He arrives with time to spare. Reverse-parking, he gets out and the cold hits him. Slapping him hard in the face and stinging his skin. He smells good. Expensive.

He's parked a few hundred yards from the school at the viewing point. On a clear day there's an uninterrupted vista across the lake, over to the mountains beyond. In better weather there'd be an ice-cream van, Japanese tourists taking photographs. Not today, though. Not with the clouds so low in the sky, and not with the autumn darkness fast approaching.

The lake water reflects the trees. It's a muddy, coffee-coloured brown – soon to be slate-grey – and the air is still.

Maybe he should get a dog, he ponders briefly. Something friendly – a spaniel perhaps, or one of those white, fluffy things. Kids love dogs, don't they? It might just be worth a go.

He checks for signs of life but for the moment he's still alone. It's just him, watching. Sizing up the scene, weighing up the risks.

Risk assessment is part of his job. Mostly he just makes stuff up, putting down on paper whatever the fire-safety officer wants to read. Along with a few extras, though, enough to give the impression that he actually gives a shit.

This is different. This, he really does need to look at carefully. Because he knows he can be rash. He knows he can be lacking in the necessary thoroughness and can end up paying for it later. He can't afford for that to happen now. Not with this.

He checks his watch. Tons of time before he's expected elsewhere. That's the great thing about his job, it leaves plenty of time for this other . . . interest.

That's how he's thinking of it at the moment, just an interest. Nothing serious. He's figuring things out, seeing if he likes it. Kind of the way one might do with evening classes.

'Come along for a couple of sessions of calligraphy before you pay in full.'

'Conversational French might not be for you, after all.'

He knows his interest can wane quickly, but that's what makes him successful, because don't all successful people have a low boredom threshold?

As a child he'd been told he couldn't stick at anything, couldn't sit still and focus on one thing at a time. He can still be like that so he needs to check before committing. He wants to be sure. He wants to be certain he's going to follow it through before taking the first step.

He checks his watch. Three forty. They'll be here soon – the first few making their way home.

He gets back inside his car and waits.

His plan is to gauge his reaction. See if what he thinks will happen does happen. Then he'll know. Then he'll know for sure.

When he spots them his pulse flickers. Each is coatless,

hatless, wearing shoes inappropriate for the season. The first to pass in front of the car are a couple of girls. Dyed hair, sulky expressions, big, shapeless legs.

No, he thinks, that's not it. That's not what he wants at all.

Next are two groups of boys. Fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds. Slapping each other across the backs of heads, laughing at nothing. One of them glances his way before sticking two fingers up. This makes him laugh. Harmless enough, he thinks.

That's when he sees her.

She's alone. Walking purposefully. Spine erect, with short, neat steps. She's around twelve – though she could be older. She might just be young-looking for her age.

She passes in front of the car and again his pulse quickens. He feels a shiver of pleasure flash through him as, momentarily, she slows. She's hanging back from the group of boys, unsure of what to do. He watches rapt as her face changes, watches as it takes on a determined expression, and at once she makes the bold decision to overtake.

Half skipping, half running, she flits off the pavement and picks up her pace. She's fawn-like! he thinks, totally delighted by her. Her slim ankles are moving quickly as she pulls away from the group.

He glances down and sees that his palms are wet. And it's then that he knows for sure. Smiling, he realizes he had not been wrong to come here.

He drops down the sun visor and checks his reflection. He looks exactly the same as he did ten minutes ago, but marvels at how different he feels. It's as if all the pieces have

clicked together, and he understands, perhaps for the first time, what people mean when they say, 'It just feels right.'

Turning the ignition, he flicks on the heated seat and, still smiling, heads towards Windermere.

DAY ONE

Tuesday

1

I WAKE UP MORE tired than when I went to sleep. I've had five and a half hours and, after hitting the snooze button for the third time, I lift my head.

It's the kind of tired I'm beyond finding reasons for. You know the sort, you first notice it and you think: What is *wrong* with me? I must have some crazy blood disorder. Or, worse, I must have contracted something really awful because no one can feel this tired. Can they?

But I've had the checks. The blood tests came back normal. My GP – a wily old guy who I'm guessing has had more than his fair share of women in complaining of being exhausted all the time – broke the news to me with a wry smile. 'Sorry, Lisa,' he said, 'but this thing you're suffering from . . . it's just life.'

Often I feel like I'm in a giant social experiment. As if some bright spark decided to get all the women of the western world together as part of one big study: Let's educate them! Let's give them good, meaningful work to do! Then let's see what happens when they procreate. Let's watch it *blow*!

You think I'm moaning.

I think I'm moaning.

That's the worst part. I can't even complain without feeling guilty, because I've got everything. Everything a person could possibly want. Should want. And I do. I want all of it.

Where did I go to? I think, looking in the bathroom mirror as I brush my teeth. I used to be so nice. I used to have time for people. Now I'm in a state of constant tired irritation and I hate it.

I'm overwhelmed. That's the only word I can use to describe myself. That's what it will say on my headstone.

Lisa Kallisto: she was just so overwhelmed.

I'm the first up. Sometimes my eldest gets downstairs before me if her hair is going through an unruly patch, if she needs to devote extra attention to it. But, usually, at six forty, it's just me.

'Get up an hour earlier,' the magazines say. Embrace the quiet time, the time before the frenzy starts. Plan your day, make your tick list, drink your hot water with a slice of lemon in it. Detox and you *will* feel the benefits.

I get the coffee going and start scooping kibble into bowls. We have three dogs, all Staffordshire Bull Terrier crosses – not what I'd pick if I had the choice, but they're good dogs. Clean, good-natured, good with the kids, and as I let them out of the utility room where they sleep, they fire past me in a rush of giddiness, sit by their bowls, expectant. 'Go ahead,' I say, and they dive in.

Walking them in the morning is generally my husband's job, because Joe often works late. You're

imagining him in an office, tie pulled loose, hair ruffled, deadline looming? I do it myself sometimes. Never thought I'd marry a taxi driver. Especially one with 'Joe le Taxi' painted on the side of his people carrier in great big silver letters.

Joe did an airport run down to Heathrow last night. Some Arabs offered him double the usual fare if he acted as their personal driver for the time they were here in the Lakes. They wanted the usual: trips to Wordsworth's house, Beatrix Potter's farm, boat rides on Ullswater, Kendal Mint Cake. I heard him roll into bed around four, round about the time I'd woken up panicking that I'd forgotten to post a Congratulations on Your New Baby card out to one of my kennel girls.

'Get a good tip?' I mumbled, my face pushed hard into the pillow, as Joe wriggled in next to me, smelling of beer.

He always keeps a couple of cans in the car if he's on a late. Then, he says, he can get straight off to sleep the minute he climbs into bed. I'm sick of telling him it is not good – taxi driver swigging away at the wheel – but he's beyond stubborn.

'Tipped me a hundred quid,' he answered, giving my buttock a quick squeeze, '. . . and I'm planning on spending the lot on new underwear for you.'

'You mean for you.' I yawned. 'I need a new exhaust.'

For the past eight years I've bought new underwear for Joe's birthday – underwear for me. Every year I question him – 'What do you want?' – and every year he stares at me, like, *Do you really need to ask?*

Once he said he wanted to shop for it himself. But we

did away with that arrangement when he came home with *red* everything. Including red fishnets. 'Best if I get it from now on, Joe,' I'd said to him, and he'd said, 'Okay,' kind of crestfallen. Though I think he knew deep down I was never going to go for that trashy get-up.

The dogs finish eating and trot to the back door as a pack. My favourite is Ruthie. She's a Staffy crossed with either a Red Setter or a Hungarian Vizsla. She's got the brindle coat of a Staffy, but instead of the usual chocolate, autumn browns, she's had her colour turned up in a mad show of russet and henna, copper and bronze. And she has these long, long legs, which make her look as if she's swapped bodies with another dog.

Ruthie came to the shelter five years ago in a batch of unwanted puppies. A bitch kept for breeding got loose for the day and had a litter of seven. Ruthie was the one we couldn't home, so, as is often the way, she ended up at ours.

Luckily, Joe is kind of a natural. He's got that calm authority dogs seem to gravitate towards. He understands dogs in the same way some people understand numbers, or circuit boards. Even if we have a problem case and I bring it home, Joe's zen effect usually means the dog is settled in by bedtime.

I open up the back door and the dogs rush out, just as the cold and the cats rush in. Winter's here early. Snow had been predicted and there's been a heavy fall overnight. The chill seeps into my bones in an instant. I hear the cry of an animal carry across the valley on the thin air and shut the door quickly.

The coffee's ready and I pour myself what the coffee houses call an Americano – espresso topped up with hot water; my cup holds almost a pint. I hear movement coming from upstairs, small feet on floorboards, the toilet flushing, a nose blowing, and I rally myself. I read somewhere that children measure their self-worth directly from the look on your face and was horrified to realize I'd been greeting my children looking kind of vague. This is because I have a hundred and one things going through my head at any given moment – but they don't know that. I'm sure they must have spent the first few years of their lives wondering if I actually recognized them at all. I feel dreadful about it now, so often I go a bit too much the other way. My youngest son laps up the attention. But my older two, particularly Sally, who's thirteen, have taken to eyeing me suspiciously.

She sits at the kitchen table now, full lips swollen from sleep, hair pulled up high in a ponytail to be dealt with later. Next to her is her iPod Touch.

She spoons Rice Krispies into her mouth while at the same time shooing a cat away with her elbow. I watch her from over by the kettle. She's dark like Joe. They all are. Ask Joe where he's from and he'll tell you Ambleside. Most people assume he's Italian. He's not. Kallisto is a South American name – Brazilian – though we reckon Joe's of Argentinian descent. He has dark hair, dark eyes and dark skin. As do the kids. Their hair is shiny-black and straight, and they have Joe's absurdly long eyelashes. Naturally, Sally thinks she's ugly. She thinks all her friends are beautiful and she is not. This is something we're working

on, but of course she distrusts everything I say, because I'm her mother. And what the hell would I know about anything?

'PE today?' I ask.

'No. Tech.'

'What are you making?'

I'm never really sure what Tech is. It seems to encompass woodwork, sewing, design, pretty much everything—

Sally puts her spoon down. Looks at me as if to say, *You are joking?*

'We're doing food tech,' she says, keeping her eyes fixed on mine. '*Food* tech, as in cooking. Don't say you forgot to get the ingredients. The list,' she says, pointing towards the fridge, 'is right there.'

'Shit,' I reply quietly. 'I completely forgot. What do you need?'

Sally gets up, scrapes her chair across the flagstone floor. All the while I'm thinking, *Please be flapjacks, please be flapjacks.* I have oats and can cobble together the rest. Or crumble. Fruit crumble would be good. She can use those apples up, throw in a bit of something else from the bottom of the fruit bowl. It'll be fine.

Sally grabs the piece of paper. 'Pizza.'

'No,' I reply, gutted. 'Really?'

'We need ready-made tomato sauce, mozzarella, something for the base, like a baguette or pitta bread, and our own choice of toppings. I thought I'd have spicy chicken and green pepper. But I don't mind having tuna, if that's all we've got.'

We have none of those ingredients. Not one.

I close my eyes. 'Why didn't you remind me about this? I specifically told you to remind me. Why didn't you remind me when I told—'

'I did.'

'When?'

'After school on Friday,' she says. 'You were on the laptop.'

That's right, I remember. I was trying to order a delivery of logs and the website wouldn't accept my credit-card details. And I lost my temper.

Sally's face now changes from the satisfaction of being in the right to that of mild panic. 'Tech is third period,' she says, her voice rising. 'How am I supposed to get the stuff by third period?'

'Can you tell the teacher your mother forgot?'

'I told her that last time, and she said, "No more chances." She said it was just as much my responsibility. She said I could go to the shop myself for the ingredients if I needed to.'

'Did you explain to her that we live in Troutbeck?'

'No, because that would have been argumentative.'

We stand there looking at one another, me hoping an answer will magic itself into my head and Sally wishing that I was better at all of this.

'Leave it with me. I'll sort it,' I say.

I'm thinking about the day ahead, pouring apple juice into glasses, as the two boys sit down at the kitchen table. We've got fourteen dogs in the shelter at present and

eleven cats. The dogs I've got space for, but one of my most dependable cat fosterers is going in for a hysterectomy tomorrow, so I need to take delivery of an extra four cats this morning. And there are two dogs arriving from Northern Ireland as well that I'd clean forgotten about.

The boys are arguing over who is having the last of the Rice Krispies because neither of them wants the stale Fruit & Fibre that's been at the back of the cupboard since summer. James is eleven and Sam is seven. They're both skinny with big brown eyes and no common sense. They're the type of boys Italian mothers slap across the head a lot. Kind boys, but silly, and I love them fiercely.

I'm resigning myself to the fact that I'll have to wake up Joe and send him out for the pizza ingredients when the phone rings. It's seven twenty, so whoever it is does not have good news. Nobody rings me at seven twenty with good news.

'Lisa, it's Kate.'

'Kate,' I say. 'What's happened? Is something wrong?'

'Yes – no – well, sort of. Listen, sorry to ring so early but I wanted to catch you while you still had the boys at home.'

Kate Riverty is my friend of around five years. She has two children, who are similar in age to both Sally, my eldest, and Sam, my youngest.

'It's nothing major. I just thought you'd want to know so that you can address it before it gets out of hand.' I stay silent, let her go on. 'It's just that Fergus came home last week saying that he would need money for school, and I didn't really think much of it at the time. You know how

it is . . . they always need money for something. So I gave it to him, and it was only when I was chatting to Guy about it last night and he said that Fergus had asked *him* for money also that we thought to question him.'

I have no idea where this is going, but that's not unusual when speaking to Kate, so I try to sound interested. 'So what do you think he wants it for?'

I'm guessing she's going to tell me the teachers have set up a tuck shop. Something she's not in agreement with. Something she's against *on principle*.

'It's Sam,' Kate says bluntly. 'He's been charging children to play with him.'

'He's what?'

'Children are paying him money to play with him. I'm not sure exactly how much because . . . he seems to have a type of sliding scale in operation. Fergus is a little upset about the whole thing, actually. He's found out he's been paying substantially more than some of the other boys.'

I turn around and look at Sam. He is wearing Mario Kart pyjamas and is feeding milk directly from his cereal spoon to our old ginger tom.

I exhale.

'You're not cross that I rang, are you, Lisa?'

I wince. Kate's trying to sound nice, but her voice has taken on a shrill quality.

'Not at all,' I say. 'I'm glad you did.'

'It's just that if it were me . . . if it were one of *mine* doing this – well, I'd want to know.'

'Absolutely,' I tell her. Then I give her my standard line, the line that I seem to be giving out to anyone and

everyone regardless of the situation I'm faced with: 'Leave it with me,' I say firmly. 'I'll sort it.'

Just before she hangs up I hear Kate say, 'The girls okay?', and I reply, 'What? Yes, fine,' because I'm flustered, and I'm embarrassed, and I'm not really thinking straight. I'm wondering how I'm going to tackle the problem of Sam's new enterprise.

But when I put the phone down, I think, *Girls?* What does she mean by that? Then I dismiss it, because Kate often gets me on the back foot. Confuses me with what she's really trying to say. It's something I've had to get used to.

2

We live in a draughty rented house in Troutbeck. Troutbeck sits to the east of Lake Windermere and is the kind of place you find in books entitled 'Quaint English Villages'. There are supposed to be two hundred and sixty houses in Troutbeck, but I don't know where all those people are hiding because I hardly see any of them.

Of course, a lot are holiday lets. And many of the cottages are home to people who've retired here – so they're not always part of the usual day-to-day goings-on, I suppose because they don't have children living in the village. Or grandchildren they pick up from school a couple of days a week. Or take to swimming lessons, or to the park.

I used to think it bordered on tragedy the way families lose touch, the way people sever ties, putting a pretty place to live above being together. But now I realize that's just how people like it. They don't always want to be together.

My mother has a flat in Windermere village. She and my father never married – we were his second family, his *other* family – and because of something shitty that happened when I was a kid, something that we don't ever

talk about, we never see him. I'd ring my mother to pick up the ingredients Sally needs for cookery, but she doesn't drive, so I've asked Joe to do it. Poor thing, he's exhausted. He's only had a few hours' sleep, too.

I back the car out with Sam in the front seat next to me and wave to the older two as they wait for the minibus.

I don't know if this is a national thing, or if it's just local to Cumbria, but if you live more than three miles away from the nearest school, or if there's not a suitable pavement to walk upon, your kids are eligible for free transport. And since no proper buses run up here in Troutbeck, this takes the form of a taxi – well, a minibus. (Not Joe. Joe's a one-man band. He generally just carts old ladies to hospital appointments, or garden centres, or to bridge club.)

I could send Sam in a taxi as well if I wanted to, but I have this fear that a rogue driver would steal him away, be on a ferry bound for Zeebrugge before I realized he hadn't made it into school (I've enquired, and the drivers are not CRB-checked). So I drop Sam on my way to the shelter, and it's useful because it's one of the only moments during a normal working day that we get some time together.

We discuss all sorts. Sam's still of an age when he believes in Father Christmas and he thinks of Jesus as having superhero status. To Sam, Jesus has quite obviously got superhero powers, because 'How else could he do all that stuff?'

Sam went through a big Jesus phase last year and kept banging on and on about him. Which I didn't see the harm in. But then I had Joe at the dinner table, hopping

mad, slamming his fork down, saying, 'That school is *corrupting* him.'

I negotiate our way down the lane. It's a narrow, badly potholed stretch of track with no passing places. I have to time my departure just right or else I meet the minibus coming the other way. And it's always me that has to reverse, because the driver has a bad neck and can only use his mirrors. In fairness, his vehicle is a lot wider than mine.

Sam has his hat on and his hood pulled up over it because of the car's frigid interior, so he can't hear a word I'm saying. And my exhaust is blowing. It needed replacing a month ago and is getting worse by the day. I sound like a boy racer every time I press on the gas. I ask Sam about school and if there's anything he wants to tell me.

'What?' he says.

'"Pardon,"' I correct.

'Pardon? What?'

'Is there anything going on at school you want to tell me about?'

He shrugs. Looks out the window. Then he turns and tells me excitedly about a child who brought in a lava lamp for Show and Tell. And one, when can we get a lava lamp?, and two, why can he never bring anything in for Show and Tell?

Inwardly, I'm cursing this mother, whoever she is, for giving me something else to do. Show and Tell. Brilliant.

'Show and Tell,' I explain patiently, 'is an American thing. It's like Trick or Treat. English people just don't really do it.'

'Everybody does Trick or Treat except us.'

'No they don't.'

'Yes they do.'

'Anyway,' I say quickly, 'what's this I hear about you making people pay to play with you?'

He doesn't answer. I can't see his face hidden behind the fur of his hood, and now I've got to concentrate because I'm on the main road and it's not been gritted particularly well. A rush job.

I have a momentary flash of panic as I imagine the taxi driver in charge of the kids' minibus, taking a bend too fast and sailing off the edge of the road, down to the valley floor below.

I picture the vehicle as it rolls and rolls, coming to a stop by a John Deere hay baler. The windows of the bus are blown out, and my kids sit there motionless like limp crash-test dummies.

I shiver.

Sam says, in answer to my question about pay for play: 'Pardon?'

'You heard me.'

Reluctantly, he explains, 'I don't make *everyone* pay,' and I can tell he's more disappointed than sorry. Probably thought he could go through life making money in this way, and he can sense by my tone that his venture has come to a premature end.

I turn to him. 'What I don't get is why these kids are willing to pay you. Why are they giving *you* money when they could just as easily play on their own or with somebody else?'

'Dunno,' he says innocently, but then shoots me a mischievous look. One that says, *I know. Are they, like, idiots, or what?*

Five minutes later and we pull up outside school. I look to see if Kate's car is in its usual place by the gate, but she isn't here yet. I do like her, but it does annoy me how she insists on going into school each day. Because really, there is no reason for it.

Her son, Fergus, is almost eight. He's more than capable of removing his coat and shoes, changing into his indoor pumps and finding his way to the classroom. The school has only eighty kids. He's not going to get lost. But Kate's one of those mothers who enjoys chatting with the teacher. She likes to watch Fergus slowly taking off his shoes, rolling her eyes at the other mothers while clapping her hands together, saying, 'Come on, chop chop! Quicksticks! Pass Mummy your boots!' Kate doesn't have a proper job. She and her husband get a steady stream of income from renting holiday cottages. So all Kate has to do when she gets home is put her washing machine on and write thank-you notes to people she doesn't really like.

I'm jealous of Kate's life.

There, I've said it.

It's taken me a while to get to this point. Before, I couldn't admit it. I used to complain to Joe. Blame him in a roundabout way for my having to work full-time, blame him for the fact I had to face every day exhausted, and—

My phone is ringing.

I pull it out of my pocket and see that it's Sally. Perhaps

the minibus has not turned up. Maybe the driver's not been able to start the engine in the cold weather.

'Hi, Sal, what's up?'

Sally is crying. Big, choking sobs. She can't get her words out.

'Mum?' I can hear noise in the background, more crying . . . the sounds of traffic. 'Mum . . . something really bad has happened.'

3

Detective Constable Joanne Aspinall is almost at the station when she gets the call about the missing girl. Thirteen years old. And not a worldly-wise thirteen either. Joanne wonders if there even is such a thing. I mean, what difference would it make if she were an astute girl? What if *she was* used to being out and about on her own? Would that change anything? Did it make it any less urgent?

Missing's missing. There shouldn't be a difference.

But when Joanne sees the photograph, she shudders. It has to be said, this girl *does* look young for her age. Astonishingly young, in fact. And Joanne has to admit, even if it's only to herself, that the thirteen-year-olds who go gadding about in Wonderbras and tall boots tend to turn up eventually. Usually returning home sorry and sheepish, sad and scared, wishing they'd not put their parents through that anguish. Because all they wanted to do was prove a point.

Joanne had been no different when she was young. Leaving the house, screaming at her mother that she was old enough to take care of herself, desperate to be taken

seriously as a grown-up. When really, *grown up* was the last thing she was.

Joanne thinks about the strange confidence that seems to come to girls at this age, and decides that this confidence, this intrepidity, comes later in boys. Round about the sixteen mark. That's when their cockiness is heightened and she starts seeing boys who've never been involved in any kind of trouble before suddenly start making nuisances of themselves.

They'd had a memo in the office just last week. The army was on the lookout for kids whose life could be 'turned around with the right sort of guidance'.

It said: 'They could have a lot to offer the British Army,' and Joanne thought, Yes, I bet they could. The self-preservation instinct is woefully lacking in young lads; they'll happily walk into battle, happily regard themselves infallible, indestructible. No wonder the bloody army wanted them.

After the quick brief on the missing girl, Joanne makes her way to the address. She knows the house. Years ago it used to be the old vicarage, before the church sold it off. Too big and expensive for the clergy to heat.

The family aren't known to the police; not many residents of Troutbeck are. It's not *that* sort of place.

Joanne deals with very few serious criminal offences from within the boundaries of the National Park. It's one of the safest areas to live in Britain. You see the same people every day, so it's hard to hide if you do screw up, if you do shaft someone or do something illegal.

People move here wanting a better life, wanting a

better life for their children. So generally they keep their heads down. They do their best not to antagonize their neighbours. They feel privileged to live here and they try their hardest to make sure it remains that way.

But it's not always easy *to* stay here.

House prices are off the scale, and industry is non-existent. So those who move here had better have a good way to earn a living, or else they won't last. Those who come thinking they'll open up a twee coffee shop, florist's or artist's studio get a rude awakening when they can't make the mortgage payments.

Joanne's noticed how newcomers will proudly announce that they're 'local' after living here for perhaps just a couple of years. As if it's a badge of honour. Joanne can never quite make sense of that. She is a local. Lived here all her life. She's not sure it's something to go on about, though.

Her mother and Auntie Jackie moved to the Lakes from Lancashire back when they were teenagers, to work as chambermaids, and Jackie scoffs at the idea of being accepted as a 'local'.

'Local?' she'll say derisively. 'What do I want to be classed as one of them for? No sense of humour . . .'

Joanne slows the car as she approaches the Rivertys' driveway.

Their daughter is not the type of girl to disappear. Joanne knows that now. No, Lucinda Riverty is not that type at all.

Joanne adjusts her bra and climbs out, thinking that when she was back in uniform, at least she got the clothes

for free. Now, trying to find suitable work clothes took up almost as much time as the paperwork. And since her bra size is a cruel 38GG, it's hard to find tops that don't make her look like a barrel.

She zips up her parka, then makes her way up the path, thinking that at least she can ring the doorbell now without being worried about being mistaken for a strippergram.

Not that that was likely to happen here today.

'Mrs Riverty?'

The woman shakes her head. 'I'm her sister, Alexa. Come in, they're all in there.'

Joanne flashes her warrant card, but the woman doesn't look at it. She doesn't ask who Joanne is, because nobody bothers at times like this. They get you in quickly, don't want to lose any time.

They're already beating themselves up for the minutes they've wasted so far. When they knew something was off, something was wrong, when the universe was whispering to them there was trouble.

The woman gestures for Joanne to go along the hallway and to the right. Joanne steps into the vestibule and wipes her feet. She glances ahead of her: muted Farrow & Ball paint colours, seagrass matting on the stairs, a dotting of tasteful black-and-white photos of the kids. Joanne spots a girl of around five dressed as a ballerina holding some tulips and a Dorothy bag, and thinks that this must be Lucinda.

The room is already busy with people, which also happens at times like this. Everyone comes straight over.

Every family member, every friend. People turning up to be together, to wait.

Joanne's used to it. She's used to the faces – expectant but confused. Who is this woman in the black parka? What is she here for?

'I'm Detective Constable Aspinall,' Joanne says.

Always best to give her full title instead of using the 'DC'. Women, particularly, don't really know what DC means anyway. Give a member of the public a police-woman in plain clothes and they don't really know what to do with her.

Is she here to console the family? Make tea? Family liaison – is that it? Is she even a real police officer?

They're not sure. Best to tell them who she is and what she's here for right from the get-go.

All eyes move from Joanne to a broken-looking blonde woman sitting in the middle of a sagging, taupe sofa.

This room's for the kids. It houses the old furniture, the stuff that doesn't matter any more, the stuff nobody gets cross about if it's ruined with spilt drinks, with felt-tip pens.

A four-year-old TV is in the corner, and beneath it a stack of game boxes: PlayStation, Wii, Xbox. Joanne knows the names of these things even if she can't correctly distinguish one from the other, not having any kids of her own.

The blonde goes to stand, but Joanne says, 'Please, don't get up. Are you Mrs Riverty?', and the woman nods her head, just slightly, spilling the mug of tea she's holding in the process. She hands her tea to the man seated next to her.

Joanne looks to him: 'Mr Riverty?', and he says, 'Guy,' attempting to smile, but he can't make his face work in that way today.

He stands. His eyes are anguished, his face so full of grief. 'Have you come to help us?' he asks, and Joanne says, 'Yes.'

Yes, that's what she's come for. Joanne has come to help.

This is the second missing girl. That's why Joanne was sent straight here. If Lucinda had been the first, these early stages would be covered by a couple of uniforms. But Joanne's department are working with Lancashire on this one, and, after a series of screwed-up abduction cases in the south, everyone's on high alert.

Two weeks ago, a young girl had gone missing from Silverdale, just over the border from Cumbria into Lancashire.

Molly Rigg. Another one who looked younger than she was. Another girl who *shouldn't have gone missing*, her boss said.

Molly Rigg turned up at teatime, twenty miles from her home, when she walked into the travel agents in Bowness-on-Windermere.

The November rain was lashing and the place was jam-packed to bursting with people wanting to escape the gloom – perhaps on an all-inclusive to the Dominican Republic. Joanne had seen it advertised in the front window: £355 per person (branded drinks extra).

Molly had been stripped bare from the waist up, and didn't know where she was. No clue as to what town she

was in. She'd chosen the travel agents because she thought the staff in there would be 'nice'.

They were.

The manager removed everyone from the shop with the minimum of fuss, while the two Dolly Daydreams manning the front desk got Molly covered up in an assortment of their own clothes. By the time Joanne got there they were clinging on to Molly so fiercely, so protectively, that it was hard for Joanne to get them to let go.

One of the two, Danielle Knox, had told of how she'd glanced up from her flight schedules and seen Molly, standing silently, rainwater pouring down her bare shoulders and young chest, her arms crossed around herself, shivering.

She told of how her mouth fell open as Molly asked her quietly and politely, 'Please can you phone my mum? I need you to get me my mum.'

Molly later said that she had been taken to a bedsit and raped more than once by a man who spoke like the people from *The Darling Buds of May*. Molly's mum was a fan of the series and watched the reruns on ITV3 on Sunday afternoons while Molly did her homework in front of the fire.

Joanne wonders just how much Kate and Guy Riverty know about the case. Or even how much attention they'd paid to poor Molly before they found themselves in this, the very worst of similar situations, with their now-missing daughter, Lucinda.

Kate Riverty asks Joanne if she thinks it could be the same man responsible for both, and Joanne answers with,

'Let's not think that way right now. There's nothing to suggest it's the same person at this stage.'

Which of course she doesn't mean. But Joanne knows that, regardless of the solid performance Mrs Riverty is putting on, no mother is ready to hear such things.

Joanne is also careful not to speculate on whether Lucinda has actually been abducted *or not*.

A child does not return home? Parents assume abduction.

Forget the statistics. Forget the runaways. You go suggesting that their child has not been abducted and you get a meltdown.

Joanne looks around at the frantic faces in the room. She does not want a meltdown.