Think of the Children

Kerry Wilkinson

A DS JESSICA DANIEL NOVEL

One is dead.
One is missing.
Who is next?
KERRY WILKINSON

THINK OF THE CHILDREN

PAN BOOKS
Contents
Afterword
Readers’ Questions and Answers
Coming Soon
Extract from Playing with Fire
The windscreen wipers on Detective Sergeant Jessica Daniel’s battered old car thundered from side to side in an attempt to clear the pouring rain. She leant forward for what seemed like the hundredth time since starting the journey, wiping a thin layer of condensation away from the inside of the front window.

Jessica steered with one hand while continuing to clear the windows, muttering curses under her breath that related partly to her car, partly to the daily commute, but mainly to the weather itself. She had lived in Manchester for over a decade and if there was one thing the natives were used to, it was rain. She shivered slightly as cool air poured out of the car’s vents. It was almost five minutes since she’d set the fans to the hottest temperature possible but they still weren’t producing anything other than a light but decidedly arctic-feeling breeze.

Glancing away from the road, Jessica looked at the man in the passenger seat. ‘If you could stop breathing for a while it would make this a lot easier.’

Detective Constable David Rowlands gave a half-smile. ‘Was that one of the selling points when you bought this thing? “Works perfectly as long as you don’t breathe when it’s raining”.’

‘You can walk if you’d prefer.’

Out of the corner of her eye, Jessica saw the constable take a half-glance out of the passenger window but it was clear he wasn’t thinking about it seriously as the rain continued hammering on the roof of the vehicle. ‘You’re all right. I can’t believe you make this journey every day.’

Jessica sighed, continuing to edge her car forward in the slow-moving traffic. She lived in the Didsbury area, south of the main city centre. In a region that offered everything from high-priced flats at Salford Quays and multi-million-pound footballers’ mansions all the way down to some of the most deprived housing estates in the country, it wasn’t a bad place to call home. The biggest problem where she lived was the traffic jams on the way to the Longsight police station where she worked. The tailbacks were bad enough at the best of times but with the weather the way it was, everyone was moving even more slowly than usual. She kept tight to the car in front, ignoring the person in the vehicle she knew was trying to cut into her lane.

‘You didn’t have to stay at mine last night, you know,’ Jessica said.

‘Yeah, but we had a good time, didn’t we?’

Jessica paused and smiled, thinking about the night before. ‘Don’t say things like that around the station or you’ll start rumours.’

‘Ugh, yes. You’re right.’
'You don’t have to be so disgusted at the idea of being associated with me. Anyway, I’m amazed your girlfriend came for tea; I’ve spent the last four months thinking this “Chloe” was imaginary. At least I’ve met her now and verified she isn’t clinically mental.’

Rowlands sighed. ‘Is that an official medical term?’

‘Yes.’

The temperature changed almost instantly from freezing cold to searing hot. Jessica’s car’s fans didn’t differentiate between anything other than the two extremes. The shift meant the windscreen did at least begin to clear, although the only thing it revealed was rows of traffic seemingly not moving and a set of traffic lights in the distance, the red light beaming through the misty greyness of the morning.

Jessica shuffled uncomfortably in the driver’s seat, trying to stop her legs from cramping, and sighed again. ‘It wasn’t that long ago I was on a beach for my only holiday in years reading crappy books, drinking cocktails and enjoying the sun.’

‘How can I forget? They dumped all your paperwork on me. I can’t picture you lying around not doing anything though. In all the time I’ve known you, you never stop.’

Jessica didn’t want to admit it but he was right. She had spent the first morning on the beach with a book trying not to look at an overweight tourist wearing leopard-print Speedos and a sailor’s hat. After getting bored and hiring a car, she spent much of the rest of her three-week break driving around the Greek island. She had intended for the holiday to be relaxing, a chance to get some space after a series of murders where the killer had sent her severed fingers from the victims through the post. After almost becoming the final casualty herself, Jessica had wondered what she wanted from her future. Given her state of mind and accrued unpaid overtime, she was given permission to take a longer holiday than most officers got.

She went away not knowing whether this was the job for her and returned none the wiser. So little had changed.

Jessica ignored Rowlands’s assessment, slowly moving her car forward as the lights ahead turned green and the line of traffic inched along. The car that had been trying to cut into her lane edged in behind her and Jessica felt a small pang of utterly irrational elation at the minor victory.

Dave started to hum an upbeat tune Jessica didn’t recognise, which only added to her irritation. The lights flicked back to red just before she could drive through and, although she thought about not stopping, she slowed before putting on the handbrake, coming to rest at the front of the queue.

‘Can you stop doing that?’ she asked irritably.

Rowlands turned to look at her. ‘What?’

‘The humming.’

‘Sorry, I didn’t even realise I was doing it.’

‘You’ve been doing it a lot recently. This whole domestic bliss, moving in with your girlfriend thing has almost turned you into a normal member of the human race. Albeit one that hums.’

Rowlands laughed quietly to himself. ‘It’s Christmas in a few weeks. Aren’t I allowed to be cheery?’

‘No, it’s unnerving.’
Jessica reached towards the fan controls and turned them off. She hoped the mixture of cold then hot air would even itself out and make the final five minutes of their journey bearable. To her relief, the thudding rain on the metal roof started to ease. She peered up at the still-red traffic lights, then looked to her left where cars continued to speed across the junction.

The screeching noise was the first thing she heard. It sounded as if it had started some distance away, but it was hard to tell because of the rest of the din going on around her. Jessica quickly looked to her right as a black car squealed across the junction, wheels locked, spinning on the drenched surface. Everything seemed to happen in slow motion, the vehicle twisting a full circle and smashing into a lamppost in the centre of the junction before being hit by a blue car coming from the opposite direction and completing another half-spin.

Jessica blinked, trying to take in what she had just witnessed. For a fraction of a second, it was as if everything had stopped, even the rain. Without thinking, she switched off her engine and got out of the car. She didn’t say a word but Rowlands was moving too and together they dashed across to where the mangled car had come to a halt. Jessica headed for the black vehicle, Rowlands towards the blue one.

Jessica could feel her heart beating quickly as she arrived at the wreck. There was a huge crack in the windscreen, the deflating airbag pressed against it. Car horns blared around her and other people were approaching the car. Jessica took out her police identification and shouted for them to stay back, at the same time pointing at a man who had his phone out and telling him to dial 999.

Because of the way the car had spun, it hadn’t entangled itself with the lamppost, instead bouncing after being hit by the other car. Jessica moved to the driver’s-side door, trying to peer through the cracked glass. The mixture of rain and condensation made it hard to see through the other windows and she took a snap decision to open the door. As she did, a splash of dark red blood from the inside dribbled onto the ground; the cream material lining of the seat was also drenched.

Jessica knew instantly the driver was dead.

The blood-soaked airbag had begun to sag onto the driver’s lap as Jessica finally allowed herself to look at the victim. She had seen plenty of dead bodies in her time but this one was a distorted mess. Jessica quickly realised why: the seatbelt clasp hung limply by the door, unfastened. She felt a shiver go through her as it started to rain again, droplets of water streaming down her face as she tried to put the pieces together. Despite the mess, the driver’s greying hair made him look as if he was in his fifties. She didn’t know for sure but it appeared that his neck had snapped. It could have been him hitting the windscreen or the force of the airbag colliding after the impact. Not that it mattered considering the way the pulped skin, blood and glass made his face look like a warped, dropped pizza. Jessica could not look for more than a second or two. Not wearing a seatbelt had cost him his life.

Jessica shut the door, knowing there was nothing she could do and not wanting to contaminate the scene either through her own presence or by letting rain in.

She again warned members of the public to stay back before walking the short distance to the blue car where Rowlands was crouched, talking to a young woman still sitting in the driver’s seat. As Jessica came closer, it was clear the woman was crying hysterically, a seatbelt stretched across her. She reached the car and put a hand on
Dave’s shoulder, shaking her head slightly to let him know the fate of the other driver before crouching herself.

Rowlands spoke slowly and deliberately. ‘This is Laura. She was on her way to work, weren’t you, Laura?’ The woman nodded, eyes wide with disbelief as tears continued to flow down her face. Jessica knew her colleague was doing his best to keep the woman calm, using her name frequently to keep her attention until help arrived. Outwardly, aside from long dark hair which was tousled across her face from the impact, the driver looked fine, but she was obviously suffering from shock.

‘Are you okay, Laura?’ Jessica asked. The woman nodded again but said nothing.

Jessica left Dave talking as cars swerved around the accident, sirens blaring in the distance.

She stopped to take a deep breath, swallowing a feeling of claustrophobia despite being in the open. The car horns and engines, the chatter of nearby pedestrians, the patter of the rain: it was becoming overpowering. Jessica felt a few drops of rain slide down her neck, struggling not to shiver as she made her way back towards the black car while tying her long hair into a ponytail.

The vehicle looked much more of a mess from the other side. It was a mid-size four-door model that Jessica thought of as always being advertised with a family sitting inside, as if the machine itself was the key to parenting bliss. A scrape ran the full length of the passenger side, the front headlight a concertina of mangled metal.

Jessica blinked the water away from her eyes as she saw the flashing lights of an ambulance a few hundred metres away, the noise from the siren blaring ever louder. Her eyes were attracted to the rear of the vehicle where the car’s boot had popped open ever so slightly. She put a hand on the metal, at first thinking about pushing it shut, but curiosity got the better of her and she opened it instead.

If she’d had to, Jessica would have struggled to guess the contents of her own boot. There might well have been jump leads and possibly a petrol can but she wouldn’t have put money on it. She definitely wasn’t prepared for the sight that met her in the rear of the smashed-up black car. Thick plastic sheeting was wrapped tightly around an object with heavy-looking tape sealing it into a tight cocoon. Next to the object was a rusting spade with a muddied plastic handle. Jessica felt something in her stomach urging her forward as if she already knew what it was.

She pushed the boot down but didn’t lock it in place. As the ambulance drew up, she ran to her own car, opening the driver’s door and digging into the well before pulling out a pair of scissors.

Her father had always been good about keeping things in their old family car just in case but Jessica hadn’t inherited his forward thinking. She had found the scissors not long after her dad bought her the car second-hand a decade or so ago, left by the previous owner. She dashed across the junction again, silently thanking whoever that previous owner was and feeling justified for never cleaning out her car.

As she arrived back at the black vehicle, paramedics stepped out of the ambulance. Jessica flashed her identification and told them the fate of the driver. One of them went to check on him anyway as another walked to where Rowlands was still comforting the woman from the blue car.

More sirens blared in the distance as Jessica returned to the black car’s boot, opening it and moving the spade to the rear of the compartment out of her way. Layer
upon layer of plastic sheeting was wrapped tightly around the object and Jessica struggled to force through the blunt blades of her scissors. As she pushed harder, it started to rain more heavily, huge drops bouncing off the tarmac road. Jessica could feel the force of the water smashing into the top of her head. She continued to cut and finally felt the scissors push through the top few layers of the plastic. Reaching in with her hands, she pulled hard to try to tear the material apart. Slowly, it began to give and, with a combination of her hands and the scissors, she opened up part of the wrapping.

With the plastic pulled back, all she could see was a piece of cloth that had a flowery pattern. It reminded Jessica of the curtains her parents used to have at their house when she was a child, a hideous mixture of yellow and brown. Still reaching into the boot, Jessica tugged at the fabric, finally freeing it with a gasp.

Jessica tried to force herself to look away but the pale skin and clamped eyelids held her hypnotically: the haunting lifeless face of a dead child.
By the time Jessica arrived at Longsight Police Station, various photographs of the crash had begun to show up on Internet news sites. Almost all of them had been taken by passers-by with their phones but luckily none seemed to feature what she had found in the car’s boot. Instead, the news stories were focusing on the length of time the junction had been shut and the knock-on effect it had had on the flow of traffic into the city.

Weather and a traffic jam: people’s two favourite talking points all wrapped up in one.

Jessica had no doubts about who the body in the boot was and wondered how long it would take for the real story to leak out. Isaac Hutchings was eleven years old and had gone missing almost three weeks ago. Jessica had never been able to figure out why some missing-children stories caught on, while others were barely reported. Sometimes a kid would disappear and there would be a national media storm that seemingly engulfed everyone. Other times, there would barely be a mention in the local papers, let alone anything wider. One of the other officers told her about an instance where a missing-child case had next to no attention until one of his friends, a blond, blue-eyed nine-year-old boy, gave a tearful appeal that had been partly stage-managed by the force. After that, the cameras came flooding in.

For whatever reason, the disappearance of Isaac Hutchings had barely registered anywhere other than on the local police’s own website.

Jessica wasn’t part of the specialist missing persons team and hadn’t been involved in the case in any way other than the fact it had happened on her patch and she was aware of it. But, as she stared into the pale face of the body she had found in the boot, she knew his identity immediately.

There was a nervous hum of energy in the air as Jessica walked into the Longsight station. Early information would have begun to leak back through the various ranks during the morning about what had been found and, as when anything major occurred, it didn’t take long for the news to spread.

Jessica headed straight for the stairs at the back of the reception area but was immediately put off by a string of tinsel wrapped around the bottom of the banister. She had noticed something similar the previous day in the canteen, where the frame around the door was decorated with bright Christmas streamers. Jessica shook her head in annoyance and then jogged up the stairs two at a time on her way to Detective Chief Inspector Jack Cole’s office. After discovering the body, she had phoned in to the station to give the brief details she knew, giving her boss the opportunity to start
the investigation from their end while she waited for the Scene of Crime team to show up.

As Jessica reached the office, she could see Detective Inspector Jason Reynolds and the DCI waiting for her through the glass walls. Both turned to face her and she didn’t have time to knock before being waved in.

DCI Cole had recently turned fifty. Since taking the chief inspector’s job around eighteen months ago, he had really started to look his age. When Jessica first began working with him a few years before, they had both been in more junior positions. Back then he seemed to take everything in his stride and remained unfazed by more or less anything. After his promotion, he had begun to change. At first it had been subtle but in recent months, Jessica had found herself less confident around him. His hair was now fully grey and new wrinkles had appeared around his eyes. His cool approach had taken a hit and Jessica had seen him angry on a few occasions, something she couldn’t have pictured beforehand. The pressure of the job, financial cutbacks and the anxiety to meet government targets were having an obvious effect.

Cole was sitting behind a large wooden desk with a selection of certificates on the wall above him and a couple of cardboard files on the table. Opposite him sat Reynolds, an imposing black officer who Jessica used to share an office with. As she entered the room, the DI shuffled his chair sideways, allowing her room.

Cole waited for a moment, eyeing her up and down, then spoke with a grin. ‘Raining out, is it?’

Jessica felt puzzled for a moment, then saw her boss nodding towards the floor where she had left a trail of drips which no doubt ran the length of the corridor and all the way down the stairs. With everything that had happened during the morning, Jessica had forgotten how wet she was. Now she shivered slightly, almost in recognition of her boss’s point. She could feel her wet hair plastered to her left ear and brushed it away with her hand.

‘Sorry, Sir . . .’

The DCI waved his hand, realising his joke had fallen flat. ‘No, it’s fine. I don’t know if anyone filled you in but the car with the body in the boot is stolen.’ Cole typed on the keyboard in front of him before shaking his head. ‘I’ve not got the information here but the owner reported the theft yesterday. The mother of the missing boy has been notified and we’re hoping she can identify the body one way or the other at some point today. It’s awkward for obvious reasons.’ He leant back into his chair, running a hand through his hair.

‘Do we know who’s doing what yet?’ Jessica asked.

Jason answered: ‘It’s all a bit of a mess because the missing persons team were involved but now it looks like a murder investigation. You know what the politics are like around here but I think we’ll end up taking it once the body has been formally identified.’

It occurred to Jessica that she’d missed an obvious point. ‘If the car was stolen, do we know who the driver is?’

The two men exchanged a glance and Jessica realised that was what they had been talking about before she arrived. It was again Reynolds who answered.

‘We don’t know yet. The Scene of Crime boys and the coroner will be involved. If we’re really lucky he’ll have a wallet in his pocket, if not we’ll have to wait a few days
but might get a match from his DNA to the national database. Other than that, we’re going to be struggling. His face is in such a bad way, we might not be able to get a picture we can use. Did you see anything in the front of the vehicle?’

Jessica shook her head. ‘It was a bit of a mess with the airbag and blood and everything. After I went to the boot, I didn’t look anywhere else.’

DCI Cole picked up the phone from his desk. ‘I’ll check to see if anyone on site found a wallet or something to get us moving. Someone’s going to have to take another statement from the person whose car was nicked but we can come back to that.’

He dialled some numbers and then leant back in his chair, the receiver to his ear. Jessica offered a thin smile to Reynolds after he caught her eye as they listened to one half of a conversation which seemed to consist largely of acknowledging grunts.

After a couple of minutes, Cole put the phone down and looked up at the other two detectives. He scratched his chin and grimaced slightly, accentuating the wrinkles around his eyes. ‘They’ve not found much,’ he said. ‘No wallet or ID on the driver and it’s going to take a little while for them to test the blood to see if they can get a match. For now we have no idea who he is.’

Reynolds hummed in response but Cole continued. ‘They did find two things on the passenger seat. They might be nothing but . . . ’ He tailed off as Jessica felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. It could have been because of the dampness of her clothes but something in the tone of her boss’s voice made it sound significant. It was almost as if he had paused for dramatic effect. The chief inspector started to shuffle papers on his desk again before picking up a pad and pen and beginning to write. ‘They’re going to have to check them for fingerprints and the like, but there was a key and a map. We’ll get them handed over later today or early tomorrow when they’re finished with them.’

‘What type of key?’ Jessica asked.

‘I don’t know. We’ll have to wait.’

Jessica thought about the state of the vehicle when she had arrived on the scene. The passenger’s side was far more damaged than the driver’s and, because of the airbags and condensation, that was probably why she had missed the items. She was still annoyed with herself for not spotting them though. Cole looked up from his pad and held it up for them to see. He had written the number ‘61’.

‘Does this number mean anything to you?’

Jessica stuck out her bottom lip and looked at Reynolds as they both shrugged their shoulders.

‘In what context?’ the inspector asked.

Cole put the pad back down. ‘The keys were attached to some sort of fob with the number sixty-one on. It could be a key for someone’s flat but it seems unlikely you’d have your own door number on it.’

‘Maybe it’s from a hotel room?’ Jessica suggested.

The two men nodded before Cole spoke. ‘Perhaps. We’ll have to wait for it to be analysed and released back to us.’

‘What about the map?’ Jessica asked.

‘They still need it but someone’s going to email over digital photos. The guy reckons they’re clear enough to use if we want to follow them up before we get the
actual map.’

Jessica stood. ‘Right, let’s go follow the map.’

She knew it wasn’t really her call to decide which cases she was allocated but, having found Isaac’s body in the boot, she wasn’t ready to stand aside and let someone else take it up. From their reactions – and considering how well they knew her – there were no objections from either of the other two.

Cole nodded. ‘Jason’s on this too. I don’t know where the site is yet but you’ll need a team with you. Start sorting that and I’ll forward you the emails when they arrive.’

As Reynolds and Jessica exited the office and began to walk down the corridor, the DI put one hand on her shoulder. ‘Are you all right, Jess?’

‘Yeah, just wet.’

‘I mean the body you found. I know what you’re like, just breezing through everything. I found the body of a child once . . .’ He tailed off but Jessica didn’t give him an opportunity to continue.

‘I’m okay. But I could do with a towel.’ She knew that wasn’t the question her colleague was asking but she didn’t want to stop working. Reynolds knew her well enough not to push.

‘All right, you sort yourself out and I’ll get a few calls in.’

Jessica was glad to get away from the inspector. It wasn’t that she didn’t like or respect him but she never enjoyed it when anyone asked questions that might make her think about her own well-being too much. She went off to dry her clothes and hair as best she could before finding Dave in the large open-plan area which the constables shared on the station’s main floor.

She couldn’t help but smile as she followed a trail of water to find him towelling his own hair as he hunched over a desk.

‘You look as if you’ve been dragged from the bottom of a lake,’ she laughed.

‘You look as if you’ve been swimming with your clothes on.’

Jessica grinned. ‘How was Laura when you left her?’

‘Shaken, but she’ll be okay. When she got wind that the other guy was dead, she kept saying it was her fault. I don’t know what she could have done about it.’

‘Do you want to come back out? We found a map in the car with the bodies. No idea what it leads to but we don’t know who the driver is yet and the body from the boot hasn’t been identified formally so we don’t have anything else for now. There was a spade in the boot so it might be where he was going to bury the body but I don’t know why you’d need a map for that. Something doesn’t add up.’

Rowlands rubbed the top of his head with his hand. ‘Do you think there’s a point you reach where you can’t get any wetter?’

Jessica was confused. ‘What?’

‘When you’re out in the rain, absolutely soaked, do you think there’s a point where you’re so wet, it doesn’t matter if you stay out in it because you’re already as wet as you can possibly be?’

Jessica screwed up her eyes, arching an eyebrow. ‘When most people settle down with a girlfriend or boyfriend, it does absolute wonders for their personality. With you, it’s just bloody weird. I preferred it when you spent half the day looking at those shite lads’ mags, now you’re offering philosophical opinions about rain.’

‘I was just . . .’
‘Whatever. Are you coming?’

Rowlands gave a small smile. ‘Yeah, but I’m getting one of those big coats from storage that uniform use before we head out.’

Jessica shared a car with DI Reynolds and Dave Rowlands while two other vehicles carried teams of officers to the location marked on the map. The digital photographs were decent quality and someone in the administration department had made copies for the team to take with them. As Reynolds drove, Jessica looked intently at the printouts in her lap. She had never been great with directions but the images appeared to come from an Ordnance Survey map. A red cross marked an area just outside the M60 ring road not too far from the main road that would take them to Altrincham.

Jessica didn’t know the district too well but the map showed some woods and a few large fields which backed onto an area that one of the other officers told them was an industrial park. The cross itself seemed to have been marked very deliberately, slightly into the woods in red pen. The photographs were a little out of focus but offered an accurate idea of what the original map would look like.

The entire team were now in heavy waterproof jackets and their bulging coats made the vehicle feel much more fuller than usual. At least the heater was working a lot better than the one in Jessica’s car did.

Rain lashed the roof as DI Reynolds drove carefully towards their destination. There was little small talk as Jessica focused on the map and the inspector concentrated on the road. Only one of the officers knew the area to which they were headed and he drove in front, the other cars following. Jessica watched as the leading vehicle turned off the main road and began to follow a tight one-track lane with high hedges on either side. Luckily there was no other traffic as it would have been awkward to squeeze more than one car through.

Eventually the front car pulled onto a verge next to a wide metal gate which opened into a field. The three vehicles just about squeezed onto the same patch, allowing access to through traffic.

Jessica slid the printout of the map into a plastic wallet to shield it from the weather and stepped out of the car. The sound of the rain bouncing from the vehicle was almost deafening. Jessica and the team of officers started walking along a thin track that ran alongside the field, their heavy boots splashing through the pools of water that had built up on the muddied ground.

No one knew what to expect, with some of the officers carrying shovels, while another had a metal battering ram. The initial visit to the location was more to get a feel of the surroundings and see if there was anything obvious. If need be, excavation experts could be brought in to dig up entire areas.

Jessica was wearing an old pair of leather shoes and could feel water squelching through her socks. She tried not to show her discomfort as the group continued to follow the two men at the front. They soon reached a stile, which the men climbed over. Jessica took her time as the coat she had borrowed was far too big and, though she was usually quite fit, she was struggling to lift her legs because of it. Dave climbed the fence after her and though she expected a joke at her expense, he was also struggling in the sodden conditions.

Slowly they crossed a line of trees into a wooded area that was nowhere near as
overgrown as Jessica might have guessed if she had looked at it from a distance. The tree trunks were thin but evenly spaced, the branches overhead stopping at least some of the rain from coming through. As her shoes slid along the ground, Jessica quickly realised the soil was still soft despite the cover. She hoped someone had thought to bring torches. Although it was daytime, the skies were grey and murky, the trees blocking out much of the natural light. Her eyes took a few moments to adjust and, although she could still see, visibility was far from good.

Reynolds waved everyone into a circle and took his copy of the map out of a pocket, shouting over the surrounding noise so that everyone could hear him.

‘My colleague here assures me this is the right place,’ he said. ‘From what I can tell, we’re looking at an area maybe a hundred yards square. Let’s skim around and see if there’s anything obvious. If not, we’ll come back when it’s stopped pissing down.’

Jessica had the urge to point out that could well mean they never returned but she held her tongue. The group spread out and began to mooch through the trees. It was clear no one really knew what they were doing and Jessica was beginning to feel her earlier enthusiasm about coming to the site was misplaced. She exchanged a glance with Rowlands as if to say ‘sorry’, and then looked back at her feet as she moved in as straight a line as she could manage without walking into any trees.

Aside from mounds of dirt and roots she did her best not to trip over, Jessica couldn’t see anything of note. The only observation that seemed slightly out of the ordinary was that the entire area appeared untouched. Most woodland like this would either be overgrown and unkempt, or surrounded by signs letting people know where they could and couldn’t walk.

As she continued, Jessica tried to keep her mind focused, looking for anything unusual. She edged further into the trees, which were becoming more densely packed, blocking even more of the light. Just as she was beginning to think they would have to come back another time, Jessica heard a shout from the far end of the line, turning to see the silhouettes of two people in thick jackets converging on a spot around thirty metres away. Her first instinct was to run but, after two steps, she realised that attempting to do so would leave her sliding along the ground.

Jessica moved as fast as she could without losing her footing and immediately saw why the officer had called them over. While most of the soil was damp on the surface, he had stopped by a patch of land that looked as if it had been dug up recently. It had been covered by stray branches which, if anything, drew more attention because the rest of the ground was clear of clutter.

Jason was the last person to reach the scene and looked straight at Jessica, not saying anything but asking the question with his eyes instead: ‘What do you want to do?’ Even though he was her supervisor and it was his call, Jessica knew he was deferring to her. She assumed it was because of her earlier insistence on being involved, or perhaps he was simply asking if she wanted to get out of the rain. Either way she reached out to take a spade from an officer standing next to her.

‘Let’s dig.’

Instead of handing over the shovel, the officer stepped past Jessica and slammed the spade into the ground himself. He was quickly followed by four others as another placed the metal battering ram on the floor and sat on it. Jessica stood silently next to Reynolds. The steel tips of the spades thudded into the ground as the rain continued
falling around them. Gradually piles of mud began to build up before, finally, everyone saw what they had come for.

The five men stopped digging in unison, glancing towards the two detectives. Jessica stepped forward first, crouching next to the hole which was around a foot deep. She picked up a large see-through plastic bag that reminded her of the freezer bags with the white zips which her mum used for leftovers. She wiped away some soil with her bare hands, surprised at how neat the object was. Jessica didn’t open the plastic; she didn’t need to. Inside she could clearly see a tidily folded light blue football shirt and a pair of jeans.

Given the size there was no doubt they belonged to a child.
Jessica held the bag up for Reynolds to see but it was Dave who spoke. ‘Is that a Man City shirt?’

Reynolds shook his head to say he didn’t know but one of the other officers stepped forward, nodding. ‘Yeah, it’s a City shirt. Few years old though, they’ve not had that sponsor in years.’

With the light fading, Reynolds signalled for everyone to return to the cars. Two officers were left to make sure no one interfered with the area. DCI Cole or a superior would decide what they should do next.

Usually when they found something of note, the officers would be buzzing but it was more or less a silent journey back to the station for Jessica, Reynolds and Rowlands. She figured it was partly because no one understood the significance of what they had discovered, not to mention the fact that they were all soaking wet. Jessica thought about the body of the child she had found that morning and how it might be connected to the clothes. She still felt there was something not quite right about the fact the driver was using a map. It seemed obvious you only needed one if you didn’t know where you were going. If the driver was heading either to bury Isaac Hutchings or, for whatever reason, dig up the clothes, wouldn’t he already know the location?

Back at the station, many of the day-shift officers had already left. DCI Cole had waited for them to get back but, aside from handing the bagged clothes over to an already overworked forensics team, there wasn’t much else any of them could do.

Jessica spent the whole of the next day feeling as if she was going through the motions. She hadn’t been present but Isaac’s mother had identified his body and their murder investigation had officially begun. The football shirt had been easily identified by other officers as being somewhere between twelve and fifteen years old because of the sponsor’s name. Jessica’s gut feeling was that there would be further excavation work required in case there was something they had missed but, aside from the map that had led them there, its significance was a mystery for now.

Their other lead was the key with the number 61 on the fob. It had been returned by the scientists who had determined there were no fingerprints or anything else of note on it. Jessica left Rowlands and a small group of officers with the task of trying to find out its use as she went to visit the owner of the stolen black car.

Partly to make up for leaving her at the station the whole of the previous day but also because she liked working with her, Jessica took DC Izzy Diamond with her for
the interview. Izzy, who had long bright-red hair, had become a good friend to Jessica in recent times.

The relentless rain from the previous day had gone, replaced by a light drizzle that seemed to define the area. Jessica drove one of the marked police cars while Izzy gave directions.

‘Have you told anyone yet?’ Jessica asked as they waited at a set of traffic lights.

‘Why? I’m not starting to show yet, am I?’

Jessica giggled gently. ‘You’re paranoid about getting fat. Of course you’re not showing, I’m just terrified of accidentally telling someone you’re pregnant before it’s officially out.’

The constable didn’t sound too fussed. ‘I’m sure I’ll blab it soon enough. I think Mal’s told his mum anyway. We said we wouldn’t but she dropped some hint about me not being allowed to drink the other day. Still, I guess I’ve told you so we’re even.’

‘I don’t know what I’m going to do when you go off on maternity. I’m going to be left talking to Dave all the time and he’s so obsessed with Chloe he’ll probably be spending his lunch breaks writing sonnets in the canteen by then.’

Izzy laughed. ‘I’ve got a few months before I disappear. Anyway, what’s she like?’

DC Diamond had not met the woman, with Jessica the only person other than Dave able to confirm her existence.

‘Chloe?’ Jessica asked.

‘Yeah, I would’ve put a tenner on either “imaginary” or “blow-up”.’

Jessica put the car in first gear and gently pulled away from the junction. ‘Me too but she’s all too real. She’s sort of normal as well. You know, two arms, two legs, one head, not mentally impaired. Normal. Christ knows what she sees in Dave.’ The two women exchanged a glance. ‘What does it feel like?’ Jessica added.

‘What?’

‘I don’t know . . . having something inside of you.’

DC Diamond cackled. ‘I didn’t realise you were that shy.’

Jessica snorted, realising what she’d said. ‘Not like that. I mean the baby. What does it feel like?’

Out of the corner of her eye, Jessica saw her colleague put a hand on her stomach. ‘I don’t know. It just feels . . . right. Like it’s meant to be there. Did I show you the first scan photo we got?’

‘Yeah, it sort of looked like a pean . . .’ Jessica tailed off before finishing the sentence.

Izzy sounded part-amused, part-offended. ‘Were you going to say “peanut”?’

‘No.’

‘Penis?’

Jessica laughed again. ‘Definitely not.’

‘You know, out of you and Dave, I think it’s getting to the point where he’s the mature one.’

‘Sod off, is he.’

‘Okay, enough about my unborn child that apparently looks like a peanut. What’s going on with you?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Dave reckoned you were seeing his friend, that magician guy.’
Jessica wasn’t too pleased at people gossiping about her but tried to hide it. ‘Hugo? No, we’re just mates. He comes round and cooks for me every week or two.’

‘Cooks’? Is that what you’re calling it nowadays?’

‘Get out, he’s just a mate. Anyway, where’s this house we’re going to?’

‘Ooh, changing the subject, very suspicious.’

Jessica was glad she had taken Izzy with her. She wouldn’t have admitted it if anyone had asked but the image of Isaac Hutchings had stayed with her and she had struggled to sleep the previous night. She tried not to think too much about her own health but couldn’t avoid the fact that her ability to sleep deteriorated significantly each time she was involved with a serious case. Trying to have normal conversations with people like Izzy was something that allowed her to feel as if her life wasn’t being overtaken by the job.

After a little more teasing, they reached the address where the black car had been stolen from. Jessica had read the report and knew the car had been taken from a driveway but it seemed sensible to go back over the details now the vehicle was part of a murder investigation.

She parked on the road outside the property, climbing out to feel yet more drizzle. As Jessica scanned the surroundings, she could almost still feel the clingy dampness from the day before when she had been soaked.

When Jessica had started in the force and worked in uniform, car crime had been fairly common. That had been around a decade ago when stereos were easier to steal and provided a quick chunk of money for addicts needing a fix. With improved security devices, cars had not only become harder to break into and pull apart – but also tougher to actually steal. Vehicle theft had significantly decreased and most instances these days meant an owner had left the car unlocked. The area they were in wasn’t a high-crime district at all. It wasn’t quite an idyllic paradise but most of the houses were well kept with neatly trimmed lawns and Jessica knew a car being stolen from a driveway would be a rarity.

She didn’t need to check to remember the name of the person whose car had been taken because she had been so taken with ‘Daisy Peters’ on the front of the report. Without meeting her, Jessica thought the name conjured thoughts of summer meadows and sunshine which perhaps wasn’t quite an accurate picture given the weather.

The woman’s driveway was clear, backing onto a closed bright white garage door. A narrow pathway ran along the tarmac, separating it from a small patch of grass. Every property on the estate looked the same.

Izzy made her way around the car and Jessica resisted the urge to ask if she was all right. She herself had no particular wish for a baby or even a husband, but she figured the last thing she would want if she were pregnant was someone asking her every five minutes if she was okay.

They cut across the drive and reached a white double-glazed door next to a bay window that jutted out into the front garden. Jessica went to ring the doorbell but, before she could, the door swung open and a woman with short blonde hair stood in front of them. ‘I saw you through the window,’ she said. ‘Come on in, the kettle’s already on. I’m Daisy.’

Jessica made sure she wiped her feet as, even from the doorway, it was clear the interior of the house was incredibly neat. The woman led them along a short hallway
into a living room completely free of clutter. There was a computer desk at one end, with a sofa and two armchairs at the other facing a television. Daisy asked if they wanted tea and, after receiving two positive replies, left the room.

Izzy blew out through her teeth. ‘If she does her own cleaning, she can come round mine any time.’

Jessica nodded in agreement. ‘Clean people always creep me out.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know, I guess I just think it’s weird.’

‘What, tidying up?’ Izzy again seemed part-puzzled, part-bemused.

‘Maybe, I don’t know.’

Jessica used the time to take in the room. It wasn’t that Daisy was a suspect but she had found over the years that a lot could be learned simply by watching, or looking at family photos of graduations or weddings. The walls of this house were completely free from decoration, except for an analogue clock hung above the flat television that was sitting on a pine cabinet.

‘What do you reckon?’ Jessica asked in a loud whisper. She was fairly confident of her own conclusions but wanted to know what her colleague thought.

Diamond was as driven as anyone Jessica had met and she knew the constable wanted to be as good at her job as she could be. For now it was a guessing game but the red-haired woman played along. ‘Single?’ Jessica nodded to indicate she agreed. ‘Clean freak, obviously.’

‘Why, though?’

The constable screwed up her face slightly. ‘I don’t know. Parents?’

‘I reckon it’s rented. No photos, no real furniture.’ Jessica pointed towards the computer desk. ‘I think she works from here too. Maybe she’s a rep or something?’

Izzy shrugged. ‘Does that matter?’

‘Maybe. We don’t know who the driver of her stolen car is – or even if he was the one who took it. If whoever it was knew the area, or lived locally themselves, they might have noticed a single woman on her own moving into a house. The report said the car was taken from her driveway.’

Daisy interrupted as she returned carrying three mugs, which she put on the coffee table before sitting in an armchair opposite the sofa both detectives were on. She smiled but seemed a little nervous.

‘I know my car was in an accident yesterday because someone called,’ she said. ‘I saw the photos on the Internet and I’ve been talking to the insurance company. They’re sorting me out with a courtesy car but I’m not really sure what I can help you with . . .’

News about what they had found in the car’s boot had been kept quiet and Jessica wasn’t about to give anything away.

‘We’d like to go back over the details you’ve already given,’ Jessica said. ‘I know you’ve already told someone about it but we might have a few different questions.’ Daisy cradled her mug, shrugging as if to say it wasn’t a problem so Jessica continued: ‘Can you tell us what exactly happened?’

Daisy took a drink of her tea then put it down on the table. She looked slightly embarrassed as she started to talk. ‘I know it sounds stupid now but, at the time, I didn’t think anything of it. Basically, I used to lose my keys all the time. They’d show up everywhere: in the fridge, under chairs, in my shoes, all over. So I got this key-rack

20