

The police arranged the meeting in the coffee shop. Katy's parents hadn't been sleeping, that much was obvious. Her father, Craig, kept his eyes down, hardly breathing while her mother sniffed intermittently, fighting back waves of tears. Ray, a man in his thirties with dirty blonde hair, stood beside me at the till as we bought the drinks.

'Maybe a coffee shop wasn't the best idea,' Ray said, looking around as he joined me at the till.

'I think we need to keep some normality.' I ordered our drinks and handed over the money. 'Being alone in a police room or something would be worse.'

Ray peered over his shoulder at Katy's parents.

'They lost their daughter?' I nodded. 'And you? Who did you lose?'

I still hadn't thought of an answer to this question. Just who was Bane to me? My teacher, my lover, my first, my friend. I bit my lip.

'A very close friend,' I took my coffee and turned back to the table. We sat in silence for a moment.

'So,' I said with very little flourish, placing my cup down on the table. 'Thank you for coming. I know this must be difficult but I thought that if we could get together and share then we could support each other through this.'

'Have the police told you anything?' Ray said.

'No.' My mind fled back to Murphy and I fought the urge to check my phone. 'Not yet.' There was another silence. I cleared my throat. 'Maybe if we shared our stories? I can go first. I visited the zoo with my friend. We went into the nocturnal house and I was looking into the enclosures. When I turned around he was gone. I couldn't find him.' I spoke quickly, trying to get the words out without allowing any tears to form. The worry was agony in my stomach, gnawing away at me.

Craig nodded.

'That's what happened to me. One minute she was there, the next...' he drifted off and tensed his jaw. I looked away out of respect and turned to Ray.

'I wasn't there. My sister, Maggie, and her little boy are zoo members. They go a lot. The police rang me and told me to go there. I didn't know what to think. I mean, what can happen in a zoo? Did a lion escape?' Ray attempted a half hearted chuckle. 'Anyway, she'd just disappeared. People said she stepped away from the pushchair and vanished. Some kind people took my nephew to the zoo staff. I don't know what would have happened to him if...what if...' Ray sighed. 'But just vanishing. I don't understand it.'

'No,' Craig's brow creased. 'I don't either. It felt like that with Katy.'

'You saw her vanish?' I asked.

'Well no, and I suppose it's plausible that someone just,' Craig stopped himself and glanced at his wife. 'But no one saw anything. And surely I would have caught up with them? She was only out of my sight for a moment.'

That was it, I thought. Bane had just vanished too.

'Do you think someone abducted them?' Ray mused.

'No,' I said. 'Bane can't be taken by force. There is no way that someone just took him.'

'Not even with chloroform?'

I hesitated.

'No, that takes more than just a moment and Bane's big. I'd have caught up with them before they could have dragged him far.'

'Are you seriously telling me that they all just vanished? Into thin air?'

Ray stared at me and I stared back, waiting for the words to come.

'Of course not,' I said carefully.

'We're all in this together,' Craig said. 'That's something,' he turned to his wife. 'We have each other. We should swap phone numbers, in case anyone needs anything.'

We each murmured agreement and Katy's mother found a pen and some paper in her handbag.

'It's been lovely meeting you all but we really must go,' Craig stood, taking his wife's hand as I shoved the list of numbers into my pocket.

'Ring us if you need anything. Or if you hear anything. Let me know,' I tried to say it gently but it came out rushed, almost begging. Craig nodded once and led his silent wife away.

'I can't imagine losing your child like that,' I said, almost to myself. 'Who's looking after your nephew?' I turned to Ray.

'Me. Me and my wife. She's in pieces, we don't know what to tell him. So far it's just that mummy's gone away for a little while but she'll be back. I hate lying to him, god knows what it will do to him when he grows up.'

'You're not lying,' I said thoughtfully.

'What?'

'She will be back. I'm getting my friend back, no matter what. And I'll bet wherever he is, that's where she is. And Katy too.' I moved to stand when Ray grabbed my wrist.

'Do you know something?'

I opened my mouth to speak when my mobile began ringing. Thrusting my hand into my pocket to retrieve it, I shrugged out of Ray's hold.

'Ring me if you hear anything.' I turned and walked out of the coffee shop, Murphy's name flashing on my phone's screen.

'Hey.'

'Emily, I've looked through all the records I can find on the disappearances.'

'And?'

'Nothing. The only thing that's come out of the investigation so far is that the zoo has a couple of new animals. They have squat.'

'What kind of new animals?'

'A couple of penguins that arrived recently and a new bat-eared fox. Why? You don't think a penguin took Bane do you?'

'Don't be ridiculous. What about the bat-eared fox? Where would it be in the zoo?'

'I don't know. It didn't say. Sorry. I have to go. Are you ok? I can still come to you if you like.'

'No, no I'm fine. Thank you Murphy.'

'Joe, please. You have to stop calling me Murphy.'

That didn't sit too comfortably with me; even if we had seen each other naked, he was still the officer charged with arresting me for murder and now he wanted to be on a first name basis.

'Call me if you hear anything else. Thanks.'

I hung up and walked to my car, repeating bat-eared fox to myself so I wouldn't forget, the idea of three people vanishing into thin air niggled at my mind. This definitely felt like something the police couldn't handle. I needed to get my laptop and find an internet connection.

As I left the coffee shop behind me I glanced back and caught Ray watching me leave.