

Missing

Chapter 1

The image would be imprinted on her brain forever, their child full of laughter and joking, skipping between the trees, every feature on her young face full of joy and life, set to burst with happiness. Pink wellingtons scuffed with mud, short of leg, long in body, trousers rolled up, coat a little short; funny what the brain remembers, happily dancing around an oak tree, gone.

The lady looked around, how she looked forward to this week each year, longing each day to last forever. They had been lucky with the rain, just the odd drizzle, lacing the leaves with drops of moisture. A haze surrounded the wooden sculpture of a stag moving in and out of her vision into the distance.

Thunder ripping through provided the atmospheric acoustics, opening a three dimensional arena out into the distant fells.

‘Octavia, where are you hiding now?’ Mock laughter heard in the lady’s voice, where was the child taking cover? Her boots squelched through the grass, evidence of how the Lake District bore its name, a certain affinity for rain no matter the season.

Thunder boomed, no sight yet of lightning, certainly louder now though; they should be safe enough in this forest, hardly open ground.

She moved slowly and hesitantly around one side of the tree, then another. No, she was not hidden behind this oak, she was getting better at concealing herself; maybe she would follow her father into the Forces. A scuffle behind eased away the frown lines she had not realised were building, a quick turn but the image of her daughter was replaced by two squirrels scampering up and away through fading green foliage amongst the copse of oak trees, a treasure trove of acorns all set for plunder.

‘Octavia!’ Any pretence at games gone now, panic was building exponentially. ‘Octavia, where are you! Octavia, this is not fun anymore!’

The lady raced from tree to tree, well developed white oaks, any attention to the gnarled, weathered exteriors long gone, acorns ripe for harvesting, she tripped and then stumbled covered in mud, her eyes wild and projecting terror. Her voice sounded out, alternating between, pleas and screams. She kept on falling, sliding, roots caught hold of her feet below the leaves. There was no beauty and majesty there

now, they merely served as obstacles designed to slow her progress and keep her daughter out of her reach. Damn the mist, why could she not see? What colour coat had Octavia been wearing this morning?

She could have sworn it was red, all these things you do on automatic pilot, where was the girl?

The lady sat open eyed, a wooden stump provided the base, staring out into the clear cut, looking but not seeing. A mindless gaze caught all flickers of motion across the alien landscape. Crass medieval surgery performed upon once noble and imperial trees, no longer reaching for the moon, now lying fallen their life juice seeping away, destined for a tabloid newspaper to be scanned and discarded. She could almost feel her fear mirrored in those neighbouring trees, knowing their time was to come, resigned to this inglorious calling.

Where in Grizedale Forest was she? Light was falling, shadows lengthened as the sun lost its fight against gravity, where was Octavia?

She could no longer shout or speak, her voice long gone. Numbness and exhaustion oozed through her system, adrenaline faded. Images pulsed through her brain, a final smile and skip remembered now distantly, where was Octavia?

‘Caroline, Octavia?’ A faint echo sounded out, twisted and distorted through the mist, water droplets absorbed the sound energy.

Her heart leapt, a hoarse voice she no longer recognised.

‘Octavia, Octavia? I’m here girl!’ She leapt to her feet, adrenaline once more driving her exhausted system to respond, a final burst of energy.

Torchlight lasered through the trees, how dark was it? What time was it? Autumn brought early nights, when had she last seen Octavia? Just after ten only just this morning; how long had it been since?

A man in yellow raced towards her, shouting into a transmitter.

‘Focus on my position, I’ve located them. This is Brown, I’ve found them!’ Joy seeped away to first confusion and then concern as he approached, looking into her face.

‘Mrs Hill, Caroline, please sit down, where is your daughter? Where is Octavia? Do you have her?’ The man sloughed off a rucksack, well-practiced movements. He unscrewed a scuffed silvery flask and the aroma of chocolate spewed forth, diffusing through the air.

The lady gratefully took the cup offered. Any semblance of movement required careful coordination, muscles screaming and groaned, the hot liquid scalded her throat. She felt a blanket brush her shoulders.

‘Mrs Hill.’ A bearded face filled her vision, fear in his eyes, fear of what? ‘Mrs Hill, could you please tell me where your daughter is, where and when did you last see her?’

She heard sounds of boots splashing through water. Rays of light pranced chaotically, their path broken by trees, until the emptiness of the clear cut released their desire to reach out, droplets of mist stalling any attempt at progress.

‘I, I don’t know. Octavia, I don’t know.’ Heat on her legs, dampness soaked through, the cup was gone, she felt herself keeling backwards, nothing.

‘Mrs Hill, Caroline, please relax; you are safe now.’ A calm voice filtered through the ground coffee beans, sluicing away the aroma and bitter taste.

Light poured in, she tried to lift her hand to block the rays, every movement an effort, as if she was swimming underwater. The visual assault faded, colours merged with the white-coated lady in front of her, a doctor? The doctor’s eyes blank; the care in her voice not echoed across her features, body language all wrong, defensive and cautious.

Caroline’s arm dropped, memories flooded back like waves pounding the lighthouse, she felt her foundations shifting, slow to realign, the storm had only just begun to build.

The same voice spoke again, she recognised that the calm and care was a little forced, stress bled through.

‘Mrs Hill, you have a visitor who would like to talk with you, time is important here.’ A pause. ‘As I say, time is of the utmost importance, I, I will be here if you need anything.’ She hurried to finish the last few words.

Caroline struggled to sit up, pain pulsing through her left forearm; she noted the saline drip with surprise. She licked her dry lips.

‘Please tell me you found Octavia, my daughter.’ Hope mixed with despair; she searched the face of the doctor in front of her for any sign of a reaction.

What must she be, early forties? Pleasant enough features, a small blob of a nose, no make up, a glint of light reflected from her eyes, evidence of contact lenses, raw intelligence shone through.

The doctor wore an immaculate white uniform, careful creases ironed in. Creases now furrowed her forehead spreading around her eyes. She shook her head gently and dropped her eye contact.

‘That is why I am here.’ A gruff voice came from her left.

Caroline strained to look over her shoulder; and blue resolved into focus. Ah, a police officer, stripes on his chest, some sign of seniority. Her heart nosedived, what news did he have? Oh no, please say it was not true, please say Octavia was still here to laugh, skip and cry, please say it could not be true.

‘Mrs Hill, my name is Detective Chief Inspector Locan; I have been assigned to lead on this investigation. Thank you for helping the police with our enquiries, could you take me through the events of the day of the 26th September, take your time.’

The man relaxed into the chair, a notebook poised in his hand.

‘Where is my daughter? You have not found my daughter!’

Caroline could see the doctor looking anxiously at traces spiking on screens, a nervous glance at the police officer, he gave a subtle shake of his head.

‘Mrs Hill, we are currently unaware of the whereabouts of your daughter.’ He held up a finger to stifle her voice. ‘We have called out all twelve teams of the Lake District mountain rescue personnel and reserves to scour Grizedale Forest, let alone the surrounding constabulary and an army of volunteers; we are doing all we can.’

‘How long has it been?’ A quiet voice she struggled to recognise as her own, devoid of emotion.

He grunted, clearing his throat. ‘Our teams have been searching for three days now, non-stop. I doubt there is a blade of grass or leaf that has not been left undisturbed at least twice through Grizedale.’

A thick Cumbrian accent shone through. ‘Mrs Hill, again, please can you talk me through the events of the 26th September.’ More direction transferred to his tone; less of a request, more an instruction.

‘Octavia and I, we have booked a cottage in the Lake District for the last three years now in the autumn. Octavia loves the leaves, kicking and dancing through them.’ A slow, sad smile began to grow. ‘I remember the first time we came up, David, my ex; he was dead against it, why would Octavia want to go on a walking holiday? After all the money he has frittered away and continues to waste on charms

and baubles; but, the look on her face, the wonder in her eyes, the joy and childlike energy bursting forth.'

She pursed her lips, a slight nod. 'I knew there and then, Octavia saw the colours as I did, the infinite variety of browns **found** across the trees, from the bluest of tarns to the grey of the fells stretching through the unsettled swirling mists ever aiming to puncture the sky.'

'Mrs Hill.' A soft growl. 'The 26th of September if you please.'

Her features fell as reality caved in and Caroline remembered where she was and why she was here. 'This latest trip, no different to the last three. We were staying at Wordsworth Lodge, a pleasant enough cottage; just enough space for the two of us and the essential log burner. Tuesday, the 26th?' She looked up to the officer, who nodded encouragingly.

'Tuesday, we got up around six thirty; Octavia will not sleep into the mornings up here, too excited to get going. We always make an early start, to avoid the crowds, gives us the afternoon to relax with logs crackling and a movie to snuggle up to.'

She focused on the white wall, what were all those nozzles and taps on the wall for? What gases could they use in a hospital other than oxygen? 'We parked at the westerly entrance to Grizedale Forest, taking in the sculpture route for what must be the tenth time over the last few years, Octavia would never get bored of it, she knows the route so well, from one wooden image to another, placing herself exactly in the right place to maximise the illusion, as if she has an inbuilt GPS.' She paused.

'Yes I carry a map and compass in case the mist and fog roll in, it is the Lakes after all. We must have been walking for around an hour, well, when I say walking I really mean hiding to and fro, we were, struggling to breathe from laughing so much. I, I can see it so clearly, the ever present smile on her face, rounding a tree, one minute in sight, the next minute, the next minute gone.' Caroline caught herself, shaking her head, tears trickled down her cheeks. 'I, I ran everywhere, I was frantic, calling her name, and you have not been able to find her? After three days?' She looked back towards the officer, his expression had not changed, was that a twinkle in his left eye?

He spoke in a quiet voice. 'Mrs Hill, why don't you tell us what really happened on Tuesday the 26th of November.'

Caroline stared, struggling to comprehend the police officer's words. 'But, it is as I say it was, one minute she was with me, laughing and joking, hiding from tree to tree, the next moment gone...'

Her voice trailed off, realisation dawned through the hardening in his eyes.

‘You think, you think I killed my daughter, that she is buried out there?’

‘Mrs Hill, you are not at this point being cautioned for the disappearance of your daughter Octavia Estelle Hill, but we would request you remain in this hospital for further questioning as and when we deem necessary, we appreciate your co-operation of course.’

His eyes sharpened, and he stretched his hand out, too slow.

Caroline reached down with a burst of speed, ripping the drip from her left arm, plunging the hollow needle into her throat, blood gushed forth.

‘I did not kill my child!’ Salmon pink frothy bubbles formed through the gases exhaled.

An explosion of motion, white and turquoise suits burst into the room leaping around her, pads applied, restraints pinning her down, feeling a needle penetrate her arm, a definite twinkle in Locan’s eyes, the image of Octavia smiling in front of her resolved; what was she murmuring?

‘Mummy, it’s okay, mummy I’m safe, don’t worry so.’

Octavia mouthed softly; a child’s voice resounding in certainty, smiling gently, her eyes reflected the awe and wonder only a child could reproduce.

Caroline struggled against her restraints, the waves gaining momentum, the blocks of the lighthouse groaning and shifted, spray arced over the light struggling to shine out, white horses dancing free. Thunder dopplered outwards, her vision narrowed to a single point, then was gone.