

1

THEY'D CUT THE ELECTRICITY. Mid-morning the sun hit the CID office, sliced by the window's metal screen into planes of tobacco smoke and dust. By 3 p.m. it reached the back of the building: Belsey liked to open the doors on the first-floor corridor so light stretched from the kitchen to the interview rooms. Long lozenges of gold slipped across the chipped walls, made the place feel less abandoned. It created a sundial around him. He sat on the floor and watched it all. Caught in the bars of light, the dust seemed frenzied, directionless. His smoke rolled through it. He used the clocks as ashtrays.

Hampstead police station had closed three weeks ago, one of six across London disposed of in cost-cutting measures. Most staff had been reassigned at the end of last year. Belsey had expected to go to Holborn, but nothing happened. The DI at Holborn said they'd tried to get him only to be told he was blocked. Then, ten days after the station closed, he was informed he'd been officially suspended pending a hearing over allegations of gross misconduct. No details. A few hours after that, he got a call from a man who wouldn't give his name but told him he was under surveillance: the Independent Police Complaints Commission were collecting ammo, approaching everyone from

Belsey's eyes to his past informers, putting obs on his car, his local, his current landlord. They were bracing themselves for a shit-storm. *Stay safe*, the caller said, and hung up. An hour later Belsey withdrew the contents of his current account, bought a gas stove, three bottles of Havana Club and a book – *Teach Yourself Spanish*. He broke into his old place of work, changed the locks. It was, he felt, the last place they'd look for him.

Eleven days ago.

It had been an odd stretch of time. Sometimes he found himself following patterns of an old routine, standing in the CID kitchen at ten-thirty making a tea; lying on the floor of the old meeting room watching the wiring exposed by missing ceiling panels. He'd wander the station. The building dated to 1913, a labyrinthine relic with adjoining courthouse and cells. Most of it had been disused for decades. But in the process of clearing out, older areas had been unlocked: the abandoned station had grown, extending itself back into the past. Belsey walked through the magistrate's court to an Edwardian custody suite, past old fuse switches to cells that had become carpeted in handwritten reports from the 1950s and '60s: loose, yellowed papers, notebooks with cracked leather covers like shells. They had spilled from rat-chewed cardboard boxes, an infestation, filled with the handwriting of dead policemen. Sometimes he'd skim through old cases to keep his mind occupied. There were unnerving moments, once or twice a day, when it felt as if he was meant to be here after all, assigned for reasons that had faded. The thick old glass made the place feel submarine. His kingdom until ten minutes ago, when someone had started knocking on the front door.

The steady insistence of the knocks was troubling. Ceremonious. A ceremony he was failing to perform: the coming of reality. He knew that this last misdemeanour, like the rest, had been a taunt, the gambler's desire to suspend the moment of reckoning, to conjure

options from nothing. The knocking was at the main entrance, directly beneath the CID office. Belsey looked down through the shutters but the angle was too tight. The sign down there was clear enough: HAMPSTEAD POLICE STATION IS NOW CLOSED. YOUR NEAREST STATION IS KENTISH TOWN. No one knew where he'd chosen to lie low. But the knocking felt like the return of something he'd forgotten: a debt, an arrangement, a plan of action.

Belsey walked down to the wood-panelled shadows of the old magistrate's court. He took a clean shirt from the line of phone cable he had strung above the pews. He picked up a heavy overcoat with metal buttons and white thread where the sergeant's stripes had been. The pockets contained his phone charger, passport, bank card and £220 in cash. Next to the coat was a foot of copper piping he'd picked up from the basement just in case. He put the coat on, slipped the piping up the sleeve, ran a hand over his eleven-day beard and took a breath. He unlocked the door at the back of the court and stepped out.

The day seemed unnaturally bright. Forty-eight hours since he'd been directly beneath the sky. Belsey climbed over the fence and dropped, silently, to the pavement. He walked to the corner and watched: a woman with shoulder-length white hair glancing up at the shuttered windows. Torn, mauve jacket. Feet in socks and sandals. Belsey stepped out.

'Are you OK?' he asked.

'I need the police,' she said.

'This station's closed. Want me to call them for you?'

'Closed?'

'Since last month.'

Belsey looked around. Hampstead's boutiques had their awnings unrolled, couture on display. Nothing had changed. It was the afternoon, but not school run yet. The lull between lunch and rush hour.

‘Are you a policeman?’ the woman asked. She had pale eyes with fear frozen into them.

‘Not really,’ Belsey said. ‘Nearest police station is Kentish Town. Lots of police there.’ He gestured towards the phone box. ‘I can dial the number; you can tell the police what happened.’

‘I was told to come *here*.’

‘Well, someone made a mistake.’

She nodded, as if she’d suspected as much all along. ‘Would I find Detective Nick Belsey at Kentish Town?’ she asked.

Belsey stopped. His mind tracked through possible explanations.

‘Why do you want Nick Belsey?’

‘I was told he could help.’

‘With what?’

‘My son. He’s disappeared.’

‘Who told you to come here?’

‘A man – he phoned the house.’

‘Who was he?’

‘I can’t remember his name. I wrote it down.’

She looked desperate. The day turned a little colder.

‘Your son went missing and a man called and said you should come here?’

‘Yes.’

‘What else did he say?’

‘Just that I should try to find Mark, urgently.’

‘Mark’s your son?’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s his surname?’

‘Doughty.’

It was no one Belsey knew. ‘How long’s he been missing?’

‘Almost two days.’

‘How old is he?’

‘Forty-one.’

This didn’t seem to lower the urgency – she reached for the railings to support herself, looked unsteady. Belsey helped her down to sit on the front steps. He took a seat beside her.

‘I’m Nick Belsey,’ he said.

She glanced at him with her scared eyes, chest rising and falling. He wasn’t sure she’d taken it in.

‘I know you must be very busy,’ she said, when she had her breath.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Maureen.’

‘Try and breathe, Maureen. Nice and calmly.’

Belsey leaned back, shut his eyes, felt the sun on his face. Life sought you out. The sun rose, people knocked. He let the piping slip out of his sleeve and placed it on the step. There were plenty of old acquaintances who might recommend him, plenty oblivious to his predicament. What difference did any of it make? He imagined a distress flare penetrating the roof of his mouth and igniting in his brain.

When he opened his eyes Maureen Doughty was studying his face. He smiled, got to his feet and helped her up. ‘What day is it?’ he asked.

‘Monday.’

‘Monday,’ he repeated. They stood there for a moment, Belsey with a hand beneath her arm, Maureen watching each car that passed, as if it might contain her son. He didn’t want to be outside. He wanted to return to the dust and continue entertaining the idea that he had options. She clutched the railings again. ‘Let’s get you home,’ Belsey said.

2

THEY CAUGHT THE 46 BUS. Belsey ignored the stares of his fellow citizens: on his coat, his beard. At Queen's Crescent, Maureen pressed the bell and they disembarked. She led the way to a ground-floor flat in one of the low council blocks behind the high street.

The key shook in her hand as she unlocked the front door.

They stepped over carrier bags into the hall. The house smelt of damp and soil. It was cold. Off the hall was a living room cluttered with pot plants and bound piles of Christian pamphlets. A bed had been made up on a floral sofa. Belsey hadn't been in someone's home for a while. Not an aspect of the job he missed: the underwear on the clothes horse, the halos of grease up the wall behind the armchairs. Pill bottles crowded the coffee table like pieces for a game: donepezil, which meant Alzheimer's or dementia; ketoprofen, for arthritis; heavy-duty painkillers.

Nothing happened when he tried the light switches. In the kitchen, the microwave display was off; same with the radio. Stacks of plates crusted with old food, a back door into a cramped concrete courtyard. Someone had kicked in the cat flap leaving an empty frame of plastic. The glass was cracked.

Maureen filled the kettle.

'You've got no power, Maureen. It won't work.'

'Oh yes.' She stood with the kettle for a moment, then poured the water into the sink.

'How long's the electricity been off?'

'I'm not sure. Mark does it.'

Belsey checked the fuse box. Then he found the meter flashing in a cupboard by the front door. She needed to top up a power key.

'This is him,' she called from the living room. He returned to find her tapping a framed photo on the living room's chest of drawers. It was a school photo. Mark Doughty's twelve-year-old face had been propped between a school prize and a prayer card. She picked it up and gave it to Belsey. Mark had been a striking child, paper-white skin, eyes small and bright, hair neatly combed. In the uniform of a local private school. A scholarship boy, Belsey imagined, who never quite fitted in.

'He's a bit older than this now, isn't he?' Belsey said.

'Yes.'

'Do you have any more recent photos, Maureen?'

'I'm not sure.' She looked troubled by this and began casting about the room. The fear in her eyes was permanent, he saw. But she wasn't mad. He knew from experience how hard it was to gauge sanity. Beyond a modest dose of fear and disorientation she seemed sharp enough.

'Does Mark work at all?'

'He can't work. He looks after me.' She eased herself down onto the sofa.

'Have you told any other police?'

'They say there's nothing they can do. He hasn't been missing long enough.'

'What happens when you try to call him?'

'It's the recorded message.'

There was a small room on the ground floor that she used as a bedroom. Belsey climbed the stairs. At the end of the landing was a very pink bathroom, beside a spare room with a washing machine and cupboards of her old clothes. Also off the landing, a closed door. Locked.

‘Is this where Mark sleeps?’ he called down. ‘The locked door?’

‘Yes.’

He crouched and checked the keyhole. No key in the lock; darkness on the other side.

‘Do you have a key?’

‘No.’

Was Mark Doughty in there, he wondered? Was she sure he wasn’t? Two days. No flies, only a slight smell that seemed general to the place. Belsey took a wire coat hanger from the wardrobe in the utility room, uncoiled it, bent the end until he had a loop. It was an easy lock. He felt the click, paused, turned the handle slowly and walked through.

‘Christ.’

The room was an explosion. Books and clothes covered the floor. Cans of energy drink and takeaway packaging. Magazine pages taped up across walls and cupboard doors.

Belsey stepped over the mounds of stale clothes and opened the curtains. He turned and admired the décor again. Celebrities – singers, actresses: glossy pages of eyes and teeth and brightly coloured dresses like frigid pornography. Gowns spilled over red carpets, bikinis emerged from turquoise water. The A-list gazed out over a double bed with a coverless duvet, opened packets of biscuits, disposable razors. Mugs had grown mould, shelves were crowded with tattered books that looked like they’d been rescued from a skip. A cupboard with its mirrored door off its hinges added another plane of reflected chaos. There was a smell of urine and unwashed denim.

Rooms like this never boded well, places that had witnessed too much unspent life, had taken on the burden of living themselves; growing septic, choking.

No PC visible, but print-outs, from an internet café or library. Belsey sifted through a few sheets on a desk beneath the window. They were shuffled with other cuttings. Mark Doughty, it seemed, collected interviews, adverts, gossip columns. He cut out diet ideas and had printed an online personality test: 'What's stopping you living the life you want to lead? Try this simple survey.'

After twenty years in the police force, Belsey had concluded that not everyone should live the life they wanted to lead.

On the bedside table was a perfume box: *Bride: The New Fragrance by Amber Knight*. It shimmered in reflective pink. The bottle stood proudly beside it, clear glass in the shape of a diamond. He couldn't smell any perfume. This bedside nook was a shrine, he realised. On the wall behind the table, all the decorations related to Amber Knight: carefully preserved interviews, photo spreads. Teen Amber, precocious and oblivious. Twenty-one-year-old Amber, dress slashed down to her belly button, seductive eyes heavy with false lashes. Then sophisticated Amber, a year or so later, pale in a silver sheath dress on a red carpet: 'Stunning in Dior at last night's Woman of the Year Awards, chart-topping British singer and now Hollywood actress Amber Knight . . .'

As an obsession, Belsey respected Mark's choice. She was alluring, working a well-tested combination of innocence and newly awoken sexual hunger. And there was something that put her a cut above; eyes that established a pact with you personally, sidestepping the photographer and the sheen of the magazine.

'You got in.' Maureen stood uncertainly in the bedroom doorway. She stared at the walls as if she hadn't seen them for a while.

'He liked Amber Knight,' Belsey said, for want of anything better to say. 'Lots of her.'

‘Oh yes.’

‘He’s got the perfume and everything.’

‘He wasn’t queer.’

‘No.’

She glanced around once more then retreated downstairs. Belsey stepped over the clothes to a dresser: on the top were empty canisters of Lynx, a pouch of tobacco, candle stubs and a pub ashtray filled with the ends of rolled cigarettes. In the drawer of the dresser he found library cards for three boroughs and a dog-eared King’s University ID from 2001. Mark had knifed up the laminate and manually adjusted the date. A student discount was nothing to lose. Mark Doughty stared out, late twenties, early thirties, postgraduate or mature student. The years since school hadn’t added much colour to his cheeks. They’d added wisps of brown beard and lent a certain mug-shot defiance to his eyes: long hair thinning, tucked behind his ears. The clever scholarship twelve-year-old had gone awry. He looked addict-thin. Belsey found a roach in the ashtray, split it with his nail. He sifted the tobacco for powders. Hard to tell. The pouch of tobacco was fresh enough; it contained Rizlas, no other drug. Belsey pocketed it and walked back to the landing. He heard Maureen Doughty talking. Belsey thought she was on the phone, then heard her addressing the Lord. He stood at the top of the stairs and felt a place thick with incestuous madness.

When he went down she was on the sofa, curled over her clasped hands, eyes closed.

‘The man who called – his name. You wrote it down.’

‘Yes. I wrote it down.’ She stopped praying, searched amongst the pill bottles on the coffee table and found a leaflet for the Catholic Medical Association. ‘Here. Look.’ On the back, in shaky writing, was the name ‘Lee’ followed by a mobile number Belsey knew off by heart.

'Lee Chester.'

'He didn't give his full name. Do you know him?'

Every police officer in north London knew Lee Chester. He was senior management in the capital's flow of proscribed narcotics.

'What did Lee say? Exactly?'

'Just that you might help.'

'He didn't say Mark owes money? Anything like that?'

'I'm not sure.'

'Did he threaten you?'

'No.'

'But he didn't just call, did he, Maureen? The back door – that was him.'

She wouldn't look up.

Belsey went out to the concrete courtyard and dialled Lee's number.

'Nicky, mate.' Belsey could hear a car engine, traffic.

'Guess who I'm with.'

'Did she come to you? I didn't think she would.'

'It's not very nice to scare old ladies, Lee. How much does he owe you?'

'About a grand. Is he there?'

'No.' Belsey looked back at the maisonette, up to the window of the bedroom. He sat down on a broken section of wall. 'What does he score?'

'All sorts.'

'Where does he get the money?'

'A life of crime, I imagine. Fuck knows. Whatever it is, he needs to do some more of it fast.'

'So you told his mother to hire a private investigator?'

'You're not a private investigator.'

'That's a good point, Lee. Let's bear it in mind next time. It can be what we take from this whole experience.'

‘You’ve got connections.’

‘Right now my best connection’s sitting on a piss-stained sofa praying to Jesus.’

‘Who else am I going to send her to?’

‘Anyone.’

‘I’m not writing it off, Nick. People think I’m a muppet for dealing with him already.’

‘You kicked the back door in.’

‘I’m not like that, Nick.’

‘Yes you are.’

Belsey hung up and went back in. There was no food in the cupboards. On the sofa, Maureen stared dumbly at an empty bottle of pregabalin, massaging her swollen hands. He found the repeat scripts on the counter behind the prayer card, took the power key from the meter.

‘I’ll be straight back.’

He left the house, turned onto Queen’s Crescent. The road was a curve of shops, cutting through the estate. It filled up twice a week with stalls selling cheap clothes and household cleaning products. Without the market it felt deflated. Poundland, Magic Hair Salon, a scruffy pub, a lot of identical grocery stores, owners standing in their doorways, looking out.

Belsey found one that charged power keys and put ten pounds on Maureen Doughty’s key. The shopkeeper was unshaven, in a leather jacket, keeping an eye on a TV above the door showing news in Turkish.

‘Do you know a man called Mark Doughty?’ Belsey asked. ‘He’s local, maybe charges his power key here. Son of Maureen Doughty.’

The shopkeeper shook his head. Belsey walked out. The afternoon was sinking towards its end. A man in a wheelchair sat on the corner of Malden Road sipping Tennent’s, another dutifully moving between

phone boxes checking the coin slots. Three kids drifted past on bikes with the solemn air of a security patrol.

Belsey sat in Bubbles Launderette and rolled a cigarette with Mark Doughty's tobacco. He watched the pub across the road, the Sir Robert Peel. He wondered what spirit of mischief inspired this corner of London to name a pub in honour of the founder of the modern police force. The laundrette clock said five past four. Belsey counted his money. A clever man would buy seeds, fill the drawers of his old desk with compost, survive alone. Belsey walked into the pub.

The place was cool and dark. An old man sat in the far corner, eyes closed, a beer mat protecting his pint from flies. A landlord whose polo shirt didn't fully cover his stomach nodded to Belsey.

'A Guinness, please.'

The man pulled the pint and let it settle.

'Does a guy called Mark Doughty ever drink here?' Belsey asked.

'No idea, son.' He took Belsey's money and passed the drink over. Belsey remained standing at the bar. Seventy-two hours without proper sleep: his body was finely balanced. He sipped and let the alcohol ride to his brain. He drank to Sir Robert Peel. Fuck the police, as the saying goes.

An inquiry into him was one thing, suspension another. Suspension, to his mind, meant a foregone conclusion. It meant they either thought he could prejudice the investigation or it would look bad having the subject of a gross-misconduct inquiry turning up for work. The whole thing was being managed by a new commander, Clive Randall, who Belsey had never met – who refused to meet Belsey now or speak to him on the phone. He heard the voice that had tipped him off, as he had done often over the past week. Someone who had cared about him once or was worried about how much he might reveal. It felt important, partly because it was the last significant human contact he'd had before today, partly because Belsey's

interpretation of his past hinged on the voice's concern. All judgements were contained in that one.

A pair of community support officers ambled past the pub, met his eyes before he could look away, kept walking. He waited for them to turn the corner before finishing his pint and stepping out.

He bought tea, milk, some bread and eggs, then went into Fine Pharmacy. Between the racks of slimming pills and incontinence pads, a man with his hood up was drinking methadone. Behind the counter, a locked glass case displayed razor blades and fragrances: Eternity, Chanel, Dior. No Bride by Amber Knight.

Belsey handed Maureen Doughty's prescriptions to a small woman in a white coat. She glanced at the paperwork, eyed his beard and creased shirt.

'Usually it's the son,' she said.

'You know him?'

'Not really.'

'He's gone missing.'

'OK.'

'Since Saturday. I'm trying to find him.'

'I only know him to see. Who are you?'

'A friend of the family.'

The chemist checked the prescriptions, assessed him again then fetched the drugs. She bagged them up and gave Belsey instructions about when and how often they needed to be taken. He thanked her and took a final look at the perfumes.

'There's a new perfume. I think it's called Bride. By Amber Knight.'

'Yes.'

'Do you stock it?'

'No.'

'OK. I'll try elsewhere. Thank you.'

He was past the toothpastes when the woman said: 'You won't find it anywhere.'

Belsey turned back.

'Why not?'

'It's not out.'

'Not out?'

'It's not available. Not yet. It hasn't been released.'

'When's it released?'

'Next week.'

'You're sure?'

'Yes.'

He stepped out with the paper bag and wondered what he'd seen in Mark Doughty's room.

Maureen Doughty answered the door and looked surprised to see him again. Belsey gave her the bag of medication and charged the electricity. Then he went to Mark's bedroom and switched on the light. He picked up the perfume bottle. It was a good weight. He put it back and lifted the box. This also struck him as authentic: UK barcode, the name in raised lettering against the pearly background.

He looked around the room again, crouched, peered under the bed – and saw the toe of a stocking.

It trailed from a rucksack. Belsey pulled the bag out. It contained women's clothing: vest, leggings, skirt, underwear. There was a pair of silk Alexander McQueen pyjamas, a Chanel clutch, a Gucci scarf. He emptied it all onto the floor. The knickers were all small; the bras all 34B. They were in good condition but not shop-new; no price tags, freshly laundered, high quality.

The only other thing under the bed was a blue carrier bag containing nylon gloves, a torch and two screwdrivers. A housebreaker's kit.

Belsey searched through the pile of clothes again. Hidden amongst the underwear were a tub of Crème de la Mer face cream and a photograph of Amber Knight with her family. At the very bottom of the rucksack was her passport.

He took the passport into the centre of the room, held it beneath the naked bulb. It looked genuine. He wouldn't have recognised her in the photo: hair scraped back, light make-up, scoop-necked top. But it was her: Amber Sophia Knight. Date of Birth: 2 June 1991. Validated seven months ago.

She had a stalker with very intimate access. Belsey took out his phone and tried to find where exactly Amber Knight was living these days. An article came up with pictures of Amber house-hunting for a central London base.

Until recently she'd been living with her mum near Epping, in the village of Theydon Bois, where she'd grown up. Her mother ensured she 'kept her feet on the ground': "We chat, we bake, we watch TV." In February last year the appeal of standing on the ground must have worn off. Along with the appeal of being managed by her mother, who she ditched. Amber bought a £13 million mansion on Wadham Gardens in Primrose Hill. She put in a £1.5 million basement extension and re-landscaped the garden. The result was somewhere she could call 'her first proper home'. She was twenty-three years old. Her first proper home was ten minutes' walk from Mark Doughty's.

Belsey studied the passport again. He sifted through a few more clippings. Underneath pages of *Grazia* and *Heat* was a more sober document from a site called the Home Chemist: 'Three poisons you can make in your kitchen'. It listed recipes for ricin, cyanide and the botulinum toxin.

He picked up the university ID from the dresser, met Mark Doughty's troubled gaze, then slipped it into his wallet. He took Amber Knight's passport and went downstairs.

Maureen Doughty was standing nervously in the living room, like someone awaiting test results.

'I found this,' Belsey said.

'What is it?'

'It appears to be Amber Knight's passport.'

'Amber Knight?'

'Know her?'

'I don't know anything about that.'

'Has Mark ever been in trouble with the police, Maureen?'

'No.'

'Did he ever say anything about things he wanted to do? Maybe bad things?'

She hesitated.

'He wanted to be famous.'

'Excellent,' Belsey sighed. 'Maureen, what did he study at the uni?'

'Chemistry. He started, twice. But he doesn't finish things. He was always very brilliant, Mark. But he has difficulty concentrating.'

'Has he brought any chemicals into the house, ever?'

Maureen Doughty came over, took Belsey's left hand in both her own. 'He's my only child. I don't know what I'd do without him.'