

DOROTHY
KOOMSON

GIVE
HIM
TO ME

H
REVIEW

Prologue

Robyn

28 February, Secret Location

‘Hello, Mr Fikowsky,’ I say when my former social worker finally prises his eyelids apart.

‘Whaaaa—?’ he mumbles, trying to remember how to speak.

‘You scared me there. I thought I’d hit you too hard or in the wrong spot or something. You’ve been out for quite a few hours.’

He blinks his bleary eyes and then moans loudly because the pain in his skull has obviously just made contact with every single nerve in his pain centres and they are not playing nicely together. He moves his right hand to his head, trying to check the areas of particular tenderness even though all of it hurts. He realises quickly that he can’t touch his head. He can’t in fact move either of his hands because he is tied to a chair in the middle of the darkened space we are in.

I watch terror bolt across his face, pooling in his eyes – he’s just discovered his feet are bound to the chair, too.

GIVE HIM TO ME

‘Who are you?’ he demands. ‘What do you want from me? I don’t have any money.’

‘I don’t want your money, Mr Fikowsky,’ I reassure. ‘I want something far more valuable.’

‘What are you talking about? What do you want? I demand you let me go. Right now!’

I step into the light then. Allow him to see me, dressed all in black from my skin-tight jeggings to my black T-shirt to my black utility jacket, my hood up and my neck scarf in place over my nose and mouth.

He quivers, properly scared now. Now he feels what I felt every time I knew he was in the children’s home. Now he knows what it feels like when someone cruelly exercises the power they have over you.

‘Please, please don’t hurt me,’ he begs. ‘Please.’

‘That all rather depends on whether you answer my questions in the way I need you to or not.’

‘Please, I haven’t done anything.’

‘We both know that’s not true,’ I say. ‘But we’re not here about that. I have some very specific questions. If you answer them, I’ll let you go.’

‘Please, I don’t know anything about anything,’ he begs.

DOROTHY KOOMSON

‘But that’s just it – you do. You told me years and years ago that you do.’

I pull down my hood, take my hat off and shove it into my coat pocket, then I lower the black snood from round my face. ‘Hello, Mr Fikowsky,’ I say with a wide smile.

‘You!’ he says. ‘I know you!’

‘You sure do.’

‘Untie me this instant! How dare you! Untie me!’

‘Weren’t you listening to me? I told you very clearly that I would let you go when you give me the answers I need.’

‘Untie me, you silly little bitch!’

My shoulders sag. He used to call me that and other stuff when we were alone. He obviously hasn’t changed his attitude towards me, so that means we’re doing this the hard way. I move out of the circle of light and grab the silver trolley, wheel it into view. I stop it right in front of Mr Fikowsky. It has an array of dental tools as well as a hammer and a screwdriver, a wrench and pliers, and a few other D.I.Y. tools, including a blowtorch.

‘I hoped it wouldn’t come to this. But you tossing around the B word like that means this is clearly needed.’

GIVE HIM TO ME

I pick up the pliers, hold them right up as I examine them, moving them this way and that, making sure Mr Fikowsky sees them, *properly* sees them. I know the exact moment when he understands what he is seeing, the precise second when all the scenarios about what I might do with them click into place in his brain. I know because that's when he sits completely still, when he stops being angry and indignant, when he stops thinking he can bully me into being fourteen again so I'll comply with his every demand. It's when he becomes very, *very* afraid.

I finally have his full, focused attention.

'Now, Mr Fikowsky,' I say, approaching him with the pliers, 'where the fuck is my father?'

Part 1

Kez

18 March, Brighton

‘So, which international agent of mystery will be spilling their guts on your therapy couch today?’ my husband asks from the other side of the kitchen. ‘James Bond? Whatshisname from *Spooks*? Or I know’ – he clicks his fingers – ‘is it Danger Mouse?’

I’ve been staring into space, I think, and haven’t offered him even the smallest morsel of conversation since Zoey and Jonah went upstairs to get ready for school. Jeb is obviously trying again to lift me out of the fug I’m in and bring me into the present with him.

‘Something like that,’ I say with a smile before I take a sip of matcha green tea from the pitch-black mug our twelve-year-old made in DT class. ‘Although Danger Mouse doesn’t sit still long enough for me to get a proper read on him.’

Jeb smirks, throws down the white dishcloth that he’s been wiping the sides down with and comes to the table, pulls over a chair to sit closer to me. ‘No, seriously, what are you up to today?’

Without moving my slightly bowed head, I lift my eyes to meet his beautiful liquid brown eyes. We hold each other’s gaze for a beat too long, a moment too tense before I lower my eye line to contemplate the pale green-brown liquid that’s been rendered black by the colour of my

cup. I don't want to say it because it feels like it's the only thing I say to him nowadays when he asks me about my work. But I have to.

'Let me guess: you can't tell me,' he states.

'I'm interviewing today,' I say, deciding to give him something. I hate having to keep things from him. It feels alien, wrong. Since we got together properly over fifteen years ago, he has known almost everything about me. I haven't hesitated to share everything with him. But when I accepted this job at Insight, a government-adjacent organisation of psychologists and profilers, I signed all sorts of documents that make it impossible to be as open with him as usual. And besides, with all the things I've been through as part of this job and my previous, related job, I know that it's better – *safer* – for him not to know. 'It's the final stage of the interviews. We've been talking to them for three months. And this is the residential bit. They're here for three days with all sorts of intense stuff to do.'

'Three months? Must be a big job.'

'Must be,' I mumble into the depths of my cup.

'Do you know who you want to get the job?' Jeb asks.

'As with most things I do, it's more a case of who I don't want to get the job. Or, rather, who shouldn't get the job but probably will because the other people will want that particular psychopath over another, despite what I say.'

'How many other people are there on the interview panel?'

I think about it for a moment. *I can tell him this*, I decide. *It won't make any difference if I tell him that*. 'Seven in total.'

'Seven? That's a lot of interviewers.'

'Well, it's a very high—' *Ah, nope, can't say any more about that*. I shrug in the place of words.

If it bothers him that I've suddenly stopped talking, he doesn't show it. 'What are the other interviewers like?'

'What are they like? Well . . . the lead interviewer is Ben Horson. He's . . . Well, he keeps calling me "Miss" and treats me like I'm only there to take the minutes and make the tea instead of, you know, psychologically profile the person in front of me to make sure they're not too much of a menace to be put into a position of power. And when I do make tea, he never says thank you. To be fair, virtually none of the other men do. They kind of assume either I or Sumaira, the other woman on the panel, will make the tea and they never say thank you.'

'You make tea?'

'Yes?'

'You. Make tea?' Jeb's divinely full lips twitch with amusement. 'I'd pay real money to see that in action.'

'What you implying? I can make tea!' I declare. 'I make tea all the time.'

'Oh, I know you can make tea. I'm just . . . *surprised* you make it for someone who demands it of you, doesn't say thank you and treats you like the help. I'm . . . *surprised* you don't just dash it on their laps and walk out.'

Not as surprised as I am, that's for sure. 'Yeah, well, needs must.'

'And what need is that?' he asks, pointedly.

Can't tell you that, either, I think, so I lower my head a little more closely to the cup I have my hands wrapped around. My morning brew is rapidly cooling, the bitter scent of green tea and matcha disappearing as its temperature drops. 'Sumaira is a funny one,' I say instead. I can talk about the people, just not the job or the interviewees for the job. Or what I've found out that has me sitting here fretting rather than going into the office. 'She's a literal enigma. She seems really demure

and gentle, lots of glossy black hair, nose ring, intricate henna tattoos on her hands, but she has some shady special-forces stuff going on in her background – I’m sure of it. And the fact they didn’t say exactly which department she worked for, just mumbled something about security and moved on, tells me there is so much going on there.

‘And then there’s Ed Baxter. He’s all right actually. Over the last three months he’s actually made me tea.’

‘Oh yeah?’ Jeb asks innocently, even though his interest has been piqued.

‘Yes, dear husband, he’s made Sumaira *and* me tea. And has never asked us to make him one, unless we offered.’ I side-eye my husband’s moment of high alert that there might be another man on the scene. I mean, after being married to me all this time, you’d think he’d credit me with it taking more than a cup of posh Tetley and nice biscuits to turn my head. ‘There are a couple of others. Andres Neimeyer is boring as all hell. And he speaks so slowly. I’m always wanting to speed him up. And then there’s Lou Langley who never speaks unless it’s to demand a cup of tea. That’s literally all he says. Even in our post-interview debriefs he just sits there not saying a thing, just pulling faces.’

‘They sound like a delightful group. And what about Dennis?’

My entire being – body and mind – becomes rigid, tense, at the mere mention of the man who runs Insight. The man who I’d been forced to make a deal with that saw me going back to work for him as his deputy late last year. I hate his name being in Jeb’s mouth. I hate his name being spoken into the atmosphere of our house. I don’t want him to infect my home like he has infected my working life. Few things push me right to the cliff edge of sanity, but talking about *him* is one of them.

‘What about him?’ I ask quietly.

‘Is he in on these interviews?’

‘He’s always in these interviews. Even if he’s not in the room for the earlier stages, he watches via a live feed from elsewhere in the building. But today he’ll sit in.’ Today he’ll sit in the corner, not saying anything, just observing.

My tea is cold now and I’ve lost my taste for it because I’m thinking about and talking about that man. I’ve known Dennis pretty much as long as I’ve known Jeb, and how much I hate him is inversely proportional to how much I love Jeb. Dennis Chambers sours everything. *Everything*. I carefully place the cup on the table, return to staring into space. Unexpectedly, Jeb’s long fingers cover my hand, a warm, gentle touch that startles me. Our hands – like our bodies and minds – have always fitted like they were created to be together. It sounds soft and a bit woo-woo to think like that, but ever since I met him at a house party back in 1998, I’ve always thought that he and I were meant to be together.

‘Do they have guns?’ he asks unexpectedly.

‘Why do you ask that?’

‘Just curious.’

‘They’re not supposed to and we’re all technically searched before we enter the interview room . . .’

‘But?’

‘But I’ve seen flashes of firearms before, so clearly some searches are more equal than others. Although, for the people meant to be doing the searches, they’re kind of in a tough spot . . . I mean, if the big boss of one of the top departments wants to carry a gun, are you – Mr Security Guard – going to stop him or are you going to decide you didn’t see nuffink?’

Jeb is silent, just nods, clearly disturbed by this revelation. ‘Why would they take a gun to an interview, though?’

‘Who knows? I suspect it’s a silent threat. A show of strength? Like, you know, look at me, I can be dangerous, don’t mess? Something like that.’

Jeb is silent again, nodding like before. ‘You were whimpering in your sleep again last night,’ he says gently, his hand squeezing mine as though trying to comfort and reassure me. ‘What were you dreaming about?’

The dream unfurls in my mind: *‘PICK UP THE GUN, KEZ!’ Brian Kershaw’s deathly, ghost-white face screams at me. ‘Pick up the gun, Kez!’ I shake my head, no. I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to pick it up. Brian’s near-skeletal hand grabs my hand, forces it towards the gun that is lying on the ground. It’s the gun that has just blasted a hole in his chest, and I don’t want to touch it. I don’t even want to be near it. ‘Pick up the gun, Kez!’ he screams. ‘PICK IT UP!’*

I force the memory of the dream away and say: ‘I . . . erm . . . I don’t properly remember.’ My husband doesn’t need to know that my friend who was shot dead twenty-two years ago has begun to invade my dreams; that every night he comes to see me while I’m asleep and tells me in different ways to pick up the gun that killed him. Jeb doesn’t need to know that I have no escape, no respite from Brian and how and why he died.

‘Kez—’

RINGGGGG . . . My mobile, lying face down on the table beside our hands, intones, interrupting the moment. I withdraw my hand from his, and pick up the phone.

Unknown number calling . . .

flashes on the screen. I check the kitchen clock, the watch on my wrist and the oven clock. All of them say that I should have been in my office, at my desk, over an hour ago.

'I have to go,' I tell Jeb.

'Can you just wait a second?'

'I really can't. I have to go.'

'Kez—'

'Mum, how many GCSEs do you have?' Zoey asks, wandering into the kitchen, closely followed by Jonah. Both of them are wearing uniforms that are too small, Jonah especially looks like an international rugby player who has poured himself into a suit for a formal dinner. I make a mental note to scour the parents' forums to find preloved items that will see them through to the end of the year.

'Why do you want to know?' I reply.

'We were just wondering. Jonah thinks it's three but I think it's four. Or even five.'

'You cheeky mares! I've got ten. Or is it eleven? Well, anyway, it's double figures.'

They both look at each other, clearly not an ounce of belief between them. 'Name them,' Jonah says.

'Name them?' I reply.

'Yes,' my daughter says, 'name them.'

'Come on, Kez, name them,' Jeb adds, smirking.

'Don't you start!' I protest.

'Come on, Mum. If it's all like you say, just name them and we can all go about our business nice and easy,' Jonah states reasonably.

'It was a long time ago, but OK, I've got: Biology, Chemistry, three English—'

'How can you have three English GCSEs?' Zoey interjects.

'Yes, Kez, how?' Jeb ribs.

He and I have discussed this before and he never quite believes me when I explain: 'It's English Language, English Lit and Spoken

English. You had to get your English Language to get your Spoken English, which was a separate half-hour exam. But if you didn't get your English Language, then you didn't get your Spoken English, no matter how well you did.'

Jonah and Zoey look at each other, then at me. 'Nah, we're not having that,' they both say at the same time.

'You don't have to "have it". I've got a certificate somewhere. It's a separate exam. Separate mark. So, where are we?'

'Five, if you count "Spoken English",' Jeb says.

'And, as we have established, we *are* counting Spoken English. Then I have History, Maths, French, RS and one more . . .' My memory fails me. 'Eek, I can't remember.'

'It obviously wasn't Geography,' my son says.

'What do you mean?' I ask, offended.

They all fall about laughing. 'You're so bad at Geography, Mum,' Zoey says, recovering first. 'You never know anything!'

I can't really argue with that, but I try anyway: 'That is not true. I know stuff! I know lots of Geography stuff. Like oxbow lakes and . . . long-shore drift! Coastal erosion!' I'm dragging all of that from my memory of their homework past, of course. 'See, I know Geography stuff. I could well have a GCSE in it.'

'What's the capital of Kazakhstan?' Jonah asks.

I want to shake an outraged fist at him as I glance from one expectant face to another, all of them waiting for an answer, none of them willing to give me a break or a hint. 'Oh, would you look at the time. I have to get to work,' I say, getting to my feet and grabbing my phone and car keys. 'It's a shame I haven't got time to answer your question right now. I mean, I'd love to. But, you know, work and everything.'

'Don't worry, Mum,' Zoey says with a smile that comes from

somewhere intrinsically evil, I'm sure, 'we'll just pick up where we left off, tonight.'

'And no searching it up on the internet,' Jeb says as I kiss each of them goodbye.

'Would I?' I ask, aghast that my husband would suggest such a thing.

'Would you indeed,' Jeb says, receiving my kiss, but holding on to my fingers a little longer after my lips brush his cheek. He hasn't forgotten the conversation we started earlier. I haven't, either, but the difference between us is that while I know it's probably necessary we have it, I also know that we should absolutely leave it alone.

'Capital of Kazakhstan, Mum, can't wait to hear your answer tonight,' Jonah calls. 'Can't wait.'

'Yeah, neither can I,' I call back, wondering how I'm going to find out the answer to stop the Geography shaming that's obviously coming my way.

Robyn

1 January, Secret Location

Just so we're clear, this isn't a confession.

What I am writing here is my last will and testament.

By the time all of this is over, I, Robyn 'Avril' Managa, will be dead. Right now, writing this, I am OK with that. I suppose I have to be. You don't start down the path I am currently on and expect to survive. I have to do this, though.

I have to find my father.

I haven't seen him in twelve years. And I have no clue where he is. I don't even know if he's still alive. There is a group of people who do know where he is. They helped him to disappear and now I need them to help me find him.

I am writing this to give my side of the story. To help you understand why I have to do this. And that's why it's not a confession. A confession means I think I'm guilty, that I believe the ends do not justify the

DOROTHY KOOMSON

means. That's not true. I have tried in every way I know to find him. I have knocked on so many doors, run so many searches, begged the people I know who could help me, but nothing.

Nothing.

I have to find him. I can't put it off any longer.

So I am going to make the people who could help but won't, help me. By any means necessary.

Let me be honest right here and say that I'm not going to tell you everything. I can't. That's the long and the short of it. There are other people involved that I need to protect. So if anyone finds this before I've found my father, I need to do everything I can to keep their identities hidden and their lives safe. I know that sounds overly dramatic, but that's just the way it is. When it comes to other people, I can't afford to be reckless.

What else is there to say at this moment? Nothing, I suppose, except: before things go too far, or get too out of hand, I hope they give him to me.

I really hope they do.

Kez

18 March, Brighton

I pull into my parking spot in the underground car park of the building where Insight is situated, knowing that even though it's early, I'm late. Which means I have to practically run through security on the ground floor, flashing my pass, and then run-walk-wheeze-pause-run-walk-almost-collapse-get-a-second-wind-run-wheeze up to the twelfth floor.

Insight is a government-ish organisation now located on the east side of central Brighton. I call it a government-ish or a government-adjacent entity because Insight isn't actually, officially a government department. We're based in this shiny, newly established government building in the financial district of Brighton, and our wages are paid from government money, but we're technically an independent group of specially recruited psychologists, therapists, behavioural scientists and profilers who are tasked with assisting the government and intelligence services in many different capacities. Various departments come to Insight for assistance with various problems that no one else can or will help with. Sometimes Insight helps with interviewee evaluation, sometimes with criminal profiling, sometimes agent mental fitness assessments, sometimes we assist the police on certain types of crimes. Sometimes we provide therapy for those who are traumatised or emotionally unsettled as a result of

their work in the intelligence services. Sometimes we just advise on how to frame messaging of a particular government campaign. We are a broad church operation, with a vast remit, even though, *technically*, we don't exist.

I started working here last October, after I made a deal with the devil that is Dennis. I was in a no-win situation, literally with a gun to my head, and Dennis helped me out on the understanding that I would work for him again. I'd met him when I was twenty-two and recruited to the Human Insight Unit, Dennis's original department in London, and he had done everything he could to stop me leaving when I had decided it was time to be on my merry way out. But after the incident where Brian was killed, Dennis had no choice – he had to let me go. So when, years later, I walked back into his life asking for help, it was too good an opportunity to pass up to force me to work with him again.

I dash into the lower level of the open-plan office with space and banks of desks for forty people. They are all empty, the computers and phones waiting patiently for people to arrive and bring them to life. Dennis is in his glass-walled office, next to mine, and he impassively watches me take the steps two at a time to the mezzanine level where our offices are located. He nods a curt 'good morning' to me as I pass his office, and I pretend not to see it so I can ignore him.

Sumaira Wilson, who I was just telling Jeb about, is sitting on the low yellow sofa in my office when I enter. I met her three months ago when Insight was asked to help with recruiting a replacement head for one of the most secret departments in the intelligence services. The man who originally had the job had lost his wife and children in a fire at the family home and had been signed off long-term sick. Because his family's deaths had been deemed potentially suspicious and were still being investigated, the official story about his departure was that

he had been given a position overseas. We were finally at the end of a very long and arduous process, with the final three candidates being interviewed today.

‘Sorry, sorry,’ I say to Sumaira as she uncrosses her legs and stands in her high, high heels. She smooths down her A-line skirt, pulls her black leather jacket into place and slightly adjusts the large bow of her pink silk blouse that sits at her throat. She then bends to retrieve the box file that was sitting next to her on the sofa. It contains everything I need for today’s interviews and she smiles as she goes to hand it to me.

Instead of taking it from her, I hesitate, then I take a step back away from her. Once I take possession of this box, I will be putting myself on a particular trajectory that will be virtually impossible to divert myself away from. Once I take this file, I’ll be accepting that I am a real part of Insight, not – as I try to convince myself every day – just visiting until I can somehow escape. Once I take this file, I’ll be admitting to myself that I will probably be doing this job for ever, because everything will become set in stone.

‘Can I ask you something before you give me this?’ I say.

‘Of course,’ Sumaira replies pleasantly.

‘Do you know what the capital of Kazakhstan is?’

She knits together her eyebrows, eyeing me suspiciously. ‘Yes, of course. Doesn’t everyone?’

‘You’d think, wouldn’t you?’ I say. ‘I mean, can you believe there are people out there who don’t know?’

‘I’ll see you in the meeting,’ she says, and pushes the box file even closer to me.

I have no choice. I have to, reluctantly, relieve her of the burden. I have to effectively seal my fate.

Robyn

From Robyn's Last Will & Testament

Devoted family man kidnapped, wife killed after armed robbers raid Sussex home

By Ted Hartley

16 July 2012

A 12-year-old girl has been left devastated, feared orphaned, after masked robbers raided her home, killing her mother and kidnapping her father. The girl, who cannot be named to protect her identity, is said to have called the police after sitting with her mother's body for several hours.

Police say the brave youngster told them how her mother had tried to protect her from the intruders, after they tied up her father. The girl went on to say that after killing her mother, the four masked men beat her father and then took him with them when they left.

GIVE HIM TO ME

The break-in occurred while the girl's mother was cooking dinner and the devoted father, 40, was helping her with her homework. Although Mr X is understood to have had a high-level job in a large corporation, police are investigating suggestions that Mrs X, also 40, may have known the armed thugs, who are thought to have been from London.

The young girl is understood to be in the care of family and friends, who have all rallied round and are praying for the safe return of Mr X, described by those who know him as devoted to his family, hard-working and selfless. 'He was a pillar of the community,' said one neighbour, who prefers to remain anonymous. 'This has rocked our neighbourhood and it will take a long time to recover.'

Another neighbour, who also prefers to remain anonymous, added that Mrs X hadn't integrated with the community like her husband had. 'She seemed like a very private person who didn't want to spend too much time around us. I think she missed London and the people there.'

Police are appealing for any witnesses who may have seen or heard anything at the family's semi-remote home in Sussex to contact them on the number below.

Picture caption: Mr and Mrs X with their daughter during happier times. (Faces obscured to preserve anonymity)

A lot of people will know my story without realising it, because names, most photos and the exact location were all withheld to protect me. There was a fear the kidnappers might come back, might try to grab me

DOROTHY KOOMSON

to use as leverage to get my father to do what they wanted. Or that having seen the story about my family in the press, other kidnappers would attempt to cash in by snatching me. I had to move, I had to change my name and I had to cut my hair. That last part was because I got my mother's blood in it and it was too much trouble for them to wash it out, so they just cut my hair instead.

It's all lies, of course. That story that was published in the papers is nonsense from start to finish. My father wasn't kidnapped; he was there when the first police officer arrived on the scene. And he told that officer a similar version of the story to the one published in the papers. Not the kidnapped bit, obviously. My father told the officer that home invaders had killed his wife and tried to take him. Because of my dad's job, he was immediately whisked out of there to a safe location. After the rest of the police arrived to find the crime scene how it was described in the papers, I was taken to be with him.

Forty-eight hours later, I listened to my father confess to having had what he called a 'psychotic break' and killing my mother during said 'psychotic break', and the people who he confessed to decided to keep the kidnapping story to cover for the fact he'd disappeared and I went into care.

And that journalist guy, Ted Hartley, he wrote my father's initial made-up version of what happened to my mother. Ted Hartley knew it was lies. He sat in a room with my father and wrote the story, so it could be instantly approved by the people who were working on getting my dad into witness protection. He knew it was lies but he wrote it anyway. I'm sure they paid him very well for his efforts.

I've read that article so many times over the years. I know it off by heart but I still read it. I still take in via my eyes the full horror of what it says. Not just the lies and omissions, but the very specific way it lies. When I was twelve and I first read it, I knew something wasn't right beyond it being a pack of lies. I knew there was stuff being said but couldn't decipher what or where my feelings of disgust were coming from.

As I got older, as I learnt to read between the lines of all sorts of things and situations, well, there it was to see: the hint that Mum was involved somehow, that she was in with the 'thugs' and they had turned on her. The framing of my father as an angel who took the time to do homework with his daughter even though he had such a high-powered job. The neighbour – who never existed – who told the world my mum was stand-offish, rude and who preferred rough London over genteel Sussex. The reality was: Dad never spoke to the neighbours. Even if they'd been right next door instead of a fair walk away, like they were because our house had quite a bit of land around it, I'm sure he still wouldn't have spoken to them. He was always sneery and condescending about the people in the village, and he very rarely sat down to do homework with me in all the time I lived with him.

That was all Mum. She would go over to the neighbours, despite the distance, to say hello and bring them stuff she'd baked. She was always entering cakes in the village fete competitions and making them slightly below par so she wouldn't win and cause an incident. She took me to church almost every Sunday, even though people would whisper and stare at the only two brown faces in the village.

They decided to add to the article the formal family photo – Dad at the back, Mum next to him and me in front with Mum’s hand on my shoulder – with circles over our faces for one reason only: they wanted everyone to see that the decent, hard-working pillar of the community father was a well-dressed white man, and that the possible gang-connected ‘mother’ was a Black woman. I was in the room when Ted Hartley said: ‘Let’s put a picture of them in, tug at the heartstrings, make them realise that the woman could have had gang connections, what with that hairstyle and nails.’ By which he meant plaits and nicely shaped nails.

I’m telling you all this to explain that I’m starting with him: Ted Hartley.

It’s the logical thing to do. They brought him in to manage our public narrative, to tell this ridiculous story about my dad being kidnapped – possibly dead – and me being cossetted and loved by a whole legion of family and friends. Every few years he’ll rattle off a ‘whatever happened to Mr X who was kidnapped after his dodgy wife was killed’ story and I suspect he does that to make sure they keep paying him for his silence. Oh yes, they kept paying him well after the story was published. So, as I said, I suspect he periodically needs to remind them that he could cause a lot of problems if he ever wrote an exposé about what really happened. I also suspect, since he was brought in so quickly, my dad’s story wasn’t the first time he’s done that sort of work for them. I often wonder if he was ex-intelligence services, who was placed in the media so he could do things like that for them. Either way, those periodic stories tell me that he is in touch with the

GIVE HIM TO ME

people running the Protected Persons Service (formerly witness protection). That he knows stuff about my dad.

So he is the one I need to speak to first.

He is the one who I'll try out my new interview technique on first.