch. Seems like she’s been protecting her most of her life, who’s to say she didn’t always know where to find her.”

“Waterford said he thought they’d been abused,” Miller frowns, “You think maybe they killed him together? The father?”

Hardy makes a unconvinced noise,

“Then why not leave together? Or both stay?”

“Someone has to take the blame. They were sixteen, adults.”

“So what? Aki kills the dad and effectively sacrifices her life for Tao?”

And now it’s Ellie’s turn to shrug,

“Isn’t that what you do for someone you love?”

The rest of the articles in the folder are more recent, profiles and other interviews with Tao over the
span of her career. There are a few more choice tidbits: a short piece from The Guardian where Tao talks about she regained her voice ‘as she grew in confidence as a pianist’. They’re mostly fluff, clearly padded due to the lack of information coming from their subject, but there are one or two noticeably more in-depth, more emotional pieces from The Times written in 2012 and 13. They’re both by Hannah Mendelsohn.

Reading through the second one, Hardy gives a little huff of cynical amusement,

“She wasn’t kidding about her being an idol was she?”

“Mm. ‘A pale heart-shaped face that speaks of a deeper existential suffering’…blimey. It’s a bit full-on isn’t it?”

Miller scrolls down the page to the accompanying image. In it, Tao Tanaka is sat on a weathered bench beneath a tree, an old cottage and rolling landscape behind her and her long black hair tossed by a strong wind.

“Picture makes her look like something from Wuthering Heights.”

Her eyes move away from the women’s beautiful face to her surroundings, and suddenly she feels her breath catch in her throat as she recognises the oh-so-familiar curve of green behind her. Glancing down at the image reference, she slaps Hardy’s arm,

“Oh, look where this was taken!”

Alec’s glasses go back on and he leans into the screen,

“Thorncombe Rise, Dorset?” His eyes narrow, focusing on the same detail she had, “Is that…?”

“It’s The Cap in the background. Thorncombe’s about two miles up the coast,” her finger stabs the screen, “And - wait - I know that house too! You can see it from the water as you come up along the coast!”

They find it on Google Maps easily, a small white square set back from the edge of cliff about two hundred metres. There’s a long narrow track leading to a gate with no through-road, but a quick search of the postcode brings up the same property on a sale listing. It’s a pretty old one - it was last sold in September 2009 - but there’s no mistaking the view from the front garden.

“Lookout Cottage, Thorncombe…”

Ellie brings up a second window, and quickly searches through the electoral register. When she scrolls down to the address though, there’s no listing for any residents.

“Could be it’s a holiday let?”

“Someone’s still got to pay the council tax on it though…”

Taking out her phone, Ellie looks at the screen for a long moment before opening up her contacts. Watching her, Alec frowns,

“Miller, it’s after 11. Who’re you calling?”

The phone rings at the other end, and after a second someone picks up.

“Oh wow! Ellie?? Hey gorgeous!!”
She doesn’t have it on speaker but Greg Neill’s voice is loud enough that she knows Alec hears, because his eyes widen just fractionally behind his glasses.

“Greg, hi! How are you?”

“Me? Oh I’m fine, fine. Just…up late, having a drink? How about you?”

There’s an unmistakable rustle of sheets on the other end, and she closes her eyes for a second as she realises what this call must seem like to him.

“I’m good. Look Greg, sorry to call you so late, but I needed to ask a favour.”

There’s a soft low laugh, and her face heats up a little under Alec’s continued scrutiny.

“Well if it’s what I think it is, it’s hardly a favour. I told you I wanted to see you again. I was a bit surprised you hadn’t been in touch actually. I thought we really hit it off!”

Hardy’s eyebrows lift at that, and she finds she has to turn her back to him so she can continue talking.

“We did, I mean…yes…but look, it’s not that actually.”

“Oh?”

“No, look…I know this is a big ask but…” she takes a deep breath, “You work for Dorset County Council right? Any chance you’ve got an out-of-hours login?”

She can’t look at Hardy while Greg is silently logging into his DBC account, so she keeps her eyes down. It’s not that she’s uncomfortable about him knowing about her date, or even why she’d decided not to call the guy again, what she’s embarrassed about is how shamelessly she’s now using that connection for personal gain. When he finally comes back on the line to give her the details, she barely has time to say ‘thank you’ before his reproachful goodbye and abrupt hang-up only compounds her guilt.

“So?”

When she looks at him, Alec is leaned back again with his arms crossed. His expression is perfectly neutral, but she still imagines that he’s judging her.

“You’re right. It’s registered as a holiday let. But guess who’s been down as the legal owner since 2009?”

“Tao Tanaka?”

“Bingo.”

There’s nothing else they can do tonight, so after a last tea Hardy suggests he comes back at 8 to pick her up and drive out to Thorncombe.

“You think that’s where she’s hiding out? Chen…Aki? Or our mystery woman?”

Hardy grunts as he drains his mug,
“That’s my thinking. But if not, it has to be where Tao was before she drove to The Cap. And we still have the gap between the Saturday night and Monday afternoon to fill, my guess is she was there the whole time.”

“You still think I’m right about the affair?”

Her partner tilts his head,

“I dunno. Something doesn’t fit,” he lifts his chin, “And there’s something else I was thinking. Remember the woman Mendelsohn said called the Society desk?”

“The one who wanted cash for Tao’s story?”

“What if that was Chen Xie?”

Ellie folds her arms, frowns,

“After everything Tao had done for her? Bit ungr…” and even as she forms the words she remembers what Natalie Dalton told them she’d overhead, “Oh bloody hell, actually you might be onto something there!”

Alec hums, but his expression is still far from certain. Setting down his mug on the side, he leans back against the kitchen counter top. There’s a long moment of silence, and she can almost see his brain working away on their mystery behind his glasses, which is why it’s so surprising when he suddenly asks her a completely unrelated question.

“Who was that guy before?”

“Who, on the phone?”

“Yeah,” he narrows his eyes a little, “Greg. He someone you went out with?”

“Mm. Beth set it up a while back. It was just the one date. I didn’t bother calling him again.”

She wrinkles her nose,

“Bit of a disaster really.”

There’s a slight settling in his posture then that, if she didn’t know him so well, she wouldn’t even have noticed. But she does know him, so when he glances down at his phone instead of at her, she knows what it is he needs to hear.

“I think…for a while I thought I just wanted someone. Anyone.”

She chews on her lip,

“You were right before. What you said about being lonely? You do have to be careful. Danger is you’ll grab onto the first thing that comes along, and convince yourself it’s what you wanted. Nice smile, reliable, kind, sweet. Good husband material.”

Hardy’s eyes come up, and when they settle on her face the man behind them is open and utterly vulnerable to her.

“I’m none of those things, Miller,” he says, and tears start to her eyes as she leans in towards him, presses a palm to his cheek. Kisses him.
“You’re such a twat sometimes, Hardy. You’re all of them. And so much more. So much more.”

He doesn’t go home. She knows it’s stupid and risky and that - even though they’re quiet as they can possibly be - the chances are more than likely that her dad hears them from the next room as they bump into her furniture, muffle each other’s noises with mouths and hands. The fact is though that she suddenly wants him so badly to be hers - in her own space, in her bed, erasing all the memories of her life with Joe that still linger there - that she realises she’s willing to risk pretty much anything.

It’s gone 1am when they’re finally silent - pressed warm, belly-to-belly in her bed with his hand stroking her face - and looking at him, she finds it utterly impossible to feel anything but a perfect sense of rightness at what’s happened between them. At everything that’s going to happen.

“Hey,” she says softly, and his eyelids flicker open, sleepy, content,

“Mm?”

She hesitates, her heart fluttering in her chest at the thought of what she was about to say, of what it would mean to say it.

“You need anything? Glass of water?”

He blinks, small shake of the head, and then - when she doesn’t continue - closes his eyes again, pulls her in fractionally closer.

“Hey,” she says again, but it’s a little softer this time, so much so that this time he doesn’t even open his eyelids, and after a moment or two of waiting for him to stir she gives up and leans forward and kisses them.

“Sleep tight,” she says, “It can wait until tomorrow.”
Her mind the usual warm morning fog, Ellie thinks next to nothing of it when Fred throws himself across her just before 6am as he always does. She lets out her usual pained, low-pitched groan, at which he giggles, but then there’s another groan that - a second later - has her eyes snapped wide as she stares at the wall in front of her in sudden dawning horror.

“Ach…alright! Mind yer elbows kiddo!”

She rolls over to see her youngest son spreadeagled across Hardy’s body, virtually nose to nose with her partner, a delighted but mischievous smile spread across his face. Reaching out a chubby hand, he gently pats his messy hair into place.

“You need to brush your hair,” he says, and after a moment Alec nods.

“I probably do, yeah.”

“You can borrow my brush if you want? If you didn’t bring one.”

Hardy’s expression shifts imperceptibly, he might be trying not to laugh or he might just be horribly uncomfortable with the whole situation, Ellie can’t really be sure. Trying to catch Fred’s eye, she makes a little movement with her head, which - she feels - clearly indicates what she wants him to do, but very pointedly he just ignores it.

“Can you make hot chocolate?” he says, and after a long silence in which she can almost hear the sound of him gathering his wits, Alec nods.

“I can.”

Looking pleased, Fred rolls off the bed sideways and holds out his hand,

“You have a lie-in today then Mummy,” he says solemnly.

In the end, he allows Hardy a few minutes to put his clothes on at least, going downstairs to organise his school bag and wait for him. Pulling on his jeans and t-shirt, Alec gives her a sideways look that cables everything she knows they’re both thinking.

“So much for sneaking out before the cock crow,” he says softly, and she smiles despite herself.

“Sorry, should have told you about Fred.”

“You think it bothered him at all?”

She makes a face,

“Dunno. Doesn’t seem like it, does it?”

There’s a bit of a lump in her throat as she replies, because the sight of Fred holding out his hand for Hardy to take is still lingering with her. Sitting down on the edge of the bed, her partner pulls on his socks, and without thinking she reaches out to smooth the back of his hair.

“I’ll come down and start breakfast. Distract him while you duck out the back.”
The touch lingers for longer than is strictly necessary though, and as her fingertips trail over the nape of his neck, Hardy closes his eyes.

“S’ok. I can stay for a bit longer,” he says.

They eat toast stood side-by-side at the kitchen counter while Fred sings to himself over his boiled egg, and then he lets himself out before the other two are up. He doesn’t kiss her goodbye at the door - he’ll see her again in a few hours anyway - but the look he gives her feels like he did: an intense warm brand on her skin that she’s still smiling at half an hour later when her dad comes down.

“You’re looking chipper this morning. You and Hardy make some headway last night?”

“Mm? Oh…think so, yes.”

She nods as she fills the kettle, not trusting herself to look at him,

“He’s picking me up again at 8. We’re going out to an address near Chideock.”

“Righto,” her dad hesitates, “Want me…to walk Fred in to school today?”

“Oh no, Tom can do that, it’s on his way anyway.”

“Oh it’s no bother!”

It’s such an uncharacteristically helpful thing to say that she can’t help but turn around. Her dad has his back turned to her, and is carefully unloading the dishwasher. As he opens the cupboard to put in the mugs though, he catches her eye and the expression on his face is entirely unmistakable, so similar as it is to the one Fred was wearing an hour earlier.

“Oh bloody hell Dad, I knew you’d heard.”

“Now now. I heard next to nothing, love. And besides, I’m not saying a word, am I?”

Her cheeks colour despite her herself, and she looks down at the mug he’s holding in his hand, ready for his tea. ‘World’s Best Grandad’ it says on the side. Oh the irony.

“I was going to tell you this weekend, I promise.”

“You don’t have to tell me a thing, love. Your private life is your own business, and it’s certainly none of mine what you…get up to. Or with who.”

He clears his throat, as he turns and neatly stacks the plates in the cupboard,

“I was thinking though, that maybe it’s time I started looking around for my own place. Pat Higgins says there’s a flat just come up in her building, the one down by the bowling green? Warden assisted. Thought I might go over and have a look at it later.”

“You don’t have to do that! I mean…this thing with Hardy. It’s not…I mean we’re not about to…”

She starts to speak and then frowns, puts down the milk and stares at the countertop when she realises that she doesn’t really know how that sentence finishes. Because actually maybe it is, and maybe they really are.
After a moment, her dad’s hand comes to rest on her shoulder, and she’s surprised to find tears in her eyes.

“Well, whatever it is, probably better if the two of you have some space to work it out together, don’t you? Man doesn’t need his girlfriend’s dad hanging around the house with him, making him feel awkward.”

And Ellie hiccups at that, because bloody hell - ‘girlfriend’. That isn’t a word she’d ever thought she’d hear applied to her again with a straight face, and to hear someone else say it out loud is frankly a bit terrifying. She thinks about telling the rest of them the same thing - Beth, Lucy, her friends, all their workmates - and her brain just stutters to a complete standstill for a moment at what it will mean.

“What about the boys?”

- is all she says though, and is rewarded with a gentle squeeze.

“The boys will be just fine, love. We all will. How about you start thinking about yourself for a change instead?”

Hardy comes back just after 8 as promised, and if he notices any of her dad’s meaningful looks, he doesn’t make any mention of it. He’s changed back into his usual dark suit and tie, showered and combed his hair, and is professionalism personified. In fact if it wasn’t for the lingering sting of the stubble-burn on Ellie’s inner thighs she could almost believe last night had never happened. Setting the Sat Nav as they pull away, she considers sharing that thought but - glancing at his profile - wisely dismisses it.

“Everything all right back home?”

“Mm. Don’t think Daise even noticed I was gone. Was still in her pit when I left.”

He slides her a look,

“What about you? Wee Fred drop us in it?”

“Nope,” she shifts, a bit uncomfortable at telling him what her father had said, “But…uh…my dad says he might be thinking of moving out.”

“Bloody hell!”

Hardy’s eyes widen slightly, and after a second he turns back to look the road,

Didn’t think we were that loud,” he mutters.

The track up to Lookout Cottage from the main road is not much more than a rough path strewn with stones with grass growing up the middle, and after driving a few hundred metres or so Hardy pulls their car into a gateway and stops.

“I’m going to bust the axle on one of these rocks.”

He checks their GPS position on GoogleMaps and frowns,
“S’only about a half mile from here. We walk it?”

It’s just their crap luck that a misty rain starts to fall almost as soon as they set off, and that - despite it being very nearly autumn now - neither of them have brought wet weather gear or an umbrella. It’s not a heavy downpour and there’s very little wind, but it’s coming in straight off the sea ahead of them, so by the time they reach the gate of the little cottage overlooking the cliffs they’re both well and truly soaked to the skin.

As they walk up the garden path, Ellie notes the little weathered bench sat under the tree, the one that featured in the picture from The Times. The backrest is cracked in the centre now, making it look a great deal less sturdy than it did before, and as she looks up the coast she sees The Golden Cap is not yet visible, still wreathed in its scarf of early morning mist.

Hardy knocks sharply on the front door, but from inside the house there’s only silence.

“Garage over to the side there.”

Shoving her hands into her pockets, Ellie steps over to the partially open door. It’s pretty rickety, one hinge partially broken away from the rotted frame, and pulling it open with some effort she peers into the dusty gloom.

“There a vehicle in there?”

Behind her, Alec is standing with his hands cupped to the cottage window, and she shakes her head.

“No. Oil patch on the floor though, doesn’t look that old.”

Stepping inside she walks over to the work bench against the far wall. On the surface are a few scattered tools, a saw, knife, a coil of jute rope - one end roughly torn - and a short 6” length of plastic hose that looks like it’s from a vacuum cleaner. Next to bench is a large metal jerry-can which - when she lifts it - sloshes heavily, about half-full of fuel. Stepping back, Ellie stares at the whole ensemble with a feeling of inexplicable low-level anxiety. She doesn't realise how tense she's gotten until the appearance of Hardy’s figure in the doorway makes her startle noticeably.

“What is it?”

“She’s some rope like the one Brian found leading to the petrol tank.”

She nods towards the bench, and then at the canister,

“Almost 10 litres in there. Probably holds about 20 when it’s full.”

Hardy’s expression shifts and he steps forward to look around the room, a deep furrow creasing his brow.

“What’s that?” he says, and turning around she follows his gaze.

In the corner of the room a large blue steel box she’d initially taken for a coal bunker sits against the back wall. Now, as they approach it, she sees that it’s nothing of the sort. There’s nowhere for the coal to be shovelled out for starters, and the construction is far heavier than any bunker she’s seen before. Reaching to push open the lid, Hardy has to exert some effort even to get it open. Thick rubber lines the rim inside, forming an air-tight seal that keeps the interior completely dry.

“Looks like a shipping container.”
Ellie nods, but her eye is drawn down to the inside of the box where, near the floor, she can see what looks like a largish rivet-hole cut in the metal.

“What’s that for d’you think? Drainage?”

Together the drag the box out from the wall a couple of inches, and squat down on the floor to see. On the outside of the container, over the hole, a short metal pipe is welded with a screw thread that appears designed to attach to something else.

“To remove the air inside maybe?”

The frown-lines in Hardy’s brow seem to deepen even more, and he casts his eyes around the room. Then, seeming to spot whatever he’s looking for, he walks back over to the work bench and reaches underneath to draw out a large metal canister. It’s the kind Ellie’s seen a million times in the back of Joe’s ambulance, and as Hardy turns it over to look at the printing on the base she shakes her head at him in confusion.

“What’s she got oxygen in here for?”

“S’not oxygen,” he says, and when he turns it so she can clearly see the label, Ellie feels her stomach drop like she just stepped into a high-speed lift.

“Miller? Miller! What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing? I’m trying to get a bloody signal! We have to call this in.”

“Call what in? What have we got? A canister full of gas? We’ve got no way to prove that was what killed her, or who took her body to The Cap.”

Following her down the garden path, Hardy’s voice seems strangely calm in comparison to her own, but she can’t think about that right now. No, suddenly all she can seem to think about is exactly how it must have felt for Tao Tanaka to have been sealed up in an airtight metal box and slowly gassed with carbon monoxide while someone she knew and trusted, most possibly even loved, stood outside and listened to her dying.

“Listen if we call in SOCO now, and she comes back to a place crawling with cops, we’ll lose her for good.”

Standing in the middle of the garden facing the cliff edge, her phone clutched high in one hand, Ellie rounds on her partner with her face flushed with rage.

“Bloody hell Hardy, we don’t even know for sure who she even is, or if she’s even been back here! All we know is that that is most probably a murder scene in there, and it’s already almost a week old.”

“Exactly! So what’s a few more hours? A day? C’mom Ellie!”

Alec’s expression is a mixture of exasperation and entreaty, and for a moment she’s reminded of that day in Sandbrook when he begged Tess for her help. Lowering the phone, she glares at him,

“So what are you suggesting, we just sit in the bloody garage till she comes back?”

“No need.”
Hardy holds out his hand containing a leather fob with a Yale key on it,

“Hanging up underneath the workbench,” he says.

The key opens the back door, and when they step inside Ellie knows at once - just as she did in the Balham flat - that the place is empty. The difference in atmosphere between the two places is palpable though. Whereas the flat felt relatively devoid of personality, neat and utilitarian, Lookout Cottage fairly glows with it.

In the kitchen, the surfaces are overflowing with fresh ingredients and an expensive espresso machine is still humming with life, filling the kitchen with the smell of roast beans. They step silently through the hall and into the front room where, sat to one side of the bay window that faces the sea, is a beautiful baby grand piano. Its well-polished walnut veneer glows softly and, approaching it, Ellie can almost hear the sound it must make in this stone-flagged room when it’s played.

On the music stand sits an open folder of loose sheet music, inscribed with hundreds of neat handwritten ink staves, and turning the pages she looks over at Hardy.

“Looks like she was working on a new piece,” he says quietly, and she nods.

“‘Loneliness’ in F flat minor?”

Pulling out the seat, Ellie sits down and squints at the first page,

“Bit of a weird key choice.”

“Why weird?”

She huffs a laugh,

“Well, because F-flat minor is the same key as E-minor, so the only reason you’d refer to it as F-flat minor would be if the whole piece were written in something like…I dunno…A double-flat major rather than G. Because then F-flat minor is closer to…”

Ellie glances up as she’s talking and - seeing Alec’s utterly baffled expression - flushes a bit self-consciously

“Sorry. Didn’t mention that before did I? I used to play quite a bit when I was younger,” she smirks, “Was half decent actually.”

She looks down at the music again and, flexing her fingers, lays them on the keys. When the first few bass notes sound, the glorious tone of the beautiful piano rings out like a great bell against the stone floor.

It’s a far more complicated piece that she’s used to playing. She can normally only just get through the first part of ‘Clare De Lune’ at home before she starts to hear her piano teacher Miss Payne’s voice in her head, and gets all self-conscious about her fingering. Even with her decidedly amateurish rendering of it though, it’s a curiously beautiful and affecting melody, and she finds herself anticipating every new phrase as she plays it, as if she’s remembering a forgotten favourite rather than playing something brand new.

Although she’s largely oblivious of him, she can see Hardy out of the corner of her eye as he walks slowly around the room, pausing to look at pictures, turning his head sideways to read the spines of
books. When he walks to the foot of the stairs though, she pauses in her playing.

“Don’t you think we’d better wait?”

“Only going to use the toilet.”

She narrows her eyes,

“Alright, but if you’re not down in five minutes I’m coming up there.”

He disappears up the narrow staircase, and after a moment or two she resumes her playing.

The second half is far more complicated than the first, and after minute or two she’s struggling to coordinate her hands and has to slow down. It’s frustrating, because the increase in tempo is definitely a big part of what makes for such a great transition, but Ellie Miller has never been someone who backed away from something just because it was difficult, so - cursing softly under her breath - she perseveres. As she reaches out her hand to turn over at the end of the second page though, she stops short with her foot rigid on the damper pedal.

Because standing in the doorway holding a bunch of freshly-cut sunflowers and listening to her, is a woman who looks exactly like the dead pianist Tao Tanaka.
“Hello.”

After what seems like the longest silence of her life, it’s the only thing that Ellie can reasonably think to say. The woman in the doorway has been standing motionless since the first moment she appeared, and although she’s apparently looking right at her, her eyes seem focused on a point somewhere behind. It’s only after gazing at her for a full minute that Ellie realises she’s barefoot in only a thin nightdress, and is soaked to the skin.

“Oh god, look at you! You must be freezing!!”

Any worry she might have about scaring her off is suddenly overcome with concern, and pulling off her jacket she walks over to her and quickly wraps it around her shoulders. Feeling the contact of warm hands, the woman’s body stiffens but she doesn’t move away and - closer to her - Ellie can now see the translucent paleness of her skin, the deep trembling under the surface. She has a fragile, birdlike delicacy to her, an impression that is only added to with her painfully slender wrists and bright dark eyes. She’s pretty much the image of the one picture Miller has seen of Tao Tanaka, so much so that the question she asks her now hardly seems to require an answer.

“Are you Aki? Are you Tao’s sister Aki?”

There’s a sound at the base of the stairs, and looking up she sees Hardy stood half in and half out of shadow, an expression of complete disbelief on his face.

“Miller…what are you doing?”

Ellie opens her mouth, and then closes it again. Beside her, the woman is trembling more violently now, her thin shoulders braced stiffly against Ellie’s side as if for support.

“What do mean what am I doing? She just walked in like this! She’s freezing cold and soaked to the skin!”

Hardy’s eyes widen fractionally and he takes a step closer,

“OK…but just…move away from her now, ok?”

“What??”

“Just…move away from her.”

“Bloody hell Hardy, look at her! She’s hardly going to…!”

Angrily, Ellie begins to protest when she realises that Alec’s eyes are very specifically focused on the bunch of sunflowers at Aki’s side. It’s only then that she sees for the first time her hand clutched tightly around a pair of long kitchen shears.

“Aki?”

Hardy’s voice is firm and authoritative but not lacking in empathy, and Ellie feels the woman react to it: a little stir of restless movement in her shoulders. Keeping her eyes on her pale face, she carefully reaches down and takes hold of her wrist. It’s so thin she can almost feel the bones grating against each other under the skin, but even so she can still feel the strength in her grip on them.
“Aki. Can you give me the scissors?” she says softly, and the woman gives a little gasp in answer, as if she’s been holding her breath.

“I went out to cut some sunflowers.”

Her eyes move sideways for the first time to rest on Miller’s face, and then there’s a little start of realisation, as if she’s suddenly noticed her, understood that there’s a human being beside her. Under Ellie’s gentle grasp, her fingers flex and slowly she loosens her hold on the shears and lets her have them. As Alec moves forward to take them from her, he shoots her a look full of relief and silent admiration and, seeming to see him too now, the woman give a faint smile.

“There are thousands,” she says, “I only took a few.”

Hardy nods,

“I saw them,” he says quietly, “Over in the next field. Was that where you were?”

“I think so.”

She looks down at her feet,

“I couldn’t find my shoes though.”

“Did you have them before?”

“I…don’t know.”

Looking around the room, Ellie spies something pushed under nearby sofa and motions with her head to Alec. When he pulls them out though they’re a pair of trainers patently too small for Aki’s feet.

“Are they upstairs maybe? Shall we go and look?”

Walking alongside her, with Hardy behind, Miller keeps a hand at the small of the woman’s back. She doesn’t know why, only that it seems at any moment she may collapse and fold herself up like an origami crane. In a bedroom at the top of the stairs a bed lies unmade, looking recently slept in, and at the foot of it a small suitcase sits open and full of clothes. Indicating to Hardy to stay just outside the door, Ellie picks a few warmer pieces from the pile and hands them to her.

Silently sitting down on the bed, Aki pulls on some underwear before dragging her wet nightdress off over her head. She’s as unselfconscious as a child, but seeing the shockingly deep, livid scar that still runs down her right hip Ellie has to avert her eyes.

“So did you go out early this morning?”

Shrugging into the t-shirt and sweater the detective has given her, Aki frowns.

“It was still dark. I watched the sunrise from the cliff. It was beautiful.”

Ellie hands her some socks and jeans, and after a moment she pulls them on too.

“And what made you go out before dawn?”

“She went out in the dark. I thought maybe…that I could find her in the dark.”

Outside the door, she hears Hardy’s feet move and his shoulder comes around the corner of the
doorframe, his face in profile.

“Find who?”

And Aki sighs, a sad broken little sound,

“Find Tao of course,” she says.

Despite Ellie having worked fairly closely with her for almost seven years now, CS Elaine Jenkinson’s expression as she stands - arms crossed, staring at the feed from the interview suite - is still entirely unreadable to her. Not that she’s ever been the kind of woman who wears her emotions outwardly of course, she’d have never gotten to her current rank if that were the case, but despite that Ellie has to confess she’d been expecting a little more from her. Jenkinson seems surprised by their discovery, curious even, but nowhere near as energised as both she and Hardy are.

“So you need to explain to me exactly how you came to find her?”

Clearing his throat, Alec shoots Ellie a sideways look, the one that she recognises means he’s about to bend the truth somewhat.

“A reporter who’d interviewed Tao a few years ago commissioned a photoshoot at a location near Thorncombe. When we realised how close the cottage was to the scene of Tao’s death, we thought it might be worth a look at.”

“And when you got there you just… let yourself in?”

Taking her cue, Ellie breaks in,

“No ma’am, we knocked and rang the bell. When no-one answered, I noticed the open garage door and went to check inside.”

“Which is where you saw the shipping container?”

“And the gas canisters ma’am, yes. All within plain sight.”

“Which led you to the conclusion that the garage might be a murder scene?”

Both she and Hardy nod, although she can see he’s still wary about making such a bold statement. The whole sequence of events from the initial discovery of Tao’s body to their trip to ‘Lookout Cottage’ that morning seems utterly random when they try to explain it, but at least now they’ve found someone who potentially has some answers. The fact that, until this morning they weren’t even convinced of her existence, seems almost by-the-by.

“And you believe this woman is Aki Tanaka?”

Bending to look closer at the monitor, Jenkinson’s eyes narrow,

“The real Aki Tanaka? Not this other… Chinese woman who was using her identity?”

“We believe so ma’am, yes.”

“And is she a suspect in this possible murder?”
Ellie frowns,

“Honestly ma’am? My gut instinct says…”

“Not as yet ma’am, no.”

Hardy’s voice as he interrupts her is quiet and even,

“And until SOCO have made a thorough investigation of the contents of that garage, we’re only working on a theory here.”

“And she just agreed to accompany you back here, for what? An informal chat?”

“We told her we needed to ask her some questions about her sister,” Hardy frowns, “And it seemed the safest option given the circumstances.”

“Which were?”

Alec’s frown deepens, and he looks over at Miller pointedly until she speaks up.

“As far as we know Tao was her only next of kin, and we both agreed it wasn’t a good idea to leave her unsupervised.”

“Based on what exactly?”

Her tone isn’t patronising exactly, but Ellie folds her arms defensively anyway,

“Well ma’am, largely based on the fact that she was out walking on the cliffs at night in just her bloody nightclothes.”

There’s an hour’s wait before an Appropriate Adult can be found to sit in, and then a further discussion with him about whether they need to wait for Dr. Hillier to reply to their messages or whether the duty solicitor needs to be called. In the end though it’s decided that, as Ms Tanaka is only being questioned informally at present, the AA is all that’s needed for now. When she and Hardy re-enter the room Aki has been waiting in with him, she turns to look at them both with wide expectant eyes.

“Is it lunch time?”

Smiling a little uncertainly in return, Ellie sits down,

“No, not yet. It’s only about 11 actually.”

Hardy, who’s taken a seat next to the video camera, removes the lens cap.

“I’m sure we could get you something to eat though, if you’re hungry. Charlie?”

The AA - a young man in his late twenties - nods,

“Sure. Just a sandwich or something? Any preference at all?”

“We usually have pasta on Friday.”

The young man hesitates, looking at the two detectives and then nods,
“Well, I’m sure we can find you some pasta.”

“Yes, I’m sure we can.”

Ellie smiles brightly,

“But in the meantime, are you ok to answer a few questions? Can I call you Aki?”

The woman who looks so much like her dead sister turns her face upwards, and fixes her eyes at a point on the ceiling,

“It means autumn.”

“Sorry?”

“Aki. It means autumn.”

“Oh. Does it? Well. That’s lovely.”

Glancing over at Hardy, Ellie see his expression is a familiar mix of curiosity and deep suspicion and - consciously - she shifts in her seat, tries to use a firmer voice.

“Aki, when we were driving back from the cottage, you told us you didn’t know how long you’d been there. Do you remember that?”

The slim Japanese woman is still turned away from her in her seat, but she inclines her head slightly at her question like she’s listening to some distant birdsong.

“And you said Tao had gone out in the dark. Do you remember when that was exactly?”

Beside her, the AA - Charlie - leans forward encouragingly,

“Aki? Did you hear DS Miller’s question? How did you come to be at the cottage? Do you think you can…?”

“Can you remember where it was you last saw your sister?”

Hardy’s voice breaks in abruptly and, although she knows this is his version of going gently, Ellie stiffens at the harshness of his tone. To her surprise though, Aki lowers her chin and fixes her eyes on his face,

“She went out to fetch the wood,” she says, and then smiles almost triumphantly, as if she’s pleased she’s managed to recollect such a significant detail.

Leaning back in his seat, Hardy narrows his eyes,

“And when was this exactly? Do you remember?”

Aki’s face goes blank for a moment and she frowns,

“I’m not sure. It was getting dark. She had to take the big lantern with her.”

“The big lantern?”

The woman nods, a tiny jerk of the head,

“Yes. I know because…when she didn’t come back I had to use the small one to go and look for
Her eyes are getting wider as she speaks, her breathing more rapid and shallow, and in her lap her small hands twist back and forth like pale fish. Watching them, Ellie feels a sudden tug of memory back to the terrible evening she sat down with Tom to ask him about Danny’s emails, and without thinking she leans in closer to her. Makes her voice soft, like she’s talking to her little boy again.

“Aki, did you find her? Did you find Tao?”

The woman’s eyes dart to fix on her own, and the horror in them is so evident Ellie feels her throat constrict.

“She was lying…she was lying on the ground. And her dress…was all…”

She shakes her head, little tiny shakes like she’s trying to work something loose,

“I tried to wake her, but she wouldn’t…she didn’t…” she sucks in a deep breath, shuddering at the intake, “And then I saw her neck. Her neck was all…”

Her hands reach out in front of her trembling, and without warning tears spill out and down her cheeks. Concerned, Charlie turns to speak at Ellie,

“I think this is enough for now, don’t you? This is obviously very distressing for her. Maybe we should wait until doctor…”

But before he can finish, Hardy breaks in, his voice like the point of a knife,

“Who was it killed your sister, Aki?”

And the agonised answering wail from the woman on the sofa shocks them all into silence,

“He did it!! He did!! It was him! It was him!”

“I just want to understand what on earth you were thinking of, DI Hardy?”

Drawing herself up imperiously to her full and not insignificant height, Dr. Anita Hillier faces them both down with a look of barely controlled fury, fists balled on her hips. Behind her a concerned-looking Atherton stands with his hands in his pockets, seeming unsure where to put himself in the face of such righteous fury, and when Hillier takes another step closer to them Ellie thinks she can see him visibly brace himself for impact.

“Questioning someone in Aki’s state of mind without a medical professional present was not only reckless, it was negligent and utterly thoughtless. For all we know you may have set her progress back years.”

Hillier’s gaze moves past them both to the interview suite, where Aki Tanaka is now crouched on the sofa in a ball sobbing, while Charlie sits by her side rubbing soothing circles on her back.
“Aki has been in our care at The Font for almost a decade, and I’m not sure I’ve ever seen her quite so distressed.”

“And you don’t think being a witness to her sister’s murder might have something to do with that?”

Hardy’s tone is clipped and acid, but Ellie can still tell he feels bad. Frankly, it’s hard not to. Aki Tanaka may be a grown woman, but something about her face as she was forced to relive the memory of seeing her twin sister dead had been deeply and profoundly affecting for both of them. Now though, watching Anita Hillier lead a mildly sedated Aki out of the station, they’re faced with the fact that - as a result of her revelation - they’re no less hopelessly lost than before.

“I’m sorry, she insisted on being brought straight up here when she arrived. I thought it was for the best, I didn’t realise she was going to interrupt your interview in that way.”

Atherton is still looking anxious, although truth be told it might only be because the ‘n’ word was mentioned. Wessex Police have made great strides in the last few years in terms of dealing with cases involving mental illness, and to be accused of negligence in such a high profile case is potentially a PR disaster for the department, let alone for the man whose put himself at the head of the investigation.

Frustrated, Hardy rubs a hand through his hair.

“When d’you think we’ll be allowed to speak to her again?”

Atherton sighs,

“I have no idea, Alec. Let’s wait to see what SOCO can turn up at the cottage though before we attempt anything further. Waterford has told me he’s going to continue to pay for Aki’s treatment for as long as she needs it, so it appears she’ll be a guest at The Font again - for the time being at least.”

He leaves them both to join Jenkinson in her office, closing the door behind them, and after a moment or two Alec jerks his head towards his own. Alone again for the first time since they got to the cottage, they sit across from each other at his desk in silent contemplation. It’s at least five minutes before either one of them speaks, and as usual it’s Hardy who starts, smack in the middle of a thought.

“He did it? We don’t even have a bloody ‘he’ do we?”

“Only Waterford? And his alibi’s pretty much watertight. After he reported Tao missing he was home until that day we saw him in Whitehall. And with that much security around him, it’d be impossible for him to duck out for as long as he’d need to.”

Ellie folds her arms then, and looks at him pointedly,

“Look, she was pretty convincing I know, but you saw that garage. If forensics do show that Tao was killed there rather than in her car, then that means whoever did it took her body up to The Cap and then staged her suicide. And remember what Anne Jeffries said about the driver of the car?”

“‘A pretty Chinese girl’.”

“So if Tao didn’t drive herself up there, as far as I can work out there’s only two people that could have.”

“Two? What about our mystery asian lady in the heels?”
Alec squints at her, and when she continues to look back, his eyebrows come up in recognition,

“So what…you’re saying you think that was Aki?”

“Would explain a lot wouldn’t it? Occam’s razor and all that? We’re chasing around London after
the fake-Aki and it’s the real one that’s actually leading the dance.”

“So all that this morning? The little girl lost thing? That was all just an act?”

Ellie shrugs,

“Don’t know that it was all an act. I think there’s no doubt she’s genuinely mentally ill, even
genuinely distressed at the thought of her sister’s death. I don’t think she was faking any of that.”

Raising one eyebrow in a mirror of his own expression, she cocks her head,

“I just know if there’s one thing you’ve taught me over the last four years, it’s that we can never
take people at face value.”
Episode 6.1

“So how do you imagine we go about proving this theory of yours?”

It’s lunchtime, and ever since Aki’s outburst earlier that morning the atmosphere in the station has been growing increasingly more claustrophobic, a fact they’d independently acknowledged by escaping at almost the exact same time. Leant back on their favourite bench on the quay, Hardy’s long legs are stretched out in front of him in what might pass for a relaxed pose, if you were someone who didn’t know him or didn’t look too closely at his expression. Beside him, Ellie sits arms folded, trying her best to enjoy a cheese and tomato sandwich and the last bit of sunshine they’re likely to get before autumn really sets in.

“I’ve been thinking about that. We both think that the woman Natalie Dalton regularly saw collecting Chen’s bills was Tao, right?”

“Seems logical. Flat’s in her name, so we assume she’s the one set her up there.”

“Set her up there as Aki,” Ellie reminds him, taking another bite of her sandwich, “And have we even figured out why she did that?”

Alec frowns,

“Well having met her, I can see why she might want to keep people away from the real Aki. Waterford said she was over protective of her.”

“Hmm.”

Ellie wrinkles her nose. There’s a stiff breeze coming in off the sea, and she’s starting to wish she’d worn her warm parka out instead of her thin suit jacket.

“When did Hannah say she started work on her book again? Late 2012?”

Hardy withdraws his notebook from his inner pocket and leafs through it,

“December 2012. Said she interviewed Tao for the first time at the start of the following year, before she went to Japan in the…March.”

“And when was it Gilroy say Aki took out the lease on the flat?”

Alec leafs through a few more pages, squinting at his own handwriting,

“April 2013,” his brows draw together and he looks at her, “So what, you’re thinking Tao set her up there specifically to throw Hannah off the track of the real Aki?”

Swallowing half her mouthful of cheese and bread, Ellie attempts to talk round the rest,

“Well, think about it! Hannah finds out that Waterford’s gotten Aki into the UK through some illegal loophole, then she discovers all this stuff about her dubious past in Japan. I know she told us she had no intention of using any of it, but she’s a journalist. You’re not telling me she wasn’t curious to meet her.”

“So Tao sets Chen Xie up as a fake sister to protect the real one?”

“And Chen’s so desperate she goes along with it.”
She takes a swig from her 7-Up to wash down the rest of the bread,

“She’d have been mad not to really. Free flat? All her bills paid, and all she has to do to keep it all
is say she’s someone else.”

“And in the meantime the real Aki is where? Down here at Lookout Cottage?”

“Probably. When she’s not in the hospital. I mean, it’s pretty isolated, no-one would notice her
there if she kept herself to herself. And from what she said this morning, it sounds like Tao was a
regular visitor. We can ask Waterford but I’m willing to bet all her ‘overseas missions’ were actually
trips down here.”

Hardy grunts,

“Her anti-trafficking work.”

A phone starts to vibrate somewhere and they’re both immediately scrambling through their bags and
pockets. Ellie gets her out first, but its actually Hardy’s that’s ringing.

“It’s SOCO.”

He answers, and Ellie can’t help but scoot up the bench and press her ear in against his. It’s a bit
more familiar than they’re used to being during work hours, but she’s buggered if she’s going to hear
everything relayed secondhand. Brian is characteristically terse, as he always is with Hardy, but
when he realises Ellie’s listening in as well he immediately thaws out a bit.

“Just so we’re clear though, these are just preliminary findings, alright? I’m sending the material
off to the lab but chances are you won’t get anything back from them now for at least three days,
maybe more.”

She hears Hardy begin to groan and digs him hard in the ribs,

“Ok, but what did you find? Was there anything in the container?”

“It’d been completely cleaned out. Household bleach I’m willing to bet. Whatever it was there was
nothing left on the surfaces, inside or out.”

“You found something though?”

“Yeah. A fingernail. It was embedded in the rubber seal, inside the joint at the hinge. My guess it
got ripped off as someone tried to tear at the seal from the inside,” he pauses, “I hope you don’t mind
but I took the liberty of calling Albie, and checking against the coroner’s results.”

Ellie swallows as a feeling like cold seawater rises up from her ankles through her body.

“He said her hands were pretty badly charred, but that the nail on Tanaka’s right index looks like it
was partially torn away pre-mortem.”

Even as he thanks him and asks a couple more clarifying questions, she can see how Alec’s face has
darkened at the news. She knows that, just like her, he had already pictured what Tao’s death might
have looked like, but the image of her tearing away her fingernails on the inside of a metal coffin is a
powerful one, and for a while they both just sit in silence after the call has ended.

Brushing the crumbs from her trousers, Ellie sighs.

“You know, even if we accept that she was murdered, we still don’t have a clear motive. If we're
saying it was Aki, then why would she kill the sister who was taking care of her? Paying her bills? I mean, she’s clearly troubled, but is she dangerous?"

Hardy leans forward, elbows on his knees, and squints at the sun on the sea.

“The Japanese authorities believed she killed her father. Burned the house down with him in it.”

“True. I mean she was just a kid, but yeah. I take your point.”

Distractedly, Ellie chews on her bottom lip before mirroring his action, so they’re sat knee to knee.

“If it’s Chen, we have even less in terms of motive. Judging from her flat she had it pretty good, so why change anything? Why get rid of Tao? Bit like killing the goose that lays the golden eggs. And if you’re right and she was the one who tried to sell Tao’s story, it’d be more likely she’d be the one in danger wouldn’t it, not the other way round.”

Her partner nods slowly, and - she can’t help but notice - glances down briefly at the hand resting loosely on her leg. Instead of making any movement towards it though, he just draws in a single deep breath.

“So what next?”

“Not sure.”

She picks up the other half of her sandwich,

“Thought you might be about to hold my hand for a minute there though, which seemed like a step in the right direction.”

In the end they decide to pursue the Chen Xie angle first. A call to the hire-car company that rented the Peugeot Estate to her confirms that the car was returned on time yesterday, although not to the central London depot where it was originally leased from the previous Saturday. Instead it had been returned to their Taunton branch after hours, the previous evening.

“After hours? So that means no-one would have seen her return the car? She didn’t have to sign any paperwork?”

The guy at the London branch - Mike - makes a noncommittal sound at Hardy’s question,

“Well you can ask them there, but it looks like that branch closes at 6pm. Then the keys just go into a lock box, and - unless the car’s damaged - we’d have no reason to contact that person again.”

Turning the mouthpiece against his chest, Alec turns in his seat to face her,

“How far’s Taunton from here, roughly?”

“From here? Thirty-five, forty miles? Maybe an hour’s drive?”

He turns back to the phone,

“Can you get them to hold the car there? Ask them if we can take a look at it?”

“I can give them a call yeah, it’s not been booked out again from what I can tell,” there’s a short pause on the line, then, “Don’t suppose you can tell me what all this is about, can you?”
“I can’t sir I’m afraid, no.”

There’s another longer pause, and holding the receiver Hardy frowns,

“Is there maybe something you want to tell me?”

The man at the other end clears his throat,

“Well, not exactly. I just…wondered if she was ok? Ms Xie who rented the car, I mean.”

“You met her?”

“Yeah, I mean… I was the one who took the booking last Saturday. Showed her the car and everything. I remember because it was the last one of the night. I was just about to close up when they got here.”

“Sorry, they?”

In the seat next to him, earwigging as usual, Ellie perks up at his words.

“Yeah, she had a friend who drove her here. I only saw her from a distance, another asian woman. I kind of assumed she was her sister.”

“And they left together?”

“Yeah, I mean she followed her out in the hire-car. She was really nervous - Ms Xie I mean. She said it was because she hadn’t driven for a while, but it seemed…more. I told her she could call me if she had problems. I gave her my number. We’re not supposed to, but she was…” he hesitates, “Has something happened to her?”

“I’m sorry sir, as I said before I can’t…”

Reaching over and grabbing Hardy’s biro, Ellie scribbles on the pad in front of him and he looks at her questioningly. When he hesitates, she taps at the paper again with an insistent look and he turns back to the phone.

“Uh…look, Mike wasn’t it? This is probably going to sound like a weird question - particularly from one straight man to another - but I don’t suppose you noticed what kind of shoes she was wearing did you?”

There’s a pause while he listens to his answer and then he hangs up the phone.

“She was wearing trainers. He said she was worried her feet might be too small for the pedals, so he helped her adjust her seat.”

Leaning back in his chair, Hardy folds her arms across his chest and looks at her over the top of his glasses.

“Trainers not heels, Miller.”

“Well yeah, but we knew that already didn’t we? Natalie told us Chen only wore flats remember? And that wasn’t why I asked.”

Ellie frowns at him and then - when he continues to look at her blankly - gives her head a little shake, as if he’s been particularly dense.
“The trainers at the cottage? That weren’t Aki’s? I had a sudden thought that if they didn’t fit her feet, then they obviously wouldn’t have fitted Tao’s either. Which means…?”

“Which means they might be Chen’s.”

Hardy’s eyebrows lift in surprise,

“She was at the cottage too.”

They drive to Taunton, and get there just before the hire-car branch shuts. Luckily for them, Mike has called ahead and the manager is waiting for them when they arrive: an odd-looking red-faced little man with a slightly embarrassed expression on his face.

“I’m so sorry, I’m afraid I only just got the message about the Peugeot after 3.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning…” he grimaces, “It’s already been valeted. I didn’t know what you wanted to look at, but if you were hoping to find anything inside I’m afraid it’s all gone. Clean as a whistle now.”

“Bollocks!”

Hardy spits out the word with some degree of venom, and giving the manager an apologetic look, Ellie indicates the fob in his hand.

“Those the keys? Mind if we take a look anyway?”

“Be my guest.”

True to his word, the car is absolutely spotless inside and out, and reeking with the slightly sickly smell of upholstery shampoo which Ellie has to admit she actually rather likes. They push their hands down into the seat crevices, search under the driver and passenger side, but there’s nothing to show that Chen Xie ever drove it. Not even a sweet wrapper.

“Does a great job doesn’t he? Bulgarian bloke. I pay him next to nothing as well.”

The manager grins broadly, and arm-deep in the car’s upholstery they both glare back at him with barely disguised annoyance. Popping the bootlid, Hardy walks around the back to check in there. It’s equally as clean, even the spare wheel and jack look immaculate and as if they’ve never been used.

Walking round to stand beside him, Ellie scans the contents before pointing to an empty rectangular well in the boot liner.

“What usually goes in there?”

Craning his neck, the short manager looks over her shoulder, and then tuts noisily.

“Oh. Well, that wasn’t marked on the check sheet. He’s supposed to mark down if anything is missing on the inventory log, so we can replace it. We can’t have customers driving out without their full inventory. And we’ll have to bill her credit card for that.”

“For what?!”

The little man bridles at the exasperation in Hardy’s voice, and when he finally answers it’s with a
distinctly less civil tone than before.

“The petrol can. There should be a green plastic petrol can in there, and it’s missing.”

The drive back to Broadchurch takes less than an hour, but it’s fully dark by the time they get back into town. As they drive past the station towards Ellie’s house they pass ‘The George’ all lit up for the evening and she gives a little grin,

“I forgot it was Friday night, did you?”

“Didn’t think you’d be in the mood for a drink this week.”

Hardy shoots her a questioning look in the dark and she shrugs,

“Just wouldn’t want that to be something that fell by the wayside is all.”

“Our regular date night, you mean?”

He’s not looking at her, but she smiles at him anyway. His straight nose and dark arch of his eyebrows in profile are so familiar to her now, she thinks she could probably draw them with her eyes closed. If she could draw that is, which much to her great disappointment she really really can’t.

“Can I ask you something?”

Alec snorts,

“Like I could stop you.”

“What made you say yes that day?”

He glances at her, and she sees immediately that he knows what she’s talking about. That afternoon back at the start of the summer, when he finally thawed out enough to take her up on the offer of a pint. What she now thinks of as the start of their slow but inexorable mutation into ‘more than friends’.

His eyes rest on her for a fraction longer than is technically safe - as he’s the one driving - and then he gives her a strange wry kind of look that she doesn’t quite know how to interpret.

“You asked me.”

“Yeah, but I’d asked you plenty of times before then. You’d always said no before.”

He shifts his shoulders, and there’s a little hint of vulnerability in his voice now that she’s getting more and more used to hearing.

“I always wanted to say yes, I just figured it was easier…not to. In the long term I mean. I think I’d gotten so used to it, I’d forgotten what it felt like to not be permanently disappointed in people, in life. I’m not sure I even thought it was possible any more.”

“So, what? You’re saying I single-handedly renewed your faith in humanity?”

They pull up outside her house and she’s only half-joking, because honestly she could say the exact
same thing about him. The most solid, utterly decent and dependable person she’s ever known and
the best friend she’s ever had, despite all his prickly awkward semi-rudeness and his almost unique
ability to say the wrong thing in every social situation.

Putting his head on one side, Hardy gives a grudging nod.

“You, Miller. And your never-ending, interminable, inexhaustible bloody optimism. Your sweet
sunny bloody nature. Your relentless bloody kindness. Your endless…niceness to me, even when I
was sometimes being the worst kind of bastard to you.”

He lifts his chin, and almost despite himself his lips twitch in a smile,

“Christ, it annoyed the shite out of me sometimes, but god I loved you for it. You wore me down,
Miller. It’d take a far stronger man than me to resist, and you wore me down.”

Tears prickle the backs of her eyes, but she grins anyway because if she doesn’t she knows she’ll
start ugly crying over him right here in the front seat. Leaning forward she kisses him softly, and tries
not to think too hard about the three little words that just slipped out like they were nothing, but
which she’s still unable to say despite feeling it with ever fibre of her being. Instead she just says,

“I should go in. Put the boy to bed.”

He nods, dark-eyed in the dash lights, and reaches past her to open her door. As she closes it behind
her, he rolls down the window and she leans in.

“Thank you,” she says, and he squints at her.

“For what exactly?”

“Not sure,” she wrinkles her nose, "For the worst kind of bastard you can be incredibly sweet
sometimes, you know? Anyone ever told you that?"

“Ach, Christ no…” He makes a face at her, “Not sure it’s something I want bandied about either,
Miller.”

She grins,

“Ruining your reputation as an arsehole, you mean?”

“Exactly.”

“Goodnight Hardy.”

“‘Night Miller. See you tomorrow.”
These days, Hardy tends to sleep reasonably well. That is to say, if he’s lucky enough to be finished with work and home before 10pm, he normally makes it to bed by midnight, which means at least 5 or 6 hours of relatively good quality sleep. Gone are the days when he’d still be awake and poring over case files at four in the morning, so when he hears the soft insistent knocking on his window at about that time, it drags him back from the very deepest recesses of sleep.

Rolling onto one side, he blearily checks the clock on the nightstand, before propping himself up on one elbow to stare out the window. Framed in the faint glow from the porch light, Ellie lifts one hand in a tentative greeting and points towards the door.

“It’s open,” Alec mutters as he drags himself upright, knowing that she’ll no doubt be able to read his lips through the double-glazing, even if she can’t hear him.

He’s just pulling a jumper on over his t-shirt, when the handle of his bedroom door turns and Ellie steps inside and closes it behind her. Her cheeks are glowing and her eyes are sparkling, and she’s breathless like she’s been running.

Smoothing a hand over his bed-mussed hair, Alec regards her a little warily.

“Miller, it’s after 4.”

“I know. Sorry.”

Her hands are shoved into her pockets like she doesn’t trust them,

“But you know when you suddenly get a thought running around inside your head? And you can’t make it stop? And it just keeps going round and round and round, like one of those little wind-up Thomas the Tank Engine trains on the circular tracks?”

She looks expectantly into his face and he folds his arms, nods. Despite what it initially looked like this doesn’t seem like it’s a social call after all, but whatever’s got Miller this excited at four in the morning is probably something worth hearing.

“OK, I’m listening.”

“OK…”

Ellie breathes out slowly and looks down at her feet for a moment, like she’s trying to gather back together the thoughts that have scattered on the way up here.

“So, Tao left Waterford in Kensington on the Saturday afternoon, ok? And then that evening Natalie Dalton hears an argument between - we think - her and Chen. An hour or so later, the hire-car guy says he sees Chen with an asian woman, he assumes is her sister. Then he says Chen follows her out in her car, so we have to assume that from there they both drove down here together. If I’m right and the trainers at the cottage are hers, that is. So that means we’ve got Tao, Chen and Aki, all at Lookout Cottage under one roof from the Saturday evening.”

“OK,” Alec frowns, “So then what? Where are you going with this Miller?”

Ellie sighs and gives him an irritated look,
“Just let me think out loud, alright? I’ve been going over it all in my brain for hours, and saying it to you helps it make sense.”

Rolling his eyes, Hardy sits down heavily on the edge of the bed and indicates for her to do the same, but she shakes her head.

“No thanks, can’t. If I sit down now I’ll just conk out…”

She walks over to the window and back again, hands still in her pockets,

“Where was I?”

“Saturday night. All three women at the cottage. Two cars.”

“OK, yes. So the next time we see anyone is the Monday afternoon, right? Anne Jenkins sees a pretty asian woman driving the Subaru up to The Cap. We now know that whoever it was she saw driving the car, they must already have had the body with them. Along with the petrol can they’d taken out of the Peugeot.”

She looks down at Hardy face,

“Alright so far?”

Alec nods, and watches as Ellie fold her arms and fixes him with the same intense look of excitement she was wearing the day she cracked Sandbrook.

“OK, so why the petrol can?”

He frowns,

“You mean…”

“We thought before that it was just insurance, right? Belt and braces. Make sure she couldn’t possibly survive.”

Hardy’s lips part a little in sudden understanding,

“But if she was already dead…”

“There had to be some other reason for putting it there,” her eyebrows come up, triumphant, “Some other reason the killer wanted to make sure that body was so badly burned that the only way we could identify who it was, was with dental records.”

Alec’s eyes widen,

“Wait. So…you’re saying you think the body in the car…isn’t Tao?”

Stepping towards him, his partner’s eyes fix on his, dancing with excitement,

“Remember what Waterford said about Tao helping all the women she found? Finding them jobs, places to live? *Taking them to the doctors*?”

She drops down to squat between his feet,

“So what if - when she set her up in the flat - Tao also took Chen to a dentist. But they gave the dentist *her* name instead?”
Hardy’s breath stalls out in his throat. Ellie’s face is only a few inches from his own, bright dark eyes shining in her pale face, damp curls sticking to her forehead, and he can’t think of a time she’s looked more beautiful.

Shaking his head, he looks back at her in wonderment.

“And you came up with all this just lying at home in bed?”

Ellie grins, and moving forward presses a passionate - but all too brief - kiss to his still slightly open mouth.

“Well, you’d gone hadn’t you? Bugger all else to do there!”

There’s no way either of them is getting any more sleep now, so when they’ve both calmed down a bit they move out into the living room and Hardy makes tea. While he’s getting a couple of clean mugs out of the dishwasher, Ellie comes back from using the loo still looking completely wired, and impatiently he waves her towards the sofa.

“No. I’m serious Alec, if I sit down now I’ll just pass out.”

She reaches past him towards the counter top and helps herself to a handful of Digestives from the biscuit tin, and then watches as he adds milk to her cup.

“Ta.”

Handing her her tea, Hardy leans back against the sink with his own,

“While you were in the loo I thought of something else.”

“Yeah?”

“Remember that landlord from the pub?”

She nods,

“Jason Taylor?”

“Remember him saying something about a car leaving the car park, when he was running up the hill calling for help?”

Stepping over to where his jacket is hanging on the back of the chair, Alec pulls out his notebook and leafs back through the pages.

“Dark blue or black, big. Maybe a people carrier, he said.”

Ellie cups her hands around her mug, cocks her head,

“Could have been the Peugeot? She’d had to have had some escape route planned for once the fire was set. Then all she’d need to do was get down the hill to the car before anyone spotted the flames.”

“So either someone was waiting for her, or what? She’d left it there beforehand?”

“Could be.”
Sitting down at the table, Hardy puts his notebook down on the surface and pushes a hand back through his hair. The dopiness he’d felt on being woken has long since gone, and - although he’s still tired - just like Ellie’s his brain is now working at top speed.

“OK, so…say you’re right. Say the body in the car isn’t Tao’s, firstly how do we prove that?”

Miller purses her lips,

“DNA? We could compare it to Aki’s?”

“She’d have to give her consent to that,” Alec shakes his head, “And even if we got her to say yes, I’m not sure her ‘yes’ would be entirely legal.”

Ellie frowns, and walks over to the door and back a couple of times, sipping her tea.

“Maybe there are other records? Medical? Or something from Japan we could use?”

“Not sure what their privacy laws are like over there. Perhaps,” Hardy taps the table with a fingertip, “You think Waterford could help?”

“Yes, you want to involve him?”

“Why, you think he knows more than he’s letting on?”

Miller half shrugs,

“Just still a bit hung up on motive, is all. I mean, who profited the most from everyone thinking Tao was dead? Do we know if they had debts? Could be this is just an old fashioned insurance job.”

“So what, are we saying she’s the killer now? And that she’s still alive somewhere?”

Putting her mug down on the table, Ellie looks at him steadily. She suddenly looks very tired.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I keep thinking about what Aki said, about finding her sister dead. She said ‘he did it’ and ‘her neck’, something about her neck, remember? So how does that fit in with all of this?”

Hardy shakes his head,

“We’ll need to talk to the coroner first thing. First to see if he can check out your theory about the dental records. If you’re right, and the body isn’t Tao, we need to figure out where she went after the fire was set.”

He gallantly fights back a yawn, before finally giving in to it,

“No use thinking about that for another 3 hours though. Coroner’s not going to be awake before 8 on a Saturday.”

Ellie nods her agreement, and then - as if the movement used up her last few drops of energy - she folds herself downwards onto the sofa. Her eyelids flutter closed for a long moment, before they spring open again accompanied by a reproachful groan.

“Bollocks. I told you not to let me sit down.”

Giving her a faint smile, Hardy stands and, reaching out a hand, drags her back to her feet. Miller sways gently back and forth, one hand at her temple, and he takes hold of her shoulders firmly with
both hands.

“Ellie. It’s Saturday. You don’t have to get back straight away. Why not try and get a few more hours sleep at least?”

Leaning forward, his partner burrows her forehead into his shoulder, mumbling something incomprehensible.

“What?”

She leans back, her eyes only semi-focusing on his face,

“I said ‘what about Daisy’.”

Alec snorts and, turning her around, walks her slowly but purposefully back towards his bedroom.

“What about Daisy? If she hasn’t worked out by now who I’ve been texting back and forth with every bloody night for the last month, then she’s no daughter of mine.”

It’s past dawn when Ellie opens her eyes again. The sun is bright and butter yellow in the crack between Alec’s curtains and rolling to one side, she finds him propped up beside her against the pillows, glasses on and his laptop balanced on his thighs. Glancing down at her, he smiles softly,

“Morning.”

He hesitates for a second, before bending to drop a kiss to her forehead. It’s such a sweetly domestic thing to do, that he looks immediately self-conscious and returns his gaze to his laptop screen.

“Don’t supposed you dreamed up anything else while you were sleeping did you?”

“What, like a decent motive and the actual location of a famous pianist?” Ellie sighs, “Not yet, no. Maybe when I’ve had my coffee though. What time is it?”

She rolls her head backwards to check the clock, and almost lurches straight out of bed when she sees what the display says. Luckily, Alec stops her with a hand on her shoulder.

“I already called yer dad and told him you were here. He said he and Tom were going to take wee Fred down to the park for a kickabout this morning anyway. He said not to hurry back.”

“Oh thank god.”

Sinking back gratefully against the fluffy pillows, Ellie closes her eyes as she exhales with relief. When she opens them again a few seconds later, Hardy is looking down at her with a heady mixture of what looks a lot like adoration, and mildly terrified uncertainty.

“What?”

“Move in with me.”

He says it as if he’s been holding the words inside for hours and, gobsmacked, Ellie’s mouth drops open.

“What??”
“Move in with me.”

He frowns deeply, shakes his head,

“I mean…not here, obviously. There’s not enough room for us all. But…somewhere. A house big enough to fit us all in. You, me, Tom, Fred and Daisy.”

“Bloody hell, Hardy!!”

Propping herself up on her elbows, Ellie stares at him in amazement,

“When did you come up with all this?! What happened to taking it slow? We haven’t even told HR yet, and what? You’re already on bloody Zoopla house hunting?!”

She raises her eyebrows, and then nods towards the screen that’s turned away from her,

“And that was a joke by the way. You’d better not be on bloody Zoopla, Alec.”

He glares at her, clearly annoyed,

“I’m not!”

“Good.”

Collapsing back again against the headboard, she closes her eyes.

“Because if and when we start looking for a place together, it’ll be me that decides where we’ll live. You don’t have a clue about this town. You’d probably have us looking at something down in Elmside,” she grimaces, “And I mean, I’m no snob, but I’m buggered if I’m having Fred growing up anywhere around that area.”

“Credit me with some sense, Miller.”

Hardy’s voice is soft and a little reproachful, but when she opens her eyes to look at him again she sees the uncertainty in his face is slowly beginning to leave it.

“Does that mean you’ll consider it?”

Ellie folds her arms on top of the covers, examines her fingernails.

“Well. I’d have to talk to the boys first. And to Daisy. There’s no way we’re just springing this on her like she’s not got any say in the matter,” she looks at him pointedly, “And you’ll have to talk to Tess.”

“Oh Christ. OK, let’s just forget I ever mentioned it alright?”

He rolls his eyes theatrically, and reaching over she smacks him in the centre of the chest, before he slides off the bed and makes his way over to the door.

“Oh no! You’re not getting away with it that easily! You asked me to move in with you. I’ll have you know that that’s tantamount to a formal proposal of marriage, DI Hardy.”

They eat breakfast at the living room table, the laptop open between them. When Daisy eventually surfaces, she barely seems to register Miller’s presence in the house as unusual, only grumpily
muttering something from the kitchen about them using too much milk and not leaving her enough for cereal. As she wanders back out of the room again to take a shower, Ellie watches her go with a curious smile.

“You think she’d mind sharing a house with boys?”

“She shares with me doesn’t she?”

“You’re her dad though. Bit different.”

Hardy looks back at her across the table, and if his lips aren’t exactly smiling then his eyes most definitely are,

“I’m sure she’d get used to it,” he says.

Just as they’d predicted, the coroner - Albie Richardson - is none too pleased to be called on a Saturday morning about a body he’d examined almost a week ago and had thought he was done with. When Ellie explains her theory to him though, it’s obvious his curiosity is piqued, and within half an hour he calls them back sounding more than a little pleased with himself.

“I back-traced the dental records for you, and you’re right. They’re all fairly recent, and all from the same small practice in Balham, South London. Looks like our woman had regular appointments over the last three years, so it may be that if you contact the head of practice he’ll remember her face. I’m sending you over the number…”

Glancing down at her phone, Ellie sees the incoming text and grins,

“Thanks Albie, you’re a star!”

“All part of the service, DS Miller.”

There’s a smile in his voice now, so chancing her luck, Ellie slips in one last request before he hangs up on them.

“Albie, sorry! One more thing I forgot to ask before. When your guys did the examination, did you take x-rays of the body at all?”

Richardson makes an uncertain humming noise,

“Possibly? I mean, it wasn’t needed for cause of death, but it might be we did some for research purposes. Intense heat like that affects the skeleton in all kinds of interesting ways…”

“Would it be possible for you to check?”

“Today?”

“If you wouldn’t mind?”

There’s a soft sigh on the other end of the line, a sound like fingers tapping and then,

“Ok, I can log in remotely from here and have a look if anything’s on file. But if you don’t hear back from me within the next half an hour assume the answer’s no,” he grunts, “I have a 9am tee-time this morning and I’m buggered if I’m going to miss it.”
As she’s hanging up on the call, Alec is finishing a conversation of his own and by the tone of his voice he’s every bit as energised as she is.

“You’re sure about this?! Early hours of yesterday?!”

Picking up his notebook, he scribbles down a number he’s been given and then turns to face her with a look of wide-eyed disbelief.

“That was Gemini Cabs. I asked them to check their system and see if any of their drivers had picked up a fare from The Cap’s car park last Sunday evening or Monday morning and taken them back to the cottage at Thorncombe.”

He pauses, and Ellie stares at him,

“Well??”

“They said they had no record of anyone being picked up from The Cap on either of those days,” he fixes her with dark excited eyes, “They did drop a fare off in Thorncombe at that address yesterday though. A woman on her own. Driver picked her up in Taunton not far from where we were later, at around 7am. Dropped her off at the end of the drive just before 8.”

“What!?”

Alec nods grimly, and he’s already moving to get her coat for her, grab his car keys, even as he pulling on his own,

“Said the driver was a bit worried about her, had asked him if he thought he should call it in. Said it’s not often you pick up someone off the street dressed only in their nightclothes.”
Ellie remembers well the feeling that comes with finally drawing the threads of a case together, and it’s a feeling she knows she wouldn’t trade for anything. The bumping heartbeat, the slightly clammy underarms, the breathlessness, and the sense that her brain is working at optimum efficiency, doing the thing it does best: solving a mystery.

There had been other puzzles in her work of course, before Hardy came along, but since Danny, since Sandbrook, everything else just seems like white noise. The grunt-work that fills in the gaps between the real cases, the ones that light her up like a 100 watt bulb and leave her tossing and turning until four in the morning. Deep down, Ellie has always known she had the potential to be something special, to excel as a detective. The irony that it was the man who effectively took her promotion that finally brought it out of her, is never entirely lost on her.

“You think I should call Atherton?”

Hardy’s driving them both, but she knows he’s not thinking about the road. Like her, his mind is running down three different avenues of thought simultaneously, the first very likely being what they’re going to ask Aki Tanaka when they get to The Font.

“I don’t know what we can tell him yet.”

Alec’s jaw is set in a grim line of determination,

“All we really know for sure is that she’s been lying to us, and that she very likely knows more than she’s letting on. What we don’t know is how much of how she’s been so far is just an act, and how much is genuine mental illness.”

“She returned the hire car, got a taxi back to the cottage, and when she found us there pretended she’d been wandering the fields all night. Those don’t seem like the actions of a confused woman.”

“No,” Alec frowns, “But why was she in her nightdress? If she’s not sick, if she’s somehow helped mastermind this whole thing, why draw attention to herself in that way?”

Ellie turns in her seat to look at him,

“You say helped, but we still don’t know who if anyone else is involved in this.”

She pauses, considering voicing the other frankly barmy idea she’s had dancing around in her head all night, ever since she first seriously considered that the body in the car wasn’t Tao Tanaka’s.

“What if no-one else is? What if this is just a good old-fashioned murder after all. Nice and simple. With just one victim, and one murderer.”

Hardy’s eyes slide sideways to look at her, and he slows the car fractionally,

“Ok, so how are we suddenly ruling out the idea that Tao has been working with someone else?”

“Think about it Hardy. Who have we actually seen? We know now that Tao’s been alive all along, and yet we’ve never actually seen her? A woman who must have been covering her tracks from us from day one? It doesn’t make any sense…” she cocks her head, “Unless she’s never been hiding at all. Just waiting for us to find her, and then rule her out without even looking twice.”
They’re just coming up to a lay-by, and - applying the brake - Alec swerves the car into it and stops. After a second or two he kills the engine, and they sit together in silence listening to the ticking sound of it cooling down, the muted noise of the road outside. Ellie’s eyes are on her partner’s face as she sees him make the same connections, eventually drawing the same ridiculously logical conclusion to this whole confused mess as she has.

“You’re saying there’s never been an Aki? Never been another woman? There’s only ever been Tao.”

The shrill tone of Ellie’s mobile breaks into the charged atmosphere between them, and holding Hardy’s gaze she reaches into her pocket and looks at the screen.

“It’s Albie.”

The coroner’s voice when he answers sound marginally less irritable than when he’d called them back twenty minutes before. Instead he now sounds curious, and more than a little excited.

“OK, so I’m looking at the x-rays now. I got your text before, and to answer your question, no, there’s nothing unusual at all about the pelvic bone. A major operation of the kind you’re describing - to separate pygopagus twins - would leave a lot of very noticeable traces or absence of bone on the pelvis and spine, which we’d still be able to see even after thirty plus years.”

He makes a considering noise,

“Plus - I mean I don’t know the exact nature of their case of course - but normally there would have been further surgeries to repair any shared organs, the bowel, urinary tract as well, and there’s none of that here either.”

“So just to be clear, you’re stating categorically that this body definitely isn’t Tao Tanaka’s?”

There’s a pause and Richardson’s tone when he answers is a little injured,

“Well, not if what you’re telling me now about her birth is true, no. And frankly Ellie, if I’d had any of this information before I would never have signed off on…”

“Ok thanks, Albie.”

He’s still protesting when she ends the call, but honestly offending the delicate sensibilities of a coroner is the least of her concerns right now. Hardy is still looking at her with the same deeply furrowed brow, and an expression that is very clearly asking her if she understands what a shitstorm all this is about to potentially unleash for both of them.

“OK. Remember, right back at the start? We thought maybe Tao was using her sister’s identity as a cover for her visits to The Forge, didn’t we? The only thing we didn’t consider is that she was still using it. We created our mystery asian woman to explain it all, but what if it's just been Tao all along? She killed Chen when she threatened to expose her. She cleared out the flat. She returned the Peugeot, minus the petrol can. And when she realised we were at the cottage waiting for her, she went back to playing Aki knowing exactly how she’d be treated.”

Folding her arms Ellie looks at him triumphantly,

“She’s been one step ahead of us all the way, watching us chase after someone that she created.”

Hardy shakes his head. Resting his hands on the wheel, he looks down at the floor for a moment, seeming to be gathering his thoughts.
“OK. OK. So, even if we accept all this might be true, there still has to be a why.”

“Why what?”

“Why make it look like she’d killed herself? Why kill off famous successful Tao Tanaka to become her nobody sister? And if this is about simple revenge, silencing a blackmailer, then why not just kill Chen at the cottage when she had her alone and get rid of the body?”

He gestures at the window,

“She’s in the middle of nowhere out there, she could have thrown her off the cliff. No-one knew who she was, she’d never have been traced back to her. And then there’s the whole thing with the dentist. If we’re right, and she took her there for three years, just to create false dental records, then this was a long term plan. She’d been working on it for a while. And that’s not a good old-fashioned murder, Miller,”

Hardy grimaces,

“To plan something like that in such detail, over so many years, and execute it all with such precision? That’s not just psychotic, that’s positively psychopathic.”

Sitting back in her seat, Ellie chews on her bottom lip. He’s right of course. And what’s more, the more she considers her theory, the more she realises they have little to no solid evidence to prove it. In the week that they’ve spent investigating this, they’ve spent the bulk of their time chasing down a dead woman and her fictional creation, and all they have to show for their troubles is a second murder scene and a suspect who is conveniently the absolute double of someone else.

“How about Waterford?”

Leaning back against the door, Alec looks at her with bright questioning eyes and she looks back at him with an equal amount of curiosity.

“You still think he’s involved?”

“Maybe,” Hardy frowns, “But more to the point, if he isn’t involved he’s probably the only person alive who can say for sure that that woman at The Font is his wife and not her twin sister.”

“And if he is involved?”

Her partner raises his eyebrows pointedly.

“My guess is that when he sees her, he’ll deny everything.”

They make the decision between them not to call Waterford direct, but instead to tell Atherton. Hardy’s concise outline of their theory is met with a tense silence at the other end of the line, and when the DAC finally speaks, his tone is more than a little strained.

“And you say the coroner can confirm the first part at least? That the dental records definitely aren’t her’s?”

“Ah…no sir, but we both figure it being a small practice the chances are that the dentist will remember the woman he actually saw, we just need to talk to him. We have the x-rays though, showing nothing where Tao should have had extensive scarring.”
He clears his throat,

“And we’re fairly confident the body is Chen Xie’s, the young Chinese woman we believe has been living in the flat in Balham, posing as Tao’s sister.”

There’s more silence, and then:

“You understand what it is you’re suggesting with all this, DI Hardy?”

“Yes sir, I think we do.”

There’s another long pause, during which they both exchange anxious glances, and then Atherton exhales audibly.

“So, just let me get this part perfectly clear. You now want me to go and tell a man, a personal friend grieving for the loss of his wife, that there’s a possibility that she’s not only alive, but is now our prime suspect in a murder that we’ve been investigating as her suicide?”

They can almost hear him grinding his teeth,

“Have you any idea how far-fetched all this sounds, DI Hardy? Or what the repercussions will be for all of us - your whole department - if it all turns out to be nonsense? Have you even considered what would happen if the papers were to get wind of any of this?”

Hardy frowns deeply,

“With all due respect sir, bollocks to the papers. The only thing we should be concerned about right now is finding the person who murdered this young woman. And if we’re right about this, and Tao Tanaka is who we think she is, then they’ll have a far juicier story on their hands than a couple of idiots who wasted their time on a wild theory.”

He pauses waiting for the explosion he might realistically expect from a DAC whose been spoken to in that way to a subordinate, but when it doesn’t come he continues.

“Here’s what we want. Don’t tell Waterford that we think Tao has been posing as her sister. If he is involved in this somehow, if he knows Tao’s really alive, then we don’t want him tipped off. All we want is for us to be there when he meets her face-to-face. Whatever happens then, that’ll give us our answer.”

The silence that follows is so long that - after thirty or so seconds have passed - Ellie gives him a questioning look, to which he shakes his head tensely. There’s a soft tapping at the other end that sounds like fingertips on a desk, and then Atherton speaks.

“Alright. I’ll do this on one condition. That I’m the one to fetch him and bring him down there myself. George has been through enough already. I can’t imagine how he’ll react to seeing her, and I don’t want to be the one responsible for the fallout if it’s handled badly.”

Hardy raises his head to look at Ellie’s face, and after a second she gives a small hesitant nod. Leaning forward she speaks into the mobile’s receiver,

“Sir, it’s DS Miller here. Can I ask what it is you are going to tell him?”

Atherton sighs again, and this time the sound of it is unmistakably weary.

“The truth, DS Miller. I’m going to tell him that we need him to identify a suspect in his wife’s
As the drive down from London is at least two hours, the two of them turn and head into Shaftesbury itself to find somewhere to kill the time until Atherton and Waterford get there. A café on the high street provides welcome shelter from the heavy rain that’s just started to come down, and they settle themselves in a back corner, shaking off their clothes as they do so. As Hardy goes up to order a couple of teas, Ellie calls her dad to bring him up to speed and let him know they’re likely to be out until at least mid afternoon.

“He going to be coming back here afterwards?”

Ellie blinks, shifts the phone to the other ear,

“Uh…I don’t know dad. Maybe? Why d’you ask?”

“No special reason.”

Her dad huffs a little nervously into the receiver, and she frowns,

“Ok, what’s going on?”

“Nothing. Really. I mean, don’t panic love, but I think young Fred might have said something to Tom when we were out earlier. I didn’t hear what exactly, but the boy’s been asking questions. I think maybe you need to talk to him.”

“Oh bloody hell, that’s all I need.”

Folding in on herself, Ellie gives a low pained groan, and as Hardy returns with their tea she raises her head and gives him a beseeching look.

“Just tell him I’ll speak to him when I get back later,” she sighs, “Tell him I’ll explain everything, ok?”

As she ends the call, her partner pushes her mug of tea towards her. His expression is wary, like he’s not sure he wants to know what’s happened, but he asks anyway.

“Dad says Tom’s worked it out. Says I need to talk to him when I get home.”

“Ah.”

Leaning back, Alec crosses his arms across his chest. When she doesn’t offer anything more though, he leans forward again. His fingertips start to reach out towards hers across the table and then stop, aborting the movement halfway.

“You maybe want me to talk to him?”

“You?”

He shrugs awkwardly,

“Maybe it’d be better coming from me? State my intentions towards you and all that? Make sure he knows that we’re both serious about this.”

Ellie’s cheeks flush with warmth, and she has to duck her head for a moment, wrapping her hands
around her mug. Under the table, she moves her feet forward until they touch his, just the toes, and feels him press back against the contact.

“Perhaps you’re right.”

She risks a look up at him, but his expression as he looks back is so ridiculously full of affection and tenderness, that she immediately has to look down again.

“Ok, can you please stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, like you’re…”

She fumbles, knowing what she wants to say but not daring. Leaning further forward in his seat, Alec frowns at her, bemused, and this time he does reach for her hand.

“Ellie.”

“No. Not right now.”

Taking a breath in, she straightens up and looks him in the face,

“First we have to solve this case. Today. I’m sick of all this running around, grabbing a few hours together. We need to wrap this mess up, so we can figure out…whatever it is we’re doing here.”

“Ok.”

He looks a little dazed, but when she finally accepts his hand and squeezes it, cautiously hopeful. She looks back at him uncertainly, not because she’s not sure of how she feels, but because - despite knowing him as well as she does - this new more-exposed version of him still seems unfamiliar. Like something she has to take care with.

“And we need to do it right. Tell Tom. Tell Daisy. Tell work,” she pauses, sucking in a breath before adding, “And then maybe...maybe we can see if the idea of us all living under the same roof isn’t the complete living hell that it sounds like.”

After her speech, happiness seems to subtly radiate off Hardy for the next couple of hours, and she can’t help but enjoy the unfamiliar look of it on him. There’s a definite lightness to his step that she’s never seen before, a swing in his arms and a small slight smile that seems to be permanently hovering at the corners of his mouth.

He’s the model of professionalism though, of course. There are no more public displays of affection or lingering glances, and they spend the rest of the time on their laptops, dutifully typing up their reports for the last few days. The café is so quiet and the complexity of the accounts is so dense that it’s a long while before either of them checks the time again, but when he finally does, Alec frowns.

“It’s almost twelve thirty y’know?”

Glancing up from her screen, Ellie looks confused for a second, then genuinely puzzled.

“That’s weird. What time did we call him again?”

“Couldn’t have been long after nine,” Hardy checks his log, “Nine thirteen.”
“Even with traffic he should have been here by now,” she nods towards his phone, “Call him and see what’s happened.”

Alec nods, scrolling through his contacts, but just as he’s about to hit call, it starts to ring. Answering the withheld number, he gives his name cautiously,

“DI Alec Hardy.”

He’s silent for a moment, listening, but the look of dawning disbelief on his face has the hairs on Ellie’s neck standing up even before he starts to speak.

“Sorry, who was it exactly who gave you this information?!”

His tone is unmistakable, sharp and angry, and she knows instantly that he’s talking to a member of the press. Looking across at her with muted fury, he shakes his head,

“No! No, I don’t have any comment at this time, or at any time. This is an ongoing investigation, not some bloody soap opera you can just write any old bollocks about. And if I find out you’ve obtained this information through any even slightly dubious means, I’ll come down on your bloody rag like a ton of bricks.”

Stabbing ‘end call’, he throws his mobile down on the table and pushes a hand back through his hair in wide-eyed amazement.

“That was some little scumbag at The Mail - Tyler. Wanted to know what I could tell him about ‘our mistaken identity of Tao Tanaka’, and the fact she’s now been found alive. Said they’re running the whole story in tonight’s evening edition!”

It takes them less than twenty minutes to drive the rest of the way to The Font, but as soon as they’re through the stone gates at the end of the driveway they can see the news vans. Four of the major news channels are already there, and reporters from those and at least three others are milling back and forth, having their makeup and hair done, talking to cameras. It’s nothing less than the proverbial media circus. Drawing up on the gravel drive at a distance, they only make it three metres from the car before they’re descended upon.

“Detectives! Detectives, are you here to speak to Ms Tanaka? And can you tell us anything about how Wessex police came to misidentify Ms Tanaka’s sister’s body as her’s??”

Rearing back from the reporters and cameras, Alec turns to Miller and they exchange looks of utter astonishment. To Ellie’s left a familiar dark-haired head pushes its way thought the crowd, and a microphone is thrust in towards her face,

“DS Miller! Ellie! Ellie!!”

Her nephew’s smiling, tanned face comes into view through the throng and, closely followed by another man armed with several large cameras, he steps in closer to grab her elbow.

“Ellie, can I speak to you alone somewhere? Maybe get an exclusive?”

“Olly!!! Jesus christ! What the bloody hell’s going on here!!”

Shaking him off, Miller takes a step back towards Hardy, her fists clenched at her sides. Behind her, her partner’s face is rigid with anger.
“Where did this information come from, Oliver? Who was it told you it was Aki Tanaka in that car?”

“You know we can’t name our sources DI Hardy.”

Olly’s mouth stretches wide in a smug grin,

“But you should know it was backed up with a great deal of supporting evidence. Did you know that Ms Tanaka had a sister who had been suffering from a severe mental health disorder? Or that she’d been hospitalised here repeatedly for it in the past?”

He cocks his head, pushing the microphone in closer,

“Given those facts, DI Hardy, don’t you think the assumption that the body of a suicide victim was Tao Tanaka’s rather than that of her twin sister, was somewhat naive?”

Whether Hardy means to simply push away the microphone, or slam it directly into Oliver’s nose isn’t immediately obvious to anyone around him, but either way the desired effect is the same. Stepping around the ensuing melee, he and Ellie make their way swiftly through the open front door and into reception, where they’re stopped in their tracks by two large burly security men. Showing them their IDs, Hardy makes to move around them, but has his path immediately barred by a single outstretched arm.

He’s just opened his mouth to start shouting, when the familiar figure of DAC Atherton appears in the doorway behind them.

“It’s ok, you can let them through.”

Dressed impeccably in a smart three-piece suit, the Deputy Assistant Commissioner looks calm and perfectly composed, the exact opposite in fact to how she and Hardy look and feel at this exact moment, and advancing on him furiously Ellie almost has to stop herself from reaching out and yanking on his silk tie.

“Sir, do you mind telling us what the hell’s going on here?! You told us both to wait for your call, that we’d meet you and Waterford here together, and now we get here and find every bloody reporter in the country on the doorstep!”

Atherton nods, and raising a placatory hand, goes to lay it on her arm.

“Alright. Just calm down, DS Miller.”

“Don’t tell her to calm down!”

To her surprise, Alec’s response is every bit as loud and furiously disrespectful as hers. Stepping to her side, he leans in towards Atherton’s face in a way that can only be described as openly hostile.

“You think I don’t see what’s going on here?!”

He waves a hand towards the door, indicating the unruly crowd outside,

“This is all spin. Isn’t it?” he bares his teeth, “Yer man Waterford knows that’s his wife in there now, doesn’t he? And he knows she killed that girl. And all this…this is all you helping him spin it so it doesn’t ruin his precious bloody career. Am I right?”

Atherton’s expression is completely unreadable, but he meets Hardy’s eyes with a steady implacable
gaze, and does not step backwards despite the obvious encroachment into his personal space.

“DI Hardy, I’d appreciate it if both you and your partner kept your wild theories to yourself from now on. You and DS Miller are way out of line here.”

Seeming unable to believe her ears, Ellie’s eyes widen.

“Pardon me sir, but what wild theory are we talking about exactly? We know this wasn’t a suicide! And we know that body isn’t Aki Tanaka’s, it’s Chen Xie’s, and we can prove it!”

“Can you DS Miller? Because all I’ve heard so far from the two of you is a lot of half-baked conclusions backed up by nothing but circumstantial evidence, evidence you should know from your own bitter experience wouldn’t stand up in a court of law.”

Atherton reaches up to adjust the knot of his tie,

“It may comfort you a little to understand that - whether she’s guilty of a crime or not - Tao Tanaka is unlikely to ever leave this facility again. It’s obvious she’s suffered an extremely severe breakdown, ostensibly as a result of her sister’s death, and can no longer function safely in society. So Dr. Hillier and I have suggested - and George has agreed - that it would be safest for her, for everyone, if she was to remain here indefinitely.”

“So what, you’ve just had her permanently sectioned?”

Hardy spreads his hands wide, dumbfounded,

“So no trial, no confession? She gets to live here in comfort for the rest of her days? And you think that’s suitable justice for taking a life in the way she did? For making that poor girl suffer!? Christ sake, we still don’t even know why she did it! Or what else she might have done!”

Fixing his cufflinks, Atherton looks pointedly back over his shoulder through the door behind him and - following his gaze - they both see the figure of George Waterford, now deep in conversation with Dr. Hillier. His face appears blotchy and red from crying, and when he turns to look in their direction he seems momentarily horrified. Staring back at him, Alec’s lip curls back from his teeth in frustration.

“Just let me talk to him for five minutes. He surely can’t believe this is the right thing to do. For anyone.”

Atherton sighs,

“DI Hardy, the man’s just been reunited with his wife, and she won’t even acknowledge that she knows him. Maybe have just a little bit of sensitivity.”

He walks past them out to the waiting press, and they watch as he’s subsumed in a flurry of flashing lights, waving hands and baying, yelling voices. Shaking her head incredulously, Ellie looks at Hardy, as outside the DAC’s voice rises loudly and clearly above the din of the thronging reporters.

“I am very happy to confirm the hitherto unsubstantiated rumours that yesterday morning Ms Tao Tanaka - the renowned pianist and wife of MP George Waterford who had been presumed dead - was found safe and well at a private home, a few miles from the scene of what had been widely assumed last week to be her suicide.

Although we fully understand that this story is of huge national interest, we ask that the press and the public respect the privacy of Mr Waterford and his family at this time.”
PLEASE NOTE: This chapter is the first part of a three part finale, which will be published all at once. So if you’ve been waiting for one final part, please be advised that there are now three :D

THREE MONTHS LATER

Ellie is on her way home from dropping Fred at school, when she notices the first snowflakes falling from the sky and, forgetting herself for a moment, she smiles as she holds out a gloved hand. The large wet flakes melt almost as soon as they land though, leeching through the wool to her skin, and after a second or two she shakes them off, then - reaching behind her - she pulls up the hood of her parka.

As she walks the last few hundred metres to her front door, slush has already started to build in the gutters - turning dirty and slippery underfoot - and by the time she steps inside her trainers are already soaked through. Throwing them onto the heap of footwear in the porch with a sigh, she stomps through the hallway in her damp sock feet and into the warm kitchen.

“Snowing out there now.”

“Is it?”

Stood at the sink, rinsing off their breakfast things for the dishwasher, Hardy looks over at her in mild surprise. It’s been almost eleven weeks since he was officially put on administrative leave as a result of their ‘handling’ of the Tanaka case, and she’s happy to see that - today at least - he’s showered and got dressed, albeit only in the t-shirt and sweatpants he taken to wearing around her house during the day now.

“Well it’s more like bloody sleet to be honest. Good knows what the A35 will be like.”

He grunts his agreement and then, as she presses into him from behind and wraps her arms around his middle, turns his head and rubs his beard against her cheek.

“You want me to pick up Fred later?”

“If you don’t mind.”

She pushes her face into the nape of his neck, kisses a spot just behind his ear,

“Don’t you have the meeting with Jenkinson later today though?”

He rolls his shoulders back in an almost-shrug, and then goes back to rinsing,

“One-thirty. We’ll be done by three at the latest. S’not going to be like the last one.”
She squeezes him a little tighter, and he gives a dramatic little groan. He’s put on a few extra pounds in the last few months, plus he’s wearing two layers and a jumper for the cold, but she can still feel the slight tension in his body at the talk of work.

“You think she’s going to give you a definite return date?”

“Maybe.”

He inclines his head, frowns,

“I’m guessing it’s still not down to her though. IOPC have the final say, and reading between the lines they want to drag this out for as long as they can.”

“C’mon, you don’t know that.”

He grunts again, but this time there’s a cynical little snort of laughter worked in with it.

“Oh I know that.”

He finishes loading the dishwasher and slams the door,

“You didn’t see them at the last one. They couldn’t have been less interested in hearing what I had to say. No, they have their version of the facts - the version Atherton and his guys cobbled together to explain all this - and there’s no way they’re deviating from them. What they really want is for all this to just magically go away, preferably with me along with it.”

Sighing Ellie, drops her hands to her sides and lets him move away from her as he busies himself putting away the cereal and other breakfast things they’d used earlier. She can’t help but feel a little guilty that she’s back at work now, even if it is only on traffic and desk duty, while Hardy is still locked in limbo while IOPC continue to investigate their handling of Tao Tanaka’s case.

The fact that he was a DI - her boss and officially the lead - meant that, when the shit finally hit, it had hit him full force, while Ellie was just caught with a little of the splatter. And she doesn’t know for sure, but she’s almost positive that Alec shoulderered far more of the blame for what IOPC saw as their ‘insane leaps of logic’ than was entirely fair. Even now, she lets that thought - that he should feel the need to take the fall for her, protect her in the exact same way that he had Tess - bother her more than it probably should.

Ultimately though, the fallout from Atherton’s cover-up had been huge for both of them. While Hardy had been subject to direct disciplinary action - and yet more news articles excoriating his abilities as a police officer - Ellie had effectively been demoted again. Although no-one had actually accused her personally of substandard detective work or bad investigation, the fact was that - ever since the first meeting with her superiors - she hadn’t been allowed with a hundred feet of a genuine case.

On top of which, in the middle of the whole ugly debacle, some complete arsehole had felt the need to let Jenkinson know that she and Hardy were ‘definitely involved romantically now’, so as well as everything else they’d had that shit to deal with as well. Their plan to break the news of their relationship gently to the kids (and to Hardy’s ex) had gone right out the window with the first front page headline, emblazoned over a candid shot of them stood together outside Wessex Court the previous year:
And christ, the memory of that alone is enough to make her cheeks burn.

It didn’t help their case either that the coroner who might have supported their version of events, mysteriously left on a year long sabbatical with his family the same week the IOPC’s investigation began. Or that, at the exact same time, the dentist who could confirm their story about Chen’s dental records was unceremoniously deported back to Romania, due to some ‘irregularity’ concerning his right to work in the UK. For the first two weeks they’d both fought tooth and nail to keep their original investigation going, to find some actual solid evidence that the body in the car wasn’t that of Aki Tanaka, but when Hardy was officially suspended by IOPC pending a second investigation into his competency, a lot of the fight had just gone out of him.

After that, he hadn’t so much moved in with Ellie as lost the desire to go home again.

To their great relief, Daisy had been completely fine with that side of things. Of course at seventeen, she was already getting herself emotionally ready to leave home for Uni the following year, so hanging out with a depressed parent wasn’t high on her list of priorities. And, despite their trepidation, her reaction to the reveal of their relationship was less earth-shattering for her than it was entirely uninteresting.

“I think it’s great. I mean, you already put up with him for most of the day anyway, so what’s a few more hours?”

And he and Ellie had looked at each other with somewhat bemused expressions.

“Daisy love, you do understand…we’re not just like house-sharing? Your dad and I have been… seeing each other. And now we’re moving in together.”

“Oh I know, I get it.”

Daisy shrugs and then her lip curls a little,

“You’re not like…getting married or anything though right? Just y’know, living together?”


“Oh then, yeah. Then I still think it’s great. I’m happy for you. Both. Woohoo,” and she drops a kiss on his cheek as she heads out of the door, “Good going dad.”

And just like that, they were living together, and it’s weird how fine it is. How utterly unlike her life with Joe was, and how completely entirely easy and wonderful at the same time. Tom, like Daisy, has been almost shockingly nonchalant about the whole thing, making Ellie wonder if - in all the chaos of the last twelve months - she’s somehow missed his maturing from a sullen teenager into a thoughtful and considerate young man.

She’s dragging a comb through her wet hair, still amusing herself with that idea, when Alec sidles up to present her with a packed lunch and a flask of coffee to take to work.

“Oh you’re brilliant you are.”

She kisses him, and allows herself to linger for a few seconds longer than she can strictly afford to,
enjoying the warmth of him as he presses her back against the wall by the door.

“Mm. Have to go,” she says, and he nods, tucks a curl back behind her ear, “Maybe meet for lunch? Before your meeting?”

“Ah. Dunno about that…have to see. I’ll text you.”

There’s a sudden evasiveness in his eyes, a glimpse of something that she knows he didn’t mean to betray, and then just as suddenly - it’s gone. Searching his face intently, she reaches down to to take the lunchbox from him, the flask.

“Alright then. Don’t tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Whatever it is that you’re up to this morning.”

“Jesus, Miller.”

He grimaces, holds her shoulders for an instant, and then lets her go, shaking his head.

“Do you have to know every little thing? Can’t I have any secrets?”

Ellie leans back, her eyes theatrically wide,

“Really?! You’re asking me that? Me? Really?”

“Ellie…”

“No, no, that’s fine. Go ahead, you have your secret. You don’t have to tell me.”

She straightens up and gives him a little push backwards, hard enough so he knows she’s serious, but not so hard he doesn’t know she’s not actually angry with him. Not really. As she heads for the front door though, she can’t resist throwing back one last barb at him,

“Well better be a nice secret though. Something I’ll be happy about,” she zips up her parka, “And I better not come home and find you attempting Goan Fish Curry again. The house stunk for days last time.”

He half-smiles, shoves his hands into the pockets of his sweats,

“I was thinking maybe scallops. In a cream and white wine sauce.”

“Bleurgh. No. Thank you, but no. Try again.”

“Oh what!? You told me you loved all seafood!”

And Ellie grimaces, shakes her head in genuine disgust,

“I do, but honestly that turns my stomach just thinking about it. Don’t know why,” she grins at him as she closes the door, “It’s Friday anyway. How about we just order pizza?”

The day passes relatively slowly, as it always tends to these days. Just before lunchtime she gets out her phone to check for texts but there’s nothing, and when she rings Alec’s number it just goes
straight to voicemail. She eats her sandwiches in a bus shelter by the side of the turn-off to Morcombelake - cheese and pickle with just the right amount of pickle - and feels just the tiniest bit peevish and hurt that Hardy hasn’t even checked in with her. The rest of the afternoon drags by, the setting sun taking any last hint of her energy with it, and by the times she pulls up in front of the house at five-thirty in the pitch black she feels pretty much ready to flake out.

The TV is blaring some CBeebies nonsense as she walks in the door, and when she pops her head round the door Fred barely looks away from the screen at her greeting. Grumbling and muttering her way into the kitchen, she’s exasperated to find Hardy not there to hear her litany of complaints and, after making herself a cup of tea from the newly boiled kettle, she goes off in search of him.

Tom’s door is firmly shut of course, the sound of death and destruction coming from inside, but the bedroom door - can she say their door now? - is a little ajar. She’s just about to push it in when she hears Alec’s voice from the other side, muffled but unmistakably excited in tone.

“Are you serious? Of course! Yes, of course!”

Then a short silence,

“No, I can’t tell her. It’s not right. It’s too risky for her. No. No, don’t ask me to do that. She’s got young kids for christ’s sake. And I’m practically living here now.”

He sighs and she leans back from the door, feeling suddenly awkward that she’s already been stood listening for longer than she should have.

“So what are you saying, you think we should leave town? When? For how long?” He pauses, “Oh god, you have to be shitting me woman…”

Behind her Tom’s door suddenly opens, and at his exclamation of surprise at seeing her Hardy hurriedly signs off from his call and a second later is standing in the doorway in a distinctly ruffled-looking state.

“When did you get back? I didn’t hear you.”

Raising an eyebrow archly, she stares at him,

“Apparently not. Who was that you were on the phone to?”

“What? When?”

Rubbing a hand through his hair, Alec looks back at her, trying unsuccessfully to affect an air of confusion, but when she doesn’t buy it he gives in almost immediately.

“Someone. A…friend. I can’t tell you who. Not just yet.”

His mouth turn downwards in a kind of unhappy frown at her face,

“I promise you, you’ll thank me for it later. Just…don’t ask me right now, ok?”

“Bloody hell Alec, what are you up to?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. I promise.”

Ellie glares at him. Even while she secretly appreciates his desire to protect her and her family, she can’t help but be annoyed with him and his constant care-taking of her. And, actually, maybe that’s what’s really pissing her off. The fact that Hardy is still drawing a distinction between her family and
his. ‘She’s got young kids’ he’d said and ‘I’m practically living here’, meaning not his kids and not actually living there, not officially, not yet. Whatever it is he’s keeping to himself, it’s obviously not something he wants her to share in - not a burden she could help bear like an equal partner should - and in the end that’s the thought that brings an unexpected surge of emotion to the surface. A hard lump to her throat.

“Maybe you should go back to your place tonight.”

His mouth drops opens slightly at that, brows knitting, and immediately she feels almost sorry for saying it. Almost, but not quite. A second or two passes as his eyes search her face and then his mouth closes again, a firm thin line, and he straightens up.

“Alright. If that’s what you want?”

“I think it’d be best, don’t you?”

He nods, small and curt, and then - after a moment’s hesitation - steps out and around her to the top of the stairs. She doesn’t turn to watch him go, but she can somehow sense the hurt disbelief coming off him in waves all the way to the front door, right up to the second he slams it.

For the first night in almost four months, Ellie doesn’t sleep at all well. Hardy’s absence in the bed feels like a pulled tooth - aching and raw - and no matter how often she turns over, tries to get comfortable, her hands and feet keep straying over into the parts where he isn’t. She feels hot and uncomfortable and even a little nauseous when she thinks back at their earlier interaction, and can’t help asking herself now why she’d gone off the deep end in the way she did.

She’s still lying awake at 3am thinking about it when she hears the soft chime of the message app on her phone and, rolling onto her side, turns the screen over on the nightstand.

’SORRY I’M STILL SUCH AN ARSEHOLE SOMETIMES’

Her fingers hover over the keyboard for a second as she considers whether to send back a sarky retort, but the little icon is already blinking to say he’s typing something else, so she waits.

‘I DON’T MEAN TO SHUT YOU OUT. I PROMISE.’

‘JUST A BAD HABIT I THINK.’

Her heart twists painfully in her chest at that, but she can’t help but smile as she taps out a reply.

’AS FAR AS BAD HABITS GO, I THINK I PREFER SMOKING.’

There’s a momentary pause and then:

‘THIS ONE’S EVEN HARDER TO BREAK THOUGH.’

‘PLUS - ONLY HAD MYSELF TO WORRY ABOUT BACK THEN.’

Ellie’s head drops back onto her pillows, and laying the phone flat on her breastbone for a minute, she breathes in deeply, and then out again to clear her head before she replies.

‘OK SO HOW ABOUT THIS THEN. ’

‘YOU TELL ME WHEN SOMETHING’S BOTHERING YOU. AND I TELL YOU WHEN
SOMETHING’S BOTHERING ME. AND WE SHARE THE WORRY OUT BETWEEN US FOR A CHANGE?’

She hesitates before adding,

‘GOT TO BE BETTER THAN THIS SURELY?’

The phone sits silently in her hand for a while, and after twenty minutes or so of watching the screen, waiting for another reply, she feels her eyelids start to droop. Another soft chime just as she’s drifting into sleep prises them open again though, and moving her head back, she focuses on the words.

‘CAN YOU COME DOWNSTAIRS AND LET ME IN? I LEFT MY KEYS.’

When she opens the front door to him, he’s still in the thin t-shirt and sweats that he left in earlier, only now they’re soaked through with snow and sticking to him. Pulling him into the hall, Ellie wraps him in her arms and the duvet she’s worn downstairs as a cloak, and buries her face in his neck as he shivers against her.

“Oh my god, was there ever a man as utterly frustrating as you?”

“Thinking not.”

His cold nose bumps against her cheek, and then warm lips are covering hers, his long fingers stretching wide over the small of her back. They twist and bump their way back up the stairs that way, wrapped up in each other, but when they kick the door shut and fall back onto the bed it’s more with a deep sense of relief than with any great urgency. Dragging her body in against him, Alec hooks a leg over hers and pulls those in too, until they’re entwined full length and wrapped in the quilt like a burrito. When he presses his lips against the side of her neck, she can feel his contented smile against her skin.

“I love you, Ellie Miller,” he says softly, and she shivers at the sound of it, the genuine sincere adoration in every syllable. He falls asleep with his arms still wrapped around her body, and his breath a soft insistent flutter at the base of her throat.

“You’d bloody better,” is all she finally whispers into the dark.
When Ellie wakes the next morning at 6:30, she can already hear the shower running next door and the sound of the TV on downstairs. Hardy’s regular morning routine of going in to Fred up before he can wake her, getting him breakfast and settling him in front of CBeebies while he takes his shower, is something she is eternally grateful for, and she sends him a silent ‘thank you’ as she turns over and snuggles back under the duvet. It’s taken her a few of months of it, but she’s finally starting to relax into the idea that there is someone else in her life who can be relied on, who she can depend on to know what needs to be done. The fact that that it's turned out to be her partner - the person she’s known that about from day one - sometimes feels like a veritable slap upside the head.

Because surely it should have been blindingly obvious, and why on earth didn’t she work it out years ago and save them all a lot of trouble.

Rolling out of bed, she stretches, wanders out and lets herself into the bathroom while the water is still running. She doesn’t have a plan to join him exactly, but she can never resist going in to have a sneaky gawp while she brushes her teeth. Looking over when the door opens, he grins knowingly at her,

“Oh aye. Come to have your morning leer.”

“Oh shut up, you love it.”

She reaches in to slap an open palm on his wet ass cheek, before turning back to pick up her toothbrush. As she brushes, she continues to watch him from the corner of one eye, although tries not to be too blindingly obvious about it.

“Hey, you never told me how it went yesterday.”

Shutting off the water, she drops her brush back into the mug,

“With Jenkinson I mean. What did she say?”

“Pretty much what I predicted. IOPC 'have yet to draw any solid conclusions’, and until then….he rubs a hand over his face, “At least she had the decency this time to look embarrassed by the whole thing.”

“So no return date?”

“Not exactly.”

He cocks his head and, finishing rinsing his hair, turns off the shower,

“She suggested IOPC might be open to drawing a line under all this though…reinstate me,” he
gives her a sideways look from under his wet fringe, “If I’d consider a transfer back up to Paisley.”

“What?”

Ellie’s mouth drops open a little in disbelief,

“She’s not serious is she?!”

Wrapping a towel around his hips, Alec gives a small nod,

“I think she is, yeah.”

They stand looking at each other for a moment, and staring into his face - at the deep frown line between his eyebrows - she can feel her chest constricting, her stomach turning over in sudden nervous anxiety.

“Oh god. You’re actually considering it.”

His frown deepens and he drops his gaze, looking down at his feet.

“Ellie, I have to.”

“No! No, you don’t! There has to be something we can do.”

She’s shaking now, genuinely nauseous, and has to lean back against the sink for a moment to steady herself. An awful thought drifts into her head suddenly, and won’t let go.

“Oh shit. Is that what you were on the phone about last night when I got home? Have you decided already? Were you working out how to leave?”

“What?”

Alec looks genuinely shocked, hurt even,

“No! No, I would have said. No, that was…” he grimaces slightly, “That was…about something else. And we have to talk about that too. Today. I just need to sort a couple of things out this morning first. But, depending on what happens this week it might mean….”

His sentence is interrupted though by Tom’s voice shouting up from downstairs. For a moment they both consider ignoring it, but then he shouts again and the sudden note of urgency in his voice has them both reaching for the door knob at the same time.

“What is it?”

At the bottom of the stairs, Ellie’s eldest son is standing in the hallway with his gym bag on his back, a look on his face that makes him look suddenly years younger. Anxious and scared, and just a tiny bit panicky.

“Mum, there’s loads of reporters outside!! Tons of them! They tried to stop me coming in!”

“What?!”

Instantly furious and balling her fists at her sides, Ellie is just starting for the front door when Alec grabs at her elbow,

“Wait. Ellie, just…wait.”
When she turns back to look at him, his face is a strange mix of disbelieving fear and wary suspicion.

“Oh christ, she didn’t. She didn’t do it already,” he mutters, and in the next moment he’s dashing back into their bedroom, scrabbling through his clothes for something.

Watching him, Ellie can feel anger and apprehension coursing powerfully through her body, and again she has to press a hand to the wall to steady herself. Calm the upsurge of anxious sickness she suddenly feels.


Finally finding what he’s looking for - his phone - Hardy straightens up, and frantically scrolling through the screen starts to read something he’s evidently been sent at some point during the night. The look of dawning horror on his face as he does so brings gooseflesh out on her arms just looking at him.

“Say something!!!”

Dropping his arm to his side, her partner turns to look at her and the expression on his face is nothing short of apocalyptic.

“You’re going to need to pack a bag. Bags. Right now. For you and the kids.”

“What?!”

Infuriated, Ellie feels her cheeks blaze with heat,

“Why? What’s happened?!”

He sighs, and - closing the gap between them - he turns his phone over in his hand and shows it to her.

“This. This happened.“

It takes her a second or two to focus on what she’s seeing, a news-site, The Times, and a headline that - were it on a bigger screen or a printed page - she knows would be at least an inch in height, screaming its tabloid message to a readership that is always greedy for new scandal:

THE PEER, THE PIANIST AND THE PERVERSION OF JUSTICE

Her eyes dart back and forth over the words - murder, cover-up, identical twins - and then over the images that intersperse the lengthy, densely written article. She recognises a couple immediately: the DVLA picture of Chen Xie, the picture of the teenage twins in Japan, the image of their tiny scarred bodies post-op, but there are others she’s never seen before. A photograph of much younger DAC Atherton and George Waterford, arms around each other at social event, a clearing in woods somewhere, cordoned off as a crime scene, and then finally a stark shot of an open grave, at the bottom of which lies a delicate skeleton.
Shaking her head, she glances at Hardy before scrolling back up the page to the byline. A familiar smiling face looks out at her from the page, only now her cheeks are clean of dust and her hair is shiny.

“This was Hannah? Hannah Mendelsohn??”

She looks up at him again as he nods, and there’s a touch of chagrin now on his face.

“Oh christ Hardy, tell me you didn’t? You gave this to her? You gave her the whole story?!”

“I gave her everything we’d worked out so far, she did all the rest herself. She went back to Japan, dug out more of their hospital records. She figured it all out Ellie. She told me yesterday she was almost ready to file the story, that we should get ready, but last night she must have...

Reaching out both hands, she shoves him as hard as she can in middle of the chest,

“Jesus christ, Alec! You stupid bastard! What were you thinking?!”

Even dressed as he is in just a bath towel, Hardy still manages to muster some degree of dignity, and - folding his arms - he looks down at her with an expression she clearly remembers from every time they’ve ever closed a case together.

“I was thinking about Chen Xie. I was thinking that I didn’t want her to have just been some bloody prop in all of this. Just be forgotten like her life never mattered. I was thinking that I want some kind of justice for her. That’s what I was thinking.”

As he continues to look at her, Ellie’s breath leaves her in a long sigh. She wants to argue you with him, wants to rage at what he’s done behind her back, but somehow she can’t find the energy. Stepping over to the bed, she collapses down onto the surface, her head in her hands.

“And what about us? What about our lives?”

She turns her face up to look at him,

“You have to know they’ll crucify you for this.”

“Maybe.”

Turning to pick up his clothes from the floor, Alec pulls on his boxers and then his jeans. Buttoning the flies, he stretches down for his t-shirt before pulling it down over his still damp hair.

“Or maybe they’ll find out for themselves what it feels like to be in the crosshairs for a change.”

They leave from the back door, into the small alley behind the house where only a couple of the reporters have ventured so far, and from there into a waiting taxi. Fred is crying and fractious at being bundled out so swiftly, and Tom seems to be sulking, but as they drive away from the house Ellie breathes a sigh of relief that they’ve managed to escape before the TV news crews arrive. The Times has been out for less than an hour, but already the BBC and all the major stations are running continuous coverage on the story, and the other papers are scrambling to play catch up. Turning his mobile towards her in the back of the cab, Tom shows her a Facebook video of Waterford being chased to his car by a crowd of paparazzi, his face a mask of anxious fear, while all around him voices shout for his comment.
“It’s all over social media,” her boy says, sounding almost impressed, and goes back to scrolling through Twitter to see what else he can find.

They drive east for just under an hour to her mate Sue’s in Exeter, who - when she lets them in - seems to mirror Tom’s look of grudging admiration,

“Blimey El! What have you been up to! Your bloke’s face has been on the box all morning!”

As she tries to settle Fred down with a drink and his Lego, her friend is busy flipping through the channels to try and find the news, and when she does she digs her in the ribs with a squawk of excitement. Even Tom makes a sudden surprised noise.

“Mum, look! Alec’s on TV outside our house.”

Filling the screen, her partner’s pale freckled face looks as irritable and thoroughly unhappy to be in front of the camera as it always does, but when he speaks his voice is clear and perfectly calm.

“Obviously I can’t officially comment on any part of Ms Mendelsohn’s article at this time. And, as I am currently placed on administrative leave, I’m also unable to comment on any investigation - internal or external - within this department or any other.”

There’s a flurry of flashbulbs and shouted questions from the mob in front of him, and then one voice - a woman’s - somehow makes it through the hubbub to be clearly heard.

“DI Hardy, is it true that you and your partner DS Miller found compelling evidence three months ago that a murder had been committed, rather than a suicide? And that this evidence was then disregarded by DAC Atherton in a bid to protect his friend’s wife? How do you feel about the news in the last hour that your investigation is now being re-opened?”

Hardy’s expression barely changes as he replies, but the brightness in his eyes is unmistakable, even though a TV screen.

“No comment,” he says.
“You ready, Miller?”

Hardy’s voice as he asks her the question is calm and confident, because it’s a rhetorical one. He already knows the answer of course. Knows that they’ve both been ready for this for weeks, months even and that - like him - Ellie has probably already played this moment over a thousand times in her own head, as eager as he is to finally be where they are.

“You ready. You?”

Hardy nods at her, his brows knitted, and when she continues to look back at him with a bemused frown, bends his head to kiss her.

Behind them she hears a sound, somewhere between a huff of disapproval and a snort of laughter, and turning her head sideways she gives the woman standing there a long hard stare.

“Something you wanted to say, Doctor Hillier?”

Looking thoroughly out of her comfort zone in the frankly intimidating surroundings of a government-run secure psychiatric hospital, Dr. Anita Hillier stares back at them both with a faintly sulky expression as she shifts uncomfortably in her high heels.

“I’d just like to get this over with detectives, if that’s quite alright with you?”

“S’alright with us.”

Hardy turns to look at her as well,

“Expect you’re wanting to get back to your nice comfy office, am I right?”

Hillier’s lip curls,

“Yes, I do. Just as I imagine the two of you want to get back to…whatever it is you’d rather be doing as well.”

Ellie smiles at her brightly,

“Oh no. We love this bit, don’t we Hardy?”

And as her partner nods grimly, she gives her an even brighter smile,

“This is always our favourite part.”
“Interview begun at 10:30am on Monday December 12 2016. Present are myself DI Alec Hardy, DS Ellie Miller, Dr. Anita Hillier and Mr. Damien Phillips, lawyer for Ms Tanaka and the suspect, Ms Tanaka.”

Looking up from his notes, Hardy glances first at Ellie and then across at Dr. Hillier, before turning back to direct his gaze at the woman sat across from him.

“And just to be absolutely clear, I’d like it if you could just identify yourself formally for the benefit of the tape, Ms. Tanaka. With your full name, and date and place of birth.”

Sitting up slightly in her seat, the pale Japanese woman opposite them, places her hands together in her lap and leans in towards the microphone.

“Tanaka Aki, born on the 6th June 1980 in Aomori, Northern Japan.”

Having spoken, she leans back and - looking at them both - smiles pleasantly.

“Ms Tanaka, just to completely clear, you have now identified yourself as Ms Aki Tanaka, is that correct?”

“Yes. That is correct.”

“And can I ask whether, at any time recently or in the past, you have gone by any other name or alias?”

Aki’s smile widens fractionally, and tilting her head a little to one side, she looks at Ellie with amusement.

“Are you asking if I ever called myself Tao Tanaka instead of Aki Tanaka, detective?”

“Yes, that is what we’re asking.”

Ellie holds her gaze, without wavering,

“So did you?”

“Yes.”

“And when did you do that?”

“Whenever she wanted me to.”

“Whenever Tao wanted you to?”

“Yes, whenever she told me to. She’d said ‘you be Tao now’. And I would be. Until I was Aki again.”

Her smiles wavers a little, and there’s a touch of sadness to it,

“It was just a game at first. Between just us two. But then later on…it stopped being one. Later on I was hardly ever Aki. And sometimes I forgot how to be.”

On the right side of the room, Dr. Hillier shifts in her seat, and hearing the sudden sound Aki turns her head sharply and looks in her direction. Then, as if noticing her old therapist for the first time, she breaks in a wide warm smile of greeting.
“Dr. Hillier! You’re here!”

Returning her smile, Hillier nods, but when she doesn’t speak Aki turns back to face both the detectives again.

“Anita helped me so much. So much. When I first came here - not here - to The Font I mean, I was broken. Like a jigsaw all in pieces. Anita helped me find all my pieces, the pieces that weren’t Tao, just Aki, and put them back together,” she nods, assertively, “And I did it. It took a long time, but I did it. I finally put Aki back together again.”

Watching her intently now, Alec nods and then, reaching into the folder in front of him he draws out a photograph.

“For the benefit of the tape I am now showing Ms Tanaka a photograph of a recent excavation sight in the town of Fujikoto in Aomori, Japan.”

Pushing the picture across the desk, he sits back in his chair.

“Ms Tanaka, can you tell me what that’s a picture of?”

Perched on the front of her seat, the slight Japanese woman leans forward and lowers her head to look at the picture. Her eyes skip back and forth over the details for several moments, as if they can’t quite allow themselves to rest on any single one, and - as Ellie watches them - the hands holding onto the seat of her chair fractionally tighten their grip.

“Is that…her?” she says very softly, “Did they find her?”

“Yes,” gentling her voice, Ellie nods, “The police used sonar on the area surrounding your old home, they found her body buried about twenty metres from the foundations.”

Moving forward, she touches a fingertip to the image, to the place on the grainy picture where the small figure’s skull joins the neck at the front.

“The examination of your sister Tao’s body showed that her hyoid bone was broken - here. That sort of break is consistent with strangulation, Aki. But strangulation with real force. Something only a much stronger person could manage.”

Leaning back from the table, Ellie looks at the other woman steadily until - finally - she raises her head and meets her eyes.

“You said he killed her. Before, when we were at the station. You said ‘he’. Was it your father, Aki? Did he kill Tao?”

The smaller woman’s lip trembles, and then - as if she were a mechanical doll - tears spill out and down her cheeks simultaneously on both sides of her face.

“It was my turn,” she says, and her voice has a fine crack in it like old china, “It was my turn to get the wood, but she told me not to. She said ‘you be Tao’ and she went out instead. But he knew. He knew she wasn’t me. He always knew. So he…he…”

She shudders, and the tremor seems to shake her whole body at the joints.

“I took the small lantern and I went in my nightclothes to find her. And I saw her. I saw her on the dirt, and her neck…her neck,” and her small hands reach up to grab at her own throat, “And I knew he’d done it. I knew he’d finally taken the last thing that mattered to me. The only thing.”
“So you killed him.”

Alec voice is calm and steady, a statement rather than a question, and brushing the back of her hand over her eyes Aki nods.

“Afterwards, when he came back from…digging…he got drunk. He told me to fetch him some saké, and I fetched it for him. And I kept fetching it. I fetched it till he was so drunk he passed out on the floor. And then I went outside, and I set fire to the house.”

“And when people came, afterwards? You just told them you were Tao?”

Aki shakes her head,

“I didn’t tell them anything. I didn’t speak. She’d told me to be her, and so I was. I just did what she told me. No-one but us and daddy knew about the scars. Which side meant which. So I kept on being Tao,” she gives a tiny shrug, “It just seemed easier that way at first I suppose.”

“You said before Tao told you. But she couldn’t speak.”

“She spoke to me. She always spoke to me. Just like Kara speaks to me. In here,” she taps her head, “Everyone’s speaking if you know how to listen, detective.”

She slumps loosely down in her seat then, her long black hair falling forward over her face, and - looking suddenly concerned - Hillier starts to move towards her. When Hardy shoots a hard look at her though, she slowly sits back down again.

“Aki, I want to talk to you now about Chen Xie.”

Taking another picture out of the folder, Alec slides it over alongside the first and, after a long moment or two, Aki raises her head to look at it. As they both watch her, the expression on her face slowly alters from one of childlike despair to a venomous hatred, and - straightening up and pushing her hair back behind her ears - she glares down at the photograph in front of her.

“That little bitch,” she said quietly, “Got exactly what was coming to her.”

Behind her, the man who’s been appointed as Aki’s lawyer makes an abortive exclamation of surprise, before quickly stepping forward to speak in her ear. Swatting him away like a fly though, Aki bares her teeth and snaps at the air between them.

“No! Time for truth now. There’s been enough pretending!”

She curls her lip,

“George always liked it when we pretended. Pretend to be a good girl, good wife. Didn’t like it when we broke. Pretended he didn’t notice, didn’t see. Just like we pretended we didn’t see all of the men he brought home. Or heard all their noises…”

At that, Phillips clears his throat loudly,

“Detectives, may I please advise you that Mr. Waterford’s personal business is not part of this investigation, and that this recording…”

“Alright alright Phillips! Sit down will you!”

Waving hand at him impatiently, Hardy motions for him to return to his seat, and reluctantly the lawyer does so.
“No-one here gives a damn what your boss gets up to in the privacy of his own bedroom, or whether he wants to continue to keep it a secret or not. We’re only interested in one thing here.”

And, tapping the photograph, Alec brings Aki’s attention back to the smiling face of Chen Xie.

“And why did you make it look like it was Tao?”

There’s a beat then, when Aki stares back at them both with wide eyes and for a moment she looks as if she might scream. The hands by her side come up and make claws, scratching at the air in front of her, and then with a light quick movement she rocks back on her chair until she’s balanced on the back feet.

“Because there **had** to be a body, detective!”

And she shakes her head at them slowly as if they’re both very stupid,

“If there was no body, she couldn’t be dead could she? There has to be a body, something for people to see and touch and cry over, or they’re never really dead are they? I mean - you’re alone, you know you’re alone, you feel it deep down inside - but they’re not dead. They can’t be. So you can’t put them away. Never. You just can’t.”

Rocking forward again, so both of her feet are flat on the floor, she turns her head sideways to look straight at Hillier,

“She told me that. Dr. Hillier. She told me that I needed to bury her. For me, and for everyone. That I needed it to know, to feel, to finally truly **accept** Tao was really gone. So I could be free to be myself, to be Aki.”

“I - no! No, I didn’t say th…I didn’t mean…”

Her face a mottled shade of red and purple, Anita Hillier is clutching the clipboard that she’s carrying to her chest, and staring at both the detectives opposite her in alarm.

“Aki’s treatment was only **ever** about integration, not destruction! I never suggested that her alternates - any of her alternates - should be **destroyed**, only that she learn to accept all of her parts, and prioritise them, in order to control the impulses and thoughts that…”

She shakes her head in horror,

“The idea that I would suggest that someone suffering from DiD…**murder** someone as a means of therapy, that’s just….it’s insanity!”

“Is it??” Aki says thoughtfully to herself, and rocking back and forth in her seat, she taps a finger on the photograph of Chen Xie’s face.

“It seemed to make perfect sense at the time. Tao thought so too. She said George would accept it, that it was perfect. And fire too. She liked that idea. She came up with that a while back, when she realised what kind of person Chen was. A fire, and then teeth she said. That was all they’d needed to prove it was daddy. So Tao took her to the dentist, and I worked out all the rest.”

There’s a long pause, during which Ellie can clearly see the lawyer Phillips’ internal struggle on his face, as it becomes obvious to him that the client he’s been asked to represent is now totally beyond help. Taking out his phone, he seems to be composing a hasty message to someone and, sensing their time is soon going to be up, Ellie decides to go for broke.
“Was Chen Xie trying to blackmail you, Aki?”

“Oh no. No. You must understand, it wasn’t just the blackmail, detective.”

Putting her head on one side, the pretty Japanese woman looks at her seriously, earnestly.

“She wanted to destroy us. Everything we’d made. Our music, our beautiful story, all the lovely things we’d ever written, all of it would have been buried under all that blackness and filth so no-one could ever listen to it again. No-one would ever hear what we’d created without remembering what it had come from.”

“And Tao? You’re saying your dead sister, she told you to do all this?”

A smile tugs at the corners of Aki’s mouth, and lacing her hands in her lap, she leans back to sit upright in her seat again.

“All Tao ever wanted was for me to be happy. Even when we were children. It was why she started making sure our father touched her instead of me. Why she always tried to protect me, even though I was the big one. I don’t think she ever meant to stay with me as long as she did. Secretly, I think the sweet thing was always a little bit worried that if she left me, I’d just be too lonely to go on without her.”

She lowers her head, and when she leans in again to speak directly to Ellie, her voice is a soft conspiratorial whisper,

“You know, I sometimes thought maybe she didn’t quite believe that she was dead, that she was the one who needed convincing too. Which is understandable when you think about it. Because no-one else ever believed it either.”

孤独

As they leave the building the sun is just struggling to come out of the heavy grey snow clouds overhead, and watching Hillier and Phillips hurry away across the car-park to their respective cars, Ellie smiles sardonically at their retreating backs.

“Think they’d have stuck around for a pint or something,” she shrugs and tucks her handbag up underneath one arm, “I wouldn’t even have minded buying after all that.”

Raising an eyebrow at her in surprise, Hardy presses a hand to the small of her back as he turns her away towards their own waiting car.

“If I’d known that Miller, I’d have suggested dinner.”

“Well, we can still go for dinner.”

Looking up at him, she grins in sudden excitement,

“Ooh, actually lets Hardy! I’ve heard there’s a fantastic steak place near here. I just fancy a steak. A big juicy rare one, maybe with a baked potato and sour cream and - ooooh nice fresh green beans!!”

Opening her door for her, Alec steps back to allow her to climb in, frowning in amusement as he
“Since when do you like green beans?”

“What?”

“Since when do you like green beans?”

He walks around to climb in his own side and buckles his seatbelt,

“When I made them with dinner last month, you said you think they taste like anti-freeze.”

“Did I? Hm. Not sure why I fancy them now then all of sudden.”

Frowning, Ellie stabs the play button on the stereo and smiles beatifically as the strains of the lovely piano piece she’s grown to love spill out of the speakers into the car. ‘Loneliness (in F flat minor)’ isn’t exactly the most cheerful of compositions, but she finds she appreciates it more and more every time she listens to it.

“Oh we’re listening to this again, are we? Jesus,” rolling his eyes, Alec pulls the car away from the kerb, “You’re definitely buying dinner then. Green beans and all.”

Ellie laughs, and as she cranks up the volume on the stereo, relaxes back in her seat with a thoughtful look.

“You know, it’s weird. The only other time I started fancying green beans out of the blue, was wh…”

There’s a decidedly long pause, and when Alec looks sideways at her, he sees that his partner’s face has suddenly drained of colour.

“Was when…?”

“What?!”

She startles slightly in her seat, and he can’t help but smile.

“You said ’was when’, but you didn’t finish?”

“Oh nothing, sorry!”

Shaking her head, Ellie leans over and cracks open her window, sucking in lungfuls of fresh air from outside,

“Probably just got a vitamin deficiency or something.”

Hardy makes a low disapproving sound in the back of his throat,

“Maybe go and see the doctor when we get home. Get that checked out.”

“Maybe.”

The music swells to a crescendo and staring out through the side window, Ellie feels her eyes fill with sudden tears. She’s not sure whether it’s the beautiful music though, or the thing she’s only just figured out, but either way she knows by now the difference between sad tears and happy ones.
“I love you, you know,” she says, without pausing to even think about it a moment longer. Without second guessing herself any more, or wondering what it means to say it out loud to someone else again at long last, or exactly what it is she might be giving away.

When Hardy doesn’t reply though, she turns around in her seat and glares at him with open fury.

“Bloody hell, aren’t you even going to say anything?!”

“Like what?”

Her partner’s lips twitch upwards in a smile and, taking his eyes off the road for a moment, he looks at her with warm steady brown eyes.

“I dunno? Maybe thank you? ‘I love you too, Ellie!’”

“You know I love you, Miller.”

“Oh my god!”

“What?”

“‘I love you Miller?’ What’s next? Make love to me, DS Miller? Kiss me, DS Miller? Ride me harder, DS Miller??”

“Ellie!”

“Oh no, it’s too late now! Miller it is. We can go back to that again. That’s just fine by me.”

“C’mon Ellie…”

“Oh just shut up and drive you twat, I’m bloody starving.”

And folding her arms and trying not to laugh, she turns away from him to look out of window again, watches all the green outside rushing by them, and tries very hard to remember a time that she’s ever felt quite as ridiculously happy.

THE END

End Notes

I sincerely hope you enjoyed my own S4 of Broadchurch. If you did PLEASE consider commenting, sharing or reccing. All these things make this humble writer happy, and frankly glad to be alive!

Oh hey, and while I've got your attention, why not come and follow me on on Bloody Twittah!!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!