

A man with curly hair, wearing a dark suit, light shirt, and dark tie, looking off to the side with a serious expression. The background is a blurred outdoor scene with a greenish tint.

A MISSING GIRL  
A COP THEY WANT GONE  
A CASE NOBODY WANTS SOLVED

# IN PLAIN VIEW

BROOK D WALKER

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*When I Was Lost, You Found Me*

# 1

Missing persons are the kinds of cases cops never want to get dragged into. Murder, robbery, rape, any other kind of mayhem the dark underbelly of this city can throw up, sure, but missing persons?

Mispers are a recipe for disaster.

The odds are stacked against you when people disappear. Either they don't want to be found, or whoever took them is keen to make sure you don't find out what happened to them. And the whole thing is on a ticking clock that gets louder every day the missing stay gone.

When eleven-year-old Cassie Edwards disappeared, the city didn't skip a beat. No posters adorned the lamp posts; no frantic broadcasts filled the news. Even in a town renowned for its casual indifference to the plight of its unwanted, a missing eleven-year-old should have caused waves.

But at the time, the media was obsessing over another missing girl—fifteen-year-old Fiona Carlisle, the daughter

of a banker father and a Queen's Counsel mother, the epitome of Sydney society.

Walking into Waverley Station, I'd run the gauntlet of news crews camped outside for the past fortnight, but since I was a nobody to the big-headed, big-haired TV news reporters, they let me be.

I could hear her through the station's heavy glass automatic doors before I even walked in.

A wiry figure of a woman in baggy grey track pants and an aged-thin zip-up top was giving a serve to Cavendish behind the smeared, toughened polymer spit shield that walled off the charge counter.

Cavendish was a tall, gawky Probationary Constable who looked more like the cop shop's work experience kid than an actual police officer. He had a plump, pimply-faced complexion and a vicious sneer, probably tattooed across his mug at birth. He stared at the woman through the fake glass with a poorly veiled mix of contempt and revulsion.

They'd probably make him Commissioner someday.

Hunched over, keeping myself as small as possible, steaming extra hot long-black take-away poised between thumb and two fingers, I fished through one pocket for the swipe card to open the security door behind the woman into the squad room.

I wanted no part in the drama unfolding at the front desk.

“Why can’t you tell me where she is?” The woman ranted. “Why can’t you tell me anything? It’s been weeks. Why can’t you tell me a fucking thing?”

“Look, you need to calm down. I’m not going to tell you anything—” Cavendish droned from behind the safety of the charge desk.

“That’s the problem. You never fucking tell me anything!” The anger welled up the woman’s neck, making her face boil, a cartoon thermometer ready to pop.

My swipe card wasn’t in that pocket. Bugger. Risking a glance at the counter, I swear there might have been steam coming from the woman’s thin, flared nostrils. The flush of blood in the cheeks made the acne pock marks on her skin stand out as bright white moon craters. “You bastards won’t talk to me!”

“I told you before.” Cavendish riled. “I’ve told you every time you come in, and so has Constable Stacey and Constable Lynn. Missing Persons will be in contact—”

Cautiously moving the takeaway cup to the other hand, I fished through the other pocket.

“My daughter’s been missing three fucking weeks, and you don’t do a fucking thing! But this other missing girl? Oh, she’s all over the news! What about my girl? What about my Cassie? What about her?”

“Listen! You—” Cavendish yelled, bony finger pointing behind the screen.

As Cavendish was about to unleash from behind the charge desk, the security door flung wide, sending me reeling and my coffee arcing all over me and the station notice board.

“Jesus!” I cried, shaking off an armful of hot, dark coffee.

Everything in the foyer stopped. All eyes were on me now.

The two uniforms that had barrelled through the security door stopped when they saw me drenched in the aftermath.

“Sorry, Sarge.” The uniforms smirked, then continued on through the automated doors into the bright sunshine outside the station where the press milled, smoking and chatting.

“Dickheads!” I called out. One of the uniforms gave me the finger as the doors hissed shut.

Turning, I saw Cavendish and the woman staring at me. The cardboard cup rolled around on the floor and came to rest against the rubber tip of one loafer.

My right hand was still in my pants pocket. I pulled out the swipe card with its blue and white Sillitoe tartan lanyard, the words ‘police’ stencilled up and down it.

“You know, I think Detective Sergeant Roth might be free.” Cavendish cheesed from behind the counter.



# 2

Cavendish found me in the tea room, sponging as much coffee as I could from the sleeve of my cleanest work shirt.

“She’s in Interview Two,” He beamed.

“Great. Thanks for throwing her my way.”

The Probie shrugged.

Not the usual respect accorded a sergeant in any station, let alone a Detective Sergeant. I had to keep reminding myself this was the way things were. Had been for a long time and probably would be for the rest of whatever short career remained for me in the coppers.

“So, what’s the Golf Oscar with the woman?” Cavendish appeared vacant, embodying the full six-foot-one-inch of dumbness he had been born with and had steadfastly cultivated since birth. “What’s her story, Constable?”

“Oh. Charmaine Edwards. Daughter ran away a few weeks ago. She’s been on our case ever since. Comes in, drunk, high, whatever, yelling and screaming.”

I filled two disposable cups from the old, grimy urn over

the sink, dropping a cheap, heavy-duty tea bag in each.

“Right. And the daughter’s name?”

His brow twisted to the left and right, eyes meandering up to the ceiling. “Um...”

“So that’s that. How old is the daughter?”

Cavendish shrugged his uniformed shoulders. “Twelve? Maybe eleven.”

I stopped jiggling the teabags and gave Cavendish a look. “Twelve? Eleven?”

The idiot shrugged.

“Bit young to be a runaway, I’d have thought.”

“That’s what they classified her as.” Cavendish sounded petulant.

“Who’s they?”

“The DCI.”

The DCI. Tom Draper. Enough said. “And what made Draper conclude that?”

I added milk and two sugars to each cup.

The uniforms had a small flat-screen TV on in the main squad room next door, the volume up high. The news announcers were breathlessly counting down to a live broadcast from the Police Executive Building on Elizabeth Street. Deputy Commissioner Clive Jeffries and Detective Chief Inspector Tom Draper were about to take their positions at the empty podium on the screen.

Underneath, the chyron scrolled: Update on missing teen Fiona Carlisle about to start.

The station was abuzz. Draper led Task Force Anvil, seventy-odd detectives and uniformed police dedicated to finding Fiona Carlisle. Anvil occupied the entire second floor of the station.

Photo sketches of peepers and stalkers had been widely circulated. The press hovered like rats over a carcass. Vans with satellite dishes pointing skywards lined up along Bronte Road outside Waverley Police Area Command headquarters next door to the Magistrate's Court, just waiting for the merest hint of activity.

Cavendish sighed and looked at me like he was dealing with a slow child. "You've seen the mother. She's a junkie. Crack. Meth. Whatever. Fucking no hope. Christ, if I had to deal with that crazy bitch all day and night, I'd run away, too."

Grabbing the two hot, sweet, milky teas, I left Cavendish to sulk and stalked off to Interview Room Two.

# 3

The air in the room fairly crackled with nervous energy.

Like every police interview room, it was spartan. There was an office desk and hand-me-down furniture from other public service buildings.

The Department were cheap bastards, at least in the field. It was a very different story in the Executive suites, but down here, where the little folk toiled, and the public came in, broken, bleeding, angry, despoiled, only the worst would do.

Putting the two cups on the desk, I introduced myself.

“Mrs Edwards, I’m Detective Sergeant Jon Roth.” I held out a hand. The woman took it. Long fingers and thin nails chewed to the quick but an iron grip. Not a weak woman.

“It’s Ms Edwards. Charmaine.”

Her face, gaunt and stretched and hard-worn, had the shadows of a once beautiful woman worn well beyond her years. Her eyes were red-rimmed: tears, not drugs. But the lines and the stained glass look to the irises told me there

had been drugs, lots of them, in her life. One foot in an old sneaker jostled over a knee like she was sitting on a live wire.

“Do you mind if I call you Charmaine?”

“You can call me anything you want, so long as you find my daughter.”

I held up a hand. “Fair enough. I’ll be honest with you, Charmaine, I’m not familiar with your daughter’s case. I’m sorry. I know you’ve probably been through this so many times you’re about to explode, but if you tell me what’s happening, I can contact someone who can help.”

Charmaine Edwards exhaled a deep, unearthly sigh. So unnaturally deep from such a small, spare frame that I reeled in my chair. Then, her head slowly tilted forward as if the weight of the entire world had suddenly pushed its way through the stained, grubby ceiling to drive her into the ground.

“Charmaine?” The head sank an inch further.

It was not until I saw the tears hitting the desk that I realised she was crying.

Opening one desk drawer and then another, I finally found what I needed. I put the box of single-ply tissues in front of her.

“Charmaine, can you talk about the last time you saw your daughter?” I kept my voice low, just above a whisper.

Weeping, she made absolutely no sound.

Of all the things I will remember about Charmaine and Cassie Edwards, what would haunt me for years after is watching that woman in that ugly little room with the morgue-like lighting, silently crying. I didn't know then that what she felt was a pain that no human being could reach, could fathom, a wound so profound there's probably not even a word for it.

After a long time, Charmaine Edwards wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and glared across the table, daring me to meet her eye.

It took a lot of work to meet that stare.

It was a look that I was being judged for something greater than myself. It wasn't just me being judged; it was everything I represented.

Worse, I realised we were sorely lacking.

I longed for my nice, comfortable hovel of an office in the basement downstairs. I promised myself a fresh coffee before I squirrelled myself away in the office. Maybe a Danish, too.

I pulled out the notebook and pen from the top pocket of my shirt. "Just take your time."

"Cassie. That's her name." Charmaine said, her voice suddenly strong. "It was the Saturday, three weeks ago. She went to her aunt's and had lunch there. But she never came home."

"OK. She went to her aunt's on her own?"

“Yeah. Why? You think that makes me a bad mother?”  
Defiance in those eyes, anger.

“No.” I shook my head, meeting that glare. “Charmaine, I’m just trying to understand what happened. I ask questions to clarify, not judge.”

She dialled the anger back. Not much. From eleven to nine, maybe.

“Where do you live?”

Charmaine heaved a heavy sigh like I was an idiot. I stayed silent. She might be right.

“Ramsgate Avenue.” She rolled off the address. Not far from the beach.

“Did Cassie walk?”

“No, she rode her bike. Rides everywhere.”

“And where does her aunt live?”

Charmaine recited that address. Top floor unit in Wellington Street. I pictured it in my mind. A little over a kilometre. Less than half a mile in old money. I imagined a little girl meandering through the side streets of North Bondi on her bike on a Saturday afternoon, daydreaming, picking daisies, stopping to pat the cats.

I’m old. That’s what I think eleven-year-olds do.

“OK. Is the aunt your sister or Cassie’s dad’s sister?”

Charmaine shook her head. “Neither.”

My brows furrowed.

Charmaine shrugged. “Lisa. She’s a friend of mine. We’ve known each other forever. She’s the closest thing Cassie has to a family.”

“Lisa’s last name?”

“Heywood.”

I made notes. “And what time did Cassie leave your place for Lisa’s?”

“Eleven-thirty. Well, just before.”

“You seem pretty certain of the time.”

“I had to catch the eleven-thirty-seven bus.”

I paused writing. “Why?”

She stared at me like someone trying to figure out if I was as mentally deficient as I came across or if it was an act. “To get to work.”

“Right. And where do you work?”

“David Jones. Bondi Junction.”

My mind returned to Cavendish in the tea room. Junkie, he’d said. No hoper. But here she was, a junkie with a job. At David Jones, no less. It’s a nice department store. Not renowned for hiring junkies or no-hopers.

Charmaine fidgeted on the other side of the table.

“Cassie left before you?”

That skull-like head nodded. “A few minutes before. I had to lock up.”



“She doesn’t have a key?”

Shake. “No.”

“What happens if she gets home before you?”

“She goes upstairs to Mrs Gibbs.”

I made a note in the book. “And Mrs Gibbs is...?”

“Stella. The old woman who lives in number four. She’s always home. She looks after Cassie after school if I’m still at work, stuff like that.”

“Alright. When did you first think Cassie was missing, Charmaine?”

Edwards leaned back in her chair. The question was open-ended, which threw her a little and made her recollect the events of that day.

“I got home at about six.”

“Six in the evening, on the Saturday?”

“Yes. Then I went upstairs to get Cassie.”

“From Mrs Gibbs?”

A deep nod. “That’s right. But...”

“Cassie wasn’t there.” There is no need to question the bleeding obvious.

She welled up again and grabbed handfuls of tissues from the box. She drew her knees up to her chest, resting her heels on the edge of the plastic seat, thin legs swimming in the cheap track pants.

“What did you do when you saw Cassie wasn’t with Mrs Gibbs?”

“I called Lisa. Right away. Then we went downstairs, and I got the address book with the numbers for Cassie’s friends, and I called their mothers.”

“When you say ‘we’, you mean you and Mrs Gibbs?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Stella’s been like gold through all this.”

“OK. So, Lisa confirmed that Cassie was at her place for lunch?”

Charmaine hesitated. Then nodded. “Right.”

“And what time did Cassie leave Ms Heywood’s unit?”

“About five-thirty, she said.”

“And Cassie left the unit alone? Ms Heywood didn’t accompany her?”

Charmaine cocked an eyebrow. “No. No, I— No. Why would she?”

I lifted one shoulder, tilting my head. “Does Ms Heywood live alone? With a partner?”

“Alone. No partner. I mean, not alone, alone. She has a son.”

I nodded. “And the son, he’s younger or older than Cassie?”

Charmaine nodded. “Eric? No, Eric’s about the same age. Well, a little older. He’s fourteen.”

“And Eric didn’t take Cassie home?”

Charmaine nodded. “No. Cassie had her bike. And they were going out.”

“Who was going out?”

“Lisa and Eric. They were going out for dinner.”

“I see.”

I paused, pretending to look over my notes.

“And that’s when you called Cassie’s friends’ parents?”

Charmaine gave a furtive nod. “They hadn’t seen Cassie.”

They. Not ‘none of them’, just they. Not many friends, then.

“What happened then?”

“It was dark and cold. I was freaking out.”

“Has Cassie ever done anything like this before?”

“What, stayed out without permission?”

“Yes.”

Firm shake. “No, never. She’s a kid. She’s been ten, fifteen minutes late sometimes. But never like this. Never this.”

“Mrs Gibbs was still with you?”

“Yes.”

“Anyone else?”

“What? No. Why?”

“No reason. What happened after you called the parents?”

“I called the police.”

“What time was this?”

“About eight-thirty.”

“Did you call the local station?”

“I was freaking out. I called triple-zero.”

“Do you remember what time the police arrived?”

“It seemed like forever, you know. Just forever. But I think, remembering back, they came pretty fast. Like, I dunno, a half hour, maybe?” Once fierce and like cut glass in the ugly interview room’s fluorescent lights, now her eyes had grown dim and dull and sunk back inside that forlorn skull. “After that, it’s all a bit of a blur.”

“Do you have any other children, Ms Edwards?”

She didn’t even look at me. She just shook her head.

Everything else would be in police notebooks and on COPS, the police computer system.

Charmaine Edwards suddenly didn’t look like the crazed bitch at the front desk, ready to tear the station apart with her bare hands.

Now she just looked like a tired wreck, rung out and spent, scared and alone and looking for her missing child.

I folded my pocketbook shut.

“Come on. I’ll give you a lift home, Charmaine.”

# 4

In total silence, we drove the ten minutes to Charmaine Edwards' unit block in North Bondi.

Now and then, I'd glance over at the small, thin form in the front passenger seat, but I couldn't see her face. The whole way, she stared out the side window. She may have dozed off at one stage.

Pulling up outside the old amber brick and orange beer-bottle glass complex halfway along Ramsgate Avenue, an old woman sat out front holding up the pale brick fence.

Both had seen better days, but at least the old brick fence wasn't smoking.

Charmaine was already out of the car when I opened the driver's door.

"Hi, Stella." Edwards greeted the woman wreathed in a cloud of acrid steel-blue cigarette smoke.

Thin lips cracked deeper than the abyssal plains gnarled into something that might have been meant to mimic a smile. "Hullo, luv," came a voice like part gravel, part

sarcophagus dust. “I see ya brought the filth. It’ll take all day to get the stink off the street from this fat fuck.” Stella Gibbs greeted me with a stare as brittle and icy as her blue eyes. “At least they had the decency to bring you home this time.”

Charmaine Edwards approached and folded herself into the small woman’s chest, a skeletal arm in the floral blouse wrapping itself around the grieving mother. It seemed impossible for such a waif to envelope a full-grown adult woman, even one as small as Charmaine Edwards, yet somehow, the old woman managed to do just that.

It was as if the little woman had transformed into a cavern for Charmaine to become an echo in.

After a while, Stella Gibbs patted Edwards firmly on the shoulder. “Take yourself inside, Charm.” She squared off to me again. “I’ll deal with this, and then I’ll be in to make us a cuppa.”

We waited until Charmaine had disappeared wraith-like into the building.

I put out my hand. “I’m Detective Sergeant Jon Roth, Mrs Gibbs.”

“Like I could give two fucks.” Gibbs stared at the hand like it was a turd. “Roth. That a Jew name?”

“Almost. Jews for Jesus.” I put the hand away. She screwed her face into a crinkled ball. “Catholic. Twice the guilt, double the damnation. Plus, altar boys.”

That grim line of a mouth twitched the merest movement. I smiled.

Short, tiny, thin-boned, browned from the sun to the point of being an old leather purse, with an outsized head on skinny shoulders, Stella Gibbs looked like a scarecrow, with a chiselled face so hard it would probably actually scare off the most pernicious crow.

“You always grin like a buffoon?”

“Some things are innate.”

She regarded me. “Innate.” She rolled the word around her mouth as if it were a mint. “Ain’t that the truth.”

I leaned against the small fence beside her as she crossed her arms and continued to smoke. We looked down the street together, several building construction company signs on security fencing up and down the street.

“Lots of changes going on.”

“What are you, the fucking real estate police?”

I shrugged. “Lot of empty places. Not so many curtain twitchers anymore.”

Gibbs grunted. “There’s a few cockatoos still about.” She pointed a tanned, grizzled talon down the road. “Over there, for instance. That old bag’s always peeping through her window at what’s happening. Then there’s the lech further down.” She jabbed again.

“The brown brick?”



“They’re all brown brick, genius. What, you need another doughnut to get that brain ticking over?”

I tried to hide my smile. “Sorry. I meant the chocolate brown one, there.”

“That’s the one. Upstairs. He’s always peeping out. Only at the girls, mind you. The younger, the better. Pervy bastard.” She took another long drag of her cigarette. “You ain’t got long. I’ve almost finished my fag, and then I’m off this fence.”

“You’ve been taking care of Charmaine.”

“Not a question.” Gibbs blew a long stream of smoke diagonally.

“It was not.”

She was quiet for a bit. “I am. She hasn’t got anyone else.”

“No family? Mother? Sisters? Brothers?”

“Nada.”

“Dead?”

“As good as.”

“Tell me about Cassie.”

The look was one of surprise. “What about her?”

Shrug. “She the type to run away? Not come home?”

“She’s eleven.”

I stared at her, face blank.

“You don’t have kids, do you?” Stella muttered.

“I don’t.”

“Figured as much. Married?”

I shook my head, inexplicably embarrassed under that withering, judgemental glare.

“There’s a surprise.” Gibbs guffawed. “I know what you’re implying. But no. Cassie’s eleven. Not an old eleven. You know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“She’s a good kid. Bit young for her age, I reckon. Younger than me at eleven. Certainly younger than her mother at that age. So, what, a normal eleven-year-old? Whatever the hell that means now.”

I nodded.

Stella had finished her cigarette, stubbed the butt out on a brick, but she still sat.

“You were here the night Cassie went missing?”

“Yeah. Reckon you already know that.”

“You never left your place? Number four, isn’t it?”

She nodded. “Yeah. And I didn’t fall asleep. I’m old, not fucking decrepit.” Stella sighed. “Cassie never knocked on my door, Roth, or whatever the fuck your name is.”

“Have to ask.”

She nodded. “I know. So fucking ask. You’re one up on

the other fucking idiots.”

“The other idiots?”

“Your mates. The other cops.”

“They didn’t ask?”

She shook that wrinkled head. “Nothing. They asked Charmaine a lot of questions that night and the next day. A few days in, the wind had gone out of their sails.”

“And you were here that night with Charmaine? The Saturday night Cassie went missing, I mean.”

“Yep. That night, all night. And every night since.”

“Huh.”

“Is that your big conclusion? Huh?”

“It’s all I’ve got right now.”

Stella spat across the bright concrete footpath into the sandy nature strip where the meagre grass struggled to clamber through the dirt, then stood up.

“Thank fuck you’re on the case.”

“I’m not. On the case, I mean.” Stella Gibbs stared at me. “I was just there when Charmaine was in the station this morning. She was upset.”

“Ah,” Stella smiled. It was vicious, filled with the savage venom of hard experience. “So, you’re the guy just here to keep her in line. Keep her from making a nuisance of herself, eh? You make it look like you’re out here, what, detecting, sleuthing, and really, you’re just catching the

breeze and chewing the fat and wasting the poor girl's fucking time?"

I stared across the road.

"Tell Charmaine I'll follow up with whoever's in charge of—"

Stella Gibbs chuckled like a pirate as she walked away.  
"Fuck you very much, Detective Sergeant. Eat shit and die."

# 5

In the car driving back from Charmaine Edward's unit, every radio talking head was prattling about the presser with Deputy Commissioner Clive Jeffries and DCI Draper. Hearing Jeffries' voice in the car, as if he were in the passenger seat right next to me, followed by Draper's sycophantic whining twang, made my skin crawl.

It took a lot of effort not to ram the car into a telegraph pole.

Outside the station, it was a three-ring circus.

The media circus had followed the DCI from the Police Executive Building on Elizabeth Street, across from Hyde Park in the middle of the city, back to the Task Force's operations centre at the station in Waverley.

A gaggle of cameramen and boom operators had formed a crowd around the entrance to the station. I spotted Draper's bald dome somewhere in the midst of it as I pulled through the security gates into the parking lot at the back of the station.

Assistant Commissioner Damien Molenhouse was occupying a vast swathe of the squad room. A tall man of sizeable girth, Molenhouse had a beet-red face topped with silver hair. He looked like an albino silverback jammed into a bright blue schoolboy's uniform.

Unfortunately, He also happened to be the Eastern Suburbs Regional Commander.

“Roth!” Molenhouse boomed as I walked across the room towards the stairs down to the basement.

“Commander,” I nodded.

“Where’s my anti-crime reports?”

The uniforms watched the big man’s show inside while Draper performed for the monkeys outside. Molenhouse was suffering from attention deprivation.

I made a show of looking at my watch. “They’re not due until next week, Commander.”

Molenhouse’s rat eyes squinted. He squared off and sauntered towards me. He was a tall guy.

But I was taller.

He must have realised that when I squared my shoulders to face his little charge head-on. He stopped a good ten feet off.

“I like progress reports, Detective Sergeant. Where have you been?”

“Taking care of an issue one of your uniform officers

was having trouble managing this morning. You might want to ask Constable Cavendish for an update.”

Every Commander in the Force was the same: they preferred to live in issue-free zones. At the slightest whiff of a problem, they’d abandon their own mothers to get away from it.

Molenshouse was no different. Turning on his heel, he walked away from me faster than any fat man should have been physically able to. “Whatever. Make sure I receive an update on the progress of those reports by the end of the day, Sergeant.”

“Would you also like an update on that issue, Commander?” I called after him, but he was already well out of earshot.

All the uniforms had ducked their heads except for Cavendish. His ruddy face was staring balefully from a cubicle in the far corner. I smiled and gave him a little wave.

My office was down the fire stairs, through the basement with more broken, overly bright ceiling lights than working ones, past the locker rooms and showers and the solid doors of the police evidence safe room, behind a line of old desks and stacked storage and archive boxes.

Really more of an old janitor’s closet than an office, I opened the little room with a big old-fashioned brass security key engraved with ‘B709’. The B probably stood for basement, but the seven-oh-nine? Apart from the change

rooms and evidence store, this was the only room in the basement.

The place was like a cell out at Long Bay. Apart from a desk, a broken filing cabinet with draws you had to fight to open, a fridge I'd salvaged from the basement that used to store the Station's serology evidence, a kettle and a couple of mugs, a broken desk chair I put my butt in and another I put my feet up on to take a nap in the afternoon.

Being below ground level, what meagre grey light filtered through from the outside world came from a tiny window jammed tight against the ceiling in the room's far corner. The dirty little pane of glass was at asphalt height to the secure car park at the back of the station. Staff coming out to smoke stood right in front of my dingy window so that most of the day I had spider-leg shadows crawling all over the walls and ceiling.

On the back of the door was a full-length mirror. The damn thing looked older than me, the glass stained with age, the silver backing rusted and peeling from the back at the edges.

Whenever I closed the door or looked up from the desk, there I was.

The years had not been kind.

Most of the time, I didn't even look at myself. Now and then, I'd catch a glance and remember how I used to be.

What looked back was not what used to be.



The height was the same, give or take. At six-four in old money, I was a big lad. The face, once square, was becoming lined and flaccid. I'd shaved the beard to reveal soft, ashen jowls.

The greying tousled hair did wonders to mask the blob of white around the deep dent at the top of the brow, just at the hairline. Luckily, the scar mixed with the grey. Still, my eye always went there—the scars you could see. One sleeve was brown to the elbow from the coffee spill this morning.

My shoulder ached.

Some scars were harder to spot.

“Living the dream,” I muttered, groaning into the seat behind the desk.

Nobody bothered to duct the HVAC down this far, so the office was bitterly cold in the winter months. In summer, it was nice and cool, but winter was deadly. I hid a little blow heater under the desk with a pair of sheepskin slippers to keep my feet warm.

The desk was empty except for a flat-screen monitor and telephone, the wires leading through a grommet in the desk across the floor under black gaffer tape to outlets in the wall.

Coventry.

This, or places like this, was where the Department sent you when they couldn't get rid of you. Or, more darkly, they hoped you would eventually get rid of yourself, one way or

another—six of one to the brass.

Before doing anything else, I pulled my phone from the back pocket of my pants and signed in to the app with the security camera feed. There were no alerts, but I checked the feeds religiously anyway.

Nothing.

A lifetime on the toecutter's shit list led to a healthy dose of paranoia.

Twenty minutes later, I logged in to the Police's Computer Operated Policing System, COPS, to check my inbox. Just a flaming hot message from Molenhouse about the anti-crime stats that weren't late—another part of the scripted melodrama concocted to keep alive the illusion of poor performance.

In five minutes, I'd responded to Molenhouse's rant. A tight, neat, drily worded email listing the due dates for the anti-crime reports (clearly indicating when they were due and scheduled brass pre-posting review dates), a list of the KPIs from my role and the due dates listed therein, as well as an attachment of an email I'd sent only last Friday morning (it was Monday) with a list of the anti-crime stats 'as-is' and status for each division within the Command in a spreadsheet.

I forwarded a copy of everything to my Union Rep, Luke Olsen.

Arse appropriately covered with an added thorn in the

side of the head-hunters in Professional Standards Command putting together a brief to oust me, I opened a spreadsheet of stats and put my feet up.

On the screen, the cursor jumped and skipped, scampering across the screen, filling in cells, deleting them again, running formulas, deleting them, pausing, before a whole new set of meaningless tasks began executing.

There was a good chance they were monitoring my terminal. If it looked like I just sat here all day doing nothing, they'd be after me in a hot minute.

The little macro I'd created was a small blessing. It was not perfect, and it wouldn't fool a real hard case looking into what I was doing with my time, but it was enough to deceive the casual observer.

My mind drifted back to Charmaine Edwards.

After a while, I stopped the macro, closed the phoney spreadsheet, and opened a terminal window for COPS. Two-finger typing, I brought up the Cassandra Edwards file.

COPS had the summary information such as age, sex, last known whereabouts, date missing, legal guardian's name and contact details, and the contact name of the leading Detective upstairs, Detective Constable Suzanne Parsons.

According to COPS, the matter had been referred to Missing Persons. Jumping out of COPS, I opened a new terminal window for the detectives' case management

system, EAGLE-I. Entering the case file reference from COPS, I scanned the case summary that filled the screen. There was not a lot.

I was interested in Parsons' summary.

It was just a couple of paragraphs. Young female, single female guardian, the biological mother with a long history of drug abuse and known criminal record, reported and known to family and community services. The Detective believes the subject had absconded from her legal guardian and residence. The matter has been referred to the Missing Persons Unit for follow-up action. Detective Constable Freida Pak was the contact there.

Police speak for Parsons' belief that Cassie Edwards ran away and has not returned home by choice. Absconded was the word used.

There was a link to an image file in COPS. I opened it up.

A young, smiling face filled the screen, with long dark hair and lean features strikingly similar to her mother. She was an attractive girl, but you could tell by the look on her face and those eyes that she was young for her age.

I stared at Cassie Edwards on the thin LCD screen in front of me.

“Runaway, my arse,” I grumbled, climbing out of the squeaky chair with another groan.