

Prologue

Ed

Ed Nicholls was in the creatives' room drinking coffee with Ronan when Sidney walked in. A man he vaguely recognized stood behind him, another of the Suits.

"We've been looking for you," Sidney said.

"Well, you found us," Ed said.

"Not Ronan, you."

Ed studied them for a minute, then threw a red foam ball at the ceiling and caught it. He glanced sideways at Ronan. Investacorp had bought half shares in the company a full eighteen months ago, but Ed and Ronan still thought of them as the Suits. It was one of the kinder things they called them in private.

"Do you know a woman called Deanna Lewis?"

"Why?"

"Did you give her any information about the launch of the new software?"

"What?"

"It's a simple question."

Ed looked from one Suit to the other. The atmosphere was strangely charged. His stomach, a packed elevator, began a slow descent toward his feet. "We may have chatted about work. No specifics that I remember."

"Deanna Lewis?" said Ronan.

"You need to be clear about this, Ed. Did you give her any information about the launch of SFAX?"

"No. Maybe. What is this?"

"The police are downstairs searching your office, with two goons from the Financial Services Authority. Her brother has been arrested

for insider trading. On the basis of information that you gave them about the launch of the software.”

“Deanna Lewis? *Our* Deanna Lewis?” Ronan began to wipe his spectacles, a thing he did when he was feeling anxious.

“Her brother’s hedge fund made two point six million dollars on the first day of trading. She alone cleared a hundred and ninety thousand on her personal account.”

“Her brother’s hedge fund?”

“I don’t understand,” Ronan said.

“I’ll spell it out. Deanna Lewis is on record talking to her brother about the launch of SFAX. She says Ed here said it was going to be enormous. And guess what? Two days later her brother’s fund is among the biggest purchasers of shares. What exactly did you tell her?”

Ronan stared at him. Ed struggled to gather his thoughts. When he swallowed, it was shamefully audible. Across the office the development team was peering over the tops of their cubicles. “I didn’t tell her anything.” He blinked. “I don’t know. I might have said something. It’s not like it was a state secret.”

“It *was* a fucking state secret, Ed,” Sidney said. “It’s called insider trading. She told him you gave her dates, times. You told her the company was going to make a fortune.”

“Then she’s lying! Shooting her mouth off. We were just . . . having a thing.”

“You wanted to bone the girl, so you shot your mouth off to impress her?”

“It wasn’t like that.”

“You had sex with Deanna Lewis?” Ed could feel Ronan’s myopic gaze burning into him.

Sidney lifted his hands. “You need to call your lawyer.”

“How can I be in trouble?” Ed asked. “It’s not like I got any benefit from it. I didn’t even know her brother had a hedge fund.”

Sidney glanced behind him. The faces suddenly found something

interesting to look at on their desks. He lowered his voice. “You have to go now. They want to interview you at the police station.”

“What? This is nuts. I’ve got a software meeting in twenty minutes. I’m not going to any police station.”

“And obviously we’re suspending you until we’ve got to the bottom of this.”

Ed half laughed. “Are you kidding me? You can’t suspend me. It’s my company.” He threw the foam ball up in the air and caught it, turning away from them. Nobody moved. “I’m not going. This is our company. Tell them, Ronan.”

He looked at Ronan, but Ronan was staring fixedly at something on the floor. Ed looked at Sidney, who shook his head. Then he looked up at the two uniformed men who had appeared behind him, at his secretary, whose hand was covering her mouth, at the carpet path already opening up between him and the door, and the foam ball dropped silently onto the floor between his feet.

Jess

Jess Thomas and Nathalie Benson slumped in the seats of their van, which was parked far enough away from Nathalie's house that they couldn't be seen from inside. Nathalie was smoking. She had given it up for the fourth time six weeks ago.

"Eighty pounds a week, guaranteed. And holiday pay." Nathalie let out a scream. "Bloody hell. I actually want to find the tart who left that earring and thump her for losing us our best job."

"Maybe she didn't know he was married."

"Oh, she knew." Before she'd met Dean, Nathalie had spent two years with a man who turned out to have not one but two families on the other side of Southampton. "No single man keeps color-coordinated scatter cushions on his bed."

"Neil Brewster does," Jess said.

"Neil Brewster's music collection is sixty-seven percent Judy Garland, thirty-three percent Pet Shop Boys."

They had cleaned together every weekday for four years, since back when the Beachfront Holiday Park was part paradise, part building site. Back when the developers promised local families access to the swimming pool and assured everyone that a large up-market development would bring benefits to their little seaside town, instead of sucking out what remained of its life. The faded moniker, **benson & thomas cleaning**, was stenciled on the side of their white van. Nathalie had added underneath: **a bit dirty? can we help?** until Jess pointed out that for two whole months half the calls they had received had nothing to do with cleaning.

Nearly all their jobs were in the Beachfront development now. Hardly anybody in town had the money—or the inclination—to

hire a cleaner, except for the doctors, the solicitor, and the odd client like Mrs. Humphrey, whose arthritis had stopped her from doing it herself. It was a good job on the one hand. You could work for yourself, organize your own hours, pick and choose your clients for the most part. The downside, weirdly, was not the crappy clients (and there always was at least one crappy client) or that scrubbing someone else's toilet somehow left you feeling like you were one step lower on a ladder than you had planned to be. Jess didn't mind pulling lumps of hair out of other people's plugholes or the fact that most people who rented holiday homes seemed to feel obliged to live like pigs for a week.

What she didn't like was that you ended up finding out much more about other people's lives than you really wanted to.

Jess could have told you about Mrs. Eldridge's secret shopping habit: the designer shoe receipts she stuffed into the bathroom bin, and the bags of unworn clothes in her wardrobe, the tags still firmly attached. She could tell you that Lena Thompson had been trying for a baby for four years and used two pregnancy tests a month (rumor had it she left her tights on). She could tell you that Mr. Mitchell in the big house behind the church earned a six-figure salary (he left his pay slips on the hall table; Nathalie swore he did it deliberately) and that his daughter smoked secretly in the bathroom.

If she was so inclined, Jess could have named the women who went out looking immaculate—hair faultless, nails polished, lightly spritzed with expensive scent—who thought nothing of leaving soiled knickers in full view on the floor. Or the teenage boys whose stiff towels she didn't want to pick up without a pair of tongs. There were the couples who spent every night in separate beds, the wives insisting brightly when they asked her to change the spare-room sheets that they'd had an "awful lot of guests lately," the lavatories that required a gas mask and a HAZCHEM warning.

And then every once in a while you got a nice client like Lisa Ritter and popped over to vacuum her floors and came away with a

diamond earring and a whole load of knowledge you could really have done without.

“It’s probably my daughter’s, from when she came home last time,” Lisa Ritter had said, her voice quivering slightly with the effort as she held it in her hand. “She’s got a pair just like it.”

“Of course,” Jess said. “It probably got kicked into your bedroom. Or carried in on someone’s shoe. We knew it would be something like that. I’m sorry. If I had known it wasn’t yours, I would never have bothered you with it.” And she knew right then, as Mrs. Ritter turned away from her, that that would be it. People didn’t thank you for bringing bad news to their doors.

At the end of the road a padded toddler toppled gently onto the ground like a felled tree and, after a brief silence, started wailing. Its mother, her two armloads of shopping bags perfectly balanced, stood and stared in mute dismay.

“Look, you heard what she said the other week—Lisa Ritter would get rid of her hairdresser before she’d get rid of us.”

Nathalie made the face that said Jess would look on the bright side of a nuclear apocalypse. “Before she got rid of ‘the cleaners.’ That’s different. She won’t care whether it’s us or Speedicleanz or Maids with Mops.” Nathalie shook her head. “Nope. To her, from now on, we’ll always be the cleaners who know the truth about her cheating husband. It matters to women like her. They’re all about appearances, aren’t they?”

The mother put down her bags and stooped to pick up the toddler. Jess put her bare feet up on the dashboard and let her face fall into her hands. “Bugger it. How are we going to make up that money, Nat?”

“That house was immaculate. It was basically a twice-a-week polishing job.” Nathalie stared out the window.

“And she always paid on time.”

Jess kept seeing that diamond earring. Why hadn’t they just ig-

nored it? It would have actually been better if one of them had simply stolen it. “Okay, so she’s going to cancel us. Let’s change the subject, Nat. I can’t afford to cry before my pub shift.”

“So, did Marty ring this week?”

“I didn’t mean change the subject to *that*.”

“Well, did he?”

Jess sighed. “Yup.”

“Did he say why he didn’t ring the week before?” Nathalie shoved Jess’s feet off the dashboard.

“Nope.” Jess could feel her staring. “And no, he didn’t send any money.”

“Oh, come *on*. You’ve got to get the Child Support Agency onto him. You can’t carry on like this. He should send money for his own kids.”

It was an old argument. “He’s . . . he’s still not right,” Jess said. “I can’t put more pressure on him. He hasn’t got a job yet.”

“Well, you’re going to need that money now. Until we get another job like Lisa Ritter’s. How’s Nicky?”

“I went round to Jason Fisher’s house to talk to his mum.”

“You’re joking. She scares the pants off me. Did she say she’d get him to leave Nicky alone?”

“Something like that.”

Nathalie kept her eyes on Jess and dropped her chin two inches.

“She told me if I set foot on her doorstep once more she’d batter me halfway to next Wednesday. Me and my . . . what was it? . . . me and my ‘freakazoid kids.’” Jess pulled down the passenger mirror and checked her hair, pulling it back into a ponytail. “Oh, and then she told me her Jason wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Typical.”

“It’s fine. I had Norman with me. And, bless him, he took an enormous dump next to their Toyota and somehow I forgot I had a plastic bag in my pocket.”

Jess put her feet back up.

Nathalie pushed them down again and mopped the dashboard with a wet wipe. “Seriously, though, Jess. How long has Marty been gone? Two years? You’re young. You can’t wait around for him to sort himself out. You’ve got to get back on the horse,” Nathalie said with a grimace.

“Get back on the horse. Nice.”

“Liam Stubbs fancies you. You could totally ride that.”

“Any certified pair of X chromosomes could ride Liam Stubbs.”

Jess closed the window. “I’m better off reading a book. Besides, I think the kids have had enough upheaval in their lives without playing Meet Your New Uncle. Right?” She looked up, wrinkled her nose at the sky. “I’ve got to get the tea on, and then I’ve got to get ready for the pub. I’ll do a quick ring-round before I go, see if any of the clients want any extras doing. And you never know, she might not cancel us.”

Nathalie lowered her window and blew out a long trail of smoke. “Sure, Dorothy. And our next job is going to be cleaning the Emerald City at the end of the Yellow Brick Road.”

Number 14 Seacole Avenue was filled with the sound of distant explosions. Tanzie had calculated recently that, since he’d turned sixteen, Nicky had spent 88 percent of his spare time in his bedroom. Jess could hardly blame him.

Jess dropped her cleaning crate in the hall, hung up her jacket, made her way upstairs, feeling the familiar faint dismay at the threadbare state of the carpet, and pushed at his door. He was wearing a set of headphones and shooting somebody; the smell of weed was strong enough to make her reel.

“Nicky,” she said, and someone exploded in a hail of bullets. “Nicky.” She walked over to him and pulled his headphones off, so that he turned, his expression briefly bemused, like someone hauled from sleep. “Hard at work, then?”

“Study break.”

She picked up an ashtray and held it toward him. "I thought I told you."

"It's from last night. Couldn't sleep."

"Not in the house, Nicky." There was no point telling him not at all. They all did it around here. She told herself she was lucky he had only started at fifteen.

"Is Tanzie back yet?" She stooped to pick up stray socks and mugs from the floor.

"No. Oh. The school rang after lunch."

"What?"

He typed something into the computer, then turned to face her. "I don't know. Something about school."

She lifted a lock of that dyed black hair, and there it was: a fresh mark on his cheekbone. He ducked away. "Are you okay?"

He shrugged, looked away from her.

"Did they come after you again?"

"I'm fine."

"Why didn't you call me?"

"No credit on my phone." He leaned back and fired a virtual grenade. The screen exploded into a ball of flame. He replaced his headphones and went back to the screen.

Nicky had come to live with Jess full-time eight years previously. He was Marty's son by Della, a woman he'd dated briefly in his teens. Nicky had arrived silent and wary, his limbs thin and elongated, his appetite raging. His mother had fallen in with a new crowd, finally disappearing somewhere in the Midlands with a man called Big Al, who never looked anyone in the eye and clutched an ever-present can of Tennent's Extra in his oversized fist. Nicky had been found sleeping in the locker rooms at school, and when the social workers called again, Jess had said he could come to them. "Just what you need," Nathalie had said. "Another mouth to feed."

"He's my stepson."

“You’ve met him twice in four years. And you’re not even twenty.”

“Well, that’s how families are these days.”

Afterward, she sometimes wondered whether that had been the final straw; the thing that had caused Marty to abdicate responsibility for his family altogether. But Nicky was a good kid, under all the raven hair and eyeliner. He was sweet to Tanzie, and on his good days he talked and laughed and allowed Jess the occasional awkward hug, and she was glad of him, even if it sometimes felt as if she had basically acquired one more person to feel anxious about.

She stepped out into the garden with the phone and took a deep breath. “Um . . . hello? It’s Jessica Thomas here. I had a message to call.”

A pause.

“Is Tanzie . . . ? Is . . . is everything all right?”

“Everything’s fine. Sorry. I should have said. It’s Mr. Tsvangarai here, Tanzie’s maths teacher.”

“Oh.” She pictured him: a tall man in a gray suit. Face like a funeral director.

“I wanted to talk to you because a few weeks ago I had a very interesting discussion with a former colleague of mine who works for St. Anne’s.”

“St. Anne’s?” Jess frowned. “The private school?”

“Yes. They have a scholarship program for children who are exceptionally gifted in maths. And as you know, we had already earmarked Tanzie as gifted and talented.”

“Because she’s good at maths.”

“Better than good. Well, we gave her the qualifying exam paper to sit last week. I don’t know if she mentioned it? I sent a letter home, but I wasn’t sure you saw it.”

Jess squinted at a seagull in the sky. A few gardens along, Terry Blackstone had started singing along to a radio. He had been known to do the full Rod Stewart if he thought nobody was looking.

“We got the results back this morning. And she has done well. Extremely well. Mrs. Thomas, if you’re agreeable, they would like to interview her for a subsidized place.”

She found herself parroting him. “A subsidized place?”

“For certain children of exceptional ability St. Anne’s will forgo a significant proportion of the school fees. It means that Tanzie would get a top-class education. She has an extraordinary numerical ability, Mrs. Thomas. I do think this could be a great opportunity for her.”

“St. Anne’s? But . . . she’d need to get a bus across town. She’d need all the uniforms and kits. She—she wouldn’t know anyone.”

“She’d make friends. But these are just details, Mrs. Thomas. Let’s wait and see what the school comes up with. Tanzie is a talented girl.” He paused. When she didn’t say anything, he lowered his voice: “I have been teaching maths for almost twenty-two years, Mrs. Thomas. And I have never met a child who grasped mathematical concepts as well as she does. I believe she is actually exceeding the point where I have anything to teach her. Algorithms, probability, prime numbers—”

“Okay. This is where you lose me, Mr. Tsvangarai.”

He chuckled. “I’ll be in touch.”

She put down the phone and sat heavily on the white plastic garden chair that had grown a fine sheen of emerald moss. She stared at nothing, in through the window at the curtains that Marty had always thought were too bright, at the red plastic tricycle she had never got round to getting rid of, at next door’s cigarette butts sprinkled like confetti on her path, at the rotten boards in the fence the dog insisted on sticking his head through. And despite what Nathalie referred to as her frankly misguided optimism, Jess found her eyes had filled unexpectedly with tears.

There were lots of awful things about the father of your children leaving: the money issues, the suppressed anger on behalf of your

children, the way most of your coupled-up friends now treated you as if you were some kind of potential husband stealer. But worse than that, worse than the endless, bloody exhausting financial and energy-sapping struggle, was that being a parent on your own when you were totally out of your depth was actually the loneliest place on earth.