

“Hi guys — so good of you to come,” said Julie as Sarah and Jack joined them at the table.

“Glad to swing by,” said Jack, then he gave a nod to the front windows. “Beautiful morning for a walk.”

Julie kept her smile as she made a quick introduction.

“Um, yes. And this—” she gave the woman’s hand a quick *squeeze*, as if to fortify her “—is my friend, Emma. Emma Finlay.”

Sarah smiled at the woman: she looked around the same age as Julie — her hair pulled back, a plain spring coat still on, a prim blue dress.

But not at all like the charismatic, vibrant manager of the Spotted Pig. Which prompted Sarah to wonder just *how* Julie and this Emma were connected.

“I know Emma from Bluebirds,” said Julie, as if reading her mind. “You know — the pre-school where our little Archy goes?”

Emma added, “I’m one of the assistants there.” Another gentle smile. “Do a bit of this, bit of that, helping with the little ones. Good for me — keeping busy — with our own two kids at Cherringham Primary.”

Julie looked at Emma as she talked, clearly waiting for a moment to step in.

“Emma has been talking to me about ... something that’s happened. Well, she can tell you herself, of course, and anyway, I thought maybe you two might be able to help her.”

Emma chewed at her lower lip, clearly anxious.

Sarah saw Jack nod and lean forward, his hands on the table folded together. She’d seen him handle delicate conversations so many times — with a victim, or a distraught relative, or shocked bystanders — always with a mix of warmth, strength and, yes, an amazing gentleness.

And he did that just now.

*

“Thank you, Julie. And Emma, maybe you can share with us what you talked to Julie about? See if we have any ideas about helping you? With whatever it is.”

Sarah heard a loud *thwack* from the back of the kitchen area and she saw Julie shift in her seat, look behind her.

“Sorry about *that*,” she said, standing. “Sam’s getting ready for lunch service. I’d better go and give him a hand.”

Emma looked a little alarmed at suddenly being left alone with the two strangers, so Sarah was quick to add: “Thank you, Julie — we’ll be fine here,” as the Pig’s owner headed back to the kitchen.

When she’d gone, Emma finally gave her throat a slight clear, looked from Jack to Sarah, *and began*.

“It’s my husband, Ed, you see,” she said. “He’s just ... *vanished*.”

*

Sarah listened as Emma Finlay described the day, a month ago, when her life had been turned upside down.

How Ed was working late, but then he hadn't come home from work at all. And how, since that night she'd had no word from him; no calls, no texts, no explanation.

Nothing at all.

She waited as Jack asked the obvious question, his voice sounding genuinely perplexed.

"Emma, I'm guessing you went to the police straight away?"

"I did. But they said they couldn't help me."

Sarah quickly looked at Jack, then back to Emma.

"They actually *said* that to you?" said Sarah.

"Oh, not when I first called them. No. It was the next day. The day *after* Ed disappeared. Didn't sleep that whole night with the worry, thinking the most dreadful things. Anyway, in the morning, I went up to the police station to report him as ... missing."

Sarah saw Emma swallow, put her hand to her chest as if to still a rising panic at the memory — the very word ... *missing*.

"Go on," said Jack. That voice steady, gentle.

Calming, Sarah thought.

"Well. I sat there. In the interview room. There were two policemen, but Sergeant Rivers — you know him? — he asked most of the questions. I said what had happened. How Ed *hadn't* come home from work. That's when Rivers told me."

The woman didn't seem to notice that, somehow, she had just left something important out — that Sarah and Jack couldn't know.

"Told you?" Jack said. "What?"

"Told me that my Ed had *himself* been to the station, a week before he disappeared! Sat down with Rivers himself and said that he 'would be going away', you see? Leaving Cherringham. And he told Rivers not to worry; no, that it might be *for quite some time*."

Sarah imagined that people go missing all the time. Husbands, to be sure, maybe go away for long or short periods — it happens. *Some probably even stay away for good*, she thought.

But this? *Telling the police first?*

This was something different.

This was strange.

She saw Jack lean back in his chair and take out a small notebook with a plain brown cover. One corner bent, the edges frayed.

A well-used little notebook.

One that Jack only used when they were working a "case".

Jack spoke as he flipped open the book to a clean page. "I *see*. And what else did Sergeant Rivers say to you?"

“Well, he said that there was absolutely *nothing* they could do. Apparently, if someone actually *tells* the police they are going away and not to worry, that means the police won’t investigate or do anything! You see, it means that my husband *isn’t* really missing!”

Emma stopped and looked at Jack and Sarah. That look, Sarah thought, like maybe the two people she was talking to were her last and only hope.

“I see. That must be very difficult for you,” said Jack, calmly. “You’ve two children, yes?”

“Theo and Olivia. I told them Daddy’s away on a work trip, but I can’t keep that up for too long, can I?”

“No,” said Jack. “Where does your husband work, by the way?”

“Just outside the village. He’s a programmer. You know, coding things? For Bubblz. At the industrial park.”

Jack nodded. “And does he travel for work much?”

Sarah wondered where this was going.

“No,” said Emma. “Though — um, well — in the last few weeks he has been away a lot. London. ‘Big meetings’, he said. Strategy.”

“Overnight stays, yes?” said Jack. Sarah realised the direction he was taking.

“Oh yes. A few times,” said Emma. “They put him up in hotels.”

Sarah watched Jack make some more notes, then look up and smile at Emma.

“And in the weeks before he, um, *went away*, how was he?”

“What do you mean?”

“Were things going well at work, with the family?” said Sarah brightly, jumping in to help Jack with these awkward questions. “No money troubles, worries, things like that?”

“No. With my Ed? Not at all. We were planning a big trip, next year: Thailand, Nepal, Vietnam. Money was fine. Ed’s paid well.” She nodded at her own assurance. “Ed is always one to be very careful with money.”

Sarah smiled, as Jack jotted down a couple more notes. But then she saw Emma frown.

“But I must admit, work was stressing him out, now I come to think of it,” she said. “Lots of long shifts. Late night calls. Texts. Emergency meetings. That sort of thing?”

“Did he tell you what the problem was?” said Sarah.

“No. He knows I don’t really understand what he does at work.”

This Ed, Sarah thought, *is suddenly seeming like he might be a more interesting spouse than his wife knew.*

What was that expression?

The wife is always the last to know.

“Ed have any good friends locally?” said Jack. “Anyone he might have confided in?”

“Well, he helped out with one of the church groups, so, yes, he had some friends there. But I don’t get involved with that. Mostly we just keep ourselves to ourselves. We’re very family-minded, you know?”

Sarah had to ask ...

“Emma, sorry for this. But is it possible that Ed could be in some kind of *trouble*?”

She shook her head. And now, her voice was stronger. “*Trouble?* No! Ed was a *good* man. Good husband. *Good father*. What kind of trouble could he have got into that could possibly make him leave?”

Sarah looked at Jack. The two of them had done enough work together for her to know when it came to “trouble” and what people did when they were “in” it.

She knew there was another question she now needed to ask. This question? Never an easy way to ask it.

“Emma, I’m sorry, but could Ed have formed another relationship with someone?”

For a moment the worried woman at the table looked *frozen*.

“*Relationship?*”

“Yes.”

“What? You mean ... with another woman?” said Emma, eyes wide.

Sarah felt she wasn’t nearly as deft and cautious as Jack had been. Her words, her questions ... stinging.

“It can happen.”

Emma’s head started shaking immediately.

“My Ed?” said Emma, now half-laughing at the idea. “I don’t *think* so!”

Sarah nodded, as if *yes, she agreed, the idea was totally crazy*.

Jack took over. “So, since you went to see them, the police haven’t helped at all?”

Now there was a bit of fire from the quiet woman.

“No! Not one bit. My husband ups and disappears and the police don’t care!”

And at that — with all these weeks to think about her husband vanishing, and what *might* have happened — on *this* spring morning, fresh tears ran down Emma’s face.

Sarah leaned across to a nearby table, already set for service, and slid a cloth napkin out from under the weight of the heavy cutlery. Gave it to Emma.

“Thank you,” the woman said, dabbing at her eyes. And when recovered: “Will you look into this? Will you?” A breath. “Please?”

Sarah glanced at Jack. She was about to say — even without a nod of agreement from him — *sure*. But he spoke first, this time extending one hand, taking one of Emma’s hands oh-so-gently in his.

“Emma, before we answer that, there’s something I must ask you.”

“Okay,” said Emma, and Sarah saw her glance nervously at both of them.

“You see,” said Jack. “Seems pretty clear to me, from what you’ve said so far, that Ed *didn’t* want anyone coming after him. You included.”

Emma didn’t reply, her hands clenched tight on the table in front of her.

Sarah looked at the woman’s watery eyes, thinking: *Emma must have realised that as well*.

“And here’s the thing, you see,” continued Jack. “When people go away like this, so *suddenly*, the reason they’ve gone can sometimes turn out to be, well, *painful* for their loved ones to discover.”

A squeeze to the woman’s hand.

“Are you prepared for that? Prepared for whatever we might find?”

Emma sat upright, stared at both of them; the look almost a challenge.

"I *am*," she said. "You see, I can't live like this. Not knowing? Not *doing* anything? Whatever the reason — whatever has happened — I *have* to know. Have to."

"Okay," said Jack, finally sitting back.

"Okay?" said Emma. "Does that mean you'll help?"

Jack looked at Sarah for confirmation. She gave him a small nod — *how could they say no?* — and then he turned back to Emma.

"Yes," he said, his most reassuring smile in place. "We will."

"Thank you," said Emma, her tears now dabbed, and amazingly, at those words, a smile again on her pale face.

And now all three of them laughed, sharing her relief, the tension suddenly gone.

"Okay," said Jack. "So *good*. Now, what we need *you* to do is tell us everything about your husband. His work. History. Past. Friends. That church group you mentioned. Bank accounts. Passwords. *Anything at all*. Oh — and we'll need a recent photo of him too."

"I thought you might say that," said Emma, and Sarah watched her dip into her handbag and pull out a photograph, slide it over.

"That's Ed on a ski trip, last summer," said Emma.

Sarah picked up the photo: Ed with his arms round his two kids, sunglasses up on his head, beaming at the camera.

Tousled hair, almost boyish, a big smile. Fit — no dad's paunch there.

And now Emma took a big breath; she looked up at the shiny steel ceiling of the restaurant, and began to fill in all the empty spaces about Ed Finlay's life.

Sarah listening, staring at the photo, thinking ...

Something made you leave, Ed Finlay.

So — what was it?

What's your secret?