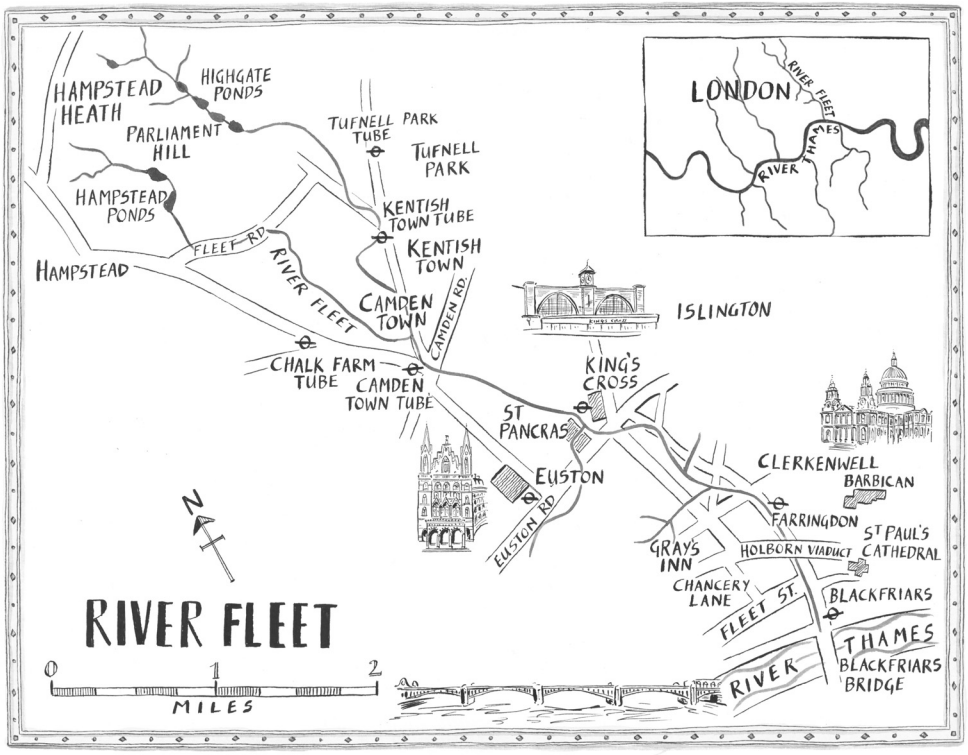

Opening Extract from...

Blue Monday

Written by Nicci French

Published by Penguin Books Ltd


HAMPSTEAD HEATH
HIGHGATE PONDS
PARLIAMENT HILL
HAMPSTEAD PONDS
FLEET RD
HAMPSTEAD
TUFNELL PARK TUBE
TUFNELL PARK
KENTISH TOWN TUBE
KENTISH TOWN
CAMDEN TOWN
CAMDEN RD
RIVER FLEET
CHALK FARM TUBE
CAMDEN TOWN TUBE
ISLINGTON
KING'S CROSS
ST PANCRAS
EUSTON
EUSTON RD
CLERKENWELL
BARBICAN
FARRINGDON
ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL
HOLBORN VIADUCT
GRAY'S INN
CHANCERY LANE
FLEET ST.
BLACKFRIARS
THAMES
BLACKFRIARS BRIDGE
RIVER
LONDON
RIVER FLEET
THAMES
RIVER
N
RIVER FLEET
0
1
2
MILES

Blue Monday

NICCI FRENCH

PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England
Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4P 2Y3
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)
Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)
Penguin Group (Australia), 707 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3008, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)
Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,
Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India
Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, Auckland 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)
Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, Block D, Rosebank Office Park,
181 Jan Smuts Avenue, Parktown North, Gauteng 2193, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

www.penguin.com

First published by Michael Joseph 2011
Published in Penguin Books 2012
Reissued in this edition 2012
001

Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ISBN: 978–1–405–91142–9

www.greenpenguin.co.uk

ALWAYS LEARNING PEARSON

To Edgar, Anna, Hadley and Molly

1987

In this city there were many ghosts. She had to take care. She avoided the cracks between the paving stones, skipping and jumping, her feet in their scuffed lace-up shoes landing in the blank spaces. She was nimble at this hopscotch by now. She had done it every day on the way to school and back ever since she could remember, first holding on to her mother's hand, dragging and jerking her as she leaped from one safe place to the next; then on her own. Don't step on the cracks. Or what? She was probably too old for such a game now, already nine, and in a few weeks' time she would be ten, just before the summer holidays began. Still she played it, mostly out of habit but also nervous about what might happen if she stopped.

This bit was tricky – the paving was broken up into a jagged mosaic. She got across it, one toe pressing into the little island between the lines. Her plaits swung against her hot cheek, her school bag bumped against her hip, heavy with books and her half-eaten packed lunch. Behind her, she could hear Joanna's feet following in her steps. She didn't turn. Her little sister was always trailing after her, always getting in her way. Now she heard her whimpering: 'Rosie! Rosie, wait for me!'

'Hurry up, then,' she called over her shoulder. There were several people between them now, but she caught a glimpse of Joanna's face, hot and red under her dark

fringe. She looked anxious. The tip of her tongue was on her lip in concentration. Her foot landed on a crack and she wobbled, hitting another. She always did that. She was a clumsy child who spilled food and stubbed her toes and stepped in dog poo. 'Hurry!' Rosie repeated crossly, weaving her way past people.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon and the sky was a flat blue; the light flared on the pavement, hurting her eyes. She rounded the corner towards the shop and was suddenly in the shade where she slowed to a walk, for the danger was over. The paving stones were replaced by Tarmac. She passed the man with the pockmarked face who sat in the doorway with a tin beside him. There weren't any laces in his boots. She tried not to look at him. She didn't like the way he smiled without really smiling, like her father sometimes, when he was saying goodbye on a Sunday. Today was Monday: Monday was when she missed him most, waking up to the week and knowing he wasn't there again. Where was Joanna? She waited, watching the other people flow past her – a flurry of youths, a woman with a scarf round her head and a large bag, a man with a stick – and then her sister emerged from the dazzle of light into the shadows, a skinny figure with an oversized bag, knobbly knees and grubby white ankle socks. Her hair was sticking to her forehead.

Rosie turned again and walked towards the sweetshop, considering what she would buy. Perhaps the Opal Fruits . . . or perhaps Maltesers, though it was so hot they would melt on the way home. Joanna would buy the strawberry laces and her mouth would be pink and smudged. Hayley from her class was already in there and they stood together

at the counter, picking out sweets. The Opal Fruits, she decided, but she had to wait to pay until Joanna arrived. She glanced towards the door and for a moment she thought she saw something – a blur, a trick of the light, something different, like a shimmer in the hot air. But then it was gone. The doorway was empty. Nobody was there.

She tutted loudly, over a screech of brakes.

'I always have to wait for my little sister.'

'Poor you,' said Hayley.

'She's such a cry-baby. It's boring.' She said this because it was something she felt she ought to say. You had to look down on your younger siblings, roll your eyes and sneer.

'I bet,' said Hayley, companionably.

'Where is she?' With a theatrical sigh, Rosie put down her packet of sweets and went to the entrance to look outside. Cars drove by. A woman wearing a sari walked past, all gold and pink and sweet-smelling, and then three boys from the secondary school up the road, jostling against each other with their sharp elbows.

'Joanna! Joanna, where are you?'

She heard her voice, high and cross, and thought: I sound like my mum in one of her moods.

Hayley stood beside her, chewing noisily on her bubble-gum. 'Where's she gone, then?' A pink bubble appeared out of her mouth and she sucked it back in again.

'She knows she's supposed to stay with me.'

Rosie ran to the corner where she had last seen Joanna and stared around, squinting. She called again, though her voice was drowned by a lorry. Maybe she had crossed the road, had seen a friend on the other side. It wasn't likely.

She was an obedient little girl. Biddable, their mother called her.

'Can't find her?' Hayley appeared at her side.

'She's probably gone home without me,' said Rosie, aiming at nonchalance, hearing the panic in her tone.

'See you, then.'

'See you.'

She tried to walk normally, but it didn't work. Her body wouldn't let her be calm. She broke into a ragged run, her heart bumping in her chest and a nasty taste in her mouth. 'Stupid idiot,' she kept saying. And 'I'll kill her. When I see her, I'll . . .' Her legs felt unsteady. She imagined herself getting hold of Joanna by the bony shoulders and shaking her until her head wobbled.

Home. A blue front door and a hedge that hadn't been cut since her father had left. She stopped, feeling a bit sick, the nauseous sensation she had when she was going to get into trouble for something. She banged the knocker hard because the bell didn't work any more. Waited. Let her be there, let her be there, let her be there. The door opened and her mother appeared, still in her coat from work. Her eyes took in Rosie and then dropped to the space beside her.

'Where's Joanna?' The words hung in the air between them. Rosie saw her mother's face tighten. 'Rosie? Where's Joanna?'

She heard her own voice saying, 'She was there. It's not my fault. I thought she'd gone home on her own.'

She felt her hand grabbed and she and her mother were running back down the road the way she had come, along the street where they lived and up past the sweetshop

where children hung around the door, past the man with the pockmarked face and the empty smile, and round the corner out of the shade and into the dazzle. Feet slamming and a stitch in her ribs, over the cracks without pausing.

All the while she could hear, above the banging of her heart and the asthmatic wheezing of her breath, her mother calling, 'Joanna? Joanna? Where are you, Joanna?'

Deborah Vine pushed a tissue against her mouth as if to stop the words streaming out of her. Outside the back window, the police officer could see a slender dark-haired girl standing in the small garden quite still, her hands by her side and a school bag still hanging off her shoulder. Deborah Vine looked at him. He was waiting for her answer.

'I'm not sure,' she said. 'About four o'clock. On her way home from school, Audley Road Primary. I would have collected her myself except it's hard to get there on time from work – and anyway she was with Rosie and there are no roads to cross and I thought it was safe. Other mothers leave their children to go home alone and they have to learn, don't they, learn to look after themselves, and Rosie promised to keep an eye on her.'

She drew a long, unsteady breath.

He made a note in his book. He rechecked Joanna's age. Five and three months. Where she was last seen. Outside the sweetshop. Deborah couldn't remember the name. She could take them there.

The officer closed his notebook. 'She's probably at a friend's house,' he said. 'But have you got a photograph? A recent one.'

'She's little for her age,' said Deborah. She could hardly get the words out. The officer had to lean forward to hear her. 'A skinny little thing. She's a good girl. Shy as anything when you first meet her. She wouldn't go off with a stranger.'

'A photo,' he said.

She went to look. The officer glanced again at the girl in the garden with her blank white face. He'd have to talk to her, or one of his colleagues perhaps. A woman would be better. But maybe Joanna would turn up before it was necessary, tumble in. She had probably wandered off with a friend and was playing with whatever five-year-old girls play with – dolls and crayons and tea-sets and tiaras. He stared at the photograph Deborah Vine passed him, of a girl with dark hair like her sister's and a thin face. One chipped tooth, a severe fringe, a smile that looked as if she had turned up her mouth when the photographer told her to say 'cheese'.

'Have you got hold of your husband?'

Her face twisted.

'Richard – my . . . I mean, their father – doesn't live with us.' Then as if she couldn't stop herself, she added: 'He left us for someone younger.'

'You should let him know.'

'Does that mean you think this is really serious?' She wanted him to say no, it didn't really matter, but she knew it was serious. She was damp with fear. He could almost feel it rising off her.

'We'll keep in touch. A female officer is on her way here.'

'What shall I do? There must be something I can do. I can't just sit here waiting. Tell me what to do. Anything.'

'You could phone people,' he said. 'Anywhere she might have gone.'

She clutched at his sleeve. 'Tell me she'll be all right,' she insisted. 'Tell me you'll get her back.'

The officer looked awkward. He couldn't say that and he couldn't think of what else to say.

Every time the phone rang it was a little bit worse. People knocking at the door. They'd heard. What a terrible thing, but of course it would be all right. Everything would be all right. The nightmare would end. Was there anything they could do, anything at all? Only ask. Say the word. Now the sun was low in the sky and shadows lay over streets and houses and parks. It was getting cold. All over London, people were sitting in front of TV sets or standing at stoves, stirring the pot, or gathering in smoke-fugged groups in pubs, talking about Saturday's results and holiday plans, moaning about little aches and pains.

Rosie crouched in the chair, her eyes wide. One of her plaits had come undone. The female police officer squatted beside her, large and plump and kind, patted her hand. But she couldn't remember, didn't know, mustn't speak: words were dangerous. Nobody had told her. She wanted her father to come home and make everything all right, but they didn't know where he was. They couldn't find him. Her mother said he was probably on the road. She pictured him on a road that stretched away from him and dwindled into the distance under a dark sky.

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut. When she opened them, Joanna would be there. She held her breath until her chest ached and her blood hammered in her ears. She

could make things happen. But when she opened her eyes to the police officer's nice concerned face, her mother was still crying and nothing had changed.

At nine thirty the following morning, there was a meeting in what had been designated the operations room at Camford Hill police station. It was the moment when what had been a frantic search was turned into a co-ordinated operation. It was given a case number. Detective Chief Inspector Frank Tanner assumed command and made a speech. People were introduced to each other. Desks were assigned and argued over. An engineer installed phone lines. Cork boards were nailed to walls. There was a special sort of urgency in the room. But there was something else that nobody said out loud but everybody felt: a sickness somewhere in the stomach. This wasn't a teenager or a husband who had disappeared after an argument. If it had been, they wouldn't have been here. This was about a five-year-old girl. Seventeen and a half hours had passed since she had last been seen. It was too long. There had been an entire night. It had been a cool night; this was June and not November, and that was something. Still. A whole night.

DCI Tanner was just giving details of the press conference that was taking place later that morning when he was interrupted. A uniformed officer had come into the room. He pushed his way through and said something to Tanner that nobody else could hear.

'Is he downstairs?' said Tanner. The officer said that he was. 'I'll see him now.'

Tanner nodded at another detective and the two of them left the room together.

'Is it the father?' said the detective, who was called Langan.

'He's only just arrived.'

'Are they on bad terms?' Detective Langan said. 'Him and his ex.'

'I reckon,' said Tanner.

'It's usually someone they know,' said Langan.

'That's good to hear.'

'I was just saying.'

They arrived outside the door of the interview room.

'How are you going to play it?' said Langan.

'He's a worried father,' said Tanner, and pushed the door open.

Richard Vine was on his feet. He was dressed in a grey suit with no tie. 'Is there any news?' he said.

'We're doing everything we can,' said Tanner.

'No news at all?'

'It's early days,' said Tanner, knowing as he said it that it wasn't true. That it was the reverse of the truth. He gestured to Richard Vine to sit down.

Langan moved to one side so that he could observe the father as he talked. Vine was tall, with the stoop of a man who feels uncomfortable with his height, and had dark hair that was already turning grey at the temples, though he couldn't have been more than his mid-thirties. He had dark, beetling brows and was unshaven; there was a bruised look to his pale, slightly puffy face. His brown eyes were red-rimmed and looked sore. He seemed dazed.

'I was on the road,' said Vine, without being asked. 'I didn't know. I didn't hear until early this morning.'

'Can you tell me where you were, Mr Vine?'

'I was on the road,' he repeated. 'My work . . .' He stopped and pushed a flap of hair back from his face. 'I'm a salesman. I spend a lot of time on the road. What's that got to do with my daughter?'

'We just need to establish your whereabouts.'

'I was in St Albans. There's a new sports centre. Do you want to know the times? Do you need proof?' His voice sharpened. 'I wasn't anywhere near here if that's what you're thinking. What's Debbie been saying about me?'

'I'd like to know times.' Tanner kept his voice neutral. 'And anyone who can corroborate what you're telling us.'

'What do you think? That I've abducted her and hidden her away somewhere, because Debbie won't let me have the kids overnight, that she turns them against me? That I've . . .' He wasn't able to say the words.

'These are just routine questions.'

'Not to me! My little girl's gone missing, my baby.' He sagged. 'Of course I'll bloody tell you times. You can check them. But you're wasting your time on me and all the while you're not looking for her.'

'We're looking,' said Langan. He thought: seventeen and a half hours. Eighteen, now. She's five years old and she's been gone eighteen hours. He stared at the father. You could never tell.

Later, Richard Vine squatted on the floor beside the sofa where Rosie huddled, still in her pyjamas and her hair still in yesterday's plaits.

'Daddy?' she said. It was almost the first thing she'd said since her mother had called the police yesterday afternoon. 'Daddy?'

He opened his arms and gathered her in. 'Don't worry,' he said. 'She'll come home soon. You'll see.'

'Promise?' she whispered against his neck.

'Promise.'

But she could feel his tears on the top of her head, where the parting was.

They asked her what she could remember, but she couldn't remember anything. Just the cracks in the pavement, just choosing sweets, just Joanna calling her to wait. And her swell of anger against her little sister, her desire for her to be somewhere else. They said it was very important that she should tell them everyone she saw on that walk home from school. People she knew and people she didn't know. It didn't matter if she didn't think it was important: that was for them to decide. But she hadn't seen anyone, just Hayley in the sweetshop and that man with the pockmarked face. Shadows flitted through her mind. She was very cold, though it was summer outside the window. She put one end of her unravelling plait into her mouth and sucked it violently.

'Still not saying anything?'

'Not a word.'

'She thinks it was her fault.'

'Poor kid, what a thing to grow up with.'

'Sssh. Don't talk as if it's over.'

'Do you really think she's still alive?'

*

They made lines and walked across the wasteland near the house, very slowly, stooping occasionally to pick things up from the ground and put them into plastic bags. They went from door to door, holding a photograph of Joanna, the one the mother had passed over on that Monday afternoon, with a block fringe and an obedient smile on her thin face. It was a famous photo now. The papers had got hold of it. There were journalists outside the house, photographers, a television crew. Joanna became 'Jo' or, even worse, 'Little Jo', like a saintly child heroine from a Victorian novel. There were rumours. It was impossible to know where they started but they spread quickly round the neighbourhood. It was the tramp. It was a man in a blue estate car. It was her father. Her clothes had been found in a skip. She'd been seen in Scotland, in France. She was definitely dead and she was definitely alive.

Rosie's granny came to stay with them and Rosie went back to school. She didn't want to go. She dreaded the way people would look at her and whisper about it behind her back and suck up to her, trying to be her friend because this big thing had happened to her. She sat at her desk and tried to concentrate on what the teacher was saying, but she could feel them behind her. *She let her little sister get snatched.*

She didn't want to go to school but she didn't want to stay at home either. Her mother wasn't like her mother any more. She was like someone pretending to be a mother, but all the time she was somewhere else. Her eyes flickered about. She kept putting her hands over her

mouth as if she was keeping something in, some truth that would otherwise burst free. Her face became thin and pinched and old. At night, when Rosie lay in bed and watched the car lights from the road outside move across her ceiling, she could hear her mother moving around downstairs. Even when it was dark and everyone else in the world was asleep, her mother was awake. And her father was different too. He lived alone again now. He hugged her too tightly. He smelt funny – sweet and sour at the same time.

Deborah and Richard Vine sat in front of the TV cameras together. They still shared a surname, but they didn't look at each other. Tanner had told them to keep it simple: tell the world how they missed Joanna and appeal to whoever it was who had taken her to let her come home. Don't worry about showing emotion. The media would like that. Just so long as it didn't stop them speaking.

'Let my daughter come home,' said Deborah Vine. Her voice broke; she covered her newly haggard face with one hand. 'Just let her come back home.'

Richard Vine added, more violently, 'Please give us our daughter back. Whoever knows anything, please help.' His face was pale and blotched with red.

'What do you think?' Langan asked Tanner.

Tanner shrugged. 'You mean, are they sincere? I've got no idea. How can a kid disappear like that, into thin air?'

There wasn't a summer holiday that year. They had been going to go to Cornwall, to stay on a farm. Rosie

remembered them planning it, how there would be cows in the fields and hens in the yard and even an old fat pony the owners might let them ride. And they would go to the nearby beaches. Joanna was scared of the sea – she shrieked when waves went over her ankles – but she loved building sandcastles and looking for shells, eating ice cream cones with chocolate Flakes stuck into the top.

Instead, Rosie went to her grandmother's house for a few weeks. She didn't want to go. She needed to be at home, for when Joanna was found. She thought Joanna might be upset if she wasn't there; it would be as if she didn't care enough to wait.

There were meetings in which detectives leafed through statements by fantasists, previous offenders, eyewitnesses who had seen nothing.

'I still think it's the father.'

'He has an alibi.'

'We've been through this. He could have driven back to the area. Just.'

'No one saw him. His own daughter didn't see him.'

'Maybe she did. Maybe that's why she won't say anything.'

'Anyway, anything she saw she won't remember now. It will just be memories of memories of suggestions. Everything's covered over.'

'What are you saying?'

'I'm saying she's gone.'

'Dead?'

'Dead.'

'You're giving up on her?'

'No.' He paused. 'But I am taking some of the men off the case.'

'That's what I said. You're giving up.'

One year later, a photograph enhanced by a new computer program, which even its inventor warned was speculative and unreliable, showed how Joanna might have changed. Her face was slightly filled out, her dark hair a little bit darker. Her tooth was still chipped and her smile was still anxious. Some newspapers carried it, but only on an inside page. There had been a murder of a particularly photogenic thirteen-year-old girl and this had dominated the headlines for weeks. Joanna was an old story now, a tingle in the public memory. Rosie stared at the picture until it blurred. She was scared she wouldn't recognize her sister when she saw her, that she would be a stranger. And she was scared that Joanna wouldn't recognize her either – or would know her but turn away from her. Sometimes she went and sat in Joanna's room, a room that hadn't been altered since the day she disappeared. Her teddy was on her pillow, her toys stacked in the underbed boxes, her clothes – which would be too small for her – neatly folded in drawers or hanging in the wardrobe.

Rosie was ten now. Next year, she would go to secondary school. She had begged to go to the one a mile and a half away in the next borough, two bus journeys, because there she would no longer be the girl who had lost her little sister. She would just be Rosie Vine, year seven, shy and quite small for her age, who did all right in every subject but wasn't the best at anything except, perhaps, biology. She was old enough to know that her father drank

more than he should. Sometimes her mother had to come and fetch her home because he couldn't look after her properly. She was old enough to feel that she was an older sister without a younger sister, and sometimes she felt Joanna's presence like a ghost – a ghost with a chipped tooth and a plaintive voice, asking her to wait. Sometimes she would see her on the street and her heart would miss a beat and then the face would resolve into the face of a stranger.

Three years after Joanna disappeared, they moved to a smaller house a mile or so away, nearer to Rosie's school. It had three bedrooms, but the third one was tiny, like a box room. Deborah Vine waited until Rosie had left in the morning before she packed away Joanna's things. She did it methodically, lifting soft piles of vests and shirts into boxes, folding up dresses and skirts and tying them into bin bags, trying not to look at the pink plastic dolls with their long manes of nylon hair and their fixed, staring eyes. In the new computer-enhanced image, Joanna looked quite composed, as if her childish anxiety had slipped away from her. Her chipped tooth had been replaced with an undamaged one.

Rosie started her periods. She shaved her legs. She fell in love for the first time, with a boy who barely knew she existed. She wrote her diary under her bedcovers and locked it with a silver key. She watched her mother dating a stranger with a bristly brown beard and pretended she didn't mind. She poured her father's drink down the sink, though she knew it would do no good. She went to her

grandmother's funeral and read a poem by Tennyson in a quiet voice no one could really hear. She cut her hair short and started going out with the boy she had been so smitten with when she was younger, but he couldn't live up to her idea of him. She kept a small pile of printouts in her underwear drawer: Joanna at six, seven, eight, nine. Joanna at thirteen. She thought her sister looked exactly like *she* did, and for some reason this made her feel worse.

'She's dead.' Deborah's voice was flat, quite calm.

'Have you come all this way to tell me that?'

'I thought we owed each other at least that much, Richard. Let her go.'

'You don't know she's dead. You're just abandoning her.'

'No.'

'Because you've found a new husband and now . . .' His glance at her pregnant belly was full of disgust. 'Now you're going to have another happy family.'

'Richard.'

'And forget all about her.'

'That's not fair. It's been eight years. Life has to go on, for all of us.'

'*Life has to go on*. Are you going to tell me that this is what Joanna would have wanted?'

'Joanna was five when we lost her.'

'When *you* lost her.'

Deborah stood up, thin legs on high heels and a round stomach pushing at her shirt. He could see her belly button. Her mouth was a thin, trembling line. 'You bastard,' she said.

'And now you're deserting her.'

'You want me to destroy myself as well?'

'Why not? Anything rather than *life has to go on*. But don't worry. I'm still waiting.'

When Rosie went to university she called herself Rosalind Teale, taking her step-father's name. She didn't tell her father. She still loved him, though she was scared by his chaotic, unchanging grief. She didn't want anyone to say: 'Rosie Vine? Why does that ring a bell?' Even though there was less and less chance of that. Joanna had melted into the past, was a wisp of memory now, a forgotten celebrity, a one-hit wonder. Sometimes, Rosie wondered if her sister was just a dream.

Deborah Teale – Vine, as was – prayed secretly, fiercely, for a son, not a daughter. But first Abbie and then Lauren arrived. She crouched over their baskets at night to hear them breathe; she clutched at their hands. She wouldn't let them out of her sight. They reached Joanna, they overtook her and they left her behind. In the attic, the boxes of Joanna's clothes stood unopened.

The case was never actually closed. Nobody made a decision. But there was less and less to report. Officers were reassigned. Meetings became more sporadic, then merged into other meetings, and then the case wasn't mentioned at all.

Rosie, Rosie. Wait for me!

Chapter One

It was ten to three in the morning. There were four people walking across Fitzroy Square. A young couple, huddled together in the wind, had made their way up from Soho where they had been at a club. For them, Sunday night was coming gradually to an end. Though they hadn't said it to each other, they were delaying the moment when they had to decide whether they were getting into separate cabs, or into the same cab. A dark-skinned woman in a brown raincoat and a transparent polythene hat tied under her chin was shuffling north along the east side of the square. For her it was Monday morning. She was going to an office on Euston Road, to empty bins and vacuum floors in the dark early morning for people she never saw.

The fourth person was Frieda Klein and for her it was neither Sunday night nor Monday morning but something in between. As she stepped into the square, the wind hit her full on. She had to push her hair away from her face so that she could see. Over the previous week the leaves on the plane trees had turned from red to gold but now the wind and rain had shaken them free and they were rippling around her like a sea. What she really wanted was to have London to herself. This was the closest she could get to that.

She stopped for a moment, undecided. Which way should she go? North, across Euston Road to Regent's

Park? That would be deserted all right, too early even for the runners. Sometimes in summer Frieda would go there in the middle of the night, climb over the fence and head into the darkness, look at the glitter on the water of the lake, listen to the sounds from the zoo. Not tonight, though. She didn't want to pretend that she wasn't in London. Not south either. That would take her across Oxford Street into Soho. Some nights she would lose herself in the oddity of the creatures who came out or stuck around in the middle of the night, the dodgy little cab firms who'd take you home for whatever they could get you to pay, the clusters of police, delivery vans dodging the crowds and the congestion charge, and, more and more, people who were still eating, still drinking, whatever time it was.

Not tonight. Not today. Not now with a new week just about to wake itself up reluctantly and blearily get going. A week that would have to face up to November, to darkness and rain, with only more darkness and more rain to come. It was a time when you ought to sleep and wake again in March or April or May. Sleep. Frieda had the sudden suffocating sense that she was surrounded by people lying asleep, alone or in pairs, in flats and houses and hostels and hotels, dreaming, watching films inside their heads. She didn't want to be one of them. She turned east, past the closed shops and restaurants. There was a flash of activity as she crossed Tottenham Court Road, with its night buses and taxis, but then it was quiet once more, and she could hear the clatter of her footsteps as she walked along past anonymous mansion blocks, shabby hotels, university buildings, even some houses that had

improbably survived. It was a place where many people lived but it didn't feel like it. Did it even have a name?

Two police officers sitting in a parked patrol car saw her as she approached Gray's Inn Road. They looked at her with a bored kind of concern. This wasn't necessarily a safe area for a woman to walk alone at night. They couldn't quite make her out. Not a prostitute. She wasn't particularly young, mid-thirties maybe. Long dark hair. Medium height. Her long coat hid her figure. She didn't look like someone on her way back from a party.

'Didn't fancy spending the whole night with him,' said one.

The other grinned. 'I wouldn't kick her out of bed on a night like this,' he said. He wound down the window as she approached. 'Everything all right, miss?' he asked, as she passed.

She just pushed her hands tightly into the pockets of her coat and walked on without giving any sign that she had heard.

'Charming,' said one of the officers, and returned to filling out the incident report on something that really hadn't been much of an incident at all.

As Frieda walked on, she heard the words of her mother in her ear. It wouldn't have hurt to say hello, would it? Well, what did she know? That was one of the reasons why she did these walks. So that she didn't have to talk, didn't have to be on show, be looked at and appraised. It was a time for thinking, or not thinking. Just walking and walking during those nights when sleep wouldn't come and when she could get the mess out of her head.

Sleep was meant to do that, but it didn't do it for her even when it came in little snatches. She crossed Gray's Inn Road – more buses and taxis – and walked down an alley, so small that it was like it had been forgotten about.

As she turned into King's Cross Road, she saw that she was approaching two teenage boys. They were dressed in hoodies and baggy jeans. One of them said something to her that she couldn't properly make out. She stared at him and he looked away.

Stupid, she said to herself. That was stupid. It was one of the main rules about walking in London: you don't make eye contact. It's a challenge. This time he had backed down, but you only needed one.

Almost without thinking, Frieda took a path that wound off the main road, then back and then off it again. For most people who worked there or drove through it, this was just an ugly and unremarkable part of London, office blocks, flats, a railway cutting. But Frieda was walking along the course of an old river. She had always been drawn to it. Once it had flowed through fields and orchards down to the Thames. It had been a place for people to sit by, to fish in. What would they have thought, men and women sitting on a summer evening, dangling their feet in the water, if they had seen its future? It had become a rubbish dump, a sewer, a ditch clogged with shit and dead animals and everything else that people couldn't be bothered to do anything with. Finally it had been built over and forgotten about. How could a river be forgotten about? When she walked this way, Frieda always stopped by a grating where you could still hear the river flowing deep below, like an echo of something. And when you

had left that behind, you could still walk between the banks rising on either side. Even the occasional street name hinted at the wharves where barges had been unloaded and before that the rises, the grass slopes where people sat and just watched the crystal water flow down into the Thames. That was London. Things built on things built on things built on things, each in their turn forgotten about but each somehow leaving a trace, if only a rush of water heard through a grating.

Was it a curse that the city covered so much of its past, or was it the only way a city could survive? Once she'd had a dream of a London where buildings and bridges and roads were demolished and excavated so that the ancient rivers flowing to the Thames could be opened up to the sky once more. But what would be the point? They were probably happier the way they were, secret, unnoticed, mysterious.

When Frieda reached the Thames, she leaned over as she always did. Most times you couldn't see where the stream flowed out of its pitiful little pipe, and this morning it was far too dark. She couldn't even hear the sound of its splash. Down here on the river, the southerly wind was fierce but it was strangely warm. It felt wrong on a dark November morning. She looked at her watch. It wasn't yet four. Which way? East End or West End? She chose West, crossed the river and headed upstream. Now, finally, she was tired, and the remainder of the walk was a blur: a bridge, government buildings, parks, grand squares, across Oxford Street, and by the time she felt the familiar cobblestones under her feet of the mews where she lived it was still so dark that she had to scrape around on her front door with her key to find the lock.