

All Fall Down

By Elizabeth Lund

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Chapter One

She was there one moment, gone the next.

In the time it took her grandmother to locate the second best plates in the bottom cupboard and straighten back up to glance out the kitchen window, she was gone.

A fully enclosed garden, at the end of a dead end street. There was no access from outside, no strangers seen in the area, no trace of anyone coming or going.

Nothing.

And then four months later, the first shoe appeared.

Chapter Two

Three times Meredith drove past the shoe. On the fourth time she stopped.

She knew it was foolish. It was a bend on crest of a hill. There was a patch of gravel wide enough for one car to pull off. She knew it might be tricky to rejoin the traffic, but she couldn't resist.

There were houses here. They must negotiate cars appearing over the brow of the hill every day.

She didn't drive this way to work often, couldn't say for certain when the shoe had first appeared.

But once it had caught her eye she couldn't help but look for it each time she passed.

It was a child's shoe, maybe navy with a white rubber sole.

It lay abandoned on the edge of the road, just far enough to the side not to be caught under passing tyres.

Meredith pulled her phone out of her bag and snapped a couple of shots on the phone camera. She didn't dare get too close - cars came over the hill and round the bend at a fair clip and they wouldn't see her until they were right on top of her.

Instead, she used the zoom feature to get a close up of the shoe.

Drivers glanced her way. A middle-aged woman standing on the road side taking photos of the tarmac.

She considered picking up the shoe, rescuing it.

But maybe its owner had passed this way, and would do so again, the shoe kicked off by the small occupant of a stroller, mother distracted by cars passing too close, not realising its absence until later.

The phone in her hand beeped, a reminder that the Monday morning managers meeting was due to start in 15 minutes.

So she left the shoe where it was, got back in the car and slipped back into the stream of early morning commuters.

But the shoe bothered her.

She wondered if the mother had kept the other one, hoping to reunite it with its lost companion.

In her lunch break she took out her phone, brought up the photos. The zoomed image revealed what she hadn't seen from a distance, a pattern of tiny black elephants on white canvas.

Her heart contracted for a moment. If she'd had a daughter that's what she would have liked to buy for her. None of that silly pink and flowers nonsense.

On a whim, she posted the photo to Facebook. "Seen on Gordons Hill Road. Please share, let's see if we can reunite it with its mate."

She pressed Post.

When she drove back home that night, the shoe was gone.

Chapter Three

Meredith woke to the sound of her old-fashioned mechanical doorbell. She reached for her phone and squinted to focus on the time. 8:46 am. A moment's panic while her brain caught up and confirmed that it was Saturday.

The doorbell sounded again. She reached for her dressing gown. It had seen better days and could best be described as "mumsy", but it was warm and usually no one but her got to see it.

"Coming!" she called as she stepped into the hall. The caller sounded impatient, twisting the front doorbell key in short angry bursts.

Only Jehovah's Witnesses and charity collectors ever came to the front. Friends and family came to the back door.

She pulled her dressing gown more tightly around her and opened the door.

Not Jehovah's Witnesses then. The man's shirt might once have been white, but it now sported an indeterminate stain over an ample belly, barely disguised by an overly busy tie. The wearer had obviously given up on trying to keep the shirt tucked in and his jacket wasn't quite up to the task of meeting in the middle.

Meredith took in his companion at a glance, a whip thin young woman in a sober navy suit, dark-rimmed glasses and classic heels, even as the woman thrust an ID wallet in her direction.

"Meredith Graham? I'm DS Bailey. My colleague is DC Farmer." The man waved his ID in a half-hearted fashion.

The boys! Meredith's thoughts flew to her sons, one in Melbourne, the other travelling overseas on a gap year. What had happened?

But the woman was holding an iPad screen towards her.

On the screen was the photo of the shoe.

"You posted this yesterday?" asked DS Bailey. "Do you have the shoe?"

“No, no. I just stopped to look at it.” Meredith’s heart was still racing. It wasn’t the boys. The boys were ok.

“Why would you do that?” asked DS Bailey.

“I was just interested.” It sounded lame. “I went back later, but it had gone.”

The detectives exchanged a quick glance.

“You’ll have to take us to the location. Get dressed please.” DS Bailey ordered.

How rude. No “do you have time”, or “would you mind”. The man at least gave her an apologetic half-shrug, but didn’t seem inclined to say anything.

She wondered why a photo of a shoe would cause such interest – and on a Saturday morning – but the woman didn’t seem inclined to offer an explanation.

She considered leaving them standing on the doorstep while she changed, but innate good manners got the better of her.

“Would you like to come in?” She stood back as they stepped inside, then followed her down the long, wide hallway to the kitchen and living room. She was acutely aware of the mess, last night’s dirty plates on the counter, a chocolate wrapper on the coffee table next to the recliner.

“Um, do you want coffee or anything?” Again, her good manners came to the fore.

The man looked up hopefully but DS Bailey shook her head.

“This is not a social visit. Now, if you wouldn’t mind...?” She looked at her watch as if to emphasise that her time was important and in short supply.

Meredith definitely wasn’t warming to this woman. She left them standing in the living room and quickly pulled on jeans and a polar fleece, brushed her teeth and hair, and made a face in the mirror at the traces of yesterday’s makeup.

She snatched up her keys and handbag, directed them out the back door and locked up.

The police car was an unmarked sedan. The man – DC Farmer – opened the back door for her before folding himself into the front passenger seat. DS Bailey took the wheel.

It was only a five minute drive to where she'd photographed the shoe yesterday.

DS Bailey pulled off the road onto the same patch of gravel as Meredith had yesterday. They all got out.

"So where was the shoe?"

Meredith pointed. "Around there. Wait a minute." She pulled her phone from her bag and swiped through the photos. "Here. You can see better in this one before I zoomed in."

DS Farmer came over to look over her shoulder.

"Do you mind?" he asked, putting his hand out for the phone. She watched as he selected all the photos and sent them to his email address.

"Thanks," he said, handing the phone back. "That could well be useful."

"You'll need to door knock these houses." DS Bailey was taking out her own phone and swiping through her messages. "See if you can establish the timeline. Take Mrs Graham home. I'll see you back at the station."

"Yes, Boss," replied DS Farmer. Meredith noticed the woman's eyes narrow slightly, but there was nothing disrespectful in his tone. He was clearly a good few years older than his superior, closer to Meredith's age probably. It wouldn't be surprising if taking orders from a girl half his age rankled a bit.

He caught her eye as she climbed into the passenger seat, and gave her a half-wink.

"Sorry about that," he offered. "I hope we didn't mess up your morning."

“No, it’s fine. It was a bit of a surprise though. Why are you so interested in the shoe?”

He was quiet for a moment.

“Look, it’s an open investigation, so I can’t say too much.”

“Oh of course. I understand.” She didn’t, but she wasn’t going to press him.

They completed the rest of the short journey in silence.

“Thank you for bringing me back.” He’d pulled into her driveway and she’d opened the door and started to get out when he spoke again.

“It’s a missing child investigation. The shoe could just be the first break we’ve had in four months.”

Chapter Four

George Farmer was watching the interplay on the other side of the office. DS Erin Bailey had returned from whatever mission she'd disappeared on after leaving him to do all the leg work. She was leaning against her desk, laughing at something the DI had just said.

He doubted it was actually funny – DI Grant had not been blessed with natural wit any more than he'd been endowed with good looks, charisma or any discernible smarts.

But he did seem to have a good supply of rat cunning. And he had power. Sometimes that was enough. It seemed to be sufficient to gain Erin Bailey's interest.

George turned his attention back to the report on the screen in front of him. He'd doorknocked all the houses near where the shoe had been, both sides of the street, and though one or two people remembered seeing it, no one claimed to remember when it had arrived, or indeed when it had left. No one had walked that stretch of road, no one had looked closely at the shoe.

Of course there was no guarantee that it was Maddie's shoe. They only had a vague description to go on, no photos of her actually wearing it.

They'd interviewed the grandmother, four months ago, soon after the call had come. She was understandably distraught. It didn't help that Maddie's parents - her son and daughter-in-law - were doing their best to make sure she knew they were holding her personally responsible.

It wasn't like the cop shows on TV, he reflected, where a witness would cry for a couple of minutes and then rally sufficiently to give a full and detailed account of what had happened. The grandmother's hysteria didn't let up and it took him a good few hours to piece together the series of events.

Maddie had been outside with her grandmother. It was a warm day, they'd decided to have a tea party on the lawn, her grandmother had popped back inside to get the cake and some plates. She been able to see Maddie through the kitchen window – she'd only bent over for a few minutes and when she'd straightened back up, the child was gone.

Erin had searched the backyard and declared it impossible for the child to have escaped that way. The fences were too high for a three year old to scale, and the side

gate was locked. The house was at the end of a cul de sac, none of the neighbours had seen any strangers or unfamiliar cars.

There was a path and a creek that ran behind the houses and they'd searched that too, even though the child shouldn't have been able to get out of the enclosed back yard.

Four months, and nothing.

Until the shoe.

It was an unusual enough design to be a good lead. But it didn't look like it was going anywhere.

Erin Bailey's phone rang. She picked it up with a nod to the DI, who wandered off back to his office.

George returned his attention to his screen.

'DC Farmer!' He looked up. Erin had finished her call and was on her feet, reaching for her bag. "We've got another one! Another missing child. With me, now!"

Heel, boy! He resisted the sarcastic response that rose to his lips, shrugged on his jacket, made a token effort to tuck in his shirt and trudged after her.

Chapter Five

"So he's been missing since *yesterday*?" George couldn't help the slightly judgemental tone that crept into his question.

"I told you, I thought he was with Aden. He often goes there after school and stays over." The woman seemed more defensive than distraught.

"And Blade is – how old?" He already had it written on the notepad in front of him, but couldn't help himself.

"Six last January. But he's old for his age. Has to be with all the young ones." George looked around. It seemed like there were children everywhere. A baby on the woman's lap, two toddlers of indeterminate gender with grimy faces and snotty noses fighting over a plastic action figure, and a small girl in the corner banging a naked Barbie doll on an upturned container. There was an older girl, maybe five, playing with an iPad on the couch next to him. Might be easy to miss one, he supposed.

"So when did you realise he was missing?" asked Erin. She was standing near the door. He'd noted her expression of distaste, quick assessment and then rejection of all the seating options.

"Well I went to get him this morning and Aden said he hadn't seen him."

"And Aden lives...?" George prompted.

"Just next door. He minds the kids for me and he and Blade get on like a house on fire. And then Beyonce here said they'd been walking home from school together," the woman indicated the child on the couch next to George, "but she'd stopped to play with a friend, and didn't know what happened to him."

"And which way do they walk home from school?" Again George failed to keep the note of disapproval out of his voice. He knew the local primary school was a good few blocks away and on the other side of a main road.

"I dunno, do I? They know they're supposed to come straight home, but I can't be everywhere keeping an eye on them, can I? Not with this lot."

“Do you have a recent photo of him?” asked Erin. “And we’ll need to know what he was wearing.”

It was with some relief that George left the house half an hour later, with a dog eared school photo held between thumb and index finger. The image in the photo coincided with the description – a dark-haired boy, wearing a green school polo shirt, grey shorts and black school shoes. Just like a dozen others.

“Couldn’t be more different to the other case,” Erin remarked as they knocked on the neighbour’s door. “He’s either gone off on some adventure or we’ll find him buried in the back garden, I reckon.

George wondered, not for the first time, whether the woman had had her empathy gene removed at birth.

The door opened. George had been expecting an older man but the lad who answered couldn’t have been much older than 20. He had dark floppy hair falling over a triangular face, and bottle-thick glasses magnifying his eyes.

“Aden Cook?” Erin made the introductions. “I understand you know Blade Smith from next door?

“Yeah, I know Blade. He’s a good kid. Have you found him yet?”

“We’re still pursuing lines of enquiry. Did you see him yesterday?”

“Nah, I had a shift last night – down at the pizza shop. I was on from 3 pm until 11pm.”

“Can anyone verify that?”

“Well yeah, everyone who came in and bought a pizza.” The boy rolled his eyes as if she’d asked a really stupid question. Maybe he had a point, thought George.

“And you didn’t see Blade at all? Any idea where he might go?”

“Nah. Sometimes he drops in to the pizza place – his mother sends him to buy pizza for dinner. Pineapple pizza’s his favourite – he’s a bit weird like that. I mean that’s not really pizza is it, no meat, no nothing except pineapple?”

“Right, well we won’t take up any more of your time. Give him your card DS Farmer.”

“Yes Boss.” He knew she hated it when he said that. But she hadn’t worked out how to call him on it, which amused him nearly as much as watching her reaction.

He handed the boy his card. “Call me if you think of something that might be helpful.”

As they headed back down the path, Erin clicked the remote to unlock the car. He sighed.

“Let me guess. You’d like me to continue doorknocking?”

“I think you can manage that without me, can’t you?”

“Sure can, Boss.”

Chapter Six

It was mid afternoon by the time Meredith had put away the groceries and finished cleaning up the kitchen and living room.

Why did unexpected visitors never arrive when everything was spick and span? She hadn't missed the judgement in the young detective sergeant's expression that morning. She looked like the sort of person who lived in minimalist sterility, not an item out of place or a dust mote allowed to enter.

The other detective, on the other hand, looked like he'd be right at home in the middle of an apocalypse.

She carried her well-earned cup of coffee over to the recliner chair and picked up her iPad. She was surprised to find 18 comments on her post from yesterday.

The lone shoe had obviously struck a chord with a number of her friends. But the comment that caught her attention was from her colleague Louise who also lived in the area:

"There must be something weird going on...driving from mornington via flagstaff gully we saw 4 shoes on the road!! And 2 certainly looked like kids shoes. I reckon someone had a cleanup and went to the tip and lost some off the trailer but why just shoes? Or did I just notice them because of your post? Lol"

Intriguing.

Meredith put down her coffee, and on a whim collected her keys and bag from the hall.

I'll just go and have a look, she told herself. She knew it was probably just a strange coincidence, but the visit from the detectives this morning had unsettled her, and she felt she'd been found wanting for not picking up the shoe.

As if she could have realised its significance at the time.

Flagstaff Gully Road wasn't far from Gordons Hill Road, but whereas one was a major thoroughfare the other was altogether more isolated and under-used.

As Meredith drove slowly along it, she wondered why it had been constructed in the first place. There were no houses either side, only bush, and it didn't even seem to lead anywhere except a dead end which sported a large "Danger! Do not Enter!" sign.

A rough gravel road branched off just before the dead end. She knew the short unsealed section led back over the hill to her suburb, but even though it provided a significant shortcut to the main highway, it was so rutted and dusty she'd chosen that route only rarely.

Just before the turn off, she spotted a shoe. It was lying in the middle of the road, across the double white lines.

Quickly she checked her rearview mirror but there wasn't another car in sight. She pulled over onto the rough gravel verge and dug her phone out of her bag.

The black trainer looked to be the right size for a young child. The toe was scuffed and the lace held together with knots.

This time she took care to take photos showing the shoe's location, before stepping out into the middle of the road and taking close ups from several angles.

A car came barrelling up the road towards her. Meredith stepped quickly off to the side. The car missed the trainer, but it was a close thing. She popped the car boot and rummaged around among the general detritus until she found a hardly used recyclable shopping bag.

Shaking her head at her own foolishness, she crossed back to the shoe and picked it up with her hand inside the bag, like she'd seen them do on TV, trying not to contaminate the evidence.

Another car was approaching. Safely back in her own vehicle, she tied the handles of the shopping bag and placed it on the passenger seat.

As she drove off, the radio news started.

"Police are appealing for information about a missing boy in the Mornington area. Blade Smith was last seen walking home yesterday afternoon. He was wearing a school green polo top, grey shorts and black trainers."

Chapter Seven

"You visited the local paedo last time, didn't you?" asked Erin, as they walked up the path to Derek Miller's council house.

George grunted assent.

"Beats me why we let kiddy fiddlers back out on the streets, give them a decent house to live in," she continued, even as she was raising her hand to knock on the door.

Oh I don't know, natural justice maybe? thought George, but he knew better than to say anything.

The man who opened the door was clearly doing it tough.

"What now? Are you ever going to leave me alone?"

Derek seemed to have aged a decade in the four months since George had last seen him. He wore stained and torn track pants, and a cheap logo T-shirt. His skin had an unhealthy yellowish tinge, his long hair greasy and unwashed.

"We'd like to ask you some questions." Erin gestured to George to lead the way inside. As he put his foot in the door Derek turned on his heel and headed to a room at the back of the house, leaving them to follow.

The house smelled like the boys' change rooms at the YMCA. They found him in the kitchen trying to light a cigarette with a cheap lighter. There were pizza boxes and half eaten take-aways on the bench top and table, an array of empty cans and overflowing ashtrays.

"Where were you yesterday afternoon, between 3 pm and 5 pm?" Erin cut straight to the chase.

"Here." Derek seemed to have given up on the lighter and was just holding the cigarette, as if hoping it might suddenly self-immolate.

"Can anyone verify that?"

“What do you think? Look, if you’re here because of that kid, I’ve told you before, I’m not into kids. I had one relationship with a teenage student, and suddenly any time a child goes missing – boy or girl – you’re on my doorstep.”

“Do you know Blade Smith?” Erin ignored his rant.

George sighed inwardly. He’d suggested that Derek wasn’t a good fit but she was determined to waste their time chasing down blind alleys.

“Yeah, sure, I know him. I’ve seen him around. He hangs out with that guy from the pizza shop sometimes. Maybe you should be talking to *him* instead.”

“Did you see him yesterday?” asked George.

“No I did not. And unless you’ve got any evidence that I did I suggest you leave my house now. It’s not enough that I’ve lost my wife and kids, and I’ll never work again, but I have to put up with harassment from your lot every time you can’t solve a missing child case.”

“We’ll be back,” informed Erin as she turned to go. “Once a paedo, always a paedo,” she muttered under her breath as she strode down the short hallway.

“George, mate, you know you’re wasting your time. I fell in love with a beautiful young woman. I’m not a nonce. I know the difference – I had plenty of opportunity to meet with real sex offenders inside.”

“Sure mate. And you’d be more than happy for your 15 year old daughter to have it off with someone my age. Don’t worry, I’ll see myself out.”

Erin was drumming her fingers impatiently on the steering wheel as he joined her in the car.

“It’s either him or that young lad, I’d put money on it.”

George considered taking the bet. Neither of the men they’d spoken to felt quite right, but it was too early to be jumping to conclusions. Call him old-fashioned, but he preferred to gather evidence before making an accusation.

"Where to now, Boss?"

She shot him a look. "It's nearly the end of the shift. I'll drop you back at the station. I've got a meeting in town."

Yeah, right, he thought. She was probably off to have a drink with the DI or some of her high-flying mates. While he typed up the day's report and handed over to the night shift. The first 24 hours after a disappearance were crucial, everyone knew that.

His phone rang as he was getting out of the car. He didn't recognise the number.

"DC Farmer?"

"Yes?"

"It's Meredith Graham speaking. We met earlier today."

"Oh yes. What can I do for you Meredith?" He remembered the look on her face when she'd opened the door this morning and how he'd wanted to reassure her they weren't the bearers of bad news, but Erin had just ploughed straight in.

"Um, I don't know if this is silly, but I heard the news report, and it's just that, I've found another shoe. A black trainer. It's probably nothing, but..."

Her voice trailed off.

"Are you home now?" George asked. "I could pop in and take a look."

"Oh would you? It's probably nothing, but I'd hate to find out later that it was important like the other one..."

"No worries." He looked at his watch. It was 3pm, the night shift would just be starting. "Give me fifteen minutes."

By rights he should be heading home, but it was easier to follow this one up himself. He'd just have a quick word with the next shift and then he'd drop in. It was on his way home, after all.

Chapter Eight

The black trainer sat on the table between them.

George had eased it out of its plastic shopping bag without actually touching it.

"It certainly looks like the right brand," he said.

He lifted his phone to compare the photo he'd taken earlier of the sister's shoes. They'd both had the same ones. Of course it was a common brand, cheap chain store mass-produced. Probably half the kids in the neighbourhood wore these trainers.

He picked up his coffee mug which turned out to be disappointingly empty.

"Would you like another one?" Meredith asked. "More cake?"

Why not, thought George, handing the mug over with a smile and helping himself to another slice of a particularly excellent chocolate cake that she'd "just happened" to have on hand when he called.

And without Erin - who thought celery was an indulgence - giving him the full weight of her disapproval, it seemed rude to refuse.

"So what made you stop and pick up that first shoe?" he asked as she placed a fresh mug in front of him and sat back down at the table.

"I don't know exactly. It just sort of caught my attention. I guess I've got a thing about shoes." She gave him a wry grin.

She didn't strike him as a Prada sort of person. When she'd opened the door to him - he'd come to the back door this time - she'd been wearing jeans and flats, and a slightly old and rubbed sweater. She looked - comfortable.

"The builder found some old shoes when we were having this place done up and I guess I just sort of got interested."

"What sort of shoes?"

"Here, I'll show you." She pushed back her chair and started digging in a pile of boxes under a desk in the corner, emerging triumphantly with a rather tattered looking pink cardboard shoebox.

She brought it back to the table and took off the lid. Nestled in a bed of tissue paper was a pair of small black children's shoes. George wasn't an expert but they looked to be quite old, maybe even from before the 1900s.

"The builder found them under the floor boards just inside the front door," said Meredith. "I think the house was built in the 1890s and I did a bit of research. The original owner had two daughters, who would have been around 4 and 6 when the house was built."

"But why were they under the floor?" George was intrigued.

"Ah. That's where it gets interesting. Apparently there was a superstition at the time that shoes left near the door warded off evil spirits. The theory is that a shoe is the only item of clothing that retains the shape of its wearer when you take it off."

"I hadn't heard that."

"Me neither, before we found the shoes. Apparently dead cats were popular as well. Luckily we didn't find any of those!"

He'd finished his second coffee. He was surprised to find he'd been here over an hour.

"Well," he said, getting to his feet and sliding the black trainer back inside its makeshift evidence bag. "I'll get Forensics to have a look at this. It probably won't come to anything, but it's worth a shot."

And even if it wasn't, it had been worth it for the cake, he reflected as he headed back to his car.

Chapter Nine

The only good thing about working on a Sunday morning, reflected George, was that the boss didn't usually come in. Even Erin had failed to appear this morning. She'd sent him a short email saying she was "pursuing other enquiries" and directing him to follow up with Aden, then revisit Derek and "put some pressure on him".

George sighed. He didn't think it was a good lead, but there was nothing else to go on at this stage. The evening shift had doorknocked the entire area between school and the missing boy's house and not turned up a single sighting, at least not one that anyone was willing to admit to.

He checked the clock. It was close to 9:00 am now. Probably like the middle of the night for a teenager but at least he was likely to find Aden at home.

In fact it was an older man who answered the door when George knocked a short time later. He identified himself as Aden's father and disappeared back down the hall way to "dig the lazy bugger out of bed", leaving George standing on the doorstep.

When Aden finally appeared he was wearing track pants and a T-shirt and an impressive case of bed hair. His father ushered George into the small family room, then disappeared to the back of the house, seemingly having no further interest in what the constabulary might have to say to his son.

"So, Aden," started George. "Any more thoughts on where Blade might have gone?"

"Not really." The lad stifled a yawn. It was clear he'd rather be back in bed. He'd flopped onto the couch and was lying back with half-closed eyes.

"Anywhere you two used to go together that he might have returned to?"

The boy scratched his arm and sighed.

"He liked walking down near the creek. We went there sometimes, chucked a few sticks and rocks, that sort of thing."

The creek. George lent forward, forearms resting on thighs. "The creek? Do you mean the one that runs behind the houses a few blocks away?"

The one that ran behind the grandmother's house where young Maddie has disappeared. Probably a coincidence, but...

"Yeah, that one." The boy looked inclined to drift off.

"Did you and Blade go there often?"

"Nah, just took him there sometimes when he needed to get away from home. His mother's a bit crazy you know. And all those kids... Sometimes he just needed a quiet place."

George nodded, man to man. I understand the need to get away, his expression carefully schooled to indicate empathy.

Which meant Aden was caught off-guard when he whipped a photo out of his inside jacket pocket and laid it on the coffee table between them.

"Ever see this girl?"

Aden leant forward, fully alert now, and picked up the photo, studying it intently.

"She's the one who went missing a while back isn't she?"

"Have you seen her?"

"Not sure. There were posters of her everywhere, so maybe I'm just thinking of that. But..."

"Yes?" prompted George.

"It's just that there was this girl, when we were walking along the creek. She used to stick her head out between the fence posts and watch us going past. Saw her a couple of times. A while ago now."

George sat back.

“And you didn’t think to come forward at the time?”

“Well I wasn’t sure. And even if it was her, it’s not like I saw her being abducted or anything.”

“Did it look as though she could have got out through the gap?”

“I don’t know. Look it was ages ago. I wasn’t really paying attention right? Anyway, isn’t it your job to find that stuff out?”

It certainly is, thought George, picking up the photo and getting to his feet.

“Well thank you anyway. If you remember anything else – about her or Blade - you have my number.

George’s next stop was Derek. He wasn’t any more pleased to see George than last time, but he visibly relaxed when he looked around George and realised he was alone.

“I still haven’t got anything to say,” he started as he sighed and led the way into the small house.

George wrinkled his nose again at the smell – unwashed socks overlaid with takeaway curry was his best guess.

“I’d like you to take me through your movements yesterday, please,” he said when they were seated at the kitchen table. “You said you were home all day?”

“Well not *all* day,” replied Derek. “Just the afternoon bit that you asked me about. I went out in the morning, bought a few bits and pieces at the supermarket, went for my walk at lunch time, that sort of thing.”

“Oh? Where do you walk?”

“Just round the neighbourhood. There’s a good circuit around here – turn left at that old house up the road, down to the creek, along the path, then turn left at Gordon’s Hill Road, and back up past those offices. Takes about an hour. Blows the cobwebs away. I do it most days.”

George didn't believe in coincidence. The tingle up his spine told him there was a connection here somewhere. He could picture the route. The creek disappeared under Gordons Hill Road at the bottom of the hill, just down from where Meredith had found the first shoe. She herself, he remembered, worked in those government offices, which was why she often drove that way.

And Maddie's grandmother's house backed onto the creek.

"Have you ever seen this girl while you've been out walking?" He took the photo out again and handed it to Derek.

The set of the man's shoulder's betrayed that he was bracing for further accusations.

"I told you last time, I had nothing to do with it."

"Even so," George deliberately dropped his voice a tone or two and spoke as casually as he could in an effort to get the man to relax. "It might be useful if you can tell me anything you've noticed when walking along the creek path, since you're a regular. Like, who else walks along there? Is there anyone you see a lot?"

The shoulders dropped a fraction. He could see the man's brow furrowing as he considered the question.

"Quite a few people use that path There's often a walking group from the offices across the road. Sometimes cyclists. Kids – I mean gangs of teenagers like that kid Blade you mentioned yesterday. The crazy cat lady from the old house. Mothers with strollers."

"You've never seen this child poking her head out through a gap in the fence?"

"No – and I would tell you if I had, if only to take the heat off me."

"Ok Derek, that's all for now. Thanks for your time."

There was a grunt in response and George was left to show himself out.

His last stop for the day was Maddie's grandmother. He hadn't visited since the frenzied two weeks of the investigation immediately following her disappearance.

The hope in the woman's eyes as she opened the door, chased quickly by the shadow of fear tore at his heart strings.

"I'm sorry, there's no news." He was quick to stop her thoughts rushing to incorrect conclusions. "I just wondered if I could take a look at your back yard?"

She turned and led the way through the house then opened the back door for him. She didn't seem inclined to follow him, just returned to sit at the kitchen table.

George made his way across the small stretch of grass to the wooden paling fence. He started at the left hand side and worked his way methodically across, testing each paling as he went.

Halfway across, in the shadow of an apple tree, he found it.

The paling was only held by one nail, in the middle. When he pushed it, it moved easily to one side pivoting on the central nail, leaving a gap between the palings either side.

A gap easily wide enough for a three year old girl to slip through.

Chapter Ten

Meredith applied a quick dash of lipstick, and ran a brush through her hair in a token gesture.

She was just looking around for her bag when the front door bell rang.

Damn. She was already late for work. She'd have to get rid of whoever it was quickly.

She opened the door to find DS Erin Bailey on her front verandah. Standing slightly behind her was George. He looked vaguely uncomfortable and seemed reluctant to meet her eyes.

"Can we come in?" asked DS Bailey. She didn't make it sound like a question.

"I was just on my way to work," sighed Meredith, but stood aside and waved them in anyway.

"Where were you between 3 and 5 pm on Friday afternoon?" DS Bailey wasted no time once they were all seated in the living room.

Meredith failed to keep the surprise off her face.

"Well at work I suppose," she replied. "Why do you want to know that?"

"We have a witness," said DS Bailey, consulting a small notepad, "who says you took a late lunch break, during which time you walked along the creek path, then you departed well before 5 pm. Is that correct?"

"Well I suppose so." Meredith was feeling unaccountably flustered. What was the woman implying? "I often walk along that track at lunchtime, and there's hardly anyone still in the office by 5 pm on a Friday."

The woman made a note in her notepad.

"Have you ever seen this boy?" She nodded to George who extracted a slightly dog-eared photo from his jacket pocket and handed it across to Meredith, still not meeting her eyes.

Meredith studied the photo for a moment. The boy looked like any one of the school-aged kids around here. They all tended to blend into one large amorphous mass. None had particularly caught her eye.

"No, I don't think so," she said, handing the photo back.

"What about this one?" George handed over another photo, a little girl this time.

"Oh, that's the poor girl who went missing, isn't it? How awful for her family. I haven't seen her, only the posters." She handed the photo to George who tucked it back in his pocket without looking at her.

"Where were you on December 15 last year?" the DS continued.

"Last December? How do you expect me to remember four months ago? I can't even remember what I had for breakfast this morning!"

No one laughed.

"Look, what's this all about? Surely you don't think I was involved with her disappearance?"

"Well, Meredith, it's like this." The DS Bailey's tone was steely, and slightly patronising. "We received the forensics on the black shoe you say you found, and it matches the missing boy. And you took a photo of the missing girl's shoe, which is now mysteriously nowhere to be found. You're the only person with a definite connection to both children and I have to say it's not looking good for you."

"What? That's ridiculous! What positive motive could I have for abducting two children?"

"It's not uncommon in women of your age." DS Bailey's emphasis on the reference to Meredith's age was quite deliberate. "Your own children grown and gone, empty nester, menopause. Can make a person do strange things."

Meredith was on her feet, the other woman a fraction of a second behind her.

“How *dare* you!” Her voice started to wobble and she clenched her fists tight at her sides to hold back the wave of emotion that threatened to overwhelm her and make her behave just like the hysterical female the DS was trying to paint.

“Perhaps you’d like to come down to the station and answer a few questions.” It sounded more like an order than an invitation.

“Perhaps you’d like to come back with some *evidence*,” Meredith snapped, her anger rising to her aid. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m late for work. You know where I am if you’ve got anything more solid to discuss.” She marched to the front door and held it open. The DS and George filed past her and she closed the door more forcibly than necessary behind them.

Chapter Eleven

"Well that went well," said George as they walked back round the corner to the car. "Do you still think she's a likely suspect?"

"I'm not ruling her out. There's something about her attitude. And she's smart. It all fits."

"Except for the bit about motive, means, opportunity. But you're the boss."

Again that flick of a sideways glance at him. There was more than a hint of venom. He'd have to back off or she'd be making his last couple of years in the force very uncomfortable. Or she'd be oiling the wheels for his early retirement like so many of his former colleagues that he'd farewelled over the last year or so.

"So what now?" He wondered if she had any ideas at all.

He'd told her about the loose paling, being careful not to point out that she had been responsible for checking the back yard, and he'd reported on yesterday's visits to Derek and Aden when she'd finally deigned to put in an appearance this morning.

They'd been her favourite suspects yesterday but she'd grasped the forensics and news of Meredith's latest find with a grim determination and certain amount of satisfaction, even though he'd tried to point out the gaping holes in her case.

He'd really hated having to report his visit to Meredith, though he'd omitted any mention of the cake.

"You can do some more doorknocking – see if any of her neighbours have seen her with a kid."

So he was to be punished further. At least it got him out in the fresh air, rather than stuck in the car with her.

He watched her drive off and turned towards the closest neighbour.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. He pulled it out. It wasn't a number he recognised.

“Um hello? Um, is that Sergeant Farmer?”

“Yes, DC Farmer speaking.” He liked the sound of the promotion but was quick to correct the caller. “Who is this?”

“It’s Aden Cook. You know, you came round the other day?”

“Yes Aden, of course. What can I do for you?”

“Look it’s probably nothing, but I just thought I’d tell you anyway. I would of called earlier but I was on the late shift last night and I only just got up...”

“What is it Aden?” George tried to get him to the point.

“There was a customer last night. At the pizza shop. It’s probably nothing.”

“Tell me anyway.”

“There was an order for pineapple pizza. Just like Blade likes it. Never heard anyone else order pineapple pizza. Even knew the right type of crust. Just thought you should know...” His voice trailed off.

“Aden, you’ve done well. Stay there, I’ll be right over.”

As soon as I can get a ride, George muttered as he rang the station for someone to come and pick him up.

Chapter Twelve

“So do you know her name?” George was once more in Aden’s living room, notepad at the ready on his knee.

“Nah. Everyone just calls her the Crazy Cat Lady. Lives in that big old house up the road.”

“And you say you’ve never seen her in the shop before?”

“No, and it was pretty obvious she’d never ordered pizza before either. I asked her all the usual questions – crispy, cheesy, regular, garlic bread? – but she just kept going back to the piece of paper in her hand and reading out “Pineapple pizza with cheesy crust”.

“Can you give me a description of her? George held his pen at the ready.

“Well she’s old.”

“How old?” George knew that from Aden’s perspective he himself would be considered a dinosaur.

“Old old,” clarified Aden. “Long grey hair, sort of held up, but sort of escaping. I don’t remember what she was wearing.”

“Ok. Was she fat, thin? Shorter than you?”

“Skinny as. And definitely shorter than me. A bit bent over.”

“And you say she lives in the big house. Which one is that?”

“You can’t miss it. Real posh like, in amongst all the normal houses.”

“Ok Aden, thanks.” George stood and put his notepad back into his pocket. “You’ve been a great help.”

Twenty minutes later George stood at the gate of the house Aden had pointed out to him.

It certainly stood out. It was surrounded on all sides by government housing – small, basic weatherboard houses made from one of only three designs it seemed, so there was a feeling of sameness that made all the streets confusingly similar. Some of the houses had now passed into private ownership – like the one where Maddie’s grandmother lived, but some still looked more like doss houses, like Derek’s and Blade’s mother’s house.

He consulted his notepad and the details he’d jotted down after checking back at the Station.

The occupant of 38 Bass Street was one Lavinia Davis (Miss), aged 78. No convictions, speeding fines, parking tickets. Resident in this same house since it was built by her father in the early 1920s.

The house had probably once been a grand dame of the architecture of the time, but from what he could see over the shoulder height paling fence, it had fallen into disrepair some time ago and was just gradually collapsing in on itself as if returning to the earth from whence its timbered walls had come.

He could see a garage off to one side and the property was bordered by impressive eucalypts giving a degree of privacy.

George reached out for the gate. It swung open with only a slight groan of protest at his touch.

Chapter Thirteen

George rapped sharply on the door and waited. The paint was peeling, or completely down to bare wood in some places. There were cobwebs stretching from the door frame to the eaves and a drift of autumn leaves had gathered in the corner of the doorstep.

He was about to knock again when he heard a soft shuffling on the other side of the door, and then the sound of a bolt being drawn back.

The door opened an inch.

"Go away."

He couldn't even see where the voice was coming from.

"Miss Davis? My name is Detective Constable Farmer. I'd just like to have a chat if that's ok?"

The door opened a crack wider.

"Go away!"

This time he could just make out a thin, wrinkled face, grey wispy hair just like Aden had described.

"Please Miss Davis. It won't take long."

He had his foot ready to wedge in the door if necessary.

"It's not time yet."

The door opened another few inches, enough to reveal a gaunt, wrinkled woman clad in layers of browns and greys. With the widening gap also came an almost overwhelming smell of cat, with an underlying smell of something altogether less pleasant.

“Miss Davis.” George tried again. “Would you mind looking at some photos of children for me? I’m hoping you may be able to help me. Perhaps you’ve seen them?”

Suddenly the woman turned and fled down the hallway leaving the door open behind her.

“You stupid, stupid man! It’s exactly what they *want!*” she called over her shoulder as she disappeared.

Well, tick cats, tick crazy, thought George. Gingerly, he pushed the door open a little wider, nearly gagging at the stench that rolled out to greet him.

The hallway was filled with boxes and papers, more cobwebs and broken bits of furniture.

He determinedly breathed through his mouth and took a step into the hallway.

The floor gave way and he crashed forward onto his knees, instinctively reaching out to catch something – anything – and instead dislodging the nearest pile so that papers and dust and goodness knows what else cascaded down on top of him as he sprawled there, his foot caught awkwardly between the broken floor boards.

The pain shooting up his leg caused him to take a sharp breath of the cat-infested, rotting air. He nearly gagged.

The woman was nowhere to be seen. Carefully he pushed himself up and twisted round to a sitting position, being careful as he rotated his ankle. The pain nearly made him black out.

There was a gaping hole in the floor, immediately inside the door. It had been covered by a tatty old rug of indeterminate colour which his first step had dislodged.

First things first, old chap, he told himself. Get backup. He pulled his phone out with a shaking hand and issued a terse request for DS Bailey and a couple of uniforms to get here ASAP.

His breathing was steadying now, and he was managing to keep the nausea at bay. But his foot was still trapped.

He dragged the rug out of the way. It looked as though someone had taken to the floorboards with a small hand saw. The edges were rough. In some cases they looked as though they'd just been ripped out with bare hands, then replaced on the centre joist, almost like a seesaw, so that when he'd stepped slightly off-centre the whole thing had tipped up catapulting him forward.

The hole was nearly the width of the hallway, with just a narrow strip down the side where the woman had stood to open the door.

He pulled at the board nearest to him. It came up easily, then the next one and the next.

As each board came up, the smell got worse though he wouldn't have believed that possible. Within a few seconds he had a pile of boards behind him and a cavernous hole in front, going right down to the bare dirt of the house's foundations.

He'd freed his foot in the process but it still throbbed painfully.

He pulled his phone out again and switched on the torch app, shining it into the dark space.

There was an old-fashioned large suitcase lying on the dirt floor of the hole. The clasps were facing him. He reached down and flicked them open, then lifted the lid of the suitcase.

The stench was so overwhelming he had to breathe rapidly and force down the bile.

It took a moment for his brain to make sense of what he was seeing. Black plastic – perhaps a bin liner – covered something rather lumpy that filled most of the case.

But on top of the bag, placed carefully side by side in the middle, were two shoes.

One black school trainer, and one canvas white-soled shoe covered in a pattern of elephants.

Chapter Fourteen

George shifted the bottle of wine to his left hand as he tried to tuck his shirt tail in with his right.

Should have thought of that before you rang the doorbell, you old fool, he thought.

He wasn't entirely presentable when Meredith opened the door.

"Oh!" she said. "Come to arrest me?"

But she was smiling.

He brandished the bottle of wine.

"We've had a result. I just wanted to say thank you. Couldn't have done it without you."

"Oh! A good result, I hope?" She clasped her hands in front of her mouth, her eyes daring him to tell her all was well.

"Yes. A good result." He held the bottle out to her. "For you."

"Oh thank you – but perhaps you'd like to come in and we could open it together."

Yes! George mentally punched the air.

"Are you allowed to tell me about it?" she continued as she opened the door wider to admit him.

"Yes, I think so. Thank you."

Minutes later they were seated at her dining table again. There was no cake this time, but she'd rustled up some cheese and biscuits and poured the wine into two long stemmed glasses.

“So, you really need to tell me. Did you find the children? Alive?” The last word was barely a whisper.

George closed his eyes for a moment and again saw the terrible contents of that suitcase, and what he’d expected to see when the scene of crime officer arrived and opened up the bag.

But it was cats. Just cats.

Maybe three or four dead and decomposing cats.

Which admittedly wasn’t pleasant but it was a whole lot better than what he’d been imagining.

“I’ve got the children!” called DS Bailey from down the hall.

When he’d limped down to join her, there they were – a small, blonde-haired girl and a dark haired boy in a school uniform. They were in a bedroom with a lock on the outside. They were watching Peppa Pig on TV, surrounded by crisp packets and pizza boxes.

One of the uniformed officers was sitting at the kitchen table with Miss Davis, but he wasn’t getting much sense out of her. The psych team were on their way.

George smiled at Meredith.

“Yes, the children are alive and well. They’d been kept in a locked room by a woman with a questionable grip on reality.”

“And they weren’t harmed?”

“I don’t think the girl has suffered too badly, though we’ll probably never know.” George thought of his own kids and how things that had been a big deal to him when they’d been three, turned out to have hardly registered with them.

“Kids are pretty resilient at that age,” he reassured her, taking another sip of his wine. “She looked clean and well-fed. Blade will probably take it a bit harder, even though he

was only there for a couple of days. He was trying to put a brave face on it, a big show of bravado, but when we took him back to his mother..."

George reached for a cracker and cheese to cover the sudden lump in his throat at the memory of that moment when the young lad had thrown himself into his mother's arms.

"Well, I'm glad it all turned out ok," said Meredith. "I'm not sure I had much to do with it though."

"Oh but you did." The wine was giving him a nice warm glow after a couple of torrid days. That might have been the reason he found himself smiling so warmly at her.

"If it wasn't for you finding that shoe, we would never have got started. And then the school trainer. It probably won't go to trial – the perpetrator is too unstable, but what really clinched it was what you told me about the shoes you found when you renovated."

"Really?" Meredith was astounded. "What did they have to do with it?"

"We found the missing shoes and some less than well preserved cats in a suitcase under the floorboards just inside the front door. And when I questioned her – which wasn't easy I can assure you! – she said that she had to do it because of Them." He capitalised the word to reflect the fear he'd seen on the woman's face as they sat at her kitchen table.

"But what about the shoes I found?"

"It seemed the ones under the floor weren't doing the trick, and the evil spirits hadn't left her alone, so she was trying to lead them away by taking the matching shoes to a different location."

"I know, I know," he continued as she raised her eyebrows in surprise. "It doesn't make sense to us, but then I don't think rational thinking had anything to do with it."

George shook his head as he remembered the pathetic sight the woman made as she was bundled off into a police car to be taken away for proper assessment. She'd looked terrified, but also utterly lost.

He wondered what path in life had brought her to this.

But then he'd put her out of his mind as he undertook the altogether more pleasant task of re-uniting Maddie with her parents and grandmother. If there had been tears four months ago, they were nothing compared to the outpouring of disbelief, joy and relief at the closing of that terrible chapter.

He doubted Maddie would be allowed out of her mother's sight any time soon.

He sighed and drained the last of his wine.

"Would you like a refill?" asked Meredith. "And I have some of that cake left."

Yes, he reflected, some days were good.